

Who is Doing What to Whom? -- A Case Study of Coding Strategies in Darma
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Cross-linguistically languages vary in terms of how the grammatical function of each participant in a clause is coded. Some grammars require a fixed word order, some mark each participant with case, and some cross-reference the participants on the verb (Andrews 1985). These three strategies are not mutually exclusive, however, so it is possible for a language to employ the three coding strategies in a number of combinations. This includes the possibility to use all three coding strategies simultaneously. This paper will explore the coding strategies documented in the Tibeto-Burman language Darma, a Western Himalayish language spoken in the Kumaun region of Northwestern India. I will present data that will demonstrate that all three coding strategies are available in Darma, and I will explore the restrictions on the use of each strategy.

Like other Tibeto-Burman languages, Darma has an ergative-absolutive alignment system and a basic constituent order of SOV. Also, like other Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayas, the grammatical subject is cross-referenced on the verb (termed pronominalization in the literature – D.D. Sharma 1989, Shafer 1955, and others). It is possible to employ all three coding strategies in a single utterance, as shown in example (1) below. In this example, we find the constituents in the basic SOV order, with the agent in initial position, followed by the patient, and the verb in final position. The agent is marked with the ergative particle [su] and the absolutive is zero marked. The agent is cross referenced on the verb complex. According to Dixon (1994:42), languages do not commonly use particles to mark ‘core syntactic functions’.

(1) *niŋ su lən gansu*
niŋ su lən-∅ ga-n-su
1PL ERG work- ABS do-1PL- PST

‘We did the work.’

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While all three coding strategies are available simultaneously in Darma, not all of them are mandatory. Pro-drop is common, patients are not always overtly expressed, and the constituent order may be scrambled (e.g. to focus a participant). Cross-referencing on the verb is the only mandatory coding strategy in Darma. Despite the flexibility with regards to coding participants in a clause, who is doing what to whom can generally be determined with little difficulty. This paper will present a case study of how this ergative language marks participants in a clause, highlighting features of Darma that are not common in the world’s languages.