"Ergativity in Milarepa's *Rnam·thar*": another viewpoint

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This paper was written in reaction to A. Saxena's 1989 article [*LTBA* 12.2:35-40], and takes issue both with its initial analysis of the data and in the conclusions it draws from them about ergativity. I would also like to suggest a system of prosodic analysis for Tibetan which would automatically minimize the possibilities for analytical errors in matters like these.

I. The corrections.

Before reviewing Saxena's remarks on ergativity in the corpus, I'd like to offer corrections to the examples and translations provided. I follow Saxena's numbers but also cite the DeJong edition's page and line.

#1 (42:12) This example may be presented as follows: ...mna·mas thog·draṇs... with mna·mas analysed as mna·ma + -s. Saxena translates this as 'The son's wife pulled the roof.' Perhaps the problem here is that this is a mere fragment of a sentence, not even a clause. We need to look at a larger part of the sentence: this phrase is describing the group of people upon whom Mila is going to wreak his vengeance with a giant scorpion-wraith: ...bag·ston-gyi sar a·khui bu-rnams-daṇ mna·mas thog· draṇs ṇed ma·smad-la śin·tu sdaṇ'-bai mi·zla sum·cu so·lṇa naṇdu 'dzom '...at the wedding site 35 people were gathered inside, **headed up by** Uncle's sons and **the bride**, who were very hostile to our family.' There is no mention of a 'roof' in the Tibetan: even as a root, below the syntactic level, thog here has its traditional meaning of 'on top, above'. There is likewise no pulling being done: thogs·draṇs is a single word, an adjective meaning 'led by, headed up by' and equivalent to the (here) more commonly seen phrase gtso byas-pai.

#4 (39:1) khoṇ grogs·po-rnams-ni phyag·rten sna-re-tsam-las mi·gtoṇ-bar 'dug. *Saxena:* 'The friends didn't give a portion of the souvenir with the letter.' I instead translate: 'As for those friends, they didn't give more than a couple of kinds of gifts' (in contrast to all that Mila gave). phyag·rten is a 'greeting-gift', not 'souvenir with letter', sna means 'kind, sort', and re here means 'some, a little bit', las is 'than, compared to'.

#5 (39:2) ŋas gser·g'yu kun phul-te: gser·g'yu kun means 'all the gold and turquoise', not 'the whole turquoise'.

#7 (43:20) de-stobs-kyis mi·śi byuŋ-ba kun-gyis thos-nas 'tshogs-te. *Saxena:* 'Hearing by what power these people had been killed, the villagers gathered together.' I translate (literally): 'Everyone, having heard of the occurrence of deaths by that power, gathered together.' The issue here is not the general meaning as much as the syntactic analysis which Saxena uses then for other purposes: śi is not a perfective verb here, it is a part of the substantive word mi·śi (further examples are in Yú Dàoquán's dictionary of modern Lhasa usage); mi·śi byuŋ-ba is a gerundial phrase meaning 'that deaths came about' which in turn serves as the direct object of thos-nas 'hearing/having heard'.

#8 (39:12) ŋa-ni yid-cig ma·ches-te... *Saxena:* 'I was not very great.' *Dempsey:* 'I didn't have even a bit of faith.' or: 'I didn't believe any of it'. Mila says this when his companions are satisfied that they have learned some real sorcery and can go back home; he feels he has learned nothing useful. yid ches-pa is a common verbal phrase meaning 'to believe'; I can't imagine how Saxena thought that yid 'mind' was an imperative form of yin 'to be', a copula which has no imperative. -cig means 'a little bit of'.

#9 (37:27) khyed grogs·po-rnams-kyis skul·lcag gyis-la mthu śin·tu [not śi·tu] mkhas-pa-źig slobs-śog-cig! *Saxena:* 'So you, his companions, should exhort him and spur him on to become deeply skilled in magic.' *Dempsey:* 'You (his) friends exhort (him) and come back having learned (to be) very skillful at magic!' The problem here again is mainly Saxena's morphosyntactic analysis: skul is not the hortative form of a verb, it is the first syllable of the noun skul·lcag 'exhortation, admonishment' which forms a transitive verbal phrase with gyis. gyis is the imperative of the verb byed-pa 'to do, make', it is certainly not an instrumental marker. Saxena's mysterious -la is common in old colloquial texts and simply means 'and'; it is only used directly after an imperative form.[1] slobs is not a noun, it is the second imperative: 'learn!' and is followed by an "auxiliary imperative" śog 'come!' The two words could alternately be analysed as an allegro form of 'having learned, come!' Such directional auxiliaries to imperatives also occur, for instance, in Chinese and Korean.

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[1] For these special uses cf. Hahn Section 14.5.

II. Ergativity.

Now that the examples are clearer, let's look at their use in a discussion of ergativity.

Before the first example, Saxena declares that ergative markers only occur in this text "when the verb is in the perfective in simple clauses." (In a footnote Saxena explains "Perfective" as what is traditionally called "Past.") This is not true: for example, 26:11-17 is a long imperative sentence which, much abbreviated, means, "I ask that, helping us, you tell us your story." The subject-agent 'you' is khyed-kyis (26:12), clearly carrying the ergative marker, but the verbs 'helping' gzuŋ'/bzuŋ'-źiŋ (26:13) and 'tell' gsuŋ' (26:16) are not perfective.[2] The spelling of the verbs, as is often the case, is equivocal, and anyway irrelevant in a colloquial text; the context and usage are clearly related to the future, not the past. This is a good place to point out that Saxena's method of using verbs spelled with distinct aspectual forms in order to prove split ergativity is not helpful, at least with vernacular texts. Many verbs, such as gzuŋ'/bzuŋ' 'to seize' used in this example and in Saxena's #2, have for many centuries had identical pronunciations for two or more of the forms—in Saxena's example rko-(b)rkos-brkos-rkos the past, future, and imperative are all pronounced the same in most dialects. As a result, in any Tibetan text (but especially in a vernacularly-oriented text) the silent letters freely dance through the manuscripts in random confusion; one can never say, 'See, this has a b- prefix: it must be a perfective form.' Interpretation can only be based on the phonology represented (as interpreted by a native speaker) and the sentence's context.

Another example is 31:20-21. In the phrase bu-'dis khyim·so pher-ba-daŋ 'when this boy will be able to manage the household' bu-'di 'this boy' has the ergative suffix, but again the (non-finite) verb is referring to the future and is certainly neither perfective nor future-perfective. A few lines later (31:25) the dying father's last words ŋa śi-dur·khuŋ-nas blta-o 'I will be watching from the grave' are interesting because most of the editions have the simple ŋa but edition A, the normative edition which DeJong perversely chose to favor, has what is probably a "correction" to ŋas.

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[2] Of the older editions available to me, four—including de Jong's normalising A—have gzuŋ', the future form, and two have bzuŋ', the past form; the prefix is actually irrelevant in this context (as well as for this type of Tibetan in general): the verb functions here as a non-finite coordinator; the finite verb most closely linked with the ergative-marker is the imperative form gsuŋ' 'tell about!'. The entire sentence is a request for a future action.

Another example of the ergative with the future is 34:29 ŋed 'di-na yod-pa kun-gyis-kyaŋ ci·grag-re ster. 'All of us here will give (you) the best (that we can).' The next line also has the same sort of usage. Another particularly clear example is 37:14 where Mila's distraught mother is challenging him to learn sorcery and get their revenge. She concludes e-yoŋ ltos-daŋ ! 'See if you can do it (lit: whether it will happen)!' and Mila replies ŋas e-yoŋ blta-o! 'I'll see if I can do it!' Here the ergative ŋas is again clearly linked with a future form.

In 51:23-25 we can see that the use of the ergative can be contrastive: ŋa is used with the quasi-future phrase byed-pa yin-pas (byed is normally the "present" form) but ŋas is used with bya-o 'will do', a clear future form. In 46:15-16 ŋa da·lta-raŋ-'oŋ'-gis 'I'll be right back' the verb is in the future, but there is no ergative. Pending a more exhaustive analysis of the text I can only say that the situation seems complex and not in accord with Saxena's simple analysis.

Regarding Saxena's analysis of ergativity in the examples, some clarification would be in order: if #3 lacks the ergative marker on a·ma due to its verb not being perfective, the verb is not 'phrad—part of a gerund not even linked with a·ma—but the verb sñam' at the end of the sentence (missing from Saxena's example). In #7 the syllables Saxena marks with (PF) are not really verbs (syntactically), so it cannot prove the point. The last example (#9) is curious in that it would seem to be proof that the ergative is not needed in certain transitive clauses in this text, but the only agent in the example is clearly marked with the ergative!

III. Interpretation of voicing.

To balance out the above criticism I would now like to bring up a few examples which illustrate the complexities of verbal voice in Tibetan. Saxena defines 'ergative marker' as "the marker which comes with the subject when the verb is either transitive or an agent-taking intransitive verb in the perfective." I have already argued against limiting it to the perfective; what I'm wondering about now is, just what do we mean by the subject of a sentence? Consider, from the same text, 24:8 yaŋ mos khrid-nas saŋs·rgyas-kyi źabs·druŋ-du phyin' '...again led by her I went into the presence of the Buddha...' The subject of the immediately preceding clause is Rechung's guide Bharima; with yaŋ there is a switch, but how subtle it is! The subject, in the sense of the one who undergoes the action of the verb khrid 'led', is Rechung speaking in the first person, but this subject is not to be found in the

sentence. My informant was emphatic that in the phrase yaŋ mos khrid-nas the only place the missing subject ŋa could be placed would be directly before the agent mos, but it is not really needed. This may seem odd to English speakers until we realise that we are too much in the habit of translating a phrase such as mos khrid- by 'she led'; clearly in this case a passive wording 'led by her' is more appropriate.

    Here are three more examples from Chang & Shefts' *Spoken Tibetan Texts*:

    4:55 tha̱ tha̱rēŋ̱ ŋa̱ āmā te̱ɛnānī, tyy̱mȳỳ sʌqīrēè 'If I your mother on this occasion were to stay, (I) would be eaten by the demon.' Chang & Shefts' 'the demon would eat me' is less appropriate, since the missing ŋa̱ could only be placed before the agent.

    4:211 pāpā lhāqpēè khīīpʌ re̱è. khīī cɛɛ chū phʌrī te̱e̱ le̱è̱ pʌ re̱è. 'The father was carried by the wind; (he) was carried and then arrived at the far side of the river.' There is no change in subject as implied by the active voicing in the Chang & Shefts' translation. This example is particularly interesting because not only is the passive sense carried over into the next sentence, but is even used with the suffix cɛɛ (byas) which normally is associated with active constructions.

    4:263 te̱ɛnā, ti̱ tyy̱mu re̱è. tyy̱mȳỳ se̱ē̱qī-re̱è 'If you stay, this is a demon; (you) will be killed by the demon'—tyy̱mȳỳ se̱ē̱qi-re̱è does not mean 'the demon will kill'.

    The point of these examples is to show that such constructions are simply transitive; it is only when considered through the filter of a language (e.g. English) which takes note of voicing distinctions that we must decide whether they are active or passive. With this in mind, the use of the terms "active verb" and "passive verb" in some widely used textbooks on colloquial Tibetan must be considered regrettable, since the categories are rather "transitive" vs. "intransitive" or "voluntary" vs. "involuntary".

IV. How can we more accurately analyse Tibetan structure?

    The reader may have already noticed the emphasis I put on getting one's phonological analysis right before going on to discussions about syntax. A major problem with Saxena's analysis, as for most foreign (at least non-Chinese) students of Tibetan, is the lack of a clear concept about which syllables in a sentence "go with" each other, or even a concept of what that means. There is usually no realisation at all of the intimate relation between

the tonal/intonational system and sentence structure. Tibetan is certainly by far the most widely studied Tibeto-Burman language (by foreigners), yet most students, the vast majority of whom are only readers, not speakers, read Tibetan in a staccato monotone which sounds more like the mutterings of a half-asleep lama than the music of a living language. I sense Saxena's confusion right from the article's title: in "Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar" what is the function of the symbol " = " ? If it is not phonological, if it is simply the marker of which syllables join together to form a semantic unit on the syntactic level, then why are rnam and thar separate? In #1, why are the syllables mna' and ma connected as mna'=ma, while yul and mi are not, even though their status as disyllabic nouns is identical? In #4 grogs=po=rnams why is the connector between grogs and po a different symbol? My purpose is not to pick on Saxena here: similar oddities are quite common in editions of Tibetan texts published in romanisation by many scholars.

I would like to introduce here a system of prosodic analysis for Tibetan which I have been using for many years; the reader may have already noticed it in my re-transcription of the examples from the Milarepa book. The basic idea is to distinguish between close juncture and looser juncture, with a symbol for each. I happen to like a mid-line dot to show close juncture since it is small and unobtrusive, with a more noticeable dash to portray the further distance associated with looser juncture; of course any reasonable symbols will do. Now the question is, just what are these two kinds of junctures? Although my informant had never studied phonological theory, with only a little coaching he knew just what distinction I meant; that is because it is a part of a native speaker's background. "Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar" would be written as "mi·la ras·pai rnam·thar". The tone sandhi occurring between mi and la as well as between the other syllables in the phrase indicates that they go together as a set of three syntactic units, with the middle one undergoing some modification due to its genitive status. If rnam and thar were separate words, there would be an optional pause between them when reading at a slightly slow pace, but there is no such option. In Saxena's example #1 thog·draŋs is simply a substantive just like mna·ma; this is evident from the lack of a potential pause between thog and draŋs, but also the tone-pattern is informative: it is possible to say thog draŋs or thog draŋs-pa, a verbal phrase cited as a dictionary entry or discussed as a term in the abstract, but there is a world of difference between the tonal patterns of thog·draŋs and thog draŋs. The first, in the Chang & Shefts system, would be th55qṭāŋ or th55ṭāŋ, but the second would be th55 ṭhaŋ.

In #7 one can tell that mi and śi go together as one word because there can be no pause between them; also, if there were a phrase *śi-byung-ba then śi would have a noticeably stronger stress-accent.[3] In #9 the gyis after lcag would be totally unstressed if it were an instrumental-marker, but in fact it has a stress only slightly less than ·lcag.

In #4 the secondary juncture marks in sna-re-tsam-las mean that the first syllable is a short, high stressed tone and that each successive syllable falls off a little more in stress and pitch.

In #6 in the phrase źes bya-bar (which Saxena both mistranscribed and neglected to translate) the basic word is bya-ba, not bya·ba. The former is Chang & Shefts cha ʋʌ, and the latter is chaʋā. The former is a gerund but the latter is a simple noun. This is analogous to dad-pa 'believing/believed' vs. dad·pa 'belief'.

The reader may have noticed some funny little marks in my transcriptions from the Mila book (gzuŋ'-źiŋ, phyin'): these are simply to mark the falling tone on these syllables which is often overlooked in conventional Tibetan orthography. Marking such details is necessary because we need an exact system which represents real Tibetan instead of an approximation that is close enough for native speakers who already know the details.

I can already hear some readers saying, "That's all very nice if you already know exactly how Tibetan is pronounced, but otherwise how should one transcribe it?" Simply one syllable after another is quite adequate, with no attempt to mark supposed linkages. This has been and should be the method of any scholars who need to refer to Tibetan words but need not discuss linguistic details. If, on the other hand, one is discussing and referring to the language itself, one must deal with real words and tones, real syntactic units and intonation patterns. Only upon that basis can one build more advanced discussion of syntax, morphology or anything else.

I'm grateful to Saxena for having initiated these discussions of Tibetan grammar: Sino-Tibetanists are fond of using Tibetan for comparative data, but sometimes we also need to focus on the details of the language itself.

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3 Substantive forms with a verbal root in second position are also seen in this text in words such as ʿdir·bźugs (33:20) 'those seated here' and ʿdir·tshogs (31:18-19) 'those gathered here'.

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