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A TIBETAN VERB LEXICON: VERBS, CLASSES, AND SYNTACTIC FRAMES

PAUL HACKETT

REVIEWED BY JAMES BLUMENTHAL

Paul Hackett's *A Tibetan Verb Lexicon: Verbs, Classes and Syntactic Frames* is a welcomed new addition to the relative paucity of available materials for the study of the literary Tibetan language.¹ Both the introductory overview of Tibetan verb usage and the detailed and exhaustive lexicon will be found to be quite useful for both linguists and students of literary Tibetan.

The first part of the book, the Introduction, is comprised of a rather technical and sophisticated analysis of Tibetan syntax as it relates to verb usage, where he presumes at least an elementary familiarity with basic terms and concepts in syntax. The book takes Joe Wilson's *Translating Buddhism From Tibetan* as its grounding and point of departure for more extensive discussions of general verb usage including the various verb classes, their relationships to cases, verbal collocations and other related topics. His analysis of the subtleties and nuances of Tibetan verb usage is often insightful and quite useful. Hackett writes, "The premise of this lexicon... is that this set of properties built around the predicate-argument structure (or subcategorization frame) of a verb yields a classificatory scheme from which a student may infer the complete structure of a sentence based primarily on the terminal verb and number and type of accompanying arguments (4)." In this respect, given the limited scope of the Introduction, the author is quite successful in demonstrating a general lack of ambiguity in Tibetan syntax that is so often presumed to be present by beginning students of the language.

As Hackett argues, literary Tibetan has maintained a remarkable degree of grammatical consistency over the course of 1,200 years. Thus a resource like this is invaluable for nearly the full spectrum of writings in Tibetan since the eighth century, when

Tibetans adopted a Kashmiri Sanskrit script to the sounds of their spoken language and began their literary enterprise.² At the time, the written language was used mostly for the translation of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan, but the types and genres of writing in Tibetan have grown extensively since that time.

Part II is the detailed lexicon and is really the heart of the book. It includes entries for nearly seven hundred verbs. Entries are alphabetized according to their present tense and include past, future and imperative forms. Since such a large percentage of Tibetan literature of various genres pertains to Buddhism and makes extensive use of Buddhist terminology inherited from Sanskrit, a large percentage of the entries also include the Sanskrit equivalents of the terms. This is followed by English translation equivalents. Though there is still a lack of consensus on the translation of many Tibetan and Sanskrit technical terms within Buddhist Studies, I found Hackett's lexicon to be quite satisfying in that he utilizes standard equivalents when they exist and offers a variety of possibilities when there is either no consensus on the English or the Tibetan term itself has multiple senses or meanings. Perhaps the aspect that will be found to be most welcomed by students of Tibetan is that nearly every entry includes at least one example of its usage in a Tibetan phrase or sentence with a detailed parsing of the syntactical parts of that phrase or sentence. The third part of the book is an index of all the verbs found in the lexicon in Part II.

Hackett's *A Tibetan Verb Lexicon* is a much-needed new contribution to the general body of materials for the study of the Literary Tibetan language. Students, linguists, and translators will all find this detailed treatment of Tibetan verb usage and particularly the

*A Tibetan Verb
Lexicon: Verbs,
Classes, and
Syntactic Frames*

Paul Hackett

Ithaca: Snow Lion
Publications, 2003.
Pp. xiv + 209.



Monks debating, Lhasa

PHOTO: MICHELE McNEIL

lexicon itself to be an invaluable resource for many years to come. Sophisticated work on the Tibetan language is long overdue and Hackett should be congratulated for this valuable offering.

*James Blumenthal is an Associate Professor of Buddhist Philosophy at Oregon State University. He is the author of *The Ornament of the Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita*. Blumenthal translated Nagarjuna's *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning from the Tibetan for His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the occasion of his teaching on the text in Los Angeles in 2004.**

ENDNOTES

¹ Modern colloquial Tibetan ought to be considered distinct from literary Tibetan in that case markers, particles, verbal usage, and verbal conjugation are often quite different.

² Two exceptions noted by the author are oral texts "written" by illiterate authors and pre-standard Tibetan texts such as those discovered among the collections at Tun-huang.