PROLEGOMENON TO RGYALTHANG TIBETAN PHONOLOGY*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan is divided into three main dialects: *Dbus gtsang*, *Amdo*, and *Khams*. However, within these major regions, situated in different areas, each dialect has its own peculiarities. These linguistic divergences can sometimes surprise us even if their speakers are only a mountain away. More interestingly, we find that dialects which are far removed from one another may share certain attributes or similarities.

Zhongdian (Rgyalthang) county is located in the South of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is on the Qinghai plateau which slopes down to the south and cuts across mountain ridges at the northern end, which is indeed far

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from the center of Tibet proper. There have been long-standing contacts between the local dialects of Tibetan and Han, Naxi, Yi, Lisu, and other languages, since these ethnic groups have been living together in this area since time immemorial. The Tibetan spoken in this region is thus quite distinct from other Tibetan dialects. Moreover, since most people are illiterate, there have been few commentaries on the culture and tradition of the place. For these reasons, most people are prone to dismiss the Rgyalthang dialect as simply "a dialect of local people having nothing to do with Literary Tibetan."

Therefore, I would like to present a brief introduction to Rgyalthang Tibetan in order to get feedback from other scholars and to ensure that more people know something about this interesting dialect.

2. CHARACTERISTICS AND PRINCIPLES OF RGYALTHANG TIBETAN FROM THE PHONETIC POINT OF VIEW

Language is a tool for the exchange of ideas. Social change and development have an impact on language change. This is true both for sound change and semantic change. In an area where transportation is difficult, economic development is slow. In such an area there are few political changes, and language change is rather slow. Contacts between Zhongdian and other areas are limited. Knowledge of Written Tibetan (WT) is quite unknown in this area. These are the reasons why the Rgyalthang dialect still preserves characteristics of more ancient forms of the language.

First of all, we should look at the pronunciation of a few basic words such as those written with the aspirated palatal initial ᜏ. These are pronounced with [tɕh] in Lhasa Tibetan (LT) and other dialects, but [tʂh] in Rgyalthang Tibetan (RT). If we look at the spelling of these basic words we will find that [tʂh] used to be a standard pronunciation of this consonant in Old Tibetan. We can verify this speculation by examining Old Chinese transcriptions of vocabulary items translated from other languages. For example, if we stick to the Lhasa pronunciation, the word *chab mdo*, a place name, should be pronounced [tɕhamto], not [tʂhā mtō]. The word *pan chen* 'great scholar' is pronounced [pān tɕhēn] in Lhasa dialect, not [bān tʂhān]. It is interesting to note that the pronunciations of these words in RT resemble those of Tibetan vocabulary items in Old Chinese. Another example is *gzhi ga rtse* (Shigatse), which is an old place name in *gTsang* Province, part of the Central *Dbus gtsang* area. If we stick to the pronunciation of the present day *Dbus gtsang*, it should be [ɕǐ kā tsē], but in RT whenever the sound *zh* is preceded by other sounds, it shifts to [ʐ]. The pronunciation of this word in Modern Chinese is [ʐǐ kē tse]. Examples of this sort are too numerous to list.

In some documents written in Old Tibetan, especially those found in Dunhuang, we often find words spelled with the initial cluster *my-*. These words in standard Written Tibetan are written with the simple intial "m-" and pronounced accordingly /m-/. However, the Rgyalthang pronunciations of these words turn out to be very similar to those of Old Tibetan, with the palatal nasal /ɲ-/. Examples are *dmyig* [ɲī] 'eye', *mye* [ɲĕ] 'fire', *amyes* [ʔā ɲē] 'grandfather', *myed* [ɲê] 'not have, not exist', *myi dgos* [ɲĭ kȳə] 'not want'. (The kind of pronunciation in which certain sounds are omitted as shown above is not only evident in the Rgyalthang dialect but is widespread in other Tibetan dialects in the whole Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.) From the above examples it is clear that RT has preserved an older form of pronunciation.

Tibetan uses an alphabetic writing system. The writing is "beyond the differences of dialects". The Tibetan dialects in the three major regions differ greatly from one another. Moreover, there is a distinction even within each major region, between counties or even between villages. The differences are due to poor communication as well as the political history of each place. A fortunate fact is that all these different dialects can be transcribed by 30 consonant and 4 vowel symbols, and they can be adequately accounted for in the framework of the grammatical treatises *Sumcupa* and *Rtagskyi 'jugpa*. This fact seems astonishing, and leads to the question: "Since Tibetan is a language that uses an alphabetic writing system, how is it possible to spell words in this dialect so that speakers of other dialects can understand?" (By contrast, the 80 or more letters of the Yi language are not sufficient for the Yi in the North and the South to communicate!) By enabling the three major dialect regions of the Tibetans to exchange opinions perfectly and accurately, the devisers of the Tibetan writing system have earned our appreciation of their intelligence and wit. What is meant by being "beyond the differences of dialects"? Why is the pronunciation of Rgyalthang not divergent from the spelling? Let us look into this further.

Though the same letters and syllables are used throughout the Tibetan-speaking area, the pronunciations are different. For example, the word *grwa ba* 'monk' is pronounced in LT as [tʂhā pā], but in Qinghai (Amdo Tibetan) as [tɕū wā], and in RT as [tɕā wā]. When we write down this word using the Tibetan alphabet, it is spelled exactly the same. Therefore, no matter what the local dialect might be, as long as one knows that it is this word with this particular spelling, any literate Tibetan will understand the meaning of the word right away.

Differences in the pronunciations of the words are due mainly to differences in the pronunciations of the consonants. For example, the

consonant in *sha* 'meat' is pronounced in LT as [ça] but in RT as [ʂa]. The
same principle works automatically with other words with this initial, e.g. *shi*
'to die' (LT [çī], RT [ʂə]); *shing* 'wood, fuel' (LT [çīŋ], RT [ʂəŋ]). In other
words, pronunciations are different, but the meanings stay the same.

The 30 consonants of WT are pronounced in RT as follows:

k	[ka f]2,3	kh	[kha f]	**g**	[ka v]	ng	[ŋa v]
c	[tʂa f]	ch	[tʂha f]	**j**	[tʂha v]	ny	[ɲa v]
t	[ta f]	th	[tha f]	**d**	[ta v]	n	[na v]
p	[pa f]	ph	[pha f]	**b**	[pa v]	m	[ma v]
ts	[tsa f]	tsh	[tsha f]	dz	[tsa v]	w	[wa v]
zh	[ʐa v]	z	[sa v]	' 4	[ɦa v]	y	[ja v]
r	[ra v]	l	[la v]	**sh**	[ʂa f]	s	[sa f]
h	[ha f]	ʔ	[ʔa f]				

Except for the nine consonants in boldface, the pronunciations of the
remaining ones are similar to those in LT. Therefore, all the differences start
with these nine consonants. If we take the total of simple initial consonants
plus their combinations with prefixes and/or following glides, we end up with
approximately 42 phonemes in RT:

Examples

p	pā	'bowl'
	pə̄	'hair (body); to move'
	pǐ	'calf; sheep hair'
ph	phà	'pig'
	phə̄	'to splash, sprinkle (water)'
	phī	'to push; to develop'

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2   The symbols *f* and *v* are used in the original to represent high and low tones respectively,
a convention used traditionally by Tibetan grammarians.
3   Note that voiceless initials induce high tone, and voiced ones low tone, in accordance
with tonogenetic principles. [Ed.]
4   The apostophe is substituted for the symbol A used by the author. It is a common
practice among Tibetologists to use the apostophe to transliterate the graph འ "a-chung",
which represents the voiced glottal fricative. In Written Tibetan this consonant can occur in
initial position or as the first part of a cluster (e.g. 'od 'light', 'gro 'to go').
It is interesting to note that these words are pronounced completely differently in
Rgyalthang and Lhasa Tibetan: 'light' LT *ɦö̀*, RT *wûi*; 'to go' LT *tʂo*, RT *ngūə*.
When the voiced glottal fricative functions as a main consonant in initial position, it
becomes a semi-vowel in RT. When it is part of a consonant cluster, it converts the whole
cluster into a prenasalized stop. Therefore, the voiced glottal fricative does not exist in
Rgyalthang phonology, and does not really belong in the inventory.