INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON
OPTIONAL CASE MARKING IN TIBETO-BURMAN*

Shobhana L. Chelliah
University of North Texas

Gwendolyn Hyslop
Boise State University

1. INTRODUCTION

This volume is the outcome of the workshop on Optional Case Marking in Tibeto-Burman held in conjunction with the Himalayan Languages Symposium at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (London, September 3rd, 2010). The purpose of the workshop was to discuss agentive case in Tibeto-Burman, focusing on the factors linked to motivation for pragmatic case marking, the terminology used to describe agentive case, and the field and analytic methods used in understanding optional case marking.

The presentations at the workshop were by Erik Andvik, SIL International, Pragmatically motivated marking of the agentive case in Tshangla; Alexander R. Coupe, Nanyang Technological University, The pragmatics of case marking in Tibeto-Burman languages of Nagaland; Inna Lazareva, Oxford University, A study of the Burmese subject/topic marker ka; David A. Peterson, Dartmouth College, Core participant case marking in Khumi; Hideo Sawada, ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign studies, Case-marking of P and A in Lhaovo; Helga So-Hartmann, Foundation of Applied Linguistics, Thailand, Case in Lemi; Hiroyuki Suzuki, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, Restricted ergative marking in Nyagrong-Minyag (Xinlong, Sichuan); Christina M. Willis, Rice University, Optional Case-marking in Darma (Tibeto-Burman); Bettina Zeisler, Universität Tübingen, Practical issues of pragmatic case marking variations in the Kenhat varieties of Ladakh.

The current volume includes papers resulting from several of the workshop presentations and three additional papers that were not presented there, those by Amos Teo (Australian National University), Liberty Lidz (STEDT / University of California, Berkeley), and Stephen Morey (Research Centre for Linguistic

* We would like to thank Nathan Hill and the other organizers of the Himalayan Languages Symposium 2010 for hosting the Workshop on Optional Case Marking in Tibeto-Burman. We also thank our reviewers Jóhanna Barðdal, Dörte Borchers, Seino van Breugel, Kristine Hildebrandt, Mark Post, Tikkaram Poudel, Willem de Reuse, and Roberto Zariquiey. Shobhana Chelliah’s assistants Nick Lester and Moriah Sidebottom helped proof the articles and discussed the ideas developed in this introduction. Thanks to Joseph Lehner, Gwen Hyslop’s brother, for his help with the language map. Finally, we thank Randy LaPolla and the LTBA editorial team for their patience and help with the production of this special issue of LTBA.
Typology, La Trobe University). Many of the papers are accompanied by short texts with interlinear analysis.

The main languages that were discussed during the workshop and written about in this collection are represented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Locating Burmese (Lolo-Burmese), Darma (Rung), Khumi (Kuki-Chin), Ladakhi (Tibetan), Lemi (Chin), Lhaovo (Burmish), Mongsen Ao (Ao group, languages of Nagaland), Chang (Konyak), Nyagrong-Minyag (Gyalrongic), Singpho (Jingpho-Konyak-Bodo), Tshangla (Bodic), Yongning Na (Lolo-Burmese).](image)

The workshop presentations were followed by a discussion session in which the presenters and members of the audience participated. We were especially fortunate to have Scott Delancey in the audience and doubly so to have him contribute an article to this volume. His article provides a historical and theoretical overview of pragmatic agentive marking in Tibeto-Burman.

There are four main themes in the articles that follow: (1) the syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse factors that co-occur with marked agents; (2) the historical origins and trajectories of development of the agentive; (3) the field methodology in data collection; and (4) the terminological issues relating to the varied functions of the agentive marker. The following sections summarize the main findings of the articles.

---

2. FACTORS LINKED TO AGENTIVE MARKING

All the languages described in this volume exhibit optional case marking, though the degree to which agentive or ergative marking can be used pragmatically varies greatly. In Coupe’s contribution, for example, we see that in one language (Ao, spoken in Nagaland), marking S and A is primarily determined by semantic and pragmatic factors, while Chang (Konyak, also spoken in Nagaland) exhibits almost complete systemic ergativity. Even Nyagrong-Minyag, which looks like a typical split ergative system based on person (1st and 2nd person agents are never marked and only 3rd person can be marked) is unusual in that marking on the 3rd person is optional. Thus a main theme in this collection is characterizing the environments where the agentive is used or can be omitted.

The predominating factor predicting the presence of agentive marking is predicate valence: monovalent verbs are less likely to have marked agents than bivalent verbs. But this distribution is by no means categorical. In fact, the valency factor may be epiphenomenal: as indicated in the articles in this collection, the agentive marker can indicate agent volition, control, directed activity, creation and transformation, and personal choice, all features which relate more closely to the semantics of bivalent verbs (such as kick and buy) than to monovalent verbs (such as sleep and walk).

Agentive marked NPs often indicate contrastive focus (sometimes called contrastive topic), as seen, for example, in Khumi, Mongsen Ao, Sumi, and Yongning Na. Agents of monovalent verbs are usually unmarked. When they are marked a contrastive focus reading is often obtained. A contrastive reading is also obtained with marked agents of bivalent verbs. In Nyagrong-Minyag, for example, only 3rd person agents of bivalent verbs can be marked and such marking provides a contrastive focus reading. Sawada points to a contrastive reading for Ps marked with the patient marker versus unmarked Ps in Lhaovo.

Likely related to the contrastive focus reading, as noted in the articles by Coupe, Willis, and others, the agentive can also relay the subjective judgment of the speaker that the agent’s actions are socially unexpected or unsanctioned.

Lidz notes that for Yongning Na, the agentive can be used in narratives to indicate a switch in actor which she argues is very similar to the contrastive focus function, setting the current actor apart from an newly (re)introduced one. Peterson shows that in Khumi, as well, the agentive can have the same “setting apart” effect seen in Yongning Na. In fact, in Khumi, even highlighted non-agents can be marked by the agentive, leading Peterson to avoid the label ‘agentive’ for Khumi altogether and opting instead for ‘foregrounding’.

Given the contrastive focus reading of the agentive, it would not be surprising to find a connection between information status and agentive marking. Indeed, Suzuki notes that agents that are new information in Nyagrong-Minyag tend to be marked. More investigation is needed in this area.

Several authors discuss the disambiguating function of case marking. For example, when the expected word order is Agent-Patient-Verb, but the actual order is Patient-Agent-Verb, either the agent (as in Khumi) or the patient (as in
Lhaovo) is marked. If both core arguments are human or animate, there is a stronger tendency to mark either the agent or patient (Khumi, Singpho, Lhaovo). However, as Peterson notes, the argument that disambiguation is a primary motivating factor for agentive marking is weak given that pragmatics allows for proper interpretation and that agentive or patient marking can be found when there is no possibility for ambiguity of semantic role. Lidz provides a detailed review of constructions (e.g., non-canonical constituent order and ellipsed patients) that are potentially ambiguous and shows that even with agentive marking ambiguity can still remain. In sum, it is shown that disambiguation may be an outcome of agentive marking but it is not the sole motivation for agentive marking.

The probability with which the factors that correlate with agentive marking occur has not been statistically quantified (however see Morey’s article for efforts in this direction). It may be useful to conduct cross-corpora comparisons between typologically similar Tibeto-Burman languages such as those described in this volume. If annotations within such corpora were standardized it would be possible to extract and analyse through statistical methods the frequency, distribution, and co-occurrence factors leading to the presence or absence of agentive marking, revealing unasked and unanswered questions and providing new researchers in Tibeto-Burman guidance on what types of correlations to expect.

Morey presents several factors that should be further investigated for links to the presence or absence of agentive marking, including person (in Singpho, 2nd person seems to take agentive more often than 1st and 3rd) and referentiality (Singpho proper nouns and pronouns are less likely to be marked). In addition, multivariate analyses may be useful. Sawada, for example, finds that a combination of values for specificity and information structure favour either marking or not marking patients: in Lhaovo patients that are old information and specific tend to be marked, whereas nonspecific NPs tend to be unmarked.

There are several other frequent observations which should be investigated systematically, such as agentive marking occurring in the following contexts:

(1) with specific verbs such as causatives and complements of the verb ‘say’ (Coupe on Mongsen Ao);
(2) with verbs of speech. Peterson notes the tendency for the agentive to occur frequently in Khumi, as does Lidz for Na. According to Morey, use of the agentive with verbs of speech ‘appears to be the single most frequent usage of the agentive marker in modern spoken Numhpuk Singpho’.
(3) with particular tense and aspect combinations. For example, Teo writes that in Sumi, past tense transitive clauses, especially if they are punctual and telic, are more likely to have marked agents than non-past tense or intransitive clauses. For Nyagrong-Minyag, Suzuki reports that in the progressive aspect, the agent is more likely to be marked. In addition,
Coupe notes that in Mongsen Ao, agents of generic statements of habitual activity must be marked;
(4) with affirmative rather than negated clauses (see Peterson and Morey, who find no agent marking in negated clauses);
(5) with heavy NPs. For example in Lhaovo, a heavy NP (an NP with a relative clause, attributive clause, post-head modifier) seems to require marking.

3. HISTORICAL SOURCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE AGENTIVE

Several articles in this issue comment on the possible diachronic pathways that lead to the creation of a pragmatic marking system. Coupe’s article contrasts core case marking patterns in Ao and Chang, two distantly related languages of Nagaland. Following a rich overview of the development of ergativity in Indo-Iranian languages, he argues that case marking, as in many other Tibeto-Burman languages, seems to have arisen from an oblique relational morpheme, which was reinterpreted as a pragmatically conditioned agentive marker in Ao and was further grammaticalized as an ergative marker in Chang. Lidz describes an ablative (now only barely in use in Yongning Na) which is homophonous and probably the precursor of the current agentive marker. Similarly, Morey’s article suggests that the homophonous locational and agentive markers in Singpho may be related to each other. An additional example is the isomorphism Sawada notes between the agentive and instrumental in Lhaovo, which has been reported elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman.

We can suppose that the oblique morphology (locational, ablative, instrumental) represents an older morpheme and its original function. The question then remains which pathway of change the oblique morpheme took to becoming the agentive and pragmatic (contrastive and related functions) and markers. In other words, which pathway is more likely: oblique > pragmatic > agentive or oblique > agentive > pragmatic?

Furthermore, was there a point and if so, at what point, did a systematic morphological alignment system exist, overlap, develop from, or be disrupted by the pragmatic marking system. Is optionality of case marking a step before the creation of an alignment system or arising from an alignment system? I refer the reader to Scott DeLancey’s article in this volume for an overview of what has been said about these possibilities in the literature to date.

Several of the authors in this collection of articles attempt to explain the diachronic relationship between optional agentive marking and systemic ergativity. Coupe concludes that Ao and Chang represent earlier and later stages on a grammaticalization cline of case alignment, the earlier being pragmatic marking and the later closer to systematic morphological alignment. Teo (on Sumi) posits a different trajectory of development for the agentive, where, rather than developing into a more paradigmatic marker as part of an alignment system, the agentive develops into a maker of (contrastive) focus. In most cases, there is no evidence in the synchronic grammar to provide clear answers to these questions: for example, Peterson notes that in Khumi it is difficult to say if the
foregrounding marker which marks agents or the homophonous reflexive is the “original” morpheme.

Finally, Lidz makes an important point regarding the development of optional agentive marking in Yongning Na. Geographically, Na is outside the area normally attributed to optional ergativity (generally considered to be a feature of languages of the Himalayas), though this volume, as others have done in the past, presents many examples of optional case marking beyond the Himalayas. Na, though Tibeto-Burman, is typologically dissimilar to the languages of the Himalayas but nonetheless shares optional agentive marking. Lidz notes that the Na have long been in contact with Newar Tibetan, and Indic speakers through trade. They are also Tibetan Buddhists, and many are fluent in liturgical Tibetan. Whether the Na agentive system arose through contact with these Himalayan languages is a valid point and one that as of yet remains unanswered. As Lidz also states, we need more data on typologically similar and divergent, Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages to determine the role of language contact in the development of Tibeto-Burman case.

4. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Since the agentive marking typically surfaces under certain pragmatic conditions, it is crucial that investigators find ways to evoke those situations during elicitation without skewing responses. As well, as pointed out by Lidz, native speakers cannot easily explain the use of the agentive marker because of the number of related and nuanced implications its use has. Therefore, the researcher must elicit these constructions indirectly through native speaker explanations of culturally-bound situations and relationships. Thus the dominant method of data gathering by the researchers contributing to this volume is to combine analysis of data from naturally occurring discourse such as narratives and conversations with elicitation of grammaticality judgements and discussion of individual speech events.

It is helpful to combine different methods of data gathering because, as pointed out by Willis, NPs are often omitted in naturally occurring speech and it may be helpful to construct clauses with overt NPs to investigate factors linked to agent marking and meaning in more detail. Willis also points to the influence of the contact language in elicitation; she notes that Darma clauses obtained through elicitation using Hindi as the contact language may make Darma seem split-ergative perhaps because consultants tend to provide calque translations of elicitation stimuli. That is, in elicitation using Hindi, Darma speakers will provide an ergative marker in perfective transitive clauses, precisely where it is found in Hindi.

Some suggestions for elicitation routines are given by Teo and Peterson. For example, Peterson asks questions which elicit responses with a particular focus structure. For example:

Predicate in Focus: Stimulus: What did the hill doctor do? Response type: The hill doctor ate rice
Sentence in Focus: Stimulus: What happened?
Response type: The hill doctor ate rice.
Narrow Focus: Stimulus: The girl ate the rice.
Response type: No, it was the hill doctor that ate rice.

5. TERMINOLOGY: ERGATIVE, AGENTIVE, SOMETHING ELSE?
A major point of discussion at the Himalayan Linguistics workshop was terminology, and the differing views expressed there are reflected in five views expressed in the papers in this collection. One opinion is that *ergative* is simply the name of a morpheme that has traditionally been used to label agent marking and therefore that label should continue to be used (see Suzuki). A second opinion is that the label *ergative* implies an ergative-absolutive system and therefore should be avoided wherever agent marking is pragmatically motivated (see Coupe and Teo). A third opinion finds that a general term which covers the many functions of the agent marker should be used. Peterson, for example, uses *foregrounding*. A final view is that a traditional label should be used until the optional agent marker can be better characterized (see Willis).

The difference between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘optional’ was also discussed at the workshop. ‘Optional’ is problematic in that the phenomenon discussed here is not ‘optional’ in the sense that presence or absence do not denote the same thing. The term ‘pragmatic’, though less ambiguous than ‘optional’, may be problematic, given that not all uses or omissions of the agent marking are due to pragmatic force.

6. FINAL THOUGHTS
In this overview of the articles in this special issue of *LTBA*, we have attempted to gather observations by our contributors on the distribution of agentive marking. Seen in this consolidated format, it is clear that there are similarities in the distribution and functions of the marking. What is as yet unclear, however, are the historical-functional motivations for such systems to develop. Articles in this volume have made important steps in that direction, and we hope this volume will help further description and understanding of Tibeto-Burman case marking in general.