

PROLEGOMENON TO RGYALTHANG TIBETAN PHONOLOGY*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan is divided into three main dialects: *Dbus gtsang*, *Amdo*, and *Khams*. However, within these major regions, situated in different areas, each dialect has its own peculiarities. These linguistic divergences can sometimes surprise us even if their speakers are only a mountain away. More interestingly, we find that dialects which are far removed from one another may share certain attributes or similarities.

Zhongdian (Rgyalhang) county is located in the South of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is on the Qinghai plateau which slopes down to the south and cuts across mountain ridges at the northern end, which is indeed far

* Rgyalhang Tibetan is spoken in Zhongdian county, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, N.W. Yunnan, People's Republic of China. The author calls the dialect Zhongdian dialect, as it is thus known among local Chinese. But we chose to call it Rgyalhang Tibetan in this translation, as this is the name the Tibetans in Zhongdian call their language. The author is a native speaker of Rgyalhang. He lives in Zhongdian and has published numerous works on Tibetan language and literature, especially those dealing with the famous *Gling Gesar* epic. In translating this essay, we edited certain portions of the material. Phonetic symbols were adjusted so that they are more consistent, and redundant information was omitted with the permission of the author. For technical reasons, we substituted the tone numbers which appear in the original paper for the following symbols: /7/ for 55; /1/ for 51; /3/ for 231; /13/ for 13. /ŋ/ and /h/ are substituted for the symbol /7/ over the nasalized vowels. We also changed the title from "Prolegomenon to Rgyalhang Tibetan" to the present title. The paper appears in a local document called "Newsletter of the History of the Zhongdian County."

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The translation has been further revised by JAM. [Ed.]

from the center of Tibet proper. There have been long-standing contacts between the local dialects of Tibetan and Han, Naxi, Yi, Lisu, and other languages, since these ethnic groups have been living together in this area since time immemorial. The Tibetan spoken in this region is thus quite distinct from other Tibetan dialects. Moreover, since most people are illiterate, there have been few commentaries on the culture and tradition of the place. For these reasons, most people are prone to dismiss the Rgyalhang dialect as simply “a dialect of local people having nothing to do with Literary Tibetan.”

Therefore, I would like to present a brief introduction to Rgyalhang Tibetan in order to get feedback from other scholars and to ensure that more people know something about this interesting dialect.

2. CHARACTERISTICS AND PRINCIPLES OF RGYALTHANG TIBETAN FROM THE PHONETIC POINT OF VIEW

Language is a tool for the exchange of ideas. Social change and development have an impact on language change. This is true both for sound change and semantic change. In an area where transportation is difficult, economic development is slow. In such an area there are few political changes, and language change is rather slow. Contacts between Zhongdian and other areas are limited. Knowledge of Written Tibetan (WT) is quite unknown in this area. These are the reasons why the Rgyalhang dialect still preserves characteristics of more ancient forms of the language.

First of all, we should look at the pronunciation of a few basic words such as those written with the aspirated palatal initial ḥ . These are pronounced with [tḥ] in Lhasa Tibetan (LT) and other dialects, but [tḡh] in Rgyalhang Tibetan (RT). If we look at the spelling of these basic words we will find that [tḡh] used to be a standard pronunciation of this consonant in Old Tibetan. We can verify this speculation by examining Old Chinese transcriptions of vocabulary items translated from other languages. For example, if we stick to the Lhasa pronunciation, the word *chab mdo*, a place name, should be pronounced [tḥamto], not [tḡhā mtō]. The word *pan chen* ‘great scholar’ is pronounced [pān tḥhēn] in Lhasa dialect, not [bān tḡhān]. It is interesting to note that the pronunciations of these words in RT resemble those of Tibetan vocabulary items in Old Chinese. Another example is *gzhi ga rtse* (Shigatse), which is an old place name in *gTsang* Province, part of the Central *Dbus gtsang* area. If we stick to the pronunciation of the present day *Dbus gtsang*, it should be [çǐ kā tsē], but in RT whenever the sound *zh* is preceded by other sounds, it shifts to [z]. The pronunciation of this word in Modern Chinese is [zǐ kē tse]. Examples of this sort are too numerous to list.

In some documents written in Old Tibetan, especially those found in Dunhuang, we often find words spelled with the initial cluster *my-*. These words in standard Written Tibetan are written with the simple initial “m-” and pronounced accordingly /m-/. However, the Rgyalhang pronunciations of these words turn out to be very similar to those of Old Tibetan, with the palatal nasal /ɲ-/. Examples are *dmyig* [ɲī] ‘eye’, *mye* [ɲě] ‘fire’, *amyas* [ʔā ɲē] ‘grandfather’, *myed* [ɲê] ‘not have, not exist’, *myi dgos* [ɲĩ k̄ȳə] ‘not want’. (The kind of pronunciation in which certain sounds are omitted as shown above is not only evident in the Rgyalhang dialect but is widespread in other Tibetan dialects in the whole Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.) From the above examples it is clear that RT has preserved an older form of pronunciation.

Tibetan uses an alphabetic writing system. The writing is “beyond the differences of dialects”. The Tibetan dialects in the three major regions differ greatly from one another. Moreover, there is a distinction even within each major region, between counties or even between villages. The differences are due to poor communication as well as the political history of each place. A fortunate fact is that all these different dialects can be transcribed by 30 consonant and 4 vowel symbols, and they can be adequately accounted for in the framework of the grammatical treatises *Sumcupa* and *Rtagskyi ’jugpa*. This fact seems astonishing, and leads to the question: “Since Tibetan is a language that uses an alphabetic writing system, how is it possible to spell words in this dialect so that speakers of other dialects can understand?” (By contrast, the 80 or more letters of the Yi language are not sufficient for the Yi in the North and the South to communicate!) By enabling the three major dialect regions of the Tibetans to exchange opinions perfectly and accurately, the devisers of the Tibetan writing system have earned our appreciation of their intelligence and wit. What is meant by being “beyond the differences of dialects”? Why is the pronunciation of Rgyalhang not divergent from the spelling? Let us look into this further.

Though the same letters and syllables are used throughout the Tibetan-speaking area, the pronunciations are different. For example, the word *grwa ba* ‘monk’ is pronounced in LT as [tʂhā pā], but in Qinghai (Amdo Tibetan) as [tɕū wā], and in RT as [tɕā wā]. When we write down this word using the Tibetan alphabet, it is spelled exactly the same. Therefore, no matter what the local dialect might be, as long as one knows that it is this word with this particular spelling, any literate Tibetan will understand the meaning of the word right away.

Differences in the pronunciations of the words are due mainly to differences in the pronunciations of the consonants. For example, the

consonant in *sha* 'meat' is pronounced in LT as [çā] but in RT as [ʂā]. The same principle works automatically with other words with this initial, e.g. *shi* 'to die' (LT [çī], RT [ʂī]); *shing* 'wood, fuel' (LT [çīŋ], RT [ʂīŋ]). In other words, pronunciations are different, but the meanings stay the same.

The 30 consonants of WT are pronounced in RT as follows:

k	[ka ^f] ^{2,3}	kh	[kha ^f]	g	[ka ^v]	ng	[ŋa ^v]
c	[tʂa ^f]	ch	[tʂha ^f]	j	[tʂha ^v]	ny	[ɲa ^v]
t	[ta ^f]	th	[tha ^f]	d	[ta ^v]	n	[na ^v]
p	[pa ^f]	ph	[pha ^f]	b	[pa ^v]	m	[ma ^v]
ts	[tʂa ^f]	tsh	[tʂha ^f]	dz	[tʂa ^v]	w	[wa ^v]
zh	[ʒa ^v]	z	[sa ^v]	' ⁴	[fi ^a v]	y	[ja ^v]
r	[ra ^v]	l	[la ^v]	sh	[ʂa ^f]	s	[sa ^f]
h	[ha ^f]	ʔ	[ʔa ^f]				

Except for the nine consonants in boldface, the pronunciations of the remaining ones are similar to those in LT. Therefore, all the differences start with these nine consonants. If we take the total of simple initial consonants plus their combinations with prefixes and/or following glides, we end up with approximately 42 phonemes in RT:

Examples

p	pā	'bowl'
	pē	'hair (body); to move'
	pī	'calf; sheep hair'
ph	phà	'pig'
	phē	'to splash, sprinkle (water)'
	phī	'to push; to develop'

² The symbols *f* and *v* are used in the original to represent high and low tones respectively, a convention used traditionally by Tibetan grammarians.

³ Note that voiceless initials induce high tone, and voiced ones low tone, in accordance with tonogenetic principles. [Ed.]

⁴ The apostrophe is substituted for the symbol A used by the author. It is a common practice among Tibetologists to use the apostrophe to transliterate the graph འ "a-chung", which represents the voiced glottal fricative. In Written Tibetan this consonant can occur in initial position or as the first part of a cluster (e.g. 'od 'light', 'gro 'to go').

It is interesting to note that these words are pronounced completely differently in Rgyalthing and Lhasa Tibetan: 'light' LT *h̄ø*, RT *wūi*; 'to go' LT *t̄ø*, RT *ngūə*.

When the voiced glottal fricative functions as a main consonant in initial position, it becomes a semi-vowel in RT. When it is part of a consonant cluster, it converts the whole cluster into a prenasalized stop. Therefore, the voiced glottal fricative does not exist in Rgyalthing phonology, and does not really belong in the inventory.

b	bǎ	‘wave’
	bī	‘to pick (grass, flower)’
nb	nbǎ	‘sound (donkey); unpleasant sound’
	nbē	‘bug, worm’
	nbī	‘abundant, plentiful’
m	mǎ	‘mother’
	mē	‘to plough’
	mī	‘scar; handprint’
ṃ	ṃā	‘wound’
w	wǎ	‘fox’
	wǎṅ	‘(cattle) milk’
	wūi	‘light’
ts	tsā	‘root; vein, pulse’
	tsē	‘to estimate, calculate; to borrow (money)’
tsh	tshā	‘salt’
	tshē	‘dog’
dz	dzā	‘bud of a tree’
	dzǎ	‘to step on’
ndz	ndzǎ	‘provisions’
	ndzǐ	‘to drill through (a hole); to enter (a hole)’
s	sā	‘field, earth’
	sē	‘coccyx; to blow one’s nose’
z	zā	‘queen; woman’ ⁵
	zī	‘to hang’
t	tā	‘to look; horse’
	tè	‘to lean’
th	thà	‘sheep’s wool cloth’
	thē	‘to pick; to gather’
d	dā	‘to lick’
	dǎ	‘to collect’
	dī	‘to make trouble’
nd	ndā	‘arrow’
n	nā	‘ear’
	nē	‘sharp, pointed’
l	lā	‘river deer’
	lì	‘to peel (skin)’
ʈ	ʈā	‘deity’
	ʈỳ	‘to cheat’

⁵ This word occurs in compounds such as *dzāzā* ‘Chinese woman’, and *dzōzā* ‘Naxi woman’. It is, however, never used with the word *pī* ‘Tibet’ to render *pīza* ‘Tibetan woman’.

r	rǎ	'goat'
	rǎ	'mountain'
	rǐ	'rotten'
tɕ	tɕā	'to chew'
	tɕǎ	'ten; tongue'
	tɕī	'to twist'
tɕh	tɕhā	'pair'
	tɕhǎ	'big; water; 10,000'
dz	dzā	'enemy'
	dzǎ	'to change'
	dzī	'to roll, curl up'
ndz	ndzǎ	'to look like'
	ndzê	'to bite'
ɕ	ɕā	'meat, flesh'
	ɕǎ	'to die'
	ɕī	'to shake; to wash'
ʐ	ʐā	'to lay; to remain'
	ʐǎ	'bow; four'
	ʐī	'to melt (natural process); to dissolve' ⁶
tɕ	tɕā	'to ride'
	tɕǎ	'to give birth'
	tɕī	'to look for'
tɕh	tɕhǎ	'to bear'
	tɕhǎ	'lard'
	tɕhī	'thorny bush'
dz	dzā	'Han; 100; net'
	dzǎ	'to stab'
	dzī	'to meet; to have an audience with'
ndz	ndzā	'to hide oneself; to shrink'
	ndzû	'quick'
ɲ	ɲā	'back part of the neck'
	ɲǎ	'fire'
	ɲī	'heart'
ɕ	ɕǎ	'hen'
	ɕǎ	'paint, oil paint; to open'
	ɕī	'to understand; to be able to'
ʐ	ʐy	'snake'
	ʐǎ	wild cat

⁶ This is semantically distinct from RT ɕǎi 'to melt by an extra force, e.g. fire, sun' (e.g. fire, the sun).

	zî	'leopard'
j	jā	'man'
	jō	'left'
	jî	'to diffuse, vanish'
k	kā	'pillar; difficult'
	kō	'thief'
	kî	'to carry on one's back'
kh	khā	'mouth'
	khē	'fluent; brilliant'
	khî	'shy; embarrassed'
g	gā	'saddle'
	gō	'nine'
	gî	'to cross over'
ng	ngā	'obstacle'
	ngū	'rice (uncooked)'
	ngî	'to move (body)'
ŋ	ŋā	'five; to harvest'
	ŋǎ	'to cry'
ʔ	ʔǎ kō	'uncle (father's younger brother)'
	ʔǎ rà	'liquor'
h	hā	'to pant'
	hû	'to console (a child) by deceiving'

The relationship between the 42 initials of RT and their various possible spellings in WT is tabulated in the following chart:

<i>Pronunciation in RT</i>	<i>WT letters</i>			
pa	pa	ba	spa	dpa
pha	pha	'pha		
ba	rba	lba	sba	
nba	'ba			
ma	ma	rma	mra	dma
ṃa	sma			
wa	wa	dba	ba (as a suffix) ⁷	
tsha	tsha	rtsa	stsa	dza
tsha	tsha	tshwa	mtsha	'tsh
dz	rdza			
ndz	mdza			
sa	sa	sra	zra	

⁷ E.g. 'moon' WT *zla ba*, RT *dǎwā*.

za	bza	gza					
ta	ta	da	rta	lta	sla	bta	
tha	tha	mtha	fitha				
da	gda	bda	rda	lda	sda	zla	
nda	mda	'da					
na	na	rna	gna	mna			
ṅa	sna						
la	la	kla	gla	rla			
ṭa	lha	sla					
ra	ra						
tṣa	ca	tra	dra	gra			
tṣha	sha	khra					
dẓa	rja	lja					
ndẓa	'ja	mja	'dra	'gra			
ṣa	sha	zha	gsha	bsha	hra		
ẓa	bzha	gzha	zha				
ṭa	kya	gya					
ṭcha	khya						
ḍza	rgya	sgya					
nḍza	'gya						
ṇa	nya	gnya	rnya	snya	nywa	mya	
ṇa	py	phyā	bya	pra	bra	phra	
za	sbra	gya					
ja	ya						
ka	ka	ga	rka	lka	ska	dka	bka
kha	kha	mkha	'kha				
ga	dga	bga	rga	lga	sga		
nga	mga	'ga					
ṅa	ṅa	mṅa	lṅa	dṅa	mṅa		
ṅa	sṅa						
h	ha						

There are 31 vowels in RT.⁸

Examples

i phĩ 'to push, to develop'

⁸ This number includes diphthongs and nasalized vowels represented by combinations of vowels and nasals in this translation. Note that the author has given two other sets of examples for /u/ and another set for /i/. As I could not find the phonetic differences among them, and with the permission of the author, I did not mention them here. I also rearranged the presentation to make it easier for the readers to follow the examples.

	bī	'indigestion'
	khī	'a kind of Chinese measurement'
y	tȳ	'colt'
	dȳ	'to grow'
	tchȳ	'you'
e	phě	'piggy'
	tṣè	'to cut (wood)'
	dzē	'gunpowder'
ε	ně	'a kind of barley'
	mè	'lower body'
	ɲê	'not have'
ə	pə	'to move'
	nbə	'worm, insect'
	tṣhə	'water'
a	mă	'mother'
	tà	'tiger'
	kā	'pillar'
o (uo)	phō	'to jump'
	bō	'breath'
	tçò	'to vomit'
u	pū	'to blow'
	ṣù	'to come (imperative form)'
	zû	'to sharpen (with knife)'
	çù	'to snatch away'
u	ʔū	'to borrow'
	kù	'to pry'
	khù	'to take'
iu	tǐu	'there'
	thîu	'plane'
	dīu	'saw'
iə	līə	'to rescue'
	tīə	'to shut (door)'
	dīə	'this one'
ia	bǐa	'tumour'
	mīa	'mole'
	kīa	'hair'
io	lìo	'to catch up'
	thìo	'to guess correctly'
	kìo	'to stir; to stir up'
yə	gȳə	'to be necessary'

	kh̄ȳə	'he/she'
ye	j̄ȳe	'to tip; to lean'
	kh̄ȳe	'lead; to be fragile'
	k̄ȳe	'wheat'
ya	ç̄ȳa	'hail'
	j̄ȳa	'handle (knife)'
	j̄ȳa	'to cover'
ei	ph̄èi	'to remove'
	nb̄èi	'to call for'
ui	w̄ûi	'light'
	nd̄ûi	'to desire'
	tsh̄ùì	'proportion; right measure'
uə	s̄ûə	'tooth'
	l̄üə	'year'
	tsh̄ūə	'lake'
ua	s̄ūa	'a kind of barley'
	ts̄ūa	'grass'
	ʃ̄ūa	'sore, ulcer'
iŋ	s̄iŋ	'to give'
	dz̄iŋ	'lie'
	t̄iŋ	'to support'
yn	j̄yn	'left side'
	t̄ç̄yn	'to put on (clothes)'
	ç̄yn	'to go/come (honorific)'
en	th̄ēn	'bad (person)'
	l̄ēn	'incorrect'
ɛŋ	ph̄ēŋ	'useful'
	b̄ěŋ	'to soak'
	m̄ēŋ	'medicine'
aŋ	w̄ǎŋ	'milk'
	w̄àŋ	'to let go'
oŋ	tsh̄ǒŋ	'to complete'
	s̄ōŋ	'to protect; to guard'
	n̄ōŋ	'sky'
iaŋ	k̄iǎŋ	'liquor pot'
	p̄iǎŋ	'rice barn; warehouse'
ioŋ	k̄iōŋ	'swollen'
	l̄iōŋ	'to shake, to tremble'
	ph̄iōŋ	'sad'
ein	p̄ēin	'headman'

	dzĕin	‘an inferior grade of wheat flour’
	gĕin	‘winter’
uin	tshuĭn wāŋ	‘vegetable’
	guĭn	‘torch made from pinewood’
	kūin	‘few, sparse’
uən	hūən kū	‘blue/light blue’

The main vowels in RT occur both short and long, viz. a, aa, i, ii, u, uu, e, ee, and o, oo. But in two syllable words short vowels are whispered, or reduced to shwa. For example, *ka* ‘pillar’ in *kadoŋ* ‘supporting pillars’ is pronounced as *kədoŋ*. Generally long vowels will remain the same in any environment.⁹

Vowels are influenced by neighboring consonants. In RT there is a special phonological process of this kind which is different from LT. That is, before the final consonants *g* or *gs*, the vowel *u* is pronounced as /o/, and the vowel *o* is pronounced as /u/.

Generally speaking, tones in RT are similar to those in LT. They are 55 / - /, 51 / ` /, 231 / ^ /, and 13 / ~ /. No tonal marks are given to unstressed words.

Examples

sā	‘earth’
sǎ	‘to eat’ ¹⁰
sà	‘to burn’
sâ	‘to fall down’
nā	‘ear’
nǎ	‘sick’
nà	‘pus’
nâ	‘black, dark; forest’
nā	‘neck’
nǎ	‘fish’
nà	‘to cut (vegetable, meat)’
nâ	‘name of a family’
lā	‘river deer’
lǎ	‘mountain pass’
là	‘eagle’
lâ	‘hand’

⁹ According to my own fieldnotes, vowel length is not distinctive in this dialect.

¹⁰ Generally, the word ‘to eat’ in Rgyalhang is /tʂhǎ/. The author might have given the Lhasa word here.

3. ROLES OF THE FINAL CONSONANTS

1. Final *g* or *gs* causes tone 55 to become 51, or tone 13 to become 231, and causes the WT vowel *o* to become /u/, and *u* to become /o/.

Exs.:

WT *phag* 'pig' is pronounced as [phà]

WT *dags* is pronounced as [dâ].

WT *lug* 'sheep' is pronounced as [lô]

WT *lugs* 'habit; tradition' is pronounced as [lô]

2. Final *ŋ* when combined with the vowel *a* causes the vowel to become rounder, that is, /oŋ/. This has no effect on tone.

Ex.:

WT *khaŋpa*, RT [khōŋpā].

3. Final *d* causes tone 55 to become 51, or 13 to become 231 and at the same time causes the WT vowel *a* to become /ɛ/, WT *o* to become /yə/, and WT *u* to become /uə/.

Exs.:

thad is pronounced as [thè].

khod is pronounced as [khỳə].

phud is pronounced as [phùə].

4. Final *s* has an effect on vowel change in a similar manner to final *d* but has no effect on tone.

5. Final *n* has the same effect as final *s*.

Exs.:

phan is pronounced as [phēn].

thon is pronounced as [thỳən].

jun is pronounced as [jŭn].

rin is pronounced as [rĭn].

len is pronounced as [lēn].

6. Final *b* causes tone 55 to become 51, or 13 to become 231, and at the same time causes the WT vowel *a* to become /o/, WT *o* to become /u/, and WT *u* to become /y/.

Exs:

khab is pronounced as [khò].

thob is pronounced as [thù].

thub is pronounced as [thỳ].

7. Final *m* has a similar effect to final *ñ*.

8. Final *r* causes the WT vowels *a* and *e* to become /ɯ/, WT *u* to become /o/, and WT *o* to become /u/. It also lengthens the vowel but has no effect on the tone.

Exs.:

shar is pronounced as [ṣū̄].

sher is pronounced as [ṣū̄].

khur is pronounced as [khǒ̄].

nor is pronounced as [nú̄].

9. Final *l* causes the WT vowel *a* to become /i/, WT *o* to become /y/, and WT *u* to become /ei/, but it has no effect on tone.

Exs.:

nyal is pronounced as [ɲĩ̄].

khól is pronounced as [khỹ̄].

shel is pronounced as [ṣēī].

rul is pronounced as [rěī].

10. Certain suffixes are fused with a preceding vowel.

Ex.:

nga-'i 'I-genitive case' is pronounced [ŋě̄].