

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).¹ 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 *Mdzañ-blun*, and the *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (*Ḥdul 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 *ña*, *bdag*, *ñan-bu*, *kho-bo*, and *kho-mo*. In both the *Mi la ras pañi rnam thar* (Hill 2007: 282-284) and the Old Tibetan texts examined in Hill (2010: 550-554) the first person singular pronoun *ña* 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, *ña* is used by a seer speaking to Malyapanta (example 1), Upade to the devaputras (example 2), king Rāma to queen Sita and his brother Lakṣaṇa (example 3), and a prince of eagles when introducing himself to the three monkeys Paśū, Sindu and Hanumān, who are to him perfect strangers (example 4).²

(1) *lha-ñi drañ-sroñ-gyis bkañ stsal-pa « ña nñ tshañs-pañi loñ-spyod-la ma chags-ste //*

A divine seer said, “I (*ña*) am not desirous of the wealth of Brahma,...” (Rāma E 34-35)

(2) *ña-ñi dños-grubs sbyin-na myi ḥdod-dam ?*

If (I) were to give you **my** (*ña-ñi*) *siddhi*, would you not want it? (Rāma A 37-38),

(3) *rgyal-po źal-nas // « ñas ri-dags bsñag-gñs // Lag-śa-na gar yañ ma ḥgro-bar // lha-mo sruñ-śig ! » ches gsuñ-ste*

The king said: 'I (*ñas*) shall pursue the deer. Lakṣaṇa, guard the queen without going anywhere!' (Rāma A 148-149).³

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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, Lakṣaṇa, 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-pañi mdog-can-gyi bu-mo yañ rñed-par dkañ ste* 'a girl the color of common gold is hard to find' (D5, vol. 9, p. 36).

(4) *bya na-re « ña-ñi pha nĩ bya khyuñ-gi rgyal-po-ste // « A-ga-ñdzah-ya » źes byah / de-la bu spun gñis yod-pa-la / ña nĩ pho-bo « Pa-dañ » źes bya //*

The bird said: 'My (*ña-ñi*) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by name. He has two sons. I (*ña*) am the elder one, Pada by name (Rāma A 227-228).

Daśagrīva's use of *ña* 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.

(5) *Mdah-śa-gri-ba na-re « ña nĩ thab-mo-la hoñs-na // cĩ-ste nan-du ħgro ? » źes byas-pa-dañ //*

Daśagrīva said, 'I (*ña*) 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).

(6) *yab-la gsol-pa // « bdag nĩ yab-kyi sku-yon-du bsños-te / rgyal-srĩd loñ-spyod-dañ / ħdu ħdzĩ-la ma chags-par spañs-nas // dran-sroñ-gi spyad-pa [sp]yo[d]-chiñ / dben-ba-ñi gnasu mchi-ħo » źes gsol-nas //*

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).⁴

(7) *bdag tsam-gyi tshoñ-la / byams-pa khyod-las myi bźugs-pa-ñi steñ-du // byams-pa-ñi bkañ-drñ mod-kyi / prin yĩg tsam-gyis rtag-du sñun gsol-ba-ñi rigsna /*

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 humilific 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 *ña* (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).

(8) *bya na-re « ña-ñi pha nĩ bya khyuñ-gi rgyal-po-ste // « A-ga-ñdzah-ya » źes byah / de-la bu spun gñis yod-pa-la / ña nĩ pho-bo « Pa-dañ » źes bya // nu-bo ni « Sam-pa-dañ » źes byah // ñed gñis rgyal srid ltod-pa / las / dam bchas-pañ rĩ rab-kyi rtse-mo-nas / ħphur-*

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).

*te // gañ mgyogs-pas // rgyal-srīd bkur-bar byas-pa-las / tha-gī tsam-gyis **bdag** mgyogste / slar bltas-na // nu-bo-ḥi ḥdab-ma ñi-mas tshig-la thug-nas / slar log-nas / nu-bo rogs byas-pa-dañ **bdag** ñi-mas tshig-ste / bañ bul-nas // rgyal srid kyañ ma thob-ste // da-ltar ḥdī-na ḥdug-pa yin-no. » žes zer-ro. //*

The bird said: 'My (*ña-ḥī*) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by name. He has two sons. I (*ña*) 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.

(9) *lha-ḥī sras rnams-la // Man-lya pan-tas gsol-paḥ // **bdag** lta žīg mchis-pa // srin-zad-kyi ñī ḥphro-ma / shīg-zad-kyī ñī dum-bu*
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 žal-nas / ḥdī skad mchī-ḥo. // « **bdag** ñī rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥī btsun-mo dam-pa Sī-ta lags mthu ldan gañ žīg / brtse-bar myī dgoñs-sam? // myī sdug gzugs-chan ḥdī-las prog-du gsol » žes mchī-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 žal-nas // « ... noñs ñī ma noñs-na / rgyal-po-ḥi thugs tañ myī ḥthad-par gyur-na // **bdag** ñī mchī-bar ḥtshal » žes / 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).

(12) *bu de skyes-te bsams-pa // « yul-myī khyim-tse thams-cad-la // pha ma-dañ gñen bžes yod-na // bdag-gyī pha ma-dañ gñen gdun ga-re ? » sñam-nas //*

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

(13) « *bdag nī mthu chuñ-bas myī nus // skyabs chen-po ḡgaḥ žig-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.' (Rāma E 29-30),

(14) *btsun-mos bsams-pa / « bdag ji ltar bu myed-de myī dgaḥ-žin sems myī bde-ba bžin-du / chun-ma yañ de bžin sems myī bde. » sñam-nas /*

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

(15) « *bdag-la ltar ma bthub-pa sñin-na myed-pas gnod-pa žig 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. (Rāma A 130).

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

The Old Tibetan version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* 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 Rāma, this pronoun demands pity for the speaker. In example 16 Marīcī is speaking to Daśagrīva and in 17 queen Sīta is speaking to Lakṣmaṇa.

(16) *de-nas rgyal-pos ñan-bu bsñags-pa-dañ / slad-na jo-bos lha-mo rgus-šig / ñan-bu nī mdaḥs phog-ste ḡgum-na*

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' (Rāma A 142-143)

(17) *lha-mo khroste // « jo-bo myed-na // ñan-bu bsrui-ste cha jñ mchis ? /*

The lady grew angry, 'Without a lord what is the good of protecting **me** (*ñan-bu*)?' (Rāma 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 myī gañ bya gañ-la rjo-bo yod-na ña-ḡi rjo-bo gar-re ? / myī gañ bya gañ-la / pha yod-na ña-ḡi pha ga-re ? žes zer-to / ña-la ston-chig ces mchi-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!' (II. 28-29). The general impoliteness of the son (as shown in his direct imperative) as well as his youth, explains his use of *ña* in contrast to the adult and overly polite use of *bdag* by Rāma in addressing his father (example 6).

to themselves as *bdag-cag ñan-pa* 'we vulgar fellows'.

(18) *bdag-cag ñan-pa* yañ lha-la ni yon ḥbul / Dmu rje-la ni bkod tsam ḥbul-ñiñ spyañ-ñar
mchis / -paḥi pho-ña 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 *ñan-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, *ñan-bu* and *bdag-cag ñan-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 Marīcī, 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 *ñan-bu* demanding pity for the extent of his service, and when he uses *ña* as a claim to increased status by virtue of his noble fate.

(19) « ḥo-na **bdag** ñi rin-po che-ḥi rī-dags śig-du bgyiste / Ra-ma-na-dañ Sī-ta gñis-kyi mdun-na mar brgyugs tañ // bud-myed-las ḥdod-žen che-ba myed-pas / « ḥu ñi sñogs! » śes mchi-ba-ḥi rigs / de-nas rgyal-pos **ñan-bu** bsñags-pa-dañ / slad-na jo-bos lha-mo rgus-śig ! / **ñan-bu** ñi mdaḥs phog-ste ḥgum-na / **ña** rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥi mdaḥs phog-pa lhar skye-bas / gum yañ bla. » śes mchi-nas mchis-pa-dañ /

'I (*bdag*) shall transform myself into a precious deer and run in front of Rāma and Sīta. Since there is no greater desire than [that of] a woman, she will certainly say, 'Pursue it!'. 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, but being hit by an arrow of king Rāma, I (*ña*) 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-ña Puñ-mo-taṇ 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-ña Puñ-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-niñ gže-niñ sña-naḥ / / gseñ lde-daṅ Spra-žal Tañ-baḥi dkor-daṅ dad-du ruñ na di-riñ sañ lta-na myi ko-boḥi nor-daṅ dad-du ruñ-graṅ ?*

Last year, the year before, in the past (this) was suitable as the treasure of Gseñ-lde and Spra-žal Thaṅ-ba. Today, tomorrow, is it not suitable as **my** (*ko-boḥi*) treasure? (ll. 108-110).

The use of *kho-mo* with female speakers also occurs regularly in the *Mdzañ blun* (examples 22 and 23).⁶

(22) *chui-mas smras-pa « ci-ste khyod-daṅ khyo-śug-tu gyur-na/ khyod mi sdug che-bas kho-mos khyod bor-te mtshan-mo bros-su ḥoñ-ño »*

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' (*Mdzañ blun*, D.341, vol. 74, p. 170a)

(23) *chui-mas yañ rab-tu dgaḥ-nas/ tshoñ-pa-la smras-pa « kho-moḥi khyim-thab-kyis kyañ gnañ-gi/ / de bžin du gyis-śig ! » ces bsgoḥo*

The wife was very happy and said to the merchant, 'Since **my** (*kho-moḥi*) husband agrees, do it like that!' (*Mdzañ 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 text assumes a male referent unless specified otherwise.

The *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (*Ḥdul ba phran tshogs kyi gži*, 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 *ña* in both passages (24a and b), whereas the other Kanjurs⁷ use *kho-bo* in the passage about the monks (25a) and *kho-mo* in the passage about nuns (25b).

(24a) *des smras-pa « tshe-daṅ ldan-ba bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon-no » žes khyod-kyis ma thos-saṃ/ ? ña skra ḥdregs-mkhan mod-kyi bcom-ldan-ḥdas-kyis ma gnañ-ño //*

He said: "O venerable sir, hast thou not heard that for workmen telling the truth is rare. I (*ña*) indeed am a barber, but the Bhagavān does not permit it."⁸

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 "DUCJQY". 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.

(24b) *des smras-ba* « *hphags-ma khyod-kyis bzo-bo-[la] bden-bar smra-ba dgon* (recte *dkon*)
no źes [ma] thos-sam ? / ña ni skra ħdreg-ħkhan myod-kyi / bcom-ldan-ħdas-kyis [ma]
gnañio / »

She said: “O noble lady, hast thou (not) heard that (for) workmen speaking truthfully is rare? I (*ña*) am indeed a hair barber, but the Bhagavān does (not) permit it.”⁹

(25a) *des smras-pa/* « *tshe-dan ldan-pa bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon*¹⁰-*no źes khyod-kyis*
*ma thos-sam/ ? kho-bo ni skra ħdreg*¹¹ *kyañ mkhas-na*¹² *bcom-ldan-ħdas-kyis ma gnañ-*
ño //

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.”¹³

(25b) *des smras-pa/* « *hphags-ma khyod-kyis bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon-par ma thos-*
*sam/*¹⁴ *? kho*¹⁵-*mo ni skra ħdreg*¹⁶ *mkhas-na*¹⁷ *hon kyañ bcom-ldan-ħdas-kyis ma gnañ-ño*¹⁸ »

She said: “O noble lady, hast thou not heard that for workmen speaking truthfully is rare? I (*kho-mo*) know how to shave hair, but the Bhagavān does not permit it.”¹⁹

In summary, *ña* is the most basic first person singular pronoun; it is used when addressing social equals or social inferiors; *bdag* is used for deference or to solicit pity; *ñan-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 *ña*. Put differently, what motivates a speaker to use a gender specific form when a gender neutral form is available.

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9 This passage is found at Do193a. Material in brackets is present in all other Kanjur versions and is provided here to make sense of the passage.

10 DUCJ,Q,HN,SZ *dkon*, Y *dkan*.

11 N,SZ *ħdreg*, Ts.,H *ħbreg*.

12 N adds.

13 This passage is found at D200a-b, J205b, N317b-318a, S300b, U200a-b, Z316a, Pdm 495-496.

14 U omit /.

15 DUJ,QY,HN,SZ *mo*, C *bo*.

16 N,SZ *ħdreg*, Ts.,H *ħbreg*.

17 SZ add /.

18 N has *gnañio*.

19 This passage is found at D204b, J209b, N323b, S306b, U204b, Z322b, Pdm 505.

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