1. **Introduction**

The topic of this paper is the ergative pattern in Tshangla. Tshangla is a Tibeto-Burman language indigenous to Eastern Bhutan. The ergative system in Tshangla is split by aspect. I will refer to these two aspects by the English aspects they translate from, that is imperfective and perfective. To be very general, in the imperfective the ergative is often optional, as in (1).

(1) Tshering(-gi) gogu she-na.
Tsh.(-ERG) chicken kill-PRES.IMPF
‘Tshering is killing a chicken.’

In the perfective the ergative is almost always either obligatory, as in (2) and (3), or not allowed, as in (4) and (5). The sentence in (5) would be allowable only if the falling has happened purposefully.

(2) Tshering-gi gogu she-wa.
Tsh.-ERG chicken kill-PAST.PERF
‘Tshering killed the chicken.’

(3) * Tshering gogu she-wa.
Tsh. chicken kill-PAST.PERF

(4) Tshering roke jong-ma.
Tsh. fall-PAST.PERF
‘Tshering fell.’

(5) * Tshering-gi roke jong-ma.
Tsh.-ERG fall-PAST.PERF
(‘Tshering fell on purpose.’)

*Gratitude to Yang Gyethelten for all this data. He comes from Trashigang in Eastern Bhutan. He also speaks Bengali, Chöke, Dzongka, English, Hindi, and Nepali.
It will be seen, however, that this is far too broad a description of the ergative pattern of Tshangla. While the ergative appears optional in the imperfective, I will argue that it is controlled by the expectations of the speaker as to the likelihood of the subject acting upon the object or vice versa. The ergative system in the perfective appears to be of one of two types described first by Bittner and Hale (1996), and later refined by Woolford (2012). However the evidence collected on this topic did not provide a conclusive answer.

The structure of this paper will be a section on the ergative morpheme -gi, a section on the pattern of the ergative in the aspect that translates from the imperfect in English, a section on the pattern of the ergative in the aspect that translates from the perfect in English, and a conclusion.

2. The morpheme -gi

The morphology marking the ergative and the instrumental cases is syncretic, that is they are both marked with the morpheme -gi. The sentence in (7) can be translated in two ways. In the first translation, the sentence is in the active voice. Tshering is the ergative subject, and the object has been scrambled out of the VP. However in the second translation, the sentence is in the passive voice, and Tshering is no longer the subject, but a PP adjunct marked with the instrumental case. (6) is provided as an example of an active sentence where no object fronting has occurred.

(6) Tshering-gi gogu she-na.
   Tsh.-ERG chicken kill-PRES.IMPF
   ‘Tshering is killing a chickin.’

(7) Gogu Tshering-gi she-na.
    chicken Tsh.-ERG kill-PRES.IMPF
    ‘Tshering is killing a chicken.’ / ‘A chicken is being killed by Tshering.’

The parse for the active, object fronting reading of (7) is in (8), and the one for the passive construction with the adjoined instrumental phrase is in (9).

```
(8) TopicP
   DP_i
   chicken
   IP
   DP_{ii}
   Tsh.-ERG
   vP
   I
   VP
   v
   V
   kill
```
Because the ergative and instrumental case are both expressed with -gi and the ergative is often optional in the imperfective, it makes good sense to ask the question – is -gi marking an ergative subject, or is it always marking an instrumental adjunct in a passive construction? To answer this question, I’ve provided the data in (10) and (11). The sentence in (10) requires a -gi marked agent, and without the -gi marker, it is ungrammatical, as in (11).

(10) Gogu-gi Tshering she-na. chicken-ERG Tsh. kill-PRES.IMPF
    ‘The chicken is killing Tshering.’
(11) * Gogu Tshering she-na. chicken Tsh. kill-PRES.IMPF

It is impossible for a passive sentence to exist without a grammatical active counterpart. Therefore, the sentence in (11) is not a passive and the -gi phrase is truly an ergative subject, not an instrumental adjunct. This question about the morpheme -gi’s identity as the ergative could not be asked in the perfective, as the ergative is almost always required or forbidden, and no such requirement can exist for a passive construction.

3. Ergative in the Imperfective

Use of the ergative case in the imperfective initially appears optional, as in (12). However in this section I will show that it is not optional, and instead controlled by likelihood of subject to act upon object, and in part animacy.

(12) Tshering(-gi) gogu she-na. Tsh.(-ERG) chicken kill-PRES.IMPF
    ‘Tshering is killing a chicken.’

The sentence in (13) and (14) requires an ergative subject because a chicken killing a human is less likely than a human killing a chicken, and ‘chicken’ is less human/animate than ‘Tshering’. In (15) and (16) the subject and object are equally human and animate, and it is equally likely that either could be acting upon the other. Therefore the subject is obligatorily marked with ergative.
In (17) and (18), the subject and object are equally animate and non-human. In (19) The subject is more animate than the object and the ergative is optional.

(17)  Khu-gi  gogu  she-na.
dog-ERG chicken kill-PRES.IMPF
‘The dog is killing the chicken.’

(18)  * Khu  gogu  she-na.
dog  chicken kill-PRES.IMPF

Based on these sentences alone, we can building an assumption that use of the ergative is conditioned by an animacy hierarchy. Below is a table of this hierarchy from the sentences above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subj.</th>
<th>obj.</th>
<th>hum.</th>
<th>anim.</th>
<th>inan.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hum.</td>
<td>-gi</td>
<td>(-gi)</td>
<td>(-gi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>anim.</td>
<td>-gi</td>
<td>-gi</td>
<td>(-gi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>inan.</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>(-gi)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, in (20), the subject and object are equally inanimate but the ergative is optional. By the animacy hierarchy, a subject at the same animacy/inanimacy level as its object must take ergative case. In (21) the subject and object are also equally inanimate, but here the ergative is required. In (20), it is not very likely a house will hit a rock, but it is fairly like a rock could hit a house, and the ergative is optional. In (21) and (22) the subject and object are equally likely to be acting on one another, and because of this, the ergative is required.

(20)  Lung(-ba)(-gi)  phe-ga  kha-na.
rock(-PL)(-ERG)  house-DAT  hit-PRES.IMPF
‘The rock(s) hit the house.’

(21) Bat-gi bal phi-na.
    bat-ERG ball hit-PRES.IMPF
    ‘The bat hit the ball.’

(22) Bat bal phi-na.
    bat ball hit-PRES.IMPF

From the examples in (20), (21), and (22) it can be seen that the ergative is conditioned by real world possibility and expectation, and not simply humanness and animacy. To describe this pattern in the form of a rule, let $\alpha$ be the subject and $\beta$ be the object.

(23) If the likelihood of $\alpha$ acting on $\beta$ is $\leq$ the likelihood of $\beta$ acting on $\alpha$, then the ergative case is obligatory.

(24) If the likelihood of $\alpha$ acting on $\beta$ is $>$ the likelihood of $\beta$ acting on $\alpha$, the ergative case is optional.

4. Ergative in the Perfective

Initially the ergative pattern in the perfective appears to act as a traditionally conceived ergative system should. The ergative appears obligatory on subjects of transitive sentences and it cannot appear on subjects of intransitive sentences. The data from the 1 is repeated below, where (25) and (26) require ergative case on the subject and (27) and (28) forbid it.

(25) Tshering-gi gogu she-wa.
    Tsh.-ERG chicken kill-PAST.PERF
    ‘Tshering killed the chicken.’

(26) * Tshering gogu she-wa.
    Tsh. chicken kill-PAST.PERF

(27) Tshering roke jong-ma.
    Tsh. fall-PAST.PERF
    ‘Tshering fell.’

(28) * Tshering-gi roke jong-ma.
    Tsh.-ERG fall-PAST.PERF
    (‘Tshering fell on purpose.’)

However, ergative is only obligatory on subjects of sentences with definite objects. In (29) and (30), the situation is such that Tshering could be looking for\textsuperscript{1} any onions, and the ergative is not allowed.\textsuperscript{2} In (31) and (32), Dechin must be looking for her dog specifically and the ergative is required.

\textsuperscript{1}This verb \textit{lam} can translate to both ‘look for’ or ‘want’.

\textsuperscript{2}In one interview, the sentences in (29) and (30) were presented to the consultant without prior description of a situation in which the subject is looking for ‘any old onions’. In this interview, the consultant preferred the ergative on the subject of this sentence.
(29) Tshering kokpu lam-ma.
   ‘Tshering looked for onions.’

(30) * Tshering-gi kokpu lam-ma.
    Tsh.-ERG onion look.for-PAST.PERF

(31) Dechin-gi ro-ka khu lam-ma.
    D.-ERG 3SG-GEN dog look.for-PAST.PERF
   ‘Dechin looked for her dog.’

(32) * Dechin ro-ka khu lam-ma.
    D. 3SG-GEN dog look.for-PAST.PERF

This pattern is similar to a number of languages, including Inuit, Tagalog, Niuean, Dyirbal and Nez Perce, and appears to be one of the two types of ergative languages described by Bittner and Hale (1996), and refined by Woolford (2012). I will follow Woolford’s typology, and call this type of ergative Object Shift Ergative.

While the data in (29) through (32) strongly suggests that Tshangla is of this type, further attempts at collecting evidence for this failed. I looked at sentences with adverbs intervening between object and verb, using the adverb to mark the edge of the VP (Diesing 1992). If this diagnostic was to prove that Tshangla was of the Object Shifty type, it would be expected that all the sentences below would behave like (36), where the ergative is required.

(33) Dechin(-gi) roka khu tretrerang lam-ma.
    D.(-ERG) 3SG-GEN dog often look.for-PAST.PERF
   ‘Dechin often looked for her dog.’

(34) Dechin(-gi) roka khu ining lam-ma.
    D.(-ERG) 3SG-GEN dog yesterday look.for-PAST.PERF
   ‘Dechin looked for her dog yesterday.’

(35) Tshering(-gi) kokpu tretrerang lam-ma.
    Tsh.(-ERG) onion often look.for-PAST.PERF
   ‘Tshering often looked for onions.’

(36) Tshering*(-gi) kokpu ining lam-ma.
    Tsh.*(-ERG) onion yesterday look.for-PAST.PERF
   ‘Tshering looked for onions yesterday.’

If the sentence in (36) was true for a larger pattern in the language, it would be strong evidence in support of the Object Shift hypothesis. The tree in (37) shows an idealized parse of what could be happening in (36), though as previously stated, no conclusive evidence was found. In the tree in (37), the ergative subject is generated at [SPEC,vP] and moves to

3Bittner and Hale calls this type syntactic ergativity and the other morphological ergativity; Woolford calls them object shift ergativity and active ergativity, respectively. The difference between the types is that in the object shift type, as the name suggests, the ergative marks subject of sentences where the object has shifted out of the VP. The shifted objects are often definite or specific. In the active type, the ergative marks all external arguments, regardless of the presence or movement of an object.
the specifier of a functional projection above vP but below IP. In this paper, I will call this project \( \mu P \), but this is not a consequential choice.\(^4\)

(37)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{IP} \\
\text{DP}_i \\
\text{Tsh.-ERG} \\
\text{DP}_{ii} \\
\text{onion} \\
\text{vP} \\
\text{VP} \\
\text{AdvP} \\
\text{yesterday} \\
\text{want}
\end{array}
\]

Tagalog is one of the languages known to be of this Object Shift ergative type. The sentences with indefinite or nonspecific objects and no ergative case on the subject have been analyzed to be antipassives (Aldridge 2012).\(^5\) It has been controversial whether or not Tagalog is actually an ergative language, but this recent work shows good evidence that Tagalog is not only ergative, but of the Object Shift Ergative type. A minimal pair of Tagalog sentences is below in (38) and (39) (Aldridge 2012). In (38), the subject is absolutive and the object is nonspecific, and in (39), the subject is ergative and the object is specific.

Tagalog

(38) B<um>ili ang babae ng isda.
\(<\text{INTR.PRV}>\text{buy ABS woman OBL fish}\)
\(\text{The woman bought a fish.}\) \hspace{1cm} \text{(Aldridge 2012)}

(39) B<in>ili ng babae ang isda.
\(<\text{TR.PRV}>\text{buy ERG woman ABS fish}\)
\(\text{The woman bought the fish.}\) \hspace{1cm} \text{(Aldridge 2012)}

Aldridge proposes that sentences in Tagalog with indefinite or nonspecific objects that cannot take ergative subjects are antipassive sentences. Aldridge shows that the clause types differ in scope, as shown in (40) and (41) below.

\(^4\)See Johnson (1991) regarding \( \mu P \).

\(^5\)It is worth noting that Tagalog possesses verbal morphology that marks transitivity. Tshangla has no such morphology.
Aldridge argues that in Tagalog the definite or specific object undergoes object shift, while the indefinite or nonspecific objects stay in situ. If this was true for Tshangla as it is true for Tagalog, we would expect to find similar differences in scope for the two constructions.

The scenarios I used to elicit involved two pictures – one of three bears attacking one person, and one of three bears each attacking one of three people (i.e., one in which every scopes over some and one in which some scopes over every). For the first picture, the consultant gave me the sentence in (42), but would also allow (43). For the second picture, Yang gave me the sentence in (43) first, but would allow (42) for that scenario as well. In both (42) and (43), the ergative case is required.

If Tshangla was like Tagalog in this respect, the presence or lack thereof of the ergative case would control scope judgements. As seen in (42) and (43) the ergative is always required. In Tshangla, if anything controls these scope judgements, it is scrambling, and that only weakly.

In an intransitive sentence in the perfective, the ergative is usually not allowed optional. This is shown in (44) and (45), where the ergative is not allowed. In (46) the ergative is optional.
Split Ergativity in Eastern Bhutanese Tshangla

However when a transitive verb is used intransitively in a sentence, the ergative must be used to preserve the meaning. If the ergative is not used, what was the subject is recognized to be the object. Below in (47), the subject is ergative and the meaning is that it is Tshering who is doing the wanting. In (48), Tshering is not ergative, and the sentence means Tshering is no longer doing the wanting, but is being wanted.

(47) Tshering-gi lam-ma.
Tsh.~ERG want-PAST.PERF
‘Tshering wanted.’

(48) Tshering lam-ma.
Tsh. want-PAST.PERF
‘Someone looked for Tshering.’ / ‘Tshering was looked for.’

The only thing I have found that resembles this pattern is from Tibetan. These sentences are presented in (49) and (50).

Tibetan

(49) ɲɛ̀ ʰɛ̃sā̀  chǐpā yǔ
1.ERG Lhasa.ALL gone-NS-CONJ
‘I went to Lhasa (myself).’

(50) ɲa ʰɛ̃sā̀  chǐpā rḕ
1 Lhasa.ALL gone-NS-DISJ
‘I went (=was taken) to Lhasa.’

(Chang and Chang 1980)

It seems in these sentences, like in (47) and (48), use of the ergative is tied to the volition of the action.

5. Conclusion

The ergative in Tshangla is split by aspect. In the the aspect that translates from the English imperfect, the ergative initially appears to be optional. However the optional or obligatory status of the ergative is conditioned by the likelihood of the subject to be acting upon the object. The ergative is only optional when the subject is more likely to be acting on the object than vice versa. In all other cases the ergative is optional. In the aspect that translates from the English perfect, the ergative is almost always obligatory or not allowed. The ergative is required when the object is specific, and not allowed when it is non-specific. The ergative also appears to be conditioned by the volition of the subject.

References


