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Habituality, Perfectivity and Ergativity in Nepali

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Abstract: This paper argues that in Nepali, the position of aspect heads leads to the ergative case assignment on agents of perfective clauses and optional marking on the agents in habitual sentences. Along with split ergativity, Nepali exhibits ergative marking also for stage vs. individual level readings of the subjects in habitual sentences. A marked subject has an individual level reading and an unmarked subject has a stage level reading. In the context of the data presented in the paper, it is argued that the case marking on the agent is an inherent case, assigned to the agent in its theta position. Furthermore, such inherent case assignment or the environment in which the agent is marked, is motivated and conditioned by the aspect of the clause, represented through various aspect heads in narrow syntax.

Keywords: Aspect, Agent, Perfectivity, Event Structure, Split-Ergativity

1. INTRODUCTION

Ergativity is a grammatical phenomenon where the subject of an intransitive clause and the object of a transitive clause display similar morphological features of case marking and agreement and/or syntactic features of control, binding and extractability (Dixon, 1976). Ergativity is further categorised as split-ergativity if this phenomenon is found in the environment of certain limiting factors and not in all intransitive and transitive alterations within a language. Many ergative languages show an aspect-based split in ergativity where the agents of transitive perfective clauses are marked differently from the subjects of non-perfective clauses. Nepali exhibits the phenomenon of split-ergativity where all transitive perfective clauses have an ergative marked agent. Also, in Nepali, the agent of a habitual transitive clause can be optionally marked. This has been sometimes analysed as aspect-based split-ergativity where the habitual aspect can motivate ergative marking on the subject of a transitive clause and also as stage level vs. individual level distinction as in Butt & Poudel (2007) and Poudel (2020). While attempting an explanation of these variations, it is important to describe in detail the notions of 'habituality', 'perfectivity' and 'ergativity' and to examine them in the context of Nepali.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data for the present research was obtained through targeted questionnaires assigned to individual informants, narrative sequences in literature and moving arts and data presented in previous analyses. The data was then cross-checked with the said informants not only for grammaticality but also for an alternative reading, wherever possible. The variety of Nepali presented in this paper attests to the Darjeeling variety of Nepali, spoken in north-eastern parts of India.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Since the analysis presented in this paper is syntactic in nature, the hypotheses have been founded within the minimalist framework of case assignment, focusing on:

- Government under minimal command that establishes the syntactic hierarchy of heads and various arguments (Chomsky, 1985, 1993), the relations of agreement and feature checking that drive merge and move (Chomsky, 1993, 1995, 2000)
- Buzio's generalisation as per the introduction of arguments in an event structure (1986)
- EPP requiring a subject be present (Chomsky, 1981: 40, Rothstein, 1983, Chomsky, 1986: 166)

3. HABITUALITY IN NEPALI

In Nepali, habitual sentences are represented through the simple present tense inflections on the verb, which is marked for agreement with the subject of the clause as shown in the example, "Mothers love their children", below. Here the verb is inflected for non-past tense and the agreement morphology is triggered by the subject 'mothers'. The '*le*' marking on the subject is optional in nature and till further clarification it is labeled here as an agent marking.

aama	haru (le)	aphnu	nani	haru	laai	prem	gar-chhan
mother	PL (AGT)	REFL	child	PL	DEF/ANI	love	do-NPST.3pl
"Mothers love their children"							

In this example the marked agent triggers agreement and is also able to bind the reflexive '*aphnu*'. It is seen that the marking on the agent is optional in nature. Since Nepali is a split-ergative language (Abadie, 1974) that has ergative marked subjects in the perfective transitive clauses, it will be a simple explanation for the agent marking on the subject of a transitive habitual clause to call it a phenomenon of split ergativity, as in Verbeke (2013). A problem for this analysis is posed by the fact that agent marking in habitual sentences is never mandatory but is optional in nature unlike the ergative marking on the agents of perfective constructions which are always necessary. Thus, the agent marking found in the habitual sentences appears to have a different semantic role and a different syntactic motivation from the ergative marking in perfective sentences.

Butt & Poudel (2007) and Poudel (2020) argue that the optional agent marking pertains to individual level predication and stage level predication distinctions. In individual level predication, the marking is present while it is absent in stage level predication as seen in examples (2a), with an individual level (henceforth IL) reading of the subject, and (2b), with a stage level (henceforth SL) reading of the subject, '*pradhanmantri*'. In (2a), the subject is marked with '*le*' and in (2b) the subject is unmarked. In these examples, the form of the verb is unchanged and is inflected for non-past tense and for agreement with the subject:

| pradhan	mantri=le	pul=ko	udghaatan	gar-chhan
prime	minister=Erg	bridge=Gen	inauguration	do-NonPast.3M.PI
'Prime minister inaugurates bridges' (Individual-level Presupposition)				
"pradhan	mantri	pul=ko	udghatan	gar-chan
prime	minister	bridge=Gen	inauguration	do-NonPast.3.M.Hon
"The prime minister is inaugurating/will inaugurate the bridge' (Stage-level Assertion of Existence) (Butt and Poudel, 2007)				

This line of research calls for making individual and stage level distinctions. The difference between an individual level reading and a stage level reading is about the nature of the predication. If a predicate first takes an event that can be treated as an individual (Davidson, 1967), and thereafter takes the subject of the sentence as an extra argument, the predicate is said to have a stage level reading (Kratzer, 1988, 1995). An individual level, on the other hand, predicates of the individual directly (Carlson, 1977; Kratzer, 1988, 1995). Consider the examples in (3a) and (3b) from Nepali, where the event of 'eating rice' is treated as an individual in the stage level reading where 'Madan' is the extra spatio-temporal argument (Davidson, 1967). This gives an episodic reading rather than a generic reading in (3a) where 'Madan' is only temporarily engaged in the activity of eating rice. In (3b), the 'eating rice' is predicated of the individual 'Madan' and thus only a generic reading that describes a property of the subject 'Madan' and holds true through all possible times as is implied:

madan	bhaat	khan-chhan	
madan	rice	eat-HAB.PRES.3SG	
'At some point of time Madan eats rice/ate rice.'			
madan	le	bhaat	khan-chhan
madan	ERG	Rice	eat-HAB.PRES.3SG
"Madan eats rice (always does)."			

A syntactic representation of the SL vs. IL predication, based on Carlson's (1977) and Kratzer's (1988, 1995) definitions is given by Arche (2006:9) in the following tree diagrams:
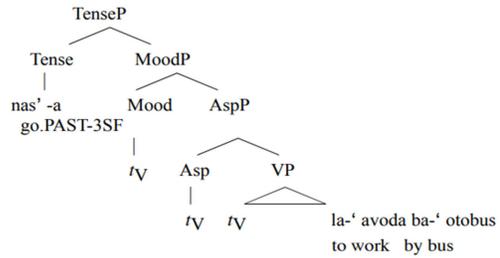
a. Stage Level Predicates

```
          IP
         /  \
             I'
            /  \
           I    VP
               /  \
             <e>   VP
```
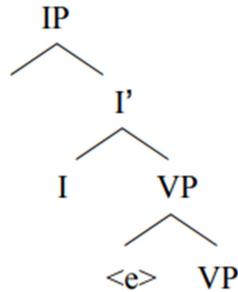
b. Individual-level Predicates

```
          IP
         /  \
             I'
            /  \
           I    VP
               /  \
          θ-subj   VP
```
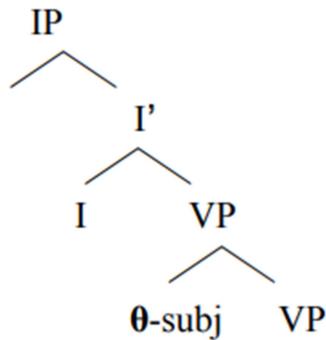
Another way to approach the generic vs. episodic reading is through the split nature of the habitual aspect. While the morphological form of the habitual aspect shows no alterations in generic and episodic readings in Nepali, there is a possibility that the two readings are a product of two different syntactic structures. Such an attempt is made by Boneh and Doron (2008), who map this distinction syntactically for Hebrew, arguing that there are two different forms of verbal structures in habitual constructions; one has a simple form and episodic reading and another has a second habitual operator within the VP, which gives only the habitual reading as seen in the trees (6) and (7) for the following example:
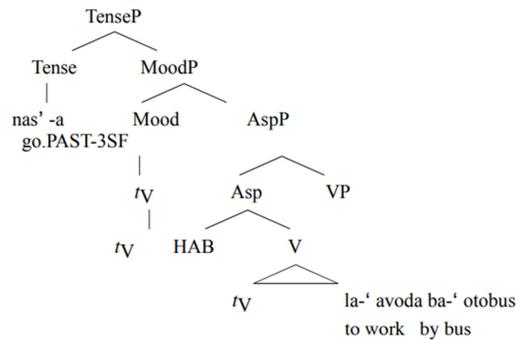
ya'dlnas'-a la- 'avodaba'- otobus
Yael go. PAST-3SF to work by bus
'Yael went to work by bus.' (episodic/ habitual)
(Bonch and Doron 2008: 322)

c. Episodic sentence

```
              TenseP
             /     \
          Tense    MoodP
            |      /    \
         nas' -a Mood   AspP
         go.PAST-3SF   /    \
                     tV Asp   VP
                         |   
                        tV  tV  la-' avoda ba-' otobus
                                 to work   by bus
```
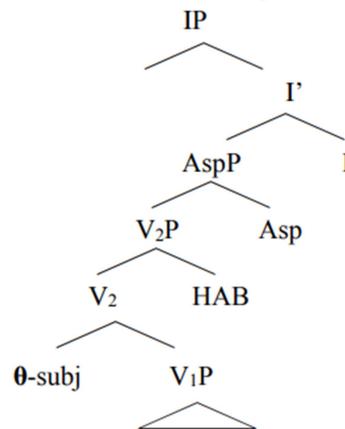
The second habitual operator is adverbial in nature and is adjoined to the verb to give a generic reading as seen in the following tree:

d. Simple Habitual Sentence

```
              TenseP
             /     \
          Tense    MoodP
            |      /    \
         nas' -a Mood   AspP
         go.PAST-3SF   /    \
                     tV Asp   VP
                         |   
                        tV  HAB   V
                                  
                                tV  la-' avoda ba-' otobus
                                     to work   by bus
```
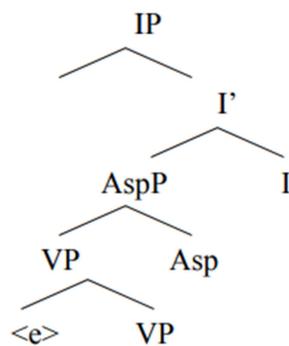
This syntactic model can be applied to Nepali as well for both episodic and generic readings in habitual aspect without a periphrastic construction of the verbal form. If we consider a second habitual operator within the verbal complex of the generic habitual sentences, it is phonologically null but acts as a functional head causing the subject to be marked in its theta position. This co-relates with the syntactic account given by Arche where the individual level predicate takes the individual as its argument in its base-generated theta position. The syntactic representation for this operation can be denoted as the following tree diagram:

```
              IP
             /  \
                 I'
                /  \
             AspP    I
            /    \
          V₂P    Asp
         /   \
        V₂   HAB
       /  \
   θ-subj  V₁P
```

The theta subject is generated in its base position with the agent marking and then it moves to spec IP for EPP conditions and triggers agreement.

On the other hand, the absence of such a habituality operator within the verbal clause implies an episodic reading where the subject is an extra argument and thus cannot be base generated with an agent marking in its theta position. It is an extraposed subject that moves to the spec of IP to fulfil EPP conditions and receives nominative unmarked case like the subject of an intransitive clause. This can be represented in the following tree diagram:

```
            IP
           /  \
              I'
             /  \
          AspP    I
          /  \
        VP    Asp
       /  \
     <e>   VP
```

Thus, the agent marking on the subject of the habitual clause is determined by two factors in Nepali, the generic vs. episodic implication of the habitual marker that is distinguished by the two syntactic structures as shown in tree diagrams (6)-(9) and also due to the argument status of the subject with respect to the predicate as shown in (4) and (8)-(9).

4. PERFECTIVITY IN NEPALI

Perfectivity is the phenomenon of a single unanalysed event coming to an end with or without a well defined result state as described in Dahl (1985). A form that denotes this phenomenon is said to be a perfective form. According to Dahl, "...the category PFV typically combines 'perfectivity' and 'past time reference'-it is clear, however, that perfectivity is subject to less variation than past time reference- and there is thus good reason to regard PFV as a basically aspectual category." (1985:23). In Nepali the form that denotes perfectivity is either the simple past tense inflection on the verb as seen in example (10) or a periphrastic form of '-eko' followed by a tensed auxiliary as seen in (11).

ram-le	chithi	lekhy-o			
ram-ERG	letter	write-PST-3SG			
"Ram wrote a letter."					
Timi	le	hari	laai	hirkaye-ko	thi-yau
You	ERG	Hari	ANI/DEF	hit-PFCT	be PST-2SG
"You had hit Hari."					

The tense on the auxiliary can either be past or non-past but in both the cases a perfectivity reading can be interpreted such that the event has come to an end and a result state has been reached as seen in the examples (11) and (12):

hari le	nai	shyam	laai	mare-ko	ho
hari ERG	EMPH	shyam	ANI/DEF	kill-PFCT	be. PRES.3G
"Hari is the one who has killed Shyam."					

The form '-eko' can be analysed as a 'perfect' marking based on what Dahl calls 'PFCT', that is, perfect "...in the ways in which they can be combined with temporal qualifiers...." (Dahl 1985:133-134). Dahl illustrates that in Swedish PFCT is formed with the use of the auxiliary with the past participial form of the verb (Dahl 1985:134). Nepali behaves like Georgian, it has an aorist, with past morphology on the root form of the verb and a perfect construction like Swedish where the root form of the verb is followed with a past participial and then an auxiliary with a past or present time specification. According to Dahl, perfective is morphological in nature whereas perfect is periphrastic and a syntactic formulation.

The main property of perfectivity is 'telicity' or 'boundedness'. It can be achieved through simple past, through a perfect which is a combination of 'telicity' and tense or through a perfective, which can have an eventive telic interpretation where the event comes to an end without a specified end result, a resultative telic interpretation where the end of an event signifies the achievement of a result state.

Languages vary as to which of these methods they apply for 'telic' interpretations. English and Nepali have the telicity specified on the tense category of simple past or the perfect, which seems to be an amalgamation of telicity marking participial form and an auxiliary that specifies tense. Nepali, unlike Hindi, does not have a separate perfective form that is tense neutral and can occur without tense specifications as seen in the following example from Hindi:

| us	ne	kapre	dho-ye
3SG	ERG	clothes	wash-PREF.3PL
"He/she washed the clothes."			

In Nepali, the 'telicity' feature of perfectivity is denoted through the use of simple past form or through a perfect form with a tensed auxiliary and in both cases the telic interpretation implies the end of an event with the end result achieved. As seen in the following example (14), a verb like 'building' is compatible with both the past form and the perfect form with a present tense marked auxiliary. 'To build' is an accomplishment verb which has both 'process' and 'state' features, meaning something can be in the process of being built and then in the final state of having been built. An accomplishment verb like 'to build' in Nepali is followed by a light verb '*saknu*' that signifies the completion of the task. Thus, both the simple past forms and perfect form with tensed auxiliary can signify result state telicity in Nepali.

us	le	ghar	banaai	sak-yo	
he	ERG	house	build	complete-PST-3SG	
"He built the house/completed building the house."					
us	le	ghar	banaai	sak-eko	chha
he	ERG	house	build	complete-PFCT	be-PRES.3SG
"He built the house/completed building the house."					

Since the 'telicity' interpretation of perfectivity is always brought about by the presence of a tensed head, either on the verb or on the auxiliary, this paper argues that the perfectivity denoting Asp head in Nepali is defective in the sense that it cannot occur without a head that locates it in time. This is in contrast to Hindi where the Asp head can occur in isolation without a dominating tense head that locates the event in time. What can be concluded, though, is that a separate head, aspectual in nature and denoting telicity is syntactically postulated in languages to give a telic, bounded interpretation to events. Since, the scope of this aspectual category is over the event structure and this category may or may not be headed by a tense phrase, it has been argued that this head is positioned above *v*P.

Thompson (2006) argues that there is an AspP that checks the feature of boundedness as proposed by Jackendoff (1991). Thompson (2006) states that, "Given that a telic reading results when a bounded verb, a bounded Asp and either a bounded direct object or a bounded PP are combined, it is proposed in the present work that telic readings are the result of feature checking of the [bounded] feature between the verb and Asp heads with either a direct object or a PP."
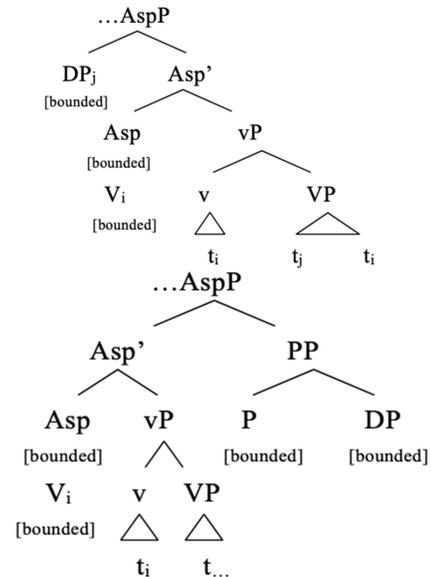
MacDonald counters this claim stating that, "...it is not clear why external arguments cannot affect the telicity of the predicate." (2008:132). Hence he proposes that the AspP is posited between *v*P and VP, following Travis (1991). According to Travis (1991), there are three points of telicity in an event structure that are brought about by the use of a light

verb in some languages, by the use of the perfective/perfect aspect and the natural endpoint signified by the lexical verb itself (2010:243). She

represents this in the syntactic form as is given in the tree below:
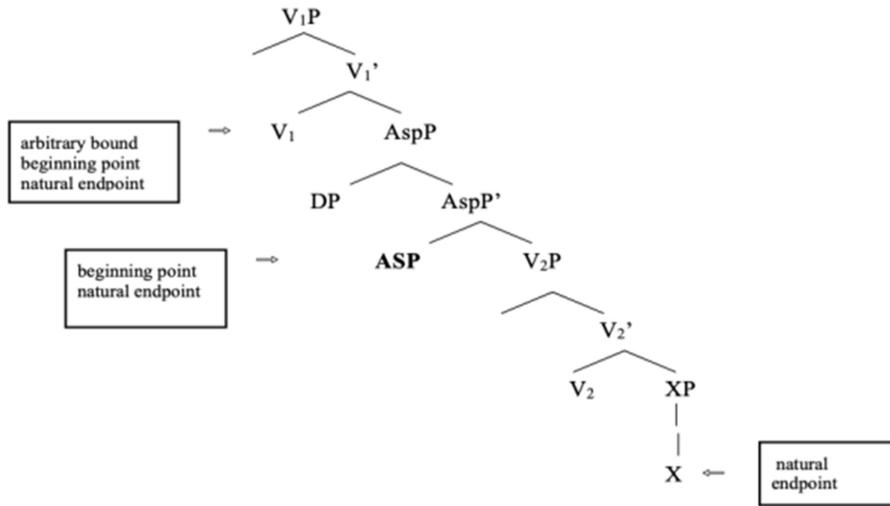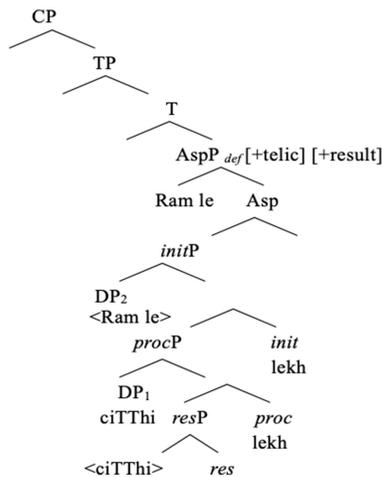

(2010 : 244)

In this paper, it is argued that though, an external argument does not directly affect the telicity of an event, it initiates an action or acts as a causer of an event that brings the object to a certain degree of affectedness as proposed by Lindemann (2019) for Nepali. Languages like Nepali signify this as an ergative marking on the external argument, which has been labeled as 'aspect based split ergativity' and thus the position of the AspP above vP is better able to explain such a phenomenon.

Another feature of perfectivity in Nepali is the 'result state'. For the syntactic representation of this

feature, this work adopts the First Phase Syntax model proposed by Ramchand where it is the inner aspect of a verb that determines whether the result state is achieved or not. According to Ramchand, an event structure will have an initiation phrase that introduces the external argument, a process phrase that takes the internal argument of the clause and the result phrase, which will be filled in the case of bounded and telic events and remain unfilled otherwise. The structure given by her is represented in the tree diagram below (2008:32):
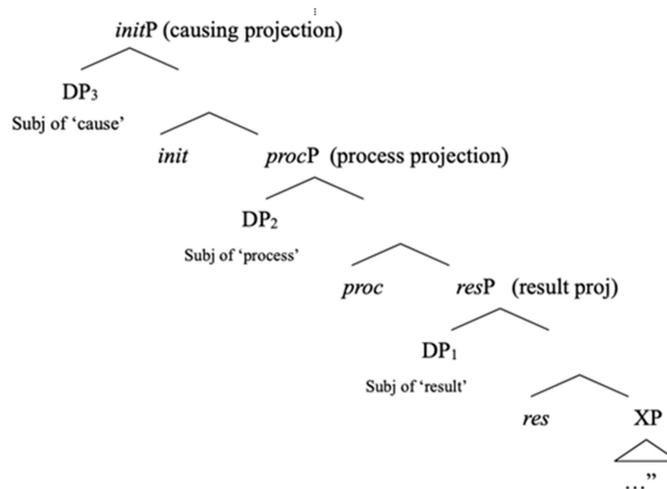
Based on these models, the syntactic representation for a perfective construction like (10) in Nepali can be seen in the following tree diagram.

```
            CP
             \
             TP
               \
               T
                \
               AspP def [+telic] [+result]
                /         \
           Ram le        Asp
                          /
                      initP
                       /
                     DP₂
                   <Ram le>
                      procP        init
                     /    \        lekh
                   DP₁
                 ciTThi  resP      proc
                        /   \      lekh
                   <ciTThi>  res
```

5. ERGATIVITY IN NEPALI

Nepali is a split-ergative language where the nominative/ergative split is conditioned by the aspect of a transitive construction (Butt & Poudel, 2007). The agent of a transitive perfective clause in Nepali is marked as ergative as seen in the following example where the agent, a second person singular pronoun '*timi*' is marked with '*le*'. The 'animate' third person singular object '*Hari*' is marked with '*laai*', a +definite/+animate marker in the language. It is also seen in the example that the ergative marked agent '*timi*' is the NP that triggers agreement with the verbal complex and not the object '*Hari*'.

timi	le	hari	laai	hiraka-eko	thi-yau
2SG	ERG	3SG	ANI/DEF	hit-PFCT	PST-2sG
"You had hit Hari."					

Intransitive clauses in Nepali are formed of unaccusative and unergative verbs and the sole argument is always unmarked for unaccusative verbs and sometimes marked for unergative verbs in the past perfect. Agreement in Nepali is subject oriented and across all verb-aspect-tense configurations, the argument structure remains the same as seen in the examples below:

hari	noaa-yo
hari	bathe-PST.3SG.
"Hari bathed."	

The verb 'noaa-nu' 'to bathe' is intransitive in Nepali. If the nominalised form of the verb is used with a light verb in the past perfect form, the sentence is treated as a transitive and the subject is marked as ergative just like Hindi verb 'nahaana', 'to bathe'.

hari	le	noaa-i dhoaa-i	gar-yo
hari	ERG	bathe-NOM wash-NOM	do-PST.3SG
"Hari did bathing and washing."			

Ura (2006) proposes an ergative parameter on feature checking to account for structurally ergative languages. This parameter allows for the features of the external argument to be checked by v, in the specifier of vP, which is the theta position for external arguments where they are base generated. The subject then moves to specifier of Infl to check its EPP features and the nominal features of the Infl can be checked by the object in situ. Since the subject always moves to the Infl, to either satisfy its EPP when marked ergative or to receive nominative through feature checking, both the ergative and nominative subjects in such languages have similar syntactic properties. The features on v that allow for feature checking of the external argument are telicity related aspect feature and the feature of volitionality

projected through the lexical verb may be another parameter in languages like Hindi that require ergativity on a volitional subject even when the clause is intransitive unergative. The object of transitive clauses moves to the inner specifier of vP to receive accusative and any definiteness/animacy related marking is purely morphological in nature.

In the light of the data presented for Nepali, this seems to be a plausible explanation as volitional external arguments of perfective transitive clauses bear the ergative marking whereas non-volitional experiencer subjects do not bear an ergative marking as seen in the following example where 'to fear' is a psyche verb that requires the experiencer subject to be near the lexical case 'dative':

nani	laai	Dor	lag-yo
child	DAT	fear	apply-PST.3SG
'The child got scared.'			

It can be concluded that the Nepali ergative agent surfaces when the sentence is transitive, the agent is volitional and the aspect is perfective. Based on Ura's (2006) account, this subject generated in its theta position, moves to a head denoting telicity to check its telicity feature. As seen for habitual constructions, an external argument that is generated in its theta position, may receive an agent related marking if the verbal complex is headed by the functional aspectual head and in Nepali an external argument in a perfective transitive construction receives an ergative case if the agent is volitional and the verb is not a psychic verb. Thus, the ergative marking in Nepali seems to be an inherent case.

In the previous section, it was argued that the telicity denoting head is Asp which is defective in nature since it always requires a tense head. The Asp head being defective lacks EPP or unvalued ø feature set and only requires an external argument to satisfy its [+telic] feature and cannot assign case or trigger agreement. Once the ergative marked external argument moves to the specifier of Asp, the defective AspP then moves to T which is finite. T, being finite, has an EPP feature and also a feature set. The external argument, due to its proximity to the T head after it moves along with the AspP, is able to check the EPP feature on T and also trigger agreement as seen in the following tree diagram:
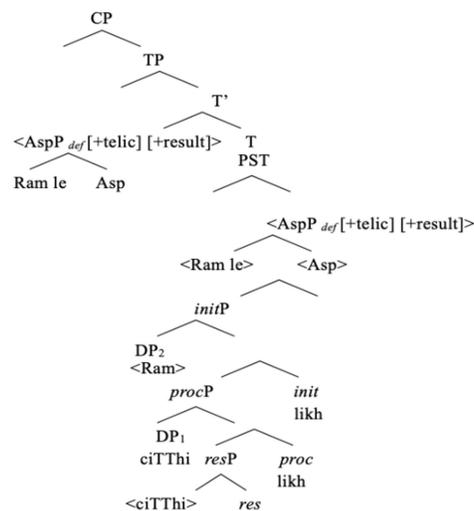
Preminger claims that languages have a "MOVE TO CANONICAL SUBJECT POSITION (MTOCSP)" requirement that is subject to typological variation. Thus, a language that allows a marked argument to MTOCSP will also allow for agreement with the said argument (2011:192-193). The arguments made here support this theory as Nepali agents are always able to trigger agreement since they move to the tense head along with the defective AspP and check its EPP features.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that the ergative marking on the agents of perfective transitive clauses and the agent marking on the agents of individual level predicating habitual clauses are a result of the syntactic positions of various aspect heads in Nepali and their interactions with other heads such as *v* and T. An issue that is left open to be addressed in future research is whether the agent marking on the external argument that occupies its theta position in

generic habitual sentences with IL predication is homophonous to the ergative marking or is an inherent case related agents in Nepali like the ergative.

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