SPECIAL LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF GSERPA TIBETAN*

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The linguistic situation of Sè’érba (<gSer.pa>) District at the eastern corner of Sèdā County in northwestern Sichuan has long been shrouded in mystery. Recent fieldwork has enabled this author to positively identify two obscure indigenous languages used by the agriculturalist Tibetans residing in the Sè’érba area. One of these turns out to be an aberrant, previously undescribed form of Tibetan. This article provides the first linguistic description of gSerpa Tibetan, highlighting some of its striking lexical, phonological and grammatical features.

Keywords: Tibeto-Burman, Tibetan, dialect subclassification

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The target language

Sèdā (<gSer.thar>) is a predominantly pastoral county in Gänzī prefecture, northwestern Sichuan. The dominant Tibetan dialect of the county is Amdo, spoken by the majority nomadic population. The linguistic situation in the agricultural Sè’érba (<gser.pa>) District (lower reaches of gSer-chu River) at the eastern corner of the county has however remained mysterious. The Gazetteer of Seda County (Anonymous 1997: 445-449) reports two obscure local patois spoken by the farming Tibetans residing in the Sè’érba area, but the scanty linguistic information given there is piecemeal and often erroneous.

Fieldwork conducted in 2005 has enabled this author to identify both the indigenous Sè’érba languages in question. The speech used in Gêlêtuô (<qol˙tæo; <ko.lo.tho>) Township is now known to be the tarkā variety of Showu rGyalrong, spilling over from the rGyalrong-speaking areas in neighboring Rângtáng (<dzam.thang>) County. Further upriver, one finds the second mystery Sè’érba language: a previously undescribed form of Tibetan spoken by about 6,500 residents of Jiâxué (<rgya.sho>), Yânggè (<jek"go <yag.’go>), and Xùrî (<xorep <sho.rib>) townships and Wêngdâ (<rvomdɔ <rbo.mda>) Town (Anonymous 1997: 446).

This article draws on fresh, first-hand data to provide a preliminary profile of this aberrant Tibetan dialect (hereafter gSerpa) by highlighting some of its most interesting linguistic peculiarities. This research embodies a new phase in our long-term endeavour to document and

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1 Written Tibetan forms will be given in Wylie’s standard transliteration, enclosed by angle brackets.

1.2 The phonemic system

The structure of the gSerpa syllable is (C)(C)V(C). The onset inventory contains forty-four simplex onsets:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
p & t & ts & t₅ & c & tf & k & q \\
\text{p}^h & \text{t}^h & \text{t}_5^h & \text{t}_5^h & \text{c}^h & \text{t}_5^h & \text{k}^h & \text{q}^h \\
b & d & dz & j & d₅ & g \\
a\text{b} & n & \text{d} & \text{dz} & \text{n} & \text{d} & \text{dz} & \text{n} \\
m & n & j & \eta \\
s & \& & \& & \chi & h \\
v & z & \& & \& & \gamma & \kappa \\
r & \& & \& & \& & \& & \j \\
\end{array}
\]

The following seventy-two cluster onsets are recorded so far, all of which are two-member clusters: /rp/-, /χp/-, /mp/-, /rb/-, /rm/-, /s/-, /s/-, /sv/-, /ft/-, /rt/-, /χt/-, /mt/-, /md/-, /vd/-, /rd/-, /kd/-, /mn/-, /rn/-, /mn/-, /fs/-, /rs/-, /χs/-, /vs/-, /vz/-, /vr/-, /vl/-, /k/-, /pts/-, /fts/-, /rt/-, /χts/-, /mts/-, /pt/-, /fts/-, /rt/-, /χt/-, /pts/-, /pt/-, /md/-, /vd/-, /rd/-, /kd/-, /mn/-, /rn/-, /mn/-, /fs/-, /rs/-, /χs/-, /vs/-, /vz/-, /vr/-, /vl/-, /k/-, /pts/-, /fts/-, /rt/-, /χts/-, /mts/-, /pt/-, /md/-, /vd/-, /rd/-, /kd/-, /mn/-, /rn/-.

The vocalic inventory comprises eight simple vowels / i, e, ε, a, ö, o, u, ø/ plus two diphthongs /ua, uo/. Vowel length is not phonemic.

Eight consonants can function as syllable codas: /-p, -m, -t, -n, -k, -ŋ, -r, -l/. The stop codas are always unreleased; the velar stop coda /-k/ frequently acquires a voiced spirant realization [ŋ]. In casual speech, the lateral coda /-l/ tends to be realized as the trilled [ɾ].

There are altogether forty-five distinct rhymes, more than a third of which are found in loaned and literary vocabulary or secondarily produced via vocalic alternation in compound formation or verb-stem ablaut: /-a/-, /-ap/-, /-am/-, /-at/-, /-an/-, /-ar/-, /-e/-, /-ep/-, /-em/-, /-en/-, /-ek/-, /-er/-, /-i/-, /-ip/-, /-im/-, /-in/-, /-ir/-, /-il/-, /-e/-, /-ep/-, /-em/-, /-et/-, /-en/-, /-er/-, /-el/-, /-o/-, /-op/-, /-om/-, /-on/-, /-on/-, /-or/-, /-ol/-, /-ø/-, /-ap/-, /-am/-, /-øt/-, /-øn/-, /-øk/-, /-ør/-, /-øl/-, /-øa/-, /-øu/.

There is no distinctive tone or accent. Non-contrastive stress tends to fall on the initial syllable, with concomitant devoicing of the following syllable(s) containing voiceless onsets. The word /kʰo-pu-/a ‘house’, for instance, is normally pronounced [kʰɔpʊa].

2. LEXICAL TRAITS

gSerpa diverges sharply in vocabulary from the (mainstream) Amdo dialect spoken in adjacent areas. Most noticeable are idiosyncratic lexical items apparently unique to this dialect, of which (1) is a sample:
Special Linguistic Features of gSerpa Tibetan

1. **Special Lexical Features**

- **'earthworm'**: sek-"dʒo
- **'spider'**: tsa-lɔ-ga-puwa
- **'whirlwind'**: pa-łp-pə-qt
- **'falling rock'**: rvap
- **'dried-up traces of mudflow'**: χtʃɔ
- **'body'**: kʰo-χə
- **'dew'** and **'to chase; to run after'**: s‰k-n dÔo
- **'to hide oneself'**: qap
- **'to spill'**: kæ-_DICT
- **'buttocks'**: n ptə ø
- **'to burn sth down'**: ñan-nyan-chəg
- **'to be allowed'**: ku-go-shes
- **'to turn on (a light)'**: ñan-gsal-"ger"

2. **Grammatical Case Markers**

- **Ergative-genitive case**: -ji /kə/²
- **Instrumental case**: -kʰe /kə/
- **Locative case**: -lə <na>
- **Dative-allative case**: -lə /-ə/ ~ /ɛ/³
- **Standard of comparison**: -ve <ltas.na>
- **Conscious animate subject nominalizer**: -vdua ---
- **Direct evidential**: -fe <gi>
- **Very**

3. **Phonological Traits**

3.1 **Synchronic phonology**

3.1.1 **Diphthongs**

- **ua and uo**: Characterized by a back unrounded onglide /ʊə/, these typologically uncommon diphthongs are the only gliding vowels in gSerpa Tibetan.

- **'hundred'**: vʃuə
- **'rainbow'**: "dʒuə
- **'book'**: χpe-tʃo
- **'alcohol'**: tʃo
- **'to learn'**: vʒo
- **'to be ugly'**: a-qʰe
- **'to overflow'**: smer
- **'to hide oneself'**: qap
- **'to be good'**: n dόk
- **'to be bad; to be ugly'**: a-qʰe
- **'to burn sth down'**: ñve
- **'dew'**: sek-"dʒo
- **'to be good'**: n dόk
- **'to close (doors)'**: n dόk

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2 In Amdo, genitive, ergative and instrumental case forms are syncretised into /kə/, with positional variants /gə/, /yə/, and ablaut (e.g. -a > -i).

3 Depending on the dialect. Like gSerpa, rDzongmda also employs the case form la <la>.
3.1.2 Extensive vocalic alternation

Regular vocalic alternation is by far the most remarkable phonological feature of gSerpa. Specifically, certain types of rhymes vary obligatorily depending on their position in a compound. The morpheme ser ‘to crack’, for example, must occur in an altered form sar- in the nominal compound sar-khø ‘crack’. This phenomenon is purely conditioned by word-internal location of a morpheme, and therefore distinct from assimilator or dissimilatory processes such as Lhasa vowel harmony, or mDzod.dge Amdo vocalic dissimilation (J. Sun 1986: §3.1).

Rhyme sets participating in this type of alternation are exemplified in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD-FINAL</th>
<th></th>
<th>WORD-MEDIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>yø ‘fox’</td>
<td>a yø-rtua ‘fox-skin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>ø ‘ghost’</td>
<td>ø ‘dzø-mpi ‘will o’ the wisp’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>ru ‘corpse’</td>
<td>o ro-rgam ‘coffin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>re-rkø ‘thread’</td>
<td>ø rkø-rni ‘end of a thread’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>pʰwa ‘pig’</td>
<td>òk pʰek-fuuo ‘pork’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>kpeø ‘eye’</td>
<td>øk kpek-ru ‘eyeball’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>pʰluuo ‘bird’</td>
<td>a pʰa-tsʰe ‘bird’s nest’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>rln ‘wet’</td>
<td>øn rln-so ‘wet ground’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>ᵼfn ‘cloud’</td>
<td>øn ᵼfn-kar ‘white cloud’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>nep ‘west’</td>
<td>øp nœp-mpe ‘western side’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>sᵉm ‘heart; mind’</td>
<td>øm sᵉm-no ‘in the heart’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>mm ‘oil’</td>
<td>øm mm-nua ‘engine oil’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>røl ‘silver’</td>
<td>øl røl-kor ‘silver coin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td>xœsær ‘gold’</td>
<td>ør xœsær-rnø ‘gold earring’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Rhyme Sets Exhibiting Position-sensitive Alternation

This type of conditioned variation operates only at the level of word formation. As shown below, affixed nominal (5a) and verbal (5b) forms fail to exhibit vocalic alternation.

(5)  a.  nœ ‘I’  rtua ‘tiger’
     nœ-lø/*nø-lø ‘(I +[DAT])’  rtua-ji */rtek-ji ‘(tiger + [ERG/GEN])’

b.  rgø ‘to like’  jen ‘to be (self-person)’
    rgø-tu */rɡa-tu ‘like +IMM’  jen-fø/*jøn-fø ‘to be + INDIR’

Some verbal forms are derived via compounding with a nominalizing element (e.g. -li; -fe; -cø; -vdwu; -co). Such verbal compounds are likewise subject to vocalic alternation.

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4 Certain rhymes are non-alternating, although exceptions do occur. The morpheme lam ‘road’, for instance, must undergo position-sensitive alternation even though it contains a non-alternating rhyme -am, e.g. lam-zër ‘roadside’.
3.2 Diachronic phonology

gSerpa has undergone certain unusual sound changes which hinder cognate recognition and contribute significantly to its unintelligibility with the mainstream Tibetan dialects.

3.2.1 Genesis of diphthongs with a velar onglide

One of the most striking gSerpa phonological developments is the emergence of -ua and -wo, diphthongs that carry a characteristic velar onglide.

Two separate origins of -ua can be identified. Rhymes checked by *-k (WT <->g(s)> were a primary source of modern -ua. As shown in (6), -ua arose from a merger of several stop-coda rhymes, written <ag(s)>; <eg(s)>, and <og(s)>, presumably involving a merger of these rhymes into *-a- vocalism followed by a spirant guttural coda, and a subsequent flip-flop turning the velar coda to an on-glide; i.e. *a© > ua:

(6)  WT   gSerpa
  khrag  tsʰua  ‘blood’
  lças   rtʃua  ‘iron’
  bsregs ṡʃua  ‘burn [TR]’
  srog   rsua   ‘life’
  phyogs ptfʰua ‘direction’

A disparate source of -ua was supplied by the nominal suffixes <ma>, <ba>, and <pa>:

(7)  WT   gSerpa
  mchil.ma ntfʰɔl-ua  ‘spittle’
  bye.ma  ptfɔ-ua   ‘sand’
  rūs.pa ṭɔr-pua  ‘bone’
  lcι.ba  rtʃɔ-vua  ‘dung’

The rhyme -wo, on the other hand, came from the open rhyme <a> after originally palatal onsets as a result of vowel breaking:

(8)  WT   gSerpa
  ’ja  ḡdʒuə  ‘rainbow’
  sha  fuo   ‘meat’
  nya  ḡuə  ‘fish’
  rgya ḡuə  ‘Chinese’
3.2.2 Merger of *-ak(s) and *-ok(s)

The Old Tibetan rhymes written <ag(s)> and <og(s)> remain distinct in most modern dialects. The merger of these rhymes to -\textit{uua} is among the notable innovations in gSerpa:

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
  \hline
  WT & gSerpa & Notes \\
  \hline
  glag & s\textit{lua} & ‘golden eagle’ \\
  glog & s\textit{lua} & ‘lightning; electricity’ \\
  phag & p\textit{hua} & ‘pig’ \\
  phogs & p\textit{hua} & ‘wages’ \\
  \hline
\end{tabular}

3.2.3 Innovative -\textit{e}- rhymes

Another major gSerpa innovation produced modern rhymes in /\textit{e}/, which tends to be realized with a centralized quality. In the Tibetan dialects where this vowel is attested, /\textit{e}/ tends to stem from closed rhymes with a non-nasal coronal coda, namely <ad>, <as>, and <al> (Qu 1991: 23). This is not the case in gSerpa, where the phoneme /\textit{e}/ came rather from certain closed rhymes containing nuclear vowels *i, *u or *e. This should count as another un-Amdo development, since in Amdo the expected reflexes would be /\textit{a}/ vocalism in the case of the high proto-vowels (written <i> and <u>) or /\textit{e}/ vocalism in the case of proto *e (written <e>), as seen below comparing the relevant sound correspondences in gSerpa and rDzongmda\textsuperscript{5} Amdo:

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
  \hline
  WT & gSerpa & rDzongmda & Amdo \\
  \hline
  ig(s); ug(s) & \textit{e}k & \textit{e}k & \textit{a}k \\
  id; ud & \textit{a} & \textit{a} & \textit{a} \\
  ed & \textit{e} & \textit{et} & \textit{t} \\
  in & \textit{en} & \textit{en} & \textit{en} \\
  en & \textit{en} & \textit{en} & \textit{en} \\
  ib(s); ub(s) & \textit{ep} & \textit{ep} & \textit{e} \\
  eb(s) & \textit{ep} & \textit{ep} & \textit{e} \\
  im(s) & \textit{em} & \textit{em} & \textit{e} \\
  em(s) & \textit{em} & \textit{em} & \textit{e} \\
  ir; ur & \textit{er} & \textit{er} & \textit{e} \\
  er & \textit{er} & \textit{er} & \textit{e} \\
  il; ul & \textit{el} & \textit{i} & \textit{i} \\
  el & \textit{el} & \textit{i}; el (literary) & \textit{i} \\
  \hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{5} rDzongmda (<rDzong.mda>, my field data) represents an Amdo subdialect spoken in northern Rângthâng County, and also in Dârî (<Dar.lag>), Bânmâ (<Pad.ma>) and Gândé (<dGa’.bde>) counties in southern Qinghai.

3.2.4 Loss of word-final dental stop coda

Of the three original stop codas, dental -t has characteristically elided in word-final position. In contrast, the dental nasal coda -n is always preserved:\(^6\)

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{WT} & \text{gSerpa} \\
\text{ad} & \text{a} \\
\text{id/ud/ed} & \varepsilon \\
\text{od} & \text{o} \\
\text{an} & \text{an} \\
\text{in/en} & \varepsilon n \\
\text{un/on} & \text{on}
\end{array}
\]

3.2.5 Retention of *-l

The old Tibetan coda *-l has disappeared in most Tibetan dialects represented in China. In Amdo, *-l dropped without suprasegmental compensation, often leaving behind a warped nuclear vowel. The sound changes discovered in the rDzongmda variety of Amdo are typical: *-*al > /e/; *-*ol > /u/; *-*il, *-*ul, *-*el > /i/.

In gSerpa *-l is directly preserved, often freely interchangeable with -r in casual speech:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{WT} & \text{gSerpa} \\
\text{al} & \text{al} \sim \text{ar} \\
\text{ol} & \text{ol} \sim \text{or} \\
\text{il/ul/el} & \varepsilon l \sim \varepsilon r
\end{array}
\]

4. MORPHOSYNTACTIC TRAITS

4.1 Plethora of directional terms

In gSerpa, one finds a richly diversified system of directional/locational words built on the Classical Tibetan roots <ya-> ‘up’, <ma-> ‘down’, <tshu-> ‘this side’, and <phi-> ‘that side’.

4.1.1 Directional pronouns

The following directional pronouns denote referents existing in the specified location:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{jo-“dø} & \text{‘the one up there’} \\
\text{mo-“dø} & \text{‘the one down there’} \\
\text{ts~b~h~o-“dø} & \text{‘the one here (near me)’} \\
\text{p~h~o-“dø} & \text{‘the one there (away from me)’}
\end{array}
\]

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\(^6\) Among the nasal codas it was the velar -g that was elided in most cases.
4.1.2 Directional demonstratives

Both the proximal (te-) and distal (na-) demonstratives can carry deictic directional specification. The directional demonstratives for ‘up’ are representative:

(14)  
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>te-ja</td>
<td>‘up there (referent relatively close)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na-ja</td>
<td>‘up there (referent relatively distant)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ja-na-ja</td>
<td>‘upward in that direction (while pointing at a certain referent)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.3 Directional adverbials

Directionals functioning as adverbials exhibit a three-way distinction, incorporating the semantic features of dynamicity and manner. The adverbials for ‘up’ illustrate:

(15)  
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ja-na</td>
<td>‘up there (static location)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ja</td>
<td>‘upward’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jar-ja</td>
<td>‘upward in slow motion’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further fine-tuned differentiation is possible via combining the above with more precise adverbial modification; e.g. peʰ ‘out’ vs. no ‘in’; cen-lə ‘directly upward’ vs. ʰer-lə ‘directly downward’; mtše-lə ‘in a horizontal direction’; jar-fsua ‘diagonally upward’ vs. mer-fsua ‘diagonally downward’; sla ‘upriver’ vs. ʰa ‘downriver’; ʰhua ‘upstairs’ vs. ʰa ‘downstairs’; kʰ ‘uphill in a ravine’ vs. rkep ‘downhill in a ravine’. Examples are given in (16) (su = imperative form of ‘to go’):

(16)  
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cen-lə ja su</td>
<td>‘Go directly upward!’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jar-fsua ja su</td>
<td>‘Go diagonally upward!’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kla ja su</td>
<td>‘Go upriver!’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʰhua ja su</td>
<td>‘Go upstairs!’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kʰ ja su</td>
<td>‘Go uphill (in a ravine)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The attested gSerpa directionals are summed up in Table II:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UP</th>
<th>DOWN</th>
<th>HITHER</th>
<th>THITHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADV (static)</td>
<td>jə-na(-lə)</td>
<td>mə-na(-lə)</td>
<td>tṣbə-na(-lə)</td>
<td>pʰə-na(-lə)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADV (dynamic, general)</td>
<td>ja</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>tṣbe</td>
<td>pʰe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADV (dynamic, slow motion)</td>
<td>jar-ja</td>
<td>mər-mə</td>
<td>tṣbʰor-tṣbʰər</td>
<td>pʰor-pʰər</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM (proximal)</td>
<td>te-ja</td>
<td>te-mə</td>
<td>te-tṣbəe</td>
<td>te-pʰe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM (distal)</td>
<td>na-ja</td>
<td>na-mə</td>
<td>na-tṣbəe</td>
<td>na-pʰe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM (adverbial)</td>
<td>jə-na-ja</td>
<td>mə-na-mə</td>
<td>tṣbə-na-tṣbəe</td>
<td>pʰə-na-pʰe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRON</td>
<td>jo-ʰdə</td>
<td>mo-ʰdə</td>
<td>tṣbʰ-ʰdə</td>
<td>pʰo-ʰdə</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Directional terms in gSerpa

4.2 Innovative verb-stem alternations

The Written Tibetan verb may distinguish as many as four stems. There is a general tendency for verb-stem variation to be drastically reduced in the spoken dialects. On the other hand,
gSerpa (and the neighboring dialect Khalong; see section 5; J. Sun to appear) appears to have multiplied verb-stem alternations.

4.2.1 The future stem

The Tibetan future stem, kept distinct from both the imperfective and the perfective stems in the standard orthography, has generally dropped as a separate stem in the spoken language. Remarkably, some traces of this old distinction are maintained in gSerpa, albeit in a changed form. Observe for example the table below contrasting the stem forms for ‘to write’ in WT, Lhasa, Themchen (Haller 2004: 269) and rDzongmda varieties of Amdo, and gSerpa:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WT</th>
<th>Lhasa</th>
<th>Themchen</th>
<th>rDzongmda</th>
<th>gSerpa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMPFV</td>
<td>’bri</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
<td>mdz²</td>
<td>ptsh³</td>
<td>ptsh³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(&lt; WT Fut)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(&lt; WT Fut)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFV</td>
<td>bris</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
<td>ptswi</td>
<td>ptši</td>
<td>ptši</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUT</td>
<td>bri</td>
<td>(= IMPFV)</td>
<td>(= IMPFV)</td>
<td>(= IMPFV)</td>
<td>mdz²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMP</td>
<td>bris</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
<td>tsh⁴i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(= IMPFV)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(innovated)</td>
<td>(innovated)</td>
<td>(innovated)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Verb-Stem Alternations of ‘to write’ Compared

Thus, the gSerpa verb ‘to write’ manifests four different stems, including notably a separate imperfective (ptši) and a future (mdz²) stem, whereas in the other modern dialects the future and the imperfective stems have generally converged.

4.2.2 Perfective stem formation via innovative ablaut

As widely observed (Jäschke 1954; Chang and Chang 1982; Qu 1985: 14), imperfective stems in the spoken dialects often trace back to Written Tibetan perfective stems. This phenomenon of stem usurpation is especially prevalent in gSerpa. An example would be the imperfective stem vga ‘to laugh’ reflecting WT PFV <bgad>. Unlike other dialects where stem replacement normally resulted in leveling of stem alternations in favor of the (originally) PFV form (e.g. rDzongmda Amdo [IMPFV/PFV] vgat <bgad>; Lhasa [IMPFV/PFV] k⁶ <bgad>), gSerpa characteristically replenished the paradigm by creating a new PFV stem vge from the innovative imperfective stem through ‘remedial’ ablaut a → e:

(17) WT          gSerpa
    dgod [IMPFV]  ---
    bgad [PFV]    > vga [IMPFV]
                   vge (via a → e ablaut) [PFV]

Further examination of the data turns out other perfectivizing ablaut patterns required by different input stem vowels, shown below in Table IV:
4.3 Epistemological verbal prefix mə-

An apparently unique gSerpa morphological innovation is the marker mə- prefixed to the perfective stem. This verb form indicates that a situation held true only in the past, often with the implication that the predicated event did not come to fruition. This ‘frustrative’ function of the verbal prefix mə- is exemplified below:

(18) nj1 rjakar-1ø t3ø "d3u mə-lsam
1SG India-DAT/LOC once go mə-think

This implication of mə- makes it readily serviceable as an epistemological marker with which the speaker explicitly denies his/her knowledge about the present validity of the predicated past situation:

(19) təam ptʃafi kpi-tə mə-yə
just.now PN be.asleep-NMLZ:STAT:CONT mə-exist
‘bKra-shis was sleeping just now (but I don’t know if he is still sleeping).’

Furthermore, mə- has been integrated into the evidential system, where it combines with the indirect evidential suffix -ʃə to form a complex mirative marker. Consider the mirative verb form (20c) as opposed to an unmarked (20a) and an immediate evidential (20b):

(20) a. khope no-1ø mə yə
house:GEN inside-DAT/LOC person exist
‘(I know all along that) There are people in the house.’

7 Adopting a label denoting a similar (but not identical) distinction in the Tariana verb (Aikhenvald 2003: §16.2).
b. $k^\text{ho}pe$ no-l{o} $m\text{ŋ}o$ yo-tu
house:GEN inside-DAT/LOC person exist-IMM
(I just saw/found out that) There are people in the house.’

c. $k^\text{ho}pe$ no-l{o} $m\text{ŋ}o$ $m\text{ŋ}o$-y-fo
house:GEN inside-DAT/LOC person $m\text{ŋ}$-exist-INDIR
(Contrary to my belief) There have been people in the house!’

The verb form marked with $m\text{ŋ}$- is emphatically not a general imperfective past, as its inherent epistemological meaning precludes it from being applicable to statements involving the speaker as a conscious participant in the predicated past event.

4.4 Volitionality opposition marked on direct evidentials

Evidentiality plays a central role in gSerpa verbal morphology, as elsewhere in modern Tibetan. The gSerpa evidentials, however, show a few peculiarities. The direct evidentials in this dialect, for instance, carry a volitionality distinction not observed in the better-known Lhasa\(^8\) or Amdo (see J. Sun 1993: §2) system. The following examples illustrate the non-volitional direct evidential -t\text{be}(21a-c) in contrast with the volitional direct evidential -c\text{be}(21d):

(21) a. k\text{hats}\text{ø}m\text{ø}u\text{a} p\text{ø}m\text{ø}u\text{a} t\text{s}u-t\text{be}/*c\text{be}
yesterday sun be.hot-DIR.INVOL/DIR.INVOL
‘It was hot yesterday.’

b. m\text{do} p\text{t}\text{s}a\text{f}i t\text{b}o-n\text{t}\text{be}/*c\text{be}
last.night PN arrive-DIR.VOL/DIR.INVOL
‘bKra-shis arrived last night (I saw it).’

c. t\text{b}am n\text{ŋ}o r\text{k}e-ne l\text{u}-t\text{be}/*c\text{be}
just.now 1SG ladder-ABL fall-DIR.INVOL/DIR.INVOL
‘I fell down from the ladder just now.’

d. f\text{s}o\text{n}am-ji p\text{t}\text{s}a\text{f}i \text{c}t\text{s}o v\text{d}i-c\text{be}/*t\text{be}
PN-ERG PN EMPH beat:PFV-DIR.VOL/DIR.INVOL
‘Sonam beat bKra-shis up (I saw it).’

4.5 Emergent subject marking in relative clauses

The Tibetan relative clause is a largely non-finite structure built on participant nominalization (e.g. “the last-night comer” for ‘the one who came last night’). Various semantic roles of the head noun are indicated via an array of nominalizers. As shown below, the nominalizer v\text{d}u\text{a}\text{d}\text{o} occurs if the head noun is an agent (22a-b) or conscious experiencer (22c-d) regardless of transitivity, volitionality, or tense-aspect:

---

\(^8\) The Lhasa direct evidentials song and byung contrast in egophoricity (Tournadre & Sangda Dorje 2003: §3.3.2), i.e. self (byung) vs. other (song).

\(^9\) Probably a grammaticalization from <bdag> ‘self’.
Recipient (23a) and patient (23b) roles are represented by the nominalizers -sø and -cø-rjø, respectively:

(23) a. ne jəkə kjar-sø-tə ptəsəfi ra
1SG:ERG book lend-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
‘The one I lent the book to was bKra-shis.’

b. vəm ne vdu-cø-tə ptəsəfi ra
just.now 1SG:ERG beat-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
‘The one I beat up just now was bKra-shis.’

The foregoing data appear to indicate the existence of a syntactic pivot in the gSerpa relativization, with the nominalizer -vdua marking a subject relation defined as S grouped with A. When further examples are considered, however, it turns out that nominalization by -vdua is still inaccessible to inanimate (24a) or insensate animate subjects (24b):

(24) a. rel-"dʒu-cø/*vdua-tə fɯo ra
spoil-go-NMLZ-DET meat be:OTHER
‘It was meat that spoiled.’

b. kʰatsəmɯa kɔpəpətʰdu-cø/*vdua-tə ptəsəfi ra
yesterday faint-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
‘It was bKra-shis who fainted yesterday.’

Despite these semantic restrictions, -vdua shows a growing tendency to override semantic-role differences in its development into a full-fledged subject-marker. This is evidenced by its interchangeable with the dative-locative nominalizer -sø when the noun head is a ‘dative subject’; for instance, a possessor serving in the S function (25b):

(25) a. mdo ja yu-vdua-tə ʃamu ra
last.night up come-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
‘The one who came up last night was Lha-mo.’

b. ptəsəfi-lə jəkə kjar-vdua-tə nə ra
PN-DAT/LOC book lend-NMLZ-DET 1SG be:OTHER
‘The one who lent bKra-shis the book was I.’

c. nə rek-vdua-tə ptəsəfi ra
1SG see-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
‘The one that sees/saw me is bKra-shis.’

d. kʰo rkom-vdua-tə ptəsəfi/chə-ʰdə ra
mouth be.thirsty-NMLZ-DET PN/dog-this be:OTHER
‘The one that is/was thirsty is bKra-shis /this dog.’

The variant -rjø occurs if the verb stem ends in a closed syllable.
(25) a. ŋə-1ə ʒoʒe ɛŋi-ve ımızwa
    1SG-DAT/LOC child two-except not.exist
    ‘I have only two children.’

    b. ʒoʒe ɛŋi-ve larınızwa-vdwha/so-tə ŋə ʃən
    child two-except not.exist-NMLZ-DET 1SG be:SELF
    ‘I am the one with only two children.’

In sum, the attested relativizing nominalizers in this language are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relativizing Nominalizer</th>
<th>Head-Noun Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vdwha</td>
<td>conscious animate subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʃə</td>
<td>recipient; location/goal/source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cə/-tʃə</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table V. gSerpa Relativizing Nominalizers*

gSerpa, then, appears to have innovated a nominalizer not only formally distinct from those attested in other Tibetan dialects, but one with an increasing function to represent the syntactically defined S/A subject.

### 4.6 Absence of causative complementizer

As in other Tibetan dialects, there is a syntactic causative construction headed by the causative verb *ptʃek* ‘to cause’ (<bcug>). The predicate of the caused event in gSerpa does not take a causative complementizer,11 unlike in the Amdo dialect where such marking is obligatory; cf. Themchen *-kə~-yə* (Haller 2004: §5.3.3), rDzongmda *-ka* (personal research), mDzoddge *-sen* (personal research; J. Sun 1986: 103-104).

(26) a. ɬamu ŋə ma-ptʃek
    PN weep PROH-cause
    ‘Don’t make/let Lha-mo weep!’

    b. ŋə *da-1ə rman *tʰu-ptʃok-vʒwa
    1SG:ERG 3SG-DAT/LOC medicine drink-cause:PFV-TELIC
    ‘I made him/her take medicine.’

### 5. LINGUISTIC POSITION OF GSERPA TIBETAN

At the present stage of investigation, it would be premature to offer definite conclusions about the place of gSerpa among modern Tibetan dialects. A relevant observation in this connection is that gSerpa is allegedly intercommunicable with certain agriculturalist Tibetan dialects from the neighboring Lúhuò (<brag.’go> and Xīnlóng (<nyag.rong>) counties. Whether this rapport stems from genetic affinity or intimate contact is still unclear. Further, an even closer

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11 Cf. the optional dative-locative marker in Written Tibetan and Lhasa; modern dialects not requiring the causative complementizer include certain Khams dialects (Gesang and Gesang 2002: 149-150) and Baima (Huang and Zhang 1995: §4.1.5).
next-of-kin of gSerpa seems to be a chain of dialects spoken along the Dükê River (<rdo.chu>) in central Rangtang County, of which Khalong (<kha.lung>) is a representative (J. Sun, to appear). Though much less aberrant phonologically, Khalong shares some of the aforementioned characteristics of gSerpa, the most significant of which being the innovative stem-building morphology through ablaut. Both dialects employ remedial ablaut yielding new perfective stems, and the resultant perfective vowel grades are front unrounded -i or -e. These commonalities can be seen in the following table comparing the gSerpa and Khalong perfective stem ablaut patterns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gSerpa PFV Ablaut Patterns</th>
<th>Khalong PFV Ablaut Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input Vowel Grade</td>
<td>Output Vowel Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u (WT &lt;a&gt;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u (WT &lt;ung&gt;)</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ø</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e (-ek rhyme)</td>
<td>ø (-ek rhyme)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VI. gSerpa and Khalong Perfective-Stem Ablaut Compared

6. CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary survey provided in this paper delineates a number of noteworthy lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic traits discovered to-date in our ongoing work on gSerpa, a fascinating, previously unknown dialect of Tibetan. In view of these linguistic eccentricities, it is not hard to see why intelligibility is so low between gSerpa and the mainstream Tibetan dialects. Much more research is required before we can fully understand the many points of interest in gSerpa highlighted in this paper, as well as its precise affiliations within modern Tibetan. A non-tonal Tibetan dialect located in the vicinity of Amdo Tibetan, gSerpa might be expediently lumped under Amdo. We hope that the data offered herein are sufficient to demonstrate that this impulse must be curbed.

ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADV</th>
<th>adverbial marker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>allative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAT</td>
<td>dative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>determiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANA</td>
<td>Anaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECL</td>
<td>Declarative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIR</td>
<td>direct evidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPH</td>
<td>emphatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTER</td>
<td>interjection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMP</td>
<td>imperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEF</td>
<td>indefinite article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVL</td>
<td>involitional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG</td>
<td>negator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFV</td>
<td>perfective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PN</td>
<td>personal name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUR</td>
<td>purposive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEQ</td>
<td>sequentializer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAT</td>
<td>stative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TR</td>
<td>transitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERG</td>
<td>Ergative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMM</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPFV</td>
<td>Imperfective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIR</td>
<td>indirect evidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>Locative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMLZ</td>
<td>Nominalizer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Plural</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Prohibitive</td>
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<td>Q</td>
<td>Interrogative</td>
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<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEL</td>
<td>Telic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOL</td>
<td>Volitional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX: SAMPLE TEXT

mdzətxə xsalpha rupe no-ła tʰerap
An Ignorant Nomad Visiting Agricultural Area\textsuperscript{12}

(1)

\textit{mdzətxə-tsə rupha ēf-e-tsi so}
pasturalist-INDEF agricultural.area acquaintance-INDEF:GEN place
\textit{a dək-vdua tʰe ve}
stay-PUR go:PFV SEQ

‘A Tibetan nomad went to stay with an acquaintance of his living in the farming area.’

(2)

tətsʰe chəm-no tʰən-twa-ło
3PL:family:GEN house-inside arrive-time-DAT/LOC

‘When he arrived at their home,’

(3)

tətsʰo-kʰo-ti
3PL:family-PL-DAT:ERG
\textit{to ētəsʰe xə-tə-ło}
now 1PL:family:GEN guest-DAT-DAT/LOC
\textit{rdʒəvua-ji zə-cʰər-rjo ra vdu-tua}
louse-ERG eat-be.the.rule-NMLZ be say:PFV-when

‘And when the the host family said, ‘Now, guest of our family, you (staying with us) will surely be bitten by lice,’

(4)

\textit{a Mbps-con}
EXCL NEG-matter
\textit{ŋə-lo tʃə mənbo-tʃə yo vdu ve}
1SG-DAT/LOC knife be.sharp-INDEF exist say:PFV SEQ

‘He said (unfamiliar with the insect), ‘Doesn’t matter! I have a sharp knife with me!’

\textsuperscript{12} This is a popular theme for jokes among agriculturalist Tibetans.
be.afraid-meanwhile sleep-pretending do:PFV SEQ "And, in fear, he pretended to go to bed."

The whole night, he grabbed the hilt of his knife and waited.'

'The whole night, he grabbed the hilt of his knife and waited.'

'At around daybreak, when the host family’s kitten jumped onto his body,'

'Thinking ‘This must be that notorious thing they call louse,'

’He gave it a powerful stab with the knife, and killed the kitten right there.'

‘At the time when they got to eat breakfast,’
(11) tøtsʰø-kʰo-ti
3PL:family-PL-DET:ERG
føχø-lo mdo rdʒøve sʰ-dʒi tɕi-tuua
guest-DAT/LOC last.night louse:ERG Q-bite:PFV ask:PFV-when
‘And when the host family asked him, ‘Did lice bite you last night?’

(12) atøvwa mtsʰari-tsø ve tø ma-rcon-the
almost disaster-INDEF do:PFV but NEG:PFV-matter-go:PFV
He said, ‘It almost got disastrous, but it was OK after all,‘

(13) martsø høtsʰo-lo rdʒøvwa χtsø-ve s-ɣø
originally 2PL:family-DAT/LOC louse one-except Q-exist
‘So there was just one single ‘louse’ in your home?’

(14) tø ɲe fse-tø-vʒuwa
ANA 1SG:ERG kill:PFV-PART-TELIC
rdʒølo høtsʰo rdʒøvwa-lo øro rtʃuwa pe-rge
afterwards 2PL:family louse-DAT/LOC at.all be.afraid NEG:be.necessary
‘And I have killed it, and from now on, you need not be afraid of lice at all!’

(15) vdze-tuwa tøtsʰe tfʰø jen ma-ku ve
say:PFV-when 3PL:family what be:SELF NEG:PFV-understand SEQ
‘When he said that, the hosts did not understand what he was talking about.’

(16) χtsø rtø-the-tuwa
a.bit look-go:PFV-when
‘And when they went to take a look,’

(17) tøtsʰe tsøvrek-tø sʰ-dzir ve vʒuwa mə-ɣø-lira
3PL:family:GEN kitten-DET thrust:PFV SEQ put mə-exist-DECL
‘They found their kitten there, stabbed to death.’