

FINAL AUXILIARY VERBS IN LITERARY TIBETAN AND IN THE DIALECTS

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'ba kha ther ther
'bo kha lhug lhug
red so btsir btsir

[In Nyemo county, people saying] /ba/ [for 'to be' have always] the mouth open
[people saying] /bo/ [for 'to be' have always] the mouth lax
[people saying] /re/ [for 'to be' always] show their teeth.
(Nyemo proverb)

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present the main characteristics of the final auxiliary verbs in Tibetan. From the panchronic and pandialectal points of view, final auxiliary verbs play an essential role within the verbal system. The Tibetan auxiliary verb may be defined throughout the centuries and the various regions by the following general morphogenetic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features:

a) Morphogenesis

The final auxiliary verbs are derived from action, motion or stative verbs and may be connected to the main verbs via nominalizers or connectives.

b) Syntax

Final auxiliary verbs are always postposed to the main verbs, along with modal verbs, negation¹ morphemes and final particles.

c) Semantics and pragmatics

Final auxiliary verbs indicate tense as well as aspect and some modalities (such as volitionality). One of the most striking phenomena is the emergence of evidentiality in the evolution of auxiliary verbs, as well as the development of first person and directional markers. The various modern systems show a remarkable

¹ The negation may sometimes precede the verb.

functional unity beyond their morphological variations (see Sun 1993, DeLancey 1992, Tournadre 1994, 1996d). Significant morphological discrepancies are found even between local varieties, so that the paradigm of final auxiliary verbs seems to be a good criterion to define the modern dialects.

In section 2, we will make some preliminary remarks about the relation between literary Tibetan and the modern dialects. The general characteristics of the Tibetan verbal system will be described in section 3. We will present the main auxiliary verbs of classical Tibetan in section 4, and of Standard Spoken Tibetan in section 5. Section 6 will be devoted to the comparison between the paradigms of auxiliary verbs in some dialects of Central Tibet, Kham (Eastern Tibet), Hor (Nakchu area) and Amdo (North-Eastern Tibet). Finally, in section 7, we will study the polygrammaticalizations of four verbs into tense-aspect markers in Standard Spoken Tibetan.

2. THE RELATIONS BETWEEN LITERARY TIBETAN AND MODERN DIALECTS

At first, Tibetan dialects seem to be so different from one other that in some cases they more closely resemble distinct languages of a single family like Polish and Russian, Dutch and German, or French and Spanish. The term “dialect” is used here to denote closely related languages that share a common literary language, as in “Arabic dialects” or “Chinese dialects”.

A famous Tibetan proverb says, “Every valley has its language and every lama has his religion².” This is indeed quite true! The reason for this situation is that the Tibetan territory is very large, the population very scattered and transportation still very difficult. The fact that many villages are separated by high passes or wide rivers limits communication. Under these circumstances, the Tibetan dialects, which are all derived from Old Tibetan, have evolved independently. Nowadays, some Tibetan dialects do not permit mutual understanding (Ladakhi, Central Tibetan, Amdo, Bhutanese) even if some, such as Tsang, Central, or certain varieties of Kham do allow a large degree of communication. The main differences between the dialects lie not only in their phonology and their vocabulary but also in their auxiliary systems. What has been said about the various dialects (Tib: *yul skad* = “dialect”) may also apply to the local varieties (Tib: *lung skad* = “valley language”) within the same dialect. When asked about the linguistic discrepancies between two close varieties of one dialect, people often cite the lexical peculiarities as well as the specificity of the final auxiliary verbs.

These remarks are also true when we compare Standard Spoken Tibetan (SST) to Classical Tibetan. In fact, it seems that the difference between these two

² *lung-pa re-re la skad lugs re, bla-ma re-re la chos-lugs re re.*

categories is roughly comparable to the one between the dialects. A remarkable feature of all the Tibetan dialects is that they are all related to Classical Literary Tibetan from lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactic points of view. This relation is always specific for each dialect. For example when one hears the Amdo Labrang dialect (used more or less as a *lingua franca* in the Amdo area), one hardly recognizes any word of Central Tibetan or Classical Literary Tibetan. But if one knows the reflexes of Amdo and Central Tibetan, it becomes fairly easy to recognize that a great majority of words are in fact derived from Classical Tibetan. To illustrate this point, let us compare the interrogative pronouns 'what', 'when', and 'how much':

	<i>Central Tibet</i>		<i>Amdo Labrang</i>	
'what'	<i>ga-re</i>	[khare]	<i>chi-zig</i>	[tʃhizək]
'when'	<i>ga-dus</i>	[khatyʔ]	<i>nam</i>	[nam]
'how many'	<i>ga-tshod</i>	[khatsøʔ]	<i>du</i>	[tə]

Though the pronouns are very different, all six forms are derived from words found in Classical or archaic Tibetan.³ Thus, knowledge of the literary language allows one to relativize those lexical discrepancies and to see the deep links existing among the various Tibetan dialects.

Before going into the description of the final auxiliary verb systems, let us explain here what is meant by Standard Spoken Tibetan (in Tibetan: *spyi skad* [tʃikeʔ] "common language"). It refers to a variety of Central Tibetan (*dbus skad* [ykeʔ]) spoken in Lhasa and in all the prefectures and villages around, up to approximately one hundred kilometers from the capital (mainly Taktse, Chushur, Tönlung Dechen), as well as in the Tibetan diaspora of India, Nepal and so forth. The term "Lhasa dialect" is not appropriate to designate this language since it would be too restrictive. In fact, Lhasa has phonological and

³ *Ga* is derived from *gang* 'what', *du* means 'time', and *tshod* 'uncover'. *Chi-zig* is derived from archaic Tibetan *chi* 'what' (Classical Tibetan *ci* 'what'). The words *nam* and *du* also occur in Classical Tibetan with the same meanings.

Metrogungkar or Reting (respectively west, east and north-east of Lhasa), the system of auxiliary verbs presents some significant variation.⁴

It is worth noting that the “common language” or *spyi skad* is used increasingly between Tibetans who have different native dialects. Apart from the people of Central and Tsang regions whose dialects are very close to Standard Spoken Tibetan and who can easily slip into it, a growing number of speakers from Kham, Hor, Amdo, Tö Ngari, Ladakh, Zangskar, Bhutan, Sikkim, Sherpa and so forth are now able to speak Standard Spoken Tibetan. However, it should be noticed that those speakers belong mainly to the social categories of civil servants, lamas, monks, intellectuals, artists or merchants. The great majority of peasants and nomads still speak only their respective dialects. For them, standardization might still take a long time since the media (radio or television) of Lhasa or the Tibet Autonomous Region do not reach the Tibetan towns of Qinghai (Amdo, Kham), Gansu (Amdo), Sichuan (Kham, Amdo) or Yunnan (Kham), where broadcasts are in local dialects. Let us finally mention the problem of the language used in the media. It is based on modern literary Tibetan⁵ but is also influenced by the spoken language of Central Tibet. The fact that the media language reflects the literary style and never mingles with conversational Tibetan makes it very difficult for uneducated people to understand. On top of that, the intonation in the Tibetan Autonomous Region's media is under the influence of Chinese Putonghua.⁶ For these various reasons, most of the persons I asked about it said they have trouble grasping even the news.

3. GENERAL FEATURES OF THE TIBETAN VERBAL SYSTEM

3.1. Verbal inflexions

In all dialects, as well as in the various forms of the literary language, the verb is always found in the final position of the clause. It is never marked for number, gender or person but is sometimes inflected for tense-aspect and the imperative mood, though many verbs are invariable.

In classical Tibetan and even in some modern dialects, the verb may thus have up to four forms that indicate '*das-pa* 'past', *da-lta-ba* 'present', *ma-*

⁴ In Metrogunkar, '*dug* is replaced by *snang* and in Nyemo, *red* is replaced by [*ba*]. See tables in section 6.

⁵ This recalls the Hindi media after Indian independence, which were not understood by Nehru himself, though he was a native Hindi speaker.

⁶ Just as the various languages of the ex-USSR were influenced by Russian intonation (or rather the “soviet” intonation).