ETYMOLOGICAL NOTES ON TIBETO-BURMAN CASE PARTICLES

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Benedict, in the Conspectus, notes the existence of comparative evidence for only one case-like particle of clearly PRB provenience, the well-known subordinating (i.e. genitive and relativizing) *-ki or *-gi. He briefly suggests that the lack of other such particles reconstructible for PTB can be taken as an indication that the general category cannot be ascribed to the protolanguage:

> It is a striking fact ... that relating morphemes of the type in question [i.e. case or case-like postpositions] seem to be of relatively recent origin in the several TB groups, strongly indicating that in the parent language these elements were largely lacking. (1972:95-6)

This conclusion is certainly debatable on general grounds; given that the syntactic category of postposition with case value is universal throughout the family, we could infer that the category should be reconstructible, even if the morphemes which fill it are not. (This argument is strengthened by the existence of cases, a few of which will be mentioned below, where we can see that as new case postpositions develop they replace older ones, rather than carving out an entirely new morphosyntactic category for themselves). What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that the conclusion must be abandoned in any case, as we by now have a comparative case for at least three other PTB case particles which is as strong as that for *-ki.

Ideally, a reconstruction of PTB, or any other family, should include a reconstruction of the structure of the case-marking system and of the morphosyntactic coding of that system.[1] In the case of Tibeto-Burman this turns out to be an extraordinarily difficult project. Some of the problems inherent in comparative work on grammatical particles are notorious -- in particular, as unstressed and typically cliticized syllables, they are subject to irregular phonological developments which

make it difficult to equate particles in different languages with confidence. This added to the rather rudimentary level of our knowledge of sound correspondences for several branches of the family makes complete confidence in many equations impossible.

In addition, Sino-Tibetan presents a number of difficult, if fascinating, problems of its own. For example, most TB languages allow at least some concatenation of postpositions, and this results in the development of case particles which are etymologically bimorphemic. Some combinations seem to be peculiar local developments, as for example the Thulung genitive kam, which is apparently a fusion of ergative/instrumental ka and ablative m. Other patterns seem to be widespread. For example, we find an ablative marking transparently composed of a locative followed by genitive or ergative, as in the following languages:

	LOC	GEN	ERG	ABL
Meithei	da	gi		da-gi
Garo	o	ni		o-ni
Anal	thuŋ	gi		thuŋ-gi
Kabui	tho		roi	tho-roi
Ao Naga	nuŋ		i	nuŋ-i
Geman Mishmi	X		ka	X-ka

(Geman has a number of different locative particles, and hence a number of different ablative combinations; this is another problem which we will return to shortly). The simplest type of problem created by this tendency is this: suppose that we have good semantic grounds for equating a kə in one language with a ki in another, and we have sufficient control of the relevant phonological correspondences to state that the vowels do not correspond. We could, of course, abandon the equation, but that is unrealistic, since there are two perfectly good possible explanations for the phonological discrepancy: the kə could be a reduced form of earlier *ki, or the ki could be etymologically bimorphemic, deriving from something like *ka-i. The obvious problem then is which explanation to adopt; this leads into even less soluble problems, e.g., if we have independent evidence for both *ka and *i, can we take this ki as additional evidence for either or both? (As I will note below, such a set of questions leads us to the possibility that Benedict's *ki, generally accepted as the one securely reconstructed PTB case particle, may in fact not reconstruct in that form for PTB).

These problems make it difficult to securely equate morphemes in cognate languages phonologically. There are consierable problems with the semantic side of the equations as well, and again Sino-Tibetan has

extra difficulties of its own. The first and most obvious is the degree of detail available in the sources; throughout the LSI and other sources of that period, and not infrequently even in more modern works, we find particles listed with wholly inadequate glosses, e.g. 'with' (which doesn't tell us whether the particle marks instrumental, comitative, or both), 'by' (locational, agentive, or means?), or 'subject' (nominative, ergative, or topic?). Moreover, a comparison of most available reports with a reasonably complete grammar such as Matisoff's Lahu Grammar makes clear how much information -- about shades of meaning, conditions of use, syntagmatic combination and paradigmatic alternation, and so on -- is lacking in almost all available descriptions. While it is possible to do comparative work with such data -- just as it was possible to do phonological comparison using even the phonetically unreliable data of the LSI and similar reports -- the results will necessarily be of rather coarse quality.

Other complications arise from certain idiosyncracies of Sino-Tibetan case marking. The most important of these is a tendency not to distinguish ablative from locative/allative expressions. Syncretism of locative and allative is, of course, widespread in languages throughout the world (e.g. French à) and these cases are very seldom distinguished in TB languages. (As we will note below, locative/allative forms, in TB as universally, are a common source of dative/accusative marking). Conflation os these with ablative is cross-linguistically quite uncommon, but within Sino-Tibetan it is extremely common, and was almost certainly a feature of PST. A useful discussion of this phenomenon in Lahu is provided by Matisoff (1973: 162-8), who points out that in most cases the semantics of the verb will make clear whether the locative noun is a location, goal, or source. (Probably most languages make at least some use of this fact; cf. the interpretation in English of unmarked NPs directly following the verbs inhabit, reach, and leave). Unfortunately, this removes any possibility of semantic control over our equation of case marking particles in different languages. As we will see directly, it is very common to find ergative/instrumental markers developing from ablative expressions (syncretism of genitive and ablative is also quite common, though it is not clear which of these senses is more likely to be original), and dative/accusative markers from locative/allative forms. Thus, in a TB context, it is entirely possible to find the same etymon as an ergative postposition in one language and an accusative in another -- in other words, there are no limits on what constitute plausible semantic equations in this area. As we will see, the data bear out this prediction; all three of our secure case etyma, *ka, *na, and *i~*e, are attested in almost all possible case marking functions: locative/allative, ablative, ergative/instrumental, and genitive.

As we have already noted, in those languages which do explicitly mark the ablative relation, it is typically expressed by a locative plus another element. This additional marking may be identifiable with some other case marker, as in the examples cited above, or it may be specific to the ablative. There are several examples of TB languages in contact with Indic languages which have developed ablative formations which appear to add a borrowed element to the native locative, e.g. Limasa ni-pharang, Deori Chutiya yo-chapi. Elsewhere the ablative formative seems to be native, as in the Bahing dialect reported in the LSI, for which are listed locatives di and la, and ablatives ding and lang, which are clearly composite. We sometimes even find doubly composite forms, as in the LSI Rungc^{h}henbung report, which lists locative da and ablative dang-ka. This ka is an important etymon, to which we will return; the other ablative marker of particular interest is the *s found in the Written Tibetan ablative and ergative/instrumental forms, where the ablatives las and nas are clearly based on the locatives la and na. This s certainly reflects an earlier motion verb *sa 'go, leave' (the evidence for which is presented in DeLancey 1980). Its particular significance for our present purpose is that it provides a possible explanation (unfortunately only one of two equally plausible explanations) for the front vowels found in many ablative and ergative forms -- Kham ni, Idu ne, Sema ki, Empeo ge-ne, etc. -- which seem to be related to original locatives *na and *ka.

Before entering the jungle which I have been describing, we should establish some general principles which will aid in the historical study of case marking. There are two common historical sources for case markers, both attested in TB. One is the grammaticalization of nouns, particularly of nouns having some kind of locative sense. In Sino-Tibetan languages, as in many others, much of the semantic load carried in English and other Indo-European languages by large sets of prepositions is carried by locative nouns. In Tibetan, for example, the normal locution for 'in' is 'at the interior of', as:

1) k'aŋ-ba-ḥi naŋ-la
house-GEN interior-LOC
'inside the house'

Such nouns, inevitably, are a productive source of locative case markers;[2] we find, for example, obvious cognates of Tibetan naŋ functioning as case postpositions in Hayu locative noŋ and Nocte locative and dative/accusative naŋ (as well as, probably, in Primi ablative nãu and Newari ablative/ergative/instrumental nɔ̃). A second source of case adpositions is earlier verbs. This is well-known as a source of locative, allative, and ablative markers (and others) in Chinese and Tai, and there are strong indications that it is to be found in TB as well. Most typically, verbs meaning 'be at', 'reach', and 'leave' grammaticalize as markers of, respectively, locative,