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Lhasa Tibetan Evidentials and the Semantics of Causation*

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Lhasa Tibetan,\(^1\) like many languages, obligatorily marks an evidential distinction in non-future, non-first person sentences, as exemplified in exx. 1-4:\(^2\)

1) Sonam-gyis tha摇了摇头=kha bkal-so摇了摇头g
Sonam-ERG thangka\(^3\) hang-PERF/DIRECT
'Sonam hung up a thangka.' (based on direct perception).

2) Sonam-gyis tha摇了摇头=kha bkal-ba-red
   -PERF/INDIRECT
   'Sonam hung up a thangka.' (based on report or inference).

3) Sonam-gyis tha摇了摇头=kha 'gel-gyi(-'dug)'\(^4\)
   hang-IMPF/DIRECT
   'Sonam is hanging a thangka/thangkas.' (direct perception)

4) Sonam-gyis tha摇了摇头=kha 'gel-gyi-yod-pa-red
   hang-IMPF/INDIRECT
   'Sonam is hanging thangkas.' (report or inference).

The glosses roughly but accurately define the appropriate set of contexts for each verb form: the sentences with the DIRECT gloss report information which the speaker has obtained through direct sensory perception (through any sense channel), while those glossed as INDIRECT represent knowledge which the speaker has obtained indirectly, as by report from a third party, or which is inferred on the basis of other knowledge (e.g. the speaker may know that Sonam has been intending to hang up some thangkas, and that he recently went into the room where they are to be hung carrying appropriate tools).

However, a more detailed examination of these and related verb forms shows that the distinction encoded is more complex than a simple binary source-of-evidence distinction, and a fuller explication of the evidential system sheds considerable light both on the rest of the Lhasa verb system and on the structure of the underlying cognitive model of event causation which informs the semantic structure of the Lhasa clause. (Needless to add, there is good reason to consider this model relevant to the semantics and syntax of other languages as well). To begin with, note that with first-person actor in a volitional clause, neither the DIRECT nor the INDIRECT forms can be used; instead a third set of forms occurs:

5a) ԴRequestMapping=q=q=kha bkal-ba-yin
     I-ERG thangka hang-PERF/VOLITIONAL
     'I hung up a thangka.'

b) *ԴRequestMapping=q=q=kha bkal-ba-red

c) *ԴRequestMapping=q=q=kha bkal-so摇了摇头g
6a) ṅa-s than-kha 'gel-gyi-yod
   I-ERG thangka hang-IMPF/VOLTIONAL
   'I am hanging thangkas.'

b) *ṅa-s than-kha 'gel-gyi(-'dug)

c) *ṅa-s than-kha 'gel-gyi-yod-pa-red

However, the -pa-yin and -gyi-yod forms are not simply indices of first person, for they occur only with volitional predicates: ⁵

7a) ṅa na-gi(-'dug)
   I sick-IMPF/NON-VOLITIONAL
   'I'm sick.'

b) *ṅa na-gi-yod

8) ṅa-s dkaryol bcag-soṇ
   I-ERG cup break-PERF/NON-VOLITIONAL
   'I broke the cup (accidentally).'

9) ṅa-s dkaryol bcag-pa-yin
   PERF/VOLITIONAL
   'I broke the cup (deliberately).'

Thus we find the same pair of forms, perfective -soṇ and imperfective -gi-′dug, used with first person actors to code the non-volitional value for a volitional/non-volitional contrast, and with non-first person actors to code the direct perception value for an evidential contrast. The morphosyntactic interaction of these two semantic categories is not entirely surprising in the light of the semantic connections between the two categories which I have noted elsewhere (DeLancey 1981. to appear a), but clearly the nature of these connections will be further illuminated if we can construct a single semantic analysis for these forms which will accomodate both the volitional and the evidential values.

We can complicate matters further -- while taking a step toward a better understanding of the semantic distinctions involved -- by considering another perfective form, bzag, ⁶which contrasts with both -soṇ and -pa-red, as illustrated in ex. 10 (compare exx. 1-2):

10) sonam-gyi than-kha bzkal-bzag
   Sonam-ERG thangka hang-PERF/INFERENTIAL
   'Sonam hung up a thangka.' (inferred from direct perception of the hanging thangka).

While ex. 1, with -soṇ, reports an event which the speaker directly witnessed, and ex. 2, with -pa-red, reports an event which the speaker knows of only by report or indirect inference, ex. 10 reports inference from directly perceived evidence: the speaker did not witness the hanging of the thangka, but has seen the thangka hanging on the wall. A similar set of examples is 11-13:
11) Sonam gñid sad-soŋ 'Sonam woke up.'
Sonam awaken-PERF/DIRECT

12) Sonam gñid sad-bzāg 'idem.'
PERF/INFERENTIAL

13) Sonam gñid sad-pa-red 'idem.'
PERF/INDIRECT

Ex. 11 can be used only if the speaker actually watched the subject awaken; 12 indicates that the speaker has seen the subject up and about, but didn't watch him wake up; while 13 represents hearsay, or inference from indirect evidence such as an empty bed.

A comparison of the two sets of examples (1-2, 10) and (11-13) demonstrates the inadequacy of a simple notion of direct evidence here, for there are clearly two distinct types of direct perception which can be distinguished: direct perception of the actual event being reported, and direct perception of the subsequent state which directly resulted from that event. This distinction can be further illustrated by a number of interesting examples along the lines of 14:

14a) kho-s ŋa-'i deb brkus-bzāg
    he-ERG I-GEN book steal-PERF/INFERENTIAL
    'He stole my book.'

b) *kho-s ŋa-'i deb brkus-soŋ
    PERF/DIRECT

Since brkus 'steal' refers only to secretive theft, it could not ordinarily be used to describe an event witnessed by the victim, so that (14b) in any ordinary context would be impossible; the speaker in this case can know of the event only by discovering its effect, i.e. the absence of the stolen article.

In some more widely-known evidential systems the category marked in Lhasa by -bzāg is conflated with the indirect evidence category marked by -pa-red. Not surprisingly, the line which separates these two categories in Lhasa is not absolutely clear. An instructive pair of examples is 15-16:

15) Sonam-gyis kušu zas-bzāg
    Sonam-ERG apple eat-PERF/INFERENTIAL
    'Sonam ate the apple.'

16) Sonam-gyis kušu zas-pa-red
    PERF/INDIRECT
    'idem.'

Both could be used in a context where the speaker sees that an apple which used to be there now exists only as a gnawed core. However, if the speaker and Sonam were alone together in the house at the time that the eating must have occurred, only 15, not 16, is a possible report, for the eaten state of the apple and the speaker's knowledge that he himself was not responsible for that state necessarily identify
Sonam as the eater, and thus the event of eating as one which is reliably described in (15). On the other hand, if more than one possible suspect was in the house at the relevant time, then (16) is much more natural than (15); for, although the evidence is incontrovertible that someone ate the apple, it is not absolutely clear that it was Sonam.

The -son/-bzig evidential distinction with non-first person actors can be neatly described in terms of a simple cause-effect schema, in which events are seen as effecting resultant states. -son then codes direct knowledge of the causal event, and -bzig direct knowledge of the resulting state, from which the occurrence of the event can be reliably inferred. An extension of this schema will also accommodate the -son/-pa-yin volitionality contrast with first person, thus taking a step toward a coherent account of the Lhasa verb system and toward an understanding of the semantics of event causation. We should first note the unsurprising fact that the indirect evidential -pa-red perfective does not normally occur with first person actors, since a conscious participant in any event normally has direct sensory evidence for the occurrence of the event. The same argument predicts the non-occurrence of the inferential -bzig with first person actor. To this prediction there are in fact a handful of counterexamples, but an examination of these serves to confirm the analysis which I am suggesting. A clear example is the occurrence of -bzig with the verb 'forget':

17) ṇa-s brjed-bzig 'I've forgotten.'
I-ERG forget-PERF/INFERENTIAL

Although 'forget', in both English and Tibetan, has the syntax of a transitive event verb, unlike most such verbs it does not actually denote an observable event; the hypothetical event of forgetting can only be inferred from the consequent state of having forgotten. Thus 'forget', like 'lose' (which also takes -bzig with first person), differs from most inadvertent events (e.g. 'trip', 'fall', 'sneeze') which are experienced by the actor as they unfold even though they were unintended; the event of forgetting cannot be experienced even by the forgettor, so that even with first person the -bzig perfective makes sense.8

The -pa-yin form, in the examples we have seen reflects volitionality on the part of first person (see Jin 1979; DeLancey 1984a,b, to appear a,b, for further discussion) and can thus be assumed to automatically have the direct knowledge value for evidentiality. However, we need to explain the non-occurrence of this form with non-first person actors, even with clearly volitional predicates. The explanation (for which further argumentation and evidence is presented in DeLancey to appear a) is that, like other tense/aspect forms, the volitional form is in fact part of the evidentiality paradigm, and encodes not simply the presence in the clause of a semantically volitional predicate, but the speaker's first-hand knowledge of the actor's volitional participation in the event. Obviously such first-hand knowledge is possible only when the speaker is also the actor. Thus the overall perfective system marks the
nature (direct or indirect) of the speaker's knowledge of three separate points in a causal chain in which an act of volition causes an overt act, which in turn causes a resulting state:

![Diagram](image)

Direct knowledge of the initiating cause, i.e. the act of volition, is indicated by the -pa-yin form; -sonq indicates direct knowledge of the actual event but not of its ultimate cause, and -bzag direct knowledge of the resultant state, but not of any prior link in the causal chain. The indirect -pa-red form reflects no direct knowledge of any aspect of the causal chain.

We can now see that what at first appeared to be distinct senses of -sonq -- non-volitional with first person actor and direct knowledge with non-first persons -- actually have in common the speaker's direct experience of the event, but not of its antecedent cause. (There is some oversimplification involved here in discussing only volition as ultimate cause, although the problem does not affect the data discussed here. For more detailed discussion of allied problems see DeLancey 1981, 1984c).

This analysis can be extended in a straightforward manner to the imperfective forms -gyi-yod, -gyi(-'dug), and -gyi-yod-pa-red, whose volitionality/evidentiality values parallel those of the perfective forms -pa-yin, -sonq, and -pa-red. As with -sonq, so with -gyi(-'dug) the apparently distinct senses have in common that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of the event or state being reported, but not of its ultimate cause. Missing from the imperfective paradigm is a form parallelling -bzag, a gap which follows logically from our analysis and the meaning of imperfectivity: since an imperfective clause by definition makes no reference to a resulting state, there can be no evidential value for the speaker's knowledge of such a resulting state.

In the future paradigm we lose one more category; there is only a two-way volitionality distinction.10 As in the other aspects, volition can be indicated only for first person actors:

18) ṇa thang=kha 'gel-gyi-yin
   I thangka hang-FUT/VOLITIONAL
   'I will hang up a thangka.'

19) ṇa na-gyi-red
   I sick-FUT/NGN-VOLITIONAL
   'I'll get sick.'

20a) kho thang=kha 'gel-gyi-red
    he thangka hang-FUT/NGN-VOLITIONAL
    'He'll hang up a thangka.'

b) *kho thang=kha 'gel-gyi-yin
    Fut/VOLITIONAL
Since, in a future predication, there can be no evidential value for the actual event, the future paradigm lacks an equivalent to the perfective -son and imperfective -gyi(-'dug). The restriction of the expression of volitionality to first person actor demonstrates that in the future also the category of volitionality is fundamentally evidential: the -gyi-yin form represents direct knowledge of the intention to perform an action, and the -gyi-red form no direct knowledge of any aspect of the causal chain which it is assumed will lead to the event described in the clause.

The forms which we have discussed can now be directly related to one another as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Act of volition</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Resultant state</th>
<th>No direct knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perfective</td>
<td>-pa-yin</td>
<td>-soq</td>
<td>-bzag</td>
<td>-pa-red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfective</td>
<td>-gyi-yod</td>
<td>-gyi(-'dug)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-gyi-yod-pa-red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>-gyi-yin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-gyi-red</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lhasa Tibetan tense/aspect/evidentiality forms

Thus arranged, the hyphenated forms cry out for further morphological and semantic analysis, which we do not have time for here; the yin, red, yod and 'dug morphemes and their place in the evidentiality system are discussed at some length (though for a slightly different dialect, the Lhasa-based koiné rather than Lhasa proper) in DeLancey to appear a.

I have presented elsewhere (DeLancey 1984a, b, to appear a,b) discussion of other Tibetan evidence for the causal chain interpretation of agentivity (and see DeLancey 1984c for discussion of related data from other languages). This analysis is of considerable importance to current debate concerning the extent to which morphosyntactic structure is directly informed by semantics. It is frequently argued, for example, that case roles cannot be taken as the determinants of syntactic structure -- e.g. as directly determining surface case marking or verb morphology, or what some refer to as "underlying grammatical relations" -- because what seem by current definitions of case roles to be identical roles may in different languages (or, for that matter, in different constructions within the same language) be represented differently. An argument along these lines to which the claim developed here is directly relevant is that put forward by Rosen (1984), who argues that casemarking in active-stative languages cannot reflect underlying case roles, because there are predicates -- typically involuntary bodily activities such as 'snore', 'sweat', etc. -- which take a
morphosyntactically agentive subject in some languages, and a morphosyntactically non-agent argument in others. The assumption underlying this and similar arguments is that the participant in such an event must be, unequivocally and universally, either an agent or not, and that therefore cross-linguistical variation in the marking of such clauses vitiates the notion that agentivity is a determinant for case marking or grammatical relations. But if agentivity is a more complicated notion -- in particular, if it universally involves a multi-stage chain of causation such as we have documented for Lhasa Tibetan -- then there are more precisely definable subcategories of agentivity which languages may choose to code morphosyntactically. In events such as snoring and sweating, the subject is the directly perceived cause of the event, but the causation cannot be traced back all the way along a causal chain to an original act of volition. On this analysis then it is precisely such predicates which should manifest cross-linguistic variation in their case marking and grammatical relations structure if these are ultimately determined by semantic role.

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1) The language described here is the dialect of Lhasa proper, which is not identical to the Lhasa-based koine taught as standard in Tibetan refugee communities in India, although the latter is sometimes referred to by some Tibetans, and by some linguists (including myself in some earlier papers, including DeLancey to appear a,b) as "Lhasa".

2) All exx. are given in a transliteration of standard orthography.

3) A thangka is a type of scroll painting.

4) Prescriptive grammar requires the -'dug, but it is normally omitted in affirmative declarative sentences in colloquial Lhasa.

5) Very similar patterns occur in some other Tibetan dialects (though very possibly not all) and in Newari, which is probably a fairly close relative of Tibetan (Hale 1980, Schötterndreyer 1980).

6) Goldstein and Nornang (1970) label this as a perfect rather than a perfective, for reasons which will be clear from our examples and discussion. There is, however, a true perfect construction, using the verb tshar 'finish' as an auxiliary, for which the term is best reserved.

7) For exceptional events involving drunkenness, etc., my informant will (often reluctantly) accept -bzag with first person, but not -pa-red. However, the -pa-red form does occasionally occur with first person in another use in which I do not entirely understand; some examples are given in Chang and Chang 1980, and briefly discussed in DeLancey to appear b.

8) I have conflicting data from different sessions with the same informant for whether -son can ever occur with 'forget'. Either can occur with 'lose', with -bzag the appropriate form when the speaker has just discovered the loss, and -son preferred once the loss is an established fact. These facts bear on another aspect of the semantics of evidentiality, which is discussed (although without these data) in DeLancey to appear a.
9) The philosophical problems associated with the notion "act of volition" (see for example numerous discussions in Brand 1970) are irrelevant to our present enterprise.

10) There is a third future form, the use of yon 'come' with the perfective stem of the verb, which occurs with both first and non-first persons; I do not at present understand its use well enough to be able to say how or whether it fits into the system developed here.


- 1984a. Transitivity and ergative case in Lhasa Tibetan. BLS 10

- 1984b. Categories of non-volitional actor in Lhasa Tibetan. in A. Zide, et. al., eds., Proc. of the Symposium on Participant Roles: South Asia and Adjacent Areas. IULC.


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