

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, **yöö** 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. $\eta\bar{a}$ $s\bar{e}ki$ $y\ddot{o}o^3$
 I eat-PR/FT EXIST

'I am eating'

- b. $mo-$ $s\bar{e}ki$ $t\bar{y}u$
 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 **yī** and **rē** (2), which are otherwise used as auxiliaries to form the future and the past.

- (2) a. $\eta\bar{a}$ $ph\ddot{o}pa$ $y\bar{i}$
 I Tibetan COP

'I am a Tibetan'

- b. kho $ph\ddot{o}pa$ $r\bar{e}$
 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. t̥imii t̥i ŋää r̥e
 key this I-GEN COP
 'This key is mine'
- b. t̥imii t̥i ŋää y̥i
 key this I-GEN COP
 'This key is mine'
- c. ŋää m̥iŋ kääsää y̥i
 I-GEN name Pr.N COP
 'My name is Kääsää'

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 **r̥e** and **y̥i**. 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,⁵ part of which is summarized in Table I.

	<u>Present</u>	<u>Future</u>	<u>Past</u>
	-ki + AUX	-ki + AUX	-pa + AUX
1p	y̥ö	y̥i	y̥i
2p/3p	t̥u	r̥e	r̥e

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. s̥aki y̥ö
 eat-PR/FT EXIST
 'I am eating'

- b. səki tɯu
eat-PR/FT EXIST
'He/she/it is eating'

- c. səki yʃi
eat-FT COP
'I'm going to eat'

- b. səki rɛɛ
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. khalə səki yöö
meal eat-PR/FT EXIST

'(I) eat' [or, 'I am eating (a meal)'].

- b. khalə səki tɯu
meal eat-PR/FT EXIST

'(He/she/it/you) eat' [or, 'He/she/it/you are eating'].

- c. khalə səki yööpaa
meal eat-PR/FT EXIST-INTERROG

'Do (you) eat?' [or, 'Are you eating?']

- d. khəre səki yööpaa
what eat-PR/FT EXIST-INTERROG/wh

'What do (you) eat?' [or, 'What are you eating?']

e. khare səki yɔɔ
 what eat-PR/FT EXIST/wh

'What do (you) eat? [or, 'What are you eating?']

Let us turn now to the Tibetan honorific language. In addition to the social class marking carried out by Tibetan honorifics (Takeuchi 1987), Hajime Kitamura (1975) has noted, "we frequently find instances where the selection of honorifics cannot be explained just by the speaker's consciousness of social stratification." (1975:63) As an example, Kitamura quotes sentence (6), said by a high-status guest to a servant in a high-status host's home (1975:63).

(6) ɲa sööca ʃuki yfi
 I tea(RESP) request(HUMB)-PR/FT COP

'I shall take tea.'

To Kitamura, accustomed to Japanese honorifics, although the host's tea is understandably marked respectful the humble verb is unexpected in speech directed to a servant, even the servant of a high-status host. In fact, Kitamura notes there are cases where respectful-level honorifics are directed to the servants of the speaker's own house---in other words, a master may address his own servant with such honorifics. Kitamura adds that despite the Dalai Lama's rank at the top of Tibetan society, "Even he...refers to himself in ordinary terms but uses honorifics for others."

The explanation for these social anomalies in honorific speech is that, although the expected honorific functions of social class marking and of politeness---referring to oneself with humble terms and not with respectful ones---are certainly the historical basis for Tibetan honorifics, and are still largely operative in honorific speech situations, personal deixis appears to have become the primary function of the differences in honorific marking in Tibetan, unlike in Japanese, where the honorific function (Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990:159) remains primary.

There are three basic levels of honorifics in Tibetan: a high or 'respectful' level, the normal 'equal' (unmarked) level, and a lower or 'humble' level. In Tibetan a speaker or writer can never use a respectful-level noun to refer to something belonging to him or her self---that is, to the first person

singular,⁶ although this is possible in Japanese, for example, a man may use **okusan** 'wife (hon.)' rather than **kanai** 'wife (non-hon.)' as a third person referent for his spouse in certain situations.

Thus, within the context of Tibetan honorific speech situations, respectful terms refer to the second or third person (whether overtly mentioned or not, and regardless of social position), while humble terms refer to the first person (again, whether overtly mentioned or not). In other words, **sööca** is marked primarily as 'non-1st person' and secondarily as 'respectful', while **su** is marked primarily as '1st person' and secondarily as 'humble'. This honorific opposition of first versus second and third persons is the same as that found in the auxiliary verbs, as shown above, where **yi** refers---without any overt pronominal marker---to the first person (whether it is used as an auxiliary or as a main verb). The honorific system in Tibetan, as a type of noun classification, has thus become bound to the function of deictic person-marking, or functionally, to what has traditionally been called pronominalization.

The subject of noun classification brings up the question of taxonomy. Kitamura states that "the relationship between honorific stems and the ordinary forms conjoined with them is analogous to that between the classifiers which have developed in Chinese, Tai and most of the Tibeto-Burman languages, with the exclusion of Tibetan and Kachin, and the words used in connection with them." (1975:68) This could be said to be true in so far as some of the honorific stems and the forms to which they attach are logically related in some fashion, although this is far from always the case. However, the stems in question appear to be distantly akin rather to the 'class terms' argued by DeLancey (1986) for Thai, or to the prefixed 'gender' class markers of African languages (such as Swahili). If a case is to be made for honorific terms being taxonomic, one unavoidable fact must be faced: many, if not most, honorifics (particularly the oldest 'primary vocabulary' terms) are simply different, etymologically unrelated words---for example, 'leg (hon.)' in Old Tibetan is **zabs**, but 'leg (non-hon.)' is **rkappa**---while many others are synonym compounds, such as OTib **zugs** 'fire (hon.)' and OTib **mye** 'fire (non-hon.)', used together in the modern language as the honorific word for 'fire', **sqome**. It is not possible to go into further detail on this here, but it would appear that Tibetan

honorifics distinguish only social and pronominal deictic class, not taxonomic class. It is noteworthy that even the third person honorific pronouns do not distinguish gender, unlike the non-honorific pronouns.

Benedict (1972) posits the existence in the hypothetical Tibeto-Burman proto-language of certain prefixes which appear to have marked various classes of nominals, for purposes that are not at all clear in general, but may have included taxonomic class. Thus, the prefix morpheme ***m-** appears to have marked, among other things, body parts. An example of the prefix may be seen in the OTib word **mgo**, 'head', which is derived from a PTib root ***go**. Benedict has reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman both the prefix **m-** and the word **m-go**---the latter as ***m-gaw ~ *(s-)gaw**; according to him, Robert Shafer "favors the view that ***m-** with words for parts of the body goes back to TB ***mi(y)** 'man (homo)'." (Benedict 1972:119) Nevertheless, although to judge by the number of words preserving it **m-** was once a fairly productive prefix in Tibetan, very many body-part terms lack it. If an argument can be made for such prefixes being taxonomic, a serious study of the taxonomies involved must be made in order to explain their apparently random distribution.

It should be added here that although there is very little overt taxonomic noun classification in Old Tibetan, the evidence of Limbu (Driem 1987:20-21) suggests that pre-Old Tibetan may have had non-concordial taxonomic class agreement between adjectives and nouns, marked on the adjectives for masculine and feminine gender. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Tibetan does distinguish natural gender (male vs. female) not only in the non-honorific third-person pronouns but also in nouns which are by form adjectives, such as **tsããpo** (< OTib **btsanpo**) 'Tibetan emperor', vs. **tsããmo** (< OTib **btsanmo**) 'Tibetan imperial consort', and **thoko** (< OTib **grogsपो**) 'friend (masc.)' vs. **thomo** (< **grogsmo** [not attested in Imaeda and Takeuchi 1990]) 'friend (fem.)'. However, there is not the slightest bit of evidence that so-called numeral classifiers ever existed at any time in the history of the Tibetan language.

In Burmese, as in Tibetan and many other Asian languages, pronouns are omitted more often than not in direct discourse, in (7), for example.⁷

- (7) a. be lai?-naiñ-mă-lè
 how come-can-V.S.(FT/GUESSING)-INTERROG
 How could (I) come with (you)?' (Okell 1969:171)

- b. mă-cai?-hpù-hsou
 not-like-V.S.(INFORMATIVE)-SAY
 '(I thought you) said (you) didn't like (them)?'
 (Okell 1969:199)

Pronominal identification where called for in discourse is frequently provided by means of the non-pronominal terms called by Okell "personal referents," including relationship terms, titles, names, and other words, as in (8), where instead of the first person pronoun *na* (inherited from Tibeto-Burman), one finds the word *cuñtó*, literally 'royal slave', one of the numerous 'personal referents' for the first person.

- (8) ù tiñ htweĩ-ká cuñtó-ăkou
 U Tin Htwei-SUBJ slave-(elder)brother
 'U Tin Htwei is my brother.' (Okell 1969:149)

Okell gives a long list of such terms, which he says are "used as first, second, and third person personal referents." These 'personal referents' could be viewed as social class markers analogous to the Burmese taxonomic class markers or 'classifiers' used---like those in Japanese, Chinese, and southeast Asian languages---in counting with nouns or anaphorically (Okell 1969:211-213; Becker 1986). However, Okell's term 'personal referent' is most apropos here. Whatever their etymological derivations (such as 'royal slave'), and their social class or intimacy marking, these words are now marked for person and used for pronominal deixis. In this sense Burmese, to a lesser degree perhaps than Tibetan, has a form of non-overt deictic class marking or pronominalization.

To return to the subject of reconstruction, DeLancey argues that not only the first two personal pronouns but also the pronominal concord *system* found in some Tibeto-Burman languages must be reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman.

It may be noted first of all that he accepts without question the popular derivation of the first and second person pronouns from 'Sino-Tibetan'---i.e., from a hypothetical

language common to both Tibeto-Burman and Chinese. One major problem with this is that the first person pronoun ***ga/na**, at least, is so widespread over the eastern hemisphere, in practically every language family from northeastern Siberia to Oceania and Australia, that it cannot be used to prove anything in historical linguistics. The word is shared by these languages; and although in some cases it may be shared due to common ancestry, it has surely been borrowed by many languages, just as the first and second person possessive pronouns in the unrelated Finnic, Turkic, Mongolic, and Germanic languages are undoubtedly the same words. How and when did they get there? No one is presently in a position to say---certainly not the Neo-Nostraticists (Shevoroshkin 1990). It is notable that Okell's list of 'personal referents' includes the words **ain** and **yu**, meaning respectively 'I' and 'you' (1969:101), both of which are loans from English, while the usual 'personal referent' for first person males in Japanese, **boku**, is a loanword from Chinese. Obviously, then, pronouns are not inviolate 'primary vocabulary'; if anything, they are prime candidates for borrowing. There is in fact no such thing as 'primary vocabulary'. As Hock says (1986:384-386), "anything can be borrowed: lexical items, morphemes, morphological rules, phonemes, phonological rules, collocations and idioms, and morphosyntactic processes."

DeLancey's attempt to go beyond the word-comparison game that has plagued Tibeto-Burman studies, and find a common structural relationship among these languages, is commendable. The existence in Tibetan and Burmese of the deictic class-marking phenomenon described above would at first glance seem to support his argument that concord-type pronominalization can be reconstructed, at least as a systemic feature, for the Tibeto-Burman proto-language. However, DeLancey admits that pronominalization is lacking in "Karen, Lolo-Burmese, Bodo-Garo, Naga, Tibetan-Gurung (...Qiangic, Newari...), and the various individual languages in which it is not attested." (1989:326)⁸ Moreover, it is significant that there is not the slightest evidence for the existence of personal deictic class in the Old Tibetan verbal system, and very little (if any) indication of it in the Old Tibetan honorific system. It would thus appear most likely that Tibetan has independently innovated the feature out of the Old Tibetan honorific system, with its basic self:other

dichotomy. Nevertheless, one must also ask if it is possible that Tibetan has developed the feature of personal deictic class under the influence of the 'pronominalized' languages on Tibet's southern and eastern borders. The Tibetans came into contact with them during their empire's expansion into those regions from the seventh century on, and the mutual interaction continues down to the present. Graham Thurgood actually argues that concordial pronominalization is useful in reconstruction precisely because it appears to have been independently innovated in many subgroups of Tibeto-Burman (Thurgood 1985); Randy LaPolla (1989) has since formally disproven DeLancey's theory. Convergence, therefore, while still far from a popular theory in Tibeto-Burmanist circles, is surely at least half of the story in nearly any language relationship, and cannot be ignored any longer.

In conclusion, it should be noted that a full, philologically and linguistically competent description does not exist for a single one of the seven known early Tibeto-Burman literary languages, namely Old Tibetan, Zangzang, 'Gnam', Tangut, Pyu, Middle Burmese, and Newari, the first three of which have been recorded from the ninth century or earlier, and the rest from the fourteenth century or earlier. If Tibeto-Burmanists are to take historical linguistics seriously, it must be agreed that the *method* of historical linguistics cannot be ignored: it is methodologically unsound (and hardly logical) to base the reconstruction of a proto-language almost exclusively upon languages recorded within the last hundred years, while largely ignoring data on the same and related languages recorded a millenium or half a millenium ago. Only after these early languages are sufficiently well described will we be able to draw far-reaching conclusions about the nature of Proto-Tibeto-Burman and about the classification of those languages which are indeed divergently related.

Notes

¹I would like to thank Scott DeLancey for sending me an offprint of his article, Krisadwan Hongladarom and Jeffrey Harlig for kindly reading and offering comments on parts of this paper, and Graham Thurgood for sending me references and an offprint of his 1985 paper. Bibliographical references to earlier work on pronominalization may be found in LaPolla (1989), DeLancey (1989), and Thurgood (1985).

²In the decades, beginning with twenty-one, the units from one to nine are provided with what appears to be a redundant decade-marker. For example, 'forty' is *šipcu* (< *bži-bcu*), and 'one' is *cik* (< *gcig*), but 'forty-one' is *šipcu šecik* (< *bži-bcu že-gcig*), or often in Classical Tibetan just *že-gcig*. Similarly, 'eighty' is *kyääcu* (< *brgyad-bcu*) and 'seven' is *tüü* (< *bdun*), but 'eighty-seven' is *kyääcu kyäätüü* (< *brgyad-bcu gyad-bdun*), or just *gyad-bdun*.

³Note on transcription:

Tibetan: There is unfortunately no standard transcription system---whether linguistic, philological, or otherwise---for any form of Tibetan. The system used in this paper is based on the simple and fairly clear system of Chang and Shefts (1964), with these differences:

1. The single undeniably phonemic tonal distinction in all dialects of spoken Central Tibetan is that between low and high tone in the first mora of words (i.e., regardless of the number of syllables). This is, accordingly, the only suprasegmental feature marked, with underlining on low-tone vowels; first-mora tones of all other Tibetan words are high. The complex question of the curves of subsequent vowels is irrelevant to the data in this paper; all other intonation marks are omitted.

2. The vowel transcribed by Chang and Shefts as ϵ is here written \ddot{a} ; the vowel transcribed as Δ is here written \ddot{a} ; the palatal sibilant transcribed \check{s} is here written \acute{s} .

Burmese: The Burmese examples are taken verbatim from Okell (1969), with minor changes in the glosses.

⁴Verbs used as auxiliaries are also important evidentials (DeLancey 1985), but the latter complex subject lies far outside the scope of the present paper. Krisadawan Hongladarom, a doctoral student at Indiana University, is currently working on a dissertation dealing with the subject of evidentials in Tibetan.

⁵There are semantic differences in Old Tibetan between some (though not all) of the verbs involved, but this is irrelevant for the modern spoken language, since New Central Tibetan (the koiné, including the Lhasa subdialect, the standard understood all over Tibet) has innovated a totally new verbal paradigm of which there is not the slightest hint in Old Tibetan. Among the innovations are the stem suffixes marking tense. Old Tibetan has a verbal system involving both prefixes and suffixes and

changes in consonantism and vocalism within the monosyllabic verb root, as well as auxiliaries that are different from modern auxiliaries. The complexities of the Old Tibetan verbal system have so far defied analysis. The most important contributions to the study of the Old Tibetan verb root are Shafer (1951), Uray (1953), Coblin (1976), and Róna-Tas (1985). All of these works, however, contain errors---primarily due to the fact that they are based not on genuine Old Tibetan materials but on modern dictionaries ---and leave many questions untouched.

⁶This does not apply to first person plural situations, where the presence of another person or persons calls for the use of the respectful level. For example, consider the following sentence:

nəñii pheekee
I-two go(RESPECT)-INTERROG
'Shall we two go?'

⁷V.S. abbreviates 'verb sentence marker', for which see Okell 1969:118-119.

⁸To DeLancey's list may be added, on the basis of comments in his article (1989:325), the Abor-Miri-Dafla group; taken together, the supposedly exceptional groups represent the overwhelming majority of Tibeto-Burman languages and language groupings, as both Thurgood (1985) and LaPolla (1989) point out. Moreover, the only old literary language to show overt pronominalization is Tangut, which is still only partially deciphered. These are additional reasons why I am unable to accept DeLancey's argument that pronominalization per se can safely be reconstructed for Tibeto-Burman.

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