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# Review of 'Colloquial Tibetan: The Complete Course for Beginners' by Jonathan Samuels

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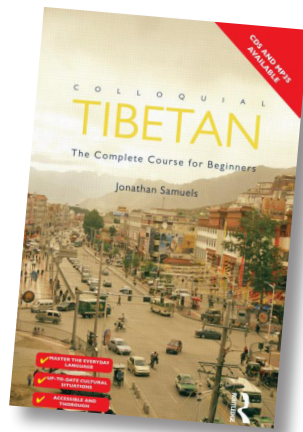
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**Colloquial Tibetan: The Complete Course for Beginners.**

**Jonathan Samuels.** London: Routledge, 2014. 320 pages. ISBN 0415595606.

**Reviewed by Françoise Robin**

*Colloquial Tibetan: The Complete Course for Beginners*, by Jonathan Samuels, is a long-awaited compact manual for beginning learners of standard Tibetan. Its 320 pages span the spectrum of the four competencies that should be mastered by any language learner (writing, reading, speaking, and listening) and, like all other titles in the series, it is organized in fifteen lessons. Each lesson consists of two dialogues (together with phonologic transcription), short and didactic grammatical explanations, a series of exercises (mostly theme and version-correction of exercises is offered at the end of the volume). Some cultural elements are provided when necessary, along with illustrations. The volume ends with a short glossary of core grammatical notions (about 20 of them) as well as a very short glossary of words used in the lessons (English-Tibetan and Tibetan-English).

Exercises are well conceived and in tune with the objectives of each lesson. Listening comprehension is also targeted, as CDs are included, which provide questions (with their answers) to the text. Speaking is also tested as the CD offers space for the learner to reply to the questions

asked. The right answers are provided too. CDs also offer exercises that do not appear in the printed volume. Of course, CDs do not replace a teacher per se, but are welcome for those learners who do not have a ready access to Tibetan language teachers. A follow-up on the Internet, with regularly updated exercises, would make up for the inevitable limitation of this learning tool.

The phonological transcription adopted in this handbook is intuitive and well done, with one exception. Low tone voiced consonants are rendered by silent consonants, meaning that /g/, /j/, /d/, /b/, /gy/ as well as the retroflex /dr/, are respectively rendered /k/, /c/, /t/, /p/, /ky/, and /tr/. This counter-intuitive choice does not usually yield satisfactory results for learners, and one may wonder why it was chosen. It may possibly be sourced to Tournadre's and Sangda Dorje's *Manual of Standard Tibetan* (Paris: Langues et Mondes – L'Asiathèque, 2009), which offers this kind of transcription.

Dialogues are lively and are at times humorous and true-to-life, reflecting both the innate humorous and light-heartedness of many Tibetans, and reflecting well the types of conversations one can have with a native Tibetan speaker. Spelling is correct and, contrary to many methods which cannot help mixing spoken and written (literary) Tibetan, thereby offering a hybrid, over-corrected form of

Tibetan that is nowhere to be found in real life, Samuels's manual does present a type of Tibetan language that is reasonably faithful to spoken Tibetan. Still, the type of spoken Tibetan presented in this course, and especially in the dialogues, is too neat to be actually true to everyday speech. For instance, very colloquial forms like the testimonial "*red bzhaq*" ("to be," essential, testimonial), the nominalising patient affix "*-kyog*" (for "*-pa*"), the connecting particle "*byas*" (for "*nas*"), and its negative form "*ma-V-pa-byas*" (for "*ma-V-par*"), current expressions like "*ga re red zer na*" ("because"), speech beginners like "*song tsang*" ("thus," "as a consequence"), or colloquial forms of possessive pronouns like "*nga ra'i*" (my), "*khyod ra'i*" (your), are not included. Dialogues are obviously elicited for the volume, and are not recorded from natural conversations. This is understandable from a didactic point of view, but as a consequence they carefully avoid most of colloquial forms that pepper everyday speech in Tibetan. This rather high degree of artificiality can easily be perceived in the recording, where readers do not sound very confident with what they are meant to read, or even diverge a little from the written script when it feels too uncomfortable, being too distant from their own everyday speech.

In what way does this Complete Course differ from Tournadre's and Dorje's *Manual of Standard Tibetan* and Tsetan Chonjore's *Colloquial Tibetan* (Dharmasala: Library

[A] welcome must-read and must-use for all beginners in spoken Tibetan.

**Françoise Robin on *Colloquial Tibetan: The Complete Course for Beginners***

of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2003), or else complement them? Tournadre's and Dorje's *Manual* offers more of a linguist's analysis of spoken Tibetan, and covers a much larger array of complex syntactic and morphological forms. For instance, Tournadre's and Sangda Dorje's *Manual* dedicates a number of lessons to the terribly complex system of epistemics (“-pa 'dra,” “-gi red,” “-sa red,” etc.), nominalizers (“-mkhan,” “-sa,” “-pa,” “-rgyu,” etc.), aspectual markers (“bsdad,” “gro” and “yong”), and directional ones (“gro” and “yong”) which form a core part of everyday speech, even at a basic level. Samuels's *Colloquial Tibetan* does mention some in passing (lessons 12 sqq.), but not in depth. As a consequence, Tournadre's and Sangda Dorje's *Manual* might be more useful for advanced learners and for learners with a commitment to fine grammatical and linguistic analysis. Moreover, while its theoretical explanations are superb, Tournadre's and Sangda Dorje's *Manual* is sometimes too specialised to be fully understood by non-linguists. Exercises are also lacking in Tournadre's and Dorje's, although the French publisher (L'Asiathèque) has added some that are accessible on its website. I would suggest users of *Colloquial Tibetan* refer to Tournadre's and Dorje's *Manual* for grammatical explanations, which are limited in the present volume, and to focus on Samuel's book for practical and preliminary learning. Tseten Chonjore's *Colloquial Tibetan* also offers more thorough explanations

than Samuels', and it can be equally referred to when in doubt. Moreover, it offers many exercises that are complementary to those found in Samuels'.

Although the introduction to the book claims to target learners up to the intermediate level, it mainly covers a one to one-and-half year university course, aimed toward beginners, as its title suggests. What is needed now for learners of Tibetan is an intermediary to advanced level practical guide to spoken Tibetan, on the same model as both Samuels' and Chonjore's *Colloquial Tibetan*, but covering more complex forms of spoken Tibetan, such the ones found in Tournadre and Sangda Dorje, which lacks exercises and recordings. Samuels announces in the introduction that he intends to publish a sequel to the present volume. This will be indeed welcome, although it could be suggested that he includes more real life dialogues and current, non-orthodox spoken forms.

Another minor criticism to be addressed to the editor is the lack of a bibliography and of a map of Tibet. But this seems to be the policy of the collection, as most other titles belonging to it do also lack them.

These minor criticisms apart, Samuels' *Colloquial Tibetan* is definitely a very good and welcome must-read and must-use for all beginners in spoken Tibetan.

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