

Case Marking System in Khaling¹

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the case-marking system in Khaling, a Rai-Kiranti language, and compares it with related languages such as Koyee, Sampang, Bantawa, Bayung, Dumi, Thulung, and Mewahang. Khaling follows an ergative-absolutive alignment, where the absolutive case remains unmarked, while the ergative and instrumental cases share the same marker (<-ʔe/-a>). The dative case is marked by <-bi>, while the genitive case takes <-po>. Other cases, including locative (<-bi>), Comitative (<-kolo>), ablative (<-la/-ka/-laka>), and allative (<-tʰa>), show both shared patterns and language-specific variations. The comparison reveals that while some Kiranti languages exhibit consistent case-marking strategies, others display phonetic and morphological divergence. Many languages use -bi/-pi for locative and -la/-la for ablative, but differences in dative and allative markers suggest independent linguistic evolution. Some languages leave the dative unmarked, while others, like Bantawa and Dumi, use -lai. The findings highlight Khaling's historical connections with other Kiranti languages while showcasing distinct grammaticalization patterns. This study contributes to a broader understanding of case systems and linguistic evolution in the Kiranti languages.

Keywords: Case marking, split ergative-absolutive, ergativity, instrumental, locative

INTRODUCTION

Khaling [klr ISO 639] is a Kirat Rai language within Eastern Himalayish subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family. This language is mainly spoken in the areas: Mapya Dudhakoshi Rural Municipality, Solududhkunda Municipality and Khumbu Pasanglhamu Rural Municipality of Solukhumbu district as well as in other districts such as Khotang, Sangkhuwasabha, Udayapur, Sunsari, Panchthar, Ilam, Surunga, Jhapa, Morang, Okhaldhunga and Dhankuta of the Eastern Nepal. Solukhumbu is called the place of origin for the Khaling Rai people (Rai, 2015, p.1). It is classified as an indigenous nationality that belongs to the endangered group (2002 NFDIN Act, No. 20, Section 2C). The term *Khaling* denotes both the Khaling language and the Khaling people. Their autonym is *Khyal*. The literal meaning of *Khyal* is a worship of ancestors and nature (Rai, 2069 BS).

No one is monolingual in this speech community and this language is listed in endangered language by UNESCO in 2010 (Eppel et al. 2012). The latest census enumerates the Khaling speakers as 16,514 (0.06% of total population) all over the country (NSO, 2023).

There exist a few scholarly works related to the Khaling language. However, the systematic study of Kiranti languages traces back to the mid-19th century, with Hodgson (1857, 1858) being widely regarded as the first scholar to collect and document linguistic data on these languages. Hodgson compiled word lists for 17 Kiranti languages, including Khaling. Grierson (1909) and Shafer (1953), further developed the classification of

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Kiranti languages based on Hodgson's foundational work. Khaling is closed to two Kirati languages Dumi and Koyee (Eppel et al. 2012). Rai (2014) states that Kirat Rai languages Dumi, Khaling, Thulung, Sampang and Nachhiring are close language to each other in terms of linguistic features. Khaling has tonal feature and three numbers singular, dual and plural as in other Kirati languages (Rapacha et al. 2009). According to Jacques et. al (2012), there are three tones in the Khaling language. The authors provided minimal pair of level and rising-falling tone. Rai (2024) has also included the Khaling in the study of the lexical comparison among the Kirati language. The basic writing system of the Khaling language is in Devanagari script and its alternative script is Kirat Sirijanga (Rai, 2024).

Besides these, there does not neither the substantial studies of this language nor the extensive studies. The studies related to the nominal morphology, there is lack of the case marking system of the Khaling language. Thus, the objective of this article is to explore the Khaling case marking systems comparing with some of the Kirati languages like Koyee (Rai, 2008, 2022), Sampang, Bayung (2008), Bantawa (Doornenbal 2009), Dumi (Rai, 2016), Thulung (Lahaussiois 2004), and Mewahang (Greber, 2022).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed an elicitation method involving native Khaling. Participants narrated stories, including personal experiences, which were recorded electronically and later transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) using ELAN (version 6.7). The transcribed data were annotated with a four-level gloss following the Leipzig Glossing Rules, and relevant examples- particularly those with transitive verbs –were extracted and analyzed across all persons, numbers, and tenses from morphological and syntactic perspectives. However, the study has certain limitations: the data were restricted to the Mapya Dudhkoshi Rural Municipality dialect, excluding other Khaling-speaking regions, and the analysis focused solely on the case-marking system, leaving other grammatical aspects unexamined. Additionally, the relatively narrow dataset may affect the generalizability of the findings.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The function of a noun, pronoun, or adjective in a clause is case. It clarifies the role of a noun or pronoun in a clause. Blake (2001) states that case is a grammatical category that marks the relationship between a noun or pronoun or other elements in a sentence. The cases are indicated by inflection, preposition, postposition or word order in a sentence. Case marking system is a language specific.

Case is a grammatical category in the analysis of word-classes to identify syntactic relationships between words in a sentence (Crystal, 2008). Cases are marked on noun or noun phrase with respective markers. But some cases are not overtly marked. Givón (2001) defines the way of overt-coding of grammatical relations is case marking. Typically, cases are marked by inflections or prepositions or postpositions or word order depending on the specific language. The case marking system and markers appeared in Khaling are briefly mentioned in the following sections.

Ergative

The ergative case marks the subject of a transitive verb in languages with an

ergative-absolutive alignment (Blake, 2001). Ergative case is marked in Khaling. Subject of transitive verb and instrument are identically marked with <-ʔε>. However, the ergative marker is <-a> for the first-person singular subject in a clause. Example 1(a) displays the ergative case for the third person singular subject of transitive verb in the past tense, (b) shows both ergative cases for third-person subject of transitive verb in the non-past tense in the clause. Example 1 (b) presents an instrumental case as well. In this example, ergativity is marked with <-ʔε> after subject Khakchalap and instrumental case is marked with the same marker after instrument *betho*. (c) and (d) exhibit the ergative for first-person singular subject of a transitive verb in the clause.

- 1) a. *ʌmʔε laskʌ tsek-te*
 ʌm-ʔε laskʌ tsek-t-ε
 3SG-ERG door close-PST-3SG
 's/he closed the door.'
- b. *kʰakchalappʔε bethoʔε sʌŋ ʌndu*
 kʰakchalap-ʔε betho-ʔε sʌŋ ʌndu
 Kʰaktsʌlʌp-ERG khukuri-INS wood cut.1SG.NPST
 'Kʰaktsʌlʌp cuts wood with khukuri.'
- c. *uŋa sanatham rekta*
 uŋ-a sanatham rek-t-a
 1SG-erg poem write-PST-1SG
 'I composed a poem.'
- d. *uŋa saŋku tuŋu*
 uŋ-a saŋku tuŋu
 1SG-ERG tea drink. 1SG.NPST
 'I drink tea.'

Besides the first-person singular subject of a transitive verb, the rest of the subjects do have ergative marker <-ʔε> in a clause. The ergative marker for first-person singular subject of transitive verb is <-a>. This phenomenon is vowel lowering phonological change. Campbell (2013) explains that due to vowel lowering and diachronic phonological changes, /ε/ vowel shifts to /a/ over time. The vowel /ε/ can shift to /a/ because of vowel lowering and articulatory phonetics (Ladefoged & Maddieson, 1996). According to Ohala (1993), /ε/ sound changes into /a/ due to articulatory and perceptual factors.

Comrie (1978) discusses that we can find the ergative is marked but absolutive is unmarked in some languages. There is mark ergative and unmarked absolutive in Khaling too.

In examples, the subject of a transitive verb is marked and the object of the same verb is unmarked. Thus, Khaling has a clear ergative but it is not ergative-absolutive. According to Givón (2001), ergative-absolutive languages may revert into nominative-accusative in many conditions.

Absolutive/Accusative case

Blake (2001) defines, the absolutive or accusative case typically marks the direct object of a verb, the entity that is directly affected by the action of the verb. The object of a transitive verb is unmarked in Khaling language as can be seen in (2a-d).

- 2) a. *Prakashʔε Nabin ɾεptε*
 Prakash-ʔε Nabin-∅ ɾεp-t-ε
 Prakash-ERG Nabin-ACC beat-PST-3SG
 'Prakash beat Nabin.'
- b. *ʌmʔε uŋ ku ibiŋʌta*
 ʌm-ʔε uŋ-∅ ku ibiŋʌ-t-a
 ʌm-ERG uŋ-ACC water give-PST-3SG
 's/he gave me water.'
- c. *uŋa in akam seimanne*
 uŋ-a in-∅ a-kam seimann-ε
 1sg-erg 2sg poss-house show-1sg.npst
 'I show you my house.'

Dative

Dative expresses grammatical relationship by means of inflection (Crystal, 2008). Dative indicates the indirect object of the transitive verb which is overtly marked. Dative case is not marked in Khaling.

- 3) a. *Bijamlalʔε Gunaskʰεptsi bitε*
 Bijamlal-ʔε Gunas kʰεptsi bi-t-ε
 Bijamlal-ERG Gunas-∅ money give.PST-3SG
 'Bijamlal gave money to Gunas.'
- b. *Ichhamlalʔε ubengme mukcham bi*
 Ichhamlal-ʔε u-bengme mukcham bi
 Ichhamlal-ERG POSS-sister gift give.3DG.NPST
 'Ichhamlal gives gift to his sister.'
- c. *Bijamlalʔε uŋ kʰεptsi ibiŋʌta*
 Bijamlal-ʔε uŋ-∅ kʰεptsi i-biŋʌ-t-a
 Bijamlal-ERG 1SG-∅ money 3-give.PST-3SG
 'Bijamlal gave me money.'

Locative

Locative case indicates the location of place using a preposition or post-position and some languages do not need any preposition or post position. Blake (2001) defines, that the locative case is a form of case which expresses the notion of location. Locative case is marked by <-bi> in Khaling.

- 4) a. *Birisphul kambi mu*
 Birisphul kAM-bi mu
 Birisphul kAM-LOC be.3SG.NPST
 'Birisphul is at home.'
- b. *uŋ Yelekhwambi muŋa*
 uŋ Yelekhwam-bi muŋa
 1.SG Kathmandu-LOC be.1SG.NPST
 'I am in Kathmandu.'
- c. *uŋ tʰebelo akɛmbi muŋa*
 uŋ tʰebelo ʌ-kɛm-bi mu-ŋa
 1.SG now poss-work-LOC be.1SG.NPST
 'I am at my work now.'

Comitative

Creissels (2009) states, 'the comitative case marks a participant who accompanies the subject or another participant in an event'. Comitative case is marked with the marker <-kolo> in Khaling.

- 5) a. *Sabin upepkolokAM kʰəsti*
 Sabin u-pep-kolo kAM kʰəsti
 Sabin POSS.3SG-father-COM home go.3DU.PST
 'Sabin went home with his father.'
- b. *ʌm u-pep-kolo kAM kʰəste*
 ʌm u-pep-kolo kAM kʰəste
 ʌm POSS.3SG-father-COM home go.3SG.PST
 'S/he went home with his/her father.'

Allative

The allative case is the case in a language which expresses motion toward a goal or destination (Blake, 2001). Allative case expresses the meaning of motion or destination and goal (Rai, 2008; Rai, 2015). The marker <-tʰʌ> is a case marker for allative in Khaling.

- 6) a. *uŋ kAMtʰʌ kʰwaiŋʌ*
 uŋ kAM-tʰʌ kʰwai-ŋʌ
 1SG home-all go-1SG.NPST
 'I go towards home.'
- b. *ʌm ukɛmtʰʌ kʰwai*
 ʌm u-kɛm-tʰʌ kʰwa-i
 1SG poss-work-ALL go.3SG.npst
 'S/he goes towards his/her work.'

Ablative

The ablative case refers to going from some location (Tallerman, 2011). Blake (2001)

adds, The ablative case typically expresses the source, separation, or cause of an action. An ablative case is marked in Khaling. The markers <-l_A>, <-k_A>, and <-l_Ak_A> and they could be used in a random way, are not contrastive.

- 7) a. *uŋ kaml_A piŋata*
 ŋ k_Am-l_A piŋata
 1SG home-ABL come.1SG.PST
 'I came from home.'
- b. *uŋ kamk_A piŋata*
 ŋ k_Am-k_A piŋata
 1SG home-ABL come.1SG.PST
 'I came from home.'
- c. *uŋ kamlak_A piŋata*
 ŋ k_Am-l_Ak_A piŋata
 1sg home-ABL come.1SG.PST
 'I came from home.'

Genitive

A genitive case shows the possession or relationship between the possessor and the thing (Tallerman, 2011). Blake (2001) also states, that the genitive case is used to express possession or relationships between entities. We can see genitive case with marker <-po> in Khaling language.

- 8) a. *ʌmpo unʌŋ Ramas*
 ʌm-po u-nʌŋ Ramas
 3SG-GEN POSS-name Ramas
 'His name is Ramas.'
- b. *mɛ Diwaspo ukam*
 mɛ Diwas-po u-kam
 that Diwas-GEN POSS-house
 'That is Diwas' house.'

Vocative

The vocative case is an expression used to address someone. Khaling speaker basically uses <e> to address someone. Dixon (1994) states that the vocative case is a distinct case used to mark direct address. The vocative case is not involved in the core syntactic functions of a sentence.

- 9) a. *e mɛʔɛ kʰɛbi ikʰoʔi ?*
 e mɛʔɛ kʰɛbi i-kʰoʔ-i ?
 VOC mom where 2-go-SG.NPST ?
 'Hey, mom where are going to?'

- b. *pɛ-ʔɛ, kʰɛbi ikʰoɔi ?*
pɛ-ʔɛ, kʰɛbi ikʰoɔ-i ?
 dad-voc where go-2SG.NPST
 'Dad, where do you go to?'
- c. *Majamphul, man imɛ ?*
 Majamphul, man i-m-ɛ ?
 Nickname what 2-do-SG ?
 'Majamphul, what do you do?'
- d. *keʔɛ, ɦɛbelo iɦo:tɛ ?*
ke-ʔɛ, ɦɛbelo i-ɦo:t-ɛ ?
 uncle-voc when 2-come-PST-SG ?
 'Uncle, when did you come?'

DISCUSSION

Khaling exhibits an ergative-absolutive case-marking system. The ergative and instrumental cases are marked by <-ʔɛ/-a>, while the absolutive and dative cases remain unmarked. The locative case is indicated by <-bi>, whereas the Comitative case is marked by <-kolo>. Similarly, the allative case is expressed using the marker <-tʰʌ>. The ablative case is marked interchangeably by <-lʌ/-kʌ/-lʌkʌ>. Table 1 presents the case markers in the Khaling language.

Table 1

Case markers in Khaling

Case	Markers
Ergative/Instrumental	-ʔɛ/-a
Absolutive	-∅
Dative	-∅
Locative	-bi
Comitative	-kolo
Allative	-tʰʌ
Ablative	-lʌ/-kʌ/-lʌkʌ

Cross-linguistically, including Khaling, Koyee, Sampang, Bayung, Bantawa, Dumi, Thulung and Mewahang exhibit more or less the same linguistic feature as they belong to the same language family. In Khaling, the ergative and instrumental cases are marked by <-ʔɛ/-a>, while the absolutive case remains unmarked (-∅). This pattern is consistent with other Kiranti languages, such as Koyee, Sampang, and Bantawa, which also exhibit unmarked absolutive cases. The instrumental case in Khaling shares the same marking as the ergative, a phenomenon found in many related languages, suggesting a historical link between these two functions.

The dative case, which marks the recipient of an action, is marked by <-bi> in Khaling. However, in some languages, such as Koyee and Sampang, the dative remains

unmarked, meaning that other grammatical cues like word order or context may indicate indirect objects. In contrast, languages such as Bayung, Bantawa, and Dumi use <-lai> to mark the dative, suggesting a common morphological feature within this subgroup. The genitive case, used to indicate possession, is marked by <-po> in Khaling. This marking differs across Kiranti languages, with variants like <-ke> in Bayung, <-ʔo> in Bantawa, and <-ku> in Thulung, indicating diversity in genitive constructions.

For locative marking, which denotes spatial relationships, Khaling uses <-bi>, a feature shared with Dumi and Koyee. Other Kiranti languages employ different suffixes, such as <-pi> in Sampang, <-di> in Bayung, <-da> in Bantawa, and <-ra> in Thulung. The widespread occurrence of <-bi/-pi/-di/-da> across multiple languages suggests a shared historical root for locative marking. The Comitative case, which expresses accompaniment (e.g., “with someone”), is marked by <-kolo> in Khaling. Other Kiranti languages show significant variation, using <-kʌ> (Koyee), <-ka> (Sampang), <-nuŋ> (Bayung), <-ŋka> (Bantawa), <-kajo> (Dumi), and <-loŋ> (Mewahang). Despite differences, the presence of velar and nasal sounds (-ŋ, -k, -loŋ) in several languages suggests a common historical development.

The ablative case, which marks movement away from a place, is expressed in Khaling through interchangeable markers <-lʌ/-kʌ/-lʌkʌ>. This variability suggests dialectal differences or morphophonological alternations within the language. Other Kiranti languages exhibit diverse forms, such as <-lʌmbo> in Koyee, <-lamphe> in Sampang, <-lanj> in Bayung, <-ŋka> in Bantawa, <-la> in Dumi, and <-lam/-lanjka> in Thulung. The presence of *l-* and *k-* sounds in many of these languages indicates a historical connection in the development of ablative markers. The allative case, which marks movement toward a place, is represented in Khaling by <-tʰʌ>. While some languages use forms like <-la> (Bayung) or <-tni> (Bantawa), others, such as Sampang (<-lamphe>) and Dumi (<-hu>), have distinct markers. The diversity in allative suffixes suggests that different Kiranti languages have developed unique yet related strategies for indicating directional movement.

Overall, the case-marking system in Khaling aligns with the ergative-absolutive typology found in many Kiranti languages. The presence of shared markers, such as <-bi> for locative and <-lʌ> for ablative/allative, indicates a historical relationship among these languages. However, the variation in suffixes across different languages suggests that while they originate from a common linguistic ancestor, they have evolved distinct morphological patterns over time. Table 2 presents the case marking systems in some of the Kirati languages.

Table 2
Case marking systems among some Kirati languages

Case	Ergative	Absolute	Instrumental	Dative	Genitive	Locative	Comitative	Ablative	Allative
KHALING	-ʔɛ/-a	-∅	-ʔɛ/-a	-bi	-po	-bi	-kolo	-lʌ/-kʌ/-lʌkʌ	-tʰʌ
KOYEE	-a/-ja/-wa	-∅	-wa	-∅		-bi	kʌ	-bika	-lʌmbo

SAMPANG	-a/-wa/-sa		-wa	-ø		-pi	-lo	-ka	-lamphe
BAYUNG	-mi	-	-mi	-lai	-ke	-di	-nuŋ	-laŋ	-la
BANNTAWA	-ʔa	-ø	-ʔa	-lai	-ʔo	-da		-ŋka	-tni
DUMI	-a	-	-a	-lai	-po	-bi	-kajo	-la	-hu
THULUNG	-ka	-	-ka	-lai	-ku	-ra	-num	-lam/-laŋka	
MEWAHANG	-ʔa		-ʔa		-mi	-pi	-loŋ	-paŋ	

CONCLUSION

Khaling is endangered and the least studied language in Nepal. Ergative, instrumental, locative, Comitative, allative, and ablative cases are marked in Khaling. Cross linguistically, the case-marking system in Khaling follows an ergative-absolutive alignment, a feature shared with other Kiranti languages. The absolutive case remains unmarked, while the ergative and instrumental cases share the same marker (<-ʔɛ/-a>), indicating a historical connection between these two functions. Similarly, the *dative case is marked by <-bi>, while the genitive is marked by <-po>, both of which show variations across related languages. The locative, Comitative, ablative, and allative cases are marked by distinct suffixes, though many Kiranti languages exhibit similarities in these markers, such as the widespread use of -bi/-pi for locative and -la/-la for ablative. While Khaling shares fundamental grammatical structures with other Kiranti languages, there are notable differences in the specific case markers used. Some languages, such as Koyee and Sampang, leave the dative case unmarked, while others, like Bantawa and Dumi, use a suffix (-lai). The ablative and allative cases show even more variation, suggesting that these languages have undergone distinct but related morphophonological developments. Overall, the comparative analysis of case marking in Khaling and related languages highlights both shared historical roots and language-specific innovations. The presence of common case-marking patterns suggests a close genetic relationship among these languages, while the diversity in suffixes reflects the natural evolution of linguistic structures over time. This study underscores the richness and complexity of the Kiranti language family, demonstrating how languages can retain core grammatical features while developing unique morphological distinctions.

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Abbreviations

1	First-person
2	Second person
3	Third person
ABL	Ablative
ACC	Accusative
ALL	Allative
COM	Comitative
DAT	Dative

ERG	Ergative
GEN	Genitive
INS	Instrumental
LOC	Locative
NPST	Non past
PST	Past tense
POSS	Possessive

Symbols

∅	Zero morpheme
-	morpheme break
/ /	phoneme
' '	Free translation
?	Glottal
< >	suffix