VIII. On *bdag*, *gzhan*, and the Supposed Active-passive Neutrality of Tibetan Verbs[1]

There is a quite common position, held by writers on Tibetan, such as Michael Hahn and Constantin Regamey, to the effect that Tibetan verbs exhibit no differentiation of voice whatsoever. This absolute voice-neutrality was expressed by Michael Hahn in the following way (speaking about the verb *mthong ba*):

> Sie kann gemäss der impersonalen Natur des tibetischen Verbs, das keine Unterscheidung von Aktiv und Passiv kennt (...) aktivisch—'ein Sehender'—und passivisch—'einer, der gesehen wird'—interpretiert werden.[2]

Further on in the same work Hahn made it clear that for him, even from a semantic point of view, Tibetan verbs were absolutely voice-neutral and could just as well be translated by a German active construction or by a German passive, depending only upon stylistic factors. He wrote:

> Es ist zu betonen, dass es im Tibetischen bei ein und demselben Verb keinen Genuswechsel gibt, selbst wenn man diesen in der Übersetzung gelegentlich aus stilistischen Gründen vornehmen wird. So lautet z.B. der Satz *rgyal pos dgra bo gsod do* in genauer Widergabe 'Es findet ein

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[1] The original article was published in the *Festschrift* for Ernst Steinkellner and contained the following dedication: "Ernst Steinkellner, over the years, has done so much to make Dharmakīrti's thought accessible and to promote the place of this great philosopher on a world stage. Actually, he has done much more than that: his own contributions and the works published in his 'orange' series have covered virtually the whole spectrum of Indo-Tibetan Studies, from Tabo to Tantra to Tibetan history and other subjects. The present article is on one of those 'other' subjects, i.e., indigenous Tibetan grammar. Ernst Steinkellner initially encouraged me to delve into this material, too."

[2] Hahn 1985, 28.

Feind-Töten staat dur den König (als den Urheber der Verbalhandlung).',
die man dann mit gleicher Berechtigung in 'Der König tötet den Feind.'
und 'Der Feind wird vom König getötet.' umformen kann.[3]

This position, in its broad outlines, seems also to be maintained in recent
analyses of Tibetan. Nicolas Tournadre, in his 1996 study, *L'Ergativité en
tibétain. Approche morphosyntaxique de la langue parlée,* far and away the
best work done yet on the phenomena of ergativity and its related issues in
spoken Tibetan, accepts strongly that Tibetan (spoken and Classical) lacks
active-passive diathesis; his stance on this looks to be similar and every bit
as radical as that promoted by Hahn and Regamey, even if his arguments
differ here and there from theirs. Such claims of absolute voice-neutrality
seem to me much too strong and neglect or misinterpret some important
data. Indigenous Tibetan grammar may well help us disentangle some of
these recurrent claims about the features of Tibetan.

A. Tournadre draws upon illustrative parallels with Chinese, citing with
approval a passage from Hagège 1975 concerning Chinese verbs that do
not distinguish, neither in terms of sense (*ni par leur sens*), nor in terms of
any marking (*ni par la présence d'une marque*), any definite orientation
of the action towards any one of the participants, or actants. The example
that Hagège gave was *yu chi le,* and he (rightly) claimed that it could just
as well mean "The fish ate" or "The fish has been eaten." Claude Hagège
then went on to say that this phenomenon of dual-orientation, where
voice is not indicated by anything other than context, frequently occurs in
certain specific types of verbs in various languages, e.g., "to look," which
can mean that someone is looking at something or that something looks
like something else. Tournadre relies on these remarks of Hagège and
then draws a categorical conclusion: this same phenomenon of complete
absence of orientation (be it in terms of sense or marking) is general to all
Tibetan verbs that are transitive, or in other words, verbs that have two (or
more) actants:

Nous prétendons qu'en tibétain l'absence d'orientation est *générale*
[my italics] pour tous les verbes transitifs ou biactanciels. Cette absence

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[3]   Hahn 1985, 58. See also Regamey 1946-47.

de diathèse est, comme on l'a vu plus haut, compensée par les marques casuelles qui précisent si l'actant est agent ou patient.[4]

In fact, Tournadre's parallel with Chinese needs some qualification to avoid misunderstanding. As is clear in the passage quoted above and in his arguments discussed in our Appendix, Tournadre is *not* saying that Tibetan *sentences* are all ambiguous in exactly the way that *yu chi le* is in Chinese, where it is indeterminate (apart from context) as to whether the fish ate or whether the fish was eaten. What he is saying is that the Tibetan verb taken by itself, or in terms of its own morphological features, exhibits no voice orientation. Thus, although in Tibetan the verb *zas pa* remains unchanged when one says "X ate" or "X has been eaten," the case markings going with "X" will resolve the ambiguity as to whether it signifies the agent (i.e., the eater) or the patient (i.e., what has been eaten). Thus, Tournadre's point—and I presume Hahn's too—is *not*, if I understand him rightly, that whole Tibetan sentences are ambiguous and

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[4] Here is the whole passage in Tournadre 1996, 88-89:

L'*absence d'orientation du verbe* n'est pas un phénomène rare. C. Hagège l'a montré à propos des verbes transitifs en chinois:

> Un grand nombre d'entre eux, dans les énoncés de types courants, n'impliquent ni par leur sens, ni par la présence d'une marque, une orientation exclusive du procès par rapport à un des participants, et par conséquent ne supposent pas de différenciation entre un état et une action dans l'expression linguistique. Il en résulte, quand on passe du chinois au français par exemple, des ambiguïtés, que le contexte, évidemment, peut toujours lever pour un Chinois. C'est le cas dans le type d'énoncé où un verbe de ce genre est précédé d'un nom. Ex: *yu chi le* (poisson manger mod.acc.) peut signifier "le poisson a mangé" ou "le poisson a été mangé" (1975: 46-47).

Il poursuit en rappelant qu'en anglais:

> de nombreux verbes sont doublement orientables ou à diathèse non spécifiée sinon par le contexte: ex. eat "manger" et "se manger" [...] apply "appliquer" et "s'appliquer," look "regarder" et "paraître".

et ajoute que dans d'autres langues la double orientation ou l'absence de diathèse est restreinte à certains champs sémantiques (français) ou à certains verbes particuliers (hébreu mischnaïque). Nous prétendons qu'en tibétain, l'absence d'orientation est générale pour tous les verbes transitifs ou biactanciels. Cette absence de diathèse est, comme on l'a vu plus haut, compensée par les marques casuelles qui précisent si l'actant est agent ou patient.

completely context dependent in the way in which *yu chi le* is, but rather that Tibetan and Chinese verbs forms have no morphological features of their own (e.g., distinctive flexion, use of additional morphemes, affixes, etc.) that allow us to say that they are, in themselves, either active or passive. This, as I will argue, is probably only an interesting half-truth in that it involves a carefully circumscribed set of data, notably the past or perfective (*'das pa*) forms like *zas pa* (ate, has eaten, has been eaten)*, bsad pa* (has killed, has been killed): it is *not*, *pace* Tournadre and Hahn, generalizable to all or even to most Tibetan verbs.

B. One of the points that we emphasized in *Agents and Actions in Classical Tibetan* (AACT), interpreting evidence from indigenous grammarians, was that, at least from a semantic perspective, Tibetan verbs do not seem to be absolutely equal and neutral with regard to the action's orientation. For clarity let me try to bring this out again with a kind of abridged version of what figured in that earlier publication.

    Tibetan grammarians, commenting on a verse from the *rTags kyi 'jug pa,* maintain that "present" (*da lta ba*) forms, like *gcod par byed* (... cuts), show "self" (*bdag*) and focus upon the agent and the activity that he does, while "future" (*ma 'ongs pa*) forms, like *gcad par bya* (... is/will be cut), show "other" (*gzhan*) and highlight the patient and the activity that the patient undergoes. A kya Yongs 'dzin, for example, speaks of *gcod* as showing the woodcutter's "exertion of cutting the wood with an axe" (*sta res shing gcod pa'i rtsol ba*), while *gcad* conveys "the fact of the wood being cut into bits" (*shing dum bur bcad pa'i cha*).[5] Or, what is the same, virtually all indigenous grammarians writing on these subjects distinguish between *byed pa'i las/ byed pa* (act-qua-doing) and *bya ba'i las/bya ba* (act-qua-thing-done), the former being the "act belonging to the agent" (*byed pa po la yod pa'i las*), the latter the "act belonging to the patient, or 'focus of the action'" (*bya ba'i yul la yod pa'i las*). Thus, various occurences of the present, e.g., *gcod do, gcod par byed,* are said to express "act-qua-doing," while those of the future, e.g., *gcad do, gcad par bya,* express "act-qua-thing-done." And what is important to note is that the present and future verb forms, e.g., *gcod* and *gcad,* are said to show the one or the other of the two sorts of acts (*las*), but *never both*.

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[5]   AACT p. 40-41, §7.

In fact, the use of the Tibetan terms *da lta ba* (present) and *ma 'ongs pa* (future) are notoriously misleading, as they are not just, or even primarily, terms for tenses. Certain grammarians, like gSer tog and A lag sha Ngag dbang bstan dar, even explicitly differentiated between the time (*dus*) when an action or event would be said to happen and the orientation and mode of that action, making it clear that in theories about "self" and "other," the terms "present" and "future" expressed a prominence of the one or the other actant, the actual temporal values expressed by the so-called "present" and "future" forms being at most approximative.[6] In any case, in the network of interlocking terminology found in grammatical treatises' chapters on "self" and "other," there seems to be a systematic attempt to arrive at a type of theory of orientation of verbs, broadly speaking in terms of agent-prominence versus patient-prominence. If that's right, then the grammarians' explanations, if they are to be believed, would seem to indicate that there is, at least in the case of present and future forms, a determinate orientation towards one or another actant and that at least these forms are not ambivalent or neutral after all. All this is of course framed with a heavy reliance on semantic notions like "agent," "patient," "doing," "thing-done," and so forth, but it should at least be clear that *total* absence of orientation of verbs is not being promoted by traditional grammar. This suggests that the parallel with Chinese and Tournadre's generalization of that parallel are hard to defend, or at the very least that they are not receiving support from sophisticated Tibetans theorizing about their own language.

C. Naturally one can ask the question whether traditional Tibetan grammarians were right about all this, or even whether their theories are germane to our discussion. I think that the fact of Tibetan verbs' exhibiting some specific orientation, at least in terms of meaning, can be relatively well maintained, irrespectively of whether one relies heavily on evidence from indigenous grammar or not. One can see evidence for some such semantic orientation in translators' choices of Tibetan equivalents for Sanskrit. It is, for example, not surprising that Tibetan translators of Sanskrit texts were sensitive to the patient-prominence of forms ending in *par bya* and generally used them to translate Sanskrit terms ending

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6   See Tillemans 1991, i.e., chapter X in the present work.

in suffixes of obligation (*kṛtyānta*), terms that are passive-oriented in Sanskrit. E.g., in philosophical contexts *sādhya* "what is to be proved" is rendered as *bsgrub bya* or *bsgrub par bya ba.* But going to less specialized contexts, it is clear that there are many cases that can be given where it is not just optional as to whether we translate by active or passive, nor is it simply a stylistic choice or a matter of context. To take Hahn's example, arguably the "present" (Pt) form *gsod* in *rgyal pos dgra gsod do* is better rendered by "The king kills the enemy" than by "The enemy is killed by the king." Equally, if we chose the "future"(F) verb-form *gsad* and constructed a sentence like *dgra rgyal pos gsad do,* a passive translation would be more accurate in the very way in which an active translation is not. The point can be brought out by the following simple pair of relative clauses:

1. *gsod pa'i*   *rgyal po* (the king who kills)
    kill (Pt)+GEN   king

2. *gsad pa'i*   *dgra* (the enemy who is/will be killed)
    kill (F)+GEN   enemy

Nothing would ever justify translating the first clause as "the king who is killed"; nor could we translate the second as "the enemy who kills." Once we grant that *gsod* and *gsad* in 1 and 2 exhibit this orientation, it is reasonable to say that they would exhibit it in other phrases, too.[7] The

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[7] Nor is the choice of *gsad* or *gsod* simply a choice of allomorphs, as if it were a matter of one morpheme that had two or more alternative forms, like using *ru, su, r,* etc. after certain consonants, instead of the oblique case marker *la.* Tournadre seems to think that this is all that is involved, even though he is aware that choice of active or passive translations are not arbitrary in examples like 1. and 2. See Tournadre 1996, 269-271. He offers a complex account as to why what seems like orientation is no more than usage of allomorphs depending upon "agreement" between the antecedent and the verb. Thus, he gives a number of examples (e.g., **gcad bya'i sta re* versus *gcod byed kyi sta re*) where using the future form is agrammatical and others where the present is agrammatical. The discussion is not convincing. The examples are indeed odd in most contexts, simply because it is usually anomalous to talk about, say, the axe that is to be cut (i.e., *gcad bya'i sta re*) rather than the axe that is doing the cutting (*gcod byed kyi sta re*). But *nothing* definitively rules out *gcad bya'i sta re*: we could, for example, imagine

same active translation of *gsod* would thus be preferable in the case of *rgyal pos dgra gsod do* and the same passive translation of *gsad* would be preferable in the case of *dgra rgyal pos gsad do*. Neither here nor in 1 and 2 is there the ambiguity or absence of orientation that Hagège had spoken about in the case of Chinese. The generalized parallel with Chinese is *not* forthcoming.

D. Now, again it could be objected that one could grant this much but still not accept genuine voice orientation of Tibetan verbs. One could stress that A kya Yongs 'dzin's *semantic* considerations about what highlights the agent's effort and what highlights the action undergone by the patient are not themselves enough to justify ascribing a difference of active and passive *voice* to verb forms. The reason would be that while some distinctions may be made from a semantic perspective, genuine *voice* differences are made on the basis of appropriate observable morphosyntactic data and not just on interpretations of meanings. Thus, it would be argued that genuine voice difference would involve, for example, something like transformations between active and passive with case-reassignment and with corresponding flexional changes in the verbs. Flexional changes and case-reassignment are what occurs in German, French, Sanskrit, English and other accusative languages, where an O[bject] NP of the active sentence becomes the S[ubject] of the passive and the A[gent] is marked by a different and non-core case, a preposition, etc. But there is no such case-reassignment in Tibetan where A and O remain, respectively, in the ergative and (usually) the absolutive.

Nor could one appeal to ergative languages' analogue to passivization in accusative languages, i.e., the phenomenon of so-called "antipassive" constructions. Many ergative languages, while often not having a passive, do indeed have a genuine distinction of voice between active and antipassive, with regular case-reassignment and other morphosyntactic features—an antipassive is a construction where the O NP is marked by

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talking about *gcad bya'i sta re* in an extraordinary high-tech context of the axe being cut by a device like a laser. Switching to more probable examples like *gsad bya'i dgra* (the enemy who is to be killed) and *gsod byed kyi dgra* (the enemy who kills)*,* both are equally grammatical and it thus seems inescapable to recognize that the orientation of *gsad/gsod* is what determines our choice of translation.

a non-core case, preposition, and so forth, and the A NP becomes the S, encoded with the Ø-marking of the absolutive case. Note, however, that there is no evidence that Tibetan, spoken or written, does have an antipassive, and thus the question of criteria for ascribing voice to an ergative language like Tibetan is undoubtedly more complicated than it is in the case of certain other such languages that admit antipassives.[8]

It is not hopeless, however. Granted, *some* morphosyntactic elements would be minimal requirements: we would need to have at least, as R.M.W. Dixon put it, "some explicit formal marking of a passive construction (generally, by a verbal affix or else by a periphrastic element in the verb phrase...)."[9] In that light, relying on purely semantic distinctions alone—like those framed by A kya Yongs 'dzin *et al.* in terms of act-qua-doing and act-qua-thing-done, the agent's exertions and what the patient undergoes, etc., etc.—would be thought insufficient to enable us to speak of voice in Tibetan. The question, thus, is as follows: are the requisite explicit formal markings to be found in Tibetan? The answer seems to be "Yes": we can find a significant opposition between a pair of morphological features pertaining to verbs. The important caution is that we should take into account the crucial differences between the so-called "present" (*da lta ba*) and "future" (*ma 'ongs pa*) verb-forms and not concentrate only on the "past" (*'das pa*), as Tournadre has done. Let me elaborate by bringing in the opposition between *byed tshig* and *bya tshig*. Again, I think indigenous grammar does have an important contribution to make.

E. The contrast between the Tibetan relative clauses given as 1 and 2 above can be brought out using the grammarians' terms *byed tshig* and *bya tshig*, i.e., expressions for doing and thing-done, or in other words the

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[8]   See Dixon 1994, 146 on antipassives; AACT p. 105 et passim; Tournadre 1996, 94 *et seq.*

[9]   Dixon 1994, 146. Cf. Lazard 1998, 226: "We shall content ourselves here with a rough definition: passivization is transferring the active, with the same notional content, to a marked construction, in which the verb takes a particular form (which may, depending on the language, be considered a case of inflexion or of derivation), in which the object (if there is one) takes the place of the agent and in which the agent becomes an oblique term or disappears. ... On the other hand, in certain languages there are constructions which border on the passive but do not conform to the definition given above: for instance, the verb does not change form or one or the other of the actants does not change grammatical function."

periphrastic *par byed* added to present forms and the *par bya* added to the future form. The explicit presence, or at least applicability, of *par byed* and *par bya* is what Tibetan grammarians take to be hallmarks of self and other, respectively. Thus, equivalent to 1 we have 3 using *byed pa,* i.e., the present form of "to do" joined to the present form of "to kill" (*gsod*) with its suffix *pa* + the oblique case-marking. Equivalent to 2 is 4, using *bya ba,* i.e., the future form of "to do" joined to the future of "to kill" (*gsad*) with the suffix *pa* + the oblique case-marking.

3. *gsod   par*   *byed pa'i*   *rgyal po*
   kill (Pt)+OBL   do(Pt)+GEN   king
   the king who kills

4. *gsad   par*   *bya ba'i*   *dgra*
   kill (F)+OBL   do(F)+GEN   enemy
   the enemy who is to be killed

Turning to nouns, the *byed tshig* shows agents and their instruments, i.e., what does or aids in doing the action, while *bya tshig* shows patients, i.e., what is to receive or undergo the action. Thus, we have e.g., *gcod par byed pa po* (the [wood] cutter), *gcod byed* (the means of cutting, i.e., the axe) and *gcad bya* (that which is to be cut, i.e., the wood), or *gsod byed* versus *gsad bya*, and other such examples, all of which follow the same pattern of nouns using the present and future verb forms plus *byed* and *bya* analogously to the *par byed* and *par bya* in 3 and 4.

It should be emphasized that this opposition between present and future forms is precisely what traditional grammarians emphasize in their theory of *bdag* and *gzhan.* Indeed, Si tu himself makes an important distinction between the meanings (*don*) of verb forms and their categorization as *bdag* or *gzhan,* so that being *bdag* or *gzhan* does not reduce to purely semantic matters of expressing only act-qua-doing and act-qua-thing-done, or the agent's exertion and what the patient undergoes, respectively, but involves a somewhat stronger criterion, namely, that in addition there must be two correlated forms, existent or at least constructible. *A verb or noun classified as showing* bdag *or* gzhan *must either end in a* byed tshig *or* bya tshig *that are either actually given, or it must be such that a* byed tshig/bya tshig *can be correctly added.* What we have seen in the above discussion is that the forms to which *byed tshig* and *bya tshig* figure, or

can correctly be added, are the present and future, respectively. The other important point of which grammarians were abundantly aware is that *byed tshig* and *bya tshig* are correlated and form a pair: when a form admits of a *byed tshig*, there will be a correlated form admitting of a *bya tshig,* and vice versa. The consequence is that a verb form is neither *bdag* nor *gzhan* unless appropriate flexional change associated with *byed*/*bya* is possible. This is what Si tu expresses by saying that the categories of self and other apply when verbs have forms in *par byed* and in *par bya* that are both of the same force (*phan tshun shed mtshungs pa*):

> "In this work [i.e., in Thon mi Saṃbhoṭa's *rTags kyi 'jug pa*], in order to include the terms 'agent' and 'focus of action,' [Thon mi] makes a separate division in terms of self and other. In the process of making this [division], he also included [in the categories of self and other] [only] those words expressing [acts-qua-]thing-done and [acts-qua-]doing (*bya byed kyi tshig*) that are related to self and other and that mutually have the same force (*phan tshun shed mtshungs pa*)."[10]

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[10] Si tu p.194, AACT pp. 62-63 §4: *gzhung 'dir byed pa po dang bya ba'i yul gyi sgra rnams bsdu ba'i phyir bdag gzhan gyi dbye ba zur du mdzad pa yin zhing / de'i zhar las bdag gzhan dang 'brel ba'i bya byed kyi tshig phan tshun shed mtshungs pa rnams kyang bsdus pa yin no /.* The translation in AACT has been amended on one significant point, notably, the understanding of *phan tshun* in *phan tshun shed mtshungs pa rnams.* I had added a wrong remark in square brackets that badly distorted the basic idea. Thankfully, Müller-Witte 2009, 191, n. 112 spotted the error.

rTags kyi 'jug pa's infamous śloka twelve mentions self/other and different times/tenses (*dus*) for each of the prefixes. Si tu's way of interpreting Thon mi is that the mention of the "times"/tenses in śl. 12 is there to include remaining (*lhag ma*) forms that are neither self nor other. Thus, e.g., in *pho ni 'das dang gzhan bsgrub phyir* "The masculine [prefix –b] is for establishing past and other," the point is that *b-* applies to *gzhan* forms like *bsgrub, bsgrub par bya* but also to past forms like *bsgrubs*, which are not included in *bdag* or *gzhan*. Similarly, *g-* is said by Thon mi to apply to both self and other (i.e., *gcod do, gcod byed, gcad do, gcad bya,* etc.) and to the present. Si tu interprets "the present" to include forms like *gcod kyin 'dug* (i.e., the vernacular present, "... cuts") and g*cod bzhin pa* (i.e., the present continuous, "... is cutting"), which use the auxiliaries *kyin 'dug* and *bzhin pa* and are hence included in neither self nor other. The same logic is applied to the other uses of the prefixes.

Si tu's point about only including expressions for thing-done (*bya tshig*) and expressions for doing (*byed tshig*) that both have the same force (*phan tshun shed mtshungs pa* =

That alternation between (*par*) *byed* and (*par*) *bya* is not possible in the case of the past (*'das pa*), nor in the case of the imperative (*bskul tshig*) or certain periphrastic constructions using auxiliaries. To take the verbs "to kill" and "to cut," for example, Tibetan grammarians exclude pseudo-past forms like *bsad (*par*) *byed*, *bsad (*par*) *bya*, *bcad (*par*) *byed*, or *bcad (*par*) *bya*. Nor would they accept pseudo-imperatives like *sod (*par*) *byed*, *sod (*par*) *bya*, or *chod (*par*) *byed*, *chod (*par*) *bya*. And, finally, Si tu and others exclude present forms with auxiliaries (*tshig grogs*), such as *gcod kyin 'dug* or *gcod bzhin pa* (...is cutting), in that there are no bona

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stobs mtshungs pa) is that *bya*-forms (such as *bsgrub bo, bsgrub par bya, bsgrub bya*) and *byed*-forms (like *sgrub bo, sgrub par byed, sgrub [par byed] pa po)* are correlates with only a change of orientation of the action towards the patient or the agent, i.e., passive versus active. It is only when *bya tshig* and *byed tshig* can be put into one-to-one, or equal, correspondence that we can say that the respective forms are to be included under *bdag* and *gzhan*. By contrast, verbs with auxiliaries such as *gcod bzhin pa* "X is in the process of cutting Y," *gcod kyin snang* "X seems to cut Y," or *gcod kyin 'dug* "X is cutting Y" do not have a patient-oriented correlate in Tibetan. There is no acceptable Tibetan sentence **gcad kyin snang, *gcad kyin 'dug,* or even *gcad bzhin pa. Thus, verbs like *gcod bzhin pa*, *gcod kyin snang,* and *gcod kyin 'dug*, which use auxiliaries, are not categorizable as either self or other. See also n. 11 below.

Finally, major traditional grammarians generally do not offer explanation of Si tu's term *phan tshun shed mtshungs* ("both having the same force," "mutually of the same force")*.* We do find the following modern "frank discussion" (*'bel gtam*) of the term *bya byed kyi sgra phan tshun shed mtshungs pa* in bShad sgrub rgya mtsho 1994, p. 7: *bya byed kyi sgra phan tshun shed mtshungs pa dang byed 'brel las tshig don 'dra la / bya byed kyi sgra phan tshun shed mi mtshungs pa dang byed med las tshig don gcig yin / bya byed tha dad pa'i las tshig dper na / bya ba sgrub pa po / sgrub byed / sgrub par byed ces pa'i byed tshig dang / bsgrub bya'i bya ba / bsgrub par bya zhes bya tshig gnyis su dbyer yod pas de gnyis phan tshun shed mtshungs pa'am do mnyam pas de skad ces grags so /.* "When *bya* and *byed* expressions are mutually of the same force, [this] is the same as a verb that has a [distinct] agent. When it is not so that *bya* and *byed* expressions are mutually of the same force, this is synonymous with the verb being without any [distinct] agent [i.e., intransitive]. Transitive verbs have a two-fold division into *byed* expressions, such as *bya ba sgrub* [*par byed*] *pa po, sgrub byed, sgrub par byed,* and *bya* expressions, such as *bsgrub bya'i bya ba, bsgrub par bya*. Therefore, they are spoken of in this way [as *bya byed kyi sgra phan tshun shed mtshungs pa*]*,* because those two [i.e., the *byed* expressions and the *bya* expressions] are of the same force, or, in other words, they have "equal weight" (*do mnyam*)."

fide corresponding phrases with a *bya*-compatible future form—**gcad kyin 'dug* and **gcad bzhin pa* are regarded as impossible.[11]

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[11]   The following passage from Si tu's discussion of the prefix *d-* gives the most complete account of this reasoning (Si tu pp. 234-235): *ma ning gi sngon 'jug gnyis po de bshad ma thag pa'i bdag gzhan gnyis po der mi gtogs pa'i dus da lta ba la 'jug pa'i tshul ni / byed pa po bdag dang 'brel ba'i byed pa'i tshig gi dper brjod pa de rnams nyid tshig grogs kyis bsgyur ba las shes par bya'o // de'ang dper na / gcar bar byed / gcar ro / dkri bar byed / dkri'o lta bu da lta ba'i sgra yin mod kyi gzung bar bya / gzung ngo / dgang bar bya / dgang ngo / lta bu gzhan gyi sgra la'ang de shed mtshungs yod pas sngar stobs mtshungs kyis bdag gzhan du zlas phye ba'i bdag sgra'i khongs su bsdus nas brjod zin pas 'dir ni don gyis bdag byed pa'i tshig yin yang gzhan gyi sgra la de dang shed mtshungs sbyar rgyu med pas gong smos bdag sgra'i khongs su sdud par mi 'os pa'i / gcar gyin snang ngo / gcar bzhin pa'o // dkri yin 'dug go // dkri bzhin pa'o // lta bu sngar smros pa'i bdag sgra'i byed tshig de rnams nyid brjod tshul tshig grogs kyi khyad par dang bcas pas dper brjod par bya'o //.* "Here is the way the two neutral prefixes [*g-* and *d-*] are used for the present tense [forms] that are not included amongst either the self or other [verb forms] that we have just given: it has to be understood that the various examples of expressions for 'doing' that are related with the agent, i.e., with self, stem from transformations through auxiliaries. Now, *gcar bar byed, gcar ro* ('… hits')*, dkri bar byed, dkri'o* ('…winds up/ties') and the like certainly are present tense expressions. And in the case of expressions for 'other' too, like *gzung bar bya* ('… is to be grasped')*, gzung ngo, dgang bar bya* ('… is to be filled')*, dgang ngo*, there are [expressions, like *'dzin par byed, 'dzin no,* etc.] that have the same force (*shed mtshungs*) as them. So earlier on [in Si tu's list of examples *g-* and *d-* prefixed verbs] they [i.e., *gcar bar byed*, etc.] had been stated included under 'self' when the classification in terms of self and other was made on account of [expressions for thing-done and doing] having the same force (*stobs mtshungs kyis*). Consequently, here [i.e., among the verb forms covered by the word 'present' (*da lta*) in Thon mi's śloka on *g-* and *d-*], there are [verb phrases] like *gcar gyin snang ngo, gcar bzhin pa'o, dkri yin 'dug go, dkri bzhin pa'o*, which are unfitting to be included under the 'self' expressions previously given [in the lists of *g-* and *d-* forms], in spite of them being 'by their sense' (*don gyis*) expressions for doing, i.e., self, because 'other' expressions cannot be used having the same force as them (*gzhan gyi sgra la de dang shed mtshungs sbyar rgyu med pas*). The examples [of present *g-* and *d-* prefixed forms that were neither self nor other, i.e., *gcar gyin snang*, etc.] had to be stated because the types of presentation (*brjod tshul*) of the words for doing, or 'self' expressions, that had been given earlier were [now] provided with specific auxiliaries (*tshig grogs kyi khyad par dang bcas pas*)." I understand *gcar* here not in the intransitive (*byed med las tshig*) sense of "coming near" (to which "self" would not apply) but in the transitive sense of "hit." Cf. *Dag yig gsar bsgrigs s.v. gcar₂: byis pa la gcar mi rung* "You shouldn't hit children."

Interestingly enough, Si tu and others did seem to give purely semantic characterizations of the orientation of the action in the case of the past (i.e., perfect) form of a verb like "to cut" (i.e., *bcad zin pa*). Following Si tu, the past can be classified, semantically, as expressing *bya ba'i gzhi la yod pa'i las*: it is taken as expressing "an act pertaining to the basis of the action," viz., to the patient.[12] It is not however either *bdag* or *gzhan,*[13] because there can be no appropriate opposing pair of *byed* and *bya* forms. Other grammarians, like A kya Yongs 'dzin and gSer tog, say much the same thing about the past expressing act-qua-thing-done (*bya ba'i las*) and will also extend the semantic characterizations of act-qua-doing (*byed pa'i las*) to the imperatives and forms with auxiliaries.

That said, this semantic characterization of the past forms in particular is somewhat controversial amongst a few contemporary grammarians. And indeed there is something quite odd about this supposed "meaning" of the past tense in Tibetan. What seems more likely is that the past is a particularly ambivalent form in Tibetan, that "in itself" a past form like *bcad* (... has cut/has been cut) does not seem to privilege any one particular orientation over another. Indeed, context is probably the only determining factor, as if the Tournadre-Hagège approach applied *here*, even if it did not

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[12] See Si tu 203-204: *spyir yang bya ba gzhi la yod pa'i las la dus gsum du dbyer rung ba ma yin te / shing gcad par bya / gcod par byed / bcad zin lta bur mtshon na gcad bya ma 'ongs pa dang bcad zin 'das pa gnyis bya ba'i gzhi dang 'brel ba mod kyi gcod byed da lta ba byed pa po dang 'brel ba las bya ba'i gzhir 'brel ba'i skabs med do /.* "In general, one cannot categorize the act present in the basis of the action in terms of the three times. If one takes [examples] like *shing gcad par bya* ("the wood is to be cut"), *gcod par byed* ("... cuts"), *bcad zin* ("... has been cut"), the future *gcad bya* ("... to be cut"), and the past *bcad zin* ("...has been cut"), both are indeed connected with the basis of the action [i.e., the patient], but the present *gcod byed* ("...cuts") is connected with the agent and is never connected with the basis of the action [i.e., the patient]."
    The term *bya ba'i gzhi la yod pa'i las* is a synonym of *bya ba'i yul la yod pa'i las,* or just simply *bya ba'i las* (act-qua-thing-done). The point of the above passage is simply that not all tenses show patient-oriented action: the past and future do; the present does not.

[13] As for Si tu's statement that the past is neither self nor other, we find him introducing the list of examples of the past as follows (Si tu p. 196-196. See AACT p. 64-65 §5): *dbye ba de gnyis su ma 'dus pa'i dus gsum las byas zin 'das pa'i sgra ni* "From among the three times not included in that two-fold division [of self and other], the [examples of] words expressing past [tense] are..." See also n. 10 above.

in the case of the present and future forms.[14] It is not at all clear *why* Si
tu and others thought that *bcad pa* etc. somehow should be said to *mean*
an act-qua-thing-done rather than a doing. Enough said on this unclarity.
The important point to be gleaned seems to be that there is recognition that
a verb's meaning is one thing, but that the presence of morphosyntactic
factors necessary for full-blown *bdag* and *gzhan* is another.

F. The tentative lesson from traditional grammar seems to be as follows:
many verbs do exhibit morphosyntactic features that are relevant to voice
orientation. These features, however, only pertain to what grammarians
call the "present" (*da lta ba*) and "future" (*ma 'ongs pa*) forms of verbs, and
not to the so-called "past" (*'das pa*), the imperative, and some other forms
using auxiliaries. Although the Tournadre-Hagège scenario of complete
ambivalence and context-dependency may quite possibly describe the
"past," nonetheless no such generalization can be made to all verb-forms.
Absolute neutrality across the whole spectrum seems unlikely.

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[14] The contemporary Tibetan grammarian bKra shis dbang 'dus has acknowledged this
ambivalence and context-dependency of the past tense, although it is certainly not a
widespread view amongst grammarians. Note that he speaks of *bdag* and *gzhan* (and
not just *byed las/bya las*) both being applicable to the past according to context. See
rTag kyi jug pa'i snying po dka' gnad gsal ba'i me long, p. 13: *'das tshig de dngos po
bdag gzhan gang du gtogs she na / rdo bzo bas brtsigs lta bu byed pa po dang 'brel nas
bshad na dngos po bdag gi khongs dang / so phag brtsigs lta bu bya ba'i yul gyi dngos
po'am las dang 'brel nas bshad na dngos po gzhan gyi khongs su gtogs so /*. "Does a
verb in the past tense belong to the entity self or other? If one says something like, 'The
stone mason has laid [them],' where there is a relation with the agent, then [the action]
is in the category of the entity self. And if one says something like, 'The bricks have
been laid,' where there is a relation with the entity that is the focus of the action, or [in
other words] with the object (*las*), then [the action] is included in the category of the
entity that is other." See AACT p. 24-25, n. 49 and p. 83 *et seq*. Major grammarians, like
gSer tog, Ngag dbang bstan dar, Si tu, dNgul chu, A kya Yongs 'dzin, and others do not,
however, share this view. Some (like Si tu and his commentators) may refuse to classify
the past as either *bdag* or *gzhan, stricto sensu,* but do nevertheless say that it expresses,
or means, *bya ba'i las* (act-qua-thing-done). It is not clear whether A kya Yongs 'dzin
held exactly that position, but it is clear that for him, too, the past expressed *bya ba'i
las*. See AACT p. 42-43, §9: *sngon 'jug gi pho ba yig bya ba'i las 'das pa la 'jug pa ni /
dper na / nor bsgrubs / lha bsgoms ...*

Where does this leave the central issue of active-passive diathesis in Tibetan? The full-blown *bdag* and *gzhan* opposition*,* as Si tu explains it, is not just a semantic matter of expressing "doing" and "thing-done," but also involves the changes of verb flexions, marking, and periphrastic forms that Dixon would take as minimal requirements for talk about voice. *Bdag* and *gzhan*, at least in the hands of Si tu and his commentators, are then potentially relevant in our attempt to understand issues of voice orientation in Tibetan. Still, no doubt, it would be weird and wrong to claim that traditional grammar supports attributing a simple and straightforward active-passive diathesis to Tibetan. Usual definitions of passivization and diathesis turning on case-reassignment, where agents are represented by oblique case terms and objects become the subject, etc., will not be satisfied. Perhaps the most one can say is that Gilbert Lazard's characterizations of some other problematic data would also be applicable here in the case of Tibetan: "there are constructions which border on the passive" even though "one or the other of the actants does not change grammatical function."[15] It seems that borderline cases of partial satisfaction of criteria for the passive are not infrequent.[16]

Appendix: a more detailed look at Nicolas Tournadre's argument for the absence of active-passive diathesis in Tibetan

Nicolas Tournadre sees none of the needed morphosyntactic factors for one to be able to ascribe active and passive voices to Tibetan. Here is the argument on p. 87-88 of Tournadre 1996, an argument which also figures in his earlier work, i.e., Stoddard and Tournadre 1992:

En revanche, il n'y a pas en tibétain de diathèse (opposition de voix passif/ actif) soit morphologique soit transformationnelle. On peut facilement montrer que les verbes (à l'écrit comme à l'oral) ne sont pas orientés. L'énoncé:

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[15]   See n. 9 above.
[16]   Cf. e.g., Givón 1982.

    3.28a   *Kho*   *bsad+song*
                    il+ABS   tuer(PASSÉ)+AOR, CONST

    ...

signifie aussi bien: "On l'a tué", "Il a été tué", ou encore "(X) l'a tué",
tandis que:

    3.28b   *Kho+s*   *bsad+song*
                    il+ERG   tuer(PASSÉ)+AOR, CONST

    ...

signifie: "il a tué." ou "il l'a tué."

    Ces deux exemples illustrent bien le fait que *seules les marques des participants indiquent si l'action est agie ou subie.*[Tournadre's italics.] Ni le verbe ni l'auxiliare ne sont susceptibles de subir une transformation. Ce qui est un argument supplémentaire montrant qu'il n'y a pas de diathèse en tibétain. C'est-à-dire que, par exemple, le verbe *byed* "faire" ou le verbe *bsad* "tuer" ne peuvent pas être transformés respectivement en "être fait" ou "être tué" ni par une flexion ni par l'adjonction d'un affixe ou d'un morphème particulier.

First of all, we see that there is an orientational difference to be made between 3.28a and 3.28b. Tournadre's point, however, is that although our understanding of orientation might vary because of marking of actants, the verb remains absolutely unchanged, and for that reason, in absence of some difference in verb auxiliaries, flexion, etc., we cannot ascribe diathesis.

    His example is actually a very interesting case because it involves a verb in the past (i.e., perfect) tense: *kho/khos bsad song*. In fact, he is quite right to say that whether we take these sentences as active or passive the verb *bsad* stays the same. As we had argued too, the past form may well be the best candidate for ambivalence and context-dependency. To put things another way, Tournadre would be right essentially because he's citing an example in the perfect tense and there is no corresponding verbal flexion that could ever show any difference of voice. That much is fine. But it is *not* always the case in Tibetan, and notably it is not the case with other verb tenses. In short, the example is not amenable to generalization. It is especially not amenable to generalization in the case of Classical Tibetan, where, as I mentioned earlier, we have present forms, actually or potentially with *par byed,* and future forms, with *par bya,* showing,

respectively, act-qua-doing and act-qua-thing-done. There is thus a significant sense in which we can and do have morphosyntactic factors that are connected with orientation. But their occurrence is circumscribed; the past (perfect) has its own specificities.