

# Semantic Peculiarities of Tibetan Verbs of Being<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

It does not take long for learners of the Tibetan language to be aware of complex functions of Tibetan auxiliary verbs and the difficulty of using them appropriately and effectively. Grammatical rules can only guide the learners to understand simple constructions in unmarked contexts, but the rules do not provide them with thorough comprehension of how language is actually used in everyday life. Like other social norms, rules generating linguistic behaviors can be violated and undergo constant change. This is particularly true when several linguistic forms are used to indicate the same function, thus making it possible for speakers to manipulate their choices.

As an illustration, to express the concept of existence in Tibetan, we have at least three choices of verbs: yöö, tuu, and yöö ree. Superficially, these verbs show overt agreement with person. But when we observe closely how people use them, we see that grammatical agreement is not an adequate answer. Speakers do manipulate these forms, choosing the word that best fits their purposes. That is, whenever there is a linguistic choice, there tends to be a pragmatic contest among words. These linguistic forms are the focus of this paper.

Tibetan verbs of being, namely the copula yin and ree, and the existential yöö, tuu, and yöö ree, have been demonstrated to possess a feature uncommon to other Tibeto-Burman languages (Chang and Chang 1984; Beckwith 1991). This feature, an association with person, distinguishes yin and yöö, generally used with the first-person speaker in the declarative mood, from the rest. Recent studies (DeLancey 1990, for example) show that there are semantic factors involved other than person distinction. In this paper I investigate the interplays between forms and functions of these

verbs in conversations. It will be argued that the distinction in question can be better explained in terms of "evidentiality," the semantic concept which underlies the speaker's linguistic choice, namely how the speaker views the event and the information she or he has obtained (cf. Chafe and Nichols, 1986). In this way, I follow Palmer (1986) in suggesting that a language can be either predominantly judgment or predominantly evidential.<sup>2</sup> Tibetan, as will be demonstrated below, belongs to the latter type.

## 2. Tibetan verbs of being

Two groups of verbs in Tibetan which occur in sentence-final position and function both as independent verbs and as auxiliary verbs are copulative and existential verbs. The former is used to identify, whereas the latter expresses the concepts of existence, possession, or location. Existential verbs show another interesting feature; they occur in copulative constructions in the sentence type N/NP + ADJ + V. When functioning independently, verbs of being indicate neither tense nor number. When used as auxiliary verbs, they mark tense, aspect, and evidentiality. Generally they are used in accord with person agreement, as shown below. The terms **conjunct** and **disjunct** are adopted here to refer to the first person versus non-first person verbal forms. It should be emphasized that the use of these terms to indicate person distinction is not wholly adequate, as has been pointed out by Hale (1980) and Shöttelndreyer (1980) for the data in Newari and Sherpa respectively. However, for the sake of simplicity in terms of reference, I have adopted this terminology.

Table 1: Independent and auxiliary functions of verbs of being

	COP <sup>3</sup>	EXIST	
CONJUNCT	<u>yin</u>	<u>yöö</u>	
DISJUNCT	<u>ree</u>	<u>tuu</u>	<u>yöö ree</u>

  

Auxiliary Functions (using the verb <u>thi</u> 'write')			
	NON-PAST	PAST	
		IMPF	PF
CONJUNCT	<u>thiki yin</u> 'I will write'	<u>thipa yin</u> 'I wrote'	<u>thi yöö</u> 'I've written'
	<u>thiki yöö</u> 'I write; I am writing'		
DISJUNCT	<u>thiki ree</u> 's/he will write'	<u>thipa ree</u> 's/he wrote'	<u>thi tuu/yöö ree</u> 's/he has written'
	<u>thiki tuu/ yöö ree</u> 's/he writes; s/he is writing'		

Other than these verbs of being, verbs like soŋ, shāā, and cūŋ also occur in sentence-final position and are auxiliary verbs indicating tense, aspect, and evidentiality. soŋ and shāā are generally used when the speaker wants to narrate about what happened to other people. cūŋ, on the other hand, is the speaker oriented: it is used when the speaker wants to tell what happened to him or her. However, these evidential verbs are out of the focus of the paper. In this article I will emphasize only on the independent functions of verbs of being. Special attention will be paid to existential verbs in copulative constructions, as they convey interesting semantic functions and elucidate the relation between choices of verbal endings and evidentiality.

### 3. Data Presentation and Analysis

#### 3.1 Copulas yin and ree

When asked what is the distinction between the copulas yin and ree, Tibetan speakers almost unanimously agree that they differ in person. yin is used with the first-person speaker whereas ree is used with a non-first person. For example,

- 1) ŋa phööpa yin  
I Tibetan CONJ  
I am a Tibetan

- 2) *khōŋ*      *phōōpa*      *ree*  
      S/he      Tibetan      DISJ  
      S/he is a Tibetan
- 3) *tī*      *nee*      *thēŋ* *thənpō*    *yīn*  
      this    my      time    first    CONJ  
      This is my first time
- 4) *thəp* *tī*      *nee*      *ree*  
      book this    my      DISJ  
      This book is mine

(1) and (2) are self-explanatory. In (3) the conjunct form is used, despite the fact that the subject of the sentence is not a first-person pronoun. *yīn* is common when it is used to refer to the things or persons that belong to the speaker. In this case the speaker mentions that the experience is his first time. Many Tibetans accept that the conjunct and disjunct copulas are interchangeable. Therefore, the disjunct form can also be used in (1) and (3) without any change in meaning.<sup>4</sup> That is, when the conjunct or disjunct is used depends on the kind of verb in the question. For example, if one asks: *thəp tī sūū ree* 'whose book is this?', then the addressee tends to repeat the verbal form in the answer, as in (4).

Consider the following sentences.

- 5) *khyērəŋ*    *phōōpa*      *yīnbēe*  
      you      Tibetan      CONJ Q  
      Are you Tibetan?
- 6) *ŋa*      *amālaa*    *ree*      *khyērəŋ*      *phumə*      *yīnta*  
      I      mother    DISJ    you      daughter    CONJ IM  
      I be the mother and you the daughter

In an interrogative sentence as in (5) the conjunct is used, as the goal of the question is the hearer (see Hale 1980; Agna and Chonjore 1987). In (6) the focus is also on the hearer, the one who wants to do the action, and thus the conjunct form is used. Note that in (6) the disjunct is used with the subject, *ŋa*. I asked the mother of the child who spoke this sentence why *ree* is used here. She explained that this was because the speaker is not the real mother, but here the child assumes the role of a mother. That is

why, the disjunct form is preferred in this sentence. Beckwith (1991) points out that the difference between these verbs, especially when they occur in interrogative sentences, is better explained as deictic difference, rather than person distinction.

### 3.2 Existentials

#### 3.2.1 *tuu* versus *yɔɔ ree*

The disjunct *tuu* and *yɔɔ ree* are often mentioned in the literature concerning existential verbs in the evidential system of Tibetan. *tuu*, according to Goldstein (1973), implies that the speaker has direct perception of a particular event, while *yɔɔ ree* typically denotes hearsay or indirect experience of the speaker for a general statement. DeLancey (1990), inspired by the data and analysis in Turkish (Slobin and Aksu, 1982), argues that the distinction in question is old versus new knowledge, rather than the common evidential contrast proposed by Goldstein. *tuu* is used when the speaker did not know about the event until he participates in it. In contrast, *yɔɔ ree* is used when the speaker has known about the statement described in the utterance for quite some time.

During my field experience, both accounts of previous research laid foundation for my interpretation. However, I found that Goldstein's and DeLancey's analyses are oversimplified. Their views to the evidential meanings of these verbs are too static. For them, it seems that both existential verbs are used separately in fixed situations. To me, on the other hand, *tuu* and *yɔɔ ree*, in certain contexts, do not belong to separate evidential categories. Talking about the same situation, the speaker may switch between both forms depending on purposes of speaking. For example, *tuu* is more appropriate when the speaker wants to convey a message that the event is her first time, but when she wants to emphasize that she has known about it well, the form *yɔɔ ree* is preferred. This is the reason why *tuu* is commonly found in personal narratives or dreams whereas *yɔɔ ree* often appears in folktales or stories of remote past.

Another problem of Goldstein's argument is how we define a certain situation as being particular or general. When asked what Tibet was like in the old days, a Tibetan grandmother used *yɔɔ ree* in almost all instances. But when the same speaker talked about the situation in Nepal where she stays, she preferred *tuu*:

- 7) *phoo la semcɛn maŋpɔ yɔɔ ree yaa maŋpɔ yɔɔ ree*  
 in Tibet there are many (kinds of) animals.  
 There are many yaks

- 8) (thetuu) phesyyuu la moṭa sheṭaa mintuu moṭa shii tuu  
 (at that time) in Nepal there were not many cars.  
 There were (only) four kinds of cars

The mentioned situations in Tibet and Nepal as in (7) and (8) both seem to be general, but the choices of the existentials differ in each case. A possible interpretation for the above examples may be that the speaker wanted to stress the fact that she herself participated in the situation; therefore, she knew about the statement in (8) for certainty. That is, tuu is used here to connote force of conviction. Because the speaker as a refugee did not stay in Tibet any more, what she knew before about Tibet (though the knowledge was acquired through direct personal experience) may not be true for the present situation.

Another example showing the contrast between tuu and yoo ree can be seen in the following short dialog between a ten-year-old nun (A) and a six-year-old boy (L):

- 9) (a) L: koomoo fii tee a  
           Give (me) two rupees  
      (b) A: ṅa la mintuu  
           I don't have  
      (c) L: yoo ree  
           (You) have  
      (d) A: yoo maree  
           (I) don't have  
      (e) L: yoo ree ṅee mik thūṅ cun  
           (You) have; I saw with my own eyes

In (b) and (d) the translations in English do not clarify what is going on in the dialog; as both mean 'I don't have.' However, in Tibetan the contrast between tuu in (b) and yoo ree in (d) is evident. Generally when tuu is used with the first-person subject as in (b), it signifies that the speaker has found out about something. In this case, A might want to say that she unexpectedly found out that she did not have any money, so she could not give any to the boy. But what is interesting here is that the boy said: yoo ree 'You have.' When I ask the native speakers for comments about the distribution of these verbs, they tend to say that to determine which form to use is dependent upon which form appears in the question. This is an understatement, as

it is true only when there is no challenge between the speaker and the hearer. It is true only when both participants cooperate.

In our example above L expected A to give him some money. So when she said that she did not have it, he challenged her by using the old knowledge form, *yɔɔ ree*. L then repeated the same verb in (e) as well as emphasized that he knew that A had money since he saw it with his own eyes. Because L is a small boy, he might have misunderstood the usual way of using the evidential *yɔɔ ree*, which in general conveys not only a person's assimilated knowledge but also a second-hand source of information. This seems to be a justifiable interpretation of L's use of this evidential verb, as I have noticed that the boy often uses *yɔɔ ree* when talking about situations in which he himself participates. He often says *nee mik thuy cuy* 'I saw it with my own eyes' after the form *yɔɔ ree*.

Another interpretation is also possible. When the addressee uses *tuu*, the speaker wants to contrast with him, so he chooses another alternative. If this is the case, then it shows how people intentionally manipulate words and how pragmatic meaning can be contested against lexical meaning.

When existential verbs are used as copulas, following the adjectives, there are semantic extensions. Chang and Chang (1984) propose that *ree* is the unmarked copula verb. When *tuu*, which itself connotes force of conviction, is used, this semantic feature is also present in the copula construction.

10) ...thongpɛə phy tji, "rəŋ khi nām'a tɿtə nŋ  
 cəpō shetəŋ tɿtə."s, ləpə rɛə ləpə taa...phytji, " nŋŋ nām'a, nŋ  
 cəpō tə shetəŋ yɔɔ ree...

...this neighbor's son said, "This bride of yours is very beautiful...". As soon as he said this...this boy said, "My bride may be very beautiful... (Chang and Chang, 1984: 616, italic added, phonetic symbols simplified)

Chang and Chang acknowledge that there is a pragmatic contest between *tuu* and *yɔɔ ree*. When one has a direct knowledge about something, it is not always necessary to use *tuu*. The speaker may prefer the latter form when he wishes to qualify or discount his statement. Therefore, in (10), they explain that the mentioned *tuu* suggests that the speaker who comments about the bride has eyewitness knowledge about it. The addressee's answer, in which *yɔɔ ree* appears, implies that he wants to qualify the

speaker's statement. However, in my opinion, that the addressee switched from *tuu* to *yɔɔ rɛɛ* is not because he wanted to qualify the comment, but because as a husband-to-be, he must have known that his bride is beautiful. It is not his newly acquired knowledge.

### 3.2.2. *yöö*

The conjunct *yöö* is shown to be used in association with the first person speaker (see (11) below). However, in everyday discourse I found that *yöö* is also common among non-first person subjects, as will be illustrated in the following examples.

- 11) *ŋa la thep maŋpɔ yöö*  
       I D-L book many CONJ  
       I have many books

- 12) *khɔŋki khɔŋla thep maŋpɔ yöö sũŋki<sup>5</sup>*  
       s/he-ERG s/he-D-L book many CONJ speak-PF  
       S/he said that s/he had many books

The use of *yöö* in (11) is common, as the subject of the sentence is first-person. But the appearance of *yöö* in (12) is an exception to the normal usage. This, according to Chang and Chang (1984), is due to the environment, the verb of saying *sũŋ*. They explain that whenever the verb of being precedes the verb of speaking, only the conjunct or neutral form will be used. But we will see that this is not the case. In (12) we would expect *tuu* after *maŋpɔ*, since the subject is *khɔŋ*, but *yöö* is used instead. This, I believe, can be better explained along the line of Hale's argument (1980) in that the subject of the speaking frame is coreferential to that of the quoted speech. That is, the subject of the matrix clause, *khɔŋ* picks out the same individual as the embedded subject, *ŋa*, which in this case is omitted. Note that there is no indirect speech in Tibetan. We cannot replace the conjunct form in (11) with either *tuu* or *yɔɔ rɛɛ* without a change in meaning. If the disjunct form is used, it means that the matrix subject and the embedded one are not the same person.

Now consider the following example.

- 13) *ti yakpɔ yöö*  
       this good CONJ  
       This (one) is good



One morning I went into the kitchen to get a sweeper. My Tibetan mother helped me find a good one and said the above sentence. There are two interesting aspects about (13). First, we see that the conjunct form is used, despite the fact that the subject of the sentence is non-first person. Second, the existential *yöö* is used in the copulative sense, following the adjective. Chang and Chang (1984: 606) claim that when *yöö* is used with non-first person subjects, it indicates the speaker's lack of certainty in the event described in the utterance. However, in my example above, there is nothing indicating that the speaker is not certain about her statement. In contrast, *yöö* in this case seems to imply that the speaker is confident of what she talks about. As the sweeper belongs to her, she knows which one is good and thus can give me a suggestion. Therefore, the disjunct use of *yöö* in this sentence points out a semantic meaning--personal experience. In contrast to *tuu*, *yöö* tells us that the speaker did not discover the fact that the particular sweeper is good at the time of speaking.

Another interesting aspect about *yöö* is that it encodes both epistemic and epistemological modality. Other than conveying an evidential meaning that the speaker knows about a given statement due to his or her personal experience, it also functions as a modal indicating an abdication of responsibility on the part of the speaker. For example,

- 14) *logkhën*            *yaŋpa*            *yöö*  
       beggar            come-V.N.    CONJ  
       The beggar might have come

*yöö* in this sentence does not denote tense or aspect. The past time is encoded in the verbal noun suffix (V.N.), *pa*. With the appearance of *yöö*, we may interpret this sentence as: the speaker was quite sure of the beggar's coming. He heard him begging at the door. Still he did not want to assert it with full certainty, for fear that he might be wrong, as he did not see the beggar with his own eyes. I will not discuss in detail the modal function of *yöö* in this paper, but one thing that is relevant to our discussion is that the evidential meaning of *yöö*, what we may call "the speaker's involvement," (Agna and Chonjore, 1987), is carried on in the modal function.

In sum, the conjunct *yöö* as an existential does not always cooccur with the first person. But in general a given noun or

noun phrase is related to the speech act participant (i.e. the speaker or the hearer) in some way.

- 15) phu laa khapaā yɔɔ  
 boy (Hon.) where CONJ  
 Where is the boy? (usually referring to the  
 hearer's son, due to the honorific term of  
 address)

The speaker uses the conjunct verb, as she addresses the hearer, the mother or a close relative of the boy, expecting the latter to know the whereabouts of the boy, the overt NP in the question.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have shown that there is a relationship between choices of verbal endings and evidentiality, and that the problem of evidentials is not a purely syntactic one. It is instead concerned with how people use these linguistic forms in everyday situations which can deviate from idealized contexts. The data suggest a trend of change in linguistic theory in that interpretation of grammatical forms is not fully based on fixed categories, but it does require a linguist's dynamic view which must be in accord with a model of language use.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>This research, which is part of my doctoral research, is supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. Tibetan here refers to the spoken language among Tibetan refugees residing in the Bodnath area, Kathmandu, Nepal. Most of these speakers are originally from Lhasa; some grow up in Kathmandu and speak the Central Dialect, which is quite similar to the Lhasa dialect. Data for this paper, mostly obtained from fieldnotes, were collected during an eight-month stay in Kathmandu from March 1991. I would like to thank my primary Tibetan consultant, Tempa Sangmo for the valuable insights in her language as well as for her friendship during my stay with her family. Special thanks go to Soraj Hongladarom for his help.

<sup>2</sup>Palmer (1986: 53) explains that some languages have grammatical systems of one type of epistemic modality only: English has only judgments, while Tuyuca has only evidentials. In Tibetan the evidential system is grammaticalized. Evidential verbs are obligatory as tense/aspect markers.

<sup>3</sup>Abbreviations used in this article are: COP = copula, EXIST = Existential verb, CONJ = Conjunct, DISJ = Disjunct, IMPF = Imperfective, PF = Perfective, Q = Question, IMP = Imperative, ERG = Ergative case, D-L = Dative-locative case.

<sup>4</sup>Goldstein (1973) points out that when the copula *yin* is used in place of *ree*, it carries more emphasis. Therefore, in (4) if *ree* is replaced by *yin*, the speaker wants to stress the fact that the book belongs to him or her, not to anyone else. During my experience in a Tibetan home, I often notice that the speaker prefers *yin* when she wants to emphasize that something is good because she has personal knowledge about it. As an example, one evening during our dinner the boy of the family took a glass of water, which was put on my tray. So his mother gave me another glass, which is not the one that I usually use. She said:

ti      tsəŋma   yin  
this   clean      CONJ  
this (one) is clean

It seems to me that the speaker uses the conjunct here to emphasize the fact that the glass is really clean, as it belongs to her and perhaps she has cleaned it herself.

<sup>5</sup>*suŋki* is an abbreviation of *suŋki tuu* (he or she says or is saying). In the colloquial language, this kind of abbreviation is common.

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