The Semantics of the Verb 'Give' in Tibetan

The development of the transfer construction and the honorific domain

In: Bouveret, M. *From Lexicalization to Grammaticalization: Give verbs and constructions.* CAL collection, Johns Benjamins.

PREPUPLICATION

Eric Mélac (Associate Professor, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA EA 741)

Nicolas Tournadre (Professor, Université d'Aix-Marseille, Lacito UMR 7107, IUF)[1]

This paper aims to examine the behaviour of the equivalents of 'give' in Lhasa Tibetan in order to confirm, qualify or invalidate the universal tendencies that previous cross-linguistic research has unveiled (Newman 1996, Ed., 1997). We will first explore the semantic relations between the various forms that can express 'give' in Tibetan: *SPRAD*, *BTANG*, *GNANG* and *PHUL*, on the basis of previous lexicographic and descriptive research on Lhasa Tibetan, as well as a corpus of spoken Lhasa Tibetan (TSC). We will see that the most basic term (*SPRAD*) has not developed much beyond its literal meaning, whereas the hypernymic *BTANG* is used as a light verb whose constructions can be divided into several categories of meaning. *GNANG* is the honorific form of *SPRAD*, and *PHUL* is its humilific form. While *SPRAD* is not used as a light verb, its honorific and humilific counterparts are very productive light verbs. To explain this phenomenon, we will explore the honorific domain, and its systematisation in Lhasa Tibetan (Hajime, 1975; Rdorje *et al.*, 1993; DeLancey, 1998; Tournadre & Sangda Dorje, 1998; Dorje & Lhazom, 2002). We will see that the humilific plane is not the symmetrical opposite of the honorific plane. We will also explore the productivity of *GNANG* and *PHUL*, which can be explained by the fact that giving is one of the most basic interpersonal actions of the human behavioural repertoire. It therefore establishes a link between two humans, which is essential in order for the honorific and humilific notions to emerge.

Keywords*: give; Tibetan; light verbs; honorific*

1. The Polyfunctionality of 'give'

The verb 'give' may be one of the most frequent and basic verbs in the world's languages, but it captures a complex situational frame (Newman, 1996). Its polyfunctional quality seems to be universally attested, as the verb root is frequently redeployed into other syntactic categories, and commonly appears as a light verb (Jespersen, 1965; Montaut, 1991; Newman, Ed., 1997; Mohanan, 2006; Tournadre & Pezechki, *forthcoming*, *inter alia*). However, the cross-linguistic descriptions collected on this verb and its equivalents still have to be confronted with more data from typologically and genetically diverse languages. Newman (Ed., 1997) has explored the use of 'give' in many languages belonging to several language families, but no comprehensive study has been conducted on 'give' in a Tibetic language so far. Our description of 'give' in Lhasa Tibetan will lead us to investigate the link between the transfer construction, the development of light verbs and the honorific domain. It will also allow us to formulate hypotheses on the cognitive and social motivations behind the evolutionary patterns of 'giving verbs'.

2. The various lexical items corresponding to 'give' in Tibetan

In order to answer the question of how one says 'give' in Tibetan, it is first essential to identify the semantic features that are generally included in the verb 'give', as well as what we mean by the 'Tibetan language'.

2.1. The polysemy of 'give'

'Give' is a highly polysemous verb in English, and its most literal meaning is to 'hand an object over to someone' (Newman, 1996). However, it is distinguished from the verbs 'hand' or 'pass' by its abstractness. It is perfectly acceptable to use 'give' when the giver, the transferred object and the recipient are not physically in the same place, or even when the three elements of the giving process are abstract entities.

(1) The station has been **giving** time to stories on education, government, the arts and community issues. (COCA, SPOK; npr_TalkNation, 2000)

In this example, the giver 'station', the transferred entity 'time' and the recipient 'stories' are all immaterial. The meaning that an English speaker can naturally extract from this sentence is

more or less that the program director of the radio station has decided that stories on education, government, the arts and community issues should be allowed a certain amount of time. This example shows that in English the verb 'give' has become a quick, spontaneous and convenient tool to express complex, abstract ideas.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the general sense of 'give' is 'make another the recipient of (something that is in the possession, or at the disposal, of the subject)'. [2] However, as the entry contains 112 senses and 17 subentries, it is quite obvious that the definition of 'give' is highly complex, and its diverse categories of meaning are not easy to map. In English as well as in probably many of the world's languages, 'give' corresponds to a semantic area made up of multiple protrusions with indefinite, ever-evolving boundaries.

2.2. 'Tibetan' and the Tibetic language family

Until the end of the 20th century, most scholars spoke of 'Tibetan dialects' to refer to a number of languages derived from Old Tibetan and spoken mainly in the Tibetan cultural area, currently covering six countries (China, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Myanmar). This label is problematic because the so-called 'Tibetan dialects' do not allow mutual intelligibility. In the beginning of the 21st century, the term 'Tibetan dialects' used to designate the languages derived from Old Tibetan has been progressively replaced by 'Tibetan languages' (Zeisler, 2004; Gawne & Hill, 2017). Tournadre (2014) proposed to adopt the term 'Tibetic' to refer to this well-defined language family, and the term is now widely used (Sun, 2014; Gawne & Hill, 2017; Yliniemi, 2017; Hyslop & Tsering, 2017; Chirkova, 2017; Suzuki, 2017; DeLancey, 2017). [3]

The Tibetic family includes at least 50 languages. However, the total number of dialects and varieties certainly amounts to more than 200. The term 'Tibetic languages' is preferable to 'Tibetan languages' because these languages are spoken not only by Tibetans *per se*, but also by other ethnic groups such as Ladakhi, Balti, Lahuli, Sherpa, Bhutanese, Sikkimese, etc. who do not actually consider themselves to be Tibetan. [4] They do not call their languages 'Tibetan' (*BOD.SKAD* in Tibetan). Similarly, we do not talk of Latin or Italian languages, but of Romance languages, and do not think of French, Portuguese, Italian, Catalan or Romanian as various

---

[2] Online version (consulted 10/05/2017)
[3] The term 'Tibetic' has been used differently by other authors to refer to 'Bodish', 'Bodic', 'Himalayish' languages, or other intermediate groupings within the Tibeto-Burman family. For details, see Tournadre (2014).
[4] Conversely, some ethnic groups in Tibet are officially classified as Tibetans (*zangzu* in Chinese) by the People's Republic of China but their native languages are not Tibetic.

'dialects' of Latin or Italian (Tournadre, 2014). Finally, let us note that Literary Tibetan is vastly different from the modern spoken languages.

In order to circumscribe a manageable dataset and conduct an in-depth analysis, we will focus here on one Ü-Tsang spoken dialect that belongs to the Central Tibetic language group, and which is usually referred to as Lhasa spoken Tibetan or standard spoken Tibetan. We will also consider Classical Tibetan in order to understand the evolutionary paths that 'giving verbs' have followed leading to the current linguistic situation in Lhasa Tibetan.

2.3. 'Give' in Classical Tibetan

In Classical Tibetan, the main word used to convey the general meaning 'give' is *SBYIN/BYIN*.[5] It may be glossed as 'give, bestow, present, offer, donate'. Its honorific and humilific forms are respectively *GNANG* and *'BUL/PHUL*. Other lexical verbs are attested in Classical Tibetan to convey the concept of 'giving'. Among them are *STER* 'give, bestow', *SPROD/SPRAD* 'pass on, hand over, give', *GTONG/BTANG* 'give, give away, send, let go', and *GTAD/GTOD* 'direct towards, hand over, give'. There are also *MCHOD* 'offer, venerate, eat', *STSAL* 'bestow, give', and more marginally, *GSOL* 'ask, wear, dress, beg', but also meaning 'give' in some expressions such as *MTSHAN GSOL* 'give/award a name title', and in the noun *GSOL.RAS* 'donation', and *GYED* 'offer, distribute'.

In the modern Tibetic languages, the most frequently attested verb is *SBYIN*, but the other verbs are also found in some languages. For example, *BTANG* is the main verb for 'give' in Ladakh and *GTOD* is used in Spiti (Tournadre & Suzuki, *forthcoming*). In some languages such as Amdo and Sherpa, *SBYIN* and *STER* are used as suppletive verbs to express the perfective past versus the imperfective/future of the basic verb 'give' (Robin, *forthcoming*; Tournadre *et al.*, 2009)

2.4. 'Give' in Lhasa spoken Tibetan

---

[5] It is possible to distinguish three main periods of written Tibetan or Literary Tibetan: Old Tibetan (8th-12th c.), Classical Tibetan (13th-19th c.) and Modern Literary Tibetan (20th c.- now). However, some contemporary authors still write in a style close to Classical Tibetan (Tournadre & Suzuki, *forthcoming*).

The basic way of saying 'give' in Lhasa spoken Tibetan is *SPRAD*. Here is one example from the Tibet Student Corpus[6] (TSC):

(2) *dngul*   *de*   ***sprad**-song*
money   DEM   **give**-DIR.PFV
'He gave the money.' (TSC)

In this dialect, *STER* 'give, offer, treat' is a synonym of *SPRAD*, with a more specific meaning. The verb *GNANG* is the honorific form of *SPRAD*, and is also a frequent light verb. *BTANG* is a common lexical verb meaning 'send' or 'let go' (but not 'give'), as well as a very frequent light verb. *PHUL* is the humilific form of *SPRAD*, and can also be used as a light verb. *SBYIN* is not used as a verb in Lhasa spoken Tibetan, but the morpheme is found in the compound form *BYIN.RLABS* 'blessing' or *SBYIN.BDAG* 'a benefactor'.

In English, a verb like 'give' has many non-literal senses and frequently appears as a light verb in (semi-)fossilised constructions. However, in Lhasa Tibetan, *SPRAD* is very rarely used figuratively and does not appear as a light verb.

One reason for this situation might be that *SPRAD* seems to have become the most frequent and basic term to say 'give' in Lhasa Tibetan fairly recently. It is not so common to use this verb root in other Tibetan dialects and it is quite rare in Old and Classical Tibetan.

Therefore, *SPRAD* might not have developed many figurative meanings, which thus results in its not being often used in fossilised constructions, partly because it has not had the time to do so, and *BTANG* had already been selected in that function as a hypernymic light verb in Lhasa Tibetan.

2.5. *'Give' as a light verb*

Jespersen (1965) coined the term 'light verb' to refer to verbs appearing in an English 'verb + noun phrase construction' as in 'have dinner' or 'take a shower'. Light verb constructions are a type of complex verbal lexeme which usually result from the collocational association of a nominal element and a verbal element, the latter being called a 'light verb'.[7] One of the salient

---

[6] The Tibet Student Corpus is a semi-guided corpus of spontaneous conversations in standard Tibetan collected in Lhasa in 2010-2011 by Eric Mélac (at the time a doctoral student at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3). It is 4 hours long and includes 8 Tibetan native speakers, aged between 21 and 29, and all studying at Tibet University or the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (Lhasa, Tibetan Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China).

[7] One can note however that the complement of a light verb is not always nominal, as it might look like a noun, but have no exact lexical equivalent in this syntactic category, such as in 'have a go'. In addition, many idiomatic

properties of light verbs is their limited semantic weight and their involvement in a linguistic sequence that functions as a complex predicate. It is therefore the verb complement that mostly carries the semantic weight of the construction (Tournadre & Lessan-Pezechki, *forthcoming*)**.**

Lexical verbs that are good candidates to function as light verbs belong to various semantic classes. There are mainly 'action verbs' ('do', 'make', 'hit', 'eat'), 'transfer verbs' ('give', 'put', 'carry', 'set', 'send', 'take'), 'motion verbs' ('go', 'come', 'run') and 'state verbs' ('be', 'have', 'become', 'stay') (Tournadre & Lessan-Pezechki, *forthcoming*).

Light verbs are not as 'light' as they seem, as they may convey significant lexical information, and they may also encode some grammatical meaning, particularly in the fields of aspect, modality, voice and diathesis (Simon, 2011; Tournadre & Lessan-Pezechki, *forthcoming*).

In order to illustrate the fact that light verbs contribute to lexical meaning, one can look at some Tibetan constructions that differ only by the light verb. For example, the nouns SKAD 'sound, voice, language', LAN 'response, answer, message', and ME 'fire' may occur with various light verbs, leading to constructions with different meanings.

SKAD BRGYAB (literally, *voice hit*) 'shout' and SKAD BTANG (lit., *voice send*) 'call'; LAN BRGYAB or LAN BTAB (lit., *response hit*; *response throw*) 'answer' and LAN BTANG (lit., *response send*) 'send a message'; ME BRGYAB (lit., *fire hit*) 'set fire to' and ME BTANG (lit., *fire send*) 'make a fire', etc.

These pairs reveal that light verbs do contribute to the structuration of the lexicon and constitute various paradigms.

'Give' appears in the list of the verbs that are commonly selected to be used as light verbs cross-linguistically (Mohanan, 2006; Tournadre & Lessan-Pezechki, *forthcoming*). In English, 'give' is a light verb in many constructions. As expected with the light verb constructions, their fossilization is quite idiosyncratic and will differ greatly from one language to another, and even from one dialect to another. Light verb constructions raise a problem for translation, since it is not possible to document all of them in a monolingual or in a bilingual dictionary. Therefore, when translating 'give' from English into Tibetan, it is first necessary to analyse in what specific construction 'give' appears in English before looking for a Tibetan equivalent. We are now going to illustrate this difficulty with a few Tibetan translations of the light verb 'give' in

---

constructions with a generic verb and an adjectival, prepositional or even onomatopoeic complement can be classified as 'light verb constructions', such as 'take into account', 'do wrong' or 'go boom'.

English. Starting from English does not mean that English is considered a reference language, or even a language with a typical distribution of the verb 'give'. It simply aims to show that the precise mapping of the semantic territory of 'give' in two unrelated languages can be highly complex.

a.   *The English light verb 'give' can quite often be translated using another light verb in Lhasa Tibetan, especially BTANG, which is the most frequent light verb in this dialect:*

'Give a hint' *GO.BRDA BTANG* (lit., *notification send*); 'give a pat' *CAG.CAG BTANG* (lit., *smack send*); 'give an order' *BKOD.PA BTANG* (lit., *order send*); 'give a punishment' *NYES.CHAD BTANG* (lit., *punishment send*); 'give amnesty' *BTSON.BKROL BTANG* (lit., *amnesty send*); 'give a warning' *SNGON.BRDA BTANG* (lit., *signal send*); 'give charity' *SBYIN.PA BTANG* (lit., *donation send*); 'give a party' *THUGS.SPRO BTANG* (lit., *party [hon.] send*); 'give an ultimatum' *MTHA'.TSHIG BTANG* (lit., *ultimatum send*); 'give a sign' *BRDA BTANG* (lit., *indication send*); 'give a hand' *ROGS.PA BTANG* (lit., *friend send*), etc. [8]

b.   *Lhasa Tibetan possesses two other very frequent light verbs that will be favoured when translating some instances of the English light verb 'give': BRGYAB and BYED* (Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003; DeLancey, 1990; Kopp, 1998; Tournadre & Jiatso, 2001; Bartee, 2011; Randall, 2016; Mélac, Robin & Simon, 2014, *inter alia*).

'Give an explanation' *'GREL.BSHAD BRGYAB* (lit., *explain hit*); 'give an answer' *LAN BRGYAB* (lit., *response hit*); 'give a call' *KHA.PAR BRGYAB* (lit., *telephone hit*); 'give advice' *BSLABS.BYA BRGYAB* (lit., *advice hit*); 'give an injection' *KHAB BRGYAB* (lit., *needle hit*); 'give instructions' *SLOB.GSO BRGYAB* (lit., *education hit*)

'Give assurances' *'GAN.LEN BYED* (lit., *guarantee do*); 'give a lecture' *LEGS.SBYAR BYED* (lit., *lecture do*); 'give medical care' *SMAN.BCOS BYED* (lit., *treatment do*); 'give credit' *YID.CHES BYED*

(lit., *trust do*); 'give support' RGYAB.SKYOR BYED (lit., *support do*); 'give consent, give support' MOS.MTHUN BYED or KHAS.LEN BYED (lit., *agreement do*, *acceptance do*), etc.[9]

c.   *In quite a number of instances, 'give' is used in English as a light verb to express a verbal communication. In these cases, it is quite frequent to simply find BSHAD or ZER ('say') in Lhasa Tibetan:*

'Give an account' GNAS.TSHUL BSHAD (lit., *event say*); 'give one's opinion' BSAM. 'CHAR BSHAD (lit., *opinion say*); 'give a teaching' CHOS BSHAD (lit., *doctrine say*); 'give thanks' THUGS.RJE.CHE ZER (lit., *thanks say*), etc.

d.   *Finally, constructions involving the light verb 'give' in English are sometimes translated into Tibetan with a collocational construction, with a compound form, or with a monomorphemic verb:*

'Give a haircut' SKRA BZO (lit., *hair make*); 'give a deadline' DUS.BKAG BZO (lit., *schedule make*); 'give birth' PHRU.GU SKYE (lit., *child be.born*); 'give as bride' MNA'.MA STER (lit., *bride bestow*); 'give a name' MING BTAGS (lit., *name attach*); 'give notice' DGONGS.PA ZHU (lit., *intent [hon.] ask [hum.]*); 'give a ride' MO.TA NANG-LA BSKYAL (lit., *car in carry*); 'give way' BTANG; 'give hugs' 'THAM, etc.

This analysis and listing of constructions that would be appropriate translations of the English verb 'give' reveal several points that are essential to further our analysis of 'give' in Tibetan. Firstly, 'give' is not only highly abstract and polysemous in English, it also appears as a light verb in a great variety of fossilised constructions, making the predictability of the use of 'give' instead of another light verb for a given idiomatic construction quite low. [10] Secondly, although the translation of 'give' when it has a basic meaning of 'handing something over to someone'

---

[9] From a historical perspective, most of the lexical components may be further analysed. For example, KHAS.LEN 'acceptance' etymologically means 'take with the mouth', 'GREL.BSHAD 'explain' means 'comment and explain', SLOB.GSO 'education' means 'teach (and) raise', and 'GAN.LEN 'responsibility' means 'take responsibility', etc.

[10] The use of light verbs is in essence idiosyncratic, as the construction has to be memorised in its entirety. It is for example difficult to explain systematically why in English 'give a talk' and 'make an announcement' are perfect collocations while '??make a talk' and '??give an announcement' are not.

is quite straightforward in Lhasa Tibetan (*SPRAD*), the translation of figurative 'give' is in no way easy to systematise. Finally, the Tibetan language has also developed very common light verbs, but *SPRAD* is not one of them.

3. The distribution of *SPRAD*, *BTANG*, *GNANG* and *PHUL* in Lhasa Tibetan

Now that we have shown that the answer to the question 'How do you say "give" in Tibetan?' is not as simple as it seems, we can adopt a form-to-function approach starting from Tibetan. We will focus on the most common morphemes that can express the notion of 'giving' in Lhasa Tibetan by exploring briefly their evolution from Classical Tibetan to contemporary Lhasa spoken Tibetan.

3.1. The Tibetan verb *SPRAD*

The verb *SPRAD* is the most common way of saying 'give' when it means 'hand something over'. However, *SPRAD* is quite monosemous, literal and unproductive. In Classical Tibetan, the meaning of *SPRAD* was different from its contemporary use in Lhasa Tibetan, as it generally meant 'make two things meet'.

The verb *SPRAD* appears 11 times in the TSC, where it is always associated with a concrete object (money, food, things, socks, gloves…). This confirms that the use of *SPRAD* is quite different from 'give' in English, the latter having most often a figurative meaning (Gilquin, 2008).

3.2. The Tibetan verb *BTANG*

The verb *BTANG* is a very productive light verb. Its frequency is confirmed in the TSC, as it appears 130 times in the corpus. Here are a few examples of light verbs constructions involving *BTANG* that can be found in the TSC:

GNYID.LAM BTANG (lit., *dream send*) 'dream'; *YIG.TSHAD BTANG* (lit., *exam send*) 'take an exam'; *SLOB.GRWA BTANG* (lit., *school send*) 'send to school'; *BSAM.BLO BTANG* (lit., *thinking send*) 'reflect'; *MO.TA BTANG* (lit., *car send*) 'drive a car'; *BED.SPYOD BTANG* (lit., *utility send*) 'use'; *GZHAS BTANG* (lit., *song send*) 'sing'; *DU.BA BTANG* (lit., *smoke send*) 'smoke, emit smoke'; *GCIN.PA BTANG* (lit., *urine send*) 'urinate'; *MGO.SKOR BTANG* (lit., *deceit send*) 'deceive'; *SPYOD.LAM BTANG* (lit., *conduct send*) 'behave'; *KHA.PAR BTANG* 'give a call'; *CHAR.PA BTANG* (lit., *rain send*) 'rain', etc.

In Classical Tibetan, the verb *BTANG* meant 'give, send, let go' (according to the reference dictionary *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, 1993). Nowadays in Lhasa Tibetan, it means 'send' or 'let go', when used as an independent lexical verb. However, as the TSC confirms it, it is a highly frequent light verb used in many diverse constructions. It is possible to map some of the semantic extensions of the light verb *BTANG* from its supposed lexical origin meaning 'give'. As a light verb, the semantic extensions of *BTANG* in Lhasa Tibetan may be subdivided into 6 categories:

a)   *Constructions with a transfer meaning implying an addressee or a beneficiary*

NYES.CHAD BTANG 'give a punishment'; *BTSON.BKROL BTANG* 'give amnesty'; *SNGON.BRDA BTANG*, 'give a warning'; *SBYIN.PA BTANG* 'give charity'; *NYES.YANGS BTANG* 'give clemency'; *BRDA BTANG*, 'give a sign'; *ROGS.PA BTANG* 'give a hand', etc.

b)   *Constructions related to driving*

MO.TA BTANG 'drive a car'; *GNAM.GRU BTANG* (lit., *plane send*) 'fly a plane'; *GRU.GZINGS BTANG* (lit., *boat send*) 'drive a boat', etc.

c)   *Physiological and psychological constructions*

GCIN.PA BTANG 'urinate'; *RTUG.DRI BTANG* (lit., *fart send*) 'fart'; *BTSOG.PA BTANG* (lit., *dirt send*) or *SKYAG.PA BTANG* (lit., *excrement send*) 'defecate'; *BSAM.BLO BTANG* 'reflect', etc.

d)   *Activity constructions*

SKYID.PO BTANG (lit., *glad send*) 'enjoy oneself'; *SPYOD.LAM BTANG* 'behave'; *THUGS.SPRO BTANG* 'give a party'; *GZHAS BTANG* 'sing', etc.

e)   *Non-controllable physiological and psychological constructions*

GNYID.LAM BTANG 'dream'; *NA.TSHA BTANG* (lit., *illness send*) 'hurt, be sore, be in pain', etc.

f)   *Meteorological constructions*

CHAR.PA BTANG 'rain'; *GANGS BTANG* (lit., *snow send*) 'snow'; *SER.BA BTANG* (lit., *hail send*) 'hail', etc.

One can notice that in most of these paradigms *BTANG* includes a controllable semantic feature. Even for the physiological verbs ('urinate', 'defecate', etc.), *BTANG* implies a controllable activity, and contrasts with the light verb *SHOR*, expressing the accidental nature of the action (*unintentionally* 'urinate', 'defecate', etc.).[11] The only non-controllable paradigms involving *BTANG* as a light verb are the e) and f) types, which are related to physiological or psychological perceptions and meteorological events.

From the meaning 'hand over' to a meaning 'send' or 'let go', the semantic shift is fairly obvious. In the first case, the transfer of the object involves that the giver and the recipient are in two separate places. In the second case, the giver and the recipient are not necessarily present, but the agent simply allows a transfer. In both cases, the central meaning of transfer is retained.

However, in the process of becoming a very common light verb, *BTANG* has undergone a further process of semantic bleaching. Sometimes the notion of transfer is retained, but the whole transaction is abstract. For example, *GSHE.GSHE BTANG* (lit., *scold.scold send*) means 'blame someone for something', and it is possible to picture a responsibility transfer.

However, in other cases, *BTANG* simply seems to encode a contact between two entities, without invoking an actual transfer. For example, *'PHUR.'PHUR BTANG* (lit., *rub.rub send*) means 'stroke' and *LAG.PA BTANG* (lit., *hand send*) means 'hold hands'.

---

[11] The unintentional feature may also be conveyed by the lexical verb *DON* 'come out, emit', e.g., *KHRAG DON* 'bleed', *KHA CHU DON* 'drool', etc.

In yet other cases, *BTANG* seems to denote the production or the release of something. For example, *CHAR.PA BTANG* means 'rain', *GCIN.PA BTANG* 'urinate', *GNYID.LAM BTANG* 'dream' and *BSAM.BLO BTANG* 'think'.

Finally, the light verb *BTANG* is sometimes used with an even more bleached meaning, and seems to refer simply to some performance. For example, *MO.TA BTANG* means 'drive a car', *SKYID.PO BTANG* means 'enjoy oneself', and *SPYOD.LAM BTANG* 'behave'. [12]

3.3. The Tibetan verb *GNANG*

The verb *GNANG* is used as a plain lexical verb in Classical Tibetan to mean 'give' in the honorific. In Lhasa Tibetan, it is used both as a lexical verb to convey the honorific meaning of *SPRAD* 'give, hand over' and *BYED* 'do' (Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003). It also occurs as an honorific morpheme after an honorific lexical verb such as *GSUNG* ('say') or after the light verb *BTANG* (see below).

In the TSC, it appears 24 times. In no occurrence, is it the honorific form of *SPRAD* ('give, hand over'), but it is the honorific of *BYED* ('do') 7 times in the corpus. It appears twice as part of the honorific imperative suffix -*GNANG.ROGS*. In the remaining 13 occurrences, it is an honorific light verb or is part of an honorific compound verb. It is compatible with different kinds of actions. Here are a few examples from the TSC:

'TSHAL.GNANG (lit., *seek.give [hon.]*) 'look for' is the honorific of *'TSHAL*; *DRAN.GNANG* (lit., *remember.give [hon.]*) 'remember' is the honorific of *DRAN*; *MOS.MTHUN GNANG* 'agree' is the honorific of *MOS.MTHUN BYED*; *BZHUGS.GNANG* (lit., *stay [hon.].give [hon.]*) 'stay' is an alternative to the simple form *BZHUGS*, the honorific of *BSDAD*; *GSUNG.GNANG* (lit., *say [hon.].give [hon.]*) 'say' is an alternative to the simple form *GSUNG*, the honorific of *BSHAD, etc.*

---

[12] One can note that *BTANG* had already been promoted as a frequent light verb in Classical Tibetan (Gyurme, 1992). In some dialects such as Amdo and Dzongkha, *BTANG* has also grammaticalised further into an auxiliary or a 'secondary verb'. (van Driem & Tshering, 1998; Robin, *forthcoming*; Tournadre & Shao, *forthcoming*)

3.4. The Tibetan verb PHUL

In Classical Tibetan as in contemporary Lhasa spoken Tibetan, *PHUL* is a lexical verb that is the humilific form of *SPRAD* 'give, hand over'. In the TSC, it only appears once in the idiomatic expression *ZHAL.PAR PHUL* ('give a phone call', hum.), in which *PHUL* is undeniably a light verb.

What is interesting about the verb *PHUL* is that when it is used as a humilific light verb, it does not correspond to the verb *SPRAD* on the ordinary plane, but to other verbs instead. For example, the ordinary form of the humilific *MTSHAN PHUL* 'give a name' is *MING BTAG*, literally meaning 'attach a name'. The ordinary form of *ZHAL.PAR PHUL* 'give a phone call' is *KHA.PAR BRGYAB* (or *KHA.PAR BTANG*). In these two examples, the original meaning of the verb *PHUL* is not much altered, as the act of 'giving a name' or 'giving a phone call' can both be seen as a 'transfer of data' between two people.

However, the meaning of the verb *PHUL* seems to have bleached further in constructions such as *PHYAG PHUL*, meaning 'prostrate' (lit., *hand [hon.] give [hum.]*) or *ZHABS.SKOR PHUL*, meaning 'circumambulate', i.e. 'walk around a religious emblem' (lit., *foot [hon.].turn give [hum.]*). The ordinary form of *PHYAG PHUL* is *PHYAG 'TSHAL* (lit., *hand [hon.] beg*), and the ordinary form of *ZHABS.SKOR PHUL* is *SKOR.BA BRGYAB* (lit., *turn hit*). In order to examine why the humilific and honorific forms *PHUL* and *GNANG* are actually more productive than the ordinary verb *SPRAD*, it is first necessary to understand the mechanics of the honorific domain in Tibetan.

4. 'Give' and the honorific domain

4.1 The honorific domain in Tibetan

We are using the term 'domain' here, as it is slightly misleading to call the honorific system of Tibetan a register, since 'a register' refers to a certain linguistic variety that has a diffuse impact on a speaker's speech and is particularly dependent on social settings. The use of Tibetan

honorifics is more complex, as it reflects the speaker's attitude toward the referents of the words he uses by positioning them on the social scale.

In all the world's languages, there are words, constructions, terms of address and/or grammatical paradigms that encode respect towards the addressee, as well as the things and people that the speaker refers to (Ide, 1989; Agha, 1994, *inter alia*). However, several Asian languages possess an honorific domain that is more pervasive and systematised. For example, there have been numerous studies on the honorific systems of Japanese and Korean (Okamoto, 1999; Strauss & Eun, 2005, *inter alia*). Several scholars have also investigated the honorific domain of Tibetan (Hajime, 1975; Rdorje et al., 1993; DeLancey, 1998; Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003; Denwood, 1999; Dorje & Lhazom, 2002).

Regarding the general conditions of the use of the honorific domain in Tibetan, it can first be noticed that it is quite limited both dialectally and sociolectally. The Lhasa aristocracy is reputed to be the only Tibetan speakers that use it 'perfectly'. The vast majority of speakers of standard Tibetan employ an honorific system that is less pervasive and simpler than in the Lhasa upper-class sociolect (Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003). Secondly, it is true that the general register of the sentence will influence the use of the honorific domain, and Tibetan speakers tend to use more honorifics in formal situations. However, in order to really understand how the honorific system of Tibetan functions, it is necessary to take into account several other linguistic parameters.

First of all, the honorific domain affects many linguistic forms, but is systematised differently according to the syntactic category of a given word. In Tibetan, the honorific domain may concern nouns, verbs, pronouns, suffixes and terms of address. Tournadre & Dorje (1998, 2003) distinguish four planes for the honorific domain in addition to the ordinary plane: the honorific, the humilific, the high honorific and the double honorific. The plane for a given linguistic item is chosen according to the social status of the participants mentioned in the sentence (explicit or implicit) with respect to the speaker. The honorific domain not only refers to people, but also to their spheres, that is, the objects and other entities that are related to them. What is special about verbs is that they generally connect several participants in a sentence, which makes all of these planes relevant for some verbs, whereas nouns generally distinguish between only the ordinary and honorific forms at most. The high honorific plane concerns very few verbs and is used to convey a highly reverential attitude. In order to illustrate the other planes of the honorific domain (honorific, humilific and double honorific), we will take SPRAD ('give, hand over') as an example.

4.2. The functioning of 'give' in the Tibetan honorific system

The special relation that the verb 'give' bears with the honorific domain has already been investigated by Loveday (1986) in his study of Japanese from a sociolinguistic perspective. In Japanese, 'give' possesses several translations depending on the social relationship between the two participants (Loveday, 1986, cited in Newman, 1996).

In Tibetan, in order to understand the honorific system of transitive and ditransitive verbs, the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee is relevant, as well as the social relationship between the participants in the sentence. The basic rules for the use of SPRAD (honorific form GNANG, humilific form PHUL and double honorific form PHUL.GNANG) are the following:

a. The honorific form GNANG encodes that the agent has a higher status than the speaker

b. The humilific form PHUL encodes that the agent has a lower status than the recipient

c. The double honorific form PHUL.GNANG encodes that the agent has a higher status than the speaker and that the agent has a lower status than the recipient

In order to illustrate these diverse possibilities, let us consider a few protagonists: some ordinary people (the speaker, Tenzin and Tsering), two monks (high on the social scale) and a *Rinpoche* (a reincarnated lama, considered very high on the social scale).
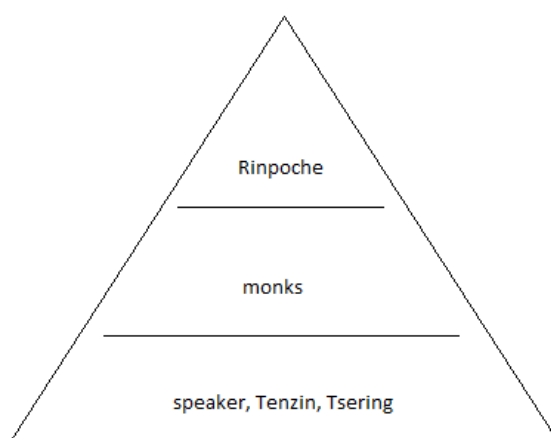

Figure 1: Schematic illustration of the Tibetan social scale

With a transfer verb such as *SPRAD*, some of the most common combinations are the following:

Table 1: 'Give' and the honorific domain in Tibetan

|			
Speaker	→	Tenzin	*SPRAD* (ordinary, because speaker on same level as Tenzin)
Tenzin	→	Tsering	*SPRAD* (ordinary, Tenzin = Tsering, and spkr = Tenzin)
Tenzin	↗	monk	*PHUL* (humilific, Tenzin < monk, and spkr = Tenzin)
Monk	↘	Tenzin	*GNANG* (honorific, monk > Tenzin, and spkr < monk)
Monk	→	monk	*GNANG* (hon., monk = monk, and spkr < monk)
Monk	↗	Rinpoche	*PHUL.GNANG* (double hon., monk < Rinpoche, and spkr < monk)
Rinpoche	↘	monk	*GNANG* (hon., Rinpoche > monk, and spkr < Rinpoche)
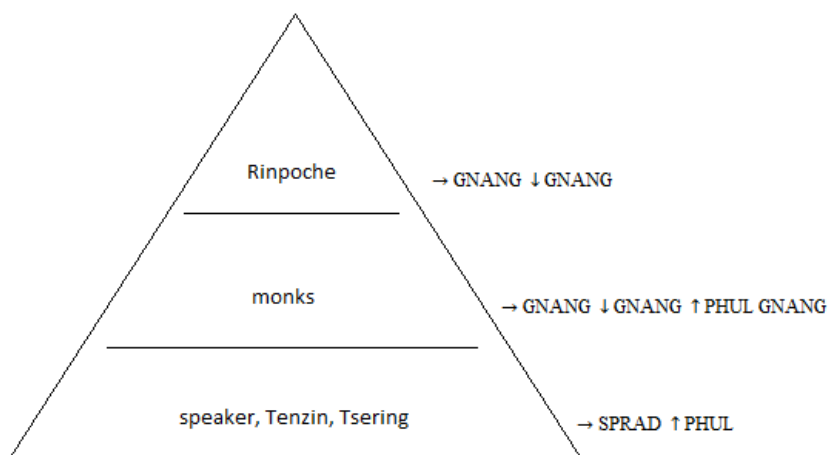
Figure 2: The form of 'give' in Tibetan according to the social positions of the agent and the recipient

What can be noticed from this schematic presentation is first that the humilific plane is not the symmetrical opposite of the honorific plane. The honorific form *GNANG* can encode a downward transfer, and also a horizontal transfer if the agent is higher than the speaker. The humilific form can only be used for an upward transfer with an agent that is not higher than the speaker, and the double honorific form will be appropriate for an upward transfer when the agent is superior to the speaker.

Nevertheless, in addition to the high variation that exists in the use of the honorific system, what makes it even more complex is the strict convention in Tibetan culture for a speaker to

pretend that he is not higher on the social scale than anyone else. Therefore, even when a monk or a *Rinpoche* is the speaker, they will never use honorific words in reference to themselves or express that it is an upward transfer when they are recipients.

4.3. The emergence of GNANG and PHUL as light verbs of the honorific domain

Is it now possible to explain why SPRAD has not redeployed as a light verb, whereas the honorific form GNANG and the humilific form PHUL have been quite productive? [13]

It is undeniable that in Tibetan there is a special relation between the honorific domain and the verb 'give'. We would argue that this phenomenon is not just a random idiosyncrasy of Tibetan, but may rely on the special cognitive status of the notion of transfer, as capturing social hierarchy quite accurately.

What the cross-linguistic research on light verbs has demonstrated is that light verbs generally come from frequent verbs with a basic meaning (Butt & Lahiri, 2003; Mohanan, 2006). It is the case in Tibetan since the three most frequent light verbs BYED, BTANG, and BRGYAB respectively mean 'do', 'give, send', and 'hit, throw'. What is special about the verb 'give' however may be that it refers to one of the most basic interpersonal actions of the human behavioural repertoire. Therefore, 'give' is particularly relevant for the honorific domain, and it is indeed one of the rare verbs in Lhasa Tibetan that possesses a humilific form.[14] The verb SPRAD is also one of the only two verbs that possesses a double honorific form PHUL.GNANG (together with BSHAD 'say', whose double honorific form is ZHU.GNANG). The verb 'say' is similar to 'give' in the sense that they are both basic verbs prototypically connecting two human beings.

In Tibetan, the honorific form GNANG has become a very frequent light verb (as confirmed by its frequent occurrences in the TSC), and its meaning has bleached so that it does not seem to encode much more than an honorific semantic feature in some of these constructions.

Although the verb PHUL is far less frequent and productive than GNANG, its meaning has also bleached when it is used as a light verb. Let us consider an example from the TSC:

---

[13] It has to be noticed however that there are a few figurative expressions involving SPRAD, and that GNANG has been far more productive than PHUL.

[14] The other humilific verbs of Tibetan are ZHU 'eat, drink, say', the humilific form of ZA 'eat', BTHUNG 'drink' and BSHAD 'say', BCAR 'come close to sb., call on sb., meet sb.', the humilific form of 'GRO 'go' or THUG 'meet', and MJAL 'visit, see', the humilific form of THUG 'meet' and MTHONG 'see'.

(3) *tshe.ring lha.mo=s   khong-la   zhal.par   phul…*
Tsering Lhamo=ERG   her-DAT   phone (hon.) give (hum.)

'Tsering Lhamo gave her a call…' (TSC)

In this example, the speaker uses the verb *PHUL*, but it does not mean 'hand something over'. It expresses a communicative contact between two people, as well as a mark of respect that the agent shows to the recipient. As mentioned before, the ordinary form of *ZHAL.PAR PHUL* is *KHA.PAR BRGYAB* (or *KHA.PAR BTANG*), and not *KHA.PAR SPRAD* for this meaning, which again shows that the humilific feature of *PHUL* was more important in its selection as a light verb than its basic meaning of 'giving'.

In some constructions, the ditransitive feature of *PHUL* is not even retained. As we saw in 3.4, *PHUL* is often used as a light verb for religious performances: *MCHOD.PA PHUL* 'make offerings', *PHYAG PHUL* 'prostrate', *ZHABS.SKOR PHUL* 'circumambulate', and *DMAR.MCHOD PHUL* (lit., *sacrifice give*) 'make a sacrifice'. In these cases, the meaning of *PHUL* has bleached further, as the constructions seem to refer to specific acts without any explicit transfer. However, we would argue that these acts imply an underlying beneficiary to which it is essential for Tibetans to show great respect. Tibetan people perform those rituals in a spirit of devotion to the Buddha or a deity. When we know how essential religious devotion is in Tibetan culture, we can understand why the humilific *PHUL* has emerged as a light verb to refer to those spiritual performances.

5. Conclusion

We have collected data on the translation of 'give' into Tibetan in order to investigate both the functioning of light verbs and the system of honorific verbs in this language. We have shown that in Lhasa spoken Tibetan, the most basic way of translating the verb 'give' when it has the literal meaning of 'handing over' is *SPRAD*. However, we noticed that this verb is not used as a light verb in Tibetan. The lack of productivity of *SPRAD* might result from the fact that it has only become the basic and frequent equivalent of 'give' in Lhasa Tibetan when other 'giving verbs' had already been selected to participate in light verb constructions. The emergence of light verbs in a language can be a relatively slow process involving the semantic evolution of a

lexical verb and the crystallisation of specific word combinations. For example, the Tibetan verb *BTANG* went through that process, and it already held the position of a light verb involved in transfer constructions in Classical Tibetan, thus being a long-established competitor to *SPRAD* for that function.

What also drew our attention is that, although *SPRAD* has not become a light verb in Lhasa Tibetan, its honorific form *GNANG*, and to a lesser extent its humilific form *PHUL*, have undeniably gone through that process. We argued that this is probably not a mere coincidence, since the honorific domain is particularly relevant when referring to a transfer between two people. The verb 'give' triggers a notional and linguistic representation that prototypically involves two human participants, and therefore captures a scene where social relationship is crucial. In order to encode the honorific domain for an abstract transfer, and later even for other types of actions, the Lhasa dialect has promoted *GNANG* and *PHUL* to the status of light verbs, because they are emblematic of this social domain, which is particularly pervasive in the strictly hierarchical society of the Tibetan capital. As we suggested, it seems that both universal semantic associations and cultural sensitivities can shed light on the motivations behind the selection of those specific verbs as central pivots of the honorific system of Tibetan.

Abbreviation list

Dictionaries

Das, S. C. (1902). *A Tibetan-English dictionary with Sanskrit synonyms*. Bengal Calcutta. Secretariat Book Depôt.

Dorje, D. S. & Lhazom, T. (2002). *Tibetan Honorific Speeches*. Lhasa: Tibet University Press.

Goldstein, M. C. (1984). *English-Tibetan dictionary of modern Tibetan*. Univ of California Press.

Goldstein, M. C., & Kashi, T. D. (1978). *Tibetan English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Mélac, E., Robin, F. and Simon, C. (2014). *Vocabulaire thématique de langue parlée français-tibétain*. Paris: L' Asiathèque.

Rdo rje, b., blo bstan, dpal ldan, yang 'dzoms & 'phrin las. (1993). *zhe sa'i tshig mdzod rab gsal melong*. Mig rigs dpe skrun khang.

Zhang, Y. (1993). *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Vol. 1). Min zu chu ban she.

The Tibetan and Himalayan Library

http://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php

Oxford English dictionary online (2007)

http://www.oed.com/

Corpora

COCA

Davies, Mark. (2008-) *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): 520 million words, 1990-present*. Available online at http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/.

TSC

Mélac, Eric (2010-2011) *The Tibet Student Corpus* (TSC): 4 hours 9 min.

Books and Articles

Agha, A. (1994). Honorification. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *23*(1), 277-302.

Bartee, E. (2011). The role of animacy in the verbal morphology of Dongwang Tibetan. In *Himalayan Languages and Linguistics* (pp. 131-182). Brill.

Butt, M., & Lahiri, A. (2002). Historical stability vs. historical change. *Unpublished Ms. http://ling. uni-konstanz. de/pages/home/butt*.

Chirkova, K. (2017). Evidentials in Pingwu Baima. In Gawne, L. & Hill, N. W. (Eds., 2017). Evidential Systems of Tibeta, Languages (Vol. 302). Walter de Gruyter, GmbH & Co KG.

DeLancey, S. (1990). Ergativity and the cognitive model of event structure in Lhasa Tibetan. *Cognitive Linguistics (includes Cognitive Linguistic Bibliography)*, *1*(3), 289-322.

DeLancey, S. (1998). Semantic categorization in Tibetan honorific nouns. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 109-123.

DeLancey, S. (2017). Evidentiality in Tibetic. *file:///C:/Users/Kladpa/Downloads/Ch20_Evidentiality%20in%20Tibetic%20(3).pdf*

Denwood, P. (1999). *Tibetan* (Vol. 3). John Benjamins Publishing.

Gawne, L., & Hill, N. W. (Eds.). (2017). *Evidential Systems of Tibetan Languages* (Vol. 302). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Gilquin, G. (2008). What you think ain't what you get: Highly polysemous verbs in mind and language. *Du fait grammatical au fait cognitif. From Gram to Mind: Grammar as Cognition*, *2*, 235-255.

Gyurme, K. (1992). *Le clair miroir : enseignement de la grammaire tibétaine*. Traduction, adaptation et commentaires de Heather Stoddard & Nicolas Tournadre. Editions Prajña.

Hajime, K. (1975). The honorifics in Tibetan. *Acta Asiatica29*, 56-74.

Hyslop, G. & Tsering, K. (2017). An overview of some epistemic categories in Dzongkha. In Gawne, L., & Hill, N. W. (Eds., 2017). *Evidential Systems of Tibetan Languages* (Vol. 302). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingual journal of cross-cultural and interlanguage communication*, *8*(2-3), 223-248.

Jespersen, O. (1965). A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles Part IV: Morphology.

Kopp, T. K. (1998). Verbalizers in Lhasa Tibetan. MA thesis. The University of Texas at Arlington.

Loveday, L. (1986). *Explorations in Japanese sociolinguistics*. John Benjamins Publishing.

Mohanan, T. (2006). Grammatical verbs (with special reference to light verbs). *The Blackwell Companion to Syntax*, 459-492.

Montaut, A. (1991). *Aspects, voix et diathèses en hindi moderne : syntaxe, sémantique, énonciation*. Préf. de Claude Hagège. Louvain ; Paris : Ed. Peeters.

Newman, J. (1996). *Give: A cognitive linguistic study* (Vol. 7). Walter de Gruyter.

Newman, J. (Ed., 1997). The linguistics of giving. *Typological Studies in Language*, *36*.

Okamoto, S. (1999). Situated politeness: manipulating honorific and non-honorific expressions in Japanese conversations. *Pragmatics*, *9*(1), 51-74.

Randall, M. G. G. (2016). *The Properties of Lhasa Tibetan Verbalizers*. MA Thesis. Payap University.

Robin, F. (*forthcoming*). *Parlons amdo*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Simon, C. (2011). *Dérivation causative en tibétain (Lhasa)*. MA Thesis. Université de Provence.

Strauss, S., & Eun, J. O. (2005). Indexicality and honorific speech level choice in Korean.

Sun, J. T. S. (Ed.). (2014). *Phonological Profiles of Little-studied Tibetic Varieties*. Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica.

Suzuki, H. (2017). The evidential system of Zhollam Tibetan. In Gawne, L., & Hill, N. W. (Eds., 2017). *Evidential Systems of Tibetan Languages* (Vol. 302). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Tournadre, N. & Dorje, S. (1998). *Manuel de tibétain standard*. Paris : L'Asiathèque.

Tournadre, N. & Dorje, S. (2003, *re-ed.* 2009). *Manual of Standard Tibetan: language and civilization.* Snow Lion Publications, Incorporated.

Tournadre, N. & Lessan-Pezechki, H. (*forthcoming*). *Les verbes supports et leur typologie : A la croisée du lexique et de la grammaire*.

Tournadre, N. & Shao, M. (*forthcoming*). *Intentionality, Evidentiality and Epistemicity in Amdo Tibetan.*

Tournadre, N. & Suzuki, H. (*forthcoming*). *The Tibetic languages. An introduction to the family of languages derived from Old Tibetan.*

Tournadre, N. (2014). The Tibetic languages and their classification. *Trans-Himalayan linguistics: Historical and descriptive linguistics of the Himalayan area*, 105-129.

Tournadre, N., & Jiatso, K. (2001). Final auxiliary verbs in literary Tibetan and in the dialects. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, *24*(1), 49-111.

Tournadre, N., Sherpa, N. S., Chodrak, G. & Oisel, G. (2009). *Sherpa-english and English-sherpa Dictionary with Literary Tibetan and Nepali Equivalents*. Vajra Publications. http://www.tibeto-burman.net/files/Tournadre_et_al-2009-Sherpa_dictionary_First_Edition.pdf

van Driem, G. L., & Tshering, K. (1998). *Dzongkha* (Vol. 1). Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies.

Yliniemi, J. (2017). Copulas in Denjonke or Sikkimese Bhutia. In Gawne, L., & Hill, N. W. (Eds., 2017). *Evidential Systems of Tibetan Languages* (Vol. 302). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Zeisler, B. (2004). *Relative tense and aspectual values in Tibetan languages: a comparative study* (Vol. 150). Walter de Gruyter.