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Transitivity and Ergative Case in
Lhasa Tibetan

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In recent years the prototype approach to semantics stemming from the psychological work of Eleanor Rosch has attracted considerable attention from workers in lexical semantics, in particular Lakoff (e.g. 1973) and Fillmore (e.g. 1975, 1982). It is becoming evident that the same theoretical framework provides solutions to many problems of morphosyntax as well. This was demonstrated by Lakoff (1977), who showed that a prototype approach to the semantics of transitivity and agentivity provides explanations for several vexing problems of English syntax and semantics. Hopper and Thompson's epochal paper on transitivity (1980) provides broad cross-linguistic evidence for the validity of Lakoff's suggestions. The present paper is an addition to the growing literature of single-language studies inspired by Hopper and Thompson's paper (cf. Hopper and Thompson 1982) which are providing more detailed data from a wide range of languages demonstrating the utility of the prototype approach to transitivity and agentivity (cf. also DeLancey 1983, 1984, to appear a).

The problem addressed in this paper is the pattern of occurrence of ergative case in Lhasa Tibetan.¹ The assumption underlying the argument is that grammatical morphemes such as case markers have meaning, and that an adequate theory of semantics should be able to characterize the meaning of a morpheme such as Lhasa ergative case. Given this assumption, the distribution of ergative case in Lhasa -- roughly an aspectually split active/stative pattern² -- immediately raises problems for traditional types of semantic description. As we will see, several semantic parameters -- number of arguments, volition and control, aspect, and individuation of the object -- are involved in ergative marking, but no one parameter or subset of parameters constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition, i.e. there is no one parameter which characterizes all of the clause types which have an ergative argument. We will see, however, that the range of ergative clause types can be neatly characterized in terms of the transitivity prototype proposed by Lakoff and by Hopper and Thompson.

Transitivity and volition

Lhasa, unlike other Tibetan dialects (see note 2), has an "active" type case marking pattern in which volitional subjects of one-argument verbs receive the same ergative case marking as transitive subjects. In Tibetan volitionality is overtly coded in the tense/aspect auxiliary when there is a first person actor,³ as in exx. 1-6:⁴

- 1) ḡa-s stag bsad-pa-yin
I-ERG tiger kill-PERF/VOL
'I killed a/the tiger.'
- 2) ḡa-s stag mthoḡ-byuḡ
I-ERG tiger see-PERF/INVOL
'I saw a/the tiger.'
- 3) ḡa-s dkaryol bcag-pa-yin
I-ERG cup break-PERF/VOL
'I broke the cup (deliberately).'
- 4) ḡa-s dkaryol bcag-soḡ
I-ERG cup break-PERF/INVOL
'I broke the cup (accidentally).'
- 5) ḡa-s ḡus-pa-yin
I-ERG cry-PERF/VOL
'I cried.'
- 6) ḡa 'sí-byuḡ
I die-PERF/INVOL
'I died.'

In examples 1-4, which are transitive in the standard sense of the term, ergative case marking is independent of volitionality; in 5-6, on the other hand, volitionality governs ergative marking. (See Chang and Chang 1980, DeLancey 1982, to appear a, for further examples). This is the typical active case marking pattern; Hopper and Thompson have already noted that this pattern links volitionality with transitivity in the traditional sense. Note that this immediately makes it impossible to describe the meaning of ergative case in terms of a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions; in this data either the presence of two arguments or volitionality is sufficient to require ergative case, but either is dispensable if the other is present. This is thus a straightforward example of Fillmore's (1982) CLIMB-type prototype meaning.

Tense/aspect and ergative marking

Like its close neighbor and distant relative Newari, Lhasa shows a variation on the familiar aspectually split ergative pattern; in two-argument clauses ergative case is obligatory in perfective aspect, but optional (rather than impossible, as in the better-known pattern) in imperfective and future:

- 7) η a-(s) stag bsad-kyi-yin
 I-(ERG) tiger kill-FUT/VOL
 'I'll kill a/the tiger.'
- 8) * η a stag bsad-pa-yin
 I tiger kill-PERF/VOL (cf ex. 1)

(A puzzling exception to this generalization will be described below). This is consistent with Hopper and Thompson's observation that perfective clauses are more highly transitive than non-perfective ones. Of more interest is the relevance of aspect to ergative marking in single-argument clauses. Here ergative case is impossible in non-perfective clauses:

- 9) η a-s Seattle-la phyin-pa-yin⁵
 I-ERG to went-PERF/VOL
 'I went to Seattle.'
- 10) η a Seattle-la 'gro-gi-yin⁶
 I go-FUT/VOL
 'I will go to Seattle.'
- 11) * η a-s Seattle-la 'gro-gi-yin

The simplest interpretation of this difference between one- and two-argument clauses is that, while both volition and traditional transitivity are relevant to the transitive prototype which is marked in Lhasa by ergative case, the presence of two arguments is a stronger determinant, i.e. that the presence of two arguments is sufficient, while volition alone is not sufficient without the support of perfectivity.

Cognate object constructions

The distribution of ergative case in the data presented so far can be described in strictly syntactic terms, but additional data show that a semantic description is necessary. Tibetan has a number of cognate object constructions consisting of a semantically very general verb and a lexically fixed (and often historically deverbal) object. Some examples are

given in 12-18:

- 12) ᠒a habdri cig rgyab-byu᠒
I sneeze a throw-PERF/INVOL
'I sneezed.'
- 13) ᠒a habdri gsum rgyab-byu᠒
I sneeze three throw-PERF/INVOL
'I sneezed three times.'
- 14) ᠒a-s habdri cig rgyab-pa-yin
I-ERG sneeze a throw-PERF/VOL
'I sneezed (deliberately).'
- 15) ᠒a ᠒᠒ulnag rgyab-byu᠒
I perspiration throw-PERF/INVOL
'I sweated.'
- 16) *᠒a-s ᠒᠒ulnag rgyab-pa-yin
I-ERG perspiration throw-PERF/VOL
- 17) ᠒a-s gzas cig bta᠒-pa-yin
I-ERG song a emit-PERF/VOL
'I sang a song.' (= Eng. 'I sang.')
- 18) ᠒a-la rmilam de yanggyar bta᠒-byu᠒
I-DAT dream that again emit-PERF/INVOL
'I had that dream again.'

All of these clauses have two arguments, and the quantifier in 13 and the demonstrative in 18 show that the objects are in fact syntactic arguments, and not lexically incorporated into the verb. Nevertheless 12, 13, 15 and 18 show that ergative case is not automatically selected, and 16 shows that it is not even always possible. That the occurrence of ergative case is not lexically dependent on the verb is shown by the identity of the verb in 12-14 and 15-16, and in 17 and 18.

It is clear from these examples that the determining factor governing ergative case with such constructions is volition, i.e. that with respect to ergative marking these constructions behave like one-argument rather than two-argument verbs. (Note that 14 is possible, while 16 is not, because sneezing, unlike sweating, can be performed (or at least simulated) voluntarily). By the general structure of our argument this shows that these constructions deviate in some way from the transitive prototype. Apparently the deviation is not in the form of indefiniteness or nonreferentiality of the object, i.e. does not fit directly in with the cases discussed by Hopper and Thompson, for the three sneezes of 13 are indubitably

referential, and the recurring dream in 18 is both morphologically and semantically definite. (Moreover, with fully transitive verbs indefinite and non-referential objects have no effect on ergativity). Nevertheless this is evidently a deviation of the same general sort as those discussed by Hopper and Thompson and by Lakoff in connection with less individuated objects. In these cases the term "individuation" seems particularly apt, for the characteristic of cognate objects is that they are not differentiated from the act which "creates" them. An effected object comes into being through a transitive act, but thereupon embarks on a independent existence -- but a sneeze is not the result of an act of sneezing, but the act itself. Hence in many languages these event types are lexicalized as intransitive verbs (Eng. sneeze, sing, dream) rather than collocations of verb + object. (Some at least of these were so lexicalized in earlier stages of Tibetan; the rmi of rmilam 'dream' in ex. 18 is historically a verb 'to dream'. rmilam etymologically means 'dream-road').

Volition and instigation

Note that we have not two but three case marking options in exx. 12-18; the first NP may be in unmarked, ergative, or dative case. We have so far discussed only the opposition between unmarked and ergative NPs, but it is clear that the question of what governs the appearance of dative case is related to our enterprise. Evidently dative, like absolutive, subjects indicate deviations from the transitive prototype. But what is the difference between sneezing and sweating on the one hand, and dreaming on the other, which is reflected in the difference in case marking?

The nature of the events suggests that the distinction may have to do with the perceived instigation of the event. Sneezing and sweating, though involuntary, nevertheless are instigated by the sneezer or sweater; i.e. the energy for the sneeze and the actual perspiration itself both originate with the subject. (Cf. Lakoff's suggestion that the prototypical agent "is the energy source in the action" (1977:244)). It is possible (though of course not necessary) to interpret dreaming otherwise, as being visited upon the dreamer from some exterior source. This distinction seems like a plausible (though again not necessary) interpretation of examples like 19:

- 19) ṅa-la champa rgyab-byuṅ
 I-DAT cold throw-PERF/INVOL
 'I got/have a cold.'

A particularly interesting pair in this context is:

- 20) ṅa-s debs brlags-sonṅ
 I-ERG book lost-PERF/INVOL
 'I lost a/the book.'
- 21) ṅa-la debs rñed-byuṅ
 I-DAT book find-PERF/INVOL
 'I found a/the book.'

21, despite its dative subject, clearly cannot be classified with with cognate object clauses discussed in the previous section. Both 20 and 21 have the same discrete, referential, and potentially definite object, and both are overtly non-volitional. Nevertheless by the criterion of case-marking they differ in transitivity. Here the notion of instigation captures the difference very neatly: losing something, like sneezing, is caused by the loser, but finding, like dreaming, has an external cause (or, for non-determinists, no cause at all).⁷

However, if this feature is the correct one to explain these cases, it cannot be interpreted as a simple dichotomous feature (as volition can and must be, since any tense/aspect auxiliary is unambiguously either volitional or non-volitional).⁸ Clauses with perception verbs, such as ex. 2, offer clear counterexamples to the suggestion just made here concerning the relevance of instigation, since seeing is not instigated by the seer. It is worth noting that in some other dialects of Tibetan verbs of perception and cognition take dative subject, as does the verb 'find' (see e.g. Read 1934). We might explain this apparent anomaly in Lhasa as simply an arbitrary irregularity; given the comparative data from such closely related (and in other respects considerably more conservative) dialects as Balti, we might hypothesize that Lhasa is simply in the process of abandoning dative subject marking for two-argument verbs, and that the shift has affected the verbs of perception but has not yet reached 'find'. I would prefer to be able to describe the verbs of perception and cognition as somehow more closely approximating the transitive prototype than does 'find'. I will tentatively suggest here the possibility that the difference has to do not with a feature present in one case and absent in the other, but with relative degree of instigation, i.e. that while neither 'see' nor 'find' are under the

actor's control in an absolute sense, 'find' is more completely adventitious than 'see'. However, this hypothesis awaits substantiation.

The problem of future volition

Thus far all of our data fits very neatly into a prototype account of the meaning of ergative case; we have identified several semantic parameters which count toward the overall transitivity of a clause, each of which corresponds to transitivity parameters independently identified by Lakoff and Hopper and Thompson, and seen that, roughly speaking, the more of these parameters which are present, the more likely a clause type is to have an ergative argument. I have in my data, however, one set of examples which seem to contradict Hopper and Thompson's Transitivity Hypothesis, and thus to directly conflict with the general conclusion supported by all the rest of the Lhasa data. Recall that ergative marking is optional for two-argument non-perfective clauses; I have argued that the contrast in this respect between two- and one-argument clauses is a reflection of the higher transitivity of two arguments. Thus we should predict that if volition has any effect on the ergative marking of such clauses, it should be that ergative case is obligatory or more likely in volitional clauses, and unacceptable or less likely in nonvolitional ones. In fact the pattern is just the opposite:

- 22) ḡa-s khong-gi miḡ brjed-soḡ
I-ERG he-GEN name forget-PERF/INVOL
'I forgot his name.'
- 23) *ḡa khoḡ-gi miḡ brjed-soḡ
- 24) ḡa-s khoḡ-gi miḡ brjed-kyi-red
I-ERG he-GEN name forget-FUT/INVOL
'I will forget his name.'
- 25) *ḡa khoḡ-gi miḡ brjed-kyi-red
- 26) ḡa-(s) dkaryol bcag-gi-yin
I-ERG cup break-FUT/VOL
'I will break the cup (deliberately).'
- 27) ḡa-s dkaryol bcag-gi-red
break-FUT/INVOL
'I will break the cup (inadvertently).'
- (I.e. I inevitably do such things).
- 28) *ḡa dkaryol bcag-gi-red

26-28 show quite clearly that the optionality of ergative marking is dependent on the volitionality of the

clause, and that the dependence is in precisely the opposite of the predicted direction. At the moment I do not know what to make of this anomaly; I welcome suggestions.

A note on diachronic typology

Comparative Tibeto-Burman data make it clear that the case marking system described here is a fairly recent development within Central Tibetan. Available evidence suggests that the Proto-Tibeto-Burman case marking system was of the well-known person-based split ergative type (Bauman 1979, DeLancey 1981), and that Proto-Tibetan was probably a consistent (unsplit) ergative language like its near relative Gurung. The aspectual split described here occurs in TB only in Lhasa and Sherpa Tibetan and in Newari, and is probably a result of Indic influence. The marking of volitional intransitive agents with ergative case is, so far as I know, found only in Lhasa and in the modern standard language based on it.

Given a prototype analysis of the meaning of Lhasa ergative case, we can describe this change very naturally in semantic terms as parallel to certain well-known types of lexical semantic change. The difference between the Lhasa pattern and the more typical ergative pattern found in Ladakhi Tibetan or Gurung is that the true ergative pattern requires a closer approximation to the transitive prototype to qualify a clause for prototypical transitive morphosyntax. In broader terms, all languages share (at least approximately) the same transitive prototype, but differ in what range of marginal examples they allow to be labelled as belonging to the category. Thus the shift from the Gurung-Ladakhi pattern to that of Lhasa can be described as a change in the meaning of a single morpheme (closely analogous to what is traditionally called widening in lexical semantics) rather than as a fundamental change in morphosyntactic type, a conclusion which is consistent with the rather common (but often criticized, by me as well as others) opinion that ergative and active typology are not as radically different from one another as both of them are from nominative structure.

Notes

1) I have discussed some of the data presented here in two other papers, DeLancey 1982, to appear a. While the account given in those papers is quite different from that presented here, the two approaches are in fact quite consistent with one another; however, a discussion of that will have to await another forum.

Some differences in the data between this and my other papers are due to the fact that all of the data here comes from a single informant, who is a monodialectal native speaker of Lhasa Tibetan; most of my other data is from speakers of the Lhasa-based standard koine.

2) I nevertheless persist in referring to "ergative" case for two reasons. First, all of Lhasa Tibetan's neighbors and close relatives are ergative, so the term is standard in comparative work. Secondly, I claim that in fact ergative and active case are minor variations on the same theme; this point is argued (effectively the same point is made in different terms) in DeLancey 1982 and at the end of this paper.

3) "Actor" in the broadest possible sense; clauses with first person patients and goals are marked for non-volitional first person involvement (see DeLancey to appear a).

4) The auxiliaries are discussed in more detail in Jin 1979 and DeLancey to appear b. I do not clearly understand the difference between byun and son as non-volitional perfective markers, and space limitations forbid a discussion of what I think I do know about them.

5) It has been reported elsewhere in the literature (including in DeLancey 1982) that motion verbs were exceptional in taking volitional auxiliaries but not allowing ergative subject. This is definitely not true for Lhasa proper; I cannot say for certain whether it is true for Standard Tibetan.

6) The -gi- in ex. 9 and the -kyi- in 7 are phonologically conditioned allomorphs.

7) In DeLancey to appear a I used the term "control" for what I here call "instigation". Both terms have been used elsewhere in the literature in ways which conflict with their use here; as we begin to understand this area of semantics there is a desperate need for standardized terminology.

8) This assumes an analysis in which non-first person forms are automatically non-volitional; see DeLancey to appear b.

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