FROM INTERROGATION TO TOPICALIZATION: PROTO-TIBETO-BURMAN *la IN KATHMANDU NEWAR*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the synchronic variation found in the discourse functions of the particle *la* in Kathmandu Newar and argues that from this synchronic variation we can reconstruct a pathway of reanalysis from an original clause-final interrogative function to a clause-initial topicalization function. In adjacency pairs such as those found in examples (1) and (2) below, the Kathmandu Newar clause-final speech act particle *la* marks a yes/no interrogative speech act. In the second pair part, the affirmative response repeats the verb phrase; the negative response repeats the negated verb phrase. As described by Kansakar (1977), interrogative utterances with the final particle *la* are marked with a fall in pitch.

(1) A: \( ja \quad no-e \quad dhun-o \quad la \)
    rice eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT
    ‘Have you eaten yet?’

    B: \( no-e \quad dhun-o \)
    eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ
    ‘(I’ve) already eaten.’

(2) A: \( ja \quad no-e \quad dhun-o \quad la \)
    rice eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT
    ‘Have you eaten yet?’

    B: \( mo-noy-a-ni \)
    NEG-eat-PST.CJ-yet
    ‘(I’ve) not eaten yet.’

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 28th ICSTLL, University of Virginia, October 6-10, 1995. My thanks to Sara Trechter and Frank Li for comments on earlier drafts.
There is good evidence that this interrogative yes/no particle *la is a reflex of a Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) interrogative particle *la. Matisoff (1988:1347) sets up a Proto-Lolo-Burmese yes/no interrogative form *la on the basis of Lahu là, and Written Burmese là, and extends this to PTB on the basis of Meithel ła. The phonological correspondence for Newar initial l- and PTB initial *l- is well attested, as is the vowel correspondence with PTB *a: Newar la ‘moon, month’ < PTB *s-la/*g-la (STC¹ #144), Modern Newar lha < laha ‘hand’ < PTB *lak/g-lak (STC #86). Thus, the Newar form shows that the distribution of the PTB particle extends at least to the Kathmandu Valley.

In addition to yes/no la, there is another Newar sentence final particle le, which occurs in questions, often, but not exclusively, in content (wh-) questions (cf. Kölver and Shresthacarya 1994:195).

(3) "wɔ gɔnc wɔn-ɔ le"
   3.ABS where go-PRF.DJ PRT
   ‘Where did he go?’ (Malla 1985:65)

(4) "wɔ cae le?"
   3.ABS why PRT
   ‘Why is that?’

It may also co-occur with the yes/no particle la.

(5) "jhī-pī: thɔnɔ chē: cwaɔ wɔ-e dhun-ɔ la le"
   1.PL.INCL here house stay come-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT PRT
   ‘Had we already come (back) to stay here at our house?’

Finally, there is another form le (variant re), which occurs in polite requests,

(6) "thɔnɔ wa re"
   here come.IMPR PRT
   ‘Come here/Will you come here?’ (Malla 1985:65)

(7) "thɔ-the yan-a biu le"
   this-like do-CM give.IMPR PRT
   ‘Please do it like this.’ (cf. Manandhar 1986:233).

(8) "chɔ: bhɔte co le"
   2.ERG paper.LOC write.IMPR PRT
   ‘Write this down on the paper!’

Thus, Malla (1985:65) cites three different utterance final forms: la ‘simple question marker’, le ‘content questions’, and re(le) ‘persuasive particle’. Given the fact that initial r- is not a phonemic category for Kathmandu Newari, occurring only with Indic loan words, attributing the full three way contrast to Proto-Newar is problematic and needs further investigation. Nevertheless, the la/le(le)(re) opposition in Newar shows interesting parallels with a lâ/lê/lê opposition in Lahu cited by Matisoff (1988): lâ ‘marker of yes/no questions’ (p.1347), le ‘marker of substance-questions’ (p.1373), and lê ‘particle that requests the assent or consent of the listener’ (p.1374). If the Newar and Lahu particles turn out to be cognate, then we can reasonably assume that the particle system is of PTB origin (cf. DeLancey 1978).

THE TOPIC/FOCUS PARTICLE la

In addition to the Newar interrogative particle la, there is another discourse particle la that appears to have a distinct function. This particle is ubiquitous in colloquial conversations and is established enough to be present in dialogs and reported speech from late Classical to modern literary texts. The first example (9) comes from a conversational text. The particle la follows a headless possessive relative clause NP, indicated via the relative marker -pī (for plural animate):

(9) olo chē-chā phukkā dū:-pī la
  > then house-RDP all collapse-REL PRT
  ‘And so, as for all those whose houses had collapsed,

    tinikha chō-gu-lī; cwō-cwō:-gu du ka
    Tundikhel one-CL-LOC stay-stay.IMP.DJ-NOM be-IMP.DJ EMPH
    they were staying throughout the Tundikhel area.’

The intonation contour on the first clause does not show the falling contour characteristic of interrogation, and the subsequent clause is not the second pair part of an interrogation adjacency pair. There is no turn transition indicated at the end of the first clause and the second clause is a follow-up to the first clause which maintains the same speaker’s turn. Thus, the particle highlights the preceding NP.

In looking at examples such as (9) above, the question arises as to whether the topic/focus form is related to the interrogative form, which we have seen as being of clear PTB origin. An alternative, of course, is that the interrogative la

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2 Examples from oral texts are written in phonemic transcription; examples from written texts are given in devanāgari transliteration.
and the topic/focus la are merely coincidentally homophonous and have no
historical relationship to one another. In this paper I argue that assuming a PTB
interrogative function, the topicalizing function can be shown to be emergent
from the interrogation function via specific stages in the reinterpretation of local
discourse relations marked by the particle, all of which are evident in
contemporary discourse. In other words, I will argue that a synchronic poly-
functionality for the form la is evidence of a progressive extension of the PTB
interrogative function towards a topic/focus function. We begin with yes/no
interrogation.

EXTENDED FUNCTIONS OF YES/NO QUESTIONS

As illustrated in the opening examples above, in the canonical yes/no
adjacency pair the cohesion of the first and second pair part is constructed via
the repetition of the verb phrase in its affirmative or negative form. However,
in many cases, the first pair part of a yes/no interrogative is not followed
directly by the second pair part. Instead, the conversational dynamics may
include material which intervenes between the question and its response. This
less canonical interrogative function is well attested for Newar la in spoken
discourse, as in example (10) below.

Example (10) comes from a three party conversation in which G is asking K
and L about their childhood memories of the devastating earthquake of 1934. G
initiates the sequence with a yes/no question addressed to K and L. However,
instead of a yes/no response, G’s question is immediately followed by another
yes/no question by K. The question demonstrates a tentativeness in making a
direct factual claim (understandably since the events happened more than 60
years ago) and attempts to clarify the scope of G’s previous question as to
whether there was electricity upstairs and downstairs, downstairs only, or not at
all. In the overlapping discussion, K’s tentativeness (as evidenced by the use
of the particle the ‘like/seem/appear’) contrasts with L’s certainty. What is less
canonical in conversation analytic terms is the fact that the first yes/no question
is followed by a second question which addresses the scope of the previous
question resulting in a dual-party discussion with overlapping turns. When K’s
question follows G’s previous question, it functions simultaneously as
interrogation, request for clarification, and delimitation of scope of assertion.3

(10)

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\begin{align*}
G: & \text{-bole bizuli mo-du-ni la} \\
> & \text{that-time electricity NEG-be.IMP.DJ-yet PRT} \\
& \text{‘At that time, wasn’t there any electricity yet?’}
\end{align*}
\]

3 Brackets on succeeding lines mark overlapping talk at turn boundaries.
K: bizuli du-sa kune-kune do-i la > electricity be.IMP.DJ-COND downstairs-RDP be-NPST.DJ PRT
   ‘If there was electricity, would it have been (only) downstairs?’

L: o-bole [mo-khu
   that-time [NEG-be.IMP.DJ
   ‘Not at that time.’

K: [töl-e no bizuli mó-du-ni thē
   [upstairs-also electricity NEG-be.IMP.DJ-yet like
   ‘It’s likely there wasn’t any upstairs yet.’

L: jhi-thae o-bole-no [bizuli mó-du-ni
   [IPL.INCL-place that-time-and [electricity NEG-be.IMP.DJ-yet
   ‘At our place, there wasn’t any electricity yet.’

K: [bizuli mó-du-ni thē-cwā
   [electricity NEG-be.IMP.DJ-yet like.stay
   ‘It doesn’t seem like there was any electricity yet.’

Thus, while the interrogative particle la functions canonically to mark speech acts in which a speaker seeks information from an addressee about a state of affairs in the world, one of the states of affairs that a speaker may wish to know about could be whether some presupposition is, in fact, shared or not shared knowledge between speaker and addressee. When this kind of interrogation occurs we find that the interrogative function includes the clarification of presuppositions and the establishment of shared knowledge, incipient contexts for extending the function of the particle.

The form is also well established in written genres with dialogue and reported speech. The following example (11) is from the modern short story Andhukār ‘Darkness’ by Cittadhara Ḥṛdaya. Here we find that the interrogative function overlaps with a referent clarification function. The first interrogative “wa-he la” ‘That (stuff)?’ functions as a clarification of the referent. Thus, when the two interrogatives are put in sequence, the expression of distaste introduced by the first interrogative, functions as context for the second interrogative me-gu jī lā ‘Would something else be OK?’ We can translate the sequence in a more colloquial English paraphrase as ‘That stuff? Isn’t there anything else?’ where the topic function of the first interrogative becomes more apparent.

(11) “bhapi” suman-āŋ vasah-ław haľ-a
     drink.IMP Suman-ERG medicine-water bring-PRF.DJ
     ‘Please, drink,” Suman brought some medicine.
“wa-he lá”
> that-EMPH PRT
“That (stuff)?”

kesar-aŋ chayŋ hī-kal-a
Keshar-ERG head turn-CAUS-PRF.DJ
Keshor twisted his head around.

“me-gu jī lá
> other-CL be.ok.NPST PRT
“Would something else be OK?”

baidhy-aŋ ma-jyū dhāḥ-gu
doctor.ERG NEG-be.ok.IMP.DJ say -NOM
“The doctor has said ‘No.’”

Another less canonical interrogative function for la occurs in a ubiquitous tag question construction with the negative form of the verb ‘to be’: mo-khu la, as in example (12) below.4 Significantly, the occurrence of the tag question does not entail a second pair part and accompanying speaker change. Instead, it often seeks clarification and confirmation of shared knowledge, establishes topics, and functions to support collaborative engagement in the discourse. In the example below, from a third person oral narrative, the tag occurs as the narrator is beginning the story and establishing the principal characters.

(12) ka laksmi laksmi-ya mo-khu
EMPH Laksmi Laksmi-GEN NEG-be.IMP.DJ
‘OK..so.. Laksmi, Laksmi, no, (I mean)

nārāyana-ya bya ya-e ma-k laksmi mo-khu la
> Narayan-GEN marry do-INF need-PRF.DJ Laksmi NEG-be PRT
Narayan wanted to marry..Laksmi, right?
laksmi bya ya-e ma-kole
Laksmi marry do-INF need.IMP.DJ-time
and in wanting to marry Laksmi,...’

In sum, it is important to emphasize that the interrogatives here are considered less canonical not because they are less frequent but rather because they may occur without an immediately occurring turn boundary followed by an affirmative or negative form of the verb phrase. Instead of an affirmative or negative second pair part, the discourse following the particle may include a

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4 This is exactly parallel to the Lahu question-tag mā hē? lá (see Matisoff 1988:973, 1077). [Ed.]
continuation by the same speaker, and elaborates or expands on the focus constructed via the interrogative form. In this sense, these functions illustrate one point on a graded continuum from canonical interrogation to the topic/focus function.

RHETORICAL REPETITION

A further extension of the particle's function occurs in rhetorical questions in which the interrogative form is followed directly by a corresponding repetition of the interrogative form in the second pair part. In example (13) below the first occurrence of la, by speaker G, is purely interrogative; it co-occurs with the politeness particle le reflecting the fact that G, a young woman, is asking her mother and uncle about their childhood. The second occurrence, by speaker K, is a repetition of the question followed by the answer. The construction is given emphatic stress and the particle la in the second case occurs with a rising intonation, rather than the falling intonation characteristic of interrogation.

(13)

K: bhatca yokkwo ləskor du-gulī:
little much group be.IMP.DJ-because
'Because there was a somewhat large group,

bhatca gya-nə mwal-ɔ
little fear-also NEG.need-PRF.DJ
(we) didn't need to be all that afraid.

ekanta nə mo-jul-ɔ
lonely also NEG-become-PRF.DJ
(No one) got left alone.'

G: gyan-pu-se cwɔ: la le
> fear-ADJ-SENS stay.IMP.DJ PRT PRT
'Was it dangerous?'

K: gyan-pu la gyan-pu [sikko gyan-pu
> fear-ADJ PRT fear-ADJ [very fear-ADJ
'Dangerous? (It was) dangerous. Very dangerous.'

L: [tɔsɔkɔ gyan-pu]
[really fear-ADJ]
'Really dangerous.'
What is significant about an example such as (13) above is that the particle itself is no longer in the canonical position of an utterance final speech act particle in which clause final position is co-extensive with an utterance or turn boundary for the first pair part in an adjacency pair. Moreover, it does not co-occur with the falling intonation of interrogative utterances; instead, it co-occurs with a rising intonation. In example (13) above, the strategic use associated with the repetition of a previous utterance is emphatic and does not challenge the truth value of the proposition. Instead, repeating the proposition from the first pair part functions to establish a discourse focus for the proposition so that its truth can be emphatically asserted.

In other cases, repetitions can also create a discourse prominence in order to challenge a proposition. In the extended stretch of discourse in example (14) below, speaker B (stammering and inarticulate) interrupts a tape-recording session between M and R and accuses M of removing a paper used to gather up chicken droppings.

(14)

B: wo əthi chae li-kọy-a biy-a-gu kha-khi əthi
   that FILL why back-take-CM give-PST.CJ-NOM chicken-shit FILL
   ‘Why’d you go and take away that thing...chicken-shit ...thing.’

M: suna chu
   who what
   ‘Who? What?’

M: bhō li-kọy-a tal-ə dhọy-a-gu la
   > paper back-take-CM put-PRF.DJ say -PST.CJ-NOM PRT
   Are you saying the paper (for cleaning chicken-shit) has gotten taken away?’

B: ā
   yea
   ‘Yea.’

M: jī: thi-e la mo-thiy-a-ni
   > 1.ERG touch-NPST.CJ PRT NEG-touch-PST.CJ-yet
   ‘Touch it? (I) didn’t touch (it)!’

B: suna li-ka:-gu cae cae li-kọy-a-gu
   who back-take.IMP.DJ-NOM why why back-take-PST.CJ-NOM
   ‘Then who took it; why did you take it?’
In the initial utterance by B, the use of the substance interrogative cæ ‘why’ presupposes the proposition ‘you took away the paper’. In response, the first occurrence of la by M illustrates the interrogative form functioning as a request for clarification, i.e. ‘Are you saying that...’. In the second use of la, M establishes a new proposition using the lexically superordinate verb thi- ‘touch’ rather than repeating li-ka- ‘take away.’ Using the la particle, M establishes the proposition with the lexically superordinate term, and then emphatically refutes it, thus refuting B’s initial accusation. The function of the form la here is that of interrogation and topicalization. In fact, the actual glossing of the function as “interrogative” or “topicalization” is problematic, which is exactly what we would expect to find in a case of poly-functionality resulting from progressive extension to new functions.

TOPICALIZATION

When not occurring in the second pair part of an adjacency pair, la occurs after an initial constituent and functions as a topic marker. In example (15) below, the first occurrence (in G’s turn) is purely interrogative and co-occurs with the le particle. The second occurrence (in K’s turn) illustrates a repetition/focus function. The three subsequent occurrences cannot clearly be identified as repetitions or even rhetorical questions, nor do they occur with the falling interrogative intonation. Their function in this discourse segment is to emphasize contrast. In the larger conversational context (not included because of space considerations), the speakers are describing how after an earthquake, they were able to get along fairly well in contrast to the many others who, because of the rubble and partially collapsed houses, had to sleep in open spaces away from the neighborhood. Thus, the use of the particle la functions to contrast the speaker’s own situation with that of the less fortunate neighbors. Again, the segment opens with a question by G.5

(15)

G: jhi-pi: thono che: cwo woe dhun-wo la le

> 1.PL.INCL here house stay come-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT PRT

‘Had we already come (back) to stay here at our house?’

K: thono che: la kho: ni

> here house PRT be.IMP.DJ EMPH

‘Here at this house, yes.

5 G’s use of the inclusive plural suggests involvement and closeness, although she obviously was not present at the events that took place.
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thọṃ čhē thahā mś-woy-a
here house upstairs NEG-come-PST.CJ
We didn’t come upstairs (for fear of collapse).

jhī-pī: la yo kkwo he cwo-a ni
1.PL.INCL PRT a lot EMPH stay-PST.CJ EMPH
As for us, we stayed (out of the house) for a long time.’

jhī la bọca chapor du-gulī:
> 1.PL.INCL PRT average hut be.IMP.DJ-NOM.ABL
‘As for us, since we had an average sized hut (outside by the house),

bhoti-ca subidha du thē cwō: ka
little-DIM facilities be.IMP.DJ like stay.IMP.DJ EMPH
it was like we had some of the comforts of home.’

Another clear example of the topicalization function is seen in (16) below, which again comes from the modern Newar short story Andhukār ‘Darkness’ by Cittadhar Hṛdaya (NS 1067 = 1947). The first occurrence is interrogative in function; the second occurrence is clearly functioning as a topicalization device.

(16) nhya va-a lā kha
> sleep come-PRF.DJ PRT be.true.IMP.DJ
‘‘Did you actually get any sleep?’’

suman-aṃ keśar-yā lāḥ ḫvān-a/
Suman-ERG Keśar-GEN hand grab-PRF.DJ
Suman took hold of Keśar’s hand.

nhyaḥ aha
sleep hah!
‘‘Sleep! Hah!

jiṃ sva-ye lā saṃsār-ay da he ma-du
> 1.ERG look-NPST PRT world-LOC be EMPH NEG-be.IMP.DJ
The way I see it, it doesn’t exist.’’

Finally, a clear case of the topic function can be found in example (17) below, from an oral narrative. In the extended narrative segment given below, the particle la occurs precisely at positions of topic switching; hence, its functions appear to be correlated with discourse prominence. The narrative segment begins with a description of Lakṣmi’s unattractive and slovenly sister. The first occurrence of la marks the shift to the description of the distraught Brahman, whom Narayan has tricked into marrying Lakṣmi’s unattractive older sister so that Narayan may go ahead and marry Lakṣmi, the younger sister.
After a switch into the directly quoted speech of the Brahman, the second occurrence of the particle *la* occurs at the point when the older sister herself begins to talk by addressing the Brahman. Hence, the two occurrences of *la* correspond exactly to shifts in character focus. The segment begins with the narrator describing Laksmi’s unattractive sister.

(17) gono gono dhu dwā dwā mū-kol-ɔ
where where dust pile pile gather-CAUS-PRF.DJ,
‘Wherever dust would pile up,

ono ono leta-i-gu  makoça: gae-k-u-sa
there there happy-NPST-NOM cobweb hang-CAUS-IMP.DJ-COND there she would be happy. If there were cobwebs draped about,

gae-k-a-na  leta-i-gu
hang-CAUS-CM-also happy-NPST.DJ-NOM
the hanging cobwebs would make her happy

phor phor jul-ɔ  dha-e-wo
dirty dirty become-PRF.DJ say-INF-and,
When things became really filthy,

ơ-the  he  cwon-i-gu
DEM-like EMPH stay-NPST.DJ-NOM
she would likewise remain.

ơ-yə-gu  ju-sa  jəko  cō  yaū
DEM-GEN-CL become-COND just head light.
It was only in these ways, that she would relax.

e-ju:gu-nittī  wo  brhamon  la
> DEM-become.IMP.DJ-NOM-result that Brahman PRT
As a result, the Brahman,

toskɔ  he  dikɔ-dakɔ  juy-a:  dukho  juy-a:  a
very EMPH sadness-RDP become-NF sorrow become-NF now he became very depressed,

gae ya-e  mal-i  chu ya-e  mal-i
how do-INF need-NPST.DJ what do-INF need-NPST.DJ
and being depressed asked, “What’s to be done? “What’s to be done?”

chɔ  sɔpha  sughɔr  yan-a:  dhupe  dhū-nɔ  yan-a:
2ERG clean neat do-NF, incense dust-also do-NF, when you’re cleaning, or incense is burning,
kopā syat-ço
head ache-PRF.DJ
you get a headache,

chɔ go-yɑ thae cwon-e
2.SNG what-GEN place stay-NPST.CJ
What sort of place do you intend to live in?

gɔ-yɑ-gu yan-a cwon-e nhya
what-GEN-CL do-CM stay-INF prefer
What would you prefer to be doing?"

dhaː-gu dhaː-bole
say-NOM say-time
he asked,

> dɔ la dhuː dhuː dwą dwą du thae
1.DAT PRT dust dust pile pile be.IMP.DJ place,
“For me, a place with piles and piles of dust,

makɔpikɑ ga-thae gɔnɔ gɔnɔ phor jul-ɔ
cobweb hang-place where where dirty become-PRF.DJ
a place draped with cobwebs, wherever it is dirty,

gɔnɔ gɔnɔ chɛː lwapu ghoraghɔ lwapu
where where house.LOC quarrel strife quarrel
wherever there is fighting in the house, bickering and strife;

jul-ɔ cɔnɔ chɛ jɔko ji-to cɔndɔ wɔ:
become-PRF.DJ there house just 1-DAT peace come.IMP.DJ
it’s only in that sort of house that I find peace.’

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The essence of the argument presented here is that the PTB interrogative particle *la has undergone a progressive extension of its discourse function as a result of occurrences in routine conversational exchanges. The discourse contexts for interrogation have functioned to invite further extensions in the range of uses for the particle from a canonical turn boundary interrogative function towards a within-turn, within-utterance, within-clause topic function. Fundamental to the argument is Vološînov’s insight that an utterance should be considered a social communicative act such that even a “monologic” text such as a written paragraph or long oral narrative be viewed as “a vitiated dialogue worked into the body of monologic utterance” (1973:111 [1929], italics in original). This insight is fundamental to much of the subsequent work in grammaticization (cf. Traugott and Heine 1991).
In other words, the discourse organization and information structuring of the monologic text can be viewed as a function, in part, of an internalization of dialog. In purely cognitive terms, Vološinov’s dialogism can be taken to suggest a speaker’s internalized mental representation of an addressee’s mental representation. It is on the basis of the speaker’s obviously incomplete understanding of the addressee’s degree of understanding that the discourse is partially structured. Thus, in part, it is the internalized representations of addressees’ viewpoints that speakers “interact” with in making rhetorical choices and structuring information. In discourse terms, dialogism suggests, among other things, the ongoing collaborative engagement of participants in establishing topics and negotiating the boundaries of shared and non-shared knowledge. In the progressive extension of the Newar particle la from interrogation to topicalization, it is the speaker’s internalized notion of how the discourse context is perceived by the addressee, and the social process of collaborative engagement, that functions as the local discourse context for the development of the particle la: (1) as a means for the speaker to seek information that s/he wishes to possess about the world at large, (2) as a means for seeking information that the speaker wishes to possess about the addressee’s degree of shared knowledge in a discourse, (3) as a means of establishing shared knowledge between speaker and addressee, and (4) as a means of directing the addressee’s attention towards a topical referent or proposition. It is in extended (monologic) narrative texts (example (17) above), that we find the most completely grammaticized occurrences of the particle’s topicalization function.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABL ablative
ABS absolutive
ADJ adjective
CAUS causative
CJ conjunct
CL classifier
CM concatenation marker
COND conditional
DAT dative
DEM demonstrative
DIM diminutive
DJ disjunct
EMPH emphatic
FILL filler
GEN genitive
IMP imperfective
IMPR imperative
INCL inclusive
INF infinitive
LOC locative
NEG negative

NF non-final
NOM nominalizer
NPST non-past
PRF perfective
PRT particle
PST past
RDP reduplication
REL relativizer
SENS sensory
SNG singular
REFERENCES


