KENHAT, THE DIALECTS OF UPPER LADAKH AND ZANSKAR

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According to phonetic features alone, the various dialects spoken in Ladakh are presently classified in roughly two main groups:

– Western Archaic Tibetan: the non-tonal ‘conservative’ dialects of the north-eastern and central areas: Baltistan, Purik, Lower Ladakh, Nubra, and Leh, showing initial and final consonant clusters

– Western Innovative Tibetan: the ‘innovative’ dialects of the south-eastern areas: Upper Indus, Changthang, and Zanskar, where the clusters have been reduced and tonal features can be found

1 I should like to thank Roland Bielmeier, who first alerted me to some phonetic and morphophonemic similarities between what I observed in Cemre and Gya and the Zanskar, Spiti, and Mustang varieties. His student Thomas Preiswerk similarly obliged me by sharing his recent observations on the Zanskar dialects with me. I am even more indebted to Rebecca Norman for all the discussions we have had on the Ladakhi varieties and for her valuable comments on this paper. I should also like to express my gratitude towards all consultants, since without their help and patience, this paper could not have been written. Special thanks go to Mengyur Tshomo who, by her own initiative, demonstrated an extraordinary diachronic awareness, which allowed us to catch an important linguistic change red-handed. I am also very grateful to my colleague Sam Featherston in the former SFB 441 and to Mark Turin for many improvements in style. Finally, I should like to thank the anonymous taxpayer, who supported the fieldwork on which this article is based: 1996 via grants from the state Berlin (NaFoG) and the DAAD, 2004-2008 via the DFG, for a research project within the SFB 441 ‘Linguistic Data Structures’: On the Relation between Data and Theory in Linguistics at the University of Tübingen (http://www.sfb441.uni-tuebingen.de/b11/), and again in 2010 by a grant from the DFG.

2 Spoken clusters or their traces in the clusterless dialects will have to be discussed in relation to their Old and Classical Tibetan written counterparts. Following conventions of traditional Tibetan grammar, the segments of a written syllable are defined as radical (or root consonant: all 30 letters of the alphabet allowed), pre-radical (5 pre-scribed and 3 super-scribed letters), post-radical (4 sub-scribed letters, still preceding the vowel slot), final (10 letters allowed at the position after the vowel slot), and post-final (2 letters allowed, in combination only with some of the final letters).

3 This designation is used here solely in relation to Ladakh, not in relation to the total course of the river. More commonly, the designation ‘Upper Indus Valley’ is applied in relation to Pakistan, referring thus to Gilgit and Chilas.

4 Cf. Bielmeier (2004, Appendix). Western Innovative Tibetan also comprises the Tibetan varieties of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Bielmeier’s classification is based on earlier work by the Hungarian scholars Ligeti, Uray, and Róna-Tas (cf. e.g.
Representing the allegedly ‘most archaic’ dialects (cf. Bielmeier 1985: 15), the ‘conservative’ dialects are taken to be more relevant for the reconstruction of Old Tibetan or even *proto-Tibetan. The classification is highly misleading, and the so-called ‘innovative’ dialects are for various reasons as relevant or perhaps even more relevant for the reconstruction of the proto-language, not least because of their syntactic properties (see especially sections 4-6 and 8 below). On the basis of my fieldwork in Ladakh and some historical considerations (Zeisler forthcoming, Zeisler in preparation), I propose a somewhat more refined version of the above classification, distinguishing between

- The group of historically younger, but lexico-phonetically conservative Shamskat dialects (Šamskad ‘language of Lower’ Ladakh) in the west and north of Ladakh: Purik, Sham, and Nubra

- The historically older, lexico-phonetically partly conservative, partly innovative Kenhat dialects (Gyenskad ‘language of Upper’ Ladakh) in the centre, south, and south-east of Ladakh

The Kenhat dialects are closely linked to Tibetan varieties spoken in Himachal Pradesh, with which they probably share a common history. My observations indicate that the Changthang dialects share many grammatical features with the Kenhat dialects, but may show particular lexical traits. The verbal auxiliary morphology shows Central Tibetan influence, and I do not want to preclude that some of the Changthang dialects may be closer to Central Tibetan varieties. However, no historical or linguistic data is presently available to state anything with certainty. The Balti dialects spoken in Pakistan and in the region

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5 The Cemre consultant called her own speech ‘Gyenskat’ (with Leh pronunciation), and the name was also accepted by the Gya consultant. The term is not very common among outsiders, but the alternative term Stot(pa), as given by Koshal (1979: 1, 1990: 14) and Bielmeier (CDTD: ii “Stot or Ken” for the dialect of “Igu”) is likewise not generally known, nor is it accepted by the speakers themselves. People from Lower Ladakh would call the people of the Upper Indus invariantly Tjamthampa and their language accordingly Tjamthampa skat. In contrast to the local designations of Sham and Gyen/Ken, I will use the terms Shamskat and Kenhat as cover terms for a wider range of dialects. For the purpose of the present paper, I will confine them to the region of Ladakh, or more precisely to the two Hill Council districts Leh and Kargil (the latter comprising the regions of Purik and Zanskar).

6 Cf. also LSI (p. 52), stating that the Zanskar dialects agree with Rong, but that in the nomadic area of “Rubshu […] a form of Central Tibetan is spoken”.

Róna-Tas 1966: 21f). For critics of this classification see below. In any case, I should prefer the attribute ‘lexico-phonetically conservative’, since the Ladakhi dialects are highly innovative at the morphological and syntactical level.