Verb Stem Alternations in Sino-Tibetan

Place: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, University of Bern (Switzerland)

Deadline for abstracts: 10 February 2025

The Sino-Tibetan (ST) languages, spoken in a vast area of Asia, are known for their typological diversity. One of the salient features, particularly in the languages of the conservative branches of the ST family – South Central, Kiranti, and Gyalrong – is the use of different verb stems in different phonological, morphological and morphosyntactic environments. Unlike the Indo-European languages, where distinct verb stems can be used for different moods, e.g., *I will* in affirmative, but *I won't* in negative in English, the use of diverse verb stems in ST is complex and yet to be fully understood. Contrary to Van Bik's claim that diverse verb stems are innovative in the South Central branch, we often see comparable verb stems outside the South Central branch. For example, the use of different verb stems can depend on transitivity, which is attested across the ST family. In Bantawa (Kiranti), *ruk* 'be angry' is an intransitive verb, but *rukt* 'be angry at someone' is transitive. In Khroskyabs (Gyalrong), the form *vâ* 'go' is intransitive, but *vǽd* 'bring' is transitive. Similarly, in Tedim (South Central), *ta:n* 'be bright' is intransitive, but *tàt* 'flash a light at/on something' is transitive. The transitive stems – *ruk-t*, *vê̂-d* and *tà-t* – in these three languages from different branches of the ST family evidently demonstrate the reflexes of a dental (t/d) transitivizing suffix. Jacques (2016) also notes that the conservative branches of the ST family have similar dental suffixes with transparent functions to the *-s suffix reconstructed for Old Chinese. Comparing the causative and applicative functions of qùshēng as noted in Downer (1959) in Old Chinese, Jacques presents examples demonstrating two dental suffixes – a *-s* causative suffix and a *-t* applicative suffix – from Limbu. In addition to demonstrating reflexes of the two valence-increasing suffixes – *-s causative and *-t applicative – the South Central, Kiranti, and Gyalrongic languages diverge in the manner they treat different verb stems derived by these suffixes.

The verbs in South Central languages furthermore demonstrate the reflex of a nominaliser *-k suffix. For example, the nominalised form *tɔ́ʔ* 'weaving' of the verb *tɔ́* 'weave' in Sumtu, a Southeastern South Central language, can be used both as a nominal argument and as a matrix clause verb. The verb stems attesting the reflexes of these three distinct suffixes – *-s causative, *-t applicative and *-k nominaliser – collapsed into different functions differently across the South Central languages.

So, the questions remain 1) how did these causative and applicative stems formally collapse into the nominalized stems in South Central? 2) how do we explain why some South Central verbs have causative stems and other applicative stems? and 3) how these stems are related to other Sino-Tibetan languages? From a functional point of view, we also don't know yet: whether there are any common motivations for the Stem 2 verbs to have different functions, as we commonly see across

the South Central languages, e.g., Stem 1 in affirmative clauses and Stem 2 in negative clauses, and how did the different uses of different verb stems develop in South Central?

The objectives of this workshop are to:

1. Explore the typological diversity of verb stems across the Sino-Tibetan (ST) language family, with a focus on understanding the different phonological, morphological, and morphosyntactic environments that influence verb stem alternations in conservative ST branches, particularly South Central, Kiranti, and Gyalrong.

2. Investigate how transitivity affects verb stem selection in various ST languages.

3. Study the functions of causative (-s) and applicative (-t) suffixes across different branches of the ST family, drawing on comparisons to Old Chinese and other branches to understand the historical development and distribution of these valence-increasing suffixes.

4. Address key unresolved questions, including the formal processes through which causative and applicative stems collapsed into nominalized stems in South Central, the morphosyntactic motivations behind verb stem alternations in specific environments and the broader implications for ST languages as a whole.

5. Formulate and discuss hypotheses regarding potential functional motivations for verb stem alternations within South Central and other ST languages, particularly regarding the roles of Stem 1 and Stem 2 in various clause types (e.g., affirmative vs. negative), and the historical and functional forces shaping these distinctions.

This workshop is supported by *The History of Verb Stem Alternations in South Central Tibeto-Burman* project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It will be held as a part of the 58th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics. We invite abstracts from scholars working on Sino-Tibetan languages showing verb stem alternations. The submission deadline and notice of acceptance of this workshop will be the same as for general papers for the conference.

Abstract Submission **Opens**: **1 December 2024**

Abstract Submission **Closes**: **10 February 2025**

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