

The Usage of Nominative Case Marker in Bodo: A Morphosyntactic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of nominative case markers in Bodo from a morphosyntactic perspective, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken primarily in Northeast India. The study identifies {-a} as the basic nominative marker, alongside its phonologically conditioned allomorphs {-ja}, {-wa}, {-u}, and {-ju}. It is observed that nominative case marking in Bodo is assigned to definite subjects based on syntactic roles and semantic features. The analysis further reveals that Bodo follows a nominative-accusative alignment, treating subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs similarly in case assignment. The interaction between morphology and syntax highlights the complexity and richness of Bodo's case marking system. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of morphosyntactic processes in Tibeto-Burman languages.

Keywords: Bodo, nominative case, morphosyntax, case alignment, allomorphs.

1.0 Introduction

The Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The origin of the Bodos, a branch of the Kachari race, is largely uncertain due to the absence of reliable historical records. Based on their Mongoloid features, research suggests Tibet or China as their likely place of origin (Endle 3). According to Aleendra Brahma, the Bodo language has a clear and rich case system, with no fewer than nine case markers (40).

Bodo thus exhibits a robust case-marking system. Among the various cases, the nominative case holds a fundamental position, as it typically marks the subject of a sentence. In Bodo, specific case markers often indicate the nominative case, although it can sometimes remain unmarked. The nominative case markers in Bodo signal grammatical relationships and are sensitive to morphological and semantic factors, such as the type of noun or the notion of definiteness. As a Tibeto-Burman language, Bodo shares certain morphosyntactic features with other languages in the family but also displays unique patterns in its use of nominative case markers. Understanding the behaviour of these markers is essential for a deeper analysis of Bodo's morphosyntactic structure and for situating it within broader typological studies of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

Review of literature

Since the beginning of Bodo literature and grammar writing, both foreign and native scholars have contributed to the study of the case marking system in Bodo. However, most of their statements and explanations differ from one another. The same inconsistency is also found in the discussion of nominative case markers. The following is a summary of their views.

Rev. Sidney Endle is widely regarded as the founder of Bodo literature and grammar. In his works, *Outline Grammar of the Kachari (Bara) Language as Spoken in District Darrang, Assam* (1884) and *The Kacharis* (1911), he mentions that the nominative case in Bodo is unmarked. His early observations laid the foundation for future research into Bodo grammar.

Following him, **Kamal Kr. Brahma** emerged as the first grammarian among the Bodos to study Bodo grammar in depth. In his works *Gibi Raokhanthi* (1968) and *Gwnang Raokhanthi* (1972), he discussed the case marking system, though he did not specifically identify the nominative case marker. Nevertheless, from the sentence examples in his texts, it can be inferred that the nominative case marker is **-a**. He categorized the nominative case into six types.

Pramod Chandra Bhattacharya was another pioneering scholar in the study of the Bodo language. In *A Descriptive Analysis of the Boro Language* (1977), he described the nominative case and explicitly noted the case marker as **{-a/Ø}**, pointing out that the nominative marker is often optional. On the other hand, **Madhu Ram Baro** identifies the nominative case markers as **{Ø/a/u}**, where **/Ø/** is suffixed to indicate general, **/a/** only with nouns, and **/u/** only with pronouns to indicate definitive sense (72). **Phukan Chandra**

Basumatary also supports this classification of nominative case markers; however, his classification is identical to Baro's.

Swarna Prabha Chainary, in her work *Boro Raokhanthi* (2006), discusses the use of {-a} and Ø as nominative case markers and notes that {-u} is also used in certain contexts. She further explains that {-a} has three phonologically conditioned allomorphs, {-a}, {-ja}, and {-wa}, depending on the final phoneme of the noun and pronouns. All the allomorph conditions are explained with examples.

Aleendra Brahma offers a more detailed and systematic account of the nominative case marker system in his *Modern Bodo Grammar* (2012). According to him, the basic nominative marker is {-a}, with four allomorphs: {-ja}, {-wa}, {-u}, and {-ju}. Specifically, {-a} is used with nouns ending in consonants or the vowel /u/, {-ja} with nouns ending in front vowels, {-wa} with back vowels, {-u} with consonant-ending pronouns, and {-ju} with vowel-ending pronouns.

In his later work, *Case Systems in Bodo and Dimasa* (2020–21), **Aleendra Brahma** also explores the case systems of both Bodo and Dimasa, focusing particularly on **case assignment** and **alignment**. His analysis demonstrates that case markers in these languages serve not only syntactic functions but also semantic ones, such as marking definiteness. For example, in both languages, certain case markers double as definiteness markers.

Traditionally, Bodo grammarians have approached case marking as a matter of morphology. However, more recent approaches emphasize the importance of a **morphosyntactic perspective** to gain a clearer understanding of the case system. Furthermore, case assignment and alignment in Bodo have not yet been examined in sufficient detail. A more complete and accurate description of the case system requires attention to both of these aspects, as they are crucial for explaining how cases function grammatically and semantically in the language.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Identifying the different allomorphs of the nominative marker and describing the phonological conditions governing each allomorph.
2. Analysing how the case is assigned based on syntax and definiteness.
3. Examining the alignment pattern (nominative-accusative).

Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data will be collected by talking with native Bodo speakers through question sessions and recording their natural speech, while secondary data will be drawn from existing linguistic works. The analysis will focus on identifying the forms and distribution of nominative case markers, examining phonological conditioning, and exploring syntactic and semantic factors influencing case assignment. A descriptive and analytical approach will be adopted within a morphosyntactic and typological framework.

The Nominative Case in Bodo

In Bodo, the nominative case is assigned to the grammatical subject of finite clauses. Subjects in Bodo must be explicitly marked for the nominative case when they are definite. Indefinite subjects may sometimes appear without overt case marking, indicating that case assignment is sensitive to syntactic position and semantic features like definiteness.

The nominative case in Bodo is primarily marked by the morphemes {-a}, {-u}, and {Ø}¹. The morpheme {-a} has three phonologically conditioned allomorphs: {-a}, {-ja}, and {-wa}, while {-u} has one allomorph: {-ju}. It is observed that:

{Ø} is used for general or indefinite.

{-a} is attached to nouns ending in a consonant or the /u/ vowel.

{-ja} occurs with nouns ending in a front vowel.

{-wa} is used after nouns ending in a back vowel.

{-u} appears with pronouns ending in a consonant.

{-ju} is used with vowel-ending pronouns.

This system of variation reflects the phonological sensitivity of case marking in Bodo. The examples below illustrate this.

- | | | | |
|----|----|-------|---------------------------|
| 1. | a) | aŋ-Ø | undu-u |
| | | I-NOM | sleep-HAB |
| | | | 'I sleep.' |
| | b) | Ram-a | sip ^h uŋ dam-u |

¹ This symbol represents the unmarked case. Linguists use it to indicate that no morpheme or suffix needs to be attached to a nominal word for case marking.

- Ram-NOM flute play-HAB
 ‘Ram plays flute.’
- c) Hari-ja met^hai k^hɔn -a
 Hari-NOM song sing-NEG
 ‘Hari does not sing songs.’
- d) Dauharu-wa met^hai k^hɔn-nu ruŋ-guu
 Dauharu-NOM song sing-NF know-IFUT
 ‘Dauharu knows how to sing songs.’
- e) aŋ-u met^hai k^hɔn-u
 I-NOM song sing-HAB
 ‘I sing songs.’
- f) bi-ju muusa-ju
 She/he-NOM dance-HAB
 ‘She/he dances.’

Morphosyntactic Assignment of the Nominative Case

The nominative case is typically associated with the subject of a clause and is a key marker in languages that follow a nominative-accusative alignment. Its assignment is governed not by lexical or semantic features, but by structural principles within the syntax. In this framework, the nominative case is assigned to noun phrases that occupy the subject position, particularly within finite clauses, and is typically licensed by the Tense (T) head in generative syntax. This section explores how the nominative case is morphosyntactically assigned in Bodo, focusing on its distribution across transitive and intransitive clauses, its structural triggers, and its role in argument alignment. The analysis aims to show that the nominative case in Bodo reflects a systematic and predictable pattern consistent with structural case theory. According to Aleendra Brahma, the morphosyntactic system of licensing case markers to nominals by the governing verb or nominal is called case assignment. The appropriate grouping of the core arguments of a verb, namely, A, S, and P, is called case alignment (239).

Structural assignment in finite clauses

In generative grammar, structural case assignment means giving case to noun phrases based on their position in the sentence, not their meaning. In finite clauses (those with tense), the subject usually gets nominative case from the functional head T (Tense), while the object of a transitive verb gets accusative case, assigned by the verb or a light verb (v). This ensures

between morphology and phonology, while the influence of definiteness highlights the role of semantics in case assignment.

Moreover, Bodo's clear nominative–accusative alignment reflects a syntactic pattern common in many Tibeto-Burman languages, yet its phonological sensitivity and definiteness marking make the system uniquely noteworthy. These findings show that the nominative case is consistently assigned to subjects regardless of verb valency. Future research may further investigate how case marking interacts with discourse features such as focus and topic in Bodo.

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|------------------------|
| 1 | 1 st person |
| ACC | Accusative |
| CONT | Continuous |
| CLF | Classifier |
| HAB | Habitual aspect |
| IFUT | Immediate Future tense |
| NEG | Negative |
| NOM | Nominative case |
| PFV | Perfective aspect |
| PRF | Perfect aspect |

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