Tibetan zero nominalization

Nathan W. Hill
(SOAS, University of London)

Several researchers draw attention to the ability of Tibeto-Burman languages to use nominalized verb forms in finite contexts (Matisoff 1972, Coupe, ed. 2008, DeLancey 2011), but the reverse pattern—morphologically finite forms occurring in nominal contexts—has received less attention. Here I collect a few examples from Classical Tibetan and Old Tibetan texts of affixless verb forms occurring in syntactically nominal contexts.

In example (1) the nominalized present verb stem ḍzin-pa 'taker' is coordinated with gzun, the finite future stem of the same verb. The meaning of gzun in this passage is unequivocally 'that which is taken', as if the form were gzun-pa or gzun-bya. The choice of -dañ as coordination marker guarantees the interpretation of gzun as a nominal form, since -dañ occurs only after nouns and never after verbs (Schwieger 2008: 161, 274-276). The expected phrase gzun-pa-dañ ḍzin-pa is attested, as seen in example (2).

(1) gzun-dañ ḍzin-pa-hi sgrīb gnis bral
‘free from the two obscurations of 'taken' and 'taker'.
(Marpa 67a)
(2) de ltar yogs-su sbyaṅs-nas gzun-pa-dañ ḍzin-pa-las rnam-par
‘being thus completely purified, one is liberated from
'taken' and 'taker' (Tenjur, vol. 13, p. 229)

One might suppose that in example (1), although the form in question looks verbal, in fact it is a noun derived from a verb just as 'a run' derives from 'to run' in English or gnas 'place' form gnas 'to stay' in Tibetan. Although 'zero nominalization' is a fine term for this type of derivation of nouns from verbs, it is a derivational rather than an inflectional process and may not be synchronically productive. Nonetheless, there are other examples in which the zero-nominalized form functions verbally to the left and nominally to the right, just as in the case of productive inflectional nominalization such as -pa suffixation.

The noun phrase rtse-la dgah dañ sbug-pa 'amorous play and

beauty’ of example (3) consists of two component phrases *rtse-la dgaḥ ‘amorous play’ and *sdug-paḥ ‘beauty’, coordinated by the associative case -daṅ. The first constituent of the coordination, *rtse-la dgaḥ ‘play and love’, itself clearly consists of two finite verbs coordinated by the converb -la. Thus, *dgaḥ functions as a verb to the left (taking the verbal coordinator la) and a noun to the right (taking the nominal coordinator daṅ).

(3) nad-kyis Ḫjigs-pa Ḫi ltar śin-tu mi bzad-pa // skyes-bu mkhas-pas gnas Ḫi mthoṅ-nas ji lta-bur // rtse-la dgaḥ daṅ sdug-paḥi Ḫdu-śes bskyed-par Ḫgyur //
The threats of illness are thus quite unbearable. The wise man, having seen this circumstance, how will he engender the notion of amorous play and beauty? (D. 96, vol. 46, p. 94a)

To my taste the passage should have read rtse-la dgaḥ-Ṕṅ sdug-paḥi, with the verbal coordinator-Ṕṅ in place of the nominal coordinator case -daṅ. Tshogs drug raṅ grol (1781-1851) shares this preference, as seen in his quotation of the passage in example (4).

(4) nad-kyis Ḫjigs-pa Ḫi ltar śin-tu mi bzad-pa / skyes-bu mkhas-pas gnas Ḫi mthoṅ-na ji lta-bur / rtse-la dgaḥ Ṕṅ sdug-paḥi Ḫdu-śes ci phyir skye //
The threats of illness are thus quite unbearable; the wise man, if he sees this circumstance, how will the notion of amorous play and beauty arise? (Tshogs drug raṅ grol 2002, vol 4, p. 413)

In example (5) the phrase ma ṛīg looks like a finite ‘didn’t know’, but functions as an attribute ‘ignorant’ as if the text had gṣuṅ ma-ṛiṅ-pa. The presence of the negation marker ma ensures that ṛiṅ is acting verbally to the left.

(5) bla-mahi gṣuṅ // ma-ṛiṅ min-pa dbyiṅs-su dag /
The words of the guru, which are not ignorant, are as pure as space. (Marpa 67a)

The expected phrase *ma-ṛiṅ-pa min-pa appears not to be attested. The ninth Karmapa Dbaṅ phyug rdo rje (1556- c. 1603) employs the finite equivalent ma-ṛiṅ-pa min (example 6). The non-occurrence of *ma-ṛiṅ-pa min-pa, together with the use of gṣuṅ-daṅ Ḫdzin-pa (example 1) in place of gṣuṅ-pa-daṅ Ḫdzin-pa (example 2), suggest that the Tibetans do not like a construction to contain too many pa’s and omit the first
when two appear in quick succession.

(6) gal-te bu ṇan-pa-la bu ma-yin zer-ba bžin-du šes-rabs ṇan-pa ni ma rig-pa-ho že-na / šes-rab ṇan-pa ni ma rig-pa min-te/ ṇon-moṅs-can-du gyur-pahi lta-ba yin-pahi phyir

If one says 'evil knowledge' is ignorance, like one says to an evil son 'he is not (my) son', evil knowledge is not ignorance because it is a view that gives rise to kleśas. (Đbañ phyug rdo rje 2001)

Analogous to the ma-rig 'ignorance' of example (5) is ma-dad 'lack of faith' in example (7); the negation of the verb stem suggests it must be understood verbally to the left, but the use of the noun coordinator -dañ requires it to be understood nominally to the right.


Pride and lack of faith, lack of interest and being distracted outward, being withdrawn inward and dejection, (these) are flaws of listening. (Bu ston 22b)

Example (7) offers a second more interesting case of zero nominalization, viz. don-du gñer-ba-med-ṅid. The clitic -ṅid typically follows a noun phrase; a phrase don-du gñer-ba med-pa-ṅid 'non-existence of searching after meaning' would pose no problem. This example is in meter, but a causa metri explanation for the lack of -pa is unsatisfying, since one could have swapped the -ṅid with a -pa and thereby improved the syntax without substantially changing the meaning.

In example (8) bžugs looks like a finite verb 'sits', but in context it means 'those who sit', as if the form were bžugs-pa. Because bžugs 'sit' governs the ḥdir 'here' to its left, it cannot be analyzed as a noun. Example (9) is exactly analogous, but with the verb tshogs 'assemble'. The expected phrases ḥdir bžugs-pa (10) and ḥdir tshogs-pa (11) also occur. In these cases, the explanation for the zero-nominalized forms is certainly that the passages in examples (8) and (9) are verse whereas examples (10) and (11) are prose.

(8) ḥdir bžugs gsan-cig !
   'listen, O you who sit here!' (Marpa 50a)
(9) ḥdir tshogs grwa-pa bu-slob kun //
   'O all you monks and disciplines gathered here!' (Marpa 83a)
There is no need to examine whether or not those sitting at this great maṇḍala are suitable for taking prātimokṣa vows. (Tenjur, vol. 29, p. 300)

We siblings assembled here, having blessed in this way these victuals which we offer (D 846, vol. 99, p. 192a)

In example (12) the verb lta 'watch' acts verbally to the left, governing gar 'dance' in the allative case, and it acts nominally to the right, as an argument of mtshuṅs 'be similar'. A nominalized form lta-ba, as seen in example (13), would have been expected.

The birth and death of creatures is like watching a dance. (D.96, vol. 46, page 88a)

Like parents looking at their only child (D.120, vol. 53, page 130b)

Zero-nominalization is also attested in Old Tibetan, although the smaller size of the corpus limits one's abilities to find closely parallel passages with and without the zero-nominalization. In example (14) the word dños-grub 'siddhi' is modified by the verb phrase srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed 'rule over the three worlds'.

The three siddhis (which) rule over the three worlds (Rama C l. 12).

One would usually expect a nominalized clause to modify its head to the right, i.e. dños-grub gsum srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed-pa, or, if the modifier is to the left of its head, one expects both nominalization and the genitive case, i.e. srid-pa gsum-la dbaṅ byed-paḥi dños-grub gsum.

The examples given above suffice to demonstrate the existence of zero-nominalization in Classical and Old Tibetan.
Primary sources


D = Derge Kanjur


Rama = de Jong 1989


References


