A Case Grammar Explanation of Tibetan Relativization

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to account for the distribution of relativizers in Tibetan.¹ The data represent the Shigatse dialect, though most of the claims made are also applicable to the 'standard' Lhasa dialect. Both Shigatse and the better-known Lhasa dialects belong to the Central group of Tibetan dialects. Tibetan belongs to the Bodic branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family.

Tibetan has a somewhat complicated system of relativization. It is complicated mainly for two reasons; first, there is no relative pronoun as such; nominalizers are used to mark relative clauses. Second, the distribution of the relativizers is not straightforwardly explainable by any single parameter. The complexity requires both diachronic and synchronic explanations, the latter of which is my primary concern here.

In this paper, I will show that conceivable analyses based on grammatical relations cannot solve the problem satisfactorily and it is best accounted for by a case grammar analysis where case roles are viewed as prototypes. Most 'objectivist' linguists define case roles in terms of discrete criteria (perhaps in the tradition of Fillmore 1968) and are puzzled by lack of a direct correspondence between case roles and surface representations. However, Tibetan relativization suggests that case roles such as Agent are better understood if described as 'fuzzy-edged' prototypes.

The organization of the paper is as follows: Section 2 is a general description of nominalization and relativization in Shigatse Tibetan. Section 3 closely examines the domains of the relativizers and shows that an analysis based on case roles is superior to a conceivable analysis based on grammatical relations in explaining the Tibetan relativization. Section 4 summarizes the discussion.

¹I would like to thank Scott DeLancey for his comments on earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to my informant Yangzom. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 1993 Fall Meeting of Korean Linguistic Society. I give thanks to the audience for their comments. All remaining failings are, of course, my responsibility.
2. Nominalization and relativization in Tibetan

In Shigatse Tibetan, nominalizers historically originated as derivational morphemes. Their distribution as derivational nominalizers is based on semantic roles, and also partly on time reference. They are: mkhan for agential nominalizations, sa locative, pa perfective patientive, vao imperfective patientive and instrumental. Examples (1)-(5) illustrate this:

(1) btsongs-mkhan
    sell-NOM;AGT
    'A seller'

(2) ritaa-brgyab-sa
    hunt-NOM;LOC
    'A hunting place'

(3) dras-pa
    cut-NOM;PAT;PERF
    'Something already cut'

(4) dras-vag
    cut-NOM;PAT;IMPF
    'Something to be cut'

(5) gzhus-vag
    shoot-NOM;INST
    'something to shoot with'

These derivational nominalizers have expanded their functions to mark sentential nominalizations, as in (6), and

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'Diachronic evidence suggests that they are in turn derived from lexical nouns (Jäschke 1981; Delancey 1989).

'The Shigatse examples in this paper are given in transliteration of standard Tibetan orthography, which will be cited in undelined forms as in stag 'tiger'. The abbreviations used in glosses are: AGT= Agentive; ASS= Associative; BEN= Benefactive; CONJ= Conjunctive; COP= Copula; DAT= Dative; DET= Determiner; DISJ= Disjunctive; DO= Direct Object; ERG= Ergative; EXST= Existential; FEM= Feminine; Fut= Future; GEN= Genitive; IO= Indirect Object; IMP= Imperative; IMPF= Imperfective; INST= Instrument; LOC= Locative; NEG= Negative; NOM= Nominalizer; OBL= Oblique; OCOMP= Object of Comparison; PAT= Patientive; PERF= Perfective; PL= Plural; POL= Polite; REL= Relativizer; Q= Question; SG= Singular; SU= Subject; VLZ= Verbalizer.

'All but patientive nominalizations are neutral with respect to tense/aspect; time reference is determined by time adverbs or the contexts where they occur.'
relative clauses by modifying another nominal element, as in (7):

(6) kho [ltag=mo bstan]-mkhan (kho) red
    3SG movies show-NOM (DET) COP
    'He is the one who shows movies.'

(7) kho [ltag=mo bstan]-mkhan mi (kho) red\(^5\)
    3SG movie show-REL man (DET) COP
    'He is the man who shows movies.'

Sa and pa relative clauses are typically in the
genitive construction with a genitive morpheme attached at
the end,\(^6\) whereas mkhan and yag relative clauses do not
take the genitive morpheme, as shown in (8)-(11):

(8) [ngas lta=bskor=byas]-sa/sa'i sa=cha kho 'di red
    1SG;ERG visit-REL/REL;GEN place DET this COP
    'This is the place I visited.'

(9) kho [ngas bzos]-pa/pa'i la-ta dga'=po 'dug
    3SG 1SG;ERG make-REL/REL;GEN food-DAT like COP
    'He likes the food I make.'

(10) 'di [khyi-la rdog=rgyag=gzhus]-mkhan(*-gyi) bu kho red
    this dog-DAT kick-REL(-GEN) boy DET COP
    'This is the boy who kicked the dog.'

(11) pha=gi [khos stag-la gzhus]-yag(*-gi)
    that 3SG;ERG tiger-DAT shoot-REL(-GEN)
    mi/mda' kho red
    gun DET COP
    'That is the gun he shot the tiger with.'

Tibetan utilizes all the cross-linguistically attested
types of relative clauses; it has postnominal relatives
(12), prenominal relatives (13), and internal relatives
(14):

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\(^5\)A relative clause is put in brackets and the head NP is
underlined.

'The genitive morpheme has several allomorphs: i) -khyi
after an obstruent, ii) -gyi after a nasal or liquid, iii) -gi
after g or ng, and iv) -li after a vowel.'

'In Lhasa, genitive marking with yag is optional in
colloquial speech, while prescriptively required (DeLancey
1989). However, my Shigatse informant never used the genitive
marking in yag relative clauses.'
The genitive morpheme is optional in prenominal relatives, as in (12), but it is not allowed in postnominal and internally-headed relatives, as in (13)-(14). According to the informant, a prenominal external relative with the genitive marking seems most common, followed by pronominal, non-genitive prenominal and internal relatives, in the order named, although their relative frequency should be determined through text analysis, which is not done in this paper. This is consistent with Keenan’s (1985) observation that prenominal relatives are the only or most productive form in verb-final languages.

Having examined the general characteristics of Tibetan relative clauses, I will attempt to account for the distribution of the four relativizers in the next two sections.

3. Distribution of Tibetan relativizers

A major problem with any analysis in explaining Tibetan relativization lies in the fact that there is no consistent relationship between head NPs and the choice of relativizers. Some relative clauses are marked by relativizers which are not supposed to be used and some can take more than one relativizer without any difference in meaning. In attempting to solve these problems, I will present a conceivable grammatical relations analysis in comparison with a case grammar analysis, and argue that, all the evidence considered, case roles best explain the state of affairs.

3.1. A grammatical relations analysis

Traditional grammar and recently the relational grammar have long noted the importance of grammatical relations in language. In particular, it is the fundamental tenet of RG that grammatical relations are taken to be ‘undefined primitives’ (Blake 1990). From the RG’s point of view, we expect that grammatical relations should play a central role in the grammar of Tibetan relativization. Thus, a plausible account for the distribution of Tibetan relativizers in this framework will be as follows: mkhan for subject head NPs, pa or yag for direct objects depending on aspect, sa for IOs and obliques, and yag for instruments. (15)-(18) illustrate this: