ONCE MORE ON THE LETTER α

Nathan W. Hill
Harvard University / Universität Tübingen

W. S. Coblin, in a contribution (2002) to the ongoing discussion about the phonetic value of the Tibetan letter α (transcribed as v), has argued that this character has no phonetic value per se but is rather an orthographic device. A review of the previous literature and consideration of Coblin’s arguments in contrast agree with the finding that before vowels and the glide -w- the letter v represents a voiced fricative, while before consonants it stands for prenasalization: in the former position, the value [ɣ] is argued for. The use of final -v in Old Tibetan inscriptions suggests that in that position too -v has the value [ɣ]. Finally, with a view to the internal reconstruction of the Tibetan verbal system, consideration is given to the question of whether the various phonetic values of v- represent a unitary phoneme.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phonetic value of the character α v has been the subject of controversy for over a century. The consensus is that before vowels and the glide -w- the letter v represents a voiced fricative (either [fi] or [ɣ]), and before consonants it stands for prenasalization. W. S.

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1 I would like to thank Prof. Jay Jasanoﬀ, Prof. Stephanie Jamison, and Prof. Zev Handel for their suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.
2 For the purposes of this essay I follow the Chinese convention of transliterating α as v, in order to avoid the use of the confusing symbol «».
Coblin (2002) has recently challenged this understanding of initial $\nu$-, but an examination of his alternative explanation shows it to be wanting. The use of $\nu$ as a final has not been well researched; most researchers believe that the letter has no phonetic value in final position (e.g. Beyer 1992: 43 n. 6). The examination of final $\nu$ in Old Tibetan texts to follow gives some indication that it indeed has a phonetic value, most likely $\gamma$.

2. ‘A-CHUNG’ AND ‘A-CHEN’

The letter $\tilde{\nu}$ is called the ‘a-chung’ (little $\alpha$) by Western scholars as opposed to $\bar{\nu} q$ the ‘a-chen’ (big $\alpha$), but these names appear never to have been used by Tibetan grammarians themselves, and are avoided here. Since these two letters are often erroneously conceived of as a pair a short digression on the letter $q$ is in order.

The Indic ancestor of the character $q$ is used to represent vocalic onset, and the corresponding character in the Vphags-pa script $\bar{\nu}$ also represents vocalic onset (Ligeti 1961: 204-212). However, it has been suggested that in Tibetan $q$- indicates a glottal stop [ʔ]. Jäschke describes it as such (1881: xiv), presumably for the reading pronunciation of Ladakh, and by Miller for ‘Central’ Tibetan (1955a: 47, §1.3.2 and 49, §3.3.1). However, in some dialects, words spelled with initial $q$- are pronounced as beginning with simple vowels (e.g. Balti, cf. Bielmeier 1985: 245; Shigatse, cf. Haller 2000: 296; Dingri, cf. Herrmann 1989: 304-305). In other dialects, there is no contrast between initial glottal stop and initial vowel (e.g. Drokpa, cf. Kretschmar 1986: 21).

Zhang (1987: 41-46) gives three reasons why she thinks $q$- represents a glottal stop in Old Tibetan: First, the transliteration of the Chinese character — ‘one’ in one text as $qyi$ and not $yi$, reflects a glottal stop in Chinese. Second, the Tibetan grammarians describe the character as a consonant and not as a vowel. Third, Zhang's

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4 I transliterate $\bar{\nu}$ as $q$, although it is omitted in transliteration by Western Tibetologists, and the Chinese transliterate it as $x$. 
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paraphrase of the Chinese translation of the Gser tog sum rtags (misspelled rtogs by Zhang) reads, “when producing the sound q the middle part of the tongue should be lifted near the palate” (1987: 46). She does not quote the Tibetan text (or the Chinese translation which appears in her bibliography) nor does she cite a page number. She seems to have intended the passage “qa ni rkan-las byung-zhing lcevi rked-par cung-zad nye bavi byed-pas bskyed-cing / brjod tshul ni shin-tu lhod-pa-dang / The q, arising from the palate, is produced by nearing the middle of the tongue a little [to the palate]; the mode of articulation is very relaxed” (Blo bzang tshul khrims rgya mtsho 1891: 48, my translation).

As for her first reason, Zhang herself admits that another motivation for such a transliteration is to match the tone of the Chinese original more closely (1987: 42). Regarding her second reason, it should be remarked that q- does not function in the Tibetan script as a vowel, but rather as a null consonant. The vowel a is inherent in any akṣaṇa unless another vowel is added to it. The interpretation of the character q- as marking vocalic onset is thus fully consistent with the indigenous description of it as a (null) consonant. Finally, the pronunciation Blo bzang tshul khrims rgya mtsho describes in 1891 seems little relevant to the Old Tibetan period a thousand years earlier. There are thus no strong arguments for analyzing q- as a glottal stop onset as opposed to vocalic onset. Since the Indic ancestor of this character indicates an initial vowel, and its heir in the Vphags-pa script does so as well, the neutral position is to assume that q- similarly indicated an initial vowel in Old Tibetan. Perhaps all vowel initial words were articulated with a sub-phonemic glottal stop as in German; in this case q- may have been accompanied by a glottal stop, but it certainly does not represent a glottal stop.
3. V- AS A PLAIN INITIAL

The pronunciation of v- as a voiced fricative before the vowel -o and the glide -w (Róna-Tas 1962: 338-339, and 1966: 131) and between vowels (1966: 129 n. 142) is preserved in a number of Tibetan dialects. The position of v in the Tibetan alphabet suggests its value as a voiced correspondent of h (loc. cit.). The character v- has been used to transliterate a *γ- in Middle Chinese (Miller 1955b: 481-482). The discussion of indigenous Tibetan phonologists further buttresses the view that v- represents [γ-] or [h-]. Bsod nams rtse mo (1142-1182) writes, “vas vphul gre-bavi phug-nas dbyung [the prescription with v is articulated from the cavity of the throat]” (qtd. in Róna-Tas 1985: 252, my translation). This description indicates a velar or glottal articulation. Bsod nams rtse mo’s use of the word vphul ‘prescription’ might imply that he is discussing v- as the initial of a consonant cluster and not as a simple initial. Róna-Tas suggests that the pronunciation Bsod nams rtse mo describes “ist die Aussprache der isolierten Buchstaben, und daher gibt sie nur indirekt Auskunft über die Aussprache der Laute im Wort [is the pronunciation of the isolated letter, and therefore gives only indirect information about the pronunciation of the sound in a word]” (1985: 252). Thus, although Bsod nams rtse mo appears to claim to describe the pronunciation of v- as the initial of a cluster, in fact the pronunciation he describes is that of a simple initial, as it would be pronounced when reciting the alphabet. Tavi si tu Chos kyi vbyung gnas (1699/1700-1774) describes v- as voiced and articulated in the velar or glottal region (“phyi-rol-du sgra thon-pa [the voice expelled

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