

# Mainstream linguistics for minor(ity) languages? Or: What is it like to speak Ladakhi?

Bettina Zeisler  
formerly SFB 441, Universität Tübingen

## 1 General background

A member of the large family of Tibetan languages, Ladakhi is spoken by approximately 180.000 speakers throughout Ladakh, one of the three main regions of the state Jammu & Kashmir in India. Together with Balti (spoken mainly in Baltistan, Pakistan) it forms the western-most branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages. The Ladakhi dialects fall into two main groups, which differ quite substantially on the grammatical level: Shamskat, spoken in Lower Ladakh (including Balti and the dialects of Purik and Nubra), Kenhat, spoken in Leh and Upper Ladakh (including Zanskar; for more details see Zeisler forthcoming). Despite a considerable number of speakers, the language is threatened by Urdu, the state language, English, the language of education, and by Classical Tibetan, the language of religious books, held up by Buddhist scholars as the only standard of writing. First sketches and descriptive grammars have been available since the beginning of the last century (for a brief discussion of the literature cf. Bielmeier 1985: 16-22 and Zeisler 2004: 600-604). Elicited data and data from free speech were collected and transcribed by the present author in various field stays from six weeks in 1994 to three or four months each in 1996, and 2002-2008. The elicited data discussed here, was mainly collected in 2007 in collaboration with a partner project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Field work in 2002-2008 was part of a research project within the Sonderforschungsbereich 441 at the Universität Tübingen, supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (see <http://www.sfb441.uni-tuebingen.de>). For our project B11 on Tibetan and the partner project B17 on comparatives, please visit the respective sites.

## 2 Mainstream linguistics and minority languages<sup>2</sup>

The somewhat remote relation suggested in the header can be described as a combination of lyric and prose. Lyric is widely used when it comes to formulate innovative projects in order to procure research funds. E.g., the newly launched EuroBABEL project (Better Analyses Based on Endangered Languages) suggests that linguistic theory can profit from the description of hitherto non-described or little-known endangered languages (but why only of endangered languages and not from lesser-known languages in general?). Less explicitly but for similar reasons, I was invited into a joint research project seven years ago (see note 1 above), but the prosaic facts are that what might be new exciting data in relation to our ignorance or very basic knowledge of the grammar of a badly described language, does not necessarily meet with interest among the ordinary linguistic community. In my particular case, when I first turned up with many quite exotic sentence patterns that are not necessarily expected by linguistic theory, such as case-marked sole arguments of one-place verbs or three non-case-marked arguments of three-place verbs, etc. (Zeisler 2007, see also <http://www.sfb441.uni-tuebingen.de/b11/b11fieldwork05.html#Clauses>), the benevolent reaction was something like “Sentence construction plans?! Shouldn’t you go on to proto-roles?”, a statement that did not even take into account that proto-roles, which are not much more than subject and object in disguise, cannot work even for ‘normal’ ergative languages.

My colleagues cannot really be blamed: there is obviously a wide gap between what mainstream linguists are doing and what *we*, the linguists concerned with lesser known or poorly documented languages, are. The reasons for this gap are likewise quite obvious: while *they* come in hundreds, drawing upon a long history of linguistic discussions, and may have many young and academically, even linguistically, trained informants, *we* are usually working alone on a given language, almost always starting from the very beginning, often lacking appropriate terminology, and may be left with the last handful of old, often toothless speakers, or with farmers, nomads, and hunters not acquainted with our standard of abstract reasoning.

Improvement is possible – if, and only if, we become many, working on the same language or dialect (which might not yet be very endangered), and if we all go beyond mere documentation of the most obvious facts, that is, deeper into de-

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘mainstream’ I refer to approaches that are, intentionally or not, biased towards the greater languages of the world, i.e., some of the Indo-European languages. Present approaches in Typology are included, since all generalisations tend to level out minor and not so minor distinctions. The term ‘minority language’ is used here rather loosely to refer to all languages that have some kind of minority status because of: (a) a limited number of speakers, (b) their status as languages of ethnic minorities, (c) their low status in a community (spoken versus written varieties, dialects versus standard languages), (d) their poor documentation or low level of recognition, (e) having features not recognised or discussed in the majority discourse of linguistics (or lacking features that are prominent in this discourse), or (f) their own linguistic traditions being unknown or neglected. I shall focus especially on those notions of ‘minority’ that have some relevance for the linguistic discourse itself (d–f).

tails, working thus upon one and the same variety for quite some time. Only if we build up a research tradition of our own, can we attempt to reach a level that would make our findings more meaningful for other linguists. I certainly do not want to deny that language documentation, specifically of highly endangered languages, is a very important research goal, but one should also accept that a language is not just ‘done’ after a preliminary documentation on the base of two or three years of post-degree research. Many of the more interesting phenomena (whether the indigenous name of the half-forgotten plant that cures cancer, the very construction that challenges all that we know about human conceptualisation or possible languages, to put it lyrically, or the details presented below) might come to light only after a long period of research. I wonder how one could even seriously expect postgraduate students without any previous knowledge of the language or at least a related specimen to come up with such crucial data in the usually allotted time frame.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 What is it like to speak Ladakhi?

If we try to understand the meaning of a particular expression or construction in a language that is structurally quite different from what we already know, such as English, Latin, or perhaps also Sanskrit, this will have at least three dimensions: one is the question of the meaning or function *for* the speaker and his or her audience, another is the question of how this specific meaning can be transferred into another language with the least losses, and finally we want to know what are the shared features to be compared cross-linguistically.

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<sup>3</sup> According to my own experience in the field, not even all regular constructions are open to elicitation or a systematic, that is, logical approach, and they may show up only gradually. E.g., I have been recording the speech of one and the same person over a period of 12 years while transcribing it during the last 7 field stays, besides conducting more focused elicitation work. In each year we came across at least one if not several new constructions or idiomatic expressions that did not appear in the previous texts (and often also not in the following ones). In some of these cases, I simply could not imagine the existence of such patterns and thus had no means of including them in the elicitation work, in others I had, in fact, tried to elicit them, but since I did not provide an adequate context or for other minor faults, the existence of the pattern was denied. Sometimes, as in the case of examples (3) and (6) below, the non-elicited data even contradicts and thus enriches the elicited data.

Even when it comes to such rather simple features as consonant migration in compounds, the systematic approach (taking a list of possible candidates, e.g. all combinations with the noun *ʃhu* ‘water’ as first element) yields not as much result as when you are able to confront your consultants with ‘real’ data from another speaker. Even in case of a negative answer, the consultant will then, more often than not, come up with one or two new compounds, which might again be rejected by the first consultant in exchange for one or two new items, and so on, almost endlessly. Only after some time you will have a list you can go through more systematically.

### 3.1 Whose meaning? – Some problems of linguistic discourse

To start with the last question, Haspelmath (2004: 572) states quite laconically that “the definition of categories for cross-linguistic comparison [...] must be based on meaning”. This should be a matter of course, but several questions arise immediately: How do we define the meaning of an utterance in a language we are not native speakers of? How much are we actually allowed to abstract from the language or utterance-specific context? Does the focus on meaning, and only meaning, imply that we can abstract from structural features?

I am asking the last question, not because I disagree with Haspelmath, but because I observe with respect to the Tibetan languages that the meaning or function of an expression is typically defined by its translation into English. To give only one example: Tibetan embedded nominalised clauses are often treated as ‘relative clauses’.<sup>4</sup> In fact, since nominalisation is quite restricted in English, relative clauses are almost always the only possible choice when translating such constructions into English. But should not the very fact that English as well as Tibetan have both constructions and that these constructions not only have different formal properties but also different distributions, tell us that they might be functionally different?

Even if English had no nominalisation and Tibetan no relative clauses at all, would it be enough to say that both constructions serve a roughly similar purpose, such as adding background information or specifying some item, to conclude that they have the same function or even the same meaning for the respective speakers? From a philosophical (as well as from a scientific) perspective it would certainly not be enough to say that the bat sonar system serves to “make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision” in order to call it a visual system (Nagel 1974: 438). And, except for the most general statements, it would be not very satisfactory if the different kinds of perception, by virtue of being perception, were not further discriminated. The word ‘perception’, however, is in fact nothing more than a cover term for what goes by various different names or descriptions. It is neither expected that these subcategories are func-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf., e.g., Beyer (1992: 309 ff.) for Classical Tibetan. Typically, the notion of ‘relative clause’ is not defined. Strictly speaking, we should not even apply the term ‘nominalisation’: all varieties have several ‘nominalisers’, the choice of which depends on the semantic role of the derived noun. In most cases, the original function of the ‘nominalisers’ as nouns is still transparent (e.g. *-sa* ‘ground, place’, yielding ‘location of *verb*-ing’). All of them, even the opaque ‘nominaliser’ {*pa*} can be found in combination with nouns, cf. Classical Tibetan as well as Ladakhi *rta-pa* ‘horse-PA’, i.e. ‘rider’ (note that the nominal derivation by {*pa*} is no longer productive and the morpheme might have lost all functions as in the case of *khanpa* ‘house’ for which no underlying lexeme *khan* seems to exist synchronically). Finally, Tibetan verb stems have some nominal properties (e.g. they can appear in the place of verbal nouns or can be combined with case or even definiteness markers). It is not very intuitive to talk of nominalisation of nouns or other items with nominal properties. However, an alternative description in terms of compounds or derivations is even less adequate, because the initial elements can still govern arguments.

tionally equivalent, nor that any one of the subcategories may serve as cover term for all others. Whereas by using the term ‘relative clause’ for embedded nominalisation it is automatically implied that there is no functional difference and that nominalisation *is* the same as a relative clause or at least a subcategory thereof. This implication might not have been intended originally, but it is symptomatic for the general terminological *laissez faire* and all-inclusive attitude in linguistics.

Haspelmath (2008) might have felt a similar uneasiness, as he states that “we should approach any language without prejudice and describe *it in its own terms*, [...] overcoming possible biases from our native language, from the model of a prestige language (such as Latin or English), or from an influential research tradition (such as that of Donatus’s Latin grammar, or Chomsky’s generative grammar).” This should be a common place. Yet again, two important questions arise immediately: First, given the many minority languages without a linguistic tradition of their own and even without a single linguist in their population, how do we, the outsiders, often very bad performers, define a language’s *own terms*? Secondly, although it is more than deplorable that native traditions are typically neglected by typological approaches (see also further below), would it not be the end of cross-linguistic comparison, if each grammar followed but its own idiosyncratic terminology? There is, in fact, an indigenous grammatical tradition and terminology for Classical Tibetan.<sup>5</sup> But besides a small elite among the scholars of Indian and Tibetan studies, who has ever heard of it? We have not yet managed to speak to a general linguistic audience about these concepts as concepts in their own right and without being forced to reinterpret them and translate them into some sort of *linguist-ese*.

Furthermore, I cannot help but observe in Haspelmath’s statement a blatant bias against non-European prestige languages such as Sanskrit or Classical Chinese and even more against the corresponding grammatical traditions, which is all the more surprising as Pāṇini’s most influential *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, recognised as the first ever generative grammar, seems to have inspired some of our modern theories. This is quite telling for a linguistic discourse that is basically a majority discourse: minorities do not have a voice, at least not a voice of their own.

From the viewpoint of a minority language, one could ask many odd questions, such as: Why is it the case that embedded nominalisation is described in terms of ‘relative clauses’ and not the other way round: why are relative

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<sup>5</sup> Not of ‘its own’ in the strict sense, as it is strongly inspired by Indian Buddhist grammars. Nevertheless, Tibetan grammarians made all efforts to reconceptualise the inherited terminology time and again in order to make it account for facts of their own language (cf. Verhagen 2001 for an overview) – to the extent that it creates the greatest confusion if one tries to interpret these terms in their original sense (cf. Zeisler 2006 for examples of how much lateral thinking we need only to understand why the Indian terminology is used the way it is and why this creates difficulties within the Tibetan grammatical tradition itself).

clauses never called ‘(a kind of) nominalisation’ or at least ‘(a kind of) embedding’ or ‘dependent modification’? Why did Indian linguists never try to apply, test, or reconceptualise one of the Indian grammatical systems as a whole with respect to some European language? Why is it not a matter of course that a grammar of an Indian language, co-authored by an Indian linguist, is written “in a more traditional indological format” and uses a “non-standard transcription”, as Liljegren (2008) states with a tone of complaint? After all, the second largest population of the world might have more Indologically trained scholars than there might be ever typologists – who, in absolute numbers, might perhaps not really become “an increasingly important target group” (ibid.).

As it is so often the case with minorities in the real world, we, the researchers of minority languages, lack strong allies. For want of a linguistic tradition or in-depth studies, we cannot compare our seemingly ‘strange’ and inexplicable phenomena with those of other minority languages of the same area, hence we lack the opportunity to draw upon the lucky brilliant insight of one of our colleagues. We are left with our own biased intuitions and with the bias of bilingual informants towards linguistic concepts of the dominant language they are taught in school (if they receive any adequate teaching at all).

Trying to understand what a particular expression really means *for the speakers* themselves, thus amounts at trying to understand what it is like to be a bat *for a bat*.<sup>6</sup> Not only because of the different cultural background, not only because informants and researcher, due to differences in education, dispose over quite different levels of abstract thinking (a constant source of errors for the latter), but mainly because the researcher speaks a structurally different language. Mainstream linguistics does not provide us with any practical or theoretical means to overcome this bias or to close the hermeneutic gap between one’s own and the other’s language. The Sapir/Worff-hypothesis is best corroborated by the linguistic discourse itself.

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<sup>6</sup> “It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one’s arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one’s feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications” (Nagel 1974 p. 439). “The problem is not confined to exotic cases, however, for it exists between one person and another. The subjective character of the experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, for example, nor presumably is mine to him” (ibid. p. 440). As the citation shows, the problem of intersubjectivity is one of degrees. But the problem described in the following is certainly somewhat more intricate than the standard situation of communication, which typically functions well, even though, or perhaps rather because, one does not fully understand (and does not want to understand) what the communication partner really means.

### 3.2 Hermeneutics fails when you least expect it

As an illustration for the above discussion I have chosen non-equative expressions of comparison, as one should think that the situation in the outside world is quite manageable and hence cross-linguistic comparison should not pose much problems: We have two entities, A (the item to be compared) and S (the standard to which something is compared), to which we ascribe, for the sake of simplicity, a perceptible and measurable, i.e. scalable property X. Furthermore, we restrict ourselves to a situation where A and S do not have the same amount or degree of X. Whether the expression is grammaticalised as in English or not as in Ladakhi, we should not find much difficulty in establishing what situations the speakers refer to.

The structure of Tibetan non-equative comparative expressions can be described as follows:

*S-REL A X-ing,*

with *-REL* being a non-specific relational morpheme, *-(b)asaj* in Shamskat, *-(e)saj* in Kenhat. This morpheme is not only found in comparisons, but can also be used to express contrastive, hence non-comparative relations, such as *not only - but, beyond, hardly, instead, or rather than*. X stands for an adjectival, i.e. a verbal expression of the property in question (e.g. *rij* ‘be long’, the verbal noun of which is *rij(b)a* ‘being long’). With the exception of Balti and Ladakhi, which both suffer heavy influences from the dominant language Urdu, the derived nominal adjectives (such as *rijmo* ‘long’) cannot be used in non-equative comparisons. In most varieties a nominalised form of the verbal adjectival plus auxiliary is used, a construction that may or may not be formally identical with a normal present tense form. In Old and Classical Tibetan we still find the adjectival stems used without nominalisation and auxiliaries and the same is true for the speakers of the more peripheral dialects of Ladakhi. In this case, the use of the tensed verb seems to always indicate some sort of comparison or some sort of dynamicity (implying a comparison between earlier and later states). But one should not forget, that even the simple property ascription implies some sort of comparison. We would not ascribe a property except when a certain threshold level has been reached (Stefan Hofstetter, B17). Example (1) shows the three available forms (for abbreviations, cf. p. 318 below).

(1) *zgo(-e riṅbo)-basan* Tsheriṅ riṅ-ok. / ?riṅ-(b)a duk. / riṅmo duk.  
 SKI door(-G length)-REL name be.long(VA)-GENR / long(ADJ) be.EXP  
 / be.long(VA)-NOM be.EXP

‘With respect to (the length of) the door, Tshering long-s (generic) / is long-ing<sup>7</sup> / is long (visual evidence).’ ~ *Tshering is taller than (the height of) the door.*<sup>8</sup>

As it appears, structural differences in basic linguistic modules, such as nominal versus verbal adjectivals or lack of comparative morphology, can be ignored in the case of simple comparisons, so that the Ladakhi expressions and their English counterparts can be matched easily. Before continuing with one of the most complex cases, I should like to draw the attention to possible differences in conceptualisation between those languages that (also) use comparative morphology and those that do not (at all): The comparative morpheme *-er* in German seems to automatically invoke a concept of difference in a way periphrastic constructions with the help of quantitative expressions, such as *more*, do not. Such differences in conceptualisation may have consequences for the analysis and understanding of a foreign utterance.

Comparisons involving an integral factor, thus *A having the property X of S y times*, are conceptually somewhat between equative and non-equative comparisons. Different languages may have different solutions to this conceptual problem, but it seems that languages with overt comparative morphology like German rather use an equative construction: *A is y times as X as S*, or a possessor construction with an abstract noun: *A has y-times the X of S*, lest an explicit interpretation in terms of difference is intended: *A is y times X-er than S*, which (for some German speakers at least) actually means that *A is y+1 times as X as S*.<sup>9</sup>

The equative option does not seem to be possible (or necessary) for languages that can only use some sort of paraphrase, thus the French expression *A est y-fois plus X que S* has only one reading, namely *A is y times as X as S*. This comes quite as a surprise to me. Apparently deeply biased by the hard-

<sup>7</sup> This rendering should not be taken as an equivalent for the English progressive. A better representation would be German *\*ist größend* which differs from a present tense *\*größt* as well as from the vernacular progressive expression *\*ist am größten*. The question mark on the corresponding form applies only for the proper dialectal form *riṅba*, which is perceived as being out-dated, while the form *riṅa*, borrowed from the Leh dialect, is perfectly acceptable, although rejected in the elicitation context by virtue of not belonging to the speaker’s dialect.

<sup>8</sup> In order to keep the underlying structure as transparent as possible and not to lose possible semantic differences, no attempt will be made to smoothing out the translation, even on the risk of making the language appear more exotic than it is. Even such ‘literal’ translations may not be very objective, since they contain my personal interpretations. Only for better understanding I will add interpretations in terms of a standard situation or a possible *intended meaning in English*. This will be marked by italics. It should be clear that such an interpretation is not necessarily a representation of the *intended meaning in Ladakhi*. Furthermore, it should never be mistaken for the only possible interpretation. It is only expected to be the most common one in a most common situation.

<sup>9</sup> In English, the expression is ambiguous between *y times* and *y+1 times* (Sam Featherston, p.c.). This may perhaps be facilitated by the frequent use of the paraphrase with *more* or *less*.



wired implication of the German comparative morpheme, I would have expected at least some sort of ambiguity. Quite similarly, Ladakhi, lacking overt comparative morphology, makes use of the non-equative or contrastive relator *-(b)asaŋ / -(e)saŋ*, and not of any available equative relator or a possessor construction, and the resulting expression is likewise not ambiguous at all. In contrast to the European languages, however, the property in question is typically not specified with an adjectival.

- (2) *tsoŋ-e    ʒaŋ-bo-saŋ    ɲildap    kontro    tʃose    tsug(g)os-anok.*  
 LEHa onion-G width-DF-REL twice depth/hole make-CC prick.need-GENR  
 ‘In relation to the width of the onion one should prick having made two times a depth (generic).’ ~  
*One should prick the onion, having made a hole two times as deep as its width.*

When it comes to more complex situations, structural differences and hence subtle non-correspondences in meaning for each linguistic module involved add up or even multiply, so that it might even be impossible to translate one sentence into another. This is exactly what happens when we think of a situation where A is compared with a non-existing standard: *A is X-er than nobody*. The resulting mismatch in such complex cases may indicate that the apparent matching in the simple cases was only superficial or accidental.

In the case of Ladakhi, the structural differences in the module of comparison combine with even more fundamental differences in the module of negation: Ladakhi like all other Tibetan languages has no n-words or negative indefinites. The negation markers are obligatorily bound to a verb or its auxiliary and thus always operate on the whole clause. In the case of constituent negation, a negative polarity item, typically consisting of an indefinite or limiting quantifier combined with a focus marker, is used together with sentence negation, e.g. *Anybody ever / A single person ever not-verbs*. Most probably this paraphrase does not have the same logical entailments as the presumed English counterpart (but this is one of the many features that have never been researched).

In order to obtain a rough equivalent of the sentence *A is X-er than nobody*, we have thus not only to transform the adjective into a verb, but also to transform the negated noun phrase into a negated clause, which in turn has to be nominalised and embedded, so that we may eventually arrive at a formulation such as:

*In relation to anybody ever non-existing, A X-es.*

Understandably, such constructions are not very natural, and the researcher finds some difficulties to get elicited examples without some more modifications, which all bring us further away from the intended meaning that the original model sentence could have had. Elicitation is not made easier by the fact, that the model sentence does not have any meaning for the researcher or for

most speakers of English.<sup>10</sup> In some languages, however, a sentence of this type implies that *there is no S compared to which A is X-er*. This paraphrase may again have two readings, which I would call tentatively: (a) ‘anti-superlative’: *A is the most non-X of all* and (b) ‘super-superlative’: *A is so extremely X that there simply does not exist a standard to which A could be compared*. The first interpretation might be somewhat more frequent and is found among other languages in Turkish (Stefan Hofstetter, B17), the second interpretation has so far only been observed in Guarani (Stefan Hofstetter, B17) and, as it seems, in Ladakhi.

In the elicitation context we get two slightly different construction types: the first one (3), by explicitly negating the property X of S, is interpreted by most informants as ascribing property X to A only in a limited quantity or quality: *in relation to S who does not X at all, A X-es*, that is, *A is not very X* either, hence I will call it tentatively the *modest excess* variant. However, as the different readings given by the Leh informants as well as example (6) below show, the interpretation depends, as in so many other cases, not so much on formal clues than on contextual features. Some informants, however, preferred a super-superlative interpretation as in the second construction (4), the *extreme excess* variant. This construction is somewhat elliptical and thus hard to analyse. If accepted at all, it gets the interpretation: *A is extremely* or *unnaturally X*.

|         |  |                 |                      |                |                    |             |
|---------|--|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|
| (3) SKI | <i>su-aj</i>   | <i>riŋmo</i>    | <i>met-kan-basaŋ</i> | <i>Tšheriŋ</i> | <i>(riŋmo)</i>     | <i>duk.</i> |
| LEHa/b  | <i>su-zig-aj</i>   | <i>*(riŋmo)</i> | <i>met-kan-esaŋ</i>  | <i>Tširiŋ</i>  | <i>riŋmo/riŋ-a</i> | <i>duk.</i> |
|         | who-(LQ)-FM  | long(ADJ)       | NG2.be.N.EXP-NOM-REL | name           | long/be.long...    | be.EXP      |
|         | ‘In relation to whosoever not being tall (assimilated knowledge), Tšhering is (tall) (visual evidence).’   |                 |                      |                |                    |             |
|         | ~ <i>modest excess</i> variant: <i>Tšhering is taller than anybody who is not tall.</i> (SKI: %, LEHa: %% , LEHb: *)   |                 |                      |                |                    |             |
|         | ~ <i>extreme excess</i> variant: <i>Tšhering is taller than the limit of tallness that no one ever reaches (i.e. extraordinary tall).</i> (LEHb: ✓, LEHa: %) <sup>11</sup> |                 |                      |                |                    |             |

<sup>10</sup> According to my colleague Stefan Hofstetter from the partner project B17, there might be some variation in acceptance. Likewise speakers from the northern parts of Germany tend to reject the sentence as having no sense at all, while speakers from the southern regions might get a superlative reading, at least if the particle *sonst* ‘else’ is added: *A ist X-er als niemand/keiner sonst*. To my ears (socialised in Bavaria) this seems to be much less shocking than the corresponding expression without the particle, but I do not want to preclude that this kind of ‘improvement’ is merely due to an interference with the equative construction *A ist so X wie niemand / keiner (sonst)*. The latter certainly improves a lot through the use of the particle. If I am forced to give the former sentence some sense and if I think (too) much about it, I will get a somewhat different reading implying two comparisons, one non-equative, the other equative: *A is in a way X-er [than S] that nobody else is X-er [than S]* or somewhat simpler: *A exceeds S with respect to X as much as nobody else*. Stefan Hofstetter, who grew up in Swabia, says he has no objections at all against the construction.

<sup>11</sup> The symbol ✓ indicates acceptance without qualification. % indicates that the acceptance or interpretation depends on a suitable context, %% signals here that the other possible interpretation must be ruled out by explicitly stating that all people are very small and that Ts. is not really tall, but at least taller than the rest. Note that the sentence is not acceptable for the Leh informants without adding a limiting quantifier to the pronoun.

- (4) a *su-basaŋ riŋmo met-kan Tšheriŋ (riŋmo) duk.*  
 SKI who-REL  $\emptyset$  long(ADJ) NG2.exist/have/be.N.EXP-NOM name long(ADJ) be.EXP  
 ‘In relation to anyone, without having / [there] existing  $\emptyset$  = [anyone] tall / without  $\emptyset$  = [anyone] being tall (assimilated knowledge), Tšhering is (tall) (visual evidence).’ ~ *Tšhering is taller than anybody (else) in a way no one is tall / without having a tall match.* (%/✓)
- b *su-basaŋ met-kan Tšheriŋ riŋmo duk.*  
 who-REL  $\emptyset$   $\emptyset$  NG2.exist/have/be.N.EXP-NOM name long(ADJ) be.EXP  
 ‘In relation to anyone, without having / [there] existing  $\emptyset$  = [anyone]  $\emptyset$  = [taH] / without  $\emptyset$  = [anyone] being  $\emptyset$  = [taH] (assimilated knowledge), Tšhering is tall (visual evidence).’ ~ *Tšhering is taller than anybody (else) in a way no one is / without having a match.* (✓)

The intended meaning was paraphrased by the informants as: “Nobody is as tall as an elephant, but Tšhering is” (SKI), that is, s/he is supernaturally (SKI) or extraordinarily (GYA) tall, “a giant” (SKI); s/he is surpassing the upper height limit expected for human beings. According to the informants, there is no or not much difference to an *as big as nobody (else)* construction (SKI, GYA). Sentences (4a/b) are, in fact, based on expressions, such as:

- (5) *ǰikrhten-ekane met-kan Tsiriŋ riŋmo / \*riŋ-a duk.*  
 LEHa/b world-upon NG2-exist/be.N.EXP-NOM name long(ADJ) / be.long(VA)... be.EXP  
 ‘[In a way/as one that] does not exist in the (whole) world, Tšhering is (tall) (visual evidence).’  
 ~ *Tšhering is [as] tall [as] nobody else in the whole world.*

The following example from a personal narrative would fall at least formally into the *modest excess* category (the inverted order is not relevant for the interpretation):

- (6) *den do rdemo dug jaŋ, ʃi-aŋ met-khan-i naŋ-ʃiŋ-basaŋ.*  
 KHAL then that.DF beautiful be.EXP CONJ what-FM NG2.exist/have/be. house-LQ-REL  
 (ADJ) N.EXP-NOM-G

But what does it actually mean?

The solution is not getting easier in view of the fact that evidential marking overrides the distinction between attributive and existential linking verbs (*in* ‘be’ vs. *yot* ‘exist’ or ‘have’), both becoming *duk* in an experiential context and *yot* in a non-experiential one, so that we get at least three possible translations for the embedded negation *ʃi-aŋ metkhan*: ‘not being any-thing’ or perhaps also ‘not being beautiful at all’, ‘not having anything’ or perhaps also ‘not having any beauty (or grain) at all’, and ‘not existing at all’. The least I can say, is that in this very utterance it is *not* implied that A is only relatively beautiful (*modest excess* variant). Nor is it implied that A is extremely beautiful (*extreme excess* variant).

In the immediately preceding context of (6), the narrator first describes a representative room that, although possessing attributes of wealth and modernity, is not very beautiful in his eyes, because it is ‘empty’. He then *contrasts* it with a room of a more traditional house where barley is heaped up in the corners (as if this could make a room more homelike) and continues with the above sentence.

Quite apparently, the relational morpheme is used here with a contrastive function. My rather tentative ‘literal’ and ‘intensional’ translations thus run as:

‘Then THAT one is/was beautiful, again, in contrast to / instead of the house that does not have anything.’ ~ *Now THIS one is (really) beautiful, NOT the other house that hasn’t anything.*

As it seems to turn out, negation may – *depending on the context* – constitute a subset of universal quantification,<sup>12</sup> which in turn is used to formulate absolute comparisons. But the boundaries between simple and absolute comparison and between comparison and positive property ascription are not well defined. ‘Comparison’ as a linguistic category is not a grammaticalised category in Ladakhi, perhaps not even a valid psychological concept. With the changing context, an expression may vary between quite contradicting values: absolute comparison, relative (qualified) property ascription, and contrastive (unqualified) property ascription. The original model sentence, whatever meaning it may or may not have, cannot be translated, because it is based on a grammatical category that does not exist in Ladakhi. Hence the conceptual problem associated with the grammatically marked form does not arise. Since any positive property ascription implies a comparison with a culturally defined, and thus always relative threshold level, the ‘real’ model for Ladakhi might be three-fold:

*A is X – modified by an underspecified negative relation with S:*

- a) with no comparable S available, b) compared to a non-X S,
- c) in contrast to a non-X S

“Mit einem Ablativ des Vergleichs übersetzt man also die Ablativpartikel mit ‚als‘ und bildet den Komparativ des betreffenden Adjektivs oder Adverbs. *Diese mechanische Übersetzungsregel* darf natürlich nicht dazu führen, dem Tibetischen eine Steigerungsform zuzuschreiben, denn vom tibetischen Standpunkt aus liegt in diesen Fällen lediglich ein spezielles modales Verhältnis vor, d.h. der Geltungsbe-  
reich von Adjektiven und Adverbien *wird in bestimmter Weise eingeschränkt*” (Hahn 1985: 97, emphasis added). What could have been rejected by Haspelmath as a merely formal approach, further biased towards traditional Latin grammar, appears to be fully justified by a closer look at the linguistic facts. Form matters. – But exactly when and how much, that remains the question.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As the question was raised in the discussion, I should like to make it clear that embedded negation is *not* an equivalent or the closest translation of the English expression *any*, nor is *any* an equivalent or the closest translation of a Ladakhi embedded negation. The English expression *any* is usually best translated by an indefinite pronoun, such as *su* ‘someone’ or ‘who’ plus focus marker {jan} ‘even, also’, or by an allquantor.

<sup>13</sup> It is certainly justified to treat different alignment systems as expressing the same relations, at least in the majority of their instantiations. I am quite convinced that a sentence like *the man sees (perceives) a dog*, does not change in meaning or does not change its semantic roles, whether the experiencer is encoded in the nominative, as in English or German, in the ergative, as in most Tibetan languages, or in the aestheticive (dative-allative), as in Ladakhi. But there are obviously many cases where different representations of the seemingly same situation lead to subtle or less subtle differences in meaning.

It goes without saying that I am not absolutely convinced to have found the right analysis and I would have been very happy to find a construction similar to those in examples (3), (4), and (6) be discussed for any of the Tibetan languages, but all that we can find in the reference grammars (if comparison is mentioned, at all) is the basic facts as described in the beginning of this section. I would also be happy to find such discussion with respect to any other language. But given the extreme difficulties in understanding a construction in a language I researched for many years and speak, although imperfectly, I am somewhat sceptical that without further knowledge of any such language I would really understand what is going on.

Before concluding I should like to refer to some discussions we had within our joint research project. Depending on our individual research socialisation we seem to have quite different expectations about what would be the most natural interpretation of *A is X-er than nobody*. While for the members of the partner project B17 there seems to be little doubt that the sentence should by preference get an ‘anti-superlative’ interpretation, I myself have the feeling that the underlying logical operation is not very natural for a speaker of a natural language outside an academic context (but I do not want to preclude a conventionalised usage). On the other hand, the ‘super-superlative’ interpretation, although not logically transparent, might perhaps be better motivated psychologically: Many languages have expressions such as *matchless*, *countless*, or even *incomparable* that express the superior quality or quantity of A by explicitly negating the feasibility of comparison. Such expressions imply that the gap between A and any ordinary standard with respect to the property X is so extreme that it is not worth to even mention S. One could say that S apparently lacks a *comparable* amount of X.

## 4 Possible lessons

While the documentation of endangered or not-so-endangered lesser known languages is certainly an important task, I hope to have shown that the writing of standard grammars alone cannot be enough, and that one has to go much deeper into every detail, e.g., by testing border-line cases.

Further more, linguistic data, however exciting it might be, cannot be selectively collected or discussed without having or giving an idea of how this data relates to the overall structure of the language.<sup>14</sup> It is, therefore, not possible to work with a standard questionnaire not specifically designed for a particular language, as it is inherently biased and thus forces its conceptualisations on languages when they do not apply (such questionnaires may still give valuable hints, what to look for or how to interpret one’s findings). Consequently it is also not

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this holds also for the present paper, but more details will be provided in Zeisler (in preparation).

possible to let just any linguist conduct such survey without a substantial knowledge of the language to be researched. Even more: elicitation can fruitfully be used to confirm data, but it cannot be the first choice for testing or establishing categories in highly context dependent languages.

Cross-linguistic comparison, neglecting the language specific details and even more how they relate to the overall structure of a language, may lead to theoretical artefacts, just as when we analyse the bat sonar system as a visual system.

### Abbreviations:

Dialects and interlocutors or language consultants

|      |   |
|------|---|
| GYA  | Gya (Kenhat), elicited data (Menggyur Tshomo)                                 |
| KHAL | Khalatse (Shamskat), free speech ( <i>meme</i> ‘grandfather’ Tondup Tshering) |
| LEH  | Leh (Kenhat), elicited data (a: Thrinlas Wangmo, b: Tsewang Dorjey; siblings) |
| SKI  | Skindiang (Shamskat), elicited data (Choron Angmo)                            |

Descriptive terms

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| ADJ   | derived adjectival of nominal character (in some cases, an additional derivational morpheme is inserted before the nominaliser) |
| DF    | definiteness marker   |
| CC    | clause chaining   |
| EXP   | experiential construction (direct visual evidence, new knowledge)   |
| FM    | focus / emphatic marker   |
| G     | genitive marker   |
| GENR  | generic statement (also: inferential future)  |
| LQ    | limiting quantifier ‘a, some’   |
| N.EXP | non-experiential construction (assimilated knowledge)   |
| NG    | negation marker or negated form (NG1 = <i>mi</i> NG2 = <i>ma</i> )  |
| NOM   | nominaliser   |
| REL   | relational marker (relator)   |
| VA    | verbal adjectival   |
| x_ _y | phonetically conditioned features across word boundaries  |

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## Postscript

Since submission of the paper, the author arrived at the conclusion that the Ladakhi expressions are best described in terms of *contrasting*, implying not a gradual, but a categorical difference between A and S: property X is positively ascribed only to A, but not to S, for which the property might even be denied. This might hold also for other Tibeto-Burman languages, e.g. for Newer (Kazuyuki Kiryu, p.c.). Accordingly, categorical contrasting and gradual non-equative comparison should be seen as part of a broader concept of *differentiating property ascription*.

Bettina Zeisler  
 formerly SFB 441, Universität Tübingen  
 zeis@uni-tuebingen.de