

The transformation of verb agreement into epistemic marking: evidence from Tibeto-Burman

Manuel Widmer, MA | University of Berne | Department of Linguistics

DeLancey (2010, 2011) has recently argued that there are two main mechanisms that account for the loss of verb agreement in Tibeto-Burman languages: clausal nominalization (an old verb form inflected for person and number is replaced by a periphrastic construction consisting of a nominalized verb and a copula) and creolization (the agreement features 'person' and 'number' are lost due to intensive language contact). In my presentation, I will adduce evidence for a third mechanism which transforms the agreement feature 'person' into a grammatical category that has been referred to as 'volitionality' (DeLancey 1986), 'conjunct-disjunct' (Hale 1980) or 'egophoricity' (Tournadre 1991). In the course of this process, the feature values '1st person' and '3rd person' are reanalyzed as expressing 'volitionality' and 'non-volitionality', respectively.

So far, this transitional mechanism has only been documented for the Newaric language Dolakha Newar (Genetti 1994), where the epistemic use of person agreement suffixes is, however, optional and rare. I will argue that the same process has affected the West Himalayish language Bunan and completely transformed its original agreement system into an epistemic system, which ultimately implies that Dolakha Newar and Bunan reflect different stages of a gradual transition from verb agreement to epistemic marking.

The causes that give rise to the functional reanalysis of verb agreement morphology are not fully understood yet. In Dolakha Newar, agreement mismatches are not only used to distinguish volitional and non-volitional actions, but also to express coreference between subjects in subordinate constructions. This suggests that the two phenomena might be related in some way (DeLancey 1992).

References:

- DeLancey, Scott (1986). Evidentiality and volitionality in Tibetan, in: Chafe, Wallace / Nichols, Johanna (ed.): *Evidentiality: the linguistic coding of epistemology*. Norwood: Ablex Publications, 203–213.
- DeLancey, Scott (1992). The historical status of the conjunct / disjunct pattern in Tibeto-Burman, in: *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 26, 39–62.
- DeLancey, Scott (2010). Towards a history of verb agreement in Tibeto-Burman, in: *Himalayan Linguistics* 9.1, 1–39.
- DeLancey, Scott (2011). Finite structures from clausal nominalization in Tibeto-Burman, in: Yap, Foong Ha / Grunow-Hårsta, Karen / Wrona, Janick (ed.): *Nominalization in Asian languages. Diachronic and typological perspectives*. Hong Kong / Oxford: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 343–360.

Tournadre, Nicholas (1991). The rhetorical use of the Tibetan ergative, in: *LTBA* 14.1, 93–107.

Genetti, Carol (1994). A descriptive and historical account of the Dolakha Newari dialect. Tokyo: Institute for the study of languages and cultures of Asia and Africa. (*Monumenta Serindica* 24)

Hale, Austin (1980). Person markers: Finite conjunct and disjunct verb forms in Newari, in: *Papers in South-East Asian linguistics* 7. Canberra: Australian National University, 95–106. (*Pacific Linguistics A* 53)