

'Anti-ergative' marking in Tibeto-Burman*

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Using arguments based on the data on verb 'agreement' (pronominalization) in Tibeto-Burman (TB), LaPolla 1989 (see also LaPolla 1992) claims that Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) should be reconstructed as a language with no inflectional morphology. In that paper it is argued that the PTB system of grammatical relations¹ was close to the typical 'role-dominated' (Van Valin & Foley 1980) Burmese-Yipho system (epitomized by Lahu—see Matisoff 1973); that is, a system where there is no definable 'subject' or 'direct object', and where semantic and pragmatic principles govern the organization of discourse, not syntactic functions. In this paper we look at the nature of 'objects' in TB languages, and find additional support for this role-dominated view of PTB grammatical relations. From a survey of ninety-five reliable grammars or descriptions of languages in the TB family, I have found 11 languages with no nominal object marking, 20 languages with nominal morphology consistently marking the patient as object, regardless of clause type, and 64 languages where the patient in monotransitive clauses is often or always marked with the same postposition as the goal or beneficiary (dative) in ditransitive clauses. This type of marking is discussed in Dryer 1986 as Primary Object marking. I argue that this type of marking in the TB languages reflects the semantically based nature of grammatical relations in PTB.

1. The Concept of Primary Object

Dryer (1986) presents arguments toward establishing the syntactic functions Primary Object (PO) and Secondary Object (SO) to contrast with

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¹ 'Grammatical relations' is here meant to include syntactic relations (manifested as the syntactic functions 'subject', 'direct object', etc.), semantic relations ('agent', 'patient', etc.), and pragmatic relations ('topic', 'focus', etc.). It is assumed that semantic and pragmatic functions are inherent in all languages, whether or not they are marked, though not all languages grammaticalize syntactic functions.

Direct Object (DO) and Indirect Object (IO). If in a language the notional indirect object (goal, benefactive, etc.) of a ditransitive verb is treated syntactically and/or morphologically the same as the notional direct object (patient, theme, etc.) of a monotransitive verb, then that language can be said to evidence a PO/SO distinction. The notional indirect object of the ditransitive verb and the notional direct object of the monotransitive verb is then the PO, and the notional direct object of the ditransitive verb is the SO. This marking can be reflected in a language's verb agreement system or in its nominal marking system. An example of the latter is the preposition *ya* in Khasi (Mon-Khmer, Assam; Dryer 1986:816, originally from Rabel 1961:77):

- (1) a *ka la yoʔʔii ya ʔuu khlaa.*
 she PAST see OBJ the tiger
 'She saw the tiger.'
- b. *ʔuu hiikay ya ŋa ka ktien phareŋ.*
 he teach OBJ lsg the language English
 'He teaches me English.'
- c. *ʔuu hiikay ya ka ktien phareŋ.*
 he teach OBJ the language English
 'He teaches English.'

In (1a) *ya* marks the notional direct object (the theme), whereas in (1b) *ya* marks the notional indirect object (the benefactive) and the notional direct object (the theme) is unmarked. In (1a) the theme is marked as the PO, while in (1b) it is unmarked and is the SO. In (1c), *ka ktien phareŋ* 'the English language' is again the notional direct object of the verb *hiikay* 'teach', but here the verb is used monotransitively and so the notional direct object gets the PO marking.

2. The Primary Object in TB

Dryer (1986:816-817) presents evidence of postpositional PO marking in three TB languages: Lahu (tʰàʔ), Kokbōrok (nɔ), and Kham (lay):

- (2) Lahu (Matisoff 1973:156-7)
- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. <i>ŋà thàʔ tâ dʂʔ.</i> | b. <i>lìʔ chi ŋà thàʔ pî-ʔ</i> |
| lsg OBJ NEG.IMP hit | book that lsg OBJ give |
| 'Don't hit me.' | 'Give me that book.' |

- (3) Kokborok (Karapurkar 1976:156-7)
- a. *burwy-čhikla-rɔg-nɔ rɔhɔr-di.*
 girl- young- many-OBJ send- IMP
 'Send the young girls.'
- b. *buphaŋ-nɔ twy ru-di.*
 tree- OBJ water give-IMP
 'Give the tree water.'
- (4) Kham (Watters 1973:44, 46, 54)²
- a. *nga: zihm nga-jxy-ke.*
 1sg house 1sg-build-PAST
 'I built a house.'
- b. *no-e ka:h-lay poh-ke-o.*
 3sg-ERG dog- OBJ beat-PAST-3sg
 'He beat the dog.'
- c. *no-e nga-lay cyu:-na-ke-o.*
 3sg-ERG 1sg-OBJ watch-1sg-PAST-3sg
 'He watched me.'
- d. *no-e nga-lay bxhtanji ya-na-ke-o.*
 3sg-erg 1sg-OBJ potato give-1sg-past-3sg
 'He gave a potato to me.'

Aside from the languages mentioned by Dryer, we also find postpositional PO marking in at least fifty other languages or dialects of TB (out of a total of ninety-five surveyed):³ Achang (*te*⁵⁵), Aka/Hrusso (*e / i*), Akha (*aŋ*), Apatani (*mi*), Bai (*no*³³), Burmese (*kou*), Cangluo Menba (*ka*¹³), Central Monpa (*ga*), Chaudangsi (*ja*), Chepang (*ka y*), Chutiya (*na*), Cuona Menba (*le*³¹), Dafla (*am*), Darang Deng (*we*⁵⁵), Dimasa (*ke*), Dulong (*le*³¹), Ergong (*ke*), Gahri (*rog/dog/tog/g*), Hallam (*rāng*), Jingpo (*e*⁷⁵⁵).⁴

² In those TB languages that have verb agreement systems there may be some overlap where the agreement system and the nominal marking seem both to be marking the PO (as in this example, which led Dryer to claim that the agreement system also marks PO's); but the agreement systems in most TB languages are based on person hierarchies (1p > 2p > 3p, or 1p/2p > 3), not on semantics. In some languages there will be partially semantic direction marking or (as with Dulong *nɔ*-) 'anti-1st person agent' marking (see note 9, below), but the marking is essentially person marking, and is not primarily semantic, as is the nominal marking.

³ The form following the language name is the postposition used to mark the primary object.

⁴ In Burmese Jingpo the full form of this particle is *phe*⁷⁵⁵ (Hanson 1954:537). There is a tendency for high frequency particles to lose their initial consonants in TB, e.g. Lahu *thə?* ~ *hə?* ~ *ə?* 'object particle'. [Ed.]

Jinuo (a³³), Kinnauri (pəŋ-nu-u-uŋ), Lalung (ga), Limbu (-n/en), Lisu (tɛ⁵⁵), Lüsu (wə⁵³), Luoba (mɛ), Manipuri (bu), Maru (rɛ), Milang (m-um), Miri (em), Moklum (ma), Namuyi (dɛ⁵⁵), Naxi (to⁵⁵), Newari (ya to), Nocte (on pronouns only: nang), Nusu (na³⁵), Pumi (tɕi⁵⁵ [singular]; bi e⁵⁵ [plural]), Purik/Ladakhi (a/la), Purum (ta/dā), Sherpa/Jirel/Lhourri (la/laa), Singpo (fē), Tangkhul Naga (li), Taoping Qiang (zi e³³), Rabha (ō/nā), Shixing (sɿ³³), Tangut (ɪn¹), Tipura (no [na]), Yakha (go), and Zaiwa (lě-žě). These languages represent the Burmish, Loloish, Jingpo/Nungish, Tibetan, West Himalayish, East Himalayish, Barish, Naga, Abor-Miri-Dafila, and Qiangic branches of TB, and cover almost the entire TB geographic area.

In a number of other languages the accusative is generally unmarked, but the dative or dative/locative marker is sometimes or often used for accusative arguments, as in Balti, Bodo (Standard Plains Kachari), Bunan, Dhimal, Gurung, Magari, Manchari, Rangkas, Sunwari, Tamang, and Thami. From the total survey of 95 reliable grammars or language descriptions, 64 languages showed some evidence of the PO pattern, 20 languages with nominal morphology (postpositions) did not show the PO marking pattern,⁵ and 11 had no postpositional 'object' marking.⁶

From the fact that most of these PO-marking languages have grammaticalized different morphemes to mark the PO's, we can assume that the marking of PO's (or at least what we find attested in these languages) is not of great time depth. That the marking is very recent can be seen by the fact that even closely related languages may have different PO markers (e.g. Lahu, Akha), or differ by having PO marking or not (e.g. Akha, which has PO marking, and Hani, which does not). On the other hand, the fact that so many languages grammaticalized the same type of function suggests either that PO's already existed at an earlier stage of this family, or there was something about the protolanguage that caused the daughter languages to grammaticalize the same function in a parallel manner. A third possibility is that this feature is an areal trait, and is not constrained by genetic boundaries.⁷ I will follow up on the second possibility, taking this to be a prime example of what Sapir (1921:168ff) referred to as 'drift': as dialects split off from the mother language and diverge from each other, they carry

⁵ The languages with nominal morphology not showing the PO marking pattern are Angami Naga, Ao Naga, Chin, Care, Hanu, Kanashi, Khaling, Khambu, Lai, Lepcha, Mishmi, Motuo Menba, Old Kuki (Rangkhoh), Pahari, Pattani, Thado, Tinan, Tod (a Tibetan dialect of Himachal Pradesh) and Tujia.

⁶ The languages showing no postpositional 'object' marking are rGyarong, Lotha Naga, Langrong, Lushai, Mhar, Rai, Sema, Vayu, Yi, and Zahao. (Karenic, the non-verb-final branch of TB, has prepositions, not postpositions.)

⁷ I have not found evidence of non-TB influence on object-marking in those languages inside the People's Republic of China, though for the TB languages of Nepal there is the influence of Nepali. See note 16, below.

with them the seeds of, or motivation for, particular types of development (aside from universal tendencies). This often results in related languages manifesting very similar, though independent, types of grammaticalizations, such as English and German both independently grammaticalizing the phonological phenomenon of "umlaut" for plural marking (e.g. *foot/feet*, *mouse/mice*). The development of PO marking in so many TB languages might be evidence of such a common starting point or motivation in PTB. The question then is, how do we characterize this common starting point? If we are to reconstruct it for PTB, what exactly is it that we should reconstruct?

3. Anti-ergative Rather than Primary Object in TB

Though Dryer presents the PO/SO distinction as being a syntactic relation on a par with the DO/IO distinction, it is the contention of this paper that in TB (or at least the vast majority of TB languages) the marking is semantically based, and based on a contrast of *actor* vs. *non-actor*, not on a contrast between *object* vs. *non-object*.⁸ Dryer's analysis is that the main function of PO marking is to distinguish a more topical object from a less topical object, but this does not explain its use in monotransitive clauses, and why in many languages it can be used on a non-topical noun phrase. That it is not simply a type of topicality marking, as also suggested by Thompson (1990) for Chepang, is clear from the fact that it can appear on question words and focal NP's, the latter as in the following example (Caughley 1982:248; *taŋʔ* functions to mark salient new information, and here follows the PO marker *kay*):⁹

- (5) ʔohaŋsəykoʔ ʔal-taŋʔ-ʔaka-cə ləw ʔoʔ-nis
 SCn go- IIF- Pt- DI Excl that- DI
 ʔapa-caʔ-kay-taŋʔ krus-ʔa-tha-cə
 Father-KN- GI- IIF meet- Pt- GI- DI
 Then they went and they met the father and child.'

Caughley also points out that the PO marking 'has no necessary connection with definiteness' (p. 70), a corollary of topicality. PO marking is related to the topicality and 'object' status of the noun phrase only indirectly. It is the animacy or overall saliency of the argument that is important: in the vast

⁸ For example, Matisoff (1976:425-6) characterizes the primary object marker in Lahu (tháʔ) as an 'efficacy depressant' which indicates that 'the accompanying noun is a receiver of the action in spite of the fact that it might well be, under other circumstances, the initiator of the action.'

⁹ Caughley's abbreviations: SCn = Sequential Conjunction; IIF = Indirect Information Flow/Reportative; DI = Dual Number; KN = Kín (Related person); GI = Goal; Pt = Past.

majority of the languages mentioned above, the PO marking only occurs with animate or human participants, and then only when necessary for disambiguation, such as in marked word order constructions. That is, generally only non-actor NP's that might be misconstrued as actors will be marked as PO's. Dryer (p. 818) argues that '[t]he PO/DO parameter is independent of the ergative/accusative parameter, and they combine to form four language types.' That is, a language can be ergative and PO, ergative and DO, accusative and PO, or accusative and DO. I am suggesting that, at least in these TB languages, ergative and PO marking systems are not so independent, in the sense that both follow from a single motivation: the disambiguation of semantic role ('case recoverability' in the sense of Givón 1984). In many of these languages there is overt actor (ergative) marking as well as the PO ('anti-ergative', Comrie 1975, 1978¹⁰; or 'dehcticaetative', Blansitt 1984) marking, and the distribution of these two types is the same: in transitive sentences either ergative¹¹ or PO marking, or both, can be used.¹²

Those languages that have postpositions, but don't have the PO marking pattern (e.g. Tujia, Hani) generally mark NP's by strictly semantic principles. That is, a locative/goal (when marked) will always be marked the same way, and a patient/theme (when marked) will always be marked the same way, and there are no relation changing (or 'promotion') rules (e.g. passive, dative, antidative). We then have two types of marking in TB. Both

¹⁰ Comrie's 'antiergative' is defined as marking used on an object only when there is also a subject in the same sentence. Comrie sees this type of marking as being functionally motivated by a need to distinguish between subject and object. He only discusses direct objects in connection with antiergative marking, but as I am talking about marking motivated by the need to distinguish between agent and non-agent, it does not seem improper for me to use the term 'antiergative' as well.

¹¹ An interesting side issue involved here is the difference between systemic morphological ergativity and the type of optional simple actor marking we find in many TB languages. By 'systemic morphological ergativity', I mean a system like Basque or even Tibetan, where the ergative marking plays a particular role in the overall system of grammar, and is obligatory in certain contexts (this of course also contrasts with syntactic ergativity such as is found in Dyrball). The optional simple actor marking that we find, e.g. in Taoping Qiang does not figure into the grammatical system as a whole, and only appears when the speakers feel the need for disambiguating the semantic roles of the participants in the action of the sentence.

¹² The semantic (actor vs. non-actor) nature of nominal marking is also reflected in the form of the personal pronouns in some of these languages: an actor pronoun will be of one form (e.g. Bai ɲo³¹ '1sg actor'), while all other pronouns (genitive, goal, patient/theme) will be of another form (e.g. Bai ɲw⁵⁵ '1sg non-actor'). This type of anti-ergative marking can also appear in the verbal morphology, as in Dulong (Sun 1982), where there is a verbal prefix ɲw- which occurs only and in every case where a speech act participant is involved (as an argument, oblique, or possessor), but the speaker is not the agent of the clause. This same pattern occurs in several other languages as well, such as Dumi Rai (though with an a- prefix) and Rawang (a language closely related to Dulong, but which has an e- prefix).

are semantically based, but one depends on what semantic role an NP is,¹³ and the other on what semantic role an NP isn't. Both types of marking can be said to have evolved because of the semantic role-dominated nature of PTB. The marking is simply for semantic disambiguation (see for example Matisoff 1973:155-8 on Lahu *thàʔ*; Wheatley 1982 on Burmese *kou*). Therefore, what we need to reconstruct for PTB as the common starting point which led to the development of both types of marking that we find in TB, is a semantically based system of grammatical relations. By this is meant a language where the organization of discourse involves only semantic and pragmatic relations, and where there has been no grammaticalization of syntactic functions such as 'subject' and 'direct object'.¹⁴ One caveat to Paul Benedict and others hoping to reconstruct ergativity for PTB: this finding in no way supports arguments for reconstructing systemic ergativity in PTB; in fact, I have never seen any evidence that would allow us to reconstruct inflectional morphology of any kind for PTB.¹⁵

4. Developments Away From Pure Semantics

In a few of the TB languages, particularly those in Nepal, we find marking that is much more grammaticalized (generalized beyond pure semantic factors to 'saliency'). In these languages the PO postposition can mark a broader range of arguments.¹⁶ In the conclusion to his article, Dryer mentions that a language in which 'the verb only codes the person/number of human objects' (p. 842) is not a PO language, though it may look like one because only PO's are generally human; coding refers to human arguments, not PO's per se. Dryer cites a personal communication from Scott DeLancey suggesting that this is possibly the case in TB. Dryer discounts DeLancey's suggestion, but bases his objections mainly on the non-TB languages Ojibwa and Huichol, and only mentions the fact that one TB language, Kokborok, has PO marking on inanimate IO's as evidence that in TB it is not simply human marking. Dryer's conclusion is that 'even though something along the lines of a human/non-human distinction is a likely diachronic source for primary objectivity, that distinction has apparently often been

¹³ See Givón 1980 and Klimov 1984 on considering ergative morphology to be semantically based on the contrast of agent vs. non-agent.

¹⁴ For detailed arguments against the existence of syntactic functions in particular TB languages, see Anderson 1987 (Tibetan) and Bhat 1988 (Manipuri). See also the discussions of Lisu in Hope 1974 and Mallison & Blake 1981.

¹⁵ It should be emphasized that I am here talking about INFLECTIONAL morphology, not DERIVATIONAL morphology, such as the causative *s- prefix, which CAN be reconstructed for Proto-TB and even Proto-Sino-Tibetan.

¹⁶ This may very well be at least partially a result of the influence of Nepali, a PO marking Indo-European language. In fact the PO marker in Kham (Iay) is a direct borrowing from Nepali.

grammaticalized and reanalyzed as a PO/SO distinction' (p. 842). I would argue that both of these scholars are correct: DeLancey is correct in that for most TB languages the distinction only works for human 'objects'; Dryer is correct both in pointing out the source of PO marking (though I would see it as an actor/non-actor contrast related to humanness rather than a direct human/non-human contrast), and in asserting that some TB languages have grammaticalized this into true PO marking or a type of more general 'salient NP' marking (affecting subordinate clauses as well as nouns).

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