Counterexpectation, free choice, and concessives in Tibetan

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Tibetan yin.n'ang ཡིན་ན་ང — variably yin.na yang ེེན་ན་ང་ or yin.n'i /yine/ ེེན་ན་ལ་— appears to have three distinct uses:

① Counterexpectational: "Tashi's tall."

བོད་སྣང་བཀོད་པའི་གཞི།
yin.n'ang sbyang.po mi-dug.
Tashi’s very clever.

② Forming wh free choice items: Context: Pema is very friendly.

གཉིས་སི་འགོ་འགོ་ལེན་མི་འདུག
su yin.n'ang la skad.cha bshad-gi-red.
Who yin.n’ang=DAT speech talk-IMP-AUX
"She talks to anyone."

③ Concessive scalar particle: Context: Don’t worry. The test is easy.

ལེན་མི་འདུག Dal-pa chos.kyi-‘id shes-kun.
"She talks to even if they’re who."

On the syntax of X yin.n’ang in argument position

Taking its morphology at face value — COPULA + COND + EVEN — yin.n’ang is a conditional clause.

But “X yin.n’ang” is in argument position in ② and ③!

See especially ② above, where X-yin.n’ang is dative marked.

➢ I adopt Shimoyama’s (1999) E-type approach for (Japanese) head internal relatives: the clause is interpreted as adjoined at LF, with a pronoun interpreted in its surface position:

• Literal ②: She talks to (if they’re who) ⇒

• LF: EVEN (if they’re who), she talks to them.

④ Wh-yin.n’ang free choice items

Proposal: I adopt the denotation for wh-phrases with no ordinary semantic value (Ramchand 1997, Beck 2006, Kotek 2014), and Erlewine 2019’s covert ③ to create an existential ordinary value.

Complete LF: EVEN [if ③[they’re who], she talks(HABITUAL) to them,]

[a]p = “if they’re someone (= if they exist), she talks to them,

[a]q = “if they’re x, she talks to them; x human"

➢ EVEN(a) asserts [a], which expresses the free choice effect: for any animate individual x, in a situation that minimally differs from our own where exists is true, “she talks to x” will be true.

➢ The prejacent [a]p asymmetrically entails each alternative in [a]q, so the presupposition of EVEN is satisfied.

⑤ Concessive scalar particle (CSP)

"[CSPs] are licensed in two types of environments: DE and modal environments. It is glossed with even in DE environments and under existential modals; it is glossed with at least in imperatives, under universal modals and under attitude predicates. The associate of [a CSP] is the lowest element on the pragmatic scale.” — Crnić 2011: 5

If for ③, EVEN [if it’s [just] one, book, [if you read it, you will pass]]

➢ The prejacent [a]p is the least likely (or most noteworthy) among its alternatives, satisfying EVEN.

➢ It is ungrammatical with other numerals.

(2) བཀྲ་ིས་གཞི་ཡིན་ན་ང / བཀྲ་ིས་ཀྱི་ཡིན་ན་ང

bKra.shis ang [gsum] in.yi.n'i len-mi-dug / “len-dug

Tashi — # 3rd YIN.N’ANG get-NEG-AUX / get-AUX

‘Tashi didn’t even get third place.’ / “got yin.n’ang third

LF: EVEN [if [it’s third, place, Tashi didn’t get it.]

➢ Assuming that getting first place is least likely (or most noteworthy), not getting third place will be the least likely, satisfying EVEN. (Considering only first, second, third place.)

(3) བཀྲ་ིས་གཞི་ཡིན་ན་ང

kha.lag [tis] in.yi.n'i za-dang

food a little YIN.N’ANG eat-IMP

‘Eat at least a little food!’ (e.g. to a child)

LF: EVEN [IMP if it’s [a little] food, you eat it, ]

➢ In a context where a stronger request — e.g. IMP [if it’s a lot of food, you eat it] — is also appropriate, the speaker’s choice to make the weaker request with ‘a little’ is noteworthy, satisfying EVEN.

This derives the ‘at least’ flavor of concessive scalar particles, also described as a “settle for less” interpretation (Alonso-Ovvalle 2016).


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Morphologically, yin.n’ang is transparently:

ཡིན་ན་ང + ང་ + རང་ > ཆི།་བཤད་ > ལེན་འདུག

yin na yang yin.n’ang yin.n'i

COPULA + COND + EVEN

I document these uses and present compositional semantics for ①, ② from these ingredients.

Particles with similar ranges of uses and morphological makeup are also attested in Dravidian (Balus, tomorrow) and Japanese (demo).