Copulas in Kutang (Northern Gorkha, Nepal): caught between descriptive systems – and evidence for the unity of these systems

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Until recently, all we knew about Kutang language stemmed from a socio-linguistic survey of Northern Gorkha conducted by Jeff Webster in 1992, in which 240 words were elicited by Warren Glover in around a dozen related 'Ghale' varieties. After Dhakal et al. (2012) presented a first sketch of the Kutang past tense distinctions, Donohue and Gautam (2019) observed that the distinctions between two existential (*jaŋ* and *goŋ*) and two equative (*na* and *noŋ*) copulas could be accounted for in terms of either evidentiality or egophoricity (or 'conjunct/disjunct'), if not mirativity.

Based on interviews conveyed in Kutang after the 2015 earthquake (supervised by Kristine Hildebrandt, https://av.mandala.library.virginia.edu/collection/kutang-reflections-2015-nepal-earthquakes) as well as more than twenty stories I recorded there with the help of Tharpa Lama from Bihi in 2023, I will show that the existential and equative copulas of this language form two evidential contrasts that are fully in line with those found in all modern Tibetic varieties as well as a number of languages that have been influenced by the latter. These evidential contrasts all share the following characteristics:

i.   The contrasting verb forms are defined against each other (and hence, the contrasts are mostly binary).
ii.   While the forms have contrasting implications as to how one knows what is being profiled in a statement (e.g. direct evidence vs. plain knowledge, new vs. old knowledge, high vs. low personal involvement, or privileged vs. non-privileged access), one of them always implies longer and/or more direct personal involvement than the other. Accordingly, contrasting evidentials qualify as ego- and allophoric, respectively.
iii. Contrasting evidentials have a shared aspecto-temporal value (i.e. the *tertium comparationis* regarding which they have contrasting evidential implications).
iv.   Contrasting forms reflect the perspective of the same (evidential) origo, which corresponds to the speaker in statements, the addressee in questions, and the source in reported speech clauses.

The contrast between *goŋ* and *jaŋ* resembles that between the two existential copulas *ŋja* and *ɲipa* in Kaike (Watters 2006) and that between the suffixes *-li* and *-yek* in Wutun (Sandman 2018), which both indicate whether a statement about a present state is based on what the interlocutors currently see before them (new knowledge) or on the speaker's personal experience up to the moment of speech (old knowledge). Unlike Kaike *ŋja* and Wutun *-li*, however, Kutang *goŋ* may also refer to past states (e.g. *lemu goŋ* '(it) is/was tasty' may refer to something the speaker is currently eating or something s/he tasted on the previous day). Hence, it seems to even more closely resemble 'direct evidential' Purik Tibetan *duk* (Zemp 2017). While the existential copula *duk* derives from a Proto-Tibetan verb form meaning *'stayed, was there', the cognate full verb mostly means 'sit' in modern Purik. As this is also what *goŋ* means in some varieties of Tamang (Mazaudon 1994: 86), it seems likely that Kutang *goŋ* derives from a form of this verb which meant 'sat, was there', and – like the Tibetic *duk* – in contrast to a neutral existential copula came to imply that the speaker directly witnessed the thing referred to.

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