

On the Change to Verb-Medial Word Order in Proto-Chinese: Evidence from Tibeto-Burman¹

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0. Introduction

In attempting to reconstruct the morphosyntax of Proto-Sino-Tibetan, one of the most basic questions to be answered is what was the unmarked word order of the proto-language? Chinese, Bai, and Karen are verb-medial languages, while all of the Tibeto-Burman languages except for Bai and Karen have verb-final word order. If these languages are all related, as we can assume from lexical correspondences, then either Chinese, Bai and Karen changed from verb-final to verb-medial word order, or the other Tibeto-Burman languages changed from verb-medial to verb-final order. How we answer the question of which languages changed their word would then give us the answer to the question of word order in Proto-Sino-Tibetan.

At the 22nd ICSTLL (LaPolla 1989, see also LaPolla 1990, Ch. 5), I argued that Proto-Sino-Tibetan had verb-final word order, and that Pre-Chinese (Proto-Chinese), Bai, and Karen had changed from verb-final to verb-medial order.² I suggested that the change was brought about because of a change in the pragmatic structure of the sentence in which the position of the unmarked focus NP changed from the usual immediately-preverbal focus position of verb-final languages to a post-verbal, or sentence-final, focus position. That is, a change in pragmatic structure brought about a change in syntactic structure. At that time I mainly used Chinese-internal evidence, though made reference to parallel patterns in Bai and Karen, and also to certain serial constructions in the Yi languages discussed by Julian Wheatley (1984, 1985) that might lead to verb medial order if the final verb in an OVOV sequence grammaticalized into a case marker. In the present paper I will present data from other Tibeto-Burman languages, particularly Tamang, Jinuo, and Burmese, that show more clearly what may be the beginnings of the development from verb-final to verb-medial word order. We will first briefly review the evidence within Bai, Karen, and Chinese that points to a change having taken place, and then discuss marked word order patterns in otherwise verb-final Tibeto-Burman languages that could be the beginnings of a change to verb-medial word order.

1. Language internal evidence of change

In Old Chinese the order of the major constituents is mainly NP-verb-NP, though there is a common marked word order pattern where an interrogative or personal pronoun referring to an undergoer (patient/theme/goal) will appear preverbally (i.e. NP-NP-V), as in the example (1), from the *Zuozhuan*, and example (2), from the *Shujing* (both 5th cen. BC; the preverbal undergoer pronouns are in bold in the pinyin transcription):

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²Though not uncontroversial, this view has been around for quite some time. See for example Terrien de Lacouperie 1887, Chapter 1, and Wolfenden 1929:6-9.

- (1) 君亡之不恤，而群臣是憂，
 jun wang zhi bu xu, er qun chen shi you,
 ruler exile this not worry-about but group vassal this worry-about
 惠之至也。（左傳僖公十五年）
 hui zhi zhi ye. (Xi Gong, Year 15)
 compassion GEN utmost PRT
 'The ruler is not concerned with his own banishment, yet is worried about his vassals; this is really the height of compassion.'
- (2) 汝念哉，無我殄。（書經康誥）
 ru nian zai, wu wo tian
 2sg remember PRT NEG 1sg destroy
 'Remember, don't forget what I told you.'

This construction is generally (though not exclusively) limited to negative and interrogative sentences, and the immediately preverbal NP is almost always a pronoun in the post-oracle-bone texts. In the oracle bone inscriptions the construction is less restricted, allowing full NPs and preposition phrases to appear in immediate-preverbal position when contrasted, and is not limited to negative and interrogative sentences. There is a gradual loss of this construction in the early Chinese texts, and in Modern Mandarin there are now only fossilized remnants, such as *hézài* (何在) 'where' (interrogative pronoun + locative verb). What is significant about this pattern is that (a) it is used in most instances for either interrogative pronouns or contrastive focus, (b) the pronoun in question appears immediately before the verb, the usual focus position of verb-final languages (whereas Modern Mandarin has a very strong post-verbal focus position—see LaPolla 1993), (c) it is a pattern that first was relatively free, involving many different prenominal pronouns, then became more and more restricted (what Hopper 1991 refers to as 'specialized'), then gradually disappeared over time from Chinese texts (see Yin 1985). A number of scholars have talked about these sentences as remnants of verb final word order; what is new in what I am saying is that they were used for contrastive focus.

In terms of phrase-internal constituents, the order in Archaic Chinese is generally modifier-modified (ATTRIBUTE-HEAD, GENITIVE-HEAD, DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD, RELATIVE-HEAD, NEGATIVE-VERB), and also ADPOSITION-NOUN, HEAD-NUMERAL-(CLASSIFIER), ADJECTIVE-MARKER-STANDARD, though there are a number of examples of HEAD-ATTRIBUTE order (e.g. *sang rou* (桑柔) 'tender mulberry') and NOUN-ADPOSITION (e.g. 所以, 是以) order as well. As with the NP-NP-V sentences, the frequency of these marked word order patterns decreased over time and finally disappeared completely (though traces of these patterns can be seen in some place names and fossilized phrases such as *suoyi* (所以) 'therefor').

Sun (1987) discusses the history and distribution of the preposition phrases with *yi* (以). He shows that the adpositional phrase (AP) can occur before or after the verb, and that the adposition itself can be prepositional or postpositional, the only restriction being that the postpositional AP cannot appear postverbally. Sun suggests that based on this pattern, the postpositional, preverbal AP is the archaic order. Based on topic continuity counts of the type used in Givón 1983, he argues that the position of the prepositional AP before or after the verb is related to discourse-pragmatic factors—the preverbal type is more likely to be used in contrastive contexts. Interestingly, he found that when it occurred with the deictic pronoun *shi* (是) 'that', *yi* ONLY appeared postpositionally. Again we see what seems to be a more conservative sentence pattern with pronouns.

In the oracle bone inscriptions, we see the contrastive use of word order, with focus position being immediately preverbal, in pairs such as the following, taken from Serruys 1981:334:³

- (3) a. 于祖丁
 Yu yu Zu Ding
 perform-exorcism to Ancestor Ding
 Perform an exorcism to Ancestor Ding.
- b. 勿于祖丁
 Wu yu Zu Ding yu.
 donot to Ancestor Ding perform-exorcism
 Don't perform an exorcism to Ancestor Ding

It would seem from this and the many examples like it in the corpus of Old Chinese, that immediate preverbal position is a focus position, at least in contrastive sentences.

Aside from the above, the position of certain clause particles at the end of the clause, and the position of adverbs within the clause in Old Chinese is generally more similar to what we would expect from a verb-final language. All of these factors lead me to believe that Chinese has changed its word order, and one of the important factors involved in that change was a change in focus position.⁴

In Karen and Bai we have the same situation as in Old Chinese in terms of the major constituents: unmarked verb-medial order, but NP-NP-V as a marked word order possibility. What is significant is that the conditions on the use of the marked word order pattern in Bai are almost exactly the same as those of Old Chinese: it is used when the second NP is a contrastive pronoun or when the sentence is negative or a question (Xu & Zhao 1984). Also interesting about the use of the different word order patterns in Bai is the fact that the older people prefer the verb-final order, whereas the younger and more Sinicized people prefer the verb-medial order (*ibid.*). This would seem to point to the change in word order as being relatively recent. Karen (Solnit 1986) has some similar word order patterns, with genitives and nominal modifiers coming before the noun, and number and classifier follow the noun, while adjectival and verbal modifiers (*i.e.* relative clauses) follow the verb. Karen does not appear to have a preverbal focus position; from the data in Solnit 1986, it seems that focus position is sentence-final as in Modern Chinese. In terms of phrase-internal order, Karen is very similar to Old Chinese, differing mainly in terms of having HEAD-ATTRIBUTE order as the unmarked word order, as opposed to Chinese, which has it only as a marked order.

Karen and Bai differ from most of the rest of the Tibeto-Burman languages mainly in terms of the position of the NP representing the undergoer referent and in terms of having prepositions. At the phrasal level there is variety among the Tibeto-Burman languages, but there are clear dominant patterns. In the table below I give the number of languages with the dominant pattern in the leftmost column, followed by that of the minority pattern and then the number of mixed languages. The last

³These divinations were made as statements, often in sets, each one testing a particular course of action, etc. (Keightley 1978). The divinations given here are part of a set testing whether it is to Yu Ding or to some other ancestor that the exorcism is to be performed, so the context is clearly contrastive.

⁴A number of other factors may also have been involved, particularly contact with verb medial Tai languages. See Matisoff 1993 for discussion of other possible factors in word order change.

column is the total number of languages for which I had data on that particular category.

dem-h (60)	h-dem (29)	dem-h-dem (7)	mixed (17)	total: 113
h-att (66)	att-h (25)		mixed (31)	total: 122
rel-h (65)	h-rel (7)		mixed (10)	total: 82
h-num (97)	num-h (14)		mixed (14)	total: 126
neg-v (69)	v-neg (39)		mixed (12)	total: 120
gen-h (121)	h-gen (Ø)		mixed (Ø)	total: 121
st-(m)-a (74)	a-(m)-st (Ø)		mixed (Ø)	total: 74

Among the languages with mixed patterns, from the use of the different patterns it was sometimes possible to determine which of the two possible orders was dominant or older within that language, and in most cases (all categories except for demonstrative and head order) the language internal dominant order was the same as that in the leftmost column above.

Based on these numbers, plus the distribution and conditions on occurrence of the different phrase internal word order patterns, I believe the original order of these elements in Proto-Tibeto-Burman was as follows:

DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD
 HEAD-ATTRIBUTE
 RELATIVE-HEAD
 HEAD-NUMBER
 NEGATIVE-VERB
 NOUN-ADPOSITION
 GENITIVE-HEAD
 STANDARD-(MARKER)-ADJECTIVE

These may also have also been the dominant orders in Proto-Sino-Tibetan as well. The most controversial of these orders is DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD, as it would seem from some factors that the opposite order is more archaic (e.g. the oldest written language, Tibetan, has HEAD-DEMONSTRATIVE order), and it is my own gut feeling that HEAD-DEMONSTRATIVE is the older order, yet given the numbers presented above, and the fact that the other old written languages (Burmese, Newari, Tangut) in Tibeto-Burman and also Chinese all have DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD order, I am forced to conclude (for the time being) that this is the older order.⁵

In terms of position of auxiliaries, the dominant pattern in Tibeto-Burman is for the auxiliary verbs to follow the main verb, though there are a number of languages that have the opposite order, as in Chinese and Karen. Change of auxiliary position from postverbal to preverbal can come about from serial, clause chaining constructions, such as are common in Sino-Tibetan languages (see Young and Givón 1990 for an example of this in Chibchan (Panama/Costa Rica).

2. Marked word order patterns in verb-final Tibeto-Burman languages

Most important to supporting my hypothesis that the development of a post-verbal, or sentence-final, focus position motivated the change to verb medial order are examples where NPs in otherwise solidly verb final languages appear in post-

⁵This order is not included in the possible word order patterns given by Hawkins (1983:83), but in many ways the Sino-Tibetan languages do not fit with the typological ideals that have been established on the basis of small databases that included few or none of the ST languages (e.g. Greenberg 1966, Hawkins 1984). These issues, and their significance to typological theory, will be dealt with in a separate paper now in preparation.

verbal (sentence-final) position for emphasis of their status as focal constituents, as in the Tamang examples in (4), below (from Taylor 1973:100-101).

- (4) a. asu-ce-m yampu-m 'khana 'khana kor-jeht-ci tinyi syoo-ri.
 Act Loc Loc Evt Time
 Where did you go for a stroll around Kathmandu this morning, Asu?
- b. 'dehre-no chyaa-la thenyi-'maah-ta-m.
 Time State Sit
 'Now they will receive (the money).'
- c. ta-ci kon 'dehre bis-bahrsa.
 Evt Voc Time Und
 'Now twenty years have passed, Kon.'
- d. Tup-'maah them-pala'Tim chyau-'maak-ri.
 Und State Sit
 The threads were placed in the sides (of the loom).
- e. 'icu-'maah-ri 'raa-pi 'phinyi-ka cung-pala yaa-ce hoi.
 Sit Und State Inst
 Here (in these places) the weaving comb is caught by the hand.
- f. ken ca-ci the-ce-no.
 UndEvt Act
 It was indeed he who ate the rice.

Word order in Tamang is pragmatically controlled. Generally an animate actor or, if there is no animate actor, then an animate undergoer, is topic (and therefore leftmost constituent) (Taylor 1973:93). Unmarked focus position is immediately preverbal. The postverbal position is used for contrastive focus. This is clear from the fact that the ~~postverbal constituent can also take the emphatic contrastive focus particle -ka 'instead of', as in (5) (Taylor 1973:97).~~

- (5) ~~ale ramaito mela-ri pip-pala 'a-yihn nga-ce
 younger-brother fun fair-Loc send-pst neg-be I-Agt
 I didn't send younger brother to the fun fair I sent him~~
- bazaar-Ti-ka pit-ci.
bazaar-Loc-emp sent-pst-
to the bazaar instead.

Another marked word order construction that possibly contributed to the change in word order is a cleft construction such as in (6), from Jinuo (Gai 1986:87), and (7), from Burmese (Sawada 1993:1).⁶

- (6) ɲu⁵⁵ vu³³ m⁴⁴ ɲu⁴⁴ mɣ⁴⁴ khə⁴².
 1pl like/love NOM 3sg
 The one we like/love is him.

⁶In example (6), NOM = nominalizer, and in example (7), NRLS = nominal clause marker, realis; DTH = disambiguated Theme marker; and POL = politeness marker.

- (7) maun_maun_yai'-ta_ ma.ma. ^kou_^pa_.
 Maung Maung beat NRLS Ma Ma DTH POL
 It was Ma Ma that Maung Maung beat.

Both of these sentences have postverbal NP undergoer arguments, with the verb taking a nominalizing particle (m^v44 and ta_ respectively). All it would take is for, for example, the realis nominalizing particle (ta_) in Burmese to be reanalyzed as an aspectual marker, and the sentence becomes a finite verb-medial structure. Before the development of nominalized forms using zhi (之) in Old Chinese, nominalization was unmarked, so a cleft construction such as this one could very easily have been reanalyzed as a verb medial construction. This type of reanalysis has occurred for example in Teso (Heine, Claudi & Hünemeyer 1991; Eastern Nilotic, Kenya), which though generally VSO, has developed an SVO word order pattern for negative clauses because of the reanalysis of a cleft structure:

- (8) mam petero e-koto ekiṅok
 not Peter 3sg-want dog
 'Peter does not want a dog'

This sentence is derived from a complex structure *e-mam petero e-koto ekiṅok 'It is not Peter (who) wants a dog'. The original main verb -mam 'not to be' grammaticalized into a negation marker, which caused the following reanalyses (ibid.: 170):

- The complex sentence was reanalyzed as a simple sentence.
- The subordinate clause was reanalyzed as the main clause.
- The subject of the erstwhile main clause was reanalyzed as the subject of the new sentence.
- Due to the grammaticalization of the verb -mam 'not to be', the main clause was reanalyzed as a grammatical marker.
- The former VSO structure was reanalyzed as SVO, with the effect that Teso has introduced an SVO word order in negative clauses.

3. Conclusions

It has been shown in languages outside Tibeto-Burman that even in otherwise verb-final languages there is a tendency for at least some types of focus to appear postverbally (see for example Herring and Paolillo 1993). This has been used as an argument for a universal sentence final focus position (e.g. Hetzron 1975). Whether or not sentence final focus is universal, we have seen evidence in Tamang, Jinuo, and Burmese of this type of pattern, and it may exist in many other languages within Tibeto-Burman as well. If in Proto-Chinese postverbal focus was one possibility, and this originally marked pattern came to be so frequent that it became the unmarked pattern, then it would cause a change in the unmarked position of the object, as the object is the NP most often in focus position cross-linguistically.

As postverbal focus in verb-final languages is generally a discourse phenomenon (i.e. does not show up in canonical sentences), the rareness of this construction in the literature may simply be because it does not turn up in the usual elicitation environment that most of the sources on Tibeto-Burman languages are based on, or is only used for particular rare types of marked focus, as in Tamang. This is again one reason in doing fieldwork we should always be sure to record a large amount of naturally occurring text, rather than simply sentences. I would also like to ask my colleagues working on Tibeto-Burman languages to let me know if they are aware of regular patterns of this sort in the languages they are familiar with.

Given all the facts discussed above, there is a strong case for the hypothesis that Proto-Sino-Tibetan word order was verb-final, and that it was Chinese, and not Tibeto-Burman, that was the innovator in terms of word order, and it is very likely this change came about at least partially because of a change in the unmarked focus position.

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