A preliminary discussion of subject marking (*byed-sgra*) in Lhasa Tibetan

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One of the puzzling grammatical questions that inevitably confronts any student of the Lhasa Tibetan dialect is when to use a subject-marker or "byed-sgra". Over the past few years, I have made it my goal to understand the grammatical function of the *byed-sgra* case marker more completely. In this effort, I have excerpted and analyzed all the examples from *Tibetan by Radio*, a textbook published by the Tibetan People’s Press. In this paper, I will present some tentative rules that seem to account for the occurrence of the *byed-sgra* case marker, in hopes of stimulating a discussion among colleagues in the field of Tibetology.

In the Tibetan language, the verb is the central constituent of grammatical constructions. The occurrence of case markers and function words is governed, to a large extent, by the nature of the verb. This is true, without exception, of the *byed-sgra* case marker.

There are a number of verb classes in Lhasa Tibetan. According to my research, there are three major classes which determine whether or not the subject of a clause is marked by *byed-sgra* transitive-intransitive, intentional-unintentional, and automatic-causative. However, the analysis of the relationship of these categories to the use of *byed-sgra* is greatly simplified by the fact that all causative verbs are both transitive and intentional. Furthermore, the majority of automatic verbs are both intransitive and unintentional.

So, although an accurate description of the grammar requires three verb classes, for our purposes the two dichotomies of intentional-unintentional and transitive-intransitive are sufficient to account for the distribution of the *byed-sgra* subject case marker.

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* Translation corrected by Lois Woodward and Lynn Moore.
1 The Tibetan grammatical term *byed-sgra* means ‘a marker of the subject’. The phonological shape of the particle used for this purpose has several written variants: *gyis*, *kys*, *gis*, *gis*, and *yis*. The spoken Lhasa dialect only distinguishes /his/ and /-s/.
2 *Tibetan by Radio*, edited by Bstan-zin Ju-gs-med and Yang Zhiguo, was published by the Tibetan People’s Press in 1980 (Vol.I), 1981 (Vol.II), and 1985 (third vol.). My examples are drawn from these three volumes. The source of each example is noted in brackets. The A, B, or C indicates the volume, and the arabic numeral indicates the page number.
First, then, we present the following definitions:

*Intentional verbs*: express action that is controlled or "governed" by the subject.

*Unintentional verbs*: express action that happens to the subject (i.e., that cannot be controlled by the subject).

*Transitive verbs*: express action that involves people or things other than the subject (i.e., the action has an object).

*Intransitive verbs*: express action that does not relate to people or things other than the subject (i.e., the action does not have an object).

A second factor that must be considered in this study is the concept of person. In the Lhasa Tibetan dialect, there is, of course, a recognition of three persons: first, second, and third. However, the verb endings that mark the second person are not distinctive. Second person interrogative sentences are marked with the same verb endings as are first person sentences (plus an interrogative word and/or auxiliary), while second person declarative sentences take the same ending as do third person sentences. So, from a grammatical perspective, the person system can be divided into only two distinct categories: self-person and other-person. The self-person includes the first person and the second person interrogative. The other referent includes the third person and the second person declarative.

By analyzing the relationship between the subject and the verb on the basis of verb class and person, we are able to propose the following rules for the distribution of the *byed-sgra* subject case marker:

### A. The Intentional-Transitive Verb.

In the case of an intentional-transitive predicate, the subject occurs in the *byed-sgra* case under the following conditions:

1. When the object precedes the subject in a sentence.

   (1) *las ka 'di khyed rang gls byed thub kyi red.*  
   You can do this work. (B. 119)

   (2) *tshal son de da cha khong gi 'thab grogs kys sa mtho'i steng du bkram nas...*  
   The vegetable seed that was just sown on the plateau by his comrades-in-arms, and then . . . (C. 97)
(3) de snga'i srol rgyun bzang mo de tsho khyed rnam pas nges par du rgyun 'dzin dang dar spel gtong ba gnang dgos red. You must promote those good traditions of the past. (C. 1)

2. In the case of ditransitive sentences.

(4) mi res tshal rgya ma chig stong tsam gong la sprod thub pa byung ba red.
Each person turned over about 1000 jin³ of vegetables to the office at the higher level. (C. 121)

(5) khong gis sgrig 'dzugs la lha rtog byed dgos pa'i re ba 'don gyi med pa red.
He doesn't ask the organization to care for him. (C. 119)

(6) yin na'ang skad brda ma 'phrod stabs mang tshogs kyis re 'dun dang bde stug gang yod pa nga tshod shod mi thub pa dang, nga tshos kyang tang gi srid zus dang mdzad phyogs thad kar mang tshod la dril bsgrags byed mi thub...
Since (we) can't communicate (verbally), the masses can't tell us their hopes and concerns. (And) we cannot publicize the Party's general and specific policies directly to the masses. (C. 86)

3. When the intentional-transitive verb is a noun-verb compound verb in a sentence, the subject must be marked by the byed-sgra.

(7) khyed rang gis nga la mgo skor gtong thub kyi ma red.
You will not be able to deceive me. (C. 67)

(8) mang tshogs kyis thon skyed ru khag gi las don la bsam 'tshar btang ba red.
The masses criticized the work of the production team. (C. 84)

(9) nga tsho bod la yong ba'i blo mthun tshang mas tang krung dbyang gis bod la 'dzid pa'i mdzad phyogs srid zus sms thag gtsang bcad kyis lag len mthar phyin bstar dgos red.
All comrades, we who come to Tibet, ought to firmly implement the general and specific policies that are adopted by the Party Central Committee for Tibet. (C. 1)

³ One jin (formerly translated catty) is now defined as equivalent to half a kilogram. [Ed.]
4. When an intentional-transitive verb denotes completed past action that had some result, and is marked with a *yod/med* verb ending, its subject (self-person) must be marked by the *byed-sgra*.

(10) ngas dug log bkrus yod.  
I have already washed the clothes.  (B. 63)

(11) ngas yi ge bris med.  
I haven’t written a letter yet.  (B. 63)

(12) khyed rang *gls* kha lag bzos yod pas?  
Have you already made food?  (B. 63)

(13) khyed rang *gls* las ka ga re byed yod?  
What work have you already done?  (B. 64)

5. When an intentional-transitive verb denotes completed past action, and is marked with a verb ending *byung, song, shag (=bzhag), 'dug, or yo'o red (=yog red, yog pa red)*, its subject (other person) must be marked by the *byed-sgra*.

(14) khong *gls* ca lag sprad ma byung ngas?  
Hasn’t he given you something?  (B. 47)

(15) khong *gls* slob sbyong byas song.  
He has learned.  (B. 45)

(16) khong *gls* yi ge bris bzhag.  
He has written a letter.  (B. 46)

(17) khong *gls* ga nas nyos 'dug?  
Where has he bought it from?  (B. 46)

(18) bod bzhugs mi dmangs bcings 'grol dmag *gls* bod kyis 'grim 'grul bya gzhag yar rgyas gong 'phel gtong rgyu'i thad byas rjes rlabs po che bzhag yod pa red.  
The People’s Liberation Army in Tibet has made a great contribution in the area of Tibet’s transportation development.  (C. 103)

6. When an intentional-transitive verb of expression follows a quotation, the subject of that verb occurs in the *byed-sgra* case.