

Subject and Object Agreement in the Tangut Verb

by

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[translated from the Russian by James A. Matisoff]

FOREWORD

In a letter to the translator (January 15, 1976), Dr. Kepping explains how her article fits into the context of the present state of Tangut studies (which have so far reached their highest level of development in the Soviet Union, Japan, and Scandinavia), and how it relates to important current issues in Tibeto-Burman linguistics in general. She makes the following points:

(a) The distinguished studies of Tangut grammar by Sofronov and Nishida [see References] were based on Buddhist texts and translations of Chinese classics, where the grammar shows considerable Chinese influence. Kepping's work is based on secular texts like the Grove of Classifications [see Note 2, and Kepping 1974], a collection of short stories of diverse content, arranged according to theme, where the grammar is less Sinicized and presumably more "Tibeto-Burman."

(b) Sofronov and Nishida found no traces of pronominal verb morphology in their texts. However, Kepping has uncovered strong evidence for pronominal agreement markers in the Tangut verb for the first person, and probably for the second person as well (though not for the third person). Tangut must therefore be admitted into the ranks of the "pronominalized" TB languages. [See the recent studies of pronominalization in TB by Bauman (1974, 1975) and Watters (1975).]

(c) The behavior of the 1st person pronominal auxiliary in the Tangut VP (*nga*) -- which can be used to mark either the subject of an intransitive verb or the object of a transitive verb -- seems to show that Tangut once had an ergative-type case system, and not a "nominative-type" system, as previously supposed.

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Tangut (or Hsi-hsia) is a long-extinct Tibeto-Burman language,

once spoken by a powerful empire that bordered northwest China, Mongolia, and Tibet. In the eleventh century a complex ideographic writing system was invented for the language, which has only been deciphered in the last 70 years. Nishida (1976) has presented persuasive evidence that Tangut belonged to the Lolo-Burmese subgroup of TB. It thus constitutes our most ancient corpus of data on that key branch of the family.

The transcription of Tangut that Dr. Kepping uses is based on the reconstruction system of Sofronov. The tones of Tangut syllables have been reconstructed, though Dr. Kepping does not indicate them in this paper, since her concerns are grammatical, not historico-phonological.

JAM

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I. The Tangut (Hsi-hsia) language has been regarded as one of those isolating Tibeto-Burman languages in which the verb phrase contains no indication of the person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) of the subject of the action.<sup>1</sup>

However, in Tangut texts that we have examined,<sup>2</sup> the first-person pronoun 能 nga 'I/me' sometimes occupies an unusual position: it may stand after the verb,<sup>3</sup> in order to show that the subject or the object of the verbal action involves a first-person singular, e.g.:

- (1) 能 有 莊 能 [N]  
nga ldie ndzio nga

'I have wealth' (lit. "I wealth have-I").

- (2) 能 滿 女 婦 悔 能 訖 性 殺 性  
nga mbju kew ni ldie nga na mi .ôn mi  
能 悔 風 婦 翁 翁 好 [GC]  
ndzi .wei na ta thîn .êi .I

'[Chang Fei 張飛] said, "[I], a general,<sup>4</sup> have come here. Why then dost thou neither surrender nor join battle?'"

- (3) 能 則 悔 女 翁 翁 能 好 [GC]  
ldie tsIwe ndziwo ndziêi vie ma sa nga .I

'[Ts'ao Ts'ao 曹操] said, "I fear that the people surrounding [me] will kill me."'

- (4) 猶多 鄉子 滿 結 親 語 許 自  
 thIn sIwo lhie tsai ndzēi vie ziēu ni  
 能 好 [GC]  
 nga .I

'[Su Wu 蘇武] said, "Why does the little state oppress me?"'

By definition [see note 3] we consider post-verbal nga 能 to be an auxiliary morpheme (homophonous with the pronoun 能 nga 'I'), which serves to put the verb into personal concord with the subject or object of the action. Whether the verb agrees with the subject or the object depends on the particular verb [Section II, below].

The auxiliary words 風 na and 花 ni have been defined in the scholarly literature on Tangut as suffixes indicating the appellative mood [vocative suffixes].<sup>5</sup> However, in our view, these auxiliary words originated as the second-person pronouns 你 na 'thou' and 你 ni 'you (pl.)', with which they are homophonous. (In the dictionary The Sea of Characters 文海 the auxiliary 花 ni appears under No. 3405, while the personal pronoun 你 ni is under No. 3406;<sup>6</sup> similarly, the pronoun 你 na appears under No. 3625, while the auxiliary 風 na is under No. 3626.<sup>7</sup>)

Apparently, the auxiliary words 風 na and 花 ni fulfilled functions in the sentence analogous to those performed by the auxiliary word 能 nga, inasmuch as: (a) the auxiliaries 風 na and 花 ni are often used in complex sentences in a way parallel to 能 nga, and (b) in verb concatenations 能 nga, 風 na, and 花 ni occupy exactly the same position.<sup>8</sup> Let us cite some examples of the parallel use of 能 nga, 風 na, and 花 ni in complex sentences:

- (5) 花 猶 鄉 後 花 南 花 鄉 後  
 tha mbu ldie .a ngIə ngəu ndze swē ?  
 爾 知 風 許 能 好 [GC]  
 khion kai na liə nwa nga .I

'[Tung Fang Shuo 東方朔] said, "That is why [I] know that [you] want to give me 49 jujubes."'

- (6) 訖 縮 須 郭 托 干 托 看 風 縮  
 na sie ngu a ? ndu lhwi sie na ta  
 訖 縮 須 郭 托 干 托 看 風 縮  
 thI viə viə ? vie nga .I [GC]

'[Kuo P'lo 郭璞] said, "You took a brush [from me] before. Return [it] to me at once."

- (7) 能 孫 能 縮 干 能 能 悅 干 縮  
 nga .In .u ta .we viə a niwo na xwi  
 能 孫 能 縮 干 能 能 悅 干 縮  
 ni .ion nga u .In ldie la zie kin  
 能 孫 能 縮 干 能 能 悅 干 縮  
 lin nga .I [GC]

'[Wu Tzŭ Hsü 伍子胥] said, "Hang ye up my head on the eastern gates of the city. When the army of Yüeh comes to crush [the kingdom of] Wu, may [I] see it!"'

- (8) 能 廉 能 郭 廉 干 郭 郭 郭 郭  
 sIn nIn nga ? nIn ndo tshiei zie nie  
 能 廉 能 郭 廉 干 郭 郭 郭 郭  
 na ndzêi vie ndu lhwi vie ngu viə ndzêi  
 能 廉 能 郭 廉 干 郭 郭 郭 郭  
 .I nga ku nIn ki ndie na .In .o via  
 能 廉 能 郭 廉 干 郭 郭 郭 郭  
 nie ndzêi vie na .I [GC]

'[Wu Tzu Hsü 伍子胥] said, "Now the Ruler (王) is catching me. When you carry [me] off to the Ruler, I shall say that you took the pearl and ate it. And the Ruler will certainly cut open your stomach and will extract the pearl [from] you."

Between the verb and the auxiliary words 能 nga, 風 na, and 訖 ni, there may occur the marker of the causative construction 能 phi and/or a modal verb. The order is as follows: