

*n*P-phasality and a subtle sign of successive cyclicity in colloquial Lhasa Tibetan

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0. Introduction

- In the Distributed Morphology (DM) framework, it has been argued that a categorizing n is a phase head, with evidence coming from interface phenomena at the complex word formation level (Marantz 2001, 2007; Marvin 2002; Arad 2003; Embick 2010).
- This study advances a related claim for phrasal nominalizers in colloquial Lhasa Tibetan (cLT): they exhibit classic defining properties of phase heads according to Chomsky (2000, 2008), in the narrow syntax
 - an nP phasality at the level of phrasal nominalizations.

0. Introduction

In particular:

- A group of empirical phenomena suggests that cLT phrase-nominalizing n is associated with three phasal properties defined by Chomsky (2000, 2008):
 - (A) n can introduce various **Edge Features**, triggering A' -movements to Spec, nP .
 - (B) n initiates **Spell-Out (PF-Transfer)** of its complement, during which a dependent ergative case assignment takes place (Baker 2015)
 - (C) Spell-Out and EF-related movement apply **simultaneously** (Chomsky 2008).
- These derive the ability for cLT phrasal nPs to do **relativization**, **argument fronting**, and **absolutive-subject licensing**.
- Their **mutual bleeding** $\Rightarrow$ *uniqueness of Spec, nP* . Together with the PIC, this correctly predicts subtle **successive-cyclicity** effects.

$\hookrightarrow$ nPs in cLT have the power of CPs in some familiar languages like English $\rightarrow$ closely related to the well-documented exceptional ubiquity and versatility of nominalizations in Tibetan languages (Noonan 1997; Genetti 2011; Cheng and Chen 2022 among many others)

0. Introduction

Roadmap:

- 1 **Empirical facts:** three operations available within cLT nominalizations — relativization, argument fronting, absolutive-subject licensing — and their **mutual bleeding**.
- 2 **Theoretical ingredients:** from classic phase and dependent case theories.
- 3 **The proposal & derivations:** cLT nominalizers head an *n*P-phase.
- 4 **A prediction borne out:** successive cyclicity effects.
- 5 **Implications:** on structures and properties cLT finite matrix clauses.
- 6 **Conclusion.**

Note on data and presentation: all data come from novel fieldwork; Examples are in IPA, with some glosses in Wylie transliteration of the Tibetan script; Judgments are strictly based on the colloquial register, where some elements are not represented in the standard literary Tibetan

1. Empirical facts

- Within a cLT phrasal nominalization, **three** operations are each independently available:
 - (A) **Absolutive subject licensing** — a transitive subject may be exceptionally unmarked (absolutive) instead of ergative.
 - (B) **Argument fronting** — a lower argument may move to a left-peripheral position.
 - (C) **Relativization** — forming a relative construction with an argument gap.

Importantly: these three **mutually bleed** — at most **one** can be initiated inside a single nominalized phrase.

1. Empirical facts

(A) **Absolutive subject licensing.** In a nominalization in an argument position, an embedded transitive subject can optionally be **absolutive** instead of ergative.

- (1) tʂà.ǰí-kì [pé.mé:/pé.ma mò.mó sø:-pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-sóŋ
Bkrashis-ERG [Pema.ERG/Pema.ABS dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made dumplings.'

1. Empirical facts

(B) **Argument fronting.** A lower argument can be fronted to the left of the subject.

- (2) a. tʂà.ʂí-kì [pé.mé: mò.mó sʈə:-pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [Pema.ERG dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made dumplings.'
- b. tʂà.ʂí-kì [mò.mó pé.mé: sʈə:-pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [dumpling Pema.ERG make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made dumplings.'
- (3) a. tʂà.ʂí-kì [pé.mé: tʰùŋ.tʂúp-la mò.mó sʈə:-pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [Pema.ERG Donvgrub-DAT dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made Donvgrub dumplings.'
- b. tʂà.ʂí-kì [tʰùŋ.tʂúp-la pé.mé: mò.mó sʈə:-pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [Donvgrub-DAT Pema.ERG dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made Donvgrub dumplings.'

1. Empirical facts

Identical semantic effects: nP-internally, an absolutive subject and a fronted internal argument seem to have the same information structural properties

- In the following cases the affected argument receives an focus reading — “only X (and no one/nothing else).”

- (4) a. tɕà.ɕí-kì [pé.mé: mò.mó sɕɛ:pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [Pema.ERG dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
‘Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made dumplings.’
- b. tɕà.ɕí-kì [pé.ma mò.mó sɕɛ:pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [Pema.ABS dumpling make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
‘Bkrashis is surprised that [PEMA] made dumplings.’ (only Pema)
- c. tɕà.ɕí-kì [mò.mó pé.mé: sɕɛ:pa tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [dumpling Pema.ERG make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
‘Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made [DUMPLINGS].’ (only dumplings)

↪ *Hypothesis: an absolutive subject is just a subject moved to a phrase-peripheral position such that it escaped ergative assignment? To be captured by my analysis*

1. Empirical facts

Bleeding I: a fronted internal argument and an absolutive subject **cannot** co-exist.

- (5) tɕà.ɕí-kì [mò.mó *pé.ma/pé.mé: sò:-pà tì] háŋ.sàŋ-són
Bkrashis-ERG [dumpling *Pema.abs/Pema.ERG make-PA DEF] be.surprised-EVID
'Bkrashis is surprised that Pema made dumplings.'

Argument fronting and absolutive-subject licensing **mutually bleed**.

↪ *Hypothesis: A fronted internal argument and an absolutive subject compete for the same position?*

1. Empirical facts

(C) **Relativization** in cLT involves a phrasal nominalization with an argument gap (DeLancey 1999). A **headless** relative involves an unmarked nominalization; an overt **head noun** obligatorily triggers **genitive** marking on the nominalization.

- (6) a. [pé.mé: t^hùŋ.tṣúp-la _; sò:-pa tì] t^hè.tsó; ʎè
[Pema.ERG Donvgrub-DAT make-PA DEF] these COP
'What Pema made for Donvgrub are these.' (headless)
- b. [pé.mé: t^hùŋ.tṣúp-la _; sò:-pe mò.mó; tì] t^hè.tsó ʎè
[Pema.ERG Donvgrub-DAT make-PA.GEN dumpling; DEF] these COP
'These are the dumplings Pema made for Donvgrub.' (headed)

1. Empirical facts

Bleeding II: inside a relativizing nominalization, **neither** argument fronting **nor** an absolutive subject is possible.

- (7) a. * $[\text{pé.ma} \quad \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{ùŋ.tɕúp-la} \quad _; \text{sø:-pa} \quad \text{tì}] \quad \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{è.tsó}; \text{ɿè}$
* $[\text{Pema.ABS} \quad \text{Donvgrub-DAT} \quad _ \quad \text{make-PA} \quad \text{DEF}] \quad \text{these} \quad \text{COP}$
Int.: 'What Pema made for Donvgrub are these.' (* absolutive subject in a relative)
- b. * $[\text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{ùŋ.tɕúp-la} \quad \text{pé.mé:} \quad _; \text{sø:-pa} \quad \text{tì}] \quad \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{è.tsó}; \text{ɿè}$
* $[\text{Donvgrub-DAT} \quad \text{Pema.ERG} \quad _ \quad \text{make-PA} \quad \text{DEF}] \quad \text{these} \quad \text{COP}$
Int.: 'What Pema made for Donvgrub are these.' (* argument fronting in a relative)

↪ *Relativization in principle involves some A'-movement targeting the edge position — in competition with a fronted internal argument and an absolutive subject.*

1. Empirical facts

Summary: Three mutual bleeding operations

within one <i>nP</i>	abs. subject	arg. fronting	relativization
absolute subject	—	✗	✗
argument fronting	✗	—	✗
relativization	✗	✗	—

- Each operation is fine on its own; **any pairing is ungrammatical**.
- This is the signature of operations competing for **one and the same position**.
- **Goal of the analysis:** derive these from an *nP*-phasality proposal, and the uniqueness of its specifier.
 - also to explain how the subject evades ergative assignment in some cases.

2. Theoretical ingredients

2.1 Properties of phases (Chomsky 2000, 2008)

- A **phase head** x triggers **Transfer** of its complement YP to PF (Spell-Out) and LF (Chomsky 2000).
- **Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC₁)**: once YP is transferred, its interior is **inaccessible** to operations outside xP (Chomsky 2000; Müller 2004).
- “**All-powerful** phase heads” (Chomsky 2008; Richards 2011): all features/operations are introduced/initiated by phase heads, including **Edge Features (EFs)** and their associated movements to the specifier.
- **Crucial timing** (Chomsky 2008:143): Transfer of the complement and EF-driven movement happen **simultaneously**.
 - $\Rightarrow$ post-syntactic modification of the complement (foreshadowing: dependent case assignment) does **not** affect the copy already raised to the edge.

2. Theoretical ingredients

Regarding how subject at the edge escapes ergative assignment:

2.2 **Dependent case** (Marantz 1991; Baker 2015): ergative as a **dependent** case.

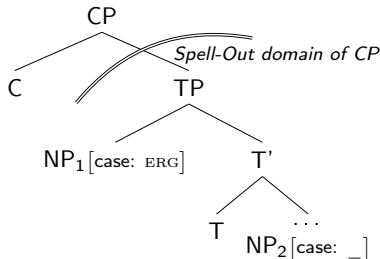
- A dependent case is assigned to a nominal **only if** another nominal serves as a case competitor in the relevant domain.
- Independent diagnostics from cLT: introducing a case competitor licenses ergative on an intransitive subject:

- (8) a. pé.ma/*pé.mé: lóp.tɕʰéŋ-là tɕò-ɕìŋ-jø
Pema.ABS/*ERG college-DAT go-PROG-have
'Pema is attending college.'
- b. pé.ma/pé.mé: [tʰùŋ.tɕúp-kì tɕʰé.tù] lóp.tɕʰéŋ-là tɕò-ɕìŋ-jø
Pema.ABS/ERG [Donvgrub-GEN sake] college-DAT go-PROG-have
'Pema is attending college for the sake of Donvgrub.'

→ Ergative is licensed by the presence of a legitimate case competitor (the absolutive remains available, plausibly for independent reasons).

2. Theoretical ingredients

2.2 **Dependent case**, continued. Baker's mechanism: during Spell-Out of a phase complement, the dependent case is assigned to a **c-commanding/c-commanded nominal** per specific parameterization; the other stays caseless and later surfaces with the unmarked/default case.



↪ *Ergative-Absolutive alignment* → dependent case assigned to the **c-commanding nominal**

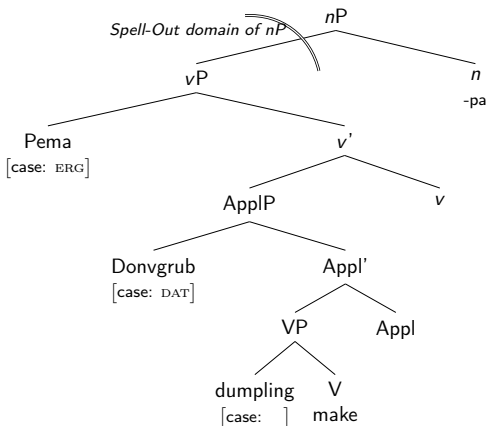
3. The proposal

3.1 cLT-specific proposals

- (p1) All cLT nominalizers are of category *n*, a **phasal** category.
- (p2) *n* directly selects the (extended) **verbal projection** - a phrasal layering approach to nominalizations (cf. Alexiadou 2001).
- (p3) **Ergative** is assigned as a **dependent case** to a c-commanding nominal **within** *vP*, during the Spell-Out of *vP*.
- (p4) *nP* has **only one specifier** — *n* can carry **at most one** EF at a time:
 [*REL*] for relativization, **or** [*FOC*] for focus-related movement.

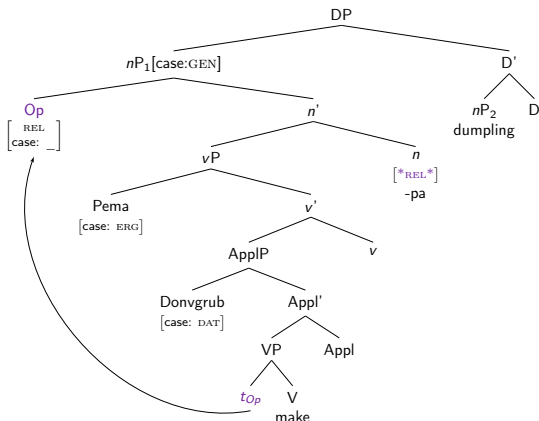
3. The proposal

3.2 Baseline: *n* merges with a *vP*. Ergative is the **dependent case** on the higher competitor (*Pema*), assigned after phase-complement Spell-Out is initiated; *dumpling* stays caseless → later unmarked.



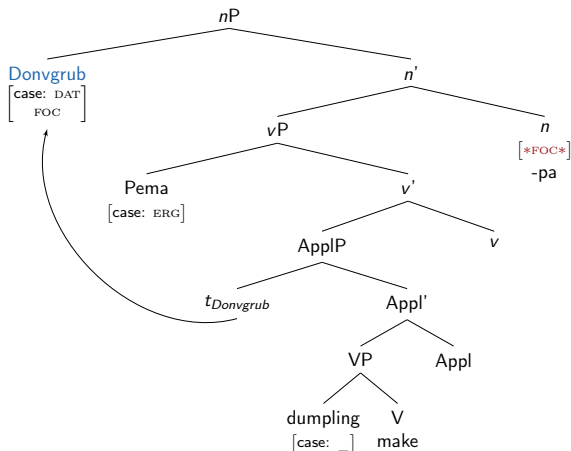
4. Derivations

4.1 Relativization = a relative operator $Op_{[REL]}$ moving to Spec, nP , driven by $[*REL*]$ on n . (Op is also a case competitor, so the ergative on *Pema* is preserved.)



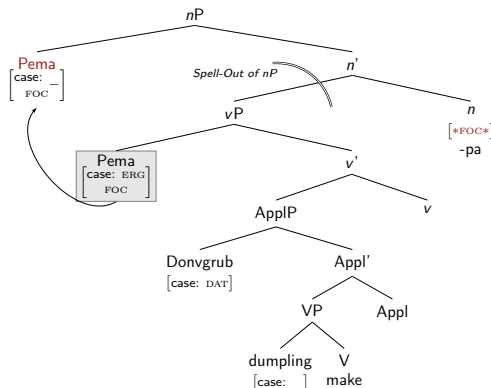
4. Derivations

4.2 **Argument fronting** = [***FOC***] on *n* targeting an object bearing [FOC]. The dative object raises to Spec,*n*P, **keeping** its dative case.



4. Derivations

4.3 The key insight: “**absolutive subject**” = “**subject focus-fronting**”. [***FOC***] targets the **external argument**, given the identical semantic effect.



The timing argument.

n moves *Pema* to Spec,*nP* and initiates Spell-Out of *vP* at the same time (§2.1).

The dependent ergative is assigned **later** during Spell-Out — so the **lower** copy gets ergative, but the **raised** copy was taken **before** that.

The raised copy is caseless and c-commands no competitor → it surfaces as **unmarked** = **absolutive**.

⇒ “Absolutive subject” is just a **focused** subject, manifested in **case** rather than word order.

4. Derivations

Mutual bleeding now follows directly.

- Relativization needs [**REL**] on *n*; object/subject fronting need [**FOC**] on *n*.
- But *n* can introduce **at most one** EF per (p4) → *n*P has **one** specifier.
- Hence, in any single nominalization, **at most one** of {relativization, argument fronting, “absolute subject”} can be initiated.

5. Prediction: successive cyclicity

- By PIC, any long-distance movement (LDM) across an embedded nP must first stop at **Spec, nP** to stay visible to the higher probe — the standard phase-based account of successive cyclicity (Chomsky 2001).
- But that intermediate copy occupies the **single** nP -edge. So the prediction is:
if LDM crosses an nP , no nP -internal fronting is possible
(no fronted object, no absolutive subject).

This is borne out in **two** independent long-distance dependencies: topicalization (§5.1) and relativization (§5.2).

5.1 LD topicalization across an *nP*

LD fronting of the embedded dative across the matrix subject. The dative passes through Spec,*nP* — so the embedded subject **cannot** be absolutive, and the embedded object **cannot** also front.

- (9) a. *t^hùŋ.tšúp-là_i* *tšà.ŋí-kì* [**pé.ma*/pé.mé: *t_i* mò.mó sò:-pa *tì*] *jì.tɕ^hí tɕ^hè-són*
Donvgrub-DAT_i Bkrashis-ERG [**Pema.ABS*/Pema.ERG *t_i* dumpling make-PA DEF] belief do-EVID
'Donvgrub, Bkrashis believes that Pema made dumplings for him.' (no absolutive subject ✗)
- b. **t^hùŋ.tšúp-là_i* *tšà.ŋí-kì* [*mò.mó_j* pé.mé: *t_i t_j* sò:-pa *tì*] *jì.tɕ^hí tɕ^hè-són*
**Donvgrub-DAT_i* Bkrashis-ERG [*dumpling_j* Pema.ERG *t_i t_j* make-PA DEF] belief do-EVID
Int.: same as (a). (no extra object fronting ✗)

5.2 LD relativization across an *nP*

Long distance relativization of an embedded object (cf. Erlewine 2019): the same effects appear.

- (10) a. [tʂà.ɕí-kì [*pé.ma/pé.mé: tʰùŋ.tʂúp-là t_i sò:-pa] ji.tʂʰí tʂʰè-pa tì] mò.mó; ɣe
 [Bkrashis-ERG [*Pema.ABS/Pema.ERG Donvgrub-DAT t_i make-PA] belief do-PA DEF] dumpling; COP
 'What Bkrashis believes that Pema made for Donvgrub were dumplings.' (no
 absolutive subject ✗)
- b. * [tʂà.ɕí-kì [tʰùŋ.tʂúp-là; pé.mé: t_j t_i sò:-pa] ji.tʂʰí tʂʰè-pa tì] mò.mó; ɣe
 * [Bkrashis-ERG [Donvgrub-DAT; Pema.ERG t_j t_i make-PA] belief do-PA DEF] dumpling; COP
 Int.: same as (a). (no extra dative fronting ✗)

↪ *An intermediate copy at the lower phase edge blocks both the absolutive subject and a fronted object — the edge is already taken.*

6. Implications: “optional ergativity” & the matrix spine

“**Optional ergativity.**” In Lhasa (Standard) Tibetan, the ergative on a transitive subject is reportedly **optional** in some finite matrix clauses (DeLancey 1990; Tournadre 1996; Gu 2025).

- (11) a. tʂá.ʂí-kì/tʂá.ʂí mò.mó sò-kí-tù
Bkrashis-ERG/Bkrashis.ABS dumpling make-GI-EXIST
‘Bkrashis is making dumplings.’ (ergative **optional**)
- b. tʂá.ʂí-kì/*tʂá.ʂí mò.mó sò:-són
Bkrashis-ERG/*Bkrashis.ABS dumpling make-EVID
‘Bkrashis made dumplings.’ (ergative **obligatory**)

→ A recent account by Gu (2025): an absolutive transitive subject is enabled by **particular aspects**

My findings imply a different story:

→ (11-a) and (11-b) instantiate two different templates for cLT finite matrix clauses — one of which contains a **nominalizer**.

6. Implications: two finite templates

cLT finite matrix clauses fall into two templates:

Template A: VP – EVID

no nominalizer; direct evidentials:

song [són], *bzhag* [ʁà], *byung* [tʂʰòŋ] ...

Template B: VP – *n* – {COP | EXIST}

n: *pa*, *yag* [já], *rgyu* [k'jú], *gi* [kí] ...

COP: *yin* [jìn], *red* [ɿè]; EXIST: *yod* [jò], *'dug* [tù]

- The classic contrast tracks the **template**, not aspect per se:
(11-a) = Template B (*gi* + *'dug*); (11-b) = Template A (*song*).
- Template B carries a wide range of **T-A-M-E** (Vokurková 2008, 2017):

	tʂá.ʃí-kì mò.mó...	<i>n</i>	gloss
a.	sò:-pà-ɿe	- <i>pa</i>	'made'
b.	sò:-pà-tù	- <i>pa</i>	'... is certainly going to make'
c.	sò-já-ɿè	- <i>yag</i>	'... is likely going to make'
d.	sò-já-tù	- <i>yag</i>	'... is obliged to make'

6. Implications: Template B is built on an nP

- If Template-B finite matrix clauses are indeed built with nPs , the embedded- nP edge properties should **carry over** to these matrix structures: e.g. absolutive-subject licensing.
- Indeed: an absolutive subject is generally possible in Template-B sentences

		n	gloss
a.	tṣá.ḡí mò.mó sḡ:-pà-ɣe	-pa	'made'
b.	tṣá.ḡí mò.mó sḡ:-pà-tù	-pa	'... is certainly going to make'
c.	tṣá.ḡí mò.mó sò-já-ɣè	-yag	'... is likely going to make'
d.	tṣá.ḡí mò.mó sò-já-tù	-yag	'... is obliged to make'

- This is exactly the reported “**optional ergativity**” effect.
- Instead of particular T-A-M-E, such “optional ergativity” is better attributed to the presence of an nP structure in these matrix constructions.
- The aspectual generalization by Gu (2025) is subsumed: particular aspectual semantics are somehow expressed with these constructions.

6. Implications: matrix mutual bleeding

Finally, the **same edge-competition** surfaces in these matrix clauses: argument fronting and an absolutive subject again mutually bleed.

- (12) a. **tṣá.ǵí** mò.mó sò:-pà-ɿe
Bkrashis.ABS dumpling make-PA-COP
'Bkrashis made dumplings.' (absolutive subject ✓)
- b. mò.mó tṣá.ǵí-kì sò:-pà-ɿe
dumpling Bkrashis-ERG make-PA-COP
'Bkrashis made dumplings.' (argument fronting ✓)
- c. *mò.mó tṣá.ǵí sò:-pà-ɿe
*dumpling Bkrashis.ABS make-PA-COP
Int.: 'Bkrashis made dumplings.' (both at once ✗)

↪ *The matrix nP has a single edge too — hosting one fronted object or one absolutive subject, never both.*

7. Conclusion

- This study establishes that phrasal n Ps in colloquial Lhasa Tibetan exhibit classic defining properties of phases.
- An analysis assuming such phrasal n P phasality accounts for various nominalization-internal phenomena, and correctly predicts subtle effects of successive cyclicity in cLT
- Important implications:
 - n P-phasality can be extended from categorizing n to phrasal nominalizers.
 - it invites us to rethink certain finite matrix clause structures and how tense/aspect/modality/evidentiality semantics are expressed in cLT and related languages.

Thank you! zhendong@usc.edu

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