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Field Report

Plural marking in Dolpo Tibetan: A preliminary investigation

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Dolpo Research and Documentation Project

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Field Report

Plural marking in Dolpo Tibetan: A preliminary investigation[1]

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1 Introduction

There are three pluralizing strategies in Dolpo Tibetan (DT)[2] — one for personal pronouns, another for animate nouns, and a third for inanimate nouns. The pluralizing strategy for personal pronouns appears to be old, similar to the system found in Classical Tibetan, but no longer found in 'Standard Tibetan'.[3] The strategies for animate and inanimate nouns point to relatively recent innovations, involving a set of morphemes whose literal meaning is roughly translated 'all'. These more recent strategies are beginning to invade the semantic space of personal pronouns as well.

2 Plural marking strategies

2.1 Nouns

The realization of number in Dolpo Tibetan (DT) is found to be a fairly simple binary system of marking singular or non-singular on nouns - no number agreement marking is necessary in the constituents of the predicate. Overt plural marking on nouns is obligatory only when the unmarked form in the current context may warrant unsolicited singular interpretation. As such, its occurrence is determined primarily by pragmatic considerations or, as Corbett (2000:14) says, "when it matters".

Depending on the context, nouns not marked for number can have a singular or plural interpretation. Examples (1-3) highlight several pragmatic conditions that guide the speaker's consideration of plural marking. In (1), the indefinite *cʰókdóŋ* 'young man' is understood as plural as it

1 Inspiration for and an initial draft of this paper came from lectures on typology led by David Watters at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal, in 2007. It has been a privilege to have known David as a friend, trekking companion, and mentor. I would also like to express appreciation to the Dolpo people from the Nangkong Valley; especially Chötol from Nisal, Chime and Gyaltsen from Karang, and Karma Chöten from Saldang – their kindness and help have made this research possible.

2 Dolpo Tibetan is spoken by nearly 9,000 people, who live primarily in five valleys of the Dolpa District in Northwest Nepal on the border of the Tibetan region traditionally known as Ngari (in what is now part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region). The residents of this region refer to themselves as well as the name of their homeland as Dolpo.

3 'Standard Tibetan' in this paper refers to the spoken variety of Central Tibet, particularly Lhasa and the nearby area, as well as the wider diaspora community (Tournadre and Dorje. 2003: 25-26) – it is also sometimes referred to as 'Standard Spoken Tibetan'.

refers to the habitual practices of young men who prepare the fields each year.[4] Similarly *mìk* 'eye' in example (2) is interpreted as 'eyes' in that such nouns are typically thought of as part of a group or a pair. The employment of the plural marker in example (3) is unnecessary because plural reference (to the six or seven sheep which had been killed) has already been established in the previous discourse.

(1) *c^{h}ókdòŋ* *mó:* *món* *òʔdìk*
young_adult_male plow(N) plow-PRS AUX.ASSER
'Young men do the plowing (of the fields).'

(2) *tèɟá* *mèmè-kò* *mìk* *ɕàr-té* *mèʔdìk*
at_that_time grandfather-FOC eye blind-NF COP.NEG.EXT.ASSER
'At that time grandpa was totally blind in the eyes.'

(3) *rò-kò-ràŋ* *jù:k*
corpse-FOC-MOD discard
'(I) discarded the corpses (of the sheep).'

2.1.1 Animate Nouns

Under felicitous pragmatic conditions, as mentioned above, the plural of animate nouns is marked by the clitic [-cǽ] */-cá/* (Kopp 2003), a morpheme of obscure etymological origins.[5] It may have been derived from the collective notion *c^{h}ú* 'herd' as in *ják c^{h}ú* 'herd of yaks.' If so, *-cá* is further along in the grammaticalization scale than *c^{h}ú; c^{h}ú* can still be quantified as in *ják c^{h}ú ɲī:* 'two herds of yaks'; *-cá* cannot. The DT *-cá* is not unique as a plural maker when compared to other Central Tibetan varieties: *-cà* is found in Mugu Tibetan (Watters 2008);[6] *-ca/-ɟa* in Kyirong Tibetan (Huber 2002: 69); *-cá/-càk* in Western Drokpa (Kretschmar 1986: 51);[7] and in Karmarong Tibetan *-cakpo/-ɟakpo* (Watters 2008). In the Baragau area where Southern Mustang is spoken, the plural marker -ja/-jak can also be noted as similar (Kretschmar 1995:84).

Unlike *tsho* in 'Standard Tibetan' (Tournadre and Dorje 2003: 86),[8] *ts^{h}œ̃ ^{53}* in Dongwang Tibetan (Bartee 2007:256), and *-cà* in Mugu Tibetan (Watters 2008),[9] the clitic *-cá* is not limited to human arguments in DT and can be found marking plural on both human and non-human arguments:

4 Data for this paper are taken primarily from oral stories collected by the author in 2002-3 while researching the phonology of the north central Dolpo valley called Nangkong - research which was sponsored by the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) of Tribhuvan University. Phonetic transcriptions of all recorded texts were completed by the author and subsequently checked with speakers from the same valley.

5 The uncertainty of this clitic's etymology is also noted by Huber (2002: 70).

6 Confirmed with Pema Angyal (Mugu village teacher), (p.c. 2011).

7 As cited by Huber 2002: 69.

8 Throughout this paper, references to Classical Tibetan and Standard Tibetan will be written in a romanized transliteration of Written Tibetan based on the widely used Wylie transcription system, which was developed by Terrell Wylie and published in 1959.

9 Confirmed with Pema Angyal (p.c., 2010).

(4) *dàŋ* *mì-cá* *jù:-le* *lók* *pù?* *zuŋ*
yesterday person=PL village-DAT return went AUX.TEST
'Yesterday the people returned to the village.'

(5) *ják-cá* *tù:ka tù:ka* *ʈʰáŋ-ni* *mà:-le* *àpjór* *ɖòn* *ò?dìk*
yak=PL sometimes cliff_trail-ABL down-DAT fall go AUX.ASSER
'Sometimes the yaks fall down from the narrow trails.'

Conjoined noun phrases are marked by a single *-cá* attached to the rightmost element in the phrase, as illustrated in example (6):

(6) *ò:* *dì* *párcáŋ* *rìŋ* *púŋma* *ʂákpa* *kʰóròk* *cúŋgà-cá*
well only only CON Pigeon Chukar Raven Chough=PL
'Well, only these and also Pigeons, Chukars, Ravens and Choughs...'

ɲè? *lùŋpà-lè* *ùn* *ò?dìk*
our (PL.EXCL) village-DAT come AUX.ASSER
'come to our village.'

2.1.2 Inanimate Nouns

When inanimate nouns are pluralized, one of several seemingly synonymous markers may be employed — *jèrè, tó:lè,* and *kʰámsàŋè* — all of which can be roughly translated as 'all'.

(7) *né:kór* *dì:* *tɕìnlá:p-kò* *jèrè* *kʰúr-te*
pilgrimage this-GEN blessing-FOC all carry-NF
'Bearing all the pilgrimage's blessings…'

(8) *dùŋ* *rìŋ* *ká-ko* *tó:le* *ɲè?-rì:* *càp-lèn* *cá:*
beam CON pillar-FOC all our(EXCL)-RFL-GEN back-DAT carry
'All the beams and pillars are carried on our own backs.'

(9) *sàmbà* *ɕì* *kʰámsàŋè* *tɕʰú:* *dè:-te*
bridge four all water-ERG carried away-NF
'All four bridges were washed away by the water…'

(10) *jògè:* *jù:-cì* *sàmbà-cá* *tɕʰú:* *mà-dè?* *ò?dìk*
up_there village-GEN bridge=PL water-ERG NEG-carry_away AUX.ASSER
' The bridges of the village up there were not washed away by the water.'

It is also possible to interpret these markers as quantifiers, which perhaps they were historically. When they occur with animate nouns, they occur in the same position as the plural clitic *-cá* does.

(11) a. *mì-cá* 'people'
b. *mì jèrè* 'people'
c. **mì jèrè-cá*

Numeral quantifiers, as well as other quantifying phrases, do not replace the plural clitic, but can occur in addition to it.

(12) a. *mì sùm* 'three people'
b. *mì sùm-cá* 'three people'
c. *mì rèŋgà-cá* '(a) few people'

DT speakers will also utilize *-cá* to mark the plurality of inanimate nouns when a specific reference is required, as shown in example (10) above. Karmarong Tibetan allows for this as well; *-cakpo/-ɟakpo* is permitted on both animate and inanimate nouns.[10] While Mugu Tibetan allows for the *-cà* form only on human nouns; the clitic *-dò* marks plural on all other animate nouns as well as on inanimate nouns (Watters 2002).[11] Huber notes that in Kyirong Tibetan the marking of an inanimate referent with the similar plural marker *-ca/-ɟa* is "very unlikely" (2002: 69).

2.2 Pronouns

2.2.1 Personal Pronouns

First, second, and third person pronouns have distinct lexicalized singular and plural forms in Dolpo Tibetan, shown in Table 1. DeLancey suggests that Classical Tibetan possibly had phonologically bound pronominal plural forms similar to many modern spoken varieties, which employ single lexemes like *nga.tsho* 'we' in 'Standard Tibetan' (DeLancey 2003: 263).

It is interesting to note that the second and third person plural forms found in DT correspond to Classical Tibetan and 'Standard Tibetan' non-plural honorific pronouns (Beyer 1992: 208; Tournadre & Dorje 2003: 92).

Person	Dolpo Tibetan SG	Standard Tibetan SG	Dolpo Tibetan PL	Standard Tibetan HONORIFIC	Standard Tibetan PL
1 INCL	ŋà	nga	ɲèʔ/ɲèʔ-cá		nga tsho
1 EXCL			ù/ù-cá		
2	cʰóʔ	khyod	cʰéʔ/cʰéʔ-cá	khyed rang	khyed rang tsho
3	kʰó	kho	kʰóŋ/kʰóŋ-cá	khong	khong rang tsho

Table 1. Dolpo Tibetan and 'Standard Tibetan' Personal Pronouns

10 Confirmed by Dorje Karmarong (p.c., 2010).

11 Confirmed by Pema Angyal (p.c., 2010).

2.2.2 Neo-encoding of Plural Marking in Personal Pronouns

Both *-cá,* the pluralizer for animate nouns, examples (13-15), and several pluralizers used for inanimate nouns (*jère, tó:lè,* and *kʰámsàŋè*) can be used to mark plural personal pronouns, example (16a-c). As a result, we can ascertain multiple layers of grammaticalization, in which the more recent plural is added to the older now-lexicalized pronominal plural stem - thus causing what appears to be a shift where there is no difference in meaning between the *cʰéʔ* and *cʰéʔ-cá*.

(13) *pádè* *cʰéʔ-cá* *rò:k* *òŋ* *rò:* *cì:* *nè:*
oh_my you=PL help come please FUT said
'Oh my! Everyone (you all) help, please come help!" (she) cried out.'

(14) *ɲèʔ-cá* *jù:-le* *lók* *gò:* *òʔ*
we(EXCL)=PL village-DAT return must AUX.EGO
'We must return to the village.'

(15) *kʰóŋ-cá* *ŋén-le* *lép* *pi* *dìk*
they=PL previous-DAT arrive PST AUX.ASSER
'We must return to the village.'

(16) a. *cʰéʔ* 'you plural'
b. *cʰéʔ-cá* 'you plural/you all'
c. *cʰéʔ tó:lè* 'you all'

The demonstrative pronoun *dì* 'this' is unmarked with respect to animacy. Animacy is determined by the head noun it modifies. In example (17), *dì* 'this' receives the animate plural marker *-cá* because the head noun *pòmò* 'girl' is animate:

(17) *pòmò* *dì-cá* *nàŋgòŋ-ni* *jìndìk*
girl this=PL Nangkong_valley-ABL COP.ASSER
'These girls are from Nangkong valley.'

Demonstrative pronouns can, in deictic constructions, function as nominal heads, in which case *dì-cá* is something of a derivation, making unique semantic reference not simply to 'these things' but to 'these girls (17).

Other deictic pronouns operate within the same basic parameters as the demonstratives mentioned above, and they can optionally co-occur with the animate plural marker *-cá* when referencing animate heads, as in examples (18) and (19).

(18) a. *dì* 'this here'
b. *ʔínì* 'that there (near)'
c. *pʰógè* 'that over there'
d. *mògè* 'that down there'
e. *jògè* 'that up there'

(19) a. *jògè-cá* 'those (animate beings) up there'
b. *pʰógè-cá* 'those (animate beings) over there'

3 Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented plural marking strategies for nouns and pronouns in Dolpo Tibetan while highlighting some similarities as well as differences in other spoken Tibetan varieties. It appears that the recasting of some older grammaticalized forms are challenging the semantic boundaries of the plural pronoun root, as well as creating a certain amount of redundancy. More investigation may show that this is a result of transition from older to newer forms.

Speakers of Dolpo Tibetan focus on information flow of the broader discourse, definitiveness of noun reference, and other factors when considering whether and how to mark plurality. Currently, more investigation is being conducted on the conditions that determine number marking as well as the influence noun classification might exert on such decisions.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABL	*ablative*	EGO	*egophoric*	N	noun
ASSER	*assertive*	ERG	*ergative*	NEG	negative
AUX	*auxiliary*	EXT	*existential*	NF	non-final
CON	*conjunction*	FOC	*focus*	PL	plural
COP	*copula*	FUT	*future*	PST	past
DAT	*dative*	GEN	*genitive*	RFL	reflexive
EXCL	*exclusive*	INCL	*inclusive*	TEST	testimonial

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