

Poly-functional phrasal nominalizers in Lhasa Tibetan

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1. Overview

- Phrasal nominalizations in Tibeto-Burman languages are well-known for being poly-functional (Genetti et al. 2008; Genetti 2010 among others)
- In Lhasa Tibetan (LT), particularly, nominalized phrases with some particular nominalizers have at least two functions: 1. Complex event nominalization (CEN) 2. Relativization (Delancey 1999; Erlewine 2019; Cheng & Chen 2022 among others)
- In particular: not all, but only some nominalizers (e.g. -pa [pa], -yag [ja], -rgyu [k'ju], -sa [sa], -mkhan [k^hen]...) can nominalize an extended verbal structure, resulting in a poly-functional nominalized phrase.
- Yet, it is not entirely clear how the choice of these nominalizers is restricted in a particular scenario (i.e. functioning as CEN vs as relative clauses), but it is clearly restricted *differently* in each case.
- Moreover - new findings from my preliminary fieldwork: These nominalized phrases seem to sit in the matrix spine, with different nominalizers associated with different combinations of matrix tense/aspect/modality.

-Analogous to saying [John is [_{nP} reading books]]

- Current hypothesis of this ongoing project:
 - There is a set of nominalizers in LT that have three functions: 1. CEN 2. Relativization 3. Matrix T/A/M expression
(coined term: **spinal nominalization**).
 - The different kinds of syntax-semantic divergence given different functions are somehow related.
- This talk:
 - Presents snapshots of diverging properties of different nominalizers in each scenario.
 - Provides a piece of syntactic argument that “spinal nominalizations” are indeed categorically nominalized phrases.

A note on data presentation:

- most data in the literature: Wylie transcription of written Tibetan script
- but I chose to strictly focus on oral utterances to minimize potential prescriptivism coming from the written tradition.
- therefore all data will be presented in IPA.

2 Snapshots of the three cases

-2.1 CEN

- Unfortunately, this is the paradigm furthest from comprehensive
- Not informative regarding the restriction on the choice of nominalizers
- In the limited environments I have, some nominalizers seem interchangeable

(1) a. [tʂo.me: tʂaŋ.koŋ momo sʂə:-pa tʂi] ɳa ka.po tʂəʰoŋ
Sgrol.ma.ERG yesterday.afternoon dumpling make-PA DEF I.ABS happy EGO.NA
'I'm happy that Sgrol.ma made dumplings.'

b. [tʂo.me: tʂaŋ.koŋ momo sʂə-ja tʂi] ɳa ka.po tʂəʰoŋ
Sgrol.ma.ERG yesterday.afternoon dumplings make-YAG DEF I.ABS happy EGO.NA
'I'm happy that Sgrol.ma made dumplings.'

(2) a. tʰəŋ.tʂup-ke [tʂo.ma ku.ɛu sa-kʰu-la] ke.len tʂəʰe
Don.vgrub-ERG Sgrol.ma apple eat-rgyu-DAT guarantee v
'Don.vgrub guarantees that Sgrol.ma will eat apples.'

b. tʰəŋ.tʂup-ke [tʂo.ma ku.ɛu sa-ja-la] ke.len tʂəʰe
Don.vgrub-ERG Sgrol.ma apple eat-rgyu-DAT guarantee v
'Don.vgrub guarantees that Sgrol.ma will eat apples.'

- More data collection needed to understand:
 - What restrictions (if any) are placed on the choice of nominalizers by what syntactic/semantic factors in what way (predicate type? tense? realis/irrealis?)?
 - In other words: what are specific semantic properties of each one?

-2.2 Relativization

- Relativization of core arguments and location also involves the use of at least these phrasal nominalizers : -pa, -rgyu, -yag, -sa (Delancey 1999; Erlewine 2019; Cheng & Chen 2022 among others)
- E.g.

(3) [_i momo sə:-pe] mi ti t^hun.t^hup ɻe
 dumpling make-PA.GEN person DEF Don.vgrub COP
 'The person who made dumplings is Don.vgrub.'

(4) [t^ho.me: _i momo sə-ja-ki] mo.tsai ti p^ha.ki ɻe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG dumpling make-YAG-GEN steamer DEF this COP
 'The steamer that Sgrol.ma will use to make dumplings is this.'

(5) [t^ho.me: _i momo so-se] mi ti t^hun.t^hup ɻe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG dumpling make-SA.GEN person DEF Don.vgrub COP
 'The person who Sgrol.ma made dumplings for is Don.vgrub.'

- In this case there is an apparent restriction on the choice of nominalizers: the choice seemingly depends on which particular argument is relativized, as noted in all previous works.
- Adding on to previous generalizations, the paradigm NMLZ × relativizable-arguments is given in the following table:

	Subj.ERG	Subj.ABS	INST	Obj.DAT	Obj.ABS	Location?
-pa	Y	Y	Y	%	Y	*
-rgyu	*	*	Y	*	Y	*
-yag	*	*	Y	*	Y	Y
-sa	*	*	*	Y	*	Y

- What's interesting: for each nominalizer, the arguments that it can relativize doesn't form an obvious natural class.
 - How is it specified in the grammar such that e.g. -rgyu can only relativize exactly instrument and an absolute object?

- A piece of regularity: in -yag and -rgyu relative clauses, the RC can't have a past perfective reading: (6) example receives a future translation, while previous literature suggests that “yag-RC” can also have an imperfective reading.

(6) [tṣo.me: _i momo sø-ja-ki] mo.tsai ti pʰa.ki ŋe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG dumpling make-YAG-GEN steamer DEF this COP
 ‘The steamer that Sgrol.ma will use to make dumplings are these.’
 #‘The steamer that Sgrol.ma used to make dumplings are these.’

- As a contrast: a “pa-RC” is always compatible with both a past and a future reading, as in (7).

(7) [_i momo sø:-pe] mi ti tʰun.tṣup ŋe
 dumpling make-PA.GEN person DEF Don.vgrub COP
 ‘The person who made dumplings are Don.vgrub.’
 ‘The person who will make dumplings are Don.vgrub.’

-2.3 “Spinal nominalizations”

- Lhasa Tibetan has a notoriously complex system of post-verbal particles associated with different tense, aspect, modality and evidentiality (Tournadre & Jiatso 2001), often complex combinations of them.
- E.g. You often can't see the morpheme x invariably expresses the tense α .
- Notably, among all other post-verbal particles, there are some that seem to be morphologically decomposable into:
 - different copulas: -red [ŋe], -yin [jin], -‘dug [tu], -yod [jø],
 plus ---
 - different nominalizers: again -pa, -rgyu, -yag, -sa, with the other one -gi (ki) with a very similar distribution in the matrix spine, but doesn't function as a nominalizer elsewhere.

(8) tṣo.me: tʰun.tṣup-la momo sø:-pa.ŋe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-pa.red
 ‘Sgrol.ma made dumplings for Don.vgrub.’

(9) tṣo.me: tʰuŋ.tṣup-la momo sø:-pa.jin.sa.ṛe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-pa.yin.sa.red
 'Sgrol.ma is probably going to make dumplings for Don.vgrub.'

- Most previous works assume that in (8) and (9), the boldfaced particles are single lexical units expressing certain tense/aspect/modality/evidentiality (Tournadre & Jiatso 2001, Kalsang et al. 2013 among others), but given that -pa and -sa are also nominalizers, another engage-able hypothesis is that cases like (8) and (9) have the following structures

(10) [[VP-NMLZ] COP]
 (11) [[[VP-NMLZ] COP]-NMLZ] COP]

- I then got an interesting paradigm putting different nominalizers and different copulas in the template (10), or (12).

(12) [tṣo.me: tʰuŋ.tṣup-la momo so-NMLZ nP] COP
 Sgrol.ma.ERG Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-NMLZ COP

Spinal nominalizations x COP:

-pa:

(13) tṣo.me: tʰuŋ.tṣup-la momo sø:-pa ḫe
 Sgrol.ma.ERG Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-pa red
 'Sgrol.ma made dumplings for Don.vgrub.'

(14) tṣo.me: tʰuŋ.tṣup-la momo sø:-pa tu/jø
 Sgrol.ma.ERG Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-pa 'dug/yod
 'Sgrol.ma will probably make dumplings for Don.vgrub.'

-yag:

(15) a. '...sø-ja ḫe': 'Sgrol.ma is definitely going to make dumplings for Don.vgrub.'
 b. '...sø-ja tu/jø': 'Sgrol.ma is going to keep making dumplings (which implies that she has made some).'

-rgyu:

(16) a. '...so-kju ḫe': 'Sgrol.ma hasn't started making dumplings for Don.vgrub.'
 b. '...so-kju tu': 'Sgrol.ma is going to make dumplings for Don.vgrub.'
 c. '...so-kju jø': 'Sgrol.ma still has a lot of dumplings to make for Don.vgrub.'

-sa:

(17) ‘...sø-sa .xe’: ‘It seems like Sgrol.ma is about to make dumplings.’

-gi (not an elsewhere nominalizer)

(18) a. ‘...so-ki .xe’: ‘Sgrol.ma will make dumplings for Don.vgrub.’
b. ‘...so-ki jø/tu’: ‘Sgrol.ma is making dumplings for Don.vgrub.’

- The English translations above are based on the Mandarin Chinese translations that my Tibetan consultants provide, which might not accurately characterize all entailments/implicatures of each morpheme combination.
- Nevertheless, we get a very similar feeling of irregularity from this paradigm: can’t isolate a single/definite meaning for any morpheme in (13)-(18) (e.g. 13 vs 14, 18a vs 18b)
- The benefit of a nominalization-view of these matrix structures: If most of the complex T-A-M-E are expressed with these nominalizations being “spinal”, it is then expected that when they are embedded, T-A-M-E are often blurred or neutralized (Chang & Chang 1984)

3. A suspected common syntactic property

- Is there any reason at all to suspect that “spinal nominalizations” are still categorically nominal?
- If it is: it must share some if not all of the characteristic syntactic properties of a nominalized phrase.
- There is a suspected one: the ability to license an absolutive subject in a phrasal peripheral position.
- In a nominalized phrase: the subject can optionally be absolutive (unmarked)

(19) t^hunjt^hup-ki [tʂo.me:/tʂo.ma tʂa.ɛi-la momo so-ja]-la ke.len te^h
Don.vgrub-ERG **Sgrol.ma.ERG/ABS** Tashi-DAT dumpling make-yag-DAT guarantee do
‘Don.vgrub guarantees that Sgrol.ma will make dumplings.’

- Crucially, this optionality disappears when an object is scrambled:

(20) t^hunjt^hup-ki tʂa.ɛi-la **tʂo.me:/tʂo.ma** momo so-ja]-la ke.len te^h
Don.vgrub-ERG Tashi-DAT **Sgrol.ma.ERG/*ABS** dumpling make-yag-DAT guarantee do
‘Don.vgrub guarantees that Sgrol.ma will make dumplings.’

- On the other hand, in relative clauses, an absolutive subject is just not possible

(21) [**tṣo.me:/*tṣo.ma** _i momo sø-ja-ki] mo.tsa:i ti p^ha.ki .e
Sgrol.ma.ERG/*ABS dumpling make-YAG-GEN steamer DEF this COP
‘The steamer that Sgrol.ma will use to make dumplings are these.’

- These facts suggest that an “absolutive subject” is probably licensed on the edge of a nominalized phrase, which becomes unavailable when an object is scrambled there, and when a relative operator is moved there.
- This fact carries over to all matrix structures like this: [spinal nominalizations - COP], and the one with “gi”, demonstrated below with “-yag”

(22) **tṣo.me:/tṣo.ma** t^huŋ.tṣup-la momo so-ja .e
Sgrol.ma.ERG/ABS Don.vgrub-DAT dumpling make-yag COP
‘Sgrol.ma is definitely going to make dumplings for Don.vgrub’

- An importantly, object scrambling blocks this optionality

(23) t^huŋ.tṣup-la **tṣo.me:/*tṣo.ma** momo so-ja .e
Don.vgrub-DAT **Sgrol.ma.ERG/*ABS** dumpling make-yag COP
‘Sgrol.ma is definitely going to make dumplings for Don.vgrub’

- This fact has long been analyzed as a split-ergativity phenomenon in the matrix clause alone, sensitive to particular aspects (Gu 2025 and works cited therein), but the parallelism between (19) (20) and (22) (23) clearly suggests an additional kind of split-ergativity phenomenon associated with nominalized phrases.

4. Conclusion

- We have glimpsed how a selected set of phrasal nominalizers in Lhasa Tibetan: -pa, -yag, -rgyu, -sa participate in (suspected) nominalized phrases with different functions: CEN, relativization and “spinal nominalization”.
- The most difficult part of this project is to understand how the same set of nominalizers give rise to different kinds of diverging behaviors in different scenarios
 - E.g. in relativization: different extractable arguments; in clausal spine: different T-A-M-E properties etc.

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