Sunwar copulas

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Sunwar is a Kiranti language spoken primarily in the Okhaldunga district of Nepal. The data reported here are all from a single informant, Tangka Raj Sunuwar, and were collected in Eugene, Oregon, where Mr. Sunuwar is attending college.

Sunwar has four etyma of recognizable copular function: two existential, tshā and 'baak, and an equational nā, with a suppletive allomorph ho. Two of these etyma, tshā and ho, are recent borrowings from Nepali. Of the remaining two, nā is apparently the older as a copula. The Sunwar verb has three paradigms: a "simple" conjugation, in which agreement markers are suffixed directly to the stem; the Past, in which the agreement suffixes follow a past tense marker *ta; and the Nonpast, which is built on a nominalized stem plus a suffixed form of the copula nā (see Genetti 1988 for paradigms). The equational nā conjugates in only one paradigm, which corresponds to the simple conjugation of other verbs:

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<td>1st</td>
<td>nā-ŋ</td>
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<td>2nd</td>
<td>'nā-ye</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>ho</td>
<td>nā-sE</td>
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The conjugation of the copula nā

1 The research reported here was supported in part by the National Science Foundation under grants BNS-8711370 and BNS-8910221. I am grateful to Carol Genetti, Larry Hayashi, Leslie Opp-Beckman, and most especially to Tangka Raj Sunuwar for useful discussions of Sunwar data.

2 The transcription used is generally phonemic but still preliminary. The opposition of high and low tone on lexical stems is phonemic; // marks a high-tone stem, and low-tone stems are unmarked (pitch on syllables following the stem is not contrastive). The falling coda which occurs with both tones is predictable in verbs (Genetti to appear) but not in nouns. It is marked in conjugated forms in this paper with //. Upper-case vowel symbols represent voiceless vowels, and upper-case [B] preceding a word-final voiceless vowel represents a partly devoiced stop. The phonological status of this devoicing remains unclear. The low back vowel transcribed as [a] alternates with [ã] in the conjugation of verbs, apparently conditioned by syllable weight; but elsewhere in the overall phonemic system these appear to be contrastive.
The borrowed ḫo occurs only as the 3rd singular form. This suggests that an earlier stage of the language may have lacked a 3rd sg. form of ná, a situation which might have arisen from the common situation in which the morphologically least marked copular form — normally, and certainly in any TB language, the 3rd sg. — is omitted in equational sentences.

This hypothesis is supported by a parallel defect in the non-past verb conjugation. Compare the non-past endings with the paradigm of ná given above:

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<td>3rd</td>
<td>-bá</td>
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<td>-nisE</td>
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**Sunwar non-past endings**

The non-past paradigm represents a morphologization of ná with its agreement; it apparently originated in a syntactic construction involving a nominalized verb stem, with the copula as the finite verb. This paradigm, like that of ná, has a non-cognate form in the 3rd singular; this presumably reflects the same gap in the original paradigm as the borrowed form in the copular paradigm. (The etymology of the 3sg. non-past -bá is not firmly established, but it likely reflects the Bodic nominalizer *ba*).

The existential/locative 'baøk, which is also a lexical verb 'dwell, reside', conjugates normally, distinguishing simple, past, and non-past paradigms: 'baøtí 'I was', 'baønunŋ 'I am/will be'. (Thus 'baønunŋ is etymologically *baøk-ná-unŋ). The full and regular conjugation of 'baøk, and its synchronic lexical sense, suggest that its copular function is a relatively recent development.

The borrowed copula tshá comes into Sunwar with a full Nepali inflectional paradigm. Compare:

1) ā-nu 'tsuübû má-'baø-bá
   1st-DAT knife NEG-exist-NP3s
   'I wouldn't have a knife.'

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3 What is presumably a remnant of the nominalizer is still visible in vowel-stem verbs, which in the non-past conjugation have a distinct stem with a final /i/ and falling tone: cp. 'tastaŋ 'I saw (him)', tainunŋ 'I see'. This is the regular reflex of final *-t.
2) ̣-nu ʰtsuːBU tshāIN
    1st-DAT  knife exist+NEG+PL
    'I don't have a knife.'

(1) shows the native Sunwar negative construction with ʰbaak; (2) shows the Nepali plural negative form of tshā. (Cp. also the suppletive past tense in ex. 19). The only sign of nativization that the paradigm shows, according to our consultant, is the 3sg form tshāa, which he identifies as characteristic of the speech of older monolinguals ("old ladies"), although in connected narrative which we have recorded he uses it himself. He says that people who have studied Nepali grammar will tend to use the more correct Nepali form tshā. This unaltered paradigm undoubtedly represents a very recent borrowing.4

In contrast to existential ʰbaak and tshā, na- is typically equational:

3) go ʰkōIts nā-ŋ
   I Sunwar be-1s
   'I am a Sunwar.'

However, it can be used as a locational, when it indicates past tense, in contrast to present tense tshā:

4) go khathmandu-m nā-ŋ
   I Kathmandu -LOC be-1s
   'I was in Kathmandu.'

5) go khathmandu-m tshu
   I Kathmandu -LOC exist-1s
   'I am in Kathmandu.'

The contrast between ʰbaak and tshā is epistemological, marking a distinction between what I have elsewhere called "old" and "new" information (Delancey 1986, 1990), although this terminology is rather imprecise. A rough characterization of the difference is that tshā represents information which the speaker knows simply because he knows it, while ʰbaak represents information which he knows through information channels to the outside world — it may be hearsay or inference from some evidence, but ʰbaak can also be used if he saw it with his own

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4 Mr. Sunuwuar says that he had asked a number of older people, thinking that there must be a native Sunuwuar equivalent for tshā, and while they all agreed that there must be, no one could think of it.
eyes. I use the simple tense here advisedly — the condition is not that the speaker has (experiential) seen it, at one time or another, but that it is something he would not know if he had not seen it (see DeLancey 1990). Thus (6) would be said by someone who had seen Carol in Kathmandu, and was bringing word of it, while (7) would be uttered by someone who knew that Kathmandu was where she had gone, but did not have first hand knowledge of her presence there:

6) Carol khatmandu-m 'baâ-tá
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist-P3s
   'Carol is in Kathmandu.'

7) Carol khatmandu-m tshaa
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist+3s
   'Carol is in Kathmandu.'

The past/non-past distinction is available with 'baâk:

8) Carol khatmandu-m 'baâ-Bá
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist-NP3s
   'Carol will be in Kathmandu.' (e.g. when you get there, she'll be there already).

While our consultant never saw anything ungrammatical about first person forms of 'baâk, such clauses tend to have odd interpretations:5

9) go khatmandu-m 'baâ-ti
    I Kathmandu -LOC exist-P1s
    'I saw myself in Kathmandu.' (e.g. in a dream)

The same semantic distinction holds in the possessive and existential senses of 'baâk and tshâ. (10) would be a normal report, while (11) would be appropriate if, for example, the speaker had reached into his pocket and unexpectedly found a knife:

5 Mr. Sunuwar suggested as another possible reason for an association between tshâ and first person the fact that it does not distinguish tense. The non-past form 'baâ-Bá is normally interpreted as future, while the morphologically past form translated as present in (6) actually has some past sense (because it implies that she was already there when the speaker saw her). Mr. Sunuwar suggests this as one reason why people might prefer to use the defective tshâ, which does not distinguish tense, in a sentence like go khatmandu-m tshu 'I am in Kathmandu.'