

The trichotomy of the Tibetan subject

Wang Zhijiang
Tibet University, Lhasa

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. | su ⁵⁴ | ku ⁷¹³ | me ⁷¹³² | ne ⁷¹³² | ha ⁵⁴ k'o ¹¹ | ki ⁵⁴ jø ⁷¹³² . |
| | su | sgug | med | gas | hago | giyod ¹ |
| | 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. | sy ⁷⁵² | t'e: ⁵⁵ | tu ? |
| | sus | vkhyer | vdug |
| | who | take | PART. |
- Who took it away?
-
- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| 3. | tɕ'i ⁷¹³² | ɕə ⁵⁴ | ki ⁵⁴ re. |
| | gris | gzheg | kyired |
| | knife | chop | PART. |
- Chop it with a knife.
-
- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 4. | tɕ'aŋ ⁵⁵ | ke | si ¹³ ɕa. |
| | chag | gis | bzhi shag |
| | highland barley wine | AGENT MARKER ² | intoxicate |
- The highland barley wine intoxicates.

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., *gas* /*ŋas*/ in Ex. 1), and writes *a-chung*, usually transcribed by *h* with a subscript dot /*h*/, as "v" (e.g., *vkhyer* /*hkhyer*/ in Ex. 2). Aspiration is indicated by an apostrophe in the Lhasa version, but by an *-h* in the WT transcription. [Ed.]

² For words ending in vowels, the agent marker is realized as a mutation, for example, when *ŋa¹³* (*qa*) 'I' is in the agent function, it has the phonetic form of *ŋe⁷¹³²/ne⁷¹³²* (*gas*); when it is in the dative, it becomes *ŋa:³⁵* (*qar*).

5. k'ɔŋ⁵⁵la rok¹¹pa⁵⁴ tu⁷11 kɛ⁷54 ?
 khog la rogsa vdug gas
 he assistant have PART.
 Has he got an assistant?
6. raŋ³⁵ su⁵⁴ jɿ¹¹pa?
 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. nɛ⁷132 mi⁷52 tiɛ:⁵⁵ko
 qas mig bstan go
 I let look³
 I'll let you look at it.
8. k'aŋ⁵⁵pa⁵⁴ nɛ⁷132 mi⁷52 tiɛ:⁵⁵ko
 khaqpa qas mig bstan go
 room I let look
 The room, I'll let you look at (it).
9. raŋ³⁵la k'aŋ⁵⁵pa⁵⁴ nɛ⁷132 mi⁷52 tiɛ:⁵⁵ko
 raq la khaqpa 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.

³ mɿ⁷52tiɛ: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:

A

B

10.

neʔ ¹³²	raŋ ³⁵ ki	keʔ ⁵⁴ tɕ'a ⁵⁴
qas	raq gi	skadcha
I	your	words

ko ¹³ ts'y ⁷⁵²	ma ¹¹	suŋ ³⁵
ŋgotshod	ma	soq
understand	not	PART.

I don't understand what you've said.

raŋ ³⁵ ki	keʔ ⁵⁴ tɕ'a ⁵⁴	neʔ ¹³²
raq gi	skadcha	qas
your	words	I

ko ¹³ ts'y ⁷⁵²	ma ¹¹	suŋ ³⁵
ŋgotshod	ma	soq
understand	not	PART.

What you've said I don't understand.

11.

ɲa¹³ ʃ'e⁷⁵⁵raŋ⁵⁵ la kə¹¹
 qa khyedraq la dga
 I you love

ki⁷⁵²
 gis
 PART.
 I love you.

ʃ'e⁷¹³²raŋ⁵⁵ la ɲa¹³
 khyedraq la qa
 you love I

kə¹¹ ki⁷⁵²
 dga gis
 PART.
 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 "Su₁-Su₂-P." It is characteristic of the psychological subject in Tibetan that it occurs with the word order of "Su₁-Su₂-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. Nkε + Nla + N + V --> Nla + Nkε + N + V

a. raŋ³⁵ kε ɲa:¹³ ja⁷⁵² ti¹³ tsuŋ⁵² ta!
 raq gis qar gyag vdi btsoqs thaq
 you A.M.⁴ I yak this sell PART.
 Please sell the yak to me.

b. ɲa:³⁵ raŋ³⁵ kε ja⁷⁵² ti¹³ tsuŋ⁵² ta!
 qar raq gis gyag vdi btsoqs thaq
 I you A.M. yak this sell PART.
 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:

⁴ The author uses the abbreviation "A.M." to mean "agent marker" (i.e., ergative marker). [Ed.]