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SPECIAL LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF GSERPA TIBETAN*

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The linguistic situation of Sè'ěrbà (<gSer.pa>) District at the eastern corner of Sèdă 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'ěrbà 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

Sèdá (<gSer.thar>)[1] is a predominantly pastoral county in Gānzī 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'ěrbà (<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'ěrbà 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'ěrbà languages in question. The speech used in Gēlètuó (*qoləth^ho*; <ko.lo.tho>) Township is now known to be the *tʌrkə̄* variety of Showu rGyalrong, spilling over from the rGyalrong-speaking areas in neighboring Rǎngtáng (<dzam.thang>) County. Further upriver, one finds the second mystery Sè'ěrbà language: a previously undescribed form of Tibetan spoken by about 6,500 residents of Jiǎxué (*ɾɟaʃɯo* <rgya.sho>), Yánggè (*jɛkⁿgo* <yag.'go>), and Xùrì (*xorɛp* <sho.rib>) townships and Wēngdá (*ɾvomdɔ* <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.

analyze the lesser-known Tibetan dialects of Sichuan (J. Sun 1986; Lin 2002; J. Sun and Lin 2002; J. Sun 2003a; 2003b; to appear).

1.2 The phonemic system

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

p	t	ts	tʂ	c	tʃ	k	q	
pʰ	tʰ	tsʰ	tʂʰ	cʰ	tʃʰ	kʰ	qʰ	
b	d		dʐ	ɟ	dʒ	g		
ⁿb	ⁿd	ⁿdz	ⁿdʐ	ⁿɟ	ⁿdʒ	ⁿg		
m	n				ɲ	ŋ		
	s		ʂ		ʃ	x	χ	h
v	z				ʒ	ɣ	ʁ	
	r							
	l							
	l̥							
				j				

The following seventy-two cluster onsets are recorded so far, all of which are two-member clusters: /rp-; χp-; mpʰ-; rb-; rm-; ʁm-; rv-; ʁv-; ft-; rt-; χt-; mtʰ-; md-; vd-; rd-; ʁd-; mn-; rn-; ʁn-; fs-; rs-; χs-; vz-; ʁz-; vr-; vl-; rl-; ʁl-; pts-; fts-; rts-; χts-; mtsʰ-; ptʂ-; ftʂ-; rtʂ-; χtʂ-; ptʂʰ-; mtʂʰ-; mdʐ-; vdʐ-; rdʐ-; ʁdʐ-; fc-; rc-; pcʰ-; mcʰ-; vɟ-; rɟ-; ʁj-; ptʃ-; ftʃ-; rtʃ-; χtʃ-; ptʃʰ-; mtʃʰ-; mdʒ-; vdʒ-; rdʒ-; mɲ-; rɲ-; ʁɲ-; vʒ-; ʁʒ-; pk-; rk-; mkʰ-; mg-; vg-; rg-; mŋ-; rŋ-/.

The vocalic inventory comprises eight simple vowels / i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u, ə/ plus two diphthongs /ɯa, ɯo/. 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 [ɣ]. In casual speech, the lateral coda /-l/ tends to be realized as the trilled [r].

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; -al; ɛ-; -ɛp; -ɛm; -ɛn; -ɛk; -ɛr; -ɛl; -i; -ip; -im; -in; -ir; -il; -u; -e; -ep; -em; -et; -en; -er; -el; -o; -op; -om-; -on; -oŋ; -or; -ol; -ə; -əp; -əm; -ət; -ən; -ək; -ər; -əl; -ɯa; -ɯo/.

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-pɯa/ 'house', for instance, is normally pronounced [kʰópu̥ɯḁ].

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:

(1) *sɛk-ⁿdʒo* ‘earthworm’
tsə-lə-qa-pɯa ‘spider’
pa-lɔ-pə-qe ‘whirlwind’
rvap ‘falling rock’
χtʂɔ ‘dried-up traces of mudflow’
qə-tsə-ʒa ‘armpit’
kʰə-χə ‘body’
ⁿ*pʰi* ‘buttocks’
ʁɲa ‘to chase; to run after’
qap ‘to hide oneself’
ʁmɛr ‘to overflow’
ⁿ*dʒɛk* ‘to be good’
a-qʰɛ ‘to be bad; to be ugly’
ⁿ*tʰar* ‘to mince’
ʁvɛ ‘to burn sth down’
ⁿ*dɛn* ‘to close (doors)’

gSerpa and (mainstream) Amdo often make different selections from the Classical Tibetan lexical stock, for example:

(2)	**gSerpa**	**Amdo**	
	ptʃe <bkres>	<ltogs>	‘to be hungry’
	con <gyon>	<gon>	‘to wear’
	χsal <gsal>	<’ger>	‘to turn on (a light)’
	mnan <mnan>	<sdud>; <sbed>	‘to bury (a corpse)’
	ku <go>	<shes>	‘to know how to’
	ɲan <nyan>	<chog>	‘to be allowed’

A good number of grammatical markers are also distinct from their usual Amdo equivalents:

(3)	**gSerpa**	**Amdo**	
	-ji	/kə/[2]	‘ergative-genitive case’
	-kʰe	/kə/	‘instrumental case’
	-lə	<na>	‘locative case’
	-lə	/-a/ ~ /-ɛ/[3]	‘dative-allative case’
	-ve	<ltas.na>	‘marker of standard of comparison’
	-vdɯa	---	‘conscious animate subject nominalizer’
	-ʃe	<gi>	‘imperfective marker’
	-cʰe	<thal>	‘direct evidential’
	ətsəvɯa	<gshis.ki>	‘very’

3. PHONOLOGICAL TRAITS

3.1 Synchronic phonology

3.1.1 Diphthongs ɯa *and* ɯo

Characterized by a back unrounded onglide *ɯ-*, these typologically uncommon diphthongs are the only gliding vowels in gSerpa Tibetan.

The diphthong /ɯo/ occurs only after palatal onsets, but is in clear contrast with /o/:

(4) *vɟɯo* ‘hundred’ ⁿ*dʒɯo* ‘rainbow’ *χpe-tʃʰɯo* ‘book’
vɟo ‘to learn’ *sɛk-ⁿdʒo* ‘earthworm’ *tʃʰo* ‘alcohol’

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2 In Amdo, genitive, ergative and instrumental case forms are syncretised into /kə/, with positional variants /ⁿgə/, /ɣə/, 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 *sɛr* 'to crack', for example, must occur in an altered form *sər-* in the nominal compound *sər-kʰɔ* '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:[4]

WORD-FINAL		WORD-MEDIAL	
ɔ	*ɣɔ* 'fox'	a	*ɣa-ɾpɯa* 'fox-skin'
i	*ⁿdzɻi* 'ghost'	ə	*ⁿdzɻə-mɲi* 'will o' the wisp'
u	*ɾu* 'corpse'	o	*ɾo-ɾgam* 'coffin'
ɛ	*ɾe-ɾkɛ* 'thread'	ə	*ɾkə-ɾni* 'end of a thread'
ɯa	*pʰɯa* 'pig'	ɛk	*pʰɛk-ʃɯo* 'pork'
ɛk	*ʁɲɛk* 'eye'	ək	*ʁɲək-ɾdu* 'eyeball'
ɯo	*ptʃɯo* 'bird'	a	*ptʃa-tsʰe* 'bird's nest'
on	*ɾlon* 'wet'	ən	*ɾlən-sɔ* 'wet ground'
ɛn	*ftʂɛn* 'cloud'	ən	*ftʂən-kaɾ* 'white cloud'
ɛp	*nɛp* 'west'	əp	*nəp-mɲe* 'western side'
ɛm	*sɛm* 'heart; mind'	əm	*səm-no* 'in the heart'
om	*ɾnom* 'oil'	əm	*ɾnəm-nɯa* 'engine oil'
ɛl	*ɾŋɛl* 'silver'	əl	*ɾŋəl-kor* 'silver coin'
ɛr	*χsɛr* 'gold'	ər	*χsər-ɾnɔ* 'gold earring'

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. *ŋɔ* 'I' *ɾtɯa* 'tiger'
*ŋɔ-lə/*ŋa-lə* '(I +[DAT])' *ɾtɯa-ji /*ɾtɛk-ji* '(tiger + [ERG/GEN])'

b. *ɾgɔ* 'to like' *jɛn* 'to be (self-person)'
*ɾgɔ-tu /*ɾga-tu* 'like +IMM' *jɛn-ʃə/*jən-ʃə* 'to be + INDIR'

Some verbal forms are derived via compounding with a nominalizing element (e.g. *-li*; *-ʃe*; *-cə*; *-vdɯa*; *-co*). Such verbal compounds are likewise subject to vocalic alternation.

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. *ləm-zɛr* '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 *-ɯa* and *-ɯo*, diphthongs that carry a characteristic velar onglide.

Two separate origins of *-ɯa* can be identified. Rhymes checked by **-k* (WT <–g(s)>) were a primary source of modern *-ɯa*. As shown in (6), *-ɯa* 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 **aɣ > ɯa*:

(6)	**WT**	**gSerpa**	
	khrag	*tʂʰɯa*	‘blood’
	lcags	*rtʃɯa*	‘iron’
	bsregs	*fsɯa*	‘burn [TR]’
	srog	*rsɯa*	‘life’
	phyogs	*ptʃʰɯa*	‘direction’

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

(7)	**WT**	**gSerpa**	
	mchil.ma	*mtʃʰəl-mɯa*	‘spittle’
	bye.ma	*ptʃə-mɯa*	‘sand’
	rus.pa	*rər-pɯa*	‘bone’
	lci.ba	*rtʃə-vɯa*	‘dung’

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

(8)	**WT**	**gSerpa**	
	’ja	*ⁿdʒɯo*	‘rainbow’
	sha	*ʃɯo*	‘meat’
	nya	*ɲɯo*	‘fish’
	rgya	*rɟɯo*	‘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 *-ɯa* is among the notable innovations in gSerpa:

(9)	**WT**	**gSerpa**	
	glag	*ʁlɯa*	'golden eagle'
	glog	*ʁlɯa*	'lightning; electricity'
	phag	*pʰɯa*	'pig'
	phogs	*pʰɯa*	'wages'

3.2.3 Innovative -ɛ- rhymes

Another major gSerpa innovation produced modern rhymes in /ɛ/, which tends to be realized with a centralized quality. In the Tibetan dialects where this vowel is attested, /ɛ/ 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 /ɛ/ 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 /ə/ vocalism in the case of the high proto-vowels (written <i> and <u>) or /e/ vocalism in the case of proto **e* (written <e>), as seen below comparing the relevant sound correspondences in gSerpa and rDzongmda[5] Amdo:

(10)	**WT**	**gSerpa**	**rDzongmda Amdo**
	ig(s); ug(s)	*ɛk*	*ək*
	id; ud	*ɛ*	*ət*
	ed	*ɛ*	*et*
	in	*ɛn*	*ən*
	en	*ɛn*	*en*
	ib(s); ub(s)	*ɛp*	*əp*
	eb(s)	*ɛp*	*ep*
	im(s)	*ɛm*	*əm*
	em(s)	*ɛm*	*em*
	ir; ur	*ɛr*	*ər*
	er	*ɛr*	*er*
	il; ul	*ɛl*	*i*
	el	*ɛl*	*i; el (literary)*

[5] rDzongmda (<rDzong.mda>, my field data) represents an Amdo subdialect spoken in northern Rǎngtháng County, and also in Dárì (<Dar.lag>), Bānmǎ (<Pad.ma>) and Gāndé (<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]

(11)	**WT**	**gSerpa**
	ad	*a*
	id/ud/ed	*ɛ*
	od	*o*
	an	*an*
	in/en	*ɛn*
	un/on	*on*

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:

(12)	**WT**	**gSerpa**
	al	*al ~ ar*
	ol	*ol ~ or*
	il/ul/el	*ɛl ~ ɛr*

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:

(13)		
	jo-^{n}də	'the one up there'
	mo-^{n}də	'the one down there'
	ts^{h}ə-^{n}də	'the one here (near me)'
	p^{h}o-^{n}də	'the one there (away from me)'

6 Among the nasal codas it was the velar *-ŋ* 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) *te-ja* 'up there (referent relatively close)'
na-ja 'up there (referent relatively distant)'
jə-na-ja 'upward in that direction (while pointing at a certain referent)'

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) *jə-na* 'up there (static location)'
ja 'upward'
jar-ja 'upward in slow motion'

Further fine-tuned differentiation is possible via combining the above with more precise adverbial modification; e.g. *pcʰə* 'out' vs. *no* 'in'; *cɛn-lə* 'directly upward' vs. *tʰɛr-lə* 'directly downward'; *mtʂɛ-lə* 'in a horizontal direction'; *jar-fsɯa* 'diagonally upward' vs. *mɛr-fsɯa* 'diagonally downward'; *ʁla* 'upriver' vs. *ⁿga* 'downriver'; *tʰɯa* 'upstairs' vs. *ʒa* 'downstairs'; *kʰɔ* 'uphill in a ravine' vs. *rkɛp* 'downhill in a ravine'. Examples are given in (16) (*su* = imperative form of 'to go'):

(16) *cɛn-lə ja su* 'Go directly upward!'
jarfsɯa ja su 'Go diagonally upward!'
ʁla ja su 'Go upriver!'
tʰɯa ja su 'Go upstairs!'
kʰɔ ja su 'Go uphill (in a ravine)!'

The attested gSerpa directionals are summed up in Table II:

		UP	DOWN	HITHER	THITHER
ADV	**(static)**	jə-na(-lə)	mə-na(-lə)	tsʰə-na(-lə)	pʰə-na(-lə)
ADV	**(dynamic, general)**	ja	me	Tsʰe	pʰe
ADV	**(dynamic, slow motion)**	jar-ja	mər-mɛ	tsʰər-tsʰɛr	pʰər-pʰɛr
DEM	**(proximal)**	te-ja	te-me	te-tsʰe	te-pʰe
DEM	**(distal)**	na-ja	na-me	na-tsʰe	na-pʰe
DEM	**(adverbial)**	jə-na-ja	mə-na-me	tsʰə-na-tsʰe	pʰə-na-pʰe
PRON		jo-ⁿdə	mo-ⁿdə	tsʰə-ⁿdə	pʰo-ⁿdə

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:

	WT	**Lhasa**	**Themchen Amdo**	**rDzongmda Amdo**	**gSerpa**
IMPFV	*'bri*	*tʂʰi̲* (< WT FUT)	*mdzɻə*	*ptʂə* (< WT FUT)	*ptʂə* (< WT FUT)
PFV	*bris*	*tʂʰi̲?*	*ptʂwi*	*ptʂi*	*ptʂi*
FUT	*bri*	(= IMPFV)	(= IMPFV)	(= IMPFV)	*mdzɻə* (< WT IMPFV)
IMP	*bris*	tʂʰi̲?	*tʂʰi* (innovated)	*tʂʰi* (innovated)	*tʂʰi* (innovated)

Table III. Verb-Stem Alternations of 'to write' Compared

Thus, the gSerpa verb 'to write' manifests four different stems, including notably a separate imperfective (*ptʂə*) and a future (*mdzɻə*) 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] *kɛ̲?* <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:

IMPFV-STEM VOWEL		PFV-STEM ABLAUT	
a	*va* 'to do', *rbar* 'to grasp'	**e**	*vej, rber*
i	*fsi* 'to mix', *ptʃi* 'to bind'	**e**	*fse, ptʃe*
u	*ŋal fsu* 'to rest'	**e**	*ŋal fse*
o	*fco* 'to stretch out', *rpor* 'to move'	**e**	*fce, rper*
ɔ	*tʂɔ* 'to cut (cloth)'	**e**	*tʂe*
u	*(< *uŋ)* $^{n}t^{h}u$ 'to drink'	**i**	$^{n}t^{h}i$
ɛ	*tɛ* 'to drive', *χtɛp* 'to cut'	**i**	*ti, χtip*
o	*fkom* 'to retract'	**i**	*Fkim*
ə	*ptʃə* 'put into (container)'	**i**	*ptʃi*
ɛk	*ptsɛk* 'thrust', *zɛk* 'to bark'	**ək**	*ptsək, zək*

Table VI. gSerpa Perfective-Stem Ablaut

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'[7] function of the verbal prefix *mə-* is exemplified below:

(18) *ŋɔ* *rɟakar-lə* *tsə* $^{n}dʒu$ ***mə-fsam***
1SG India-DAT/LOC once go *mə*-think
tsənə *ləmjɛk* *ma* *lon*
but passport NEG:PFV get
'I wanted to pay a vist to India, but failed to get a passport.'

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) $t^{h}am$ *ptʂaʃi* *ʁɲi-tə* ***mə-ɣɔ***
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. $k^{h}ope$ *no-lə* *mɲə* *ɣɔ*
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. *kʰope no-lə mɲə* ***ɣo-tu***
house:GEN inside-DAT/LOC person exist-IMM
'(I just saw/found out that) There are people in the house.'

c. *kʰope no-lə mɲə* ***mə-ɣɔ-ʃə***
house:GEN inside-DAT/LOC person *mə*-exist-INDIR
'(Contrary to my belief) There have been people in the house!'

The verb form marked with *mə-* 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 *-tʰe* (21a-c) in contrast with the volitional direct evidential *-cʰe* (21d):

(21) a. *kʰatsəɲəmɯa ɲəmɯa tʂut-****tʰe****/*cʰe*
yesterday sun be.hot-DIR.INVOL/DIR.INVOL
'It was hot yesterday.'

b. *mdo ptʂaʃi tʰon-****tʰe****/*cʰe*
last.night PN arrive-DIR.VOL/DIR.INVOL
'bKra-shis arrived last night (I saw it).'

c. *tʰam ŋɔ rke-ne ʟu-****tʰe****/*cʰe*
just.now 1SG ladder-ABL fall-DIR.INVOL/DIR.INVOL
'I fell down from the ladder just now.'

d. *fsənam-ji ptʂaʃi χtsə vdi-****cʰe****/*tʰe*
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 *vdɯa*[9] occurs if the head noun is an agent (22a-b) or conscious experiencer (22c-d) regardless of transitivity, volitionality, or tense-aspect:

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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'.

(22) a. *mdo ja ɣu-**vdɯa**-tə ɭamu ra*
last.night up come-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
'The one who came up last night was Lha-mo.'

b. *ptʂaʃi-lə jəkə ʁjar-**vdɯa**-tə ŋɔ ra*
PN-DAT/LOC book lend-NMLZ-DET 1SG be:OTHER
'The one who lent bKra-shis the book was I.'

c. *ŋɔ rɛk-**vdɯa**-tə ptʂaʃi ra*
1SG see-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
'The one that sees/saw me is bKra-shis.'

d. *kʰɔ rkom-**vdɯa**-tə ptʂaʃi/cʰə-ⁿdə ra*
mouth be.thirsty-NMLZ-DET PN/dog-this be:OTHER
'The one that is/was thirsty is bKra-shis /this dog.'

Recipient (23a) and patient (23b) roles are represented by the nominalizers *-sɔ* and *-cə/-rɟə*,[10] respectively:

(23) a. *ŋe jəkə ʁjar-**sɔ**-tə ptʂaʃi ra*
1SG:ERG book lend-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
'The one I lent the book to was bKra-shis.'

b. *tʰam ŋe vdu-**cə**-tə ptʂaʃi 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 *-vdɯa* marking a **subject** relation defined as S grouped with A. When further examples are considered, however, it turns out that nominalization by *-vdɯa* is still inaccessible to inanimate (24a) or insensate animate subjects (24b):

(24) a. *rɛl-ⁿdʒu-**cə/*vdɯa**-tə ʃɯo ra*
spoil-go-NMLZ-DET meat be:OTHER
'It was meat that spoiled.'

b. *kʰatsəmɯa ʁopəpatⁿdzu-**cə/*vdɯa**-tə ptʂaʃi ra*
yesterday faint-NMLZ-DET PN be:OTHER
'It was bKra-shis who fainted yesterday.'

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

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10 The variant *-rɟə* occurs if the verb stem ends in a closed syllable.

(25) a. *ŋɔ-lə* *ʒoʒe* *ʁɲi-ve* *mɲɯa*
1SG-DAT/LOC child two-except not.exist
'I have only two children.'

b. *ʒoʒe* *ʁɲi-ve* *mɲɯa-**vdɯa/sɔ**-tə* *ŋɔ* *jɛn*
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:

Relativizing Nominalizer	Head-Noun Type
vdɯa	conscious animate subject
sɔ	recipient; location/goal/source
cə/-rɟə	Other

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 *ptʃɛk* '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 ~ -ɣə* (Haller 2004: §5.3.3), rDzongmda *-ka* (personal research), mDzoddge *-ʁen* (personal research; J. Sun 1986: 103-104).

(26) a. *ɻamu* *ŋə* *ma-ptʃɛk*
PN weep PROH-cause
'Don't make/let Lha-mo weep!'

b. *ŋe* *ⁿdə-lə* *ɾman* *ⁿtʰu-ptʃək-vʒɯa*
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

[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 Dùkē 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:

gSerpa PFV Ablaut Patterns		**Khalong PFV Ablaut Patterns**	
Input Vowel Grade	**Output Vowel Grade**	**Input Vowel Grade**	**Output Vowel Grade**
a	*e*	*a*	*e*
i		*i*	
u (WT <o>)		*u* (WT <o>)	
o		*O*	
ɔ			
u (WT <ung>)	*i*	*u (WT <ung>)*	*i*
ɛ		*e*	
o		*ə*	
ə			
ɛ (-ɛk rhyme)	*ə (-ək rhyme)*	---	---

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

ADV	adverbial marker	ANA	Anaphor
ALL	allative	CONT	Continuous
DAT	dative	DECL	Declarative
DET	determiner	DIR	direct evidential

EMPH	emphatic	ERG	Ergative
INTER	interjection	IMM	Immediate
IMP	imperative	IMPFV	Imperfective
INDEF	indefinite article	INDIR	indirect evidential
INVOL	involitional	LOC	Locative
NEG	negator	NMLZ	Nominalizer
PFV	perfective	PL	Plural
PN	personal name	PROH	Prohibitive
PUR	purposive	Q	Interrogative
SEQ	sequentializer	SG	Singular
STAT	stative	TEL	Telic
TR	transitive	VOL	Volitional

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE TEXT

mdzɻəχɔ χsalpɯa rupe no-lə tʰerap
An Ignorant Nomad Visiting Agricultural Area[12]

(1)
mdzɻəχɔ-tsə *rupɯa* *ŋoʃe-tsi* *sɔ*
pasturalist-INDEF agricultural.area acquaintance-INDEF:GEN place
ⁿdək-vdɯa *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-tɯa-lə*
3PL:family:GEN house-inside arrive-time-DAT/LOC
'When he arrived at their home,'

(3)
tətsʰo-kʰo-ti
3PL:family-PL-DET:ERG
tɔ *ŋətsʰe* *ʃəχə-tə-lə*
now 1PL:family:GEN guest-DET-DAT/LOC
rdʒəvɯa-ji *zɔ-cʰər-rɟo* *ra* *vdze-tɯa*
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)
a *ɲə-rcon*
EXCL NEG-matter
ŋɔ-lə *tʂə* *rnənbə-tsə* *ɣɔ* *vdze* *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!'

12 This is a popular theme for jokes among agriculturalist Tibetans.

(5)
rtʂɛk-ʒorci *ɲal-kʰəkɔ* *ve* *ve*
be.afraid-meanwhile sleep-pretending do:PFV SEQ
'And, in fear, he pretended to go to bed.'

(6)
mtsʰan-tʰɯa-te
night-whole-ADV
tʂəⁿgu-lə *ⁿdʒi* *ve* *vgək-ⁿdək-lira*
handle.of.knife-DAT/LOC grab:PFV SEQ wait-keep-DECL
'The whole night, he grabbed the hilt of his knife and waited.'

(7)
namχsal *rkor-ʃe*
daybreak around-DAT/LOC
tətsʰe *tsəvrɛk-tə* *tʰɯa-lə* *mtʃʰe-pte-tɯa*
3PL:family:GEN kitten-DET top-DAT/LOC jump:PFV-TELIC-when
'At around daybreak, when the host family's kitten jumped onto his body,'

(8)
rdʒəvɯa *vdza-ci* *tʂɛktʃʰɛn-tə*
louse say-NMLZ:GEN famous.one-DET
ⁿdə *jɛn-sɔ* *ɣo-tu* *fsam-ʒorci*
this be-NMLZ exist-IMM think-meanwhile
'Thinking 'This must be that notorious thing they call *louse*,'

(9)
tʂə-kʰe *χtsə* *ⁿdzir* *ve*
knife-INST EMPH stab:PFV SEQ
tsəvrɛk-tə *te* *fse*
kitten-DET there kill:PFV
'He gave it a powerful stab with the knife, and killed the kitten right there.'

(10)
ja *le* *ve*
up get.up:PFV SEQ
kʰafsal *ⁿtʰu-tɯa-lə*
breakfast eat (lit. 'drink') -when-DAT/LOC
'At the time when they got to eat breakfast,'

(11)
tətsʰo-kʰo-ti
3PL:family-PL-DET:ERG
ʃəχə-lə *mdo* *rdʒəve* *ə́-ⁿdʒi* *tʂi-tɯa*
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)
atəvɯa *mtsʰari-tsə* *ve* *tsə* *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)
martsɔ *hətsʰo-lə* *rdʒəvɯa* *χtsə-ve* *ə́-ɣɔ*
originally 2PL:family-DAT/LOC louse one-except Q-exist
'So there was just one single 'louse' in your home?'

(14)
tə *ŋe* *fse-tə-vʒɯa*
ANA 1SG:ERG kill:PFV-PART-TELIC
rdzɔlə *hətsʰo* *rdʒəvɯa-lə* *ə́ro* *rtʂɯa* *ɲe-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-tɯa *tətsʰe* *tʃʰə* *jɛn* *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)
χtsə *rtɔ-tʰe-tɯa*
a.bit look-go:PFV-when
'And when they went to take a look,'

(17)
tətsʰe *tsəvrɛk-tə* *ⁿdzir* *ve* *vʒɯa* *mə-ɣɔ-lira*
3PL:family:GEN kitten-DET thrust:PFV SEQ put *mə*-exist-DECL
'They found their kitten there, stabbed to death.'