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## Himalayan Linguistics

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*Extended ergativity in Bumthang*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses ergativity in Bumthang. In 2016, Donohue & Donohue reported on the variable use of the ergative case marker in Bumthang transitive clauses. They identified a number of largely pragmatic, semantic, and informational structural contexts that license the use of the ergative case on the subjects. Given the nature of the factors involved we examined similar conditions for arguments of monovalent verbs, not a typical context for receiving ergative case if structural conditions were uniquely determining case, but which would likely also be sensitive to these same factors. We find that there are some contexts in which the sole argument of an monovalent verb can bear ergative case, drawing on some of the same features, but not identical to those relevant for transitive verbs. In particular, the notion of agentivity is of paramount importance for licensing ergative case arguments of monovalent verbs, and we discuss the set of factors that need to coincide for this to happen.

### KEYWORDS

Case marking, ergativity, Bumthang, transitivity, lexical semantics, agentivity

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# *Extended ergativity in Bumthang*\*

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## 1 Introduction

In its definitional function ergative case is used to mark the most agentive argument of a bivalent clause (the “A” in Comrie’s (1978) terminology) as distinct from the more patientive “P” argument and the single argument of a monovalent verb (“S”) (e.g. Dixon 1994). However, ergative case is often found to be optional or its usage constrained to occur in specific contexts (e.g. McGregor 2009). This is indeed true of the use of ergative case in many Himalayan languages which has been shown to be sensitive to a range of semantic or pragmatic contexts. A number of languages have reported the use of the ergative case in on some monovalent predicates. Examples are shown in (1)–(3) from Tibetan (Tournadre 1991), Kurtöp (Hyslop 2010), and Nepali (own knowledge).<sup>1</sup>

(1) **Lhasa Tibetan**

- |    |   |                  |                |                   |
|----|---|------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| a. | <i>Mo</i>                                     | <i>las.khung</i> | <i>nang-la</i> | <i>nyal-song.</i> |
|    | she.ABS                                       | office           | in-DAT         | sleep-AOR+EVID    |
|    | ‘She slept (or went to sleep) in the office.’ |                  |                |                   |
| b. | <i>Mo-s</i>                                   | <i>las.khung</i> | <i>nang-la</i> | <i>nyal-song.</i> |
|    | she-ERG                                       | office           | in-DAT         | sleep-AOR+EVID    |
|    | ‘She slept (or went to sleep) in the office.’ |                  |                |                   |
|    | (implied: but someone else did not)           |                  |                |                   |

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<sup>1</sup> Arguments for labelling the case markers in (1) – (3) as an (extended) ergative, rather than an agentive, lie in the dependency of the case on semantic factors other than simply agency or activity. This is just a selection of a few languages for illustrative purposes; many others have reported on the careful studies noting an extensive use of non-canonical case arrays in Himalayan languages (see, e.g., Zeisler 2012 on Ladakhi, or DeLancey 2011 on Tibeto-Burman more generally).

- (2) **Kurtöp**
- a. *Tshe ozi meme-the jong-shang.*  
 DEM then grandfather-one emerge-PFV.EGO  
 ‘So then an old man came out.’
- b. *Meme-the-gi jong-shang.*  
 grandfather-one-ERG emerge-PFV.EGO  
 ‘An old man came out.’
- (3) **Nepali**
- a. *U ā-i-pug-yo.*  
 3SG.M.ABS come-LNKR-arrive-3SG.M.PST  
 ‘He arrived.’
- b. *Us-le ā-i-pug-yo.*  
 3SG.M.ERG come-LNKR-arrive-3SG.M.PST  
 ‘He (not someone else) arrived.’

Donohue & Donohue (2016) present data on the different factors that affect the use of the ergative case in bivalent clauses (those involving two or more core arguments) in Bumthang (Tibeto-Burman, Bhutan). They show that use of the ergative case can be understood only when considering a range of factors relevant to the notion of “semantic transitivity”, as first expounded in Hopper & Thompson (1980). The original ten-point formulation is shown in Table 1 (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 252).

	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>
<i>Participants</i>	2 or more	1
<i>Kinesis</i>	action	non-action
<i>Aspect</i>	telic	atelic
<i>Punctuality</i>	punctual	non-punctual
<i>Volitionality</i>	volitional	non-volitional
<i>Affirmation</i>	affirmative	negative
<i>Mode</i>	realis	irrealis
<i>Agency</i>	A high in potency	A low in potency
<i>Affectedness of O</i>	O totally affected	O not affected
<i>Individuation of O</i>	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

Table 1. Semantic factors affecting “transitivity” (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 252)

The first of these factors identified by Hopper & Thompson, “participants”, separates bivalent clauses from monovalent clauses; but the data discussed here primarily center on monovalent clauses, those that are low in transitivity according to this first of Hopper & Thompson’s criteria. We find that if enough of the other criteria are highly transitive, the ergative case can still be found to mark the S argument. The factors that we find to be relevant to a discussion of ergative case in monovalent

clauses include the lexical semantics of the verb (action/non-action) and the animacy of the arguments (agency, volitionality), as well as clause-level factors such as TAM choice (realis/irrealis, telic/atelic) and information structure. In this paper we present the results of an investigation into this construction, paying attention to the range of factors already attested as being relevant to predicting the use of the ergative in bivalent clauses for Bumthang. We find that the ergative case may be licensed by some monovalent verbs in certain contexts, but only as the result of a number of transitivity factors all coinciding.

## 2 Methodology

The majority of data presented in this paper come from primary fieldwork carried out between 2013-2019 with five speakers in Bhutan and with one speaker temporarily resident in Australia. All of the speakers come from the same village in Ura Valley and are 30-40 years old. In addition to their own Ura dialect of Bumthang, they all also speak the Chamkhar dialect, the national language Dzongkha, have some degree of proficiency in English, and most have some ability with Tshangla and Nepali. The target contexts and combinations of features to “test” for allowing ergative case were constructed in large part following the set of factors presented in Donohue & Donohue (2016)’s paper on ergativity in bivalent verbs in Bumthang. In that paper we presented a set of interacting features responsible for defining the contexts in which ergative case was found on the subject argument as shown in Figure 1.

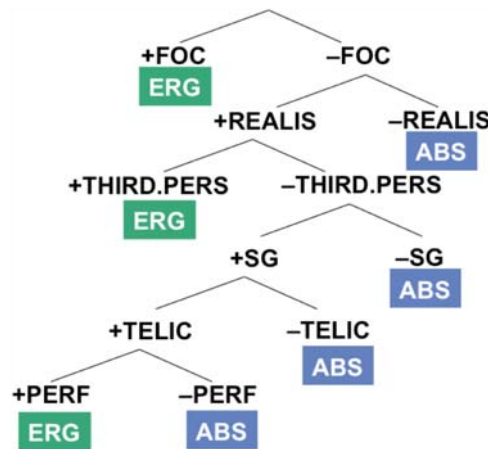


Figure 1. Ergative case licensing factors for bivalent predicates in Bumthang (Donohue & Donohue 2016: 186)

To ensure that the pragmatic/information structural contexts were accurate, we did not rely solely on our corpora to extract the sentences. Rather we chose to carefully construct the context and then involve the native speakers in judgement tasks and/or translations; this resulted in more comparable data between speakers, which was more easily analysed and presented. Many of the examples involved lengthy discussions exploring multiple, subtly different contexts in which the target sentences occurred to check for level of grammaticality or pragmatic felicity (infelicitous sentences are marked by #). We also cross-checked with existing data from our archived corpora (available on the PARADISEC archives: KJZ1, KJZ2, KJZ3), and initial sentences were often taken from these corpora, but all necessarily followed up individually with the native speakers. After

investigating the monovalent contexts and finding the notion of agency coercion relevant, we returned to the bivalent data, finding that this is indeed a factor potentially influencing case outcomes. We checked the bivalent data in a similar way and discussed these with our native speakers, resulting in additional data for bivalent verbs presented here.

### 3 Ergative Case with Monovalent Verbs

As noted, in its most basic conception, case serves to identify arguments: The marked case serves to distinguish participants when there are two arguments in a clause, and in an ergative case system, the ergative case is used to identify the subject (A) of a bivalent verb. Arguments of monovalent predicates typically occur in the absolutive case, as in (4a). This is to be expected as the default marking in a morphologically ergative language. However, it is possible for subjects to sometimes be marked with the ergative case as illustrated by the sentence in (4b). A sample of other verbs that allow the use of the ergative case are given in (5). We note that the verbs listed in (5) involve volitionality on the part of the actor.

- (4) a. *Ngat*            *yang(-s)*.  
1SG.ABS            stand-PFV.PERS  
'I stood up.'
- b. *Nga-i*            *yang(-s)*.  
1SG-ERG            stand-PFV.PERS  
'I stood up.'

- (5) Verbs that behave similarly to *yang* "stand" include *nyit* "sit", *juk* "run", *go* "walk", *ja* "yell", *bae* "cough", and *ra* "come".

By contrast with (4), there are predicates for which the subject can never appear in the ergative case as shown by the examples in (6). In (6) we see a realis, perfective clause with a third person subject, a context shown to licence the ergative case in transitive clauses, but the ergative case is not licensed. Volitionality is not a possible factor for these *non-action* verbs (for more on lexical aspectual classification of verbs, see e.g. Dowty 1979, Verkyul 1993, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005, among others). Furthermore, focus has been shown to be a strong licensing environment for ergative case in Bumthang bivalent predicates (Donohue & Donohue 2016), but (6c) and (6d) show that focus does not license ergative case for these predicates.

- (6) a. *Gon*            *se-na*.  
3SG.ABS            die-IMPERS.PFV  
'He died.'
- b. \**gon-i*            *se-na*  
SG-ERG            die-IMPERS.PFV

- c.     *Ae*                 *se-bi-gé?*  
           who.ABS         die-IMPERS.INT.PFV-Q  
           ‘Who died?’
- d.     \**aji*             *se-bi-gé?*  
           who.ERG        die-IMPERS.INT.PFV-Q

Other verbs that show the same marking options as *se* “die” are given in (7).

- (7)     Verbs that behave similarly to *se* “die” include *dot* “sleep”, *na* “be sick, hurt”,  
           (*guyung*) *mung* “be dizzy”, *khru* “have diarrhoea”, and *shit* “forget”.

We note these verbs in (7) are crucially different from the verbs in (5) that pattern with *yang* “stand” above in that they cannot have a volitional actor argument.<sup>2</sup>

We next explore conditions under which the monovalent verbs license ergative case on single arguments.

### 3.1 Focus and Information Structure

Donohue & Donohue (2016) showed that the difference between ergative and absolutive marked subjects of transitive verbs in Bumthang is not arbitrary, but may reflect a difference in information structure, a factor distinct from the Hopper & Thompson notions of transitivity noted above in Table 1. If we consider information structure we find that the monovalent sentence with an ergatively marked subject in (4b) *Ngai yang(s)* “I (ERG) stood up.” would be an appropriate response to a question, “Who stood up?”, as shown in (8b). Here, the information question forces focus on the argument, requiring the ergative case on the subject. *Ngat yang(s)* in (4b) does not encode focus, and thus cannot be a felicitous response to this question as shown by (8c).<sup>3</sup>

- (8)    a.     *Q:*     *Aji*                 *yang-bi-gé?*  
                   who.ERG         stand-IMPERS.INT.PFV-Q  
                   ‘Who stood up?’
- b.     *A:*     *Nga-i*             *yang(-s).*  
                   1SG-ERG         stand-PFV.PERS  
                   ‘I stood up.’
- c.     *A:*     #*Ngat*             *yang(-s).*  
                   1SG.ABS         stand-PFV.PERS  
                   ‘I stood up.’

<sup>2</sup> We note that the semantics of “die” embedded in “kill” (“cause to die”) are not relevant; the concept “kill” in Bumthang is expressed with a suppletive verb, *sut*, as is true with many languages (e.g. Haspelmath 1993).

<sup>3</sup> We have thus far mainly investigated contrastive focus on the subject as it is relatively straightforward to test for, giving clear results. Unavoidably, these data may seem a little circular as the evidence of the focus marking is the ergative case, but the ergative case is also the indicator of (at least contrastive) focus here, but this correlation is at least our chief observation in this study of ergative case marking. We hope to further investigate coincidental cues of this and other types of focus (e.g. Chafe 1976 and others) in future work.



By contrast, when the argument does not bear focus, it is realized in the absolutive case. Further, the use of the ergative case is not a general feature of sentences with focus, but rather specifically reserved for those arguments that are focussed. For example, the question given in (9a) does not have focus on the subject, so the response in (9b), *with* ergative case on the subject is infelicitous. Instead, the subject in the response which does not inherently bear focus, must be realized with the absolutive case as shown in (9c).

- (9) a. Q: *Wet zhra bu-zi-gé?*  
 2SG.ABS what do-SEQ-Q  
 ‘What have you done?’
- b. A: *#Nga-i yang(-s).*  
 1SG-ERG stand-PFV.PERS  
 ‘I stood up.’
- c. A: *Ngat yang(-s).*  
 1SG.ABS stand-PFV.PERS  
 ‘I stood up.’

Focus is certainly an important factor in determining case in Bumthang. This is no doubt part of the pragmatic use of the ergative that has been noted by other scholars. Referring to the earlier set of monovalent sentences from other Himalayan languages in (1)–(3), DeLancey (2005) notes that in Tibetan, the ergative case “also occurs optionally on S arguments in perfective intransitive clauses which refer to intentional action, but never in non-perfective one-argument clauses or in non-control clauses”. In her work on Kurtöp, Hyslop (2010) observes the contrast and notes that “[e]rgativity ... is often intertwined with pragmatic factors” (2010: 25). These observations also apply to the Nepali use of ergative case with monovalent predicates.

Donohue & Donohue (2016) showed that the focussed subject of a bivalent verb *must* be realised with ergative case preferentially in the immediately preverbal position, regardless of verbal semantics. With monovalent predicates the role of information structure is not so determinative, with aspect playing a role that overrides that of focus: irrealis monovalent clauses can never license ergative subjects, in contrast to the possibility of ergative case in irrealis modes with bivalent clauses. This difference in behaviour between monovalent and bivalent clauses can also be seen in the contrast between the obligatory use of absolutive case with focussed subjects in irrealis monovalent predicates in (10), and the obligatory use of ergative case in bivalent clauses with the same features in (11).

- (10) a. *Aji yer-bi-gé?*  
 who.ERG jump-IMPERS.INT.PFV  
 ‘Who jumped?’
- b. *Ae yer-bi-gé?*  
 who.ABS jump-IMPERS.INT.PFV  
 ‘Who jumped?’

- c.     *Ae*                 *yer-sang?*  
           who.ABS         jump-IRR.PERS  
           ‘Who will jump?’
- d.     \**aji*             *yer-sang?*  
           who.ERG        jump-IRR.PERS

All monovalent predicates allow an absolutive subject in at least some contexts, as in (10b), whereas bivalent predicates with focussed subjects in perfective aspect must appear with the ergative, as shown in the contrast between (11a) and (11b).

- (11) a.     *Suja aji*             *thong-bi-gé?*<sup>4</sup>  
           tea    who.ERG        drink-IMPERS.INT.PFV-Q  
           ‘Who drank the tea?’
- b.     \**suja ae*             *thong-bi-gé?*  
           tea    who.ABS        drink-IMPERS.INT.PFV-Q
- c.     *Suja aji*             *thong-sang?*  
           tea    who.ERG        drink-IRR.PERS  
           ‘Who will drink the tea?’
- d.     \**suja ae*             *thong-sang?*  
           tea    who.ABS        drink-IRR.PERS

The first major difference in case behaviour was seen with active predicates such as “stand up” and non-active predicates such as “die”, as in (6). Under no circumstances may the single argument of predicates such as “die” and others given in (7) appear with ergative case. With an activity verb such as *yang* “stand” and those shown in (5), we may observe that the ergative case in (4b) is licensed by the contrastive focus on the subject. The contrastive focus of subject arguments is reported to not just have special morphological privileges, but occurs in the immediately preverbal position, supported by data from the placement of adjuncts which shows that the absolutive and ergative pronouns in (4) occupy different positions in the clause (Donohue & Donohue 2016: 183). We can assume, following much work on the syntax of information structure (e.g. Aissen 1992, King 1995,

<sup>4</sup> We note that an absolutive coding is possible, but only through a cleft strategy involving aspect-less nominalization. The equivalent of (11a) is given in (i):

(i)     [<sub>NP</sub> *Suja thong-khan*]        [<sub>NP</sub> *ae*]             *yo?*  
           tea    drink-REL            who.ABS            INTER  
           ‘Who (is the one who) drank (the) tea?’

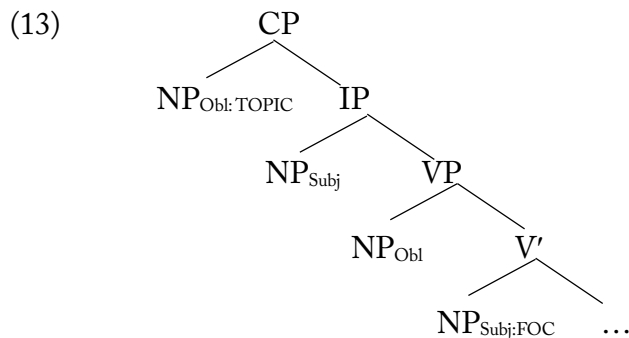
We also note that we are not discussing the appearance of instrumental marked by a case morphologically identical to the ergative case (not uncommon in many of the world’s languages). These are adverbials licensed by their semantic contribution. Compare (10b) with the grammatical instrumental marking in (ii):

(ii)    *Ae shram-i yer-sang?*  
           who.ABS    shoe-INSTER    jump-IRR.PERS  
           ‘Who will jump with shoes?’

Kiss 1998, Lambrecht 1994, and others), that the ergative/focus marked subject in (4b) is structurally “closer” to the verb than the absolutely marked sentence in (4a) (we will address this explicitly below).

While the absolutive pronouns are unmarked when occurring before a VP-internal adjunct as in (12a), the focussed ergative in (12c) is unmarked when it is immediately preverbal, a position shown to attract focus in Bumthang. We see in (12b) that with the adjunct phrase now in sentence initial position and the subject marked absolutely, the only grammatical interpretation is that where the locative phrase is a contrastive topic. We assume that these judgements correspond to different phrase structural configurations: where the ergative case is licensed only by the immediately preverbal (VP internal) focus position. This point is exemplified in the simplistic constituent structure given in (13). Here we see that in addition to the typical S(O/Obl)V order (e.g. (12a)), there is a predetermined initial position for foregrounded oblique phrases which is what we observe in (12b) and a preverbal position for focussed subject phrases, also assigning ergative case, as in (12c). (12d) does not conform to this structure so is ungrammatical. Recall that (11a) and (11c) show that objects appear to the left of the (focussed) interrogative phrase, emphasising that this position is very tightly bound to the verb.

- (12) a. *Ngat khwégang-o nyit-sa.*  
 1SG.ABS riverbank-ALL sit-IMPFV  
 ‘I was sitting at the river bank.’
- b. ? *Khwégang-o ngat nyit-sa.*  
 riverbank-ALL 1SG.ABS sit-IMPFV  
 ‘I was sitting at the river bank.’  
 (Felicitous for: “At the river bank (not elsewhere), I sat.”)
- c. *Khwégang-o nga-i nyit-sa.*  
 riverbank-ALL 1SG-ERG sit-IMPFV  
 ‘I was sitting at the riverbank.’  
 (Primary focus is now on the actor)
- d. \*? *Nga-i khwégang-o nyit-sa.*  
 1SG-ERG riverbank-ALL sit-IMPFV  
 ‘I was sitting at the riverbank.’



In sum, the ergative case on *nga* in (12c) is only licensed if two other conditions are met: the subject must be intentionally carrying out the action, and the predicate as a whole must be realis. Furthermore, it appears unacceptable when not realized in the immediately preverbal position, hence the borderline ungrammaticality of (12d).

### 3.2 Semantics: Action Verbs and Volitionality

Animacy was shown to be a relevant factor in case licensing for bivalent verbs, both in terms of person and number of the subject. This appears to also be a relevant factor for monovalent predicates. We find that the volitionality of the subject is important as alluded to with respect to the different type of predicates that allow ergative case in some contexts given in (5) versus those that do not given in (7).

Exploring further the volitionality of the arguments, we can compare the grammatical use of the ergative case in (12c) with the variants in (14), which show the ungrammaticality of the ergative case with either non-intentional agents, in (14a), or irrealis predicates, (14b). These data are not dependent on the other factors that were seen to be relevant with bivalent predicates (person of the subject, or aspect of the clause).

- (14) a.     \* *nga-i*           *tapmederó*       *nyi(t)-s*.  
           1SG-ERG       accidentally   sit-PFV.PERS  
           ‘I accidentally sat down.’  
           (e.g., I lost my balance, and fell onto a chair)  
           (Grammatical with absolutive case: *Ngat tapmederó nyis*)
- b.     \* *nga-i*           *nyit-sang*.  
           1SG-ERG       sit-IRR.PERS  
           ‘I will sit down.’  
           (Grammatical with absolutive case: *Ngat nyitsang*)

These conditions are not enough to predict ergative case on all monovalent predicates. If we examine other, non-agentive, predicates such as *dar* “fall over” (which must appear with the inflecting predicate *gae* “go”), we find that ergative case cannot be licensed in the same circumstances that were sufficient for licensing with an active verb, such as *nyit* “sit”. The proscription against ergative appearing with non-intentional or irrealis predicates still holds, but we find that focus is not a sufficient factor that can license ergative case in these conditions; compare (15) with (12).<sup>5</sup>

- (15) a.     *Ae*               *dar-zé*           *gae(s)*.  
           who.ABS       fall-SEQ       go.PFV.PERS  
           ‘Who fell over?’

<sup>5</sup> This verb cannot be coerced into an agentive reading; to indicate someone deliberately falling over (instead a verb such as *yer* “jump” would be used). Note that if anything, having *gae*, arguably a light verb in this context, may lead us to expect an ergative case, but as this is not possible, we conclude that it is the semantics of *dar*, and not *gae*, that affects the ability to be interpreted agentively.

- |    |  |                           |                              |
|----|--|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| b. | <i>Ngat</i><br>1SG.ABS<br>'I fell over.' | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae(s)</i><br>go.PFV.PERS |
| c. | * <i>nga-i</i><br>1SG-ERG                | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae(s)</i><br>go.PFV.PERS |

The fact that (15c) is ungrammatical with an ergative case-marked subject, even when bearing pragmatic focus (as attributed through the question-response set up), might be taken to indicate that the inherent lack of agentivity of the subject as determined by the predicate precludes it from having optional ergative marking.<sup>6</sup>

Ergative case can, however, be licensed for non-agentive predicates, as long as they are not “stative” (non-action). In (6b) we saw that ergative case is ungrammatical with predicates such as *se* “die”, and in (15c) above we saw that a first person subject with *dar* “fall” is ungrammatical with ergative case. If we examine a clause with a third person subject we find that when focussed the ergative case can be licensed, provided that the clause is perfective. (16b) shows that a third person subject with a perfective predicate allows for ergative case; if the clause is irrealis, or imperfective, ergative is not licensed even with a third person subject, as shown in (16c) and (16d).

- |         |  |                           |                                |
|---------|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (16) a. | <i>Gon</i><br>3SG.ABS<br>'S/he fell over.'   | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae-na</i><br>go-PFV.IMPERS |
| b.      | <i>Gon-i</i><br>3SG-ERG<br>'S/he fell over.' | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae-na</i><br>go-PFV.IMPERS |
| c.      | * <i>gon-i</i><br>3SG-ERG                    | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae-Ø</i><br>go-IRR.IMPERS  |
| d.      | * <i>gon-i</i><br>3SG-ERG                    | <i>dar-zé</i><br>fall-SEQ | <i>gae-za</i><br>go-IMPV       |

We hypothesize that the use of the ergative with a third person subject is grammatical because a third person more readily allows an inferred interpretation that the subject is more agentive. This type of “confession” is potentially possible with a first person subject, but less likely in general in areas where evidentiality and egophoricity is typically marked, precluding flexible interpretations of the features in this context.

### 3.3 Coercing Agentivity

When revisiting the bivalent predicates, we found that inherent degrees of agency of the A and affectedness of the P play a role in allowing for absolutive marking on A. Consider a range of

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<sup>6</sup> We note that “drop” (the verb taking an object) is not related to “fall” in Bumthang. *Shror* “drop, release” is a regular agentive bivalent verb.

predicates such as *ga* “like”, *thung* “see”, *ta* “look at” and *ja* “touch” that require ergatively-marked subjects shown by the examples in (17), which typically cannot occur in the absolutive case.

- (17) a. *Nga-i utui seng ga.*  
 1SG-ERG that tree like  
 ‘I like that tree.’
- b. *Nga-i seng-dé thung(s).<sup>7</sup>*  
 1SG-ERG tree-INDEF “see”.PFV.PERS  
 ‘I saw a tree.’
- c. *Nga-i seng-na ta-s.*  
 1SG-ERG tree-LOC watch-PFV.PERS  
 ‘I looked at the tree.’
- d. *Nga-i seng ja-s.*  
 1SG-ERG tree touch-PFV.PERS  
 ‘I touched the tree.’

If we were to add an adverbial to the sentence, such as *tapmederó* “accidentally”, we see that the ergative is now not only grammatical (as in (18)), but the ergative becomes ungrammatical as shown in (19).

- (18) a. *Ngat tapmederó sengna tas.*  
 ‘I accidentally looked at the tree.’
- b. *Ngat tapmederó seng jas.*  
 ‘I accidentally touched the tree.’
- (19) a. \* *ngai tapmederó sengna tas*  
 b. \* *ngai tapmederó seng jas*

Similarly, the use of the adverbial phrase *shedo buzé* “deliberately” with a clause forces a volitional reading on the subject, licencing the use of the ergative case, even in clauses that would not otherwise allow ergative case. In (20) the ergative is irrealis mood proscribes against the use of the ergative case, while in (21) *shedó buzé* “deliberately” licenses the ergative in this otherwise identical context.

- (20) a. *Ngat phrum zu-sang.*  
 1SG.ABS cheese eat-IRR.PERS  
 ‘I will eat the cheese.’

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<sup>7</sup> We use the (s) convention to indicate the personal perfective when the segmental component, [s], is lost due to syllable structure violations, with only the tonal component (<sup>H</sup>) surviving.

- b. # *nga-i*            *phrum zu-sang.*  
 1SG-ERG            cheese eat-IRR.PERS
- (21) a. *Nga-i*            *shedó*            *bu-zé*            *phrum zu-sang.*  
 1SG-ERG            deliberate        do-SEQ            cheese eat-IRR.PERS  
 ‘I will intentionally eat the cheese.’
- b. \* *ngat*            *shedó*            *bu-zé*            *phrum zu-sang.*  
 1SG.ABS            deliberate        do-SEQ            cheese eat-IRR.PERS

The data in (20) and (21) show that the addition of the “deliberate” adverbial allows ergative case to be coerced even when an irrealis predicate would not otherwise permit this.

We tested this coerced agentivity with action-type monovalent verbs, and found that the same behaviour is true for these verbs as well. Recall the examples in (4) with the verb *yang* “stand”. The default case marking is to assign an absolutive (Ø) case unless focussed, which licenses ergative case. Now we see in (22) that the use of an adverbial can add or subtract agency, tipping the transitivity balance either in favour of the ergative or absolutive case.

- (22) a. *Nga-i*            *shedó*            *bu-zé*            *yang(-s).*  
 1SG-ERG            deliberate        do-SEQ            stand-PFV.PERS  
 ‘I deliberately stood up.’
- b. \* *Ngat*            *shedó*            *bu-zé*            *yang(-s).*  
 1SG.ABS            deliberate        do-SEQ            stand-PFV.PERS

This now comes the full circle back to the notion of semantic transitivity, showing that in Bumthang it is not at the typical structural notion of transitivity that defines the use of the ergative case but rather the semantic notion as we have illustrated.

### **3.4 Summary of Features Influencing Ergativity in Monovalent Verbs**

From the data discussed above we can conclude that lexical semantics is more important than the pragmatics of focus in licensing ergative case marking *with monovalent predicates*. The complete ban on ergative case with arguments of stative predicates, regardless of pragmatics, shows this to be the case. We have also seen that for action predicates, whether their subject is agentive or not, irrealis marking is not compatible with ergative marking (see examples (10d) and (16c,d)), unlike what has been found in certain Tibetan varieties (e.g. DeLancey 1990: 307). Also shared is the restriction that non-intentional predicates, whether construed as non-intentional because of inherent lexical semantics, or coerced into such a reading via an adjunct such as “accidentally”, do not license ergative case (see examples (10) and (11)). Finally, no subject of a monovalent verb may appear with ergative case if it is not focussed; only at this stage are pragmatic factors relevant in ergative licensing; a focussed argument that is in an irrealis clause, or a stative clause, or a clause with a non-intentional event, can appear with ergative case if the predicate is bivalent (or trivalent), but a clause being irrealis,

or stative, or non-intentional is reason enough for the argument of a monovalent predicate to be excluded from possible ergative marking.

In summary, the selection of ergative case on arguments of monovalent verbs depends on a number of factors, as demonstrated above, and all of the different criteria must be met for ergative case to be assigned. If the clause is headed by a stative predicate, then there is no possibility of ergative case appearing ((6b), (6d)); if the clause is not stative, then there is the possibility of ergative case, but only if the clause is realis and perfective, and the subject is focused ((16c)). Person conditions are not relevant for the assignment of case to subjects of monovalent predicates. Instead, what is important is that the subject should be (or be perceived as) volitional. This is manifested through a Proto-Agent subject, or through the addition of an adverb, “deliberately” (e.g. (22)). For the monovalent predicates it simply boils down to meeting all of a set of factors as outlined in (23).

- (23)                    If the predicate is an action verb, *and*  
                          if the predicate is realis, *and*  
                          if the predicate is perfective, *and*  
                                  if the predicate is construed as highly agentive,  
                                  *and/or* if the argument is focussed,  
*then: Assign ergative case.*  
                          Otherwise, do not assign morphological case.

#### **4 Conditions on Ergativity in Bumthang**

The verb types that have been discussed in this paper, describing predicates with only a single core argument, license ergativity only in particular circumstances involving a constellation of factors, as summarized in (23) above. These factors are not ordered; they must simply all be met in order for the ergative case to be used. Because of the extreme restriction of the use of case marking with Ss, we believe that it is more appropriate to call this an ergative system, rather than a system of semantic alignment (following Donohue 2008, and many others). It is true that “agentive” or “active” are labels that accurately describe the clauses in which the case marking appears, but they are not, for monovalent verbs, sufficient.

It is interesting to note that in keeping with this notion of semantic transitivity, in Bumthang “ergative” does not just mean “A”, but something closer to proto-agent (e.g. Dowty 1991). The ergative can be licensed by any of a large number of factors when it occurs on an argument of a bivalent verb, as seen in Figure 1; for instance, a non-perfective predicate may appear with an ergative-marked argument if the A is third person, or focussed, while that is not possible for the argument of a monovalent predicate.

The fact that it is possible to force the ergative in otherwise excluded contexts in order to match the agentivity of the deliberate action is evidence of this. The role of information structure on licensing grammatical case is also striking, when compared to more categorial ergativity in other parts of the world, and most discussions of differential case marking. When focussed, or in contexts which appear functionally marginal and thus necessarily drawing a kind of focus, ergative case can be found, and this was not a possibility explicitly discussed in Hopper & Thompson (1980), though it is inherent in the work on discourse as an important variable. The different licensing conditions for monovalent and bivalent verbs is perhaps due, at least in part, to the implicit expectations (and



agentivity) of the arguments: in a clause headed by a bivalent verb agentivity is more likely to be associated with the A than the P, and (outside of voice alternations) very few verbs include *less* agentive As than their Ps.<sup>8</sup> For the single argument of a monovalent verb, by contrast, both agentive and non-agentive Ss are valid for discourse continuity, and the expectation of agentivity is lower. This is reflected in several ways, including the role of the coerced agentivity as noted above. We hope that further work on additional languages will be able to tease out the uses of case in monovalent and bivalent clauses by explicitly examining the different semantic and pragmatic factors that influence the choice of case-marking, and will further illuminate the question of whether the kinds of fluid case-marking systems reported for many languages of the Himalayas are best described as being extended ergative systems, or split-S/semantic alignment.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

We have shown that a more nuanced notion of semantic transitivity is required to begin to understand the conditions under which ergative case may be licensed in Bumthang, including agreements of monovalent predicates, typically precluded from licensing ergative case under purely structural conditions. The data presented here for Bumthang strongly indicates that a number of semantic and pragmatic factors must be taken into account in order to arrive at a detailed account of case licensing for all verb types. This has been noted for a number of other Himalayan languages for which similar insights have been noted (see, for example, Tournadre 1991, DeLancey 1981, 1984, 1985, 1990, 2005, amongst others, Vollmann 2008 on Tibetan, Zeisler 2012 on Ladakhi). We hope that the Bumthang data presented here makes a contribution to this growing body of work, to our understanding of optional case marking in the region, and of the typology of case in general. We reserve the challenge of how to incorporate this notion of case marking into a formal model of the grammar to future work.

### ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person	INSTR	instrumental
2	Second person	INT	interrogative
3	third person	IRR	irrealis
ABS	absolutive	LNKR	linker
AOR	aorist	M	masculine
DAT	dative	PAST	past
DEM	demonstrative	PERS	personal
EGO	egophoric	PFV	perfective
ERG	ergative	PST	past
EVID	evidential	Q	interrogative
IMPERS	impersonal	SG	singular
IMPFV	imperfective	SEQ	sequential

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<sup>8</sup> English allows examples such as *John predeceased Mary*, in which the A is clearly less agentive. Such examples are vanishingly small, arguably belong to special registers, and cannot be directly translated into most languages of the world (including Bumthang).

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