The rhetorical\(^1\) use of the Tibetan ergative

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Tibetan as spoken in the Central province ("Lhasa dialect") presents a standard nominal ergative structure, i.e. a specific marker for the agent\(^2\) 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: \( \text{X(erg)} \ Y(\text{abs}) \ V_2 \)

\[ \text{Ex 1:} \]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pu.gu} & \quad \text{\textquoteright}d\text{\textquoteright}s \quad \text{chang} \quad \text{\textquoteright}thun\text{-}g\text{l.\textquoteright}dug \\
\text{child} & \quad \text{this\text{-}ERG}^3 \quad \text{beer\text{-}ABS} \quad \text{drink\text{-}UNAC\text{+}EVID} \\
\text{ra.bzi} & \quad \text{mt} \quad \text{yong\text{-}ngas} \\
\text{drunk} & \quad \text{NEG} \quad \text{UNAC\text{-}INTER} \\
\text{\textquoteright}This \text{ child \ is \ drinking \ beer; \ won\text{'}t \ he \ get \ drunk?\textquoteright}^4 \text{ (Hu)}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\( \text{X(obl)} \ Y(\text{abs}) \ V_2 \)

a) possession

\[ \text{Ex 2:} \]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kho\text{-}nta} & \quad \text{deb} \quad \text{rdzag.do} \quad \text{yo\text{'o}.red} \\
\text{he\text{-}OBL} & \quad \text{book\text{-}ABS} \quad \text{lots} \quad \text{have\text{-}GNOMIC} \\
\text{\textquoteright}He \ has \ a \ lot \ of \ books.\textquoteright
\end{align*}
\]

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1 In this context, "rhetorical" would be equivalent to "pragmatic".
2 I prefer, along with other authors such as T. Tillemann, 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: \( \text{nga-r} \ \text{yl} \ \text{ge} \ \text{gnyis} \ \text{byor-byung} \)
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: \( \text{kho} \ \text{s} \ \text{khyl} \ \text{la} \ \text{zhed-kyl} \ \text{dug} \)
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: \( \text{kho} \ \text{s} \ \text{bu} \ \text{mo} \ \text{snying-rje} \ \text{po} \ \text{de-la} \ \text{btias-song} \)
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.

I. 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:

- nang rang sens bzunng bas ma ztn na/
- inside self mind catch (imperf) CONNECT NEG catch(perf) if
- phyil gzhon lus bzunng bas ci-las phan.
- 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: llos shig "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 bitaspayin "I looked", but *mthong-pa,yin "I saw".

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) 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 breakRESULT-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 breakRESULT-AOR+EVID
   "He broke the cup (not on purpose)."

This category will be referred to as V₁/₂ 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 V₁/₂

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

Ob'jasnjaj ja'eto l'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 reshel etu zadac'hu no ne reshel
   "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 V₁/₂ verbs correspond to the resultative verbs of the verbal pairs.
nonvol are a special case of verbs which may be used either as V₁ or V₂ nonvol.)

The ergative can occur with all the categories except V₁ nonvol:

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

However, the ergative does occur with V₂ non-volitional verbs such as "see":

Ex 8b: ngas dom gnyis mthong-byung
       1-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 V₁ 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 Ø) with the nine final auxiliaries (ylin, red, yod, yo'ored⁹, '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 aoristic¹¹ for the accomplished.

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⁹ yo'ored is traditionally written yol.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