

Contour Tones from Lost Syllables in Central Tibetan

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A recent paper by Mazaudon and Michailovsky (1989) describes the origins of contour tones in Dzongkha Tibetan through a mechanism rather unusual for Asian languages. In Asian languages we are accustomed to seeing contour tones develop concurrent with a reduction in the number of distinctions among syllable codas. In Dzongkha, however, falling tone in a number of forms reflects loss of a second syllable, with the contour representing coalescence of what were originally distinct pitch specifications on separate syllables. As Mazaudon and Michailovsky point out, it is interesting that while both Dzongkha and Central Tibetan have developed contour tones, they have done so by quite distinct mechanisms: the Central Tibetan falling tone originates in glottalization of the nucleus which reflects lost glottalized obstruent syllable codas, while a major source of Dzongkha falling tones is the loss of an entire syllable.

The purpose of this note is to present a handful of forms in which the same mechanism which has produced contour tones in Dzongkha has operated in Central dialects. The forms where this can be observed in Central dialects are originally trisyllabic words, with a disyllabic construction (usually object + verb) and the *-ba* derivational nominalizer. This *-ba* becomes [wa] intervocally in many forms of Tibetan. In a few words in modern spoken Lhasa and Shigatse the *-ba* is absorbed into the preceding syllable, resulting in a long lowered vowel with falling tone. My only examples at present are:¹

<i>tshem bu ba</i>	/tshimpȫ/	'tailor'
<i>lham bzo ba</i>	/lhamsɔ̄/	'shoemaker'
<i>shing bzo ba</i>	/šingsō/	'woodworker'
<i>zhar ra ba</i>	/š̄arā/	'blind person'

All but the last form can be found in dictionaries, and Goldstein (1975, 1984) transcribes them with ordinary falling tone. The last form is apparently a Lhasa colloquialism: Goldstein 1975 gives *zhar ra* 'blind in one eye', but *Rgya Bod Ming Mdzod* agrees with my consultant in giving 'blind person' for *zhar ra*; other sources I have consulted (including the

¹ The phonemic transcription here differs from the familiar Chang and Shefts system in marking the high-low distinction only on the first syllables of words, using underlining for low tone and leaving high tone unmarked, and in using a circumflex rather than an acute to represent falling tone.

comprehensive work of Zhang et. al.) don't list the form. No dictionary that I have consulted lists *zhar ra ba*, but I infer the origin of the spoken form from the trisyllabic pronunciation which my consultant accepts as a more careful alternant to /ṣ̌aaraa/ (see below).

For most speakers this contour is distinct from the ordinary Central Tibetan falling tone in careful speech, where the ordinary falling tone is distinctly glottalized, and often ends with a clear glottal stop.² Moreover, literate consultants whom I have asked are willing to pronounce the above words very carefully with the third syllable restored, i.e:

/tshimpowa/
/lhamsɔwa/
/ṣ̌iŋsowa/
/ṣ̌aarawa/

It is probably not coincidental that the only speaker we have had a chance to work with who was not literate in Tibetan—a young Lhasa speaker whose education was entirely in Chinese—is also the speaker with whom we had the most difficulty in distinguishing these two contour tones even in careful citation, and did not himself seem to have any sense that they were different. For this speaker, we were unable to discern any difference between the final vowels and tones of e.g. *lham bzo ba* /lhamsɔ̃ʔ/ 'shoemaker' and *zhar gog* /ṣ̌aakʔ̃/ 'blind person (derogatory)'. (Note that **wa* < *ba* has the same lowering effect on a preceding /o/ as has -*k*).

References

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² And for most speakers falling tone with back vowels alternates with /-k/, while the bisyllabic contour tones never do.