Sunwar copulas

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Sunwar is a Kiranti language spoken primarily in the Okhaldunga district of Nepal. The data reported here are all from a single informant, Tangka Raj Sunuwar, and were collected in Eugene, Oregon, where Mr. Sunuwar is attending college.

Sunwar has four etyma of recognizably copular function: two existentials, tŝhā² and baak, and an equational nā, with a suppletive allomorph ho. Two of these etyma, tŝhā and ho, are recent borrowings from Nepali. Of the remaining two, nā is apparently the older as a copula. The Sunwar verb has three paradigms: a "simple" conjugation, in which agreement markers are suffixed directly to the stem; the Past, in which the agreement suffixes follow a past tense marker *ta; and the Nonpast, which is built on a nominalized stem plus a suffixed form of the copula nā (see Genetti 1988 for paradigms). The equational nā conjugates in only one paradigm, which corresponds to the simple conjugation of other verbs:

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The conjugation of the copula nā

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1 The research reported here was supported in part by the National Science Foundation under grants BNS-8711370 and BNS-8910221. I am grateful to Carol Genetti, Larry Hayashi, Leslie Opp-Beckman, and most especially to Tangka Raj Sunuwar for useful discussions of Sunwar data.

2 The transcription used is generally phonemic but still preliminary. The opposition of high and low tone on lexical stems is phonemic; /'/ marks a high-tone stem, and low-tone stems are unmarked (pitch on syllables following the stem is not contrastive). The falling coda which occurs with both tones is predictable in verbs (Genetti to appear) but not in nouns. It is marked in conjugated forms in this paper with /'/.

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Upper-case vowel symbols represent voiceless vowels, and upper-case [B] preceding a word-final voiceless vowel represents a partly devoiced stop. The phonological status of this devoicing remains unclear. The low back vowel transcribed as [ŋ] alternates with [a] in the conjugation of verbs, apparently conditioned by syllable weight; but elsewhere in the overall phonemic system these appear to be contrastive.
The borrowed ho occurs only as the 3rd singular form. This suggests that an earlier stage of the language may have lacked a 3rd sg. form of ná, a situation which might have arisen from the common situation in which the morphologically least marked copular form — normally, and certainly in any TB language, the 3rd sg. — is omitted in equational sentences.

This hypothesis is supported by a parallel defect in the non-past verb conjugation. Compare the non-past endings with the paradigm of ná given above:

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_Sunwar non-past endings_

The non-past paradigm represents a morphologization of ná with its agreement; it apparently originated in a syntactic construction involving a nominalized verb stem, with the copula as the finite verb. This paradigm, like that of ná, has a non-cognate form in the 3rd singular; this presumably reflects the same gap in the original paradigm as the borrowed form in the copular paradigm. (The etymology of the 3sg. non-past -bÁ is not firmly established, but it likely reflects the Bodic nominalizer *ba*).

The existential/locative *baak*, which is also a lexical verb 'dwell, reside', conjugates normally, distinguishing simple, past, and non-past paradigms: *baâti 'I was', *baânuŋ 'I am/will be'. (Thus *baânuŋ* is etymologically *baak-ná-uŋ*). The full and regular conjugation of *baak*, and its synchronic lexical sense, suggest that its copular function is a relatively recent development.

The borrowed copula _tshá_ comes into Sunwar with a full Nepali inflectional paradigm. Compare:

1) á-nu  'tsuûbu  má-'baâ-bÁ
   1st-DAT knife  NEG-exist-NP3s
   'I wouldn't have a knife.'

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3 What is presumably a remnant of the nominalizer is still visible in vowel-stem verbs, which in the non-past conjugation have a distinct stem with a final /í/ and falling tone: cp. *tastaŋ* 'I saw (him)', *tainuŋ* 'I see'. This is the regular reflex of final *-t*.
2)  ā-nu  'tsuûBu  tshāIn
    1st-DAT  knife  exist+NEG+PL
    'I don't have a knife.'

(1) shows the native Sunwar negative construction with 'baak'; (2) shows the Nepali plural negative form of tshā. (Cp. also the suppletive past tense in ex. 19). The only sign of nativization that the paradigm shows, according to our consultant, is the 3sg form tshaα, which he identifies as characteristic of the speech of older monolinguals ("old ladies"), although in connected narrative which we have recorded he uses it himself. He says that people who have studied Nepali grammar will tend to use the more correct Nepali form tshā. This unaltered paradigm undoubtedly represents a very recent borrowing.⁴

In contrast to existential 'baak and tshā, nā is typically equational:

3)  go  'kōIts  nā-ŋ
    I  Sunwar  be-1s
    'I am a Sunwar.'

However, it can be used as a locational, when it indicates past tense, in contrast to present tense tshā:

4)  go  khaθmandu-m  nā-ŋ
    I  Kathmandu  -LOC  be-1s
    'I was in Kathmandu.'

5)  go  khaθmandu-m  tshu
    I  Kathmandu  -LOC  exist-1s
    'I am in Kathmandu.'

The contrast between 'baak and tshā is epistemological, marking a distinction between what I have elsewhere called "old" and "new" information (DeLancey 1986, 1990), although this terminology is rather imprecise. A rough characterization of the difference is that tshā represents information which the speaker knows simply because he knows it, while 'baak represents information which he knows through information channels to the outside world — it may be hearsay or inference from some evidence, but 'baak can also be used if he saw it with his own

⁴ Mr. Sunuwar says that he had asked a number of older people, thinking that there must be a native Sunwar equivalent for tshā, and while they all agreed that there must be, no one could think of it.
eyes. I use the simple tense here advisedly — the condition is not that the
speaker has (experiential) seen it, at one time or another, but that it is
something he would not know if he had not seen it (see DeLancey 1990).
Thus (6) would be said by someone who had seen Carol in Kathmandu, and
was bringing word of it, while (7) would be uttered by someone who knew
that Kathmandu was where she had gone, but did not have first hand
knowledge of her presence there:

6) Carol khatmandu-m 'baâ-tâ
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist-P3s
   'Carol is in Kathmandu.'

7) Carol khatmandu-m tshaa
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist+3s
   'Carol is in Kathmandu.'

The past/non-past distinction is available with 'baâk:

8) Carol khatmandu-m 'baâ-bâ
   Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist-NP3s
   'Carol will be in Kathmandu.' (e.g. when you get there, she'll be
there already).

While our consultant never saw anything ungrammatical about first person
forms of 'baâk, such clauses tend to have odd interpretations:5

9) go khatmandu-m 'baâ-ti
   I Kathmandu -LOC exist-P1s
   'I saw myself in Kathmandu.' (e.g. in a dream)

The same semantic distinction holds in the possessive and existential
senses of 'baâk and tshâ. (10) would be a normal report, while (11)
would be appropriate if, for example, the speaker had reached into his
pocket and unexpectedly found a knife:

5 Mr. Sunuwar suggested as another possible reason for an association between tshâ and
first person the fact that it does not distinguish tense. The non-past form 'baâ-bâ
is normally interpreted as future, while the morphologically past form translated as present in
(6) actually has some past sense (because it implies that she was already there when the speaker
saw her). Mr. Sunuwar suggests this as one reason why people might prefer to use the defective
tshâ, which does not distinguish tense, in a sentence like go khatmandu-m tshu 'I am in
Kathmandu.'
10) ą-nu  'tsuûBU  kaa  tshaa  
      1st-DAT  knife  one  exist+3s  
      'I have a knife.'

11) ą-nu  'tsuûBU  'baâ-tâ  
      1st-DAT  knife  exist-P3s  
      'There's a knife on me!'

Likewise, (13), in contrast to (12), suggests that the speaker discovered the knife:

12) a-nu  'tsuûBU  kaa  tshaa  
      3rd-DAT  knife  one  exist+3s  
      'S/he has a knife.'

13) a-nu  'tsuûBU  'baâ-tâ  
      3rd-DAT  knife  exist-P3s  
      'S/he has a knife!'

The semantic contrast between 'baak' and tshâ can be identified with one made in some other TB languages (DeLancey 1986, 1990, to appear: Sun 1991). This distinction is coded in Sunwar with two morphemes which are both clearly new to the function, and one of which had to be borrowed for the job. It is possible, of course, that the modern system represents relexicalization of an ancient semantic contrast, but the evidence suggests rather that the entire system is a recent development. The common pattern for TB languages seems to be at least a two-term copular system, distinguishing equational and existential functions. However, Hayu, apparently a close cousin of Sunwar, has only one, no(t) (Michailovsky 1988). This is evidently cognate to Sunwar ná, lending support to the inference that at an earlier stage of Sunwar or some immediate precursor the copular system consisted only of ná, and thus presumably lacked the unusual epistemological system encoded in the modern set of copulas.

All three copulas occur with various non-finite forms of the verb in constructions which form a significant part of a complex system of tense/aspect/evidential categories. The epistemological opposition is thus imported into the verbal system. There is both an imperfective and a perfect construction using 'baak', each of which carries with it part of the "new knowledge" semantics of the existential. In narrative discourse we

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6 While the number of languages for which this semantic distinction has been reported remains small, it is attested from all over the world (DeLancey 1990).
find, contrasting with the simple past, a perfect with the existential ‘baâ-k’ in the 3rd person singular form, and the main verb conjugated in the simple paradigm. This has an inferential perfect sense:

14) pi-tì
   come-3s-Pst
   ‘S/he came.’

15) pi-me ‘baâ-tì
   come-3s exist-P3s
   ‘S/he came. [I hear].’

This construction does not have the sense of surprised direct perception. In my small collection of narrative data, the ‘baâ-k’ perfect is quite common, but normally marks inference, as in (16), or events which the speaker did not personally witness, as in (17):

   next day tiger there across cross-3s exist-P3s
   ‘The next day the tiger had crossed the river.’

17) kalpa boō-šì naamin kyarśE ’khor-ge
    old man get up-NF then goat pen-ALL
   lâ-me ‘baâ-tì
    go-3s exist-P3s
   ‘The old man got up and went to the goat pen.’

This construction can be used with stative as well as eventive predicates:

18) Tangka khathmandu-m baâ-me baâ-tì
    Tangka Kathmandu -LOC exist-3s exist-3sPERF
    ‘Tangka is in Kathmandu [I hear].’

There are two imperfective constructions, consisting of a nominalized form of the lexical verb with ‘baâ-k or tshâ’, each of which has the semantic force of the existential it is built on. We thus have a four-way contrast:
19) kyaršE 'sāf-šo thiyo⁷
   goat      kill-NOM  TSHA/3s/PST
   'He was killing a goat/goats.'

20) kyaršE 'sāf-šo tshaa
   goat      kill-NOM  TSHA/3s/NPST
   'He is killing a goat/goats.'

21) kyaršE 'sāf-šo 'baā-tā
   goat      kill-NOM  BAAK-3sPST
   '[I saw] he was killing a goat/goats.' [e.g. when I discovered him]

22) kyaršE 'sad-a 'baā-tā
   goat      kill-3s    BAAK-3sPST
   'He killed a goat [I hear or infer].'

The various grammaticalized constructions can be concatenated. At one point in a story about killing a marauding tiger, the villagers have just caught sight of the tiger on a nearby hillside, and (23) reports their sudden realization that a group of children had been playing near where the tiger was:

23) ?al-puki ?ōtTh dāra-m gyar-ša 'baā-šo
    child-PL  this.side hill-LOC play-NF  exist-NOM
    'baā-me 'baā-tā
    exist-3pl  exist-3sPST
    'The children were still playing on that hill!'

The construction in which 'baak is used with the non-final -ša gives a persitve sense, so gyar-ša 'baak here means 'were still playing'. This construction is itself in the -šo 'baak- construction indicating newly acquired knowledge, reflecting the impact of the realization on the minds of the villagers, who at this point constitute the experiential center of the narrative. This in turn is in the 'baak perfect, marking it as information which the narrator acquired at second hand.

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⁷ The paradigmatic borrowing from Nepali includes the suppletive past paradigm.
REFERENCES


