

RGYALTHANG TIBETAN OF YUNNAN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan is divided into four major dialects: *ütsāṅ*, which includes Lhasa Tibetan; *tö*, such as Ladakhi and Balti Tibetan; *amdo*, a northeastern dialect; and *kham*s, a southeastern dialect. All these dialects and subdialects differ greatly from one another. Most work on Tibetan dialects, except for Lhasa, concentrate merely on phonetic and phonological systems. Only a few works, (e.g. Sun 1993) have been devoted to grammatical topics. A comprehensive picture of the grammatical system of Tibetan drawn from the various dialects still awaits further research.

Rgyalthang is a Kham language spoken in Zhongdian county,¹ Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, N.W. Yunnan, People's Republic of China. Diqing lies to the south of the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau. Other than Tibetans, there are several other minority groups residing in this area, such as Han, Yi, Naxi, Bai, Lisu, and Pumi. Tibetans outnumber these groups. There are more than 100,000 Tibetans in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The main concentrations are in Zhongdian and Deqin counties. Other minority groups, especially the Lisu, live along the Mekong river. Most Hans work in offices or own businesses such as retail stores, and live in the capital city of the prefecture called *dzīādāṅ dzōṅ*. The Tibetans grow barley, wheat, and potatoes for a living. Most of the families raise animals such as yaks and pigs, and pick mushrooms and "wide asparagus" (*ṭubūṅ*) in the summertime.

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¹ Zhongdian county is divided into Da Zhongdian and Xiao Zhongdian, called Rgyalthang and Yangthang respectively. Xiao Zhongdian is about 40 minutes by car from Da Zhongdian. Its main population is Tibetan, and the language used there is a sub-dialect of Rgyalthang.

Unlike other places in Yunnan, Zhongdian is quite unknown. The area had been closed to foreigners until a few years ago, when it was opened up for individual foreign tourists and a few fortunate researchers. This is a reason why few scholarly works have been published on Rgyalthag Tibetan. The first publication on Rgyalthag phonology, as far as I know, is by a local scholar, Wang Xiaosong, who turned out to be my main language consultant (cf. Wang, this issue). Other publications (Corlin 1978, 1980) are anthropologically oriented, dealing with house symbolism and the kinship system respectively. Unfortunately, these anthropological works were not based on data collected in the sociocultural milieu of the Rgyalthag people in Yunnan, but rather on data obtained from a few Rgyalthag families who had immigrated to Switzerland.

The data used in this paper were collected during a period of fourteen days in October 1995, and of 45 days from May to June 1996, in Zhongdian County. Additional data were obtained from a Rgyalthag speaker invited to work in Bangkok for 18 days in January 1997. The main informants are Wang Xiaosong (Tshering Dbang'dus), aged 47, and Sonam Rgyatso, aged 70. Both are local scholars working mainly on a famous local epic called *Gling Gesar*, and thus are among the few people in Zhongdian who have had the opportunity for higher education.

This paper aims at presenting a preliminary linguistic description of Rgyalthag with a focus on the grammatical system of the language. Like other Tibetan dialects, Rgyalthag exhibits complex grammatical features associated with the verbs, such as evidentiality, person marking, and aspectual marking. Unlike Lhasa Tibetan, however, Rgyalthag has object (accusative) marking, in addition to ergative marking. This raises the question of the origin and development of these case patterns. A description of the language's phonological system is given in Section 2. Section 3 presents correspondence patterns between Written Tibetan and Rgyalthag Tibetan so that the development of Rgyalthag consonants can be seen more clearly. Section 4 outlines some of the salient features of Rgyalthag Tibetan grammar, namely case marking and indexical categories. In particular, I raise the question of whether Rgyalthag is an ergative language, and discuss the notion of person marking extensively.

2. OUTLINE OF PHONOLOGY

2.1 Consonants

Rgyalthag Tibetan is rich in consonantal phonemes (44 altogether). All can occur in syllable initial position. However, the glottal stop occurs only in a few monosyllabic words, e.g. *ñu* 'to do' and *ñu* 'to borrow'. This consonant

is also common as the initial of the first syllable of disyllabic words such as *ʔäpō* 'stomach', *ʔälē* 'cat', and *ʔäsū* 'grandmother'. See Figure 1.

p	ts	t	tɕ	tɕ	k	ʔ
ph	tsh	th	tɕh	tɕh	kh	
b	dz	d	dʒ	dʒ	g	
nb	ndz	nd	ndʒ	ndʒ	ng	
m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
ɱ		ɱ		ɲ		
		s	ɕ	ɕ		h
		z	ʒ	ʒ		
		ʈ				
		l				
		r				
w				j		

Figure 1. Rgyalthang Tibetan initial consonants.

The syllabic structures of Rgyalthang are simple. There are no initial clusters, except for those with prenasalization. Only nasals can occupy the syllable final position. The consonantal inventory is quite complex when compared to that of Lhasa Tibetan. For example, prenasalized stops, voiced obstruents, and voiceless nasals do not occur as phonemes in Lhasa Tibetan. The phonological complexity of Khams dialects like Rgyalthang has been reported elsewhere, e.g. for 'Bathang (Gesang Jumian 1989), Sde-dge (Yu 1948), and Hsi-ning (Gō et al. 1954).

There are four tonemes in Rgyalthang Tibetan. The following symbols are used to represent the tones: / ˥ / = high tone or 55, / ˨˨˩ / = rising tone or 13, / ˨˨˩˨˩ / = mid-rising-falling tone or 231, and / ˨˨˩ / = falling tone or 51. An allotone / ˨˨˩ / 11 replaces the rising pitch of the first syllable of a disyllabic word. This tone also occurs in unstressed syllables. Grammatical morphemes, such as case postpositions, or auxiliary verbs which express grammatical meanings, carry no tones. For example, the underlying tone of the number one *tci* is falling, but when it modifies a head noun to indicate indefiniteness, it has no tonal marking. In the same way, when this form appears as a suffix to the main verb indicating perfective aspect, it has no tone.

Examples²:

/p/:	pî	'Tibet'
	pǝ	'hair (body); to move'*
/ph/:	phù	'to be affected, e.g. by an illness'
	phě	'piggy'
/b/	bǎ	'to hide; wave'†
	bî	'to arrive'
/nb/	nbǝ	'insect; worm'*
	nbî	'abundant; plentiful'*
/m/	mū ɕīŋ	'red'
	mǐ diu	'flower'
/ŋ/	ŋēŋ	'medicine'
	ŋī	'ripen; well-cooked'
/w/:	wǎ	'boat; fox'†
	wǎŋ	'to give (a bride); to send'
/ts/:	tsōŋ	'to sell'
	tsà	'to strain, sift, filter'
/tsh/:	tshǐ	'puppy'
	tshǔ	'grandchild'

² I have selected these examples carefully so that they do not overlap with those given in Wang 1996. Those that also appear in Wang are marked with *. Those that appear in Wang but are given with extra meanings are marked with †.

/dz/:

dzā t̥shə	'Mekong river'
dză wāŋ	'earthenware pot'

/ndz/:

ndzĩ	'finger; toe'
ndză	'foodstuffs; provisions'*

/t/:

tā wāŋ	'rhododendron'
tûə	'poison'

/th/:

thà	'distance'
thÿa	'dust'

/d/:

dūə	'stone'
dēn	'rug, carpet'

/nd/:

ndā	'leech; arrow'†
ndô	'to sit, stay; to give birth'

/n/:

nă	'ill'
nă	'person'

/ŋ/:

ŋă	'nose'
ŋāŋ	'to be; to exist'

/s/:

sûə	'tooth'
sū	'gold'

/z/:

zū	'to pain, numb; to hang'†
zûə	'to cook; to do; to make'

/l/:

lô	'sheep'
lûə	'year'

/h/:	tà	'remaining'
	tỳ	'to lure, entice'*
/r/:	rî pā	'bone'
	rĩŋ dē	'long'
/tɕ/:	tɕà	'iron'
	tɕô	'six'
/tɕh/:	tɕhāŋ	'beer'
	tɕhĩm bā	'liver'
/dz/:	dzũ	'to glue, seal'
	dzũa	'tick'
/ndz/:	ndzǎ	'to look like'*
	ndzē tɕhē	'Yangtse river'
/ɕ/:	ɕĩ	'to melt (naturally, e.g. snow)'
	ɕũ	'east'
/z/:	zĩ	'to melt (by extra force, e.g. by putting into fire)'
	zũ	'to slip'
/tɕ/:	tɕā wā	'excrement'
	tɕò	'to vomit'
/tɕh/:	tɕhỳ	'you'
	tɕhà	'blood'
/dz/:	dzê	'eight'
	dzĩa dāŋ	place name (Rgyalthang)

/ndz/:

ndzâ	'to hide oneself; to shrink'*
ndzû	'quick'*

/ɲ/:

ɲŷə	'to buy'
ɲă	'fish'

/ɲ/:

ɲī	'heart'
ɲī wāŋ	'bamboo'

/ɕ/:

ɕì	'louse'
ɕĩ	'son, child'

/ʈ/:

ʈŷ	'snake'*
ʈə	'wild cat'*

/j/:

jē	'right'
jŷn	'left'

/k/:

kū kū	'white'
kūə	'to dig'

/kh/:

khǒ	'to carry; to carry on one's back'
khò	'needle'

/g/:

gū gū	'round'
gûa	'egg'

/ng/:

ngūə	'head'
ngū	'rice (uncooked)'+

/ŋ/:

ŋă	'I'
ŋū cīŋ	'sweet'

/ɲ/:

ʔũ	‘to do’
ʔũ	‘to borrow’

/h/:

hũə ɕĩŋ	‘blue’
hũ	‘to console (a child) by deceiving’*

2.2 Vowels

There are nine monophthongs in the Rgyalthag Tibetan vocalic system. [ɑ] is an allophone of /a/. It occurs only when the vowel is followed by /ŋ/ as in the second syllable of the word *kũ wāŋ* ‘star’.³ Vowel length is not distinctive. Wang (this issue) lists eleven diphthongs, but I have found only nine. Those given in Wang which do not appear in my investigation are shown in parentheses.

i	y	u	u
e	ə		o
ɛ			
	a		
iə	ia	iu (io)	yə (ye)
ya	ui	uə	ua
ei			

Examples:

/i/:

tɕi	‘one; grammatical morpheme’
ɕĩ	‘to know’

/y/:

jŷ	‘to have, exist’
tɕhŷ	‘you’

/e/:

nē	‘bride’
tè	‘to give’

/ɛ/:

nê	‘not have’
sê	‘to kill’

³ For the sake of convenience, I have opted to use a phonemic transcription system in this paper.

/ə/:

tɕə	'to be born'
rə	'mountain'

/a/:

nā	'vow'
tɕà	'fear'

/u/:

mũ	'butter'
tshũ	'hear'

/ɲ/:

zũ	'summer'
ɲũ	'sweet'

/o/:

thōŋ	'to see'
tɕō	'sour'

/iə/:

kĩə dzāŋ	'knife'
dzĩə	'to stab'

/iu/:

ɕiu	'bird'
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/ia/:

pĩaŋ	'rice barn'
dzĩa dāŋ	place name (Rgyalthag)

/yə/:

ɲyə	'to buy'
khyə	'he, she (ergative case)'

/ya/:

khĩa	'soup'
thĩa	'dust'

/ui/:

tùi	'on top of'
dzùi	'to sew'

/uə/:

ngūə	‘head’
tsūə	‘to boil’

/ua/:

dzūa	‘tick’
tsūa	‘grass’

/ei/:

nēi	‘two’
tēi	‘rub’

3. CORRESPONDENCE PATTERNS BETWEEN WRITTEN TIBETAN AND RGYALTHANG TIBETAN

The Rgyalthang (RGT) consonantal initials which are not found in Lhasa Tibetan (LT) such as /ṃ/, /ndz/, /g/, or /ng/ can be traced to Written Tibetan (WT) in which consonant clusters are apparent. For example:

WT	RGT	LT	Gloss
rma	ṃā	mā	‘wound’
mdzub	ndzī	tsup	‘finger; toe’
dgu	gə	kü	‘nine’
ḥgro	ngūə	tə	‘to go’

It is obvious that what causes the phonological differences between RGT and LT is the presence of consonant clusters in earlier stages of Tibetan, as preserved in the spelling of WT. All the clusters disappear in LT, causing the root-initial (except for nasals) to be devoiced. On the other hand, we can still see the remnants of the consonantal clusters in RGT.⁴ The prefix *r-* devoices the root-initial consonant. The prefixes *m-* and *ḥ-* before the affricate *dz* and the stop *g* cause the affricate and the stop to be prenasalized.

To see the development of Rgyalthang phonology more clearly, we can set up five major correspondence rules between RGT and WT consonants, as follows:

1. In words with the WT prefixes *m-* and *ḥ-*, RGT unaspirated stops and affricates are prenasalized.

⁴ This is the reason why Gö et al. (1954) think that Khams represents a middle stage of development between Written Tibetan and Modern Central Tibetan.

WT	RGT	Gloss
fibu	nbə	'insect; worm'
mdafi	ndā	'arrow'
mgo	ngūə	'head'
mdzub (mo)	ndzĩ	'finger; toe'
fibri	ndzə	'Yangtse (river)'

Note that this phenomenon is also observed for Central Khams (Hsi-ning) in Gō et al. (1954), where most of the WT initials can still be traced. In LT, all prefixes become zero. Some prefixes in Rgyalthang also are dropped, though their former presence may have affected the quality of the following sounds.

2. When the voiceless alveolar fricative precedes nasals, it causes them to be devoiced. The pitch associated with this syllabic pattern is usually high. This is in line with the general fact that aspirated initials tend to cause syllables to become high.

WT	RGT	Gloss
sman	ṃēŋ	'medicine'
smin (po)	ṃĩ	'ripen; well-cooked'
sna	ṃā	'nose'

3. Voiced obstruents become voiceless when they occur in initial position. Note that a similar process does occur in LT. The only difference is that in RGT the voiceless counterparts are not aspirated.

WT	RGT	Gloss
bod	pĩ	'Tibet'
dug	tūə	'poison'
zhij	ʃĩŋ	'field'

4. WT *c*, *ch*, *sh*, *zh* become /tʃ, tʃh, ʃ, ʃh/.

WT	RGT	Gloss
bcu	tʃə	'ten'
chu	tʃhə	'river'
shi	ʃə	'to die'
bzhi	ʃə	'four; bow'

5. Palatalized velar stops become palatal stops. Other palatalized stops become palatal fricatives.

WT	RGT	Gloss
rgyags pa	tṣā pā	'fat'
skyag pa	tṣā wā	'excrement'
khyod	tṣhỳ	'you'
bya	ṣā	'chicken'

4. OUTLINE OF SYNTAX

4.1 Indexical marking

Like other Tibetan dialects, Rgyalthang is a postpositional language with agglutinative morphology. The word order is SOV. Simple clauses end with auxiliary morphemes which express what Agha (1993) calls "indexical categories" including aspect, person, and evidentiality. These auxiliaries range from verbs of being (i.e. copula and existential verbs) to those grammaticalized from motion verbs such as *thal* [thi] 'to cross', and *'byung* [ṣaŋ]⁵ 'to emerge, come off'. Some of the forms which connote these indexical features do not necessarily originate from verbs, but they may be remnants of Written Tibetan grammatical morphemes. For example, the auxiliary *guu*, which is used with a control predicate in a first-person perfective sentence, came from the ergative marker *gis*, which is found not only in Classical Tibetan but Old Tibetan as well.⁶

- (1) ṇṣ̣ ẓỵ tṣi sè-tṣi guu
 1S.ERG snake one.ABS kill-PF AUX:SELF; +CON⁷
 'I killed a snake.'

According to the informant, we can replace *guu* in (1) with another first person marker *zin* (corresponding to *yin* in Lhasa Tibetan) without any change in meaning. However, I think there are at least two subtle differences between the two forms. *guu* appears only in perfective predicates (this is perhaps

⁵ ṣaŋ can also function as a copula. For example,

tṣā khā ṣaŋ
 tea bitter COP

'Today the tea is bitter.'

Note that in Lhasa the deictic motion verb *'byung* does not have a copular usage.

⁶ Readers interested in ergative marking in Old Tibetan should consult Takeuchi and Takahashi (1994).

⁷ Abbreviations used in this paper: A agent; O object; S subject; AUX auxiliary; CON control; CONJ conjunctive; COP copula; FUT future; IMPF imperfective; PF perfective; PN proper noun; POSS possessive; TOP topic; 1S first person singular; 2S second person singular; 3S third person singular; 1P first person plural; 3P third person plural. Case markers are abbreviated as follows: ABS absolutive; ACC accusative; ERG ergative; DAT dative; INS instrumental; LOC locative.

related to its original function as an ergative marker), whereas *zin* is plurifunctional.⁸ *zin* can occur both in perfective and imperfective predicates. Besides, it is a main copula verb for the first-person subject. *gu* does not function as a copula.

- (2) *ŋă* *tshăwăŋ* *tătçì* *gûa* *zûă-zə* *zin*
 1S.ABS vegetable and egg.ABS cook-FUT COP:SELF
 'I'll cook vegetables and eggs.'
- (3) *ră* *nə* *şŋŋ* *tşhă* *ngûă-zə*
 mountain LOC mushroom.ABS pick go-FUT
 'I'll go to pick mushroom on the mountain.'
- (4) *ŋă* *gīgēn* *zin*
 1S.ABS teacher.ABS COP:SELF
 'I'm a teacher.'

The subjects of (2-4) are all first person, and thus *zin* is used. (2-3) indicate the speaker's future actions. (4) illustrates the copular usage of *zin*. Note that in (3) *zin* and the grammatical subject are omitted, but it can be easily inferred from the final ending *-zə*. If the subject is non-first person, the copula *re* (resulting in the construction *-zə re*) will be employed (see Table 3 at the end of this section).

The fact that Rgyalthang exhibits person distinctions (not only in the use of copular verbs but also in the other auxiliaries, including existential verbs) is not surprising, given that the phenomenon is also reported in Lhasa Tibetan and Newar (see Hongladarom 1996a for Tibetan, and Hale 1980; Hargreaves 1990 for Newar⁹). However, the phenomenon in Tibetan is quite different from the so-called person agreement in pronominalized Tibeto-Burman languages. Agreement in Tibetan is encoded by auxiliary verbs, whereas in pronominalized languages it is marked on main verbs, and the pronominalized suffixes are often related etymologically to the personal pronouns. Another important characteristic of person marking in Tibetan is that in certain utterances the grammatical subject does not have to agree with the auxiliary

⁸ If *gu* comes from the ergative *gis*, then *gə*, which marks the ergative and genitive cases in present-day Rgyalthang may have originated from the Written Tibetan genitive *gi*. This observation is supported by the phonological system of the language: /i/ in Written Tibetan becomes /ə/, and when there is a final consonant, it is often deleted resulting in a change of the quality of the preceding vowel.

⁹ In accordance with the wishes expressed by a group of distinguished scholars from Nepal at the 3rd Symposium on Himalayan Languages (UCSB, July 1997), *LTBA* will henceforth refer to this language as Newar, without the Indo-Aryan suffix *-i*. An exception will be bibliographical references to works where the previously standard form "Newari" occurs. [Ed.]

verb (Agha 1993). If the predicate is a non-control verb, to use Hargreaves's terminology, such as 'to be afraid', 'to be sick', 'to die', the auxiliary verb for non-first person must be used with the first person subject. The term first person subject in both Tibetan and Newar refers to the speech act participant in general—the speaker in a statement and the addressee in a question. Hale calls this phenomenon "conjunct/disjunct distinction" (conjunct refers to first person and disjunct non-first), whereas Agha calls it "participant role perspective".

Although Agha contends that there is no such thing as person agreement in Tibetan (that is why he deems it necessary to use a different term), I still think the phenomenon described can be referred to as person marking. In my view, the two phenomena associated with person may be related. It is possible that the kind of marking found in Tibetan is a source of motivation for the type of morphological marking to be found in pronominalized languages. That is, over time the auxiliary verb may be dropped or grammaticalized into a suffix which attaches to the main verb. Actually, this kind of process is going on in both Rgyalthang and Lhasa Tibetan. Example 3 above clearly illustrates that the verbal suffix *-zə* is associated with the first person subject.¹⁰ In Lhasa Tibetan the perfective evidential *sōŋ* is often pronounced as *su* or simply a lengthened *s*. That is, this auxiliary verb is becoming an enclitic (Hongladarom 1996b). Moreover, it should be noted that the person marking morphemes in Newar are all verbal suffixes (Hargreaves 1990). However, with the hypothesis that the phenomenon in Tibetan may provide insight into the origin of person agreement, we still run into a problem—the person marking auxiliaries in Tibetan have nothing to do with personal pronouns. Most of them are grammaticalized from common motion verbs, as I have mentioned earlier (see Hongladarom 1996a for the data in Lhasa Tibetan).

Tables 1-3 illustrate the complexity of Rgyalthang indexical morphemes which contrast in aspect, person, and evidentiality. There are three main aspectual categories involved: perfective which characterizes past events, imperfective (progressive events both in past and non-past), and non-past (future events). Control is the main factor that governs the choice of the first

¹⁰ The following utterance, which is a common way of greeting, ends with the verbal suffix *-zə*.

khă ngũə-zə
where go-FUT
'Where are you going?'

Though the grammatical subject in this sentence is omitted, we can still easily recover the identity of the person addressed. In Tibetan the auxiliary morpheme which marks the speaker in an assertion can also be used for the addressee in an interrogation. This is because the addressee will become the next speaker when s/he answers the question. That is why we may say that *-zə* marks the speech act participant.

person forms. Those that have this attribute are presented in the tables as +CON and those that lack it -CON. Evidentiality comes into play only in the non-first person forms (hereafter OTHER), in contrast with the first person forms (SELF). There are two salient evidential categories in Rgyalthang Tibetan: new knowledge (+NEW) and old knowledge (-NEW). By new knowledge, I mean the speaker has just obtained information described in the utterance, usually by way of direct, visual experience. What I call old knowledge is not necessarily obtained via indirect experience. The speaker's direct experience becomes old knowledge over time. Moreover, the old knowledge form is also used as an "unmarked" category when the speakers are not certain of the validity of the information, or are not interested in its source. For future events, the evidentiality contrast is neutralized (see Table 3 below).

SELF		OTHER	
+CON	-CON	+NEW	-NEW
(1) a. zin/ -tci zin	a. caŋ/ -tci caŋ	(1) thi/ -tci thi/	-tci re
b. gu/ -tci gu	b. -tci nə	-tci nə	
		(2) a. thui thi/	thui re
		b. thui nə	
		(3) tshā nə	tshā re

Table 1. Indexical morphemes marking perfective aspect.

Table 1 lists the most common auxiliaries which mark perfective aspect. We see that most of the auxiliaries may contain the verbal suffix *-tci*. This suffix plays an important role in Rgyalthang grammar. In narratives the preferred form for perfective marking is simply *tca*, which is likely to be the same form as *tci*. According to the informant, the forms a and b in Set 1 (SELF, +CON) can alternate without any change in meaning. Set 2 (OTHER) seems to characterize an event which has already been completed but still has present relevance (perfect). It contrasts with Set 3, in that in Set 3 emphasis is placed simply on the fact that the action has already been completed. Examples 5-6 illustrate the evidentiality contrast between *thui nə* (Set 2: OTHER; +NEW) and *thui re* (Set 2: OTHER; -NEW).

- (5) khō lăwā tchō thui nə
 3S.ABS hand.ABS wash complete COP:OTHER
 'He has washed his hand (I know because I saw him doing it).'

- (6) khō lăwā tchō thūi re
 3S.ABS hand.ABS wash complete COP:OTHER
 'He has washed his hand.'

As I have not found an instance of the verb *thūi* being used as an enclitic, I opted to gloss it as a verb with tonal marking meaning 'to complete'. That is, it is a "versatile" verb (in the sense of Matisoff 1973), which may later become a suffix in the same way as the progressive marker *-de* (grammaticalized from *dē* 'to stay'). Another example of a versatile verb is *tshā* 'to finish' in Set 3 (OTHER). In (5) *nə* indicates that the speaker has obtained the information described in the utterance by means of direct experience, whereas the use of *re* in (6) does not indicate this extra information.

Examples 7-8 involve non-control predicates. Note that non-first person utterances do not distinguish between control and non-control verbs—all of them employ *thi* or *-tci thi*.

- (7) ŋă tshè-tci ɕaŋ
 1S.ABS tire-PF AUX:SELF; -CON
 'I was tired.'
- (8) khōtshē tshè-tci thi
 3P.ABS tire-PF AUX:OTHER
 'They were tired.'

SELF		OTHER	
+CON	-CON	+NEW	-NEW
(1) -de zin		(1) -de/ -de nə	-de re
		(2) -ra nə ¹¹	-ra re
(3) zin	nə/ re	(3) nə	re

Table 2. Indexical morphemes marking imperfective aspect.

Three patterns in Table 2 characterize imperfective aspect: (1) the verbal suffix *-de* indicates an event in progress, whether occurring at the moment of speaking, or in the past, as in example 9; (2) the verbal suffix *-ra* emphasizes the current state of an action/event (example 10). All the forms in Set 3 comprising bare copula verbs describe habitual actions/events (examples 11-12).

¹¹ There is only one example of *-ra thi* in my corpus. So I hesitate to include it in the chart.

- (9) ʔondā pǔmā mā-tsa sǎŋ zǔə-de nə
 this girl.ABS mother-DAT food.ABS cook-IMP COP:OTHER
 'This girl is cooking food for her mother.'
- (10) nāŋ nə ɕīŋ thū-ra nə
 sky LOC cloud.ABS float-IMP COP:OTHER
 'Clouds are floating in the sky.'
- (11) mā ɕy rǝŋkhā ɕihò ɕī re
 wound.ABS heal after itchy tend (know) COP:OTHER
 'The wound tends to itch after it is healed.'
- (12) ŋǎ nǎbū tchǎŋŋ-gə tsò-ji tchūŋ mǎtɕì ngǎ
 1S.ABS PN PN-ERG build-INS house.ABS very like
 nə
 COP:OTHER
 'I really like the house which Norbu Tshering built.'

Note that when non-control predicates, such as 'to know' and 'to like' are involved, the OTHER forms will be selected. This is why the OTHER copula *nə* is used with the first person subject in (12). The same thing is also clearly seen in Table 3, where *-zə re* is used with non-control predicates in the first person utterance.

SELF		OTHER	
+CON	-CON		
-zə/ -zə zin	-zə re	-zə re	

Table 3. Indexical morphemes marking non-past.

4.2 CASE MARKING

4.2.1 Overview

Case markers are postposed to nominals. Generally, they occur as the rightmost element of a noun phrase which can include an adjective, a demonstrative, and a topic marker. Rgyalthang distinguishes eight morphological cases on nouns, illustrated in the Table 4.

Note that the genitive and ergative cases have the same form. The genitive is usually omitted. The ergative is used mainly to emphasize the agent. Generally the intransitive subject (S) and the transitive object (O) appear in the same case, which is the absolutive (unmarked) case. Interestingly, certain O's in Rgyalthang are marked by *-go*. This accusative

marker also functions as a dative marker. A language which has this kind of marking is said to evidence a primary object/secondary object distinction (Dryer 1986). A primary object is a direct object in a monotransitive clause (a nominal marked by the accusative) and, to use a traditional label, an indirect object in a ditransitive clause (a nominal marked by the dative). Other than being marked by *-go*, nominals with recipient case roles also appear with the dative *la* or *-go la*, and *-tsa*. *la* is borrowed from Lhasa Tibetan. It is found only in the speech of Rgyalthang folks who can communicate in Lhasa Tibetan.¹² In addition, *-go*, like *nə* and *la*, can function as a locative marker.

Case	Form
Ergative	<i>gə</i>
Absolutive (unmarked)	Ø
Accusative	<i>go</i>
Dative	<i>go, la, go la, tsa</i>
Locative	<i>nə, la, go</i>
Instrumental	<i>ji, gə</i>
Ablative	<i>re</i>
Genitive	<i>gə</i>

Table 4. Cases and forms.

The ergative *-gə* also functions like the instrumental *-ji*. Consider (13):

- (13) *khō pětā-gə tōŋ dzēpà sè-tçi thi*
 3S.ABS gun-INS (ERG) bear several.ABS kill-PF AUX:OTHER
 'He killed several bears with a gun.'

It is clear that *-gə* in (13) does not function as an ergative marker, because it does not modify the actor but rather the nominal which carries the semantic role of an instrument (a gun). And interestingly we find *ji* with a similar function as an ergative, for example:

- (14) *sə-ji gūa dāŋ-de nə*
 who-ERG (INS) door.ABS knock-IMPF COP:OTHER
 'Who is knocking at the door?'

¹² While in Dharamsala, India, I got an opportunity to interview an old monk who had immigrated from Rgyalthang nearly 20 years ago. When asked to translate the examples which ordinarily require *-go* marking, the monk gave only sentences with *la*. *-go* does not appear in his speech. I also found that the inhabitants of Rgyalthang who know Lhasa often use *la*, in place of *-go*, in their speech.

4.2.2 Ergative marking

Rgyalthang can be said to be an ergative language due to the following pattern.

- (15) pǎ tɕì-gə¹³ ɲǎ-go jǎŋjũ tè ɕaŋ
 boy one-ERG 1S-DAT potato.ABS give AUX: SELF
 'A boy gave a potato to me.'
- (16) khō nǎŋ-nī ndzĩ thi
 3S.ABS inside-LOC enter AUX:OTHER
 'S/he entered inside.'

(15-16) are typical for ergative marking: A (agent) is marked as ergative; O and S appear in the absolutive; and R (recipient) is in the dative.

Intransitive sentences present no problem in Rgyalthang Tibetan. S's in all of the sentences elicited so far appear in the absolutive case. That is, there is no trace of what Dixon (1987) calls the 'fluid-S' phenomenon. What is problematic is that A's are not always marked with ergative. Compare (17) with (15) above.

- (17) kho-ni ʔāsũ ɲanakin-go tʂǎ tè ɕaŋ
 3S-POSS grandmother.ABS 1P-DAT tea.ABS AUX:SELF give
 'His grandmother gave us tea.'

In (17) both A and O are in the same case, despite the presence of the transitive verb *tè* 'give'. We cannot say that the difference in the case patterns of (15) and (17) lies in the verb, since the verb is the same in these sentences. What then is the factor that governs the use of the ergative case in Rgyalthang? Let us consider some more examples.

- (18) khȳə zȳ tɕi sè-tɕi thi
 3S.ERG snake one.ABS kill-PF AUX:OTHER
 'S/he killed a snake.'
- (19) ɲě tchũŋ tɕi zũə zin
 1S.ERG house one.ABS make COP: SELF
 'I built a house.'

¹³ It is difficult at this stage to determine the status of case morphemes, i.e. whether they are nominal suffixes or postpositions. To me, they are more like suffixes, as evidenced in the merger of the ergative marker with the personal pronoun: *ɲǎ + gə > ɲě* and *khō + gə > khȳə*. Note that this kind of phonological merger of the head noun and the case morpheme is also found in Lhasa Tibetan.

- (20) ɲě cəl̩ mī thūi-ji dzèpā ɲyə khǒ gu
 1S.ERG pear ripen already-INS many.ABS buy bring AUX
 ‘I bought several pears which have already ripened.’

The subject of (18) is third person, whereas those of (19-20) are first person. Therefore, the difference in person of A does not constrain ergative marking. We may further suspect that perhaps it is the tense/aspect of the predicate which governs the use of the ergative case. Generally, a language with a split pattern tends to mark ergative only in perfective aspect. All the examples illustrated so far are events that have already happened. Some of these events, e.g. (18), contain the perfective suffix *-tci*. However, when we investigate further, we see that events marked as imperfective aspect with the suffixes *-de* (expressing progressive aspect) or *-ra* (indicating state) do require A's to be ergatively marked, as in (21-23).

- (21) de tshə-gə ɲǐ kām̩bā cǔ-de nə
 that dog-ERG 1S-POSS leg.ABS lick-IMPF COP:OTHER
 ‘That dog is/was licking my leg.’
- (22) khǃə tʂǎ lə-de nə
 3S.ERG tea.ABS pour-IMPF COP:OTHER
 ‘S/he is/was pouring tea.’
- (23) dǔha tǒmā-gə tshāŋ tʂǎ-ra nə
 here ant-ERG nest.ABS make-IMPF COP:OTHER
 ‘Ants made nests here.’

However, upon examining the rest of the sentences in the corpus which express imperfective aspect, I found that the majority of them do have a split pattern, as in examples 24-25 below.

- (24) ʔondə pǔm̩ə mǎ-tsa sǎŋ zǔə-de nə
 this girl.ABS mother-DAT food.ABS cook-IMPF COP:OTHER
 ‘This girl is cooking food for her mother.’
- (25) khǒ ɲǎ-go dzô-de nə
 3S.ABS 1S-ACC watch-IMPF COP:OTHER
 ‘He is watching me.’

Before we go on to look at the ergative question, it is important to note that certain O's in Rgyalthang, such as the one in (25), are marked with *-go*. This morpheme also functions as a dative marker, as we have seen in (15-17) above. It is interesting to note that when O is marked with *-go*, A is not marked (appears in the absolutive case). The only exception I have found so far is (26).

- (26) tǎṣ-gə dǎwā-go kǐǎdzǎŋ dzǐǎ teminǎ
 PN-ERG PN-ACC knife stab it.seems
 'It seems that Tashi stabbed Dawa.'

I speculate that the reason why A is marked by the ergative case here is because the speaker wants to emphasize who is the actor and who is the patient, since there are two proper nouns involved. Note that this sentence is not natural. It is a product of the linguist's grammatical elicitation.

Further examples in which A's do not appear in the ergative:

- (27) khō lǎwā tchō thūi nǎ
 3S.ABS hand.ABS wash complete COP:OTHER
 'S/he has washed her/his hands.' (I just found out about this)
- (28) khō pǎ sǎŋ tē nǎ
 3S.ABS cow.ABS food.ABS give COP:OTHER
 'S/he fed the cow.'
- (29) ŋǎ tchǐ tǝŋn-tci nǎ
 3S.ABS child.ABS miss-PF COP:OTHER
 'I missed (my) child.'
- (30) ŋǎ tshō tci thōŋ ɕaŋ
 1S.ABS dog one.ABS see AUX:SELF
 'I saw a dog.'
- (31) ŋǎ tshǎwǎŋ tǎtci gūa zǔǎ-zǎ zin
 1S.ABS vegetable and egg.ABS cook-FUT COP:SELF
 'I'll cook vegetables and eggs.'

Except for (31), all of these sentences express perfective aspect. That A in (31) is not marked with ergative is expected, given that a future event is low in transitivity, and thus A (like other semantic roles) does not need to be marked. When there are verbs of perception involved, A's in many languages do not appear in the ergative case. In Rgyalthag both the perceiver and perceived are marked as absolutive case, as is seen in (30). Since the verb in (29) is non-control (low in volitionality), it is expected that the subject is not ergatively marked. (27-28) are problematic, as they concern completed events, but their subjects appear in the absolutive case.

It is interesting to note that most A's in narratives are not ergatively marked, but they are more often presented as topics (marked by the topic marker *-tə*). This is in accord with Du Bois (1987)'s "Given A Constraint" principle, which postulates that most narratives (no matter whether the language has an ergative-absolutive or nominative-accusative alignment) tend

to avoid introducing new A's. Note that the combination *-ga tə*, as in (32) is good evidence that *-tə* is not an ergative marker.

- (32) dz̥ũa-gə-tə dz̥ũa dz̥ũa phō khö-thuireŋ
 tick-ERG-TOP quickly quickly jump carry-CON
 'As for the tick, while (she) was carrying (the wooden load), (she) jumped very quickly.'

So it seems that the only conclusions we can come to at this stage of our research regarding ergative marking in Rgyalhang are:

1. A is not marked when O appears in the accusative case.
2. A's in discourse are usually modified by the topic marker *-tə*, instead of the ergative *-ga*.
3. Aspect does not seem to be an important factor governing the use of the ergative case. We found ergative subjects in both perfective and imperfective sentences (except for those expressing future events in which the ergative case is not used). But in accordance with the universal pattern, there is a tendency for most A's in perfective predicates to be marked ergatively.
4. Ergative marking in Rgyalhang is thus very irregular. When asked, many informants agreed that *-ga* is not necessary unless one wants to emphasize who is the actor.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented preliminary data on a relatively unknown dialect of Tibetan at both the phonological and grammatical levels. Although Rgyalhang possesses a number of grammatical features common to Lhasa Tibetan, there are some subtle differences in terms of case patterns (particularly ergativity), which provide typological insights and raise questions for further studies. An investigation into the language's verbal ending system reveals the complexity of indexical categories, which are known to be innovative in Tibetan grammar. It will be interesting to examine the development of these categories in other Tibetan dialects and compare them with those to be found elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman.

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