

The broken jug: causative and resultative verbs in Tibetan

In my talk I will discuss the theories of two Tibetan grammarians, Sangs-rGyas and gDong-Drug, on the Tibetan verb, the empirical basis for their claims, and the insights to be gained for the creation of Tibetan corpora and translating from Tibetan.

I'll start with giving a rough sketch of Tibetan and its main features and present two conflicting theories about the Tibetan verb system. I'll explain how a philosophical assumption lies behind one theory and how it affects the view on which verbs should be classified as transitive. Evidence from Tibetan texts of different periods – before and after the existence of the first sound grammatical paradigm – will suggest that these philosophical assumptions did indeed influence the way Tibetan authors wrote.

As in any language there is a distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. For Tibetan, however, being an ergative language, a definition of transitivity via a direct object is impossible. I'll use the terms 'differentiating' and 'non-differentiating verbs' instead because they are literal translations for the Tibetan linguistic terms. Differentiating verbs have their semantic subject marked with the ergative case marker and the semantic object is unmarked.

One subcategory of differentiating verbs is causative verbs. They have corresponding resultative verbs which they share their root with. There are about 180 pairs of them. Causative verbs describe the attempt of a conscious agent to affect an object, to bring about a change in its state. They only describe the agent's effort, but not the result. For the result to come about, further conditions are needed. It's the resultative verbs which reveal whether the intended result comes or came about. Thus the causative verbs might be called agent-centered, and the resultative verbs object-centered.

Both grammarians acknowledge the existence of these two verb categories and they agree that causative verbs are differentiating – but they disagree on the resultative verbs. According to Sangs-rGyas resultative verbs are differentiating: In his view, there is no way for the result to come about without the effort of the agent. A result needs a cause. The cause is a conscious agent; when the result is there, the agent has become an experiencer and is an argument of the resultative verb.

gDong-Drug, however, maintains that resultative verbs are non-differentiating: A result comes after the cause, cause and result do not exist at the same time. When the result is there, the cause is gone. His view is based on the Buddhist philosophical idea of momentariness. According to this concept things change moment by moment – a jug in this moment is not the same like a jug in the previous moment, and in the next moment it will be another jug again. This philosophical concept applied to language means that there is no agent at the time of the result and thus resultative verbs are non-differentiating.

This view, however, has difficulties in explaining the frequent usage of the ergative marker with resultative verbs.

There is no unified usage of the ergative marker with resultative verbs, however. In the middle of the 18th century the Tibetan grammarian Situ-Panchen made history by arguably cleaning up the chaos in preceding grammatical views and creating a sound paradigm for the first time. His model formulated rules for what a differentiating and what a non-differentiating verb is and that the ergative case marker ought to be used with differentiating verbs only. It left some space for the interpretation of resultative verbs. One interpretation, however, became dominant: that what we call resultative verbs are non-differentiating.

Did this interpretation influence the way Tibetan was written afterwards in the grammatical tradition of Situ-Panchen? Have Tibetan authors since then tried to avoid using the ergative marker with resultative verbs? To answer this first part of my research questions, I compare Tibetan texts before and after Situ-Panchen and texts inside and outside his tradition.

Now according to Sangs-rGyas a further distinction in Tibetan verbs has to be made. Resultative verbs should not be mixed up with non-differentiating verbs. In his view, there are three categories: causative, resultative and non-differentiating verbs. In gDong-Drug's view, resultative verbs belong to the category of non-differentiating verbs. Does an important semantic distinction get lost in this way? Sangs-rGyas answer is yes: There is a difference between, say, a jug breaking by itself and breaking as a result of a conscious act of trying to break it. And indeed, Sangs-rGyas argues, there are different forms for resultative and non-differentiating verbs.

bum pa bcag kyang ma chog ngang gis chag pa mtshar

jug try-to-break though NEG broken by itself broken strange

Though [she] tried to break the jug, it didn't break – how strange, that it got broken by itself!

Note the three morphologically related verbs 'bcag', 'chog' and 'chag'. 'bcag' is the past stem of the causative verb, 'chog' – according to Sangs-rGyas – is the resultative verb and 'chag' is the non-differentiating verb, which expresses that an event happens of its own accord.

First, there is the attempt to break the jug expressed by the past stem of the causative verb 'bcag'. The 'ma' is a negation marker. Together with the resultative verb 'chog', it expresses that the person trying to break the jug did not succeed. The non-differentiating verb 'chag' finally insists on the fact that the jug broke of its own accord – there is no conscious distinct agent that could be blamed for it.

gDong-Drug, however, does not seem to distinguish between the form 'chog' and 'chag'. Examples he gives show that he considers them to be synonymous. Whether

a non-differentiating verb is resultative or shows that event happens of its own accord has to be gleaned from the context.

Thus the next question is: Do we find an empirical basis for Sangs-rGyas theory of the three categories of verbs? Are his categories universally applicable for all Tibetan texts from all times and genres, or do they apply during a certain period only – supposedly before Situ-Panchen? Authors in which grammatical traditions distinguish verbs like 'chog' and 'chag'? Which errors in translating from Tibetan might ensue from ignoring the differences Sangs-rGyas points out or clinging to a supposedly idealized theory of three verb categories which is empirically unfounded?

Answering these questions will deepen the understanding of Tibetan and be helpful for avoiding mistakes when translating.