

# **Ergative in *Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar*\***

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## **Introduction**

Classical Tibetan<sup>1</sup> has been reported to be an aspectually split ergative language (Regamey, 1954; Dixon, 1979), although this is true only of some texts. DeLancey (1984) shows that case marking in modern Lhasa Tibetan has an active-stative pattern. The data given in Saxena (1988) suggest that there is a shift, in at least one modern dialect of modern Lhasa Tibetan, away from the active-stative pattern, and that the original ergative marker seems to function now as some sort of topic/emphasis marker<sup>2</sup>. In view of these various case marking patterns found in Tibetan, it will be interesting to see the case marking system in a text which is not so modern. The aim of this paper is to examine the 'ergative'<sup>3</sup> pattern in *Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar* 'the biography of Milarepa', an early vernacular Tibetan text. It will be shown that the Tibetan of the *Mi=la=ras=pa* has an active-stative case marking pattern. One of the limitations of working with a text is the nonavailability of all types of constructions that one would like in order to verify the claims; thus the suggestions made here should be taken as tentative.

## **Active-stative case marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa***

We will start the discussion by briefly talking about the tense-aspect system in Tibetan and how it is being manifested in the language. This discussion is crucial in view of the fact that our claims about the 'ergative' marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa* depend on it.

In written Tibetan there are no separate tense markers, the distinction is manifested by different aspectual forms of the verb. A verb can

\* The data for this paper is from the third chapter of the text edited by De Jong (1959). The exact date of this text is not known but it is claimed that it was written not later than the sixteenth century - maybe somewhere "between the eleventh century and the sixteenth century". It represents the colloquial Tibetan of that era (DeLancey, p.c.). Therefore it is neither classified as classical Tibetan nor as modern Tibetan text. In this paper, I will use the term *Mi=la=ras=pa* when I refer to the text, I will use the term Tibetan to refer to the variety of Tibetan of *Mi=la=ras=pa*.

<sup>1</sup> This work was partially supported by NSF grant II BNS-8711370. I wish to thank Professor Scott DeLancey for encouraging me to work on Tibetan. The abbreviations used in this study stand for: ERG = ergative, HON = honorific marker, NOM = nominalizer, INST = instrumental case marker, CLP = clause linkage particle, LOC = locative case marker, GEN = genitive, DAT = dative, ABL = ablative, NEG = negative, N.MRKR = noun marker, POSS = possessive, PL = plural, TOP = topic marker, PST = past tense, COMPA = comparative marker, PF = perfective, SAME = verb form remains the same in all tenses/aspects.

<sup>2</sup> There is evidence for this development elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman.

<sup>3</sup> I am using the term 'ergative marker' loosely here. We will use this term for the marker which comes with the subject when the verb is either transitive or an agent-taking intransitive verb in the perfective.

take at most four different forms to indicate the various aspects, for example, *rko* 'dig (IMPF)<sup>4</sup>', (*b*)*rkos* 'dig (PF)', *brkos* 'dig (FUT)', *rkos* 'dig (IMP)'. Sometimes the aspectual distinction is manifested by means of the vowel alternation, for example, *rgyab* 'throw (INF)', *brgyab* 'throw (PF & FUT)', *rgyob* 'throw (IMP)'. In order to show that the ergative is aspectually split in Tibetan, examples with verbs which have distinct forms to indicate aspectual information will be given. This, we hope, will show the correlation between the perfective and the occurrence of the ergative marking.

In written Tibetan the ergative markers are: *s*, *kyis*, *gyis*, *gis* and *kis*. These markers are in complementary distribution. *s* occurs when the preceding morpheme/word ends with a vowel; *kyis* after obstruents; *gyis* after sonorants; and *gis* after velars.

The following examples illustrate that the ergative markers in *Mi=la=ras=pa* occur only when the verb is in the perfective in simple clauses. This indicates that the ergative system in *Mi=la=ras=pa* is aspectually split.

- 1    *mna'*=*ma*                    - *s*                    *thog*                    *drangs*  
daughter-in-law   - ERG                    roof                    pull (PF)

'The son's wife pulled the roof.'

- 2    *yul*                    *mi*                    *mams*                    - *kyis*                    *bzung*                    *ste*  
country                    man                    PL                    - ERG                    take(PF)                    CLP

'The countrymen took ().'

- 3    *a*=*ma*                    *rang*                    *nga*                    - *la*                    '*phrad*                    - *pa*                    *dang*  
mother                    SELF                    I                    - DAT                    meet(IMPF)                    - NOM                    and...

'My mother thought of coming herself (to bring provisions and) [give me advice].'

The ergative marker occurs in sentences (1) and (2) when the verb is in the perfective. In sentence (3) when the verb is not in the perfective, the ergative marker does not occur.

As mentioned earlier, for some verbs, there is a change in the verb form to indicate the tense/aspect information whereas for some other verbs, the verb form remains the same. When the verb form is explicitly imperfective, the ergative marker never occurs with it. When the verb form remains the same in all tenses/aspects, we sometimes find the ergative marking. From this we can infer that the verb may be in the perfective when

<sup>4</sup> What we here label "Imperfective" and "Perfective" are traditionally called "Present" and "Past" forms.

the ergative marker occurs in such cases. The following sentences are illustrative.

- 4    *khong*    *grogs*    - *po*    - *rnam*    *ni*    *phyag=rten*  
      he(HON)   friends   - NOM   - PL   TOP   souvenir with letter
- sna*        *re*        *tsam*        - *las*        *mi*        *gtong*        - *ba*  
      portion   each   COMPA   - ABL   NEG   give(IMPF)   - NOM
- *r*        'dug  
      - LOC   be(SAME)

'The friends didn't give a portion of the souvenir with the letter.'

- 5    *nga*    - *s*        *gser*    *g=yu*        *kun*    *phul*        *te*  
      I       - ERG   gold   turquoise   whole   give(HON)(SAME)   CLP

'I gave the whole turquoise (to him).'

In sentence (4) the verb 'give' is in the imperfective (the perfective form being *btang*) and we don't find the ergative marking on the subject, whereas in sentence (5) when the verb form remains the same in all tenses/aspects, we find the ergative marking. This seems to indicate that the verb, in this case, is in the perfective.

The data given above suggest that Tibetan is an aspectually split ergative language. The question that arises now is: Is it just that or do we find ergative case marking with some intransitive verbs too, as in modern Lhasa Tibetan. In *Mi=la=ras=pa*, the ergative marking also occurs with agent taking (volitional) intransitive verbs in the perfective. Sentence (6) below illustrates the occurrence of the ergative marker when the verb is agent-taking and is in the perfective, sentences (7) and (8) illustrate that the ergative marker does not occur with verbs which are non-active (non-volitional) even though those verbs are in the perfective.

- 6    *nged* - *rnam*    - *kyis*        *dbus=gtsang*    - *gi*        *lam*        - *du*  
      I       - PL        - ERG        Ü=Tsang        - GEN       path       - LOC
- zhugs*        - *nas*        *phyin*        - *pa*        - *s*        *gtsang*  
      begin(PF)   - CLP   set out(SAME)   - NOM   - INST   place name
- rong*        - *gi*        *g=yag*        *sde*        *zhes*        *bya=ba*    *sleb*        - *s*  
      center    - GEN   place name ?   (THUS)   called   reach   - PERF

'We set out on the road to Ü and Tsang and arrived at Yakde (in the valley of Tsangrong).'

- 7    *de*    *stobs*    - *kyis*    *mi*    *shi*    *byung*    - *ba*  
       that    strength    - INST    man    die(PF)    happen(PF,IMP)    - NOM
- kun*    - *gyis*    *thos*    *na*    - *s*    *'tshogs*    *te*  
       whole    - ERG    hear(SAME)    when    - ?    assemble(IMP)    CLP

'Hearing by what power these people had been killed, the villagers gathered together.'

- 8    *nga*    *ni*    *yid=cig*    *ma*    *che*    - *s*    *te*  
       I    TOP    be(IMP)    NEG    very great    - PERF    CLP

'I was not very great.'

The above description suggests that the case marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa* has an active-stative pattern. That seems to be the reason why the ergative marker occurs not only with the verbs but also with agent-taking intransitive verbs in the perfective.

In modern standard Lhasa, ergative case marking is optional in non-perfective transitive clauses, with its absence being the normal case. A single example from the corpus suggests that in this respect also the language of *Mi=la=ras=pa* is already like the modern dialect. The example is given below.

- 9    *khyed*    *grog*    *po*    - *rnam*    - *kyis*    *skul*  
       you    friends    NOM - PL    - ERG    HORTATIVE
- lcag*    - *gyis*    - *la*    *mtu*    *shi=tu*  
       whip    - INST    - ?    black magic    very
- mkhas*    - *pa*    *zhig*    *slob*    *shog*    *cig*  
       learned    - NOM    one    exercise    come back(IMP)    IMP

'So you, his companions, should exhort him and spur him on to become deeply skilled in magic.'

To summarize, the data given above suggests that Tibetan of the *Mi=la=ras=pa* has the active-stative case marking pattern.