

**ASSIGNMENT OF CASE IN NON-NOMINATIVE SUBJECTS IN ASSAMESE**

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**Abstract:**

*Sentential subjects generally bear the nominative Case which is marked by an INFL which contains AGR. If an INFL is infinitival and contains no AGR, the subject is un-case marked. In Chomsky (1981, 1986) the verb has no role in determining the subject's Case. Any departure from this norm calls for an explanation. However, Assamese provides counter to this claim. A few Assamese sentential constructions such as (i) Embedded Small Clauses, (ii) Embedded Infinitival Clauses, and (iii) Experiencer Subject Constructions have non-nominative subjects. This paper examines sentential constructions with non-nominative subjects and provides a mechanism of assignment of case in such constructions.*

**Keywords:** *Case, Nominative Case, Case Assignment, Small Clauses, Infinitival Clauses, and Experiencer Subjects.*

**1.0** Sentential subjects generally bear the nominative Case. Chomsky (1981) claims that subjects are case marked nominative by an INFL which contains AGR. If an INFL is infinitival and contains no AGR, the subject is un-case marked. In Chomsky (1981, 1986) the verb has no role in determining the subjects Case. Any departure from this norm calls for an explanation. The present paper lists some Assamese sentential constructions that have non-nominative subjects and provide some basic information about some of these syntactic properties. The paper is divided in to three sections: the first lists some constructions, clauses and NPs having non-nominative subjects and provide some basic information about them, using the terminology of generative grammar, the second is about the Experiencer Genitive Subjects in Assamese and the third deals with the appropriate syntactic position of Genitive Subjects within the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework.

In Assamese, non-nominative subjects occur in: (1) Embedded Small Clauses, (2) Embedded Infinitival Clauses, and (3) Experiencer Subject Constructions.

### 1.1 Embedded Small Clauses

In Assamese embedded small clauses have Accusative subjects. This is a common phenomenon in many Indian Languages such as Oriya and Bengali:

- (1) *xakaioe [teuk pa:gal boli] bha:be*  
 everybody-NOM he-ACC mad COMP think-3-PRE  
 “Everybody think him mad.”
- (2) *moi [teuk dhunia: boli] bha:bo*  
 I-NOM she-ACC pretty COMP think-1-PRE  
 “I think her pretty.”

Since there is no source of Case within the small clauses, these subjects are assumed to be Case marked by the main verb of the matrix clause. This is not surprising because a noun phrase in a similar position in English also bears the Accusative Case as in (3):

### (3) I believe [him intelligent].

However, the presence of the complementizer ‘boli’ is significant in (1) and (2). In ECM constructions like these, how does the subject of the embedded clause get Accusative Case when the complementizer is present? Following Mohanty (2002), I think that this particular complementizer is transparent and allows the matrix verb to assign Case to the embedded subject. Assuming Chomsky and Lasnik (1977), for the supposition of a  $\emptyset$ -complementizer, we can extend the transparency hypothesis to (3) and say that the null complementizer in (3i) is also [+transparent]

### 1.2 Embedded Infinitival Clauses

The subject of an embedded non-finite clause receives Accusative Case from the main verb:

- (4) *moi [ra:mak sinema: sa:boloi jua:] dekhisilo*  
 I-NOM Ram-ACC film see-DAT go-INF see-Ps-Pst  
 “I saw Ram going to film.”
- (5) *moi [teuk ga:n guwa:] ketia:u xuna: na;i*  
 I-NOM he-ACC song sing-INF never hear not  
 “I never heard him singing.”

The constructions in (4) and (5) are somewhat similar to that of the small clauses in (1), (2) and (3) except the fact that the former carries a non-finite verb. One interesting point about (4) and (5) is that the embedded clauses may take a Nominative Case as seen in (4i) and (5i):

- (4i) *moi [ra:me sinema: sa:boloi jua:] dekhisilo*  
 I-NOM Ram-NOM film see-DAT go-INF see-Pst-1  
 “I saw Ram going to film.”
- (5i) *moi [teu ga:n guwa:] ketia:u xuna: na;i*  
 I-NOM he-NOM song sing-INF never hear not  
 “I never heard him singing.”

However, the source of Nominative Case in the subject position of the embedded clause is a problem within the P&P framework.

### 1.3 Genitive Subject Construction:

The phenomenon of Genitive subject constructions can, in general, be seen attached to experiential predicates i.e., all those predicates which opt for an experiential reading on one of their arguments or participants. Some studies of Dative-Experiencer Subjects have defined the experience theta role as a typical example of a semantic role that is found out of the amalgamation of two or more thematic meanings (Mohanan & Mohanan 1988, Mohanan 1994). The general

conclusion of these studies is their analysis of the semantics of these specific subjects as aggregation of the two abstract notions of goal and possession. This can in general be extended to Genitive-Experiencer Subject also.

(6) Malayalam

*enikka weedana toonni*  
I-DAT pain seemed  
“I felt pain.”

(7) Bangoli

*hamraa ii naa miilal*  
I-GEN this not became available  
“I did not get it.”

(8) Assamese

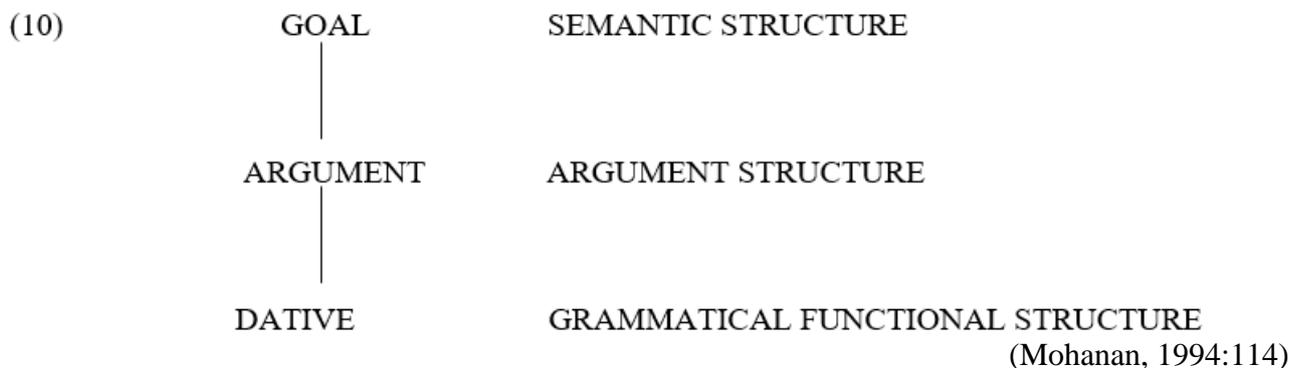
*a:ma:r bahut taka: a:se*  
We-GEN plenty money have  
“We have a plenty of money.”

Mohanan (1994) claims that the amalgamation of the semantics is a general process and that other semantic role, as for instance the agent theta role, can be derived from the schematic representations of the action depicted by the predicates. Mohanan assumes a Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) framework. The essential idea of this particular grammatical theory is that lexical information is distributed at all the four levels, that of the Semantic Structure, Argument Structure, Grammatical Function Structure, and Grammatical Category Structure. The knowledge about each lexeme, which is learnt by the child acquiring the language, would consist of its idiosyncratic properties relating to phonetic, semantic, and morphological and syntactic structure. According to this theory, the precise explanation for a sentence like (9) would be formulated on the general principle of the association of thematic roles and cases and the relation of Subjects with specific cases, each relation corresponding to a separate level, shown in (10).

(9) Hindi

*mujhe bhukh lagi: he*  
I DAT hunger feel is  
“I am hungry”

(Chandra, P. 2000)



The argument with the semantic role of Goal (i.e., the entity towards whom the particular feeling/state is directed) indirectly corresponds to the dative case in this specific grammatical framework

However, LFG differs from the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework by adopting a direct association between theta role and Case. In the former grammatical theory, a nominal with a particular theta role at one level automatically receives a particular Case at another level (implying one to one correspondence between the two modules in the grammar). The interaction between the components in the grammar takes place through the mapping of expressions from one level to another, where mapping is defined as translation of the lexeme’s specific properties at each of the structures in (10). This view contradicts the P & P approach, where each component corresponds with the other component only through the structurally represented properties in the derivations. According to the P & P approach, there is no one to one correspondence between theta role and Case. If Monahan’s assumptions were towards the right direction, we would expect the experiencer/goal theta role to be assigned to the external argument of the constructions in (7) and (8). The respective nominals would have received a dative case in a framework that ascribes to a strict mapping of Case and theta role. However, in the sentences, the nominals receive genitive Case. The LFG account of theta role and case is unable to explain why the experiential subjects in these sentences do not receive the dative theta role. Thus the sentences reaffirm the P&P claim that Case Theory and Theta Theory are two different principles in the grammar and do not come as part of the lexical knowledge of the language.

Thus, it is reasonably clear that we cannot attain any success in understanding the semantics of the Experiencer Subject Constructions if we restrict ourselves to the traditional notions of theta role. However, irrespective of the theoretical

assumptions, it is still possible to explore the kinds of predicate types that trigger Genitive NP that may be perceived as a *subject* on some level. What follows here is a list of predicate types triggering Genitive subjects in Assamese.

## 2. Predicate Types Triggering Genitive Subjects in Assamese:

As stated earlier, researchers have identified a large class of meanings associated with the Experiencer Subject Constructions in various languages. These include mental or physical experiences, stative, non-volitionality, permission, ability, possession, subjectivity, obligation and advent of time. The types of predicates triggering Genitive subjects in Assamese are:

### A) State of sickness

- (11) *mor ka:h hoise*  
I-GEN cough be-pre.  
“I have a cold”.

### B) State of consciousness

- (12) *mor manat a:se ze...*  
I-GEN memory is COMP...  
“I remember that...”

### C) Physical state

- (13) *mor kasta hoise*  
I-GEN trouble is-being  
“I have got a trouble.

- (14) *mor bhok laagise*  
I-GEN hunger feeling  
“I am feeling hungry.”

### D) Emotional state

- (15) *toma:r a:nanda la:gise*  
You-GEN happiness feeling  
“You are feeling happy.”

- (16) *teur dukh la:gise*  
S/he-GEN sorrow feeling  
“S/he is feeling sorrow.”

### E) State of things in one's personal situation

- (17) *mor ka:m a:se*  
I-GEN work is-be  
“I have work”

- (18) *mor xamai na:i*  
I-GEN time not have  
“I do not have time”

All except (E) fit the general designation of psychological predicates; (E) however seems to fit the appellation “the state of things”. Constructions of inalienable possession also fit into this type, such as (19-20):

### E) Inalienable Possession

- (19) *mor eta: lora: a:se*  
I-GEN one boy have  
“I have a boy”.

- (20) *a:ma:r dukhan ha:t a:se*  
We-GEN two-CL hands have  
“We have two hands.”

The type unalienable possession is interesting. Assamese uses the same construction for “alienable” possession as in

- (21) *teur ejan sa:kar a:se*  
He-GEN one servant has  
“He has a servant.”

However, like Hindi a marked alienable construction is also available in Assamese. In such constructions, Assamese make use of postpositions like “usarat” or “lagat” as in (22) & (23):

- (22) *teur lagat ejan sa:kar a:se*  
He-GEN with one servant has

“He has one servant.”

- (23) *mor lagat/usarat etaa kalam a:se*  
I-GEN with one pen have  
“I have a pen.”

### 3. Subjecthood and Genitive Experiencial:

In the preceding discussion we have been assuming that the Genitive NPs denoting the experiencer in an Experiencer Subject Construction is a subject. But what is the motivation or justification for considering these experiencers as subject? One flip answer is that they translate that way into English. And since English is the new Latin of grammatical standards, or analytical templates, we had better look very hard before denying them that status. Talking about the Experiencer Subjects presumes that we know what subject is, and that we want to talk about it because it is a special variety. But more seriously, what are the criteria that we could take into account in deciding on the subject-hood of these NPs? We bring in a variety of notions as they suit us, such as, deep subject, surface subject, logical subject, subject as the specifier node (Chomsky 1981), subject as the external argument or as element attributed to the verb’s “external theta role”, subject as the indexical relation, subject as a primitive notion in Relational Grammar, subject as the “derivative” notion of structural configuration, the big SUBJECT, AGR as subject, etc. etc. Subject is not a unified notion and it can be parameterized according to language. As pointed out by Verma (1976) for Nepali, we have to accept the notion of varying degree of subject-hood. The concept of ‘subject’ is however, best defined in purely structural terms, as the syntactically most prominent element in a sentence (Chomsky 1981). Prominence here refers to certain syntactic properties such as agreement, binding control and movement. The prototypical “nominative” subject obeys all these properties, as far as in (24) it triggers subject-verb agreement. While in (25) it binds the reflexive:

- (24) *moi/tumi kita:p parhi a:su/a:sa:*  
I/ You-NOM book read. be-pre.  
“I/you am/are reading books”
- (25) *ra:me nijar sabi sa:i a:se*  
Ram-NOM self picture look-NF. be-pre-3sg  
“Ram is looking at his own picture.”

Unlike nominative subjects, Genitive Subjects cannot trigger subject verb agreement as in (26):

- (26) *mor/toma:r/teur gharaloi manat par-is-e*  
I/You/He-GEN home-DAT remembrance be-P-AGR  
“I/You/He remember home.”

There are other inconsistencies in their behaviour, for instance, unlike nominative subjects, the Experiencer Subject Constructions cannot be passivised to allow the Experiencer subject to change its grammatical role. Like Hindi Dative Subjects, Genitive Subjects also show conflicting behaviour in constructions where the “repeated subject NP” is deleted in the second clause, as in (27). A similar construction works perfectly with a nominative subject as in example (28).

- (27) \**mor toma:loi manat paril a:ru # ka:ndiboloi dhar-il-o*  
I-GEN you-DAT remember and # weep-to start  
“I remembered you and # started crying.”
- (28) *moi toma:k manat pela:lo a:ru # ka:ndiboloi dharilo*  
I-NOM You-ACC remembered and # weep-to start  
“I remembered you and started crying.”

These inconsistencies of Genitive Subjects have led to the debate on the validity of the status of subject-hood given to the theme. However Genitive Subjects, like Nominative subjects serve as antecedents as in (29).

- (29) *mor<sub>i</sub> nijar<sub>i</sub> katha: manta paril*  
I-GEN self story remember  
“I remember myself.”

### 4. Phrase Structure Characterization of Experiencer Subjects:

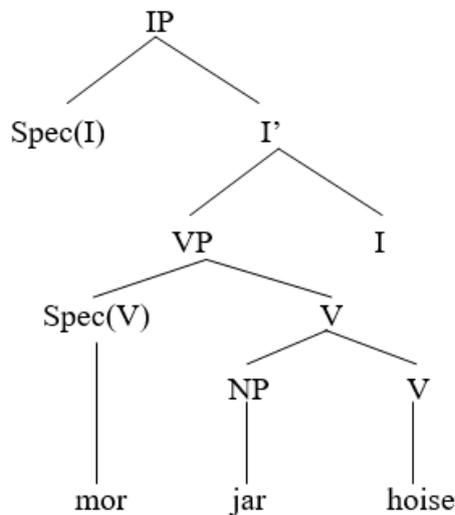
In view of the limited subject properties, one may question the subject status of these NPs. It seems, this is related to the notion of prominence in one way or another. As pointed out in Verma (1988), the notion of prominence gets into the definition of subject as well as topic. This would mean that we either abandon the notion of a strictly configurational subject or provide for a principled mechanism for the structural coding of thematic prominence, and thereby accord the experiencer the status of subject as necessary. One way to conceptualize this and then accomplish it in phrase structure terms could be as suggested below, of course, very sketchily. There is a hierarchy relation between arguments, ‘Agent’ is higher than “Experiencer”, “Experiencer” is higher than ‘Goal’ and ‘Goal’ is higher than ‘theme’. The highest argument is the “external” argument and gets to be the subject. Therefore, in the absence of an Agent, the Experiencer becomes the subject. This is what underlies the notion of a logical subject. The noun, which shows up as the syntactic subject in such a construction, namely, the “themes”, is one that is in fact lower in the argument hierarchy. All subjects start out as VP subjects [Spec, VP]. This then gets promoted at S-structure to the [Spec, IP] position to be the sentential

subject. This applies quite naturally to the Agentive Subject, and also to the Experiencer or Logical Subject, unless it is inherently case marked in the argument structure of the predicate. However, the Experiencer Subject of Assamese is inherently Case marked Genitive (as other South Asian languages case mark their Exp Subs Dative) and so will not become the sentential subject. The themes, on the other hand will. Since the Experiencer is pre-associated (i.e., has a lexically marked Case), the theme becomes the most prominent argument, by default, and gets to be realized as the sentential subject. Since the ‘theme’ argument is not Case marked, it has to move to the [Spec, IP] position to get its Case and be in agreement with INFL and be the sentential subject. ‘Experiencer’ NP, then, is adjoined left to the I node, to act as the subject of the sentence or various control functions of the subject and still not be a structural subject directly under the IP node requiring the nominative case. The theme NP, with no case, can then move to the [Spec, IP] to get the nominative case and be the structural subject in agreement with INFL.

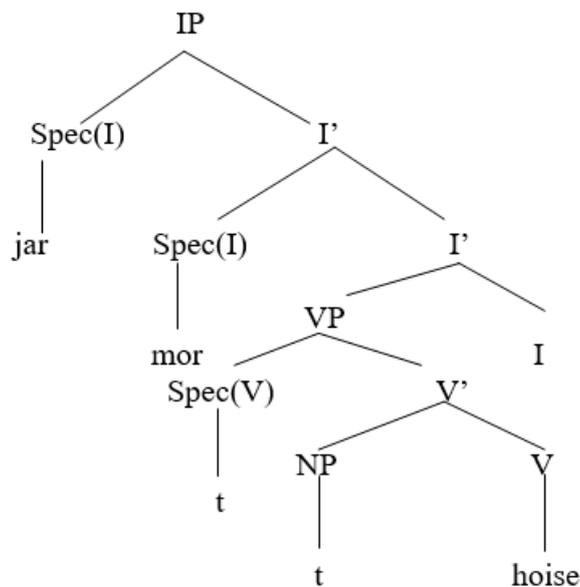
This conceptualization can be translated into Phrase Structure Terms as shown in (30 i-ii).

(30) mor jar hoise  
 I-GEN fever-NOM is-being  
 “I have fever.”

i) D-structure



ii) S-structure



Thus, in this paper we look into the different non-nominative subject constructions in Assamese and using the terminology of generative grammar, showed the appropriate syntactic position of non-nominative Subjects within the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework. It also looked the mechanism of case assignment in the subjects in (1) Embedded Small Clauses, (2) Embedded Infinitival Clauses, and (3) Experiencer Subject Constructions in Assamese.

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