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## The Semantics of the Verb ‘Give’ in Tibetan

*The development of the transfer construction and the honorific domain*

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

**Keywords:** give, Tibetan, light verbs, honorific, humilific

### 1. The Polyfunctionality of ‘give’

The verb ‘give’ may be one of the most frequent and basic verbs in the world’s languages, but it captures a complex situational frame (Newman, 1996). Its polyfunctional quality seems to be universally attested, as the verb root is frequently redeployed into other syntactic categories, and commonly appears

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as a light verb (Jespersen, 1965; Montaut, 1991; Newman, Ed., 1997; Mohanan, 2006; Tournadre & Pezechki, *forthcoming, inter alia*). However, the cross-linguistic descriptions collected on this verb and its equivalents still have to be confronted with more data from typologically and genetically diverse languages, which is the aim of this volume. Newman (Ed., 1997) has explored the use of ‘give’ in many languages belonging to several language families, but no comprehensive study has been conducted on ‘give’ in a Tibetic language so far. Our description of ‘give’ in standard spoken Tibetan will lead us to investigate the link between the transfer construction, the development of light verbs and the honorific domain. It will also allow us to formulate hypotheses on the cognitive and social motivations behind the evolutionary patterns of ‘giving verbs’.

## **2. The various lexical items corresponding to ‘give’ in Tibetan**

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

### *2.1. The polysemy of ‘give’*

‘Give’ is a highly polysemous verb in English, and its most literal meaning is to ‘hand an object over to someone’ (Newman, 1996). However, it is distinguished from the verbs ‘hand’ or ‘pass’ by its abstractness. It is perfectly acceptable to use ‘give’ when the giver, the transferred object and the

recipient are not physically in the same place, or even when the three elements of the giving process are abstract entities.

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

In this example, the giver ‘station’, the transferred entity ‘time’ and the recipient ‘stories’ are all immaterial. The meaning that an English speaker can naturally extract from this sentence is more or less that the program director of the radio station has decided that stories on education, government, the arts and community issues should be allowed a certain amount of time. This example shows that in English the verb ‘give’ has become a quick, spontaneous and convenient tool to express complex, abstract ideas.

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

## 2.2. *‘Tibetan’ and the Tibetic language family*

Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most scholars spoke of ‘Tibetan dialects’ to refer to a number of languages derived from Old Tibetan and spoken mainly in the Tibetan cultural area, currently covering six countries (China, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Myanmar). This label is problematic because the so-called ‘Tibetan dialects’ do not allow mutual intelligibility. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Online version (consulted 10/05/2017).

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term ‘Tibetan dialects’ used to designate the languages derived from Old Tibetan has been progressively replaced by ‘Tibetan languages’ (Zeisler, 2004; Gawne & Hill, 2017). Tournadre (2014) proposed to adopt the term ‘Tibetic’ to refer to this well-defined language family, and the term is now widely used (Sun, 2014; Gawne & Hill, 2017; Yliniemi, 2017; Hyslop & Tsering, 2017; Chirkova, 2017; Suzuki, 2017; DeLancey, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The Tibetic family includes at least 50 languages. However, the total number of dialects and varieties certainly amounts to more than 200. The term ‘Tibetic languages’ is preferable to ‘Tibetan languages’ because these languages are spoken not only by Tibetans *per se*, but also by other ethnic groups such as Ladakhi, Balti, Lahuli, Sherpa, Bhutanese, Sikkimese, etc. who do not actually consider themselves to be Tibetan.<sup>4</sup> They also do not call their languages ‘Tibetan’ (*BOD.SKAD* in Tibetan). Similarly, we do not talk of Latin or Italian languages, but of Romance languages, and do not think of French, Portuguese, Italian, Catalan or Romanian as various ‘dialects’ of Latin or Italian (Tournadre, 2014). Finally, let us note that Literary Tibetan is vastly different from the modern spoken languages.

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

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘Tibetic’ has been used differently by other authors to refer to ‘Bodish’, ‘Bodic’, ‘Himalayish’ languages, or other intermediate groupings within the Tibeto-Burman family. For details, see Tournadre (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Conversely, some ethnic groups in Tibet are officially classified as Tibetans (*zangzu* in Chinese) by the People’s Republic of China but their native languages are not Tibetic.

### 2.3. 'Give' in Old and Classical Tibetan

The basic verb expressing 'give' in Tibetan has evolved from *SBYIN/BYIN* in Old Tibetan to *SPRAD*<sup>5</sup> in contemporary standard spoken Tibetan.<sup>6</sup> In Old Tibetan, the verb *SPROD/SPRAD* barely exists whereas *SBYIN/BYIN* is commonly used:

(2)

'di	btsun.mo	gnang.cen-la	<b>byin</b>	dang	sras	yong-pa-r
DEM	queen	Nangchen-OBL	<b>give</b>	IMP	son	come-NMZ-OBL
'gyur=ro	zhes					
FUT= FCLT	QUOT					

“ ‘Give it to the queen Nangchen, and you will have a son.’, he said...” (Pt 0981, r099)

In Classical Tibetan, *SBYIN/BYIN* remained the most common verb meaning 'give' in a neutral register. However, *SPROD/SPRAD* had already emerged as a slightly less frequent competitor. In *the life of Milarepa* (16<sup>th</sup> c.), *SPROD/SPRAD* is used around one third of the times as a synonym of *SBYIN/BYIN*.

(3)

kho-'i	ska.rags-kyi	mdud.pa	bkrol	nas	'jim.pa-'i	sho
3SG-GEN	belt-GEN	knot	loosen	CONN	clay-GEN	die
zhig	<b>sprad-byung</b>					
one	<b>give-CMPL.PAST.REC</b>					

‘After loosening his belt, he handed a clay die to me.’ (MLNT)

<sup>5</sup> Standard spoken Tibetan has replaced most of its inflectional verbal system by a system of verbal suffixes. Therefore, we use the allomorphs *SPROD/SPRAD* when referring to Old and Classical Tibetan, and only *SPRAD* for standard spoken Tibetan.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible to distinguish three main periods of written Tibetan or Literary Tibetan: Old Tibetan (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.), Classical Tibetan (13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c.) and Modern Literary Tibetan (20<sup>th</sup> c.-now). However, some contemporary authors still write in a style close to Classical Tibetan (Tournadre & Suzuki, *forthcoming*). For Old Tibetan, our examples come from a text written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the Tibetan version of *Rāmāyaṇa* stories found in Dunhuang caves (Pt 0981). The examples in Classical Tibetan come from *the life of Milarepa*, written by Tsangnyön Heruka in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (*mi la'i rnam thar, gtsang smyon he ru ka*).

The honorific and humilific forms to express ‘give’ are respectively *GNANG* and *'BUL/PHUL*. They are very frequent verbs in Old and Classical Tibetan, as well as in standard spoken Tibetan.

There are other lexical verbs that are attested in Old and Classical Tibetan to convey the concept of ‘giving’. Among them are *STER* ‘give, bestow, offer’, *GTONG/BTANG* ‘give, give away, send, let go’, and *GTAD/GTOD* ‘direct towards, hand over, give’. There are also the less frequent *MCHOD* ‘offer, venerate, eat’, *STSAL* ‘bestow, give’, and marginally, *GSOL* meaning ‘ask, wear, dress, beg’, but also ‘give’ in some expressions such as *MTSHAN GSOL* ‘give/award a name title’, and in the noun *GSOL.RAS* ‘donation’, and *'GYED/GYED* ‘offer, distribute’. In the modern Tibetic languages, the most frequently attested verb is *SBYIN*, but the other verbs are also found in some languages. For example, *BTANG* is the main verb for ‘give’ in Ladakh and *GTOD* is used in Spiti (Tournadre & Suzuki, *forthcoming*). In some languages such as Amdo and Sherpa, *SBYIN* and *STER* are used as suppletive verbs to express the completed past versus the imperfective/future of the basic verb ‘give’ (Robin, *forthcoming*; Tournadre *et al.*, 2009).

#### 2.4. ‘Give’ in standard spoken Tibetan

The basic way of saying ‘give’ in standard spoken Tibetan is *SPRAD*. Here is one example from the Tibet Student Corpus (TSC):<sup>7</sup>

(4)

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<sup>7</sup> The Tibet Student Corpus is a semi-guided corpus of spontaneous conversations in standard Tibetan collected in Lhasa in 2010-2011 by Eric Mélaç (at the time a doctoral student at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3). It is 4 hours long and includes 8 Tibetan native speakers, aged between 21 and 29, and all studying at Tibet University or the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (Lhasa, Tibetan Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China).

*dn̄gul de sprad-song*  
money DEM give-DIR.CMPL.PAST  
'He gave the money.' (TSC)

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

In English, a verb like 'give' has many non-literal senses and frequently appears as a light verb in (semi-)fossilized constructions. However, in standard spoken Tibetan, *SPRAD* is very rarely used figuratively and does not appear as a light verb. It might be surprising to note that *SPRAD*, as well as the archaic form *SBYIN/BYIN*, have not really developed figurative meanings, and do not serve as light verbs. Old Tibetan already had a set of light verbs and many of them are still used today. Among them, *BTANG* can be seen as a verb expressing 'give, send, let go' that was already widely used as a light verb in Old Tibetan, and it seems that the other basic verbs expressing 'give', such as *SBYIN/BYIN* and *SPROD/SPRAD*, have never competed for this status.

### 2.5. 'Give' as a light verb

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



verbal element, the latter being called a ‘light verb’.<sup>8</sup> One of the salient properties of light verbs is their limited semantic weight and their involvement in a linguistic sequence that functions as a complex predicate. It is therefore the verb complement that mostly carries the semantic weight of the construction (Tournadre & Lessan-Pezzechki, *forthcoming*).

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

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

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

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<sup>8</sup> One can note however that the complement of a light verb is not always nominal, as it might look like a noun, but have no exact lexical equivalent in this syntactic category, such as in ‘have a go’. In addition, many idiomatic constructions with a generic verb and an adjectival, prepositional or even onomatopoeic complement can be classified as ‘light verb constructions’, such as ‘take into account’, ‘do wrong’ or ‘go boom’.

equivalent. We are now going to illustrate this difficulty with a few Tibetan translations of the light verb ‘give’ in English. Starting from English does not mean that English is considered a reference language, or even a language with a typical distribution of the verb ‘give’. It simply aims to show that the precise mapping of the semantic territory of ‘give’ in two unrelated languages can be highly complex.

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

‘Give a hint’ *GO.BRDA BTANG* (lit., *notification send/give*); ‘give a pat’ *CAG.CAG BTANG* (lit., *smack send*); ‘give an order’ *BKOD.PA BTANG* (lit., *order send*); ‘give a punishment’ *NYES.CHAD BTANG* (lit., *punishment send*); ‘give a hand’ *ROGS.PA BTANG* (lit., *friend send*), etc.<sup>9</sup>

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

‘Give an explanation’ *’GREL.BSHAD BRGYAB* (lit., *explain hit*); ‘give an answer’ *LAN BRGYAB* (lit., *response hit*); ‘give a call’ *KHA.PAR BRGYAB* (lit., *telephone hit*), etc.

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<sup>9</sup> These word-to-word translations are just given as indications. Most words are polysemous, and many polymorphemic units can also be found outside of the light verb construction with an autonomous meaning.

‘Give a lecture’ *LEGS.SBYAR BYED* (lit., *lecture do*); ‘give medical care’ *SMAN.BCOS BYED* (lit., *treatment do*); ‘give credit’ *YID.CHEB BYED* (lit., *trust do*), etc.

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

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

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

‘Give a haircut’ *SKRA BZO* (lit., *hair make*); ‘give a name’ *MING BTAGS* (lit., *name attach*); ‘give notice’ *DGONGS.PA ZHU* (lit., *intent [hon.] ask [hum.]*); ‘give a ride’ *MO.TA NANG-LA BSKYAL* (lit., *car in carry*), etc.

This analysis and listing of constructions that would be appropriate translations of the English verb ‘give’ reveal several points that are essential to further our analysis of ‘give’ in Tibetan. Firstly, ‘give’ is not only highly abstract and polysemous in English, it also appears as a light verb in a great variety of entrenched constructions, making the predictability of the use of ‘give’ instead of another light verb for a given idiomatic construction quite low.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, although the translation of ‘give’ when it has a basic

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<sup>10</sup> The use of light verbs is in essence idiosyncratic, as the construction has to be memorised in its entirety. It is for example difficult to explain systematically why in English ‘give a talk’

meaning of ‘handing something over to someone’ is quite straightforward in standard spoken Tibetan (*SPRAD*), the translation of figurative ‘give’ is in no way easy to systematize. Finally, this contrastive analysis illustrates that the Tibetan language has also developed very common light verbs, but *SPRAD* is not one of them.

### 3. The distribution of *SPRAD*, *GNANG* and *PHUL* in standard spoken Tibetan

Now that we know that the answer to the question ‘How do you say “give” in Tibetan?’ is not as simple as it seems, we can adopt a form-to-function approach starting from Tibetan. We will focus on the most common words that can express the notion of ‘giving’ in standard spoken Tibetan and briefly explore their evolution from Old Tibetan.

#### 3.1. The Tibetan verb *SPRAD*

The verb *SPRAD* is the most common way of saying ‘give’ when it means ‘hand something over’. However, *SPRAD* is quite monosemous, literal and unproductive. In Old Tibetan, and partly in Classical Tibetan, the meaning of *SPROD/SPRAD* was different from its contemporary use in standard spoken Tibetan, since it usually meant ‘meet’ or ‘bring together’.

(5)

*'o.na nga-s mar.pa dang sprad=kyis*

then 1SG-ERG Marpa ASSOC bring together=FCLT

‘Then I can arrange for you to meet Marpa...’ (MLNT)

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and ‘make an announcement’ are perfect collocations while ‘??make a talk’ and ‘??give an announcement’ are not.

In standard spoken Tibetan, the verb *SPRAD* has lost that meaning and only signifies ‘give’. It appears 11 times in the TSC, where it is always associated with a concrete object (money, food, things, socks, gloves...; *see* example 4). This further confirms that the use of *SPRAD* is quite different from ‘give’ in English, the latter having most often a figurative meaning as shown by large corpus statistics (Gilquin, 2008).

### 3.2. The Tibetan verb *GNANG*

The verb *GNANG* is used as a plain lexical verb in Old Tibetan to mean ‘give’ in the honorific. It can have both a concrete or an abstract meaning. Since the agent of the transfer has to be a high-profile person, it can quite often be translated as ‘grant’.

(6)

*bdag-gyi pha ltar dgum-ba-r ci gnang zhes gsol=lo*  
 1SG-GEN father like kill-NMZ-OBL CR give (H) QUOT beg=FCLT

“ ‘Grant me to be killed just like my father’, he begged.” (Pt 0981, r250)

In Classical Tibetan, *GNANG* is also a very frequent verb expressing ‘give’ when the agent is seen as particularly respectable. There are many instances of it in *the life of Milarepa* (15<sup>th</sup> c.).

(7)

*gser srang bdun.po gnang-byung*  
 gold ounce seven give (H)-CMPL.PAST.REC

‘She gave me seven ounces of gold.’ (MLNT)

The verb *GNANG* was also already used as a frequent light verb in Classical Tibetan. In *the life of Milarepa*, one can find the following constructions, which are all in the honorific:

*CHOS GNANG* (lit., *doctrine give [hon.]*) ‘teach the Buddhist doctrine’; *MTHU GNANG* (lit., *magic give [hon.]*) ‘grant magical power’; *GDAMS.NGAG GNANG* (lit., *instruction give[hon.]*) ‘give instructions’; *PHYAG.’BEBS GNANG* (lit., *beating give[hon.]*) ‘beat’; *DBANG GNANG* (lit., *power give [hon.]*) ‘give empowerment’; *PHYAG.RTAGS GNANG* (lit., *sign give [hon.]*) ‘give a sign, wave’; *LUNG.BSTAN GNANG* (lit. *prophecy give [hon.]*) ‘predict, prophecy’, etc.

In standard spoken Tibetan, it is used as a lexical verb to convey the honorific meaning of both *SPRAD* ‘give, hand over’ and *BYED* ‘do’ (Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003). It also occurs as an honorific morpheme after an honorific lexical verb such as *GSUNG* (‘say’) or after the light verb *BTANG* (see below).

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

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

### 3.3. The Tibetan verb PHUL

In Old Tibetan, 'BUL/PHUL is a lexical verb that is the humilific form of SPRAD 'give, hand over' when the agent of the transfer is presented as inferior to the recipient.

(8)

*de.nas phyag byas 'phrin.yig dang rtags so.rdub*  
then arm (H.) LV letter CONN token ring

**phul** *te*  
give (h) CONN

'After paying respect, he gave her the letter and the ring as a token...' (Pt 0981, r219)

The same function can be observed in Classical Tibetan:

(9)

*nga-s gser g.yu kun phul te*  
1SG-ERG gold turquoise all give (h) CONN

'I gave you all the gold and Turquoise...' (MLNT)

Just like the honorific verb GNANG, the humilific verb 'BUL/PHUL was already a well-established light verb in Classical Tibetan. The following constructions appear in *the life of Milarepa*:

*PHYAG PHUL* (lit., *arm [hon.] give [hum.]*) 'prostrate'; *GZIGS PHUL* (lit., *eye [hon.] give [hum.]*) 'show'; *RGYU.MTSHAN PHUL* (lit. *reason give [hum.]*) 'give some reasons'; *GLU PHUL* (lit. *song give [hum.]*) 'offer a song', etc.

In the TSC, the verb PHUL only appears once in the idiomatic expression *ZHAL.PAR PHUL* ('give a phone call', hum.), in which it is undeniably a light verb.

What is interesting about the verb PHUL is that when it is used as a humilific light verb, it does not correspond to the verb SPRAD in the ordinary domain,

but to other verbs instead. For example, the ordinary form of the humilific *MTSHAN PHUL* ‘give a name’ is *MING BTAG*, literally meaning ‘attach a name’. The ordinary form of *ZHAL.PAR PHUL* ‘give a phone call’ is *KHA.PAR BRGYAB* (or *KHA.PAR BTANG*). In these two examples, the original meaning of the verb *PHUL* is not much altered, as the act of ‘giving a name’ or ‘giving a phone call’ can both be seen as a ‘transfer of data’ between two people.

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

#### **4. ‘Give’ and the honorific domain**

##### *4.1 The honorific domain in Tibetan*

We are using the term ‘domain’ here, as it is slightly misleading to call the honorific system of Tibetan a register, since ‘a register’ refers to a certain linguistic variety that has a diffuse impact on a speaker’s speech and is particularly dependent on social settings. The use of Tibetan honorifics is more specific and systematized than what is usually meant by the notion of register, as it reflects the speaker’s attitude toward the referents of the words he uses by positioning them on the social scale.

In all the world’s languages, there are words, constructions, terms of address and/or grammatical paradigms that encode respect towards the addressee, as



well as the things and people that the speaker refers to (Ide, 1989; Agha, 1994, *inter alia*). However, several Asian languages possess an honorific domain that is more pervasive and systematized. For example, there have been numerous studies on the honorific systems of Japanese and Korean (Okamoto, 1999; Strauss & Eun, 2005, *inter alia*). Several scholars have also investigated the honorific domain of Tibetan (Hajime, 1975; Rdorje et al., 1993; DeLancey, 1998; Tournadre & Dorje, 1998, 2003; Denwood, 1999; Dorje & Lhazom, 2002).

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

First of all, the honorific domain affects many linguistic forms, but is systematized differently according to the syntactic category of a given word. In Tibetan, the honorific domain may concern nouns, verbs, pronouns, suffixes and terms of address. Tournadre & Dorje (1998, 2003) distinguish four planes for the honorific domain in addition to the ordinary plane: the honorific, the humilific, the high honorific and the double honorific. The plane for a given linguistic item is chosen according to the social status of the participants mentioned in the sentence (explicit or implicit) with respect to the speaker. The honorific domain not only refers to people, but also to their spheres, that is, the objects and other entities that are related to them. What is special about verbs is that they generally connect several participants in a

sentence, which makes all of these planes relevant for some verbs, whereas nouns generally distinguish between only the ordinary and honorific forms at most. The high honorific plane concerns very few verbs and is used to convey a highly reverential attitude. In order to illustrate the other planes of the honorific domain (honorific, humilific and double honorific), we will take *SPRAD* ('give, hand over') as an example.

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

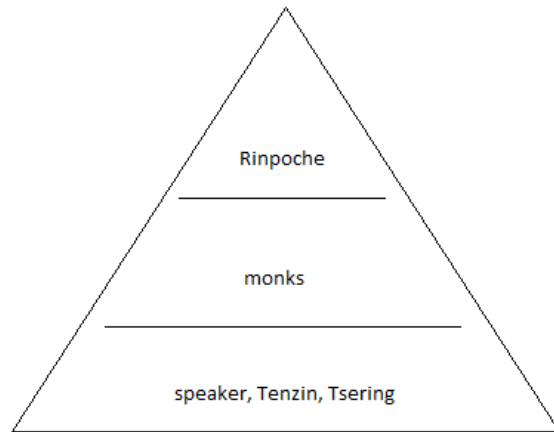
The special relation that the verb 'give' bears with the honorific domain has already been investigated by Loveday (1986) in his study of Japanese from a sociolinguistic perspective. In Japanese, 'give' possesses several translations depending on the social relationship between the two participants (Loveday,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

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

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

In order to illustrate these diverse possibilities, let us consider a few protagonists: some ordinary people (the speaker, Tenzin and Tsering), two

monks (high on the social scale) and a *Rinpoche* (a reincarnated lama, considered very high on the social scale).

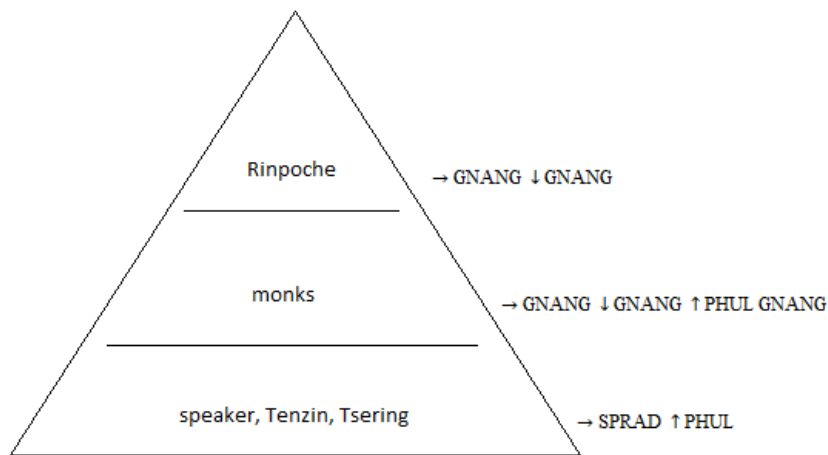


*Figure 1: Schematic illustration of the Tibetan social scale*

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

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

Speaker	→	Tenzin	<i>SPRAD</i> (ordinary, because speaker on same level as Tenzin)
Tenzin	→	Tsering	<i>SPRAD</i> (ordinary, Tenzin = Tsering, and spkr = Tenzin)
Tenzin	↗	monk	<i>PHUL</i> (humilific, Tenzin < monk, and spkr = Tenzin)
Monk	↘	Tenzin	<i>GNANG</i> (honorific, monk > Tenzin, and spkr < monk )
Monk	→	monk	<i>GNANG</i> (hon., monk = monk, and spkr < monk)
Monk	↗	Rinpoche	<i>PHUL.GNANG</i> (double hon., monk < Rinpoche, and spkr < monk)
Rinpoche	↘	monk	<i>GNANG</i> (hon., Rinpoche > monk, and spkr < Rinpoche)



*Figure 2: The form of 'give' in Tibetan according to the social positions of the agent and the recipient*

What can be noticed from this schematic presentation is first that the humilific plane is not the symmetrical opposite of the honorific plane. The honorific

form *GNANG* can encode a downward transfer, and also a horizontal transfer if the agent is higher than the speaker. The humilific form can only be used for an upward transfer with an agent that is not higher than the speaker, and the double honorific form will be appropriate for an upward transfer when the agent is superior to the speaker.

Nevertheless, in addition to the high variation that exists in the use of the honorific system, what makes it even more complex is the strict convention in Tibetan culture for a speaker to pretend that he is not higher on the social scale than anyone else. Therefore, even when a monk or a *Rinpoche* is the speaker, they will never use honorific words in reference to themselves or express that it is an upward transfer when they are recipients.

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

Is it now possible to offer some explanations as to why *SPRAD* has not redeployed as a light verb, whereas the honorific form *GNANG* and the humilific form *PHUL* have been quite productive?<sup>11</sup>

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

What the cross-linguistic research on light verbs has demonstrated is that light verbs generally come from frequent verbs with a basic meaning (Butt & Lahiri, 2003; Mohanan, 2006). It is the case in Tibetan since the three most frequent light verbs *BYED*, *BTANG*, and *BRGYAB* respectively mean ‘do’, ‘give, send’, and ‘hit, throw’. What is special about the verb ‘give’ however may be that it refers to one of the most basic interpersonal actions of the human

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<sup>11</sup> It has to be noticed however that there are a few figurative expressions involving *SPRAD*, and that *GNANG* has been far more productive than *PHUL*.

behavioural repertoire. Therefore, ‘give’ is particularly relevant for the honorific domain, and it is indeed one of the rare verbs in standard spoken Tibetan that possesses a humilific form.<sup>12</sup> The verb *SPRAD* is also one of the only two verbs that possess a double honorific form *PHUL.GNANG* (together with *BSHAD* ‘say’, whose double honorific form is *ZHU.GNANG*). The verb ‘say’ is similar to ‘give’ in the sense that they are both basic verbs prototypically connecting two human beings.

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

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

(10)

*tshe.ring lha.mo-s khong-la zhal.par phul...*  
 Tsering Lhamo-ERG 3SG-OBL phone (H) VBZ (h)  
 ‘Tsering Lhamo gave her a call...’ (TSC)

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

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<sup>12</sup> The other humilific verbs of Tibetan are *ZHU* ‘eat, drink, say’, the humilific form of *ZA* ‘eat’, *BTHUNG* ‘drink’ and *BSHAD* ‘say’, *BCAR* ‘come close to sb., call on sb., meet sb.’, the humilific form of *GRO* ‘go’ or *THUG* ‘meet’, and *MJAL* ‘visit, see’, the humilific form of *THUG* ‘meet’ and *MTHONG* ‘see’.

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

## 5. Conclusion

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

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



## Abbreviation list

**1/2/3**, first/second/third person; **ASSOC**, associative case; **CMPL**, completive aspect; **CONN**, connective; **CR**, correlative; **DEM**, demonstrative; **DIR**, direct perceptive evidential; **ERG**, ergative; **FCLT**, sentence final clitic; **FUT**, future; **GEN**, genitive; **(H)**, honorific; **(h)**, humilific; **IMP**, imperative; **LV**, light verb; **OBL**, oblique; **NMZ**, nominalizer; **PAST**, past tense; **QUOT**, quotative; **REC**, receptive directionality; **SG**, singular

**lit.**, literally; **hon.**, honorific; **hum.**, humilific; **sb.**, somebody; **spkr**, speaker; **TSC**, Tibet Student Corpus; **COCA**, Corpus Of Contemporary American English; **MLNT**, *mi la'i rnam thar* (*The life of Milarepa* by T. Heruka, 15<sup>th</sup> c.); **SPOK**, spoken English

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