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Ergativity in Thulung Rai: a shift in the position of pronominal split.¹

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Thulung Rai is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in eastern Nepal, in the Solu Khumbu district. It is subgrouped with the Kiranti languages, all of which are spoken roughly in the same geographical area, based on its complex verbal morphology, marking both subject and object agreement with verbal suffixes. Thulung is endangered (my estimate is 1000 speakers in the year 2000), with no fluent speakers younger than twenty, and has been subject to the inroads of Nepali, the Indo-Aryan national language of Nepal.

I first became interested in Thulung because of an attempt of Jim's to have it as the target language for a field methods class at Berkeley. He had found, to everyone's amazement, a Thulung speaker in the Bay Area, and one who was willing to be our consultant at that. It quickly became obvious, in the very first session, that the consultant, while Thulung, did not fit the definition of speaker, and he struggled even with basic vocabulary. I had been studying Nepali at the time, and recognized some of the words he was giving as Thulung forms. We eventually switched to a different field methods language, but I remained intrigued by this elusive language, which was so clearly losing out to Nepali. As a result of this brief exposure, I ended up in Nepal working on Thulung with probably the last generation of native speakers, and encountering throughout the language evidence of the intense influence of Nepali. The issue described in this paper is the result of such influence, and it was thus through Jim, in a roundabout way, that I came across this linguistic puzzle.

¹ Glosses used are the following:

DAT=dative; ERG=ergative; NOM.rel=relativizer; NOM.inf=infinitivizer; OBL=obligation; PURP=purposive

Other abbreviations used are as follows:

for all persons, s=singular, d=dual, p=plural, i=inclusive, e=exclusive

POL. preceding person/number indicates a polite form, where relevant; the absence of POL. indicates a default casual form

Transitive verb agreement suffixes show the agent first, separated from the patient by /. Thus hit-1s/3p indicates a 1s agent acting on a 3p patient.

.PST following the person combinations in the verbal suffixes indicates a past form of the verb. The non-past is considered the default and is unmarked in the gloss.

The issue at hand is an unusually positioned split conditioning morphological ergative marking in Thulung. This pattern became apparent when I did research in Nepal², but when I looked at the work of Allen on Thulung in the 1970s, I found that a different distribution of case markers was present at that time. I will first describe transitivity patterns in the language, in so far as they relate to ergative marking or the lack thereof, first laying out the present pattern and then contrasting it with that described by Allen. Because of the pronominal nature of this ergative split, as is the case with most Kiranti languages, I then discuss the pronominal systems of modern and older³ Thulung, comparing these systems to that of co-territorial Nepali (which is Indo-Aryan). This appears to provide the key to the puzzle, as the Nepali pronoun system reveals itself to be the model for change in the Thulung system, with morphosyntactic repercussions as far as ergative marking is concerned. I also discuss the typology of pronominal ergative splits in so far as they relate to person and animacy hierarchies, and show that the shift seen in Thulung, although motivated by a contact phenomenon, results in a typologically consistent pattern.

1. **Transitivity marking in modern Thulung**

1.1 *A marking*⁴

Thulung exhibits a split system of morphological ergativity, with the split conditioned by person. In other words, the actor in a transitive clause will, for the appropriate persons, receive ergative case marking, whereas the single argument of an intransitive clause will receive (zero) nominative marking. In my research on the Mukli dialect of modern Thulung⁵, I found the

² My data comes from ten months of field research in Nepal in 1999-2000, under the auspices of the Fulbright Commission, with additional funding from a UC Humanities and Social Sciences Research grant. My main informant was a 25-year old female, and data from her is from elicitation sessions. The bulk of my data comes from analysis of narrative, collected in Mukli from 12 different speakers, aged 25-67. I first detected the ergative pattern I describe in the paper in the speech of the main informant, and noticed that in the stories I collected from speakers of a fairly wide age-range, the ergative was used consistently with the 'new' pattern. Allen seems to have worked with three main informants, two of whom were schoolmasters (1975: 7). It could be that the data these informants provided was more conservative and perhaps even prescriptive, rather than reflecting the speech of most speakers at the time. This might explain how the change happened over the course of only 30 years.

³ I will henceforth use these two labels to refer to the data I collected, in 1999-2000, and to Allen's data, from the 1970s, respectively.

⁴ In discussing the assignment of grammatical markers, I use the semantico-syntactic primitives S, A and O, where S is the only argument in a clause, A is the most agent-like argument in a transitive clause, and O is the least agent-like argument in a transitive clause. These are the terms used by Dixon (1994).

⁵ This is the same dialect which Allen, in the 1970's, used for his data. Mukli is considered the homeland of the Thulung people (and is where the king, when there was one, had his residence). It has the largest proportion of Thulung in its population, compared to other villages.

ergative case marker (-*ka*) to be applied to agents when these were a second plural⁶ or “lower” (the notion of position in a hierarchy is taken from Silverstein 1976). The appearance of the ergative marker is entirely based on the person/number of the agent, and has nothing to do with tense. The following transitive sentences illustrate the distribution of the ergative marker for a range of pronouns:

No ergative marker -*ka* on agent:

1s agent, 3s patient

- (1) **go** **mag** **ɬɕu-to**
 1s mug drop-1s/3s.PST
 'I dropped the mug.'

1pi agent, 3s patient

- (2) **gui** **pe-pa** **ʈhal** **swl-mu** **basi**
 1pi eat-Npst.PRT dish wash-NOM.inf OBL
 'We must wash the dishes.'

2d agent, 3s patient

- (3) **gatsi** **mam-lai** **kruum-da** **lɔ-mu** **basi**
 2d mother-DAT visit-PURP go-NOM.inf OBL
 'You two must go visit mother.'

Ergative marker -*ka* present on agent:

2p agent, 3s patient

- (4) **ganimim-ka** **go-lai** **jal-ŋini**
 2p-ERG 1s-DAT hit-2p/1s
 'You hit me.'

3s agent, 3s patient

- (5) **gu-ka** **thulu-lwa** **si-mu** **basi**
 3s-ERG Thulung-language learn-NOM.inf OBL

⁶ But not second person dual, as we see from the examples. I use plural and dual as exclusive throughout this paper, as Thulung always distinguishes the two.

'She must learn Thulung.'

3p agent, 3s patient

- (6) gumimim-**ka** kam be-mri
3p-ERG work do-3p/3s.PST
'They do work.'

The above examples show that the pronominal split determining the presence of the ergative marker occurs between the second person dual and the second person plural. This is a surprising position for a pronominal split, as most other languages reveal a pattern whereby the entire person patterns as a unit, rather than showing divisions within a person, based on number.

1.2 *O marking*

In addition to nominative (unmarked) and ergative (marked *-ka*), Thulung also has a category called Primary Object. This is the syntactic function proposed by Dryer (1986) to cover the situation where the indirect object of a ditransitive and the direct object of a monotransitive receive the same morphological marking. In the case of Thulung, the marker in such situations is *-lai*, most probably borrowed from Nepali (Allen 1975: 92.)

The Primary Object marker is seen in monotransitive sentences:

- (7) go mam-**lai** tsum dwak-pu
1s mother-DAT much like-1s/3s
'I like my mother a lot.'
- (8) i-lwak-ka i-mam-**lai** khlui
2POSS-y.sibling-ERG 2POSS-mother-DAT help.3s/3s
'Your younger sibling helps your mother.'

For ditransitive sentences, it is the recipient which is marked with *-lai*, while the patient does not get overtly marked.

- (9) mam-ka u-tsu-tsi-**lai** pomuṭhok gwak-ty
mother-ERG 3POSS-children-dual-DAT food give-3s/3s.PST
'The mother gave her two children food.'
- (10) go a-mam-**lai** tsutswu gwak-tomi
1s 1POSS-mother-DAT child give-1s/POL.3s.PST

'I gave the child to my mother.'

The absence of marking on the patient in ditransitives can be explained in terms of the avoidance of potential ambiguity. There is a much greater possibility of the (animate, usually human) recipient being an agent-like participant than the (usually inanimate) patient. In other words, the marking on the recipient serves to diminish the chances of confusing it with the agent, by tagging it as clearly un-agentive.

It is also important to note that there is an animacy constraint on the PO marking in Thulung, as exemplified below.

O is marked with *-lai* when human:

- (11) **gu-ka** **gana-lai** **jal-na**
 3s-ERG 2s-DAT⁷ hit-3s/2s
 'He hits you.'

- (12) *gu-ka gana jal-na

A non-human animate can be either marked or unmarked:

- (13) **gu-ka** **khlea(-lai)** **jal-y**
 3s-ERG dog(-DAT) hit-3s/3s
 'He hits the dog.'

Inanimate objects are unmarked :

- (14) **gu-ka** **gari(-*lai)** **thur-y**
 3s-ERG car drive-3s/3s
 'He drives the car.'

La Polla (1992, 1994) argues that for Tibeto-Burman languages, a more appropriate term to cover the similar marking of recipient and patient is 'anti-ergative'. While Dryer's Primary Object/Secondary Object pair describe syntactic functions, LaPolla believes the marking to be based in semantics and "on an actor vs non-actor contrast, not on an object vs. non-object contrast." (1992:5) It is indeed significant that the marker has an animacy constraint in Thulung, as in other Tibeto-Burman languages, as this is an indication that semantics are involved in the

assignment of the markers. Dryer suggests that "something along the lines of a human/non-human distinction is a likely diachronic source for primary objectivity". (1986: 842). LaPolla points out (1992: 7) that Primary Object marking is much more grammaticalized in languages of Nepal than others in the Tibeto-Burman family, as a result presumably of contact with Nepali (which is PO marking), from which some of the languages have borrowed the actual marker⁸. While I fully accept LaPolla's judgement that for most of the Tibeto-Burman family the marking is semantic rather than syntactic, and can be called 'anti-ergative' for those languages, I believe that Primary Object, representing a grammatical relation, is a more appropriate analysis of the situation in Thulung.

2. Transitivity marking in older Thulung

Allen too notes a suffix *-ka*, marking agents of transitive sentences, but the distribution is different from that which I found. His data largely points to a clear pronominal split, with first and second person being in the nominative case, and third person and common NPs following an ergative pattern. He reports a few counterexamples to the pattern though, where (in Mukli dialect) ergative marking occurs on first and second persons (1975: 93).⁹

We have seen how the marker *-ka* functions in older Thulung. The other transitive marker Allen mentions is *-lai*¹⁰. He says it is a Nepali suffix, used to mark direct or indirect objects when these are animate, and even then the use of the suffix is optional. At the time of his research, comparative data on Kiranti languages was virtually unavailable¹¹, so he probably was not aware of the presence of *-lai* in other related languages, or of possible TB cognates. Furthermore, he mentions that "there can be no doubt at all that traditionally both the direct and

⁷ The choice of the term 'dative' follows the suggestion of Balthasar Bickel, as per his and Nichols' description of the term as "sometimes used for primary objects" (2001: 93).

⁸ This is the case for Thulung, but also for Kham (*lay*) among others.

⁹ The counterexamples to Allen's neat ergative marking pattern are as follows (transliterated into my transcription system, with the ergative marker in bold; I leave Allen's gloss as in his text):

(1) gutsi niphi-**ka**
'we both'

(2) gana-**ka** erakhom ben-na
you lodging have-made

(3) ...rwak-saka rwam basi guku-**ka**
...saying to-say it-is-necessary for-us (excl)

'This is what we Thulung have to say'

¹⁰ Which he writes with a long /a:/. His data shows that he found contrastive vowel length at the time of his research, which is no longer present.

indirect objects have been unmarked.” I do not see a basis for making such a comment, but he possibly compared the speech of the oldest speakers he encountered with that of the younger generation, and noticed a difference in transitive markers. Allen points out that if the object of a transitive verb is marked with *-lai*, then there is no longer a correlation with the subject of intransitive verbs (which were, and still are, unmarked). To him, this is indicative of the breakdown of the ergative structure in the language.

3. Pronominal systems of Thulung and Nepali

As we have seen from looking at the transitivity patterns for modern and older Thulung, the ergative system functions according to a pronominal split, which has shifted over this time period. The second person plural used to be marked in the same way as the other second person pronouns, whereas now it is paired with third persons and common NPs. In order to see how this came about, we must look at the pronoun systems of the language and see where the change operated.

Modern Thulung shows a fairly complex pronoun system:

Table 1: Modern Thulung pronouns

person	singular		dual		plural	
1	go		exclusive	inclusive	exclusive	inclusive
			gutsuku	gutsi	guku	gui
2	casual	polite	gatsi		ganimim	
	gana	gani				
3	casual	polite	gutsi		gumimim	
	gu	gumi				

The system laid out in table 1 makes dual-plural as well as inclusive-exclusive distinctions, both characteristic of other related languages in the same general region of Nepal. The presence of honorifics is attested in Burmese and Tibetan, both languages with a long literary tradition, and in Newar, which has long been in contact with Nepali as well as being the language of the first

¹¹ Allen’s grammar was printed in 1975 (his unpublished dissertation is from 1976), and even by 1984 it remained the only existing grammar of a Kiranti language (Ebert 1994: 8).

kings of the Kathmandu Valley. So while the existence of honorific pronouns is documented for a few TB languages, these tend to be languages spoken in more explicitly hierarchical, urban societies than the smaller, rural ones that make up most of the language family. In other words, the pronoun system of modern Thulung is typical of its Kiranti heritage, while containing an unusual element in the existence of politeness distinctions for the second and third person singular pronouns.

The pronoun system of older Thulung is presented in the following table:

Table 2: Older Thulung pronouns

person	singular	dual		plural	
1	go	exclusive	inclusive	exclusive	inclusive
		gutsuku	gutsi	guku	gui
2	gana	gatsi		gani	
3	gu	gutsi		gumi	

Table 2 shows a prototypical Kiranti pronoun system. We can see from a comparison of these two pronoun charts that the change rests in the addition of the honorific pronouns for the modern version of the dialect. The creation of a new set of polite pronouns for the second and third singular forms resulted in a rearrangement of the system: the second singular *gana* shifted into being used as an casual second singular, and the second plural *gani* became the polite second singular. Interestingly this is the same pattern as in many Indo-European languages, where the second plural has become the polite equivalent of the second singular pronoun. In Thulung, the shift of second plural into polite second singular resulted in a gap in the second person plurals. A new form was needed to replace the missing plural, and this was created with the help of the nominal pluralizing suffix, *-mim*¹², resulting in a new second plural *gani-mim*. The same situation occurred in the third person, resulting in a parallel shift in the pronouns and creation of a new plural form.

¹² This plural marker is used to pluralize nouns, and its use with pronouns appears to be a new phenomenon, calqued on the Nepali. The distribution of the pluralizer *-mim* is as follows: it is an optional plural marker, but there is a scale in the frequency of appearance with certain noun classes. It appears most frequently with kin terms, where its use is fairly consistent, although examples are found where it is omitted. It is optional but generally used with non-kin humans, and considerably less frequent with non-human animates, such as herd animals. It tends not to appear very frequently with inanimate nouns (but this depends on the speaker).

More schematically, where the old second person pronoun system was 2S *gana* / 2D *gatsi* / 2P *gani*, it shifted to 2S casual *gana* / 2S polite *gani* / 2D *gatsi* / 2P *gani-mim*. Similarly for the third person, 3S *gu* / 3D *gutsi* / 3P *gumi* changed to 3S casual *gu* / 3S polite *gumi* / 3D *gutsi* / 3P *gumi-mim*.

The pronoun system of modern Thulung is much more similar to those of Nepali and other Indo-Aryan languages. Nepali makes politeness distinctions, in fact making a three-way distinction¹³, for both second and third persons. Thulung, then, has followed the concept without achieving exactly the same result. Nepali pronouns are listed in the following table.¹⁴

Table 3: Nepali pronouns

person\number	singular			plural	
1	ma			hāmī	
2	low	middle	high	low/middle	high
	tā	timī	tapāl	timīharū	tapaiharū
3	low	middle	high	low/middle	high
	u	unī	wahā	unīharū	wahāharū

The Nepali plural pronouns for second and third person are formed by adding a nominal pluralizing suffix *-haru* to the singular pronouns (except in the case of *u* which becomes *uniharū*, with the addition of an extra syllable *-ni-*). This suffix is productive for pluralizing animate objects: *manche*, ‘person’, for example, becomes *manche-haru*, ‘people.’ It is possible to use the pluralizing suffix with inanimate objects, such as in *kalam*, ‘pen’ becoming *kalam-haru*, ‘pens’, but this results in a very marked form.¹⁵

¹³ The levels of politeness are often called ‘low’, ‘middle’ and ‘high’ in grammars of Nepali: ‘low’ is used for animals, untouchable castes, and anyone to whom one wishes to express scorn or superiority, and additionally for wives and children sometimes. ‘Middle’ is most commonly used to refer to intimates, such as wives and children (although a wife will never refer to her husband by the same form, but rather use ‘high’). ‘High’ is used in addressing strangers, parents and other elders.

¹⁴ These pronouns are a simplified set of the pronouns given in Matthews (1998: 39-44), omitting alternative pronouns as well as the less-commonly used feminine forms.

¹⁵ Plural is often conveyed via context, particularly for inanimate objects.

In Thulung, pluralized nouns seem to pattern similarly to the way they do in Nepali, with a restriction based on animacy (as briefly described in footnote 13), except for situations when a marked plural form is desirable. The Thulung suffix for formation of plural forms of nominals is *-mim*, and we see how the creation of the new second and third plural pronouns, *gani-mim* and *gumi-mim*, is perfectly analogous to the corresponding plural forms in Nepali.

We have seen how both the ergative marking split and the pronoun system in Thulung have shifted over the last thirty years, and the next issue is to correlate the two. In older Thulung, the ergative splits along a clear first and second person vs third person pattern¹⁶, whereas it now splits within the second person. This is exemplified by the following representation, where // stands for the position of the split in the system:

Older Thulung system:

go	gutsuku	gutsi	guku	gui	gana	gatsi	gani	//	gu	gutsi	gumi
1s	1de	1di	1pe	1pi	2s	2d	2p	//	3s	3d	3p

Modern Thulung system:

go	gutsuku	gutsi	guku	gui	gana	gani	gatsi	//	gani-mim
1s	1de	1di	1pe	1pi	2s	POL.2s	2d	//	2p
	gu	gumi	gutsi	gumi-mim					
	3s	POL.3s	3d	3p					

If we look at the pronouns which are to the left of the // split mark, they are identical in form, even if their referents are slightly rearranged.¹⁷ According to this representation, the shift in the split looks quite natural, and its explanation lies in the behavior of the pluralizing suffix, *-mim*. By virtue of being exclusively a nominal pluralizer, before its relatively recent appearance on pronouns, *-mim* was limited to common nouns, which are by nature treated as third persons. Looking at the representation of the new split system above, we see that all pronouns on the right side (and therefore receiving ergative marking) of the // mark are either third persons or marked with the pluralizer associated with common NPs. As a result of the formation of the new second

¹⁶ If we ignore the few examples where first and second person take ergative *-ka* (these cases are not well explained, and more complete data would probably clarify their presence), and consider that the Ribdung dialect is outside the scope of this discussion.

person plural pronoun by suffixation of the nominal pluralizer, *gani-mim* is treated as part of the third person-common NP subclass, and its ergative marking patterned accordingly.

4. Typology of pronominal splits

Now that I have shown the likely explanation for the shift in pronominal split in Thulung's ergative marking, I will place the Thulung split in the typological context of other splits. Of the four major kinds of ergative split which occur in the world's languages (Dixon 1994: 70-110), a split conditioned by the semantic nature of the NPs is a prominent possibility, along with conditioning based on tense/aspect, main versus subordinate clause, and the semantic nature of the verb. Within the category of split where the conditioning is based on the nature of the NP, as is the case for Thulung, a classic example is the Australian language Dyirbal, where the first two persons use a nominative-accusative system, and the third person and all other nouns an ergative-absolutive. Many different patterns of pronominal split have been attested (Silverstein 1976) but that in Thulung, coming within the second person, is to my knowledge unattested. Silverstein's theory of person hierarchies states that first and second persons are always higher ranked than third persons, but says that which of first or second person is the highest ranked is difficult to determine. Dixon maps out the Nominal Hierarchy (1994: 85), which I reproduce here:

Table 4: Nominal hierarchy

1 st person pronouns	2 nd person pronouns	Demonstratives, 3 rd person pronouns	Proper nouns	Common nouns: human, animate, inanimate
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←———— more likely to be in A¹⁸ than in O function ←————

(and therefore less likely to take ergative marking)

Dixon places first person pronouns at the top of the hierarchy, and says that in all but a very small number of languages (the exception are Algonquian languages) first always outranks second, in being more control-oriented. For Dixon the issue of where a split occurs, in languages which do have split systems between nominative and ergative, is very much a semantic one,

¹⁷ In other words, the second person pronouns to the left of the // are still *gana gatsi* and *gani*, even if the *gani* now represents a polite second singular instead of the plural it used to be.

¹⁸ S, A and O are used to distinguish participants in the ergative literature. S is used for the only participant in an intransitive sentence, and A and O are the agent and object, respectively, in transitive sentences.

related to issues of control over certain types of action. The speaker is always considered to think of himself as having more control over an action, and therefore gets ranked at the left-most side of his hierarchy chart, followed by second and then third person, and eventually common nouns on the rightmost side of the chart. The main prediction of this chart is that if there is a split within the range of pronouns, proper nouns, and common NPs, the ergative marking will always apply to the right side of the chart before the left side¹⁹. In other words, if a system has any ergative marking at all, there will be no instance of proper nouns being marked when common nouns are not, third person pronouns marked when proper nouns are not, and so on up the hierarchy. The split will always occur somewhere in the chart so that the left side will be accusative and the right side ergative.

In the case of Thulung, the conditioning of the split is based on the association of *-mim* with third person/common NP behavior, following a contact-induced shift in the pronoun system. The original split in Thulung was based on the person hierarchy, with first and second person aligning differently from third person and other NPs, whereas the system has been pushed by the influence of Nepali to change to a different pattern. Yet it is interesting to note that Thulung, even after the shift in the system, still patterns along typologically predictable lines. This raises the question whether the new ergative pattern would have been possible had it violated the constraints of the hierarchies seen to control issues such as pronominal splits. This cannot of course be answered, as the data fits a typologically sound pattern, but raises the issue whether change, even through analogy, conforms to universal tendencies.

It is interesting that the influence of Nepali has been limited, as far as the ergative goes, to a reorganization of the pronoun system and the resulting shift in position of the ergative split. The reason this is surprising is that Nepali also has a split ergative system, similar to that of Hindi, where the split is along the lines of tense: only perfective transitive sentences are marked for ergative. Considering the influence of Nepali in so many areas of the grammar, it is interesting that Thulung's ergative system is strong enough to fend off a possible Nepali-like tense split in favour of a much more Rai-like person-based split, all the while rearranging its pronouns to look more like those of Nepali.

¹⁹ This is because the likelihood for ergative marking is inversely proportional with the likelihood of an NP being in A rather than O role.

In this paper, I have attempted to account for the position of the split in Thulung's ergative marking. The split occurs between the second person dual and plural, with the second person dual and all 'higher' pronouns (first person and second singular) being unmarked, and all 'lower' pronouns (second plural, third person, and all common NPs) receiving ergative marking. The position of the split is typologically sound, both before and after the change, in respecting the person hierarchy, and the explanation for the shift therefore lies elsewhere.

In having data from both 1970s and 2000, it was possible to notice a change in the pronoun system, which proved to be at the root of the shift. Through contact, Thulung's pronoun system was expanded to be more similar to that of Nepali, resulting in two-way politeness distinction for second and third person singular. This shift then led to a new, compounded version of second and third person plural pronouns, which were created by the suffixation of the nominal pluralizer. Because of this pluralizer's previously exclusive association with common NPs, the new second person plural pronoun has been reinterpreted by analogy as being similar in nature to such NPs. The result is that it is now marked as ergative in appropriate contexts, with a concomitant shift in the position of the ergative split.

Thulung and the other Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal are in an intense contact situation with Indo-Aryan Nepali, as we saw in this case, with Nepali creating the pressure for a shift in the pronoun system which then has consequences in other areas, such as case marking. It is interesting to speculate on further contact-induced changes in Thulung, as the number of fluent speakers dwindles and Nepali makes further inroads into the language.

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