Direct evidentials, case, tense and aspect in Tibetan: evidence for a general theory of the semantics of evidential

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Abstract Tibetan has three different morphemes expressing direct evidentiality. Only two of the three have been described in any detail, and the distinctions among these morphemes are described in quite different ways by different authors. We argue that careful study of these morphemes reveals that evidentials do not encode evidence type per se. Instead, they encode a relation between the situation being reported by the speaker and the situation within which evidence was acquired. This approach turns out not only to provide an accurate and systematic characterization of the different Tibetan direct evidentials, but also to predict a number of seemingly unrelated restrictions on their syntactic distribution. The distribution of these direct evidentials hence provides strong support for the proposal of Speas (2010) that evidentials of all categories encode relations among situations. Since Tibetan evidentials operate at the illocutionary level, our analysis further suggests that illocutionary force is best modeled not as a feature of situations per se, but rather as a relation between relevant situations.

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1 Introduction

The Tibetan evidential system seems to defy systematic analysis. Each evidential cat-
egory comprises multiple morphemes, and the semantic distinctions that these mor-
phemes encode are often so subtle that native speakers have difficulty explaining
them and are often surprised when shown that pairs of morphemes are not intersub-
stitutable. Nonetheless, careful analysis of these subtle distinctions reveals a surpris-
ingly coherent system, with implications beyond the description of Tibetan. In this
paper we sketch that system, focusing on the multiple markers of direct evidential-
ity. Our account of the Tibetan direct evidential system provides striking support for
a theory in which evidence is not a semantic primitive and evidentials encode not
evidence type or information source per se, but relations between situations.

It is generally agreed that post-verbal morphemes in Tibetan mark three basic
distinctions among evidence types. Direct evidentials (1a) indicate that the speaker
witnessed the event, indirect evidentials (1b) indicate that the speaker infers from
indirect evidence and ego evidentials (1c) indicate that the speaker is reporting im-
mediate reflexive knowledge. Tibetan also has neutral evidentials (1d), which indicate
nothing about evidence source.[1][2]

(1) a. ama   lags kha lag bzos   kyi **'dug**.
         mother HON   food   make   PRES **DIRECT**
         'Mother is cooking.' (witnessed)

     b. ama   lags thab tsang nang la   **yod kyi red**.
         mother HON   kitchen   in   LOC **INDIRECT**
         'Mother is in the kitchen.' (speaker knows through general inference)

     c. nga lha sar   bsdad kyi **yod**
         I   Lhasa.LOC   stay   PRES **EGO**
         'I live in Lhasa.'

     d. khong slob 'phrug **red**.
         he   student   **NEUTRAL**
         'He is a student.' (neutral statement of fact)

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[1] We use the standard Wylie (1959) transliteration system for the Tibetan examples. Capitalization in some
systems of Tibetan transcription represents aspects of Tibetan script that are otherwise missing from the
transcription. We use capital letters only to indicate the root letter of a proper name.

[2] We use the following abbreviations in the glosses: ABL = ablative case, ACC = accusative case, AGT/INST
= agentive/instrumental case, DIR = direct evidential, HON = honorific, IMPF = imperfective aspect, IND
= indirect evidential, LOC = locative case, NEG = negative, NEUT = neutral evidential, OBL = oblique
case, PERF = perfective aspect, PRES = present tense, Q = question, TERM = terminative. Ego eviden-
tials are used "when the origo has intimate and immediate knowledge of a situation." (Garrett 2001:5)
Ego evidence involves personal, usually internal, experience, while direct evidence involves witnessing of
a distinct, usually external, situation.