'Anti-ergative' marking in Tibeto-Burman*

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Using arguments based on the data on verb 'agreement' (pronominalization) in Tibeto-Burman (TB), LaPolla 1989 (see also LaPolla 1992) claims that Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) should be reconstructed as a language with no inflectional morphology. In that paper it is argued that the PTB system of grammatical relations was close to the typical 'role-dominated' (Van Valin & Foley 1980) Burmese-Yiphö system (epitomized by Lahu—see Matisoff 1973): that is, a system where there is no definable 'subject' or 'direct object', and where semantic and pragmatic principles govern the organization of discourse, not syntactic functions. In this paper we look at the nature of 'objects' in TB languages, and find additional support for this role-dominated view of PTB grammatical relations. From a survey of ninety-five reliable grammars or descriptions of languages in the TB family, I have found 11 languages with no nominal object marking, 20 languages with nominal morphology consistently marking the patient as object, regardless of clause type, and 64 languages where the patient in monotransitive clauses is often or always marked with the same postposition as the goal or benefactive (dative) in ditransitive clauses. This type of marking is discussed in Dryer 1986 as Primary Object marking. I argue that this type of marking in the TB languages reflects the semantically based nature of grammatical relations in PTB.

1. The Concept of Primary Object

Dryer (1986) presents arguments toward establishing the syntactic functions Primary Object (PO) and Secondary Object (SO) to contrast with

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* I would like to thank Søren Egerod, Martine Mazaudon, Boyd Michailovsky, Johanna Nichols, Jackson T-S. Sun, and other colleagues at the Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus Project for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The earlier version (with the title 'The primary object in Tibeto-Burman') was also presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Chinese Languages and Linguistics (August 9-11, 1991), Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

1 'Grammatical relations' is here meant to include syntactic relations (manifested as the syntactic functions 'subject', 'direct object', etc.), semantic relations ('agent', 'patient', etc.), and pragmatic relations ('topic', 'focus', etc.). It is assumed that semantic and pragmatic functions are inherent in all languages, whether or not they are marked, though not all languages grammaticalize syntactic functions.
Direct Object (DO) and Indirect Object (IO). If in a language the notional indirect object (goal, benefactive, etc.) of a ditransitive verb is treated syntactically and/or morphologically the same as the notional direct object (patient, theme, etc.) of a monotransitive verb, then that language can be said to evidence a PO/SO distinction. The notional indirect object of the ditransitive verb and the notional direct object of the monotransitive verb is then the PO, and the notional direct object of the ditransitive verb is the SO. This marking can be reflected in a language’s verb agreement system or in its nominal marking system. An example of the latter is the preposition ya in Khasi (Mon-Khmer, Assam; Dryer 1986:816, originally from Rabel 1961:77):

1. a ka la yo??ii ya ?uu khlaa.
   she PAST see OBJ the tiger
   ‘She saw the tiger.’

   b. ?uu hiikay ya ṇa ka ktien pharenŋ.
   he teach OBJ 1sg the language English
   ‘He teaches me English.’

   c. ?uu hiikay ya ka ktien pharenŋ.
   he teach OBJ the language English
   ‘He teaches English.’

In (1a) ya marks the notional direct object (the theme), whereas in (1b) ya marks the notional indirect object (the benefactive) and the notional direct object (the theme) is unmarked. In (1a) the theme is marked as the PO, while in (1b) it is unmarked and is the SO. In (1c), ka ktien pharenŋ ‘the English language’ is again the notional direct object of the verb hiikay ‘teach’, but here the verb is used monotransitively and so the notional direct object gets the PO marking.

2. The Primary Object in TB

   Dryer (1986:816-817) presents evidence of postpositional PO marking in three TB languages: Lahu (thâ?), Kokbôrok (nc), and Kham (1ay):

2. Lahu (Matisoff 1973:156-7)
   a ṇa thâ? tâ dê?.
   1sg OBJ NEG.IMP hit book that 1sg OBJ give
   ‘Don’t hit me.’
   b. li? chi ṇa thâ? pî-?
   3sg CHI 1sg thâ? give
   ‘Give me that book.’
(3) Kokborok (Karapurkar 1976:156-7)

a. bwrwy-čikla-rog-ndo rohmr-di.
girl-young-many-OBJ send-IMP
'Send the young girls.'

b. buphan-no twy ru-di.
tree-OBJ water give-IMP
'Give the tree water.'

(4) Kham (Watters 1973:44, 46, 54)2

a. nga: zihm nga-jxy-ke.
1sg house 1sg-build-PAST
'I built a house.'

b. no-e ka:h-lay poh-ke-o.
3sg-ERG dog- OBJ beat-PAST-3sg
'He beat the dog.'

c. no-e nga-lay cyu:-na-ke-o.
3sg-ERG 1sg-OBJ watch-1sg-PAST-3sg
'He watched me.'

d. no-e nga-lay bxhtanji ya-na-ke-o.
3sg-erg 1sg-OBJ potato give-1sg-past-3sg
'He gave a potato to me.'

Aside from the languages mentioned by Dryer, we also find postpositional PO marking in at least fifty other languages or dialects of TB (out of a total of ninety-five surveyed):3 Achang (e55), Aka/Hrusso (e / i), Akha (aŋ), Apatani (m1), Bai (no33), Burmese (kou), Cangluo Menba (ka13), Central Monpa (qa), Chaudangsi (jā), Chebang (kaŋ), Chutiya (na), Cuona Menba (l31), Dafla (am), Darang Deng (vē55), Dimasa (kè), Dulong (lē31), Ergong (kē), Gahri (rog/dog/tog/q), Hallam (rāŋg), Jingpo (e?55).4

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2 In those TB languages that have verb agreement systems there may be some overlap where the agreement system and the nominal marking seem both to be marking the PO (as in this example, which led Dryer to claim that the agreement system also marks PO's); but the agreement systems in most TB languages are based on person hierarchies (1p > 2p > 3p, or 1p/2p > 3), not on semantics. In some languages there will be partially semantic direction marking or (as with Dulong hw-) 'anti-1st person agent' marking (see note 9, below), but the marking is essentially person marking, and is not primarily semantic, as is the nominal marking.

3 The form following the language name is the postposition used to mark the primary object.

4 In Burmese Jingpo the full form of this particle is phē55 (Hanson 1954:537). There is a tendency for high frequency particles to lose their initial consonants in TB, e.g. Lahu thā? ~ ha? ~ a? 'object particle'. [Ed.]
Jinuo (a³³), Kinnauri (pəŋ-nu-u-uŋ), Lalung (ga), Limbu (-n/en), Lisu (tɛ⁵⁵), Lûsu (və³⁵), Luoba (me), Manipuri (bu), Maru (rê), Milang (m-um), Miri (em), Mokhum (ma), Namuyi (de⁵⁵), Naxi (to⁵⁵), Newari (yatō), Nocte (on pronouns only: nang), Nusu (na³⁵), Pumi (ʨi⁵⁵ [singular]: bie⁵⁵ [plural]), Purik/Ladakhî (a/la), Purum (ta/dō), Sherpa/Jirel/Lhouri (lā/lāa), Singpo (fê), Tangkhul Naga (li), Taoping Qiang (zi³³), Rabha (ō/nō), Shixing (sì³³), Tangut (in¹), Tipura (no [na]), Yakha (qo), and Zaiwa (lē-3ē). These languages represent the Burmish, Loloish, Jingpo/Nungish, Tibetan, West Himalayish, East Himalayish, Barish, Naga, Abor-Miri-Dalla, and Qiangic branches of TB, and cover almost the entire TB geographic area.

In a number of other languages the accusative is generally unmarked, but the dative or dative/locative marker is sometimes or often used for accusative arguments, as in Balti, Bodo [Standard Plains Kachari], Bunun, Dhimal, Gurung, Magari, Manchati, Rangkas, Sunwari, Tamang, and Thami. From the total survey of 95 reliable grammars or language descriptions, 64 languages showed some evidence of the PO pattern. 20 languages with nominal morphology (postpositions) did not show the PO marking pattern, and 11 had no postpositional 'object' marking.

From the fact that most of these PO-marking languages have grammaticalized different morphemes to mark the PO's, we can assume that the marking of PO's (or at least what we find attested in these languages) is not of great time depth. That the marking is very recent can be seen by the fact that even closely related languages may have different PO markers (e.g. Lahu, Akha), or differ by having PO marking or not (e.g. Akha, which has PO marking, and Hani, which does not). On the other hand, the fact that so many languages grammaticalized the same type of function suggests either that PO's already existed at an earlier stage of this family, or there was something about the protolanguage that caused the daughter languages to grammaticalize the same function in a parallel manner. A third possibility is that this feature is an areal trait, and is not constrained by genetic boundaries. I will follow up on the second possibility, taking this to be a prime example of what Sapir (1921:168f) referred to as 'drift': as dialects split off from the mother language and diverge from each other, they carry

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5 The languages with nominal morphology not showing the PO marking pattern are Angami Naga, Ao Naga, Chin, Caro, Hani, Kanashi, Khaling, Khambu, Lai, Lepcha, Mishmi, Motuo Menba, Old Kuki (Rangkhol), Pahri, Pattani, Thado, Tinan, Tod (a Tibetan dialect of Himachal Pradesh) and Tuju.

6 The languages showing no postpositional 'object' marking are Gyarong, Lotha Naga, Langtong, Lushai, Mhar, Rai, Sema, Vayu, Yi, and Zangza. (Karenic, the non-verb-final branch of TB, has prepositions, not postpositions.)

7 I have not found evidence of non-TB influence on object-marking in those languages inside the People's Republic of China, though for the TB languages of Nepal there is the influence of Nepali. See note 16, below.