Reconstructing Old Tibetan

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I call with R. A. Miller (1968)1 Old Tibetan the language of the Old Tibetan Empire. The period begun with the gradual consolidation of the rule of the Yarlung dynasty and lasted until the so-called second conversion to Buddhism in the 11th century. It is clear that the Tibetan language of this period was not homogeneous, neither was it from the point of view of the historical change, nor in respect to its dialects, sociolects and stylistical variants. Early Old Tibetan lasted until the death of Srong-btsan sgam-po, roughly until 650 A. D. In this subperiod the dialect of the Yarlung valley gradually became dominant and formed the basis of the central language variant, to which other local dialects have surely contributed their share. The language of the court, the language of the chancellery, and a rapidly developing koine have not yet been stabilized. Middle Old Tibetan lasted from about 650 until 814. This is the Golden Age of the Old Tibetan Empire, the great expansion of the Tibetan Kingdom and the beginnings of the translation activities of the Buddhist texts. The new norms of the translation, the (third) Edict of the King Khris-lde srong-btsan, the Sgra-sbyor, which became to be in effect from the years 814/815 did not change at once the Buddhist literary language, but influenced on the long run not only the religious but also the non-religious literary language. All the great Central Tibetan inscriptions pertain to the Middle Old Tibetan period. Late Old Tibetan lasted from 815 until the 11th century. Though in Central Tibet the power of the centralized government rapidly decayed, the cultural life in East Tibetan flourished. Though the Chinese reoccupied Tun-huang in 848 the Tibetan literary activities did not cease. Most of our texts from Chinese Turkestan and Tunhuang pertain to the Late Old Tibetan period, even some of those which were written earlier because we only dispose of copies or excerpts of this time.

Since we have contemporary texts from both the Middle and the Late Old Tibetan periods why and what do we have to reconstruct? What has to be reconstructed is the spoken language of this time. The most interesting question is of course the phonetics and the phonological system, because the Old Tibetan orthography is not independent from but not reflecting directly the pronunciation. From the studies of the last years (cf. Róna-Tas 1983) we know that we have to distinguish between the so-called reading style and the actual spoken language, which had several dialects. Thus our first aim is to reconstruct the phonetics of the Spoken Old Tibetan. By the way this promises also a help to the solution of the basic questions of the Tibetan orthography. Of course we have not to forget that neither the morphology nor the syntax of the spoken language was identical with that of the simultaneous written one.

What types of sources do we have for the reconstruction of Spoken Old Tibetan?

The first group of sources is of course Written Old Tibetan. The orthography sometimes reveals in other cases hides the pronunciation. The inconsequences of the orthography, the possible range of orthographic variants, typical orthographical errors, the various forms of the same proper nouns (personal and geographical names) may offer effective help to the reconstruction of Spoken Old Tibetan.

To the second group of sources pertain Tibetan texts or isolated words written with scripts other than Tibetan. This group is very heterogeneous. Chinese, Khotanese Brahmi, various Turkic scripts, even sources written with the Arabic script preserved Tibetan words2.

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1) See the details in Róna-Tas (1985, 93-105).

2) Recently I have shown what kind of use we can make of a Tibetan text written in the Northern or Khotanese Brahmi (Reconstructing Old Tibetan: Tibetan in Khotanese Brahmi, yet unpublished paper read at the Csoma de Kénés Symposium 1987 Sopron).
To the third group pertain the foreign words and names written with the Tibetan alphabet in a form adapted to the orthographic rules. This of course gives a help if we can reconstruct the original pronunciation of the word or name. This is not an easy task, since we have to deal mostly with Chinese, Khotanese, Turkic and other materials, where the reconstruction of the forms heard and fixed by the Tibetans is neither an easy task.

From this third group which I would call cited forms the group of loanwords has to be distinguished. The cited forms had to be adapted only to the Tibetan orthography, but not necessarily to the Tibetan phonological system. The loan-words entered the Spoken Tibetan language and thus stood under the rules of Tibetan phonotactics.

A hitherto very neglected group is the fourth. Texts or words of different languages written with the Tibetan script offer a help for reconstructing the graphotactic rules of Old Tibetan, and thus show us how the Tibetan script was used for rendering the pronunciation. We dispose of Chinese, Tangut, Khotanese, Sanskrit and Turkic texts or word lists written with the Tibetan script. One of the difficulties in these cases is that we are far from having an exact picture of the pronunciation of the respective languages in the 6th–11th centuries and therefore we do not know exactly what did the Tibetan script render. A second difficulty is that the graphotactic rules of Old Tibetan were not always followed in the cases of transcribing non-Tibetan languages.

Though all types of sources have their own greater or lesser incertitudes, just their difference help us to remove them. We have to do with a series of networks, those of languages, scripts, orthographies and they help to solve the problems of each other.

**Languages written with Scripts**

- Tibetan
- Chinese
- Uighur
- Turkic
- Sogdian
- Manichean
- Northern Brahmi
- Southern Brahmi
- Khotanese Saka
- Saka

Let us see a few examples. Miller (1968) following Lauter (1914) suggested that the so-called reversed gi-gu or inverted i-sign, originally the sign of the long i, has been used in Old Tibetan, at least in the earlier Old Tibetan texts, to render a kind of back vocalic i which appeared under the effect of the vowel harmony. We have a Turkic, more precisely an Uighur Turkic text written in Tibetan script from Tunhuang published recently by Maue/Röhrborn (1984/85) and Moriyasu (1985). The graphotactic rules used are only partly Tibetans. Some rules were taken over from the graphotactic rules of Brahmi rendering the same Uighur language. There did exist two sets of graphotactic rules for Turkic written with Brahmi, the Northern one and the Southern or Khotanese Brahmi. Turkic had the vowel opposition of front and back i. None of the two Brahmi

5) "...an allophone of \( i \) partially assimilated to the position of articulation of the \( /u/ \)." (Miller, 1966: 263).