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*Eat and drink – if you can! : A language internal explanation for the ‘irregular’ paradigm of Tibetan
za, zos, zo ‘eat’*

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses recent suggestions that Tibetan may originally have had a system of person marking, which could thus be reconstructed for proto-Tibeto-Burman. While self-evident traces of such person marking are clearly missing, the ‘irregular’ paradigm of the verb ‘eat’ has been taken as indirect evidence. This proposal, however, is in need of several further assumptions. The ‘irregular’ stem forms *zos* and *zo*, on the other hand, correspond to a regular, albeit obsolete modal derivation of ability in Old and Classical Tibetan.

KEYWORDS

Tibeto-Burman person marking, Tibetan verb paradigms, modality

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Eat and drink – if you can!

A language internal explanation for the ‘irregular’ paradigm of Tibetan za, zos, zo ‘eat’

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According to the standard dictionary for Classical Tibetan, BRGY, the verb ‘eat’ shows a ‘regular’ paradigm: stem I (or ‘present’): *za*, stem II (or ‘past’): *bzas*, stem III (or ‘future’): *bzah*, and stem IV (or ‘imperative’): *zo*. However, in many modern Tibetic languages on the western and eastern periphery, stem II corresponds to a form of *zos*.¹ This form is also given in BRGY as an alternative spelling for stem II. Only the more central varieties have a form of (*b*)*zas* as stem II.²

This and the ‘regular’ paradigm of the dictionary might be taken as the result of a process of regularisation or analogical levelling (cf. Jacques 2010: 42) and/ or as a clerical scholarly attempt at standardisation.³ The form *bzas*, however, is already attested in Old Tibetan documents,⁴ besides the

¹ Stem II takes the forms *zos* in Balti, Shamskat Ladakhi and Leh, *zoe* in Zanskar, *zo* in Trangtse (Upper Ladakh), *zø* in Man-Meraks (Upper Ladakh), *sə* in Tabo Spiti, *sə* in Jirel, *su* in Mkharmar and Ndzorge, *si* in Chabcha, *sy*⁶ in Nangchen, and *zu* in Rngaba (CDTD).

² Tholing *za*’, Rutok, Gar, Purang, Tshochen *ze*’, Gertse *ze*’, Southern Mustang *se*, Gergye, Nubri *se*’, Western Drokpa *se*’, Kyirong, Dingri *se*’, Shigatse *si*’, and Lhasa *se*? (CDTD).

³ If I remember well, late Prof. Bielmeier was of this opinion.

⁴ Pt 1073, *Law of indemnities for dog-bite*, l. 18 *bzas* besides *bzahs* in ll. 7 and 24. In Pt 0239, *Substitution (of Buddhist funeral rites for indigenous ones)*, r6.3–r7.2, stem II *bzas* is found in the compound *kha.bzas* and *zal.bzas* ‘(prepared) food’. In Classical Tibetan, the *b*-prefix is dropped: *kha.zas*. This is in conformity with the Classical Tibetan formation rule for abstract nouns, which has been observed by Tibetan grammarians, e.g., Dpañris Saṅsrgyas (1999: 218), who states: *bya.bañi miñ ḥdas.pañi sñon.hjug dor.na | de.dañ ḥbrel.bañi dños.poñi miñ.du gyur* ‘If one deletes the prefix of the past tense form, it turns into a general term associated with it [=the verb]’. Quite apparently, this rule was not yet active in Old Tibetan, cf. also the use of *blas* for *las* ‘remunerated work’, discussed by Uebach and Zeisler (2008: 310–314). The eventual drop of the prefix in abstract nouns may be due to its phonetic erosion and obsolescence in the spoken language and to the fact that the original temporal relation was irrelevant for the meaning of the abstract noun. Whereas for the verb, the prefix remained important in the written language as a marker of anteriority and past tense.

Stem III *bzah* is likewise attested, e.g. in the already mentioned Pt 0239, r11.1: *bzah.bar bñam.pa.las* ‘prepared for consumption’ or in Pt 0126, the *Sūtra of the prophecy by the sublime monk* (*Hphrul.kyi byig.ñus phyi.ma.la bñam.pañi mdo*), l. 7, in the collocation *mnañ za* ‘renew’: *mnañ yañ bñah* ‘shall also renew’. These usages show that the standard paradigm cannot be just a product of scholarly regularisation, but that the stem forms were already available in the earliest stages of the documented language.

much more frequent form *zos*.⁵ One may nevertheless wonder why the apparently ‘irregular’ form is so robust, even in those varieties that have levelled out all other vowel alternations in the temporal stems I and II, such as, e.g., Balti. This robustness is all the more surprising, as an *ablaut* *a > o* for stem II (or an *ablaut* *o > a* for stem I) is, with one exception, not found in any other Tibetan verb.

There are two possible explanations. One, found in the Tibetan system of verb stem derivation itself, is rather trivial, the other one is more involved, drawing upon the proto-Tibeto-Burman person marking system as proposed by some other scholars. I shall first discuss the problems associated with the recent suggestions by Jacques (2010) and DeLancey (2014) that Tibetan or rather its ancestor language had lost an original person marking system of the Tibeto-Burman type.

1 Tibetan and the Tibeto-Burman hypothesis

The opaqueness of the Old and Classical Tibetan verb stem formation keeps puzzling the supporters of the Tibeto-Burman (or Sino-Tibetan) language family hypothesis, as nothing similar is to be found among the other members of the group (see also Jacques 2012a: 212). The Tibetic languages are the sole languages to show an intricate, yet never fully accomplished, system of two plus four tense and mood stems, that is, two intransitive or inagentive and four transitive-causative verb stems,⁶ or at least traces thereof. It seems to be clear that this cannot be the original proto-Tibeto-Burman system, which all other Tibeto-Burman languages would have lost without leaving a single trace. For the adherents of the Tibeto-Burman hypothesis, it follows thus that the Tibetan derivational system must be an innovation, acquired at some time before the mid 7th century CE, the point when Old Tibetan started being documented. The possibility that Tibetan simply perpetuated an inherited system is not considered, as this would imply that Tibetan was not originally part of the Tibeto-Burman family, but a language isolate that became heavily lexified.⁷

⁵ E.g. in ITJ 0731, *Tragedy of the horse and yak*, v35f. and v40: *ša rlon.du zos khrag rlon.du hthunjs (/hthug)* ‘ate/ was able to eat the meat raw, drank/ was able to drink the blood fresh’ and Pt 1134, a funeral text, l. 94, again in the collocation *mmah zos* ‘renewed’.

⁶ This is based on an earlier system of eight or nine derivational stems, see Zeisler (2001 and 2004: 845–874). Note that there is not necessarily only one pair of intransitive verb stems, but often a second pair, although only one of the pairs enters into the paradigmatic relation with the transitive-causative verbs. The two intransitive roots differ in the voicedness of the initial, sometimes the non-voiced one also shows an *e* ablaut with respect to the main verb root underlying all derivations, e.g. *√gan* ‘get full, fill up’: intransitive I: *gan* ‘get, be full’, intransitive II: *hkhejs, khejs* ‘be, get filled up’, causative: *hgejs, bkan, dgan, khon* ‘make full’ or *√bab* ‘move down’: intransitive I: *hbab, babs, bob* ‘go, fall down’, intransitive II: *hphebs, phebs* in Classical and Modern Central Tibetan meaning ‘hon. come, go’, but most probably originally related to the mythical *descent* of the ‘first king’ from heaven, causative: *hbebs, phab, dbab, phob* ‘make move down’ (cf. Zeisler 2001: 20–29). Which of the two sets enters the paradigmatic relation remains unpredictable. For a recent discussion, see also Hill (2014a) and more briefly (2014b: 622).

⁷ I do not, however, subscribe to Beckwith’s (2002: 153) suggestion that we might deal with an Indo-European language that acquired too many Tibeto-Burman traits to be identified in its origins. There is nothing in Tibetan grammar that could suggest such a development. I would think, however, that certain reorganisations in the Tibetan verbal system might have been influenced by a dominant Indoaryan language. The most likely candidate for this could have been Scythian, the language of the Yue-chi. No known language or language family of the Himalayas, Pamirs, or Central Asia provides a morphological system that could underlie the Tibetan verbal system or that could have triggered the supposed changes from a pronominalising language to the Old Tibetan system. LaPolla (2001: 236) assumes that the predecessor of Old Tibetan was a Tibeto-Burman language that underwent some influences from

Among the adherents of the Tibeto-Burman hypothesis, several scholars have suggested that the original system of proto-Tibeto-Burman must have had some kind of person marking, as displayed by a large part of the modern Tibeto-Burman languages – none of them, however, attested as early as Tibetan. According to DeLancey, Tibetan or rather the higher node proto-Bodish would have lost this original system all of a sudden, when replacing the finite verb forms with constructions consisting of a nominalised form plus a linking verb or auxiliary, similar to the system found in the modern Tibetic varieties. This loss would have occurred in situations of intense linguistic contact during the process of state formation and the development of urban-like centres and/ or valley cultures (DeLancey 2014: 41, 64f., and *passim*).

However, periphrastic forms are not yet common in Old Tibetan, where the verb stems are frequently used in sentence final position, without further morphological markers or auxiliaries. According to DeLancey, even these simple stems would go back to nominalised auxiliary constructions. Evidence for this would come from the sentence final particle *-o*, which would have been reanalysed from “an original copula in a nominalization construction”, cognate with the Tibeto-Burman copula **way* (DeLancey 2010: 26, 28).⁸ This would mean that the Tibetan verb stems must have lost or fused the nominaliser in an intermediate state. There are several problems with this and similar approaches.

1.1 Unknown dimensions in time and space: The origin of Tibetan

The first problem is the timing for the presumed language development and the order of the following steps: 1. replacement of pronominalised forms by nominalised forms plus auxiliaries, 2. loss or fusion of the nominalisers and auxiliaries, 3. acquisition of the Tibetan-specific morphemes, such as prefixes and suffixes, and formation of *ablaut* patterns, 4. reorganisation of the derivational system from 8 or 9 slots (see note 6 above) to the system of 2 plus 4 tense and mood stems, 5. growing opacity of the new system, and thus 6. (re-) introduction of auxiliary verbs for a few constructions – all this before the mid 7th c. CE at the latest. What is described as step 5 might have happened actually before step 4, so that we alternatively would have: 3. acquisition of the Tibetan-specific morphemes, 4. growing opacity. 5. reorganisation, perhaps together with the introduction of periphrastic constructions. While some steps, such as 1, 2, and 6 could happen within one or two generations, steps 3, 4, and 5 would need considerably more time.

If DeLancey’s analysis of the final marker *-o* as an earlier linking verb was correct, the formation of periphrastic constructions based on a nominalised verbal form and a linking verb would have happened at least two times in the language history. This would mean two more steps, perhaps between step 3 and 4.

There is no apparent reason why such repetition should be limited to only two cycles. Nothing prevents the assumption that the system built up after a previous merger or loss of morphology resembles the former system in its structure, even if different lexical material is used.

non-Tibeto-Burman languages, but under this hypothesis, the influence would be restricted merely to the lexicon, and the question would remain why the Tibetan verbal system is so untypical for Tibeto-Burman.

⁸ Note that the sentence final marker is much less frequent in Old Tibetan than in standardised Classical Tibetan. It is more a paragraph marker, and particularly occurs at the end of a direct quotation. The latter usage reminds of the use of *iti* in Sanskrit. The marker is thus perhaps more likely related to the pronominal form *ho ~ hu*, which we find in Old Tibetan and several modern varieties (see Zeisler 2011: 278–281), and which may even be part of the Shamskat Ladakhi definiteness marker *po ~ bo ~ wo*.

Quite on the contrary, this seems to be the most likely development. It is an accepted fact in historical linguistics that the morphological system of a language constitutes something like its linguistic ‘DNA’, because it is least affected by outside influences, and because the presence of older layers in neighbouring dialects, in the speech of the elder generation, or in certain conservative genres, such as poetry, proverbs, songs, or liturgical texts, may serve as a corrective. This inbuilt resistance is the main reason why the idea of a ‘mixed language’ that would display morphological features of two or more languages is usually rejected (cf., e.g., Dixon 1997: 11f.), and this is also the reason why a language like Brahui can still be classified as being Dravidian, although it retains in its vocabulary only 15% of Dravidian origin (Elfenbein 1989, cf. also Emeneau 1962: 438f.).

If the Tibeto-Burman hypothesis was correct and if proto-Tibeto-Burman had been pronominalising, one could have thus expected that the predecessor of Tibetan either built up a new system of pronominal clitics, especially if in contact with pronominalising languages, or that it simply built up a system of periphrastic constructions with auxiliary verbs following a simple or nominalised verb stem. The supporters of the Tibeto-Burman hypothesis have so far not shown how the complex and opaque verbal system of Tibetan could have evolved from either starting point. Jacques’ (2012) so-called ‘internal’ reconstruction of the Old Tibetan prefixes is an interesting speculation, based on external evidence, namely the Japhug prefixes as attested in the 21st c. CE. It is far from being a reconstruction, not to speak of providing evidence for the alleged development, nor does it account for the vowel alternations in the Tibetan verbal paradigms.

On the other hand, if a new morphological system differs fundamentally from the original one, this is less likely the result from an internal development than the result of interrupted transmission associated with heavy linguistic influences from a substrate language. At this point, I would agree with DeLancey. Admittedly, in the case of Tibetan, none of the known languages or language families of Central Asia and the Himalayas (Indo-European, Mongolic, Turkic, Burushaski, and perhaps also Austro-Asiatic) could have yielded the typically Tibetan result. The difference between their systems and that of Tibetan is as fundamental as that between the Tibetan verbal system and that of the rest of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

However, the possibility remains that an unknown language isolate or a member of a now extinct family, ‘language Y’, so to speak, was spoken in the homeland of the Tibetan ancestors. Under this scenario, one may well ask whether it was not exactly this hypothetical substrate ‘language Y’ that was continued with its particular morphosyntactic ‘DNA’, rather than the Tibeto-Burman lexifier, that is, whether the ancestor of Tibetan might not have been a language isolate. For sure, the very idea of a language isolate defies verification as well as falsification, and it cannot thus achieve the status of a hypothesis in the strict sense. However, if the structural properties of Tibetan and that of the other Tibeto-Burman languages cannot be matched without applying force to Tibetan and its presumed development, it might be worth considering this option.

1.2 State formation and Tibetan prehistory

State formation that deserves this name did not start on the Tibetan plateau before the mid or late 6th c. CE. In a note, DeLancey (2014: 61, n. 8) challenges this idea, because “urban civilizations with state-level political organization do not simply spring up like mushrooms.” They do so, however, particularly when nomadic tribes consolidate, as, e.g., the Mongols did. As for Tibet, there is no historical evidence that an important political entity existed in Central Tibet before the imperial

period. While archaeology suggests that there may have been a few larger settlements, perhaps even ‘urban’-like centres, these were most probably not connected with each other, and it is also not clear how long each of them continued through the centuries and how they could have been related to the later Empire. It still remains to be established which culture the people in these settlements belonged to and which languages they might have spoken.

This also holds for the most likely candidate for an early urban civilisation on the Tibetan plateau: *Žaṇžun*, the alleged homeland of the Bonpos, in the western half. The history of this area has been obliterated by willful reconstructions or idealisations by both post-imperial Bonpos and Buddhists alike. Despite claims to the contrary, *Žaṇžun* was most probably not a centralised state or kingdom, but at best a tribal confederation. Even if it were a state in the sense DeLancey thinks of, the so-called *Žaṇžun* language would not have belonged to the Bodish node – it is commonly assumed to belong to the Almora group of West Himalayish,⁹ but it is also possible or even quite likely that non-Tibeto-Burman languages, such as (Eastern) Iranian, the Northwestern Prakrit or proto-Dardic, perhaps Burushaski, and the unknown language(s) of the *Hūṇas* and the *Hephthalites* were spoken in the western area, which, according to the Bonpo traditions, might have been more central at some time.¹⁰ The underlying culture of the *Žaṇžun* polity seems to have extended quite far into the Central Tibetan region (Bellezza 2008: 30–199 and the maps, pp. 698–743, Bellezza 2011) and may have stretched along the northern rim of the *Changthang* up to *Amdo* (cf. Zeisler 2010: 404). Other important tribes on the northern rim, such as the *Sumpa* and the *Tuyuhun* are generally supposed to have been of Mongolian stock. The *Tuyuhun* seem to have swept the area in the mid 5th c. CE (see Molè 1970: 10), possibly destroying whatever urban complex might have been there.

It is unknown when the speakers of Old Tibetan or an earlier language stage arrived on the Tibetan plateau, but their arrival must have been rather late. It is likewise unknown whence they had come, except that they must have entered from the northeast, most probably coming down the *Gansu* corridor. It is further completely unknown how far their political and social organisation was developed and whether they could already have started to attract and integrate or to dominate and enslave speakers of other languages.

By the end of the 6th c. CE, a comparatively small principality enters history, in competition with its neighbours. By the mid 7th c., it successively overthrows the older powers, such as *Žaṇžun* and the *Tuyuhun*, and then begins to conquer Central Asia and to challenge China. How this success story was possible is a mystery, but it is quite probable that the success was based on alliances with powerful military elites, perhaps those people who brought in (the precursor of) the Old Tibetan language.

It is the imperial period, during the late 7th to the mid 9th c., where the first process of state formation takes place with a conscious attempt at the amalgamating of the most diverse ethnicities. (The second such process starts on a smaller, more local scale in the 11th c., during the so-called *phyidar*, the period of the second spread of Buddhism, after the breakdown of the Empire and a

⁹ It is unknown whether so-called ‘Old Zhangzhung’, the language of a handful of documents in Tibetan script found in Central Asia, dating from the late 8th to the first half of the 9th c. (Takeuchi & Nishida 2009: 154), can in any meaningful way be associated with *Žaṇžun*.

¹⁰ If the Bonpo accounts of a scriptural tradition in pre-imperial *Žaṇžun* can be trusted, then this necessarily refers to the *Brāhmī* and the *Kharoṣṭhī* inscriptions and documents of Central Asia and the Pamiran borderlands, featuring Iranian or Indoaryan languages.

phase of anarchy.) The military administration of the Empire is in the hands of speakers of Old Tibetan (or its immediate precursor). An eastern variety with features known from modern Amdo Tibetan seems to be dominant. Old Tibetan becomes the military (and then also the commercial and religious) lingua franca on the Tibetan plateau and in large parts of Central Asia (see Zeisler 2009a for a somewhat more detailed discussion).

The official writings from the imperial period show no traces of a dramatic linguistic change, let alone an interruption in the language transmission. On the contrary, the language was adopted by more and more people, and while this certainly had some ‘creolisation’ or simplification effects on the language in the long run, it did not lead to a sudden loss of the available morphology. 1200 or 1300 years later, traces of the Old Tibetan system are still visible in the modern Tibetic languages.

No witness from the west (Persia), the south (India), or the east (China) has observed a growing ‘urban’ civilisation on the Tibetan plateau before the mid 7th c., although at least Chinese observers described in some detail some of the tribes that populated the northern and western rim of what might have been *Žaržur* in the 6th to mid-7th c.: *Nüguo*: the Women’s Dominion (possibly in the vicinity of Gilgit or further south, but confounded with a region in Sichuan), *Suvarṇagotra*: the land of the Gold Clan (likewise possibly in the vicinity of Gilgit, or according to the Indian sources, along the *Satlej*), and *Yangtong* (possibly reaching from Ladakh through all of the *Changthang*; see here Zeisler 2010).

As it is unlikely that a large-scale urbanisation process on the Tibetan Plateau would have remained unnoticed by any of the three important neighbouring civilisations, one can thus safely assume that no such process took place.¹¹ One may thus also assume that the above-sketched five to six stages of the language development before the imperial period would not have been dramatically faster than the observed language changes, and may have taken at least another 1300 years.¹²

¹¹ Nothing can be said about the civilisatory progress in the unknown area(s) where the ancestor language must have been spoken, but the mere fact that the Chinese sources remain silent on this issue, indicates that the society either was too far away to be noticed or too insignificant. In the first case, the odds are against a Tibeto-Burman background, in the second case, the odds are against an urbanisation process in DeLancey’s sense.

¹² See also below, section 2, p. 12. One of the reviewers objected that there is no reason to believe that change occurs at a constant rate. He thinks that a radical change as suggested by DeLancey could well have been ‘induced by the consolidation of the Tibetan Empire, with speakers of a variety of conquered peoples speaking different languages becoming speakers of Tibetan’. I have never claimed that the rate of change was constant. It may be noted, however, that a non-constant rate of change has two consequences: at any period in the history, the process of change could be faster but also much slower than in the period observed.

My claim here is that there is no evidence for a sudden and radical loss of morphology in Tibetan. It is possible to see that there has been a reorganisation of the Tibetan verbal system at some time in the prehistorical period, but by the resulting chaotic system, one cannot assume that the reorganisation was complete and radical, nor is there the slightest hint that the system proposed by DeLancey and others stood at its beginning. We do not see much change in the documented language exactly during the epoch when Tibet became a real power, integrating more and more foreign people in more and more distant areas.

There is further evidence that Central Asia people adopted Tibetan as a *lingua franca*, and that some changes, such as levelling of stem alternation occurred during the Old Tibetan Empire, but these changes were minimal, and they were continued into some of the modern languages, where the traces of the earlier system are still visible (Zeisler 2009a). We do not have any evidence that a sudden radical change occurred in the centuries or millennia before the Tibetan Empire came into being, simply because we do not have any evidence where and under which conditions the ancestor of Tibetan was spoken.

I agree that one cannot preclude *a priori* the possibility that a radical change occurred. However, given the fact that a lot of gradual language change has been observed everywhere in the world, particularly also in the Indo-European

Specifically the process of growing opacity (whenever it may have started) must have lasted a few centuries. The first stage might then end up at about 2600 BP or earlier, a period for which we do not have the slightest historical evidence where and under which conditions the speakers of the then language or rather: languages actually lived.

DeLancey (2014: 60) actually posits the loss of finite morphology in a similar distant prehistory, when he assumes that the next higher node to Bodish, “common Tibetan-East Bodish,” dates already *several centuries* before the state-formation of the Empire, and that at the even higher node, proto-Bodish should already have been of the creoloid type. Divergent branches of proto-Bodish would not have developed “any later than the beginning of the Common Era” (ibid.).

1.3 *An inbuilt fallacy*

LaPolla (1992 and 2012a) raises serious objections against DeLancey’s hypothesis, most of which I do not want to repeat here. Instead, I would like to point out a logical inconsistency in DeLancey’s basic argument. I want to illustrate this with a very simple and intentionally trivial example. Its triviality is by no means meant to ridicule DeLancey’s position, but to shed light on a hidden fallacy in the arguments of all supporters of the hypothesis that proto-Tibeto-Burman was pronominalising.

Premiss 1: Some members of my family have umbrellas, some don’t.

Premiss 2: It is well-known that people who have umbrellas loose (or get rid of) them easily.

Conclusion 1: Ergo, those members of my family who have no umbrellas must have lost (or got rid of) them.

Conclusion 2: Ergo, all members of my family must have had umbrellas in the first place.

In this trivial case, everybody would agree that the first conclusion does not follow from the two premisses. It is a possible outcome of the two premisses, but certainly not the only one. Conclusion 1 would only follow as the most likely solution, iff the proposition in conclusion 2 was true. But conclusion 2 is exactly what is to be proven.

Iff we could be sure that all of the so-called Tibeto-Burman languages were, in fact, genetically related and iff we further had a definite proof that the proto-language had person marking, then we could assume that those genetically related languages which do not show person marking, in all likelihood, had lost this feature. However, we neither know for sure whether all of the so-called Tibeto-Burman languages are genetically related (i.e., offspring from the same ancestor language), nor is there any independent evidence that the supposed ancestor language had person marking, at all.

Logically then, there remain several options. 1.) The higher branches of Tibeto-Burman are not genetically related, but form a convergent areal group. In that case, no feature can be projected from one branch to another. 2.) All pronominalising languages belong to a genetically related group, say Core Tibeto-Burman – for the sake of the argument, I assume here that recently innovated

languages, but not so much radical losses, I fear the chances that such a radical change occurred in the development of Tibetan are rather low. See also section 1.3 below.

pronominal systems have built up the system anew after a temporary break down. 2a) Non-pronominalising languages may then be genetically related with the core group, but may be in a stage of a temporary (or perhaps also final) break down. 2b) They may be genetically related on a higher node, but belong to a separate Non-Core Tibeto-Burman branch that never developed pronominalisation. 2c) Finally, they might not belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages at all. For each single non-pronominalising language, option 2a, 2b, or 2c must be considered with equal likelihood. That means, the likelihood that a non-pronominalising language like Tibetan had completely lost its pronominal system is at best 1 : 2. Other factors, like the rather weird Tibetan verbal morphology and the relative stability of the system would bring the likelihood further down. In this connection, LaPolla's (2012a: 12) observation is quite important that

[t]he earliest example we have of person marking in TB is in Tangut, a dead language in which there are texts dating back to the eleventh century.

Since in these texts, person marking is not obligatory¹³ and since the person markers are exact copies of the personal pronouns (ibid.), one may assume that by the 11th c., person marking in Tangut is a comparatively recent innovation. If LaPolla is right and if Tangut provides the earliest evidence for person marking in a Tibeto-Burman language, how can one argue, let alone prove, that any of the person marking systems among the even more recent Tibeto-Burman languages or an abstraction from these systems truly reflects a feature of the assumed proto-language 4000 years or more before present?

1.4 *Complex irregularities of the Old Tibetan verbal morphology*

One of the main problems in the reconstruction of proto-Tibetan or higher nodes is that the Old Tibetan verbal morphology is highly irregular: there is a large variety of inflectional 'paradigms' or rather unpredictable stem forms (see here the works of Shafer 1950/51, Uray 1959, and Coblin 1976), while only about half of all verbs show inflectional alternations. This irregularity and complexity is not to be expected if the Old Tibetan verb stems should basically result from a contraction of a non-inflected verb stem plus nominaliser (plus auxiliary), because in this case, all verb stems should show a very limited set of stem finals, and these should pattern in a regular way.

Old Tibetan verb roots have the same set of finals that other Tibetan words have, namely *g*, *ŋ*, *d*, *n*, *b*, *m*, *r*, *l*, *s*, and vowel. The plain roots, therefore, cannot possibly retain earlier morphological material.

The verb stems show two suffixes: *-d* (alternating with *-s*) for stem I of transitive-causative verbs and *-s* (alternating with *-d*) for stem II (and IV) of both transitive and intransitive verbs.¹⁴ Neither suffix is regular. Suffix *-d* appears rather infrequently, it may perhaps be an old suffix getting obsolete. Suffix *-s* is more frequent, but it seems to be an innovation, spreading from the weak

¹³ Person marking only appears in quoted speech and seems thus to be a feature of the colloquial language (LaPolla 1992: 303). While "we do not know for certain which of the two styles is the more conservative" (LaPolla ibid. n. 20), it is most often the written language that preserves older stages of the language and slows down language change.

¹⁴ Both suffixes take the form *-s* after final *g*, *ŋ*, *b*, *m*, and the (obsolete) form *-d* after *n*, *r*, and *l*. The difference becomes apparent only after open stems. Only suffix *-d* triggers vowel *ablaut*. Cf. the verb *√bya* 'do', stem I: *bya* + *-d* > *byed*, stem II: *bya* + *-s* > *byas*.

paradigms without prefix alternation into the strong paradigms where it is redundant. The Ladakhi varieties, particularly the Kenhat varieties, show that the process of overgeneralisation of the *-s* suffix continued until the suffix became meaningless and/ or phonetically eroded (see here also Zeisler 2011: 258–261). This process of overgeneralisation would not have been possible or at least would have been extremely unlikely, if the *-s* suffix was the remnant of already obsolete morphology (be it an auxiliary or a nominaliser). As the *-s* suffix of stem II seems to be an innovation and the *-d* suffix of stem I is rather infrequent, the possibility that the suffixes of Tibetan verb stems contain traces of older morphological material is ruled out for the majority of the Tibetan verbs. It would seem thus that all older morphological material, particularly all person-marking suffixes must have been lost completely – if they ever existed.

2 The irregular stem II *zos* as a remnant of an earlier person marking system

It may, nevertheless, be the case that the Tibetan *ablaut* features result from vowel assimilation features triggered by suffixes that have got lost. Tibetan transitive-causative verbs show the following *ablaut* patterns: if the verb root contains the vowel *a*, stem IV regularly has *o*, stem I may have *e* (usually conditioned by the suffix *-d*), *o*, or no *ablaut*. Roots containing vowel *e*, usually have an *o* ablaut in stem IV. Roots containing the rhyme *uŋ* may have an ablaut *u > i* (again conditioned by the suffix *-d*, which also regularly leads to the assimilation of the velar nasal: $\eta + d > nd > n$). Roots containing the vowels *u* (with any rhyme other than *uŋ*), *i*, and *o*, do not show any *ablaut*.

	stem I	stem II	stem III	stem IV
root vowel a:	a	a	a	o
	e	a	a	o
	o	a	a	o
root vowel e:	e	e	e	o
root vowel u:	i(n)	u(ŋ)	u(ŋ)	u(ŋ)
the verb ‘eat’	a	o / a	– / a	o

Table 1 Tibetan *ablaut* patterns in transitive verbs

Since *ablaut e* (and *i*) is clearly triggered by a suffix, the vowel quality of which is, however, unknown,¹⁵ it might well be possible that *ablaut o* reflects the earlier presence of a suffix, most probably containing a low rounded vowel. This opens up the possibility that the *ablaut* features might be due to an earlier person marking system.

This is the idea Jacques (2010) pursues in his attempt to explain the irregular pattern of the verb ‘eat’. According to him, the irregular *o* form of stem II *zos* would correspond to a Tibeto-Burman

¹⁵ The rules for vowel assimilation or vowel merger discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 below would predict that the suffix contained a high vowel in order to yield a raised vowel in the preceding syllable. However, the Shamskat Ladakhi and Balti present tense suffix *-et < ba + yod* (besides Kenhat *-at* and besides the Shamskat habitual morpheme *-bat*) and possibly also the pan-Tibetan negated form of the copula *med < ma (?) + yod* indicate that a raised vowel *e* may also result from the combination of *a* with a suffix containing low vowel *o*, at least, or perhaps only, when the suffix had a palatal initial. It might thus be possible that the Old Tibetan *-d* suffix for stem I was a contracted form of the very auxiliary *yod* (or its earlier form), as already suggested by Laufer (1914: 63).

third person patient suffix #-u in the past tense. The majority of the Tibetan verbs with vowel *a* in the root would have lost this past tense *ablaut* through analogical levelling (p. 48). The idea seems to have a certain attraction, and students with insufficient knowledge of Old and Classical Tibetan feel obliged to cite it uncritically (cf. Oisel 2013: 83, n. 90).

As van Driem (2011: 35) notes, R.K. Sprigg had once talked to him about a similar idea, based on an apparent parallel in Limbu, where one can observe a switch from *a* to *ɔ*, when a 3rd person patient is involved. Sprigg was further wondering whether one could find more traces of such *ablaut* features in the Old Tibetan documents. As far as I know, the answer is no.

Hill (2014b: 621), however, suggests that there are three other verbs showing the same *ablaut* pattern: 1. a most probably etymologically related agentive transitive verb I: *hchah*, II: *hchos*, III: *hchah*, IV: *hcho* ‘bite, gnaw’, 2. an inagentive *intransitive* verb I/(III): *lan*,¹⁶ II: *lon*, IV: –, with the alleged meaning ‘finish’, and 3. the inagentive *intransitive* verb I: *hden*, II: *don*, III: –, IV: –, with the alleged meaning ‘disappear’.

It should be clear that the last two verbs could not show a trace of a 3rd person patient marker, simply because they do not imply any patient. Apart from this, the verb *hden* ‘disappear’ would also show a different *ablaut* feature *e* ~ *o* – if it were, an *ablaut*, at all, and not a possible vowel alternation as found in quite a few words, such as CT *rje* and OT *rjo.bo* ‘lord’ or *che-* ‘big’ with modern dialectal variants in *cho-*, cf., e.g. common Ladakhi *ŋhenmo* vs. western Shamskat Ladakhi *ŋhopo* ‘big, great’. Based on textual attestation, JÄK lists two verbs with almost the same meaning I: *hden*, II: *den*, IV: *den(s)* ‘go’ and I: *hdon*, II/IV: *(h)don* ‘go, proceed’. BRGY lists a reduplicated verb *hden-hden.ba* with the meaning ‘like going’ (*hgro-bžin.pa*) and the verb I/III: *hdon*, II: *don*, IV: *dens* (!) with the meaning ‘go out or go’ (*hthon.paḥam hgro*). The meaning ‘disappear’ may be a secondary extension of the basic meaning ‘go (away), depart’, but among Hill’s sources, it is only attested as such in the DYGB, where it refers to the vanishing of clouds. The DYGB, however, gives the forms as I/(III) *hden*, II: *dens*. The GTSR lists the verb as I: *hden*, II: *den* ~ *don* ~ *hdon*, III: *hdon*, IV: *dens*.¹⁷ The BKM differentiates between I/III: *hden*, II: *dens* ‘disappear, dissolve (of clouds, smoke)’ and an allegedly Old Tibetan variant *hden* for I: *hdon*, II/III: *don* ~ *hdon*, IV: *hdens* ‘go’. It seems that two related variants of one and the same verb have merged in usage.

The second verb *lan* is likewise an intransitive verb, which according to the BRGY has the meaning ‘be, get complete (of numbers, speech)’: *tshan.ba* | *grans.kyis mi.lan.ba* | *brjod.kyis mi.lan.ba* | ‘be, get complete; [e.g.] not getting complete with respect to the number; not getting complete with respect to the speech’. Note that the medium argument for the completion is in the instrumental. The ‘subject’ undergoer argument is not given but can be assumed to be in the absolutive. There is again no patient argument available. According to the BKM this verb should not have vowel *o*: I/II: *lan*, III: *lan* with the meaning ‘be, get complete’ (*tshan.ba*). The BRGY notes a second pattern I: *lon*, II: *lon*: *lon.ba* | 1. (*tha.mi.dad.pa*) *lon.pa* | *lon.ba* || (1) ... (2) *hlan.ba* | *rtsisgrans lon.pa* | *tshad lon.pa* |

¹⁶ In the case of inagentive verbs, the dictionaries usually indicate a fictive stem III, the so-called ‘future’ (*ma.hons.pa*) which is, as in this case, almost always identical with stem I, and hence should not be counted. That the verb is inagentive becomes clear from the fact that the dictionaries do not mention stem IV, the so-called ‘imperative’ (*skul.tshig*).

¹⁷ This is based on Hill’s own comparative list as provided for our earlier research project at the SFB 441 in Tübingen.

lo, grays loys.pa/ rin.tshad ma.loys.pa ..., that is, 'loy, 1. (without difference);¹⁸ [stem II:] loys; [stem III:] loy;¹⁹ (1) ... (2) being enough, reaching (an amount or size); having reached an amount, having reached a measurement, having reached a certain age; not having reached a certain length...'. This variant is also found in the BKM: I/III: loy, II: loys with the meaning 'reach an amount, be enough' (*grays.tshad lday.ba*). Again, it is possible that in the course of time, two related verbs had been conflated.

The first verb is the most interesting, particularly as it seems to display the same pattern as the verb *za* 'eat'. However, as far as I see, it is not very well attested. The verb is listed only in the BRGY and in the DYGB. Only the latter gives the four forms: I/III: *hchah*, II: *hchos*, IV: *hcho*, and defines the meaning as 'chewing with the teeth some kind of hard food' (*zas sra.mohi rigs sos ldad.pa*). One of the examples, however, also refers to the consumption of a fruit: *yas sil.tog hchos* 'I ate a fruit'.

The BRGY merely gives the forms I: *hchah* and II: *hchos*, and it is not clear whether these can be extrapolated to stem III and IV (as, e.g., in the CDTD): *mur.mur byed.pa | sha hchah.ba | khyis hchos.pa | gcig.gis gcig hchah.ba | hchah-rlom.pa* | 'biting/ gnawing; eating meat; the dog having eaten/ bitten/ gnawed; eating/ biting each other; eat-robbing'. The last meaning is defined by Jim Valby in the TETT as 'eating unfairly and cheating others of their share'. Under the entry for *hchos*, the BRGY indicates that it would be an old form for *zos*, i.e., the past tense of the verb *za* 'eat', but the example given points rather to the idea of gnawing: (*rñin*) *zos.pa | khyis hchos.pa* | '(old [Tibetan]) having eaten; the dog having eaten/ gnawed'. Under the form *hcho*, we do not find any reference to a verb 'eat' or 'gnaw'.

The *o* ablaut does not seem to be attested in Old Tibetan: none of the forms *hchos* or *hcho* appears with a meaning related to 'eat', 'bite', or 'gnaw' in the Old Tibetan online documents, while *hcha* appears altogether two times, in Pt 1194, ll. 62–63 and in ITJ 0731, r68. In both cases, the usage is rather formulaic: *rus.pa gle.hcha* 'the bones, fodder for the *gle*',²⁰ besides *sha bya.za* 'the meat, fodder for the birds' and *kbrag sa.hthun* 'the blood, a beverage for the earth' or *sas hthun* 'dunk by the earth'.

The only modern attestation is Batang *tea* < *bcah* 'chew', which points to an originally 'regular' pattern (I: **nchah* or *bcah*, II: **bcas*, III: *bcah*, IV: *(*h*)*chos*), and Themchen I: *pteħa* < *hchah*, II: *pteħa* < *hchah* ~ *pteħi* < *hchas* or possibly < *hchos*, IV: *pteħu* < *hcho* (?) or perhaps rather < *hchos* 'gnaw'.²¹ Themchen might perhaps corroborate the 'irregular' pattern, but the evidence is rather problematic. One could further not preclude that the 'irregular' pattern of *hchah* 'bite, gnaw' was formed in analogy to that of *za* ~ *bzah* 'eat'.

¹⁸ That is, not implying an object different from (an active) agent. The term 'without difference' or *tha.mi.dad.pa* precludes agentive transitive verbs, but includes inagentive transitive verbs as well as agentive or inagentive intransitive verbs. For a discussion of this rather problematic term, cf. Zeisler (2006: 65f. n. 12).

¹⁹ The verb is thus inagentive, cf. also note 18 above.

²⁰ Perhaps a wild dog? Otherwise, *gle* refers to an island or a swamp. The idea might perhaps have been that the bones were exposed and that the sand of the island would 'gnaw off' the bones. On the other hand, the onomatopoeic *krum.krum*, which follows, points rather to a real gnawing. Thomas (1957: main text, p. 24, n. 4) suggests to read *gre* 'bear', but the word for 'bear' is *dred.moj* or *dred-* plus gender affix *pho* or *mo*.

²¹ Both final *-as* and final *-os* may yield /i/ in Themchen, cf. I: *sta* < *lh̥ta*, II: *phi* < *bl̥tas*, IV: *sti* < *l̥htos* 'look (at)' (CDTD). In other Amdo dialects however, *-as* yields /i/ and *-os* yields /u/, e.g. Mkharma *sta*, *phi*, *stu*, Rngaba *stæ*, *sti*, *stu*, Ndzorge *htæ*, *hti*, *htu*, Mdzorganrabar *ta*, *ti*, *tu*, and Rmastod *ta*, imp. *tu* for the same verb (CDTD). The realisation of a final *o* as /u/ is not common in Themchen, cf. also the forms *sa*, *sí*, *so* in the case of the verb 'eat'. It is thus possible that the verb 'gnaw' is either a loan from a neighbouring dialect or that its command form has been influenced by that of the neighbouring dialects.

Furthermore, although no sound law within Tibetan would allow a change from *hch* to *z* or the other way round, the two words *za* ‘eat’ and *hcha* ‘eat, bite, gnaw’ seem to be etymologically related (see here Matisoff 2003: 648 and passim for a possible common root **dz̥ya* and STEDT for a possible root **N-dz̥(y)a*²²), and it is possible that the presence of two slightly different forms led to a differentiation in meaning, with the older (?) or more marginal form developing a slightly negative meaning.

Nevertheless, for the sake of the argument, I shall assume that the pattern as given in the DYGB is valid, but given the semantic closeness between the two verbs ‘eat’ and ‘eat, bite, gnaw’, I would also assume that the same reasons can be adduced for a possible pattern *hchah*, *hchos*, *hcho* as in the case of *za*, *zos*, *zo*.

The scenario suggested by Jacques and Sprigg would, of course, contradict DeLancey’s scenario of a sudden loss of person endings via nominalisation (and the possible second cycle of loss of morphological material). Analogical levelling is usually a rather slow process, affecting first only a few verbs, then slowly more and more, but not necessarily all. It does not progress with the same speed in all dialect regions.

This difference in speed is quite obvious in the Tibetic languages, where apart from stem IV, the stem alternations have been levelled out to various degrees. The western-most varieties have lost all alternations between stem I and II in the verbal paradigms, except for the verb *za* ‘eat’ (but have preserved some traces in nominal derivations, cf. Zeisler 2004: 877f.). Lhasa Tibetan has retained a single verb with an alternation between stem I and II, namely *ʃhɛ?* < *byed* vs. *ʃhɛ?* < *byas*. Several varieties in Western Tibet retain between a handful and two dozen verbs with alternations in tone, reflecting an earlier alternation of voicedness of the initial consonant, alternations of aspiration, triggered by the earlier prefixes, and alternations of vowels (Zeisler 2004: 877, 2009a: 92; see also section 2.5, p. 50 below). Northern Kham varieties such as Nangchenpa (Causemann 1989) show a robust alternation of vowels, voicedness, and the nasal prefixes, while the nomadic Amdo varieties, such as Themchen (Haller 2004) even retain the prefixes, although a few verbs have been levelled out.

The general levelling out of a person-related *ablaut* in stem II, as mentioned by Jacques and implied in Sprigg’s consideration, could only have happened in a pre-Tibetan stage, for which we do not have any linguistic evidence, not even indirectly, as there is no documented sister language that could shed light on the pre-Tibetan stages. The archaic text elements within the Old Tibetan documents and the seemingly irregular usages of verb stems may allow to reconstruct a more complex system of eight or nine derivational verb stems (see note 6 above), but they do not attest unexpected stem forms other than the common orthographic variations and other than unexpected, that is, not yet well understood, usages. In particular, they do not attest any kind of irregular *ablaut* within an individual verb stem in general, or an *a > o* *ablaut* within a verb stem II, except for the verb ‘eat’.²³

²² The supposed root would be reflected throughout the Tibeto-Burman languages with initials such as *dz*, *ⁿdz*, *ts*, *te* or *ʃ*, *ʃb*, *ɗ* or *ɗɟ*, *ⁿɗɟ*, *s*, *z*, *zy*, *ɛ*, *f*, *sya*, *zya*, *ty*, *dz*, *tɕ*, and *ɕ*, which are, except perhaps the last three, similar enough to allow the assumption of an etymological relation, at least via borrowing. As rather common among Tibeto-Burman languages, the vowels vary, but vowel *a* is the most frequent. The form *hchah* with a possible realisation as *ⁿʃha* would thus fit well into the row. In a few languages, the word also shows vowel *o*, among them Lepcha *zo*, see <http://stedt.berkeley.edu/~stedt/cgi/rootcanal.pl/etymon/36> (24.11.2014). Matisoff (2003: 165) takes this as an independent development, but at least in the case of Lepcha, one could ask whether the form *zo* was not borrowed from the Tibetan *potentialis* form *zo*, *zos* (see further below).

²³ Even if we might find some instances in some of the non-edited fragments, one should bear in mind that the language of the oldest documents is neither homogeneous (or standardised) nor necessarily ‘purely’ Tibetan. Many of

2.1 Vowel assimilation in modern Tibetic languages

first syllable	o / (ø)	a / (ɛ)	e	i	u / (y)
	resulting first syllable				
second syllable high (i, u)	u / (y)	ɛ ~ e ~ i	i	—	—
second syllable low (a, e, o)	—	—	—	e	o / (ø)

Table 2 Regressive vowel assimilation in modern Tibetan

Many modern Tibetic varieties show regressive vertical vowel assimilation, that is, a high vowel *i* or *u* in a second syllable leads to the raising of mid and low vowels *e* > *i*, *a* > *ɛ*, *e*, or even *i*, and *o* > *u*, while a low vowel in the second syllable leads to the lowering of a high vowel, see Table 2. Examples from Ladakhi are CT *boŋbu* > *buŋbu* ~ *pũ*: ‘donkey’ and CT *bumo* > *bomo* ~ *pomo* ‘girl, woman, daughter’. See here also Sprigg (1961), Chang & Chang (1969) for Lhasa Tibetan, and Haller (2000: 27–29) for Shigatse. Some varieties additionally show progressive assimilation along the same principle. In such cases, the assimilation direction may depend on the intonation pattern (cf. Haller 2000: 26).

If a similar process applied to the non-documented language stages, a suffix containing the vowel *u* should thus have affected verb roots containing the vowels *e*, *a*, and *o*. The resulting forms should be *i*, *e* ~ *ɛ*, and *u*. In the case of the verb ‘eat’, the result should thus have been **zes* (or even **zis*), not *zos*. If the suffix contained a low rounded vowel, the vowel *a* would not have changed, and stem II of ‘eat’ should have been **zas*, whereas roots containing the vowel *i* should have changed to *e*, those containing *u* to *o*.

We do not usually observe an assimilation feature that yields a rounded vowel from an unrounded vowel. If, nevertheless, the observable ablaut feature *a* > *o* in Tibetan verb stems was due to a following rounded vowel (whether high or low), we should observe the same kind of rounding also in the higher vowels, hence *i* > *u*, and *e* > *u* or *o*. If *additionally* the opening grade of the suffix was important, we should expect the following results: *i*, *e*, *a* + *u* > *u* and *i*, *e*, *a* + *o* > *o*.

The Tibetan verb paradigms show none of these changes for root vowels other than *a* and *e*. Hence it does not seem likely that a regular process of vowel assimilation caused by a round vowel was the cause for the vowel alternation *a*, *e* > *o* in the Tibetan verb stems.

2.2 Vowel merger and diphthongs in Tibetan

first syllable	o	a	e	i	u
	resulting syllable				
second syllable high (i)	ø ~ e	ɛ ~ e ~ i	e(:)	i(:)	y ~ i

the obsolete words, which are usually quite obscure, just because they were not continued into the classical language, may have been words inherited from the ancestor language, borrowed from a Tibeto-Burman language, or borrowed from a non-Tibeto-Burman language. Verbs can be borrowed directly, and when they are, they might be borrowed in their basic form or, less frequently, also with (part of) their foreign paradigm.

second syllable high (u)	eu	eu ~ iu	?	?	u:
second syllable low (o)	o(:)	o	o	u	?

Table 3 Observed vowel changes under vowel merging

The remaining possibility is that the suffix was joined directly to the verb root, with a merger of the two vowels (this is actually what Jacques 2010: 47 suggests). Vowel mergers are infrequently observable in the modern languages. Unfortunately, they are not well documented. The main effect seems to be a possible lengthening and the rounding or unrounding of the resulting vowel, triggered by the second vowel, while the opening grade is only marginally affected.

In Shamskat Ladakhi, one can observe the contraction of the demonstrative pronouns *di* (CT *hdi*) and *de* (CT *de*) with the definiteness marker *po* ~ *bo* ~ *wo*, resulting in the forms *du* and *do*, respectively. The word for buckwheat, CT *bra.bo* merges to *bro* in Western Shamskat, Purik, and Balti. Similarly, the word for ‘seed’ *sa.bon* merges via *saon* as in the Kenhat dialects of Ladakh to *soon* in Balti (CDTD) or *son* in the Shamskat dialects of Ladakh. The *-i* element of the genitive and instrumental marker, if following an open syllable, generally leads to a raised vowel in the case of an original *a* and may further have a fronting, sometimes even unrounding effect in the modern Tibetan varieties. In Ladakhi, the limiting quantifier *ʃik* has a similar effect, leading to an unrounded and possibly raised vowel, e.g. *ʃa* ‘tea’ + *ʃik* > *ʃe:k* ‘some tea’, *ʃhu* ‘water’ + *ʃik* > *ʃhi:k* ‘some water’, *noro* ‘good’ + *ʃik* > *norek* ‘somewhat good’. As mentioned in note 15, even vowel *o* may lead to a merger into *e-*, but perhaps only when it follows a palatal glide, as in the case of the auxiliary *yod*, for which this effect has been observed in Shamskat Ladakhi and Balti (*ba* + *yod* > *et*).

Already Old Tibetan shows a near merger of vowels *a* and *o* + *u*, namely in the case of the diminutive (*hu*, *gu*, or *bu*). The result is typically that vowel *a* is raised one step and that vowel *o* is unrounded, e.g. *rta* ‘horse’ > *rtehu* ‘fowl’, *sga* ‘ginger’ > *sgehu* ‘small ginger’, *sgo* ‘door’ > *sgehu* ‘small door’, *rdo* ‘stone’ > *rdehu* ‘little stone, pebble’. Amdo, at least, shows vowel raising (plus unrounding) also in the case of vowel *o*, cf. CT *sgehu-khuŋ* lit. ‘small door hole’ for ‘window’: Arik *rgikoŋ*, Labrang *rgikhuŋ*, Ndzorge *gikhoŋ*, and Rmastod *gikhuŋ* (CDTD). As the alternative form *k(h)oŋ* for *khuŋ* indicates, the second element of the compound is most probably not responsible for the vowel raising in the first element. In some Western Tibetan varieties, vowel *a* is raised even two steps, e.g. Rudok, Gergye, and Shigatse *tīu*, Mustang *tīu* ~ *tīwu* ‘fowl’ (CDTD). This feature of raising vowel *a* by two steps to *i* is also attested in Classical Tibetan with the diminutive form *gu: rtig.gi* ‘fowl’, cf. also Tshochen, Nubri, Western Drokpa, Dingri, Kyirong, Shigatse, and Lhasa *tīgi*, Themchen and Arik *ṛtiyā* (CDTD). In this case, the vowel of the suffix has become unrounded. Similarly, *thagpa* rope has a diminutive written *thagu*, but vernacular *thigu* (JÄK).

The result of a vowel merger with a first syllable vowel *a* is thus almost the same as in the case of vowel assimilation. Whether *zos* resulted from a vowel merger or from vowel assimilation across a syllable final, the vowel of the morpheme in question should have been *o*, not *u*, otherwise the result should have been **zes*, **zis*, **zeus*, **zius*, or **zi:s*.

The question is then, whether this hypothetical *-o* containing element can be identical with the 3rd person patient marking suffix *-u*, that is, does the vowel quality not matter? Is the non-applicability of the suggested sound law *a + u > o* to Tibetan irrelevant? Or do we have to assume that the vowel merger *a + u > o* was an inherited feature from proto-Sino-Tibetan (as suggested by Jacques 2010: 46), but likewise lost in Tibetan except in the two verbs for ‘eat’ and ‘eat, bite, gnaw’?

Even if these questions can be answered, there still remains the further question whether the *-o* containing element that triggered the form *zos* can be distinguished from those elements that triggered ablaut *o* in other stem forms, particularly in stem IV, the so-called imperative.

2.3 *Lack of a functional minimal pair in terms of person marking*

In order to argue for the existence of a functional category, one should be able to list minimal functional pairs. When talking about remnants of a functional category, there should be at least one single minimal functional pair left. In our case, we would need a pair of verb forms within a given TMA functional slot or independently of such slots, with each form referring to different participants (AGENTS or PATIENTS), in order to infer some kind of person marking. This is, e.g., the case of Lepcha, “where the verb ‘give’ has a stem *bi* when the RECIPIENT is 3rd person, and *bo* when the RECIPIENT is 1st or 2nd person” (DeLancey 2010: 23 with further reference).

This can be compared to an even more robust system, such as that of the above mentioned Limbu, where the verb shows an *o* ablaut in the past tense when the AGENT is 2nd or 3rd person singular and the PATIENT is 3rd person (Jacques 2010: 43) or, according to Jacques (2009: 19 and 2010: 46), the system of Tangut, where the marked stem would be used when the AGENT of a transitive verb is 1st or 2nd person singular and the PATIENT is 3rd person, while the unmarked stem would be used in all other cases – but see here the different description by LaPolla (1992: 308f.), whereby the marked stem would only indicate speech act participant involvement.

The case of the Tibetan stem II *zos* is in a significant way different: the form is used indiscriminately, whether the AGENT is 1st person or not, whether the PATIENT is 3rd person or not, or whether there is any specific combination of 1st and 3rd person (1st person AGENT & 3rd person PATIENT vs. 3rd person AGENT & 1st person PATIENT) or any other kind of speech act participant involvement. In this respect, the verb ‘eat’ does not differ from any other Tibetan verb.

2.4 *The relation between person marking and temporal coding*

It is not immediately obvious how an earlier person marking system could turn into (irregular) temporal marking. As Jacques (2010: 47) suggests, the *-u* suffix could have been conditioned by the TMA domain, that is, the 3rd person PATIENT agreement marker would have occurred only in past tense. This seems to be the case in Kiranti (cf. the case of Limbu, just mentioned above), but apparently in no other person-marking language (p. 46). Nevertheless, Jacques goes on to suggest that

This trace of person agreement could only be preserved precisely because the *-u* third person patient suffix not only marks person, but also TAM: it is only in its function of distinguishing between non-past and past that it could survive after the person agreement system collapsed (Jacques 2010: 47).²⁴

Jacques remains silent, however, about why such an important and rather straightforward past tense marker should have disappeared from the rest of the Tibetan verbs and how it could have been

²⁴ Similarly in Jacques (2012b: 90): “Tibetan thus indirectly preserved this person marker because it also was a tense marker.”

replaced by a comparatively opaque derivative system. He further finds difficulties to explain why the Tibetan form *zos* combines an alleged past tense marker *-u* and a further past tense marker *-s*. With similar difficulties outlining the relative order of the two markers, he offers three hypotheses. According to the first, the suffix *-u* would have been only a person marker, following the verb root, and preceding the past tense suffix *-s* (Jacques 2010: 47f.), a typologically rather unlikely combination. Furthermore, the above-mentioned motivation for keeping the form *zos* (marking of TMA, namely past tense) would no longer apply.

According to the second hypothesis, the suffix would have been a past marker itself, and the *-s* suffix would have been secondarily overgeneralised. In the latter case, “the original past tense of $\sqrt{\text{za}}$ ought to have been **zo*” (Jacques 2010: 48).

This **zo*, however, is the attested form of stem IV, the so-called imperative. Jacques fails to explain the anomaly of the latter form. With the exception of the verb ‘eat’, all Tibetan open-syllable verbs have an *-s* suffix in stem IV. Similarly, many verbs with closed syllables show an *-s* suffix in stem IV, when this is phonologically possible. Stem form IV *zo* would then be doubly odd: not only does it not conform to the regular stem IV of open syllable verbs, it would also be identical with the hypothesised original past tense form **zo*.

According to the third hypothesis, the person-marking suffix would have joined the past tense suffix, leading to vowel assimilation (Jacques 2010: 48), hence *zas + u > zosu*. With the drop of the suffix, the form *zos* would have resulted, looking like a regular command form.

The question is thus, whether it is conceivable, according to the first two hypotheses, that the past stem **zo* acquired a past tense suffix *-s* through overgeneralisation, if the result would look like an ordinary command form. In that case, as well as according to the third hypothesis, a further question would be, whether it is conceivable, that during a further process of analogical levelling of a person related *ablaut*, a single past stem could have been exempted, when it could have been confounded with a (regular) command form. Would it further be conceivable that in order to avoid this confusion, the corresponding command form would have lost its suffix or would have been blocked from acquiring it?

In view of the fact that the attested 3rd person patient suffix does not necessarily occur with all person agents, e.g., not with plural agents in Limbu and Tangut, not with a 1st person agent in Limbu, not with a 3rd person agent in Tangut – and, as LaPolla (1992: 308f.) demonstrates, not as a 3rd person patient marker, but as a marker that indicates 1st or 2nd person *involvement*, there arises the further question, whether there was enough pressure to overgeneralise the *-o* forms for all persons, agent and patient, when person marking became obsolete.

It may be further noted that Jacques’ third hypothesis (the person-marking suffix *-u* following the past tense suffix *-s*) would imply that most of the Tibetan verbal morphology existed already at the stage where the language was supposed to have person marking, and that it was *not* an innovation after the loss of person marking.²⁵

²⁵ A possible counter-argument might be that only the past tense suffix *-s* existed at that time, but not the complex stem formation with prefixes and consonant alternations and vowel *ablaut*. But this suggestion would imply that a comparatively straightforward system of tense marking with the help of the past tense suffix *-s* was replaced by an opaque system of stem formation, while the past tense suffix *-s* itself was retained for the greater part of the verbs – and was even overgeneralised in some of the modern dialects. This is rather unlikely, and it can be shown that the past tense suffix *-s* must have been a comparatively late development in Tibetan, which spread from the weak paradigms into the strong paradigms, where it was redundant, see here Zeisler (2004: 346–348, 447 and 2011: 259–261). This spread may have paved the way for the process of analogical levelling in the modern languages.

2.5 Morphological conservatism of the verb ‘eat’

According to Jacques (2010: 47), it would not be “uncommon for a verb meaning ‘to eat’ to be among the most conservative verbs in the language”. As we shall see below, the irregular pattern of the verb ‘eat’ in the Tibetic languages might, in fact, have something to do with conservatism, however, on a different level. The question is, of course, what makes a verb conservative, belonging to the core vocabulary, high frequency, or, by contrast, low frequency? Low frequency words may remain unaffected from sound laws, just because they are rarely used or restricted to special registers. Highly frequent words may remain unaffected just because they are used so often and the ideal form is always present in the speaker’s mind. High frequency might account for the conservatism in the verb *za* ‘eat’. But in the case of the poorly attested verb *hchah* ‘eat, bite, gnaw’, it would be rather its obsolescence.

It might be worth to have a look at the modern Tibetic languages, more specifically at those highly frequent verbs that resisted the analogical levelling of stem I and II. As already mentioned, the only Lhasa Tibetan verb retaining the earlier stem alternation is the CT verb *byed*, *byas* ‘do’.

Shigatse (Haller 2000: 80, 85 and CDTD) has preserved the ablaut pattern *e - a* of the CT verb *byed*, *byas* > *tehe*; *tehie*, ablaut pattern *o - a* of the CT verbs *sdod*, *bsdad* > *tə*, *tiə* ‘sit stay’; *sprod*, *sprad* > *tsə*, *tsiə* ‘give’; and of the CT verb *gcod*, *bcad* ‘cut’ in the collocation CT *rtsad* *gcod*, *bcad* > *tsiə* *teə*, *teiə* ‘ask about’. It has further retained the *ablaut* pattern for the CT verb I: *hchad* ~ *šod*,²⁶ II/III: *bšad*, IV: *šod* ‘tell, explain’ as I: *əə*, II: *eiə*, IV: *əə* ‘speak’.

Dingri (Herrmann 1989: 29, 304–489 and CDTD) has preserved the *o - a* ablaut of some CT verbs with *g-* prefix: *gcod*, *bcad* > *teə*; *teə*: ‘cut’; *gton*, *btan* > *tə*, *tə*: ‘send off’; *gsod*, *bsad* > *sə*; *sə*: ‘kill’. It further shows *o - a* *ablaut* in the above-mentioned CT verbs *sdod*, *bsdad* > *tə*; *tə*: ‘sit’; *sprod*, *sprad* > *tə*: ~ *tət-*, *tə*: ~ *tət-* ‘give’; *šod*, *bšad* > *əə*; *əə*: ‘tell’, additionally also in the CT verbs *ston*, *bstan* > *tə*, *tə*: ‘show’; *šdom*, *bsdams* > *tə*, *tə*: ‘bind’; *sloŋ*, *bslaŋs* > *lə*, *lə*: ‘ask, pray’; *slob*, *bslabs* > *lə*, *lə*: ‘teach’ (in derived forms); *hdogs*, *btag* > *tə*; *tə*: ‘bind’; *hjoŋ*, *bžag* > *əə*, *əə*: ‘put, place’; and an otherwise non-attested stem I **g.yor*, for the verb *g.yar* ‘borrow’ > *jə*, *jə*:. Ablaut *e - a* is preserved in the CT verbs *byed*, *byas* > *tehe* ~ *tehi*, *tehe*: ‘do’; *hdren*, *draŋs* > *tə*, *tə*: ‘invite, serve’; *hbebs*, *phab* > *pə*, *pə*: ‘put down’; *len*, *blaŋ* > *lə*, *lə*: ‘take’; and in the verb *skyel*, *bskyal* in the collocation *mnaŋ* *skyel* ‘swear’, here also with an *-o* form of stem I **skyol*: *nə* *cəl* ~ *cəl*, *cəl*. Verbs like CT *hdul*, *btul* > *tul*, *tul*: ‘overcome’; *hdon*, *bton* *tən*, *tən*: ‘take out’; and *hbul*, *phul* > *pul* ~ *pə*; *pul*: ‘give’ show an alternation of low vs. high tone in accordance with the voiced and unvoiced radical of the Classical Tibetan verbs. This alternation is also found in the pair *tuy* (CDTD: *tuy* ~ *tūy*), *tūy* ‘drink’, which yields an otherwise non-attested stem I **hdun*, for the CT verb I: *hthun*, II: *btun* ~ *thun* ‘drink’.²⁷

Western Drokpa (Kretschmar 1986: 350–596 and CDTD) mainly retains the tone and aspiration distinction of the radical, but also a few verbs with *ablaut o - a*, such as the CT verbs *sñob*, *bsñabs* > *nəp*, *nəp*: ‘be able to reach up, be able to seize’; *gnon*, *gnan* > *nə*, *nə*: ‘subdue’; *htshol*, *btsal* (with possible overgeneralisation of vowel *o*) > *tshəl*, *tsā*: ~ *tsē*: ~ *tsō*: ‘search’; *rdzoŋ*, *brdzaŋs* > *tsə*, *tsə*: ‘dismiss, send away’; the already mentioned pair **g.yor*, *gyar* > *jə*, *jə*: ‘borrow’; and verbs

²⁶ This form is not listed in the BRGY. See, however, JÄK and CDTD. The original form of stem I might have been **gšod*.

²⁷ This may either reflect an older pattern or a regional variant, but it could also be an innovative form in analogy to, e.g. *hdul*, *btul* ‘overcome’.

with ablaut *e* – *a*, such as CT *byed/ bya, byas* > *teḥi*²⁸ ~ *teḥa, teḥe*.²⁹ ‘do’ and CT *len, blaŋ* > *len, lāŋ* ‘take’. It further shows the parallel use of both the original stem I and the original stem II in all tenses for the CT verbs *gtoŋ, btaŋ* > *tōŋ* ~ *tāŋ* ‘let go, send’; *gtod, btad* > *tō* ~ *tē* ‘give, hand over’; *gsod, bsad* > *sō* ? ~ *sō* : ~ *sē* ? ~ *sē* : ‘kill’; *ston, bstan* > *tōn* ~ *tēn* ‘show’; *sdom, bsdoms* > *tōm* ~ *tām* ‘fasten, bind’; *sprod, sprad* > *tō* ? ~ *tō* : ~ *tē* ? ~ *tē* : ‘give’, *ḥdogs, btag* > *tōk* ~ *tāk* ‘fasten’; *šod, bšad* > *ēō* : ~ *ēō* ? ~ *ēō* : ~ *ēē* ? ~ *ēē* : ‘tell, narrate’; and *sems, bsam* > *sēm* ~ *sām* ‘think’, plus a few more verbs where the stems differ with respect to tone or aspiration.

Interestingly, none of these languages has stem II *zos* for the verb *za* ‘eat’ (see note 2, p. 34 and further below). The verb shared by all four languages is the verb *byed* ‘do’, which has an open syllable root $\sqrt{\text{bya}}$. While this verb was conservative enough to survive analogical levelling in Lhasa Tibetan, it does not show the supposed original *-o* ablaut in stem II. Another relatively conservative verb is *len* ‘take’. It is the only verb in Lhasa Tibetan, and one of the very few verbs in West Tibetan, where stem I has been overgeneralised rather than the stems II and III. Ladakhi, nevertheless, also preserves stem II *blaŋ* in collocations. Unlike in the case of *zos*, the marked form *len* is preserved in all modern Tibetic varieties, if only as the overgeneralised form, while the marked form *byed* is preserved in all modern Tibetic varieties (in Kham only as the overgeneralised stem), except Balti and Ladakhi.³⁰ The verb ‘give’ in its different incarnations (*sprod* and *gtoŋ*) likewise belongs to the

²⁸ As verbaliser and in negated forms also *-teḥi*’.

²⁹ As verbaliser and in negated forms also *-teḥe*’.

³⁰ Even in these two regions, the stem alternation of the verb *byed, byas* ‘do’ must have continued for some time. However, the different sound changes affecting the cluster *by* before high/ front and low/ back vowels: *by* + *i, e* > *b-* or *p-* vs. *by* + *u, o, a* > *j-* or *c-*, yielded two incompatible stems **bet* ~ **pet* and **ḍas* ~ **ḥas* in the Kenhat dialects of Ladakh. The fricativisation of the glide before back vowels must have occurred comparatively late, as Balti, Purik, and Sham were not affected. The incompatibility in the Kenhat dialects must have led to the comparatively recent replacement by the verb *ḥfo, ḥfos* (Zanskari *ḥfo, ḥfoe*, Gya-Miru *ḥfe, ḥfe*; < CT *ḥchos, bcos* ‘prepare, construct’) in most dialects of Ladakh. The Purik and Sham forms *ba, bas, bos* show a complicated development: the consonant alternation was levelled out in favour of the original stem I *byed* > *bet* > *b-*, whereas the vowel and the root shape was levelled out in favour of the original stem II and III *byas, bya* > *-a-*.

Balti must have levelled out the original alternation more straightforwardly towards stem II and III: *bja, bjas, bjos*. Stem I *bja* appears in the gerundive *bjaŋa*, the present non-continuative participle *bja* (< **bya-ba*), the conditional *bjana*, the agentive participle *bjakhan* ‘doer’, the causative *bjaŋuk-*, the irrealis form *bjasukpana*, the negated present *bjamet* < *bja-a-met* (< **bya-ba-med*), and in various compounds. However, in combination with a high vowel suffix the root vowel merges to *e*, and accordingly the palatal glide is neutralised, so that we get the genitive of the non-continuative participle *be* (< **bya-bahi*), the present continuous participle *ben* < **bjen* < *bja-in*, the inferential future *bek* < **bjeuk* < *bja-(t)uk*, and the present tense form *bet* < **bjet* < *bja-et* (< **bya-ba-yod*) ‘do, does, am, are is doing’. See here Read (1934: 53f., 60), Bielseimer (1985: 158), and Sprigg (2002: 35f.); in particular, Bielseimer (1985: 106) for the present tense form *-et*. The reconstruction of this form as resulting from *-ba-yod* is based on the negated form *-amet* in Central and Upper Ladakhi, *-amet, -bamet*, and *-pamet* in Sham, cf. Domkhar *ŋa(:) kho fespamet* ‘I don’t know him/her (episodic)’, and *-amet, -mamet*, and *-pamet* in Balti, cf. the negated forms *jakpamet* ‘do(es) not put’ and *oŋmamet* ‘am not coming’ in Read (1934: 56f.) and *goamet* ‘does not go’ in Ghulam Hassan Lobsang (1995: 34); it is further based on the positive habitual form *-at, -bat, -pat* of the Sham dialects, cf. *ŋa(:) inlif mifespāt* ‘I don’t know English (generally)’, and some positive evidential forms in Upper Ladakh that show at least the element *-a-* before the auxiliary *fiot* ≈ CT *yod*, cf. Sakti *zerafiokjak*, Leh *zeratjak*, Sham *zeretsok* ‘must have said, seems to be saying’, Gya-Miru *mēafiokanak*, Leh *ṛmoatjak*, Sham *ṛmoetsok* ‘seems to be ploughing’. It is only by accident that the Balti present tense form *bet* almost looks like CT *byed*. The same holds for the Purik and Western Sham speaker-related present tense form *bet* < *ba-et* (< **bya-ba-yod*), negated *ba(:)met* (< **bya-ba-med*). Unfortunately, Bielseimer (1985: 158) gives the root of the Balti verb as *be-*, while the CDTD even lists stem I as *bet* for the Balti and Purik dialects. This gives the wrong impression that these varieties still continue the Old and Classical Tibetan stem I *byed*.

more conservative verbs. In Limbu, it is exactly the verb ‘give’, which has preserved a person-related dimorphism.

Are the verb *za* ‘eat’ and its rather obsolete counterpart *hchah* ‘eat, bite, gnaw’ in any meaningful way more predestined to retain a pre-Tibetan form than the obviously most conservative Tibetic verbs ‘do’, or ‘take’ (or also ‘give’)?

2.6 The low transitivity of the verb ‘eat’

According to Driem (2011: 35), Sprigg stressed that the verb ‘eat’ “precisely represented the environment in which such a vestige of a cognate verbal desinence would have been likely to have been preserved”, but the reasons for his suggestion have not been transmitted. It were most probably not only frequency considerations. Perhaps Sprigg thought so, because there would be few instances where the verb could refer to a 1st person PATIENT, so that a 3rd person PATIENT marker could be overgeneralised. But this would be true even more in the case of the verb ‘kill’: a 1st person PATIENT is logically impossible as he or she would not have survived in order to be able to talk about his or her being killed.³¹ Being ‘cut’ or ‘broken’ are certainly also not very likely with a 1st person PATIENT. Note that all three verbs *gcog* ‘break’, *gcod* ‘cut’, and *gsod* ‘kill’ have an *o* ablaut in stem I.

On the other hand, there are usages in Tibetan (and possibly in many other Tibeto-Burman languages) where the verb ‘eat’ is used more figuratively to express the sensation of negative experiences, from being bitten by insects to feeling jealousy and the like. Particularly in the case of *being bitten*, a 1st person PATIENT would be rather common, but there is again no trace of a person-related vowel alternation.

In contrast to Sprigg, I would rather think that, apart from frequency considerations (see above), consumption verbs are not the best candidates for the survival of person marking, as they do not belong to the prototypical transitive verbs. In many languages, particularly the Standard European languages, they are not necessarily realised as transitive verbs. That is, the PATIENT of eating, the item consumed is not necessarily mentioned. Even, when a PATIENT is specified, it is typically inanimate (at least at the time of consumption). Consumption verbs are thus lower on the transitivity hierarchy than verbs that necessarily or commonly imply an animate PATIENT, such as ‘kill’.

Furthermore, since the PATIENT of consumption verbs is, so to speak, incorporated by the AGENT, the verb may also be formally treated as being low transitive (like reflexive constructions), so that it does not follow the ergative pattern. This is, e.g., the case in the Kenhat dialects of Ladakh, where the AGENT of consumption verbs does not receive an ergative marker (cf. also Koshal 1979: 64f. for Leh, Zeisler 2012: 89 for the Kenhat dialect of Gya-Mīru), except in contrastive or emphatic contexts. This corresponds to the logic of traditional Tibetan grammar, where a significant difference between the agent and the action (and the item acted upon) is the prerequisite for ergative marking. See here Zeisler (2006: 65, n. 12) or, in greater detail, Tillemans (1989).

All this does not preclude, but makes it rather unlikely, that traces of person marking, and particularly PATIENT marking should have survived just and only in the Tibetan verbs ‘eat’ and ‘eat, bite, gnaw’, rather than in a prototypical transitive verb.

³¹ If one wants to project a first person statement to the other world or to a near-escape scenario, there is no reason why this should not also be possible in the case of *being eaten*, e.g., by a tiger or one of the many demons.

It should also be noted that several pronominalising Tibeto-Burman languages do not mark syntactic relations or semantic roles but simply person or, more precisely, speech act participant (1P and/ or 2P) involvement: Tangut, Gyarong, Nocte, Muya, Dulong, Kiranti, Hayu (LaPolla 1992: 308 with note 29, 309). It is thus not fully intelligible, how a 3P PATIENT marker can be ‘reconstructed’ for proto-Tibeto-Burman.

I cannot avoid the impression that the whole discussion about earlier person marking in Tibetan is triggered only by the preconceptions that a) Tibetan must be genetically related to all other Tibeto-Burman languages and b) that proto-Tibeto-Burman must have started with person marking. What, if one or both presumptions are wrong? *Neither has been proven so far. Neither could possibly be proven beyond doubt.*

3 Stem II *zos* and stem IV *zo* as part of the Tibetan *potentialis* derivation

Before the reorganisation of the pre-Tibetan verbal system into the Old Tibetan system of two intransitive plus four transitive slots, the reconstructable earlier derivational system contained also one or two slots for the expression of ability. One slot expressed the resulting state of *being able to do/ transform something* or of *being able to be done/ transformed*, the other one may have expressed the corresponding inchoative or processual phase. The resultative form was marked with an *-s* suffix. Like the so-called imperative stem (IV), these two *potentialis* stems have an *o* vowel when the root vowel is *a* or *e*. To be more precise, the command function of stem IV is only a secondary application of the *potentialis* derivation, and the so-called imperative stem (IV) is identical with one of the two *potentialis* stems, mostly with the resultative stem.

As shown in Zeisler (2002, 2004: 847–852), the notion of ‘physical ability’ was first extended to the notion of ‘social ability’ or ‘permission’: *if you want, you may do X*. In a second step, the permissive form, being more indirect and thus more polite, must have replaced an earlier command form. This secondary function as command has almost completely obliterated the original *potentialis* function of stem IV. However, there are enough cases in Classical Tibetan where a *potentialis* reading makes more sense (cf. Zeisler 2004: 848–849, example 868, pp. 858–860, examples 874–875).

In Classical Tibetan and most modern Tibetic languages, prohibitions are typically formed with stem I (in Old Tibetan also with stem II or III). Only in Balti and Purik, the difference between commands and prohibitions has been levelled out. As the negated stem IV was not used for prohibitions, it could retain its *potentialis* function for some time. In Amdo Tibetan, the *potentialis* function of stem IV is still available in negative polarity contexts, that is, in questions and negations (Kalsang Norbu et al. 2000: 242–247, Haller 2004: passim). In Ladakhi, the function has become lexicalised in a few verb stems, such as *ʃhot* ‘be cuttable, be able to cut, be harvested (of fields, crops), or be able to finish the harvest’³² in contrast to the command form *ʃot!*, which implies an overgeneralised prefix *b-*: *bcod* (for the overgeneralisation of prefix *b-* in stem IV, see Zeisler 2009b).

³² Cf., e.g., Gya-Miru (Kenhat Ladakhi): *i fare kāmde, diṅse ʃhotʃemerak*. ‘This meat has dried and cannot be cut, at all.’; *i trija ʃa maʃhot*. ‘This knife could not cut the meat.’; *e! tri-ra boran, kbone ṅa(:) laḳaran ʃhorin*. ‘What you say! Not to talk about a knife, that one, I’ll be able to cut it with (my) bare hand.’

If we take the standard paradigm of the BRGY for the verb ‘eat’, namely I: *za* ~ *bzah*, II: *bzas*, III: *bzah*, IV: *zo*, the forms *zo* and *zos* would regularly correspond to stem I (inchoative) and II (resultative) of the *potentialis* derivation ‘be able to eat, be able to be eaten’.

From the perspective of Tibetan then, the most likely explanation for the seemingly ‘irregular’ paradigm of the verb ‘eat’ would be that stem II of the *potentialis* derivation (I: *zo*, II: *zos* ‘be able to eat, be eat-able’) got incorporated into the active-transitive paradigm as stem II, while, or just because, stem IV *zo* (that is, stem I of the original *potentialis* derivation) did not so much express a command but an invitation to eat: (*if you want*) *you may eat*. Compare here the corresponding invitation by a wishful tree in the Old Tibetan Ramāyāṇa: *su ḥdod ṇa.la loṅ*³³ ‘Who[soever] wishes, can/ may take from me’ (de Jong 1989: 86/E6).

The connotation of ‘ability’ may perhaps seem far-fetched from a modern, Amer-Euro-centric perspective. However, the question of being able to eat (one’s fill) may have accompanied the hardships of rural life more often than we know. It is, therefore, not at all inconceivable that speakers of Tibetic languages may have preferred to talk about a past event of consumption as of an event that they barely achieved or also as of an event that was linked to some kind of social regulation and permission. The connotations of ability (and permissibility) might also explain why this anomalous *ablaut* pattern has been preserved for such a long time, particularly also in West Tibetan, where all other vowel alternations between stem I and stem II have been levelled out.

The seemingly strange behaviour of the verb ‘eat’ has a parallel in the verb ‘drink’ *ḥthuṅ*. Here the regular stem II would be *btuṅs*, cf. BRGY: I: *ḥthuṅ*, II: *btuṅs*, III: *btuṅ*, IV: *ḥthuṅs*; but as JÄK indicates, the form *ḥthūṅs*, corresponding to stem IV (the *potentialis* derivation), is more common for stem II. With the exception of only a few Western and Central Tibetan varieties, which have a verb form based on the regular stem II (Purang *tūṅ*, Dingri *tūṅ* (~ *tūṅ*), Shigatse *tūṅ*, and Lhasa *tū*), most modern varieties have a verb form based on the *potentialis* stem IV: West Tibetan Shamskat: *thuṅ*, Kenhat, Western, and Central Tibetan: *thūṅ*, Eastern Kham Tibetan: *thū*, and Chabcha, Labrang: *thuṅ*, while most Amdo varieties have a nasalised form *nthuṅ* < *ḥthuṅ(s)*: Themchen, Rmastod, Mdzorganabar: *ṇthuṅ*, Sertha: *nthoṅ* or Ndzorge: *nthoṅ* (CDTD). The motivation for the *potentialis* form for ‘drink’ is most probably the same as in the case of ‘eat’.

Incidentally, it is again particularly the Western and Central Tibetan varieties Tholing, Rutok, Gar, Purang Tshochen, Gergye, Nubri, South Mustang, Western Drokpa, Kyirong, Dingri, and Lhasa that have preserved the regular pattern of the verb ‘eat’ as given in the BRGY: I: *za*, II: *bzas*, III: *bza*, IV: *zos* ‘eat’ with stem I: *zə* (Tholing, Gertse); *sə* (most varieties) or *sə* (Kyirong) < *za* (or *bzah*), stem II: *zə* (Tholing), *zə* (Gertse), *sə* (South Mustang) *sə* (Gergye, Nubri), *sə* (Rutok, Gar, Purang Tshochen), *sə* (Dingri), *siə* (Shigatse), or *sə*? (Lhasa) < *bzas*, and stem IV: *zə* (Tholing), *sə* (almost all varieties) < *zo*, and *sə* (Nubri) < (*b*)*zas* (CDTD). In these dialects, written *-os* always corresponds to *-ø* (possibly associated with a falling tone or a glottal stop).

There is thus a certain correlation (certainly not fully perfect) between the dialects that use the ‘irregular’ *potentialis* form for stem II for the verb ‘eat’ and those that use the ‘irregular’ *potentialis* form for stem II for the verb ‘drink’. And there is a similar (not fully perfect) correlation between the dialects that use the ‘regular’ form for stem II for the verb ‘eat’ and those that use the ‘regular’ form for stem II for the verb drink.

³³ The verb $\sqrt{\text{lay}}$ ‘take’ has the stems I: *len* (< **layd*), II: *blays*, III: *blay*, IV: *loṅs*; cf. BRGY; stem IV may also appear as *lon* (< *loyd*) and *loṅ* (JÄK). Cf. Ciktan: *loṅ* ‘(be able to) obtain’ (Silke Herrmann, unpublished manuscript), Dingri *loṅ* ‘obtain’, Tabo *lən* ‘get hold of sth, catch’, Western Drokpa *lən* ‘get, obtain’, Batang *lō* ‘get, to acquire; have taken hold of, to have gotten’, Lithang *lō* ‘find, get’, Themchen and Rmastod *lon* ‘get, obtain’ (CDTD).

In the case of the only other Tibetan verb that possibly shows an *-o* ablaut for stem II, *hchah*, *hchos*, *hcho* ‘eat, bit, gnaw’, it is, due to its marginal attestation, not possible to decide whether the notions of ‘bite, gnaw’ – associated with dogs, rather than with human beings, and thus less likely following the logic of consumption verbs – are basic and the glossing ‘eat’ thus erroneous or whether these notions are secondary extensions of an original meaning ‘eat’ that evolved in competition with the etymologically related verb *za* ‘eat’. In the first case, the ‘irregular’ pattern could have also evolved in analogy to the semantically closely related verb *za* ‘eat’.

4 Concluding remarks

The proposed explanation has several advantages: first of all, we do not have to make any assumption about the status of Tibetan as a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The explanation is valid even if Tibetan were genetically related to other Tibeto-Burman languages. We need not develop stacked hypotheses about non-documented linguistic processes. In particular, we can dismiss sound-changes that do not fit the attested language (sections 2.1 and 2.2) or an extraordinary conservative property for the verb ‘eat’ (section 2.5). We also need not go back 2000 years or more to a language stage that is completely beyond our reach (sections 1.1 and 1.2) and we can avoid begging the question with respect to a presumed proto-stage (section 1.3). Neither do we need to take recourse to a process of rapid morphological loss in a situation of linguistic contact under high pressure – of which we don’t know whether it actually occurred (section 1.4). Such radical losses are perhaps less common or much less radical than the current literature on interrupted languages, such as, e.g. McWorther (2007), may have it.³⁴

DeLancey (2010: 8) draws upon the fact that Kathmandu Newari shows no person marking while Dolakha Newari does. His conclusion is that Kathmandu Newari has lost all person-marking morphology in a sudden development. The problem is that without adequate historical linguistic data, both for the development of Dolakha and for pre-classical Newari, we do not know when this happened, why this happened, or whether we might perhaps deal with an opposite development, namely the acquisition of person marking – blocked in the Kathmandu valley by the same socio-linguistic factors adduced by DeLancey for the presumed loss, cf. also Kansakar (1999: 431). Even if Kathmandu Newari lost all verbal morphology all of a sudden, sometime before Classical Newari got documented (from the 12th c. CE onwards) this would not necessarily suggest that the same process happened in the ancestor language of Tibetan, 2000 years or more ago.

It should be noted, however, that only two of six Newari dialects or dialect groups, namely Dolakha and Pahari, show some kind of agreement, but apparently only subject agreement for

³⁴ One of his examples for an ‘interrupted’ language is the transition from Old to Middle Persian. However, while the case morphology broke down almost completely (the case markers fused into a single marker, Windfuhr 2009: 23 – case syncretism, however, started already in the stage of Old Persian, Skjærvø 2009a: 71), the same cannot be said for the verbal morphology. What happened is that the preterit forms (aorist and imperfect) were replaced by participial perfect forms. The person endings of the original present tense forms were fully retained with some sound changes. The new preterit used the present, imperfect, and preterit forms of ‘be’ and the present and preterit forms of ‘stand’ with endings, obviously borrowed from the present tense. See here Skjærvø (2009b: 217–219). With respect to the verb stems, a five-fold system was reanalysed ending up again in a five-fold system (Windfuhr 2009: 25). The replacement of a preterit by a perfect is not triggered by linguistic contact, but is a rather common and often repeated language internal development. I am indebted to Rainer Kimmig, Tübingen, who pointed out to me the development in Persian and also indicated relevant literature.

person and number. The agreement morphemes in question differ between Dolakha and Pahari (Kansakar 1999: 435) and do not bear much similarity with the alleged proto-Tibeto-Burman agreement markers. They are thus not necessarily inherited and/ or of much age. The remaining dialects, among them also hill dialects from eastern, central, and western Nepal, all show some kind of conjunct-disjunct system (*ibid.*), and it seems that already Early Classical Newar shows traces of such a system (*ibid.* p. 427). The question remains, which of the two systems in Newari is inherited and which one ‘borrowed’ or ‘inspired’ by linguistic contact.

There are certainly more than one linguistic scenario to ethnic amalgamation. Questions of self-perception or identity or religion may be as important as economic incentives or brute force. There may be the forceful imposition of a conqueror’s language but also the partisan-like keeping to one’s own language as a secret language, part of clandestine resistance. There is the free choice of one of the languages around as a *lingua franca* and the egalitarian, almost playful, systems of mutual bilingualism within families as in the case of the Brahui, where, out of politeness, each spouse uses the language of his or her partner (see Elfenbein 1987: 222f.), or in the case of linguistic exogamy elsewhere, where the in-marrying women must be speakers of a different father’s language or dialect and are not expected to adopt their husband’s language or dialect.³⁵

And finally, there might be the contextually driven switch between various languages in a multilingual setting. One of the Sikh traders in Ladakh can serve as an example. He is fluent not only in his mother tongue (Kashmiri), the state language (Urdu), and the language of his religious community (Panjabi), but also in the language of his neighbours (Ladakhi), and of his customers (English). Such practises may have been much more common in the multi-ethnic Himalayan and Central Asian environments than we are aware of.

While this is all mere speculation, the suggested explanation, by contrast, is based on some observed properties of the Tibetan verbal derivation system itself, namely the *potentialis* derivation. The integration of the *potentialis* form into the active paradigm has even a parallel in the consumption verb ‘drink’ and may perhaps have also occurred in another consumption verb ‘eat, bite, gnaw’.

With this explanation, the presence of a ‘regular’ or ‘standardised’ pattern for the verb ‘eat’ as given by the BRGY as well as the reflexes of this pattern in the Central Tibetan varieties would no longer be merely the result of a diachronic process of regularisation or analogical levelling. Rather, both patterns could have co-existed synchronically throughout language history. The socio-linguistic factors that led to the integration of the *potentialis* forms into the active paradigm may also explain why the seemingly ‘irregular’ pattern was not regularised even in those varieties that have otherwise levelled out all vowel alternations between stem I and stem II, as, e.g., all Western varieties. One might perhaps even draw the conclusion that the use of the regular paradigm in Central Tibetan for both consumption verbs indicates a far more favourable economic situation in Central Tibet than in the more peripheral areas throughout the ages.

³⁵ Linguistic exogamy has been reported particularly among the Tukano in the Vaupés region of Eastern Columbia (Jackson 1974: 53) and in various other regions (Croft 2003: 18), as well as in Southern China among the Sui (Stanford 2006). Another example for language exogamy within Tibeto-Burman are the four Jinghpaw subgroups, which have their own languages and “keep the languages distinct in terms of exogamy, marrying other-language speakers, the children being considered speakers of the father’s language even though they may speak one language to the father, one to the mother, and a third to the grandmother. Living in such a situation the people come to think in similar patterns and have similar cultures, and this leads to certain types of lexical and usage convergences among the languages” (LaPolla 2001: 39; I am grateful to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to this data).

Finally, the socio-linguistic factors may seem exotic to us in our modern societies, but should be comprehensible in view of a more traditional and economically fragile society. By contrast, the argument that the absence of a particular feature in a language may be due to sudden loss and the conclusion that, therefore, a language without traces of this feature must have had it earlier seem to be rather odd. In the case of Tibetan, the argument *e silentio* is particularly odd, since there is no independent evidence that pronominalisation existed in any state of pre-Tibetan or the presumed Tibeto-Burman proto-language. Neither has it been proven beyond doubt that Tibetan is a descendant of proto-Tibeto-Burman, nor is there any evidence of another language showing pronominalisation and particularly 3rd person PATIENT marking at a period roughly contemporary to, let alone earlier than, the earliest documented stages of Tibetan. It is further not really comprehensible how an isolated verbal form of the TMA domain should testify to the remnants of a person marking system without there being a corresponding functional opposition or a minimal pair, that is, a person-related alternation in at least one single verb. Cf. also LaPolla (2012b: 119f.) for a critique of this highly questionable assumption:

I also assume that for a form to be reconstructable to Proto-Tibeto-Burman, there should be a statistically significant representation of the form in the family [...], and so [...] I would not leap to farfetched conclusions on the basis of one or two forms that do not even match semantically, such as Guillaume's [! read Jacques'] (2010b, 2012) conclusion that, since the vowel in one verb root in Tibetan changes from *-a* to *-o* in the perfective, and in some Kiranti languages the vowel of some verb roots [...] changes from *-a* to *-o* due to a third person [patient] *-u* suffix, and in Bantawa this vowel change happens only with past tense forms, then this is evidence that [the ancestor of] Tibetan has [had] a person marking system.

ABBREVIATIONS

BKM	<i>Byatshig kungsäl melon</i> , Hri Žaolis & Skalbzan Lhamo, 2002
BRGY	<i>Bod-Rgya tshigmdzod chenmo</i> , Zhang, Yisun [<i>Kran Dbyisun</i>] et. al., 1993
CDTD	<i>Comparative Dictionary of Tibetan Dialects</i> , Bielmeier et al., draft
DYGB	<i>Dagyig Gsarbsgrigs</i> , Blomthun Bsamtan, 1994
GTSR	<i>Gsertog sumrtags</i> , Gsertog, ed. 1957/1995
JÄK	<i>A Tibetan-English dictionary</i> , Jäschke, 1881
TETT	<i>Tibetan to English Translation Tool</i> , Pellegrini, 2006–2009

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