

TIBETAN *VWA* ‘FOX’ AND THE SOUND CHANGE TIBETO-BURMAN **WA* > TIBETAN *O*

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Paul Benedict (1972: 34) proposed that Tibeto-Burman medial *-*wa*-regularly leads to -*o*- in Old Tibetan, but that initial **wa* did not undergo this change. Because Old Tibetan has no initial *w*-, and several genuine words have the rhyme -*wa*, this proposal cannot be accepted. In particular, the initial of the Old Tibetan word *vwa* ‘fox’ is ^ʳ*v*- and not *w*-.

Keywords: Old Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, phonology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tibetan word *vwa* ‘fox’ has received a certain amount of attention for being an exception to the theory that Tibeto-Burman **wa* yields *o* in Tibetan¹. The first formulation of this sound law known to me is Laufer’s statement “Das Barmanische besitzt nämlich häufig die Verbindung *w+a*, der ein tibetisches [sic] *o* oder *u* entspricht [Burmese namely frequently has the combination *w+a*, which corresponds to a Tibetan *o* or *u*]” (Laufer 1898/1899: part III, 224; 1976: 120). Laufer’s generalization was based in turn upon cognate sets assembled by Bernard Houghton (1898). Concerning this sound change, in his 1972 monograph, Paul Benedict writes: “Tibetan has initial *w*- only in the words *wa* ‘gutter’, *wa* ‘fox’ and

¹ Here I follow the Wylie system of Tibetan transliteration with the exception that the letter ^ʳ (erroneously called *a-chung* by some) is written in the Chinese fashion as <*v*> rather than the confusing <’>. On the value of Written Tibetan *v* as [ʃ] cf. Hill (2005).

wa-le ~*wal-le* ‘clear’ [...]; medial *wa* is regularly represented in Tibetan by *o*” (1972: 34). W. South Coblin paraphrases this position, saying that: “[i]t would therefore seem that it is only where **wa* appears in absolute initial position in Tibetan that it essentially retains its P[roto]T[ibeto]B[urman] form” (1994: 117). This explanation of the conditioning for this sound law relies on two false premises: first, that the consonant *w-* can occur as an initial in Old Tibetan; and second, that Old Tibetan does not have a genuine example of medial *-w-*.

2. THE NONEXISTENCE OF INTIAL *w-* IN OLD TIBETAN

Two of Benedict’s examples of initial *w-*, *wa* ‘gutter’ and *wa-le* ‘clear’ are easily dismissed, because neither of these words is attested in Old Tibetan². The second, *wa-le*, is an expressive adverb/adjective formed with the *-e* suffix. Such words “do not belong to the Late Old Tibetan layer of the classical language, but to the elements that were taken from the spoken language” (Uray 1953: 240). The word *wa* ‘gutter’ in the Amdo dialect of Rme-ba (Hóngyuán county 紅原縣) is pronounced [ʁa], exactly the same pronunciation as the word *vwa* ‘fox’ (Hua 2001: 125 #773). This is perhaps evidence that the initial of this word was also originally *vw-*³. However, all of the other dialects reported by Hua pronounce this word with initial *w-*.

Benedict somehow overlooks the fact that his third example of initial *w-*, the Tibetan word *vwa* ‘fox,’ does not have an initial *w-* but rather an initial འ *v-* [ɣ]. The classical Tibetan letter འ *w-* is

² These words are lacking in the indexed texts of the Old Tibetan Documents Online Project of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, hereafter cited as OTDO: < http://www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/~hoshi/OTDO_web/index.html > (accessed 6 August 2006).

³ Inversly, the coincidence of these two words could conceivably be seen as evidence for an initial *w-* in ‘fox.’ However, given the Old Tibetan spelling *vwa* and those dialects which point to an initial *v-* presented in this paper, this interpretation is untenable.

historically an Old Tibetan diagraph $\text{𑄎} \text{vw-}$ (Uray 1955: 110). Old Tibetan has no words with initial *w-*. A note of Benedict’s to the previously quoted passage itself belies his belief that *w-* is the initial of the word *vwa*.

T[ibetan] *wa* ‘fox’ has been derived from T[ibeto-]B[urman] **gwa*, as represented by Chamba Lahuli *g̃wa*, Bunan *goa-nu* ~ *gwa-nu*. The initial stop appears to be preserved in the form *gaa* ‘fox’ cited for the Amdo dialect (Kansu) in N. M. Przhevalski, *Mongolie et pays des Tangoutes* (trans. by G. du Laurens), Paris, 1880 [i.e. Prjévalski 1880]. (Benedict 1972: 34 n. 111)

Benedict does not provide a page number for his citation but must intend “renard *gaa* [fox *gaa*]” (Prjévalski 1880: 210, in the original Russian “Лилица *Gaa* [Lisitsa *Gaa*, Fox *Gaa*]” Пржевальский 1875: 258). Had Benedict consulted the original Russian, or the English or German translations, he would have seen this sentence (omitted in the French translation): “«Г» въ иачалѣ словъ произносится какъ латинское «h»: гóма (молоко)” (Пржевальский 1875: 258), translated by Morgan as “The letter g at the beginning of a word is pronounced like the Latin h: *hóma* (milk)” (Prejevalsky 1876: 112), and by Kohn as “„G“ wird am Anfange eines Wortes wie das lateinische „H“ ausgesprochen: Goma [spr. Homa] (die Milch)” (von Prschewalski 1881: 333, brackets in original). Prževalskij decided to indicate this sound with <Г> ‘g’, but mention its similarity to an ‘h’; it seems thus that <Г> is meant to represent [ɣ], with the same voicing and place of articulation of ‘g’, but the fricative manner of an ‘h’. The initial that Benedict considered a Proto-Tibeto-Burman relic, instead perfectly parallels the written Old Tibetan form.

As Uray Géza points out, the Tibetan form *vwa* [ɣwa] matches the proposed Tibeto-Burman **gwa* very well (1955: 110 n. 5). Uray was not responding to Benedict’s reconstruction (which had not yet

been published) but instead to Robert Shafer's identical earlier suggestion (1940: 318). In addition to the forms cited by Benedict, Shafer also adds Chinese 狐 *hú* (1940: 318), which is now reconstructed in the system of Sagart and Baxter as Old Chinese **^agwa* (Guillaume Jacques, personal communication 11 August 2006).

In addition to the work of Prževalskij, a number of other resources documenting the pronunciation of initial *v-* in the word *vwa* 'fox' could have been available to Benedict. These sources have been assembled by Róna-Tas András (1962: 339):

<i>chwa</i> (=γḡa)	Dpa-ri	(Hermanns 1952: 196)
<i>kwa</i> (<γḡa)		(von Klaproth 1823: 350) ⁴
<i>γ^wa</i>	Blo-bzang brtan-vdzin	(Gō 1954: 90)
<i>ra</i> (<γa) ⁵	Amdo	(Széchenyi 1897: 360 vol. III, and 1898: 425 vol. III)
<i>γa</i>	Reb-gong	(de Roerich 1958: 23)
<i>zaa</i> (=γā)	Amdo	(Пржевальский 1875: 259) ⁶
<i>g a</i>	Pao an	(Потанин 1893) ⁷

⁴ von Klaproth gives no indication of which dialect he is citing.

⁵ In light of the choice of transcription perhaps *za* is a better analysis (cf. Uray 1955: 110 n. 4). Széchenyi Béla also offers the alternate transcription *kva* (= γḡa ?) (vol. III, 1897: 360 and vol. III, 1898: 425).

⁶ This is of course the same form noticed by Benedict in his note 111, discussed above.

⁷ For clarity of presentation I have reorganized Róna-Tas' citations and added full bibliographical information. His original text reads as follows:

Dpa-ri *chwa* (=γḡa) [...] Klaproth *kwa* (< γḡa), Blo-bzañ brtan-'jin [=Blo-bzang brtan-vdzin] γ^wa, Széchenyi *ra* (<γa), Rebkong [Rebgong] γa, Prževalskij *zaa* (= γā) (>Pao an *g a*). (Róna-Tas 1962: 339 parentheses in original, brackets mine)

In the citation from Blo-bzang brtan-vdzin (Gō 1954: 90) in entry 1260 the pronunciation is given as *r^wa*, but the alphabetical list of entries on page E6 gives γ^wa for the same entry; Róna-Tas is undoubtedly correct to see the first as a printing error, and follow the second. I have been unable to locate the correct page number in Потанин (1893). Róna-Tas' analysis follows up on the work of Uray (1955), and is returned to in Róna-Tas (1966: 132 n. 155).

To these one could now add the following dialects:

<i>ɣɛ</i>	Zho-ngu (Rèwù 熱務)	(Sun 2003: 812)
<i>ɣa</i>	Rtavu (Dàofú 道孚)	(Zhang 1996: 23)
<i>ɣa</i>	Bsang-chu (Xiàhé 夏河)	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɣa</i>	Reb-gong (Tóngrén 衞仁)	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409) ⁸
<i>ɣa</i>	Rdo-sbis (Xúnhuà 循化)	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɣa</i>	Ba-yan-mkhar (Huàlóng 化隆)	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɤa</i>	Rme-ba (Hóngyuán 紅原)	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409) ⁹
<i>ɤa</i>	Them-chen (Tiānjùn 天峻)	(Haller 2004: 389, Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɤæ</i>	Mdzo-dge Sde-pa (Ruòěrgài Xiámàn 若爾蓋轄幔)	(Sun 1986: 204 #44)
<i>ɤwa</i>	Dar-lag (Dári 達日)	(Zhang 1996: 23)

The dialects mentioned so far all stem from Eastern Tibet. Bettina Zeisler however draws my attention to /fiatse/ ‘fox’ in the Gyen Skad dialect of Ladakh (the suffix /-tse/ is a productive noun suffix in much of Ladakh, Bettina Zeisler personal communication 10 September 2005). Compare in the same dialect *vong* /fioŋ/ ‘come,’ *vod* /fiot/ ‘light,’ and *vo-ma* /fioma/ ‘milk.’ There can remain no doubt that the initial of *vwa* is *v-* and not *w-*.

3. THE PHONETIC VALUE OF MEDIAL -*W-*

In the Old Tibetan Dunhuang documents the following words with medial *-w-* are attested: *grwa* ‘corner’ (*Pelliot tibétain* 1134, l. 190), *phywa* ‘luck, fortune’ (PT 0126, l. 14, etc.), *rtswa* ‘grass’ (PT 1136, l. 36, etc.), *vwa* ‘fox’ (PT 1134, ll. 93, 94 and 98), and *rwa* ‘horn’ (*India Office Library* 0730, l. 33, etc.)¹⁰. The second point of Benedict’s argument, that medial *-w-* does not occur in Old Tibetan, relies on the widespread misconception that the medial *-w-* in such examples has no phonetic value (Benedict 1972: 49; Beyer 1992: 79-

⁸ This is of course the same dialect and the same pronunciation recorded by de Roerich (1958: 23) and cited by Róna-Tas above.

⁹ In many Amdo dialects *ɤ* is the regular reflex of *v-* (cf. Sun 2003: 781 n. 18).

¹⁰ The examples were collected using OTDO (accessed 6 August 2006).

81; Beckwith 2006: 53 n. 9). More than a century ago Berthold Laufer proved otherwise (1898/1899). Because his arguments have gone unheeded they merit detailed rehearsal here. Evidence that medial *-w-* of the orthography indeed represents a phonetic reality comes in three kinds: phonetic transcriptions of spoken Tibetan, alternations within Written Tibetan between *-wa-* on the one hand and *-u-* or *-o-* on the other hand, and finally, the transcription of foreign labial medial glides with Tibetan *-w-*.

The pronunciation of medial *-wa-* in the Tibetan dialects is directly attested in the words *rtswa* ‘grass’, *vwa* ‘fox’, *zhwa* ‘hat’, and *rwa* ‘horn’. For the word *rtswa* ‘grass’, Laufer gathered the following citations (1898/1899: part I, 305-307; 1976: 77-79):

<i>stswá-</i>	Ladakh	(Sandberg 1894: 283) ¹¹
<i>stswa</i>	Purik	(Jäschke 1881: 437)
<i>rtsva</i>	Balti	(Jäschke 1868: 163)
<i>rtswa</i>	Balti	(Jäschke 1881: 437) ¹²

To these I am able to add one citation, also from Balti:

[<i>rtswa:</i>]	Balti	(Sprigg 2002: 146) ¹³
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For *zhwa* ‘hat’, Laufer cites Ladakh *zhwá-* (Sandberg 1894: 282). Unfortunately Balti appears to lack the word *zhwa* ‘hat.’ Concerning the pronunciation of the word *rwa* ‘horn’, Laufer (1898/1899: part I, 307; 1976: 79) cites Jäschke’s comment that *rwa* “sounded exactly like the French word *roi*” (Jäschke 1881: xiii). However, it is not clear to me whether Jäschke is reporting a pronunciation he heard (presumably in Ladakh) or expressing an opinion about how this

¹¹ Only in the compound <rtswa-skam> *stswáskám* ‘dry grass, hay’.

¹² In his prefatory material Jäschke also gives *stsoá* for Balti, and *rtsoá* for Purik (1881: xix), but when compared with his other citations, and that of Sprigg (2002: 146), it is clear that in this case Jäschke has mistakenly inverted the two dialects.

¹³ In fact the entry reads as follows “*rtso-ba s* (pron. *-tswaa*) weed, grass [T. *rtswa*]” (Sprigg 2002: 146), which according to the introduction appears to mean <rtswa> /rtso^ba/ [*rtswa:*].

word was pronounced in the seventh century. In either case, the *-w-* can be seen to be valid with reference to Sprigg, who gives [rwa:] for this word in Balti (Sprigg 2002: 143)¹⁴. One may also add the transcription *roua dong* for Written Tibetan *rwa-dung* ‘ox-horn trumpet’ by the French missionaries of Eastern Tibet (Desgodins 1885: 393).

Laufer also finds reason to consider the *-w-* of the word *lwa-ba* ‘woollen cloth, garment’ genuine. This word is used as the translation equivalent of the Sanskrit word *kambala* ‘woollen cloth.’ In a number of texts however, Sanskrit proper nouns containing the word *kambala* are rendered into Tibetan with *wa-ba* or *wa-wa* (1898/1899: part II, 212; 1976: 108). Unable to confirm such a pronunciation for this word in the contemporary dialects, I am tempted to consider such examples scribal error. A copyist seeing *lw-* ལ་ might easily write *w-* ར་, especially in foreign names where copyists are liable to error in any case.

The preservation of a medial *-w-* is further attested in the following aforementioned forms for the word *vwa* ‘fox:’ *ɣ^wa* (Gö 1954: 90), *chwa* (ɣ^wɑ) (Hermanns 1952: 196), *kwa* (ɣ^wɑ) (von Klaproth 1823: 350), *kva* (ɣ^wɑ) (Széchenyi 1897: 360 vol. III, and 1898: 425 vol. III), and *ɸwa* (Zhang 1996: 23).

Three of those dialects cited above where the medial *-w-* of the cluster *vw-* is not directly preserved, have a uvular rather than a velar fricative as the initial of the word *vwa*, although they have a velar fricative as the reflex of *-v-* in the word *rtevu* ‘colt, pony’. This fact could indicate a sound change **ɣ^w > ɸ* in these dialects, and thus provide indirect evidence for the erstwhile medial *-w-*.

vwa ‘fox’

<i>ɸa</i>	Rme-ba	(Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɸa</i>	Them-chen	(Haller 2004: 389, Hua 2001: 84-85 #409)
<i>ɸæ</i>	Mdzo-dge Sde-pa	(Sun 1986: 204 #44)

¹⁴ In fact the entry reads “ro-ba s (pron. rwa), horn [T. rwa/tu]” (Sprigg 2002: 143).

<i>rtevu</i>	‘colt, pony’	
<i>rtiyə</i>	Rme-ba	(Hua 2001: 77 #342)
<i>rtiyə</i>	Them-chen	(Hua 2001: 77 #342)
<i>stiγə</i>	Them-chen	(Haller 2004: 329)
<i>htiγr</i>	Mdzo-dge Sde-pa	(Sun 1986: 202 #25) ¹⁵

However, the matter is not quite so simple, as can be seen from the reflexes of the word *vod* ‘light’.

<i>ɛot</i>	Rme-ba	(Hua 2001: 41 #3)
<i>ol</i>	Them-chen	(Hua 2001: 41 #3; Haller 2004: 416)
<i>ot</i>	Mdzo-dge Sde-pa	(Sun 1986: 234 #48)

The doublet *ra* (= *ka*) with the alternate *kva* (= *γua*) given by Széchenyi could be seen as sign that this sound change was in progress in the dialect of Amdo he describes (1897: 360 vol. III, and 1898: 425 vol. III).

Finally, all of those dialects in which the word for ‘fox’ is pronounced with an initial *w-* provide indirect evidence for the validity of a former medial *-w-* (e.g. Shigatse *wɑ* [Haller 2000: 293]; Balti *wa* [Sprigg 2002: 173]; Lhasa *wa¹¹ mo⁵³* [Hua 2001: 84 #409]). If the medial *-w-* in *vwa* were not genuine, the word for ‘fox’ would have been **va* [γa]. Dialect reflexes of **va* as *wa* would then be odd. So, the possibility that the medial *-w-* in *vwa* is not genuine must be rejected.

¹⁵ The other dialects have lost the diminutive suffix, but its former presence can still be seen in the quality of the vowel: Reb-gong *hti* (Hua 2001: 77 #342); Reb-gong *^xtī* (de Roerich 1958: 125); Bsang-chu *hti* (*tshək*) (Hua 2001: 76 #342). Them-chen also has the suffix *-vu* in the word <revu>: *riγə* ‘kid’ (Hua 2001: 79 #352); *riγə* ‘Zicklein [kid]’ (Haller 2004: 313). In this case Rme-ba has lost the suffix but retained the changed vowel quality: *ri* (Hua 2001: 79 #352). With two interesting exceptions the other dialects reported by Hua for this word in fact use instead the word <ra-phyug>. The exceptions are: Reb-gong *ri nbə*; Rdo-sbis *rj ko* (Hua 2001: 79 #352). De Roerich gives the Reb-gong form as *rī-gō* ‘cheveau [kid]’ (1958: 146). For a study of this diminutive suffix, see Uray (1952).

The second type of evidence confirming the reality of medial *-w-* is the alternation within Written Tibetan of *-wa* with *-u*. Such alternations were first pointed out by Anton Schiefner who drew attention to the two doublets *ru* ~ *rwa*¹⁶ ‘horn’ and *gru* ~ *grwa* ‘corner’ (1852: 343); such doublets in themselves constitute evidence for a phonetic value of medial *-w-*. Laufer adds *shwa* ~ *shu* ‘deer,’ and *dwa(-ba)* / *dwa(-ma)* ~ *du(-ba)* ‘tobacco’ (1898/1899: part II, 96; 1976: 80). Rolf Stein adds *zhwa* ~ *zhu* ‘hat’ and *phywa* ~ *phyu* ~ *phyavu* ‘luck, fortune’ (1952: 82). Another particularly noteworthy example of exchange among *-wa*, *-u*, and *-o* occurs in the number ten. According to the prescriptive grammar of Written Tibetan the word *bcu* ‘ten’ is written as *bco* in the words *bco-linga* ‘fifteen’ and *bco-brgyad* ‘eighteen.’ First mentioned by Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1834: 63), but reiterated by Laufer and Walter Simon is the fact however that *bco* appears to develop from an earlier *bcwa*; before *linga* ‘five’ and *brgyad* ‘eight’ the word ‘ten’ has taken the various forms *bcu*, *bcwa*, *bcwo*, *bco* and even *bcwav* (Simon 1971). I am able to add an additional example of an alternation between *-o* and *-wa*. In his dictionary Sarat Chandra Das gives the following entry “*srin-bu-kwa-kwa* maggot worm, generally infesting the mouth of the rectum” (1902). This is clearly a compound formed of *srin-bu* ‘worm’ and *ko-ko* ‘excrement.’ Thus the pair *-kwa-kwa* and *ko-ko* shows an alternation between *-wa-* and *-o-*¹⁷.

The third type of evidence for the validity of the medial *-w-* in is the use of this letter to transcribe a foreign medial *-w-*. Evidence of a Chinese labial semivowel transcribed with a Tibetan *wa-zur* in ninth and tenth century documents has been pointed to by several authors (e.g. Laufer 1898/1899: part III, 221-222; 1976: 117-118; Uray 1955:

¹⁶ Pointing to the three spellings *sna-ru*, *rna-ru* and *na-ro* for the vowel symbol འོ, Schiefner suggests adding *ro* as a variant of *rwa* and *ru* (1852: 358-359). This variant is confirmed in a text edited by Laufer “*sdig pa ro ring*, [line] 66, Scorpionen mit langem Stachel [scorpions with a long tail]” (1899: 57; 1976: 563).

¹⁷ Laufer mentions a number of additional pairs showing an alternation between *-wa* and *-u*, which are less straightforward (1898/1899: part II, 95; 1976: 80).

107; Beyer 1992: 80). An evaluation of this evidence unfortunately lies outside of my competence.

4. THE CONDITIONING OF THE SOUND CHANGE *WA > O

Since *w-* is not the initial of *vwa* ‘fox,’ and in quite a number of words medial *-wa-* remains unchanged in Old Tibetan, Benedict’s explanation for the conditioning of the change *wa > o* must be rejected. It is worth considering afresh what indications the Tibetan data can yield about the conditioning of this sound law.

Although the practice of writing by the Tibetans only began after the completion of this change, there appears to be one Tibetan word which is preserved in foreign transcription possibly before undergoing this sound change. The Tibetan autonym *bod* is preserved in two early foreign transcriptions. In the *Hòuhànshū* 後漢書 of Fàn Yè 范曄, the Fā Qiāng 發羌 people are mentioned three times. The first entry pertains to the time circa 126-145CE. In the Han dynasty the character 發 was pronounced something like *bwat* (Beckwith 1977: 1-6). The *Geography* of Ptolemy (circa 100-178CE) gives the name of a βαῖται ‘Baitai’ people. However, due to the name of the nearby river given as βαύτισος ‘Bautisos’ many authors have suggested that the text is corrupt and the people ought to have been called the *βαῦται *Bautai (Beckwith 1977: 1-6). The Chinese transcription *bwat* thus disagrees with the Greek transcription *baut* about the nature of the diphthong. In either case these data, even if difficult to interpret, are relevant to the sound change *wa > o*, and should be considered in future research.

An examination of all Tibetan words for which the reality of a medial *-w-* can be confirmed reveals them to be open syllables (*kwa-kwa* ‘excrement’, *grwa* ‘corner’, *bcwa* ‘ten’, *phywa* ‘fortune, luck’, *rtswa* ‘grass’, *vwa* ‘fox’, *zhwa* ‘hat’, *rwa* ‘horn’, *shwa* ‘deer’). I am aware of two Written Tibetan words which are closed syllables, and yet are regularly spelled with a medial *-w-*. The first is *-dwags* as in *ri-dwags* ‘beast of the chase’ and *yi-dwags* ‘hungry ghost, Sanskrit *preta*’. The second example is the word *dwangs* ‘clear’. In both of these cases, Balti, which normally preserves *-wa-*, has no indication

of medial *-w-*: /ridaks/ [ridaɣs] ‘ibex’ (Sprigg 2002: 139), with /than/ [t^hã] in the Khapalu dialect and /thans/ [t^hãs] in the Skardu dialect (Sprigg 2002: 164)¹⁸. In both these examples, the medial *-w-* by attaching to the *ming-gzhi* serves as a *mater lectionis* to differentiate རྩམས *dwags* from རྩམས *dgas*, and རྩངས *dwangs* from རྩངས *dngas* respectively. Given the lack of data confirming *-w-* in these two cases, and the fact that there is an ulterior motive for the employment of *-w-*, there is reason to suspect that in these two cases the *-w-* is not genuine. Both words are lacking in Old Tibetan (OTDO, accessed 10 August 2006). Laufer also dismisses these two examples, connecting *-dwags* to *vdogs*, *btags*, *gdags*, *thogs* ‘to bind’, and *dwangs* to *dang* ‘pure, clean’, *thang* (West) ‘clear, serene’, and *dag-pa* ‘clean, pure’, pointing out the absence of a *wa-zur* in these latter words (1898/1899: part I, 300-302; 1976: 72-74).

Since all confirmed examples of medial *-w-* are in open syllables, and the examples in closed syllables are suspect, it is tempting to suggest that the change **wa > o* did not apply in open syllables, and therefore it is only in open syllables that *-wa* may still be found. The phonological history of the word *vwa-* ‘fox’ provides striking confirmation of this hypothesis. As pointed out by Coblin (1994: 118), in the Dunhuang manuscript *Pelliot Tibétain* 1071 the word ‘fox’ did undergo this change; the term *vwa-dom* ‘fox-pendant worn as a badge of dishonor’ is written *vo-dom*. This compound word would thus seem to be earlier than the sound change **wa > o*. After that sound change *vo-* was no longer transparently connected to *vwa*, and consequently the compound was formed anew as *vwa-dom*. Similarly Middle English *houswif* leads to *hussy* through regular sound change, and now it exists next to the newer and more transparent compound *housewife*. If indeed *vwa* and *vo-dom* are of Tibeto-Burman provenance, it seems that the only available explanation for why the former did not undergo the **wa > o* sound

¹⁸ The relevant entries read “thang (K.) *v* clear of clouds (sky) [T. (W.) thang; cf. *dwangs-pa* ‘pure’, ‘clear’]” and “thangs (S.) *v* clear of clouds [T. (W.) thang; cf. *dwangs-pa* ‘pure’, ‘clear’]” (Sprigg 2002: 164 brackets in original).

change, whereas the latter did, is that **wa* > *o* obtained only in closed syllables.

Some Tibetan words with open syllables in *-o-* have been provided Tibeto-Burman etymologies with **-wa*. These words are counterexamples to the proposal here that the change **wa* > *o* did not occur in open syllables. In Benedict (1972) I find the following such examples: **gwa* > Tibetan *bgo* ‘to put on clothes’ (#160), **twa* > Tibetan *mtho* ‘span’ (#165), **s-wa* > Tibetan *so* ‘tooth’ (#437). Matisoff appears to add no new examples (2003: 167)¹⁹. Either these reconstructions are to be somehow revised, or the conditioning of the change the change **wa* > *o* proposed here must be further refined, or rejected. A reexamination of the comparative data which lead to reconstructions of these words with the rhyme **-wa* exceeds the scope of this paper. Whether the conditioning of the change **wa* > *o* proposed here, that the change occurred only in closed syllables, prove valid or not, it should in any event be clear that the Old Tibetan word *vwa* ‘fox’ has *v-* and not *w-* as its initial, and that the medial *-w-* in Old Tibetan indeed represents a phonetic reality. Consequently, the conditioning of the sound change proposed by Benedict cannot be valid.

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¹⁹ Benedict also posulates **-aw* and **-ow* as sources for Old Tibetan *-o* (1972: 62).

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