Some Comparative Notes on Tibeto-Burman Copulas

Gwendolyn Lowes
University of Oregon
glow@uoregon.edu

1. Introduction

1.1. Copulas and their Diachronic Pathways

1.2. Proto-Tibeto-Burman Copulas

2. Forms

2.1. Palatal Glide Initial with Back Vowel

2.2. Coronal Initial with Round Vowel

2.3. Coronal Initial with Non-Round Vowel

2.4. Coronal Nasal with High Front Vowel

2.5. Lateral Initial

2.6. Remaining

3. Final Thoughts

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-Hårsta 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 *way.

• 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 *way as the PST copula

• Matisoff (1983) reconstructs *way as the ST copula. It and its allofams are shown in (1) below.

(1) *sʔ r a y -t -t
    g w (ə) -n *s- ri -n *s- rut
(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-, yoL Limbu ya.kmaʔ, Lepcha yam, Bumthang yo, Kurtoep yo, Mishmi yà, Tanaoan ya, Angami yá, Lahu yó

• Copula

  p Classical Tibetan yod
  p Sherpa, Lahul yod
  p Ladakhi yod is a copula which is based on ‘definiteness’
  p Jad yot
  p Jad h:t 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.
  p Balti yodpa ‘to be’
  p Tod yot is a copula with the sense of ‘become’
  p Nyam-Kad hot appears to be a copula in possessive and existential clauses.
  p Spiti yod is used for possession and as an ‘emphatic’ copula
  p Limbu ya.kmaʔ is the locational copula
Tiberoan i, yi, iya and yu all indicating existence for human beings.

- **Morphology**
  - Angami -ya indicates 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 yo as a sentence final a particle in declarative sentences.
  - Mishmi yu

**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 dug, Kinnauri du, to, Proto-Tani *dug/duk, Gulo do, diu, Deuri dū-, Garo dog, Hayu dum, Caodeng 8Gyalrong to?, Prinmi djō

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

**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)

- **Lexical verb:**
  - *Kham* *ta* ‘be currently true’
  - *Galo* *dák* ‘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.
  - *Darmiya* *-da* is found as a type of present or habitual tense marker
  - *Kurtoep* *-ta* is used to mark present tense.

- **Particle**
  - *Darmiya* *ta* is an emphatic particle
  - *Caodeng RGyalrong* *ta*? a sentence final particle
  - *Singpho dai* indicates present tense.

---

2.4. Coronal Nasal with High Front Vowel (11 languages)
Darmiya *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**
  - *Darmiya* *nini* is one of the possible ‘substantive’ verbs meaning ‘to become’ or ‘to have’ for third person, present tense.
  - *Darmiya* *nif* first person singular and *nifón* or *nifón* 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 Marccha 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 $N$
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

Some Comparative Notes on Tibeto-Burman Copulas  Gwendolyn Lowes

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 $yin$, Limbu $ʔɛ$ 33 languages
7. Tibetan red 11 languages
8. Written Tibetan $gnas$ 23 languages
9. Kurtoep $wen$ 10 languages
10. Thulung Rai -$na$ 4 languages (wide geographic distribution)
11. Cogtse Gyarong $gos$ 4 languages (limited geographic distribution)
12. Kurtoep $mu$ 6 languages
13. Kurtoep $sho$ 4 languages
14. Kham $lɛ/le$ 7 languages
15. Limbu $si$ 7 languages
16. Mishmi $u$ 5 languages
17. Hayu $pon$ 7 languages
18. Tshangla $gi$ 3 languages
19. Tshangla $cha$ 3 languages
20. Tshangla $chho$ 3 languages
21. Gahri $gode$ 5 languages
22. Bengni $ka$ 2 languages
23. Tshangla $chhi$ 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.

References


LaPolla, Randy J. and Chengong Huang. 2002. The Copula and Existential Verbs in Qiang. Paper presented at the Workshop on Copula Clauses and Verbless Clauses. Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, LaTrobe University. Available at

Some Comparative Notes on Tibeto-Burman Copulas
Gwendolyn Lowes
Prasad, Bsl Ram. 1991. CIL.