

Comparative Notes on Tibeto-Burman Copulas

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Tibeto-Burman languages tend to innovate main clause grammar quite readily. As a result, Tibeto-Burman languages display a wide variety of disparate copulas. This paper has compiled copulas from over 60 Tibeto-Burman languages. These forms are then considered from a comparative/historical perspective.

From the total of over 60 languages, no less than eighteen distinct forms of copulas have been found. Two of the more widespread forms are reconstructed by Matisoff (2003) as **ri(y)* and **na*. These are not the only widespread forms, however. For example, forms similar to Tibetan *yod* are found as far east as Lahu and forms akin to Newar *da* are found further west in Darmiya and east in Lisu.

By including main verbs, tense/aspect/mood morphology and particles, this paper also sheds light on the diachronic pathway of copulas in Tibeto-Burman languages. For example, Kurtoep *ni* is a main verb meaning 'sit' or 'stay' and inflects for tense/aspect/mode. In a number of languages, such as Darmiya, Meithei and Sema Naga the same form appears as a copula. In other languages, such as Hayu, the same form marks progressive aspect. Assuming *ni* and other forms discussed in this paper are related etyma across these languages, this paper also sheds light on the origin and endpoint of Tibeto-Burman copulas.