

Tibetan zero nominalization

Several researchers draw attention to the ability of Tibeto-Burman languages to use nominalized verb forms in finite contexts (Matisoff 1972, Coupe, ed. 2008, DeLancey 2011), but the reverse pattern—morphologically finite forms occurring in nominal contexts—has received less attention. Here I collect a few examples from Classical Tibetan and Old Tibetan texts of affixless verb forms occurring in syntactically nominal contexts.

In example (1) the nominalized present verb stem *ḥdzin-pa* 'taker' is coordinated with *gzun*, the finite future stem of the same verb. The meaning of *gzun* in this passage is unequivocally 'that which is taken', as if the form were *gzun-pa* or *gzun-bya*. The choice of *-dan* as coordination marker guarantees the interpretation of *gzun* as a nominal form, since *-dan* occurs only after nouns and never after verbs (Schwieger 2008: 161, 274-276). The expected phrase *gzun-pa-dan ḥdzin-pa* is attested, as seen in example (2).

(1) *gzun-dan ḥdzin-paḥi sgrib gñis bral*

'free from the two obscurations of 'taken' and 'taker'. (Marpa 67a)

(2) *de ltar yoṅs-su sbyaṅs-nas gzun-pa-dan ḥdzin-pa-las rnam-par grol-ñin*

'being thus completely purified, one is liberated from 'taken' and 'taker' (Tenjur, vol. 13, p. 229)

One might suppose that in example (1), although the form in question looks verbal, in fact it is a noun derived from a verb just as 'a run' derives from 'to run' in English or *gnas* 'place' form *gnas* 'to stay' in Tibetan. Although 'zero nominalization' is a fine term for this type of derivation of nouns from verbs, it is a derivational rather than an inflectional process and may not be synchronically productive. Nonetheless, there are other examples in which the zero-nominalized form functions verbally to the left and nominally to the right, just as in the case of productive inflectional nominalization such as *-pa* suffixation.

The noun phrase *rtse-la dgaḥ dan sdug-pa* 'amorous play and beauty' of example (3) consists of two component phrases *rtse-la dgaḥ* 'amorous play' and *sdug-pa* 'beauty', coordinated by the associative case *-dan*. The first constituent of the coordination, *rtse-la dgaḥ* 'play and love', itself clearly consists of two finite verbs coordinated by the converb *-la*. Thus, *dgaḥ* functions as a verb to the left (taking the verbal coordinator *la*) and a noun to the right (taking the nominal coordinator *dan*).

(3) *nad-kyis ḥjigs-pa ḥdi ltar śin-tu mi bzad-pa // skyes-bu mkhas-pas gnas ḥdi mthoṅ-nas ji lta-bur // rtse-la dgaḥ dan sdug-paḥi ḥdu-śes bskyed-par ḥgyur //*

The threats of illness are thus quite unbearable. The wise man, having seen this circumstance, how will he engender the notion of amorous play and beauty?
(D. 96, vol. 46, p. 94a)

To my taste the passage should have read *rtse-la dgaḥ-ḥiñ sdug-paḥi*, with the verbal coordinator-*ḥiñ* in place of the nominal coordinator case *-dañ*. Tshogs drug rañ grol (1781-1851) shares this preference, as seen in his quotation of the passage in example (4).

(4) *nad-kyis ḥjigs-pa ḥdi ltar śin-tu mi bzad-pa / skyas-bu mkhas-pas gnas ḥdi mthoñ-na ji lta-bur // rtse-la dgaḥ ḥiñ sdug-paḥi ḥdu-śes ci phyir skye //*

The threats of illness are thus quite unbearable; the wise man, if he sees this circumstance, how will the notion of amorous play and beauty arise? (Tshogs drug rañ grol 2002, vol 4, p. 413)

In example (5) the phrase *ma rig* looks like a finite 'didn't know', but functions as an attribute 'ignorant' as if the text had *gsuñ ma-rig-pa*. The presence of the negation marker *ma* ensures that *rig* is acting verbally to the left.

(5) *bla-maḥi gsuñ // ma-rig min-pa dbyiñs-su dag /*

The words of the guru, which are not ignorant, are as pure as space. (Marpa 67a)

The expected phrase **ma-rig-pa min-pa* appears not to be attested. The ninth Karmapa Dbañ phyug rdo rje (1556- c. 1603) employs the finite equivalent *ma-rig-pa min* (example 6). The non-occurrence of **ma-rig-pa min-pa*, together with the use of *gsuñ-dañ ḥdzin-pa* (example 1) in place of *gsuñ-pa-dañ ḥdzin-pa* (example 2), suggest that the Tibetans do not like a construction to contain too many *pa*'s and omit the first when two appear in quick succession.

(6) *gal-te bu ñan-pa-la bu ma-yin zer-ba bžin-du śes-rabs ñan-pa ni ma rig-paḥo že-na / śes-rab ñan-pa ni ma rig-pa min-te/ ñon-moñs-can-du gyur-paḥi lta-ba yin-paḥi phyir*

If one says 'evil knowledge' is ignorance, like one says to an evil son 'he is not (my) son', evil knowledge is not ignorance because it is a view that gives rise to *kleśas*. (Dbañ phyug rdo rje 2001)

Analogous to the *ma-rig* 'ignorance' of example (5) is *ma-dad* 'lack of faith' in example (7); the negation of the verb stem suggests it must be understood verbally to the left, but the use of the noun coordinator *-dañ* requires it to be understood nominally to the right.

(7) *ña-rgyal-dañ ni ma-dad-dañ // don-du gñer-ba-med-ñid-dañ // phyi-rol-rnam-g.yeñ-nañ-bsdus-dañ // skyo-ba-ñan-paḥi dri-ma yin //*

Pride and lack of faith, lack of interest and being distracted outward, being withdrawn inward and dejection, (these) are flaws of listening. (Bu ston 22b)

Example (7) offers a second more interesting case of zero nominalization, viz. *don-du gñer-ba-med-ñid*. The clitic *-ñid* typically follows a noun phrase; a phrase *don-du gñer-ba-med-pa-ñid* 'non-existence of searching after meaning' would pose no problem. This example is in meter, but a *causa metri* explanation for the lack of *-pa* is unsatisfying, since one could have swapped the *-ñid* with a *-pa* and thereby improved the syntax without substantially changing the meaning.

In example (8) *bźugs* looks like a finite verb 'sits', but in context it means 'those who sit', as if the form were *bźugs-pa*. Because *bźugs* 'sit' governs the *ḥdir* 'here' to its left, it cannot be analyzed as a noun. Example (9) is exactly analogous, but with the verb *tshogs* 'assemble'. The expected phrases *ḥdir bźugs-pa* (10) and *ḥdir tshogs-pa* (11) also occur. In these cases, the explanation for the zero-nominalized forms is certainly that the passages in examples (8) and (9) are verse whereas examples (10) and (11) are prose.

(8) *ḥdir bźugs gsan-cig !*

'listen, O you who sit here !' (Marpa 50a)

(9) *ḥdir tshogs grwa-pa bu-slob kun //*

'O all you monks and disciplines gathered here!' (Marpa 83a)

(10) *dkyil-ḥkhor chen-po ḥdir bźugs-pa-la snod-du gyur-pa-dañ / snod-du ma gyur-pa brtag mi ḥtshal-lo*

There is no need to examine whether or not those sitting at this great maṇḍala are suitable for taking prātimokṣa vows. (Tenjur, vol. 29, p. 300)

(11) *bdag-cag mched-lcam-dral ḥdir tshogs-pa rnams-kyis mchod-paḥi źal-zas ḥdi-dag tshul bźin-du byin-gyis brlabs-nas*

We siblings assembled here, having blessed in this way these victuals which we offer (D 846, vol. 99, p. 192a)

In example (12) the verb *lta* 'watch' acts verbally to the left, governing *gar* 'dance' in the allative case, and it acts nominally to the right, as an argument of *mtshuñis* 'be similar'. A nominalized form *lta-ba*, as seen in example (13), would have been expected.

(12) *ḥgro-baḥi skye-ḥchi gar-la lta dañ mtshuñis //*

The birth and death of creatures is like watching a dance. (D.96, vol. 46, page 88a)

(13) *pha-mas bu gcig-pa la lta-ba dañ mtshuñs //*

Like parents looking at their only child (D.120, vol. 53, page 130b)

Zero-nominalization is also attested in Old Tibetan, although the smaller size of the corpus limits one's abilities to find closely parallel passages with and without the zero-nominalization. In example (14) the word *ñnos-grub* 'siddhi' is modified by the verb phrase *srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed* 'rule over the three worlds'.

(14) *srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed ñnos-grub gsum //*

The three siddhis (which) rule over the three worlds (Rama C l. 12).

One would usually expect a nominalized clause to modify its head to the right, i.e. *ñnos-grub gsum srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed-pa*, or, if the modifier is to the left of its head, one expects both nominalization and the genitive case, i.e. *srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed-paḥi ñnos-grub gsum*.

The examples given above suffice to demonstrate the existence of zero-nominalization in Classical and Old Tibetan.

Primary sources

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