An Article on Articles: Tibetan Debate and Translation

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Collected Topics (*Bsdus grwa*) has been a foundational genre for Tibetan philosophy since the foundation of Sangpu Neutok (Gsang phu ne'u thog) in 1072 CE, where it was first conceived as a vehicle for the study of authentic cognition (*tshad ma*), up until the present day. This terse and formulaic genre is something like its own Tibetan dialect, replete with its own technical neologisms and idiosyncrasies. It eventually became the engine of both textual and verbal Tibetan philosophical debate, allowing for a targeted, efficient, and fast-paced dialectic.

For anyone interested in Tibetan philosophy, a grasp of Collected Topics is indispensable. However, translation of this genre of texts presents special challenges.[1] Some of these are specific to the genre and how to render its concise formulations into natural English prose. Other challenges arise from broader differences between Tibetan and English, both grammatical and cultural.

The present study focuses on one specific part of a much wider set of complexities in translating Collected Topics. Specifically, we concentrate on the English demand for articles in contrast to the absence of articles in Tibetan. We analyze how this linguistic difference presents specific challenges to rendering this genre into an English prose intelligible to an educated readership.

Because Collected Topics is not just a textual genre but part of a thriving debate practice, we were committed to exploring this question in conjunction with representatives of Tibetan philosophical communities. That is, we wanted to understand how members of these traditions interpret the types of statements found in these texts. Because our research concentrates on translation, we also needed a comparative approach, and so equally wanted to probe English interpretations of translated versions. This led to a mixed methods research approach comparing participant data from both those adept at Collected Topics in Tibetan and those proficient in English

[1] Daniel Perdue's work (1992; 2014) is seminal in this regard.

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generally.

1. Backstory

The impetus for this project itself arose from debate. The authors were debating at Sera Jey Monastery, experimenting with using English in place of Tibetan. The topic was the definition of "person." In Tibetan, the debate may start, "*mi chos can, smra shes don go ba yin par thal*." We were engaged in a similar debate. Author #2 thus started with "Take person, they know how to speak and understand meaning," an English equivalent. This immediately gave Author #1 pause. "What do you mean?" he replied. "Do you mean *a* person? *The* person? People?"

In Author #1's estimation, his response to this proposition would depend on which of these Author #2 meant. If the topic were just *any* person—*a* person—then whether the predicate holds would be inconclusive, since there are some people who are mute. "The person," on the other hand, suggested something abstract—the person writ large, perhaps like "The State" or "The Economy," that is, an idealized object. So, for example, *the* state, by definition, has authority. But *a* state might lose that authority. Likewise, *a* person in particular might be mute, but, perhaps, *the* person, as an idealized object, is not. Lastly, *people* seem to understand language, but for a different reason, since there are at least *some* that do.

Based on our own introspection, then, we determined that "Take person" appears incomplete. It would seem that we must substitute this with a definite, indefinite, or plural version—"Take *a* person," "Take *the* person," or "Take *people*." We did not come to this conclusion from a grammatical analysis, but from our own linguistic intuitions as native English speakers. On the other hand, even the most colloquial Tibetan speaker would not find anything strange about the article-less "*mi chos can*," despite the fact that Tibetan debate language is highly formalized and counterintuitive to most Tibetan speakers. The question then becomes whether the seeming ambiguity in the English "Take person" only arises from English's demand for articles, or if it is an ambiguity that is latent even in Tibetan debate. In other words, do "a," "the," and the plural have equivalents in Tibetan that are often left unstated? Or do the distinctions they make fail to cut at natural semantic joints in Tibetan?[2]

As a similar (albeit inverse) example, we could think of evidentials

[2] We are not the first researchers to recognize this difficulty in translating Collected Topics. See, for example, Dreyfus 1997: 494 n. 51; Goldberg 1985: 162; Tillemans 1999: 130.

in Tibetan. In colloquial Tibetan, all verbs are suffixed by a verb helper (*bya rogs*). This helper carries information about the verb's tense. But it also carries information about the speaker's proximity to the information communicated by the sentence. So, if someone says, "*bod la g.yag 'dug*," or, "There are yaks in Tibet," the "*'dug*" ending suggests they have been to Tibet and seen yaks there. On the other hand, if they say "*bod la g.yag yod red*"—again, "There are yaks in Tibet"—it means that they know this to be a fact, but it is not necessarily a fact garnered through their own experience.

So, here we have two ways to say in Tibetan something said one way in English, an inverse of the case under investigation, where Tibetan uses one noun that could be rendered in English in at least three ways. Now, should we say that "There are yaks in Tibet" is *ambiguous* about the information provided by Tibetan evidentials? Or is it unambiguous, since the distinction made by evidentials is simply not pertinent to English speakers? This is an open question. And it is the same question to which we turn on the Tibetan side—i.e., whether the distinction expressed by English articles is ambiguous in Tibetan or simply does not obtain.

We wanted to balance a natural language approach to this question while keeping our analysis confined to the genre of Collected Topics. Our suspicion was that differences between English and Tibetan would bear out in how their respective speakers would respond to various propositions. In other words, rather than analyze how speakers describe their understanding of a given proposition—which is often *ad hoc* and puts a high demand on participants to felicitously account for their own linguistic presuppositions—we decided to probe whether different iterations of propositions would provoke different responses, revealing how article use may affect comprehension. In other words, the use of different articles was our independent variable while responses to the propositions were the dependent variable. Our research question, therefore, was broad: how do different, equally felicitous English translations of Tibetan propositions using different articles affect how English speakers interpret those propositions compared to their Tibetan counterparts?

2. The Logic of Collected Topics

One of the central components of the cognitive theory found in Collected Topics textbooks is that thought depends on language, and that language discretizes phenomena from one another. For example, the "color of a red ruby" and "the color red" have distinct referents because their phrasing is distinct. All linguistic distinctions thus map

onto distinct conceptual isolates. The same applies to "The color red" and "red." There is, as the theory goes, a slight difference in what appears (*snang ba*) to the mind with each phrase, entailing a unique subjective experience in each case.[3] The, perhaps, counterintuitive element of Collected Topics, however, is that the referents of these subjective experiences are not rarified concepts. The notion of platonic ideal forms is foreign to this understanding of cognition.[4] So whether we say "Take person," "…a person," "…the person," or "…people," we are referring to something actual (however broad or limited its scope may be), and not a mere idealized person.

With this in mind, we could rephrase our research question in this way: how do language users understand the referent of words, given that the scope of that referent is often ambiguous? This question is also central to Collected Topics. Lopen Karma Puntsho problematizes this problem of referentiality in his Collected Topics Primer.

Exploring the position that there is (a/the) "tree" which pervades all individual trees, he first offers the absurd consequence that there is no tree that pervades across instances, because that general tree does not grow anywhere in particular, and so could not be a tree. He continues with many more lines of reasoning like this. To summarize, he excuses the conundrum of how conceptual entities relate to actual particulars, taking their relationship as a necessary precondition of thinking. Even though there are no real entities that pervade over their particulars, our ordinary language use demands that we discuss the fundamental principles of logic and philosophy from this perspective.[5]

At its core, the problem that Karma Puntsho identifies concerns conceptual scope. Now, even without articles, Tibetan has a rich vocabulary of quantifiers ("some," "all," "every,") that could foreclose some of these scope ambiguities: These are as plentiful in Tibetan as they are in English, with near-total equivalents for each of the English terms used in many forms of Western logic. Still, they are minimally used in Collected Topics. Why this is so would be another research question entirely. Yet, since it is relevant to our research, we would like to hypothesize based on the pedagogical aims of Collected Topics.

Namely, the use of quantifiers would weight the very debates that Collected Topics is meant to provoke. The very question is whether "tree" refers to "all trees" collectively (a universal) or "a tree" individually (a particular) when the word "tree" comes to mind. The

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3 Shākya'i dge sbyong Blo bzang Rgya mtsho 2007: 138.

4 Similarly, Georges Dreyfus argues that Gelugpa authors advocate "moderate realism," such that they consider conceptual universals to be real insofar as they are instantiated in particulars but not reified real entities in the way that Plato would argue (1997: 179–182).

5 Slop dpon Karma Phun tshogs 2007: 29–30.

use of quantifiers would implicitly favor one interpretation over the other. And so, by eliding quantifier use, the authors of Collected Topics can keep these questions open for the ensuing debate.

While there are few explicit directives of how to interpret the logical statements in the unique phrasing of Tibetan Debate, there is something of a roadmap that is signposted in debates found in the textbooks. These textbooks are considered to be normative, as they have been vetted over centuries of use.[6] Students are encouraged to find a way to interpret them without creating internal contradictions, and that process creates a functioning understanding of how different terms are to be interpreted in different contexts.

3. Methods

We take our research question, as well as Collected Topics central concerns in this regard, to be largely psychological. That is, when these conceptual entities “appear to the mind,” what is their understood referent? Likewise, we take the Collected Topics tendency to bracket quantifier use to promote a range of possible interpretations in debates to be methodologically sound. Lastly, the question is comparative. Especially in consideration of how to translate these works, we wanted to examine best practices for rendering their debates in English, since English readers typically expect articles and quantifiers where Collected Topics elides them. How can we translate these texts such that “what appears to the mind” of a Tibetan speaker adept in the genre reading Collected Topics also appears to the mind of an English speaker reading them in translation?

For these reasons, we opted to use a mixed-methods, adapted version of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method.[7] This method is descriptive rather than hypothesis-proving. That is, just as Collected Topics is an open-ended method to instigate debate on these issues rather than a compendium of linguistic-ontological conclusions about the nature of concepts, so too did we want to keep our investigation open ended, so that differences in language use could be discovered qualitatively. By examining responses to pointed questions that probe respondents’ intuitions about article usage, we hoped that a holistic picture of that usage would emerge.

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[6] At least in the Gelugpa monasteries, the same four sets of textbooks (by Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen, Panchen Sonam Drakpa, and Kunkhyen Jamyang Shepa) have been used for roughly five hundred years and continue to form the basis of the Gelug monastic curriculum today, where students are expected to have a working familiarity with their contents (Dreyfus 2003: 124).

[7] Giorgi 2009; Giorgi and Giorgi 2008.

This does not mean, however, that our exploration was theoretically adrift. We depended on Tom Roeper's theory of a "universal grammar," which argues that the linguistic use of articles and quantifiers is basic to the fundamental logic of every language, and that, even when these parts of speech are not present, each language has equivalent ways to make these distinctions.[8] We were curious about the degree to which these distinctions are truly universal and shared between English and the Collected Topics dialect.

Thus, we used Roeper's theorization that articles and quantifiers distinguish "General from Specific" entities, along with our own hypotheses about what distinctions they might entail, to develop a questionnaire probing native speakers' thinking about language use. This questionnaire included ten propositions modeled after the syntax of Collected Topics. This syntax involves a subject and a predicate. In Tibetan, the subject is marked by "*chos can*" and the predicate by "*thal*." We translated this in English with "Take" to mark the subject and "it follows" to mark the predicate. So, as a classic example, "Take a white horse: it follows that it is white" (*lta dkar po chos can/ dkar po yin par thal/*). Participants could either agree or disagree with the proposition, either responding that it is "True" (*'dod*) or "False" (*ci'i phyir*).[9] In addition to Roeper's theory, we (as native English speakers) also introspected about what semantic distinctions are communicated by articles. We hypothesized three broad distinctions: (1) General vs. Specific, (2) Indefinite vs. Definite, and (3) Abstract vs. Concrete.

The first distinction concerns whether the noun designates the set of all things that belong to that noun or specifies only one specific member. That is, does the predicate universally quantify *all* things to which that noun applies, or does it only describe one or some of those things? For example, "Lions are felines" describes all lions, whereas "The lion sleeps tonight" describes a feature of just one, particular lion.

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8 Roeper 2007: 76–80.

9 In Tibetan Debate, the "*ci'i phyir*" response—literally "why"—is a request for a reason (*rtags*) to substantiate that the major term (*bsgrub bya'i chos*) is correctly predicated about the subject (*chos can*)—e.g., that the major term "white" can be accurately predicated of a white horse, that "a white horse is white." In standard Tibetan debate, this proposition would elicit a "*ci'i phyir*" response, since, in Collected Topics, "white" (*dkar po*) is not interpreted as a predicate adjective, but as a substantive. Because a horse is not *the color* white, the proposition does not hold. Again, this debate relies on an ambiguity, specifically between predicative adjectives and substantives in Tibetan. More to the point, the request for a reason expresses the respondent's disagreement with the proposition. After the original proposition giver states their reason, the respondent will either claim that the reason does not entail the proposition (*khyab pa ma byung*) or that the reason is false (*rtags ma grub*). It would be odd for the respondent to accept the argument after asking for a reason, unless they are backpedaling. So, a response of "*ci'i phyir*" is the standard way to deny a proposition in Tibetan debate and Collected Topics.

"Indefinite vs. Definite" describes whether we are referencing a unique member of some group, or a particular member without defining which one. So, for example, if someone says, "A person, somewhere, owns a Lamborghini," they are giving a description of a *particular* person without designating who that person is. Notice that we can use plurals in the same way, e.g., "There are people who love origami." This is not necessarily a feature of *all* people in the same way that being a feline is true of *all* lions. So, the distinction here is about whether we are being specific about what the predicate applies to or if we are just noting that it applies to something, somewhere.

The last distinction, "Abstract vs. Concrete," accounts for how articles can sometimes indicate something conceptual rather than an instantiated actual. So, to reiterate an example from above, talk of "The State" most often refers to an abstract political entity within theories of governance rather than any actual state. "The consumer" plays a similar role in economic theory. But, on the other hand, if we talk about "states," we are most likely predicating something about some *actual* group of *states.* Similarly, talk about "consumers" would describe actual observed trends in their behavior. So, for example, we could say, "While economic theory assumes *the* consumer is perfectly rational, more in-depth research reveals *consumers'* habits are much more emotional." The first instance refers to an idealized, theoretical entity while the latter denotes their actual instantiations.

Based on our analysis, we wanted to determine whether changes in articles would force the interpretation of one dipole over the other in the manner outlined in Table 1, using "person" as an example:

	INDEFINITE ARTICLE (*A* PERSON)	DEFINITE ARTICLE (*THE* PERSON)	PLURAL (*PEOPLE*)
GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC	Specific	Specific	General
INDEFINITE VS. DEFINITE	Indefinite	Definite	Indefinite
ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete

Table 1 — Hypothesized Distinctions Created by English Articles

Through a qualitative process of proposition formation, we developed a list of ten propositions for which we thought varied uses of articles would create different interpretations across these distinctions. Importantly, we constructed these propositions so that this difference in interpretation would create different responses to the proposition among fluent English speakers—that is, whether they would agree it is True or False. An exhaustive list of those propositions is found

below in Table 2:

GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they have ovaries.
	Take a/the car(s). It follows it/they is/are a Honda.
	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they live in China.
INDEFINITE VS. DEFINITE	Take a/the sun(s). It follows that it/they is/are orbited by planet Earth.
	Take a/the ocean. It follows it/they is/are made of water.
	Take a/president(s). It follows they live in the White House.
ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE	Take a/the child(ren). It follows they have a mother.
	Take a/the university(ies). It follows it/they has/have buildings.
	Take a/the brain(s). It follows it/they process(es) information.
	Take a/the mind(s). It follows it/they is/are aware.

Table 2 — List of Propositions with Associated Distinctions

In our instructions to participants, we specified that "they" would be used both as a plural and a gender-neutral singular pronoun.

While we do not have the space to give an exhaustive justification for why we theorized each of these propositions would produce different responses depending on article choice, an analysis of a few propositions will be helpful. For example, if we say, "Take cars: it follows they are a Honda," we theorized this would elicit a response of "False," since being a Honda is not a feature of *all* cars. However, if we had said, "Take a car: it follows it is a Honda," our expectation

(later shown by the data to not pan out) was that this would more likely elicit a "True" response, since there does exist at least *one* car that is a Honda. In other words, we theorized that fluent English speakers would interpret "A car is a Honda" to have a meaning akin to "Some cars are Hondas."

For the second distinction, we thought that predicating "being orbited by planet Earth" would hold for *the* sun, since this refers to the sun of our particular solar system, while it would not for *a* sun, where the reference to our solar system's sun is not specified. Lastly, we hypothesized "The brain" would provoke a recognition of the brain *as such*—the brain as defined in principle. While *this* brain "processes information," *a* brain might not—e.g., a dead one.

Once we had developed our list of propositions, we randomized their order to mitigate any bias in our analysis. We also solicited the help of Namdru and Dondup Tsomo, students from Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies (Dharamsala, India) and native Tibetan speakers, to translate them into article-less Tibetan versions. These equivalences are listed in Table 3:

1.	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they have ovaries.	མི་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་མངལ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།
2.	Take a/the car(s). It follows that it/they is/are a Honda.	མོ་ཊ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཧོན་ཌ་ ༼Honda༽ ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
3.	Take a/the sun(s). It follows that it/they is/are orbited by planet Earth.	ཉི་མ་ཆོས་ཅན། འཛམ་གླིང་གིས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཁྱིམ་དུ་འཁོར་བར་ཐལ།
4.	Take a/the brain(s). It follows that it/they process(es) information.	ཀླད་པ་ཆོས་ཅན། གནས་ཚུལ་འགྲོ་འདུ་བྱེད་པར་ཐལ།
5.	Take a/the child(ren). It follows that they have a mother.	ཕྲུ་གུ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཨ་མ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།
6.	Take a/the ocean. It follows that it/they is/are made of water.	རྒྱ་མཚོ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཆུ་ལས་གྲུབ་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
7.	Take a/president(s). It follows that they live in the White House.	ཨ་རིའི་སྲིད་འཛིན་ཆོས་ཅན། ཕོ་བྲང་དཀར་པོའི་ནང་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།
8.	Take a/the mind(s). It follows that it/they is/are aware.	བློ་ཆོས་ཅན། རིག་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།
9.	Take a/the person/people. It follows that they live in China.	མི་ཆོས་ཅན། རྒྱ་ནག་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།
10.	Take a/the university(ies). It follows that it/they has/have buildings.	མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཁང་པ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།

Table 3 — English Propositions and Tibetan Translations

We then used Qualtrics XM online software to construct a dynamic questionnaire based on these propositions. We created two versions, one in English and (with the help of Namdru and Dondup Tsomo) one in Tibetan. On the landing page of the questionnaire, participants were informed about the aims of the study (with no deception), that their participation was completely voluntary, that there was no compensation, and gave contact information for the principal investigators (ourselves). We assured participants that all data was collected anonymously.

Both versions of the questionnaire randomized the order in which participants were shown the propositions. In the Tibetan version, participants would be shown all ten propositions. In the English version, participants would be shown one of three versions of the proposition—either an indefinite article version, a definite article version, or a plural version. So, for proposition (1), participants would see either "Take a person: it follows that they have ovaries," or "Take the person: it follows that they have ovaries," or "Take people: it follows that they have ovaries." One of these three versions would be shown for each proposition randomly. Qualtrics XM also has a feature that guarantees each version is shown equally as often as the others. So, although for each participant one version of the proposition was shown randomly, each version was shown an equal number of times across all participants.

For each proposition, participants could either respond "True" (*'dod*) or "False" (*ci'i phyir*). Afterwards, we presented a follow-up question, first reiterating their response and then asking, "Is it clear to you that this is the case?" (*lan de yang dag yin pa'i rgyu mtshan gsal por yod dam*). Responding yes or no, participants could elaborate as to why they were confident or ambivalent about their response. This was explained in detail on the questionnaire instructions before they began.

For participants, we recruited widely among English speakers, advertising our questionnaire on Facebook and among our soft contacts, including colleagues and students. For Tibetan participants, we recruited among monastics studying at Sera Jey Monastic University in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India through personal contacts. The comparison between Tibetan-speaking monastics and a much larger demographic of English speakers was intentional. Our goal was to examine how those adept at Collected Topics in Tibetan would read these propositions in comparison to a wider English-speaking audience—experts and non-experts alike—who might be interested in reading about Collected Topics in translation. Thus, the comparison between a restricted set of Tibetan-speaking experts and a larger sample of English speakers is appropriate, since this mimics the

potential diversity in readership of Collected Topics in English. However, this limits some of the conclusions we can make from our study, since those Tibetans who are versed in Collected Topics language also have philosophical training. Thus, we cannot be sure to what degree any differences between samples are an effect of differences of language or philosophical education. This is a limitation we would like to address in future studies.

After culling the data for quality and eliminating duplicate responses (as determined by IP address and other factors), we collected *n*=139 responses on the English version (79 full completions and 60 partial completions) and *n*=116 responses on the Tibetan version (40 full, 76 partial). Ideally, we would have liked to have three times as many English responses as Tibetan, so that we were comparing an equal number of responses for the indefinite, definite, plural, and Tibetan versions of the proposition. At this juncture, the number of responses did not give us sufficient power for any statistical analysis. However, as a pilot study, we were able to perform several qualitative analyses that generated some compelling hypotheses for future study.

4. Results

Table 4 gives a complete list of participant responses for each proposition. The number to the left of the forward slash shows how many participants answered "True" (*'dod*) to a proposition while the one to the right indicates how many said "False" (*ci'i phyir*). The number in parentheses next to each of these indicates the number of those participants that were certain about their answer:

		T(sure)/F(sure)
1	མི་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་མངལ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	20(14)/20(15)
	Take a person. It follows that they have ovaries.	4(3)/25(23)
	Take the person. It follows that they have ovaries.	2(1)/27(24)
	Take people. It follows that they have ovaries.	1(1)/29(26)
2	མོ་ཊ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཧོན་ཊ་༼Honda༽ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	2(0)/35(29)
	Take a car. It follows it is a Honda.	4(3)/27(23)
	Take the car. It follows it is a Honda.	1(0)/27(22)
	Take cars. It follows they are Hondas.	1(0)/28(26)
3	ཉི་མ་ཆོས་ཅན། འཛམ་གླིང་གིས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཁྱིམ་དུ་འཁོར་བར་ཐལ།	25(20)/12(9)
	Take a sun. It follows that it is orbited by planet earth.	13(10)/18(17)
	Take the sun. It follows that it is orbited by planet earth.	23(20)/5(3)
	Take suns. It follows that they are orbited by planet earth.	2(2)/24(22)
4	ཀླད་པ་ཆོས་ཅན། གནས་ཚུལ་འགྲོ་འདུ་བྱེད་པར་ཐལ།	18(14)/14(12)
	Take a brain. It follows it processes information.	20(17)/11(10)
	Take the brain. It follows it processes information.	24(17)/7(5)
	Take brains. It follows they processes information.	18(14)/13(9)

5	ཕྲུ་གུ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཨ་མ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	36(33)/2(1)
	Take a child. It follows they have a mother.	18(13)/9(7)
	Take the child. It follows they have a mother.	20(17)/9(5)
	Take children. It follows they have a mother.	17(14)/10(6)
6	རྒྱ་མཚོ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཆུ་ལས་གྲུབ་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	29(24)/6(4)
	Take an ocean. It follows it is made of water.	24(21)/8(5)
	Take the ocean. It follows it is made of water.	27(24)/3(2)
	Take oceans. It follows they are made of water.	24(21)/6(6)
7	ཨ་རིའི་སྲིད་འཛིན་ཆོས་ཅན། ཕོ་བྲང་དཀར་པོའི་ནང་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།	29(24)/8(6)
	Take a US president. It follows they live in the White House.	21(15)/10(6)
	Take the US president. It follows they live in the White House.	21(16)/9(5)
	Take US presidents. It follows they live in the White House.	22(20)/8(6)
8	བློ་ཆོས་ཅན། རིག་པ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།	32(29)/3(1)
	Take a mind. It follows it is aware.	15(10)/14(11)
	Take the mind. It follows it is aware.	13(9)/17(9)
	Take minds. It follows they are aware.	17(12)/12(7)
9	མི་ཆོས་ཅན། རྒྱ་ནག་ལ་གནས་པར་ཐལ།	9(8)/26(23)
	Take the person. It follows that they live in China.	4(2)/24(23)
	Take a person. It follows that they live in China.	1(1)/28(24)
	Take people. It follows they live in China.	2(1)/27(24)
10	མཐོ་རིམ་སློབ་གྲྭ་ཆོས་ཅན། ཁྱོད་ལ་ཁང་པ་ཡོད་པར་ཐལ།	25(23)/13(7)
	Take a university. It follows it has buildings.	12(11)/18(11)
	Take the university. It follows it has buildings.	9(9)/21(14)
	Take universities. It follows they have buildings.	11(7)/17(14)

Table 4 — Responses to Propositions

So, for example, on proposition 10, “Take a university: it follows it has buildings,” 12 respondents said “True” with 11 being confident, while 18 said “False” with 11 being confident. Below in Figure 1, we graph these responses as ratios. Positive numbers represent the ratio of “True” responses to “False” responses, while negative numbers represent the ratio of “False” responses to “True” responses. Each version of the proposition—indefinite, definite, plural, or Tibetan—is represented by a different colored line.

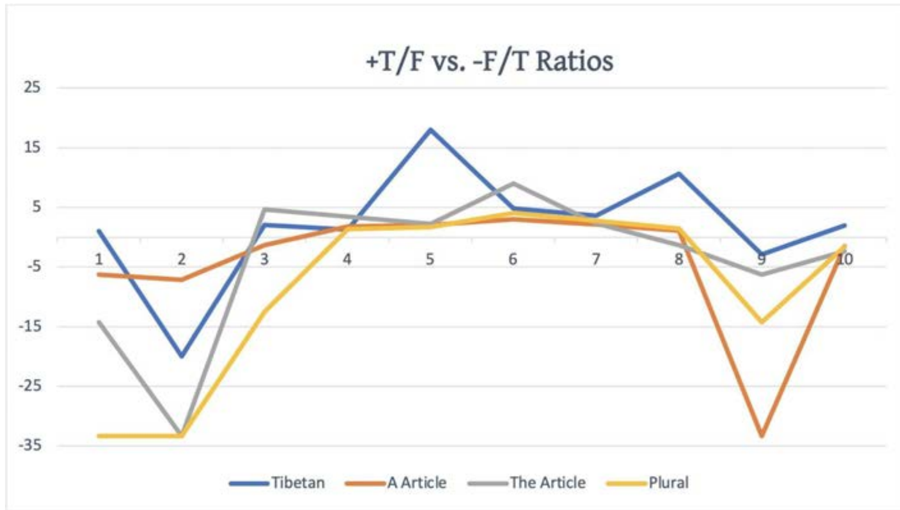

Figure 1— Ratios of True to False and False to True Responses for Each Proposition

We discuss the significance of these findings in the next section.

5. Discussion

Our findings revealed that propositions 1, 2, and 9 from our master list (see Table 3) demonstrated the most variance across the four versions of the propositions. These three were also all and the only propositions originally hypothesized to reveal a distinction between General and Specific. The linguist Tom Roeper argues that this distinction, in particular, is ubiquitous across languages, present even when those languages can be ambiguous about whether a noun is general or specific—what he calls "bare nouns." Roeper cites other article-less languages, such as Chinese and Russian, as an example:

> Finally, what about the reference of ''bare nouns''—nouns that have no determiner at all? Some languages—like Chinese and Russian—have no articles, so they must accomplish definite and indefinite reference differently. English-speaking children begin without articles as well. What does the two-year-old mean when she looks at a plate of cookies and says, ''I want cookie''? Is ''I want cookie'' general (compare ''I want cake''), or is the child asking for a specific cookie (compare ''I want that cake'')? We don't know for sure. Because I think children have ready access to abstractions, I think they start with the abstract and general

> meaning and learn the markers for specificity, which may vary from language to language.[10]

In other words, Roeper argues that even in languages with "bare nouns" that do not distinguish between general or specific that this distinction is still operative but left ambiguous. Regardless of whether this is true of *all* languages, or even Tibetan more generally, it is clearly a feature of Collected Topics. This literature distinguishes generalities (*spyi*) and specifics (*bye brag*), which comes close to Roeper's own differentiation. According to Collected Topics, all members of a generality share some common feature that unites them even though each specific member may have qualities not shared by other members.

So, like in Roeper's example, when a child says, "I want cookie," they could mean *any* cookie will do—any member of that generality—or they could mean *a specific* cookie. In colloquial English, this usage is expected to be corrected developmentally through language acquisition, where the child learns to specify either "that" or "any." In Collected Topics, however, one may say, "Take vases: it follows that they are bulbous with a flat base and able to hold water" (*bum pa chos can/ lto ldir zhabs shum chu skyor gyi don byed nus pa yin par thal/*)—indeed, this is the Collected Topics definition of "vase."[11] This applies both to "a" and "any" vase. While in English, we must differentiate "vases" (general) from "the vase" (specific), both of these can be covered by "*bum pa*" in Tibetan. Without context, "*bum pa*" is thus ambiguous in the way "cookie" would be. This is an ambiguity of which Collected Topics authors are self-aware—hence the discussion of generality versus specific.[12]

We would expect, then, that the Tibetan version of the proposition would show the most ambiguity on this dimension and so would have True-False ratios the closest to 1 or -1. This is, in fact, what we see for propositions 1 and 9. This seems to support our expectation that the English articles are foreclosing general-specific ambiguities in a manner that reduces variances in interpretation compared to Tibetan. However, we did not see this increased ambiguity for the Tibetan version of proposition 2. In that case, the English indefinite version

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10 Roeper 2007: 76.

11 Phur lcog Byams pa Rgya mtsho 2015: 62.

12 For example, Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen discusses how to interpret the relationship between the mental continuum(ua) of sentiment being(s) and buddhas: "*sangs rgyas phags pa yin na/ sems can dang rgyud gcig yin pas khyab.*" In this case, the text has to specify that this does *not* mean that several mental continua produce one buddha, since this is ambiguous otherwise. In other words, "*sems can*" must be interpreted as "*a* mental continuum" (Rje btsun Chos kyi Rgyal mtshan 2015: 208).

showed more ambiguity than the Tibetan version.

We have since developed a hypothesis as to why this might be the case. After conducting an online version of this study, we had several participants from Sera Jey monastery take the questionnaire in person so that we could informally interview them about their experience and ask questions about their interpretation. (Their responses have not been included in the current study.) Specifically, we found that Sera Jey participants commonly interpreted "Honda" as a brand of motorcycle only. This is a product of living in different environments: while in the U.S. people commonly own Honda-made cars, those in India more often associate this brand with motorcycles. This would understandably skew responses toward False among Tibetan speakers, not as any product of grammar, but because they did not believe Honda to be a brand of car.

We also hypothesize that the significant differences between Tibetan and English speakers on proposition 8 was a result of environment. In Collected Topics, part of the definition of "mind" (*blo*) is to be aware (*rig pa*). Thus, given that assumption, it would make sense that our Tibetan-speaking participants, who were monastics, would consider this true analytically. We see a similar Tibetan-English split on proposition 5. It seems as if English speakers interpreted "have a mother" to mean "currently," whereas in Tibetan, "*a ma yod*" may have been interpreted to mean "at any point." This difference in temporal understandings of existence is something that warrants more study.

Returning to the distinction between general and specific and those statements concerning it (1, 2, and 9): although there is some evidence that English foreclosed ambiguities that manifested in Tibetan, English articles did not affect responses in the way we expected. Our hypothesis did appear to hold for the indefinite version. We expected that this version would skew more toward True responses, since some participants would interpret "Take a car" specifically. Although, "A car is a Honda," may sound stilted, we expected it to be interpreted to mean there is some car, somewhere that is a Honda. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this version elicited the most True responses out of the English variants, participants overwhelmingly responded False to the indefinite version (87%, 27/31). This is likely because they interpreted "*a*" to mean "*any*," or else "all," in which case it was understood to denote a generality. Still, it is difficult with such a small sample to say anything conclusive, especially since even a few outliers greatly skew the ratios.

On the other hand, responses to the definite and plural versions did not differentiate as we expected. We expected that the plural version would elicit more False responses than the definite version, since the

former suggests a generality while the latter, a specific. However, both the plural and definite versions elicited identical False-True ratios. This was a consistent feature across all of the general versus specific propositions: the indefinite version consistently created much more ambiguity than the definite and plural versions, which in turn more consistently produced False responses. Based on our analysis above, we hypothesize this is because the indefinite article can be interpreted both as a generality or a specific, either as "any" or "some." Determining why the definite and plural versions were more closely aligned than expected, however, requires further research.

Conclusion

As a largely qualitative study, we cannot make any definitive claims at this juncture about linguistic differences between Tibetan and English. We can, however, offer some reasonable hypotheses that would warrant further study. First, our research lends further evidence to the claim that the absence of articles in Tibetan creates ambiguities for English translation. At the very least, then, we can safely advise that translators should be vigilant about their article choices when translating Tibetan texts. It will be prudent for translators to consider the diversity of readers, reflecting broadly on the potential ways that any given translation choice may be interpreted. Although we have no definitive recommendations for how translators should proceed, we find it sufficient to demonstrate how seemingly minimal translation choices can have large ramifications for how readers interpret their meaning, how different subjects "appear to the mind." At this early stage, promoting awareness of the disparities that these choices can create fulfils our aims. We also encourage those who are interested in practicing Collected Topics debates in English to experiment with articles and see how this affects the debate.

One thing that our data does clearly show is that there is not universal agreement on interpretation of these simple subject-predicate statements for either English speakers or Tibetan speakers; not a single proposition, regardless of which article form the subjects took, received a unanimous response as either true or false. The lack of agreement within both language groups raises questions about the idealized definitions of quantifiers in Euro-American forms of logic. Do native speakers use and interpret their own language badly? Or does our analysis reveal that the logic of quantifiers and articles is "fuzzy" and mutable based on context? This is an open question.

Furthermore, following Roeper, we argue that the distinction

between Generality and Specific is an operative distinction in Collected Topics as well. Our research suggests that when “bare nouns” are given in Tibetan without context, that this distinction is sufficiently ambiguous to create a greater variety in interpretation than seen in English, article-latent versions of the same proposition. In other words, this ambiguity is not *only* a product of linguistic comparison but is latent in the original Tibetan. Surely, Tibetan has other ways to foreclose this ambiguity *other* than articles, such as context. There are also several pronouns and particles that can serve this function—“*’di,*” “*rnams,*” “*gang,*” etc.—even though they are not grammatically necessary in the manner English articles often are. Likewise, Tibetan debate form could have incorporated quantifiers just as easily as done in certain forms of Western logic. But they were not included, and no later scholars appear to have identified a need for them. Indeed, they may have considered their inclusion to hamper debate, which relies on a plethora of diverging interpretations.

Despite our preliminary evidence for the effect of articles in interpretation, we also revealed that articles and their absence are not the *sole* or even most important factor in interpretation. Our analysis suggests that in the case of proposition 2, for example, indexical meaning and its variance across different cultures eclipsed the effect of articles. The different understandings of “Honda” between Tibetan- and English-speaking milieus had a much greater effect than grammatical differences between the languages. Although we can attempt to control for these cultural differences in comparative grammatical studies, it is important to note that when translating “on the ground” that other considerations may dominate.

Lastly, we propose that our analysis may give reasons to reevaluate some aspects of the developmental picture proposed by Roeper and others. That is, he assumes that a language is like a perfectly specific “quadratic equation” that a child must figure out how to apply correctly. The key to deciphering this linguistic codex, according to Roeper, is a “universal grammar” latent in every child, in whose mind these distinctions are inchoate and must be aligned to their equivalents in the target language. Furthermore, according to Roeper, this “Universal grammar provides methods, like the *a* *the* shift in English, to move from *general* to *particular*.”[13] For Roeper, learning language would seem to be a process of coordinating a predefined logical map to a linguistic terrain that reflects that logic.

However, our initial study suggests that even in language proficient adults, these ambiguities remain. Rather than assume that this a product of speakers’ failing to fully realize the logical capacity of their

[13] Roeper 2007: 102.

mother tongue, we argue that language is more highly tolerant of logical ambiguity than Roeper may have us believe.[14] Indeed, much of Collected Topics literature is committed to probing the inherent ambiguities of language in order to reveal its logical limits. The translator's task, then, is to find methods that felicitously reveal the subtleties of these ambiguities in Collected Topics and resist English equivalents that erase them—nullifying the debate—while preserving their cogency so that their import is communicated. This is no easy task and will require further study, working closely not only with Tibetan literature, but members of the living tradition that keeps their interpretation alive.

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[14] E.g., see Ewa Dąbrowska's (2015) comprehensive analysis of the notion of universal grammar and its shortcomings.

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