

**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.¹ 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

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*; *tsha*, *tsha*, *dza*, *wa*; *zha*, *za*, *va*, *ya*; *ra*, *la*, *sha*, *sa*; *ha*, *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*, *ɿ*. Forms in square brackets are given in IPA.

Also, the rather mysterious letter *a-chung* is arbitrarily transcribed by *u*. [Ed.]

OT	Lhasa Dialect
<div><div>ཀྲ (kra)</div><div>ཏྲ (tra)</div><div>པྲ (pra)</div></div>	<div>→ [tʂa ʈ]</div>
<div><div>ཁྲ (khra)</div><div>ཕྲ (phra)</div></div>	<div>→ [tʂha ʈ]</div>
<div><div>གྲ (gra)</div><div>དྲ (dra)</div><div>བྲ (bra)</div></div>	<div>→ [tʂha ʈ]</div>
ཏྲ (hra)	<div>→ [ʂa ʈ]</div>
མྲ (mra)	<div>→ [ma ʈ]</div>
སྲ (sra)	<div>→ [sa ʈ]</div>

In connection with these changes there appear in OT texts quite a number of erroneous or variant spellings. e.g.

Aberrant form	Standard form	Meaning
(1) ཀྲལ (kral) (B 175.8) ³	ཁྲལ (khral)	corvée
(2) བཀའ་བྲིམ་མེད་ (bkav grims) (A 16.8)	བཀའ་བྲིམ་མེད་ (bkav khrims)	law

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.

(3) འཕྲག་རྟ་ག (vprag dog) (A 65.12)	ཕྲག་རྟ་ག (phrag dog)	to envy
(4) ཕྱ་མོ (pra mo) (A 90.19)	ཕྱ་མོ (phra mo)	minute, tiny
(5) ཕྲན་ (pran) (A 75.12)	བྲན་ (bran)	slave, serf
(6) འབྲོན་ (vtren) (B 182.2)	འབྲོན་ (vdren)	to pull, convey
(7) འབྲན་ (vdran) (A 42.13)	འབྲན་ (vgran)	to vie, contend
(8) འབྲུལ་ (vdrul) (C 8.13)	འབྲུལ་ (vgrul)	walk, travel

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 OT of the 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*, when 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* = *dra* —> (*dʒa*) or (*tʂa*), and that this accounts for the scribal modification of *ugran* 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 [phaʌ] in the Lhasa dialect. Among the five pre-initials, *ga*, *da*, *ba*, *ma*, and *u-*, only *da* and *u-* 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 [mpaʌ] or [paʌ]; 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 [waʌ]. 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.

It is generally agreed that OT had no tones and that its sound system distinguished voiced and voiceless varieties of consonants, so that *ba* in the syllabary would have been read with a voiced stop initial. But how was the consonant cluster *db-* read at that time? The following aberrant forms, culled from OT documents of the Royal Period, throw light on this question:

Aberrant form	Standard form	Meaning
(1) སྔང་ས་དབྱལ (stangs dbyal) (A 26.21)	སྔང་ས་དཔྱལ (stangs dpyal)	husband and wife, a couple
(2) དབྱོང་ས་དཀྱིགས (dbyongs dkyigs) (B 174.11)	དཔྱོང་དཀྱིགས (dpyong dkyigs)	kill by hanging or garroting
(3) ཞལ་ཅི་དབྱངས (zhal tse dbyangs) (A 22.20)	ཞལ་ཅི་དཔྱངས (zhal ce dpyangs)	to pronounce judgement

In documents of the Royal Period, example (1) is sometimes written as *stangs dpyal* and sometimes as *stangs dbyal*. *Stangs dpyal* is the standard form, and by comparison with it we can identify *stangs dbyal* as an erroneous form. The forms *dbyongs* in example (2) and *dbyangs* in example (3) would also appear to be mistakes, because *dbyongs* is an otherwise unknown syllable, while *dbyangs* is a noun meaning "sound" or "vowel sound" and, dialectally, a verb meaning "to sing". When read as written these words are either incomprehensible or are incompatible with the contexts of the passages in which they are found. But if they are read as forms of the verb *dpyong* [present], *dpyangs* [past], *dpyang* [future], *dpyongs* [imperative] "to hang, string up, suspend", they fit well in their respective contexts.

In general, during the middle and late Royal Period the language still preserved initial consonant clusters made up of root consonants plus pre-initial and post-initial consonants. The fact that the scribes who produced the OT documents alternated freely between *pa* and *ba*, or miswrote *pa* as *ba*, in the preceding examples not only reflects the devoicing of *ba* but more importantly also indicates that *ba*, when preceded by *da*, was still a bilabial stop at that time and not a semivowel [w]. In modern Lhasa dialect the pro-

nunciations of *dpav* and *dbav* are rather different, as revealed in the following comparative table:

WT Form		OT Pronunciation		Modern Lhasa Form	
<div>དཔའ་</div> <div>(dpav)</div>	<div>དབའ་</div> <div>(dbav)</div>	*[dpa]	*[dba]	[paʔ]	[waʔ]
<div>དཔང་</div> <div>(dpang)</div>	<div>དབང་</div> <div>(dbang)</div>	*[dpaŋ]	*[dbaŋ]	[paŋʔ]	[waŋʔ]
<div>དཔར་</div> <div>(dpar)</div>	<div>དབར་</div> <div>(dbar)</div>	*[dpar]	*[dbar]	[parʔ]	[warʔ]
<div>དཔོན་</div> <div>(dpon)</div>	<div>དབོན་</div> <div>(dbon)</div>	*[dpon]	*[dbon]	[pønʔ]	[wønʔ]
<div>དཔོར་</div> <div>(dpor)</div>	<div>དབོར་</div> <div>(dbor)</div>	*[dpor]	*[dbor]	[porʔ]	[wo:ʔ]

If the differences in the Royal Period were already as great as those found in the modern Lhasa dialect, free variation between the root initials in the two syllables would not have been possible. Thus, we may conclude that the reading of *dbav* as [waʔ] was a later development. The writer holds that this sound change dates, at the latest, from the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. The proof for this is that during the Yuan 元 period (1279-1368) the Chinese referred to Tibet as *Wusi Zang* 烏斯藏, which is a phonetic transcription of Tibetan *dbus gtsang*. *Dbus* is the name of the central region of Tibet, while *gtsang* is the southwest part of central Tibet. Joined together they form a compound meaning “Tibet”. That *dbus* was rendered as *wusi* reveals the following points:

1. By the Yuan period pre-initial *da* may have already been lost.
2. The root consonant *ba*, influenced by the loss of *da*, was already pronounced as a semivowel [w], and had combined with the vowel [u] as [wu], resulting in the the Chinese transliteration *wu* 烏.

3. The final consonant *sa* was still preserved at that period and was rendered by Chinese *st* 斯.

How did these sound changes occur? The initial of the syllable *dbau* was a cluster [db] in OT. Its pre-initial element, *da*, was a voiced dental stop, and in pronouncing this sound the lips would have assumed a half-open configuration. The root initial was *ba*, which is a voiced bilabial stop, and to pronounce it the lips must first be closed. In the process of the development of the Tibetan language, pre-initial consonants gradually weakened, coalesced, fell away, or evolved into other phonetic elements. Pre-initial *da*, in progressing towards its eventual disappearance, influenced the root initial *ba*, causing its labial closure to open a bit and moreover causing the tone to be fixed at high pitch. Hereupon it evolved into a high level tone bilabial semivowel [w], which became fused with the vowel [a] as [wa].⁶

III

Another very peculiar phenomenon in the relationship between orthography and pronunciation in modern Lhasa dialect is that *zla* is realized as [ntaʌ] or [taʌ]. In OT texts we find that the syllable *zla* of *zla-ba* "month, moon" is sometimes spelled as *zla* but sometimes also as *sla*, e.g.

དཔྱིད་སྐྱེད་བྱིང་པོ་ (dpyiḍ sla vbring po) second or middle spring month

(C 38.5)

དགུན་སྐྱེད་ར་བ་ (dgun sla ra ba) first winter month

(C 37.5)

གཉི་ཟླ་ (gnyi zla) (= WT ཉི་ཟླ་ nyi zla) sun and moon

(A 85.21)

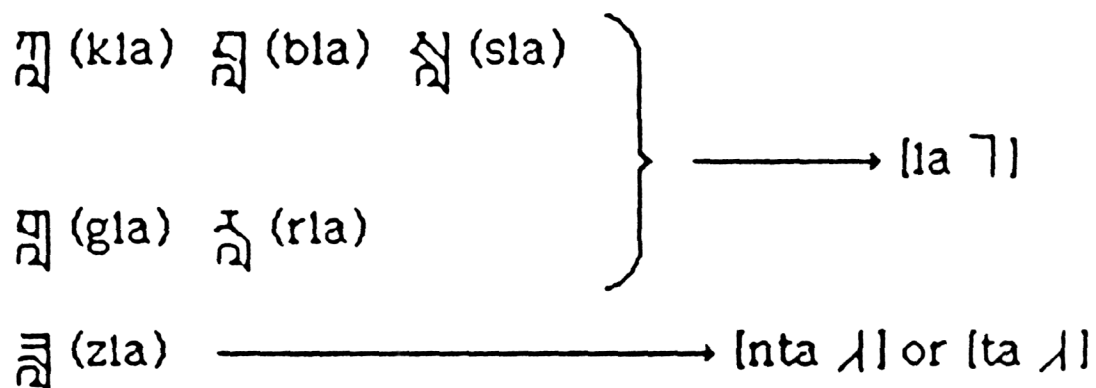
We have already remarked that in modern Lhasa dialect *zla* is pronounced as [ntaʌ] or [taʌ]. *Sla*, on the contrary, would be realized as [laʌ], a very different phonetic entity. If in the mid or late Royal Period these two syllables had already become as different as this, the interchange between pre-initial *za* and *sa* should not have occurred. This proves that in the

⁶ Perhaps the high tone of these syllables is to be explained by positing an intermediate glottalized *w*: **db*- > *?*w*- > *w*. [Ed.]

eighth and ninth centuries *zla* had not yet evolved to [nta ɿ] or [ta ɿ]. Quite possibly it was still pronounced [zla], while *sla* was read as [sla].

If this is correct, then why would root initial *za* and *sa* be in free variation in Royal Period documents? This problem throws light on the devoicing process which was an important historical development in Tibetan. By the eighth and ninth centuries *za* had gradually devoiced and become almost identical to *sa*; and because distinctive tone had not yet developed at that time, the conditions leading to free variation were present.

Finally I should like to analyze the process whereby *zla* came to be read as [nta ɿ] or [ta ɿ] in Lhasa Tibetan. With the exception of *zla*, all words spelled with WT subscribed *la* are read as [la ɿ]:



I believe the following points can be made here:

1. From the standpoint of the WT script, preposed, superscribed, and subscribed consonants can be viewed as having been attached before, above, or below certain root initial consonants. But from the standpoint of the OT spoken language rather than the script they were all combined with the root consonants to form ancient consonant cluster initials. In those syllables which in the script had no subscribed consonants, the root consonant was the one which was pronounced together with the vowel; but in syllables which did have a subscribed consonant, it was this subscribed consonant which was actually in direct contact with the vowel. Taking this tack, in a certain sense the original root initials in our examples above could in effect be said to have become the pre-initial consonants, while the original subscribed consonant took over the position of root initial. Thus, the *la* in *kla*, *gla*, *bla*, *rla*, and *sla* was the consonant which was directly joined with the vowel; and *ka*, *ga*, *ba*, *ra*, and *sa*, from the orthographic standpoint, seem to have become the pre-initial elements in relation to *la*. For this reason, in the process of historical development of the Tibetan language, these letters *ka*, etc., when occurring before *la*, began to weaken and fall away, just as the

other pre-initials did; and they moreover caused the pitch to be raised. This is why, with the exception of *zla*, all other syllables having subscribed *la* became [lã] in Lhasa Tibetan.⁷

2. The fact that only *zla* did not become [lã] but rather yielded [ntaɿ] or [taɿ] is due to special conditions which were present here. Subscribed *la* was a voiced sound, and it goes without saying that the voiceless consonants to which it could be attached were fundamentally different from it. Among the voiced consonants it could follow, we note in connection with manner of articulation that *za* was a fricative, while *la* was a lateral in which air hissed as it passed by the sides of the tongue. Thus *za* and *la* belonged to a common class of sounds characterized by friction. If we consider the question of point of articulation, only *za* (made with the tongue tip against the back of the teeth) and *ra* (made with the blade of the tongue and the front of the hard palate) are similar to *la* (made with the tip of the tongue and the gums). And *za* and *la*, which are both tongue-tip dentals, are especially close. This similarity led to a tendency for interaction between them, with the result that there occurred dissimilation in manner of articulation, causing *la* to become a stop and yielding [ntaɿ] or [taɿ] as modern forms.⁸

3. Both the root consonant and the subscribed consonant of *zla* were voiced and moreover were similar in point and manner of articulation, therefore resulting in the development of a low rising tone. The root consonants in the remaining clusters, *kla*, *sla*, *bla*, *gla*, and *rla*, were voiceless, or if voiced were rather different from *la* in point and manner of articulation. As a consequence they yielded a high even tone.

The preceding cursory and tentative views on three problems in Tibetan historical phonology are not presented as established solutions but are suggested in hopes that they may arouse the interest of colleagues involved in the common endeavor of tracing the historical development of the Tibetan language.

⁷ This explanation is consistent with the **db* - > **ʔw* - > *w* hypothesis suggested above. [Ed.]

⁸ This etymon has developed a dental stop in other TB languages as well, e.g. *Jingpho* *ṣəta* 'moon; month.' Cf. Matisoff, James A. "The linguist's dilemma: l/d interchange in Sino-Tibetan." Paper presented at the 23rd International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, University of Texas, Arlington (1990). [Ed.]

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