Verb Agreement and Epistemic Marking: a Typological Journey from the Himalayas to the Caucasus

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Epistemische Morphologie registriert manchmal das Wissen über spezifische Argumente anstatt über Propositionen. Sie steht dann in minimalem Kontrast zu Kongruenzmorphologie, die die Identität von Argumenten registriert. Diese Ähnlichkeit lässt erwarten, dass die relevante Personenkategorie – der Referent, dessen Wissen in epistemischer Morphologie angezeigt wird bzw. der Referent dessen Merkmale in Kongruenzmorphologie unifiziert werden – der gleichen typologischen Varianz unterliegen. Eine Untersuchung vorwiegend himalajischer und kaukasischer Daten bestätigt diese Voraussage: in beiden Systemen sind Personenkategorien bald als Sprecher vs. Andere, bald als Adressat vs. Andere, bald als Informant vs. Andere (Sprecher in Aussagen, Adressat in Fragen) definiert. Die einzige Option, die in epistemischen Systemen bisher nicht belegt ist, ist die Dreifachopposition von Sprecher vs. Adressat vs. Andere, die in Kongruenzsystemen gängig ist.

1 Introduction

Studies of the epistemic categories expressed in Tibetan auxiliaries and copulas have mostly compared the phenomena with mirativity marking, and this is no doubt the correct comparandum in diachronic research. However, synchronic descriptions are also often tempted to compare the relevant categories with agreement systems or similar reference-related structures, at least for expository purposes when explaining how the system works (e. g. Denwood 1999, Tournadre 1996, Goldstein et al. 1991).

The purview of this chapter is a typological comparison of Tibetan epistemic categories with known agreement systems in order to determine in what respects the two systems are the same and in what respects they are different. The rationale for such an enterprise is two-fold: first, it is part of a large-scale research program which aims at replacing debates about appropriate terminology ('is it correct to call X an agreement system?')

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by fine-grained typologies ('in what respect is the auxiliary system of L_i the same as the agreement system of L_j?'; Bickel 2007); second, as we will see, a comparison with Tibetan epistemic auxiliary systems allows insights into the nature and limits of agreement systems that are otherwise simply unavailable.

I begin by identifying the crucial variables of Tibetan epistemic morphology through a comparison with mirativity systems. I then raise the question of how far the same variables also apply to verb agreement systems, especially to non-canonical instances of such systems. This will lead us from epistemic marking and agreement systems in the Himalayas to rare kinds of agreement systems in the Caucasus and elsewhere – covering thereby two of Roland Bielmeier's field areas. The final section summarizes the findings and proposes a generalized system of variables for analyzing epistemic and agreement systems alike.

2 Mirativity, person and arguments

The opposition expressed by mirativity systems is the difference between information that is 'assimilated', 'old', 'definite' (Bielmeier 2000) knowledge (henceforth glossed as 'DEF') and information that is 'as yet unassimilated' or 'freshly acquired' knowledge ('mirative', 'MIR'). Such distinctions are fairly widespread in the languages of the world (for surveys, see DeLancey 1997, Lazard 1999, Aikhenvald & Dixon 2003, Aikhenvald 2004, among others), but, naturally, the basic distinction is elaborated in different ways in different languages – even in closely related languages and dialects, as Bielmeier (2000) has demonstrated for Tibetan. All I am concerned with here is the availability in a language of a grammatical category that differentiates between kinds of knowledge.

What differentiates Tibetan epistemic morphology from standard average miratives can best be captured by different responses to two key variables: (i) whose knowledge is at issue? (ii) what is the knowledge about? I refer to the first variable as the person variable, and to the second variable as the scope variable.

2.1 Person

In most mirative systems, such as the one found in Turkish, the person whose knowledge is at issue is always the speaker; in Tibetan, by contrast, it is the category 'informant', i. e. the speaker in statements and the addressee in questions – sometimes called 'conjunct' (Hale 1980, DeLancey 1986), 'epistemic source' (Hargreaves 2005) or 'locutor' (Aikhenvald 2004). As a result, the two languages use mirative forms in very similar ways in statements but in very different ways in questions.

In statements, the use of mirative forms is similar in both languages.[1] The effect is to suggest that the proposition expressed is in some sense new, not yet assimilated knowledge. As a result, propositions with first person referents have a special status, as a mirative form is compatible only in situations of near-amnesia, sleep, or unconsciousness, where the speaker is surprised at his or her own deeds, cf:[2]

(1) Tibetan (Tournadre 1996: 197)

ṅa *Lha.sa-r* *phyin-pa-red.*
1SABS L.-OBL go.PST-AOR-MIR

'I must have been to Lhasa.' (+> 'I can't remember; I was a child then.')

(2) Turkish (Kissling 1960: 154)

bu *gece* *çarşaf-ım-ı* *yırt-mış-ım.*
DEM night bed.sheet-1SPOSS-ACC tear-MIR-1S

'I must have torn my sheet tonight.' (+> 'I can't remember.')

In questions, Tibetan miratives strongly differ from Turkish miratives. In Tibetan, the miratives are not tied to the conversational role 'speaker', but to the role 'informant', the information source. Since in questions, the informant is by definition the addressee, second person questions require the definite form; the mirative is virtually excluded since it would suggest

[1] There is one important difference which I gloss over here: in Turkish, DEFINITE has zero exponence and is the functionally unmarked member of the opposition; in Tibetan both values have overt exponence and in most contexts and in most varities, the oppositions seems to be either equipollent or having the MIRATIVE as the functionally unmarked member. This has no direct impact for the following discussion.

[2] Abbreviations follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules (www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/morpheme.html), with the addition of AOR for 'aorist' and capital letters for genders in Nakh-Daghestanian languages. The symbol '+>' introduces implicatures.

that the speaker charges the addressee with lack of self-awareness while at the same time asking a question about his or her intentions:

(3) Tibetan (Tournadre 1996: 220)

khyed.raṅ 'gro-gi-yod-pas? (-dug-)*
2ABS go.PRS-IPFV-DEF-Q MIR
'Are you going?'

In Turkish, the mirative always refers to the speaker. Therefore, the form is suitable for second person questions, where it signals that the speaker is surprised at the information he or she is seeking to get confirmed in the question:

(4) Turkish (Gretler 1987: 78)

sen konuş-ur mu-ymuş-sun, Hasan?
2SNOM speak-AOR Q-MIR-2S H.
'Hasan, can you speak nevertheless?' (+ > Speaker is surprised.)

A third possibility has recently been discovered in the Caucasus, in the Nakh-Daghestanian language Chechen (Molochieva 2006). Definite knowledge marking in this language is centered neither on the speaker nor on the informant, but on the addressee. The relevant markers are phonologically reduced variants of second person dative pronouns (singular and plural, as well as first person inclusive) that are restricted to post-verbal position (unlike ordinary pronouns which can occur in all argument positions in the clause). Using these markers entails that the speaker thinks that the addressee must have definite, well-established knowledge of the situation:

(5) Chechen (Molochieva 2006)

a. *Zara j-eʔna ħan?*
Z(J).ABS J-come.PRF 2SDEF
'Zara has been here, hasn't she?' (+ > 'You must have noticed!')

b. *As ħuːna koch ecna ħan.*
1SERG 2SDAT dress.ABS buy.PRF 2SDEF
'I bought you a dress.' (+ > 'You must have known that I would!')

Example (5b) shows the formal difference between a regular second person dative pronoun in beneficiary function (*ħuːna* 'for you') and the post-verbal definite marker *ħan*.[3]

2.2 Scope

The Turkish, Tibetan and Chechen data in the preceding share the property that what is at stake is the knowledge of the entire proposition. However, unlike Turkish and Chechen, and most other languages with mirative systems, some varieties of Tibetan – notably what Tournadre (1996) calls Standard Spoken Tibetan – narrow the scope down to one of the referents contained in the proposition. As a result, a definite marker like *yod* can only occur if the informant is personally involved in the situation, either as an argument (6a), a possessor (6b), or as an otherwise interested person (6c):

(6) Tibetan

a. *ṅa-s dpe.cha yag.po lta-gi-yod.* (Tournadre 1996: 275)
1SG.ERG Tibetan.book.ABS well read-IPFV-DEF
'As for me, I am reading the sacred texts.'

b. *khoṅ ṅa-'i rtsa-la phebs-kyi-yod.* (Tournadre 1996: 223)
3SG.ABS 1SG-GEN near-DAT come-IPFV-DEF
'He comes to my place.'

c. *ja 'di zhim.po yod.* (Tournadre 1996: 222)
tea DEM excellent DEF
'This tea is excellent.' (+> 'I have tasted it.')

This scope restriction is strongest in the aorist system, where the definite knowledge marker *yin* can only have scope over volitional agents (glossed below as 'DEF(A)'.) As a result, *yin* is incompatible with verbs like *mthoṅ* 'see' that do not license such an argument (Tournadre 1996: 192):

(7) Tibetan

a. *ṅa-s dkar.yol bcag-pa-yin.*
1s-ERG cup.ABS break-AOR-DEF(A)
'I broke the cup.'

[3] While definite-knowledge marking seems to be common throughout Chechen and Ingush, the forms and the degree of phonological reduction vary considerably across dialects (Johanna Nichols, p. c.).

b. * *ṅa-s* *mthoṅ-pa-yin.*
1s-ERG see-AOR-DEF(A)

b'. *ṅa-s* *mthoṅ-byuṅ.*
1s-ERG see-AOR.DEF(G)
'I saw it.'

As shown by (7b'), if there is no A argument available, definite knowledge marking in the aorist requires the use of a dedicated marker *byuṅ*, which takes scope over recipients, goals and experiencers ('DEF(G)'). The tightest scope restrictions of a mirative system that I am aware of are those in Kathmandu Newar, where definite knowledge marking only ever takes scope over volitional agents, never over other arguments, let alone entire propositions (Hargreaves 2003, 2005). In the following I refer to such systems as epistemic argument marking (as opposed to epistemic proposition marking).

Epistemic argument marking has an important implication for the semantics of the epistemic relationship. When the scope of epistemic marking is on a proposition, the precise nature of the knowledge relationship between the informant and the proposition is flexible: there are many ways in which one can become familiar with a situation, through participation or observation but also more indirectly by having some possessive relation or some general interest or empathy. When the scope is on a specified, individual argument, by contrast, definite knowledge is possible only if the informant is in fact identical with the argument. Note that what is at stake is knowledge of a referent in a certain argument role. One can of course have old, assimilated knowledge of someone as such, but this is not the same as having such knowledge of the person in a specific argument role – e. g. as a volitional agent, or as a recipient – in a specific situation. Here, only the person herself or himself can possibly have the required knowledge. This is the point where epistemic argument marking approaches the nature of standard agreement systems, as I will explore next.

3 Epistemic argument marking vs. agreement

As observed above, marking a given person (say, the informant) as having definite knowledge about a specified argument (say, the agent) entails that the informant is identical with the specified argument. It is crucial

to note that this is a one-way material implication and not an equivalence relationship: while using a definite knowledge form entails identity of a given person and a given argument, it does not follow from this that not using a definite knowledge form entails distinctness of that person and that argument. A mirative form like *phyin-pa-red* 'go-AOR-MIR' does not necessarily entail that another person (a third person, or the addressee) was the agent. The form merely suggests that the speaker is not familiar with the agentive force in the reported event. Therefore, it is perfectly compatible with a first person pronoun, as in example (1).

The reason for the one-way relationship between person and argument is that, despite its similarity to agreement marking, the system is fundamentally based on an epistemic opposition between knowing and not knowing the argument. In order to distinguish between epistemic argument and agreement marking we therefore need an additional typological variable that specifies the relationship between person and argument. In epistemic argument marking this relationship is one of knowledge, in agreement systems this relationship is one of feature matching, or, as argued in Bickel (2000), of feature subsumption (part-whole relations) or feature appositions.

Interestingly, however, the same distinctions between kinds of person values that we noticed among epistemic systems are also found among agreement systems, specifically, the distinction between speaker-based, informant-based, and addressee-based systems. This is shown in Table 1 (p. 8), where the person and scope variables are cross-tabulated. Note that the relationship variable is relevant only when the scope variable is set to 'specified argument' or 'interested referent' (covering both possessors, as in example 6b, and other interested parties such as 'ethical dative' referents). When the scope variable is set to 'proposition', the relationship is necessarily an epistemic one. The variable settings scope = 'proposition' and person = 'speaker' characterize the Turkish mirative system; the settings scope = 'proposition' and person = 'addressee' are instantiated by Chechen. The setting scope = 'proposition' and person = 'informant' is what we find throughout Tibetan, with frequent but cross-dialectically variable extensions to scope = 'interested referent' with relationship = 'epistemic'. The settings scope = 'specified argument', relationship = 'epistemic' and person = 'informant' characterize the Kathmandu Newar sys-

		SCOPE				
		proposition			*interested referent*	*specified argument*
PERSON	*speaker vs. other*	Turkish	RELATIONSHIP	*epistemic*		
				agreement		
	informant vs. other	Tibetan		*epistemic*	Tibetan	Std. Spoken Tibetan; Kathmandu Newar
				agreement		
	addressee vs. other	Chechen		*epistemic*		
				agreement		

Table 1: *The interplay between typological variables of* PERSON, SCOPE *(of person) and* PERSON-ARGUMENT RELATIONSHIP. *Small caps indicate variable names, italics indicate variable values (settings).*

tem, as well as those parts of the Tibetan epistemic morphology that are restricted to specified arguments.

What about the empty cells that are predicted by how the variables interact with each other? The combination of person = 'informant' with scope = 'argument', like in Tibetan and Newar, but with an agreement relationship is attested in some languages of the Caucasus, specifically in Daghestanian languages. A case in point is the suffixal agreement that has developed in the Megeb dialect of Dargi (where it supplements the inherited gender agreement that is available in the form of a prefix or infix in some verbs).[4] The suffixal agreement distinguishes between *-ra* for informants in subject (S or A) role as opposed to zero for non-informant subjects. Since the critical role is defined as 'informant' rather than 'speaker', *-ra* refers to the speaker in statements, but to the addressee in questions. Consider the following examples. (Note that *-ra* regularly assimilates to the preceding consonant; prefix agreement shows the gender of the absolutive argument, here *b-* registering gender 'B'.)

[4] The Megeb data were brought to my attention by a *LinguistList* posting by Wolfgang Schulze in 1999 (linguistlist.org/issues/10/10-856.html)

(8) Megeb dialect of Dargi (Magometov 1982: 69)

a. *nu-ni / nuša'i-ni kung b-elč̣-un-na*
1s-ERG 1p-ERG book(B).ABS B-read-PST-INFORMANT
'I/we read the book.'

b. *ħu-ni / iti'-in kung b-elč̣-un.*
2s-ERG 3s-ERG book(B).ABS B-read-PST
'You/he read the book.'

c. *ħu-ni / ħuša'-ini kung b-elč̣-un-na-w?*
2s-ERG 2p-ERG book(B).ABS B-read-PST-INFORMANT-Q
'Did you read the book?'

d. *nu-ni / iti'-ini kung b-elč̣-un-w?*
1s-ERG 3s-ERG book(B).ABS B-read-PST-Q
'Did I/he read the book?'

The data in (8a–b) are statements and therefore *-ra* 'INFORMANT' signals that the speaker is the subject. In the interrogative sentences (8c–d), by contrast, the informant is the addressee and therefore *-ra* indicates that the addressee is the subject. As a result, a question like 'Did I read the book?', as in (8d), fails to trigger suffixal agreement because the informant, here the addressee, is not subject.

Megeb fills cells with person = 'informant' in agreement systems. Combinations of person = 'speaker' with agreement relationships are also attested (Cysouw 2003, Siewierska 2004). An example is the isolate language Chitimacha that was once spoken in South Louisiana:

(9) Chitimacha (Swadesh 1946)

a. *get-ik*
beat-1s
'I beat'

b. *get-nuk*
beat-1p
'we beat'

c. *get-i*
beat-non1s
'you beat' or 's/he beats'

d. *get-na*
beat-non1p
'you beat' or 'they beat'

There is no evidence that *-ik* and *-nuk* would register anything else than the speaker in questions (as they would if the system was based on informant rather the speaker).

A system where the setting person = 'speaker' combines with an epistemic instead of an agreement relationship is possibly found in Sangkong, a Lolo-Burmese language of Yunnan, although the data are too scarce to allow a definite conclusion. This language has a basic opposition between first and nonfirst person marking similar to what we noted for Chitimacha, but, unlike in Chitimacha, the same opposition also has epistemic uses:

(10) Sangkong (Matisoff 1993)

a. *ŋa*^{55} / *ho*^{33}*ɲaŋ*^{31} *pɤ*^{33} *tso*^{33} *pi*^{55} *ŋa*^{55}.
1s 1p hit middle PRF 1
'I / we hit the mark.'

b. *thaŋ*^{55} / *thi*^{55}*kun*^{33} *pɤ*^{33} *tso*^{33} *pi*^{55} *ʑe*^{55}.
3s 3p hit middle PRF non-1
'S/he / they hit the mark.'

c. *laŋ*^{55}*ɕa*^{55} *me*^{33} *laŋ*^{55}*tɕho*^{31} *qø*^{33} *ŋa*^{55}.
paddyfield LOC water have 1
'There's water in the paddyfield.' (+> 'I see it with my own eyes.')

d. *thaŋ*^{55} *ti*^{31} *tha*^{55} *ʑi*^{33} *tse*^{55} *pi*^{55} *ŋa*^{55}.
3s one time come EXP PRF 1
'S/he has already come.' (+> 'I know this personally.')

Examples (10a–b) are not distinguishable from a regular agreement system, where the verb agrees with the subject in person: first person in (10a) vs. non-first person in (10b). But, as (10c–d) show, *ŋa* is synchronically also used in ways similar to Tibetan sentences ending in *yod,* expressing definite knowledge about the situation. What is unclear from the published data on Sangkong is whether non-1 marking can also be used with first person sentences with the implicature that the speaker was not aware of his or her own activities, much like in (1) and (2). If this is possible, and the purely epistemic uses of *ŋa* in (10c–d) suggests it is possible, the Sangkong system would instantiate a speaker-based epistemic system.

Addressee-based agreement systems are occasionally found as a result of phonological mergers in paradigms, e. g. in Spanish where the second person past tense form *hablabas* 'you spoke' is in opposition to a general form *hablaba* 'I spoke' or 's/he/it spoke' (see Cysouw 2003 for discussion of this

and similar systems worldwide). Limited to the plural, Standard German also illustrates the same pattern, although in this language pronouns are standardly used to disambiguate reference, cf. *wir/sie gehen* 'we/they go' vs. *ihr geht* 'you (pl.) go'. I am not aware of addressee-based systems of epistemic argument marking.

The cells in Table 1 that are still empty are those where the scope is not over a specified argument but over non-arguments like possessors or interested parties. Epistemic systems, like the Tibetan one, cover these along with arguments. This was exemplified by (6b) above. Agreement systems are most often tied to a specific argument, and I am not aware of speaker-based, informant-based, or addressee-based agreement systems that would extend to non-arguments. But one would not be surprised to discover such systems because agreement systems with different person features are known to occasionally extend to non-arguments. A case in point is the Indo-Aryan language Maithili, where one kind of agreement morphology differentiates three persons (i. e. not only speaker vs. non-speaker or informant vs. non-informant), registering either an object argument, a possessor, or an otherwise interested referent:

(11) Maithili (Bickel et al. 1999)

a. *ham to-rā kaniyã̃-kẽ dekh-au-l-i-au-nh.*
1NOM 2nh-DAT bride-DAT see-CAUS-PT-1N-2nhNN-3hNN
'I showed you^{nh} the bride^{h}.'

b. *ham toh-ar ghar par ge-l ch-al-i-ah.*
1NOM 2mh-GEN house LOC go-P AUX-PT-1N-2mhNN
'I had been to your^{mh} house.'

c. *u bhāig je-t-auk.*
3nhNOM run.CVB AUX.TEL-FUT-2nhNN
'He will run away (because he is afraid of you^{nh}).'

Maithili verbs agree with up to three referents. In (11a), the first agreement marker *-i* registers the person of the nominative ('N') argument *ham* 'I'. This is followed by what is called non-nominative ('NN') agreement markers that realize the person and honorific degree markers of the direct (*kaniyã̃kẽ* 'bride' '3h') and the indirect object (*torā* 'you, non-honorific (nh)'). (11b) shows that the same non-nominative agreement markers can also refer to possessors (here the second person mid-honorific ('mh') pronoun *tohar* 'your'), and (11c) shows agreement with a referent that is

		SCOPE			
		proposition		*interested referent*	*argument*
PERSON	*speaker vs. other*	Turkish, Sankong	RELATIONSHIP *epistemic*		Sangkong?
			agreement		Chitimacha
	informant vs. other	Tibetan	*epistemic*	Tibetan	Std. Spoken Tib.; Kathm. Newar
			agreement		Megeb Dargi
	addressee vs. other	Chechen	*epistemic*		
			agreement		Spanish, Ger. pl.
	informant vs. addressee vs. other		*agreement*	Maithili	German sg.

Table 2: *Person, scope and relationship variables, with additional data*

involved in the situation (here, the non-honorific addressee as the cause of the event) without being an argument or adjunct in the clause.

4 Conclusions

Table 2 expands Table 1 by adding ternary person systems and filling in the data surveyed in the preceding section.

Most remaining gaps are likely to be accidental. This concerns extensions to non-arguments ('interested referents') and epistemic argument marking with addressee-based person categories. There is no compelling reason why such systems should not occur, and it is possible that a more extensive survey might well unearth them.

A more interesting question concerns the combination of a three-way person distinction with epistemic marking (grey-shaded in Table 2). Such a combination is perhaps unlikely on functional grounds because it would presuppose that a speaker must always be able to specify that at least one person must have definite knowledge of a proposition or an argument. This would make it difficult to communicate information that is genuinely new

and unfamiliar to everyone. But some societies have a strong tendency to presuppose as much information as possible in everyday interactions and to sell off any information as if it was known and familiar, e. g. by not using referential expressions, even for new referents in a story (as has been observed in some Tibeto-Burman languages including Tibetan, cf. Bickel 2003, Stoll & Bickel in press). From this perspective, it would not come as an ethnographic surprise, if in some society, people would systematically claim that, if something is new to the interlocutors, there must at least be an unknown third person who would be familiar with the information. Only continued fieldwork in linguistics and anthropology will make it possible to delimit the range of what is possible here.

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