LINGUISTICS OF THE TIBETO-BURMAN AREA
VOLUME 14.2 — FALL 1991

The spelling-style pronunciation of Written Tibetan, and the hazards of using citation forms in the phonological analysis of spoken Tibetan[1]

R. K. Sprigg
Kalimpore, India

'It is a habit of Tibetans, probably of people in general, to pronounce a word in one way when used in the ordinary speech, and in another way when the word is read from a book.' (Y. R. Chao, in Yu and Jaw, Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama Tshangs-dbyangs=rgya-mtsho, Peiping, 1930)

I. Reading-style pronunciation of Written Tibetan

In *Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama* (Yu and Jaw 1930) Jaw (Y. R. Chao) has transcribed the 62 songs from three readings, 'once very slowly for direct listening and transcription and twice naturally to a dictaphone for subsequent transcription by repeated listening' (26). His transcription is remarkable for combining phonemics, including tonemics, with phonetics, including pitch, through symbolizing allophones; it is even more remarkable in being also stylistic: it introduces symbols into the transcription for distinguishing variations in style: (i) 'an asterisk in the transcription . . . means that the symbol or symbols marked by it are, in ordinary speech, not pronounced as transcribed there. The ordinary pronunciation is given on page 198-199' (ix); (ii) 'when the three readings differ for a particular sound the variation is placed in parenthesis' (27); e.g.

1. ɕaɹr^{55} tɕ'ok^{44} ɹi^{11} vø^{35} tse^{44} nɛ^{11}
   kaɹr^{55} sel*r tɑ$^{131/11}$vɑ^{44} ɕaɹr^{44} tɕ'uŋ$^{131/11}$
   (Yu and Jaw 1930:44)

[1] Based on a paper with the same title presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal, Kathmandu, November, 1990.

ii. ten(ɲ)^{55} t(')i(ɪ)$^{121/22}$ t(t')yn(m)$^{121/11}$ mɑ(ə)ɹr^{24}
tɕ'uŋ$^{131/11}$ nɑ^{33} tɑ$^{131/11}$ts'ø^{13} tiŋ^{4}nɛ^{34}
noɹr^{45}p(')u*$^{131/55}$
(Yu and Jaw 1930:48)[2]

(i) *shar-phyogs ri-bo'i rtse-nas dkar-gsal zla-ba shar-byung*
'From the mountain peaks in the east, the silvery moon has peeped out.'

(ii) *brtan-gyi bdun-mar byung-na rgya-mtsho'i gting-nas nor-bu*
'. . . were to become my lifelong companion, a jewel from the bottom of the ocean . . .'

The asterisked lexical items /sel/ *gsal*, /ɕel/ *zhal*, and /p(')u/ *bu* are given as /se/, /ɕe/, and /pu/ in 'ordinary speech' (198); the brackets indicate that the sounds [ə], [ɲ], [ɪ], and [m] alternate with [ɑ], [n], [i], and [n] for the phonemes /ɑ/, /n/, /i/, and /n/, and that the phonemes /t'/ and /p'/ alternate with the phonemes /t/ [sic, for /ʈ/; see note 2] and /p/.

II. Spelling-style pronunciation of Written Tibetan

The two styles of pronunciation that Chao has referred to in the passages quoted in the preceding section (I) are what I have termed the Reading style, exemplified here in the 'transcribed text' of *Love Songs*, read, or recited, by his informant Lopsang Sanggay, and Lhasa Tibetan (LT), a contemporary spoken, and normally unwritten, dialect of Tibet, referred to by Chao as 'ordinary pronunciation.' As I have pointed out elsewhere, in my work with my informant Rinzin Wangpo (R) during the period 1948-50 I

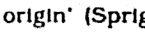
---

2 The symbol /t/ in 't(')i(ɪ)' and in 'tɑ' must be a misprint for /ʈ/ (13). Chao could, in my opinion, have added to his list of stylistic variations the following from example (i): /ɕɑtɕo/ [ɕa:dʑɔ:], /kɑɜɛ/ [ka:ɜɛ:], and /ɕɑtɕuŋ/ [ɕa:dʑṹ] as the 'ordinary pronunciation' of 'ɕɑɹtɕ'ok', 'kɑɹɜɛl', and 'ɕɑɹtɕ'uŋ'.

It is possible, if not probable, that the first of the three readings, which Chao has described with the words 'very slowly', may have been so slow as to give rise to artificial pronunciations (of the type /breikfa:st/, in English, for /brekfəst/, in which case Spelling-style pronunciations may have intruded into this specimen of Reading-style pronunciation.

found it necessary to distinguish a third style of pronunciation, the Spelling style, though this third style has, as is only to be expected, much in common with the Reading style: 'the relations of these two styles to LT are quite different from the relations of e.g. the Tsang, Kham, or Sikkim dialects to it; for R. shares these two styles with literate speakers of these three dialects, and indeed with all literate Tibetans regardless of dialect or province of origin' (Sprigg 1968:15).[3] My informant was reluctant to pronounce words in isolation, as citation forms, without first identifying them, and distinguishing them from homophones, through naming the orthographic components in order of writing. This technique is described in Bell (1939:17); e.g.


(WT *ko*): ka-na-ro, ko


(WT *ltogs*): la-ta-ta, ta, ta-na-ro, to, tok˙-k˙a-sa, tok˙;

but I made greater use of the slightly later book, Gould and Richardson 1949, for studying this characteristic aspect of Tibetan literacy, through sections B1-3 ('The simple consonants', 'The vowels', 'The compound consonants', 'Subjoined consonants', 'Superscribed consonants'), B4-8 ('Prefixed letters'), B9-13 ('Final consonants'), and B20-35 ('Spelling'), with careful attention to pitch behaviour; e.g.

|ka ʋʌ sʊr ka|[4] *ka wa-zur kwa* 'ka wa-corner kwa' (B2)
|la l̥apta l̥a| *la lha-btags lha* 'la lha-joined lha' (B3)
[phʌʊ sə gapta gə ɹətə dɪə kj̊ɪkudɪɪk khɑ: sɑ: dɪɪk]
ba'u bas bsga-btags bsga ra-btags bsgra gi-gu bsgrig ga sa bsgrigs
'little-ba bsa bsga-joined bsga ra-joined bsgra gi-gu (vowel 'i') bsgrig ga sa bsgrigs' (Sprigg 1968:20)

---

3 I have recently had cause to modify this statement: speakers of the Golok dialect of Tibetan, of Amdo, in the extreme northeast of the Tibetan-speaking area, have a Spelling-style pronunciation of their own, different from the general Spelling style of Lhasa, Tsang, Kham, and Ladakh speakers: e.g., (Golok Spelling style) [l̥op, ɸlab-, rdo, βdi:] *slob, bslabs, zlo, bzlas* 'teach, taught, say, said': cf. (general Spelling style) [¯lɑp, ¯lʏp, _ndɔ:, _ndɛʔ], and (Golok-dialect spoken forms) [ʂ(ɜ)tɜab, ɸtɜab, rdzo, bzi:] (Sprigg 1979:53).

4 These spelled syllables are conventionally pronounced with specific tonal contours, though we are not indicating them because of transcriptional difficulties. [Ed.]

Phonetic criteria

While, therefore, the Reading style of pronunciation was *recognized* as distinct from LT as early as 1930, a separate style or pronunciation for *spelling* has not, so far, been recognized; on the contrary, Nishi Yoshio, in a recent letter, has expressed surprise at my proposal to distinguish a further style from the Reading style: 'I myself have noted and mentioned in section 3.1 of my paper on "Tibetan dialects" (1988) that in the older literature of Tibetan dialects the authors often confused the reading style and colloquial style pronunciations quoting an example from the Amdo dialect. (I suspected that Nishida's Amdo is one such example.) However, it is quite new to me that there is a further distinction between the reading and spelling style pronunciations' (12/11/90).

In response to Nishi's comment I have paid special attention, in what follows, to phonetic features that distinguish the Spelling style from the Reading style, and therefore have the status of absolute criteria of the Spelling style, from those which are shared with the Reading style, as joint criteria, versus LT. Elsewhere, I have given criteria for distinguishing the Spelling style at the situational, lexical, and grammatical levels of linguistic analysis (1968:15-21); in what follows such features as I need to cite as criteria will be restricted to the phonetic level. For this account of the phonetic features characteristic of the Spelling style, especially those features which distinguish the Spelling style from LT, I have divided my material into (A) word-initial, and (B) word-final, features.

A. WORD-INITIAL

1. Nasal-and-plosive/affricate clusters, and a nasal-and-fricative cluster

The most prominent characteristic of the Spelling style in word-initial position is nasality as the opening feature of a cluster in which the initial nasal is homorganic in voicing — voice — and in place of articulation — velar, alveolo-palatal, alveolar, dental, bilabial — with a following plosive or affricative, [Ng Ndʒ Ndɹ Ndz Nd Nb], or, in fast-tempo utterances, with a