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The Trans-Himalayan "middle": An object lesson in the perils of armchair typology, with a side note on the status of "Rung"

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Abstract

LaPolla (1996, 2005, 2013) has made at least two strong claims regarding the putative Trans-Himalayan morphological category "middle". The first is that scholars such as Sun (1982) and Liu (1988) were incorrect in their identification of this category as a marker of subject autonomy, and that the correct interpretation of this category is that it is in essence identical to an Indo-European-style middle voice marker. The second is that one common marker of this category — said to be an innovation in a geographically-dispersed group of languages — provides evidence for a high-level "Rung" subgrouping within Trans-Himalayan. This paper will demonstrate that LaPolla is wrong on both of these points, and that scholars such as Sun and Liu were precisely correct: the Trans-Himalayan "middle" is in fact a subject-autonomy marker. Its distribution overlaps with both middle and reflexive (and reciprocal) marking in several languages, but it is, nonetheless, fundamentally distinct. Furthermore, the Trans-Himalayan "middle", if it is an innovation, is an innovation at a very deep level, which is in no way identifiable with the specific set of languages LaPolla identifies.

As a result of this study, we will learn several important lessons: one, that applications of armchair typology to language description are inherently perilous: each language must be thoroughly understood on its own terms before a safe generalization can be made. Two, that linguistic categories are incommensurate across languages: they have different origins, different grammaticalization pathways, and different outcomes. There are similarities, of course, throughout the process and the result, but this in itself does not substantiate the existence of underlying categorical identities. Finally, we will learn that the cherrypicking of subgrouping criteria may be beautified by statistics (in the eyes of some), but it is not thereby improved as a methodology. Effective subgrouping requires a deep understanding of both linguistic and cultural data, meticulous application of the comparative method, and even then may turn out to be impossible. Nevertheless, there are no shortcuts.