

THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE TIBETAN DIALECT¹

—by Dr Richard K. Sprigg

'One curious result of the cold should be mentioned here, namely its effect upon the speech of the people. A peculiarity of the language of the Tibetans, in common with the Russians and most Arctic nations is the remarkably few vowels in their words, and the extra-ordinarily large number of consonants: for example, the Tibetan name for Sikkim is "Hbras-Yongs", Indeed, so full of consonants are Tibetan words that most of them could be articulated with semi-closed mouth, evidently from the enforced necessity of keeping the lips closed as far as possible against the cutting cold when speaking'. This remarkable statement was made by the Chief Medical Officer of the Younghusband Expedition, Col. L.A. Waddell, in his book 'Lhasa and its mysteries' (p. 144), published on his return from Lhasa in 1905.²

Waddell's account of the relative richness of the Tibetan language in consonants was very much wide of the mark; he was confusing sound with symbol. Though the Tibetan name for Sikkim does indeed have eight consonant symbols to two vowel symbols, in the pronunciation of the Lhasa dialect it has only four consonant sounds to two vowel sounds. A more striking case is the pronunciation of *dbus*, the name of the province in which Lhasa stands, in the Lhasa dialect. In spite of being written with three consonant symbols to one vowel symbol it is pronounced with one consonant sound (initial glottal plosive) to one vowel sound, though it is true that in the Balti dialect of Tibetan, spoken in Pakistan, there is a pronunciation [rbus], with three consonant sounds to one vowel sound.³

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1. Based on a paper read at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, 16th March 1974. [The paper was illustrated with tape-recordings of examples in the Balti, Golok, and Lhasa dialects.]
 2. I have incidentally a personal link with Col. Waddell through my wife's grandfather, David Machonald, who was his Tibetan interpreter on the Expedition, and helped him to arrange the collection of articles brought back from Lhasa for the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.
 3. Cf. 'The role of R in the development of the modern spoken Tibetan dialects', *Acta Orientalia Hungarica*, xxi, 3 (1968), 304 n.8

A prominent part in the study of Tibetan, and in dialect comparison, has been taken by Hungarians. The first Tibetan-English Dictionary was produced by a Hungarian, Csoma de Koros, in 1834, after spending some considerable time in Baltistan; and, since then, G. Uray and A. Rona-Tas have compared and classified the spoken dialects, former distinguishig four main groups, and the latter two main groups. They have an advantage over me in the number of dialects studied; but I have an advantage over them in that my more limited studies were made at first hand.

I began my study in the United Kingdom with Rinzin Wangpo, a Tibetan scholar, born in Lhasa, and nephew of Tharchin Babu, the well-known Tibetan printer, in 1948 and continued it with him in Kalimpong, Darjeeling District, in 1949 and 1950. In the latter year I was granted permission by the Government of India to spend three weeks at their trade agency at Gyantse, in the Tsang province of Tibet. Most of the people there spoke the Tsang dialect of Tibetan, markedly different from the dialect of the capital, Lhasa; but all the members of the official class there spoke the Lhasa dialect; and both the Governor of Gyantse and the Abbot of the Pengor Chorten Monastery helped me, and made recordings on my wire-recorder.

My study of Sikkimese was very limited. I spent only one day on it, working with the son of the late Lingmo Kaji; but at least that was enough for me to hear for myself the well-known feature of the Sikkim dialect whereby words spelt with *kh* and *gr*, e.g. *khrag* 'blood' are pronounced with [khj-] and [gj-], for the most part, as though they were written *khy* - and *gy*-; and, correspondingly, words written with *phr* and *br* - e.g. *phrug* 'offspring' are pronounced with [phj-] and [bj-], as though written *phy*- and *by*-.

A month in Thyangboche and Namchi Bazaar in 1956 enabled me to study the Sherpa dialect on the spot, with a young monk, Tenzing Lodroo, of Thyangboche monastery. Unfortunately, my tape-recorder broke after the first ten minutes of recording; but I was able to bring away detailed notes of the dialect, perhaps the most important feature of which is that, unlike the Lhasa dialect, it has three different verb forms, each corresponding to one of the three verb roots of Classical Tibetan, e.g. '*gengs/bkang/ khong* 'fill'.

The West Pakistan Government refused me permission to go to Baltistan, in 1964-5, to study the Skardu and the Khapalu dialects of Balti Tibetan on the spot; so I had to be content with studying, and recording, material in both dialects in Rawalpindi, with Fakir Hussein, a 17-year-old student and radio-announcer, and Abdul Karim, my servant, during five or six months.

After the Sikkim Coronation, in 1965, I returned to Gangtok, to this Institute, to spend seven or eight days working with the learned Lama Dodrupchen Rimpoche on his dialect of Tibetan, the Golok dialect, spoken in the extreme north-east of the Tibetan language area, near Amne Machen and the Koko Nor.

The Khampa dialects I have, I regret to say, not studied at all apart from an hour or two with Sangye Tenzing, one of the Bon monks who were formerly at my College in London, the School of Oriental and African Studies.

One of the most interesting features of Balti Tibetan is that it has pronunciations with (phr-) and (br-) corresponding to the Classical Tibetan *phr-* and *br-*, e.g. *phrug* 'offspring' and *brag* 'rock', where other Tibetan dialects have (thr-) and (dr-) In the case of words spelt with *kh-* and *gr-*, though, e.g. *khrag* 'blood', *gri* 'knife', the Skardu dialect of Balti has pronunciations with (thr-) and (dr-); and among all Tibetan dialects, it is only the Khapalu dialect of Balti that has pronunciations with velar plosive initials, (khr-) and (gr-), so closely resembling the spelling, and suggesting that it was on pronunciations such as the Khapalu that Tibetan spelling was originally based, at least in this respect.

Another important respect in which Balti, or, rather, the Skardu dialect of Balti, supports the orthographic distinctions made in literary Tibetan is that it has syllable final consonants [-ks], [-ps], [-ms], etc. corresponding to *-gs*, *-ngs*, *-bs*, and *-ms*, and, therefore distinguishes lexical items having these finals, e.g. *lcags* 'iron', from those having [-k], [-p], [-m], and corresponding to syllables in *-g*, *-ng*, *-b*, and *-m* ⁴.

The Golok dialect makes what I believe to be a unique contribution to Tibetan dialect comparison, and to the reconstruction of a 'common Tibetan' preceding the various modern dialects, through its word-initial clusters containing a labial nasal, [mkh-], [mg-], [mthr-], etc. which it distinguishes from word-initial clusters containing a nasal that is homorganic with the following plosive or affricate, [nth-], [nd-], [mph-], etc. In this way it supports the orthographic distinction between *mkh-*, *mg-*, *md-*, etc. and 'kh-', 'g-', 'd-', etc. in literary Tibetan.

Another important contribution that Golok makes to the reconstruction of an earlier stage of the Tibetan language is to be found in the present and past tense forms of verbs; e.g. *lta/bltas* 'look at'. In other Tibetan dialects the initial consonants of the present tense are pronounced in exactly the same way as those of the past tense form, so that

4. Cf. 'Balti-Tibetan verb syllable finals, and a prosodic analysis', *Asia Major*, New Series, XIII, 1-2, 187-201.

lt- and *blt-* are pronounced the same; but Golok makes a difference: *lt-*, for example, is pronounced something like [hrt-] and *blt-* something like [ft-].

One of the most interesting features of Tibetan dialects, especially from the point of view of general linguistic typology, is whether (or how far) they are tonal, and make pitch distinctions that correspond to a difference in the meaning of words. The position of the Tibetan dialects seems to correspond -roughly- to that of the Scandinavian languages: all the dialects of Swedish are tonal; nearly all the dialects of Danish are non-tonal; and Norwegian comes in between these two extremes, with some tonal dialects and some non-tonal dialects. Correspondingly, Lhasa Tibetan is a tonal dialect of Tibetan, Golok is non-tonal, and Balti might be said to be slightly tonal⁵. In Lhasa Tibetan, though, the pitch level distinction, between an upper range and a lower range, does not apply to the second syllable of a polysyllabic noun. e.g. the second syllable of both *mchod-me* 'butter lamp' and *khal-rta* 'pack horse' has the higher pitch level, though, elsewhere, the lexical item *me* 'fire' has the lower pitch and the lexical item *rta* 'horse' has the higher, e.g. *me-mda* 'gun' [fire arrow,] *rta-pa* 'horseman'. In Balti it is only in disyllabic and trisyllabic nouns that a lexically significant difference in pitch level is made; and, even then, only about ninety nouns depart from the normal low-high pattern by having a high-pitch syllable initially, e.g. (low-high) [ato] 'father' (honorific), (high-high or high-low) [ata] 'father' (non-honorific)⁶.

What emerges from the comparative study of the Tibetan dialects is that the orthographic forms of literary Tibetan, complicated though such forms as *bsdad* 'stayed' and *brgyad* 'eight' appear to be, can be supported by one or other of the dialects in spoken use today, especially such conservative dialects as Balti and Golok. In fact this study suggests that the ancient Tibetan phoneticians who devised the original spelling system of the language, its early orthography, were highly skilled indeed.

In this paper I have concentrated on the phonetic aspects of some of the dialects, on their pronunciation features; but I should not wish to give the impression that dialect comparison consists of phonetic

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5. Cf: 'Verbal phrases in Lhasa Tibetan— I' Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, XVI, 1 (1954), 134-56, 'The tonal system of Tibetan (Lhasa dialect) and the nominal phrase' BSOAS, XVII, 1 (1955), 133-53, and 'Lepcha and Balti Tibetan: tonal or non-tonal languages, AM, NS, XII, 2 (1966), 185-201.
 6. Cf. 'Lepcha and Balti Tibetan' (note 5).

study only. There is also the question of differences in vocabulary - lexical differences -, whereby the word for 'house' in the Lhasa dialect is *khang-pa* (non-honourific) or *gzim-shag* (honourific); but the Sikkimese word is *khyim*, much more like the literary Tibetan form. There are also considerable grammatical differences to be taken into account, especially differences in syntax. These, however, should form the subject of a separate paper.

In this paper I have emphasized the importance, because of their conservatism, of the more remote, and well-known dialects such as Balti and Golok, as against the much more widely known Lhasa dialect, which Dr Tshewang Pemba, in his book 'Young days in Tibet', speaks of as 'the "Oxford accent" of Tibetan'.