Subject and Object Agreement in the Tangut Verb

by

Ksenia Borisovna Kepping
Soviet Academy of Sciences, Leningrad

[translated from the Russian by James A. Matisoff]

FOREWORD

In a letter to the translator (January 15, 1976), Dr. Kepping explains how her article fits into the context of the present state of Tangut studies (which have so far reached their highest level of development in the Soviet Union, Japan, and Scandinavia), and how it relates to important current issues in Tibeto-Burman linguistics in general. She makes the following points:

(a) The distinguished studies of Tangut grammar by Sofronov and Nishida [see References] were based on Buddhist texts and translations of Chinese classics, where the grammar shows considerable Chinese influence. Kepping's work is based on secular texts like the Grove of Classifications [see Note 2, and Kepping 1974], a collection of short stories of diverse content, arranged according to theme, where the grammar is less Sinicized and presumably more "Tibeto-Burman."

(b) Sofronov and Nishida found no traces of pronominal verb morphology in their texts. However, Kepping has uncovered strong evidence for pronominal agreement markers in the Tangut verb for the first person, and probably for the second person as well (though not for the third person). Tangut must therefore be admitted into the ranks of the "pronominalized" TB languages. [See the recent studies of pronominalization in TB by Bauman (1974, 1975) and Watters (1975).]

(c) The behavior of the 1st person pronominal auxiliary in the Tangut VP (nga) -- which can be used to mark either the subject of an intransitive verb or the object of a transitive verb -- seems to show that Tangut once had an ergative-type case system, and not a "nominative-type" system, as previously supposed.

* * *

Tangut (or Hsi-hsia) is a long-extinct Tibeto-Burman language,
once spoken by a powerful empire that bordered northwest China, Mongolia, and Tibet. In the eleventh century a complex ideographic writing system was invented for the language, which has only been deciphered in the last 70 years. Nishida (1976) has presented persuasive evidence that Tangut belonged to the Lolo-Burmese subgroup of TB. It thus constitutes our most ancient corpus of data on that key branch of the family.

The transcription of Tangut that Dr. Kepping uses is based on the reconstruction system of Sofronov. The tones of Tangut syllables have been reconstructed, though Dr. Kepping does not indicate them in this paper, since her concerns are grammatical, not historico-phonological.

I.

The Tangut (Hsi-hsia) language has been regarded as one of those isolating Tibeto-Burman languages in which the verb phrase contains no indication of the person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) of the subject of the action.¹

However, in Tangut texts that we have examined,² the first-person pronoun nga 'I/me' sometimes occupies an unusual position: it may stand after the verb,³ in order to show that the subject or the object of the verbal action involves a first-person singular, e.g.:

1. nga lđiə ngə [N] ngə
   'I have wealth' (lit. "I wealth have-I").

(2) nga mbiu keu nɪ lđiə nga na mi .on mi
    ndzi ā .wei na ta thin .ei .I

    '[Chang Fei 張飛] said, "[I], a general,⁴ have come here. Why then dost thou neither surrender nor join battle?"'

(3) lđiə tsǐwe ndzi ō ndzi ā viə ma sa ngə .I

    '[Ts'ao Ts'ao 曹操] said, "I fear that the people surrounding [me] will kill me."'
‘[Su Wu] said, “Why does the little state oppress me?”

By definition [see note 3] we consider post-verbal nga to be an auxiliary morpheme (homophones with the pronoun nga 'I'), which serves to put the verb into personal concord with the subject or object of the action. Whether the verb agrees with the subject or the object depends on the particular verb [Section II, below].

The auxiliary words na and ni have been defined in the scholarly literature on Tangut as suffixes indicating the appellative mood [vocative suffixes]. However, in our view, these auxiliary words originated as the second-person pronouns na 'thou' and ni 'you (pl.)', with which they are homophonous. (In the dictionary The Sea of Characters 文海 the auxiliary ni appears under No. 3405, while the personal pronoun ni is under No. 3406; similarly, the pronoun na appears under No. 3625, while the auxiliary na is under No. 3626.)

Apparently, the auxiliary words na and ni fulfilled functions in the sentence analogous to those performed by the auxiliary word nga, inasmuch as: (a) the auxiliaries na and ni are often used in complex sentences in a way parallel to nga, and (b) in verb concatenations nga, na, and ni occupy exactly the same position. Let us cite some examples of the parallel use of nga, na, and ni in complex sentences:

‘[Tung Fang Shuo] said, “That is why [I] know that [you] want to give me 49 jujubes.”
"[Kuo P'o 軍璞] said, "You took a brush [from me] before. Return [it] to me at once."

"[Wu Tzu Hsü 伍子胥] said, "Hang ye up my head on the eastern gates of the city. When the army of Yüeh comes to crush [the kingdom of] Wu, may [I] see it!"

"[Wu Tzu Hsü] said, "Now the Ruler (王) is catching me. When you carry [me] off to the Ruler, I shall say that you took the pearl and ate it. And the Ruler will certainly cut open your stomach and will extract the pearl [from] you."

Between the verb and the auxiliary words 能 nga, 且 na, and 庶 ni, there may occur the marker of the causative construction 童 phi and/or a modal verb. The order is as follows:
V + 艮 phi + MODAL VERB + 𦣇 nga/בני na/.MoveNext.

After the auxiliaries 𦣇 nga, arest na, or mousemove ni may stand the auxiliary 返 'to intend, have the intention of,' which in certain cases gives the verb the meaning of future time; and the interrogative particle 镙 mo 'really?; is it the case that?'. The word-order is as follows:

V + 𦣇 nga/בני na/.MoveNext ni + 返. In + 镙 mo.

Thus there is every reason to suppose that the auxiliary words 𦣇 na and mousemove ni were originally the second-person pronouns 返 na 'thou' and 返 ni 'you,' whose attachment to the verb signalled that the subject (and object?) of the verbal action was second-person (singular or plural, respectively). However, in the language of the texts studied, the attachment of the auxiliary words 𦣇 na and mousemove ni to the verb already distinguishes singular vs. plural number of the subject of the action. For example:

(9) 艮 艪 ngi mbin ndu siei nga mbin
    viete ni nga. [GC]

'[The wife of Ch'iu Hu 秋胡] said, "Take thou another
wife, I do not want to be [thy] wife."

(10) 艬 艬 siwa mbin won u swè a ndzwè ria
    viete na. [GC]

'Write a poem in the time it takes you to make seven
steps!'

(u) 艬 艬 艬 ni nle ldye ldye tsiwe lda wo zie rhiu siei
    a ndzwè na si ndzwè nda nle. [S]
'[Sun Tzu 孫子] asked, "Do you all know how to examine your heart, left and right hands, and back?" The women replied, "We know."

Thus the supposition that the category of person received no formal expression in the Tangut verb is not corroborated by the texts we have studied. In the course of the language's history, in order to indicate the person of the subject or object of the action, there came to be affixed to the verb auxiliary words that were homophonous to the first and second person pronouns. (It is worth mentioning that the addition of these auxiliaries did not depend on the tense or aspect of the verb.) It is possible that the third person did not receive any special marking on the verb. In the language of the texts under study, person-marking in the verb-phrase for the first person was maintained only in the singular.

II. According to their orientation to the subject and object, Tangut verbs may be divided into two groups: (a) verbs which show agreement with the subject of the action (henceforth "Verbs A"); and (b) verbs which show agreement with the object ("addressee") or with a possessive attribute of the object of the action (henceforth "Verbs B"). These groups which may be set up on formal grounds are each internally diverse, in that each of them comprises verbs of various semantic types. Let us present some lists of verbs from both groups.

**Group A Verbs [with subject-concord]**

(1) **verbs of thinking, feeling, utterance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tangut Verb</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sIwng 'I think'</td>
<td>'I rejoice'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nIew nga mIe nga nga</td>
<td>'I listen'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ndwo nga</td>
<td>'I see'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kIwa nga</td>
<td>'I say'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mbe nga</td>
<td>'I tell, recount (?)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) modal verbs</td>
<td>(5) verbs of possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kái nga 'I want'</td>
<td>ndžio nga 'I have'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nǐwi nga 'I can'</td>
<td>o nga 'I have'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngie nga 'I want'</td>
<td>wə nga 'I have'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mį viį nga 'I cannot'</td>
<td>mIn nga 'I do not have'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mį kie nga 'I dare not'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3) verbs of motion</th>
<th>(6) copular verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>šie nga 'I go away'</td>
<td>ngu nga 'I appear'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lidę nga 'I arrive'</td>
<td>we nga 'become'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lidę nga 'I come'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la nga 'I come'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(4) stative verbs</th>
<th>(7) other verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>si nga 'I die'</td>
<td>ndžio nga 'I eat'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si nga 'I die'</td>
<td>thi nga 'I drink'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mię nga 'I sleep'</td>
<td>riuo nga 'I receive'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ndžie nga 'I am (in a certain place)'</td>
<td>lhię nga 'I take'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we nga 'I resign myself; I am submissive'</td>
<td>vio nga 'I do'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>th phIn nga 'I place, set down'</td>
<td>khie nga 'I give'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Group B Verbs [with object-concord]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) verbs with a &quot;bad&quot; connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sa nga 'kill me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thI nga 'drive me away'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mi kevię nga 'be disrespectful to me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ziewi nga 'scorn me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ldio nga 'bury me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phou nga 'attack me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lhwi vę nga 'capture my cities'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nga 'seize my profit'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>žwon nga 'grab my hand'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2) verbs with two complements

(3) causative verbs

(4) other verbs

In order for the auxiliary 駄 nga to refer to the subject of the action after verbs of Group B, the auxiliary word 他 is placed after 駄 nga in the verb-phrase. Thus:

**VERB** Group B + 駄 nga : action performed on me

*駄 nga sa nga 'kills me'*

[Chinese: 杀我]

**VERB** Group A + 駄 nga : action performed by me

*駄 nga e nga 'I go'*

[Chinese: 我去]

**VERB** Group B + 駄 nga si : action performed by me

*駄 nga si sa nga si 'I kill'*

[Chinese: 我杀]

III. In the language of the texts we have studied, objective relationships are regularly expressed via an object-complement that stands before the verb. However, the use of the auxiliary word 駄 nga shows that historically in the Tangut language there apparently existed other ways of expressing objective relationships. Let us examine constructions with verbs of Group B.

The subject of a predicate expressed by a Group B verb may
be followed by a special marker ꓘ ndéi vie, meaning literally "do action." For example:

(4) thín siwo lhie tsai ndéi vie zióm ni nga [GC]

'[Su Wu 蘇武] said, "Why does the little state oppress me?"

However, the subject may also not have any marker following it, e.g.:

(12) tin viié žié ma phóm nga [S]

'[He] said, "I fear that the enemy will fall upon me suddenly."

(13) na tin nga [In] ldi̍h thi nga ku tha tsi vié thi na [N]

'If indeed thou drivest me out, then I shall drive her out also.'

In the last sentence, besides the auxiliary word nga after the verb, indicating the object of the action, there is an object-complement expressed by the combination of the first-person pronoun nga 'I' and the postposition In; that is, in this sentence there is a redundant double indication of the object.

The following sentence is imperative, without a subject. There is also no object-complement. However, the object is expressed by placing the auxiliary word nga after the verb:

(14) nga si niwo rié tha tsha ni a mbjù

'After I die, bury me at the gates of the house of T'ao Ch'ien [陶潛]."
When it appears after verbs which may take two object-complements (e.g. 'give'), 绂 nga agrees with the indirect object [nominative] which refers to the person affected, but not with the direct object [accusative] referring to the thing affected. For example:

(6) 绹 绚 绚 茂 绚 茂 绚 绚 绚 绚 绢 络 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚
na srie ngu a ? ndu lhwi srie na ta
[GC] thl vio vi? vie nga .I

'[Kuo P'o 賈璞] said, "You took a brush [from me] before. Return [it] to me at once."

(15) 绹 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚
 nga .in sa men kwie ndu khion nga [N]

'Give me a sha-men fruit.'

In the last sentence there is a redundancy: the goal of the action is expressed by an object-complement consisting of the pronoun 绂 nga plus the postposition 绚 .in, and is also signalled by the auxiliary word 绊 nga after the verb.

The auxiliary 绊 nga after the verb may also indicate a possessive attribute of the object, e.g.:

(16) 绦 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚
ni ni mI wo ngu we lhwi vie nga

'You have illegally seized my cities.'

(17) 绦 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚 绚
ndzIwo ngl nga .in lda kl éwon nga [GC]

'Someone has grabbed my hand.'

In the last sentence, before the word 绚 lda 'hand', there is a possessive attribute, expressed by the combination of the pronoun 绖 nga 'I' and the postposition 绚 .in, while after the verb stands the auxiliary word 终 nga. That is, here
too there is a redundant indication of the possessive relationship.

IV. Up to now the Tangut language had been considered to belong to the class of languages with a "nominative-type" case-system. However, the similar grammatical treatment of the subject of Group A verbs (intransitives) and the object of Group B verbs (transitives) allows us to conjecture that historically the Tangut language was not of the nominative, but rather of the **ergative** type. This whole question requires a special study.

In our opinion, the language of the texts we have studied is from a transitional period, when the language was passing from the ergative to the nominative type, although the older ways of expressing subjective relationships had still not completely died out. This probably explains the redundancy of certain sentences (Exs. 13, 15, 17) in which the objective relationships are expressed both "in the old way" -- in the verb -- and "in the new way" -- in the object-complement.

* * *

**Notes**

1. Thus, M. V. Sofronov writes, "The person of the verb is defined only by the meaningful morphemes which make up the linguistic context, so that the person of the verb does not constitute a formal category." Cf. Sofronov 1968, Vol. I, p. 186.

2. I have in mind certain translations into the Tangut language of Chinese works, now preserved in the Institute of Oriental Studies (Институт Востоковедения) of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (Ленинград). Examples are taken from the following sources:

[a] *The Grove of Classifications* 項林, abbreviated "GC."

Translator's note: In Russian this work is called Leš Kategorij, and is abbreviated "LK" by the author.

[b] *Sun Tzi* ["Descendants"] 頤子, abbreviated "S."

[c] The dictionary of N. A. Nevyk (1960), abbreviated "N."

3. The word-order in the Tangut sentence is SOV. After the predicate-verb only auxiliary words relating to the verb may occur.

4. The character 萃 nga² (上声) is an element in the compound 萃 nga-mbJu 'general' (軍將), and is not to be confused with 萃 nga¹ (平声) 'I.'


7. Ibid., p. 57.

8. [Translator's note] Kepping's phrase *glagol'na*ja tsepochka, literally "verbal chain," is quite similar to the term "verb concatenation" that has recently been used in the descriptions of modern TB (and other Southeast Asian) languages. See, e.g. Matisoff 1969, 1974; Trần Trọng Hải 1976.

9. Probably for this reason the second person pronouns 疑 and 疑 came to be written in post-verbal position with different characters: 疑 and 疑.

10. [Translator's note] This verb [see Sentence (1), third character] ndōjo looks as if it might be cognate to Lahu cɔ 'have, be there' < PLB *N-dzan. The verb ɔ (next example) might be cognate to Chinese 有 *g4dg/j1gùu.*

11. [Translator's note] The modern Sherpa word for 'do not have' is also min, derivable from ma 'not' + in 'possessive copula.' Whether this is a cognate of the Tangut form or merely a "look-alike" must await detailed comparative work to determine. But see also the graph 疑, In, which sometimes seems to have possessive function (Sentence 17, below).

12. [Translator's note] Perhaps 'eat me up' could be included in Class (1) above, "Verbs with a 'bad' connotation."

13. The functions of the auxiliary word 疑 si have still not been fully discovered. Thus, e.g., Sofronov calls it a "word-forming suffix" (1968, Vol. I, p. 155).


[Translator's note] The characters sha-men were used in Chinese to transcribe the Sanskrit word *śramaṇa* 'Buddhist priest.'

15. [Translator's note] This Tangut form is very similar to Jinghpaw *la*t 'hand', which is the only other TB language so far discovered to have a dental stop after the lateral in this word, perhaps < PTB *g-lak (cf. Benedict 1972, notes 102 [p. 32] and 109 [p. 34]).

* * *

REFERENCES


Trần Trọng Hài. 1976. "Verb concatenation in Vietnamese." LTBA 2.2 [this issue].