

Some Comparative Notes on Tibeto-Burman Copulas

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1. Introduction

- Copulas in Tibeto-Burman languages have not received as much attention as other areas, such as tone, for example. Work that has been done indicates TB languages have a diverse set of copulas, for a given language, and across the family (e.g. LaPolla 1994).
- By compiling a list of possible copula forms in Tibeto-Burman languages, I hope to facilitate both description in un- and under-described languages, and comparative and historical endeavors.
- This paper organizes copulas from a 71 Tibeto-Burman languages. While the work is still too preliminary to make strong claims about relationships between the forms, I will spend a few moments reflecting on the ramifications of these results.

1.1. Copulas

- Copulas can come historically from verbs of posture (e.g. Noonan & Grunow-Härsta 2002).
- Copulas can become topic or focus markers (Payne 1997). We see them becoming verbal morphology and sentence final ‘particles’. Thurgood (1982) mentions a number of particles with varying functions that have come from the old PST Copula *wəy.

- As a result, I have cast a wide net to catch copulas as well as potential new and old copulas. I’ve compiled copulas, stative-type verbs, including verbs of posture, particles and some verbal morphology.

1.2. Proto-Tibeto-Burman

- Thurgood (1982) reconstructs *wəy as the PST copula
- Matisoff (1983) reconstructs *way as the ST copula. It and its allomorphs are shown in (1) below.

(1)

*s
 ? r a y -t -t
 g w (ə) -n *s- ri -n *s- rut
 (l-)
 (m)

- We also know that *na and *pret can be reconstructed as ‘be’ for PTB (Matisoff 2003b).

2. The Copulas

- By pouring through references for 71 languages, I have come across 23 forms, based on different place and manner of articulation of the onset and vowel shape, roughly.

2.1. Palatal Glide Initial with Back Vowel (15 languages)

Jad *yot*, *hot*, Nyam-Kan *hot*, Lhasa Tibetan *yod*, Balti *yodpa*, Ladakhi *yod*, Spiti *yot*, Tod *yod-*, *yo?* Limbu *ya.kma?*, Lepcha *yam*, Bumthang *yo*, Kurtoep *yo*, Mishmi *yá*, Taraoan *ya*, Angami *yá*, Lahu *yò*

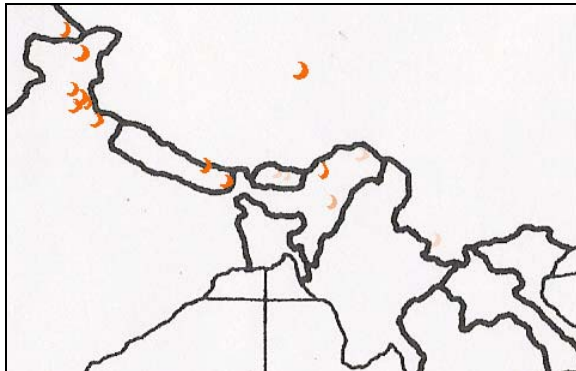
• Copula

- Classical Tibetan *yod*
- Sherpa, Lahul *yod*
- Ladakhi *yod* is a copula which is based on ‘definiteness’
- Jad *yot*
- Jad *hət* is described as a general term indiscriminately used for all tenses and numbers’ (Sharma 1990). It is not clear if or how this differs from *yot*.
- Balti *yodpa* ‘to be’
- Tod *yot* is a copula with the sense of ‘become’
- Nyam-Kad *hot* appears to be a copula in possessive and existential clauses.
- Spiti *yod* is used for possession and as an ‘emphatic’ copula (Sharma 1992).
- Limbu *ya.kma?* is the locational copula

- ☞ Taraoan *i*, *yi*, *iya* and *ya* all indicating existence for human beings.
- Morphology
 - ☞ Angami *-yá* marks habitual aspect
- Particle
 - ☞ Kurtoep *yo* is a sentence-final particle occurring in wh- phrases.
 - ☞ Bumthang *yo* is a sentence-final particle but its distribution beyond that is not clear.
 - ☞ Lahu *yò* as a sentence final a particle in declarative sentences.
 - ☞ Mishmi *yà*

Figure One: Map of Tibeto-Burman YO

Key: dark shade indicates copulas; medium shade indicates morphology; lightest shade indicates particles.



2.2. Coronal Initial with Round Vowels (19 languages)

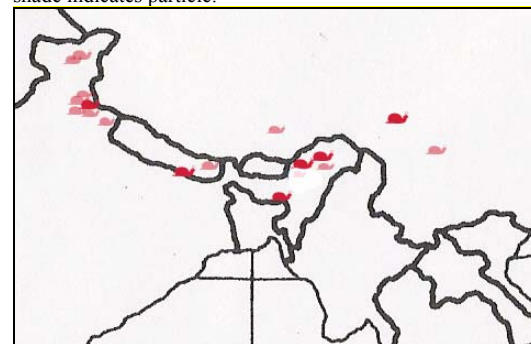
Sherpa *'dug*, Lahul *du*, Jad *duk*, Pattani *to*, Tinani *to-*, Tod *duk*, *to*, Chhitkuli *to ~ ta*, Nyam-Kad *dok*, Ladakhi *dug*, Lhasa Tibetan *'dug*, Purki *duk*, Kinnauri *du*, *to*, Proto-Tani **duŋ/duk*, Galo *dóo*, *dùu*, Deuri *dú-*, Garo *doŋ*, Hayu *dum*, Caodeng RGYalrong *to?*, Prinmi *djō*

- Lexical verb:
 - ☞ Hayu *dum* 'become'
 - ☞ Garo *doŋ* 'exist/be at'
 - ☞ Proto-Tani **duŋ/duk* were copulas reconstructed by Sun (1993:461) though Mark Post (pc) says they were likely postural verbs at that stage.

- ☞ Galo *dóo* 'lie down' and *dùu* 'sit/stay' (though Post, pc, reports the extent to which these are main verbs versus copulas is not entirely clear.
- ☞ Caodeng RGYalrong *to?* 'exist'
- ☞ Kinnauri *du* and *to* function as 'to be' and 'to have', the distinction between them is not mentioned (Sharma 1988).
- Copula
 - ☞ Lhasa Tibetan *'dug*
 - ☞ Ladakhi *dug* is the copula used when the person gains their information about the predicate by sight
 - ☞ Prinmi *djō* is used to predicate inanimate entities existing within a group.
 - ☞ Sherpa also reports a *'dug* copula
 - ☞ Purki *duk* is glossed as 'to be'
 - ☞ Lahul, Jad, Tod have *duk* as a copula
 - ☞ Nyam-Kod *dok*
 - ☞ Chhitkuli, Kanashi and Tod have *to* as one of the copulas
 - ☞ Pattani and Tanani *to* is apparently a copula in at least existential and possessive constructions
 - ☞ Deuri form *dú-* is found to predicate existence in all tenses and across all person
- Particle
 - ☞ Pailibo *du* and *dung* present tense or 'habit' particle

Figure Two: Map of Tibeto-Burman DU

Key: dark shade indicates lexical verb; medium shade indicates copula; light shade indicates particle.



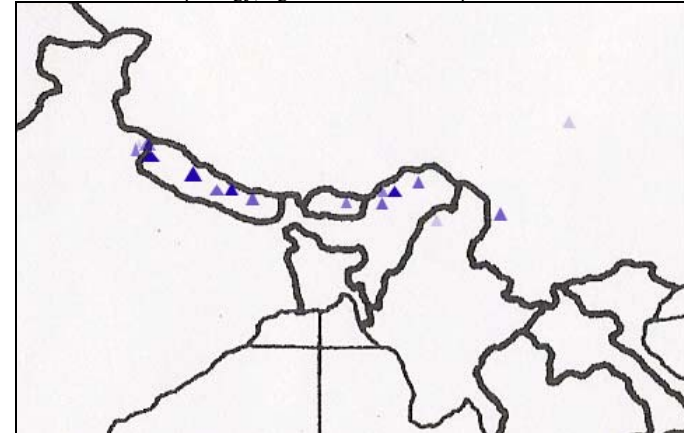
2.3. Coronal Initial with Non-Round Vowel (17 languages)

Darmiya *da*, Gahri *ta*, Tamang *ta*, Chantyal *ta*, Kham *ta-*, Dolakha Newar *dar-*, Kathmandu Newar *da-ye*, Apatani *da*, Mising *dak*, Bokar *da*, Galo *dak*, Padam-Mising *dak*, Singpho *dai*, Lisu *da*, Caodeng RGYalrong *ta?*,

- Lexical verb:
 - ⊗ Kham *ta* 'be currently true'
 - ⊗ Galo *dak* 'stand'
 - ⊗ Gahri *ta* 'to have'
 - ⊗ Kathmandu Newar *da-ye* is the verb 'to exist'¹
- Copula
 - ⊗ Tamang *ta* is considered a positive acquisitional (Poudel 2006).
 - ⊗ Dolakha Newar *dar-*
 - ⊗ Apatani *da* 'there exists'
 - ⊗ Bokar *da* 'exist' (Ouyang 1985)
 - ⊗ Lisu *da* 'be at'
- Morphology
 - ⊗ Mising *dak* marks present tense for second and third person
 - ⊗ Chaudangsi-Byangsi *ta* is an auxiliary with the meaning 'to remain' or 'to be'. Also marks present tense.
 - ⊗ Darmiia *-da* is found as a type of present or habitual tense marker
 - ⊗ Kurtoep *-ta* is used to mark present tense.
- Particle
 - ⊗ Darmiia *tə* is an emphatic particle
 - ⊗ Caodeng RGYalrong *ta?* a sentence final particle
 - ⊗ Singpho *dai* indicates present tense.

Figure Three: Map of Tibeto-Burman DA

Key: dark shade indicates lexical verb; medium shade indicates copula; lighter shade indicates morphology; lightest shade indicate particle.



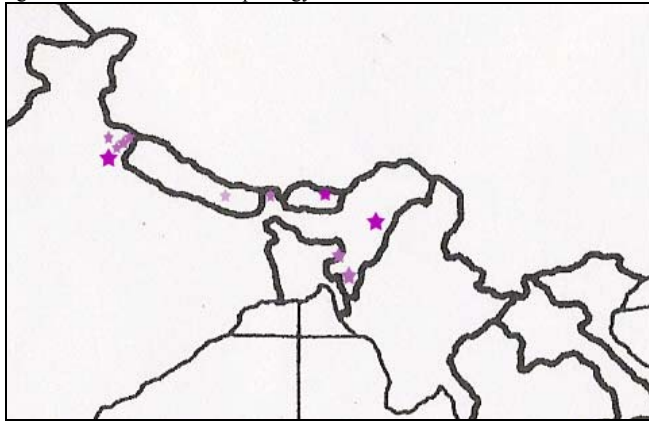
2.4. Coronal Nasal with High Front Vowel (11 languages)

Darmiia *ni-*, Chaudangsi-Byangsi *ni*, Marchha *hini*, Johari *ni-*, Gahri *ni-*, Kurtoep *ni*, Hayu *ni*, Lepcha *nyi*, Meithei *ni*, Lushai *ni*, Sema *ani*

- Lexical verb:
 - ⊗ Gahri *nide* 'exist, to be'
 - ⊗ Kurtoep *ni* 'sit, stay'
 - ⊗ Sema *ani* is the locative verb and also marks progressive aspect.
- Copula
 - ⊗ Darmiia *nini* is one of the possible 'substantive' verbs meaning 'to become' or 'to have' for third person, present time.
 - ⊗ Darmiia *nifi*, first person singular and *nifən* or *nifyən* for plural
 - ⊗ Chaudangsi-Byangsi *ni-* 'to be'
 - ⊗ Johari *ni-* is one of the roots which has been employed for the copulas
 - ⊗ Marchha *ni* is found in Marchha possession and existential expressions
 - ⊗ Lepcha *nyi* serves as the verb 'to have' and is also glossed as 'was' (Mainwaring 1876).
 - ⊗ Meithei *ni* is a copula
 - ⊗ Lushai *ni* is a copula
- Morphology
 - ⊗ Hayu *ni* marks progressive aspect.

Figure Four: Map of Tibeto-Burman *NI*

Key: dark shade indicates lexical verb; medium shade indicates copula; lightest shade indicates morphology.



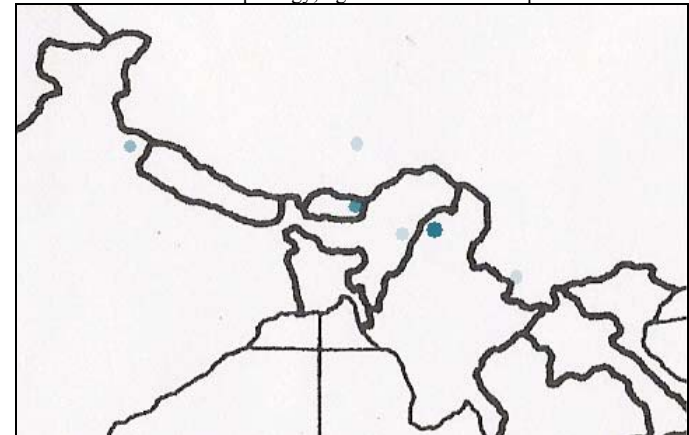
2.5. Lateral Initial (8 languages)

Johari *la*, Kurtoep *la*, Tamang *la*, Tshangla *la*, Lotha *la*, Mongsen Ao *la*, Lahu *lɔ*, Jingphaw *lu*,

- Lexical verb:
 - ☞ Jingphaw *lu* 'to possess'
- Copulas
 - ☞ Tshangla *la* is the mirative copula
- Morphology
 - ☞ Johari *la* is an auxiliary for present continuous
- Particle
 - ☞ Classical Tibetan *la* was a locus particle, topicalizer, marked embedding and occurred in exclamations with <pa> (Beyer 1992).
 - ☞ Mongsen Ao Naga *la* is a topic marker. It also marks negative past.
 - ☞ Lahu *lɔ* is a declarative marker

Figure Five: Map of Tibeto-Burman *LA*

Key: dark shade indicates lexical verb; medium shade indicates copula; light shade indicates verbal morphology; lightest shade indicates particle



2.6. Remaining

- | | |
|---|---|
| 6. Tibetan <i>yin</i> , Limbu <i>ʔe</i> | 33 languages |
| 7. Tibetan <i>red</i> | 11 languages |
| 8. Written Tibetan <i>gnas</i> | 23 languages |
| 9. Kurtoep <i>wen</i> | 10 languages |
| 10. Thulung Rai <i>-ŋa</i> | 4 languages (wide geographic distribution) |
| 11. Cogtse Gyarong <i>ŋos</i> | 4 languages (limited geographic distribution) |
| 12. Kurtoep <i>mu</i> | 6 languages |
| 13. Kurtoep <i>sho</i> | 4 languages |
| 14. Kham <i>li/le</i> | 7 languages |
| 15. Limbu <i>si</i> | 7 languages |
| 16. Mishmi <i>à</i> | 5 languages |
| 17. Hayu <i>pon</i> | 7 languages |
| 18. Tshangla <i>gi</i> | 3 languages |
| 19. Tshangla <i>cha</i> | 3 languages |
| 20. Tshangla <i>chho</i> | 3 languages |
| 21. Gahri <i>gode</i> | 5 languages |
| 22. Bengni <i>ka</i> : | 2 languages |
| 23. Tshangla <i>chhi</i> | 4 languages |

3. Final Thoughts

- A preliminary comparison of some Tibeto-Burman copulas finds geographically divergent languages to employ similar forms as copulas or, forms having old/new copula-like functions.
- We are still far from illustrating historical relationship between the forms I have grouped together, but one observation can be made: there exist a number of formally disparate forms in a number of different languages which are geographically distant.
- Either the original PTB copula(s) have undergone intense phonological change, or the modern TB languages have innovated a number of copulas along the way, perhaps an example of parallel innovation.
- Future research will continue to add data, as well as confirm the accuracy of the data. The criteria for formal similarity will be further refined and motivated.

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