SOME REMARKS ON THE VOWEL SYSTEM OF SPOKEN TIBETAN

BY

A. RÓNA-TAS (Szeged)

The history of modern Spoken Tibetan is of unique importance both for general linguistics and for Tibetology. Tibetan has been known from various kinds of sources for more than 1,200 years. Its wide range of dialects offers a solid basis for a comparative historical approach. Tibetan has been documented for over a millennium by a script, which has always rendered the spoken form only approximately but which can be used, with due caution, for its linguistic reconstruction. The analysis of synchronic and diachronic processes have received support in the last thirty years from increased fieldwork and/or direct observation.¹

However, the use of the abundant material is hampered by several factors.

One of these factors is the interference of Written Tibetan. It is, of course, important to give the spelling rules of Written Tibetan (WT), this is what most non-Tibetan students and even scholars need, when they have to pronounce the words which they learnt in written form. However, in most cases it is left unconsidered that the data one gets from a learned Tibetan, if asked for the pronunciation of a word, is the «reading style», a more or less artificial, but in any case literary rendering which is not identical with everyday speech. The «reading style» was slightly different even in the main monasteries of Central Tibet, and the monasteries in the north-eastern region had their own, «reading style» variants.² It is evident that the «reading style» depends on the spoken vernacular like any of the literary languages do and consequently it may serve as one of the sources of its investigation. We have only not to forget that the two are not identical. It was a clear idea of R. A. Miller³ to consider WT as a system of symbols with «which it is customary written by its speakers» and consequently to give the «spelling rules» and not the «rules of pronunciation». These spelling rules can be considered as graphotactic devices with

¹ The field work has been increased among the exile Tibetans living in India. From a sociolinguistic point of view these communities cannot be considered as of the same type as those communities which lived or live in Tibet proper. Many Tibetans joined Western centres where Tibetan is studied. Their presence made possible direct observation without fieldwork. In the last years a series of works on Tibetan have been published by Tibetan authors.


the help of which Tibetans try to render their phonemes. However, in such cases one obtains less reliable data. Everybody who has worked with Tibetan informants has the experience that if one asks them to put down the WT form of a phrase or greater unit, the WT form will not be automatic. The desirable process is to describe Spoken Tibetan (ST) as it is, without any reference to and inference from WT. After having analyzed it in an appropriate manner the result can be confronted with the WT forms.

Another factor which hampers the mastering of the linguistic material is the difference in the conceptual (in some cases terminological) and perceptual approaches. Some use the native Tibetan terminology, others work with the classical European concepts or use modern American analyzing procedures. The problem is with the compatibility. For a long time scholars in Tibetology had only the problem of the various systems of transliterations of WT, now with the growing amount of material recorded from native speakers, the various systems of transcription complicate the picture.

The third factor hampering the linguistic work is the confusion of dialects, subdiasects, sociolects and idiolects. It was R. A. Miller who discovered the difference between «Central Tibetan» and «Lhasa dialect», but even this important distinction has not been accepted by each scholar. In a note in my Tibeto-Mongolica I demonstrated the almost chaotic picture concerning «Central Tibetan» and «Lhasa dialect». Recently Nishida collected the vowel symbols used by his predecessors; however he put the symbols side by side and not their phonemic values. Nevertheless even this chart shows almost as many vowel systems of Spoken Tibetan as researchers.

There is no general agreement on the description of the structure of the Tibetan syllable. My earlier suggestion to distinguish, e.g. preradical (phonemic structure), prescribed (orthographical system) and prefix (morphological structure) has only been inconsistently accepted.

4 Under the title Studies in the grammatical tradition in Tibet, (Amsterdam 1976) R. A. Miller has republished with some additional remarks, seven of his earlier papers dealing with Tibetan grammar. In these and in some of his more recent papers (see e.g. Phone, phoneme and graph in the Old Tibetan grammarians: AOH XXXIV (1980), pp. 153-162, Phonemic theory and orthographic practice in Old Tibetan: JTS 1 (1981), pp. 45-62) he studied the understanding of the Tibetan native scholars on the segmentation of their own language.


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