

Contextual semantics of ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan evidentials

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DeLancey (2012) eloquently makes the point that the generativist notion of 'grammaticality' is a misleading metaphor by which to understand human language. Despite this, DeLancey himself claims that a number of constructions in 'Lhasa' Tibetan cannot be said at all, cannot be said by ethnic Tibetans, or can only be said by ethnic Tibetan. These purported usage restrictions are not accurate. The contextual semantics of 'Lhasa' Tibetan evidentials falsify DeLancey's and Aikhenvald's use of hierarchies of information source to explain the use of evidentials. 'Lhasa' Tibetan also falsifies several other of Aikhenvald's typological generalizations.

Keywords: Lhasa Tibetan, evidentials, mirativity, conjunct-disjunct, personal, testimonial

བསྐྱེགས་བཅད་བརྟན་བའི་གསེར་བཞིན་ད།
མཁས་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་ཡོངས་བརྟགས་ནས།
—the Buddha

One of the triumphs of corpus linguistics is to put the lie to the generativist notion of iron-clad grammaticality (cf. e.g. Pereira 2000, McEnery & Wilson 2001: 1-28). A language is not a set of possible sentences produced by a sentence generation machine locked inside a human skull, neither is it the list of rules that would programme such a machine. Instead, language is a set of conventional social practices, with some practices more conventional than others.

Speech is a human activity that varies without assignable limits, because it is a purely historical heritage of a group, the products of long-continued social usage. It varies as all creative effort varies—not as consciously, perhaps, but none the less as truly as do the religions, the beliefs, the customs and the arts of different peoples (Sapir 1921: 2).

A speaker, whether native or non-native, can say whatever he wants to say. If he has a good command of the language, then what he says corresponds with what he intends to convey. Scott DeLancey reiterates this point in a recent article.

When we say that construction X MEANS M, we are not saying the speakers automatically react to M with X, like Skinnerian pigeons, or even that M must somehow be objectively true of the situation depicted in the utterance including X. Rather, what it means is that the speaker is depicting the situation as being characterized by M. (2012: 541 emphasis in original)

Despite DeLancey's unambiguous methodological perspective, he falls pray to the very Chomskian *Denkweise* he warns against. In his discussion of 'Lhasa' Tibetan evidentials,² DeLancey marks example (1b) with an asterisk, incorrectly suggesting that it is ungrammatical (1990: 300 example 28).

- (1) a. ང་ན་གི་འདག་
ña na-gi-ḥdug
 me sick-PRS-TES
 ‘I’m sick at the moment’ (Denwood 1999: 151)
- b. ང་ན་གི་ཡོད་
ña na-gi-yod
 me sick-PRS-PER
 ‘I’m chronically sick.’ (Denwood 1999: 151, cf. Tournadre 1996: 223
 example 7.12)

The mistake persists; apparently unaware of Tournadre (1996: 223) and Denwood’s (1999: 151) discussion, Bartee also asserts that example (1b) is “ungrammatical” (2011: 143).³

Remarking on the pair of sentences (2a) and (2b),⁴ DeLancey suggests that although “both sentences are grammatical, a Tibetan, who has actual visual knowledge of the presence of yaks in Tibet cannot use *ḥdug* to report this fact” (1986: 205); instead example (2b) is appropriate as “a response of someone who was fascinated with yaks but knew nothing of where they existed until visiting Tibet and encountering one” (1986: 205).

- (2) a. བོད་ལ་གཡག་ཡོད།
Bod-la g.yag yod
 Tibet-OBL yak exist-PER
- b. བོད་ལ་གཡག་འདག་
Bod-la g.yag ḥdug
 Tibet-OBL yak exist-TES
- c. བོད་ལ་གཡག་ཡོད་པ་རེད།
Bod-la g.yag yod-pa-red
 Tibet-OBL yak exist-FAC
 ‘There are yaks in Tibet’ (DeLancey 1986: 204-205 example 4; 2012: 550
 example 22)

In 2012 DeLancey reiterates his claim, writing that “no Tibetan could ever say” example (2b) and consequently “it is not the case that what is being expressed here is simply that the speaker has direct perceptual evidence for the statement” (2012: 551). DeLancey is mistaken; a Tibetan can say what he likes, and given the correct circumstances he will say example (2b). To counteract a false news story that due to Chinese pastoral mismanagement all the yaks in Tibet have died, Dorje, a Tibetan from Tibet on a visit to the United States, insists to his cousin who lives there with example (3) that there are even now yaks in Tibet.

(3) འདི་བདེན་པ་ཡིན་ཟིན་གྱི་མ་རེད།

h̥di *bden-pa* *yin* *srid-kyi-ma-red*

This truth is possible-NEG-FUT-FAC

བོད་ལ་ད་ལྟ་གཡག་འདག

Bod-la *da lta* *g.yag* *h̥dug*

Tibet-OBL now yak exist-TES

བདན་ཕག་ཐུན་མ་དེ་ག་རང་ལ་གཡག་གསུམ་མཐོང་བྱུང་།

bdun-phrag *sñan-ma* *de-ga-rañ-la* *g.yag* *gsum mthoñ-byuñ*

week last just-OBL yak three see-PST-PER

‘This (story) is impossible. There are yaks in Tibet now. I saw three just last week’

In example (3), Dorje, who knows that there are yaks in Tibet from personal experience, from generic knowledge, and from sense experience, foregrounds in this context that he has ‘direct perceptual evidence for the statement’, and this nuance is encoded entirely and exclusively by the morpheme *h̥dug*.

While DeLancey is consistent in the mistaken belief that a Tibetan cannot utter (2b), he is inconsistent with regard to the ethnic identity of the speakers he permits to say (2a). In 1986 he claims that (2a) “could conceivably be spoken by a non-Tibetan” (DeLancey 1986: 205), but in 2012 he puts (2a) beyond the mouths of non-Tibetans.⁵

The point of this example is not, as many readers reasonably inferred from my earlier description, that this is what any Tibetan would be expected to say, but rather that it is something that only a Tibetan could ever say. (DeLancey 2012: 551)

A non-Tibetan livestock tycoon, boasting of his vast holdings spread around the globe could very easily employ example (4), which contains (2a).

(4) ཇར་སེམས་ཅན་མང་པོ་ཡོད།

nar *sems-can* *mañ-po* *yod*

I, me-OBL cattle many exist-PER

ཇ་མེ་རི་ཀར་བ་ཕྱགས་ཡོད།

a-me-ri-kar *ba-phyugs* *Yod*

America-OBL cow exist-PER

ཕ་རན་སི་ལ་རྟ་ཡོད།

pha-ran-si-la rta yod

France-OBL horse exist-PER

བོད་ལ་གཡག་ཡོད།

Bod-la g.yag Yod

Tibet-OBL yak exist-PER

'I have many cattle, cows in America, horses in France, yaks in Tibet'

Based on DeLancey's misapprehension of the impossibility of example (2a) in foreign mouths and example (2b) in Tibetan mouths, he sets up an epistemological hierarchy among the 'Lhasa' Tibetan evidential verbal categories.

If one considers a fact to be generic knowledge, then that is the strongest basis one can have for the statement, and one will report the fact using that form. Failing that, personal knowledge is the next strongest warrant. The essential fact about the “direct” or immediate form is that it can be used only when neither of the stronger bases is available (DeLancey 2012: 551)

This epistemological hierarchy is unnecessary and leads to false predictions. The Tibetan who utters (3), knows that there are yaks in Tibet, from generic knowledge, personal knowledge, and direct knowledge, and yet he chooses for contextual reasons to foreground his direct knowledge. This direct knowledge is not 'weaker' than the other two sources of knowledge, and it is available to him whenever he wishes to call upon it.

DeLancey incorrectly assumes that if *hdug* marks “direct perceptual evidence” then “anyone who has seen a yak in Tibet – which would include a great many Tibetans – could, and, one would expect, normally would, use this construction to report this fact” (2012: 551). Anyone who has seen a yak in Tibet can say example (2b), including any Tibetan. Nonetheless, it requires a highly specific context such as (3) to sound natural in the speech of someone with personal and genetic knowledge of the whereabouts of yaks.

DeLancey provides no evidence or argumentation for his belief that if *hdug* marks direct perceptual evidence (which it does) then necessarily this would be the default construction used when speaking of witnessed things that one may also know by other means (which it is not). The belief that a direct evidential should be the default is consistent with Aikhenvald's generalization that in all evidential systems throughout the world “visually obtained information is preferred over any other information source” (2004: 305). The Tibetan data falsifies Aikhenvald's hypothesis, while providing very good evidence for her conclusion that “choosing an evidential is quite unlike automatically applying steadfast rules” (2004: 331).

In another set of instances where a speaker must choose how to represent a fact that he knows from multiple information sources, a Tibetan called Dorje, introducing himself to a stranger uses example (5a), whereas presenting a group picture he indicates his own place in the crowd by pointing at his image in the photograph and saying example (5b).

(5) a. ང་ལྷོ་རྗེ་ཡིན།
na rdo-rje yin
 I, me Dorje be-TES
 ‘I’m Dorje.’

b. འདི་ང་རེད།
hdi na red
 This me be-FAC
 ‘This is me.’

In both situations the speaker knows who he is both with personal knowledge and with generic knowledge. There is no hierarchy among the evidential categories; one is not ‘stronger’ than the others; and a Tibetan need not choose one or the other through some mechanical calculation, reacting to M with X like a Skinnerian pigeon.

Although DeLancey’s discussions of ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan has had little influence on other researchers working on Tibetan,⁶ because typologists such as Aikhenvald (2004, 2012) take his descriptions as a point of reference, inaccurate claims regarding ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan have infiltrated the typological literature and some typological conclusions rest on the strength of these inaccuracies. Relying on DeLancey’s work Aikhenvald describes ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan as exhibiting conjunct-disjunct person-marking (2004: 127) and “mirative extensions” thereof (2004: 204, 211). The majority of researchers on ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan avoid both of the conceptualizations ‘conjunct-disjunct’ and ‘mirative’ (Tournadre 1996, Denwood 1999, Garrett 2001). Despite Tournadre’s explicit rejection of ‘conjunct-disjunct’ in Tibetan (2008) and Hargreaves’s “reluctance” (2005: 5) about this terminology for Kathmandu Newar, Aikhenvald insist that both languages exhibit conjunct-disjunct and employ them as a “mirative strategy” (2012: 471), repeating her earlier description verbatim.

In a number of Tibeto-Burman languages—e.g. Lhasa Tibetan, Akha, Chepang, and Newari (DeLancey 1997: 44), as well as in Tsafiki (Barbacoan)—the alternation between conjunct and disjunct person marking (4.6) is employed to mark new information and suprise, especially in the first person contexts (Aikhenvald 2004: 204).

In a number of Tibeto-Burman languages, e.g., Lhasa Tibetan, Akha, Chepang, and Newari (DeLancey 1997: 44), as well as in Tsafiki (Barbacoan; Dickinson 2000), the alternation between conjunct and disjunct person marking marks new information and surprise, especially in 1st person contexts (Aikhenvald 2012: 471).

As a consequence of relying on the inaccurate description of ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan as exhibiting ‘conjunct-disjunct’ Aikhenvald mischaracterizes the copula system in her presentation by omitting *red-bžag* and *yod-pa-red*, thereby collapsing a three termed evidential system into a two termed ‘conjunct-disjunct’ system (2004: 127).

Despite the fact that “evidentiality in Tibetan varieties was hardly mentioned in

Aikhenvald (2004)” (Aikhenvald 2012: 467 note 20), these misrepresentations of ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan effect several of the conclusions of Aikhenvald’s monograph. If one accepts the discussion of ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan in terms as ‘conjunct-disjunct person-marking’ as Aikhenvald does, Chang & Chang’s analysis of the Tibetan verbal system as a ‘certainty hierarchy’ disproves her claim that conjunct-disjunct person marking “develops mirative, rather than epistemic extensions” (2004: 145). As mentioned above, ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan disproves her idea that visual evidence overrides other sources of information (2004: 305). The fact that ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan *hdug*, a marker of direct evidence (cf. Hill 2012), gave birth to ‘mirativity’ as a discursive category (DeLancey 2001: 371, 2012: 530) disproves her claim that “any evidential except for visual and firsthand, can acquire mirative extensions” (2004: 210). Aikhenvald’s contradictory description of *hdug* as both a “disjunct copula” (2004: 127) and a morpheme that “marks ‘actual visual knowledge’” (2004: 284) disproves her contention that “[c]onjunct-disjunct person-marking systems are not evidential in nature” (2004: 127, cf. 12, 146, 276). Perhaps most importantly, her classification of three term evidential systems does not allow for a system like ‘Lhasa’ Tibetan with an obligatory contrast among personal, factual, and testimonial. These results of Aikhenvald’s misplaced credulity vis à vis DeLancey stand as a warning to those typologists lacking the temerity to “feel entitled to explicitly doubt a direct statement about a language by someone who actually knows something about it” (DeLancey 2012: 538).

Notes

- 1 I here acknowledge my gratitude to Sonam Dugdak (SOAS, University of London) and Sonam Tsering (University of Michigan) for checking the examples used in this paper and discussing their meaning with me. I also thank the British Academy for financial support during the writing of this paper. The abbreviations employed for Tibetan glosses herein are FAC (factual), FUT (future), NEG (negation), OBL (oblique), PER (personal), PRS (present), TES (testimonial). Any noun phrase not specified for case should be construed as absolutive.
- 2 Ideally one should draw a distinction among the language of the city of Lhasa itself, other dialects of Central Tibet, and the *lingua franca* of the Tibetan diaspora (Miller 1955, Róna-Tas 1985: 160-161). However, because previous authors, including DeLancey, do not clearly maintain these distinctions, in order to keep the ambiguity of the underlying language in focus I write ‘Lhasa’ with single quotes.
- 3 In his most recent discussion of *hdug*, DeLancey does not remark on this pair of examples (2012).
- 4 DeLancey omits example c) from his 1986 discussion, but includes in his 2012 paper.
- 5 As Garrett points out, the translation DeLancey provides for example a) is in error; possible translations include ‘I have yaks in Tibet’ or ‘My yaks are in Tibet’ (Garrett 2001: 102-103). In 2012 DeLancey corrects his translation of a) to ‘In my country, Tibet, we have yaks’ (2012: 550).
- 6 DeLancey’s work makes no appearance in the bibliography of Volkart (2000); the writings of Denwood (1999), Garrett (2001), Chonjore (2003), and Tournadre (2008) appear to have been uninfluenced by DeLancey.

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