

Anchoring Speaker : A Conceptual Account of a Copula Distinction in Tibetan with Related Phenomena in Japanese, English & Mongolian

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1. Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to shed light upon a well-known idiosyncratic pattern of Tibetan copula distinction both theoretically and cross-linguistically. This study proposes a speech event conception to account for the different forms of Tibetan copulas and further demonstrates that a comparable conception manifests itself in the different grammatical categories of other languages.

Tibeto-Burman languages show an idiosyncratic pattern of subject-copula agreement, distinct from the subject-verb agreement of Indo-European languages (DeLancey 1990; Sun 1993; Blo-bzan-don-ldan 2004; Hoshi 2004; Tournadre 2008). Although it is well-known that Amdo and Lhasa Tibetan have significant differences in grammatical and phonological terms, both exhibit the same pattern of copula distinction, as illustrated in (1) to (3)¹:

(1) FIRST PERSON

- | | | | | |
|----|-------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>nga</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>yin.</i> | [Declarative] |
| | I | first | be | |
| | 'I'm the first.' | | | |
| b. | <i>nga</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>ä-ree?</i> | [Interrogative] |
| | I | first | Q-be | |
| | 'Am I the first?' | | | |

(2) SECOND PERSON

- | | | | | |
|----|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>kherang</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>ree.</i> | [Declarative] |
| | you | first | be | |
| | 'You are the first.' | | | |
| b. | <i>kherang</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>ä-yin?</i> | [Interrogative] |
| | you | first | Q-be | |
| | 'Are you the first?' | | | |

(3) THIRD PERSON

- | | | | | |
|----|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>khong</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>ree.</i> | [Declarative] |
| | s/he | first | be | |
| | 'S/he is the first.' | | | |
| b. | <i>khong</i> | <i>dangpo</i> | <i>ä-ree?</i> | [Interrogative] |
| | s/he | first | Q-be | |
| | 'Is s/he the first?' | | | |

Amdo and Lhasa Tibetan are both classified as OV languages. *Nga* means 'I', *kherang* means 'you,' and *khong* means third-person singular 'he' or 'she.' Tibetan copulas do not distinguish between singular and plural.

Examples (1) - (3) might be uttered in a waiting room for a job interview. In (1a), the speaker is announcing that she is the first candidate. In (1b), the speaker is asking an administrative staff member whether she herself is the first to go into the interview. In (2a), the speaker, who is either the person in charge of the interview or another candidate, is appointing the addressee to be the first candidate. In (2b), the speaker, who can be either a candidate or staff, is asking another candidate if that candidate is the first. (3a) and (3b) are likely to be interpreted as administrative utterances between personnel managers.

Note that the two languages exhibit symbolic grouping crosscutting declarative and interrogative sentences. In declarative sentences, the languages group the second/third-person subjects together as taking *ree*, excluding the first person taking *yin*, whereas in interrogative sentences they group the first/third-person subjects together as marked with *ree* to the exclusion of the second person marked with *yin*.

Here we have observed the idiosyncratic subject-copula agreement pattern that Amdo Tibetan exhibits. Section 2 proposes a conceptual approach to the idiosyncratic pattern in question and demonstrates that it can provide a natural and plausible account for viewpoint-shift that previous studies fail to explain sufficiently. Our analysis differs from the previous studies in that it discusses an immanent conceptual manipulation which gives rise to the viewpoint-shift. Section 3 explores some comparable linguistic phenomena, wherein a particular interpretation is assumed to result from interrogative environment. Section 4 concludes the discussion.

2. Anchoring Speakers

Drawing a line of demarcation between the first person and the others, such as the person-grouping observed in Amdo Tibetan declaratives, is assumed to be a natural and ubiquitous conceptual categorization (e.g., *ich wachse* ‘I grow’; *du wächst* ‘you grow,’ *er/sie wächst* ‘he/she grows’ in German). Likewise, grouping the first and third persons together to the exclusion of the second person is not an unusual division (e.g., *j’aime* ‘I love,’ *il/elle aime* ‘he/she loves’; *tu aimes* ‘you love’ in French). However, the discrepant person-grouping observed between declarative and interrogative sentences does raise a theoretical challenge.

In this section, we argue that the idiosyncratic pattern reflects a particular conceptual distinction: whether a speaker (current or next-turn) talks about herself/himself or whether s/he talks about someone else. We propose to call speakers who are supposed to do ‘reflexive recounting’ in the relevant speech-event conception ‘anchoring speaker.’”

As illustrated in Table 1, the use of copula *yin* is confined to speech-event participants. This copula is used either with *nga* ‘I’ in the declarative sentence (e.g., (1a)) or with *kherang* ‘you’ in the interrogative sentence (e.g., (2b)), but not with *khong* ‘s/he,’ as shown in (3a) and (3b).

Table 1: Subject-Copula Agreement in Amdo Tibetan

	DECLARATIVE (Statement)	INTERROGATIVE (Question)
1 st person: <i>nga</i> Speaker (Current Speaker)	<i>yin</i> (1a)	<i>ree</i> (1b)
2 nd person: <i>kherang</i> Addressee (Next Speaker)	<i>ree</i> (2a)	<i>yin</i> (2b)
3 rd person: <i>khong</i>	<i>ree</i> (3a)	<i>ree</i> (3b)

Observe that the subject of the copula *yin* (i.e., the shaded portion in Table 1) alternates between Speaker and Addressee depending on whether the clause is a declarative or interrogative utterance. In declarative sentences, as in (1a), Speaker uses *yin* to talk about herself, whereas she uses *ree* to talk about someone else including an addressee, as in (2a) and (3a).

This conceptual grouping in declarative sentences is

characterized in a straightforward manner, as roughly depicted in Figure 1. The rectangular balloon represents what the speaker conceives of. The three figures depicted in the balloon are potential subject referents, which correspond to the speaker, the addressee, and the third person in the physical environment. The identity of each figure in the balloon is indicated by the corresponding dotted lines and distinctive texture-patterns. The thick dotted line shows that the speaker talks about the white-texture figure in the balloon, which is co-referential with the speaker. This reflexive recounting results in employing *yin* rather than *ree*. The other subjects, namely the addressee (i.e., the dotted-pattern figure) and the third person (i.e., the crosshatched-pattern figure), are marked with *ree*.

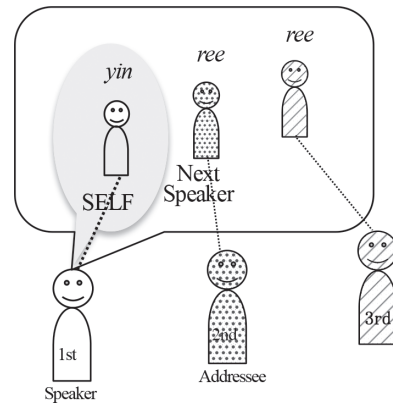


Figure 1: Conceptual Manipulation in Declaratives

Let us now discuss an apparently mysterious grouping displayed in Tibetan interrogative sentences. The conceptual manipulation in this case can be schematically diagrammed as in Figure 2 below.² It differs from the manipulation of declarative sentences (Figure 1) in that it involves another internal rectangular balloon, which is represented in the broken line. The internal balloon containing three figures shows another speech-event conception, which the current speaker envisages as what the addressee conceives of in responding to the ongoing question. The envisaged speech-event conception, namely the inner balloon, is anchored by the dotted-pattern figure in the outer balloon, which corresponds to the addressee in the outermost physical environment. We can assume that speakers who ask questions will

ordinarily anticipate some response from the addressee, which essentially evokes a nested mental organization of speech event conception. The thick dotted line represents the referential correspondence between the dotted-pattern figures in the inner and outer balloons, which are identified with the addressee. This facet of conceptualization in the speaker’s mind also substantially manifests a reflexive recounting.

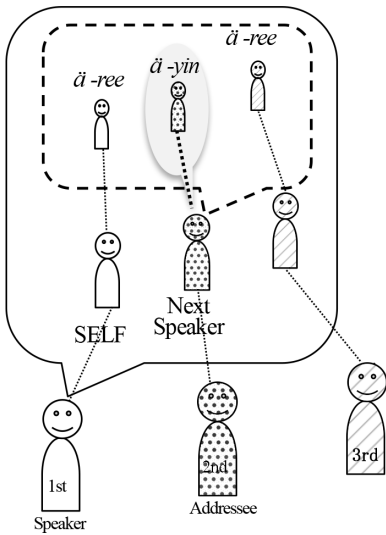


Figure 2: Conceptual Manipulation in Interrogatives

Note that the addressee is the next-turn speaker, who is supposed to delineate herself. The fundamental function of interrogative utterances is to talk the addressee into providing some relevant information for the current speaker. This causative-like meaning presupposes conceptual embedding, in which the addressee’s reflexive recounting is unfolding; therefore the second person subject is marked by *yin*. The conceptual embedding is diagramed as a nested balloon. The other figures located in the inner balloon, which do not meet the condition of the self-recounting, are to be marked with *ree* rather than *yin*.

In interrogative sentences, Addressee rather than Speaker serves as an anchoring speaker. The apparently mysterious conceptual groupings of persons (i.e., first/ third vs. second) in the interrogative is also accounted for in a natural and unified manner.

To recapitulate the argument of Section 2, the notion of anchoring speaker is responsible for the conceptual grouping observed in the Amdo and Lhasa copula distinction in both declaratives and interrogatives. The contrast between *yin* and *ree* can be viewed as the conceptual distinction: whether a current/next-turn speaker talks about herself/himself or about someone else. Furthermore, this alternation of the speaker that anchors the self-reference should be located as one or the other facet of ‘speaker’s reflexive conceptualization.’

The following section will explore some comparable linguistic phenomena in Japanese, English, and Mongolian, which can also be accounted for with the notion “anchoring speaker.”

3. Comparable Conception Manifestations

In this section, we further demonstrate that our anchoring speaker-based approach provides a natural and plausible account for the mechanism underlying some comparable linguistic phenomena observed in Japanese, English, and Mongolian.³

3.1 Japanese Reflexive Pronoun: *Zibun*

Interestingly, the same person-grouping as employed in Tibetan is found in the interpretation of the Japanese reflexive pronoun *zibun* (cf. Hirose 2000). In (4a) below, Speaker confesses that she herself cannot do what she has urged Addressee to do, while in (4b), Speaker complains to Addressee who has urged her to do something she finds difficult to do:

- (4) a. (*soo iu*) *zibun-wa dekinai-kedo-ne*. [Declarative]
so say self-TOP cannot-though-FP
‘(Having said that,) I myself cannot do it.’
- b. (*soo iu*) *zibun-wa dekiru-no*. [Interrogative]
so say self-TOP can -FP
‘(Having said that,) can you yourself do it?’

The same lexical item *zibun* refers to the speaker in declarative sentences like (4a) but to the addressee in interrogative sentences like (4b), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Referents of the Japanese Reflexive Pronoun *zibun*

	DECLARATIVE (Statement)	INTERROGATIVE (Question)
<i>Zibun</i>	1 st person Speaker	2 nd person Addressee

As with the Tibetan copulas, therefore, the speaker in declaratives and the addressee in interrogatives receive an identical linguistic coding. This person-grouping can also be accounted for in terms of “anchoring speaker,” along with the “reflexive recounting.”

Table 3 arranges the referents of the Japanese pronoun *zibun* in the same format as the Tibetan copula person grouping in Table 1. Notice that the Japanese person grouping exhibits the same pattern as the conceptual grouping observed with Tibetan copulas.

Table 3: Anchoring Speaker of *zibun*

	DECLARATIVE (Statement)	INTERROGATIVE (Question)
1 st person Current Speaker	<i>Zibun</i> (4a)	* <i>Zibun</i>
2 nd person Next Speaker	* <i>Zibun</i>	<i>Zibun</i> (4b)

The conceptual manipulation manifested in this speech event conception can also be best characterized in terms of the combination of anchoring speaker and self-recounting.

3.2 Some English Dangling Participles: Speech-act Based Adverbials

An anchoring-speaker phenomenon is found with English participial adverbial phrases with *speak* or *talk* such as *frankly speaking* or *honestly speaking*. Let us take a close look at *frankly speaking* as in example (5) :

- (5) a. Frankly speaking, it was a good idea—using MOtoCMS for creating your website.
b. Frankly speaking, was it a good idea—using MOtoCMS for creating your website?

(cited from <http://www.motocms.com/blog/en/motocms-customer-interview-devon-spittle/>)

The implicit semantic subject, those who speak

frankly, alternates between Speaker and Addressee, depending on whether the participial phrase precedes a declarative or interrogative sentence. Sentence (5a) presupposes that Speaker rather than Addressee speaks frankly. In other words, the participial phrase is thus speaker-oriented. On the other hand, sentence (5b) turns out to be ambiguous in terms of its implicit semantic subject. It can allow for two interpretations, in which either Speaker or Addressee can be assumed to speak frankly. In interrogative sentences like example (6), the expression *frankly speaking* has an addressee-oriented interpretation in addition to a speaker-oriented reading.

- (6) Frankly speaking, did I force you to do them? Did you not volunteer them? How can you ignore me now when I am punished for no fault of mine?
(cited from <http://www.telugubhakti.com/telugupages/Monthly/Bhaktas/content18.htm>)

The observation on the implied speaker of *frankly speaking* can be summarized as in Table 4.

Table 4: Implied Speaker of *frankly speaking*

	DECLARATIVE (Statement)	INTERROGATIVE (Question)
Speaker-oriented reading Current Speaker	✓ (3a)	✓ (3b)
Addressee-oriented reading Next Speaker	N/A	✓ (3b)

Interrogative sentences do not exclude the reading where Speaker, not Addressee, speaks frankly. In this regard, the adverbial *frankly speaking* behaves somewhat differently from Tibetan copulas and the Japanese pronoun *zibun*. However, the addressee-oriented reading is only available in interrogative sentences; this presumably stems from the pivotal notion of speech-event conception that we have discussed so far: anchoring speaker.

3.3 Mongolian Reflexive *uur-uu*

Lastly, let us consider a further comparable linguistic phenomenon observed in Mongolian. The subject pronouns, *bi* in (7a) and *ta* in (7b), are optional and the absence of the pronouns does not affect the basic semantic imports of the whole sentences.⁴ Regardless of the presence of those pronouns, (7a) is interpreted as

‘I speak Mongolian,’ neither ‘you speak’ nor ‘he speaks Mongolian,’ and (7b) is understood as ‘Do you speak Mongolian?’, excluding the reading with a first/third person subject.

- (7) a. (Би) өөрөө монгол хэл-ээр
Bi uur-uu mongol hel-eer
 I self Mongolian language-INST
 ярина.
yari-na
 speak-NonPast
 ‘I speak Mongolian.’
- b. (Та) өөрөө монгол хэл-ээр
ta uur-uu mongol hel-eer
 you self Mongolian language-INST
 ярих уу?
yarikh uu.
 speak Q
 ‘Do you speak Mongolian?’

This means that the identity of the reflexive pronoun *uur-uu* alternates between Speaker and Addressee depending on whether the sentence in which it occurs is declarative or interrogative.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the apparently idiosyncratic pattern of subject-copula agreement in Amdo and Lhasa Tibetan could be best characterized in terms of the notion of ‘anchoring speaker,’ which alternates between Speaker and Addressee depending on who is primarily assumed to (i) talk about himself/herself and (ii) who serves as a bona fide information provider. This study differs from the previous literature in proposing the notion of anchoring speaker, from which the epiphenomenon of viewpoint-shift derives.

It is the event conception of reflexive recounting that plays a pivotal role in Tibetan copula distinction. This pivotal conception can be lexicalized as one verb in some languages. In Ainu, an indigenous language of Japan, the verbs *yayeisoitak* and *yayetuitak* both express ‘talk about oneself’ or ‘talk about one’s own experience.’ This strongly implies that the conception of reflexive

recounting, and the linguistic notion of anchoring speaker, can play an important role in many languages and can therefore be conventionalized as one linguistic categorization.

This study also demonstrated that the proposed model of speech-event conception can provide a natural and plausible explanation for the morpho-syntactically different but semantically closely related manifestations of ‘reflexive recounting’ or ‘reflexive conceptualization’ in geographically and genealogically unrelated languages. We argued that in addition to the referent alternation of self-reference in Tibetan copulas, the Japanese reflexive pronoun *zibun*, English participial adverbials, and the Mongolian reflexive pronoun *uur-uu*, can all be best accounted for in terms of anchoring speakers in declarative and interrogative speech-event conceptions.

* This paper is partially supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture, Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C), JP15K02487, 2015-2017. The primary discussion and claim in this paper is a refined version of our presentation at the 10th Conference of the Spanish Society of Cognitive Linguistics (AELCO 2016) held at Universidad de Alcalá, Spain, Oct. 27th, 2016.

- 1 We owe the examples in (1) through (3) to Serubunja, a native Amdo Tibetan speaker.
- 2 The outer and inner balloons largely correspond to “adjacency pairs” (Schegloff 2007) but differ starkly in that one is conceptually embedded in the other.
- 3 Comparable linguistic phenomena are also found in some languages in the Barbacoan language family spoken in Northwest Ecuador and Southwest Columbia: Coaoquer (Awa), Cayapa (Cha’palaachi), and Tsáfiki (Colorado). We are indebted to Enrique Bernárdez for this information.
- 4 We owe the examples in (7) to Bat-ochir Baljinnyam, a native Mongolian speaker.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Jiro Tanase, Walter Klinger, John Rippey,

and Martin Hawkes for their helpful comments and valuable suggestions on an earlier version of the present discussion. We would like to thank Serubunja and Bat-ochir Baljinnyam for patiently answering questions and providing us with useful and suggestive comments of their languages. We would also like to express to Enrique Bernárdez our gratitude for providing insightful and encouraging comments and instructive pieces of cross-linguistic information, and to Yuki-Shige Tamura our thanks for referring us to some literature on Tibetan.

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