

**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*".¹ 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.² 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.

* 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*, *kyis*, *gis*, *yls*, and *-s*. The spoken Lhasa dialect only distinguishes /his/ and /-s/.

The Tibetan grammatical term *mam dbye* is sometimes translated by 'case', though it is really more like a function word than a case marker.

² *Tibetan by Radio*, edited by Bstan-'dzin 'jigs-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 **gis** byed thub kyi red.
You can do this work. (B. 119)

- (2) tshal son de da cha khong gi 'thab grogs **kyis** 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 mam 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 kyi 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 kyi 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 sems 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 gis kha lag bzos yod pas?*
Have you already made food? (B. 63)
- (13) *khyed rang gis 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 (=bzhang), 'dug, or yo'o red (=yog red, yog pa red)*, its subject (other person) must be marked by the *byed-sgra*.

- (14) *khong gis ca lag sprad ma byung ngas?*
Hasn't he given you something? (B. 47)
- (15) *khong gis slob sbyong byas song.*
He has learned. (B. 45)
- (16) *khong gis yi ge bris bzhang.*
He has written a letter. (B. 46)
- (17) *khong gis ga nas nyos 'dug?*
Where has he bought it from? (B. 46)
- (18) *bod bzhugs mi dmangs bcings 'grol dmag gis bod kyis 'grim 'grul bya gzhang yar rgyas gong 'phel gtong rgyu't thad byas rjes rlabs po che bzhang 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.

- (19) blo mthun krang se de **yi** ha cang dga' po'i ngang nas "ngas gsar brje'i don du sol ba yag po rgyag gi yin," zhes bshad pa red.
Comrade Side Zhang said very cheerfully, "I am going to make charcoal well for the revolution." (C. 14)
- (20) rta rji ba "slob sbyong byed myong," zhes zhus pa red.
The stockman said, "I have studied." (C. 79)
- (21) de nas yun ring po ma song bar yang log spyod kyi grwa pa "khang byi'u dang a bra ni lha'i sprul pa red," ces khag bzahag...
Soon after that some reactionary monks also said as a pretext, "Sparrows and fieldmice are incarnate deities." (C. 20)

7. When an object changes from one state to another, the resultant state is marked by a *la-sgra* case before the predicate, and the subject of the predicate occurs in the *byed-sgra* case.

- (22) mang tshogs **kyis** kyang bu phrug dmag gi dka' dal de rang nyid kyi dka' ngal **la** brtsis...
The masses also regarded the difficulty of our own army as their own difficulty. (C. 110)
- (23) rim pa gong ma chung rigs me sgyogs pan de rdzas me rgyag mkhan pan **la** bsgyur rgyu'i gtan 'bebs byas pa red.
The office at the higher level decided to change the small artillery squad into a demolition squad. (C. 95)

8. When the subject uses a tool or material to perform an intentional-transitive action, both the subject and the tool or material must be marked with the *byed-sgra*.

- (24) ngas zha smyug **gis** yi ge gcig 'bri gi yin.
I am going to write a letter with a pencil.⁴
- (25) bkra shis **kyis** sta res shing sdong de bcad pa red.
Bkrashis cut that tree with an axe.
- (26) khong **gis** shing cha yag ga (pa) cig **gis** cog rtse gcig bzo gi red.
He will use the better lumber to make a table.

⁴ Examples 24-26 and 53-54 were provided, at my request, by Tse-ring Dbyangs-can, a student from Lhasa at the Southwest Institute of Nationalities. There were not enough examples of this kind in the *Tibetan by Radio* textbook.

Except under the conditions listed above, the subjects (any person) of intentional-transitive verbal predicates (any tense) are not marked by the *byed-sgra*.

(a) Future:

- (27) nga tsho ja tog tsam skol dgos yod.
We need to boil a little tea. (A. 85)
- (28) khyed rang ca lag nyo gi min pas?
Won't you buy (some)thing? (B. 15)
- (29) khong gi re bza' gi red?
What will he eat? (B. 16)

(b) Present:

- (30) nga da lta las ka byed kyi yod.
I am working now. (A. 55)
- (31) khyed rang ri mo 'bri gi yod pas?
Are you drawing a picture? (B. 26)
- (32) khong shing 'dzugs gi 'dug.
He is planting trees. (B. 25)

(c) Past:

- (33) nga ja btungs pa yin.
I drank tea. (B. 36)
- (34) khyed rang dpe deb bltas pas?
Did you read the book? (B. 38)
- (35) khong kha lag bzas yog ma red pas?
Hasn't he taken a meal? (B. 39)

However, a subject may be marked with the *byed-sgra* in order to emphasize its role in the action. Please compare the following pairs of sentences:

- (36) a. nga yi ge bris pa yin.
I wrote a letter. (B. 36)
b. nga^s bris pa yin.
I wrote (it). (C. 114)
- (37) a. khyed rang deb blta gi yin pas?
Will you read a book? (B. 15)
b. khyed rang gi^s deb 'di lta thub kyi 'dug gas?
Can you read this book? (B. 119)
- (38) a. khong las ka brel ba 'tshub 'tshub ngang byed bzhin pa'i
sgang...
When he is working intensely . . . (C. 96)
b. khong gnyis po^s gzhogs gnyis nas las ka byas te bsdad pa red.
The two of them were working side by side. (C. 34)

The following sentences express this same kind of emphasis.

- (39) nga^s rogs ram zhus chog.
I would really like to help. (B. 91)
- (40) khong lag rtsal mkhas po yog red; byas tsang nga tsho^s slob
sbyong byed dgos.
His technique is very wise, therefore we need to study it.
(B. 126)
- (41) tshang ma^s las don hur thag ma bsgrubs na ga la 'grig?
If all (people) don't work hard, it isn't right, is it? (B. 103)

However, I also discovered sentences with the same or similar meaning and construction, in which the subject of one exhibits the *byed-sgra* case, and the subject of the other does not. It is difficult to say what shade of meaning is contributed by the *byed-sgra* in these cases. Please compare the following sets of sentences:

- (42) a. khong kha lag bzas song.
He has taken the meal. (B. 42)
b. khong gi^s kha lag bzas song.
He has taken the meal. (B. 45)
- (43) a. nga^s deb khyer med.
I haven't brought the book. (B. 62)

- b. khyed rang deb khyer med pas?
Haven't you brought the book? (B. 62)

- (44) a. kyed rang zhing las byed myong ngas?
Have you ever done farm work? (A. 75)
b. khyod ~~kyls~~ sa zhing 'debs myong ngas?
Have you ever tilled land? (C. 79)

Taking into consideration the above examples, I would account for the occurrence of the *byed-sgra* case marker as follows:

1. The case marker *byed-sgra* indicates the agent of an action. Thus, the subject of an intentional-transitive verbal predicate is marked with the *byed-sgra*.
2. There is a tendency to simplify non-ambiguous grammatical constructions in the colloquial speech of the Lhasa Tibetan dialect. Thus, the *byed-sgra* is often omitted except in the cases discussed above, and particularly when the predicate is not strengthened by an adverbial.
3. It seems that emphasis plays an important role in determining whether or not a subject occurs in the *byed-sgra* case. When the subject receives special emphasis, it is marked by the *byed-sgra*.
4. Sentence structure in the modern written language is more complex, and less subject to simplification than the spoken language. Therefore, the subject of intentional-transitive verbal predicates regularly occurs in the *byed-sgra* case.

B. The Intentional-Intransitive Verb.

As a general rule, the subject of an intentional-intransitive verbal predicate does not occur in the *byed-sgra* case.

- (45) nga da lta ngal gso rgyag gi yod.
I am taking a rest now. (A.55)
- (46) nga tsho tshang ma 'gro dgos red pas?
Do we all need to go? (A.83)
- (47) de ring nga phyi log la phyin nas log yong ma thag yin.
Today I just returned after going outside. (C. 26)

- (48) *khong nyal gi ma red pas?*
 Won't he sleep? (B. 15)
- (49) *tshang ma kha khar bzhugs rogs gnang!*
 Everyone, please keep quiet! (A. 72)
- (50) *nga yang la nas mar mi babs thag chod yin.*
 I definitely will not fall down the mountain either. (C. 95)
- (51) *sbal pa gcig khron pa'i nang du sdod pa'i skabs su ri byi'u gcig*
'phur yong nas khron pa'i kha la babs pa red.
 A skylark flew and landed on the edge of the well, as the frog
 was sitting inside. (C. 66)

In only a few cases, when the subject receives emphasis, does it occur in the *byed-sgra* case. And, in most of these cases, the verb is 'gro 'to go', *phyin* 'to come', etc.

- (52) *ngal rtsol la ngas phyin chog.*
 Let me go to manual labor. (B. 92)
- (53) *ga 'dras byas na'i khong gis mo éda'i nang nas mar 'bab kyi ma red.*
 In any case, he will not get out of the car.
- (54) *khyed rang tshos yig cha pha gi len gag ma phyin na, ngas phyin go.*
 If you don't go to fetch that document, I will have to go.

C. The Unintentional-Transitive Verb.

In the case of an unintentional-transitive verbal predicate, the subject occurs in the *byed-sgra* case.

- (55) *khong gis ga nas shes 'dug?*
 Where does he know that from? (B. 55)
- (56) *khyed rang gis go byung ngas?*
 Have you heard? (B. 56)

- (57) glog brnyan 'di khyed rang **gis** mthong myong ngas?
Have you ever seen this film? (A. 75)
- (58) khong **gis** brjed bzhag.
He has forgotten. (B. 54)
- (59) khong **gis** dran 'dug gas?
Has he remembered? (B. 55)
- (60) ngas rgya yig shes rgyu lta zhog bod yig kyang yag po
shes kyi med.
If I don't even know written Tibetan well, it goes without saying
that I don't know written Chinese. (C. 108)

D. The Unintentional-Intransitive Verb.

In the case of an unintentional-intransitive verbal predicate, the subject generally does not occur in the *byed-sgra* case.

- (61) khyed rang cham pa brgyab bzhag.
You have caught a cold. (A. 63)
- (62) de'i rkyen gyis a ma 'ang rlung **gis** grongs song.⁵
Also, mother has died from rage because of that. (C. 10)
- (63) khyed rang ltogs byung ngas?
Are you hungry? (B. 56)
- (64) tshang ma mchi ma lhung lhung du shod byung.
All (of us) have shed tears like a waterfall. (C. 52)
- (65) glo bur du pha bong chen po zhig mar zags yong nas...
A big stone suddenly fell down, and . . . (C. 96)
- (66) glog brnyan 'go tshugs ma tshugs la nga **gzhi** nas slebs
byung.
When the film was about to begin, I had just arrived. (C. 39)

⁵ Neither of the particles *gyis* and *gis* in this sentence follows the subject (*de'i rkyen gyis* 'because of that'; *rlung gis* 'from rage'), so they are not deemed to be occurring in their "byed-sgra" function. [Ed.]

- (67) nye char lo bstud mar lo legs byung ba'i dbang gis 'bru rigs 'bal du
phyin 'dug.
Because of rich harvests in recent years, the grain has become
very plentiful. (C. 101)
- (68) dpa' bo'i dar cha dus gtan du bod ljongs sa mtho'i steng du lhab
lhab tu g-yo bzhin yod pa red.
The hero's flag is always flying on the Tibetan highland. (C. 97)

However, under the conditions set out below, the subjects of an unintentional-intransitive verbal predicate can occur in the *byed-sgra* case:

1. When the subject receives special emphasis.

- (69) khyed rang **gis** nor pa red. khong gi ming la bkra shis zer gyi
yog red.
You are mistaken. His name is Bkrashis (is called Bkrashis).
(A. 71)
- (70) khong **gis** ga dus brlags 'dug?
When did he lose (it)? (B. 55)

2. When an unintentional-intransitive verb produces a new state or result.

- (71) sngon gshegs dpa' bo'i khrag dron **gyis** sde dge khro la dmar po
gyur yod pa.
The martyr's blood dyed the Sde-dge Khro mountain red.
(C. 97)
- (72) ...grong tsho'i nang de 'phral dga' spros khengs
(The sounds of) Happiness filled the village. (C. 32)

In this paper, I have presented evidence for my opinion that the occurrence of the *byed-sgra* subject case marker is related to the verb class of its predicate. My purpose is to make this material available to colleagues in the field of Tibetan research, in order to invite their responses and stimulate further study.