

The rhetorical¹ use of the Tibetan ergative

Nicolas Tournadre

University of Paris III and INALCO

Tibetan as spoken in the Central province ("Lhasa dialect") presents a standard nominal ergative structure, i.e. a specific marker for the agent² of two-place predicates, and a Ø marker (the absolutive) for the patient of two-place predicates as well as for the only participant of one-place predicates. The ergative marker is a case particle formally identical to the instrumental, but functionally distinct from it. Besides its semantic and syntactic functions the ergative also has a rhetorical effect that will be examined below. First we will consider the standard function.

We can distinguish four basic constructions occurring with two-place predicates:

1) the ergative construction: X(erg) Y(abs) V₂

- Ex 1: *pu.gu 'di-s chang 'thung-gl.'dug*
child this-ERG³ beer+ABS drink-UNAC+EVID
ra.bzi mi yong-ngas
drunk NEG UNAC-INTER
"This child is drinking beer; won't he get drunk?"⁴ (Hu)

2) the possessive construction as well as the construction of reception:

X(obl) Y(abs) V₂

a) possession

- Ex 2: *khong-la deb rdzag.do yo'o.red*
he-OBL book+ABS lots have+GNOMIC
"He has a lot of books."

¹ In this context, "rhetorical" would be equivalent to "pragmatic".

² I prefer, along with other authors such as T. Lillemann, D. Herforth, H. Zimmerman to avoid the highly ambiguous terms of "subject" and "transitive" in Tibetan.

³ Abbreviations: ABS: absolutive; AOR: aorist; AUX: auxiliary; C.E.: contrastive emphasis; CONNECT: connector; EGO: egophoric auxiliary; ERG: ergative; EVID: evidential; EXPRESS: expressive particle; FUT: future; HON: honorific; INTER: interrogative particle; NEG: negation; NOM: particle of nominalization; OBL: oblique; RESULT: resultative verb; UNAC: unaccomplished (aspect); V₁: monovalent verb; PART: particle; V₂: bivalent verb; VOL: volitional verb or auxiliary.

⁴ The data presented in this paper come either from Hu Tan 1989 (these examples will be indicated by "Hu") or from my personal recordings made in Lhasa (1988) mainly of the speech of Professor Thubten Wangpo (Academy of Social Sciences) to whom I am especially indebted. Last but not least, I am particularly grateful to Martine Mazaudon for her help and suggestions while I was writing this paper.

b) reception

Ex 3: *nga-r ylge gnyis 'byor-byung*
 I-OBL letter two+ABS receive-AOR+EGO NONVOL
 "I received two letters."

3) the affective construction (verbs indicating emotional attitude):

X(abs) Y(obl) V₂

Ex 4: *khong khyi-la zhed-kyl 'dug*
 he+ABS dog-OBL afraid-UNAC+EVID
 "He is afraid of the dog."

4) the mixed ergative construction: X(erg) Y(obl) V₂

Ex 5: *kho-s bu.mo snying.rje.po de-la btlas-song.*
 he-ERG girl nice this-OBL look-AOR+EVID
 "He looked at the nice girl."

As we notice the ergative marker is present only in the first and fourth construction types.

The main relevant features conditioning the appearance or the absence of the ergative are on the one hand the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the verb, and on the other hand the verbal action.

1. Syntactico-semantic categories of Tibetan verbs

The syntactic and semantic characteristics of the verb can be broken down into two main categories: volition and valency. Another optional category is causativity (vs. resultativity)⁵.

⁵ Classical Tibetan has around 180 verbal pairs that oppose causative vs. resultative forms. I have collected about one hundred of the most frequently used. They are given in the *rab gsal me long* by Kesang Gyurme, a grammar of classical Tibetan translated into French by H. Stoddard and N. Tournadre (forthcoming, 1991) with many linguistic comments about classical as well as modern central Tibetan.

It is also worth noting that the causative shares some features with the imperfective aspect in insisting on the conative activity or the intention of the agent, while the resultative verbs can assume a perfective role. Compare the following Russian and Tibetan sentences: *dkar.yol bcag-pa.yin te chag ma song* lit: "I broke (causative) the cup, but it did not break (resultative)" meaning "I tried to break the cup, but didn't succeed"; or *(nga-s) gnas don-de thag bcad pa yin te (thag) chod ma song*, "I (tried) to solve (causative) this problem, but I could not solve it (resultative)". This opposition between causative-imperfective and resultative-perfective also occurs in Classical Tibetan. For instance, in Milarepa's hundred thousand songs:

<i>nang</i>	<i>rang</i>	<i>sems</i>	<i>bzung</i>	<i>bas</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>zin</i>	<i>na/</i>
inside	self	mind	catch (imperf)	CONNECT	NEG	catch(perf)	if
<i>phyi</i>	<i>gzhan</i>	<i>lus</i>	<i>bzung</i>	<i>bas</i>	<i>ci-la</i>	<i>phan.</i>	
outside	other	body	catch(imperf)	CONNECT	what-OBL	use	

"If you try to catch the (inner) mind and cannot catch it, what is the use of catching prey (lit: outer body) outside?" (*khyi ra ba dgon po rdo rje*)

1) Volition: the intentional or unintentional nature of the action is certainly the essential feature in the description of the Tibetan verb, since it has consequences not only for case marking but also for verbal morphology and syntax. The volitional verb (V vol) has an imperative form while the non-volitional does not: *ltos shug* "look!", but **mthong zhig* "see". Another criterion can be used to determine if the verb is volitional: only the volitional verb can take the egophoric volitional auxiliary YIN, as in *bitas-pa.yin* "I looked", but **mthong-pa.yin* "I saw"⁶

2) Valency: the majority of verbs can be defined simply and immediately according to their valency. For example, the verb *drag* "to be cured, to recover" is always monovalent (V₁), i.e., it implies only one participant, namely the person who recovers (Tib: *drag mkhan*).

Other verbs such as *gsod* "kill" are bivalent (V₂)⁷ since they imply two participants, whether these are formally present in the sentence or not.

There is another category of verbs which are monovalent, but allow a second participant in certain contexts. A typical example is *chag* "to break":

Ex 6: *dkar.yol chag-song*
teacup+ABS break(RESULT)-AOR+EVID
"The teacup broke."

But when an agent breaks the cup unintentionally, one might say

Ex 7: *kho-s dkar.yol chag-song*
he-ERG teacup+ABS break(RESULT)-AOR+EVID
"He broke the cup (not on purpose)."

This category will be referred to as V_{1/2} nonvol.⁸

To sum up, taking into consideration both valency and volition, we find four verbal categories: V₁ nonvol, V₁ vol, V₂ nonvol and V₂ vol. (The V_{1/2}

See also example 16, as well as these Russian sentences:

Ob'jasnjaj ja èto i ne ob'jasnil.

"I tried to explain (imperfective) it (to him), but did not succeed in explaining it (perfective)."

Ubivali da ne ubili

"They tried to kill (imperfective) (him), but they could not kill (perfective)."

Dolgo rešal ètu zadaču no ne rešil

"I tried for a long time to solve (imperfective) this problem, but failed to solve it (perfective)."

⁶ The egophoric non-volitional auxiliary *byung* must be used here.

⁷ V₂ indicates a verb requiring at least two participants. It includes trivalent verbs (V₃). As far as ergativity and general syntactic properties are concerned, the main dichotomy is between V₁ and V₂.

⁸ Most of the V_{1/2} verbs correspond to the resultative verbs of the verbal pairs.

nonvol are a special case of verbs which may be used either as V_1 or V_2 nonvol.)

The ergative can occur with all the categories except V_1 nonvol:

Ex 8a: **khe.sa kho-s shi-song*
 yesterday he-ERG die-AOR+EVID
 "Yesterday, he died."

However, the ergative *does* occur with V_2 non-volitional verbs such as "see"

Ex 8b: *ngas dom gnyls mthong-byung*
 I-ERG bear two-Abs see-EGO NONVOL+AOR
 "I saw two bears."

And as will be shown later (Exs. 10 and 11b), the ergative is also used with V_1 volitional verbs.

II. Aspect and the ergative

The second essential conditioning factor for the use of the ergative case is the verbal aspect. Below, I will give a brief description of its main characteristics. The Central Tibetan dialect has developed a rich and complicated aspect/modality system at the expense of the tenses, with a paradigm of forms resulting from the combination of three verbal suffixes (*gl*, *pa*, and \emptyset) with the nine final auxiliaries (*yin*, *red*, *yod*, *yo'ored*⁹, *'dug*, *song*, *byung*, *shag*, *myong*). The verbal aspect can be formally divided into two morphological categories: unaccomplished and accomplished,¹⁰ the first marked by *gl* and the second without *gl*. These two broad categories of aspects can be broken down into two subcategories: *future* and *progressive* (or *general*) for the unaccomplished, and *perfect* and *auristic*¹¹ for the accomplished.

⁹ *yo'ored* is traditionally written *yod.pa.red* in literary Tibetan. The Tibetan refugees in India also spell it *yog.red*.

¹⁰ The unaccomplished forms include the suffix *gl*, while the accomplished forms include the suffix *pa* or have no suffix at all.

¹¹ The perfect in the sense I use it indicates the present result of an action performed in the past. This use is somewhat similar to the English "present perfect". The aorist, on the other hand, shows that the action was performed in the past but is not related to the present situation.

Compare for instance the following sentences:

kho-s kha.lag bzod-'dug/pa.red
 he-ERG food make-PERF/AOR