Semantic Peculiarities of Tibetan Verbs of Being

Krisadawan Hongladarom
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Linguistics
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
U.S.A.

1. Introduction

It does not take long for learners of the Tibetan language to be aware of complex functions of Tibetan auxiliary verbs and the difficulty of using them appropriately and effectively. Grammatical rules can only guide the learners to understand simple constructions in unmarked contexts, but the rules do not provide them with thorough comprehension of how language is actually used in everyday life. Like other social norms, rules generating linguistic behaviors can be violated and undergo constant change. This is particularly true when several linguistic forms are used to indicate the same function, thus making it possible for speakers to manipulate their choices.

As an illustration, to express the concept of existence in Tibetan, we have at least three choices of verbs: yoö, tuo, and yoö ree. Superficially, these verbs show overt agreement with person. But when we observe closely how people use them, we see that grammatical agreement is not an adequate answer. Speakers do manipulate these forms, choosing the word that best fits their purposes. That is, whenever there is a linguistic choice, there tends to be a pragmatic contest among words. These linguistic forms are the focus of this paper.

Tibetan verbs of being, namely the copula yin and ree, and the existential yoö, tuo, and yoö ree, have been demonstrated to possess a feature uncommon to other Tibeto-Burman languages (Chang and Chang 1984; Beckwith 1991). This feature, an association with person, distinguishes yin and yoö, generally used with the first-person speaker in the declarative mood, from the rest. Recent studies (Delancey 1990, for example) show that there are semantic factors involved other than person distinction. In this paper I investigate the interplays between forms and functions of these
verbs in conversations. It will be argued that the distinction in question can be better explained in terms of "evidentiality," the semantic concept which underlies the speaker's linguistic choice, namely how the speaker views the event and the information she or he has obtained (cf. Chafe and Nichols, 1986). In this way, I follow Palmer (1986) in suggesting that a language can be either predominantly judgment or predominantly evidential. Tibetan, as will be demonstrated below, belongs to the latter type.

2. Tibetan verbs of being

Two groups of verbs in Tibetan which occur in sentence-final position and function both as independent verbs and as auxiliary verbs are copulative and existential verbs. The former is used to identify, whereas the latter expresses the concepts of existence, possession, or location. Existential verbs show another interesting feature; they occur in copulative constructions in the sentence type N/NP + ADJ + V. When functioning independently, verbs of being indicate neither tense nor number. When used as auxiliary verbs, they mark tense, aspect, and evidentiality. Generally they are used in accord with person agreement, as shown below. The terms conjunct and disjunct are adopted here to refer to the first person versus non-first person verbal forms. It should be emphasized that the use of these terms to indicate person distinction is not wholly adequate, as has been pointed out by Hale (1980) and Shöttelndreyer (1980) for the data in Newari and Sherpa respectively. However, for the sake of simplicity in terms of reference, I have adopted this terminology.
Table 1: Independent and auxiliary functions of verbs of being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COP³</th>
<th>EXIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONJUNCT</td>
<td>yin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISJUNCT</td>
<td>rai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Auxiliary Functions (using the verb thī 'write')**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NON-PAST</th>
<th>IMPF</th>
<th>PAST</th>
<th>PF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONJUNCT</td>
<td>thiki yin</td>
<td>thipa yin</td>
<td>thī yöö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I will write'</td>
<td>'I wrote'</td>
<td>'I've written'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thiki yöö</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I write; I am writing'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISJUNCT</td>
<td>thiki ree</td>
<td>thipa ree</td>
<td>thī tuu/yöö ree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'s/he will write'</td>
<td>'s/he wrote'</td>
<td>'s/he has written'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thiki tuu/yöö ree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'s/he writes; s/he is writing'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other than these verbs of being, verbs like səŋ, shad, and cuŋ also occur in sentence-final position and are auxiliary verbs indicating tense, aspect, and evidentiality. səŋ and shad are generally used when the speaker wants to narrate about what happened to other people. cuŋ, on the other hand, is the speaker oriented: it is used when the speaker wants to tell what happened to him or her. However, these evidential verbs are out of the focus of the paper. In this article I will emphasize only on the independent functions of verbs of being. Special attention will be paid to existential verbs in copulative constructions, as they convey interesting semantic functions and elucidate the relation between choices of verbal endings and evidentiality.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

3.1 Copulas yin and ree

When asked what is the distinction between the copulas yin and ree, Tibetan speakers almost unanimously agree that they differ in person. yin is used with the first-person speaker whereas ree is used with a non-first person. For example,

1) nang phöopa yin
   I  Tibetan CONJ
   I am a Tibetan
2) khön phöpa ree
   S/he Tibetan DISJ
   S/he is a Tibetan

3) ti nge thön thangdö yin
   this my time first CONJ
   This is my first time

4) thep ti nge ree
   book this my DISJ
   This book is mine

(1) and (2) are self-explanatory. In (3) the conjunct form is used, despite the fact that the subject of the sentence is not a first-person pronoun. yin is common when it is used to refer to the things or persons that belong to the speaker. In this case the speaker mentions that the experience is his first time. Many Tibetans accept that the conjunct and disjunct copulas are interchangeable. Therefore, the disjunct form can also be used in (1) and (3) without any change in meaning. That is, when the conjunct or disjunct is used depends on the kind of verb in the question. For example, if one asks: thep ti sū ree ‘whose book is this?’, then the addressee tends to repeat the verbal form in the answer, as in (4).

Consider the following sentences.

5) khyerang phöpa yinbec
   you Tibetan CONJ Q
   Are you Tibetan?

6) na amalaa ree khyerang phung yinta
   I mother DISJ you daughter CONJ IMI
   I be the mother and you the daughter

In an interrogative sentence as in (5) the conjunct is used, as the goal of the question is the hearer (see Hale 1980; Agna and Chonjore 1987). In (6) the focus is also on the hearer, the one who wants to do the action, and thus the conjunct form is used. Note that in (6) the disjunct is used with the subject, na. I asked the mother of the child who spoke this sentence why ree is used here. She explained that this was because the speaker is not the real mother, but here the child assumes the role of a mother. That is