The trichotomy of the Tibetan subject

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1. The Triple Subject in Tibetan.

1.1. The subject in Tibetan is of three types: the psychological, the logical, and the grammatical. The psychological subject may be exemplified by the following sentence:

1. su⁵⁴ ku¹³ me¹³₂ ne¹³₂ ha⁵⁴k'o¹¹ ki⁵⁴jø¹³₂. su sgug med qa s hago giyod¹
who wait NOM. I know PARTICLE
I know who is to wait for/who you are waiting for.

The logical subject may be divided into agent subject (Example 2), instrumental subject (3), causative subject (4), possessive subject (5), and identifying subject (6):

2. sy⁵² tš'e:⁵⁵ tu ?
sus vkhyer vdeg who take PART.
Who took it away?

3. tš'i¹³₂ go⁵⁴ ki⁵⁴re.
gris gzheg kyired knife chop PART.
Chop it with a knife.

4. tš'aŋ⁵⁵ ke si¹³ça.
chag gis bzhi shag hIGHLAND barley wine AGENT MARKER² intoxicate
The highland barley wine intoxicates.

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¹ In each example sentence, the first line is a transcription of the modern Lhasa pronunciation, while the second line spells the same words in a transliteration of Written Tibetan (WT). The author represents the WT velar nasal /ŋ/ by "q" (e.g., qa s /qas/ in Ex. 1), and writes a-chung, usually transcribed by h with a subscript dot \(^{\cdot}\) /h/, as "v" (e.g., vkhyer /vkhyer/ in Ex. 2). Aspiration is indicated by an apostrophe in the Lhasa version, but by an \(^{\cdot}\) in the WT transcription. [Ed.]

² For words ending in vowels, the agent marker is realized as a mutation, for example, when qa¹³ (qa) 'I' is in the agent function, it has the phonetic form of ne¹³₂/ŋa¹³₂ (qa): when it is in the dative, it becomes qa:³⁵ (qar).
5. **k'ọŋ⁵⁵la** rok¹¹pa⁵⁴ **tu?¹¹** ke⁷⁵⁴ ?
   khog la rogs pa vduug gas
   he assistant have PART.
   Has he got an assistant?

6. **raŋ³⁵** su⁵⁴ **jī¹¹pa?**
   raq su yinpa
   you who be
   Who are you?

A comparison between (1) and (2-6) shows that the psychological subject and the logical subject are usually separated and independent from one another. But in certain situations, the psychological subject, the grammatical subject, and the agent (logical) subject are closely related to each other. The three may all coincide (Ex. 7); two may coincide while the other is separate (Ex. 8); or all may be separate (Ex. 9):

7. **nɛ?¹³²** mi⁵⁵² tiɐ:⁵⁵ko
   qas mig bstan go
   I let look
   I'll let you look at it.

8. **k'anya⁵⁵pa⁵⁴** nɛ?¹³² **mi⁵⁵²** tiɐ:⁵⁵ko
   khaqp a qas mig bstan go
   room I let look
   The room, I'll let you look at (it).

9. **raŋ³⁵la** k'anya⁵⁵pa⁵⁴ **nɛ?¹³²** mi⁵⁵² tiɐ:⁵⁵ko
   raq la khaqp a qas mig bstan go
   you room I let look
   You, the room, I'll let (you) look at (it).

As a result of the separation, "the room" in Ex. 9 becomes the grammatical subject. In Ex. 8, the psychological subject and the grammatical subject are collectively realized in "the room," while the agent subject is separated out. By the triple subject in Tibetan we mean the three types of subject—the psychological, the grammatical and the logical—when they are separated from each other.

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³ mi⁵⁵²tiɐ:⁵⁵ (mig bstan) is ambiguous. As a word, it means 'to let (sb) look at (sth)'; as a word group, it means 'to let (sb) look at one's eyes'. In this paper, it is used in the first sense.
1.2. The psychological subject.

The psychological subject is the starting point of a message the speaker conveys; it is what the clause is concerned with. The grammatical subject is the basis of a proposition; it is what a predicate refers to. The agent subject is the performer of an action. There is usually more than one function in a grammatical unit. For example, "I" in (7) is, at the same time, the starting point of a message, the psychological subject; the basis of a proposition, the grammatical subject; and the performer of an action, the agent subject. It is the realization of all three subjects. In (8), "the room" is the starting point of a message and the basis of a proposition. It is the realization of both the psychological subject and the grammatical subject. In (9), "you" is the starting point of a message, the psychological subject; "the room" is the basis of a proposition, the grammatical subject; while "I" is the agent subject. Of the three types of sentences (7), (8) and (9), (7) is the most usual, while (9) is the most unusual, showing the separation of the three subjects.

The word order in Tibetan is "Su-O-P", which is the basis of any grammatical analysis of Tibetan. If the word order changes, the object is moved to the initial position; we may call this "forward movement." Forward movement does not occur at random. It is a regular means of expressing grammatical relations, and there are reasons for it. Forward movement introduces a pause in speech after the forwarded object, which does not exist originally. The sentences of column B with a pause after the forwarded object are in sharp contrast to those in column A:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ne?132 raŋ35ki</td>
<td>raŋ35ki ke?54tp'a54 ne?132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qas raŋ gi skad cha</td>
<td>your words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l</td>
<td>qas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ko13ts'y52 ma11</td>
<td>ko13ts'y52 ma11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sng35</td>
<td>sng35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mgot shod ma soq</td>
<td>mgot shod ma soq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understand</td>
<td>understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not</td>
<td>not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART.</td>
<td>PART.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't understand what you've said.</td>
<td>What you've said I don't understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11.  

\[ \text{ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 13} \quad \text{t'e}\text{\footnotesize 55} \text{raŋ}\text{\footnotesize 55} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{ka}\text{\footnotesize 11} \]
\[ \text{khyedraq} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{dga} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 13} \]
\[ \text{t'e}\text{\footnotesize 13} \text{raŋ}\text{\footnotesize 55} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 13} \]
\[ \text{khyedraq} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{qa} \]
\[ \text{ka}\text{\footnotesize 11} \quad \text{ki}\text{\footnotesize 52} \]
\[ \text{gis} \quad \text{PART.} \]
\[ \text{I love you.} \]

\[ \text{ki}\text{\footnotesize 52} \quad \text{gis} \quad \text{PART.} \]
\[ \text{You are the one I love.} \]

The change of word order signifies a change in the information structure, hence also a change in the grammatical categories. The movement of the object in the sentences of column A to the initial position in the sentences of column B changes the new information into the given, so that the object is also changed into the subject. We call this kind of subject the psychological subject. Forward movement causes the word order in Tibetan to change from "Su-O-P" to "Su\textsubscript{1}-Su\textsubscript{2}-P." It is characteristic of the psychological subject in Tibetan that it occurs with the word order of "Su\textsubscript{1}-Su\textsubscript{2}-P."

In the construction "Nkε + Nla + N + V," Nla may be forwarded to the initial position, changing from a dative object to the psychological subject:

12.  

\[ \text{Nkε} + \text{Nla} + \text{N} + \text{V} \rightarrow \text{Nla} + \text{Nkε} + \text{N} + \text{V} \]

\[ \text{a. raŋ}\text{\footnotesize 35} \quad \text{ke} \quad \text{ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 13} \quad \text{ja}\text{\footnotesize 52} \quad \text{ti}\text{\footnotesize 13} \quad \text{tsun}\text{\footnotesize 52} \quad \text{ta!} \]
\[ \text{raŋ} \quad \text{gis} \quad \text{qar} \quad \text{gyag} \quad \text{vdi} \quad \text{btsoqs} \quad \text{thaq} \quad \text{you} \quad \text{A.M.}\text{\footnotesize 4} \quad \text{I} \quad \text{yak} \quad \text{this} \quad \text{sell} \quad \text{PART.} \]
\[ \text{Please sell the yak to me.} \]

\[ \text{b. ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 35} \quad \text{raŋ}\text{\footnotesize 35} \quad \text{ke} \quad \text{ŋa}\text{\footnotesize 13} \quad \text{ja}\text{\footnotesize 52} \quad \text{ti}\text{\footnotesize 13} \quad \text{tsun}\text{\footnotesize 52} \quad \text{ta!} \]
\[ \text{raŋ} \quad \text{qar} \quad \text{gis} \quad \text{gyag} \quad \text{vdi} \quad \text{btsoqs} \quad \text{thaq} \quad \text{I} \quad \text{you} \quad \text{A.M.} \quad \text{yak} \quad \text{this} \quad \text{sell} \quad \text{PART.} \]
\[ \text{Me, please sell the yak to (me).} \]

Similarly, N may also be forwarded to the initial position, changing from an accusative object to the psychological subject:

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\[ \text{The author uses the abbreviation "A.M." to mean "agent marker" (i.e., ergative marker). [Ed.]} \]