



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 35 | Number 1

Article 24

July 2015

Review of 'Bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad [General Introduction to the Tibetan Dialects]' by Sum-bha Don-grub Tshe-ring [Sumbha Dondrub Tshering]

Nicolas Tournadre
Aix-Marseille University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

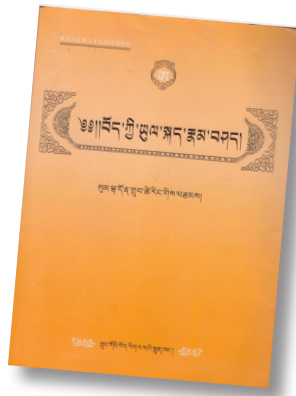
Tournadre, Nicolas (2015) "Review of 'Bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad [General Introduction to the Tibetan Dialects]' by Sum-bha Don-grub Tshe-ring [Sumbha Dondrub Tshering]," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 35: No. 1, Article 24.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol35/iss1/24>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the
DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester
College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the
Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized





***Bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad*
[General Introduction to the Tibetan
Dialects]**

Sum-bha Don-grub Tshering
[Sumbha Dondrub Tshering]. Krung
go'i bod rigs dpe skrun khang:
Beijing, 2011. 589 pages. ISBN
9787802533318.

Reviewed by Nicolas Tournadre

Sumbha Dondrub Tshering's *Bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad* (*General Introduction to the Tibetan Dialects*) is a very impressive opus. The target audience of the book is the Tibetan readership of scholars and students interested in languages and cultures of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas.

This work is the largest ever written in Tibetan about the Tibetan dialects, which are now more often referred to as Tibetic languages. The author is a linguist and a native Tibetan who comes from Thrika county (*khri-ka rdzong*) in Amdo (Qinghai Province). The author investigates not only Tibetan dialects from the Tibet Autonomous Region in China, such as Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, but also deals with the Tibetan dialects (*bod-kyi yul skad*) spoken in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan. This contrasts with earlier reference works published in China by Tibetan authors. Even Gesang Jumian's monograph (2002. *Zangyu fanyan gailun* (*skad bzang 'gyur med, bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad*). Minzu Chubanshe: Beijing) on Tibetan dialects, which was, until the present work, the most

comprehensive work on this topic written in Tibetan (and translated in Chinese), did not deal with Tibetan dialects beyond the Chinese borders. To illustrate phonetic and phonological issues, the author uses International Phonetic Alphabet and he also gives correspondences with a transliteration system close to Wylie. The author also provides a number of charts and four maps. The first one is a general map of Tibetan dialects and the others are maps of the main dialect groups Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo, together with related dialects (pp. 79, 175, 269, 342). Generally speaking, this work meets international scientific standards and it is thus a real pleasure to read in the Tibetan language such a compendium about the Tibetan dialects.

In the first chapter, the author provides a nice introduction to Tibetan dialectology and proposes many Tibetan neologisms in the field of dialectology and sociolinguistics such as *zhib bris yul skad rig pa* ('descriptive linguistics'), *lo rgyus yul skad rig pa* ('historical dialectology'), and *sa bab yul skad rig pa* ('geolinguistics or geographic dialectology').

The author also provides a series of definitions for a lot of terms used in Tibetan dialectology such as *kha-skad* ('spoken language'), *yig-skad* ('written language'), *spyi-skad* ('standard language'), *phal-skad* ('common language or ordinary language'), *chos-skad* ('Dharma language or Classical Tibetan'), *yul-skad* ('dialect'), *lung-skad* ('valley dialect or variety')

grong-pa'i skad or *grong skad* ('village dialect or variety'), *logs skad* ('social dialects') (pp. 2, 8-13). He also uses many technical neologisms related to phonetics and phonology. This new terminology is very clear and well formed in literary Tibetan and will facilitate the research for Tibetan scholars and students as well as for foreign scholars dealing with Tibetan linguistics.

The second chapter begins with classification issues related to Tibetan dialects. Of course one may disagree with the expression Tibetan dialects, which seems to indicate that the given languages allow mutual intelligibility, which is, of course, not the case. For example, a Sherpa speaker does not understand a Dzongkha speaker. In the author's terminology "Tibetan dialects" also includes some Tibeto-Burman languages that are not directly derived from Old Tibetan such as rGyalrongic languages, Qiangic languages such as Tau (*rta'u skad*) or Minyak as well as Bodic languages such as Bake (*brag skad*). These languages, spoken by ethnic Tibetans, are very distinct from the Tibetan/Tibetic languages and thus the terminology and the underlying classification raise a number of problems.

Furthermore, having presented a classification into five major groups, which is relatively close to Nishi's classification (1986. *Gendai Chibettogo hōgen no bunrui* [A classification of Tibetan dialects]). Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology 11 (4):

A great achievement and should be recommended to any scholar or student who is interested in Tibetic languages and cultures.

Nicolas Tournadre on *Bod kyi yul skad rnam bshad* [General Introduction to the Tibetan Dialects]

837-900; see also Nicholas Tournadre. 2014. "The Tibetic languages and their classification," in *Proceedings of the 16th Himalayan Linguistics Symposium* (N. Hill, ed.). London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Mouton de Gruyter), Dondrub Tshering collapses the five groups into three major groups (p. 51). In the first grouping, the author groups together Ü, Tsang, and Ngari (as expected) as well as *brag gsum skad* [or Bake, a non Tibetic language], Sherpa, Dzongkha, Balti, Ladakhi, and Purik. The second major grouping includes Eastern, Southern Western [or Hor dialects], and Northern Kham dialects as well as Chone and Druchu dialects, rGyalrong, Minyak, and 'Drapa (the three latter are not Tibetic languages). The third major grouping includes Amdo pastoralists, cultivator, and semi-pastoralists dialects. While this classification of all 'Tibetan dialects' (or Tibetic languages) might find some political justifications from a Tibetan point of view, it has no linguistic ground. There is no reason related to phonology, lexicon, or grammar to lump together Ü-Tsang, Dzongkha, Sherpa, Balti, and Ladakhi (concerning Dzongkha and Sherpa see e.g. George van Driem. 1998. *Dzongkha*. Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, and also Nicolas Tournadre, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, Gyurme Chodrak, and Guillaume Oisel. 2009. *Sherpa-English and English-Sherpa Dictionary, with Literary Tibetan and Nepali Equivalents*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications).

The following sections of the second chapter are devoted to the general introduction to the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical characteristics of the Tibetan dialects. The information presented in the phonetic section is generally accurate with the exception of Dzongkha, which, according to the author, has no tone. All the scholarly works on Dzongkha show that this language does have tone (see e.g. van Driem, *ibid.*).

In the third chapter, the author introduces the reader to *dbus gtsang phyogs kyi yul skad* ('dialects around the Central area') in which he includes Ü, Tsang, mNgaris Sherpa, Dzongkha, Ladakhi, and Balti Purik, as well as *brag gsum* [Bake], a non Tibetic language spoken in Kongpo. After a brief historical presentation, he deals with the main features of phonology, lexicon, and grammar. In many cases, Dondrub Tshering provides comparative charts in which he also includes examples from Amdo and Kham.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Khams *phyogs kyi yul skad* ('dialects around the Kham area'), but also includes Qiangic and rGyalrongic languages such as rGyalrong, Minyak, and Drapa dialects. The section is further divided into eastern (*shar-skad*), southern (*lho phyogs-kyi skad*), western (*nub phyogs-kyi skad*) and northern dialects (*byang phyogs kyi skad*). The Tibetan dialects of Cone and Drugchu are also treated in this chapter. In his historical presentation of the region, the author insists on the relationship

between Kham and the ethnic groups of Sumpa, Azha, Minyak, and rGyalrong. These historical links probably aim at justifying the author's linguistic taxonomy which classifies rGyalrong languages together with the Kham dialects. Then in the subsequent section, he presents the main phonological, lexical, as well as grammatical features of Kham dialects and rGyalrong dialects.

The fifth chapter deals with Amdo dialects (*a mdo'i yul skad*). The author first makes a historical presentation of the region and then proposes three subgroups: '*brog-skad* ('pastoralists') dialects, *rong-skad* ('cultivators') dialects and *rong-ma-'brog-gi skad* ('semi-pastoralists') dialects. The subsequent sections are organized in the same way as for the Ü-tsang and Kham groups.

The sixth chapter is entitled *bod kyi yul skad kyi 'phel 'gyur* ('evolution of the Tibetan dialects'). Dondrub Tshering analyses in the first section the syllabic structures on the basis of the classical literary language and provides a chart (pp. 353-354) of all the possible syllabic initial clusters as well as all the possible rimes (p. 356). He then provides comparison with the modern dialects. The author discusses the phonotactics of Classical Tibetan and then Dondrub Tshering examines the particular phonetic evolutions of the various modern systems and specific phonetic innovations of the three main dialect groups. The evolution of the lexicon is discussed in section

two of this chapter and the evolution of grammar in section three.

The seventh chapter is devoted to research methodology. If we consider the linguistics literature written in Tibetan, this chapter is very original. It provides not only an overview of the literature on Tibetan dialects but also useful guidelines for scholars who carry out fieldwork research in the field of Tibetan dialectology.

One of the strengths of the book is the abundance of examples, as well as the pedagogical and methodological dimensions. The Tibetan terminology used for the linguistic description and the analysis is also very clear. Of course, a number of criticisms may be directed at some aspects of the author's methodology and analysis. The main one is the confusion between ethnicity and linguistic characteristics, which leads Dondrub Tshering to consider rGyalrongic and Qiangic languages, such as rGyalong, Minyak, or Tau, as "Tibetan dialects." This is of course motivated by the fact that these languages are spoken by ethnic Tibetans (concerning this question see Tournadre 2014, *ibid.*; Gerald Roche. Forthcoming. 'The Vitality of Tibet's Minority Languages in the Twenty-first Century' in *Multiethnica*; and, Nicholas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje. 2003. *Manual of Standard Tibetan* (with 2 CDs). Preface by M. Kapstein. Snowlion: Ithaca, New York). However, from a linguistic point of view, the two approaches do not coincide: there are Tibetans who speak non-Tibetic languages (or

'Tibetan dialects' / *bod kyi yul skad*, as used by the author) and there are non-Tibetans, such as Ladakhi, Bhutanese, etc., who speak Tibetic languages (or 'Tibetan dialects').

One might express some reserves concerning the lack of sources and translations for many examples throughout the book. Another weak point of the book is the fact that in many instances, the author does not indicate precisely the dialects and just mentions a general taxon such as Kham or Amdo while there are many dialects and varieties spoken in Kham and Amdo. Additionally, a lot of data displayed in the book is probably secondhand data and the author has not precisely explained in which areas he has conducted fieldwork and what his specific contributions are. Finally, Dondrub Tshering provides a useful bibliography where he mentions many references mainly in Tibetan and Chinese as well as some in Japanese and English. One can regret the scarcity of references in English language with only four publications dealing with Tibetan dialectology. A few authors mentioned in the book such as H. Jäschke, R.A. Miller, R.K. Sprigg or C.A. Bell are not listed in the bibliography.

Despite this minor criticism, this book remains a great achievement and should be recommended to any scholar or student who is interested in Tibetic languages and cultures.

Nicolas Tournadre is Professor of Linguistics at Aix-Marseille University. He is a typologist and specialist of Tibetic languages. During the last thirty years he has conducted extensive fieldwork on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas.