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Ergativity and Stage/Individual-level Predications in Nepali and Manipuri

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ABSTRACT

The ergative systems of Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages have drawn the attention of scholars because of their interesting variations. The tense/aspect based split ergative system (Dixon 1994) found in languages like Hindi-Urdu and other Western Indo-Aryan languages have dominated the ergative literature of South Asian linguistics (Klaiman 1978, Hock 1986, Hook 1992, Mohanan 1994, Butt 2006, Deo & Sharma 2006, etc.). In the Central and the Eastern regions, in contrast, some Tibeto-Burman languages such as Tamang (Mazaudon, 2003) and Bhujel (Regmi 2007) are consistently ergative, i.e., they have ergative marking on the subjects of all transitive clauses and nominative marking on the subjects of all intransitive clauses. Some Tibeto-Burman languages of this region such as Kham (Watters 1973) display NP-hierarchy split ergativity (Silverstein 1976). In addition to these ergative systems of South Asian languages, Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language from the Pahari group (Grierson 1928) and Manipuri, a Tibeto-Burman language (Chelliah 1997), show split ergative system based on individual-level and stage-level predications, i.e. individual-level predicates align with ergative marking and stage-level predicates align with nominative marking. With the synchronic data from Nepali and Manipuri, this study systematically demonstrates that these languages employ the ergative case to distinguish individual-level predications from stage-level ones.

1 Introduction

South Asia is home to four different language families, namely Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, as well as some language isolates such as Kusunda. There is no ergative case in Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and the language isolate, Kusunda, whereas many Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages have ergative case systems. The Western Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi-Urdu tend to have tense/aspect based split ergative systems (Klaiman 1978, Hock 1986, Hook 1999, Mohanan 1994, Butt 2006). In a split ergative system, the ergative is obligatory in some contexts but not in other contexts (Dixon 1994). These languages show ergative marking on the subject as well as in the agreement system (Deo and Sharma 2006). For example, in Hindi-Urdu, the ergative appears on agents of transitive verbs and the verb agrees with the object but only when the verbal morphology is past or perfective. Consider the examples in (1).

- (1) a. $\text{r\bar{a}m} \quad \text{p\bar{e}tra} \quad \text{likh-t\bar{a}} \quad \text{h\bar{o}i}^1$
 Ram.MASC.SG letter.FEM write-IPFV.MASC.SG be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Ram writes letters.’ (Hindi-Urdu)

- b. rām=ne pətra likh-ī həi
 Ram.MASC.SG=ERG letter.FEM write-PFV.FEM be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Ram has written letters.’ (Hindi-Urdu)

Another split ergative system found among ergative languages is based on the NP hierarchy (Silverstein 1976). Some Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Kham (Watters 1973), spoken in Western Nepal, have a split ergative system based on the NP hierarchy. In Kham, the first and second person subject arguments of transitive clauses receive nominative marking and the third person pronouns and the full NPs of transitive clauses receive ergative marking. Consider the following examples from Kham² (data from Watters 1973).

- (2) a. ŋā nan-lāi ŋa-poh-ni-ke
 1 SG.NOM you-ACC 1SG-hit-2-PFV
 ‘I hit you.’ (Kham)
- b. no-e nan-lāi poh-na-ke-o
 3 SG-ERG you-ACC hit-2-PFV-3SG
 ‘He hit you.’ (Kham)

Some other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Tamang (Mazaudon 2003) and Bhujel (Regmi 2007) are reported to have consistent ergative systems. In a consistent ergative language, the subjects of transitive clauses are all marked with the ergative case and the subjects of intransitive clauses with the nominative case. The following data from Tamang (Mazaudon 2003) illustrate the consistent ergative system, with the transitives in (3)a, (3)b and (3)c. (perfective, imperfective and future, respectively) and intransitives in (3)d and (3)e (perfective and imperfective, respectively).

- (3) a. naka=se tap ca-ci
 chicken=ERG vegetable eat-PFV
 ‘The chicken ate the vegetable.’ (Tamang)
- b. mam=se kol_kat=ta paŋ-pa
 grandma=ERG children=DAT scold-IPFV
 ‘Grandma is scolding the children.’ (Tamang)
- c. ai=se pwi/pwi-pa=ri kham-la
 2SG=ERG carry/carry-NMLZ=LOC can-FUT
 ‘Will you be able to carry it?’ (Tamang)
- d. mi kha-ci
 man.NOM come-PFV
 ‘Someone came.’ (Tamang)

¹Abbreviations: ACC=accusative, ANT=anterior, CAUS=causative, CLF=classifier, CNTR=contrastive, COMPA=comparative, COP=copula, DAT=dative, DEF=definite, DET=determiner, DIR=directional, DES=desiderative, DST=distal, DUR=durative, ERG=ergative, EVD=evidential, FEM=feminine, FIN=finiteness marker, GEN=genitive, HAB=habitual, HON=honorific, IPFV=imperfective, INF=infinitive, INS=instrumental, INT=intentive, IRR=irrealis, LOC=locative, MASC=male, NEG=negative, NMLZ=nominalizer, NOM=nominative, NPST=non-past, OBL=oblique, PFV=perfective, PL=plural, POL=polite, PROG=progressive, PROX=proximate, PRS=present, PTR=past time reference, REAL=realis, RFLX=reflexive, SG=singular.

²In a transitive clause in Kham, the first and second person subject agreement affixes are prefixes. The third person subject agreement affix fills the right most slot after the tense/aspect markers. The second person object agreement suffixes occur between the stem and the tense/aspect marker.

- e. ai naŋkar ni-pa
 2SG.NOM tomorrow go-IPFV
 ‘Are you going tomorrow?’ (Tamang)

Besides these attested South Asian split ergative systems, some South Asian languages such as Nepali show an ergative/nominative alternation in non-past tenses, this is illustrated in (4).

- (4) a. rām (āja) gāri calāũ-cha
 Ram (today) car drive-NPST.3SG.MASC
 ‘Ram will drive a car (today).’ (Nepali)
- b. rām=le (*āja) gāri calāũ-cha
 Ram=ERG (*today) car drive-NPST.3.SG.MASC
 ‘Ram drives cars (that is what he does).’ (Nepali)

This type of alternation between ergative and nominative on subjects in non-past is also found in Tibeto-Burman languages such as Manipuri. In Manipuri the subjects of verbs inflected with realis mood³ alternate between ergative and nominative case, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. naunā pokpa aŋāŋ (ŋasi) tum-mi
 newly born baby (today) sleep-REAL
 ‘A newly born baby is sleeping (today).’ (Manipuri)
- b. naunā pokpa aŋāŋ-na (*ŋasi) yām tum-mi
 newly born baby-ERG (*today) much sleep-REAL
 ‘Newly born babies sleep much (*today).’ (Manipuri)

The nominative-ergative alternation exemplified in (4) for Nepali and in (5) for Manipuri is the concern of the present paper. This paper argues that this nominative-ergative alternation in Nepali and Manipuri must be understood in terms of primarily semantic factors, in particular, stage-level vs. individual-level predications. A close look at the data reveals that the uses of an ergative subject in clauses with present time references in Nepali and Manipuri correlates mainly with individual-level predication.

The data presented in this paper were elicited and/or taken from published works. The author, being native speaker of Nepali, also used his own intuitions and cross-checked these with other native speakers. Although the author has near native competence in Manipuri, native speakers from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur and from Kakching, a small town about 45 kilometers to the south of Imphal, the capital of Manipur, have been consulted for verification and authentication of the data. This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the standard conception of ergativity (Plank 1979, Dixon 1979, 1994) and the data from both Nepali and Manipuri⁴ demonstrate that these languages should be classified as ergative languages. Section 3 presents an overview of ergative distribution in these two languages. Section 4 begins with the discussion on individual-level and stage-level distinction that is relevant for the present paper. As this distinction is more salient in copula sentences, I establish that such a distinction really exists in the grammars of Nepali and Manipuri. Then I demonstrate that these languages make use of case markers to encode the distinction of individual-level vs. stage-level in non-copular action sentences because copulas are not available for the distinction in this sentence type. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the findings of this study.

³Manipuri finite verbs inflect for realis and irrealis moods. The realis mood that distinguishes between past time reference and present time reference is marked with the suffixes *-la.e* and *-i*, respectively. The irrealis mood distinguishes semantic fields such as future (*-kani*), future negation (*-loi*), benefactive (*-piyu*), command (*-o*), prohibitive (*-kanu*), optative (*-ke*), hortative (*-si*), etc. For details see Poudel (2007).

⁴Nepali ergativity has been established for some time. However, in Manipuri linguistics the term ergativity is not common. Bhat and Ningomba (1997) call it nominative and Chelliah (1997, 2009) calls it agentive.

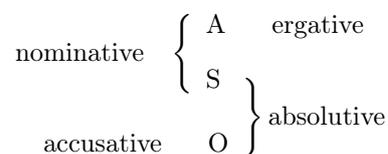
2 Ergativity: The Standard Concept

In the literature, the distinction between ergative and accusative languages is conceived of as in terms of how languages group subjects of transitive vs. intransitive clauses and the objects of the transitive clauses (Dixon 1979, Plank 1979, a.o.). Plank (1979, 4) summarizes the idea as:

A grammatical pattern or process shows ergative alignment if it identifies intransitive subjects (Si) and transitive direct objects (dO) as opposed to transitive subjects (St). It shows accusative alignment if it identifies Si and St as opposed to dO.

Dixon (1979, 9) formulates this basic idea as: In an ergative language, the A argument of a transitive clause is marked differently from the O argument of transitive clause and the S argument of an intransitive clause. On the other hand, in an accusative language, the O argument is marked differently from the A and S arguments. In a later work, Dixon (1994) presents the distinction diagrammatically as in (6). In (6), A stands for the subject of transitive clause, S stands for the subject of intransitive clause and O for the direct object of a transitive clause. Following Butt (2006), I use the term nominative case for both nominative and absolutive because both of them are unmarked cases in the languages discussed in this study.

(6)



Given these definitional criteria both Nepali and Manipuri have ergative patterns. Previous studies (Abadie 1974, Abdulky 1974, Clark 1963, Wallace 1982, Klaiman 1978, Masica 1991, Li 2006) have established that Nepali is a morphologically ergative language. However, the earlier studies on Manipuri used nominative (Hodson 1908, Pettigrew 1912) instead of ergative. More recent works such as Sharma (1987) and Bhat and Ningomba (1997) also follow the same tradition. However, Chelliah (1997) used the term agentive instead of ergative. This usage of the term nominative for ergative can also be found by nineteenth century authors such as Beames (1872–79) and Kellogg (1893) with respect to the split-ergative language Hindi-Urdu. Consider the following examples from Nepali and Manipuri:

- (7) a. $\bar{r}\bar{a}m=le$ $bh\bar{a}t$ $kh\bar{a}-yo$
 Ram.MASC.SG=Erg rice eat-PST.3SG.MASC
 ‘Ram ate rice.’ (Nepali)
- b. $\bar{r}\bar{a}m$ $sut-yo$
 Ram sleep-PST.3SG.MASC
 ‘Ram slept.’ (Nepali)
- (8) a. $tomb\bar{a}=na$ $c\bar{a}k$ $c\bar{a}-re$
 Tomba=ERG food eat-ANT.REAL
 ‘Tomba ate food.’ (Manipuri)
- b. $tomb\bar{a}$ $tum-me$
 Tomba sleep-ANT.REAL
 ‘Tomba slept.’ (Manipuri)

Note that the A arguments i.e., *Ram* in (7a) and *Tomba* in (8a) the subjects of transitive verbs *khā-* ‘eat’ and *cā-* ‘eat’ are marked with the ergative case markers *=le* and *=na*, respectively. On the

other hand, the O arguments i.e., *bhāt* ‘rice’ in (7a) and *cāk* ‘food’ in (8a) and the S arguments i.e., *Ram* in (7b) and *Tomba* in (8b) all have nominative case, which is unmarked for both languages. The O argument may receive dative marking to distinguish the unmarked form from semantically marked cases. In Nepali, it receives dative marking if it is animate or socially important (O-high) (Bickel 2013), as shown in (9).

- (9) mai=le prembahādur=lāi dekh-ē
 1SG=ERG Prem Bahadur=DAT see-PST.1SG
 ‘I saw Prem Bahadur.’ (Nepali)

In Manipuri, the O receives locative marking if it is specific or definite, as shown in (10). The locative is form identical with the dative in Manipuri.

- (10) a. tombā=na tebal theṅ-i
 Tomba=ERG table touch-REAL
 ‘Tomba touched a table.’ (Manipuri)
- b. tombā=na tebal=da theṅ-i
 Tomba=ERG table=LOC touch-REAL
 ‘Tomba touched the table.’ (Manipuri)

Hence, the marking of the O arguments is semantically, not syntactically oriented, in both languages.

3 Ergative distributions in Nepali and Manipuri: An Overview

This section provides an overview of general ergative distribution in Nepali and Manipuri. The ergative marker in Nepali is =le, which is form identical with the instrumental and the marker of a ‘reason clause’, as shown in (11)a and (11)b, respectively.

- (11) a. rām=le ghan=le murti phuṭ-ā-yo
 Ram=ERG hammer=INS statue break-CAUS-PST.3SG.MASC
 ‘Ram broke the statue with a hammer.’ (Nepali)
- b. pāhun-ā ā-ekā=le ma timro bihā-mā āu-na
 guest-PL come-PTCP.PL=ERG/INS Pron.1SG your wedding=LOC come-INF
 pā-ĩ-na
 get-PST.1SG-NEG
 ‘Because of guests coming, I could not come to your wedding.’ (Nepali)

Also in Manipuri, the ergative marker =na is form identical with the markers of instrumental, shown in (12)a, and causal subordination, as in (12)b.⁵

- (12) a. tombā=na nuṅthəṅ=na murti thugāi-re
 Tomba=ERG hammer=INS statue break-ANT.REAL
 ‘Tomba broke the statue with a hammer.’ (Manipuri)
- b. noṅ tāba=na ma-hāk bazār=da cat-t-e
 rain fall=ERG/INS Pron.3SG-POL market=LOC go-NEG-ANT.REAL
 ‘Because of rain falling, he did not go to the market.’ (Manipuri)

In (11)b and (12)b the ergative/instrumental is used to mark reason clauses in Nepali and Manipuri, respectively. This we take as the semantic extension of the ergative/instrumental because the notion

⁵Manipuri distinguishes long and short mid low vowels. I use /ā/ for long mid low vowel and /a/ for short mid low vowel, very close to schwa /ə/.

of cause is semantically very close to that of agency, for which the ergative is apt.

In Nepali, the agents of transitive verbs obligatorily receive ergative case if the verbal morphology is past or perfective (13)a. However, the agents of transitive verbs receive either ergative (13)b or nominative (13)c case if the verbal morphology is imperfective.

- (13) a. mahes=le upanyās lekh-yo
 Mahesh=ERG novel write-PST.3SG
 ‘Mahesh wrote a novel.’ (Nepali)
- b. mahes=le upanyās lekh-cha
 Mahesh=ERG novel write-NPST.3SG
 ‘Mahesh writes novels.’ (Nepali)
- c. mahes upanyās lekh-tai cha
 Mahesh novel write-IPFV AUX.NPST.3SG
 ‘Mahesh is writing a novel.’ (Nepali)

Manipuri also has a similar distribution. Consider the following example where the agent of the transitive verb *thaʔ-* ‘drink’, which has perfective morphology, is marked with the ergative in (14)a. However, the agents of the verb *thaʔ-* ‘drink’ with realis morphology indicating habitual or progressive aspectual senses are marked with ergative and nominative in (14)b and (14)c, respectively.

- (14) a. tombā=na curup amā thaʔ-le
 Tomba=ERG cigarette one drink-ANT.REAL
 ‘Tomba has smoked a cigarette.’ (Manipuri)
- b. tombā=na curup thaʔ-i
 Tomba=ERG cigarette drink-REAL
 ‘Tomba smokes cigarettes.’ (Manipuri)
- c. tombā curup amā thaʔ-i
 Tomba cigarette one drink-REAL
 ‘Tomba is smoking a cigarette.’ (Manipuri)

In Nepali the agents of transitive verbs are obligatorily marked with the ergative case if the verbal morphology is past or perfective. However, in Manipuri the semantic notion of volitionality determines the case on the subject of a transitive verb if the verb has past time reference. Bhat and Ningomba (1997, 104) note that the ergative entails a volitional act and the nominative entails a non-volitional act on the part of the subject. They provide the minimal pair in (15) as an illustration.

- (15) a. ai=na tebal=da theŋ-i
 Pron.1SG=ERG table=LOC touch-REAL
 ‘I touched the table (volitionally).’ (Manipuri)
- b. ai tebal=da theŋ-i
 Pron.1SG table=LOC touch-REAL
 ‘I touched the table (involuntarily).’ (Manipuri)

In both Nepali and Manipuri inanimate subjects such as natural forces of transitive verbs obligatorily receive ergative case. In such contexts the tense/aspect morphology of the verb does not determine the choice of case on subjects. This is illustrated in (16) and (17).

- (16) a. bhuĩcālā=le ghar bhatkā-yo
 earthquake=ERG house collapse-PST.3SG
 ‘The earthquake collapsed houses.’ (Nepali)
- b. bhuĩcālā=le ghar bhatkā-cha
 earthquake=ERG house collapse-NPST.3SG
 ‘The earthquake collapses houses.’ (Nepali)
- (17) a. noᅇlainuᅇsit=na yum mayām thudek-le
 wind storm=ERG house many break-ANT.REAL
 ‘The wind-storm broke many houses.’ (Manipuri)
- b. noᅇlainuᅇsit=na yum mayām thudek-ka-ni
 wind storm=ERG house many break-IRR-COP
 ‘The wind-storm will break many houses.’ (Manipuri)
- c. noᅇlainuᅇsit=na yum thudek-i
 wind storm=ERG house break-IRR
 ‘The wind-storm breaks houses.’ (Manipuri)

Sharma (1987, 147) states that the ergative in Manipuri is obligatory for the subject of causative verbs, no matter whether the verbal morphology is perfective or imperfective. In the examples below, the sentences (18)b and (18)c, which are in perfective and in imperfective aspects respectively, are the causative forms of (18)a.

- (18) a. mināi kap-pe
 servant weep-ANT.REAL
 ‘The servant wept.’ (Manipuri)
- b. ma-pu-du=na mināi=du kap-hal-le
 3SG-master-DET.DST=ERG servant-DET.DST weep-CAUS-ANT.REAL
 ‘The master made the servant weep.’ (Manipuri)
- c. ma-pu-du=na mināi=du kap-hal-li
 3SG-master-DET.DST=ERG servant-DET.DST weep-CAUS-REAL
 ‘The master makes the servant weep.’ (Manipuri)

Chelliah (1997, 111–112) also provides similar examples, as illustrated in (19).⁶

- (19) a. ma-pā=na dāktar=bu mā=gi ma-cā nu-pi-du
 3SG-father=ERG doctor=ACC 3SG=GEN 3SG-small person-FEM-DST.DET
 lāi-yeᅇhal-li
 disease-look-CAUS-REAL
 ‘The father makes the doctor treat his daughter.’ (Manipuri)
- b. ma-pā=na tomba=da mā=gi ma-cā nu-pi-du
 3SG-father=ERG Tomba=LOC 3SG=GEN 3SG-small person-FEM-DST.DET
 lāi-yeᅇhal-le
 disease-look-CAUS-ANT.REAL
 ‘Her father made Tomba treat his daughter.’ (Manipuri)

The ergative marking is also associated with several modal senses. One of the ways of expressing

⁶Chelliah (1997) uses the term agentive, instead of ergative.

modality in Nepali is with the light verb *par-* ‘fall’ and the main verb in the *-nu* infinitive form.⁷ The obligation sense is available only with the subject in ergative case. The same sentence with nominative subject expresses the desire of the speaker. Consider the minimal pair in (20) from Pokharel (1998, 166).

- (20) a. mai=le jā-nu par-yo
 Pron1SG=ERG go-INF fall-PST.3SG
 ‘I must/ have to go.’ (Nepali)
- b. ma jā-nu par-yo
 Pron.1SG go-INF fall-PST.3SG
 ‘I wish to go.’ (Nepali)

In Manipuri the ergative-nominative alternation entails different modal sense as well. In the following near minimal pair in (21), the speaker expresses prior fixed and planned activities of the referent. In (21)a the speaker is certain that the activity takes place at the scheduled place and time. On the other hand, such planned activity is not inferred from (21)b.

- (21) a. binodini=na olimpik=ta hoki s̄ana-ga-ni
 Binodini=ERG olimpik=LOC hockey play-IRR.COP
 ‘Binidini will certainly play hockey in the Olympics.’ (Manipuri)
- b. binodini hoki s̄ana-ga-ni
 Binodini hockey play-IRR.COP
 ‘Binidini will play hockey.’ (Manipuri)

In Nepali, ergative and nominative are said to be used to contrast the pragmatic notions of focus and topic (Bickel 2013). Bickel argues that the nominative-ergative alternation on the subjects *mero s̄athii* ‘my friend’ in (22)a and *karmi-haru* ‘the workmen’ in (22)b is because of the topic and focus status of the respective subjects.

- (22) a. mero s̄athi momo khāi-rahe-cha
 my friend Tibetan dumplings eat-IPFV-NPST.3SG
 ‘My friend is eating *momos* (Tibetan dumplings).’ (Nepali)
- b. bāhira ke=ko khalbal
 outside what=GEN noise
 karmi-haru=le chāno hāli-rahe-chan
 worker-PL=ERG roof lay-IPFV-NPST.3PL
 ‘What is the noise outside? — It is the workmen laying the roof.’ (Nepali)

However, all subject arguments with topic status do not receive nominative case. The subject argument *mauri* ‘honey-bee’ in example (23), taken from a school textbook, fulfills the criterion of the topic status i.e., an anchoring point for the new information (Lambrecht 1994), but it takes an ergative case. This indicates that in Nepali the topic status of subject argument does not determine nominative vs. ergative case marking.

⁷A light verb is the second verb in a sequence of at least two verbs, where the first verb is the main predicating verb and the second verb, although homophonous with an independent verb in the language, does not appear with its primary lexical meaning and it occurs in the sequence to mark different meanings such as aspectual, modal or attitudinal.

- (23) mauri=le āphno kām ucit samaya=mā gar-chan
 honey-bee=ERG RFLX work right time=LOC do-NPST.3PL
 ‘Honey-bees perform their duties in time.’ (Nepali)

For Manipuri, Bhat and Ningomba (1997, 143) argue that the ergative has extended its use to denote the contrastive focus that distinguishes a pragmatically marked context from a pragmatically unmarked one. The minimal pair in (24) illustrates the contrast.

- (24) a. ai mā=bu yeṅ-e
 Pron.1SG Pron.3SG=LOC see-ANT.REAL
 ‘I looked at him.’ (Manipuri)
- b. ai=na mā=bu yeṅ-e
 Pron.1SG=ERG Pron.3SG=LOC see-ANT.REAL
 ‘I looked at him (but others did not).’ (Manipuri)

Chelliah (1997) also distinguishes two uses of =na in Manipuri: the agentive (=ergative) use and the contrastive use. She argues that the lexical semantics of the verb subcategorizes for the agentive use and the contrastive use is signaled by pragmatic information. In the following examples, she glosses the causer arguments *Chaoba* in (25)a and *Tomba* in (25)b as agentive and contrastive respectively and the causee argument *nupā* ‘person’ in (25)b as agentive (Chelliah 1997, 123). I consider that the causer arguments in these examples receive ergative case, but that the causee argument in (25)b receives instrumental case, which Chelliah glosses as agentive.⁸

- (25) a. cāoba=na aṅāṅ-du ṅaw-hal-lam-mi
 chaoba=ERG child-DST.DET white-CAUS-PFV-REAL
 ‘Chaoba caused the child to appear fair (by powdering her face).’ (Manipuri)
- b. tomba=na lāirik-tu nu-pā-du=na pā-hal-lam-mi
 Tomba=ERG book-DST.DET person male-DST.DET=INS read-CAUS-PFV-REAL
 ‘Tomba made the man read the book.’ (Manipuri)

Chelliah (2009) argues that the agents of non-stative verbs are marked in those instances where the speaker wishes to indicate the involvement of agent in a noteworthy or unexpected instance of an activity, as in (26)a, and that subjects of states receive contrastive focus if marked with =na as in (26)b.^{9,10} She argues that in (26)a the agent *Tomba* receives ergative case because the speaker took *Tomba* to be a vegetarian so that *Tomba*’s eating meat is unexpected.

- (26) a. tomba=na sā cā-i
 Tomba=ERG meat eat-REAL
 ‘Tomba ate meat.’ (Manipuri)
- b. ai=na rām=da nuṣi-i
 Pron.1SG=ERG Ram=LOC love-REAL
 ‘I — not you — love Ram.’ (Manipuri)

In Nepali, as noted by Pokharel (1998, 157), the subjects of intransitive verbs referring to body function of emission such as ‘cough’, ‘spit’, ‘urinate’, ‘vomit’ always receive ergative case if the verbal

⁸In (25)b the causee argument *nupā* ‘person’ receives instrumental case marking. This is a common feature of South Asian languages and a feature that has been common since the time of Classical Sanskrit (Hock 1991).

⁹I do not see any reason to consider the sentence in (26)b to necessarily contain a contrastive focus because it is equally suitable to just mean ‘I love Ram’. Section 4 provides some discussion on ergative and stative predicates.

¹⁰However, Chelliah’s (2009) observations cannot be extended if the sentences have present time reference. I discuss this and related issues in next section.

morphology is perfective. The examples in (27) from Pokharel (1998, 166) are illustrative.

- (27) a. bhāi=le chād-yo
 brother=ERG vomit-PST.3SG
 ‘The brother vomited.’ (Nepali)
- b. mai=le khok-ẽ
 Pron.1SG=ERG cough-PST.1SG
 ‘I coughed.’ (Nepali)

This section has shown that the distribution of the ergative in Nepali and in Manipuri is both obligatory (syntactic) and optional (semantic). It is obligatory on the subject of a transitive verb that inflects for past tense or perfective aspect. On the other hand, it alternates with nominative case on the subject of a transitive verb inflecting for non-past tense or progressive aspect in Nepali and realis mood in Manipuri. Ergative is also found with modal senses of obligation in Nepali and with planned activity on the part of referent in Manipuri, respectively. In Manipuri, the ergative-nominative alternation also distinguishes volitional and non-volitional acts on the part of the subject. In Nepali, there is a small set of intransitive predicates denoting body functions (‘cough’, ‘urinate’, ‘vomit’, etc.) that require ergative case on their subjects.

In addition to these, the following type of contrast is also coded by a ergative-nominative alternation both in Nepali and in Manipuri:

- (28) a. harke=le nepāl bhāsā jān-da-cha
 Harke=ERG Nepal Bhasa know-IPFV-NPST.3SG
 ‘Harke knows Nepal Bhasa.’ (Nepali)
- b. harke sabhā=mā bol-cha
 Harke meeting=LOC speak-NPST.3SG
 ‘Harke will speak in the meeting. (≠Harke speaks in meetings).’ (Nepali)
- (29) a. māibi=na lāiharāoba jagoi ha-i
 shaman=ERG Laiharaoba dance know-REAL
 ‘The shaman knows the Laiharaoba dance.’ (Manipuri)
- b. māibi lāiharāoba jagoi sā-i
 shamans Laiharaoba dance make-REAL
 ‘Shamans dance/are dancing the Laiharaoba dance.’ (Manipuri)

Native speakers of both Nepali and Manipuri agree that such an ergative-nominative alternation exists, but they fail to suggest the exact semantic contrast coded by the case alternation on the subjects. I suggest the difference lies in individual-level vs. stage-level predications. This aspect of ergative semantics in Nepali and Manipuri linguistics has so far not received much attention and has not been fully understood. Therefore, the systematic investigation of this aspect of the ergative in Nepali and in Manipuri is the main concern of this paper.

4 Stage vs. Individual-level Distinction

This section begins with discussions of the stage/individual-level predication distinction. Based on the theoretical distinction of stage-level vs. individual-level distinction, I establish the case for a stage vs. individual-level distinction in Nepali and Manipuri copular sentences because the distinction is more salient in this sentence type. Since the copulas are not available for stage-level and individual-level distinction in non-copular sentences, I demonstrate that both Nepali and Manipuri employ the nominative-ergative alternation to distinguish stage-level predication from the individual-level predication, but only if the verbal morphology is non-past in Nepali and denotes present time

reference in Manipuri. Milsark (1977) distinguished two types of predicates—state-descriptive and property predicates. A state-descriptive predicate denotes states, conditions in which an entity finds itself and which are subject to change without their being any essential alternation of the entity. On the other hand, a property predicate denotes properties of the entities. Property predicates describe some traits possessed by the entity, which are assumed to be more or less permanent, or at least to be such that some significant change in the character of the entity will result if the description is altered (as cited in Kearns 2003). Carlson (1977) analyzed property predicates as individual-level predicates and state-descriptive predicates as stage-level predicates. He argued that an individual-level predicate is true throughout the existence of an individual. On the other hand, a stage-level predicate is true of a temporal stage of its subject. For example:

- (30) a. Individual-level predicate
 John is intelligent.
 b. Stage-level predicate
 John is hungry.

According to Carlson, the property of John’s intelligence lasts his entire lifespan, but this is not the case with the property ‘hungry’ because John’s state of being hungry lasts a certain amount of time i.e., when he eats, he does not remain hungry anymore. Carlson’s terminology for the distinction has become standard. Since Carlson’s (1977) study different diagnostics have been developed to distinguish a stage-level predicate from an individual-level one. Based on Chierchia (1995), the stage-level predicates, not individual-level ones, are compatible with temporal adverbials, locatives, perception sentences, and *there*-sentences:

- (31) (In)compatibility with individual/stage-level predicates (Chierchia 1995, 177–179)
- a. **Temporal adverbials:**
 *John was tall yesterday/ a month ago/ last year. (Individual-level)
 John was drunk yesterday/ a month ago/ last year. (Stage-level)
 - b. **Locatives:**
 *John is intelligent in France. (Individual-level)
 John is sick in France. (Stage-level)
 - c. **Perception sentences:**
 *I saw John tall. (Individual-level)
 I saw John drunk. (Stage-level)
 - d. **There-sentences:**
 *There are two men intelligent. (Individual-level)
 There are two men drunk. (Stage-level)

Chierchia (1995, 179) further argues that individual-level predicates select the universal or generic readings of bare plurals (32)a, but stage-level predicates select existential ones (32)b.

- (32) a. Dogs hate cats. (Individual-level)
 b. Dogs are barking in the courtyard. (Stage-level)

Kratzer (1995) notes that clauses headed by an individual-level predicate cannot serve as the restrictor in *when*-conditionals, provided its arguments are definite.

- (33) a. *When John knows Latin, he always knows it well,
 b. When John speaks Latin, he always speaks it well.

Krifka et al. (1995) argue that generic sentences are generalization over particular objects or particular events or facts.¹¹ In the case of an NP argument, the generic reading implies a “kind” denoting

¹¹Following Chierchia (1995), I take all individual-level predications to be generics.

interpretation (Carlson 1977), while the non-generic reading implies an “object” denoting interpretation. In case of predicates, the generic reading contrasts with an episodic reading. The set of sentences in (34) from Krifka et al. (1995) illustrates these possibilities.

- (34) a. The potato was first cultivated in South America. (Kind denoting NP; episodic predicate)
 b. John smokes a cigar after dinner. (Object denoting NP; generic predicate)
 c. The potato is highly digestible. (Kind denoting NP; generic predicate)

The definite singular NP *the potato* receives an episodic interpretation in (34)a but a generic one in (34)c. The predicate *smokes* in (34)b is generic (characterizing) because it is a generalization over several episodic events of *John’s smoking*. The predicate *be highly digestible* in (34)c is generic because it is lexically stative. A sentence in which the predicate is generic is called a characterizing sentence. A characterizing sentence stands in contrast to a particular sentence that has an episodic predicate, i.e., the potato being first cultivated in (34)a.

All characterizing sentences have generic interpretation and all individual-level predicates, as argued by Chierchia (1995), are inherently generics. Hence, a characterizing sentence has individual-level interpretation. The key properties that bind Milsark’s (1977) property predicates, Carlson’s (1977) individual-level predicates and Krifka et al’s (1995) characterizing sentences are as in (35).

- (35) **Common properties of property, individual-level predicates and characterizing sentences:**
 a. The verbal predicate describes an “essential” property of some entity mentioned in the sentence.
 b. The verbal predicate is stative and it expresses a property of the referent and it never reports a specific event.
 c. The verbal predicate requires strong NPs as subjects.¹²

4.1 The copulas and stage/individual-level distinction

In many South Asian languages, two different forms of the verbs for ‘be’ express the distinction between individual-level and stage-level interpretation (Mahapatra 2002). For example, Oriya, an Indo-Aryan language of eastern India, has two different forms of the verb for ‘be’ to express individual-level and stage-level predications. The Oriya verbs *aṭ-*‘be’ and *ach-* ‘be’ express individual-level and stage-level predications, respectively.

- (36) a. *rām mo=ra bhāi aṭ-e*
 Ram.NOM my=GEN brother COP-PRS.3SG
 ‘Ram is my brother.’ (Oriya; Mahapatra 2002, 17–18)
 b. *rām ghar=e ach-i*
 Ram home=LOC COP-PRS.3SG
 ‘Ram is at home.’ (Oriya; Mahapatra 2002, 17–18)

In Nepali, the copula verbs *ho* and *cha* have individual-level and stage-level interpretations, respectively, as shown in (37).

- (37) a. *sarubhakta kabi hun*
 sarubhakta poet COP.NPST.3SG.HON
 ‘Sarubhakta is a poet.’ (Nepali)

¹²A strong NP has definite referential expression, i.e., names and definite pronouns. It can be modified by presuppositional determiners such as *every*, *the*, *most*, *all* and it refers to a referent familiar in the discourse context. On the other hand, a weak NP has cardinal pronominals such as *one*, *a*, *few*, etc. and can take a cardinal determiner.

- b. sarubhakta khusi chan
 sarubhakta happy COP.NPST.3SG.HON
 ‘Saru Bhakta is happy today.’ (Nepali)

Similarly, the Manipuri copula *ni* encodes individual-level and the other copula *lai* expresses stage-level interpretation, as illustrated in (38).

- (38) a. tomba ojā ni
 Tomba teacher COP.REAL
 ‘Tomba is a teacher.’ (Manipuri)
- b. tomba ma-yum=da lai
 Tomba 3SG-house=LOC COP.REAL
 ‘Tomba is at home.’ (Manipuri)

As in (31) above, it has been established that the individual-level predicates are ruled out as predicates of perception verbs. Accordingly, the predicates in the (a) sentences of (37)–(38) are ruled out when used as the complements of perception verbs because they have individual-level interpretations (39), whereas the predicates in the (b) sentences of (37)–(38) can function as the complements of perception verbs because they have a stage-level interpretation (39).

- (39) a. *mai=le sarubhakta=lāi kabi dekh-ē
 1SG=ERG sarubhakta=DAT poet see-PST.1SG
 ‘*I saw Sarubhakta a poet.’ (Nepali)
- b. *ai=na tomba=da ojā ui
 1SG=ERG Tomba=LOC teacher see.REAL
 ‘*I saw Tomba a teacher.’ (Manipuri)
- (40) a. mai=le sarubhakta=lāi khusi dekh-ē
 1SG=ERG sarubhakta=DAT happy see-PST.1SG
 ‘I saw Sarubhakta happy.’ (Nepali)
- b. ai=na tomba ma-yum=da ui
 1SG=ERG Tomba 3SG-house=LOC see.REAL
 ‘I saw Tomba in his house.’ (Manipuri)

The insertion of spatio-temporal adverbs turns the (a) sentences in (37)–(38) ungrammatical because of their individual-level status (41), whereas the (b) sentences in (37)–(38) accept such adverbs because of their stage-level status (42).

- (41) a. *sarubhakta āja pokharā=mā kabi hun
 sarubhakta today Pokhara=LOC poet COP.NPST.3SG.HON
 ‘*Today Sarubhakta is a poet in Pokhara.’ (Nepali)
- b. *bhariyā āja yahā parisrami hun-chan
 laborers today here hard-working COP.NPST.3PL
 ‘*Today labors are hard-working here.’ (Nepali)
- c. tomba ṅasi imphāl=da ojā ni
 Tomba today Imphal=LOC teacher COP.REAL
 ‘*Today Tomba is a teacher in Imphal.’ (Manipuri)

- (42) a. sarubhakta āja pokharā=mā khusi chan
 sarubhakta today Pokhara=LOC happy COP.NPST.3SG.HON
 ‘Today Sarubhakta is happy in Pokhara.’ (Nepali)
- b. *bhariyā āja yahā upalabdha chan
 Labors today here available COP.NPST.3PL
 ‘Today laborers are available here.’ (Nepali)
- c. tomba ṅasi ma-yum=da lai
 Tomba today 3SG-house=LOC COP.REAL
 ‘Tomba is at home.’ (Manipuri)

Hence, these diagnostics establish that in Nepali and Manipuri the distinction between stage-level and individual-level is grammatically encoded.

4.2 The ergative and individual-level predicate correlation

The previous section has established that the different forms of copula verbs and generic or existential interpretation of the referent lead to stage-level vs. individual-level interpretation in Nepali and Manipuri. But the non-copular i.e., action sentences lack copula verbs for this distinction. In that case, case marking is employed to distinguish the individual-level predicates from stage-level predicates. Considering the ergative-nominative case alternation in (28) and (29), I hypothesize the correlation in (43).

- (43) The ergative is correlated with individual-level interpretation and the nominative with the stage-level interpretation.

4.2.1 Ergativity, Stative predicates and individual-level predication

Stative verbs such as *know*, *resemble*, *weigh*, *believe*, etc.¹³ have individual-level interpretation and non-stative verbs such as *speak*, *dance*, *run*, etc. have stage-level interpretation (Carlson 1977). In (28) and (29), I have noted that the agents of stative predicates such as *jān-* ‘know’ in Nepali and *hai-* ‘know’ in Manipuri get the ergative case and the agents of non-stative predicates such as *bol-* ‘speak’ and *sā-* ‘make’ in Manipuri have nominative. The examples are repeated in (44) and (45).

- (44) a. harke=le nepāl bhāsā jān-da-cha
 Harke=ERG Nepal Bhasa know-IPFV-NPST.3SG
 ‘Harke knows Nepal Bhasa.’ (Nepali)
- b. harke sabhā=mā bol-cha
 Harke meeting=LOC speak-NPST.3SG
 ‘Harke will speak in the meeting. (≠Harke speaks in meetings).’ (Nepali)

¹³I am aware that the English stative verbs like *know* can be translated with different verbs depending on different contexts, e.g., the verb *know* in the phrase *know a person* translates to *cin-* in Nepali and *khaij* in Manipuri and the verb *know* in the phrase *know English* translates to *jān-* in Nepali and *hai-* in Manipuri. Very often the verbs *cin-* in Nepali and *khaij-* in Manipuri are interpreted as inchoative because they are often translated into English as ‘recognize’. However, these verbs only have a stative sense if the verbal morphology is non-past/imperfective. In this sense, the subjects of these verbs take ergative case because of their individual level interpretation.

i. rām=le ma=lāi cin-cha
 Ram=ERG 1SG=ACC know-NPST.3SG
 ‘Ram knows me.’ (Nepali)

ii. tomba=na ai khaij-ṅji
 Tomba=ERG 1SG know-REAL
 ‘Tomba knows me.’ (Manipuri)

Here I am not dealing with the inchoative sense of these verbs.

- (45) a. māibi=na lāiharāoba jagoi ha-i
 shaman=ERG Laiharaoba dance know-REAL
 ‘The shaman knows the Laiharaoba dance.’ (Manipuri)
- b. māibi lāiharāoba jagoi s̄a-i
 shamans Laiharaoba dance make-REAL
 ‘Shamans dance/are dancing the Laiharaoba dance.’ (Manipuri)

Note that the (a) sentences in (44) and (45) have ergative case, but the (b) sentences in (44) and (45) have nominative case on their subjects in spite of same transitivity status and tense-aspect morphology. I attribute this distinction to the individual-level and stage-level interpretations of these sentences. The individual-level status of Nepali verb *jān-* ‘know’ and Manipuri verb *hai-* ‘know’ can be established through the following diagnostics. The (a) sentences in (44) and (45) pass the diagnostic tests for individual-level and (b) sentences for stage-level. Only the (b) sentences, not the (a) sentences, in (44) and (45) accept spatio-temporal adverbs.

- (46) a. *harke=le āja nepāl bhāsā jān-da-cha
 Harke=ERG today Nepal Bhasa know-IPFV-NPST.3SG
 ‘*Harke knows Nepal Bhasa today.’ (Nepali)
- b. harke āja sabhā=mā nepali bol-cha
 Harke today meeting=LOC Nepali speak-NPST.3SG
 ‘Harke will speak Nepali in the meeting today.’ (Nepali)
- (47) a. *māibi=na ṅasi lāiharāoba jagoi ha-i
 shaman=ERG today Laiharaoba dance know-REAL
 ‘*The shaman knows the Laiharaoba dance today.’ (Manipuri)
- b. māibi ṅasi lāiharāoba jagoi s̄a-i
 shamans today Laiharaoba dance make-REAL
 ‘Shamans are dancing the Laiharaoba dance today.’ (Manipuri)

Kratzer (1995) argues that transitive *when*-conditionals need to have at least one of their arguments be non-specific in individual-level predications. This can be used as a diagnostic for the distinction between stage and individual-level predications. The sentences in (48) are thus ruled in, but the sentences in (49) are ruled out. The sentences in (48) have one non-specific argument of the conditional clause (Newars and Shamans, respectively), whereas the sentences in (49) have both the arguments in conditional clause be specific (*Harke/Nepali* and *Carulata/Laiharaoba dance*, respectively).

- (48) a. newār=le nepāl bhāsā jān-dā rāmrari jān-da-cha
 Newar=ERG Nepal Bhasa know-IPFV well know-IPFV-NPST.3PL
 ‘When Newars know Nepal Bhasa, they know it well.’ (Nepali)
- b. māibi=na lāiharāoba jagoi hai-ba kānda phajana hai-i
 shaman=ERG Laharaoba dance know-INF when well know-REAL
 ‘When shamans know Laiharaoba dance, they know it well.’ (Manipuri)
- (49) a. *harke=le nepali jān-dā rāmrari jān-da-cha
 Harke=ERG Nepali know-IPFV well know-IPFV-NPST.3SG
 ‘*When Harke knows Nepali, he knows it well.’ (Nepali)

- b. *cārulata=na lāiharāoba jagoi hai-ba kānda phajana hai-i
 Carulata=ERG Laharaoba dance know-INF when well know-REAL
 ‘*When Carulata knows the Laiharaoba dance, she knows it well.’ (Manipuri)

This test establishes that the Nepali predicate ‘know a language’ (44)a, and Manipuri predicate ‘know a dance’ (45)a are individual-level predicates. As expected by (43), the subjects of these predicates are marked with the ergative.

4.2.2 Ergativity, generic reference and individual-level predications

Note that the previous section demonstrated Nepali verbs like *jān-* ‘know’ and Manipuri verbs like *hai-* ‘know’ are individual-level predicates. In contrast, Nepali verbs like *bol-* ‘speak’ and Manipuri verbs like *jagoi sā-* ‘dance a dance’ are stage-level predicates. However, an inherently stage-level predicate such as *bol-* ‘speak’ and *jagoi sā-* ‘dance a dance’ can have stage-level or individual-level interpretation depending on the generic or existential interpretation of its referent arguments. Carlson (1977) has argued that NPs with generic reference are the arguments of individual-level predicates by default. Kearns (2003, 621) has also noted that strong subjects and generic nouns correlate with individual-level predicates. Note that the subjects in the (a) sentences in (50) and (51) have generic reference and the subjects in the (b) sentences (50) and (51) have existential reference.¹⁴

- (50) a. newār=le (*āja) nepāli bol-chan
 Newar=ERG (*today) Nepali speak-NPST.3PL
 ‘(All) Newars speak Nepali (*today).’ (Nepali)
- b. newār (āja) nepāli bol-chan
 Newar (today) Nepali speak-NPST.3PL
 ‘(Some) Newars will speak Nepali (today).’ (Nepali)
- (51) a. māibi=na (*ṅasi) lāiharāoba jagoi sā-i
 shaman=ERG (*today) Laiharaoba dance dance-REAL
 ‘(All) shamans dance Laiharaoba dance (*today).’ (Manipuri)
- b. māibi (ṅasi) lāiharāoba jagoi sā-i
 shaman (today) Laiharaoba dance dance-REAL
 ‘(Some) shamans danced Laiharaoba dance (today).’ (Manipuri)

The (a) sentences in (50) and (51) have individual-level interpretation as shown by the fact that these sentences do not accept the temporal adverb ‘today’. As expected, the ergative case on the subjects marks the individual-level status of these sentences. This is evident since when we exchange the ergative case with the nominative one, the subject NPs have existential interpretation leading to the stage-level status of the (b) sentences in (50) and (51). This reasoning is further supported by the acceptability of the temporal adverb ‘today’ in these sentences. Carlson (1977) observes that the plural forms of indefinite singular nouns that appear with weak determiners like *a/an* express existential reference. However, the singular forms of plural nouns with generic reference appear with strong determiners such as *the*. As both Nepali and Manipuri do not have an overt strong determiner such as English *the*, the NPs with generic reference appear with ergative marking (52). Both in Nepali and in Manipuri the singular form of NPs with existential reference is expressed with *ek* ‘one’ and *amā* ‘one’, respectively (53).¹⁵

¹⁴Carlson (1977) distinguishes between generic and existential reference. The generic reference works akin to a universal quantifier, although it admits exceptions, and it appears to have the force of *most*, whereas the existential reference lacks the universal flavor of the generic reference and appears to have the force of *some*.

¹⁵Nepali has an inflectional plural exponent only with o-ending nouns e.g., *keṭo* ‘boy’ vs. *keṭā* ‘boys’. With other

- (52) a. *rāuṭe=le (*āja) jaṅgal=ko kandamul khān-cha*
 Raute=ERG (*today) forest=GEN edible eat-NPST.3SG
 ‘The Raute eats edibles of the forest (*today).’ (Nepali)
- b. *māibi=na (*ṅasi) lāiharāoba jagoi s̄a-i*
 shaman=ERG (*today) Laiharaoba dance dance-REAL
 ‘The shaman dances the Laiharaoba dance (*today).’¹⁶ (Manipuri)
- (53) a. *ek-ṭā rāuṭe (āja) jaṅgal=ko kandamul khān-cha*
 one-CLF Raute (today) forest=GEN edible eat-NPST.3SG
 ‘A (particular) Raute will eat edibles of the forest (today).’ (Nepali)
- b. *māibi amā (ṅasi) lāiharāoba jagoi s̄a-i*
 shaman one (today) Laiharaoba dance dance-REAL
 ‘A (particular) shaman danced/ is dancing the Laiharaoba dance (today).’ (Manipuri)

The distinction between the sentences in (52) and the sentences in (53) is significant. The subject NPs in (53) have existential interpretation because they can be modified with cardinal numbers such as ‘two’, e.g., *two Rautes* or *two shamans*; whereas the subject NPs in (52) cannot be similarly modified. Following Kearns (2003), I argue that the transitive predicates *khā* ‘eat’ in Nepali (52)a and *jagoi sa-* ‘dance’ in Manipuri (52)b have individual-level interpretation for the subject NPs because these have generic interpretation. On the other hand, the same predicates in (53) have a stage-level interpretation because of the existential reference of the subject NPs. Both Nepali and Manipuri encode this distinction through the ergative-nominative alternation.

The discussion so far shows that a predicate along with its arguments determines its stage-level or individual-level interpretation. The individual-level interpretation of human generic subject NPs in (52) also applies with respect to abstract and inanimate subject NPs, as shown in (54).

- (54) *hāwā=le lugā sukāũ-cha*
 wind=ERG washing dry-NPST.3SG
 ‘The wind dries the washing.’ (Nepali)

However, the ergative marking on the subject of the sentence in (54) and the nominative marking on the subject of (53)a and (55)b have been explained differently in literature. Bickel (2013) argues that the A arguments of transitive verbs receive ergative marking in non-past contexts if this argument is an A-low argument and nominative marking if this argument is an A-high argument. An A-high or an A-low argument is determined on the basis of a person and animacy hierarchy called ‘hierarchy of inherent lexical content’ (Silverstein 1976, 113). According to this hierarchy, human nouns are prototypically agentive and receive the default nominative case. These are termed as A-high arguments. On the other hand, inanimate nouns prototypically function as patient arguments. When prototypical patient arguments function as A-arguments of transitive verbs, they get a marked case, in this case an ergative one. These are termed as A-low argument. However, this explanation does not seem to be valid because we have sentences as in (55)a with A-high arguments with ergative case.

nouns a clitic-like morpheme *=haru* is added for plural marking, but it actually has a meaning of denoting the referent and others, e.g., *āmā=haru* means ‘mother and father, aunts, sisters, etc.’, not simply mothers. Similarly, Manipuri does not have an inflectional plural marker on either nouns or verbs. Grammar books often gloss as plural the morphemes *siy* (for non-humans, e.g., *lārik-siy* ‘book-PL’) and *-khoi* (for human nouns, e.g. *imā-khoi* ‘mother-PL’). However, these morphemes more often have the meaning of ‘N and others’ i.e., *lārik-siy* actually means ‘books and other such things like pens, pencils, etc.’ and *imā-khoi* actually means ‘mother and father, sisters, aunts, etc. Hence, the bare plural ‘shamans’ and the generic ‘shaman’ are realized by identical forms in Manipuri.

¹⁶The sentence is ambiguous between the readings of past time and present time references. The temporal adverb ‘today’ is, of course, only compatible with present time reference.

- (55) a. *rām=le (*āja) lugā sukāũ-cha*
 Ram=ERG (*today) washing dry-NPST.3SG
 ‘Ram dries washing (*today).’ (Nepali)
- b. *rām (āja) lugā sukāũ-cha*
 Ram (today) washing dry-NPST.3SG
 ‘Ram will dry washing (today).’ (Nepali)

Under the analysis proposed in this paper, Nepali requires the ergative marking in non-past contexts when an individual-level predication is to be expressed. This is the case in (55)a, where an appropriate context would be one in which Ram works in a laundry and his job is to dry washings. In contrast, the nominative is used to signal stage-level predications as in (55)b. The stage vs. individual-level readings are further confirmed by the acceptability of the temporal adverb ‘today’ in (55)b and its non-acceptability in (55)a.

4.2.3 Ergativity, characterizing predicates and individual-level predications

A characterizing predicate corresponds to an individual-level predicate (Krifka et al. 1995). A characterizing predicate predicates its referents as a whole and describes the more permanent traits or property of the referents. Consider the Manipuri sentences in (56).

- (56) a. *hui=na khoŋ-i*
 dog=ERG bark-REAL
 ‘The dog barks (=Dogs bark).’ (Manipuri)
- b. *hui-du thau-i*
 dog-DET.DIST attack-REAL
 ‘That dog attacks.’ (Manipuri)

The important point to note here is that the predicate ‘barking’ describes the inherent property of the referent ‘dogs’. If dogs do not bark, they cease to be dogs at least in our concept of dogs. However, such a characterizing property is not predicated in (56)b because if a dog stops attacking someone it is still a dog. Such predicates are called episodic. As has been noted before, the arguments of an individual-level predicates have generic reference, this is also true for the arguments of characterizing predicates. However, the argument of a characterizing predicate need not be generic.

- (57) *cāme=le gauthali=lāi gāli gar-cha*
 Chame=ERG Gauthali=DAT abuse do-NPST.3SG
 ‘Chame abuses Gauthali.’ (Nepali)

A sentence like (57) expresses a generalization over a series of ‘Chame abusing Gauthali’ events, and this has become a part of their life. Both the arguments Chame and Gauthali are specific but the predicate is non-distributive, which leads to an individual-level interpretation. Note that temporally non-distributive predicates are classed as individual-level for the event (Kearns 2003, 596). But once we change the temporally non-distributive event into a temporally distributive one with an ‘in process progressive’ interpretation as in (58), the sentence ceases to have an individual-level interpretation. As expected by (43), the agent is marked nominative in this case.

- (58) *cāme gauthali=lāi gāli gar-dai-cha*
 Chame Gauthali=DAT abuse do-PROG-NPST.3SG
 ‘Chame is abusing Gauthali.’ (Nepali)

A similar explanation holds for the Manipuri data. Let’s consider some examples from real life situations. For example, take a situation in which a person named Yaswant is a professor of linguistics at Manipur University. In this case (59)a is appropriate. Similarly, if Sri Biren is a well-known

Manipuri poet, (59)b is appropriate. And if Mary Kom is a well-known sports personality, (59)c is appropriate.

- (59) a. yasawanta=na liṅwistik tāʔ-i
 Yasawanta=ERG linguistics teach-REAL
 ‘Yasawanta teaches linguistics.’ (Manipuri)
- b. srī biren=na saireṅ í-i
 Sri Biren=ERG poem write-REAL
 ‘Sri Biren writes poems.’ (Manipuri)
- c. meri kom=na boksiṅ sāna-i
 Mary Kom=ERG boxing play-REAL
 ‘Mary Kom plays boxing (Mary Kom is a boxer).’ (Manipuri)

Changing these temporally non-distributive predicates into temporally distributive requires nominative case on the subjects because then the individual-level interpretation is not available any more. Temporally distributive predicates are classed as stage-level.

- (60) a. yasawanta liṅwistik tāʔ-i
 Yasawanta linguistics teach-REAL
 ‘Yasawanta is teaching linguistics.’ (Manipuri)
- b. srī biren saireṅ í-i
 Sri Biren poem write-REAL
 ‘Sri Biren is writing a poem.’ (Manipuri)
- c. meri kom boksiṅ sāna-i
 Mary Kom boxing play-REAL
 ‘Mary Kom is boxing.’ (Manipuri)

Chelliah (2009, 386) argues: “. . . agents are marked in those instances where the speaker wishes to indicate agent involvement in a noteworthy or unexpected instance of an activity.” However, the sentences in (59) express usual and expected instances of activities and have marked agents. As per the hypothesis in this paper, the sentences in (59) have the ergative on their subjects because they are characterizing sentences (Krifka et al. 1995) i.e., have individual-level interpretation. On the other hand, the sentences in (60) are episodic and as expected the subjects receive nominative case.

The ergative and individual-level correlation is stronger with stative predicates. As stative verbal predicates are non-distributive, the stage-level reading is not available with them in present time reference. Consider the sentences in (61).

- (61) a. maitei=na ṅā pām-mi
 Manipuri=ERG fish like-REAL
 ‘Manipuri people like fish.’ (Manipuri)
- b. raghumani=na ibempishak nuṅsi-i
 Raghmani=ERG Ibempishak love-REAL
 ‘Raghmani loves Ibempishak.’ (Manipuri)
- c. sanamahi=na pānthoibi thāja-i
 Sanamahi=ERG Panthoibi believe-REAL
 ‘Sanamahi (a traditional religious group of Manipur) believe in Panthoibi.’ (Manipuri)

Replacing the ergative case with nominative case on the subjects of (61) makes the sentences ungrammatical. The reason is simple. In present time reference nominative is acceptable only with stage-level interpretation but stative predicates have individual-level interpretation by default. Hence, there is a contradiction. However, this has got different explanation in literature. More particularly, Chelliah (2009) argues “. . . subjects of states cannot be marked with *-nə*, but rather, receive a reading of contrastive focus if marked with *-nə*.” However, there is nothing contrastive with the subject NPs in (61) and the ergative case on these NPs is not pragmatically determined. These are different from a pragmatically focused NP as in (62).

- (62) *cāoba=na* *wāŋ-ŋi*
 Chaoba=CNTR tall-REAL
 ‘Chaoba is taller (than say Tomba)’. (Manipuri)

An appropriate context for a sentence like (62) could be: someone is talking about the height of two boys called Chaoba and Tomba and the speaker thinks Chaoba is taller than Tomba.

5 Conclusions

A closer examination of the earlier studies on ergativity in Nepali and Manipuri revealed that ergative marking on the subjects of transitive verbs with past tense or perfective aspectual morphology is fairly consistent. On the other hand, with respect to the clauses with non-past and imperfective aspectual morphology, the marking on the subjects alternates between the nominative and the ergative. This alternation is semantically oriented. In Manipuri, the semantic domains of volitionality and non-volitionality determine the marking of the ergative and the nominative respectively on the subjects of transitive verbs. Both Nepali and Manipuri distinguish modal senses with nominative and ergative alternations. Obligatory senses align with the ergative whereas the sense of desire is expressed with the nominative in Nepali. Similarly, in Manipuri, the ergative is compatible with a future planned action, whereas for an accidental future action the nominative is apt.

The ergative-nominative alternation on the subjects of transitive verbs with non-past tense and imperfective aspectual morphology in Nepali and Manipuri has been a puzzle for a long time. The data presented in this paper indicate that a great deal of the pattern can be explained with reference to the notions of stage-level vs. individual-level predication. Crosslinguistically, it has been established that stative predicates (Carlson 1977), NPs with generic reference (Kearns 2003) and characterizing predicates (Krifka et al. 1995) are prime candidates for individual-level predication. Stative predicates such as ‘know a language’ in Nepali and ‘know to dance a dance’ in Manipuri align with the ergativity. Non-stative predicates such as ‘speak’ and ‘dance’ get individual-level interpretation provided that their subject NPs have generic, non-existential reference. Both Nepali and Manipuri non-stative predicates with generic subject NPs align with the ergative, but with the nominative if the subjects have existential reference. A characterizing predicate such as one expressing an inherent property of the referent, for example such as a dog’s barking or the expression of a series of events over a long period of time aligns with the ergative. On the other hand, episodic predicates such as an attack of a dog are compatible with the nominative. The correlation of the ergative and individual-level predicates discussed in this paper, though typologically unexpected, can provide a new perspective on our understanding of the functioning of the ergative patterns of the languages of this region.

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