

PROLEGOMENON TO RGYALTHANG TIBETAN PHONOLOGY*

Wang Xiaosong
Southwest Nationalities Institute, Yunnan

*Translated by Krisadawan Hongladarom
and Suree Choonharuangdej¹*

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

* Rgyalthang Tibetan is spoken in Zhongdian county, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, N.W. Yunnan, People's Republic of China. The author calls the dialect Zhongdian dialect, as it is thus known among local Chinese. But we chose to call it Rgyalthang Tibetan in this translation, as this is the name the Tibetans in Zhongdian call their language. The author is a native speaker of Rgyalthang. He lives in Zhongdian and has published numerous works on Tibetan language and literature, especially those dealing with the famous *Gling Gesar* epic. In translating this essay, we edited certain portions of the material. Phonetic symbols were adjusted so that they are more consistent, and redundant information was omitted with the permission of the author. For technical reasons, we substituted the tone numbers which appear in the original paper for the following symbols: /ʔ/ for 55; /ʔ/ for 51; /ʔ/ for 231; /ʔ/ for 13. /ŋ/ and /h/ are substituted for the symbol /ʔ/ over the nasalized vowels. We also changed the title from "Prolegomenon to Rgyalthang Tibetan" to the present title. The paper appears in a local document called "Newsletter of the History of the Zhongdian County."

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the footnotes in this paper are provided by the first translator. She would like to thank the Thailand Research Fund for the generous financial support for the project "Grammar of Rgyalthang, a Tibetan language in Yunnan" (September 1995-September 1998), which enabled her to conduct fieldwork and meet with the author of this paper. Thanks are also due to Chulalongkorn University for partially supporting the project. She is grateful to Tsuguhito Takeuchi for commenting on an earlier draft of this translation and for giving helpful suggestions regarding Old Tibetan phonology.

The translation has been further revised by JAM. [Ed.]

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 ṭh . These are pronounced with [tṣh] in Lhasa Tibetan (LT) and other dialects, but [tṣʰ] in Rgyalthang Tibetan (RT). If we look at the spelling of these basic words we will find that [tṣʰ] 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 [tṣhamto], not [tṣhā mtō]. The word *pan chen* ‘great scholar’ is pronounced [pān tṣhēn] in Lhasa dialect, not [bān tṣhān]. 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 [çĩ kā tsē], but in RT whenever the sound *zh* is preceded by other sounds, it shifts to [ʈ]. The pronunciation of this word in Modern Chinese is [ʈĩ 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 initial “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* [ɲě] ‘fire’, *amyes* [ʔā ɲě] ‘grandfather’, *myed* [ɲê] ‘not have, not exist’, *myi dgos* [ɲī k̄yə] ‘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 [t̚ḡhā pā], but in Qinghai (Amdo Tibetan) as [tcū wā], and in RT as [tcā 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 [cā] but in RT as [ṣā]. The same principle works automatically with other words with this initial, e.g. *shi* ‘to die’ (LT [cī], RT [ṣī]); *shing* ‘wood, fuel’ (LT [cīŋ], RT [ṣīŋ]). 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	[tṣa f]	ch	[tṣha f]	j	[tṣha 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	[ʒa v]	z	[sa v]	’ ⁴	[fia v]	y	[ja v]
r	[ra v]	l	[la v]	sh	[ṣa 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’
	pṣ	‘hair (body); to move’
	pī	‘calf; sheep hair’
ph	phā	‘pig’
	phṣ	‘to splash, sprinkle (water)’
	phī	‘to push; to develop’

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 apostrophe is substituted for the symbol *A* used by the author. It is a common practice among Tibetologists to use the apostrophe to transliterate the graph ࠨ “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 Rgyalthag and Lhasa Tibetan: ‘light’ LT *hīḡ*, RT *wūi*; ‘to go’ LT *tṣo*, RT *ngūā*.

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 Rgyalthag phonology, and does not really belong in the inventory.

b	bă	'wave'
	bī	'to pick (grass, flower)'
nb	nbă	'sound (donkey); unpleasant sound'
	nbě	'bug, worm'
	nbī	'abundant, plentiful'
m	mă	'mother'
	mě	'to plough'
	mī	'scar; handprint'
ṃ	ṃā	'wound'
w	wă	'fox'
	wăṅ	'(cattle) milk'
	wūi	'light'
ts	tsă	'root; vein, pulse'
	tsě	'to estimate, calculate; to borrow (money)'
tsh	tshă	'salt'
	tshě	'dog'
dz	dză	'bud of a tree'
	dzě	'to step on'
ndz	ndză	'provisions'
	ndzī	'to drill through (a hole); to enter (a hole)'
s	să	'field, earth'
	sě	'coccyx; to blow one's nose'
z	ză	'queen; woman' ⁵
	zī	'to hang'
t	tă	'to look; horse'
	tě	'to lean'
th	thă	'sheep's wool cloth'
	thě	'to pick; to gather'
d	dă	'to lick'
	dě	'to collect'
	dī	'to make trouble'
nd	ndă	'arrow'
n	nă	'ear'
	ně	'sharp, pointed'
l	lă	'river deer'
	lī	'to peel (skin)'
ṭ	ṭă	'deity'
	ṭy	'to cheat'

⁵ This word occurs in compounds such as *dzăză* 'Chinese woman', and *dzěză* 'Naxi woman'. It is, however, never used with the word *pi* 'Tibet' to render *pīza* 'Tibetan woman'.

r	rǎ	'goat'
	rǔ	'mountain'
	rǐ	'rotten'
tɕ	tɕǎ	'to chew'
	tɕǔ	'ten; tongue'
	tɕǐ	'to twist'
tɕh	tɕhǎ	'pair'
	tɕhǔ	'big; water; 10,000'
dz	dzǎ	'enemy'
	dzǔ	'to change'
	dzǐ	'to roll, curl up'
ndz	ndzǎ	'to look like'
	ndzǐ	'to bite'
ɕ	ɕǎ	'meat; flesh'
	ɕǔ	'to die'
	ɕǐ	'to shake; to wash'
z	zǎ	'to lay; to remain'
	zǔ	'bow; four'
	zǐ	'to melt (natural process); to dissolve' ⁶
tɕ	tɕǎ	'to ride'
	tɕǔ	'to give birth'
	tɕǐ	'to look for'
tɕh	tɕhǎ	'to bear'
	tɕhǔ	'lard'
	tɕhǐ	'thorny bush'
dz	dzǎ	'Han; 100; net'
	dzǔ	'to stab'
	dzǐ	'to meet; to have an audience with'
ndz	ndzǎ	'to hide oneself; to shrink'
	ndzǐ	'quick'
ɲ	ɲǎ	'back part of the neck'
	ɲǔ	'fire'
	ɲǐ	'heart'
ɕ	ɕǎ	'hen'
	ɕǔ	'paint, oil paint; to open'
	ɕǐ	'to understand; to be able to'
ʐ	ʐǎ	'snake'
	ʐǔ	wild cat

⁶ This is semantically distinct from RT ㄗㄟ 'to melt by an extra force, e.g. fire, sun' (e.g. fire, the sun).

	zî	'leopard'
j	jā	'man'
	jā	'left'
	jî	'to diffuse, vanish'
k	kā	'pillar; difficult'
	kā	'thief'
	kî	'to carry on one's back'
kh	khā	'mouth'
	khē	'fluent; brilliant'
	khî	'shy; embarrassed'
g	gā	'saddle'
	gā	'nine'
	gî	'to cross over'
ng	ngā	'obstacle'
	ngū	'rice (uncooked)'
	ngî	'to move (body)'
ŋ	ŋā	'five; to harvest'
	ŋā	'to cry'
ʔ	ʔā kā	'uncle (father's younger brother)'
	ʔā rā	'liquor'
h	hā	'to pant'
	hū	'to console (a child) by deceiving'

The relationship between the 42 initials of RT and their various possible spellings in WT is tabulated in the following chart:

<i>Pronunciation in RT</i>	<i>WT letters</i>			
pa	pa	ba	spa	dpa
pha	pha	'pha		
ba	rba	lba	sba	
nba	'ba			
ma	ma	rma	mra	dma
ṃa	sma			
wa	wa	dba	ba (as a suffix) ⁷	
tsa	tsa	rtsa	stsa	dza
tsha	tsha	tshwa	mtsha	'tsh
dz	rdza			
ndz	mdza			
sa	sa	sra	zra	

⁷ E.g. 'moon' WT *zla ba*, RT *dāwā*.

za	bza	gza				
ta	ta	da	rta	lta	sla	bta
tha	tha	mtha	fitha			
da	gda	bda	rda	lda	sda	zla
nda	mda	'da				
na	na	rna	gna	mna		
ŋa	sna					
la	la	kla	gla	rla		
ła	lha	sla				
ra	ra					
tʂa	ca	tra	dra	gra		
tʂha	sha	khra				
dzʰa	rja	lja				
ndzʰa	'ja	mja	'dra	'gra		
ʂa	sha	zha	gsha	bsha	hra	
ʐa	bzha	gzha	zha			
tʂa	kya	gya				
tʂha	khyā					
dza	rgya	sgya				
ndza	'gya					
ŋa	nya	gnya	mya	snya	nywa	mya
ca	py	phya	bya	pra	bra	phra
za	sbra	gya				
ja	ya					
ka	ka	ga	rka	lka	ska	dka bka
kha	kha	mkha	'kha			
ga	dga	bga	rga	lga	sga	
nga	mga	'ga				
ŋa	ŋa	rŋa	lŋa	dŋa	mŋa	
ŋa	sŋa					
h	ha					

There are 31 vowels in RT.⁸

Examples

i phĩ 'to push, to develop'

⁸ This number includes diphthongs and nasalized vowels represented by combinations of vowels and nasals in this translation. Note that the author has given two other sets of examples for /w/ and another set for /i/. As I could not find the phonetic differences among them, and with the permission of the author, I did not mention them here. I also rearranged the presentation to make it easier for the readers to follow the examples.

	bī	'indigestion'
	khī	'a kind of Chinese measurement'
y	tī	'colt'
	dī	'to grow'
	tchī	'you'
e	phē	'piggy'
	tṣē	'to cut (wood)'
	dzē	'gunpowder'
ε	nē	'a kind of barley'
	mē	'lower body'
	ṇē	'not have'
ə	pā	'to move'
	nbā	'worm, insect'
	tṣhā	'water'
a	mā	'mother'
	tā	'tiger'
	kā	'pillar'
o (uo)	phō	'to jump'
	bō	'breath'
	tṣō	'to vomit'
u	pū	'to blow'
	ṣū	'to come (imperative form)'
	zū	'to sharpen (with knife)'
	ṣū	'to snatch away'
u	ʔū	'to borrow'
	kū	'to pry'
	khū	'to take'
iu	tīu	'there'
	thīu	'plane'
	dīu	'saw'
iə	līə	'to rescue'
	tīə	'to shut (door)'
	dīə	'this one'
ia	bīa	'tumour'
	mīa	'mole'
	kīa	'hair'
io	līo	'to catch up'
	thīo	'to guess correctly'
	kīo	'to stir; to stir up'
yə	gīə	'to be necessary'

	khȳə	'he/she'
ye	jȳe	'to tip; to lean'
	khȳe	'lead; to be fragile'
ya	kȳe	'wheat'
	çȳa	'hail'
	jȳa	'handle (knife)'
ei	jȳa	'to cover'
	phèi	'to remove'
	nbêi	'to call for'
ui	wûi	'light'
	ndûi	'to desire'
	tshùi	'proportion; right measure'
uə	sūə	'tooth'
	lǔə	'year'
	tshūə	'lake'
ua	sūa	'a kind of barley'
	tsūa	'grass'
	ʂūa	'sore, ulcer'
iŋ	sīŋ	'to give'
	dzīŋ	'lie'
	tīŋ	'to support'
yn	jȳn	'left side'
	tçȳn	'to put on (clothes)'
	çȳn	'to go/come (honorific)'
en	thēn	'bad (person)'
	lēn	'incorrect'
ɛŋ	phēŋ	'useful'
	bēŋ	'to soak'
	ṃēŋ	'medicine'
aŋ	wǎŋ	'milk'
	wàŋ	'to let go'
oŋ	tshōŋ	'to complete'
	sōŋ	'to protect; to guard'
	nōŋ	'sky'
iaŋ	kīaŋ	'liquor pot'
	pīaŋ	'rice barn; warehouse'
ioŋ	kīoŋ	'swollen'
	līoŋ	'to shake, to tremble'
	phīoŋ	'sad'
ein	pēin	'headman'

	dz̥ɛ̃n	'an inferior grade of wheat flour'
	gɛ̃n	'winter'
uin	tshuɿn wāŋ	'vegetable'
	guɿn	'torch made from pinewood'
	kūin	'few, sparse'
uən	hūən kū	'blue/light blue'

The main vowels in RT occur both short and long, viz. a, aa, i, ii, u, uu, e, ee, and o, oo. But in two syllable words short vowels are whispered, or reduced to shwa. For example, *ka* 'pillar' in *kadoŋ* 'supporting pillars' is pronounced as *kadoŋ*. Generally long vowels will remain the same in any environment.⁹

Vowels are influenced by neighboring consonants. In RT there is a special phonological process of this kind which is different from LT. That is, before the final consonants *g* or *gs*, the vowel *u* is pronounced as /o/, and the vowel *o* is pronounced as /u/.

Generally speaking, tones in RT are similar to those in LT. They are 55 / ˉ/, 51 / ˘/, 231 / ˆ/, and 13 / ˜/. They are 55 / ˉ/, 51 / ˘/, 231 / ˆ/, and 13 / ˜/. No tonal marks are given to unstressed words.

Examples

sā	'earth'
sǎ	'to eat' ¹⁰
sà	'to burn'
sā	'to fall down'
nā	'ear'
nǎ	'sick'
nà	'pus'
nā	'black, dark; forest'
nā	'neck'
nǎ	'fish'
nà	'to cut (vegetable, meat)'
nā	'name of a family'
lā	'river deer'
lǎ	'mountain pass'
là	'eagle'
lā	'hand'

⁹ According to my own fieldnotes, vowel length is not distinctive in this dialect.

¹⁰ Generally, the word 'to eat' in Rgyalthing is *tṣhǎ*/. The author might have given the Lhasa word here.

3. ROLES OF THE FINAL CONSONANTS

1. Final *g* or *gs* causes tone 55 to become 51, or tone 13 to become 231, and causes the WT vowel *o* to become /u/, and *u* to become /o/.

Exs.:

WT *phag* 'pig' is pronounced as [phà]

WT *dags* is pronounced as [dâ].

WT *lug* 'sheep' is pronounced as [lô]

WT *lugs* 'habit; tradition' is pronounced as [lô]

2. Final *ñ* when combined with the vowel *a* causes the vowel to become rounder, that is, /oŋ/. This has no effect on tone.

Ex.:

WT *khañpa*, RT [khõŋpā].

3. Final *d* causes tone 55 to become 51, or 13 to become 231 and at the same time causes the WT vowel *a* to become /ɛ/, WT *o* to become /yə/, and WT *u* to become /uə/.

Exs.:

thad is pronounced as [thè].

khod is pronounced as [khỳə].

phud is pronounced as [phùə].

4. Final *s* has an effect on vowel change in a similar manner to final *d* but has no effect on tone.

5. Final *n* has the same effect as final *s*.

Exs.:

phan is pronounced as [phēn].

thon is pronounced as [thỹən].

jun is pronounced as [jűn].

rin is pronounced as [rĩn].

len is pronounced as [lēn].

6. Final *b* causes tone 55 to become 51, or 13 to become 231, and at the same time causes the WT vowel *a* to become /o/, WT *o* to become /u/, and WT *u* to become /y/.

Exs:

khāb is pronounced as [khò].

thob is pronounced as [thù].

thub is pronounced as [thỳ].

7. Final *m* has a similar effect to final *ṅ*.

8. Final *r* causes the WT vowels *a* and *e* to become /u/, WT *u* to become /o/, and WT *o* to become /u/. It also lengthens the vowel but has no effect on the tone.

Exs.:

shar is pronounced as [ṣū̃].

sher is pronounced as [ṣū̃].

khur is pronounced as [khǒ̃].

nor is pronounced as [nū̃].

9. Final *l* causes the WT vowel *a* to become /i/, WT *o* to become /y/, and WT *u* to become /ei/, but it has no effect on tone.

Exs.:

nyal is pronounced as [nĩ̃].

khol is pronounced as [khỹ̃].

shel is pronounced as [ṣēĩ̃].

rul is pronounced as [rēĩ̃].

10. Certain suffixes are fused with a preceding vowel.

Ex.:

nga-'i 'I-genitive case' is pronounced [ŋě̃].