AN EMPATHY-BASED APPROACH TO THE DESCRIPTION OF THE VERB SYSTEM OF THE DEGE DIALECT OF TIBETAN

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The Tibetan verb system has attracted the attention of several linguists, who all have their own views on which approach or which terminology best describes the usage of the different auxiliaries and other verb markers. In the first section I will give a brief overview of three different lines of description and will compare them to each other. In the second section I will present the copulas and auxiliary verbs used in the Dege dialect to form complex verb forms. I will also discuss how the three approaches introduced in section one can be applied to the different examples from the Dege dialect, and will point out some of the advantages and difficulties involved. In the third section I will propose a new, empathy-based approach, which while enhancing the other analyses proposed so far, offers a wider frame of description, since it can also account for the "special" cases which other approaches have to treat separately.

1. DIFFERENT DESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES TO THE TIBETAN EPISTEMIC VERB SYSTEM

There are, basically, three main avenues of description among the more recent studies of the Tibetan verb system. The first can be traced back to Hale (1980) and will here be called the CONJUNCT–DISJUNCT approach. The second, which as we will see is similar to the first, will be called the VOLITIONAL.

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approach. The third approach used in the description of the Tibetan verb system is based on the notion of OLD versus NEW KNOWLEDGE. There are also, of course, the autochthonic traditions of Tibetan grammar, a discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this overview.

1.1. The conjunct–disjunct approach

Hale introduced the terms CONJUNCT and DISJUNCT in an article on Newari (Hale 1980). The terms were originally coined to refer to embedded clauses where the verb is marked, either with a CONJUNCT verb form when the referent of both clauses is identical, or with a DISJUNCT verb form when the two clauses have different referents. Then Hale expanded the meaning of the two terms. By means of using IMPLICIT QUOTE FRAMES (see examples 1 and 2), with simple sentences, he shifted the range of the description from the syntactic level describing the relation between the subject of the main clause and the subject of a subordinate clause, to a pragmatic level comparing the identity of the speaker with the syntactic subject of the sentence.

(1) [I say to you] “I went there.” (CONJUNCT FORM)
(2) [I say to you] “He went there.” (DISJUNCT FORM)

Hale’s analysis of Newari has been applied to Tibetan by various authors, e.g. by Schöttelndreyer in his short article on Sherpa (Schöttelndreyer 1980). Later DeLancey used this approach in several articles on Lhasa Tibetan (1990, 1992), which will be used here to present the basic ideas of this line of research.

Lhasa dialect:

Examples with framed quotes:

(3) khos kho bod=pa yin zer=gis
   he'ERG heij Tibetan be say-IPFV/CONJUNCT
   ‘Heij says that heij is a Tibetan.’

   [The speaker refers to what a third person has said about himself]

(4) khos kho bod=pa red zer=gis
   he'ERGij heij Tibetan be say-IPFV/DISJUNCT
   ‘Heij says that heij is a Tibetan.’

   [The speaker refers to what a third person has said about someone else]

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2 The original glosses have been slightly adapted for the sake of consistency with abbreviations used in this paper.
(5) khos nga bod=pa red zer=gis  
he'ERG I Tibetan be say-IPFV/DISJUNCT  
‘He says that I am a Tibetan.’  
[The speaker refers to what a third person has said about the speaker herself]

Examples with implicit quote frames:

(6) nga bod=pa yin  
I'ABS Tibetan be  
‘I am a Tibetan.’ [I say so]

(7) kho bod=pa red  
he'ABS Tibetan be  
‘He is a Tibetan.’ [I say so]  
(All examples are taken from DeLancey 1990: 295–296)

The following examples show that the system can be extended to finite verb constructions which are built with a verb form plus a nominalizer followed by the respective auxiliary:

(8) ngas byas-pa yin.  
I'ERG did'PERF be/CONJUNCT  
‘I did it.’

(9) khyed=rang-gis/khos byas-pa red.  
You yourself'ERG/He himself'ERG did'PERF be/DISJUNCT  
‘You/He did it.’ (DeLancey 1992: 44–45)

Here again the CONJUNCT form marks the identity between agent and speaker, whilst the DISJUNCT form expresses that agent and speaker are not identical. DeLancey further notices that the CONJUNCT–DISJUNCT system only functions with controllable verbs (called “volitional” in his 1992 paper) while the finite forms of non-controllable verbs are constructed differently.4

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3 Control is here used as a semantic category of the verb. In sentences with a controllable verb as predicate, the subject of the sentence is a true actor, she instigates the action. Non-controllable verbs have patient subjects.

4 In Lhasa with the auxiliary song.
This was already anticipated in Hale’s paper:

The problem regarding impersonal verbs [non-controllable in our terminology K.H.] points up a very central fact about the conjunct–disjunct pattern in Newari. Finite conjunct forms are appropriate only where the actor of the clause is portrayed as a true instigator, one responsible for an intentional act. Even with personal verbs disjunct forms replace conjunct forms where the actor is not portrayed as true instigator. Hale 1980: 96 (italics mine)

In his cognitive approach to event structure DeLancey formalized the different roles an actor can play in a proposition in the form of a table, represented below in a slightly rearranged form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>direct knowledge</th>
<th>no direct knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AV</td>
<td>event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfective</td>
<td>-pa yin</td>
<td>-song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imperfective</td>
<td>=gi yod</td>
<td>=gis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future</td>
<td>=gi yin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Cognitive model of event structure with the respective verb forms as used in the Lhasa dialect (DeLancey 1990: 303). (AV = initial act of volition)

According to DeLancey the use of the auxiliary depends on the speaker’s knowledge about the act or event described in a sentence. If the actor has direct evidence of the initial act of volition, which she can have only if the speaker herself is the actor/true instigator of the action, then a conjunct form is used. If the actor has direct knowledge of the event itself but not of the initial act of volition, then a disjunct form will be used. If the actor has knowledge only of the resultant state, an inferential form will be used. Thus, the verb system is reduced to a system of evidentiality where only the knowledge about the initial act of volition is considered relevant and not, as in the volitionality approach, the speaker’s volition itself.

5 In this paper the speaker, actor, etc. is normally referred to as she, which stands here as an abbreviation for he/she. Only where it was explicit that the speaker was male is the form he used instead.