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Agreement systems and syntactic organization in the Kham verb [Nepal]*

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1. *Introduction.*

Throughout its early history, Tibeto-Burman was characterized as monosyllabic with few remarkable features in terms of elaborate morphosyntactic systems. The few exceptions were found in the so-called "pronominalizing" languages of the sub-Himalayan region and dismissed as a probable consequence of a Munda substratum (Konow, in Grierson 1909). Maspero (1946) and Egerod (1973) rejected the Munda hypothesis and ascribed the feature to probable Indo-Aryan areal diffusion. Henderson (1957) was perhaps the first to suggest that the feature was "the possibility of a genuine Tibeto-Burman family trait." In 1975, Bauman, basing his work on a broad sampling of Tibeto-Burman languages introduced the first serious, typological study of the question. Many of the languages he drew upon were clearly outside the geographical confines implicit to the notion of a substratum influence. Furthermore, serious typological dissimilarities to the supposed substrate and highly significant consistencies within the morphologies of the Tibeto-Burman languages themselves provided all the evidence needed to imply a native origin of the complex verb morphologies to the internal inclinations and predispositions of Tibeto-Burman itself.

The actual time depth of the pronominal developments is still a matter of much debate; some assigning the feature to the proto language itself (Bauman, DeLancey, van Driem), while others imply that the feature should be interpreted as a relatively late innovation involving only a subset of the total language family (Caughley, LaPolla), or even that the feature may be due to independent, parallel developments accompanied by drift and areal influence (LaPolla).

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* The Kham of this paper is not to be confused with the Kham spoken in Eastern Tibet. An earlier version of this paper entitled "The maintenance of deictic integrity across Kham dialects" was presented at the 24th Sino-Tibetan Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, October 1991. After the initial writing I have benefitted greatly from a discussion with Scott DeLancey, and also a personal letter from Randy LaPolla. They do not necessarily agree with my views or conclusions presented in this paper. If I inadvertently misrepresent them or any others in this paper, I am solely responsible for such errors.

Arguments on all sides abound, and though there may not be sufficient evidence to confidently assign verb agreement systems to Proto-Tibeto-Burman, still, the similarities and consistencies in the languages which exhibit such features across the family cannot be lightly dismissed. Since the only reasonable option, in my opinion, capable of accounting for the similarities is one of "shared retention" from an earlier parent language, I would opt for (short of assigning the feature to a position within PTB itself) a high level, genetically related subset of the family of considerable antiquity—something akin to Thurgood's Rung branch.

Given the broad geographical spread of the proposed Rung languages, and their frequent geographical position in the midst of other genetic subgroupings, the proposal seemed at first rather 'odd' and highly unlikely. Given, however, Ebert's recent (1990) findings on related marking systems (apparently) distinctive to Gyarong and the Eastern Kiranti languages, there is now stronger evidence for a Kiranti-Rung genetic grouping. Thurgood (1985) as reported by LaPolla (1992) (I don't possess the original article) gives evidence that the Kanauri-Almora group, too, is genetically closer to Kiranti and Kuki-Chin than to the Tibetan-like languages it is usually associated with.

Incidentally, Thurgood had already noticed some striking similarities in the grammatical patterns of Rung and Kham, and tentatively placed Kham into the Rung subset as well. For a discussion of these similarities, see Thurgood 1984. In recent discoveries of a new Kham dialect—Gamale Kham—(which I will discuss at length in this paper), further similarities appear, both with Rawang and Limbu (Rung and Kiranti respectively). See, for example, footnote 3.

1.1 The aberrant Takale paradigm.

In the early stages of attempting to reconstruct a verb agreement system for Proto-Tibeto-Burman, among all the languages Bauman sampled (1975), Kham manifested a number of aberrant features difficult to link to an original PTB system. Foremost of these aberrations was a verbal agreement paradigm which manifested two complete sets of role marked agreement indices—one for subjects and one for objects. Later in the same year (1975), in an attempt to account for this anomaly, I presented material from another Kham dialect (Mhai) which suggested that a set of suffixed subject agreement markers could be posited for proto-Kham which had clear connections with an original Tibeto-Burman suffixal agreement system. Then, by certain innovative affixation developments in relative clauses, the original system was augmented by a redundant set of prefixed subject

markers. The older suffixes, now redundant, were lost and then replaced by a new set of object suffixes in Takale, also from innovative affixation *developments in clefted relative constructions*. My intention then, more than anything else, was to show that complex agreement systems could develop within Tibeto-Burman languages as independent innovations apart from substratum influences.

1.2 The relationship of the Takale paradigm to an earlier proto-system.

After DeLancey's work (1980), I have since rejected my earlier position that proto-Kham exhibited only subject agreement patterns in the verb. Though the Takale paradigm exhibited anomalous elements not easy to account for, DeLancey, basing his argument on a comparison of the more conservative Mhai data with other TB languages, concluded that the original Kham paradigm must have been fairly similar to the model he was proposing for PTB, and that the elaborate Takale system was due more to a reanalysis and restructuring of original PTB material than to completely novel innovations. (See also Bauman, 1979:426.) DeLancey predicted that the reanalysis process had likely begun with the reinterpretation of a 2nd person prefix belonging to the ***te** series (attested in a few other TB languages). In 1988 he adduced even further evidence for an original PTB prefixal series (along the same theme as the ***te** series) partly from Thurgood's (1984) proposed Rung subset of languages, plus data from Limbu (Weidert and Subba, 1985) and the newly discovered data from Lakher (Weidert, 1985). Based on the new evidence, he came to the conclusion that "the essential data required for an adequate solution to the Kham puzzle have to do with a prefixal paradigm which, while not as well attested as the suffixal series, seems to be of PTB or near-PTB provenience."

1.3 The scope of this paper.

In about the same year I began collecting data from a new Kham dialect, Gamale Kham, which turns out to be more conservative than the Mhai dialect, and shows clear evidence of an extant prefixal paradigm with apparent phonological similarities with Rawang *e-*, and Lakher *ei-*. (See also van Driem, 1990.) With the new comparative data from Gamale Kham, not only is there stronger support for an early TB prefixal series, but there is also illuminating new evidence for a solution to the "Kham puzzle." More important to my own purposes, however, is that the new material lends significant support to a principle which appears to lie at the heart of the Tibeto-Burman verb—DeLancey's notion of "deictic reference."

DeLancey (1980), enlarging upon Bauman's observation of a Tibeto-Burman "dominance hierarchy" (sometimes referred to as a hierarchy of 'animacy', 'agentivity', 'salience', or 'empathy'), in which 1st and 2nd persons take precedence over 3rd persons in verb agreement patterns showed that what was really at issue was an original system of "deictic reference" in the Tibeto-Burman verb. The systems alluded to are pragmatically oriented discourse grammaticalizations which mark such things as natural viewpoint, the directionality of attention flow, and the orientation of speaker and hearer as they relate to the event being reported. In fact, (as implied by DeLancey in 1980), deictic reference turns out to be a major focal point of organization in the Tibeto-Burman verb. The preservation of such reference across major Kham dialect boundaries is analogous to certain long term historical developments in Tibeto-Burman itself, and as such makes an interesting microcosmic case study of the phenomenon.

2. *Major dialect groupings.*

Within the Kham branch of languages [Nepal], there are three major dialect groupings: Takale Kham, Gamale Kham, and Sheshi Kham. A fourth group, less distinct than the others, centers around the Nisi-Bhuji nucleus, a probable offshoot from Takale. Other minor nuclei are probable, but about which little is currently known (Mhai being one of them). Within each of the major groups are numerous village dialects, each of which is distinguished from its neighbors by at least minor changes in vocabulary, phonology, and morphology. Most of the changes are well within the range of intelligibility, but when two villages are separated from each other by several stages in such a continuum, levels of intelligibility between them may be considerably reduced. Still, there is a homogeneity of features within major groupings that no longer holds when crossing over major dialect boundaries (which often coincide with major geographical boundaries). These internal features, mostly grammatical, are what give the dialects their distinctive definition. The kinds of differences that are significant across major dialect boundaries are thus in the area of morphosyntactic systems, not in lexical differences. They are systemic in nature and interrupt cohesive grammatical ties. As such, they play a major role in determining levels of inter-intelligibility.

2.1 Incompatibility of surface morphemes.

Though lexical similarity in root morphemes between Kham dialects is relatively high (72% between Takale and Gamale), inherent intelligibility levels between them is surprisingly low—somewhere in the mid 30% range