

Chapter 13

Differential A and S marking in Sumi (Naga): Synchronic and diachronic considerations

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This paper presents data on the argument marking system of Sumi, a Tibeto-Burman language of Nagaland, and examines the possible diachronic sources of differential A and S marking in the language. In Sumi, there is a two-way contrast for A arguments (=no vs. =ye) and a three-way contrast for S arguments (=no vs. =ye vs. unmarked). I examine the triggers of such differential marking, looking at semantic factors associated with transitivity, as well as pragmatic factors associated with information structure.

In transitive clauses, =no is more commonly found on A arguments, where it marks a semantic agent, while =ye on A arguments signals a lack of agentivity. In intransitive clauses, =no on S arguments marks contrastive focus, while =ye marks a contrastive topic, or sometimes continuing reference.

Based on available synchronic data from Sumi and related languages, I examine the possibility that one source for the marker =ye is an old locative marker. I also examine potential sources for the marker =no, which has cognates across the language family that function as agentives or ergatives, as well as instrumentals and ablatives.

1 Introduction

Sumi, also known as Sema or Simi, is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nagaland, North-East India. Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages of the area, Sumi displays semantically and pragmatically motivated differential A and S argument marking.¹ This type of differential argument marking is not unusual for the area, where it appears that semantic and pragmatic factors play a major role in the distribution of what is sometimes

¹In this paper, I follow Dixon (1994)'s use of the terms A, S and O to refer to: the subject of transitive clause, the subject of an intransitive clause; and the object of a transitive clause respectively.



described as the ‘ergative’ or the ‘agentive’ in these languages.² Similar patterns of argument marking are found in other languages of Nagaland, including Mongsen Ao (Coupe 2007; 2011), and more generally across Tibeto-Burman (see DeLancey 2011; Chelliah & Hyslop 2012).

What is unusual about Sumi, at least for a Tibeto-Burman language of the area, is that I find a two-way distinction with A marking: the choice of two enclitics: =*ye* and =*no*; but a three-way distinction with S marking: the choice of the two enclitics: =*ye* and =*no*, and no overt morphological marking. In addition, O arguments are unmarked. By comparison, two closely related languages Khezha and Mao display the more typical ‘optional ergative’ system, where A and S may take an overt ‘ergative’ marker vs. no overt morphological marking; in addition to differential O argument marking. For instance, Khezha has an ‘optional’ ergative marker *nü* (glossed ‘nominative’ by Kapfo 2005) on A arguments, as well as an ‘optional’ patientive / locative marker *eh /è/* on O arguments.

Traditional accounts of differential argument marking have focused on differential object marking and the role of animacy and definiteness (e.g. Bossong 1983; 1985; Aissen 2003). More recent work on differential argument marking has also looked at the role of information structure (e.g. Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011; Iemmolo & Klumpp 2014). Comparatively fewer studies have examined differential subject marking / differential agent marking / optional ergativity, with notable exceptions such as de Hoop & de Swart (2008) and McGregor & Verstraete (2010). Although differential subject marking has been assumed to be the mirror counterpart of differential object marking, there is evidence suggesting that the triggers of both are not identical (Malchukov 2008; Fauconnier 2011).

Malchukov (2008) also argues that the indexation of animacy is simply an epiphenomenon associated with the expression of two potentially competing functions: the indexation of semantic roles, and the differentiation of subjects from objects. Fauconnier (2011) considers the role of animacy, but rejects the notion that ‘Agents’ (defined as participants in the A role) and ‘Objects’ can be placed on a single animacy hierarchy (as per Silverstein 1976). Rather, she suggests that unexpectedness plays a crucial role in differential agent marking, where for instance, inanimates are not expected to act as Agents and may receive special morphological marking or be restricted from appearing as Agents. Similarly, McGregor (2010) shows that in Gooniyandi and Warrwa, the absence of an ergative morpheme on an A argument marks an unusual or unexpected A.

Similarly, it will be shown that in Sumi, differential A and S marking is not triggered by some inherent animacy of the referent, but by the interaction between situational factors such as agentivity, defined by the degree of volition, control and purpose associated with a referent in a particular situation; and discourse pragmatic functions, including the marking of contrastiveness and unexpectedness. However, this notion of ‘unexpectedness’ is primarily about the management of listener-based and/or speaker-based expectations.

²LaPolla (1995) distinguishes ‘ergative’ from ‘agentive’ marking thus: the former is ‘systematic’ (in other words, the A argument is consistently marked); while the latter is ‘non-systematic’ (in other words, what one might call ‘differential A marking’ or ‘optional ergativity’, e.g. Chelliah & Hyslop 2012; McGregor 2010). In this paper, I use the terms ‘ergative’ and ‘agentive’ in a similar fashion to LaPolla.

In §2, I first give some background on Sumi and describe the circumstances under which argument marking is obligatory in the language. In §3, I then describe some of the triggers of differential A and S marking. In §4, I consider the diachronic origins of these markers by presenting both language-internal and cross-linguistic evidence. Finally, in §5, I summarize the findings and consider future avenues of inquiry.

2 Language background

Sumi, also known as Sema, is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an estimated 104,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013) mainly in Nagaland, North-East India. Burling (2003) classifies Sumi as a member of the Angami-Pochuri group, along with Angami, Khezha and Mao. Many Sumi speakers also speak English, as well as Nagamese, an Assamese-based creole. The canonical word order of Sumi is AOV / SV, like other Tibeto-Burman languages of the region. In Sumi transitive clauses, A arguments must be marked by either =*ye* or =*no*,³ while O arguments are typically unmarked morphologically when they occur right before the verb, as seen in (1)–(3).

- (1) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, Line 23)⁴
 ... [*a-zü=no*]_A [*küma*]_O *yipesü-u-ve*.⁵
 NRL-water=*no*]_A [3DU]_O sweep-go-VM
 ‘... the water swept them both away.’
- (2) * *a-zü küma yipesü-u-ve*
- (3) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, line 5)
 ... [*küma=ye*]_A [*a-kishina*]_O *chu-kha-mo-ve=ke=hu* ...
 3DU=*ye*]_A [NRL-lunch]_O eat-NCPL-NEG-VM=NZR=DIST
 ‘... they were unable to finish their lunch ...’

First and second person singular pronominal O arguments are realized as proclitics on verbs, as in (4) and (5).⁶

- (4) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)
Pa=no o=he.
 3SG=*no* 2SG=*hit*
 ‘He hit you.’

³There is in fact a third option, the additive *ghi* ‘also’. Additionally, speakers may choose to omit an NP altogether. However, these will not be discussed in this paper.

⁵Examples from texts can be found at <http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/repository/ABT1>. Cite as: Amos Teo (collector). 2008. *Sumi (India)* (ABT1), Digital collection managed by PARADISEC. DOI: 10.4225/72/56E7A73CE9FA7

⁶In this paper, examples are given in the working orthography, which does not consistently mark tones. The graph *ü* represents a high central unrounded vowel /i/.

⁶Note that these pronominal proclitics are identical in form to the possessive pronominal prefixes.

- (5) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

No=no i=he.
 2SG=*no* 1SG=*hit*
 ‘You hit me.’

In intransitive clauses, S arguments can be morphologically unmarked, as in (6), or marked with either =*ye* or =*no*, as in (7) and (8) respectively.

- (6) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, line 3)

Küma *a-lu=lo hu-niye=ke=lo ...*
 3DU NRL-field=LOC go.field-PROS=NZR=LOC
 ‘While the two were about to go to the field ...’

- (7) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Telephone_conversation01, line 4)

O Kivi=ye zü a-phi.
 EXCL Kivi=*ye* sleep PROG-CONT
 ‘Oh, Kivi is still sleeping.’ (2nd mention)

- (8) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

Kivi=no *zü a-ni.*
 Kivi=*no* sleep PROG-NPST
 ‘Kivi (not someone else) is sleeping.’

The obligatoriness of argument marking therefore depends largely on clause type: A arguments (and as I shall demonstrate, the first NPs in non-verbal clauses) must be accompanied by either =*ye* or =*no*, while S arguments may be marked by =*ye*, =*no* or be morphologically unmarked. In all cases, the choice of marking, or lack thereof, depends largely on semantic and pragmatic factors. These will be examined in the next section.

3 Triggers of differential A and S marking

In this section, I describe some of the triggers of differential A and S marking in Sumi. The analysis presented here is a summary of the one presented in Teo (2012). Generally, in transitive clauses, situational characteristics of arguments like control and volition largely determine the choice of =*no* or =*ye*. In intransitive and non-verbal clause types, it seems that discourse characteristics like topicality, contrastiveness, focus, and perhaps unexpectedness are the main triggers. However, there are cases where such discourse characteristics appear to also influence differential A marking in transitive clauses, while certain situational characteristics of arguments may also be relevant for differential S marking.

3.1 Transitive clauses

As mentioned in the previous section, A arguments in clauses with two or more core arguments must take either =no or =ye. The use of =no in such clauses is often associated with an agent that has a high degree of volition, control and purpose. For instance, in (9)–(11), =no marks a volitional and purposeful A that is able to effect a change in the world. Note that in (10), the river is regarded as a supernatural force that has been actively preventing a mother from making a crossing with her baby, and eventually sweeps them away when they attempt to cross. In contrast, =ye often marks experiencers, which are characterized by having a low degree of volition and control over an action, as in (12) and (13).⁷ These features of the A argument: volition, control and purpose, are in line with some of the components proposed by Hopper & Thompson (1980) in their analysis of semantic transitivity.

- (9) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)
I=no a-lhache he-qhi-ve.
 1SG=no NRL-ant hit-kill-VM
 ‘I killed an ant.’
- (10) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 23)
 ... *a-zü=no kuma yipesü-u-ve.*
 NRL-water=no 3DU sweep-go-VM
 ‘... the water swept them both away.’
- (11) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)
Ni-nga=no kuu shi-va kea?
 1PL-child=no what do-PRF Q
 ‘What has our daughter done?’
- (12) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 27)
Ni=ye ni-nga=sütsa chu-mla-va-i.
 1SG=ye 1PL-daughter=voice hear-NCAP-PRF-EMPH
 ‘I no longer hear any news from our daughter.’
- (13) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 26)
Ni-nga=ye kuu shi-va kea?
 1PL-child=ye what do-PRF Q
 ‘What has happened to our daughter?’

Certainly, in most of these examples, the degree of agentivity of the A is closely linked to the lexical verb: =no is preferred on the A argument with canonical transitive verbs like ‘kill’, as in (9), where A has a higher degree of agentivity; while =ye is preferred on A

⁷In (13), the argument marked by =ye would not be considered to be an A argument, but rather an experiencer/locative subject.

with verbs of passive perception like ‘see’ or ‘hear’, as in (12), where A has a low degree of agentivity.

With some verbal predicates, the choice of =*no* or =*ye* on A corresponds to a specific sense of the verb. For example, (14), where A is marked with =*ye*, describes a scene where the referent is not in control of the action. One could interpret *pele* as ‘to spill’ or ‘to bleed’. In contrast, in (15), where A is marked with =*no*, the verb *pele* has more of a causative interpretation: ‘cause to spill’.

(14) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

Pa=ye *a-ji* *pele-ve*.
 3SG=*ye* NRL-blood spill-VM
 ‘He was bleeding.’

(15) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

Pa=no *a-ji* *pele-ve*.
 3SG=*no* NRL-blood spill-VM
 ‘He threw away blood.’

With some verbal predicates, as in (16), =*no* is the expected marker on A if one assumes that the chief should have authority among his people. In comparison, in one possible interpretation of (17), the use of =*ye* suggests that A is a less effective agent, i.e. a chief who cannot make his people obey him even though he gave an explicit command. Note that animacy and definiteness do not appear to affect the choice of =*no* or =*ye* in these examples.

(16) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

A-kü-ka-u=no *a-zah* *tsü-ve*.
 NRL-NZP-rule-DEF=*no* NRL-command give-VM
 ‘The chief gave a command.’

(17) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

A-kü-ka-u=ye *a-zah* *tsü-ve*.
 NRL-NZP-rule-DEF=*ye* NRL-command give-VM
 ‘The chief gave a command.’ (One interpretation: has a sarcastic reading and implies no one obeyed him.)

Transitive clauses show a split-A system, where =*no* typically correlates with higher agentivity and =*ye* with lower agentivity, such as experiencers with a low degree of volition and control.⁸ However, the agentivity of the A referent cannot always explain the distribution of the morphemes =*no* and =*ye*. It is important to note that the sentence in (17) could also be interpreted without sarcasm as ‘(Someone else did something), as for the chief, (he) gave a command.’ This, as well as evidence from intransitive clauses

⁸A prototypical “experiencer”, as per Payne (1997: 50), is “an entity that receives a sensory impression, or in some other way is the locus of some event or activity that involves neither volition nor a change of state.”

(see next section), suggests that =ye can also function as a kind of topic marker in some transitive clauses.

In narratives, it is not always easy to tease apart the various functions of =ye. For example, in (18),⁹ =no occurs in the first clause, which describes how two sisters made *axone*, a popular Sumi dish of fermented soya beans, for the very first time. In contrast, =ye is found in the second clause, which describes how Sumis then habitually cooked the dish. Although the use of =no and =ye does not appear to be motivated by situational characteristics relating to volition and control of the participants, one might still argue that according to Hopper & Thompson's (1980) criteria, the first clause displays a higher degree of transitivity than the second, since the former refers to the first (telic and punctual) instance of an event, while the latter refers to a repeated event that is atelic and non-punctual. On the other hand, in an alternative analysis that assigns greater importance to discourse factors, =no highlights that this was a newsworthy event, and that it was this pair of sisters, not anyone else, who instigated the first instance of the event; while =ye is used in the second clause to set up a change in A argument from the two sisters to Sumis in general.

- (18) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, lines 17–20)
Tishi=no [küma=no a-xone lho-chu-phe=püzü=no]
 like.that=no [3DU=no NRL-ferm.soya.beans cook-eat-start=CONJ=CONN]
tingu=no a-la-u=ye Sümi=qo=ye a-xone
 because.of.that=no NRL-path-DEF=ye [Sumi=PL=ye NRL-ferm.soya.beans
 lho-chu-u-ve].
 cook-eat-go-VM]
 'Henceforth, the two (sisters) started to cook and eat axone (a fermented soya bean dish) and consequently from then on, the Sumis have cooked and eaten axone.'

In some cases, it may be difficult to tell if =no is marking an agent or some kind of contrast. For example, in (19), the A argument has volition and control, which may explain the appearance of =no. However, it is also possible that the use of =no is associated with counter-expectation, i.e. the event that is instigated by A is not expected given the known circumstances, if one assumes that having children gives a husband less reason to abuse his wife.

- (19) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, lines 6–7)
 ... a-tianu a-u-ve=mu [a-kimi=no li=sapüsa]
 NRL-children EXIST-go-VM=NEG NRL-husband=no 3SG.F=mistreat]
 '... despite having children, the husband mistreated her.'

In general, the degree of agentivity of A seems to be the more important factor in the choice of =no or =ye. A corpus study is currently being done to investigate the extent to

⁹It should be noted that =no and =ye can also occur on adverbial adjuncts. This will be discussed further in §4.4.

which the choice of =no or =ye is determined by the number of core arguments licensed by a verb, the semantic roles assigned by a verb, and the animacy of A.

3.2 Intransitive clauses

In intransitive clauses, the first time an argument is mentioned in discourse, it can be morphologically unmarked, as in (20). However, if an S is being contrasted with another S, it takes =ye, which marks it as a contrastive topic, i.e. ‘as for this S, S did something’, as in (21).

- (20) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Telephone_conversation01, line 4)

Kivi zü a-ni.

Kivi sleep PROG-NPST

‘Kivi is sleeping.’ (1st mention)

- (21) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Telephone_conversation01, line 7)

O **Kivi=ye** zü a-phi.

EXCL Kivi=ye sleep PROG-CONT

‘Oh, Kivi is still sleeping.’ (2nd mention) (Kivi was previously mentioned, but the speaker then switched to talking about her other son, before switching back to talking about Kivi)

S is unmarked after having been introduced in a previous presentational clause, as in (22), which follows the opening line: ‘Once upon there were two sisters’. Here, the S argument *küma* is not marked with =ye because the two sisters are not being contrasted with anyone else in the story.

- (22) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, line 3)

Küma a-lu=lo hu-niye=ke=lo ...

3DU NRL-field=LOC go.field-PROS=NZR=LOC

‘While the two were about to go to the field ...’

Importantly, S is always marked with =ye in elicited sentences, such as (23).

- (23) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

A-kulu=ye ighi=va.

NRL-light=ye come-PRF

‘The power has come back.’

This illustrates how only in data collected in more naturalistic contexts, i.e. from conversations and narratives, can S be morphologically unmarked. When working with recorded texts, if speakers are asked to repeat sentences produced in such texts, they will sometimes add =ye to S arguments, even in cases where =ye was not found with

S in the original text. This suggests that the use of =*ye* in intransitive clauses is associated with some discourse pragmatic function, such as continuing topic, than with the marking of the semantic role of experiencer, as was described for transitive clauses.

In addition, S arguments can be marked by =*no*. The use of =*no* here, rather than marking the semantic role of agent, typically marks some kind of focus on the argument. For example, in (24), =*no* is used when S is the answer to a question. It can also be used to highlight contrastive focus, i.e. ‘*this* S, not any other one, as well as corrective focus, i.e. ‘*this* S, not the one you think it is’.

(24) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

Pa=no nu-va.

3SG=*no* laugh-PRF

‘He laughed (not anyone else).’ (answers the question: “Who laughed?”)

In some situations, S is marked with =*no*, with no obvious contrastive focus reading. An example is given in (25), which describes God’s descent to Earth in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.

(25) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Sumi Bibel Genesis 11:5)

... *A-mpeu=no iqi-e.*

NRL-lord=*no* descend-EMPH

‘... the Lord came down.’

The ongoing corpus study will also look at how frequently =*no* occurs with S and what factors best account for its occurrence in intransitive clauses, since it is unclear whether =*no* is used in examples (25) because: (a) it signals a high degree of volition, control and purpose associated with the referent, i.e. an omnipotent being; or (b) it marks some degree of surprise or counter-expectation for the action performed by S; or (c) it is a combination of these two and other factors.

3.3 Non-verbal clauses

Non-verbal clauses are also worth mentioning in a discussion of differential argument marking in Sumi. There is no copula verb in the affirmative present tense and in such clauses, the first NP is obligatorily marked by either =*ye* or =*no*. In pragmatically unmarked statements, the subject requires =*ye*, cf. (26) and (27). If the first NP is marked with =*no*, as in (28), corrective focus or contrastive focus reading is obtained, similar to the use of =*no* with S arguments in intransitive clauses. This particular example came about when a speaker corrected the researcher for assuming that the father of a person of mixed ancestry in the town was Sumi – in fact, it was the mother who was Sumi.

(26) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

Pa-za=ye Sümi.

3SG-mother=*ye* Sumi

‘His mother is Sumi.’

(27) **Pa-za Sümi.*

(28) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; natural conversation, unrecorded)

*Pa-za=no Sümi.*3SG-mother=*no* Sumi

'His mother is Sumi.' (i.e. not his father, not anyone else)

Unlike in the previously discussed clause types, the choice between *=no* and *=ye* in equative clauses cannot be attributed to differences in the semantic transitivity of the clause. Rather, it is discourse pragmatic factors that seem to condition the distribution of *=no* and *=ye*, with the former used to mark contrastive or corrective argument focus while the latter is used to mark either a new, contrastive or continuing topic.

3.4 Summary of triggers of differential argument marking

A summary of the functions of *=no* and *=ye* by clause type is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of functions of *=no* and *=ye* by clause type

Clause type	<i>=no</i>	<i>=ye</i>	unmarked
Transitive clauses	'agent' – high degree of control, volition, purpose etc.	'experiencer' – low degree of control, volition, purpose etc.	[not possible]
Intransitive clauses	'focus' – contrastive / corrective	'topic' – contrastive, continuing	first mention of referent
Non-verbal clauses	'focus' – contrastive / corrective	'topic' – new, contrastive, continuing	[not possible]

It appears that situational characteristics of arguments like control and volition play a large role in differential A marking in transitive clauses, while discourse characteristics like topicality and contrastiveness play a large role in differential argument marking in intransitive and equative clauses. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this distinction is not as clear-cut as it appears in Table 1. As previously shown, there are examples that suggest that discourse characteristics like focus and unexpectedness may play a role in determining differential A marking even in transitive clauses, while situational characteristics like volitionality and control may also determine differential S marking in some intransitive clauses. Crucially, it should be noted that certain features of referents like animacy and definiteness do not seem to play a large role in differential argument marking in Sumi. Certainly, such features interact with notions of discourse prominence and

expectedness, but any apparent indexation of these features could simply be regarded as epiphenomenal.

4 Origins of differential A and S marking

Having looked at some factors governing the synchronic pattern of differential argument marking in Sumi, let us now consider the diachronic origins of the relevant markers. Given that the primary functions of =no and =ye differ by clause type, and that different clause types differ in terms of the obligatoriness of argument marking, it would be prudent to consider the origin of the =ye and =no markers in each clause type separately.

4.1 Origins of =ye in transitive clauses

It was shown earlier that experiencers in transitive clauses are typically marked by =ye, as in (29).

- (29) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 27)
Ni=ye ni-nga=sütsa chu-mla-va-i.
 1SG=ye 1PL-daughter=voice hear-NCAP-PRF-EMPH
 ‘I no longer hear any news from our daughter.’

There is some language-internal evidence that points to a locative as the source of this marker, even though the synchronic locative marker in Sumi is *lo*. In predicate possession clauses, such as (30), the possessor is marked with =ye. The possessor is then followed by the possessee and an existential verb *ani* or *ache*. The structure of such predicate possession clauses parallels that of existential clauses, as in (31), where the location *aghuloki lakhi lo* is marked with the synchronic locative *lo*, followed by the entity in question and an existential verb.

- (30) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)
Ni=ye a-tsü a-ni.
 1SG=ye NRL-dog EXIST-NPST
 ‘I have a dog.’
- (31) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, line 2)
Khaghi a-ghuloki lakhi=lo a-tsünipu kini a-che=ke=ti ...
 long.ago NRL-time.period one=LOC NRL-sister two EXIST-PST=NZR=MED
 ‘Once upon a time, there were two sisters ...’

Given that Sumi does not appear to have a separate verb meaning ‘to possess’, but rather the same existential verb root *a-* in both clause types, this suggests that the =ye that is found on the possessor was once used to indicate location. The use of a locative subject in possessive constructions are common in Tibeto-Burman, but are also found in other languages of the world (see Clark 1978; Stassen 2013).

Similarly, in constructions that express ‘to like’, as in (32), the liker is typically marked with =*ye*. What looks like a verb meaning ‘to like’ *alo* has the internal structure of a noun meaning ‘goodness’ or ‘good’, and has the same nominal prefix *a-* found in the citation form of most nouns in Sumi. This would suggest that the origin of this construction is possibly a locative construction that may be translated literally as ‘At you, *axone* is (usually) good?’ The verb *cheni* marks the existence of a habitual state and in some contexts can be used interchangeably with the existential verb *ani*.

- (32) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; natural conversation, unrecorded)
No=ye a-xone a-lo che-ni kea?
 2SG=*ye* NRL-fermented.soya.beans NRL-good HAB-NPST Q
 ‘Do you like *axone* (fermented soya bean dish)?’

The use of locative constructions to code experiencer “subjects” is well attested in the languages of South Asia (see Verma & Mohanan 1990), including Tibeto-Burman languages of the area, such as Meithei (Chelliah 1997: 108) and Tshangla (Andvik 2010: 142). In these languages, locative (as well as dative) case marking is also found on possessor subjects in copular clauses. The second argument in these clauses is usually in the absolutive case, which is typically morphologically unmarked.

Preliminary comparative data from other Angami-Pochuri languages further suggest that Sumi =*ye* derives from an old locative marker. In Khezha, the locative marker is *eh* /è/,¹⁰ as seen in (33), while in Mao, the locative marker is *yi*, as seen in (34).¹¹ It is possible that both these markers are cognates with Sumi =*ye*, although more work is to be done to establish their cognacy by examining regular sound correspondences between these languages.

- (33) Khezha (Tibeto-Burman; Kapfo 2005: 286)
Mary nü ketsü eh beh a.
 Mary NOM garden LOC EXIST PART
 ‘Mary is in the garden.’

- (34) Mao (Tibeto-Burman; based on Giridhar 1994: 185)
Athikho Lokho-yi kahie.
 Athikho Lokho-LOC be.close?
 ‘Athikho is close (in spatial distance) to Lokho.’

Given the above evidence, it would therefore be reasonable to hypothesize that an old Angami-Pochuri locative is the origin of Sumi =*ye*, at least in transitive clauses.

However, it should also be noted that in Khezha and Mao, O arguments appear to optionally take locative markers, i.e. there is a contrast between an overt marker and a lack of marking, though the triggers for such differential marking are not well described.

¹⁰The grave accent marks low tone in Khezha.

¹¹Giridhar (1994) does not provide morpheme-by-morpheme glosses for his examples. All glosses for examples from Mao have been added based on his grammatical description and examples given in the grammar.

Examples where O arguments are overtly marked are given in (35)–(37). It is unclear if these markers really do mark semantic patients / grammatical objects vs. semantic locations, since they usually occur with contact verbs, e.g. *meke* ‘to bite’ or a compound based on a contact verb, e.g. *meke-thru* ‘to kill by biting’. However, in Mao at least, the locative with O is also used with the verb ‘to love’, as in (37), suggesting it has started to mark O arguments more generally.

- (35) Khezha (Tibeto-Burman; Kapfo 2005: 288)
Cotsü nü coha eh meke-thru dah.
 black.ant NOM red.ant LOC bite-kill PART
 ‘A black ant has killed a red ant.’
- (36) Mao (Tibeto-Burman; based on Giridhar 1994: 180)
Nili-no Nisa-yi da pie.
 Nili-ERG Nisa-LOC beat give
 ‘Nili beats Nisa.’
- (37) Mao (Tibeto-Burman; based on Giridhar 1994: 184)
Ai Athia-yi le shüe.
 1SG.NOM Athia-LOC love
 ‘I love Athia.’

While it is still uncertain what the exact triggers for such differential O marking in Khezha and Mao are, for the purposes of this paper, it is simply important to note the shift from a locative to what is starting to look like a patientive marker. Similar patterns have been noted in other Tibeto-Burman languages of South Asia, including Tshangla (Andvik 2010: 156), where the locative / dative *ga* may occur on an experiencer or goal patient.

It therefore appears that one source for =*ye* on A arguments in transitive clauses is the reanalysis of locative experiencers/patients as experiencer As. The function of =*ye* was then extended to non-agent-like As, possibly because it was then in contrast with the agentive marker =*no*. This would be a Sumi-specific innovation not found in other Angami-Pochuri languages where the locative optionally marks O arguments.¹²

4.2 Origins of =*ye* in intransitive and non-verbal clauses

In the previous section, we saw how a locative might have developed into an experiencer A marker. In intransitive clauses, the same locative marker might have developed into a topic marker. However, the latter is not a widely attested grammaticalization pathway

¹²In new data collected by the author, it turns out that there are some Sumi speakers who can optionally mark O arguments with the synchronic Sumi locative =*lo*. Little is known of the triggers of differential O marking, and preliminary data and speaker judgements shows much variation across the community: some speakers reject any marking on O arguments; some accept O marking only with verbs of contact; and others accept optional marking on O arguments in general.

and without sufficient language-internal and comparative evidence, I am left to speculate on the origins of =*ye* in intransitive clauses.

One possible clue to the origins of =*ye* marking on S arguments may come from non-verbal clauses. As previously shown, the first NP in such clauses obligatorily takes =*ye* or =*no*. Synchronically, there is no copular verb in such clauses in the present affirmative.¹³

In contrast, in the related language Mao, Giridhar (1994) gives examples of equative clauses (which he calls “predicate phrases”) where *-ko-e* is added to the second argument in the clause, as in (38). What is represented as the suffix *-ko* is identical in form to a verbal nominalizing prefix in the language. This would suggest that *-e* has a verbal origin – more specifically, a copular verb.

(38) Mao (Tibeto-Burman; based on Giridhar 1994: 456)

hihi a zhu-ko-e
PRX 1SG name-*ko-e*

‘This is my name.’

This may lead one to wonder if Sumi also once used a copular verb in equative clauses.¹⁴ The pathway from copula to topic marker is not common, but it is attested. Harris & Campbell (1995: 165–166) give examples of copulas being reanalyzed as topic markers, in what they term “anti-cleft” constructions.

Alternatively, it is not uncommon for equative copulas to develop into focus markers, typically through cleft constructions (Heine & Kuteva 2002: 95). One could speculate that an old Sumi equative copula was reanalyzed as a focus marker via a cleft construction, which has been extended to mark new and continuing topics. This pathway is attested – for instance, Ueno (1987) uses historical textual data to show that the Japanese topic marker *wa* originated as a contrastive marker *ha* used for “emphasis” before it developed the function of marking topic differentiation, and eventually topic continuity.

In the case of Sumi, good historical data is not available and what has been presented here is still speculation. Furthermore, it is still unclear how =*ye* would have spread from equative clauses to intransitive ones. Perhaps, if the time depth for such grammaticalization processes in Sumi is shallow, it might even be helpful to look at differences in the distribution of =*ye* in the speech of older vs. younger speakers or between villages which are said to speak more ‘conservative’ varieties of Sumi vs. other villages.

¹³However, in other tenses, Sumi does use copulas derived from the verb *shi* ‘to do’.

¹⁴One also wonders if the Sumi post-verbal emphatic suffix *-e ~ -i*, as seen below, is a reflex of an older copula.

(i) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 33)

Pa=ye khaghi=no o=pütsa-ni pi u-va-e.
3SG=*ye* long.time=*no* 2SG=talk.to-pros say go-PRF-EMPH

‘She said a long time ago that she was going to see you and left.’

4.3 Origin of =no in transitive and intransitive clauses

There is evidence pointing to an instrumental origin for the agentive =no, which then was extended to mark contrastive focus. However, positing a Sumi-specific origin for =no in transitive and intransitive clauses is somewhat problematic. The instrumental marker in Sumi is *pesü*, derived from a verb meaning ‘take’, but there is evidence of a rarer instrumental =no that is homophonous with the agentive =no, as in (39). This rarer =no is likely an older instrumental marker that is being replaced by a more recently innovated and morphologically transparent *pesü*.

(39) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; elicited)

<i>Pa-puh=no</i>	<i>a-ngu=no</i>	<i>a-chequ</i>	<i>qhi-ve.</i>
3SG-father=no	NRL-spear=no	NRL-porcupine	pierce-VM

‘His father impaled the porcupine with the spear.’

Syncretism between the agentive and instrumental (and sometimes the ablative) is widespread across languages (Garrett 1990) and found throughout Tibeto-Burman (DeLancey 1984; LaPolla 1995; Noonan 2009). In the family, one finds numerous morphemes with the form *nV* (where *V* is a vowel) that have been glossed as ‘ergative’, ‘instrumental’ or ‘ablative’. Consequently, this makes it difficult to determine whether the agentive function of Sumi =no is inherited from an earlier proto-language, or if it is an example of parallel grammaticalization across languages of the family, as per LaPolla (1995).

In terms of directionality, the development of ergative / agentive markers from instrumental markers is well attested, e.g. Garrett (1990).¹⁵ However, Coupe (2011) questions this particular pathway for the Ao languages (Tibeto-Burman), which often display syncretism between the agentive, instrumental and allative. Rather, he posits a proto-Ao **na* which was a “semantically underspecified marker of location” and that it was pragmatic context that determined the “precise” semantic role it marked, such as agent, instrument, goal, source etc.¹⁶

In addition, in many Tibeto-Burman languages, the agentive / ergative, like Sumi =no, does not simply mark agentivity, but has been extended to other functions, including discourse pragmatic functions like contrastiveness and unexpectedness. For example, in Lhasa Tibetan, the ergative marker *-s/-gis* on an argument in certain monovalent clauses can give a contrastive focus reading, i.e. ‘this S, not someone else’, when accompanied by the “proper intonation” (Tournadre 1991). In Mongsen Ao, the agentive *na* can be used to indicate willfulness, in addition to intentionality (Coupe 2007: 157). In terms of directionality, it has been demonstrated in some languages, the discourse pragmatic morphemes have developed from the semantic role markers (e.g. Chelliah 2009 for Meithei), following the expected path from more concrete to more abstract meaning (Heine & Kuteva 2002, *inter alia*).

¹⁵Note that Garrett (1990) does not rule out the possibility that some instrumental markers may reflect older ergatives.

¹⁶Coupe (2011) also shows that most synchronic ablatives in Ao languages are compounds of the locative + agentive / instrumental, and suggests that the original ablative in these languages was syncretic with the agentive and instrumental, as well as the allative.

However, once again given the presence of numerous potential *nV* cognates across the family, it is difficult to use cross-linguistic data to determine the extent to which the functions of *=no* in Sumi as both an agent marker and a focus marker is something that was inherited from an ancestor language, or is an example of parallel drift within the Tibeto-Burman family. It would perhaps be useful to look beyond the marking of A and S and examine morphological marking in other parts of the grammar.

4.4 Morphological marking of adverbial adjuncts

To further understand the historical development of *=ye* and *=no*, one area for further research is the marking of adverbial adjuncts in Sumi. Like S arguments, these adjuncts show a three-way opposition in morphological marking. In (40)–(42), there are examples of adjuncts marked by *=ye*, *=no* or by neither enclitic, respectively. These examples are important to consider, since they appear to have similar discourse pragmatic functions, e.g. contrastive focus, to what have been described for S argument markers.

- (40) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 8)
Ishi=ke=hu pa=ye ghulo lakhi=ye, “Ei ...”
 like.this=NZR=DIST 3SG=*ye* day one=*ye* EXCL
 ‘So one day she thought to herself, “Oh ...”’
- (41) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Kutili_bird_short, line 33)
Pa=ye khaghi=no o=pütsa-ni pi u-va-e.
 3SG=*ye* long.time=*no* 2SG=talk.to-PROS say go-PRF-EMPH
 ‘She said a long time ago that she was going to see you and left.’
- (42) Sumi (Tibeto-Burman; Origin_of_axone, line 7)
A-tsalá a-küthü-ni-u a-lu=lo ilesü hu-ghi=no
 NRL-day NRL-three-ORD-DEF NRL-field=LOC return go.field-come=CONN
 ‘On the third day, they returned to the field’

The question here is: did such marking on adjuncts arise prior to, parallel to, or even after differential A and S marking? For example, one might posit a locative function and origin for *=ye* in (40), but it cannot be assumed that its development followed the same diachronic pathway as *=ye* in *pa=ye*, in the same example. One also cannot easily posit an origin for *=no* in (41).

If the development of differential A and S marking has been driven to some extent by information structure, it is important to understand how pragmatic discourse factors have influenced other aspects of the grammar, including cleft / cleft-like constructions and the marking of relative clauses. Such work would benefit from the use of experimental methods typically used to study the role of prosody in information structure, including questionnaires and other tasks designed to elicit semi-spontaneous speech (e.g. Skopeteas et al. 2006; Hellmuth et al. 2007).

5 Summary and further questions

In this paper, I first looked at the distribution of A and S marking in Sumi, and showed that Sumi has a two-way contrast for A and a three-way contrast for S, but no morphological marking of non-pronominal O. This is markedly different from closely related languages such as Mao and Khezha that show a two-way opposition for O, in addition to a two-way opposition on S and A arguments.

Next, I examined some of the triggers of differential A and S marking in Sumi. It was shown that in transitive clauses, differential A marking is determined largely by the agentivity of the A argument, i.e. the degree of volition, control and purpose of the A argument. In intransitive clauses, it was shown that differential S marking was determined mainly by discourse pragmatic functions such as continuing reference, contrastive focus, and the marking of unexpectedness. Furthermore, some of these functions seem to influence differential A marking even in transitive clauses, although the extent to which this is the case remains a topic for further investigation.

I then considered the origins of such differential markers in Sumi. It was hypothesized that =ye in transitive clauses developed from an old locative marker. It was further speculated that =ye in intransitive and equative clauses may have developed from an old copula.¹⁷ No clear Sumi-specific origin could be presented for the agentive / focus marker =no, given that cognates of =no are found throughout the Tibeto-Burman family – these typically function as agentives or ergatives, but also instrumentals and ablatives, and can have discourse pragmatic functions like marking contrastive focus.

There are still many questions to be answered regarding the distribution of =ye and =no in Sumi, as well as their diachronic origins. Future research will also need to look at the morphological marking of adjuncts and relative clauses. Such work would benefit from corpus studies based on naturalistic data, as well as the use of experimental tasks designed to elicit and identify information structure categories.

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¹⁷To account for the same form =ye used in transitive, intransitive and equative clauses, one might have to further speculate that the old locative marker and equative copula both derive from an older locative copula.

Abbreviations

1	1 st person	NEG	negative
2	2 nd person	NOM	nominative
3	3 rd person	NPST	non-past tense
CONJ	conjunction	NRL	non-relational (unpossessed noun)
CONN	connective	NZP	nominalizing prefix
CONT	continuative aspect	NZR	nominalizing enclitic
DEF	definite	ORD	ordinal number
DIST	distal	PART	particle
DU	dual	PL	plural
EMPH	emphatic	PRF	perfect aspect
ERG	ergative	PRX	proximal
EXCL	exclamation	PST	past tense
EXIST	existential verb	PROG	progressive aspect
HAB	habitual aspect	PROS	prospective aspect
LOC	locative	Q	question particle
MED	medial	QUOT	quotative
NCAP	non-capability	SG	singular
NCPL	non-completive	VM	verbal marker

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