

## Split Ergative Patterns in Transitive and Intransitive Sentences in Tibetan : a Reconsideration

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## Split Ergative Patterns in Transitive and Intransitive Sentences in Tibetan: a Reconsideration

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### INTRODUCTION

Tibetan is known to have an ergative type case marking pattern: namely, one argument of a transitive sentence takes an ergative marker (e.g. *ngas* in ex. 1a), while the other argument remains unmarked (e.g. *mog-mog* in ex. 1a), in the same way that the single argument of an intransitive sentence has no marker or is in the absolutive case (e.g. *nga* in ex. 2a).

- (1a) *ngas* mog mog bzas pa yin/<sup>1)</sup>  
 I-ERG momo ate AV "I ate momo."  
 (2a) *nga* lha sar 'gro gi yin/  
 I-ABS Lhasa-LOC go AV "I will go to Lhasa."

It is also known that there exist so called split patterns: namely, the ergative marker of a transitive subject may drop in certain context (e.g. *nga* in ex. 1b). Interestingly, a split pattern also appears in intransitive sentences, where the intransitive subject may take an ergative marker (e.g. *ngas* in ex. 2b).

- (1b) *nga* mog mog za gi yin/ "I will eat momo."  
 I-ABS momo eat AV  
 (2b) *ngas* lha sar phyin pa yin/ "I went to Lhasa."  
 I-ERG Lhasa-LOC went AV

Thus, there are two kinds of ergative split patterns: the split in transitive sentences and the split in intransitive sentences.

There have been several studies devoted to the ergative phenomena in Tibetan in the last two decades. The major points at issue are:

- 1) What are the conditioning factors for the split-ergative pattern in transitive

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- 1) The data upon which this paper is based come from three sources: a folktale in Tibetan (*ro sgrung*), an Old Tibetan text (the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*), and the personal recordings of the language of Professor Tsultrim Kalsang, who speaks the Central Dialect of Tibetan. Examples with no reference are from him. For more details on the speech of Professor Tsultrim Kalsang, see Takeuchi (1978).

sentences: tense/aspectual differences, the semantic features of verbs, the pragmatic nature of agent nouns, or some other factor or combination of factors?<sup>2)</sup>

2) What are the ergative subjects in intransitive sentences? Are they related to those in transitive sentences?

3) How have the ergative patterns in Tibetan developed historically, and in what direction are they changing: towards 'ergativity' or 'non-ergativity'?

So far, the intransitive ergative has been treated as equal to or analogous with the transitive ergative. This leads to correlating the Tibetan ergatives in general with the notion of agentivity or activity. The historical development has accordingly been modelled as: from the (split) ergative pattern to the active-stative pattern.<sup>3)</sup>

In this paper we wish to present a different view by reexamining these problems, especially the relation between the transitive ergative and the intransitive ergative, in terms of a) their historical change from the Old Tibetan period, and b) the occurrence of split-ergative patterns in sentential nominals.

## 1. ERGATIVE SUBJECTS IN INTRANSITIVE SENTENCES

First, let us look at the split in intransitive sentences. We will begin with examining the usage of the ergative marker in intransitive sentences in Modern Tibetan.

### 1.1 Modern Tibetan Data

The ergative subjects in intransitive sentences have been recognized to occur primarily with the motion verbs (e.g. ex. 2b and ex. 3) but also with other action verbs such as staying (ex. 4) and crying (ex. 5), with a connotation of emphasizing

2) Takeuchi (1978) claims that the ergative marker of a transitive subject drops when the verb is in the non-past tense, under the condition that the subject is neither new information nor focussed on; he considers the subject to be topicalized. DeLancey (1981) explains the split ergative patterns on the basis of empathy hierarchy of subject nouns. DeLancey (1984), however, states that the ergative marking in Lhasa Tibetan shows an aspectually split pattern. Nagano (1985, 1986), using the hierarchy of verbs based on the classification by Chafe, attributes the split phenomena to the semantic features of verbs: he suggests that agentivity is a critical factor for split patterns. Takahashi (1992) proposes a classification of verbs based on another criterion of whether the subject can take the ergative marker or not. Tournadre (1991), independently of Takeuchi *op. cit.*, claims that the split patterns are conditioned by the combination of the perfect aspect and the pragmatic function of the ergative marker, which he calls 'a rhetorical function whose aim is to underline or "highlight" the agent.' (p. 105). In this paper, all three conditioning factors will be taken into consideration.

3) For example, DeLancey (1984: 131) says, 'the distribution of ergative case in Lhasa—roughly an aspectually split active/stative pattern ...' The researchers who regard Modern Tibetan as having the active-stative split pattern of the ergative marker may think that non-active transitive verbs take a passive construction, as Chang and Chang (1980).

the subject. For example, ex. 3 has the meaning “I will go but not others.”

- (3) ngas lha sar 'gro gi yin/  
I-ERG Lhasa-LOC go AV  
“I will go to Lhasa.”
- (4) bsod nams kyis skub kyag 'di'i sgang la sdod kyi red/  
Sonam ERG chair this-GEN top LOC sit AV  
“Sonam will sit on this chair (if nobody else sits).”
- (5) bu chung des ngus yong/ *ro sgrung: 17*  
boy little that-ERG cried AV  
“The little boy is about to cry. (emphatic)”

These action verbs, however, do not take an ergative subject if the verbal action is unintentional. For example, in ex. 6, the verb “to go” is followed by the non-volitional auxiliary *red*; as a result, the sentence has a connotation that the subject was forced to go against his will. It is thus considered inadequate to emphasize the intention of the subject by adding the ergative marker to the subject.

- (6) nga/ \*ngas lha sar phyin pa red/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG Lhasa-LOC went AV  
“I went to Lhasa (not on my will).”

Non-action verbs, such as *na* “to be sick” in ex. 7, usually do not take an ergative subject.

- (7) nga/ \*ngas na gi red/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG sick AV  
“I will be sick.”

However, as Hoshi (1988: 194) has pointed out, the subject of a non-active intransitive verb may take the ergative marker in exceptional cases where the intention of the subject is particularly emphasized by a construction with the ergative marker and the volitional auxiliary *yin*.

- (8) ngas shi gi yin/  
I-ERG dead AV  
“I will die (on purpose).”

These facts appear at first to point to a correlation between the intransitive ergative and the intention or control of the agent. However, as Tournadre (1991: 100-101) has also pointed out, there are cases in which the intransitive ergative occurs with no relation to the volition of the agent.<sup>4)</sup> The intransitive ergative also appears with a few non-action verbs such as *nus* “be able to” (ex. 9).

- (9) 'phrad pa'i thabs yod de khyod tshos mi nus gsungs so/  
 meet NOM-GEN means exist CONJ you PL-ERG NEG can said SFM  
*ro sgrung*: 17  
 "(He) said though you have a means to meet, you cannot (do that)."

It is therefore more suitable to describe the function of the intransitive ergative as a contrastive emphatic marker, without primary connection with the agentivity or the intention of the agent. It is only when the action is intentional that the intention of the agent is emphasized by the ergative marking.

This view finds support in the historical development of the intransitive ergative, as will be discussed in the next section.

## 1.2 Old Tibetan Data

The occurrence of intransitive ergatives goes back to the earliest written records; they are attested in the Old Tibetan texts of the 8th to 9th centuries (ex. 10-12), where they are used even with adjective predicates such as *skyid* "be happy" (ex. 11), and *glo-ba ring* "be disloyal" (ex. 12) with a connotation of contrastively emphasizing the subject.

- (10) *khyo 'da's dmag pon 'ong ngam//* *OT Chronicle* (P1287: 205)  
 you-ERG general fit QM  
 "You sir, are you fit to be a general?"
- (11) *myi yongs kyis skyid do/* *OT Chronicle* (P1287: 338, 451)  
 person all ERG happy SFM  
 "Every one is happy."
- (12) *myang gis kyang glo ba ring ste/* *OT Chronicle* (P1287: 259)  
 Myang ERG too lung far CONJ  
 "Myang, too, became disloyal."

Thus, the intransitive ergative has been used since the Old Tibetan period as an emphatic marker.<sup>5)</sup> It is, however, an unusually marked form for the intransitive subject, and very rarely occurs in number compared to the absolutive subject, which is the unmarked form for the intransitive subject. This clearly contrasts with the case of transitive sentences where ergative is the unmarked form for the subject; their usages and functions are also clearly different, except for the case of one particular ergative marking pattern to be discussed below.<sup>6)</sup>

4) Tournadre (1991: 100) quotes the following example:

(n1) *khos lo gnyis shu rtson khang nang la bsdad pa red/*  
 "He stayed twenty years in jail (but Lobsang did not)."

5) '... the subject of an intransitive verb of change of place ... takes the instrumental case when it is emphasized, or gives new information ...' (Takeuchi [1985: 138 fn. 7])

6) A certain kind of transitive ergative marking, which we will call pattern 3, has a similar function with the intransitive ergative marking. See discussion in § 3.

We therefore think that the employment of the instrumental case marker as a contrastive emphatic marker for intransitive subjects started in or prior to the Old Tibetan period with no direct relation to the ergative in transitive sentences;<sup>7)</sup> in other words, it was not an ergative marker *per se*; and this is probably the reason why its occurrence is rather unpredictable; however, it has gradually come to be partly associated with agentivity or volition due probably to analogy to the transitive ergatives, and has gotten mixed up with a particular usage of the transitive ergative as an emphatic marker, as will be discussed later.<sup>8)</sup>

In this way, the instrumental marker in intransitive sentences and the transitive ergative have distinct functions and should not be confused. In the next section, we will examine their occurrences in sentential nominals, where their differences figure more prominently.

## 2. ERGATIVE MARKINGS IN SENTENTIAL NOMINALS

As has been discussed in previous studies, the occurrence or absence of the ergative marker is primarily conditioned by pragmatic or rhetorical factors. We may expect then to find unmarked usages of case forms, which are little influenced by the pragmatic factors and are determined solely according to the case frame of the verb, in their occurrences in sentential nominals.<sup>9)</sup>

### 2.1 Transitive Clauses

Let us start with transitive sentential nominals. Examples 13 through 17 give

7) It seems that there were four distinct usages of the instrumental case form: i.e., a conjunction in sentence final position expressing a reason, a contrastive emphatic marker, and two kinds of the case markers, one as an instrumental case, the other as an ergative case.

8) It is probably this later association of the intransitive ergative (= an ergative marker) with volition of the agent that makes ex. 6 and 7 unacceptable.

9) Though the present paper is concerned with the ergative case, it should be noted that other case markers, such as the dative-locative case, are also retained in sentential nominals. Compare ex. n1a and n1b.

(n1a) [ngar/\*nga rogs pa zhig dgos pa] tshang mas shes kyi yod pa red/  
"All people know that I need a helper."

(n1b) ngar/nga rogs pa zhig dgos/  
"I need a helper."

It must, however, be noted that in Tibetan PA Nominalizer, which is added to a verb to make it nominal, and has *pa* and *ba* as allomorphs, is also used to form a modifying clause. In the latter construction, the case marker of the modified phrase usually drops (ex. n2b), while it is retained in the sentential nominal (ex. n2a).

(n2a) ['bras chang la bu ram phul ba] dang ro sgrung: 15  
"the rice beer which he put sugar into and ..."

(n2b) ['bras chang bu ram phul ba] gsol bas ro sgrung: 15  
"because (I) give (you) rice beer into which he put sugar"

pairs of a transitive sentence and its occurrence as a sentential nominal. If we compare ex. a and ex. b of each pair, they show a clear contrast in the occurrence of the ergative marker: For example, in ex. 13a, the conditioning factors, i.e., the imperfect aspect, the active verb, and the first person subject,<sup>10</sup> together make it almost compulsory to drop the ergative marker of the subject. While in ex. 13b, namely, in a sentential nominal, the ergative marker is obligatory. This is also true of ex. 14 and 15.

- (13a) nga/ \*ngas stag gsod kyi yin/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG tiger kill AV  
“I kill a tiger.”
- b. [ngas/ \*nga stag gsod pa] bkra shis kyis shes kyi red/<sup>11</sup>  
I-ERG/ I-ABS tiger kill NOM Tashi ERG know AV  
“Tashi knows that I kill a tiger.”
- (14a) nga/ \*ngas cog rtse 'phyid 'dar gtong gi yin/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG table wiping VBL AV  
“I wipe a table.”
- b. [ngas/ \*nga 'phyid 'dar gtong sa] cog rtse red/  
I-ERG/ I-ABS wiping VBL place table is  
“It is a table that I wipe.”
- (15a) nga/ \*ngas khang pa gtsang ma byed kyi yin/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG house clean VBL AV  
“I clean a house.”
- b. [ngas/ \*nga gtsang ma byed sa] khang pa red/  
I-ERG/ I-ABS clean VBL place house is  
“It is a house that I clean.”

In ex. 16b and 17b, the absolutive form is not unacceptable but is much lower in acceptability than the ergative form.

- (16a) nga/ \*ngas deb klog gi yin/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG book read AV  
“I read a book.”
- b. [ngas/ ?nga deb klog pa]-r bkra shis kyis bkag song/  
I-ERG/ I-ABS book read NOM-DAT Tashi ERG stop AV  
“Tashi stopped me from reading a book.”

10) The term “subject” in a transitive sentence may arouse discussion. The term “agent” is usually used in discussing the ergative case markings. But since the semantic role of an ergative marked noun could be either an agent or an experiencer, we prefer to use the term “subject” as a tentative cover term. However, Chang and Chang (1980: 28) hold a different view, namely, that the ergative marked experiencer such as *ngas* in *ngas mthong byung* “I saw (it)” is neither the subject nor ergative; they regard this sentence as a passive construction, and define the ergative to be a volitional agent.

11) Sentential nominals are put in brackets.

- (17a) nga/ngas phru gu rdung gi yin/  
I-ABS/I-ERG child hit AV  
“I hit a child.”
- b. [ngas/?nga phru gu rdung ba]-r bkra shis kyis bkag song/  
I-ERG/I-ABS child hit NOM-DAT Tashi ERG stop AV  
“Tashi stopped me from hitting a child.”

Thus, although the ergative marker of the transitive subject may drop in a simple sentence under certain pragmatic conditions, it hardly ever drops in sentential nominals: in other words, split patterns rarely occur in sentential nominals.<sup>12)</sup>

## 2.2 Intransitive Clauses

Next, let us examine intransitive sentential nominals. As seen in ex. 18, the subject of an intransitive clause in a sentential nominal usually does not take the ergative marker. In rare cases, if the verb is in the perfect aspect, the subject may sometimes take the ergative marker (ex. 20).

- (18) [nga/?ngas lha sar 'gro ba] bkra shis kyis shes kyid red/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG Lhasa-LOC go NOM Tashi ERG know AV  
“Tashi knows that I go to Lhasa.”
- (19) [nga/?ngas lha sar bsdad pa] bkra shis kyis shes kyid red/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG Lhasa-LOC stay NOM Tashi ERG know AV  
“Tashi knows that I stay in Lhasa.”
- (20) [nga/ngas lha sar phyin pa] bkra shis kyis shes kyid red/  
I-ABS/ I-ERG Lhasa-LOC went NOM Tashi ERG know AV  
“Tashi knows that I went to Lhasa.”

The above examination reveals two opposite split patterns: namely, in transitive sentences, the ergative is the unmarked case form for the subject, and the absolutive is the marked form that occurs under certain pragmatic conditions. In intransitive sentences, on the other hand, the absolutive is the unmarked form for the subject, and the ergative marker may be attached rather sporadically as a contrastive emphatic marker.

The examination also suggests that the ergative split in transitive sentences is conditioned by a combination of pragmatic or rhetorical factors. What are the relevant conditioning factors for the drop of the ergative marker?<sup>13)</sup>

12) We have found a few examples in which the absolutive agent is allowed in a sentential nominal:

(n1) [ngas/nga kha lag za ba] bkra shis kyis shes kyid red/  
“Tashi knows that I eat food.”

This seems to be restricted to sentences with a kind of action verb such as “eat” and “drink”, in which the agent himself is fully influenced by the result of his action.

13) As Takahashi (1992) has pointed out, there are a group of transitive verbs which have both morphologically and semantically corresponding intransitive counterparts; however, this kind of transitive verb always takes an ergative subject in simple sentences, that ✓

### 3. NON-ERGATIVE SUBJECTS IN TRANSITIVE SENTENCES

Three distinct split patterns may be found in the ways the ergative marker in transitive sentences occurs or drops, depending on what values the three conditioning factors take: i.e., whether the verb is in the imperfect aspect or not, whether the verb is active or non-active, and whether the subject is first person or not. The relation between the case marking patterns and these conditioning factors will be summarized in the chart below.

As shown in the chart, the primary conditioning factor is the verbal aspect: namely, if the verb is in the perfect aspect or the verbal action is completed (i.e. pattern 1 in the chart), regardless of whichever value the other two factors take, the transitive subject is almost obligatory in the ergative case (ex. 21).

- (21) ngas/\*nga    mog mog bzas pa yin/<sup>14</sup>  
 I-ERG/ I-ABS momo    ate AV            "I ate momo."

#### 3.1 Absolutive Agents in Pattern 2: Topicalization

If the verb is in the imperfect aspect, the ergative marker becomes optional, where we may distinguish two distinct split patterns, according to the values of the other two factors. If either the verb is not active or the subject is not first person (i.e. pattern 2), then the subject usually appears in the ergative case, as in ex. 22-24: ex. 22 has a third person subject with a non-active verb, ex. 23 has the first person subject with a non-active verb, and ex. 24 has a third person subject with an active verb.

- (22) khos/\*kho    sgrung de rjed kyired/  
 he-ERG/ he-ABS story that forget AV            "He forgets the story."  
 (23) ngas/\*nga    gangs ri            mthong gi red/  
 I-ERG/ I-ABS snow mountain see    AV            "I see a snow mountain."  
 (24) khos/\*kho    mog mog za gi red/  
 he-ERG/ he-ABS momo    eat    AV            "He eats momo."

However, if the subject is not in focus or is old information, the ergative marker drops, as exemplified in the answer sentence of ex. 25; whereas if the subject is in focus or is new information, it must take the ergative marker, as shown in ex. 26.<sup>15</sup>

- (25) Q: khong    ga re byed kyid 'dug/  
 he-ABS what do            AV            "What is he doing?"

↘ is, it does not show the split pattern. Consequently, this kind of verb will not be treated in this paper.

- 14) The ergative marker may drop in the perfect aspect if the subject is topicalized, but this is very rare.  
 15) As seen in ex. 25, a pronominal subject is more likely to drop the ergative marker, because a pronoun is in principle old information.

- A: khong mog mog bzo kyi dug/  
 he-ABS momo make AV "He is making momo."  
 (26) Q: sus mog mog za gi red/  
 who-ERG momo eat AV "Who eats momo?"  
 A: bkra shis kyis mog mog za gi red/  
 Tashi ERG momo eat AV "Tashi eats momo."

We thus consider, following the proposal of Takeuchi (1978), that the subjects in these cases are topicalized or become topics.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2 Marked Ergative Subjects in Pattern 3: Contrastive Emphatic Markers

If the verb is active and in the imperfect aspect, and the subject is first person (i.e. all the three conditioning factors take positive values in the chart), in other words, when the degree of animacy of the subject and the degree of transitivity of the verb are highest in the hierarchy, the ergative marker drops naturally,<sup>17</sup> and the absolutive becomes the unmarked form for the subject (i.e. pattern 3). Compare ex. 27-29, where the subjects normally occur in the absolutive case. However, these absolutive subjects may nevertheless take the ergative marker when the subjects are contrastively emphasized; see ex. 30 and the ergative subjects in ex. 27-29.

- (27) nga/ngas kha lag za gi yin/  
 I-ABS/I-ERG food eat AV  
 "I eat food."  
 (28) nga/ngas zhal ta ma gcig 'tshol gyi yin/  
 I-ABS/I-ERG maid servant one seek AV  
 "I will find a maid servant."  
 (29) nga/ngas lug gcig gsod kyi yin/  
 I-ABS/I-ERG sheep one kill AV  
 "I will kill a sheep."  
 (30) ngas kyang dmigs pa dang sgrub pa rim la bya'o/  
 I-ERG too thought and meditation successively do-SFM  
kyhod kyis kyang zhe rus rim la skyed cig/  
 you ERG too bravery successively grow IMP *ro sgrung: 5*  
 "I also successively complete meditation. You also be brave."

Here, the ergative marker functions as a contrastive emphatic marker. Note that

16) The notion of "topicalization" is also employed by Saxena (1991), but in an opposite way. Saxena says, 'if the subject is topical, it is likely to be ergative, and if the subject is not topical, it is more likely to occur in its absolutive form'(Saxena 1991: 112), and 'when the ergative is reanalyzed as an emphatic marker, it would be the *KE* that would become the topic marker, and the complementary distribution of the original ergative forms would be lost.' (ibid. 114). It is true that the ergative is becoming an emphatic marker, but it is by no means becoming a topic marker. Tournadre (1991), on the other hand, proposes a notion of "topicalization", which is very similar to that of Takeuchi (1978).

17) In other words, under these conditions subjects most naturally function as agents; the ergative marker thus becomes unnecessary.

this situation is identical with that of the intransitive ergative we have examined above.

Compare pattern 3 and Vi (intransitive) pattern at the bottom of the chart; in both cases, the absolutive is the unmarked form for the subject, and the ergative is used as a contrastive emphatic marker. We suspect that the use of the ergative marker as an emphatic marker in pattern 3 may have come about due to influence from the intransitive ergative. It is the existence of pattern 3 that led the previous studies to find similarities between the intransitive ergative and the transitive ergative, and treat them in equal terms. However, the ergative marker in pattern 3 is a result of emphatic marking, and should be distinguished from the original ergative marker for the transitive subjects found in pattern 1 and pattern 2. It is also pattern 3 that has induced researchers to correlate the transitive ergative with the notion of agentivity.

	pattern	conditioning factors			unmarked usage	marked usage
		impf	active	1stP		
Vt	1	-	-	-	ERG	(ABS)
		-	-	+		
		-	+	-		
Vt	2	-	+	+	ERG	ABS (topic)
		+	-	-		
		+	+	-		
Vt	3	+	+	+	ABS	ERG (emphatic)
Vi					ABS	ERG (emphatic)

However, if we exclude the peculiar usage of the ergative marker in pattern 3 and that in intransitive sentences, both of which are not the ergative *per se*, Tibetan transitive sentences show a relatively plain ergative pattern. And, as indicated by ex. 22 and 23, the Tibetan ergative is not necessarily associated with the notion of agentivity. It is primarily a method for disambiguating the two arguments of transitive sentences, and was originally related with the notion of source and the ablative case.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

We may conclude as follows:

1) Tibetan shows, both in its historical forms and in the Modern Central dialect, a relatively plain ergative marking pattern, where, except for 'marked'

usages, subjects in transitive sentences have the ergative marker, be they agents or experiencers, and those in intransitive sentences have no marker.

2) Ergative marking for subjects in intransitive sentences is a marker of contrastive emphasis, and is not the ergative *per se*; it developed independently of the transitive ergative since the Old Tibetan period.

3) The ergative split in transitive sentences is probably a later development; the split is conditioned by a combination of pragmatic factors. After the drop of the ergative marker, the ergative marker was again re-employed, but this time, as a contrastive emphatic marker. The similarity of this to the intransitive ergative has caused confusion both on the part of the native speakers and the part of researchers.

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#### Abbreviations

ABS	absolutive
AV	auxiliary verb
CONJ	conjunction
DAT	dative
ERG	ergative
GEN	genitive
LOC	locative
NOM	nominalizer
QM	question marker
SFM	sentence final marker
VBL	verbalizer

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