Pronominal Verb Morphology in Tibeto-Burman

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0.0 Introduction

The most commonly preferred typological evaluation of Tibeto-Burman (T-B) as a language family characterizes it as consisting of monosyllabic roots strung together into higher syntactic organizations in an analytic manner, there being little if any derivational or inflectional morphology. It is also characterized as semantically terse, expressing few redundancies within its structure. Skirting the issue of whether this description is synchronically accurate or not, the proponents of this view have used it as a springboard from which questions of wide relationship and diachronic development have been launched. It certainly constitutes a concise heuristic principle, and in early comparative linguistic work proved useful in circumscribing the field of T-B, separating it off from neighboring families such as Austroasiatic with its disyllabic stems exhibiting a pervasive derivational morphology; Indo-Aryan with its complex system of noun and verb classification seen in its various declensions and conjugations, its syncretic inflections, and its complicated system of agreement and concord relations; and Altaic with multisyllabic roots, a multitude of agglutinative affixes on both nouns and verbs some of which express agreement relations, and verb stem alternation associated with tense distinctions.

In the pages to follow, a specific problem in T-B will be examined, concerning the appearance in a minority of languages of a very complex verbal morphology. Two contrasting opinions will be probed, each purporting to account for the origin of this complexity. The dominant opinion, in keeping with the spirit of the preceding typological assessment of the family, proposes some non-native source from which T-B borrowed this structure. The other, much less advocated stance rejects this common stereotype of T-B, proposing instead that the verb morphology in question reverts to a feature of the proto-language.

The type of verb structure under consideration shows elaborate paradigms of person/number agreement with the subject, and often object, of the sentence. The details differ from language to language, but within this framework, most languages will show agreement for singular, dual, and plural numbers in all three persons, as well as for inclusive and exclusive 1st persons in the dual and plural. For the
most part the affixes involved are suffixed either directly to the verb stem or to some type of tense/aspect auxiliary. In some languages prefixes are also used. The syntax of the verb with respect to these affixes varies widely, some languages prefixing some markers, suffixing others; some splitting subject from object affixes across a tense or aspect marker; some prefixing for certain semantic relations, suffixing for others; some allowing agreement only for certain tenses; etc. This phenomenon has following Hodgson's (1856) usage been referred to as verb pronominalization or just simply as pronominalization. I will continue to use this term since it is solidly entrenched in over one hundred years of literature, even though it is potentially confusable with certain recently proposed transformational processes.

1.0 History of Thought Regarding Pronominalization

The next section sets itself the task of tracing the history of the pronominalization problem in the literature. Bearing in mind the preceding statement of the overall simplicity in which T-B was and is conceived, most of the early explanations of pronominalization were allied to the first position of finding some outside source on which these languages modeled their verb morphology. Brian H. Hodgson, however, was exceptional in seeing the feature as native, although within a much wider network of relationship than can be sustained today.

1.1 Brian H. Hodgson

Hodgson's post as British Resident at the Court of Nepal with the India Office for over 20 years (1821-1843) and his later unofficial residence at Darjeeling for about 10 years (1848-1857), provided him the opportunity of actively collecting materials dealing with the native languages and cultures. During this time, Hodgson collected many of the materials that, up until the last few years, constituted our only sources of information about several languages of the area. It was apparent then and remains true today that in most ways he was an accurate and thorough recorder of whatever he heard. His material consequently remains valuable. Hodgson's linguistic interests ranged very widely and consequently we have information on tribes extending from northern Tibet to Ceylon and southern Burma.

Some publications under his name, however, are materials submitted to him by other investigators of languages located in Burma and eastern Assam (Hodgson 1849a, 1850, 1853a) and in central and southern India (Hodgson 1848, 1849b, 1856). All other materials were personally gathered from native speakers of the languages. For some of these languages, namely Bodo and Dhimal (1847) and Hayu and Baining (1857-1858) he supplied full grammatical sketches and extensive lexical
materials. For others only random grammatical notes and partial vocabularies are available.

1.11 Classification of Tibeto-Burman

Hodgson's primary purpose in amassing such copious data was to substantiate his contention that all of the aboriginal population of British India including Nepal, Burma, Indo-China, and China proper was ultimately related, though the web of relationship was somewhat diffuse even in his own mind. He conceived of three major "stocks" (1847, 1849c) into which this population was subdivided: a Tibetan stock which included many of the languages of the sub-Himalayas and northern Assam; a Chinese stock to the east of this region, excepting the languages of the Assam valley; and a Tamulian stock comprising all the native languages of India including those in the Assam valley and those of the forested Indian border areas of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. These stocks merge families now felt to be separate, such as Dravidian and Munda within Tamulian, and also transect now recognized families, specifically T-B and Austroasiatic. The T-B languages seen as Tamulian include many of the Barish languages of Assam as well as the East Himalayish group of Nepal; the Tibetan members comprise Tibetan and its dialects as well as the Gurung branch of central Nepal; and the Chinese stock includes Chinese and the many T-B languages of Burma and Thailand. Even though Hodgson does not state the reasons for assigning one language or another to different stocks, it would seem from the evidence available to him that he depended most heavily on the syllabic structure of the word. Tamulian, including the T-B languages considered as such, shows words susceptible of a polysyllabic analysis, while the root structure of Chinese type languages is decidedly monosyllabic. The Tibetan stock took in those languages which were predominantly monosyllabic in root structure, but which also evidenced more complicated morphological processes, such as verb stem alternation. Hodgson yields a clue to his reasoning in his opinion "that the Bodo and Dhimal languages belong pretty evidently to the aboriginal Indian tongues [i.e. Munda and Dravidian] and not to the Indo-Chinese or monosyllabic" (1847:157).

Several years later, however, Hodgson (1850) had corrected his original subgroupings. Now he finds "one type of language prevailing from the Kali to the Koladan, and from Ladakh to Malacca, so as to bring the Himalayans, Indo-Chinese, and Tibetans into the same family" (1850:28). And, suggesting how he has arrived at this re-evaluation, he points to "syntactic poverty and crudity and etymological refinement and abundance [as] the characteristics of this vast group of tongues" (1850:33). He also presumes that "grammatical peculiarities" will not prove especially useful as
diagnostics of relationship since they are "apt to be ex-
cessively vague or else palpably borrowed" (1850:33). His
methods of linguistic comparison had now channeled into a
heavy reliance on lexical, as opposed to morpho-syntactic
evidence, and neither he nor his successors have ever swerved
too far from this course.7 "A common stock of primitive
roots and serviles...indicates unmistakably a common lineage
and origin among the several races to which such stock
belongs." (Hodgson 1853:33). It should also be noted, in
reinforcement of an earlier argument, that Hodgson had in
effect negatively christened his neonate Tibeto-Burman as
possessing no interesting syntax or morphology to whet a
comparativist's appetite. This view also persisted under
his powerful influence, until Conrady (1896) partially dis-
pelled it by demonstrating the archaic nature of the pre-
fixes of written Tibetan along with some of the morphological
categories they probably represented.

1.12 The Turanian Hypothesis

In spite of this hierarchical redistribution of languages
and the postulation of T-B, Hodgson still firmly believed in
the larger pattern which enclosed all of central and eastern
Asia's languages, excepting those of Indo-European lineage.
This hypothetical construct he called Turanian. "Tamilian
Tibetans, Indo-Chinese, Chinese, Tangus, Modgols, and Turks
are so many branches of another single family, viz., the
Turanian" (1849:3). This quote demonstrates his early
position; his consistency is maintained seven years later
after he had rearranged his subgroups. "Turanian affinities
are not to be circumscribed by the Deccan, nor by the Deccan
and Central India, nor, I may here add, by the whole continent
of India, but spread beyond it into Indo-China, Himalaya,
and the northern regions beyond Himalaya" (1856:127). In
an earlier paper Hodgson (1853b) also attempted the demon-
stration of a relation between the languages of the Caucasus
and Mongolian (intending mostly Tibeto-Burman) and, even
farther afield, Pelasgian (intending Malay and Tagalog);
though properly speaking he excluded these other groups from
Turanian.

It was by this Turanian category that Hodgson chose to
explain many of the apparent similarities between widely
separated members of the family. In the last and most
complete statement of his position, Hodgson (1856) lists
a series of facts, one of these being verb pronominalization,
which, from his point of view, seem to offer evidence of
genetic relation between his Turanian languages, specifically
those now thought to be separate and unrelated. From an
explanatory standpoint, this wide stance allows him to ex-
plain characteristics at variance with the overall typological
picture of the language subgroup as merely remnants of a more