A note on PST-level morphosyntax

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The development in recent years of Tibeto-Burman (TB) morphosyntax as a rich field of analysis naturally leads to the question of possible assignment of any given feature to the earlier Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST) level. Three kinds of situation arise in this connection: (1) A and B are alternatives and a choice is to be made between them; (2) the feature appears only in Tibeto-Karen or Sinitic (Chinese, Bai) and a choice is to be made between positing absence or retention/loss; (3) the feature appears to be represented in both divisions of the stock and accordingly is to be set up at the PST level.

The first situation involves the OV vs. VO choice at the PST level: TB (almost without exception) OV vs. Sinitic and Karen VO. This representation might on the very face of it appear to favor the VO order, but both Chinese and Karen appear to have been influenced by a linguistic substratum (Austro-Tai) of VO type. It should also be noted that early Chinese texts show an OV arrangement after negatives, the generally conservative slot, suggesting retention rather than innovation. The evidence would appear to favor the OV alternative for PST, but, strictly speaking, the case remains moot.

The second situation is well exemplified by the verb agreement system (VAS). Bauman (1975), the pioneer in this field, and DeLancey (1989) have both assigned this to the PTB level, and this view has found widespread support, so much so that 'many people have begun to accept the existence of

a VAS in PTB as received knowledge' (LaPolla 1989:356). LaPolla argues very cogently that a more likely possibility is that 'one or more languages in the family innovated a VAS and it spread geographically' (p. 357; see also LaPolla 1990), paralleling a similar opinion expressed earlier by the writer: 'Pronominalization impresses as an innovation within TB (northern spread ...)' (Benedict 1983:fn. 15; not cited by LaPolla). In any event, neither Chinese nor Bai appears to show any trace of this feature, strengthening the view that it is an innovation in TB, albeit at a fairly early level (Tangut has it as an 'optional' feature). Again, as in the case of VO order (above), it cannot be absolutely excluded as a possibility at the PST level and in this sense the case can be said to remain moot.

The third situation, involving features with some representation in both Tibeto-Karen and Sinitic, permits of assignment to the PST level, e.g. PST 'collective plural' *-n suffix (Benedict 1972: fn. 428). The vast difference of almost two millennia in time depth between Chinese (Archaic) and the much later recorded TB languages leads on occasion to some surprising correspondences, but even marked asymmetry in evolution does not in itself provide sufficient grounds to deny an indicated PST status. The prime example here is supplied by the PST *ka - *ga first-person marker,[1] presented at considerable length in the writer's Lund (1988) handouts on Sino-Tibetan reconstruction. Written Tibetan (WT) -ka ~ -ga represent the simple marker, whereas the creaky tone of Written Burmese (WB) -ká reflects an earlier *s- prefixed form (< *s-ga, a regular shift; cf. WT sga 'saddle', WB ká). The 'high tone' initial *ŋ- of P-Tamang 'I'

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[1] The *ga variant was a close-juncture form.

reflects an assimilated *ŋa-sŋa < *ŋa-sga. Elsewhere in TB, however,
the marker has either been 'detopicalized' (Kiranti *a-ŋa-ga, et al. '1st p.
pronoun'; cf. PTB *ŋa 'id.') or 'promoted', usually to 1st person pronoun
(Qiang ka, Lepcha and Ahi Lolo both go < *ga, et al.) but in Kiranti to 2nd
person pronoun (*ga, et al.). The early Chinese sources, as one might well
have anticipated, show a mélange of pronominal forms, with representation
of all the above:

卬 : ŋâŋ/ŋâŋ (loan) '1st p. pr.' (GSR-699a), 'apparently used when
contrasted with another person and therefore stressed' (Schuessler
1987:5), from *ŋâ-g[a]; cf. 我 ŋâ/ŋâ: '1st p. pr.' (GSR-2a), from PST *ŋâ
'self' (Benedict 1988:3).

若 : nịak/ńźịak (loan) '2nd p. pr.' (detopicalized) (GSR-777a)
from *ńịa-k[a]; cf. 爾 niǎr/ńźịę: (loan for ńia/ńźịę:) '2nd p. pr.'
(GSR-359a), the 'Vulgar Archaic Chinese' (AC) equivalent (see Benedict
1988) of 汝 nịo/ńźịvo: (loan) 'id.' (GSR-94j), the latter showing the
regular *-a > *-o shift, from PST *na 'id.'.

余 : sgịo/ịvo '1st p. pr.' (GSR-82a) and 予 *dịo/ịvo (loan) 'id.'
(GSR-83a), from *sga (with regular PST *-a > -o shift); also the double
台 sgịəg/i '1st p. pr.' (GSR-976p), also from *sga, but with regular *-a
> -ịəg shift after initial dental sibilant/affricate, paralleling other double
forms (Benedict 1988:3).

It can be seen from the above that even within Chinese itself the full
evolution from marker to promoted pronoun is in evidence, apparently
reflecting diverse dialectal developments. The prefixed *s- forms from
*s-ga are morph-for-morph equivalents of the WB -ká marker, with the

*s- to be identified with the ergative -s marker found in WT, i.e. PST-level
*ŋa-s-ka ~ *ŋa-s-ga yielded the promoted *s-ga forms of AC as well
as the WB -ká marker. The 'high tone' initial *ŋ- of P-Tamang (above) is
paralleled both in Wu (Shanghai dial.; see Benedict 1983) and Min
(Pulleyblank 1989), with representation also in the early bronzes (ibid.), as
indicated by the use of 魚 s-ŋi̯o (<*s-ŋya) 'fish' to write 吾 ŋo =
*s-ŋo (< *s-ŋa) 'I'. Additionally, PST-level *kow '3rd p. pr.' with ergative
*-s (WT kho-s) yielded AC 厥 ki̯wăt/ki̯wot '3rd p. pr.' (GSR-301c),
which occurs both in the possessive and (bronze inscriptions) nominative
roles, apparently having undergone early (before 750 B.C.) 'de-
ergativization'. The indicated *-s > -t is the regular shift, found also in
other key roots: 'bone', 'fruit', 'seven' (Benedict 1987:27-8); in the modern
language, Cantonese k'øy '3rd p. pr.' is a product of the same pronominal
root, reflecting initial aspiration as well as an earlier suffix: *k'i̯wăd <
*k'i̯wăt+. It is arguable, perhaps, that the /s/'s involved here are not
cognate or, somewhat differently, that although they are indeed cognate, the
ergative role seen in WT represents an innovation. In the writer's opinion,
however, it is far more likely that both the WB and the AC forms are
products of an earlier *ŋa-s-ga, with the *-s to be assigned an ergative
role at that early level.

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