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Person marking in Rtau

Guillaume Jacques, Anton Antonov, Lai Yunfan and Lobsang Nima

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with the verbal flexion of Rtau (locally known as *rəspəske*), a Rgyalrongic language¹ spoken in Rtau country (Chinese Daofu 道孚), Sichuan province, China.

Previous work on Rtau include [Huang \(1991\)](#), [Sun \(2007\)](#) and especially [Sun & Tian \(to appear\)](#). The variety presented here represents the dialect of Khang.gsar spoken in the North of Rtau county, and differs slightly from the varieties studied by other authors.

2. Morphophonology

Core Rgyalrong languages (Situ, Japhug, Tshobdun and Zbu) present complex ablaut patterns conditioned by TAM, number and direction (direct vs. inverse) as was first discovered by [Sun \(2000\)](#). Morphophonological alternations based on person however are rather limited, except in Zbu (where it appears that some verbs have irregular first person singular forms, see [Gong to appear](#)).

Languages of the Tre-Hor branch have a less complex verbal morphology, but present an elaborate system of vowel alternations marking person and transitivity. In this section, we describe the attested alternations and propose a historical hypothesis to account for them.

In Rtau, there are two groups of conjugations that we can call intransitive and transitive respectively, though the exact detail is quite complex. Intransitive conjugations only distinguish two forms, while transitive conjugations have four distinct stems which combined with the inverse prefix make up to six different forms.

2.1. Intransitive conjugations

Verbs with intransitive conjugations in Rtau never have more than two stem forms. The first stem appears with first person subject (singular or plural),

¹See [Sun \(2000\)](#) for an overview of the Rgyalrongic subbranch of Sino-Tibetan.

while the second stem is present with second and third person forms.

The first person forms only have limited array of possible rhymes: only open syllable nasal rhymes $-\tilde{a}$ and $-\tilde{o}$, velarized vowels $-o^v$ and $-a^v$ or the back rounded $-u$: we never find front or central vowels.

In the non-first person (henceforth 2/3) form however, almost all possible rhymes are attested, including open and closed syllables (except non-velarized $-o$). The first person forms is generally predictable from the 2/3 form except in a few isolated counterexamples, thus it is legitimate to analyse the 2/3 as the base form, and the first person form as being derived from it by a morphological process.

Six classes of alternations are found in verbs with open syllables; class 6 includes verbs without alternation, whose rhyme can be any of $-u$, $-o^v$, $-a^v$, $-\tilde{o}$ and $-\tilde{a}$:

Table 1: Vowel alternations in open-syllable intransitive verbs in Rtau

	1	2	3	4	5	6
meaning	look at	move	like	be full	be ill	be hot
1	<i>scəqã</i>	<i>mbəçã</i>	<i>rgã</i>	<i>fkõ</i>	<i>ŋõ</i>	<i>c^hu</i>
2/3	<i>scəqi</i>	<i>mbəçe</i>	<i>rga</i>	<i>fkə</i>	<i>ŋβ</i>	<i>c^hu</i>

The alternations can be stated in a straightforward way: centralized vowels $-\ə$ and $-\e$ change to $-\tilde{o}$, and front and open (unrounded and non-velarized) vowels change to $-\tilde{a}$.

In the case of verb with stems ending in $-r$ or $-v$, the first person is always derived by the replacing the entire rhyme by $-\tilde{a}$ or \tilde{o} depending on the main vowel of the rhyme:

Table 2: Vowel alternations in closed syllable intransitive verbs in Rtau

	meaning	sleep	hide
1		<i>ŋfã</i>	<i>ŋc^hã</i>
2/3		<i>ŋjev</i>	<i>ŋc^her</i>

Stem ending in $-m$ (the only other final consonant available) are always Tibetan loanwords and do not present any alternation.

There are two irregular verbs with intransitive morphology in Japhug with have $-\tilde{a}$ in the first person instead of expected $-\tilde{o}$ (cf table 3). Additional irregular intransitive verbs include “go” and “come”, which present suppletive TAM forms, but no irregularity related to person marking.

Table 3: Irregular intransitive verbs in Rtau

meaning	go	say
1	<i>ɕã</i>	<i>jã</i>
2/3	<i>ɕə</i>	<i>jə</i>

If we disregard the irregular verbs, it is always possible to determine the first person from the second/third person form. Thus, we may posit that the 2/3 person represents the bare stem, and that the first person is derived from it by fusion with a suffix $-\tilde{a}$, which is realized as $-\tilde{o}$ when the rhyme is centralized.

2.2. Transitive conjugation

The transitive conjugation includes at most six different forms, illustrated by the paradigms in tables 4 and 5 (these paradigms are in the perfective form with directional prefixes, which can be neglected for the purpose of the present paper). Some of these forms are distinguished by the presence of a prefix $f-$ / $v-$ whose nature is analysed in more detail in section 3.. If we disregard this prefix, only four different stems at most are distinguished: 1SG > 3, 2 > 3, 1PL > 3 (which has the same vocalism as 2/3 > 1) and third person (which has the same vocalism as 1 > 2).

Table 4: *fse* ‘to kill’

AP	1s	1p	2	3
1s			<i>nə-se</i>	<i>nə-sow</i>
1p				<i>nə-sã</i>
2		<i>nə-fsã</i>		<i>nə-sej</i>
3				<i>nə-fse</i>

Table 5: *f-k^hə* ‘to give’

AR	1	2	3
1s		<i>tə-k^hə</i>	<i>tə-k^how</i>
1p			<i>tə-k^hõ</i>
2			<i>tə-k^he</i>
3	<i>tə-fk^hõ</i>		<i>tə-fk^hə</i>

As with intransitive verbs, six classes of verb alternation are attested in transitive conjugations, depending on the final vowel of the verb stem. Table 6 presents all six classes (it contains the verbs stems without the inverse prefix $f-$ / $v-$.) Class 6 includes all verbs with stem ending in $-u$, $-o^y$, $-a^y$, $-\tilde{o}$ and $-\tilde{a}$.

Table 6: Vowel alternations in open-syllable transitive verbs in Resnyeske

meaning	1 drink	2 kill	3 dig	4 dress up	5 give	6 cut
1SG > 3	-t ^h u	-sow	-Nq ^h ərow	-zgu	-k ^h ow	-tsu
1PL > 3, 2/3 > 1	-t ^h ã	-sã	-Nq ^h ərã	-zgõ	-k ^h õ	-tsu
2 > 3	-t ^h i	-sej	-Nq ^h ərej	-zgi	-k ^h ej	-tsu
3 > 3, 1 > 2	-t ^h i	-se	-Nq ^h əra	-zgə	-k ^h ə	-tsu

As with intransitive verbs, it is possible to consider the third person form as the basic one; the 1PL > 3 and 2/3 > 1 stems can be analyzed as resulting from fusion with the first person -ã suffix. The 1SG > 3 form presents rounding of the vowels with an additional -w glide in the case of mid-low and low vowels. These alternations can be accounted for by assuming the existence of a suffix whose underlying form is -w.

The 2 > 3 form has vowel fronting with an additional -j glide for mid-low and low vowels. Here the underlying form -j can be posited.

In closed syllables, final consonants differ as to their behaviour with the person suffixes. Final -v drops with the 1SG > 3 -w and first person -ã suffixes; the second person -j suffix does not cause final -v to drop but nevertheless induces vowel fronting as in -zgriv “you accomplished”. Final -m is immune to any change from the suffixes and verbs ending in this consonant present no stem alternations. Final -r drops with all three suffixes -w, -ã and -j and the final consonant is preserved on the in the third person and 1 > 2 forms.

Table 7: Vowel alternations in closed syllable transitive verbs in Rtau

meaning	accomplish	give back	close	rob
1SG > 3	-zgru	-xsow	-zdəm	-stow
1PL > 3, 2/3 > 1	-zgrõ	-xsõ	-zdəm	-stõ
2 > 3	-zgriv	-xsev	-zdəm	-stej
3 > 3, 1 > 2	-zgrəv	-xsev	-zdəm	-stər

All the morphophonological rules observed in this section are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8: Vowel fusion in Rtau verbs

StemSuffix	1SG > 3 <i>-w</i>	1 <i>-ã</i>	2 > 3 <i>-j</i>
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>ã</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>e</i>	<i>ow</i>	<i>ã</i>	<i>ej</i>
<i>a</i>	<i>ow</i>	<i>ã</i>	<i>ej</i>
<i>ə</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>õ</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>ø</i>	<i>ow</i>	<i>õ</i>	<i>ej</i>

These vowel fusion rules are not restricted to the verbal system, but also apply to the ergative *-w* and genitive *-j* case markers. Table 9 illustrates some examples(of vowel fusion in nouns.

Table 9: Vowel fusion in Rtau nouns

base form	meaning	ergative	genitive
<i>kəta</i>	dog	<i>kətow</i>	<i>kətej</i>
<i>vdzi</i>	man	<i>vdzu</i>	<i>vdzi</i>
<i>xə</i>	hybrid of yak and cow	<i>xu</i>	<i>xi</i>

3. The structure of person marking paradigms in Rtau

With the morphophonological rules presented in the previous section, it is possible to present the Rtau paradigms in condensed format as in Table 10.

Table 10: Rtau transitive and intransitive paradigms

AP	1	2	3
1s		Σ	$\Sigma-w$
1p			$\Sigma-\tilde{a}$
2	$v-\Sigma-\tilde{a}$		$\Sigma-j$
3		$v-\Sigma$	
INTR	$\Sigma-\tilde{a}$	Σ	

The suffixes *-w* and *-j* are restricted to transitive *direct* forms (with SAP agent and third person patient); they are not found in intransitive and *inverse* forms (with SAP patient and third person agent). The first person default suffix *-ã* appears in all forms involving the first person except 1SG > 3 (where the suffixal slot is occupied by *-w*) and 1 > 2.

The absence of the suffix *-ã* in 1 > 2 is not surprising. In all Rgyalrongic languages, as well as in neighbouring languages such as Tangut (see for instance Jacques 2009: 18, *Gong to appear*, *Lai to appear*), in local 1 > 2 and 2 > 1 forms suffixes are coreferent with the P (except in the case of

double suffixation). Since the second person S/P suffix is zero, the absence of any suffix in the 1 > 2 form is expected.

3.1. The inverse prefix

The *f-* / *v-* prefix appears in 2/3 > 1, 3 > 2 and 3 > 3 forms. Its presence in 2 > 1 precludes an analysis as a third person agent marker, and it is best to treat it as an inverse marker.

The inverse appears in 2 > 1, as in Situ, Tshobdun, Zbu Rgyalrong and Lavrung (DeLancey 1981, Sun & Shidanluo 2002, Gong to appear, Lai to appear), but unlike Japhug (Jacques 2010), implying a person hierarchy 1 > 2 > 3.

The inverse *v-* prefix appears in all 3 > 3 forms in Rtau, a feature shared with Lavrung. Both Rtau and Lavrung differ from Rgyalrong languages, where two 3 > 3 forms are found: the *direct* and the *inverse* form. Table 11 presents the Zbu Rgyalrong transitive paradigm, with inverse forms coloured in green; non-coloured slots are direct forms.

Table 11: Zbu Rgyalrong transitive and intransitive paradigms (adapted from Gong to appear)

	1sg	1DU	1PL	2sg	2DU	2PL	3sg	3DU	3PL	3'
1SG				$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1$	$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$	$\Sigma_3\text{-}\eta$	$\Sigma_3\text{-}\eta\text{-}ndz\theta$	$\Sigma_3\text{-}\eta\text{-}p\theta$	
1DU							$\Sigma_1\text{-}t\theta$			
1PL							$\Sigma_1\text{-}j\theta$			
2SG	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta$						$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_3$			
2DU	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta\text{-}ndz\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}t\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}j\theta$				$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$			
2PL	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta\text{-}p\theta$						$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$			
3SG	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta$			$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1$	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$				Σ_3
3DU	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta\text{-}ndz\theta$	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}t\theta$	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}j\theta$							$\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$
3PL	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta\text{-}p\theta$									$\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$
3'							$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1$	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$	$w\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$	
INTR	$\Sigma_1\text{-}\eta$	$\Sigma_1\text{-}t\theta$	$\Sigma_1\text{-}j\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1$	$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$	$t\theta\text{-}\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$	Σ_1	$\Sigma_1\text{-}ndz\theta$	$\Sigma_1\text{-}p\theta$	

The 3 > 3 direct forms, which appear when the agent is more salient than the patient, do not have a uniform marking in Rgyalrong languages. They receive the third person direct suffix *-w* in Situ, but this suffix has not equivalent in the remaining three languages. In Zbu, direct 3 > 3 forms receive the aorist direct prefix and have stem III alternation when the agent is singular. The number suffixes agree with the agent in direct forms.

The 3 > 3 inverse forms appear when the agent is less salient than the patient; they are obligatory when an inanimate acts upon an animate. Verbs in inverse form have the inverse prefix (*w\theta-* in Zbu) and the number suffixes agree with the patient.

The distribution of the inverse prefix in Rtau (and its cognate in Lavrung) differs from that of Zbu only in that the direct 3 > 3 form have disappeared in this language, and the inverse 3 > 3 have been generalized to all 3 > 3 forms. This probably represents a common innovation of Rtau and Lavrung, and suggest that Rtau and Lavrung languages form a clade within the Rgyalrongic branch of Sino-Tibetan.

The inverse *v-* prefix presents phonological alternations and phonotactic constraints. It is prefixed to the first syllable of the verb stem, even when polysyllabic. In verbs with reduplicated stem, such a “wipe” (Table 12), reduplication also applies to the inverse prefix.

Table 12: *f-çə-f-çə* ‘to wipe’

AP	1	2	3
1s		<i>nə-çəçə</i>	<i>nə-çəçə-w</i>
1p			<i>nə-çəç-ã</i>
2	<i>nə-fçəfç-ã</i>		<i>nə-çəçə-j</i>
3		<i>nə-fçəfçə</i>	

The *v-* prefix is assimilated to *f-* when prefixed to a verb stem with unvoiced initial consonant (as in *f-se* INV-kill “he kills”). It cannot be inserted whenever any of the following two conditions apply:

- When the stem-initial consonant is a labial (either /p/, /b/, /m/, or /v/) or the voiced uvular /ʁ/, the inverse cannot be prefixed. Thus the third person form of *və* “to do” *ʁə* “to help” are identical to the corresponding bare stems.
- The inverse prefix is not compatible with most stem-initial clusters. The only clusters that allow prefixation of *v-* are /stop + r/ clusters. For instance, the root /k^hrə/ “to hold” (1SG > 3 *k^hru*) thus has a 3→3 form *f-k^hrə*, whereas *zjə* “to sell” has a third person form identical to the bare stem (the cluster **vzj-* is not allowed in the variety of Rtau under study).
- The inverse does not appear in transitive verbs with final *-v*, due to a dissimilatory constraint. For instance, the 3→3 form of /k^hev/ ‘scoop’ and /çev/ ‘take out’ are *k^hev* and *çev*, not **fk^hev* or **fçev*.

3.2. Transitivity in Rtau

The morphologically based distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs in Rtau must be refined by taking into account case-marking on arguments.

Rtau, as all Rgyalrongic languages, is a strict verb-final language with postpositions. Case markers include the ergative *-w*, the genitive *-j*, the dative *-gi* and the instrumental *-k^ha*. Only animate referents can receive ergative marking, inanimate can only be marked with the instrumental. SAP pronouns are not normally marked with the ergative (except in some subordinate clauses).

Some verbs with intransitive morphology, such as “like”, do require ergative marking on the argument whose person is indexed on the verb, as illustrated by examples 1 and 2.

- (1) *ŋa tə-gi rga-ã-rə*
 I he-DAT like-1-CONST
 ‘I like him/her.’
- (2) *tə-w ŋa-gi rga-rə*
 he-ERG I-DAT like-CONST
 ‘(S)he likes me.’

This type of semi-transitive verb (which are transitive from the point of view of case marking and intransitive from that of verb morphology) include some experiencer verbs like *rga* “like” and some speech verbs like *jə* “to say”. The stimulus or the recipient is marked with the dative case.

Some verbs with transitive morphology agree with only one of their arguments. Thus, /*si*/ “to know (somebody)” indexes the person knowing, while the P is always third person by default, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13: *f-si* ‘to know’

AP	1	2	3
1s			<i>su</i>
1p			<i>sã</i>
2	<i>si</i>		<i>si</i>
3			<i>fsi</i>

When the person known is SAP, an overt pronoun must be used, and appears in the absolutive form (example 3).

- (3) *tə-w ŋa f-si*
 he-ERG I INV-know
 ‘S/he knows me’.

Bitransitive verbs that index the recipient as the P (*secondative* in Malchukov et al. 2010’s terminology), the recipient still receives dative marking despite being indexed in the verb morphology, as in example 7 with the verb /*xsev*/ “to give back”.

- (4) *tənu ŋaŋəgi kəxsã*
tə-nə-w ŋa-nə-gi kə-v-xsev-ã.
 3-PL-ERG 1-PL-DAT AOR-INV-return-1

They gave it back to us.

4. Conclusion

This paper presents an account of person marking in Rtau, and is the first step towards a description of the verbal morphology and the morphosyntax of this language.

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