Style and Standardization: A Case Study of Tibetan Family Interaction in Greater New York[1]

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1. Introduction

This paper examines competing processes of stylization and standardization among Tibetan families living in diaspora. Through a case study of conversation between ten-year-old Pangmo (pseudonym), and her father, Tenzin, I demonstrate the ways that correction constitutes an ideal, standard Tibetan code. This standard code marks features of Lhasa Tibetan, a regionally specific prestige variety that is also associated with femininity, as non-normative. Conversation analysis approaches talk (on the level of the utterance rather than the sentence) as a form of contextualized social action which, through its patterning, structures both language and ontology. Using conversation analytic methods, I address the following questions: 1) How do the values associated with sociolinguistic variables change as speakers move throughout a spatially dispersed community? 2) How do multilingual children enact and reformat these styles of speaking throughout the trajectory of their language socialization?

Tibetans in exile comprise a population of over 128,000 worldwide. Most live in India, the home of Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, the seat of the Tibetan exile government, and the primary destination for new migrants from Tibet.[2] While scholars have noted movements between the Tibetan plateau and South Asia since at least the 18th century (Harris 2013: 27-45), Tibetan exiles espouse a common narrative of departure, dating to the 1959 invasion of Lhasa, and the Dalai Lama's subsequent establishment of refugee settlements across the subcontinent (Ward 2012). Tibetans tend to migrate along a common route, from Tibet to Nepal to India and then, in some cases, to Europe and North America. While the Chinese government recognizes Tibet as the Tibet Autonomous Region, the territory of Greater Tibet, traditionally inhabited by ethnic Tibetans, stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas in India, Bhutan, and Nepal, through parts of Sichuan,

Gansu, and Qinghai provinces. Linguists have enumerated 220 Tibetan dialects spoken over this region. Forty-five of these are common within a specific region (or home-region, in the case of migrants), and can be located within one of twelve major dialect groups (Tournadre & Dorje 2003: 25). Dialects tend to be mutually intelligible within these dialect groups, but mutually unintelligible across dialect groups. Three of these dialect groups, U-tsang, Amdo, and Kham, correspond to the three-region map of greater Tibet that the Tibetan freedom movement and government in exile claim as their homeland. Tibetans living in exile—be it New York or the Himalayan regions of India and Nepal—trace their heritage to one of these three regions, and describe their native languages as characteristic of this region. However, the extent of diversity, which has not been fully studied by linguists, and, when it has, has tended to work from elicited sentences, complicates any assumption of boundaries among languages and dialects. Exiles identify their languages not only as "U-tsang" Amdo," and "Kham," but also name them with the specific county that they consider to be their homeland, or *pha.yul*. Exiles also vary in how they describe the boundaries among Tibetan languages. Most name the three major dialect groups U-tsang, Amdo, and Kham as separate languages, and describe their homeland's language as a dialect of one of these dialect groups.

Pangmo's parents trace their homeland to Lhasa, Tibet. Like other speakers of Lhasa Tibetan, Pangmo's speech is mutually intelligible to exiled Tibetans from other regions who speak Standard Tibetan. And yet, Pangmo's speech retains features of Lhasa Tibetan not commonly found among other exiles speaking Standard Tibetan, including a clear 4-tone distinction, verb-stem alteration, and certain lexical items. These features became evident in a distinct genre of speaking, oriented around conversations structured by question-answer routines. The conversations sampled for this paper were taken from an after school routine that the family performed, with Tenzin asking Pangmo to recount her day at school and to report specific activities and lessons. Although sampling has taken place on an intermittent basis since February 2014, in this paper, I focus on one sample from October 2014. At the beginning of the sampling, Pangmo was nine years old, and attended a public school in Manhattan. She has since celebrated her tenth birthday, and has moved with her family to New Jersey, where she attends a new public school. A graduate of Lhasa University, Tenzin taught middle-school biology in an experimental bilingual Mandarin/Tibetan program in Central Tibet, before moving to the United States in 1995. In greater New York, Tenzin and his wife have continued to be involved in Tibetan language education, especially through literary activities. Tenzin translated a children's books series into Tibetan, authored two children's books in Tibetan (one with his wife), and created a Tibetan-English visual dictionary for children. He is also currently working on a book of Tibetan grammar. Tenzin's particular metalinguistic sophistication, which he demonstrates in his published work as well as in his conversation, underlines the importance of language pedagogy within this family. In addition to the conversational material, I rely on published metalinguistic statements, as well as on comments made by Tibetans in Nepal and New York about Pangmo's speech.

Drawing from Schieffelin and Ochs' definition of language socialization (1986: 2), I show that processes of correction in these question-answer routines socialize Pangmo *to use* standard Tibetan, and also socialize her *through* standard Tibetan into ways of speaking that express the imperative for ethno-linguistic reproduction in exile.[3] Standard Tibetan retains grammatical similarities to Lhasa Tibetan, but is currently undergoing

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[3] The conversations' form and content also suggests socialization to models of interaction and information recall common in mainstream American schools.

processes of denotational standardization in exile communities, especially through the work of linguists and educators. As a written language originally developed for the purposes of translating Sanskrit Buddhist texts, literary Tibetan was largely not used outside of monasteries or other governing bodies before the formation of Tibet-in-exile (Avedon 1984: 12-21; Shakabpa 2010: 14). However, the development of Tibetan-language curricula in secular schools flourished in the 1980s, both within Tibet and in exile schools in India. With the Cultural Revolution in China, Tibetan administrators were given the right to implement Tibetan medium education up to the tertiary level (Bass 2008: 39). Schools in Greater Tibet continue to use a combination of Tibetan and Chinese medium materials. And, in the mid-1980s, as it became apparent that exiled Tibetans were a settled, rather than transient population, the Tibetan government in exile initiated a "Tibetanization program" that reformulated school curricula and created new textbooks. The Tibetan government's goal was to, through Tibetan language, create a "curriculum that effectively links modern education with an intimate understanding of Tibetan cultural heritage and identity" (Tibetan Children's Village 1999, as cited in Swank 2014: 27).

I argue that, although Pangmo attends an English-medium school in America, the broader context of Tibetan-medium education bears upon her language socialization. Specifically, Tibetans in New York, including Pangmo's father, have articulated a standard language ideology that expresses anxieties about the cultural survival of Tibetans. In a paper delivered at the Trace Foundation, activist Thupten Chogdrup called for the Exile Government's Department of Education to devote a special unit to textbook creation, and questioned "why Tibetan language cannot have a standard uniformity and universal form of written or spoken usage" when languages such as English and Sanskrit do (2013: 58). In the same lecture series, Tenzin discussed the challenges he faced in teaching Tibetan-medium biology within Tibet. As he explained, "Despite the significant role that Tibetan played in terms of transmitting and developing the practice and philosophy of Buddhism, it had not had an opportunity to fully function as a medium for disseminating modern science and related knowledge" (Nangsal 2012: 108). The divorce of Tibetan language from modern science has extended to concerns about the incompatibility of Tibetan language, and its associations with Buddhist philosophy, from modernity. As a result, Tibetans in Tibet as well as in exile have sought to modernize Tibetan language and culture. As Lempert (2012) notes in his study of exiled Tibetan monks, political efforts to position Tibetan exile society in line with modernity have pronounced the compatibility of Buddhism, as a religious philosophy centered on rational inquiry, with Western science (2-3). The specific mechanisms for modernizing and standardizing the Tibetan language have further become a point of contention between Tibet in exile and the Chinese government, as both administrative bodies have instituted committees to create Tibetan terminologies.[4]

In demonstrating how standard language ideologies co-constitute linguistic form, I turn now to an exploration of Tenzin's correction of Pangmo's nominalizers and verb configurations. I argue that these emergent features of their question-answer routines correlate with explicitly articulated efforts towards the modernization of Tibetan language, religion, and culture. These efforts may drive the development of language standards, and the discouragement of regional variation, as a form of cultural preservation.

2. Nominalizers

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[4] http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/1916231.html

The distribution of nominalizing particles demonstrates Tenzin's attempts to correct Pangmo's stylistic moves to standard Tibetan. In this section, I focus on a nominalizing particle, *nyen*, which Tibetan interlocutors in New York City and Kathmandu described as typical of Lhasa Tibetan. *Nyen* is a nominalizer that attaches directly to a verb, creating a noun that means roughly, "the one who does X." Pangmo's use of *nyen* prompted her father to respond with a structurally identical nominalizer, *mkhan*, considered to be standard across region of origin (that is, a feature of "Standard Tibetan" rather than "Lhasa Tibetan"). Further, while *nyen* has no agreed-upon spelling, *mkhan* can be found in dictionaries, and thus serves as a literary standard.

In Example 1, the first occurrence of *nyen* in the October 2014 sample, Tenzin corrects Pangmo through a self-repair:

(1) 1 P: ga.re.byas.na'i zer-na   de   Christopher Columbus de   de
             because   say-COND DEM Christopher Columbus DEM DEM
     2   amerika 'tshol-byed-nyen   de   red-pa
           America search-VZR(do/PRS)-NZR DEM COP/FCT-EMP
           Because that guy Christopher Columbus is the one who did the searching for
           America.
     3 T: 'o   rnyed-nyen de   dang.po thog.ma   rnyed
           mm find-NZR   DEM first   beginning find
     4   de   rnyed-mkhan Chr-Columbus zer-red-pa
           DEM find-NZR   Chr-Columbus say-AUX/FCT-EMP
           Yeah, that one who first found (America), that one who found (America) is called
           Columbus.
     5 P: ani de   Christopher Columbus de   amerika de   rnyed-byas
           and DEM Christopher Columbus DEM America DEM find-VZR(do/PST)
     6   de   rnyed-byas
           DEM find-VZR(do/PST)
     7   ani de.na'i dang.po rgya.gar 'gro-nyen red
           and then   first   India   go-NZR COP/FCT
            And then Christopher Columbus found America, he found America. And then,
           first, he was one who went to India.

Pangmo first introduces *nyen* in line 2. In the next turn, Tenzin repeats Pangmo's use of *nyen* (line 3), while omitting the verbalizer *byed* and offering a gloss, *rnyed* ("to find") for Pangmo's verb *'tshol* ("to search"). In this same utterance, however, he offers a self-repair, shifting *nyen* to *mkhan* (line 4). In the next turn, Pangmo, does not incorporate his subtle correction, repeating *nyen* with another verb (line 7).

In the remainder of the conversation, Tenzin employs *mkhan* an additional five times, and *nyen* an additional one time. Although not specifically following Pangmo's previous turn, Tenzin's next instance of *nyen* is also immediately followed by a self-repair to *mkhan*. In Example 2, Tenzin is responding to Pangmo's description of the First Thanksgiving, by adding additional information about Columbus Day, the initial topic of discussion.

(2) 1 T: ani Columbus Day de   byas.na'i dang.po thog.ma   de
             and Columbus Day DEM because   first   beginning DEM
     2   Columbus 'di   rgya.gar-la 'gro-mkhan   red-pa ((....))
           Columbus DEM India-LOC   go/PRS-NZR COP/FCT-EMP

3   ani lhag.pa-brgyab   ani kha.phyogs-la 'gyur=
        and wind-VZR(send/PST) and direction-LOC change/PST
        And it's Columbus Day because first, in the beginning, Columbus was going to
        India, right? And then there was a storm and (he) changed direction ((…))

4   ani de   ga.re da   ga.re za de   amerika slebs-mkhan
        and DEM what DEM what say DEM America arrive/PST-NZR
        (He) changed direction, and then, what do you say, he was the one who arrived in
        America.

5 P: o
        mmhmm
        mmhmm

6 T: yin.na'i amerika rnyed-zer-nyen rnyed-de
         but   America find-say-NZR find-DEM

7   rnyed-de-yod<ma>red
        find-DEM- AUX<NEG>(PFC/assertive)

8   dang.po thog.ma amerika rnyed-mkhan yod.red
        first   beginning America find-NZR   COP/assertive

9   yod<ma>red   red-pa
        COP<NEG> assertive COP/FCT-EMP

10   de.i sgang.la btsho.ba skyes-mkhan amerika-gi   glo.ba   yod.red-pa
        then before   living   born-NZR America-GEN indigenous COP/assertive EMP

11   Native American zer red-pa
        Native American say COP/FCT-EMP

12   American Indians zer red-pa
        American Indians say COP/FCT-EMP

13   byas.tsang American Indians zer-yag de.'dras nor.ba-byas
        because   American Indians say-NZR like this mistake-VZR(do/PST)

14   Indians red   bsams   red-pa
        Indians COP/FCT think/PST COP/FCT-EMP
        But, the one who is said to have found America didn't find it. Was (Columbus)
        or wasn't (he) the first one to find America? Right? Before then, the people who
        were living there were indigenous Americans, called Native Americans.
        (They're) called American Indians. (They're) called American Indians like this
        because (Columbus) made a mistake. (He) thought they were Indians.

15 P: huh.

In this sequence, Tenzin supplies to Pangmo the information that Columbus did not actually find America, which was already inhabited by Native Americans. In lines 2, 8, and 10, Tenzin employs *mkhan* with three different verbs. Lines 6 and 8, however, demonstrate a process of self-correction almost identical to that found in Example 1. Tenzin employs the verb *rnyed* ("to find"), along with an additional verb *zer* ("to say"), first with the nominalizer *nyen*. In the very next turn, however, he employs the verb *rnyed* with the nominalizer *mkhan*.

    Tenzin's use of nominalizers represents an attempt to socialize Pangmo to use a standard language over a regional variant. Objectively standard languages—languages with structural uniformity—are never fully achieved. Rather, the institutionalized codification of norms of language use centers upon and maintains a prestige variety as a "standard" against which speakers' language use is measured (Milroy 2001: 547). As described above, the form *mkhan* can be found in dictionaries, as well as in manuals for Tibetan language learners co-authored by Euro-American linguists and native Tibetan

speakers (Tournadre & Dorje 2003). When I worked with transcription assistants[5] in Kathmandu and New York City, all commented upon *nyen* not as Standard Tibetan but as a word from Lhasa Tibetan with "no spelling." They sometimes offered the form *mkhan,* in its place, for transcription. In light of the extensive standardization efforts in exile communities, it seems that this process of correction marks *nyen* and *mkhan* as sociolinguistic variants. There is no evidence, however, that Pangmo actively responds to Tenzin's corrections of *nyen* to *mkhan*. Rather, Pangmo demonstrates an ability to use both *nyen* and *mkhan* in conversation. Since Pangmo has attained competency in both forms, her use of nominalizers represents stylistic choice.

3. Verb configurations

In addition, the Tibetan verb system has become a focus of standardization efforts. Thupten Chogdrup, for example, articulated a particular sense of danger in the "variation in verb forms [that are] in turn causing deviations in nouns or adjectives, which are made of verbs in Tibetan" (2012: 58). Thupten Chogdrup's statement stems from a structural fact about Tibetan: it is both isolating and fusional (Agha 1993: 4). That is, verb conjugations involve laminations of time, person, case, aspect, and evidentials—markers of the social, sensory, or cognitive source of evidence—through a combination of nominalizers, quotative particles, and auxiliary verbs, which may take the form of suffixes or separate particles. In addition, verbs fall into binary lexical classes, covertly coding either volition or involution. In Lhasa Tibetan, as well as the developing Standard Tibetan, a split-ergative system characterizes the volitional class of verbs; the agents of certain volitional verbs always or frequently carry ergative markers in certain tense, aspect, and evidential constructions. And, while many spoken varieties of Tibetan employ only one, or at most two, phonetically-distinct root forms of a verb, literary grammars generally differentiate five tense-aspect forms that differ in affixes or syllable-internal vowel features (Vokurkova 2008: 88-91). Pangmo's father is also the process of writing a book of Tibetan grammar, and he has over 100 pages devoted to the documentation of verb forms.

Tenzin's correction of Pangmo's verb configurations provides some evidence of efforts towards standardization. And, I argue that Pangmo's use of verbalizers may demonstrate changing linguistic competency, in her ability to discern word-class. Returning to Example 1, in line 2, Pangmo describes Columbus as "the one who did the searching," with a verb ("to search"), verbalizer, and nominalizer (*nyen*). In the next turn, Tenzin corrects the nominalizer *nyen* to *mkhan* through a self-repair, while offering a single verb ("to find"), without an additional verbalizer (lines 3 and 4). In lines 5 and 6, while Pangmo incorporates Tenzin's gloss of *'tshol* ("to search") as *rnyed* ("to find"), she does not mirror his verb configuration. Rather, she adds the same additional verbalizer *byas/byed* ("to do"), as in line 2. In Example 3, Pangmo similarly adopts a single feature of her father's correction of her verb configuration.

(3) 1 P: ga.pa-r-nas   byed-phyin-dus*   ani=
         where-LOC-ABL VZR(do/PRS)-go/PST*-while and=
         where (he came) from while he went to go*
   2 T: =ga.pa-r-nas   byed-'gro-dus   de   'o=
         where-LOC-ABL VZR(do/PRS)-go/PRS-while DEM EMP

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where (he came) from while he was going
3 P: =ga.pa-r-nas   byed-dus
where-LOC-ABL do/PRS-while
where (he came) from while doing that (i.e. while going)

In line 1, Pangmo makes a move that linguists have defined as an error, by joining a temporal adjective to a verb root in past tense form (Tournadre & Dorje 2003: 480). The verb "to go" does not require the additional verbalizer "to do." While Pangmo's use of this verb-verbalizer configuration is unusual, along with other volitional verbs, "to go" can be combined with the verbalizer "to do" without grammatical error. In line 2, Tenzin corrects the tense-aspect form of the root verb while incorporating the same verbalizer and verb. In line 3, Pangmo omits the verbalizer structure entirely, employing "to do" as a main verb. From this example, it seems that Pangmo has not fully acquired the ability to configure verbs that vary phonologically across tense-aspect forms along with verbalizers and temporal adjectives. However, she may recognize regional variation in word-internal inflection of verbs and in the treatment of word classes. The past tense of "to go", *phyin*, while here a grammatical error in Standard Tibetan (the temporal adjective *–dus* can only be suffixed to a present-future verb stem), is a shibboleth indicating Lhasa origins. Consistent use of the root *'gro* across tense-aspect configurations (the present-future form in literary and Lhasa Tibetan) is much more common among Standard Tibetan and other regional varieties (Vokurkova 2008: 80-81). Therefore, Pangmo's sophistication in differentiating the tense-aspect forms of "to go" demonstrates a consistency in regional style.

4. Conclusions

This case study suggests that variation in nominalizers indicating regional origins, as well choices about the use of auxiliary verbs, may carry aesthetic value, and may indicate changing understandings of Tibetan grammar. Previous research in language variation and style has demonstrated that variation exists as a broad sociolinguistic field, with certain distinctive ways of speaking consolidated around networks of speakers (Eckert 2008, Zentella 1997). These networks and the linguistic features associated with them can be defined by characteristics including age, gender, and socioeconomic status. As Coupland asserts, however, while research on style has tended to focus on dialectal variation—that is, variation clearly linked to social (and especially, class) variation—the concept also encompasses intra-dialectal expressive variation (2001: 189). Irvine similarly highlights the reach of style beyond dialectal variation, arguing that the concept can be defined as "a social semiosis of distinctiveness" (2001: 22). These broader definitions of style show that stylization, or speakers' use of socio-linguistic variables in context, exploits consistencies and inconsistencies in the aesthetic dimensions of language.

In situations of extensive migration, however, speaker networks are de-territorialized. Pangmo and Tenzin's conversation, therefore, raises questions about how style is reformatted as diasporic peoples move and age. The issue of de-territorialization becomes particularly pronounced in the context of the Tibetan diaspora, where efforts towards cultivating pan-Tibetan ethno-linguistic identity (Nowak 1984: 65) also overlap with regionalism. In fact, the competition between regionalism and pan-Tibetan unity serves as a key factor structuring social networks and systems of political power (McGranahan 2010: 100; 62-63; 144-147). For example, exiled Tibetans remain particularly close to those from the same regions (U-tsang, Amdo, and Kham) and homelands (*pha.yul*)—the territorial terms that Tibetan exiles also employ as descriptors of their language varieties.

Tenzin and Pangmo's conversational moves demonstrate the extension of the competing forces of unification and regionalism in the realm of language socialization. As other case studies of language socialization have demonstrated, the structure of caregiver child conversational routines fosters children's development of both language form (grammar) and language ideologies (Brown 2002; Demuth 1986). And, social interaction, mediated through language, facilitates children's acquisition of culturally specific ideologies that guide (unconscious) judgments about aesthetics and thus allow for the transmission of stylistic features that function as forms of distinction. That is, in making stylistic choices, children manifest their knowledge of variation across linguistic forms, of the social identities associated with these varieties, and of the ideologies that structure these associations of language form and social value.

Pangmo, therefore, demonstrates tacit knowledge of the complexities of exiled Tibetan socio-linguistic identity. Previous scholars have noted that Lhasa Tibetan identity has permeated exile society, and that Lhasa Tibetan language has formed the primary base for the emergent Standard Tibetan. McGranahan, for example, argues that, in exiled Tibet,

> A homogenous and hegemonic Lhasa-centered identity critiques regional and sectarian identities as backward, divisive, and harmful to the Tibetan cause. Favored are central Tibetan styles of language and dress, general senses of propriety and comportment, and ideas of class, hierarchy, and prestige directly correlated to central Tibetan sociopolitical worlds [2010: 17].

My interlocutors, in Nepal and in New York City, described Pangmo's speech within a similar ideological framework. Some defined Pangmo's speech as "true Lhasa Tibetan," also remarking upon its "clearness". In addition to its associations with prestige, Lhasa Tibetan is also marked as feminine. Tibetans from all regions describe Lhasa Tibetan, with its four-tone distinction, as "like singing." My interlocutors also encouraged me to learn Lhasa Tibetan over other varieties, since, they argued, "Lhasa Tibetan is good for girls." In contrast, varieties of Kham and Amdo, which lack tones or show less-elaborated tone distinctions and employ fricatives and affricates not found in Lhasa Tibetan are described as "strong." And, men who speak Lhasa Tibetan have been called feminine and "gay." And, the metalinguistic differentiation of features as masculine or feminine contrasts "Lhasa" with Amdo/Kham, a formulation of the three-region map of Tibet. Neither masculine nor feminine is associated with "Standard Tibetan" features.

Tenzin's correction of Pangmo's speech, however, suggests that features of a single prestige variety are valorized differently across spaces of speaking. As people are displaced, so are socio-linguistic hegemonies. While Pangmo's stylistic choices may demonstrate regional or gender affiliation, these linguistic features are de-valorized by her father, within the specific genre of question-answer routines. Further research could differentiate how speakers employ such sociolinguistic variants across genres of speaking, and also throughout their movement between transnational communities.

Further, this material from Tibetan demonstrates that the notion of error, especially applied to children's speech, needs to be taken as an ontological rather than grammatical category. That is, researchers should consider the extent to which their documentation imposes ideologically-charged categorical rules that may obscure stylistic (both dialectal and expressive) variation (Ochs 1986). And, as Marcyliena Morgan demonstrates in the context of AAVE, researchers can implicitly define the authentic, vernacular form of a

language according to norms associated with gender and age (1994: 328-329). The complex values evoked by even a single linguistic feature demands attention to the social meanings of linguistic variants, rather than isolated evaluations of their grammatical functions.

A note on transcription:

The transcript follows the Wylie (1959) transliteration system. Each line is followed by a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss. An English translation of each utterance is then provided below the gloss. Parentheses in the English translation indicate an element that is covertly marked in the Tibetan gloss. All morpheme abbreviations were taken from the Leipzig glossing rules: http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php. Following the Leipzing rules, uncommon grammatical categories, namely, Tibetan's evidential categories, are written in full below the corresponding morphemes. Further, I have chosen to follow grammatical rules of literary Tibetan in transcribing certain verb roots that are phonetically identical but orthographically distinct across tense-aspect forms. As Vokurokva explains, the inflection of verb roots can be syllable-internal, often involving a vowel change, or external, involving affixes (2008: 88). In Lhasa and Standard Tibetan, only certain cases of syllable-internal changes render the tense-aspect forms phonetically distinct. Therefore, without further explanation in the body of the paper, the glosses of verb roots I have provided in the interlineal transcription (present or past) cannot be assumed as indicative of the speaker's intended tense-aspect form.

Key to conversation analysis symbols:
[indicates overlap
= indicates latching
* indicates grammatical error
(…) indicates a pause
((…)) indicates omitted speech

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