TIBETAN VOWEL HARMONY REEXAMINED

BY

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In the ‘Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou’, Paris 1971, pp. 472-478, Walter Simon, in a contribution entitled ‘Tibetan “fifteen” and “eighteen” ’, has reverted to the problem of the form bco- of the morpheme meaning “ten” in the Tibetan compound numerals for “15” and “18”, written Tibetan (henceforth WT) bco.lna and bco.brgyad respectively. The modern Lhasa dialect, in which these numerals are pronounced cööya and cöphke 1), (I leave out the tone marks as irrelevant in this connection), shows, at least in some of its varieties 2), a similar vowel change also in the word for “13”, given as cogsom 3) or cogsum 4), which however is not reflected in WT bcu.gsum.

Prior to Simon’s recent paper two widely diverging explanations of the aberrant vowel in these numerals had been proposed. In a paper published in this journal in 1955, R. A. Miller 5) sought the solution in “regressive discontinuous dissimilation”, basing his explanation on the Lhasa form of the numeral “13”, which he gives as cogsum, “since the Lhasa form sum “three” contains a sequence of two successive labial phonemes u and m”. As this explanation evidently cannot be applied to the forms for “15” and “18”, he tried to save his theory by pointing to the Ancient Chinese forms for the numerals “five” and “eight”, nguo and pwat,


2 There seems to be some dialectal variation within Lhasa, since Sprigg’s description in his “Vowel harmony in Lhasa Tibetan”, BSOAS 24. 116-38 (1961) differs considerably from that given in the works cited in note 1 above. Differing from both in details is the variety described in Eberhardt Richter, Grundlagen der Phonetik des Lhasa-Dialektes. Berlin 1964.

3) The form given in Kun Chang and Goldstein (note 1 supra).


5) See note 4 supra.
as reconstructed by Karlgren, since these two, alone among the
simple numerals, also contain a succession of two labial phonemes.

In an article in this same journal four years later 1), I reacted
rather strongly against Miller’s paper on two grounds: firstly
on account of his attempt to explain the anomalous vocalisation by
a process of vowel dissimilation, which otherwise is very sparsely,
if at all, attested in Tibetan, but above all on account of the in-
troduction of Chinese forms in the discussion. I objected that if
Chinese forms were to be taken as evidence for Tibetan develop-
ments at all—which I considered questionable from the point of
view of methodology—then Karlgren’s Archaic Chinese reconstruc-
tions should be used in preference to his Ancient forms. But it
seemed to me wholly unnecessary to go outside Tibetan, and I
found it very natural to seek an explanation of the o-vocalisation
of the two forms for “15” and “18” in the fact that in both the
second syllable contains the vowel a. I therefore suggested that we
have here a simple case of a-umlaut of u to o, operating in a closely
knit compound, and I cited as an example of the same process
Old Nordic *hurna > horna 2).

W. Simon in his recent paper remarks that the ‘umlaut-theory’
was hinted at by H. A. Francke in his Addenda to Jäschke’s Tibetan
grammar, Berlin 1929, p. 123, who noted that “in both cases the
following unit contains the vowel a.” Simon does not mention,
though, that this theory is clearly formulated already by B. Laufer
in WZKM, 13 (1899), p. 217: „die Wandlung des u zu o scheint
auf vocalharmonischen Gründen zu beruhen, die wir freilich
völlig zu erklären noch nicht imstande sind; äußerlich ist nur zu
erkennen, dass lha und bgyad ‚die einzigen Grundzahlen mit
a-Vocal sind, der also jedenfalls rückwirkend jene Veränderung
bedingt haben muss . . .’” Unfortunately I had not read this paper
when I wrote my critique of Miller’s dissimilation theory, and so
I did not give Laufer his due credit.

W. Simon does not approve of either the dissimilation or the
assimilation theory as explanations of the aberrant vocalisation
in the Tibetan numerals in question. Instead he bases his own

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2) In a paper entitled “Early evidence for vowel harmony in Tibetan”,
Lg 42, 252-77 (1966), Roy A. Miller objected, among other things, to my
use of IE forms as illustration of a-umlaut, quite overlooking the fact that
these IE forms were not compared with any forms in Tibetan, but were only
meant to illustrate the general principle of a-umlaut.