Tibetan first person singular pronouns

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In a series of papers I have explored the development of the personal pronoun system in different periods of Tibetan linguistics history (Hill 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015). In this paper, I focus on first person singular pronouns, surveying my own previous findings and filling in the picture with further gleanings from version A and (where the passage in question is missing in A) version E of the Old Tibetan Rāmāyaṇa (de Jong 1989). When the evidence of the Rāmāyaṇa is insufficient, I further consult other Dunhuang texts, the Mdsan-blun, and the Vinayakṣudrakavastu (Hdul ba phran tshogs kyi gzi, D.6). Apart from a few Dunhuang texts, these sources are all translations or adaptations of foreign literature into Tibetan.

Tibetan boasts a wide range of first person singulars; I have collected examples of ɲa, bdag, ɲan-bu, kho-bo, and kho-mo. In both the Mi la ras paḥi rnam thar (Hill 2007: 282-284) and the Old Tibetan texts examined in Hill (2010: 550-554) the first person singular pronoun ɲa is used when addressing social equals or social inferiors whereas bdag is used to show the speaker’s low status or deference. The Old Tibetan Rāmāyaṇa confirms this pattern. Thus, ɲa is used by a seer speaking to Malyapanta (example 1), Upade to the devaputras (example 2), king Rāma to queen Śīta and his brother Lakṣana (example 3), and a prince of eagles when introducing himself to the three monkeys Pagśu, Sindu and Hanumān, who are to him perfect strangers (example 4).

1 lha-ḥi dran-sron-gyis bkah stsal-pa « ɲa nĭ tshaṅs-paḥi loṅ-spyod-la ma chags-ste //
A divine seer said, “I (ɲa) am not desirous of the wealth of Brahma,...” (Rāma E 34-35)

2 ɲa-ḥĭ dṅos-grubs sbyin-na myi ḥdod-dam ?
If (I) were to give you my (ɲa-ḥĭ) Siddhi, would you not want it?’ (Rāma A 37-38),

The king said: ‘I (ɲas) shall pursue the deer. Lakṣana, guard the queen without going anywhere!’ (Rāma A 148-149).

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2 I punctuate textual citations to aid the ease of reading them, as is standard in Classics and Sinology.

3 An anonymous referee suggests translating “Because (gis) I shall pursue the deer, Lakṣana, guard the queen so that (bar) she cannot(? ma) go anywhere!” To translate a verb followed by -gis as ‘because’ is not correct. The evidence presented by Hoffmann (1955) suggests this construction is primarily used for first person futures, as seen here. In addition, there is no need to take any clause ending in -par as a purpose clause, and indeed to do so would often be absurd, e.g. gser tha-mal-pahi mdog-can-gyi bu-mo yaṅ rṇed-par dkah ste ‘a girl the color of common gold is hard to find’ (D5, vol. 9, p. 36).
The bird said: 'My (ṅa-ḥī) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by name. He has two sons. I (ṅa) am the elder one, Pada by name (Rāma A 227-228).

Daśagrīva's use of ṅa while addressing the god Viṣṇu may appear to contradict the generalization that it is used to address equals or inferiors (example 5), but the point of this episode is to show Daśagrīva's inappropriate haughtiness. He, ridiculously, regards Viṣṇu as his equal or inferior, and Viṣṇu unambiguously puts him in his place.


Daśagrīva said, 'I (ṅa) have come for a fight; why should (I) go inside?' (Rāma E 73).

Cases of bdag as a first person singular to emphasize the humility or low status of the speaker include Rāma addressing his father (example 6) and Hanumān writing an apologetic letter to Rāma (example 7).


He said to his father, 'I (bdag) dedicate myself as a gift to my father and having no attachment to worldly affairs, renounce the reign. (I) will practice the practice of a seer, going to an isolated place. (Rāma A 80-82).


Not only is there no affection for one like me (bdag) except from you, but also (I) received the favor of your affection. (I) should have continually enquired by letter after your health. (Rāma A 350-351).

The humilifying force of bdag can also be used for rhetorical effect rather than to show that the status of the speaker is lower than that of the addressee. When introducing himself to three monkeys, the prince of eagles, Pada, initially uses ṅa (reflecting his equal status), but when describing how his kindheartedness results in his pitiful downfall bdag is the pronoun he prefers (example 8, the expanded context of example 4).


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4 An anonymous referee suggests translating “[I] have renounced the reign so that (par) I don’t attach to pleasures and worldly affairs. Hence (nas), I will practise the practice of a seer and go to an isolated place.” On -par for purpose clauses see the preceding note. The translation of -nas as ‘hence’ is inappropriate. The main use of -nas is to indicate that there is no change of subject (see Zadoks 2000, Haller 2009).
The bird said: 'My (ṅa-ḥĭ) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by name. He has two sons. I (ṅa) am the elder one, Pada by name. My younger brother is called Sampada. We both fought for the kingdom. We pledged that the reign should be taken away by him who was the swiftest in flying from the peak of mount Meru. I (bdag) was slightly swifter but, when (I) looked behind me, (I) saw that the wing of my younger brother was on the point of being burned by the sun. (I) returned and assisted my younger brother. I (bdag) was burned by the sun and being slow in the race I did not obtain the reign. Now, (I) am here.' (Rāma A 227-231).

One may be surprised to see Manlyapanta address his nephews the devaputras using the humble bdag, but because in context he is attempting to elicit pity from his nephews, his choice of first person pronoun is appropriate.


Manlyapanta said to the devaputras, 'I (bdag) am the last of the fallen demons, the twig of a fallen tree...' (Rāma A 05-06)

This rhetorical use of bdag is frequently detectable in the speech of Sīta, when she complains of her lot in life (examples 10 and 11).

(10) lha-mo ],&uacute;śal-nas / ḥdī skad mchi-ḥo. // « bdag nī rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥĭ btsun-mo dam-pa Sī-ta lags mthu ldan gaṅ ẃig / brtse-bar myi dgoṅs-sam? // myī sdug gzugs-chan ḥdī-las prog-du gsol » ẃes mchi-ste / The queen said these words, 'I (bdag) am Sīta, the chief wife of king Rāma. Is there no powerful person who has pity? Please take (me) away from this ugly demon.' (Rāma A 185-187),

(11) lha-mo-ḥi ],&uacute;śal-nas // « ... noṅs nī ma noṅs-na / rgyal-po-ḥi thugs taṅ myī ḥthad-par gyur-na // bdag nī mchi-bar ḥtshal » ẃes / mchiste / The queen said, '... (I) have not committed any offense whatsoever but if I do not suit the king, I (bdag) wish to go' (Rāma A 387-400).

Some examples of bdag are difficult to account for either on the basis of the speaker's low status or on the basis of a speaker's appeal to his own pitiful circumstance. Since humility requires a relationship with another, before whom one is humble, it is a surprise to see bdag used inside of thoughts. These contexts lack an addressee and thus an interpretation in terms of status or humility is not possible (examples 12-15).

The son grew up and thought: 'If all the neighbors in the land have parents and relatives, who are my (bdag-gyî) parents and relatives?' (Râma E 23-24).5

(13) « bdag nî mthu chuñ-bas myî nus // skyabs chen-po ḥgaḥ źig-la brten-te // bsam-pa bsgrub-par bsams-nas

He thought: 'As I (bdag) have little power I am unable to do so. By relying on a great protector I shall accomplish my purpose.' (Râma E 29-30),

(14) btsun-mos bsams-pa / « bdag ji ltar bu myed-de myî dgah-źiûn semp myî bde-ba bźiin-du / chun-ma yañ de bźiin semp myî bde. » sñam-nas /

The queen thought 'just as I (bdag), being without child, am unhappy and my my mind grieves, so too the mind of the junior queen must also grieve. (Râma A 68-70),

(15) « bdag-la ltar ma bthub-pa siiûn-na myed-pas gnod-pa źig bya-bar bsam-ste /

Because he is unable to look at me (bdag) and there is nothing in his heart, I will do him harm' she thought. (Râma A 130).

I am unable to account for the use of bdag in thoughts.

The Old Tibetan version of the Râmâyâna offers a first person singular pronoun ñan-bu which is yet more humble than bdag. Foucaux acknowledges this pronoun, but does not distinguish its use from other first person pronouns (1858: 47). Cordier recognizes ñan-bu as one of several "formes d'humilité" (1907: 45). In the story of Râmâyâna, this pronoun demands pity for the speaker. In example 16 Marîći is speaking to Daśagrîva and in 17 queen Sîta is speaking to Lakşmana.


Then the king will pursue me (ñan-bu). Thereafter, my lord, ravish the queen! I (ñan-bu) will be hit by an arrow and die' (Râma A 142-143)


The lady grew angry, 'Without a lord what is the good of protecting me (ñan-bu)?' (Râma A 154).

As a lexical item ñan-bu is a diminutive nominal derived from ñan 'be bad, evil'. In the Envoys of Phywa to Dmu (PT 0126) while addressing the lord of Dmu the envoys of Phywa habitually refer

5 The Old Tibetan Chronicle (PT 1287) furnishes a similar passage, this time in dialogue, in which a son asks his mother about his origins: ma-la myî gai hya gai-la rjo-bo yod-na ña-hi rjo-bo gar-re ? / myî gai hya gai-la / pha yod-na ña-hi pha ga-re ? žes zer-to / ña-la ston-chig ces mchî-na He said to his mother, 'If all men and all birds have a lord, who is my lord? If all birds and all men have a father, who is my father? Tell me!' (ll. 28-29). The general impoliteness of the son (as shown in his direct imperative) as well as his youth, explains his use of na in contrast to the adult and overly polite use of bdag by Râmâyâna in addressing his father (example 6).
to themselves as **bdag-cag ṅan-pa** 'we vulgar fellows'.

(18) **bdag-cag ṅan-pa** yaṅ lha-la ni yon ḥbul / Dmu rje-la ni bkod tsam ḥbul-ziṅ spyaṅ-ṅar mchis / -pahi pho-ṅa lags . » / / /  

**We vulgar fellows**, come before [you] merely offering an oblation to the god and offering governance to the lord of Dmu, are messengers. (ll. 114-115, also cf. ll. 129, 131, 135, 152, 159, and 163).

One might think that this conventionalized usage of the adjective **ṅan-pa** 'vulgar' after a first person pronoun as a transitional stage toward the use of the word as a pronoun in its own right. However, **ṅan-bu** and **bdag-cag ṅan-pa** are not directly comparable since the first is a diminutive and singular in reference, whereas the second is explicitly plural.

The wide array of available first person singular pronouns in the Old Tibetan version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* allows for subtle literary effects. For example, in one passage Maṛíci, the minister of Daśagrīva, changes the word he uses for himself three times (example 19, the expanded context of example 16). He begins with the humble **bdag**, typical of his usage in addressing his socially superior employer. Next he switches to the extra-humble **ṅan-bu** demanding pity for the extent of his service, and when he uses **ṅa** as a claim to increased status by virtue of his noble fate.


**ṅan-bu** nĭ mdaḥs phog-ste ḥgum-na / **ṅa** rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥi mdaḥs phog-pa lhar skye-bas / gum yaṅ bla. » śes mchi-nas mchis-pa-daṅ /  

'I (**bdag**) shall transform myself into a precious deer and run in front of Rāma and Śīta. Since there is no greater desire than [that of] a woman, she will certainly say, 'Pursue it'! Then the king will pursue **me** (**ṅan-bu**). Thereafter, my lord, ravish the queen! I (**ṅan-bu**) will be hit by an arrow and die, but being hit by an arrow of king Rāma, I (**ṅa**) will be reborn as a god. Therefore, even death is preferable.' Having spoken thus, he went away and... (Rāma A 140-144)

Despite the wide array of first person singulars in the Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*, it fails to use the gender specific forms **kho-bo** (male) and **kho-mo** (female). Although I have previously discussed the use of **kho-bo** in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Hill 2010: 554-555), because I had no contrasting examples of **kho-mo** at that time, I failed to note the gendered nature of these pronouns. The two pronouns **kho-bo** and **kho-mo** appear contrastively in the ritual narrative PT 1040. In this text the lady Ta-ṅa Puṅ-mo-taṅ uses **ko-mo** after accidentally causing the death of her third husband (example 20).

(20) **myi ko-mo** byed-de  

I (**kho-mo**), this person, have done this (ll. 98-99).
After the suicide of Ta-ṅa Puṅ-mo-taṅ, the lord of Bal uses kho-bo in the words of his decision to take her wealth for himself (example 21).

(21) na-niṅ قسام śia-nah / / قسام ید-daṅ Spra-زةہ Taṅ-بہہ kəɾ-daɾ dam-du ṅa dəɾ-نى saɾ la-na myi ko-bəɾhi nor-daɾ dam-du ṅa ṅəɾ-ɡəɾah?

Last year, the year before, in the past (this) was suitable as the treasure of Gseṅ-lde and Spra-زةہ Taṅ-بہہ. Today, tomorrow, is it not suitable as my (ko-boɾhi) treasure? (ll. 108-110).

The use of kho-mo with female speakers also occurs regularly in the Mdsan blun (examples 22 and 23).

(22) chuŋ-mas əms-pəɾ « ci-ste กาย-daɾ กาย-ʃug-tu กายur-na/ กายod mi ʃdug che-bas kho-mos khoɾd bor-te mtsəɾh-mo bros-su ḥoɾ-ɾəo »

The wife said, ‘However, if (I) were to be married with you, because you are very ugly, abandoning you, I (kho-mos) would run away at night’ (Mdsan blun, D.341, vol. 74, p. 170a)

(23) chuŋ-mas yan ɾab-tu ɾgəɾh-nas/ tshoɾn-pəɾ la əms-pəɾ « kho-moɾhi กาย-im-thab-kyiɾ kəɾəɾ gnaɾ-ɡi/ / ɾəɾz ŋu ɾgis-ʃiɾ! » ɾəɾz bsʰoɾho

The wife was very happy and said to the merchant, ‘Since my (kho-ɾmoɾhi) husband agrees, do it like that!’ (Mdsan blun, D.341, vol. 74, p. 190a)

Although kho-bo often occurs in the text as well, it is seldom as explicit that the speaker of kho-bo is male, perhaps this is because the texts assumes a male referent unless specified otherwise.

The Vinayakṣudrakavastu (Ḥdul ba phran tshyg kyi gza, D.6) provides incontrovertible evidence that kho-bo was male and kho-mo is female. The story is about a cleric who has been badly treated by a barber and is in desperate need of a haircut. The story is told twice in nearly identical words, first about a monk and then about a nun. The Dolpo manuscript, which reflects an earlier unrevised translation uses ṇa in both passages (24a and b), whereas the other Kanjurs use kho-bo in the passage about the monks (25a) and kho-mo in the passage about nuns (25b).


He said: “O venerable sir, hast thou not heard that for workmen telling the truth is rare. I (ɾna) indeed am a barber, but the Bhagavān does not permit it.”

6 The wife in example 23 on the same page speaks to her husband with the more polite bdag.
7 I happen to have collated this passage across ten Kanjur versions. The sigla employed follow the Viennese conventions (https://www.istb.univie.ac.at/kanjur/xml4/xml/, accessed 11 May 2016), which in turn take Harrison & Eimer (1997) as a point of departure. For D, C, Q, Y, and H the edition here follows the collation of the Dpe bsdur ma. I have collated J, N, S, U and Z myself. To avoid clutter in the edition I use “Ts.” (for Tshal-pa) in place of “DUCIOY”. I follow the punctuation of D in text, rather than attempting to reconstruct the original punctuation; variant punctuations appear in the notes.
8 This passage is found at Do189a.
She said: “O noble lady, hast thou (not) heard that (for) workmen speaking truthfully is rare? I (ṇa) am indeed a hair barber, but the Bhagavān does (not) permit it.”

He said, “O venerable sir, hast thou not heard that for workmen speaking truthfully is rare? I (kho-bo) know how to shave hair, but the Bhagavān does not permit it.”

In summary, ṇa is the most basic first person singular pronoun; it is uses when addressing social equals or social inferiors; bdag is used for deference or to solicit pity; ṇan-bu is a yet more humble and pitiful form; kho-bo is used for male speakers and kho-mo for female speakers. These latter two pronouns appear not to be humble. Two remaining points of unclarity include the use of bdag in thought and what nuance kho-bo/kho-mo add to distinguish them from ṇa. Put differently, what motivates a speaker to use a gender specific form when a gender neutral form is available.

References
Hill, Nathan W. (2013). “The Emergence of the Pluralis majestatis and the Relative Chronology of


