

TSUM ADJECTIVES IN AREAL-TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This paper presents the semantic and morphological features of Tsum adjectives. Additionally, comaprison of the inflectional suffixes in Tsum will be made with genetically neighbouring languages. The affixes -po, -mo appearing in the structure of affixes can be related to broader Tibetan languages. By contrast, some affixes that appear in deriving comparative and superlative forms can only be associated among sister languages.

Keywords: Tibetan language, adjective, comparative, superlative, compounding

1. Introduction

Tsum is a Tibetan variety spoke in northern Gorkha, Nepal (Glottocode: 1240), and this is labelled as ‘threatened’ in endangerment scale. The Tsumbas (Tsum people) are recorded as one of the indigenous nationalities in Nepal as ‘Siyars’ (Ethnologue, 2012). The speakers of the Tsum (Tsum-ba-s) live primarily in Tsum-Nubri Village Council, Gorkha. In the national census of 2021, two languages, viz. Tsum, and Nubri are enumerated under a single term ‘Chum-Nubri’ with a total population of 4284 (National Statistics Office, 2025). The data do not show the exact number of the Tsum in the national data because this figure comprises the speakers of the Nubri and Tsum into a single category. The classification of the Tsum is given in Figure 1.

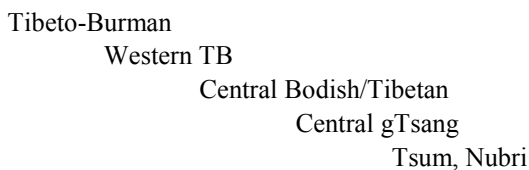


Figure 1: Genetic classification of Tsum (Bradley, 1997, p. 5)

Noonan (2005) lists Tsum in Tibetan complex among Tibetn varieties. He proposed the classification as follows: Bodish, Tibetic, Central Bodish, Central Tibetan, Tsum. Some further

information associated to the classification of the Tsum language. Tournadre (2014, p. 122) mentions that these languages fall within ‘South-Western’ section among Tibeto-Burman languages.

Bielmeier et al. (2008) classify the Tibetan varieties into seven distinct branches. Among the Tibetan languages spoken between the border between Nepal and China (Tibet), Tsum falls within the group of languages in the languages spoken in ‘Northern Nepalese Border area (Nepal)’ of the central Tibetan languages. The closest neighbor of Tsum is Nubri (Genetti, 2016). As noted in Genetti (2016, p. 108), this classification is based on the “most extensive project on Tibetan dialectology” aiming to compile the comparative dictionary on Tibetan dialects (CDTD).

Typologically, Tsum shares a number of features of central Tibetan languages. It is a Sinospheric language in its typological features (see Matisoff, 1991). Tsum is an SOV language, and tonal like other languages spoken in the bordering area between Nepal and China (Hildebrandt, 2007), and is heavily monosyllabic. Liu (2015) reports that there are as many as eight distinct tones in Tsum. There are different sets of plain and honorific nouns in Tsum like in other Tibetan languages (cf. DeLancey, 2017a; 2017b; Denwood, 1999). A full grammatical description of the Tsum is not available, and its details are yet to come.

The comparative wordlists of some kinds are available, such as Webster (1992), kinship terms (Dhakal, 2021), and a more lexicon with comments on the phonological inventory, and contact history (Donohue & Dhakal, 2016). There are 36 contrastive phonemes in Tsum, and seven vowels. Tsum is a Tibetan language, and Tsum bears the grammatical tone (Donohue & Dhakal, 2016).

There are only a few references associated with the Tsum morphology so far. Dhakal (2016) shows that Tsum nouns inflect for gender, number, classifier, case, emphasis, and definiteness. Tsum has two classifiers, *-po*, and *-kar*, both of which are found in some Tibetic languages of the same geographic area.

Dhakal (2017b) mentions that the noun phrase in Tsum are typical of Tibetan languages. While most of the constituents precede the head noun, others follow it. There is unusually high use of suppletion in the creation of inchoative/causative verb pairs. The same pattern is also attested in other languages of the region, such as Gyalsumdo, Nubri, Lowa, and Nubri (Dhakal, 2017a).

It seems that Tsum shows a mixed result as far as the verb agreement is concerned (Dhakal et al., 2016). The evidence of the verbal agreement system, and the complicated (and contradictory) tone system should be taken as more indicative of the language's origins. It is relevant to quote Dhakal et al. (2016, p. 9).

It is clear that no one social history unambiguously explains the modern Tsum language, which must be regarded as a mixed language. It follows that no one 'affiliation' should be assumed for the language; one of its parents was a 'Manaslu' area language, and the other, more visible, parent was a Central Tibetan language. Any attempt to arrive at a single, unique genealogical classification does so only at the cost of forcing a simple explanation to a complex question.

They also suggest

The morphological categories split between nominal and verbal; previous work (eg., McConvell & Meakins 2005) suggests that verbal morphological systems are less prone to borrowing than nominal ones. All of this suggests that the original Tsum linguistic system is a 'Manaslu' one, and not a Tibetan one (Dhakal, 2016, p. 9).

It is therefore relevant to make a study of Tsum adjectives and adjectival morphology to link Tsum with Tibetan dialects, or the languages spoken in the Manaslu region (Dhakal, 2024).

2. Adjectives in Tsum

Adjectives are a closed class in Tsum. There are a few monosyllabic adjectives, but most of the adjectives are polysyllabic. As shown below in the next section (section 3), a number of adjectives end in *-po*, *-bo*, *-wo*, *-ma*, *-pa*, *-ba* among others. This is common in other varieties of Tibetan, such as Kyirong Tibetan (Huber, 2002, p. 94) and classical and Lhasa Tibetan (DeLancey, 2017a; 2017b). The feminine gender is expressed with *-m* in some adjectives.

While a majority of adjectives follow adjectives as in (1-2) adjectives are used as copula complement. We see that the adjective appear in NP ADJ COP construction in copula construction (3-4).

- (1) pu ghjapo hō
boy fat come.PST
'A fat boy came.'
- (2) kho-i ghotsa d3hipo jo-so
he-ERG house big buy-PST.DJ
'He bought a big house.'
- (3) ŋa repa hjop
I thin COP
'I am thin.'
- (4) ŋəi ghōla domba hi
I clothes wet COP
'My clothes are wet.'

3. Semantic categories of adjectives

The semantic categorization of adjectives in this section is based on Dixon (2004). We show that these semantic categories are also evident in Tsum. The numeral and non-numeral adjectives are not

included in this analysis. The major categories of adjectives are discussed in this section.

3.1 Dimension adjectives

(5)	<i>thryma</i>	‘short’
	<i>riṇmu</i>	‘long’
	<i>thompo</i>	‘tall’
	<i>tshemo</i>	‘big’
	<i>thukpo</i>	‘thick’
	<i>ṣapi</i>	‘thin’
	<i>ghjapo</i>	‘thick’
	<i>sjar</i>	‘wide’
	<i>ghjapo</i>	‘fat’
	<i>thombo</i>	‘high’
	<i>tsyma</i>	‘small’

3.2 Age adjectives

(6)	<i>sjompa</i>	‘young’
	<i>sampa</i>	‘new’
	<i>ghêgun</i>	‘old’

3.3 Colour adjectives

(7)	<i>nakpo</i>	‘black’
	<i>marbo</i>	‘red’
	<i>karbo</i>	‘white’
	<i>dʒjaṇbo</i>	‘green’
	<i>thalto</i>	‘brown’
	<i>serpo</i>	‘yellow’
	<i>munna</i>	‘dark’
	<i>ṇubu</i>	‘blue’
	<i>mukpo</i>	‘dark red’
	<i>thaṭamaṭa</i>	‘with mixed stripe’

3.4 Value adjectives

(8)	<i>site</i>	‘peaceful’
	<i>nepo</i>	‘bad’
	<i>ghənan</i>	‘useful’
	<i>kūmbo</i>	‘expensive’
	<i>khū</i>	‘cheap’
	<i>ṭaḍikpo</i>	‘suitable’
	<i>tiṅgel</i>	‘real’
	<i>ṭhampa</i>	‘fake’
	<i>kokpo</i>	‘dangerous’
	<i>jamu</i>	‘good’
	<i>dzempo</i>	‘very clever’
	<i>menṭa</i>	‘odd’

<i>qhetshabo</i>	‘strange’
<i>gheltshimbo</i>	‘necessary’
<i>dhonaj</i>	‘curious’
<i>naṇ tshembo</i>	‘important’
<i>sodze tshambo</i>	‘lucky’

3.5 Physical property

(9)	<i>qhompō</i>	‘hot’
	<i>tsāde</i>	‘hot’
	<i>khja:po</i>	‘cold’
	<i>dhompa</i>	‘wet’
	<i>kambo</i>	‘dry’
	<i>ghokor</i>	‘round’
	<i>tsaṇma</i>	‘clean’
	<i>tshorbo</i>	‘dirty’
	<i>naṇse dhewo</i>	‘quiet’
	<i>tin riṇmu</i>	‘deep’
	<i>tsēde</i>	‘heavy’
	<i>ṣante</i>	‘hard’
	<i>khjalo</i>	‘crooked’
	<i>toṇba</i>	‘empty’
	<i>numbo</i>	‘sharp’
	<i>simbo</i>	‘sweet’
	<i>kha:ti</i>	‘sour’
	<i>kha:kja</i>	‘bitter’
	<i>amlwā</i>	‘salt less’
	<i>thaṇ tshemba</i>	‘tired’
	<i>siko</i>	‘dead’
	<i>memep</i>	‘absent’
	<i>tʃhoeme</i>	‘unripe’
	<i>khanṭo</i>	‘beautiful (when they appear as god/goddess)’

The other categories of adjectives are limited in number. Some adjectives associated with difficulty are given in (10).

(10)	<i>kale ghapo</i>	‘difficult’
	<i>lelaū</i>	‘easy’

Some adjectives related to position are given in (11).

(11)	<i>tsjaṇ</i>	‘north’
	<i>lo</i>	‘south’
	<i>sjar</i>	‘east’
	<i>nup</i>	‘west’
	<i>thakal</i>	‘horizontal’
	<i>e</i>	‘left’

jorŋ 'right'

There are adjectives which show the human propensity.

- (12) *kipo* 'happy'
thadzo 'jealous'
sedzan 'angry'

As mentioned in the earlier section, the structural properties of Tsum adjectives are similar to adjectives in other Tibetan languages.

4. Derivation of Tsum adjectives

Adjectives inflect for intensifying or lessening the degree of adjectives they refer to. Moreover, adjectives also inflect distinctly for comparative and superlative degrees. They will be discussed in this section.

4.1 Derivation

Some adjectives derived from the nouns end in *-i* in Tsum. Some adjectives are derived from place and caste names. It is not certain whether the derivation of this like is an influence of the Nepali as the Nepali also has nearly same way of forming the adjectives.

- (13) *bhalbo* 'Newar' *bhalbi* 'Newari'
farpa 'Sherpa' *farpi* 'of Sherpa'

- (14) *ŋa-la* *bhalbi* *hjopta*
 I-DAT of.Newar food
simpa *duk*
 tasty COP
 'I like the Newari foods.'

- (15) *kho-i* *ferpi* *ghoela*
 he-ERG of.Sherpa clothes
ghon-so
 wear-PST
 'He wore the Shepa clothes.'

The definiteness marking is a clitic rather than a suffix. The definiteness marking which appears with the noun also occurs with the adjective.

- (16) *ŋə-e* *di* *lu* *karbo-de*
 I-ERG this sheep black-DEF
ŋə-e
 buy-PST
 'I bought the very black sheep.'

The morphological means of expressing definiteness and indefiniteness is common in Tibetan languages¹.

4.2 Compounding

Some adjectives in Tsum, particular the colour adjectives are formed by employing the first parts of each of the words (adjectives) which participate in this word formation process.

Compounding

- (17) *karbo* 'white'
nakpo 'black' *karna* 'white and black'
marbo 'red'
serbo 'yellow' *marser* 'orange'
ŋumbo 'blue'
serbo 'yellow' *ŋuse* 'blue and yellow'
dzjanbo 'green'
serbo 'yellow' *dzjanser* 'green and yellow'

The compounding of adjectives is also an areal feature of the languages spoken in this region. Huber (2002, p. 94) also notes that this is a feature of Kyirong, one of the Tibetan variety spoken in Tibetan area, close to Nepal-Tibet area border.

4.3 Inflection

The inflection of adjective will be taken up in this section. Adjectives showing the greater or lesser in degree are taken up in this section.

4.3.1 Expressing intensity

Intensity of adjectives is express by morphological means. Generally, the adjectives host the suffix *-na* to mean 'light colour' to which it is added. And when the morpheme *-kja* is added, it adds the meaning of 'dark colour'.

- (18) *dzjanŋu* 'green' *dzjanŋa* 'dark green'
dzjanŋkja 'light green'

¹ There are morphemes that express definiteness or indefiniteness. For example, Nubri expresses indefiniteness by *-ra* (Dhakal, 2023, p. 9). Gyalsumdo has the definite marker *-ko*, and indefinites maker *-ra* (Dhakal, 2015, p. 22). The definite article is *-de* in Kyirong Tibetan (Huber, 2002, p. 70), but it is *-dzig*, or *bo-* in Ladakh (Koshal 1979, p. 62-63).

<i>marbo</i>	'red'	<i>magna</i>	'dark red'
		<i>markja</i>	'light red'
<i>ɲumbo</i>	'blue'	<i>ɲuna</i>	'dark blue'
		<i>ɲunɲja</i>	'light blue'
<i>nakpo</i>	'black'	<i>nakkja</i>	'light black'
<i>serbo</i>	'yellow'	<i>serna</i>	'dark yellow'
		<i>serkja</i>	'light yellow'

The formation of the adjectives following this pattern is also common in Kyirong Tibetan (Huber, 2002, p. 22).

4.3.2 Comparative degree

Comparative form is expressed which typically end in *-wa* or *-a*. When the comparative is formed with *-wa*, the last syllable of the adjective is deleted before the comparative marker is added.

- (19) *ghjapo* 'fat' *ghjawa* 'fatter'
jamo 'good' *jawa* 'better'
tfēde 'heavy' *tfewa* 'heavier'
sopsop 'soft' *sowa* 'softer'
dzempo 'clever' *dzenwa* 'cleverer'

Some examples follow.

- (20) *tsudzo* *ɲa-le* *ghja-wa* *hi*
 brother I-than fat-COMPR COP
 '(My) brother is fatter than me.'
- (21) *pja* *guri-le* *tshwa* *hi*
 mouse cat-CMPR small-COMPR COP
 'The mouse is smaller than the cat.'

When the comparative is formed with the suffix that typically end in *-a*, the adjectives are shortened (19). Some examples follow.

- (22) *tsaɲma* 'clean' *tsã* 'cleaner'
ghorkkor 'thick' *ghora* 'thicker'
hjoɲpa 'light' *hjaɲa* 'lighter'
tfhãde 'hot' *tfhaa* 'hotter'
kambo 'thin' *kamba* 'thinner'
dhokpo 'narrow' *dhopa* 'narrower'
thether 'flat' *thera* 'flatter'

When the comparative is formed with the suffix that typically end in *-a*, the adjectives are shortened. Examples follow.

- (23) *thyma* 'short' *thuɲa* 'shorter'
tsyma 'small' *tsuɲa* 'smaller'
ɲyma 'little' *ɲyɲa* 'less'

An example follows.

- (24) *di* *bhō-re* *ɲə-i* *bhō-le*
 this girl-DEF I-GEN girl-ABL
tshō-wa *hi*
 small-CMPR COP
 'This girl is smaller than my daughter.'

The comparison of similar items are made by the lexical items, such as *tfōta* 'like'.

- (25) *tfum* *hjombu* *tfōta* *hi*
 Tsum Kathmandu like COP
 'Tsum is like (similar to) Kathmandu.'
- (26) *ɲə-i* *bu* *ɲa* *tfōta* *hjop*
 I-ERG son I like COP
 'My son is like me.'
- (27) *mo-i* *tse* *mento* *tfōta* *hi*
 she-ERG face flower like COP
 'Her face is like a flower.'

The comparison of the similar items are made by the lexical items, such as *dzor* 'like'.

- (28) *kho-i* *kipsaɲ* *dzor* *semdzen*
 he-ERG jackal like animal
thuɲ-de
 see-EVID
 'He saw an animal like the jackal.'

As Denwood (1999, p. 183) noted, the suffix *-a* is attested in some Tibetan varieties to obtain comparative form. Lamjung Yohlmo does not contain the comparative marker (Gawne, 2016). The comparative *-a* in Tsum is identical with Lhomi *-a* (Vesalainen, 2016, p. 78).

4.2.3 Superlative forms

The superlative form is found more regular than comparative form.

- (29) *kole* 'slow' *kulfo* 'slowest'
kumbo 'expensive' *kunfo* 'most expensive'
kjapo 'cool' *kjapfo* 'coolest'
dhokpo 'narrow' *dhokfo* 'thinnest'
samba 'new' *samfosjo* 'newest'
tshembo 'big' *tshesjo* 'biggest'
- (30) *nupri* *la* *qho-si*
 Nupri road go-NMLZ
lamde *qhok-sja* *hi*
 very narrow-SUP COP

‘The road to Nubri is the narrowest.’

- (31) *niŋjo-la* *bhər-fo* *mi* *hi*
Nile-LOC rich-SUP man COP
‘There are richest men in Nile.’

The superlative *-sjo* can be related to Tibetan *-tŋjo* (Denwood, 1999, p.184). This is also to be reported that the superlative suffix *-tŋjo* is the same as in Kyirong *-tŋjo*.²

5. Discussion

This section presents the areal-typological features of morphological aspects of Tsum with its geographical closest languages mainly on adjective derivation, comparative and superlative morphology.

The inflection of adjectives in Tsum resembles similar to other Tibetan varieties of the region. For example, the inflectional affixes also adds degree in Gyalsumso as shown in Dhakal (2018).

- (32) *ŋoŋpu* ‘blue’ *ŋohaŋ* ‘light blue’
máŋpu ‘red’ *máŋhaŋ* ‘light’
nákpu ‘black’ *nákhaŋ* ‘light black’
serpu ‘yellow’ *serhaŋ* ‘light yellow’

The meaning of excessive is obtained by *thiŋe* ‘much’. The word *thiŋe* ‘much’ seems to be like a separate lexical item rather than a suffix.

- (33) *ferpu* ‘yellow’ *ferthiŋe* ‘very yellow’
nákpu ‘black’ *nákthiŋe* ‘very black’
máŋpu ‘red’ *máŋthiŋe* ‘very red’
ferpu ‘yellow’ *ferphak* ‘little yellow’
ŋoŋbu ‘blue’ *ŋohaŋ* ‘dark blue’
karpu ‘white’ *kjahāŋ* ‘very white’

In these examples, only the first syllable of the adjective is combined with *thiŋe* ‘much’. The suffixes *-bu*, *-pa* get lost in these constructions (33).

The comparative form is formed with the derivational suffix *-ro*, *-ru* in Gyalsumdo. Similarly, the comparative marker *-ru*, *-tu*, *-du* appear in Lowa, such as, *gjakpo* ‘fat’, *gjaktu* ‘fatter’, *tŋhe* ‘big’, *tŋheru* ‘bigger’. (personal communication, Chhing Chhipa Lhomi 2025;

Regmi et al., 2023). Some adjectives with comparative forms of adjectives in Gyalsumdo are mentioned in (34). The comparative suffix *-ro* is the same as in Kyirong Tibetan (Huber, 2002, p. 99). Denwood (1999) notes that the suffix *-ro* is borrowed from the serial verb particle *-ru*.³ Examples from Gyalsumdo follow (Dhakal, 2015).

- (34) *ghjakpa* ‘fat’ *ghjakro* ‘fatter’
tsebu ‘good’ *tsero* ‘better’
tŋaŋma ‘clean’ *tŋaŋro* ‘cleaner’
jàŋmo ‘light’ *jàŋro* ‘lighter’
tŋenti ‘heavy’ *tŋjaro* ‘heavier’

The comparative form of adjectives is derived by *-a/wa* in Nubri although the comparative marker is *-a/-ja* in Nubri (Dhakal, 2023, p.29).

- (35) *ghjawa* ‘fat’ *ghja* ‘fatter’
ghoŋ ‘good’ *ghaa* ‘better’
tsaŋma ‘clean’ *tsaŋa* ‘cleaner’
hjaŋmo ‘light’ *hjaŋa* ‘lighter’
tŋande ‘heavy’ *tŋa* ‘heavier’
tōma ‘short’ *tūŋa* ‘shorter’

The comparison shows that the comparative degree is made with the morphemes. For example, the comparative form is obtained by the atonal morphology *-pa*, *-ba*, *-wa*, or *-a* in Kyirong Tibetan (Huber, 2002, p. 95).

The superlative is formed with the derivational suffix *-fo* in Gyalsumdo (Dhakal, 2015). Some adjectives with superlative forms of adjectives are given in (36).

- (36) *khjapu* ‘cool’ *kjabufo* ‘coolest’
səmpa ‘new’ *səmpo* ‘newest’
kəmpu ‘thin’ *kəmpo* ‘thinnest’
thompu ‘tall’ *thofo* ‘tallest’
ghjakpu ‘fat’ *ghjakfo* ‘fatest’
tsema ‘small’ *tshunfo* ‘smallest’

The superlative form is obtained by the addition of a morpheme in Nubri (Dhakal, 2023, p.30). The discussion can be summarized in Table 1.

² Beyer (1992, p. 201) notes “Tibetan adjectives are not regularly inflected for degree as in English.”

³ Denwood (1999, p. 184) reports the comparative marker with *thag* in Tibetan. He reports that this is shows an excessive amount.

Table 1: Summary of comparative and superlative suffixes

Languages	Comparative form	Superlative form
Tsum	-fo	-a, -wa
Nubri	-fo	-a, -ja
Gyalsumdo	-fo	-ru, -ro
Lhomi	-tfo	-a
Lowa	-fo, -jok	-ru, -tu, -du
Kyirong	-tfo	-a

As shown in Table (1), the comparative marker in adjective in Tsum is similar to Lhomi, Nubri, and Kyirong Tibetan differing from Gyalsumdo, and Lowa. By contrast, the superlative marker in Tsum is similar to all the languages mentioned in Table 1. It is to be noted that Lowa has the superlative marker, such as *tsaja* ‘clean’, *tsajso* ‘cleanest’, *tenda* ‘stable’, *tenjok* ‘most stable’. Similarly, Lhomi has the superlative words, such as *thaj* ‘strong’, *thajtfo* ‘strongest’, *ga* ‘happy’, *gaa* ‘happier’, *tsha* ‘happy’ *tshajaa* ‘greater’.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents the semantic categories of adjectives in Tsum in areal-typological perspectives. Structurally, a number of adjectives end in *-po*, *-mo* which is common in Tibetan languages. Some adjectives ending in *-m*, *-mo* express the feminine gender. Tsum possesses a wide range of adjectives in terms of semantic categories. Although there are a very few monosyllabic adjectives, most adjectives are polysyllabic. The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives are formed by making use of the suffix *-ro* and *-fo* respectively. While the adjectives ending in *-fo* is widely attested in the languages, there are more variations in deriving superlative forms. While Nubri shares the superlative form with Tsum, Lhomi, and Kyirong Tibetan, Gyalsumdo and Lowa are distinct in this respect.

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