



Argument Marking and Ergativity in Nepali Speech from the Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

Ergativity, assigning intransitive subjects and transitive objects to the same case separately from transitive subjects, has been observed as a feature of Himalayan regional languages since at least the 1970s. However, varied ('differential') marking on transitive objects within the same case is also common in the region, and complicates case assignments and ergative classification. This study of Darjeeling Nepali provides a detailed analysis of case marking in a single dialect and reflections on the implications for ergative classification.

The study examines a corpus of 1502 Nepali speech clauses obtained from recorded narratives and conversations, and tallies marking on intransitive single argument S and transitive arguments A and O. The marking type is examined for correlation with tense/aspect, mood, and modality of the clause, as well as factors related to the argument noun phrases (NPs) such as person of A and animacy and definiteness of O arguments.

Transitivity is found to be a necessary factor for ergative marking in Nepali. Marking is obligatory in perfective transitive clauses, but variable in the imperfective. It is found to be proscribed in 1SG (first person singular) imperfective clauses. Imperfective non-1SG transitive clauses are pointed out for possible pragmatic ergative marking. Object marking is found to correlate most strongly with animacy of the O argument, but to play a role in marking definiteness, as well. Finally, a definition of ergativity which centres on differentiating A and S arguments rather than aligning S and O arguments through marking is proposed as being more helpful in analysing Nepali, and perhaps languages throughout the region and beyond.

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1 Introduction: Nepali and ergativity

1.1 Purpose and grammatical model

The purpose of this investigation is to examine argument marking in spoken Nepali in the Darjeeling Hills, and to consider the implications for classifying Nepali as an ergative language.¹ The terms and grammar model follow R. M. W. Dixon's *Basic Linguistic Theory* (2010) and *Ergativity* (1994) in respect to defining transitivity classes and naming argument types and the semantic roles they fill. Thus, a verb which has a single core, or necessary argument, is intransitive, and a transitive verb is one that sanctions two core arguments. Dixon's core argument terminology (2010:116) has become common for discussing ergativity: S (single argument) names the single core argument of an intransitive verb. A (agent) and O (object) name the two core arguments of a transitive verb, with A being the argument most responsible for the success of the action, and O being the most greatly affected. The category 'subject' refers to both A and S arguments.

1.2 Linguistic and sociolinguistic environment

Nepali is an Indo-Aryan language. It is the national language and *lingua franca* of Nepal and serves as both a mother tongue (MT) and a language of wider communication throughout the Himalayan belt, particularly eastward through parts of North India, Bhutan, and Burma. Spoken Nepali has significant contact with languages from across the Tibeto-Burman family, and with Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi and Bengali. English is also an important language across the region. Within Nepal, Nepali is a dominant cultural language through which minority Tibeto-Burman language speakers access a broader marketplace. Elsewhere, including the Darjeeling Hills, Nepali is an isolated regional language; MT Nepali speakers access government and the broader marketplace through global languages such as Hindi and English.

Not surprisingly, Nepali evidences multiple spoken varieties, with the Kathmandu variety universally considered the standard. Varieties differ in such factors as argument marking, use of honorifics, lexical inventory, and complexity of verb conjugation. This paper investigates the Darjeeling variety, spoken by nearly 1.4 million residents throughout the Indian foothills of northern West Bengal and Sikkim (Nakkeerar 2011:24). Though little documentation is available on this variety, it is a thriving mother tongue, remaining the only proficient language for most MT speakers throughout their primary school years, and often beyond. However, fewer Nepali-medium schools operate in Darjeeling today, and Nepali literacy is declining in the region. Within India, more than 50 percent of Nepali speakers are bilingual, and more than 20 percent are trilingual (Nakkeerar 2011:26).

Nepali is a verb-final language, typically placing the subject first but allowing significant flexibility in ordering the first two arguments, which speakers exploit for discourse-level meaning. Nepali employs postpositions and word-final case marking. Modifiers precede the words they modify. Verb agreement is with the subject, which may be elided. Verbal inflection is traditionally complex, agreeing in person, number, gender, tense, negation, and across four levels of honorific status (Schmidt and Dahal 1993:xiii) in the second and third persons. In the spoken Darjeeling variety, number and gender distinctions have largely been lost, as well as the highest honorific level. Much daily conversation takes place in the middle of the three remaining levels of honorifics, reserving the higher for expressions of deference and the lower for intimacy.

¹ This paper was originally submitted as a master's dissertation to Redcliffe College, UK. I would like to thank my academic advisor Phil King and field advisor Juha Yliniemi for their invaluable guidance, and my language consultant Prerna Ghimirey for her collaboration and insight.

1.3 Argument marking and ergative classification

This section will consider the concept of ergativity, highlighting the challenges posed in describing and classifying Nepali argument marking. Nepali has drawn academic interest mainly for its classification as a split-ergative language: agents of transitive clauses require the marker *-le* in the perfective aspect only, while in the imperfective aspect its use is variable. However, a fuller description of Nepali case marking proves complex, and the language poses unusual challenges to classification under existing paradigms.

Ergative-absolutive systems assign A and S arguments to different grammatical cases, and group O with S in the absolutive case. By contrast, nominative-accusative systems group A and S arguments together in the nominative case, separating O in the accusative. A tripartite system in which all three arguments take separate marking is neither nominative-accusative nor ergative-absolutive. Case assignments are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Case assignments of arguments in ergative-absolutive, nominative-accusative, and tripartite systems

ERG-ABS	Ergative A	Absolutive S, O	
NOM-ACC	Nominative A, S	Accusative O	
Tripartite	Case 1 A	Case 2 S	Case 3 O

A split-ergative language shows ergative-absolutive typology in some morphosyntactic environments and nominative-accusative or tripartite typology elsewhere. For example, case marking systems may divide based on semantic properties of argument noun phrases (NPs – person, animacy), semantic properties of verbs (e.g., agency), clause type (independent, subordinate, relative), or tense/aspect of the clause (Dixon, 1994:70–109). Aspect-based split ergativity, described above for Nepali, is well documented among Indo-Aryan languages, such as Hindi (Dixon 1994:100) and Gujarati (DeLancey 1981:628–629). DeLancey (1981:628) finds this feature in a region spanning from North India to the Caucasus.²

Split-ergative categorisation in the literature is generally based on the marking of A: where A takes non-zero marking, the marker and typology are labelled ‘ergative.’ The accepted definition of ergativity, however, hinges on shared (usually zero) marking for absolutive S and O (e.g., Dixon, 1994:1), which creates a difficulty when the marking of O varies based on separate linguistic factors. In fact, such differential object marking is a well-documented areal feature in South Asia (DeLancey 2011:11), so the difficulty extends to much of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

Nepali illustrates the problem well. A-marking varies with aspect, while O-marking depends on the semantic nature of the NP, thus moving the language in and out of alignment with the definition of ergativity throughout the ergative-perfective aspect:

² Notably, the reverse case of ergative typology in the imperfective but not the perfective aspect has never been documented. Dixon (1994:97–99) suggests an inherent correlation of S with A (nom-acc alignment) for non-completed events, which depend on the propensity of S/A to act, and S with O (erg-abs alignment) for completed events for which outcomes are most relevant.

	S-∅				
[1] ³	<i>naani-∅</i>	<i>sut-yo</i>			
	child	sleep-PST.3SG			
	‘The child fell asleep.’				
	A- <i>le</i>			O-∅	
[2]	<i>Mina-le</i>	<i>hijo</i>	<i>besi</i>	<i>gaajar-∅</i>	<i>kaṭ-yo</i>
	Mina-ERG	yesterday	many	carrot(s)-ABS	cut-PST.3SG
	‘Mina cut many carrots yesterday.’				
		A- <i>le</i>		O- <i>laai</i>	
[3]	<i>mero</i>	<i>kaka-le</i>	<i>kukur-laai</i>	<i>pit-yo</i>	
	1SG.GEN	uncle-ERG	dog-ACC	hit-PST.3SG	
	‘My uncle hit the dog.’				

The intransitive clause in [1] shows \emptyset (zero) marking for S, as expected. In perfective transitive clauses [2] and [3], A is obligatorily marked with *-le*. Yet, while [2] represents ergative-absolutive typology because O is marked like S, the animate O in [3] requires the accusative marker *-laai*, resulting in tripartite marking. Thus, although both [2] and [3] display the ergative marker, only [2] is truly an ergative clause.

This example demonstrates why object marking has been largely neglected in the literature on split-ergativity in South Asia. DeLancey, a scholar of Himalayan languages, reflects that ‘[f]or our purposes, and perhaps in general, a definition of “ergative construction” based solely on transitive agent-marking is more useful than the standard definition’ (DeLancey 1981:628). Following the regional literature, I call *-le* an ergative marker. However, the marker occurs in many clauses which, by accepted terminology, display tripartite and not ergative-absolutive typology.

Nepali argument marking outside the perfective aspect is even more complex. Unlike Hindi and other regional languages, Nepali continues to show significant use of the ergative marker beyond the perfective aspect, but describing its distribution has proven difficult. Classification also proves more challenging, as the occurrence of both the ergative marker *-le* and accusative marker *-laai* vary separately, producing four possible case alignments, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Argument marking possibilities in the imperfective (non-corpus)

Example	A	O	Pattern	
A-∅	O-∅	\emptyset	\emptyset	A = S = O
<i>ma</i>	<i>simi</i>	<i>kin-chhu</i>		
1SG	beans	buy-NPST.1SG		
‘I buy beans.’				
A-∅	O- <i>laai</i>	\emptyset	- <i>laai</i>	A = S ≠ O NOM-ACC
<i>ma</i>	<i>saathii-laai</i>	<i>koj-chhu</i>		
1SG	friend-ACC	look.for-NPST.1SG		
‘I look for my friend.’				

³ Numbered examples are data generated during the current investigation. Examples with numbers in parentheses () are from the corpus of recorded natural speech, or participant data. Examples with numbers in brackets [] are from elicited data or language assistant data (see section 2.2.1).

Example			A	O	Pattern
A- <i>le</i>	O-∅		- <i>le</i>	∅	A≠S=O
<i>us-le</i>	<i>gaajar</i>	<i>kaṭ-<i>chha</i></i>			ERG-ABS
3SG-ERG	carrots	cut-NPST.3SG			
'She cuts carrots.'					
A- <i>le</i>	O- <i>laai</i>		- <i>le</i>	- <i>laai</i>	A≠S≠O
<i>us-le</i>	<i>naani-laai</i>	<i>nuhaa-idī-<i>chha</i></i>			Tripartite
3SG-ERG	child-ACC	bathe-TR-NPST.3SG			
'She bathes the child.'					

Finally, Nepali verb agreement is unusual among split-ergative Indo-Aryan languages (DeLancey 1981:630–631). Typically, verbal agreement is with the unmarked argument NP, whether A or O (e.g., Hindi [Kachru 1987:227], Gujarati [DeLancey 1981:631], Punjabi [Abadie 1974:156]). Nepali verb agreement, by contrast, is insensitive to ergative marking and remains with the marked A argument, as in example 4.

	A	O	
[4]	<i>mai-le</i>	<i>simi</i>	<i>kin-ē</i>
	1SG-ERG	beans	buy-PST.1SG
'I bought beans.'			

1.4 Nepali in ergativity literature

Academic interest in Nepali increased in the 1970s; prior publications were mainly teaching grammars (Wallace 1985:14–15). Abadie gives the first thorough description of Nepali ergative characteristics and observes the distribution of *-le* but remarks that differential object marking 'weakens Nepali's claim to ergative status' (Abadie 1974:158). She also notes that statements of obligation and permission coincide with ergative marking (Abadie 1974:171–173), an observation largely undeveloped by later authors. Wallace further explicates the complexity of predicting ergative marking, noting the likely involvement of 'pragmatic factors within the discourse context,' (Wallace 1985:41).

Split ergativity garnered interest in the next decades, but Nepali went relatively unexamined until 2007, when two papers stimulated further dialogue. Li's oft-cited contribution focuses on the role of the semantic nature of verbs and NP arguments in Nepali ergative marker distribution (Li 2007). Incorporating the formal definition of ergativity, Li's analysis considers both subject and object marking to see where marking on S and O align. He observes that *-le* is obligatory with inanimate A across all tenses/aspects (Li 2007:176). He also gives overdue attention to the object marker *-laai*, observing that O arguments which are animate, as well as 'specific and socially important,' are more likely to be marked (Li 2007:177).⁴ He also helpfully introduces a statistical approach to the distribution of *-le*.⁵ However, in examining the semantic nature of intransitive verbs, he inaccurately imposes Perlmutter's (1978:162) 'unergative' category on Nepali verbs (Li 2007:72–174), grouping grammatically transitive verbs such as *hernu* 'to look at, watch', *sunnu* 'to listen to, attend to', *maagnu* 'to ask for, request', *praarthana garnu* 'to offer prayer' and others as intransitives (unergatives). This leads him to significantly overstate use of the ergative marker with Nepali intransitives (Li 2007:179).

Butt and Poudel (2007) examine the distribution of *-le* in the imperfective aspect, arguing that the marker is acceptable only with 'individual-level' (inherent quality) and not 'stage-level' (temporary state) clauses. The analysis makes progress in accounting for MT speaker judgments that certain clauses are

⁴ Paudyal (2010), a careful description of argument marking on trivalent Nepali verbs by a MT Nepali linguist, confirms the relevance of animacy and definiteness in argument marking (Paudyal 2010:5).

⁵ His statistics record MT speaker judgements about verb lists, but the technique has been fruitfully applied elsewhere to speech corpora (McGregor 2010:1620–1621).

acceptable with or without the marker, and the obligatory use of *-le* in generalisations (e.g., ‘cows eat grass’), which are inherently individual-level. Attempts to extend the argument lack detailed argumentation. For instance, ergative-marked A with non-finite verbs is a common feature in Nepali, as in example 5.

- [5] *mai-le* *pask-i-eko* *khaana* *jutho* *bha-yo*
 I-ERG serve-PASS-PST.PTCP food contaminated become-PST.3SG
 ‘The food I served became contaminated.’ (lit. *the food served by me*)

Butt and Poudel (2007:10) include the following example (glosses mine):

- mai-le* *mitai* *khaa-eko* *dekh-era,* *u* *has-yo*
 I-ERG sweets eat-PST.PTCP see-PFV he laugh-PST.3SG
 ‘Seeing me eat sweets, he laughed.’

It is difficult to argue that candy-eating is intended as an individual-level characteristic of the first-person argument in the example (though further rationale is not needed here, as *khaaeko* is in the perfective aspect, accounting for the ergative marking on *maile*). Citing the identical form of the ergative and instrumental markers, the authors dismiss all such marking with non-finite verbs as instrumental (Butt and Poudel 2007:10–11). Further, though the authors make a good case that habitual mood does not necessarily equate to individual-level predication, their argument that *-le* is therefore forbidden in the habitual past inexplicably relies on intransitive verbs (such as *jaanu* ‘to go’ and *ladnu* ‘to fall’), whose S arguments are never candidates for ergative marking (Butt and Poudel 2007:9). The paper nevertheless provides a significant milestone in the recognition that examining clause-level semantic properties is productive in predicting the distribution of *-le* in the imperfective.

Verbeke (2013) builds on Butt and Poudel’s idea that *-le* reflects clausal properties, arguing that the marker places the clause in a ‘perfective construction’ regardless of verbal inflection. He helpfully includes more data than many papers on Nepali, introducing interesting and well-documented examples from written Nepali, but the theory ultimately fails to hold together. A primary motivation for the argument is the assertion that ‘Nepali...does not allow the use of the perfective verb form for tenseless actions (as it happens in Hindi)’ and therefore needs another way to cast tenseless actions as completed (Verbeke 2013:607). This assertion rests on a single Nepali example where the protasis of a conditional uses an imperfective inflection, contrasted with a similar example in Hindi that uses past tense. However, Verbeke’s example notwithstanding, the past tense is also the expected inflection in the protasis of a Nepali conditional, indicating that Nepali is able to make similar use of the perfective aspect to Hindi, as in example 6 from the current corpus.

- (6) *aaphno* *shriman-le* *ta* *bahira* *gaadhi*
 REFL.GEN husband-ERG INTJ outside car

chala-era *lyaa-nubhayo* *bhane,* *tyo-maa* *paisa-le*
 drive-PFV bring-PST.3HON COND that-LOC money-ERG

chahi *paryapta* *pug-daina* *ghar-maa*
 INT sufficient reach-NPST.3SG.NEG home-LOC
 ‘If one’s husband brings (lit. *brought*) [income]⁶ by driving an outside vehicle, the money in that will not suffice at home.’

Verbeke rejects inanimacy as a requirement for marking A arguments, citing three examples with unmarked inanimate A. However, all three prove problematic on further inspection: one from Abadie is a hypothetical alteration to the *-le*-marked original (Verbeke 2013:597; Abadie 1974:170). A second uses

⁶ In free glosses, brackets [] indicate lexical items which are not present in Nepali but necessary for clear rendering in English, and parentheses () indicate contextual or clarifying information, or alternate glosses.

the habitual past inflection, which is ungrammatical with *-le* in standard Nepali (Watters and Rajbhandary 1998:192). The third, below, actually has an elided, presumably animate subject (transliteration original but glosses mine).

<i>santān</i>	<i>vinā</i>	<i>svarga = ko</i>	<i>bāṭo</i>	<i>chek-in-ch-a</i>
offspring	without	heaven = GEN	way	block-PASS-NPST-3SG
<i>bhanne</i>	<i>Hindū</i>	<i>dharma</i>	<i>jān-os</i>	
REL	Hindu	teaching	know-OPT	

‘May [he] know the Hindu teaching which says that the way to heaven is blocked [to those] without children.’

Verbeke’s gloss treats the teaching as the inanimate subject: ‘May the Hindu belief/rule, saying that the way to heaven is barred to one if he does not have children, know it!’ (Verbeke 2013:597).

Finally, Verbeke’s argument, in order not to be circular in associating *-le* with perfective aspect, must rely strongly on subjective interpretation of what should be viewed as a perfective clause when *-le* occurs outside of the grammatically inflected perfective. Nepali employs modal devices that allow the speaker to convey more or less certainty: *-ne* inserted before the final inflectional ending expresses assertive mood, i.e., speaker certainty, as in example 7.

[7] *malik-le* *yo* *barsa* *bitra* *naaya* *ghar*
 landlord-ERG this year within new house

banau-nuhu-ne-chha
 build-HON-ASSERT-NPST.3SG

‘The landlord will certainly build a new house this year.’

Speculation or possibility is expressed by inflectional endings terminating in *-la*,⁷ as in example 8.

(8) *aa* *bhai* *pani* *her-nu*
 AFF.INTJ younger.brother also watch-INF

par-thiyo-la *na*
 must-PST.3SG-SPEC Q

‘Yes, [and] you probably had to look after your younger brother too, right?’

Verbeke draws on future tense examples of both the assertive and the speculative inflections to support his argument, judging them both so certain as to ‘consider the action as determined’ (Verbeke 2013:604), thus motivating the use of perfective-making *-le*.⁸ Yet, as shown in section 4, speakers in the current investigation unanimously required *-le* with the speculative mood, weakening the case that Verbeke’s example is an isolated instance of the construction being called on to express certainty in contrast to its canonical meaning. The language has existing grammatical means of expressing both perfective aspect and certainty apart from *-le*. Verbeke (2013) helpfully expands the conversation through interesting data and demonstrates how Butt and Poudel’s theory stimulates further work, but his theory ultimately proves no less subjective than the ‘focus hypothesis’ of *-le* marking that he sets out to refine (Verbeke 2013:608).

⁷ The lexical item *hola* ‘maybe’ derives from the copula *ho* modified with the speculative *-la* ending. Li incorrectly labels this inflection ‘simple future’ (Li 2007:173–174). The simple nonpast inflection is used for both present continuous and simple future meanings, as differentiated by context.

⁸ It is conceivable that a speaker could employ this linguistic device, as when the subjunctive in some languages may be called on to express certainty as well as doubt (e.g., the Giryama language in Ngowa and Ngonyani 2017:25). However, this use of the construction has not been recognized in Nepali.

Lindemann (2016) also builds on Butt and Poudel's work, suggesting that *-le* in the imperfective is associated rather with categorical (topic-comment) as opposed tothetic propositions. This appears to be a fruitful direction for analysis. In shifting criteria from the semantic to the discourse domain, it corresponds well with the intuitive sense of focus or emphasis many authors and MT language assistants have attributed to *-le*-marked arguments. It also helps to make sense of the perceived optionality of the marker in some clauses: 'In many discourse contexts a speaker may felicitously express the same statement either thetically or categorically, and this is the source of the optionality of *-le*' (Lindemann 2016:91).

Though Lindemann does not cite it, the idea of 'optional' or 'pragmatic' ergativity has been gaining ground in the literature. While split ergativity is conditioned on properties of the clause or its constituents, pragmatic ergativity views the encoded meaning of the marker ('transitive agent') separately from the discourse meaning⁹ of its optional appearance in a given utterance, acknowledging that speakers will make use of both. DeLancey foreshadows the idea in early work on split ergativity, observing that the ergative marker may carry 'two levels of information: the fact that it is present...carries one message, and its identity...carries another' (1981:630). Thirty years later, he affirms that such pragmatic ergativity represents 'the dominant case-marking pattern' for natural discourse in Tibeto-Burman languages (DeLancey 2011:10), and Verbeke (2013:607) highlights the influence of Tibeto-Burman languages on Nepali through bilingual speakers. McGregor observes the pattern especially in Australia, New Guinea, and the Himalayas (2010:1610), and estimates that approximately 10 percent of ergative languages display optionality (2010:1616). He classes Nepali as one, citing Li (2007). However, he notes the lack of 'any suggestions in the literature that topicality (i.e., categorical proposition) is a motivating factor for ergative marking of Agent NPs in transitive clauses' in any language (McGregor 2010:1620), indicating that Lindemann's (2016) analysis may make Nepali typologically unique in this regard.

Finally, though scholars have made significant progress and proposed fruitful directions for study, problems plague much of the literature on Nepali. Primarily, it has been cursory: studies are typologically motivated, and the foundation of careful descriptive work is lacking. As Dixon notes, the significance of ergativity 'can only be fully appreciated in the context of the complete grammatical system' (Dixon 1994:xvii), but investigations of Nepali ergativity, on the whole, have proceeded without this depth of knowledge and with meager data. Li's (2007) improper assignment of transitivity classes is one example, and contradictions in the literature¹⁰ can often be attributed to statements made on the basis of sparse data. Authors also fail to account for Nepali's complex linguistic environment. Chandra and Udaar (2015:65), for example, conclude, based on a single pair of sentences, that Darjeeling Nepali is unique in 'optionally allowing verbal agreement with the [ergative] marked subject'. However, the unattributed data, presumably from different speakers, appear to capture a dialectal distinction instead: both have feminine ergative agents, yet, while one verb employs an archaic feminine inflection, the other (purportedly lacking agreement) uses the 3MSG inflection more common in Darjeeling Nepali with any singular third person subject. Finally, transparency in data sourcing and methodology is lacking in many cases (e.g., Chandra and Udaar 2015; Butt and Poudel 2010), leading to uncertainty about whether the examples are contrived, elicited, or naturally occurring, and what variant(s) of the language may be represented.

2 Current investigation and methodology

McGregor (2010:1628), reviewing existing findings on optional ergativity, pleads for 'more careful investigations of corpora,' a need to which the literature on Nepali ergativity attests. This paper seeks to offer such an investigation of core argument marking in Darjeeling Nepali, followed by reflections on its implications for understanding ergativity in the language and beyond.

⁹ Such discourse-motivated 'pragmatic ergativity' is distinct from Dixon's 'discourse ergativity' in which S and O are found to fill parallel roles, as opposed to A, in discourse functions such as introducing new topics (Dixon 1987:5).

¹⁰ For example, the permissibility of marking inanimate O with *-laai*, (Paudyal 2010:7, contra Li 2007:176); permissibility of *-le* with present progressives (Paudyal 2010:2, contra Lindemann 2016:90).

2.1 Data collection

The current corpus of spoken Darjeeling Nepali was recorded between February and June 2017 in the town of Kalimpong, Darjeeling District, West Bengal, India. Fourteen MT speakers of Darjeeling Nepali participated in up to three data elicitation tasks. Participants included ten women and four men, ages 22 through 52. An attempt was made to balance the sample with regard to age and gender, but older speakers proved hesitant to be recorded, and male speakers less available. All participants were raised and educated through primary school in the Darjeeling District. One participant studied secondary school and taught in a Tibetan language monastery in NE India before returning to Kalimpong. The rest remained in Kalimpong through adolescence, though at least two later attended college in other regions of India before returning. All were born in the district apart from one participant, who moved to Kalimpong from rural Nepal at age 5 and has remained since that time. All interviews took place in the home or workplace of a participant.¹¹

In the first task, eleven participants each recorded a narrative (average length 3:22), based on a selection of prompts about past events. In the second task, all fourteen participants paired with familiar partners to record seven conversations (average length 4:34) based on a separate selection of prompts.¹² Where more than one participant was present, and participants were willing to handle the recording equipment, tasks 1 and 2 were recorded without the researcher present to increase naturalness, but this was not possible in several cases.

The third task aimed to investigate argument marking in particular contexts. In this task, participants viewed a series of simple drawings prepared by a local student artist based on a verb list. In response to each picture, participants were asked to give two descriptive statements in the present, two in the past, and ask two questions. They were then prompted to use the specific word under investigation if it did not spontaneously occur in the responses. The data produced from this task initially was not specific enough. Participants willingly elaborated, but often did not employ the tenses and lexical items requested, even with repeated prompting. This task was eventually revised, replacing the pictures with a set of approximately 250 oral prompts recorded by a local speaker, based on a similar verb list. For most of these, participants listened to two sentences which differed only in argument marking or verbal morphology and then chose from among four possibilities: A (sentence A preferred for their personal use), B (sentence B preferred), C (both sentences equally appropriate), or D (neither sentence appropriate). In the case of C (and sometimes A and B), participants further elaborated whether the sentences had different meanings or were appropriate in different situations. In the case of D, participants recorded an alternative appropriate sentence. Each participant's responses included some C and D choices, indicating that they understood the instructions and were willing to deviate from the recorded selections. For twelve prompts, participants were asked only whether a sentence was correct or incorrect, and clear or unclear. For four prompts aimed at uncovering how ambiguity in argument roles was resolved, participants listened to an utterance and then selected from two pictures the one which matched their interpretation. Eleven full responses for this task were obtained, including four for the original task and seven for the revised task.¹³

2.2 Data processing

2.2.1 From speech to statistics

The narratives and conversations together make up the current corpus of (hopefully) 'natural speech.' The recordings were transcribed, glossed, and checked with a MT language assistant for accuracy. They were then separated into clauses using FLEx software, and characteristics of the verbs, arguments, and

¹¹ Participants gave informed consent for their work on the project but were not compensated.

¹² Appendix B contains prompts for eliciting narratives and conversations.

¹³ Four participants completed the original task and eight took part in the revised task, including two participants in one family who opted to complete complementary portions of the revised task, giving one full set of data. One participant completed both tasks.

markers in each clause were entered into Excel to facilitate statistical tabulation. Examples taken from the speech corpus are referred to as ‘participant data’ and are numbered with parenthetical numbers (1) throughout the paper.

Narrative picture descriptions from the original third task were also transcribed, glossed, and checked. These clauses are not included in the corpus because they were elicited at an utterance level, likely reducing naturalness, but they were used to inform analysis where similar data was lacking. Responses to the revised listening-based task were recorded in Excel separately from the corpus data. Sentences generated in the picture task or selected by participants from the spoken prompts as being appropriate for their personal use are collectively referred to as ‘elicited data,’ though it should be noted that some of these utterances were chosen in response to prompts as described above, rather than generated by participants. In addition, two other MT speakers and one participant whose data collection was already complete served as language assistants, answering specific language questions that arose in the course of data gathering and analysis. In a few instances, language assistants provided spontaneous spoken examples with their explanations. This data is noted in the paper as ‘language assistant data.’ Elicited and language assistant data is presented with bracketed numbers [1] throughout the paper.

2.2.2 Counting clauses

In the corpus of natural speech, each separate verbal element is counted as a clause, except for two types: verbal elements used as nouns and modifiers (e.g., ‘educated’ or ‘worker,’ which use participial forms), and adverbial connectors which are accomplished verbally in Nepali (such as *tyaile garda kheri*, lit. ‘because of this doing then’, meaning ‘therefore’). Example 9 contains an instance of each type of uncounted verbal element and is counted as a single clause based on the finite final copula.

(9)	<i>ty-ai-le</i> this-INT-INSTR	<i>gar-da</i> do-IPFV	<i>kheri</i> while	<i>aba</i> now	<i>kalimpong-maa</i> Kalimpong-LOC
	<i>dherai-dherai</i> many-INT	<i>paḍ-ne</i> study-NPST.PTCP	<i>manche-haru</i> person-PL	<i>chh-a</i> COP.NPST-3SG	

‘Therefore, there are now very many educated people in Kalimpong.’

In general, however, dependent adverbial clauses that are not part of known connective constructions are counted separately. Example 10 is counted as two clauses, with the two separate verbal elements in bold.

(10)	<i>aama-baba-le</i> mother-father-ERG	<i>dukha</i> difficulty	<i>gar-era</i> do-PFV	<i>uni-haru-laai</i> 3SG-PL-ACC
	<i>paḍ-a-i-rak-eko</i> study-CAUS-LNK-put-PST.PTCP		<i>chh-a</i> PRS.PRF-3SG ¹⁴	

‘Their parents, by taking pains (lit. *doing difficulty*), have kept educating them.’

Nepali frequently combines verbs, usually joining them with *-i* to form a modified lexical item. Such concatenations as *bha-i-halnu* ‘to happen quickly or easily’ in example 11 are counted as single verbal elements.

(11)	<i>hotel-maa</i> hotel (Eng)-LOC	<i>hotel</i> hotel (Eng)	<i>ta</i> INTJ	<i>bha-i-hal-chha</i> be-LNK-pour-NPST.3SG
------	-------------------------------------	-----------------------------	-------------------	--

‘At a hotel, actually, [it] will be simple.’

¹⁴ The *-i-rak-* form used here is a local variation of *-i-rah-*, from *rahanu*, ‘to be or continue.’ It indicates an ongoing action.

There are also compound constructions combining separate verbs with one set of arguments; for example, ‘we all **wanted to study**’ or ‘they themselves **cannot remove** it’ (example 12). Such constructions are counted as a single clause for the current investigation of argument marking.

- (12) *aphu-le* *nikal-nu* *sak-daina*
 REFL-ERG remove-INF be.able-NPST.3SG.NEG
 ‘[They] themselves cannot remove [it].’

2.2.3 Transitivity classes

As stated above, I have followed Dixon’s *Basic Linguistic Theory* (2010:116) in defining transitive verbs as those which require two arguments (though they may be elided based on context), with A being the argument more responsible for the success of the action, and O being the other, generally more affected argument. An intransitive verb, then, is one which sanctions a single obligatory argument, S. In addition to transitive and intransitive verbs, Dixon (2010:117) recognises extended intransitive and extended transitive clauses, which include an extension argument E, usually a GOAL or RECIPIENT, along with the canonical arguments. An extended intransitive has arguments S and E but does not function syntactically like a transitive clause; the S argument is in the case of a canonical S and not A, while E is often dative-marked. An extended transitive (for example, ‘to give’) has arguments A, O, and E.

Most languages (perhaps all) have an extended transitive class (Dixon 1994:122), and section 4 discusses Nepali extended transitives in the corpus. Section 3 argues that Nepali also makes use of extended intransitive verbs and shows specifics of the so-called ‘dative subject’ type. Further, Nepali employs ambitransitive verbs, such as *khaanu*, ‘to eat’, which can be used either transitively or intransitively. These verbs are discussed in section 5. Transitivity of ambitransitive verbs must be determined on a clause-by-clause basis, taking context into account. Where ambitransitive verbs occur with a second argument present in the clause or evident from the immediate context, they are counted as transitive, as in example 13. Otherwise, as in example 14, they are counted as intransitive.

- (13) *us-le* *khaana* *khaa-ena*
 3SG-ERG food eat-PST.3SG.NEG
 ‘She did not eat [any] food.’

- (14) *ahile* *aba* *bagwan-ko* *dayaa-le* *dukha* *sukha*
 presently now God-GEN mercy-INSTR difficulty comfort
- gar-era* *khaan-dai-chhu*
 do-PFV eat-PROG-NPST.1SG
 ‘Today, by God’s mercy, through bad times and good, I am eating.’
 (i.e., surviving; not going hungry)

Finally, the obligative construction in Nepali combines an infinitive with the default (3SG) conjugation of *parnu*, ‘must’, as in example 15. Although *parnu* is canonically intransitive, the transitivity of the clause – as well as lexical meaning – is dependent on the infinitive. Obligative constructions are also counted as single clauses.

- (15) *hotel-maa* *bas-nu* *par-chha* *haami* *sabaai* *jaana*
 hotel (Eng)-LOC stay-INF must-NPST.3SG 1PL all CLF
 ‘We must all stay at a hotel.’

2.3 Data yield

The natural speech corpus yielded 1502 clauses spoken by participants. The verbal element is elided or otherwise omitted (e.g., by interruption) in forty-three clauses, leaving 1459 clauses with an explicit verbal element. Subclasses of extended intransitive and ambitransitive verbs are tallied separately. For the core argument analysis (sections 3 and 4), ambitransitives used as intransitives are included with intransitive clauses; extended transitives and ambitransitives used as transitives are included with transitives. Extended intransitives are not tallied as a separate class, but the class of dative subject extended intransitives is discussed in section 3.

Table 3. Summary of clauses in the corpus

Intransitive clauses		910
Ambitransitive as intransitive	34	
Canonical intransitive	876	
Transitive clauses		549
Ambitransitive as transitive	29	
Extended transitive	75	
Canonical transitive	445	
Clauses with omitted verb		43
Total clauses		1502

Data from the corpus of recorded natural speech (narratives and conversations) conforms to many conventional expectations for Nepali: higher prevalence of ergative marking in past tense and perfective aspect, largely unmarked S, and O marking dependent on animacy and definiteness. The data also highlight differences in how argument marking functions in Darjeeling Nepali versus other regional and related languages, specifically in strong prohibition on ergative marking of S.

3 Core argument marking in the intransitive clause

Of the 910 intransitive clauses, the subject is elided in 309 cases, leaving 601 clauses with an explicit S argument. Distribution of marking on these arguments is summarised in table 4 and detailed below.

Table 4. Marking on S arguments

Marking	Gloss	Occurrences	Percentage
none	∅	527	88%
-le	ERG	5	1%
-laai	DAT/ACC	62	10%
other		7	1%
TOTALS		601	100%

As expected, S arguments in the corpus are overwhelmingly unmarked. In contrast to claims made for other languages in the region (section 3.1), Darjeeling Nepali appears to evidence very little flexibility in this regard, with only 1 percent of S arguments apparently taking the ergative marker *-le*. S marked with *-laai* occurs in 10 percent of intransitive clauses but is found exclusively with the so-called ‘dative subject’ construction, as discussed in section 3.2. Other marking is discussed in section 3.3.

3.1 Ergative-marked S

There is precedent from other regional Indo-Aryan and Tibetan languages to suggest that ergative marking may express intent or agency on the part of S (e.g., Butt and Poudel 2007:2; Coupe 2017:3; DeLancey 2011:10–11). Coupe compiles abundant examples of intransitive verbs such as ‘to go’ (Coupe 2017:15 [Tibetan], 18 [Kurtöp]); ‘to stay’ (Coupe 2017:20 [Mongsen Au]); and ‘to live’ (Coupe 2017:19 [Darma]) occurring with agentive-marked S in Tibeto-Burman languages. Butt and Poudel (2007:2) show a Hindi/Urdu example where ergative marking supplies an agentive distinction for the S argument of ‘to cough.’ Some limited examples of *-le*-marking on S in standard Nepali are also available (e.g., Butt and Poudel 2007:3; Li, 2007:175), though claims regarding its meaning are imprecise.

The corpus data do not support agentive usage of *-le* with S in Darjeeling Nepali. Ergative S-marking is rare (five of 598 clauses), and more readily explained in terms of transitivity. Four of the five instances were spoken by a single participant. In two of these, the ambitransitive verb *paḍnu* ‘to study’ is used without a second argument (O), as in example 16:

- | | | | | | |
|------|---|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| | | | | S | |
| (16) | <i>sarkar-ko</i> | <i>laagi</i> | <i>chahi</i> | <i>abo</i> | <i>naani-haru-le</i> |
| | government-GEN | for.the.sake.of | INT | now | child-PL-ERG |
| | <i>pani</i> | <i>paḍ-dai-chha,</i> | <i>uni-haru-ko</i> | <i>laagi</i> | <i>pani</i> |
| | also | study-PROG-NPST.3SG | 3-PL-GEN | for.the.sake.of | also |
| | ‘The children are studying for the government’s sake, (but) also for their [own] sake.’ | | | | |

Example 17 shows that this verb takes ergative-marked A when used transitively. It is possible that the speaker in example 16 conceived of the utterance as transitive with the O argument elided.

- | | | | | | | |
|------|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | A | | O | | O | |
| (17) | <i>mai-le</i> | <i>etro</i> | <i>Buddhis</i> | <i>paḍ-ẽ...</i> | <i>Buddhis</i> | <i>Tibetan</i> |
| | 1SG-ERG | this.much | Buddhism | study-PST.1SG | Buddhism | Tibetan |
| | | | A | | | |
| | <i>satra</i> | <i>barsa</i> | <i>mai-le</i> | <i>paḍ-ẽ</i> | | |
| | seventeen | years | 1SG-ERG | study-PST.1SG | | |
| | ‘I studied Buddhism so much.... I studied Tibetan Buddhism for seventeen years.’ | | | | | |

In the third instance (example 18), a speaker begins a sentence with *-le*-marked S, then repeats the argument without *-le* just before the final intransitive verb. This should likely be viewed as an instance of a speaker adjusting mid-utterance and self-correcting argument marking.

- | | | | | | |
|------|---|-----------------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| | | | S | | |
| (18) | <i>khasmaa</i> | <i>aba</i> | <i>manche-le</i> | <i>ahile</i> | <i>net-baaṭa</i> |
| | actually | now | person-ERG | now | Internet (Eng)-ABL |
| | S (repeated) | | | | |
| | <i>manche</i> | <i>bigrĩ-dai-chha</i> | | | |
| | person | spoil-PROG-NPST.3SG | | | |
| | ‘Actually, nowadays people are being ruined because of the Internet.’ | | | | |

The fourth instance is shown in example 19, where intransitive and transitive clauses combine with a single explicit subject argument.

- | | | | | | |
|------|------------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|
| | S/A | | | | |
| (19) | <i>tapaai-le</i> | <i>mero</i> | <i>laagi</i> | <i>raati-raati</i> | <i>bas-yo,</i> |
| | you.HON-ERG | 1SG.GEN | for.the.sake.of | night-RED | stay-PST.3SG |

- | | | |
|--|--|---------------|
| | O | |
| | <i>praarthana</i> | <i>gar-yo</i> |
| | prayer | do-PST.3SG |
| | ‘Night after night, you sat [up late and] prayed for me.’ | |
| | (Alt. ‘Night after night, you sat [up late] for me [and] prayed.’) | |

When two independent clauses share a subject, it will typically display the marking that is appropriate to the adjacent clause. For example, a language assistant rejected ergative marking in the following utterance, where the shared subject is adjacent to the intransitive clause.

- | | | | | | |
|------|---|---------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| | S/A | | | O | |
| [20] | <i>ma (*-ile)</i> | <i>bazaar</i> | <i>ga-ē</i> | <i>ra</i> | <i>sabji</i> <i>kin-ē</i> |
| | 1SG (*-ERG) | market | go-PST.1SG | and | vegetables buy-PST.1SG |
| | ‘I went to the market and bought vegetables.’ | | | | |

When dependent and independent clauses share a subject, marking typically agrees with the subject of the independent clause, though in speech it may be influenced by an adjacent dependent clause. For example, the language assistant rejected ergative marking in example 21, but considered it optional in example 22.¹⁵

- | | | | | |
|------|--|--------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| | S | | | |
| [21] | <i>Manoj (*-le)</i> | <i>sabji</i> | <i>kin-nu-laai</i> | <i>bazaar</i> <i>ga-yo</i> |
| | Manoj (*-ERG) | vegetables | buy-INF-PURP | market go-PST.3SG |
| | ‘Manoj, in order to buy vegetables, went to the market.’ | | | |
-
- | | | | | |
|------|---|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| | A | | O | |
| [22] | <i>ma (-ile)</i> | <i>bazaar</i> | <i>ga-era</i> | <i>sabji</i> <i>kin-ē</i> |
| | 1SG (-ERG) | market | go-PFV | vegetables buy-PST.1SG |
| | ‘Going to the market, I bought vegetables.’ | | | |

In example 19 (and throughout the corpus), the agent is counted as S because it is adjacent to an independent intransitive clause. However, it is likely, in this case, that the marked argument should be considered A of the final transitive verb, with the intransitive clause included as an aside by the speaker. Because the benefactive *mero laagi* is common with *praarthana garnu* (i.e., ‘to pray for me’), and uncommon with *basnu*, it is likely the marked argument should be attributed to the transitive verb *garnu* in this instance.

The final instance in example 23 is less clear, combining the past tense intransitive *basnu* ‘to sit, stay, or remain’ with the English ‘fasting.’ The resulting construction is similar to the Nepali *upawas basnu* ‘to fast’, which language assistants deem incompatible with ergative marking. It is also grammatically similar to many common transitive constructions with *garnu* ‘to do’ such as *praarthana garnu* ‘to do prayer; to pray’ and *barta garnu* ‘to do fasting; to fast’ that require *-le* in the past tense. The clause also mirrors the preceding transitive clause in construction, possibly influencing the speaker’s choice.

¹⁵ This judgment again suggests that the prohibition on *-le* with intransitives is generally stronger than the requirement to apply the marker with transitives in speech.

	A	O			
(23)	<i>us-le</i>	<i>khaana</i>	<i>khaa-ena,</i>	<i>din</i>	<i>bari</i>
	3SG-ERG	food	eat-PST.3SG.NEG	day	full
	S				
	<i>us-le</i>	<i>fasting</i>	<i>bas-yo</i>		
	3SG-ERG	fasting (Eng)	stay-PST.3SG		
	‘She did not eat food; all day she remained fasting.’				

This example, spoken by the participant who produced four of the five examples of *-le*-marked S, may indicate that this speaker does use *-le* to express agency of S. More likely, it is an idiosyncratic, ungrammatical use triggered by similarity to the transitive *barta garnu* construction and analogy to the preceding transitive clause.

Data from elicitation, in which participants were specifically queried on the acceptability of the ergative marker, show similar patterns. While speakers were more likely overall to employ *-le* in elicited data than in natural speech (see section 4.1.1), an effect also noted in Tibeto-Burman languages (DeLancey 2011:10), they consistently rejected constructions in which *-le* was combined with intransitive verbs. The sole exception was one participant who was willing to accept or omit *-le* with simple past and non-past progressive tenses of the verb ‘to bathe.’ The six remaining participants rejected the marker in these clauses.

3.2 Dative subjects and *-laai*-marked S

Ten percent of intransitive clauses in the corpus have S marked with *-laai*, which may mark both dative and accusative arguments (see section 4.2). On S, *-laai*-marking occurs exclusively in constructions which deal with liking, thinking (including knowing, judging), and experience. Dixon notes that, in general, the semantic cues underlying argument assignment for experience verbs are mixed, because ‘either the EXPERIENCER or the STIMULUS could hold major responsibility for the state of mind’ (Dixon 2010:129). In addition, the role of EXPERIENCER has affinity for both A, which is most likely to be animate, and O, because it is most affected (Butt, Grimm, and Ahmed 2006:2). This results in variation among languages concerning how the semantic roles STIMULUS and EXPERIENCER are mapped to syntactic arguments A, S, O, and E. Such constructions in Nepali present a dilemma for argument assignment, but the data below show that these *-laai*-marked arguments are best labelled S.

Syntax may clarify how arguments are assigned in a language; as Dixon points out, transitivity is a syntactic concept, with underlying semantic bases (Dixon 2010:115–116). Therefore, syntax is primary in determining transitivity classes and argument types. However, in certain Nepali clauses dealing with experience and liking, the syntactic cues are also unclear regarding argument assignments. Like most extended intransitives, these sentences (see example 24) have a dative-marked EXPERIENCER and an unmarked STIMULUS. A very productive type of experience clause uses the intransitive verb *laagnu*, ‘to affect or apply to’,¹⁶ to convey physical and mental impressions such as illness, hunger, fear, and affection.

	EXP		STIM		
(24)	<i>ma-laai</i>	<i>abo</i>	<i>leprasi</i>	<i>rog</i>	<i>laag-yo</i>
	1SG-DAT	now	leprosy (Eng)	disease	affect-PST.3SG
	‘Now, I got leprosy.’ (lit. ‘leprosy disease affected me’)				

Another common type uses the combination of *man* ‘heart, mind’ and *parnu* ‘to fall, befall’ (as of rain or snow) to express liking, as in example 25.

¹⁶ In spite of having a definition which appears to require a second argument, *laagnu* is classed as an intransitive verb (Schmidt and Dahal 1993:572). The verb is also used in a typically intransitive sense for ‘to shine,’ of the sun.

	EXP				STIM	
[25]	<i>ke</i>	<i>timi-laai</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>bun-eko</i>	<i>swetar-ko</i>	<i>rang</i>
	Q	2SG-DAT	this	knit-PST.PTCP	sweater-GEN	colour
		<i>man</i>	<i>par-chha</i>			
		heart	fall-NPST.3SG			

‘Do you like the colour of this knitted sweater?’

Typically, a dative-marked EXPERIENCER would be assigned as E, and an unmarked STIMULUS as S, as for the Spanish verb *gustar*, ‘to like’ (Dixon 2010:129). Verb agreement with the unmarked STIMULUS also suggests that it should be viewed as S. However, in Nepali experience clauses, the dative-marked EXPERIENCER also displays several syntactic characteristics generally associated with subjects, and some authors have classed it as a ‘dative subject’ (e.g., DeLancey 1981:630).¹⁷ For example, when clauses combine, the EXPERIENCER of a dative subject clause may be coreferential with the S argument of another clause, allowing the second S to be elided, as in example 26 (from a participant describing a picture). The elided S argument of the second clause is evidence for viewing the dative-marked coreferent *manche* ‘person’ as S in the first clause below.

	EXP		STIM	
[26]	<i>manche-laai</i>	<i>bimar</i>	<i>laag-era</i>	<i>haspatal</i>
	person-DAT	illness	affect-PFV	hospital
	<i>ga-eko</i>	<i>chh-a</i>		
	go-PST.PTCP	PRS.PRF-3SG		

‘The person, being ill, has gone to the hospital.’

Word order provides another clue: in unmarked Nepali clauses, the subject (S or A) is the first argument. In dative subject constructions, the dative-marked EXPERIENCER usually comes first; to put the STIMULUS first creates a marked clause (see example 28).

Control of reflexivisation often gives additional insight into which argument should be considered the subject. Dixon states that, of two co-referential arguments, the one which cannot be replaced by a reflexive pronoun is A or S (Dixon 1994:138). Though the two arguments are not exactly coreferential, example 27 suggests that the *-laai*-marked EXPERIENCER may control reflexivisation, because the reflexive possessive pronoun is used in the bolded STIMULUS NP.

	EXP		STIM			
[27] ¹⁸	<i>u-laai</i>	<i>aphn-ai</i>	<i>bichar</i>	<i>matrai</i>	<i>tik</i>	<i>laag-chha</i>
	3SG-DAT	self.GEN-INT	opinion	only	correct	affect-NPST.3SG

‘He feels that only his **own opinion** is correct.’

One final argument for assigning EXPERIENCERS as S comes from evidence in the data that the STIMULUS and verb may form a compound lexical item in these constructions. First, these two words are not generally separated. Whereas typical transitive clauses types may reverse arguments to form a marked construction (i.e., AOV becomes OAV), marked dative subject constructions place the *-laai*-marked argument (S) after the verb (SEV becomes EVS), thus not separating the STIMULUS from the verb, as in example 28. The STIMULUS argument here refers to views previously expressed, and the marked status of the EXPERIENCER is further confirmed by the following intensifier *chahi*.

¹⁷ Butt, Grimm, and Ahmed (2006:8) consider dative subjects to be ‘a standard part of South Asian languages.’

¹⁸ Example 27 is from a follow-up conversation in 2018 with one of the original MT language assistants.

			STIM		EXP	
[28]	<i>yo</i>	<i>samay-maa</i>	<i>chahi</i>	<i>yasto</i>	<i>laag-chha</i>	<i>ma-laai chahi</i>
	this	time-LOC	INT	like.this	apply-NPST.3SG	1SG-DAT INT
	‘At this time, this is how [it] seems to me.’					

The argument for viewing STIMULUS + verb as a lexical item is strengthened by the observation that, in some cases, a lexical verb exists similar to the *laagnu* construction. Examples 29 and 30 are from separate participants describing a picture of a dog chasing a person.

			EXP	
[29]	<i>ani</i>	<i>khed-era</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>dara-ē</i>
	and	chase-PFV	1SG	fear-PST.1SG
	‘And when [it] chased [me], I was frightened.’			

		EXP		STIM	
[30]	<i>ra</i>	<i>ma-laai</i>	<i>pura</i>	<i>dar</i>	<i>laag-dai-chha</i>
	and	1SG-DAT	greatly	fear	apply-PROG-NPST.3SG
	‘And I am very frightened.’				

Even when a specific lexical verb is not available, most liking and experience constructions also offer a parallel construction with a canonically marked subject.

These corpus examples show two constructions in use for emotion in Darjeeling Nepali.

		EXP		STIM	
[31]	<i>tyas-maa</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>dherai</i>	<i>khusi</i>	<i>chhu</i>
	this-LOC	1SG	very	happy	be-NPST.1SG
	‘I am very happy about this.’				

	EXP					
[32]	<i>ma-laai</i>	<i>garba</i>	<i>laag-i</i>	<i>garba</i>	<i>laag-i</i>	<i>matlaab</i>
	1SG-DAT	pride	affect-IPFV	pride	affect-IPFV	meaning
		STIM		STIM		
	<i>bahud</i>	<i>khusi</i>	<i>khusi</i>	<i>laag-yo</i>		
	very	happy	happy	affect-PST.3SG		
	‘I feel very proud, that is, I am very, very happy.’ ¹⁹					

In examples 29 and 31, the EXPERIENCER is clearly S and triggers verb agreement. The similarity of constructions 29–30 and of 31–32 is one more basis for arguing that EXPERIENCERS in dative subject constructions can be viewed as S, and STIMULUS arguments as E, closely tied to the intransitive verb.

Not surprisingly, some alternative constructions have come to portray different shades of meaning. Three participants expressed that the dative subject construction *bimar laagnu* ‘to be ill’ is more specific than the standard copula formulation *bimar hunu*. One thought the *laagnu* construction was more likely to indicate an illness of the bowels or stomach rather than a cough or fever, and two others considered it likely to refer to the onset of labour pains in childbirth. Where two constructions appear to be identical in meaning, they may be unstable. In rapid speech, one participant merged the two experience forms,

¹⁹ Past tense experience constructions are translated as present in the absence of specific time reference (e.g., Schmidt and Dahal 1993:573). The sense is of an ongoing experience initiated in the past.

producing the ungrammatical utterance in example 33, which is the only *-laai*-marked S in the corpus to (apparently) trigger verb agreement. This may be a sign in Nepali of the observation that ‘dative subjects appear to be a fairly unstable part of a language’s grammar’ (Butt, Grimm, and Ahmed 2006:1).

		EXP		STIM	
(33)*	<i>an ta</i>	<i>ma-laai*</i>		<i>khusi</i>	<i>chhu</i>
	then	1SG-DAT		happy	be-NPST.1SG
	‘So then, I am happy.’				

Because of the arguments advanced above, these *-laai*-marked arguments are counted as S but must certainly be recognized as a specific type.

3.3 Other marking and summary

Although the vast majority of extended intransitives in the corpus are dative subject clauses, one corpus clause suggests that Darjeeling Nepali does permit traditional extended intransitives. Example 34 uses the passive of *dekhnu*, ‘to see’, which in standard Nepali means ‘to be visible’ or ‘to appear’. Here it means ‘to seem, appear to’, with the STIMULUS placed first as unmarked S, triggering verb agreement, and the EXPERIENCER following as dative-marked E.

		STIM		EXP		
(34)	<i>ho</i>	<i>hajur</i>	<i>aja</i>	<i>haami-laai</i>	<i>naaya</i>	<i>dekh-i-yāū</i>
	VOC	2SG.HON	today	1PL-DAT	new	see-PASS-PST.2SG
	‘Hey, you appeared to us [to be] new [here] today.’					

Finally, of the seven instances of S carrying other markings, six carry the genitive marker *-ko* and replace an elided nominal argument, as in example 35.

		S			
(35)	<i>aba</i>	<i>kasai-ko</i>		<i>bigri-yo</i>	<i>bhane</i>
	now	anyone-GEN		spoil-PST.3SG	if
	‘Now, if anyone’s (children) are ruined,’				

In the one remaining instance (example 36), S is marked with the benefactive construction *-ko laagi*, a combination of the genitive with a form of the verb *laagnu*, ‘to affect, apply to’. The S argument might be expected to carry *-laai*-marking in this experience clause, but perhaps because of the additional complement *jiunu* ‘to live’, S receives a more specific marking.

			S			
(36)	<i>majdur</i>	<i>kaam</i>	<i>gar-ne-haru-ko</i>	<i>laagi</i>	<i>chahi</i>	<i>abo</i>
	sweeping	work	do-NPST.PTCP-PL-GEN	for.the.sake.of	INT	now
	<i>jiu-nu</i>	<i>ekdam-ai</i>	<i>dherai</i>	<i>garo</i>	<i>par-i-rak-eko</i>	
	live-INF	very-INT	very	difficult	fall-LNK-put-PST.PTCP	
	<i>chh-a</i>					
	PRS.PRF-3SG					
	‘Nowadays, for those who work as sweepers, it has been very difficult to live.’					

In conclusion, the data indicate that S arguments in Darjeeling Nepali are unmarked apart from very well-defined circumstances, and that such marking on S (ergative or dative) should not be considered ‘pragmatic’ or ‘optional’ as in other regional languages. Transitivity proves a necessary requirement for the use of the ergative marker.

4 Core argument marking in the transitive clause

4.1 Marking on A arguments

Of 549 transitive clauses in the corpus, 293 have elided subjects, leaving 256 explicit A arguments. Fifty-three percent of A arguments in the corpus are elided, in contrast to only 34 percent of S arguments, suggesting that A arguments may be more readily elided. Prevalence of ergative marking is high, with *-le* applied to 72 percent of all A arguments. Distribution of marking on A arguments is summarized in table 5 and detailed below. In this section, variables of elicitation, tense/aspect, mood, modality, and person are examined with respect to A-marking distribution.

Table 5. Marking on A arguments

Marking	Occurrences	Percentage
none	71	28%
<i>-le</i>	184	72%
<i>-laai</i>	0	0%
other	1	<1%
TOTALS	256	100%

4.1.1 Natural v. elicited data

As noted above, the ergative marker is more prevalent in elicited data than in natural speech. As part of the elicitation task, seven participants each evaluated seventeen clauses representing various tense/aspect/mood conjugations of the transitive verb *katnu* ‘to cut’. Ten clauses were non-past/imperfective, and seven were past/perfective; all had 3SG A arguments. Of the 119 responses generated, only seven responses by three participants rejected *-le* in any clause. There was minimal agreement; the seven responses dealt with five unique clauses.²⁰ An additional thirteen responses allowed for optionally omitting *-le*; the remaining ninety-nine responses required *-le*. In transitive non-past/imperfective clauses, participants required *-le* in 95 percent of elicited responses, compared with 56 percent in the corpus of natural speech. They required *-le* in 89 percent of elicited transitive past/perfective clauses, compared to 83 percent in the speech corpus. Though the elicited and corpus data are not compared for frequency of clause types, the comparison gives some idea of how natural and elicited data differ with respect to A marking.

²⁰ Most consistently allowed/preferred without ergative marking were sentences with the colloquial progressive formulation verb + *i* + *rahanu* ‘to remain’. This concurs with Abadie who observes that ‘*-le* is excluded from the non-perfective more adamantly in multi-verbal concatenations’ (1974:163). In addition, individual participants rejected future, present habitual, and past obligatory clauses with *-le*.

4.1.2 Tense/aspect

Thirty-two tense/aspect/mood combinations²¹ occur in the transitive data, including nine types of non-finite verbs accounting for twenty-six clauses. The finite verbs²² are divided into past/perfective (including present perfect) and non-past/imperfective categories. Each category has more ergative-marked than unmarked A arguments, with the highest percentage in the past/perfective group (83 percent marked) as expected for a language that displays an aspectual split in ergative marking (see section 1.3). Table 6 shows the distribution of marking by tense/aspect among A arguments, which is discussed in detail below. Appendix C tallies marking across all thirty-two tense/aspect/mood types.

Table 6. Ergative marking on A by tense/aspect

Marking	Past/Perfective		Non-past/Imperfective		Nonfinite	
none	27	17%	34	45%	11	42%
<i>-le</i>	128	83%	42	55%	14	54%
<i>-laai</i>	0	-	0	-	0	-
other	0	-	0	-	1	4%
Total Clauses	154		76		26	

Of the 256 A arguments, none exhibit *-laai* marking. The single ‘other’ marking is benefactive (*-ko laagi*), and occurs in a dependent infinitive clause (bolded):

- (37) *ani jo garib nimna-ko barga manche-haru*
 and whoever poor level-GEN class person-PL
- A
O
- chh-a uni-haru-ko laagi chahi abo chijbij*
 COP.NPST-3SG 3SG-PL-GEN for.the.sake.of INT now things
- kin-nu... dherai garo jasto dekh-i-rahe-chha*
 buy-INF very difficult like.that appear-LNK-remain-NPST.3SG
- ‘And whoever is from the poorer classes, for them to buy things now...seems very difficult.’

In this instance, the unusual *-ko laagi* marking on A serves as a complementiser indicating the role of the bolded clause in the larger utterance, rather than the role of A within the bolded clause. See example 36 for a similar use of *-ko laagi*.

Perfective: Further separation of the corpus data by tense and aspect sheds light on constructions of interest. Table 7 summarises data for past/perfective clauses.

²¹ These include various actually-occurring combinations of tenses: future (an informal use of the present participle as a finite verb), non-past, past, past perfect, and present perfect; moods: indicative, habitual, obligative, and optative; aspects: progressive, perfective (*-era*), and imperfective (*-da*); polarities: positive and negative; and non-finite inflections such as infinitives, participles, and participle-based Nepali inflections such as *-ekole*, ‘because of X-ing.’

²² Includes participles used informally as finite verbs.

Table 7. A marking in past/perfective clauses

Marking	Perfect	Simple past	Habitual past	Other
none	0	10	15	2
<i>-le</i>	28	71	18	11
Total	28	81	33	13

First, the data suggest that the perfective aspect in Darjeeling Nepali strongly influences ergative marking. In the past perfect and present perfect tenses, where perfective aspect is the most salient feature of the construction, ergative-marking is most consistent: all twenty-eight instances of A with perfect tense are marked with *-le*.

Further, among eighty-one simple past tense clauses, seventy-one A arguments carry *-le* and ten are unmarked. Several of these ten exceptions offer a possible explanation. In examples 38 and 39, the ambitransitive verbs *padnu* ‘to study’ and *khaanu* ‘to eat’ respectively appear to be used transitively but have O arguments that could possibly be seen as adjuncts instead.

- (38) A O
- (38) *abo* *keṭaa-haru* *kaalaj* *paḍ-yo*
- now boy-PL college (Eng) study-PST.3SG
- ‘Nowadays, [if] young men study college....’
- (39) A O
- (39) *uni-haru* *besi* *khaa-yo* *bhan-era*
- 3-PL much eat-PST.3SG say-PFV
- ‘Thinking that they ate a lot....’

In example 38 (one of several protases in a longer sentence), ‘college’ could be the environment rather than the topic of study. In example 39, the context suggests that the adjective *besi* represents an argument, i.e., ‘a lot [of food].’ However, adjectives and adverbs are not sharply differentiated in Darjeeling Nepali, and an alternative reading is adverbial: ‘they ate and ate.’ Another of the clauses with unmarked A also uses the ambitransitive verb *khaanu*, with the English loan word ‘dinner’ as the O argument. The sentence includes details of the place, time, and participants for the meal, and it is possible that the speaker conceives of this as an intransitive use of a complex predicate: ‘we dined.’ There is a third *khaanu* sentence among the ten exceptions, with the O argument *dabai*, ‘potion’ (e.g., medicine). The sentence indicates undergoing a month-long course of treatment, which semantically could be viewed as intransitive. It appears that the ambitransitive *khaanu* may be more prone than other verbs to form complex predicates, omitting *-le* on the A argument.

A fifth unmarked A clause, example 40, uses the English ‘help’ with *garnu* ‘to do’. This type of *garnu* construction is always counted as transitive in the corpus. However, in this instance, the semantics suggest an intransitive clause, which may weaken the motivation for *-le* marking in the speaker’s mind.

- (40) A O
- (40) *haami* *hyelp* *gar-na* *thal-yo* *alikasi*
- 1PL help (Eng) do-INF begin-PST.3SG a.little.bit
- dekorayshan-ko* *laagi*
- decoration (Eng)-GEN for.the.sake.of
- ‘We began to help a little bit with the decorations.’

A sixth clause, example 41, has an intransitive clause (bolded) intervening between unmarked A and the transitive verb (similar to example 22), which likely explains the absence of *-le*.

- | | | | | | | | |
|------|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
| | | | A | | | O | |
| (41) | <i>last-maa</i> | <i>chahi</i> | <i>haami</i> | <i>yahaa</i> | <i>a-era</i> | <i>biha</i> | <i>gar-yau</i> |
| | last (Eng)-LOC | INT | 1PL | here | come-PFV | wedding | do-PST.1PL |
| | ‘Finally, after coming here, we got married.’ | | | | | | |

A seventh clause, example 42, is a habitual past sentence by context: the speaker is recalling life during her childhood (conversation prompt 5, appendix A). Marking is significantly less frequent in the habitual past (see below, in this section), which may influence the speaker’s omission of marking, although she concludes with the simple past *garyo* rather than the habitual past *garthyo*.

- | | | | | | | | |
|------|--|-------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---|--|
| | | A | | O | | O | |
| (42) | <i>basti-ko</i> | <i>naani-haru</i> | <i>ghaas</i> | <i>daura</i> | <i>gar-yo</i> | | |
| | village-GEN | child-PL | grass | firewood | do-PST.3SG | | |
| | ‘Village children gathered (lit. <i>did</i>) grass [and] firewood.’ | | | | | | |

The remaining three sentences offer no clear explanation for the omission of *-le*. They appear to be ungrammatical exceptions in spoken language, using the verbs *paḍaunu* ‘to educate’, *bolnu* ‘to speak’, and *garnu* ‘to do’, each with explicit O arguments, as in example 43.

- | | | | | | | | |
|------|--|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------|--|--------------|
| | | O | | | A | | O (repeated) |
| (43) | <i>haami</i> | <i>panch-jaana-haru-laai</i> | <i>chahi</i> | <i>wahaa-haru</i> | <i>sabaai-laai</i> | | |
| | 1PL | five-CLF-PL-ACC | INT | 3HON-PL | all-ACC | | |
| | <i>chahi</i> | <i>paḍau-nubhayo</i> | | | | | |
| | INT | educate-PST.3HON | | | | | |
| | ‘They educated the five of us, all [of us].’ | | | | | | |

The largest group of unmarked A arguments in perfective aspect are habitual past constructions. In standard Nepali, ergative marking is claimed to be ungrammatical with the habitual past (Watters and Rajbhandary 1998:192; Butt and Poudel 2007:11). However, in Darjeeling Nepali, ergative marking seems to be preferred. The corpus data contain thirty-three habitual past constructions with A arguments, of which eighteen have ergative marking and fifteen are unmarked. In the elicitation task, all seven participants preferred or required *-le*-marked A in each of three habitual past sentences, except for one participant, who considered ergative marking optional in one example.

Of the remaining twelve perfective clauses (participles, progressives, and obligative constructions), eleven A arguments are marked with *-le*, and one, shown in example 44, is unmarked. This sentence is unusual in that its obligative construction does not deal with past action, and has 1SG A, which is shown in the next section to inhibit use of *-le* in the imperfective.

- | | | | | | | |
|------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------------|--|
| | A | | O | | | |
| (44) | <i>ma</i> | <i>tapaai-laai</i> | <i>sod-nu</i> | <i>par-yo</i> | <i>are</i> ²³ | |
| | 1SG | 2SG.HON-ACC | ask-INF | must-PST.3SG | REP | |
| | ‘I’m supposed to ask you, [it says].’ | | | | | |

Imperfective: Imperfective aspect evidences more variability in marking, as shown in table 8. Some possible factors affecting distribution are considered below; however, no single factor appears to account for all the data. It seems likely from the data that there is room for pragmatic marking in spoken Darjeeling Nepali, though only in tightly defined morphosyntactic environments.

²³ The particle *are* indicates second-hand information, serving as a spoken reportative evidential.

Table 8. A marking in non-past/imperfective clauses

Marking	Simple non-past	Present progressive	Present participle	Other
none	22	0	5	7
-le	34	2	0	6
Total	56	2	5	13

The most straightforward imperfective construction in Nepali is the simple non-past tense, used for both present habitual and future. Among 56 simple non-past clauses, thirty-four are marked with *-le* and twenty-two are unmarked. These clauses offer an opportunity for further examination in terms of pragmatic marking, beyond the scope of the current investigation.

Authors disagree about whether ergative marking is permissible with present progressive tense (footnote 8). The corpus yields only two instances of present progressive with explicit A argument; both are marked with *-le*, as in example 45.

	A				O	
(45)	<i>uniharu-le</i>	<i>chahi</i>	<i>kasari</i>	<i>chahi</i>	<i>jivika</i>	<i>chalaun-dai-chha</i>
	3PL-ERG	INT	how	INT	livelihood	operate-PROG-NPST.3SG
	‘As for them, how are they managing [their] livelihood?’					

In the elicitation task, seven participants evaluated six present progressive clauses. Of the forty-two responses generated, participants required *-le* in twenty-nine instances, rejected it in seven, and optionally allowed it in six. Two participants considered *-le* optional in example 46; the other five considered it obligatory.

	A		O	
[46]	<i>Mina-(le)</i>	<i>gaajar</i>	<i>kaṭ-dai-chha</i>	
	Mina-(ERG)	carrot(s)	cut-PROG-NPST.3SG	
	‘Mina is cutting carrots.’			

Marking was not rejected by a majority of participants for any present progressive clause. Response patterns hint at other possible effects: ergative marking was most likely to be rejected (three of seven responses) for one clause with first person singular A and another with the ambitransitive verb *khelnu* ‘to play’, shown in example 47.

		A		O	
[47]	<i>aaju</i>	<i>ko-ko (kas-kas-le)</i>	<i>goli</i>	<i>khel-dai-chha</i>	
	today	who-RED-(ERG)	football	play-PROG-NPST.3SG	
	‘Who all is playing football today?’				

It is possible, as proposed for *khaanu*, that the ambitransitive verb *khelnu* forms an intransitive complex predicate ‘to play football,’ at least for some speakers. Another factor is that participants chose between unmarked *ko-ko* and the standard marked form *kas-kasle*. This form is used in spoken Darjeeling Nepali, but some participants indicated elsewhere that they prefer the spoken-only forms *ko-kole* or *ko-kasle*, which could have influenced their rejection of the marked form here.

Five instances of the present participle, including three used as informal future, show unmarked A, as in example 48. The remaining imperfective clauses are those marked for mood or modality and are considered in section 4.1.4.

- (48) *an ta* *tyahaa* *ga-era* O *gar-ne* A
 then there go-PFV what-RED do-PRS.PTCP 1PL
 ‘Then, when we get there, what all will we do?’

4.1.3 Person

Corpus data indicate that first person singular A arguments are unlikely to carry ergative markers in the imperfective aspect. The fifty-six simple non-past tense clauses include eleven 1SG A arguments. Ten of these are unmarked, while only one (example 49) is marked with *-le*. This is also the only negative inflection among the 1SG clauses. Among the remaining (non 1SG) clauses, thirty-two are *-le*-marked, and twelve unmarked.

- (49) *tyahaa* *dekhi-n*²⁴ *chahi* A *mai-le* O *raksi-haru* *piũ-dina*
 there from-also INT 1SG-ERG alcohol-PL drink-NPST.1SG.NEG
 ‘And since that time, I don’t drink alcohol.’

In the elicitation task, all seven participants affirmed example 50 as acceptable with unmarked 1SG A.

- [50] A *ma* *haat-le* O *khaana* *khaan-chhu*
 1SG hand-INSTR food eat-NPST.1SG
 ‘I eat (will eat) food with my hands.’

However, given a 3PL A in a non-past sentence (example 51), five of seven required *-le* marking on A, and two considered it optional. Also see example 54, below.

- [51] A *sabaai-jaana-le* O *chiya* *khaan-chha*
 all-CLF-ERG tea eat-NPST.3SG
 ‘Everyone drinks (will drink) tea.’

A language assistant affirms that in Darjeeling Nepali, *-le* is ungrammatical with the 1SG pronoun in the simple non-past tense, while *-le* is preferred for second- and third-person arguments. If standard Nepali shares this prohibition, it may shed some light on Abadie’s (1974:165–166) difficulty explaining the inconsistent application of *-le* in the non-past tense. Of her five examples, the two arguments without *-le* are also the two 1SG arguments.

4.1.4 Mood, modality, and polarity

Nepali inflects verbs with mood, modality, and polarity. Obligative mood in Nepali is typically associated with ergative marking: authors widely accept that *-le* is required with the obligative construction infinitive + *parnu* meaning ‘it is required/necessary to X’ (Watters and Rajbhandary 1998:134). Abadie further notes that regardless of tense, *-le* is more likely to appear in ‘constructions in the semantic area of permission/obligation’ (Abadie 1974:163); related topics such as polarity and interrogatives may also be involved. Evidence in the current corpus is sparse but indicates items for further investigation.

²⁴ Spoken-only abbreviation of *pani*, ‘also’.

Obligative: The corpus data include thirteen instances of transitive verbs in obligative constructions with explicit A arguments. Of these, eight are marked *-le* (four perfective and four imperfective clauses), and five are unmarked (one perfective and four imperfective). All three 1SG arguments in the data are unmarked (one perfective and two imperfective), indicating that the prohibition on *-le* marking of 1SG A may take precedence over the requirement for marking A in obligative clauses, at least in speech. A fourth unmarked clause involves a less common obligative construction in which *parnu* is replaced with *hunu* ‘to be’, which is not otherwise permitted with *-le* and may explain the omission here. The final unmarked clause has a 1PL argument, whereas two other 1PL arguments are marked with *-le*.

Table 9. Marking in obligative corpus clauses

Aspect	Person/ number	Number of clauses	Marking	
			<i>-le</i>	∅
PRF (5)	1SG	1	-	1
	3SG/PL	4	4	-
IPFV (8)	1SG	2	-	2
	1PL	3	2	1
	3SG/PL	3	2	1

The corpus data support the ergative marking of obligative clauses, apart from 1SG A arguments. Elicited data do not address 1SG arguments in the obligative mood, but participants uniformly required *-le* in a 3SG non-past obligative clause, shown in example 52.

		A		O	
[52]	<i>aba</i>	<i>Mina-le</i>	<i>gaajar</i>	<i>kaṭ-nu</i>	<i>par-chha</i>
	now	Mina-ERG	carrots	cut-INF	must-NPST.3SG
	‘Now Mina must cut carrots.’				

Interrogative: Ten interrogative transitive clauses in the corpus contain explicit subjects; of these six are unmarked and four are marked with *-le*. Neither tense/aspect nor question type (polar v. Wh-questions) consistently correlates with marking. In this small sample, all the first-and-second-person A arguments are unmarked, and all third-person arguments are ergative marked, with the exception of one 3PL argument that denotes a group including the speaker (‘everyone [i.e., all of us]’). Given that *-le* is more often spontaneously omitted than added in speech, this at least seems to indicate a strong preference for marking third person arguments in interrogatives, regardless of tense/aspect.

Table 10. Marking in interrogative corpus clauses

Tense/aspect	Person/number	Number of clauses	Marking	
			<i>-le</i>	∅
Perfective (2)	2PL	1	-	1
	3PL	1	1	-
Imperfective (8)	1PL	3	-	3
	2SG	1	-	1
	3PL	4	3	1

The elicited data contain two sets of similar sentences in the interrogative and indicative. First, all seven participants required *-le* on a 3SG argument in a polar interrogative sentence (example 53), and six required *-le* in the corresponding indicative sentence (example 54), while one considered it optional.

[53] A O
ke Mina (-le) harek din gaajar kaṭ-chha?
 Q Mina (-ERG) each day carrot cut-NPST.3SG
 ‘Does Mina cut carrots every day?’

[54] A O
Mina (-le) harek din gaajar kaṭ-chha
 Mina (-ERG) each day carrot cut-NPST.3SG
 ‘Mina cuts carrots every day.’

All seven participants required *-le* in a present progressive clause with interrogative pronoun A (example 55), while only three required it in the corresponding indicative clause with 1SG A (example 56).

[55] A O
ko/kas-le himal dekh-dai-chha
 who/who-ERG mountain see-PROG-PRS.3SG
 ‘Who is seeing the mountain?’

[56] A O
ma (-ile) himal dekh-dai-chhu²⁵
 I (-ERG) mountain see-PROG-PRS.1SG
 ‘I am seeing the mountain.’

It appears that interrogative mood may be associated with increased likelihood of ergative marking, but the data above (sections 4.1.2–3) indicate that the 1SG argument and progressive tense likely also affect marking preferences in the examples. More clear investigation of the effects of interrogative mood on marking is needed.

Polarity: Negation is inflected in the verb in Nepali and may influence ergative marking in the corpus. Among all 256 transitive clauses (including non-finite verbs, which carry polarity), 81 percent of negative clauses are marked with *-le*, compared with 71 percent of affirmative clauses. In the perfective aspect, (154 clauses) 82 percent of affirmative and 92 percent of negative clauses have *-le*-marked A. In the imperfective aspect (seventy-six clauses) where marking is more varied, the divide is greater: 69 percent of negative and 52 percent of affirmative clauses are marked with *-le*.

Table 11. A argument marking and polarity

Tense/ aspect	Polarity	Number of clauses	Marking	
			<i>-le</i>	∅
Perfective	Affirmative	141	116 (82%)	25 (18%)
	Negative	13	12 (92%)	1 (8%)
Imperfective	Affirmative	63	33 (52%)	30 (48%)
	Negative	13	9 (69%)	4 (31%)

Other moods and modalities: The corpus has a few examples of other marked moods and modalities in transitive clauses with explicit A arguments; these are summarized in table 12. There is one prohibitive clause, which is *-le*-marked. There are four optative clauses: one has A marked with *-le* (3SG), and three are unmarked (1PL, 1SG, 3SG). The unmarked 3SG clause is shown in example 57.

²⁵ One participant preferred *hernu* ‘to look at, watch’ rather than *dekhnu* ‘to see’.

(57) A
ek-jaana chahi bol-ne chahi h-os
 one-CLF INT speak-NPST.PTCP INT NPST-3SG.OPT

O O (repeated)
wahaa-singa mero shriman-singa
 3HON-with 1SG.GEN husband-with
 ‘May just one person speak with him, with my husband.’

There is one clause with the modal indicator *hola* ‘maybe’ following the verb; the 3SG A argument is marked with *-le*. According to language assistants, this construction is a local variation of the inflected speculative ending in standard Nepali (see example 8). Nepali inflects verbs for imperative mood, but the corpus does not contain any examples of transitive imperative verbs with explicit A.

Abadie (1974:163) further suggests that *-le* is expected with the verb + *dinu* construction²⁶ ‘to permit to X’. The single non-past example of this construction in the corpus (a paraphrase from the elicitation questions) uses *-le*-marked A argument.

(58) A O O
an ta tapaa-i-le chahi tapaa-i shrimati wa chorii
 then 2SG.HON-ERG INT 2SG.HON-GEN wife or daughter

O
wa aphanta-haru-laai chala-na di-nu di-nuhunchha bhan-era
 or relative-PL-DAT drive-INF give-INF give-NPST.2HON say-PFV
 ‘Then, “As for you, would you allow your wife or daughter or [female] relative to drive?” it says.’

Table 12. Ergative marking in corpus data

Mood/ modality	Tense/ aspect	Person/ number	Number of clauses	Marking	
				<i>-le</i>	∅
Prohibitive	IPFV	1PL	1	1	-
Optative (4)	IPFV	1SG	1	-	1
		1PL	1	-	1
		3SG/PL	2	1	1
Speculative	IPFV	3SG	1	1	-
Permissive	IPFV	2SG HON	1	1	-

In the elicited data, participants overwhelmingly required *-le* in non-past transitive clauses with verbs inflected for negation, prohibition, permission, uncertain future, and certainty. The task did not include optative clauses. Table 13 shows elicitation results. It appears that marked modalities (apart from optative) may be associated with increased likelihood of ergative marking; however, given the unexpectedly high frequency with which participants required *-le* in all elicited data, more investigation is needed to determine whether these moods and modalities actually influence ergative marking.

²⁶ This construction is separate from the benefactive verb + *idinu* in section 5.1.2.

Table 13. Ergative marking responses in elicited data (all non-past/imperfective)

Modality/ polarity	Inflection	Gloss	Pers	-le required	-le optional	-le prohibited
Negative	<i>-daina</i>	‘will not X’	3SG HON	5	1	1
Prohibitive	<i>-nu hūdaina</i>	‘may not X’	3PL	7	-	-
Permissive	<i>-nu hunchha</i>	‘may X’	3PL	6	1	-
Speculative	<i>-chha hola</i>	‘might X’	3SG	7	-	-
Assertive	<i>-hunechha</i>	‘will certainly X’	3SG	7	-	-

4.2 Marking on O arguments

The 549 transitive clauses in the corpus include 481 explicit O arguments. Only 9 percent of O arguments are omitted, compared to 34 percent of S and 53 percent of A arguments. Marking on O arguments is summarized in table 14 and discussed below.

Table 14. Marking on O arguments

Marking	Gloss	Occurrences	Percentage
none	∅	423	88%
<i>-laai</i>	DAT/ACC	47	10%
<i>bhanera</i>	discourse	6	1%
<i>-maa</i>	LOC	2	0.4%
<i>-sanga/singa</i>	‘with’	2	0.4%
<i>-le</i>	INSTR	1	0.2%
TOTAL		481	100%

4.2.1 -le marking for instrumental

Ergative marking on an O argument is unexpected and ungrammatical in Nepali. The single instance of *-le* marking on an O argument appears to be the form-identical instrumental marker, based on the relation of the argument to the subsequent clause: the medicine (O) taken in the first clause is the instrument of the disease getting better in the second clause, below.

- (59) O
- tyo dabai-haru-le khaa-yo jati hun-thyo,*
 that medicine-PL-INSTR eat-PST.3SG well be-PST.HAB.3SG
- tyahaa-dekhi-n-ko pheri baaljin-thyo h-o*
 there-ABL-also-GEN again surface-PST.HAB.3SG COP.NPST-3SG
- ‘Because of those medicines [I] took, it would get better, but from there [the disease] would resurface, right?’

4.2.2 Extended transitives and -maa, -sanga marking

Seventy-two clauses in the corpus contain extended transitive verbs, which sanction A, O, and E arguments. Dixon states that E arguments will be marked separately from A and O, often with dative (1994:122). However, the Nepali dative marker *-laai* also marks accusative case, so it is necessary to differentiate the arguments by other means. I have assigned the argument likely to be most affected (Dixon 2010:130), or most resembling a semantic UNDERGOER to O and the argument most likely to be a GOAL or RECIPIENT to E, as in example 60.

- | | | | | | | | |
|------|--|--------------|-------------------|-----------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|
| | | E | | A | | O | |
| (60) | <i>kun</i> | <i>chahi</i> | <i>dharma-maa</i> | <i>ma</i> | <i>chahi</i> | <i>aama-laai</i> | <i>hal-ū</i> |
| | which | INT | religion-LOC | 1SG | INT | mother-ACC | place-NPST.CO.H.1SG |
| | ‘In which religious faith should I place [my] mother?’ | | | | | | |

In example 60, locative marking on the E argument makes the choice clearer, marking *dharma* as a GOAL and therefore the best candidate for E. Rarely (as in table 14), locative marking can also occur on O when it indicates a location, as shown below:

- | | | | | | | |
|------|---|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| | A | | | | O | |
| (61) | <i>sabaai-jaana</i> | <i>dara-era</i> | <i>kirki-baaṭa</i> | <i>tala</i> | <i>bato-maa</i> | <i>her-thyo</i> |
| | all-CLF | fear-PFV | window-ABL | down | road-LOC | watch-PST.HAB.3SG |
| | ‘Everyone, being afraid, used to watch the road from the window.’ | | | | | |
-
- | | | | | | | |
|------|--|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|--|
| | | O | | A | | |
| (62) | <i>last-maa</i> | <i>shariir-maa</i> | <i>ago-le</i> | <i>pol-chha</i> | <i>ni</i> | |
| | last (Eng)-LOC | body-LOC | fire-ERG | burn-NPST.3SG | INTJ | |
| | ‘Finally, [it feels like] fire burns your body.’ (of leprosy symptoms) | | | | | |

Many of the extended transitive verbs in the corpus have to do with giving or speaking. Most often, the GIFT or MESSAGE is assigned to O, but, in example 63, the ADDRESSEE is O and the MESSAGE is omitted. This concurs with Dixon’s judgment about speaking verbs, that the more specific argument is O, while others may be more readily omitted (Dixon 2010:130).

- | | | | | | |
|------|---|----------------|------------|-----------|-----------------|
| | | | A | O | |
| (63) | <i>an ta</i> | <i>yaha-ai</i> | <i>hai</i> | <i>ma</i> | <i>sab-laai</i> |
| | then | here-INT | INTJ | 1SG | all-ACC |
| | ‘Then here, hey, I’m telling everyone.’ | | | | |

In two clauses using *bolnu*, to speak, the O argument is the ADDRESSEE and the MEDIUM/MESSAGE is omitted. In these clauses, the ADDRESSEE is marked with *-singa*, a spoken-only variant of *-sanga*, ‘with.’ One of these clauses is seen above in example 57 (section 4.1.4). Table 15 shows that *-sanga* marking on ADDRESSEES is also used with other speaking constructions, such as prayer and discussion.

Finally, there are twenty-one clauses combining (mostly) nouns with *garnu*, ‘to do’, which might be analysed in future work as complex verbal phrases. Many use English borrowed words, and further analysis is needed. For consistency, they are counted here as bitransitives, with the complement of *garnu* as the O argument and the other (non-A) argument as E. These E arguments, though not UNDERGOERS of *garnu* directly, are often best described as UNDERGOERS of the *garnu* phrase, which seems to make them atypical E arguments. Table 15 attempts to identify the semantic roles with respect to *garnu* rather than with respect to the *garnu* phrase. Hence, though the person changed would be an UNDERGOER of the verb ‘to change,’ the person is better viewed as the BENEFICIARY in the construction ‘to do change to X.’

Table 15. Extended transitives with *garnu*

Instances in corpus	O (unmarked)	Phrase	E, for example	E marking
1	<i>kura</i> 'matter, thing'	<i>kura garnu</i> 'to discuss'	conversation partner (ADDRESSEE)	- <i>sanga</i>
1	<i>sanghat</i> 'association'	<i>sanghat garnu</i> 'to associate (with)'	associate, e.g., neighbour (COMITATIVE)	- <i>sanga</i>
1	<i>praarthana</i> 'prayer'	<i>praarthana garnu</i> 'to pray'	deity prayed to (ADDRESSEE)	- <i>sanga</i> ²⁷
2	<i>praarthana</i> 'prayer'	<i>praarthana garnu</i> 'to pray (for)'	entity prayed on behalf of (BENEFICIARY)	- <i>laai</i> ²⁸
2	<i>hyelp</i> 'help (Eng)'	<i>hyelp garnu</i> 'to help'	entity helped (BENEFICIARY)	- <i>laai</i>
1	<i>saayataa</i> 'help'	<i>saayataa garnu</i> 'to help'	entity helped (BENEFICIARY)	- <i>laai</i>
1	<i>chanj</i> 'change (Eng)'	<i>chanj garnu</i> 'to change (someone/something)'	entity changed (BENEFICIARY)	- <i>laai</i>
3	<i>fon</i> 'phone (Eng)'	<i>fon garnu</i> 'to call (by phone)'	person called (ADDRESSEE)	- <i>laai</i>
2	<i>shayrsusar</i> 'care'	<i>shayrsusar garnu</i> 'to care for'	person cared for, e.g., child (BENEFICIARY)	- <i>laai</i>
1	<i>dukha</i> 'difficulty'	<i>dukha garnu</i> ²⁹ 'to trouble'	person troubled (EXPERIENCER)	- <i>laai</i>
1	<i>samjhana</i> 'memory'	<i>samjhana garnu</i> 'to remember'	person/thing remembered (THOUGHT)	- <i>laai</i>
1	<i>maayaa</i> 'love, affection'	<i>maayaa garnu</i> 'to show affection for, to love'	person loved (EXPERIENCER)	- <i>laai</i>
2	<i>samnaa</i> 'face (verb)'	<i>samnaa garnu</i> 'to face, undergo'	e.g., difficulty, circumstance (GOAL)	∅, - <i>laai</i>
1	<i>fiks</i> 'fix, set (Eng)'	<i>fiks garnu</i> 'to fix, set'	plan, e.g., timeframe (GOAL)	∅
1	<i>arjaan</i> 'acquisition'	<i>arjaan garnu</i> 'to acquire'	possession, e.g., education (GOAL)	∅

4.2.3 Clauses as O and bhanera marking

Twenty-seven O arguments are clauses, six of which are marked with *bhanera*, a discourse marker from the perfective of the verb *bhannu* 'to say', as in example 64.

²⁷ This argument may also be marked *-laai* elsewhere, but not in the corpus.

²⁸ This argument may also be marked *-ko laagi* (BEN) elsewhere, but not in the corpus.

²⁹ This phrase in the corpus also means 'to take pains' (see example 10), but in that usage there is no E argument so it is not counted as an extended transitive.

- | | | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| | O | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
- (64) *tapaai-ko* *chorii* *jati* *hun-chha* *bhanera* *bhan-yo*
 2HON-GEN daughter well be-NPST.3SG DM say-PST.3SG
 “Your daughter will get well,” [he] said.’

The second person reference in the example above suggests that it is probably intended as a direct quote rather than as reported speech; however, *bhanera* is not required for all direct quotes, as example 65 shows.

- | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| | O | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|
- (65) *bholi* *timi-haru-laai* *sajai* *din-chhu*
 tomorrow 2SG-PL-DAT punishment give-NPST.1SG

bhan-eko *thi-yo*
 say-PST.PTCP PST.PRF-3SG
 “I will punish you (PL) tomorrow,” [he] had said.’

The speech frame may also precede a quote, as in example 66, but *bhanera* is not used before an utterance.

- (66) *mero* *aama-le* *ma-laai* *bhan-thyo,* *sabaai-ko*
 1SG-GEN mother-ERG 1SG-DAT say-PST.HAB.3SG everyone-GEN

choraa-chorii *yo* *jagaa-maa* *aat-yo;* *mero* *chorii*
 son-daughter this place-LOC adapt³⁰-PST.3SG my daughter

aat-ena
 adapt-PST.NEG.3SG
 ‘My mother used to say to me, “Everyone [else]’s children adapted to this place, [but] my daughter didn’t adapt.’”

O argument clauses which do not carry *bhanera* are counted as unmarked arguments. Not all argument clauses are speech, as in example 67, where the clause on the first line is the O argument of the independent clause on the second line.

- (67) *tyasto-haru* *gar-di-eko* *chahi* *abo* *sarkar-le*
 like.this-PL do-BEN-PST.PTCP INT now government-ERG

ma *chahan-chhu*
 I want-NPST.1SG
 ‘Now, I want the government to do these sorts [of things] [for us].’

4.2.4 -laai marking: animacy and definiteness

By far the largest segment of marked O arguments carry *-laai*. Animacy and definiteness are suggested as criteria for *-laai*-marking in Nepali (e.g., Li 2007), and the corpus data generally support this assertion, while providing additional insight.

³⁰ Gloss determined in consultation with a language assistant; *aatnu* typically means ‘to venture or decide’ (Schmidt and Dahal 1993:31).

Animate O: Much of the distribution of *-laai* can be explained in terms of animacy; in fact, some participants articulated that *-laai* denotes people. Among the 481 O arguments, fifty-eight are animate, and forty-five of those are marked with *-laai*. Most of the animate O arguments are also definite; only 3 of 56 are clearly indefinite,³¹ and two of these are also unmarked. Therefore, the typical *-laai*-marked O argument in the corpus is both animate and definite.

Table 16. Types of *-laai*-marked and unmarked O arguments

Marking type	Total arguments	Animate	Animate and definite
<i>-laai</i>	47	45	44
<i>-sanga</i>	2	2	2
∅	423	11	9

The use of *-sanga* with ADDRESSEES is discussed above in section 4.2.2. Eleven animate arguments are unmarked; nine of these are definite. Some of these exceptions to *-laai* marking may depend on convention: four instances occur with the verb *milaunu*, ‘to arrange or organize’, used in the context of coordinating people for an event or task. Apart from this specific use, the verb does not typically take an animate O argument, which may account for the repeated omission of *-laai*. A fifth instance recalls a visit to the doctor:

- (68) *pichari* *last-maa* *an ta* O *daktar* *dekh-ãũ-dakheri*
 afterwards last (Eng)-LOC then doctor see-CAUS-while
 ‘Then afterwards, finally, when (I was) seeing the doctor...’

The construction *daktar dekhaunu* (lit. *to show the doctor* to someone) is a convention in Darjeeling Nepali, in which the patient (here omitted) is marked with *-laai* and the doctor is unmarked. All seven participants unanimously confirmed this marking convention in the elicitation task. Based on the grammatical construction, doctor (UNDERGOER) is analysed as O, and the patient (GOAL) as E. This may be another instance where *daktar dekhaunu* is best considered a complex verb phrase, which would explain the lack of marking on doctor and make the *-laai*-marked patient the O argument.

Other exceptions may be semantic exceptions to the typical personal object: Two use *prabu* ‘lord’ in reference to deity (though *prabu* for deity is more often marked *-laai* in the corpus). Of the four remaining unmarked animate arguments, two are indefinite and refer to farm animals. In the elicitation task, five of seven participants preferred *-laai* with an animal O in a context that allowed for definiteness (example 3, section 1.3), which indicates that animals are candidates for *-laai* marking. Definiteness then emerges in the corpus as a further requirement for *-laai*-marking. The remaining two arguments are definite and simply do not carry the *-laai* marker where it would be expected; they appear to be exceptions. One is example 8 (section 1.4), and the other is example 69.

- (69) O
tyas-maa *naani-haru* *paq-au-nu,* *khaa-nu*
 this-LOC child-PL study-CAUS-INF eat-INF
 ‘With this much [money] to educate the children, to eat...’

Animate proper nouns and pronouns are inherently definite and always require *-laai*. However, with other animate arguments, *-laai* may be the primary means to mark definiteness. For example, in the elicitation task, five of the seven participants considered *-laai* optional in example 70, and the other two disagreed about whether it is permissible. Two participants stated that the meaning of the sentence

³¹ This may also indicate a preference in Nepali discourse for introducing topics in A/S roles rather than O roles, which would mean that most O arguments are presupposed and therefore definite.

differs based on the inclusion or exclusion of *-laai*, and language assistants confirm that the difference is whether a specific doctor, known to the hearer, is meant.

[70] *ma-ile* *daktar (-laai)* *khoj-dai-thyē*
 I-ERG doctor (-DEF) seek-PROG-PST.1SG
 ‘I was looking for a (the) doctor.’

Inanimate O: Marking of inanimate arguments is better explained in terms of definiteness and what could be called particularity, or social significance to the speaker and/or hearer.³² Many definite, inanimate O arguments exist in the corpus, but of all 423 inanimate O arguments, only two are marked with *-laai*. In addition, one inanimate E argument of a *garṇu* construction is marked with *-laai* (example 71). These three inanimate arguments which are marked with *-laai* each carry explicit marking for both definiteness and particularity. Two are preceded by *tyai*, which is the far deictic demonstrative adjective *tyo* ‘that’ modified with the intensifier ending *-ai*: that very [one].³³

(71) *ani* *aaju* *ty-ai* *dukha* E *paristiti-haru-laai*
 and today this-INT difficult circumstance-PL-ACC

O
samnaa *gar-eko* *karan-le* *gar-da* *n-ai*
 face (verb) do-PST.PTCP reason-INSTR do-PROG INTJ-INT
 ‘And today, because I have faced [up to] these difficult circumstances....’

The third (example 72) is preceded by *yo* and followed by the intensifying particle *chahi*. Thus, *-laai* marking on inanimate O is associated with both definiteness and particularity in the corpus.

(72) *tara* *aaju-ko* *din-maa* *chahi* *abo* O *yo* *chalanj-laai*
 but today-GEN day-LOC INT now this challenge (Eng)-ACC

A
chahi *mai-le* *chahi* *pura* *gar-na* *sak-ē*
 INT 1SG-ERG INT fully do-INF be.able-PST.1SG
 ‘But today I was able to fully accomplish (lit. *do*) this challenge.’

The elicitation task may help clarify what constitutes ‘particularity’ for *-laai* marking. It goes beyond definiteness: in the second sentence below, the inanimate O argument is made definite by context, yet participants unanimously rejected *-laai* in both sentences.

[73] A *ma-ile* O *kitaab (*-laai)* *khoj-ē*
 1SG-ERG book seek-PST.1SG
 ‘I looked for a book.’

³² Li (2007:176–177) makes a similar observation, using ‘specific or socially important’ rather than definiteness as a criterion for marking on animate O arguments.

³³ Nepali does not have a definite article and can mark definiteness with the demonstratives *tyo* and *yo*.

	<input type="checkbox"/> A			<input type="checkbox"/> O	
[74]	<i>ma-ile</i>	<i>mero</i>	<i>maths</i>	<i>kitaab (*-laai)</i>	<i>khoj-ē</i>
	1SG-ERG	my	math (Eng)	book	seek-PST.1SG
	‘I looked for my math book.’				

One participant remarked regarding example 74 that *-laai* is inappropriate because there is ‘no need to respect a book.’ For this speaker, the use of *-laai* communicates respect.

In the following two examples, the context within the second sentence lends a degree of social significance, as well as definiteness, to the O argument: both grandparents and family land tend to be significant entities in a Darjeeling family, and the sale of a grandparent’s home is an important event.

	<input type="checkbox"/> A		<input type="checkbox"/> O	
[75]	<i>manche-le</i>	<i>ghar (-laai)</i>	<i>bech-chha</i>	
	person-ERG	house (-ACC)	sell-NPST.3SG	
	‘A person sells/will sell a house.’			

		<input type="checkbox"/> A		<input type="checkbox"/> O		
[76]	<i>mero</i>	<i>baje-le</i>	<i>aaphno</i>	<i>ghar (-laai)</i>	<i>bech-nu</i>	<i>koj-dai-chha</i>
	my	grandfather-ERG	own	house (-ACC)	sell-INF	seek-PROG-PRS.3SG
	‘My grandfather is trying to sell his own house.’					

In this set, four participants considered *-laai* incorrect (three) or optional (one) in example 75 but required it in example 76. Two participants rejected it in both sentences, and one considered it optional in both. Comparison with examples 73 and 74 indicates that social significance influences the acceptability of *-laai* with an inanimate argument.

4.2.5 Clarity and argument differentiation

Another important use of *-laai* is differentiating argument roles. Especially with extended transitives or when one argument is omitted, *-laai* may be needed for clarity. Example 77 is from the elicitation task and refers to a teacher providing an unspecified resource to a child. Participants were asked to judge the sentence (voiced by an MT speaker) either correct or incorrect, and either clear or unclear. It was deemed incorrect and unclear by all seven participants.

	<input type="checkbox"/> A		<input type="checkbox"/> O	
[77]*	<i>shikchak-le</i>	<i>naani*</i>	<i>din-chha</i>	
	teacher-ERG	child	give-NPST.3SG	
	‘The teacher will give [it] to [a] child.’			

One participant stated that the sentence in example 77, though ungrammatical, suggests a child being given by a teacher to assist another person. However, with the addition of *-laai*, all participants judged example 78 correct and clear.

	<input type="checkbox"/> A		<input type="checkbox"/> O	
[78]	<i>shikchak-le</i>	<i>naani-laai</i>	<i>din-chha</i>	
	teacher-ERG	child-DAT	give-NPST.3SG	
	‘The teacher will give [it] to the child.’			

Even with the further omission of *-le*, four participants still judged the sentence in example 78 clear, and three of those also deemed it to be correct. In this case, *-laai*-marked O was of greater importance than *-le*-marked A for clarity.

Though *-laai*-marking is often associated with a GOAL or RECIPIENT role, its use in marking animacy takes precedence, as in example 79.

	O	E		E	
(79)	<i>ma-laai</i>	<i>kahaa-kahaa</i>	<i>paṭaa-yo,</i>	<i>Jalpaiguri</i>	<i>paṭaa-yo</i>
	1SG-ACC	where-RED	send-PST.3SG	Jalpaiguri	send-PST.3SG
	‘[He] sent me here and there; he sent me to Jalpaiguri.’				

Marking with *-laai* can also be important in distinguishing subject from non-subject arguments. Example 80 is an extended intransitive (S and E arguments), but it shows the importance of *-laai* for argument differentiation when one argument is omitted, and the context does not clarify which role the remaining argument must fill.

(80)	<i>jo</i>	<i>saathii</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>par-daina,</i>	<i>u-laai</i>	<i>gar-yāũ</i>
	whomever	friend	heart	fall-NEG.NPST.3SG	3SG-ACC	do-PST.1PL
	‘Whichever friend we did not like, we did [it] to him/her.’					

The speaker is recalling misbehaviour during school days. The bolded clause has two animate arguments: an omitted 1PL dative subject S, the speaker and friends, experiencing dislike for (and doing mischief to, in the second clause) another friend, the E argument. *Saathii* ‘friend’ is co-referent with the *-laai*-marked 3SG pronoun in the second clause; at first glance it should also carry *-laai* marking. However, in this case, marking *saathii* with *-laai* would indicate the friend, instead of the elided ‘we,’ as the *-laai*-marked EXPERIENCER. The meaning would then be ‘whichever friend did not like [it], we did [it] to him/her.’

In summary, the marker *-laai* is best understood primarily as a marker of animacy, which is the use speakers articulated and the most common use in the corpus. Pragmatically, its use extends to marking definiteness among animate arguments, showing social significance of inanimate arguments, and clarifying argument roles.

4.3 Marking on E arguments

E arguments are not explicitly examined in the current analysis. However, E marking in extended transitive clauses was tabulated as part of the current section and is included here as a stimulus for further investigation. Among seventy-seven extended intransitive clauses, there are fifty-three explicit E arguments, and twenty-four (31%) are omitted. See table 17 for a summary of markings.

Table 17. Marking on E arguments of extended transitives

Marking	Gloss	Occurrences	Percentage
none	∅	10	19%
<i>-laai</i>	DAT/ACC	35	66%
<i>-maa</i>	LOC	4	8%
<i>-sanga</i>	‘with’	3	6%
<i>-koma</i>	co-locative ‘to/at X’s place’	1	2%
TOTAL		53	101%^a

^aPercentages do not add to 100, due to rounding.

4.4 Summary

In summary, transitivity is a necessary criterion for ergative marking in Darjeeling Nepali, unlike in other regional (especially Tibeto-Burman) languages. As expected, marking is obligatory in the perfective

aspect. Unlike in standard Nepali, it is preferred with the habitual past. Marking is prohibited on 1SG arguments outside the perfective aspect but is generally preferred on second and third-person arguments. It is required in obligative constructions except those with 1SG arguments and shows higher prevalence in negative and interrogative clauses. Further investigation is needed into the effects of marked mood and modality on ergative marking. The ergative marker *-le* is more frequent in elicited than in natural speech. Speakers show greater certainty and agreement about where the marker is prohibited than where it is required.

Pragmatic ergative marking in Darjeeling Nepali, if it exists, is limited to A arguments except for 1SG in imperfective (transitive) clauses, and may be further constrained by mood, modality, and polarity.

Object marking is also well-regulated in Darjeeling Nepali, where *-laai* marks animate, definite O arguments. Pragmatic marking does appear to function with inanimate O arguments, where *-laai* marking accords with social significance of the argument.

5 Valency-changing processes and ambitransitives

Nepali employs both ambitransitive verbs and valency-changing processes to shape the number and roles of verbal arguments. Because they affect argument slots available in a clause, both factors also influence argument marking. This section examines argument marking in the data in the presence of valency-changing processes (section 5.1) and ambitransitive verbs (section 5.2).

5.1 Valency-changing processes

5.1.1 Causative and passive

Nepali uses valency-changing processes to adjust the number and role of verbal arguments. The affix *-au* between the root and inflectional ending makes a verb causative:

<i>sut-nu</i>	→	<i>sut-au-nu</i>
sleep-INF		sleep-CAUS-INF
‘to sleep’		‘to put to sleep’

Intransitive verbs undergoing this process become transitive, as in the two clauses below (not from the corpus). The S argument of the verb *sutnu*, the one falling asleep, becomes the O argument of *sutaunu*, the one being put to sleep, and an A argument slot is added.

S		
<i>naani</i>		<i>sut-chha</i>
child		sleep-NPST.3SG
‘the child sleeps’		
A	O	
<i>ma</i>	<i>naani-laai</i>	<i>sut-āũ-chhu</i>
I	child-ACC	sleep-CAUS-NPST.1SG
‘I put the child to sleep’		

The affix *-i* makes a verb passive, as shown below.

<i>sun-nu</i>	→	<i>sun-i-nu</i>
hear-INF		be.heard-PASS-INF
‘to hear’		‘to be heard, audible’

Above, *sunnu* is a transitive verb taking arguments A (EXPERIENCER) and O (STIMULUS). The passive *suninu* is intransitive with only an S argument, which is the O argument (STIMULUS) from the corresponding use of *sunnu*. Both passive and causative processes, then, involve identity of the S argument of the intransitive with the O argument of the transitive formulation.

The availability of this process for a given verb depends on semantics (whether the verb makes sense as a causative/passive) as well as convention, although speakers may spontaneously modify verbs. Some verbs such as *dekhnu* ('to see') and *garnu* ('to do') are regularly modified with both affixes. As seen in table 18, a transitive verb becomes intransitive with the passive affix, or extended transitive with the causative affix.

Conversely, some pairs evidence only a two-way contrast by convention, with the -i form being the passive of the -au form. In such cases, the -au form is not a true causative, but the lexical form of the transitive verb, as seen in table 18 for *hurkaunu*, 'to raise (children)'.

Table 18. Effects of passive and causative processes on transitivity

	Intransitive		Transitive		Extended transitive
	<i>dekh-i-nu</i>	←	<i>dekh-nu</i>	→	<i>dekh-au-nu</i>
	see-PASS-INF		see-INF		see-CAUS-INF
	'to be seen, appear'		'to see'		'to cause to see, show'
Arguments	S		A, O		A, O, E
	<i>hurk-i-nu</i>	↔	<i>hurkau-nu</i>		
	raise-PASS-INF		raise-INF		
	'to be raised'		'to raise'		
Arguments	S		A, O		

These processes may semantically augment the verb as seen in table 18; *dekhinu* means not only the literal 'to be seen,' but also 'to appear.'

The corpus contains an example of both the transitive *hurkaunu* (example 81), and its intransitive passive (example 82).

- O
- (81) *aaphno* *choraa.chorii-laai* *hurkau-nu* *sak-yāū* *ho-ina*
 own children-ACC raise-INF be.able-PST.1PL be-NPST.3SG.NEG
 '[We] were able to raise our own children, right?'

In example 81, A is omitted, and O is clearly identified with *-laai*-marking. In example 82, the subject S of the passive form is unmarked.

- S
- (82) *tapaai* *hurk-ī-dai-garda* *are,* *hurk-ī-dai-garda* *chahi*
 2SG.HON raise-PASS-PROG-IPFV REP raise-PASS-PROG-IPFV INT
 'While you were being raised, as it were, while you were being brought up'

Arguments of verbs undergoing valency-changing processes follow the same argument marking rules as arguments of other verbs. Example 83 employs the causative of *siknu*, 'to learn', with *-le*-marked A and *-laai*-marked O. This use also sanctions an E argument, what is learned, which is included as the next clause.

- (83) O A
- aaphno haami-laai aamababa-le sik-aa³⁴-yo saan-ai dekhi-n*
 own 1PL-DAT parents-ERG teach-CAUS-PST.3SG small-INT since-also
- E
- kaam danda-haru eta-uti gar-nu*
 work responsibility-PL here-there do-INF
- ‘Our own parents taught us since we were very small to do various types of work.’

A clause from the picture description task demonstrates a causative with explicit A, O, and E arguments. It uses *khuwaanu*, ‘to feed’, the irregular causative of *khaanu*, ‘to eat’. Following Dixon (2010:130), the O argument is taken to be *timi* ‘you’ because it is more specific (and therefore the effect on it is more in view) than *khaana* ‘food’. As expected, the animate *timi* receives *-laai* marking, while *khaana* is unmarked.

- [84] A O E
- hijo mai-le timi-laai khaana khuwaa-eko thi-yē*
 yesterday 1SG-ERG 2SG-ACC food feed-PST.PTCP PST.PRF-1SG
- ‘Yesterday I had fed you food.’

While E arguments of canonical extended transitives are often animate (e.g., RECIPIENTS), it is O arguments in causative Nepali extended transitives that tend to be animate/personal, as in examples 83 and 84. Just as causative processes generally shift S into the O position, they also shift A arguments of transitive verbs, which are commonly animate, into the O position.

An interesting effect occurs with *man parnu* liking clauses: the causative process transforms an extended intransitive into a transitive clause. A typical *man parnu* clause has the EXPERIENCER as dative subject S and STIMULUS as E (see section 3.2). This type is seen in example 85, which was affirmed by all participants in the elicitation task.

- [85] S E
- naani-laai phalphul man par-chha*
 child-DAT fruit heart fall-NPST.3SG
- ‘(The) child likes fruit.’

A parallel formulation uses the causative of *parnu*. The number of arguments remains the same, but marking suggests that the extended intransitive becomes transitive, mapping S onto A, and E onto O.

- [86]³⁵ A O
- naani-(le) phalphul man par-au-chha*
 child-ERG fruit heart fall-CAUS-NPST.3SG
- ‘(The) child likes fruit.’

Most participants did not acknowledge a meaning difference between the two constructions, although one expressed that the intransitive formulation (example 85) sounds like the answer to a specific question about the child’s preferences.

³⁴ Modified causative form due to the initial glide in *-yo*.

³⁵ Participants compared examples 85 and 86 in the elicitation task. Example 86 was presented without ergative marking on A. Four participants found both examples acceptable: two volunteered that 86 is better with *-le* on *naani*, and two accepted it without *-le* marking. The remaining three preferred example 85, perhaps because of the omission of *-le* in 86.

The intransitive-to-transitive change is further confirmed by example 87, in which all participants required *-le* on *mai*. This example demonstrates that the A argument in a causative-modified *man parnu* clause not only requires ergative marking in the past tense, but also triggers verb agreement, unlike dative-marked S arguments (see section 3.2).

	A	O		
[87]	<i>mai-le</i>	<i>khaana</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>par-a-ẽ</i>
	1SG-ERG	food	heart	fall-CAUS-PST.1SG
	'I liked the food.'			

Finally, the identical form of the ergative and instrumental markers in Nepali introduces an interesting situation with causatives.³⁶ The *-le* instrumental marker is seen in example 88.

	A		O	
[88]	<i>ma</i>	<i>haat-le</i>	<i>khaana</i>	<i>khaan-chhu</i>
	1SG	hand-INSTR	food	eat-NPST.1SG
	'I will eat with my hand.'			

Ergative and instrument marking may occur together, as in example 89. All participants required *-le* marking on *bhaanji* 'niece'; marking on *goli* 'football' was included by default and affirmed by all participants.

	A			O	
[89]	<i>mero</i>	<i>bhaanji-le</i>	<i>goli-le</i>	<i>khirki-ko</i>	<i>aina</i> <i>phuṭ-a-yo</i>
	my	niece-ERG	football-INSTR	window-GEN	glass break-CAUS-PST.3SG
	'My niece broke the window glass with the football.'				

An important difference between the two forms is that instrumental-marked constituents do not serve as core arguments or trigger verb agreement. However, because both ergatives and instrumentals exhibit causation, the marking may appear identical even as a constituent is demoted from an ergative A argument to an instrumental adjunct (non-argument) through valency changing. Examples 90 and 91 demonstrate this situation.

	A		O	
[90]	<i>goli-le</i>	<i>khirki-ko</i>	<i>aina</i>	<i>phuṭ-āũ-chha</i>
	football-ERG	window-GEN	glass	break-CAUS-NPST.3SG
	'The football will break the window glass.'			

			S	
[91]	<i>goli-le</i>	<i>khirki-ko</i>	<i>aina</i>	<i>phuṭ-ĩ-chha</i>
	football-INSTR	window-GEN	glass	break-PASS-NPST.3SG
	'The window glass will be broken by the football.'			

All participants required *-le* marking on *goli* in both examples.³⁷ Through valency changing, *aina* 'glass' is shifted from O in example 90 to S in example 91, and *goli* likewise shifts from an A argument with ergative marking to an adjunct constituent with instrument marking.

³⁶ Identical ergative and instrumental forms are by no means unique to Nepali (e.g., Dixon 2010:122; McGregor 2010:1613).

³⁷ One participant preferred *phuṭchha* to *phuṭ-ĩchha* in example 91, while still requiring *-le* marking on *goli*. Section 5.2 discusses that passive forms may be less used in Darjeeling Nepali.

In summary, a transitive verb created through causative valency changing adds an A argument eligible for ergative marking, and the intransitive S argument becomes transitive O, subject to *-laai* marking as determined by its animacy and definiteness. In addition, transitive verbs may add an E argument through causative valency changing. An intransitive created through passive valency changing has a single S argument, which is unmarked. The extended intransitive ‘liking’ construction *man parnu* becomes transitive through causative valency changing. Finally, the identical marking of ergatives and instruments means that constituents may retain *-le* marking even as valency changing adjusts their role in the clause.

5.1.2 Benefactive *-idi*

Another valency-changing process in Nepali adds a benefactive argument to verbs by combining them with the root of *dinu*, ‘to give.’ The benefactive process adds *-idi*³⁸ to a verb stem, as shown below for *kinnu*, ‘to buy.’

<i>kin-nu</i>	→	<i>kin-idi-nu</i>
buy-INF		buy-for-INF
‘to buy’		‘to buy for’

The resulting verb, *kinidinu*, inflects like any other infinitive, and sanctions a third argument, the beneficiary, generally marked with *-ko laagi* ‘for the sake of’. The following example was generated by a participant in the picture description task, with the modified verb sanctioning an additional E argument.

	A		E		O
[92]	<i>mai-le</i>	<i>mero</i>	<i>chorii-ko</i>	<i>laagi</i>	<i>mocha</i>
	I-ERG	my	daughter-GEN	for.the.sake.of	socks
	<i>bun-idi-eko</i>		<i>chh-u</i>		
	knit-for-PST.PTCP		PRS.PRF-1SG		
	‘I have knitted socks for my daughter.’				

The phrase *choriiko laagi* ‘for my daughter’ could almost certainly have been included as an adjunct even in the absence of the *-idi* modification. However, with *-idi*, it is sanctioned by the verb as an argument and is necessary here because this sentence was produced apart from the context of a narrative, so no beneficiary is in view in the context.

With personal dressing/hygiene, *-idi* generally indicates performing an action on another person rather than merely for their benefit. For example, *lagaunu*, ‘to wear’, is modified to *lagaaidinu*, ‘to put on [someone].’ Transitive verbs in this category with *-idi* add an E argument with canonical marking rather than *-ko laagi* marking. With intransitive verbs in this category, the *-idi* affix creates a transitive verb, adding a canonically marked O argument. For example, the verb *nuhaunu*, ‘to bathe’, is intransitive in Nepali and cannot be used with the ergative marker on S: in the elicitation task, six participants rejected *-le* with the argument of *nuhaunu* in both past and non-past constructions, and one considered it optional. However, when *nuhaunu* was modified with *-idi*, all seven participants required *-le*-marked A in a past tense clause. The resulting *nuhaaidinu* indicates bathing another person rather than bathing on their behalf. It takes two arguments, and marks A with the ergative *-le* and (animate) O with the accusative *-laai*. Example 93 is from the picture description task.

³⁸ The linking morpheme *-i* joins verbs in Nepali and is distinct from the passive affix *-i*; for simplicity, *-idi* is glossed together in the examples.

- | | | | | | |
|------|------------------------------------|--|-------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| | A | | O | | |
| [93] | <i>aama-le</i> | | <i>naani-laai</i> | <i>nuhaa-idi-eko</i> | <i>thi-yo</i> |
| | mother-ERG | | child-ACC | bathe-TR-PST.PTCP | PST.PRF-3SG |
| | ‘The mother had bathed the child.’ | | | | |

Outside the category of personal care and hygiene, however, *-idi* with intransitives generally results in an extended intransitive, as in example 94 with the verb *aunu*, ‘to come’. In this example, participants unanimously rejected *-le*-marking on the S argument, further confirming that *-le* is not used to mark agentive S in Darjeeling Nepali. The speaker is the implied benefactive E argument.

- | | | | | |
|------|---|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| | | | S | |
| [94] | <i>samasyaa</i> | <i>bha-yo</i> | <i>bhanera,</i> | <i>u mero-maa</i> |
| | problem | be-PST.3SG | thinking | 3SG my-LOC |
| | <i>chito</i> | <i>a-idi-yo</i> | | |
| | quickly | come-BEN-PST.3SG | | |
| | ‘Thinking that there was a problem, he came quickly to my [place].’ | | | |

Finally, augmenting extended transitive clauses with *-idi* indicates an existing O or E argument as the beneficiary of the clause action, without adding an argument. Example 95 is from the picture description task and uses the modified form of the extended transitive *pharkaaunu*, ‘to return [an item].’

- | | | | | | |
|------|--|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------------------|
| | A | | | O | |
| [95] | <i>timi-le</i> | <i>kina</i> | <i>mero</i> | <i>buk</i> | <i>pharkaa-idi-enāū</i> |
| | you-ERG | why | my | book (Eng) | return-BEN-PST.NEG.2SG |
| | ‘Why didn’t you return my book (to me)?’ | | | | |

The use of *-idi* indicates that the action is for the benefit of the omitted E argument, the GOAL (first person narrator referenced by the possessive pronoun). In such cases, the number and marking of arguments are not affected by the affix; the A argument retains ergative marking in the past tense, and the inanimate O argument is unmarked.

Such non-valency-changing use of *-idi* with a canonical extended intransitive is also seen in the corpus; a participant is describing a sanatorium visit when the family was compelled to commit their child for treatment on the spot. Example 96 summarises the experience.

- | | | | | |
|------|---|-----------------|--------------------|--|
| | A | | | |
| (96) | <i>aama-haru-le</i> | <i>lyaa-era</i> | <i>raakh-di-yo</i> | |
| | mother-PL-ERG | bring-PFV | put-BEN-PST.3SG | |
| | ‘Bringing [me] [here], my parents left [me].’ | | | |

The modified verb *raakhidinu* (linking *-i* is often omitted in Darjeeling speech following consonants) indicates that the action was performed for the benefit of the omitted O argument, the first-person narrator.

In summary, the *-idi-* affix creates an extended transitive verb from a transitive by adding a benefactive E argument. Used with an intransitive, it creates either an extended intransitive or, in verbs dealing with personal care and hygiene, a transitive verb. With extended intransitives, it is employed by speakers not to modify valency, but to identify an existing argument as the beneficiary of the action of the clause.

5.2 Ambitransitives

Ambitransitive verbs are those that can function transitively or intransitively. Dixon (1994:216–217) recognizes two types of ambitransitive verbs with respect to core arguments. In S=A verbs, such as ‘eat’ and ‘study’ in English, the transitive A argument equates to the intransitive S:

TRANSITIVE	INTRANSITIVE
A O	S
‘the child ate cherries’	‘the child ate’

In the second type of ambitransitive verbs, S=O, the transitive O argument equates to the intransitive S, and the A argument disappears from the clause. English examples include ‘break’ and ‘cook’:

TRANSITIVE	INTRANSITIVE
A O	S
‘he broke the vase ’	‘the vase broke’

5.2.1 S=A verbs

Most ambitransitive verbs in the corpus are of type S=A. Four S=A verbs appear in both transitive and intransitive clauses in the corpus. An additional four S=A ambitransitive verbs occur in only one clause type in the corpus but are listed by the dictionary (Schmidt and Dahal, 1993) as either ambitransitive, or as the opposite of the usage found in the corpus. Two of the four (*khelnu* ‘to play’ and *parkhinu* ‘to wait’) occur in both clause types in the elicitation task. The list of verbs, as well as glosses and numbers of transitive/intransitive uses, is shown in table 19.

Table 19. S=A ambitransitive verbs in the corpus

Verb	Gloss	O argument example	Transitive uses	Intransitive uses
<i>paḍnu</i>	‘to study’	<i>maths</i> ‘maths’ (Eng)	8	22
<i>khaanu</i>	‘to eat’	<i>khaana</i> ‘food’	14	8
<i>khelnu</i> ³⁹	‘to play’	<i>goli</i> ‘football’ (from elicitation)	-	3
<i>jhelnu</i>	‘to live, conduct’	<i>jiwan</i> ‘life’	2	1
<i>karaaunu</i> ⁴⁰	‘to yell, scream’	<i>aah</i> ‘aah’	1	-
<i>parkhinu</i> ⁴¹	‘to wait/await’	<i>resalt</i> ‘result’ (Eng)	1	-
<i>sochnu</i>	‘to think, consider’	<i>tyai sab</i> ‘all of this’	2	1
<i>jiunu</i> ⁴¹	‘to live’	<i>jiwan</i> ‘life’	1	-

Ergative marking is expected (at least in past/perfective) on A, and no marking on S. Thus, only in the transitive use (with explicit or implied O argument) should the subject be marked, and the corpus bears this out. Examples 97 and 98 show an intransitive and transitive example, respectively, with *paḍnu*, ‘to study.’ (Example 98 is also included in example 17.)

³⁹ Schmidt and Dahal (1993:136) list *khelnu* as transitive, but it occurs intransitively in the corpus.

⁴⁰ Both *karaunu* and *parkhinu* are ambitransitive per Schmidt and Dahal (1993:88, 371).

⁴¹ Schmidt and Dahal (1993:233) list *jiunu* as intransitive, but it occurs transitively in the corpus.

- (97) S
ani haamro naani-haru paḍ-i-rah-eko
 and 1PL.GEN child-PL study-LNK-remain-PST.PTCP
chh-a dherai
 PRS.PRF-3SG much
 ‘And our children have kept studying very much.’ (i.e., are well educated)
- (98) O A
Buddhis Tibetan satra barsa mai-le paḍ-ẽ
 Buddhism Tibetan seventeen year 1SG-ERG study-PST.1SG
 ‘I studied Tibetan Buddhism for seventeen years.’

The intransitive clause in (97) shows unmarked S, while the transitive clause in (98) demonstrates *-le* marking on the A argument.

In the elicitation task, speakers demonstrated that they sense a difference between the transitive and intransitive uses. When seven participants listened to example 99, five rejected *-le* marking on S, one considered it optional, and one mandatory. But in example 100, only one participant rejected *-le* marking, while two considered it optional, and four required it.

- [99] S
naani-haru-(le) hiyo ban-maa khel-yo
 child-PL-(ERG) yesterday forest-LOC play-PST.3SG
 ‘The children played in the forest yesterday.’
- [100] A O
keḷaa-haru-(le) goli khel-yo
 boy-PL-(ERG) football play-PST.3SG
 ‘The boys played football.’

The preponderance of S = A ambitransitives in Nepali is contra Dixon’s prediction (1994:217) for an ergative language. When A becomes S, ergative marking is lost, as in the examples above. Dixon notes the difficulty then of distinguishing the S argument of the intransitive use from the (likewise unmarked) O argument of the transitive use when A is omitted. For example, clauses 2 and 3 in table 20 become indistinguishable.

Table 20. Role ambiguity due to A argument omission with S = A ambitransitive verbs

		A/S	O	VERB
1.	Transitive	man-ERG ‘the man ate chicken’	chicken-∅	ate
2.	Transitive:	(omitted) ‘(X) ate chicken’	chicken-∅	ate
3.	Intransitive: S = A	chicken-∅ ‘The chicken ate.’	∅	ate

Dixon posits that such situations require additional restrictions: either the A argument may not be omitted, or the verb will carry marking of transitivity (Dixon 1994:218). Nepali, however, does not impose such restrictions, and confusion is indeed possible. Participants were asked, without any context, to imagine the action as they listened to each of the following sentences. Then, they were shown two pictures representing the transitive and intransitive interpretations and asked to select the one that matched their mental image. Responses are shown to the right; each column represents an individual participant's responses. 'I' responses correspond to the intransitive interpretation, in which the chicken eats and the bus waits. 'T' responses correspond to the transitive interpretation, in which an omitted A argument eats the chicken or awaits the bus.

Sentences			Responses						
[101]	<i>kukhra</i> chicken	<i>khaan-chha</i> eat-NPST.3SG	T	I	T	I	I	I	T
[102]	<i>kukhra</i> chicken	<i>khaa-yo</i> eat-PST.3SG	T	T	T	T	T	T	I
[103]	<i>bas</i> bus	<i>parkin-chha</i> wait-NPST.3SG	T	I	T	I	T	T	T
[104]	<i>bas</i> bus	<i>parkin-dai-chha</i> wait-PROG-NPST.3SG	T	T	I	I	T	T	T

In none of the sentences were argument roles agreed upon by all participants. Practically, however, this problem rarely arises. Except in rare contexts, all the verbs in table 19 will have animate A/S and inanimate O, minimising the opportunity for S/O confusion. In addition, differential O argument marking adds clarity: any animate, definite O object will be *-laai*-marked and ineligible for consideration as S. Speakers and hearers achieve clarity by using context, O marking (*-laai*), and explicit A arguments.

5.2.2 S = O verbs

No S = O ambitransitive verbs appear in the corpus, but the elicitation task gives evidence that Darjeeling Nepali speakers employ S = O verbs in spoken language by omitting the passive affix. A common example is *dekhnu* 'to see' (transitive), which takes the passive form *dekhinu* 'to be seen, be visible'. In practice, the passive form is rarely spoken in Darjeeling. In the elicitation task, participants listened to the sentence below with and without the passive modification to the verb.

	S				
[105]	<i>mero</i>	<i>bahini</i>	<i>aaju</i>	<i>raamri</i>	<i>dekh-(in)-dai-chha</i>
	my	younger.sister	today	nice	look-(PASS)-PROG-NPST.3SG
	'My younger sister is looking nice today.'				

Only one participant chose the passive modification over the unmodified form. Two preferred the unmodified version, and the remaining four felt that both were correct, with two of these adding that the unmodified form is preferred locally, and the other in Kathmandu.

In the same way that S = A verbs introduce ambiguity with ergative marking, S = O verbs involve possible argument role ambiguity with nominative-accusative marking, which Nepali may exhibit in imperfective clauses (Dixon 1994:217). Intransitive S identifies with O but can be confused with unmarked A of the transitive when O is omitted. However, the semantic nature of the verb 'to see' makes it highly unlikely that O will not be in view in the immediate context. That is, 'to see' does not work

semantically as an S=A verb, except in discussion of physical sightedness.⁴² Perhaps for this reason, speakers have found it expedient to simplify the form, creating an S=O ambitransitive.

Other spoken S=O verbs include *paunu*, ‘to find’ (passive *painu*, ‘to be available’) and *banaunu*, ‘to make, build, repair’ (passive *banainu*, ‘to be made, repaired’). Thus, the second sentence below is more commonly heard in Darjeeling than the first.⁴³ The same semantic restriction applies to these verbs as to *dekhnu*: unlike the verbs in table 18, ‘to find’ and ‘to make’ do not make sense as S=A verbs, that is, without an UNDERGOER (O or S) argument in view.

<i>dudh</i>	<i>pa-ĩ-chha</i>	vs.	<i>dudh</i>	<i>pāũ-chha</i>
milk	find-PASS-NPST.3SG		milk	find-NPST.3SG
‘Milk is available.’ (Standard Nepali)			‘Milk is available.’ (Darjeeling Nepali)	

Thus, Dixon’s posited additional restriction on argument deletion is (largely) met in this case: S=O verbs appear to occur only where O arguments are very unlikely to be deleted (Dixon 1994:218).

In Nepali, the passive form is neutralized in spoken language in the simple past tense, where inflectional endings begin with the /i/ sound. Thus, the two forms below sound alike:

<i>gar-yo</i>	vs.	<i>gar-i-yo</i>
do-PST.3SG		do-PASS-PST.3SG
‘[he] did’		‘[it] was done’

The past tense corresponds with the environment in which ergative marking is obligatory, and therefore the convergence of these forms cannot produce S/A role confusion, because A must be marked. Perhaps starting with this past tense form, the passive (intransitive) and active (transitive) forms of verbs that rarely omit O merged in speech, because the number of arguments is sufficient to identify which use is in view. As the merger spread to other inflections, an S=O ambitransitive verb was created.

In summary, then, formal ambitransitives in the corpus are all of the type S=A, which display expected argument marking based on their transitivity. The elicitation task confirms the potential for argument role confusion with S=A verbs in the context of ergative marking, but, in the absence of additional restrictions, speakers and hearers appear to use context, object marking, and explicit arguments to minimize confusion. In addition, Darjeeling speakers employ a class of spoken-only S=O ambitransitives. This class appears to be semantically determined, limited to verbs which require a specific O argument to be in view for a transitive construction, thereby avoiding S/O argument confusion in nominative-accusative marking environments.

6 Conclusion and implications for Nepali classification

6.1 Summary and questions for further investigation

The standard definition of ergativity states that O and S marking should be identical, usually \emptyset , while A exhibits ergative marking (e.g., Dixon 1994:1). As discussed in section 1.3, many Himalayan languages pose a challenge to ergative classification because of differential O marking; that is, the O marking varies with separate linguistic factors from those affecting S and A marking. The current corpus shows this to be the case for Darjeeling Nepali, as well.

In Nepali, transitivity emerges as a necessary factor for ergative marking. A tense/aspect marking divide is also in evidence: perfective aspect necessitates A marking, while there is a proscription on

⁴² Dixon notes several languages in which the verb ‘to see’ is an exception in allowing both S=O and S=A ambitransitives, with the S=A intransitive dedicated to sightedness discussions. Though this is not the case in Nepali, it demonstrates that the nature of this verb may make it a special case regarding transitivity (Dixon 2010:125).

⁴³ Based on personal observation and conversations, but not present in the data.

marking 1SG arguments in the imperfective aspect. Other moods and modalities also appear to correlate with increased (e.g., obligative mood) or, less frequently, decreased (e.g., habitual mood) ergative marking. For O arguments, first animacy and then definiteness are the primary factors for marking arguments, in either dative or accusative case. For animate O, argument marking may be the primary indicator of definiteness. For inanimate O, marking is rare and indicates social significance to the speaker and/or hearer. Marking on S is limited to *-laai* in the dative subject construction, including clauses of liking, thinking/judging, and experiencing.

The corpus does not show evidence of pragmatic ergative marking on S arguments in Darjeeling Nepali. It limits the range of morphosyntactic environments available for pragmatic A marking to non-1SG arguments in the imperfective aspect. One evidence that pragmatic marking may occur is the fact that speaker intuition about the appropriateness of marking in sentences varies considerably within these environments, while converging elsewhere. This suggests that the motivation for marking in these environments may lie beyond the sentence, at the discourse level: as language assistants supply different mental contexts, their marking decisions will differ. Further investigation is needed to determine how speakers may interpret and apply ergative marking in the imperfective aspect. Given that, in general, speakers show greater agreement and confidence about where *-le* marking is proscribed than about where it is required, it may be as fruitful to consider the commonalities of clauses with unmarked arguments as of those with marked arguments.

Other areas for further investigation include how and whether other properties of A, such as the use of honorifics, influence ergative marking. In addition, the implications for marking of verbal processes beyond the three valency-changing processes examined here should be explored. Another question is whether frequency of marking increases when arguments are elided, as Coupe (2017:11) finds for Tibeto-Burman languages. Finally, Lindemann's (2016) topicality hypothesis (see section 1.4) demands further investigation, as does the interaction of marking with discourse factors as a whole. This work is important both to the understanding of Nepali and to the understanding of ergativity in discourse. In particular, if the ergative marker plays a role in discourse, how is such functionality accomplished in environments where marking is obligatory or prohibited?

6.2 Ergative typology

Clearly, ergative marking of A arguments is a significant aspect of Nepali syntax. Speakers have a clear sense of both where marking is required and where it is prohibited, meaning that an ergativity decision occurs in nearly every clause. However, looking across the corpus reveals that only 23 percent of transitive clauses display fully ergative marking; that is, ergative-marked A and unmarked O. Among transitive clauses with both A and O arguments made explicit, 63 percent display fully-ergative marking. Merely delineating environments where S and O marking align, according to the textbook definition of ergativity (e.g., Dixon 1994:1; DeLancey 1981:628), obscures the importance of ergativity in the language.

The modern framework of ergativity was developed largely in the context of Australian Pama-Nyungan languages (e.g., Dixon 1994:xiii) which display 'syntactic ergativity' (Dixon 1987:4–5). That is, S and O, rather than S and A, trigger verb agreement, and S and O arguments are co-referential when clauses combine (Dixon's 'S-O pivot' [1994:11]). This intriguing phenomenon is nevertheless very different from the 'morphological ergativity' (Dixon 1987:3–4) based on argument marking which is found in the Himalayan region and elsewhere. In fact, the difference between syntactic and morphological ergativity, in terms of resulting language structure, appears greater than the difference between morphologically ergative-absolutive and nominative-accusative languages in general.⁴⁴ The question then arises, what is the significance of ergativity as a typological category? Is there something real that unites these languages as a type?

Modern ergativity literature has wrestled repeatedly with this question as more and more languages are studied. McGregor and Verstraete (2010:1607) observe that 'One question that has continually raised

⁴⁴ In most cases, the main structural difference between languages assigned to these two categories seems to be whether A arguments can take a case marker (ERG-ABS) or not (NOM-ACC).

its head...is what exactly counts as ergative patterning or ergativity.’ The term ergativity is well-entrenched, but inconsistently applied. There is little agreement even about what realm it addresses: Is it a morphological, grammatical, syntactic, or discourse category? Is it a matter of type or of degree? Can some languages be ‘more ergative’ than others, and if so, what is being measured? In the conclusion of a lengthy survey of ‘optional’ ergative languages, McGregor (2010:1629) pleads for inclusiveness:

...the discussion of this paper demonstrates that optional ergative case marking systems are indeed genuine ergative systems: regardless of the facts of usage of the markers, they do mark Agent NPs in transitive clauses (though not necessarily exclusively). The case marking system itself is an ergative one; the use of the ergative case marker is something else again. Excluding optional ergative systems from the domain of ergative systems runs the risk of arbitrarily delimiting the phenomenon of ergativity, resulting in an impoverished typology.

McGregor’s quote reveals not only the ongoing perceived significance of ergative languages as a type, but also what has come to be the operating definition of ergativity in the literature: the distinctive marking of ‘agent NPs in transitive clauses.’ This definition based on A marking is at odds with Dixon’s S-O focused definition: ‘a grammatical pattern in which the subject of an intransitive clause is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause, and differently from transitive subject’ (Dixon 1994:1).

Seeking a solution to these questions begins with Dixon’s observation that all languages exhibit transitive and intransitive clause types (1994:39). It is self-evident that arguments in ambivalent (i.e., transitive) clauses need to be distinguished in some way, even if through context, and that economy (or default lack of marking) may cause one of these markings to align with the marking accorded the single argument of an intransitive clause. However, it does not necessarily follow that such alignment is motivated; that is, indicative of grammatical categories for speakers, as is the case for S-O alignment in Dyirbal, or A-S ‘subject’ alignment in English. Thus, in Nepali, some O arguments are unmarked, but not through motivation towards associating those particular O arguments more closely with unmarked S arguments.

Understanding the motivation of argument alignment in a language then, rather than merely its form, is essential for understanding the significance of ergativity. It begins with understanding the motivation for marking each of the three universal argument types, A, O, and S. Thus, both Dyirbal and English group two arguments together as shown in figure 1.

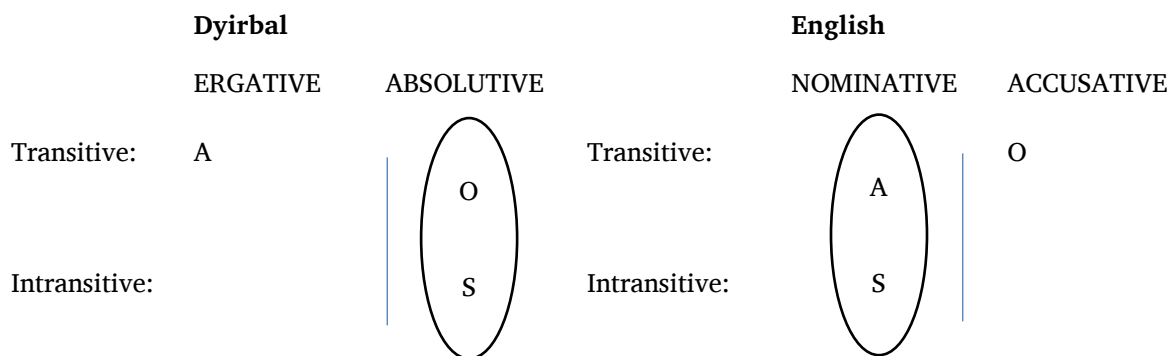


Figure 1. Dyirbal and English argument alignment.

Speakers of English and Dyirbal hypothetically may be aware of only two argument types. Meanwhile, Nepali grammar recognizes the three types separately, and alignment of \emptyset -marking is generally incidental rather than motivated. Although marking in all clauses does not accord with figure 2, Nepali speakers will hypothetically be aware of (at least) three argument types: A, S, and O.

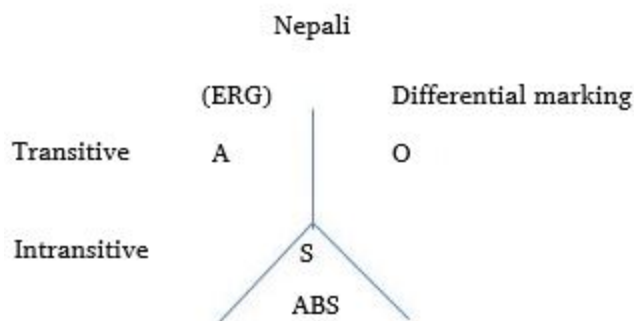


Figure 2. Nepali argument alignment.

As demonstrated in section 3.1, many Tibeto-Burman languages show significant argument marking on S in clauses with certain semantic or discourse properties. Coupe (2017:3) proposes supplementing the nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive marking types with a third category, ‘agentive-anti-agentive’, to better describe marking in many Tibeto-Burman languages. Agentive marking can be present or absent in either transitive or intransitive clauses, and Coupe’s contention is that it acknowledges not transitivity, but the heightened agentivity of some A or S arguments in contrast to others, to O arguments, or to speaker expectation. Speakers of Mongsen Ao may hypothetically be aware of only two argument types.

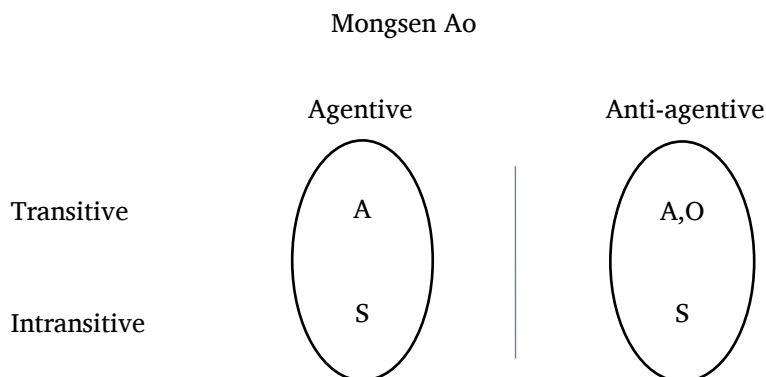


Figure 3. Mongsen Ao argument alignment (Coupe, 2017).⁴⁵

What has come to be described as ergativity seems to be every type of alignment that draws a line between A and S; that is, grammatically acknowledges a distinction among different types of ‘subject’ or ‘actor.’ Thus, Dyirbal, Nepali, and Mongsen Ao (McGregor 2009:496) have all been described as ergative, without showing much deep similarity in types or motivations of argument alignment. What they do share is an understanding of different types within the category of ‘subject.’

Therefore, to bring clarity without jeopardizing previous progress, it would be helpful to codify ergativity as the marking of transitive agents A as distinct from S, rather than the alignment of S and O marking.⁴⁶ This definition is clear and broad and can function in both typological and grammatical description. A key element would be speaker awareness: if speakers distinguish transitive subjects from intransitive single arguments, whether they are marked separately throughout the language or not, then a language could be considered ergative, without reference to degrees of ergativity. A case defined to mark A arguments could also be called the ‘ergative case,’ whether or not it was applied to all A

⁴⁵ The figure is not from Coupe, but summarizes categories as presented in his data.

⁴⁶ The question of whether languages which mark agentivity on both A and S are rightly classified as ergative is left aside as beyond the scope of this paper, but they have often been grouped as ergative because of A marking.

arguments, and its application in morphosyntactic environments could be called ‘ergative marking.’ Within this broad definition, specific types can still be distinguished along the lines of previous work:

- Syntactic ergativity, e.g. in Dyirbal, refers to ergative languages with S-O alignment and verb agreement. In these languages, the unmarked absolutive case rather than ergative is most significant, as Dixon notes (1987:10). The current definition attempts to impose aspects of this specific type on all ergative languages, with the result that few of them make the cut, and degrees of ergativity enter the conversation.
- Pragmatic ergativity would apply to languages that make additional pragmatic use of an existing ergative marker, such as Lhasa Tibetan (DeLancey 2011:12–13), and would focus largely on describing use of the ergative marker in discourse functions.
- Split ergativity would remain relevant, but would cease to centre around the ‘degree of ergativity’ and would instead focus on factors affecting the appearance of ergative marking.

The proposed minor change to the definition of what can be considered an ergative language is needed in light of the preponderance of new evidence and would allow for continuity while increasing clarity in the ongoing discussion. One departure the proposed definition requires from existing terminology is that, while ergative-absolutive and nominative-accusative could still be discussed as corollary marking types, they could no longer be viewed as opposing language types, since many languages which show ergativity in terms of distinctive A marking also display nominative-accusative marking in certain environments. However, Dixon states that ‘no language has thus far been reported that is fully ergative’ by the existing definition (Dixon 1994:14). Thus, the idea of an ergative-accusative language under the S-O alignment definition is already problematic. However, defining ergativity as a distinction between A and S within the category of subject allows for clear discussion of ergative languages, or languages which display ergativity. The current survey of Darjeeling Nepali shows that it is possible for a language to have a pervasive divide between A and S and yet display nominative-accusative marking in a significant portion of clauses, and differential O marking influenced by NP-related factors. Disentangling these separate factors, which are tied together in the current definition of ergativity, strengthens the definition of the language.

Appendix A: Abbreviations

A	the agent or subject of a transitive verb
ABL	ablative
ABS	absolutive case or marker
ACC	accusative case or marker
AFF	affirmative
ASSERT	assertive mood: expresses certainty
BEN	benefactive
CAUS	causative
CLF	classifier
COH	cohortative
COND	conditional
COP	copula
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
DM	discourse marker
E	Additional argument sanctioned by an extended transitive or extended intransitive verb; often in dative case
Eng	English
ERG	ergative case or marker
EXP	EXPERIENCER, a semantic argument role
FUT	future tense
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual aspect
HON	honorific
INF	infinitive
INSTR	instrumental
INT	intensifier
INTJ	interjection
IPFV	imperfective
LOC	locative
LNK	linking morpheme
MT	mother tongue
NEG	negative
NP	noun phrase
NPST	non-past tense
NOM	nominative case or marker
O	the object or patient of a transitive verb
OBL	obligatory mood
OPT	optative mood
PASS	passive
PL	plural

PRF	perfect tense
PFV	perfective
PROG	progressive aspect
PROH	prohibitive mood
PRS	present tense
PST	past tense
PTCP	participle
PURP	purpose
Q	question particle
RED	reduplication
REFL	reflexive
REL	relativiser
REP	reportative evidential marker
S	the single argument of an intransitive verb
SG	singular
SPEC	speculative mood
STIM	STIMULUS, a semantic argument role
TR	transitive
VOC	vocative
X	any unspecified verb in the gloss of a verbal construction, such as 'having X-ed'; any unspecified noun in a phrase or as a subject or object of a verb

Appendix B: Elicitation Prompts for Corpus Data

In each case, the participants, individually for Task 1 and paired with regular conversation partners for Task 2, received five cards with the five prompts printed in large font in Nepali, with English translations below. They were asked to choose the most interesting topic for sharing a personal narrative or conversation. Participants were able to refer to the cards during the recording if needed. A mother-tongue language assistant assisted in shaping and scripting the topics in Nepali. English translations of the prompts are given below.

1. Task 1: Personal past-tense narratives

- **Change of habits:** What is something that you always used to do, but don't do any longer, or something you have started to do that you never used to do? Explain the reason for the change of habit and whether you are happy about it, or not.
- **Wedding or trip:** Describe a memorable wedding you attended or a trip you took—who was there, how you were invited, where it took place, what it looked like when you arrived, who else was there, what happened, and when or why you left. Did you enjoy it? What did you do/see/eat? Did anything unexpected happen?
- **Greatest challenge:** What is the greatest challenge you have faced in life or recently? What made it so difficult? How did you feel? What did you do to face the challenge? Did you receive help or encouragement from anyone else? Is the challenge resolved?
- **School story:** Tell a story from when you were in school – what happened, who was involved and who saw it, what the teacher did, what the other students did, how you felt, what your parents said if they were involved, etc.
- **Difficult time or happy day:** Tell about a difficult time in your city or village, or tell about a happy day for you or for your family.

2. Task 2: Conversations

- **Inflation:** What things are getting more expensive in Kalimpong? Why? How is this affecting what you choose to buy? How will people be able to continue to afford necessities, especially the poor? Is this causing people to go abroad for work?
- **Trip:** Should we take a trip this year? Where should we go? How will we get there? What things should we take? How long should we stay? What will we do there? Where will we stay and what will we see? Who will go with us?
- **More drivers:** Why are so many more people driving cars? Is it a good thing or a bad one? What do you think about more women driving? Women – would you drive? Men – would you let your wife/daughter/female relative drive?
- **Improving circumstances:** What do you wish the government would do for your city/your neighbourhood? Why? What could your family/neighbourhood do to improve life for yourselves?
- **Olden days:** What did it used to be like in school or when you were growing up? How did people live differently? How was technology different? How was society different? Were things better when you were younger? Why or why not?

Appendix C: Marking on A Arguments across All Tenses/Aspects

Past/perfective	<i>-le</i> Marked	Unmarked	Other markings	Total
PST	66	9	0	75
PST.NEG	5	1	0	6
PST.HAB	16	15	0	31
PST.HAB.NEG	2	0	0	2
PST.OBL	1	1	0	2
PST.OBL.NEG	2	0	0	2
PRS.PRF	13	0	0	13
PRS.PRF.NEG	2	0	0	2
PRS.PRF.OBL	1	0	0	1
PST.PRF	11	0	0	11
PST.PRF.NEG	1	0	0	1
PST.PROG	2	0	0	2
PST.PTCP	6	0	0	6
	128	26	0	154
	83.1%	16.9%	0.0%	

Nonpast/imperfective	<i>-le</i> Marked	Unmarked	Other markings	Total
FUT	0	3	0	3
NPST	25	18	0	43
NPST.NEG	9	4	0	13
NPST.OBL	3	4	0	7
NPST.OPT	1	3	0	4
NPST.PROH	1	0	0	1
PRS.PROG	2	0	0	2
PRS.PTCP	0	2	0	2
PRS.PTCP.OBL	1	0	0	1
	42	34	0	76
	55.3%	44.7%	0.0%	

Non-finite	<i>-le</i> marked	Unmarked	Other markings	Total
-da (IPFV)	1	2	0	3
-da kheri (IPFV)	1	1	0	2
-eko karanle garda	1	0	0	1
-ekole garda	0	1	0	1
-ekomaa	1	0	0	1
-epani	1	0	0	1
-era (PFV)	5	7	0	12

-era-sNEG (PFV)	1	0	0	1
-nu (INF)	2	0	1	3
-nulaai (INF)	1	0	0	1
	14	11	1	26
	53.8%	42.3%	3.8%	

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