Ergative in *Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar**

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Introduction

Classical Tibetan[1] has been reported to be an aspectually split ergative language (Regamey, 1954; Dixon, 1979), although this is true only of some texts. DeLancey (1984) shows that case marking in modern Lhasa Tibetan has an active-stative pattern. The data given in Saxena (1988) suggest that there is a shift, in at least one modern dialect of modern Lhasa Tibetan, away from the active-stative pattern, and that the original ergative marker seems to function now as some sort of topic/emphasis marker[2]. In view of these various case marking patterns found in Tibetan, it will be interesting to see the case marking system in a text which is not so modern. The aim of this paper is to examine the 'ergative'[3] pattern in *Mi=la=ras=pa'i rnam thar* 'the biography of Milarepa', an early vernacular Tibetan text. It will be shown that the Tibetan of the *Mi=la=ras=pa* has an active-stative case marking pattern. One of the limitations of working with a text is the nonavailability of all types of constructions that one would like in order to verify the claims; thus the suggestions made here should be taken as tentative.

Active-stative case marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa*

We will start the discussion by briefly talking about the tense-aspect system in Tibetan and how it is being manifested in the language. This discussion is crucial in view of the fact that our claims about the 'ergative' marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa* depend on it.

In written Tibetan there are no separate tense markers, the distinction is manifested by different aspectual forms of the verb. A verb can

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take at most four different forms to indicate the various aspects, for example, *rko* 'dig (IMPF)'[4], *(b)rkos* 'dig (PF)', *brkos* 'dig (FUT)', *rkos* 'dig (IMP)'. Sometimes the aspectual distinction is manifested by means of the vowel alternation, for example, *rgyab* 'throw (INF)', *brgyab* 'throw (PF & FUT)', *rgyob* 'throw (IMP)'. In order to show that the ergative is aspectually split in Tibetan, examples with verbs which have distinct forms to indicate aspectual information will be given. This, we hope, will show the correlation between the perfective and the occurrence of the ergative marking.

In written Tibetan the ergative markers are: *s, kyis, gyis, gis* and *kis*. These markers are in complementary distribution. *s* occurs when the preceding morpheme/word ends with a vowel; *kyis* after obstruents; *gyis* after sonorants; and *gis* after velars.

The following examples illustrate that the ergative markers in *Mi=la=ras=pa* occur only when the verb is in the perfective in simple clauses. This indicates that the ergative system in *Mi=la=ras=pa* is aspectually split.

1   *mna'=ma*   - *s*   thog   *drangs*
      daughter-in-law - ERG   roof   pull (PF)

     'The son's wife pulled the roof.'

2   *yul*   *mi*   *rnams*   - *kyis*   *bzung*   ste
      country man PL   - ERG   take(PF) CLP

     'The countrymen took ().'

3   *a=ma*   rang nga   - la   *'phrad*   - pa   dang
      mother SELF I   - DAT   meet(IMPF) - NOM and...

     'My mother thought of coming herself (to bring provisions and) [give me advice].'

The ergative marker occurs in sentences (1) and (2) when the verb is in the perfective. In sentence (3) when the verb is not in the perfective, the ergative marker does not occur.

As mentioned earlier, for some verbs, there is a change in the verb form to indicate the tense/aspect information whereas for some other verbs, the verb form remains the same. When the verb form is explicitly imperfective, the ergative marker never occurs with it. When the verb form remains the same in all tenses/aspects, we sometimes find the ergative marking. From this we can infer that the verb may be in the perfective when

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4 What we here label "Imperfective" and "Perfective" are traditionally called "Present" and "Past" forms.

the ergative marker occurs in such cases. The following sentences are illustrative.

4 khong   grogs   - po   - rnams   ni   phyag=rten
   he(HON)   friends - NOM   - PL   TOP   souvenir with letter

   sna   re   tsam   - las   mi   gtong   - ba
   portion   each   COMPA   - ABL   NEG   give(IMPF)   - NOM

   - r   'dug
   - LOC   be(SAME)

'The friends didn't give a portion of the souvenir with the letter.'

5 nga - s   gser   g=yu   kun   phul   te
   I   - ERG   gold   turquoise   whole   give(HON)(SAME)   CLP

'I gave the whole turquoise (to him).'

In sentence (4) the verb 'give' is in the imperfective (the perfective form being *btang*) and we don't find the ergative marking on the subject, whereas in sentence (5) when the verb form remains the same in all tenses/aspects, we find the ergative marking. This seems to indicate that the verb, in this case, is in the perfective.

The data given above suggest that Tibetan is an aspectually split ergative language. The question that arises now is: Is it just that or do we find ergative case marking with some intransitive verbs too, as in modern Lhasa Tibetan. In *Mi=la=ras=pa*, the ergative marking also occurs with agent taking (volitional) intransitive verbs in the perfective. Sentence (6) below illustrates the occurrence of the ergative marker when the verb is agent-taking and is in the perfective, sentences (7) and (8) illustrate that the ergative marker does not occur with verbs which are non-active (non-volitional) even though those verbs are in the perfective.

6 nged - rnams   - kyis   dbus=gtsang   - gi   lam   - du
   I   - PL   - ERG   Ū=Tsang   - GEN   path   - LOC

   zhugs   - nas   phyin   - pa   - s   gtsang
    begin(PF) - CLP   set out(SAME)   - NOM   - INST   place name

   rong   - gi   g=yag   sde   zhes   bya=ba   sleb   - s
   center - GEN   place name   ?   (THUS) called   reach   - PERF

'We set out on the road to Ū and Tsang and arrived at Yakde (in the valley of Tsangrong).'

7   de   stobs   - kyis   mi   shi   byung   - ba
        that   strength   - INST   man   die(PF)   happen(PF,IMP)   - NOM

de	stobs	- kyis	mi	shi	byung	- ba
that	strength	- INST	man	die(PF)	happen(PF,IMP)	- NOM
kun	- gyis	thos	na	- s	'tshogs	te
whole	- ERG	hear(SAME)	when	- ?	assemble(IMPF)	CLP

'Hearing by what power these people had been killed, the villagers gathered together.'

8   *nga*   ni   yid=cig   ma   *che*   - s   te

nga	ni	yid=cig	ma	*che*	- s	te
I	TOP	be(IMP)	NEG	very great	- PERF	CLP

'I was not very great.'

The above description suggests that the case marking in *Mi=la=ras=pa* has an active-stative pattern. That seems to be the reason why the ergative marker occurs not only with the verbs but also with agent-taking intransitive verbs in the perfective.

In modern standard Lhasa, ergative case marking is optional in non-perfective transitive clauses, with its absence being the normal case. A single example from the corpus suggests that in this respect also the language of *Mi=la=ras=pa* is already like the modern dialect. The example is given below.

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khyed	grogs	po - rnams	- kyis	skul	
you	friends	NOM - PL	- ERG	HORTATIVE	
lcag	- gyis	- la	mthu	shi=tu	
whip	- INST	- ?	black magic	very	
mkhas	- pa	zhig	*slobs*	*shog*	cig
learned	- NOM	one	exercise	come back(IMP)	IMP

'So you, his companions, should exhort him and spur him on to become deeply skilled in magic.'

To summarize, the data given above suggests that Tibetan of the *Mi=la=ras=pa* has the active-stative case marking pattern.

References

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