

Las, byaba'i yul, and the ladon particles: on the Tibetan understanding of the Sanskrit case-relation karman

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For Western scholars, themselves speaking an accusative language, it has always been a matter of fact that the Sanskrit “second case” or the *kāraka* relation *karman* has to be understood as the “accusative” case marker or as a case relation corresponding to the syntactic category of Direct Object. The application of the term *karman* in its Tibetan translation as *las* or *byaba'i yul* to the directional case marker *ladon*, used for recipients, goals, and locations, thus, seems to be a gross error on the part of the Tibetan grammarians, due to their blind imitation of a prestigious model that simply cannot be applied to an ergative language such as Tibetan. But can we be sure that their understanding of *karman* was something like “Direct Object”? And can we be sure that the *ladon* is always only a directional marker?

The Sanskrit “second case” does not only indicate the typical Direct Object of transitive verbs, but also the direction or destination of verbs of movement and other non-typical “objects”. In fact, most of these “objects” are in need of one of the *ladon* particles in Tibetan. In particular, Tibetan and other Tibeto-Burman languages show quite a few intransitive verbs with *ladon* marking on the “object”. Due to the ergative marking of the subject these verbs have been treated as “transitive” (*thadadpa*) by the Tibetan grammarians as well as by European scholars. While such case marking patterns may already sufficiently motivate the identification of the *ladon* particles with the *kāraka* relation *karman*, early grammatical treatises as well as empirical data indicate the possibility of facultative use of *ladon* particles for real Direct Objects in earlier stages of the language.