Deictic class marking in Tibetan and Burmese¹

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It has long been noted that in some respects, viewed both synchronically and diachronically, Tibetan and Burmese are disappointingly 'un-Tibeto-Burman'. Tibetan in particular seems to lack numerous features, ranging from grammar to lexicon, which are typical of other languages classified as Tibeto-Burman. One of the most outstanding of these features is a phenomenon known in the field as 'pronominalization'. It has been proposed, most recently by Scott DeLancey (1989), that---despite its apparent absence from Tibetan and Burmese---pronominalization may be reconstructed for proto-Tibeto-Burman. As DeLancey points out, pronominalization is a type of agreement whereby pronominal affixes on the verb refer to animate arguments in sentences irrespective of syntactic functions; when two arguments are involved, a hierarchy rule is invoked, and "suffixation is determined by the person of the two arguments." (DeLancey 1989:319, emphasis added.) Pronominalization may therefore be categorized as a variety of deictic class-marking.

Although neither Tibetan nor Burmese has pronominalization as such, both languages do mark lexical or grammatical classes in one way or another. Class-marking is found in Tibetan in sometimes unexpected places, such as the numeral system.² Of particular interest in this regard is the pronominal class-marking found in modern spoken Tibetan and Burmese, but so far overlooked in the literature on pronominalization in Tibeto-Burman.

Consider first of all the system of verbal auxiliary agreement in Lhasa Tibetan, where the auxiliaries are used to form finite affirmative verb phrases. It appears from the examples in (1) that the present forms take the same present-future stem suffix, -ki, but different existential verbs, yū∅ and tuu, as auxiliaries, depending on the person of the subject, whether overtly expressed or not. (The pronouns are commonly dropped, with no change of meaning, except that
the non-honorific third-person pronouns distinguish human
gender; dropping the pronoun may thus produce ambiguity.)

(1)  a.  ṇa    sãki    yôô³
     I         eat-PR/FT    EXIST

      'I am eating'

   b.  mo-    sãki    tûu
     she      eat-PR/FT    EXIST

      'She is eating'

This agreement pattern, of first versus second and third
persons, holds also for the other tenses and their auxiliaries.
(Note that although the pronouns have plural forms, the verbal
agreement system ignores number completely. Accordingly,
the glosses in this paper ignore the plural possibilities in
sentences where the pronoun is omitted.) Even when the
verbs used as auxiliaries occur as main verbs they retain this
personal distinction, for example the copulas yîî and ree (2),
which are otherwise used as auxiliaries to form the future and
the past.

(2) a.  ṇa    phôôpa    yîî
     I      Tibetan       COP

      'I am a Tibetan'

   b.  kho    phôôpa    ree
     he      Tibetan       COP

      'He is a Tibetan'

Although both verbs have exactly the same denotation, they
agree with the person of the subject.4

The 'pronominalizing' quality of the auxiliary verbs,
whether used as auxiliaries or as main verbs, becomes clear
when the pronoun does not represent an argument in the
sentence. Although it is possible to say (3a), normal
unmarked usage in Tibetan is exemplified by (3b) and (3c),
where the copula agrees with the pronoun.
(3) a. timii ti nga± ree
   key this I-GEN COP
   'This key is mine'

b. timii ti nga± yiff
   key this I-GEN COP
   'This key is mine'

c. nga± min kaasaa yiff
   I-GEN name Pr.N COP
   'My name is Kaasaa'

DeLancey (1989:324) claims that the modern spoken Central Tibetan agreement between person and verbal auxiliary "has a clear semantic basis and is not agreement in any relevant sense." In fact, however, there is no lexical semantic difference---even historically---between ree and yiff. Moreover, informants are not only unable to make any semantic distinctions within the verb pairs involved, they consistently explain the difference in usage as due to person agreement. There is, therefore, no 'semantic basis' for this agreement system, part of which is summarized in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-ki + AUX</td>
<td>-ki + AUX</td>
<td>-pa + AUX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1p yöö</td>
<td>yiff</td>
<td>yiff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2p/3p tuu</td>
<td>ree</td>
<td>ree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I Honorifically Neutral Verb Agreement in Lhasa Dialect Tibetan in Present, Future, and Past Affirmative

As illustrations, consider the examples in (4).

(4) a. saki yöö
    eat-PR/FT EXIST
    'I am eating'
b. sāki tuu
    eat-PR/FT EXIST
    'He/she/it is eating'

c. sāki yīī
    eat-FT COP
    'I'm going to eat'

b. sāki rēe
    eat-FT EXIST
    'He/she/it is going to eat'

This pronominal agreement applies throughout the verbal system. Important changes occur in interrogative sentences: second person questions (as well as first person questions, which are rare in actual discourse) take the auxiliary used for the first person in the affirmative, as in the examples in (5). Also, in question-word sentences, the vowel of the final verbal morpheme changes—whether it is the vowel of the interrogative mood tense-suffix or the vowel of the auxiliary verb itself—as in (5)d and (5)e.

(5) a. khala sāki yōō
    meal eat-PR/FT EXIST
    '(I) eat' [or, 'I am eating (a meal)'].

b. khala sāki tuu
    meal eat-PR/FT EXIST
    '(He/she/it/you) eat' [or, 'He/she/it/you are eating'].

c. khala sāki yōōpāa
    meal eat-PR/FT EXIST-INTERROG
    'Do (you) eat?' [or, 'Are you eating?']

d. khare sāki yōōpaa
    what eat-PR/FT EXIST-INTERROG/wh
    'What do (you) eat?' [or, 'What are you eating?']