

‘Anti-ergative’ Marking in Tibeto-Burman*

Randy J. LaPolla

Institute of History and Philology
Academia Sinica

Using arguments based on the data on verb agreement (pronominalization) in Tibeto-Burman, LaPolla 1989 (see also LaPolla 1992) argues that Proto-Tibeto-Burman should be reconstructed as a language with no inflectional morphology. In that paper it is argued that the Proto-Tibeto-Burman system of grammatical relations¹ was closer 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’; a system where semantic and pragmatic principles govern the organization of discourse, not syntactic functions. In this paper we look at the nature of ‘objects’ in Tibeto-Burman languages, and here also find support for this view of Proto-Tibeto-Burman grammatical relations. From a survey of ninety-five reliable grammars or descriptions of languages in the Tibeto-Burman family, I found eleven languages with no nominal object marking, twenty languages with nominal morphology consistently marking the patient as object, regardless of clause type, and sixty-four languages with a type of marking 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 Tibeto-Burman languages reflects the semantically based nature of grammatical relations in Proto-Tibeto-Burman.

1. The Concept of Primary Object

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

*I would like to thank Søren Egerod, Martine Mazaudon, Boyd Michailovsky, Johanna Nichols, Jackson T-S. Sun, and other colleagues at the Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The earlier version (with the title ‘The primary object in Tibeto-Burman’) was also presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Chinese Languages and Linguistics, August 9-11, 1991, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

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 ɲa ka ktien phareŋ.*
 he teach OBJ 1sg 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 Tibeto-Burman

Dryer (1986:816-817) presents evidence of postpositional PO marking in three Tibeto-Burman languages: Lahu (*thàʔ*), Kokborok (*no*), and Kham (*lay*):

- (2) Lahu (Matisoff 1973:156-7)
- | | |
|---|--|
| a. <i>ɲà thàʔ tâ dɔʔ.</i>
1sg OBJ NEG.IMP hit
Don't hit me. | b. <i>liʔ chi ɲà thàʔ piʔ.</i>
book that 1sg OBJ give
Give me that book. |
|---|--|

- (3) Kokborok (Karapurkar 1976:156-7)
- a. buruɣy-čhikla-rɔg-nɔ rɔhór-di.
girl-young-many-OBJ send-IMP
Send the young girls.
- b. buphaŋ-nɔ tuɣ 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 Tibeto-Burman (out of a total of ninety-five surveyed):³ Achang (te⁵⁵), Aka (Hrusso; e/i), Akha (áŋ), Apatani (mi), Bai (no³³), Burmese (ko), Cangluo Menba (ka¹³), Central Monpa (gɑ), Chaudangsi (jā), Chepang (kɑy), Chutiya (nɑ), Cuona Menba (le³¹), Dafla (am), Darang Deng (we⁵⁵), Dimasa (kè), Dulong (le³¹), Ergong (ke), Gahri (rog/dog/tog/g), Hallam (rāng), Jingpo (eʔ⁵⁵), Jinuo (a³³), Kinnauri (pəŋ~nu~u~uŋ), Lalung (gɑ), Limbu (-n/en), Lisu (te⁵⁵), Lüsü (wæ⁵³), Luoba (me), Manipuri (bu), Maru (rè), Milang (m~um), Miri (em), Moklum (ma), Namuyi

²In those Tibeto-Burman languages that have verb agreement systems there may be some overlap where the agreement system and the nominal marking seem to both 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 Tibeto-Burman 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 nu-) '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.

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

(dɛ⁵⁵), Naxi (to⁵⁵), Newari (yɔtɔ), Nocte (on pronouns only; nang), Nusu (nɑ³⁵), Pumi (tɕi⁵⁵—singular; bie⁵⁵—plural), Purik/Ladakhi (ɑ/la), Purum (ta/dā), Sherpa/Jirel/Lhourī (la/laa), Singpo (fē), Tangkhul Naga (li), Taoping Qiang (zie³³), Rabba (ō/nō), Shixing (sɿ³³), Tangut (m^l), Tipura (no [nɑ]), Yakha (go), and Zaiwa (lě~zě). These languages represent the Burmish, Loloish, Jingpo/Nungish, Tibetan, West Himalayan, Abor-Miri-Dafla, Qiangic, East Himalayan, Barish, and Naga branches of Tibeto-Burman, and cover almost the entire Tibeto-Burman geographic area.

In a number of other languages the accusative is generally unmarked, but the dative or dative/locative marker can sometimes be, or is often, used for accusative arguments, as in Balti, Bodo (Standard Plains Kachari), Bunan, Dhimal, Gurung, Magari, Manchatī, Rangkas, Sunwari, Tamang, and Thami. From the total survey of ninety-five reliable grammars or language descriptions, sixty-four languages showed some evidence of the PO pattern, twenty languages with nominal morphology (postpositions) did not show the PO marking pattern,⁴ and eleven had no postpositional ‘object’ marking.⁵

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 the marking we find attested in these languages) is not of great time depth. That the marking is very recent can be seen in the fact that closely related languages have different PO markers (e.g. Lahu, Akha), or differ in terms of 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 that either PO’s were a fact of an earlier stage of this family, or there was something about the protolanguage that caused the daughter languages to grammaticalize the same type of function. A third possibility is that this feature is an areal trait, and is not constrained by genetic boundaries.⁶ 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 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 *foot/feet*, *mouse/mice* form of plural marking. The

⁴ The languages with nominal morphology not showing the PO marking pattern are Angami Naga, Ao Naga, Chin, Garo, Hani, Kanashi, Khaling, Khambu, Lai, Lepcha, Mishmi, Motuo Menba, Old Kuki (Rangkhōl), Pahari, Pattani, Thado, Tinani, Tod (a Tibetan dialect of Himachal Pradesh) and Tujia.

⁵ The languages showing no postpositional ‘object’ marking are rGyarong, Karen, Lotha Naga, Langrong, Lushai, Mhar, Rai, Sema, Vayu, Yi, and Zahao.

⁶ I have not found evidence of non-Tibeto-Burman influence on those languages inside the People’s Republic of China, though for those languages in Nepal there is the influence of Nepali. See note 14, below.

development of PO marking in so many Tibeto-Burman languages might be evidence of such a common starting point or motivation in Proto-Tibeto-Burman. The question then is, how do we characterize this common starting point? If we are to reconstruct it for Proto-Tibeto-Burman, what exactly is it we are to reconstruct?

3. Anti-ergative Rather than Primary Object in Tibeto-Burman

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 Tibeto-Burman (or at least the vast majority of Tibeto-Burman languages) the marking is semantically based, and based on an actor vs. non-actor contrast, not on an object vs. non-object contrast.⁷ 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, can be seen in the fact that this marking 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*):⁸

- (5) *ʔohaŋsəykoʔ ʔal-taŋʔ-ʔaka-cə læw ʔoʔ-nis ʔapa-caʔ-kay-taŋʔ*
 Scn go-IIF-PT-DI Excl that-DI Father-KN-GI-IIF

 krus-ʔa-tha-cə
 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 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

⁷For example, Matisoff (1976: 425-6) characterizes the primary object marker in Lahu (*th\ə-*) 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'.

⁸Caughley's abbreviations: Scn: Sequential Conjunction; IIF: Indirect Information Flow/Reportative; DI: Dual Number; KN: Kin (Related person); GI: Goal; PT: Past.

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 Tibeto-Burman 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'—Givón 1984). In many of these languages there is overt actor (ergative) marking as well as the PO ('anti-ergative', Comrie 1975, 1978⁹; or 'dehcticaetative', Blansitt 1984) marking, and the distribution of these two types of marking is the same; in transitive sentences either ergative¹⁰ or PO marking, or both, can be used.¹¹

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 are semantically based, but one is based on what semantic role an NP is,¹² 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 Proto-Tibeto-Burman. The marking is simply for semantic disambiguation (see for example Matisoff 1973:155-8 on Lahu thà?; Wheatley 1982 on Burmese kou). What we

⁹Comrie's 'anti-ergative' 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 talking about anti-ergative 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 'anti-ergative' as well.

¹⁰An interesting side issue involved here is the difference between systemic morphological ergativity and the type of optional simple actor marking we find in many Tibeto-Burman 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 Dyrbal). The optional simple actor marking that we find in for example Taoping Qiang does not figure into the grammatical system as a whole, and only appears when the speaker feels the need for disambiguating the semantic roles of the participants in the action of the sentence.

¹¹The 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 oŋj '1sg actor'), while all other pronouns (genitive, goal, patient/theme) will be of another form (e.g. Bai ŋu⁵⁵ '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 nu- 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).

¹²See Givón 1980 and Klimov 1984 on seeing ergative morphology as being semantically based on the contrast of agent vs. non-agent.

need to reconstruct in Proto-Tibeto-Burman then as the common starting point which led to the development of both the types of marking we find in Tibeto-Burman 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 there has been no grammaticalization of syntactic functions such as 'subject' and 'direct object'.¹³ One caveat to Paul Benedict and others hoping to reconstruct ergativity to Proto-Tibeto-Burman: This finding in no way supports arguments for reconstructing systemic ergativity in Proto-Tibeto-Burman; to date I have not seen any evidence that would allow us to reconstruct inflectional morphology of any kind to Proto-Tibeto-Burman.¹⁴

4. Developments Away From Pure Semantics

In a few of the Tibeto-Burman 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.¹⁵ 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 Tibeto-Burman. Dryer discounts DeLancey's suggestion, but bases his objections mainly on the non-Tibeto-Burman languages Ojibwa and Huichol, and only mentions the fact that one Tibeto-Burman language, Kokborok, has PO marking on inanimate IO's as evidence that in Tibeto-Burman 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 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 Tibeto-Burman 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

¹³For detailed arguments against the existence of syntactic functions in particular Tibeto-Burman languages, see Andersen 1987 (Tibetan) and Bhat 1988 (Manipuri). See also the discussions of Lisu in Hope 1974 and Mallison & Blake 1981.

¹⁴It should be emphasized that I am here talking about INFLECTIONAL morphology, not DERIVATIONAL morphology, such as the causative *s- prefix, which we CAN reconstruct to Proto-Tibeto-Burman and even Proto-Sino-Tibetan.

¹⁵This may very well be at least partially a result of the influence of Nepali, a PO marking Indo-European language. In fact the PO marking in Kham (lay) is a direct borrowing from Nepali.

contrast), and in asserting that some Tibeto-Burman languages have grammaticalized this marking into true PO marking or a type of more general 'salient NP' marking (marking subordinate clauses as well as nouns).

REFERENCES

- Andersen, Paul Kent. 1987. Zero-anaphora and related phenomena in Classical Tibetan. *Studies in Language* 11.2:279-312.
- Bhat, D. N. S. 1988. Grammatical relations in Indian languages (An introduction to Indian grammars 1). Mysore, India: Central Institute of Indian Languages.
- Blansitt, E. L., Jr. 1984. Deictic and dative. Objects: towards a theory of grammatical relations, ed. by Frans Plank, 127-150. London: Academic Press.
- Caughley, Ross. 1982. The syntax and morphology of the verb in Chepang (Pacific Linguistics Series B, No. 84). Canberra: Australian National University.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1975. Antiergative. Papers from the 11th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, ed. by R. E. Grossman, L. J. San, & T. J. Vance, 112-121. University of Chicago.
- _____. 1978. Ergativity. Syntactic typology, ed. by Winfred P. Lehmann, 329-94. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Dryer, Matthew S. 1986. Primary objects, secondary objects, and antidative. *Language* 62.4:808-845.
- Givón, Talmy. 1984. Direct object and dative shifting: semantic and pragmatic case. Objects: towards a theory of grammatical relations, ed. by Frans Plank, 151-182. London: Academic Press.
- Hope, Edward R. 1974. The deep syntax of Lisu sentences: a transformational case grammar (Pacific Linguistics B-34). Canberra: Australian National University.
- Karapurkar, Pushpa. 1976. Kokborok grammar. (CIIL grammar series, 3.) Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Linguistics.
- LaPolla, Randy J. 1989. Verb agreement, head-marking vs. dependent-marking, and the 'deconstruction' of Tibeto-Burman morpho-syntax. Proceedings of the 15th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, ed. by Kira Hall, Michael Meacham & Richard Shapiro, 356-365. University of California, Berkeley.
- _____. 1992. On the Dating and Nature of Verb Agreement in Tibeto-Burman. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55.2.
- Mallison, Graham & Barry J. Blake. 1981. Language typology: cross-linguistic studies in syntax (North-Holland linguistic series 46). Amsterdam, New York, Oxford: North-Holland Pub. Co.
- Matisoff, James A. 1973. The grammar of Lahu. (University of California publications in linguistics, 75.) Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- _____. 1976. Lahu causative constructions: Case hierarchies and the morphology/syntax cycle in a Tibeto-Burman perspective.
- Rabel, Lili. 1961. Khasi, a language of Assam. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

- Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Thompson, Chad L. 1990. On the treatment of topical objects in Chepang: passive or inverse? *Studies in Language* 14.2:405-427.
- Watters, David E. 1973. Clause patterns in Kham. *Clause, sentence, and discourse patterns in selected languages of Nepal, I: General approach*, ed. by Austin Hale, 39-202. Norman, OK: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Van Valin, Robert D., Jr. & William A. Foley. 1980. Role and Reference Grammar. *Current approaches to syntax (Syntax and semantics, 13)*, ed. by Edith A. Moravcsik & Jessica R. Wirth, 329-352.