Certain Phonetic Changes in Tibetan in the Light of Variant and Erroneous Spellings in Old Tibetan Documents of the Royal Period

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Due to the fact that from the creation of Tibetan writing in the seventh century until the graphic reforms of the third decade of the ninth century the script did not undergo systematic standardization, there is considerable variation in spelling, usage, addition of grammatical particles, and syntax in the language of documents of this period. When compared with the standard Written Tibetan (WT) forms which have developed in successive periods, one finds in these texts quite a number of examples which are clearly misspellings or variant forms. Although the appearance of misspellings and corrupt variants is in principle an unfortunate thing, in this case, due to the alphabetic nature of the Tibetan script, they provide us with clues about sound changes. So here the cloud may indeed be said to have had a silver lining.

I

When the subscribed letter ra was added to the letters ka, ta, pa, kha, pha, ga, da, ba, ha, ma, sa, etc. in Old Tibetan (OT), there resulted the consonant clusters kra, tra, pra, khra, phra, gra, dra, bra, hra, mra, and sra. But in the course of their development to the modern Lhasa dialect, these underwent the following changes:2

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1 I take as standard the Written Tibetan forms listed in the Zang-Han da cidian of Zhang Yisun (Beijing, 1985).
2 Forms in round brackets are given according to Yu Daoquan's internationally used transcription system for rendering WT. This system is as follows: ka, kha, ga, nga; ca, cha, ja, nya; ta, tha, da, na; pa, pha, ba, ma; ts, tsha, dz, wa; zha, za, ya; ra, la, sha, sa; ha, a, i, u, e, o. Forms in square brackets are given in IPA.

Also, the rather mysterious letter a-chung is arbitrarily transcribed by u. [Ed.]
In connection with these changes there appear in OT texts quite a number of erroneous or variant spellings, e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aberrant form</th>
<th>Standard form</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) ལོག (kral)</td>
<td>[tša la] (khral)</td>
<td>corvée</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B 175.8)³</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) སྲོག་གི་མས། (bkav grims)</td>
<td>[dba msa] (bkav khrims)</td>
<td>law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A 16.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ Text references for the Old Tibetan forms will be given in round brackets. The text sources are as follows: A — Wang and Chen (1980); B — Chen and Wang (1983); C — Wang (1982). Numerals after these capitalized letters refer to page and line numbers respectively.
Discussion of items (1) through (6):

1. Almost without exception these cases show errors in the root initial consonants. But it is noteworthy that these errors all involve replacement of the consonant in the standard form with another member of the same articulatory class. The pattern is to use ka in place of kha and ga in place of kha, pa in place of pha and ba, and ta in place of da. Generally speaking, this sort of confusion between members of the same articulatory class is common in the texts.

2. From the use of ga in place of kha in example (2), pa in place of ba in example (5), and ta in place of da in example (6), we observe that voiced consonants are used in place of voiceless ones and vice versa. This may indicate that by the eighth or ninth centuries the process of devoicing of voiced consonants had already begun in Tibetan, resulting in confusion between voiced and voiceless series of letters in written forms.

3. The erroneous substitutions of ga for kha in the second syllable of example (2), pa for ba in example (5), and ta for da in example (6) reveal that in the eighth and ninth centuries Tibetan had not yet developed tones. In modern Lhasa dialect the syllables kha, ta, and pa are read in the high level tone, while ga, da, and ba are read with the low rising tone. If tones had already arisen in eighth and ninth century Tibetan, it is improbable that
the quite different high tone and low tone letters would have been confused in spelling.

4. Again, the fact that in the first syllables of examples (3) and (4) standard pha is mistakenly written as pa proves the supposition that in other words such as Royal Period the aspirated and unaspirated voiceless stops and affricates had not yet formed independent series of phonemes but were instead merely freely varying allophones of single phonemes.⁴

Because examples (1) through (6) all involve errors among root initials of the same articulatory classes, they cannot prove that the voiceless stops pa, pha, ta, ka, and kha, the voiced stops ba, da, ga, or the fricative ha, were followed by subscribed ra, had become retroflex sounds. But examples (7) and (8) arouse our curiosity, for they are both cases where the root consonant ga has been supplanted by da. Now ga is a voiced velar stop, while da is a voiced dental stop: their points of articulation are quite far apart. Why should they be confused in this way? A plausible explanation would be that when ga and da were followed by ra, they became retroflexes, i.e. gra = dgra → (dz'a) or (tʃ'a), and that this accounts for the scribal modification of vgran to vdran and vgrul to vdrul. From this we can perhaps draw the conclusion that by the middle or late stages of the Royal Period, stops followed by ra already showed traces of a shift to retroflex realization.

II

The element ba in the Tibetan syllabary is now read [pha] in the Lhasa dialect. Among the five pre-initials, ga, da, ba, ma, and va, only da and va can be added to the root initial ba. When ba is preceded by pre-initial u- yielding ubau, this syllable is then read as Lhasa [mpa] or [pa]; and the root initial ba is still read as a voiceless bilabial stop, though it is now plain rather than aspirated.⁵ But a most curious fact is that when ba is preceded by pre-initial da, yielding dbau, then there is a radical change and this syllable is read as [wa]. We are therefore led to wonder whether this peculiar relationship between spelling and pronunciation already existed at the time the script was created or is a later development. In fact this state of affairs is one of the true oddities in the relationship between orthography and phonology in Lhasa Tibetan, and to elucidate its origin and development and trace the internal rules of its historical progress would be of considerable value for our understanding of Tibetan historical phonology.

⁴ See Che (1981) for a more detailed discussion of this question.
⁵ It should be noted that there are nowadays certain Lhasa speakers who read the syllable ga, ja, da, ba, and dza with unaspirated initials.