

Sunwar copulas

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Sunwar is a Kiranti language spoken primarily in the Okhaldunga district of Nepal.¹ 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, *tshá*² and *'baak*, and an equational *ná*, with a suppletive allomorph *ho*. Two of these etyma, *tshá* and *ho*, are recent borrowings from Nepali. Of the remaining two, *ná* 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 **tá*; and the Nonpast, which is built on a nominalized stem plus a suffixed form of the copula *ná* (see Genetti 1988 for paradigms). The equational *ná* conjugates in only one paradigm, which corresponds to the simple conjugation of other verbs:

	SINGULAR	DUAL		PLURAL	
		INCLUSIVE	EXCLUSIVE	INCLUSIVE	EXCLUSIVE
1st	<i>ná-ŋ</i>	<i>ná-sE</i>	<i>ná-sku</i>	<i>ná-i</i>	<i>ná-ikI</i>
2nd	<i>'ná-ye</i>	<i>'ná-si</i>		<i>'ná-ni</i>	
3rd	<i>ho</i>	<i>ná-sE</i>		<i>ná-m</i>	

The conjugation of the copula ná

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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 / '. 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 [á] 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:

	SINGULAR	DUAL		PLURAL	
		INCLUSIVE	EXCLUSIVE	INCLUSIVE	EXCLUSIVE
1st	-nuŋ	ná-se	ná-sku	-náí	-níkI
2nd	-neye	-nísi		-nini	
3rd	-BÁ	-níse		-nim	

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.³ 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', 'baânun 'I am/will be'. (Thus 'baânun is etymologically *baak-ná-un). 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) ā-nu 'tsuŋBU má-'baâ-BÁ
 1st-DAT knife NEG-exist-NP3s
 'I wouldn't have a knife.'

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 /i/ and falling tone; cp. 'taetan 'I saw (him)', ta'inun 'I see'. This is the regular reflex of final *-t.

- 2) *ā-nu* *'tsuūBU* *tshāĩn*
 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 *tshaa*, 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* *'kōĩts* *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 khathmandu-m* *nā-ŋ*
 I Kathmandu -LOC be-1s
 'I was in Kathmandu.'
- 5) *go khathmandu-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 khathmandu-m 'baâ-tâ
Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist-P3s
'Carol is in Kathmandu.'
- 7) Carol khathmandu-m tshaa
Carol Kathmandu -LOC exist+3s
'Carol is in Kathmandu.'

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

- 8) Carol khathmandu-m 'baâ-BĀ
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 'baak, such clauses tend to have odd interpretations:⁵

- 9) go khathmandu-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 'baak and tshā. (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 tshā and first person the fact that it does not distinguish tense. The non-past form 'baâ-BĀ 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 tshā, which does not distinguish tense, in a sentence like go khathmandu-m tshu 'I am in Kathmandu.'

10) *ã-nu* *'tsuûBU* *kaa* *tshaa*
 1st-DAT knife one exist+3s
 'I have a knife.'

11) *ã-nu* *'tsuûBU* *'baâ-tɿ*
 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-tɿ*
 3rd-DAT knife exist-P3s
 'S/he has a knife!'

The semantic contrast between *'baak* and *tshã* can be identified with one made in some other TB languages (DeLancey 1986, 1990, to appear; Sun 1991).⁶ 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 *nã*, lending support to the inference that at an earlier stage of Sunwar or some immediate precursor the copular system consisted only of *nã*, 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

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 'baak in the 3rd person singular form, and the main verb conjugated in the simple paradigm. This has an inferential perfect sense:

- 14) pi-t1
come-3s-Pst
'S/he came.'

- 15) pi-me 'baâ-t1
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 'baak perfect is quite common, but normally marks inference, as in (16), or events which the speaker did not personally witness, as in (17):

- 16) ?a'diisa dzoi ?ai'tshi 'haâmBU šoô-se 'baâ-t1
next day tiger there across cross-3s exist-P3s
'The next day the tiger had crossed the river.'

- 17) kalpa boô-ša ŋaamin kyaršE 'khor-ge
old man get up-NF then goat pen-ALL

lâ-me 'baâ-t1
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-t1
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 'baak 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 'saî-šo thiyo⁷
 goat kill-NOM TSHA/3s/PST
 'He was killing a goat/goats.'
- 20) kyaršE 'saî-šo tshaa
 goat kill-NOM TSHA/3s/NPST
 'He is killing a goat/goats.'
- 21) kyaršE 'saî-šo 'baâ-tĀ
 goat kill-NOM BAAK-3sPST
 '[I saw] he was killing a goat/goats.' [e.g. when I discovered him]
- 22) kyaršE 'sad-a 'baâ-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 'baâ-šo
 child-PL this.side hill-LOC play-NF exist-NOM
- 'baâ-me 'baâ-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 persistive 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.

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

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