THIRTEEN

The Nature and Origins of the Akha Evidentials System

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INTRODUCTION

In Akha, evidentiality is overtly and obligatorily expressed through an elaborate system of sentence-final particles which indicate ‘the alleged source of information about the narrated event’ (Jakobson 1971:135). The following examples, all reporting nonpast, nonexpected events, differ only in evidential marking (Egerod 1974:10):

(1) N-s-m̄t̄ q-e-d̄q-a-d̄q di-é.
   you-PL. he-OBJ. beat NONSENSORYAL
   ‘You (plural) will beat him.’

(2) N-s-m̄t̄ q-e-d̄q-a-d̄q di-γ̄i.
   you-PL. he-OBJ. beat VISUAL
   ‘You (plural) are beating him (I see it now).’

(3) N-s-m̄t̄ q-e-d̄q-a-d̄q di-γ̄i.
   you-PL. he-OBJ. beat NONVISUAL
   ‘You (plural) are beating him (e.g. I guess so from the sound of beating).’

* This paper, a thoroughly revised and modified version of Thurgood (1981b), has benefited enormously from the substantive and stylistic comments of Johanna Nichols. The Akha data comes largely out of the works of Egerod and Hansson (especially 1974), supplemented by Lewis (1968). The diachronic analysis is my own.

The speculative and somewhat preliminary nature of this paper is due in part to the fact that there are no handbooks or etymological dictionaries or comparative grammars for the languages treated; for my tentativeness I offer no apology. However, to those whose papers I have read and may to some degree have misunderstood, I do apologize, with the hope that errors will be gently pointed out.

1 This introduction owes a debt to Woodbury 1981 (this volume), which is also my source for the reference to Jakobson (1937) 1971.

2 Akha forms are cited in the notation used in Egerod and Hansson (1974).

In the first example the speaker’s source of evidence is nonsensory, while in the second it is visual and in the third it is nonvisual sensory evidence, e.g. auditory evidence.

The foundations for a historical look at the origins of the Akha evidentials are found in the works of Egerod and Hansson, in which the synchronic system is explicitly laid out. Using their synchronic work as a base, I will trace the particles that make up the modern evidential system back to earlier etyma with fuller meanings and more precise functions. I discuss paths of historical change emphasizing evolution in the meanings and functions of these forms.

Akha Sentence Particles

The centrality of evidentiality to the elaborate system of Akha sentential particles is implicit in the fact that after treating the ubiquitous -a separately, Egerod and Hansson (1974:227–8) begin by dividing the sentential particles into two evidential sets: the ‘sensory’ particles, which specify how the speaker’s knowledge was arrived at, and the ‘nonsensory’ particles, which do not. Although other manifestations of evidentiality can be found elsewhere in the grammar, these sentential particles contain the essence and core of the system.

The Ubiquitous -a: Synchronic Grammar

The ubiquitous -a is the most frequently used particle in Akha. Its functions include: subordinating one noun to another in possessive, genitive, and other noun-modifying constructions; subordinating verbs to nouns in relative clause constructions; marking the citation form of the verb; and terminating utterances, most typically in the declarative mood. As with many Akha particles, tense is marked tonally, with the low-toned variant -d indicating past tense and the high-toned variant -b indicating non-past.

In Egerod and Hansson’s analysis -d and -b are analyzed as differing only in tense and tone, but Lewis’ dictionary suggests an evidential distinction in its three entries under -a:

- -d used in the following statements: declarative positive, declarative negative, and in questions demanding an explanation (it tends to be a bit scoldy in the latter)
- -b this signifies STRONG ASSERTION THAT WHAT IS SAID IS TRUE [emphasis mine]
- -a much the same as -b, but tends to be used more with: 1. negative statements 2. about something in the past

It is the variant -b, marked as past tense by the low tone, that carries with it the ‘strong assertion that what is said is true’. However, what Lewis saw as its strong assertive flavor may be nothing more than a predictable consequence of two pragmatic factors: the past tense marking and the lack of an evidentiality marker. Reference to events in the past has its own consequence: our knowledge of the present and future is perceived as less certain than our knowledge of the past. This would give a more ‘assertive’ flavor to any statement about the past. The second pragmatic factor involves the very fact of qualification of a statement. It
is only statements which need attestation that are qualified; consequently, implicit in a totally unqualified statement is a greater degree of certainty than in a qualified one (cf. Bill is male with It is true that Bill is male). Thus, Lewis’ perception of an assertive flavor may have originated from a combination of our perception of sureness about past events and the ‘certainty’ implicit in unqualified statements.

The Ubiquitous -ə: Diachronic Origins. The Akha -ə is reconstructed successively at the Proto-Loloish (PL) level as *wəy-3 (Bradley 1979:254), at the Proto-Lolo-Burmese level as *wəy (= *wiy) (Thurgood 1977, 1981a, 1982), and at the Proto-Sino-Tibetan level as *wəy (Thurgood 1982). Regular correspondences within Lolo-Burmese (ibid.) demonstrate the cognacy of the -ə of Akha with the ve of Black Lahu, and the rgh3/rgh1 of Fraser’s Lisu (1922); the same correspondences also indicate that the Burmish rai/rai’ of Written Burmese is not cognate and reflects a distinct etymology (cf. Kachin ve versus rë, rai). Outside of Lolo-Burmese, reflexes are found in other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Khaling and Sherpa, as well as in Karen and Archaic Chinese. In several of these languages the reflexes have an evidential meaning, but it does not seem necessary to reconstruct the distinction back to the proto-stage.

For Proto-Loloish, Bradley (1979:254) describes the functions of *wəy-3 thus:

There is one particle, probably of considerable antiquity, which occurs both after nouns and after verbs. This particle, ‘declarative’/‘genitive’ *wəy-, occurs in every language for which there are any significant data available on particles. Its functions include the subordinating of one noun to another, . . . ; the subordinating of verbs to nouns, in a relative-clause-type relationship; and the termination of an utterance in a declarative mood.

This characterization is virtually identical to the functions of its modern Loloish reflexes Black Lahu ve and Akha -ə. However, in other languages it is a particle other than the phonological cognate which is the functional counterpart of Black Lahu ve and Akha -ə. The phonologically cognate form in Fraser’s Lisu is rgh3/rgh1, but this is in no sense a functional counterpart to either particle. In the taitai1 of Written Burmese we have a functional counterpart which subordinates one noun to another in possessive, genitive, and other noun-modifying constructions; subordinates verbs to nouns in relative clause constructions; marks the citation form of the verb; and terminates utterances, most typically in the declarative mood; however, this is clearly not a phonological cognate. In short, although a functional counterpart to the Akha -ə often exists, except in the case of Black Lahu ve it is not the particle which is phonologically cognate. And, in fact, this exemplifies the independence in the evolution of form and function typified throughout Lolo-Burmese.

The Sentential Particles. Egerod and Hansson divide the remaining particles into sensorial and nonsensorial. These show category intersections with both tense and a notion they describe as expected/nonexpected. With the sensorial particles, their category labeled expected/nonexpected often shifts meaning to other related dimensions (1974:228):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Nonexpected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonsurprise</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the time</td>
<td>Intermittently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luckily</td>
<td>Unfortunately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common to the notions in the first column is predictability and hence good fortune; common to the notions in the second column is unpredictability and hence misfortune. The category labeled past/nonpast is also reported as sometimes undergoing a shift of meaning to indirect/direct. This may be a consequence of the fact that the past but not the present is inaccessible to direct knowledge.

The sensorial particles. The sensorial particles, which specify how the speaker’s knowledge was arrived at, distinguish between visual and nonvisual sources of evidence.

The core of the four visual evidential particles (Table 1) is the morpheme yə. The two ‘nonexpected’ particles are variants of yə marked by tone for tense, and the two ‘expected’ particles are composite forms containing yə i.e. yə + a > yəə and yə + a > yəə. The yə itself descends historically from the first person singular pronoun found throughout Tibeto-Burman, PTB *ya. In this specific sentence-final environment, the Akha evidential sense of yə arose from one of two sources: either it came from the reinterpretation of a first person agreement marker—a conclusion that in one sense simply begs the question of where it ultimately came from—or it arose out of the semantics and syntax of embedding a clause under *yə ‘1’ plus a verb of perception or cognition, i.e. arose out of the semantics and syntax of a structure like I SOV1, *ya + verb, which is the Tibeto-Burman equivalent of a structure such as I see that . . . or I know that . . . .

The four nonvisual sensorial evidentials are divided into an ‘expected’ pair mía and mîa and a ‘nonexpected’ pair nja and ngà (Table 2). Like their visual counterparts, the two ‘expected’ particles are composite forms i.e. mî + a > mîa and mî + a > mîa, with the tonal variation marking tense. The mi-segment, the essence of the marker, has a direct cognate in Lisu mî4, a concessive particle found with both nouns and verbs in Lisu; in addition, it has

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3 The a of the these two composite forms and of the two composite forms mía and mîa (discussed below) is a sentence final particle which serves to mark the sentence as ‘expected’. Ultimately, this a appears to descend from the third person pronoun ?a of Tibeto-Burman, but its path of development from this origin to a sentence final particle remains unclear.
4 See footnote 3.
Table 1. Akha Sensorial Evidential Particles (Visual) (Adapted from Egerod and Hansson 1974:227–8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Nonexpected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nonpast</td>
<td>ɲáa</td>
<td>ɲá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>ɲáá</td>
<td>ɲá</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

another possible cognate in the Burmese -mai' of the phrasal conjunction pei mai'(lit) 'although, in spite of...' (Oke 1969:381). The Lisu evidence suggests the reconstruction of an earlier concessive for mi-, a particle that now indicates a nonvisual source of evidence.

Putting aside discussion of njá and njá for a moment, the modern distinction between the four visual and the two nonvisual expected particles, which now distinguish between visual and nonvisual sensorily attained knowledge, reflects an earlier distinction between knowledge obtained through personal experience, the forms with ɲa from 'ɲa 'I', and what was assumed to be true, the forms with mi- from a concessive particle.

The final pair of particles njá and njá, both monomorphemic, are related to the auxiliary verb njá 'able to' and to the sentence-final particle njá 'will'. In fact, the initial member of this pair, njá, indicating a nonpast, nonexpected event, is indistinguishable from njá 'able to'; not only does njá lack the anticipated high tone associated elsewhere with the nonpast and non-only is it phonologically identical to njá 'able to', but the identity is also supported by the semantics. A comparison with the pragmatics of English can, used here not to argue for the semantics of Akha but only as a more familiar parallel, illustrates the point about semantics: an assertion that something 'can be' implies both that it is the result of nonvisual knowledge and unexpected. njá, the second member of the pair, is a tonal variant of njá 'able to' with the expected low tone designating past tense. The semantics again support this analysis: an assertion that something 'could be' implies both that it is the result of nonvisual knowledge and that it is unexpected. In the case of both members of this opposition, the earlier, fuller, more precise meanings have given way to less restricted, more abstract evidential meanings.²

The non-sensorial particles. The nonsensorial particles, which do not indicate the source of evidence for a statement, also show category intersections with both tense and the notion of expected/nonexpected. There is in addition, a person distinction shown in Table 3 and indicated by the labels X and Y. For example, in a declarative statement, if the subject is first person, the pertinent particle from set X is used; otherwise, the particle is chosen from set Y. (Examples from Egerod 1974: 8, 10, 13.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Nonexpected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nonpast</td>
<td>má</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>má</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Akha Nonsensorial Particles (Positive and Negative) (Adapted from Egerod and Hansson 1974:227–8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Nonexpected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td>má</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative</td>
<td>má</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, for a question, it is with the second person subjects that the pertinent particle from set X is used; otherwise, the particle is chosen from set Y.⁶ (Examples from Egerod 1974:12.)

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² Related to this pair is njá, glossed as 'will' by Egerod and Hansson and described as indicating one's immediate intention or purpose by Lewis. This njá, which functions as a marker of predications of the future, carries the high tone associated elsewhere with the nonpast. Intriguingly, but inexplicably, this particle is cognate to the topic marker in Lisu that marks new topics.

⁶ Egerod and Hansson also note the existence of a third pattern for 'indirect reference' in which the particle is chosen from set X for third person subjects but from set Y otherwise.
Evidentiality Elsewhere in the World

(7) Nà ngàq dì-éló.
you 1-OBJ. beat = é (X) = QUESTION
‘Will you beat me?’

(8) Na-màq nà-áy dì-éló.
1-PL. you-OBJ. beat = á (Y) = QUESTION
‘Will we (exclusive) beat you?’

(9) Àjìq nà-áy dì-éló.
he you-OBJ. beat = á (Y) = QUESTION
‘Will he beat you?’

The above Akha person distinction is paralleled in distantly related Sherpa (Woodbury this volume, p. 192, note 3):

The first person vs. nonfirst person distinction is widespread in Sherpa, but the term ‘first person’ is something of a misnomer. In the interrogative all so-called first person phenomena are associated with second person. This is because second person forms in questions anticipate the use of first person in the answer.

As a consequence of this, questions carry an evidential value which is appropriate to the anticipated response.

This person distinction is the remnant of much earlier co-occurrence constraints within the Proto-Tibeto-Burman verbal paradigm. An examination of the paired particles -ə(X) and -ə(Y) illustrates this well. This restriction of Akha -e to first person is paralleled by a similar restriction on its Tibetan cognate yin and on its Sherpa cognate 'in.' On the other hand, the particle paired with -e is -a, whose person restrictions relate to its ultimate origin as a third person pronoun. Akha me also shows traces of earlier co-occurrence constraints. Throughout Tibeto-Burman me and its cognates favor nonfirst person environments. However, the particle ma—paired with me—is part of a different system; it originated as a full verb. The person restrictions on its Akha distribution are the result of its pairing with me, a particle with its own co-occurrence restrictions, rather than being the result of inherited constraints. In any case, the person distinction found with the nonsensorial particles is a residue of co-occurrence constraints present in the verbal paradigm of Proto-Tibeto-Burman and has had little effect on the semantics of the modern Akha particles.

The morphemes ma and me are the core of the ‘expected’ nonsensorial particles. Contra Thurgood 1981b, the particle ma is related to the Akha full verb mā ‘be real, true’ and the adverb mā mā ‘really, surely’, an origin which fits nicely with particle’s meaning ‘I know by experience that this is true’ (Inga-Lill Hansson, personal communication). The low-toned variant mā is due to the same historical mechanism that imposed a tonally-marked past/nonpast distinction on all the Akha particles. The other member of the expected, nonsensorial pair is me, which developed out of a copula and is still realized as such in the me of Karen. Within Lolo-Burmese, it has a number of excellent cognates, including the sentence-final aspectual particle of Burmese mai ‘future, or assumptive’ (Okell 1969:354). The assumptive aspect is compatible with the modern Akha evidential meaning of nonsensorial, expected.

The morphemes e and a are the core of the ‘nonexpected’ nonsensorial particles. The e is, as mentioned above, cognate with the copulas yin of Tibetan and ‘in’ of Sherpa. This appears to have represented a ‘speculative’ future contrasting with the ‘assumptive’ future of me. This distinction might be illustrated by the contrast between He could go to Fresno tomorrow and He is going to Fresno tomorrow. The other member of this pair is a. Etymologically its various manifestations are reflexes of the Proto-Tibeto-Burman third person pronoun *a, which subsequently developed into a relatively neutral sentence-final particle (see the person distinction discussed above and note 3). Any additional meaning it may have acquired is due more to its opposition to e than to any originally inherent meaning of its own.

The Quotative

The quotative is the last evidential particle to be discussed in this paper. It is illustrated in the following examples (from Egerer 1974:10):

(10) Nà-màq àjìq-dì-mé.
you-PL. he-OBJ. beat = mé
‘You (PL.) will beat me.’

(11) Nà-màq àjìq-dì-mé dìjé.
you-PL. he-OBJ. beat = mé QUOT.
‘He told me that your group will beat him.’

The Akha quotative is cognate with Phunoi cē, Bisu kyɔtsi, and Mpi ʔɛt. It derives from a verb meaning ‘to speak’ and can be used either to report indirect knowledge or to indicate the hearsay nature of the knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The Akha evidential particles evolved from a variety of sources with a number of different functions: (a) Full verbs: the quotative dìjé descended from a full verb meaning ‘to speak, say’, under which full clauses were originally embedded. mā came from another full verb meaning ‘be true’. (b) Modal nja originated as a modal verb meaning ‘be able’. (c) Copulas: Both me and e evolved from copulas with future meanings, the first an ‘assumptive’ future and the second a ‘spec-
ulative' future. (d) Particle: mi- derives from a concessive particle. (e) Pronouns: 
nya came from a first person pronoun, which was original either an agreement 
marker or part of a matrix sentence under which clauses were embedded. It may 
also have gone through a stage in which it was a sentence-final particle. a started 
as a third person pronoun and went through a stage in which it was a neutral 
sentence-final particle.9

Despite the variety of sources and despite the gaps in our knowledge of 
historical developments, an outline has emerged. Through the reconstruction and 
examination of earlier forms and functions, a general picture of the evolution 
of the Akha evidentials has been drawn, tracing them from their ultimate origins in 
the grammatical and semantic roots present in the language family as far back as 
Proto-Tibeto-Burman through to their development into the complex system of 
the modern language.

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9 With the exception of djé, a still not understood historical development has imposed a tonal 
split on particles, doubling their number. Each now has a low tone variant designating past tense and 
a high tone variant designating nonpast.