CHAPTER 3

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SINO-TIBETAN SYNTAX

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

THE Sino-Tibetan language family is second only to Indo-European in number of speakers, though its geographic distribution is restricted to a relatively small area (China, Myanmar [Burma], Nepal, Bhutan, northern India, and some bordering lands). Much work has been done in reconstructing the sound system and lexicon of this family (see for example Benedict 1972; Bodman 1980; Coblin 1986, Matisoff 2003), as well as the morphology (e.g., LaPolla 2003, 2004, 2005 and references therein), but very little has been said about the nature of Sino-Tibetan syntax. If we are to establish a definite link between the different branches of Sino-Tibetan, we must explain the divergences in word order: the modern Sinitic varieties are generally verb-medial, with adjective-noun, genitive-head, relative clause-head, and number-measure/ classifier-noun order; on the Tibeto-Burman side, Karen and Bai are also generally verb medial and have relative clause-head and genitive-noun order but have noun-adjective and noun-number-measure order, while the rest of the Tibeto-Burman languages are all verb-final and generally have noun-adjective (and secondarily adjective-noun), genitive-head, relative clause-head, and noun-number-measure order.

Unlike Indo-European, where there is abundant ancient textual evidence, to the extent that it is sometimes possible to have an exact match between text fragments in two different languages within the family (see Watkins 1989), in Sino-Tibetan the time between the break-up of the family into Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman and the development of writing on both sides of the family[1] was long enough to allow one or both sides of the family to change radically. Also unlike Indo-European, what was written about in the earliest attestations of Chinese (divinations) and Tibetan (translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts) are unrelated, so the chance of similar phrases appearing in both is extremely slim. What we need to do then is analyze the attested languages and then work backward from them, "undoing" the changes that have occurred and project back along that trajectory to the parent language.

3.2 SINITIC

Work on Old Chinese and Modern Mandarin has shown Chinese overall to be consistently topic-comment, though the particular constructions used in the different periods have changed considerably. Even within the period that we refer to as Old Chinese, the language shows significant changes that we might trace back to a change in information structure. Unfortunately, we do not have detailed analyses of most of the Sinitic varieties other than Mandarin. Due to the mistaken assumption that the grammar of all Sinitic varieties is basically the same, until recently very little work was done on the grammar of Sinitic varieties other than Mandarin. In particular there has been little work on how information structure affects clause structure in the varieties other than Mandarin. One study that was done (Lee 2002) showed that there are differences between Mandarin and Hong Kong Cantonese in this regard. It would be good, then, if other varieties were investigated in this regard.

Modern Mandarin has been shown to be a language in which constituent order is not governed by syntactic relations such as subject and object but by information structure, with the basic clause structure being topic-comment (Chao 1968; Lü 1979; LaPolla 1995, 2009; LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006). If Givón (1979) is correct in assuming that languages develop from having more pragmatically based syntactic structures to having more syntactically based structures (as we assume now regularly in discussions of grammaticalization), then the hypothesis should be that since syntax in Modern Mandarin is heavily weighted in favor of pragmatic factors, we should find the same or an even stronger tendency toward pragmatic control of syntax in Old Chinese. In fact Wang Li (1985:8ff) earlier argued for two periods in the history of Chinese, an earlier "not yet fixed grammar" period and a "fixed grammar" era. In the former period, the grammar is loose, as if there is no grammar (Wang Li 1985:9), and he gives examples of structures from that period that are no longer acceptable. Wang Li (1985), Wang Kezhong (1986), and Herforth (1987) all argue that Old Chinese is very much a discourse-based language, so much so that individual sentences very often cannot be interpreted properly outside the full context in which they appeared. Serruys (1981:356) states that in the oracle bone inscriptions (the earliest Chinese), "there are no particles to mark either concessive or conditional subordinate clauses; *everything seems to be implied by context*" (emphasis added; see also Takashima 1973:288–305). This radical ambiguity even extends to where, in NP_1 V NP_2 constructions, NP_1 and NP_2 can both be either actor or undergoer, depending on the context or knowledge about the referents represented by the NPs (Wang Kezhong 1986). Gao (1987:295) gives examples from the oracle bone inscriptions in which the actor and the undergoer, and even the goal, all appear after the verb.

Discussions of word order in Old Chinese generally start out with a statement to the effect that the most common word order is verb-medial for transitive sentences, just as in Modern Mandarin, so word order has been basically stable, but that there are a number of other word order patterns, particularly verb-final clauses (e.g., Wang Li 1980; Dai 1981; Gao 1987). These clause types have the undergoer (or goal) immediately before the verb, as in (1a-c), from the *Zuozhuan* (4th century BCE; the words in bold are the "preposed objects"; Modern Mandarin forms in pinyin are used instead of reconstructions, as phonology is not at issue here)[2]:

(1) a. 我无尔诈，尔无我虞。（左传．宣公十五年）

Wo wu **er** zha er wu **wo** yu.   (Xuan Gong, Year 15)

1sg NEG 2sg cheat 2sg NEG 1sg deceive

'I didn't cheat you, you don't deceive me.'

b. 君亡之不恤，而群臣是忧，惠之至也。（左传．禧公十五年）

[Jun wang]$_i$ **zhi**$_i$ bu xu, er [qun chen]$_j$ **shi**$_j$ you,

ruler exile   this NEG worry but group vassal this worry

hui   zhi   zhi   ye. (Xi Gong, Year 15)

compassion GEN utmost ASS

'The ruler is not concerned with his own banishment, yet is worried about his vassals; this is really the height of compassion.'

c. 余虽与晋出入，余唯利是视。（左传．成公十三年）

Yu sui   yu Jin churu, yu wei li **shi** shi. (Cheng Gong, Year 13)

1sg although COM PN interact 1sg COP benefit this look.at

'Although I have dealings with Jin, I only consider benefit (to me).'

In this construction, the immediately preverbal NP is almost always a pronoun in the post-oracle bone texts (7th century BCE on). In (1a) we have the pronoun alone, but in (1b–c) the pronoun is resumptive, coreferential with the preceding referring expression. In both constructions the focus is narrow and contrastive. In the latter the event/thing to be focused on is first introduced then commented on using the pronoun and predicate, much like in the English construction *What do I want? You coming to work on time, THAT is what I want!* The narrow focus and contrastive nature can be seen clearly in the parallelism of (1a–b) and in the use of the copula *wei* in (1c), which is a narrow focus cleft structure with the sense of 'only' (Takashima 1990).

In the oracle bone inscriptions the construction is less restricted, allowing full NPs and preposition phrases to appear in immediate preverbal position when contrasted. The oracle bone inscriptions were divinations made as statements, often in sets, each one testing a particular course of action (Keightley 1978; Serruys 1981). We see the contrastive use of word order (but with focus position being immediately preverbal) in sets such as in (2) (Serruys 1981:334), which is a single series of propositions testing whether it is to Zu Ding or to some other spirit that the exorcism is to be performed, and it is clear that what is in focus is the one to perform the exorcism to:

(2) 卯 于祖丁，

X³   yu Zu   Ding,

perform.exorcism LOC Ancestor Ding

勿于祖丁 午卩

wu	yu	Zu	Ding	X.
do.not	LOC	ancestor	Ding	perform.exorcism

于羌甲午卩，

yu	Qiang	Jia	X
LOC	Qiang	Jia	perform.exorcism

勿于羌甲 午卩

wu	yu	Qiang	Jia	X
do.not	LOC	Qiang	Jia	perform.exorcism

'Perform an exorcism to Ancestor Ding, don't perform an exorcism to Ancestor Ding, perform an exorcism to Qiang Jia, don't perform an exorcism to Qiang Jia.'

Yu (1980, 1981, 1987) gives examples to show that the so-called "inverted"[4] clausal order of undergoer immediately before the verb is not limited to pronouns in negative and question constructions. He gives the function of this word order as "emphasizing" the undergoer, but as the constructions discussed here are narrow focus constructions (including question-word questions), this word order should be seen as putting it in the focus. Yu also argues that the deictic pronouns of Old Chinese, *shi* 是 (*djeʔ) and *zhi* 之 (*tjɨ), are cognate with Tibetan *de* 'that' and *´di* 'this'[5] and that the word order exhibited by these pronouns in these sentences is the original Sino-Tibetan order. Wang Li (1980:356) also suggests that with pronouns the preverbal order may have been the original standard order, "as it is in French" but does not make the connection between this suggestion and the possibility that the order of pronouns may reflect an older general word order pattern, as it does in French.

What is significant about this pattern is that (a) it is used in most instances for interrogative pronouns and contrastive focus; (b) the pronoun in question appears immediately before the verb, the usual focus position of verb-final languages (cf. Comrie's discussion [1981:57, 1988] of focus position in Hungarian); and (c) it is a pattern that first was relatively free, involving lexical nouns and several different pronominal 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—in Modern Mandarin there are now only fossilized remnants, such as *hezai* 何在 [interrogative pronoun-locative verb] 'where'). It would seem from the phenomena presented here that immediate preverbal position was the focus position in Old Chinese—at least in contrastive sentences—whereas Modern Mandarin has a very strong postverbal focus position (see LaPolla 1995, 2009; LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006).

In terms of phrase-internal constituents, the order in Old Chinese is generally modifier-modified (ATTRIBUTE-HEAD, GENITIVE-HEAD, DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD,

RELATIVE CLAUSE-HEAD, NEGATIVE-VERB), and also ADPOSITION-NOUN, NUMERAL-HEAD (or HEAD-NUMERAL-CLASSIFIER/MEASURE), ADJECTIVE-MARKER-STANDARD, though there are a number of examples of HEAD-ATTRIBUTE order (e.g., *sang rou* 桑柔 [mulberry-tender] 'tender mulberry') and NOUN-ADPOSITION order as well (Wang Li 1980; Dai 1981; Shen 1986).[6]

Sun (1991) 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.

As with the NP-NP-V clauses, the frequency of these marked word order patterns decreased over time and finally disappeared completely (though traces of these patterns can be seen in the fixed expressions *suoyi* 所以 [pronoun-postposition] 'therefore', *heyi* 何以 [what-postposition] 'why, how', *shiyi* 是以 [pronoun-postposition] 'therefore').

Yu (1980, 1981, 1987) argues that the other examples of marked word order, such as noun-attribute (as in *sang rou* 'tender mulberry', *Qu Xia* 区夏 'Xia District') and noun-adposition order (he gives examples with *yu* 于, *zai* 在, and *yi* 以), are also remnants of the original Sino-Tibetan word order. Qin and Zhang (1985) argue that the early Chinese expressions of '*you* + country name' (*You Shang* 有商 'Shang Country', *You Xia* 有夏 'Xia Country', etc.) should be seen as examples of noun-attribute order, with *you* meaning 'country'. They point out that noun-attribute order is not at all uncommon in the earliest Chinese, especially in names of places and people, such as in *Qiu Shang* 邱商 'Shang Hill', *Di Yao* 帝尧 'Emperor Yao', *Zu Yi* 祖乙 'Ancestor Yi'.

In Old Chinese all adverbial quantifiers generally appeared in preverbal position, as in (3a). In Modern Mandarin some quantifiers still appear in preverbal position, but more often those composed of a numeral and verbal classifier appear in postverbal position, as in (3b).

(3) a. 齐人三鼓.（左传．庄公十年）

　　　Qi　ren　　　san　　gu　　　　　(*Zuozhuan:* Zhuang Gong, Year 10)

　　　PN　person　three　drum

　　　'The Qi army drummed three times'

　　b. 齐国军队敲了三次鼓。

　　　Qiguo　jundui　qiao-le　　san-ci　　　　gu

　　　PN　　army　hit-PFV　three-times　drum

　　　'The Qi army drummed three times'

As a verbal quantifier is generally used when the assertion is about the number of times one does something, it would follow that a change of focus position from immediate preverbal position to postverbal position would entail a corresponding change in the position of such quantifiers when they are focal.

In Modern Mandarin the order of elements in nominal quantifier phrases is always (except in listings/catalogues) 'number + measure/classifier + noun'. In Old Chinese, the order was 'noun + number + measure' (there were few classifiers) or 'number + noun'. Takashima (1985, 1987) gives a pragmatic explanation to the variation—the former is used when the number is focal and the latter when it is not. It is significant that the common order with measures (noun + number + measure) is the same as that of most Tibeto-Burman languages (see LaPolla 2002).

Chou (1961) and Dai (1981) both analyze all sentences in Old Chinese as topic-comment structures. Dai (1981) and Shen (1986) both state that alternate word order patterns exist for pragmatic reasons: to set off a particular element as either a topic or a comment. There are very few restrictions on alternate word orders; in fact some elements that cannot "topicalize" freely in Modern Mandarin do so regularly in Old Chinese. Just as in Modern Mandarin, in Old Chinese there are also "topic-comment within a topic-comment" structures (see LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006 on this structure).

Relative clauses in the earliest Chinese (which, according to Chen 1956:133 and Gao 1987:283, is based on, and close to, the spoken language of the day—13th century BCE) do not have any overt relational marking; they are simply placed before the noun, with no additional marking (Serruys 1981:356). This is a common pattern found in verb-final languages (cf. Greenberg 1966) and the only pattern reconstructable to Proto-Tibeto-Burman (see LaPolla 2002, 2008).

Aside from this, 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.

These are just a few of the facts that suggest that Old Chinese was very likely even more pragmatically based than Modern Mandarin and that there was a change in word order, from verb-final to verb-medial, at least partially related to a change in focus position but possibly also related to language contact, as in the case of Bai and Karen (see below, and LaPolla 2001).

3.3 TIBETO-BURMAN

Karen and Bai manifest the same pattern 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 and 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 (Xu and Zhao 1984). This would seem to point to the change in word order as being relatively recent. Karen (e.g., Solnit 1997) has similar word order patterns, with genitives and nominal modifiers coming before the noun and number and classifier following the noun, while adjectival and verbal modifiers follow the verb. Karen does not appear to have a preverbal focus position; from the data in Solnit (1997), it seems that focus position is sentence-final as in Modern Mandarin. Karen possibly changed because of the influence of the surrounding Tai and Mon-Khmer languages. 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 Old 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. Table 3.1 lists 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 column is the total number of languages for which data was available on that particular category.

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 dominant order was the same as that in the leftmost column in Table 3.1.

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

Table 3.1 Phrase patterns in Tibeto–Burman languages

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: 125
neg-v (69)	v-neg (39)		mixed (12)	total: 120
gen-h (121)	h-gen (Ø)		mixed (Ø)	total: 121
st-(m)-att (74)	att-(m)-st (Ø)		mixed (Ø)	total: 74

Note: att = attribute, dem = demonstrative, gen = genitive, h = head, m = marker (in comparative), neg = negation, num = numeral, rel = relative clause, st = standard (in comparative), v = verb.

These may also have 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 in Table 3.1, and the fact that the other old written languages (Burmese, Newari, Tangut) in Tibeto-Burman and also Old Chinese all have DEMONSTRATIVE-HEAD order, I am forced to conclude that this is the older order.

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 Sinitic and Karen. Change of auxiliary position from postverbal to preverbal can come about from serial, clause chaining constructions (see Young and Givón 1990 for an example of this in Chibchan [Panama/Costa Rica]), such as are common in Sino-Tibetan languages.

Most important to supporting my hypothesis that the development of a postverbal, or sentence-final, focus position motivated the change to verb medial order are examples in which NPs in otherwise solidly verb final languages appear in postverbal (clause-final) position for emphasis of their status as focal constituents, as in the following Tamang examples (from Taylor 1973:100–101).[7]

(4) a. asu-ce-m   yampu-m   'khana 'khana kor-jeht-ci   <u>tinyi syoo-ri</u>.
     Actor   Location   Location   Event   Time
     'Where did you go for a stroll around Kathmandu <u>this morning</u>, Asu?'

   b. 'dehre-no   chyaa-la   <u>thenyi-'maah-ta-m.</u>
      Time   State   Site
      'Now <u>they</u> will receive (the money).'

   c. ta-ci   kon   <u>'dehre bis-bahrsa</u>.
      Event   Vocative   Time Undergoer
      '<u>Now twenty years</u> have passed, Kon.'

   d. Tup-'maah them-pala'Tim <u>chyau-'maak-ri</u>.
      Undergoer State   Site
      'The threads were placed <u>in the sides</u> (of the loom).'

   e. 'icu-'maah-ri 'raa-pi 'phinyi-ka cung-pala <u>yaa-ce hoi</u>.
      Site   Undergoer   State   Instrument
      'Here (in these places) the weaving comb is caught <u>by the hand</u>.'

f. ken   ca-ci   <u>the-ce-no</u>.

Undergoer Event   Actor

'It was <u>indeed he</u> who ate the rice.'

This is a narrow focus construction, the flip side of the one we saw in Old Chinese, as the unmarked focus position is preverbal in Tamang.

3.4 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 1995). 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 of this type of pattern, and it may exist in many other languages within Tibeto-Burman as well. If in Proto-Sinitic 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 undergoer, as the NP representing the undergoer is 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 elicited data on which most of the sources on Tibeto-Burman languages are based, or is only used for particular rare types of marked focus, as in Tamang. This is again one reason when doing fieldwork we should always record a large amount of naturally occurring text, rather than simply sentences.

Given all the facts discussed here, there is a strong case for the view, originally proposed by Terrien de Lacouperie (1887, chapter 1) and Wolfenden (1929:6–9), that Proto-Sino-Tibetan word order was verb-final and that it was Sinitic, 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. The earliest Chinese writing dates to the 13th century BC (Keightley 1978); the earliest Tibeto-Burman writing (Old Tibetan) dates to the seventh century CE (Jäschke 1954). The time depth of the breakup of Sino-Tibetan is about 6,000 years (Wang 1998), roughly the same as Indo-European (Nichols 1992).

2. Abbreviations used in the examples: 1 first person, 2 second person, 3 third person, ASS assertive, COM comitative, COP copula, GEN genitive, LOC locative, NEG negative, PN proper name, PFV perfective, sg singular.

3. Serruys (1981) does not give a pronunciation for this character, and it is not used in Modern Mandarin, so I have represented the pronunciation with "X."

4. As Wang Li argues (1980:366), this name implies it is a marked order. It is in fact the unmarked order for pronouns.

5. Coblin (1986:149) lists Chinese *shi* 时 (*djɨ(ʔ)) 'this' and *shi* 是 'this, that' with Tibetan ´*di* and *de* but does not include *zhi*, while Yu (1981:83) equates *shi* 时 with *zhi*. (The reconstructed forms are from Baxter 1992.) Yu (1987:39) also equates the Old Chinese copula *wei* 惟 / 唯 (*wjij) with the Modern Tibetan copula *red*, but in this I think he is mistaken, as *red* does not appear in Old Tibetan texts, so is a late development.

6. All of the Old Chinese adpositions are in some contexts predicative, and so this order is really just a subtype of verb-final word order.

7. This article is in the Tagmemics framework (see Hale 1973); word-for-word glosses are not given; only the roles are given. The focal element is underlined.

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