# Adapting the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Tibetan

**Sha Wang***

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China

**Wenchun Yang***

Leibniz-Centre General Linguistics (ZAS), Germany

This paper introduces the Tibetan version of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN). We describe the main typological properties of the Tibetan language, including word order, case markers, and evidentiality. Finally, the motivation for adaptation, the process of adaptation, and the challenges encountered are discussed.

## 1 Introduction

The Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN; Gagarina et al., 2012, 2015, 2019) was developed as a part of the LITMUS (Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings) test battery by an international research team within the COST Action IS0804 *Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment* (Armon-Lotem et al., 2015). MAIN is a reliable tool to assess narrative production and comprehension abilities in monolingual and bilingual speakers. By 2023, MAIN has been adapted to more than 90 languages and it has been widely used in testing children's narrative abilities (e.g., Gagarina et al., 2019; Gagarina & Bohnacker, 2022a). Despite a rich body of research on children's narrative development, thus far, the investigations are heavily biased towards English and other Indo-European languages and the so-called WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). Given the diversity of cultures and languages, addressing other populations and languages is crucial. Also, to make validation of child language acquisition theories, diverse empirical evidence is necessary (Kidd & Garcia, 2022).

Thus far, Sino-Tibetan languages, including the Tibetan language, are still underexplored in child language development research. In addition, the social-communicative

* Corresponding authors: wangsha.emma@gmail.com; w.yang@leibniz-zas.de

environment of Tibetan children is different compared to their WEIRD peers. Most Tibetan children live in relatively underdeveloped regions and rural areas and come from low social-economic status families with a lack of learning resources and facilities. Moreover, Tibetan is spoken across a broad geographical area. The Tibetan MAIN will not only enrich the MAIN database but also provide a proper language assessment tool for children living in the Tibetan Plateau. Moreover, the Tibetan MAIN can be used in other Himalayan regions with Tibetan as a lingua franca and similar cultures, including some areas in north India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The linguistic data collected using the MAIN can help practitioners, educators, and policymakers to take further steps, such as diagnosing language disorders and crafting curriculums and programs to facilitate children's language development.

This paper focuses on Central Tibetan (the Ü-Tsang language). Central Tibetan, one of the core varieties of Modern Tibetan, is spoken by the Tibetan ethnic minority people living in Lhasa, Shigatse, and other areas of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (DeLancey, 2017). The present article is organized as follows. In section 2, we introduce the properties of central Tibetan (henceforth, Tibetan). In section 3, we describe the process of translating and adapting MAIN to Tibetan. In Section 4, we provide some concluding remarks.

## 2 Properties of Central Tibetan

Tibetan is mainly spoken by ethnically Tibetan people residing in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and other Tibetan-speaking areas in China, such as Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan (DeLancey, 2017). There are more than 6 million Tibetan speakers in China (Office of Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2021). Tibetan belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, typologically different from Indo-European languages such as English in phonology and morphosyntax (Thurgood & LaPolla, 2017). For example, unlike English, the unmarked word order of Tibetan is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV), as shown in (1) and (2).[1]

(1) English

| The girl | bought | an apple. |
|---|---|---|
| S | V | O |

(2) Tibetan

| mø-*s* | kuɕu | tɕi' | ɲø-pa-ɪe |
|---|---|---|---|
| girl-*agentive* | apple | a/an | bought |
| S | O | | V |

'The girl bought an apple.'

The majority of nouns tend to be disyllabic, such as *ɕi-mi* 'cat', *o-ma* 'milk', and *za-k$^{h}$aŋ* 'restaurant.' Tibetan uses enclitics to encode cases,[2] as illustrated in (3) and (4).

[1] All Tibetan examples are rendered using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

[2] There are debates on the classifications of case categories in the Tibetan language. DeLancey (2017) argued that there are five case categories-genitive, ergative/instrumental, dative/locative, and ablative and one unmarked

(3) pʰu-*i* ama naŋ-*la* du'
boy-*genitive* mother home-*locative* is
'The boy's mother is at home.'

(4) ɕimi-*s* tɕʰi-u tɕi' tsʰin-pa-ɹe
cat-*agentive* baby bird a caught
'The cat caught a baby bird.'

Verbs occur with stems and inflectional suffixes, which indicate tense: past, present, and future, as shown in (5)– (7).

(5) ŋa-*s* za kʰaŋ-*la* ʈʂʰo-ɕin-pa-yin
Isg-*agentive* restaurant-*locative* go-ing present/conjunct
'I am going to a restaurant.'

(6) ŋa-*s* za kʰaŋ-*la* tɕʰin-pa-yin
Isg-*agentive* restaurant-*locative* went-past/conjunct
'I went to a restaurant.'

(7) ŋa-*s* za kʰaŋ-*la* ʈʂʰo-ji-yin
Isg-*agentive* restaurant-*locative* go-future/conjunct
'I will go to a restaurant.'

Another feature relevant to the adaptation process is how evidentiality is expressed in Tibetan. Evidentiality deals with information sources. There are three primary evidential modalities in Tibetan (Denwood, 1999; Garrett, 2001): 1) indirect, which is used when the assertion has indirect support, including inference and hearsay; 2) direct, which is used when the assertion is based on directly witnessed/perceptual knowledge; and 3) "ego", which is unique to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is based on intimate and immediate knowledge of a situation associated with the first person. The evidentiality in Tibetan is realized as suffixes on verbal predicates, shown in (8)–(10).

(8) Indirect
ɕimi-*s* oma tʰoŋ-gi-yø-ɹe
cat-*agentive* milk drink-indirect
'(It is said/reported that) the cats drink milk.'

(9) Direct
ɕimi de oma tʰoŋ-gi-du'
cat that milk drinking-direct
'(The speaker/hearer is looking) That cat is drinking milk.'

(10) Ego
ŋa-*i* ɕimi naŋ-*la*-yø
I-*genitive* cat home-*locative*-ego
'My cat is at home.'

nominative, whereas Tournadre (2010) argued that there are ten cases: absolutive, agentive, genitive, dative, purposive, locative, ablative, elative, associative, and comparative.

In the adaptation, we considered the evidentiality in the stories. MAIN stories are fictional and the examples of answers are based on the assumption, which means that the stories or responses are not fully based on children's directed experience or real-time visual sensory perception in real life. Hence, the scripts were translated in the indirect evidentiality form.

## 3 The adaptation process

The Tibetan MAIN is based on the revised English MAIN (Gagarina et al., 2019) and strictly follows the guidelines for adaptation (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2020b). The adaptation process was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, a pilot study on the appropriateness of the MAIN pictures was conducted by using an acceptability judgment task. Nine children were recruited to rate the acceptability of the animals and the action events in the MAIN pictures. Results showed that all children fully accepted the animals (i.e., cat, dog, bird, goat, and mouse) and the action events of the four stories, showing that the story characters and story plotlines were familiar to and accepted by Tibetan children.

However, some minor changes were still needed for certain aspects of the *Dog* and *Cat* story. Some items in the original pictures of the *Dog* and *Cat* story did not well suit the Tibetan context because of the unique food habit, religions, and culture in the Tibetan region. For example, the sausages in the *Dog* story would better be replaced with dried meat, which is more familiar to the children living in the Tibetan Plateau. In the *Cat* story, fish is not a common food or even taboo in Tibetan culture. Therefore, the fish should be substituted with milk, and the fishing rod should be replaced with a branch of a tree. Consequently, the basket for the fish should also be changed to a transparent container, a glass bottle, so that the milk could be easily visible. Hence, a new set of pictures with these changes is needed.

Several rounds of discussions and crosschecking took place to ensure the adapted version's quality, including consistency and accuracy. In the second phase, the first author (Wang), a native speaker of Central Tibetan and currently a Ph.D. candidate in Linguistics, translated the MAIN protocol. The second author (Yang), a linguist who has been involved in adapting MAIN to Kam and Mandarin, provided detailed instructions during the translation. The second author (Yang) double-checked the translation of linguistic terminologies. During the third phase, the entire draft was sent to four native speakers and two experts in Tibetan language and culture research for proofreading.

There were a few challenges in adapting and translating the story scripts. The biggest one was that there was no comparable use of some terminologies and vocabulary in Tibetan. It is difficult to translate these items directly from English to Tibetan. For example, the term *narrative* is not commonly used; thus, it may not be accessible to children in the Tibetan context. It was replaced with *ʤʐoŋ ɛɛ* 'storytelling' which is more familiar to Tibetan children. There is also no overarching term for *Internal State Terms (IS)* in Tibetan, and this terminology is quite opaque to speakers. Our way to deal with this issue was to use another umbrella term, *tsʰor wa* 'feeling', in Tibetan. This term covers Central Tibetan nominations for the different mental and physical states, linguistic verbs, etc. Another challenge is the translation of internal states. For instance, some physiological state terms in Tibetan, like 'worry' and 'fear' cannot

be directly expressed as a single word as in English. In Tibetan, 'worry' and 'fear' are compound words, *sem-ʈʰɛl tɕʰe* 'anxiety make' (11) and *ʃe-naŋ-ce* 'fear arise' (12). These features inevitably lead the Tibetan text to be longer than English in terms of the number of syllables.

(11) ɹa mø-*s* ɹa ʈʂʰu'-*la* sem ʈʰɛl tɕʰe-pa-ɹe
goat female-*agentive* goat baby-*dative* worry made-past/conjunct
'Mother goat worried about the baby goat.'

(12) ɹa mo ɹa ʈʂʰu' tɕʰ naŋ-*la* tʰoŋ nɛ ʃe naŋ ce-pa-ɹe
goat female goat baby water inside-*locative* see after fear arose-past/conjunct
'Mother goat feared when she saw the baby goat was in the water.'

## 4 Final remarks

This short paper has briefly introduced the significance of adapting MAIN to Tibetan, the properties of Tibetan, and the challenges during the adaptation process. The Tibetan MAIN can provide rich linguistic samples of Tibetan speakers. Such data would contribute to research on child language acquisition in a Tibetan context which is little so far (except de Villiers et al., 2009). Future studies which make use of the assessment protocol are required to cite the following references:

- Gagarina, N., Klop, D., Kunnari, S., Tantele, K., Välimaa, T., Bohnacker, U. & Walters, J. (2019). MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives. Revised version. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, *63*. Translated and adapted to Tibetan by S. Wang & W. Yang.
- Wang, S., & Yang, W. (2023). Adapting the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Tibetan. *ZAS paper in Linguistics*, *65*, 85–90.

## References

Armon-Lotem, S., de Jong, J. & Meir, N. (Eds.) (2015). *Assessing Multilingual Children: Disentangling Bilingualism from Language Impairment*. Multilingual Matters.

Bohnacker, U., & Gagarina, N. (Eds.). (2020a). *Developing narrative comprehension: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives*. John Benjamins.

Bohnacker, U., & Gagarina, N. (2020b). Introduction to MAIN–Revised, how to use the instrument and adapt it to further languages. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, *64*, xiii – xxi.

DeLancey, S. (2017). Lhasa Tibetan. In Thurgood, G., & R. J. LaPolla (Eds.), *The Sino-Tibetan Languages, 2nd Edition* (pp. 385–403). Routledge.

Denwood, P. (1999). *Tibetan*. John Benjamins.

de Villiers, J., Garfield, J., Gernet-Girard, H., Roeper, T., & Speas, M. (2009). Evidentials in Tibetan: Acquisition, semantics, and cognitive development. In S. A. Fitneva & T. Matsui (Eds.), *Evidentiality: A window into language and cognitive development, New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (pp. 29–47). Jossey-Bass.

Gagarina, N., & Bohnacker, U. (2022). A new perspective on referentiality in elicited narratives: Introduction to the Special Issue. *First Language*, *42*(2), 171–190.

Gagarina N., Klop, D., Kunnari S., Tantele K., Välimaa T., Balčiūnienė I., Bohnacker, U. & Walters, J. (2012). MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, *56*, 1–140.

Gagarina, N., Klop, D., Kunnari, S., Tantele, K., Välimaa, T., Balčiūnienė, I., Bohnacker, U. & Walters, J. (2015). Assessment of narrative abilities in bilingual children. In S. Armon- Lotem, J. de Jong & N. Meir (Ed.), *Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings* (pp. 241–274). John Benjamins.

Gagarina, N., Klop, D., Kunnari, S., Tantele, K., Välimaa, T., Bohnacker, U. & Walters, J. (2019). MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives – Revised. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, *63*, 1–36.

Gagarina, N., Klop, D., Tsimpli, I. M., & Walters, J. (2016). Narrative abilities in bilingual children. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *37*(1), 11–17.

Garrett, E. J. (2001). *Evidentiality and assertion in Tibetan*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of California, Los Angeles.

Henrich, J., Heine, S., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61–83. https://doi:10.1017/S0140525X0999152X

Kidd, E., & Garcia, R. (2022). How diverse is child language acquisition research? *First Language*. Online First, available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/01427237211066405

Office of Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census (Eds.) (2021). *Significant Figures on 2020 Population Census of China*. China Statistic Press.

Tournadre, N. (2010). The Classical Tibetan cases and their transcategoriality: From sacred grammar to modern linguistics. *Himalayan Linguistics*, *9*(2), 87–125. http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/H99223480

Thurgood, G. & LaPolla, R. J. (Eds.). (2017). *The Sino-Tibetan Languages*. 2nd Edition. Routledge.