

## NOTES ON DZONGKHA ORTHOGRAPHY

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In a recent paper (1985), with the sub-title 'New wine into old bottles', R. K. Sprigg discusses the question of whether South East Asian writing systems are alphabetic or syllabic. He concludes:

I would say that there is a grammatological lesson to be learnt from the adaptation of Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Austronesian languages of South East Asia. The outcome has been novel, and especially prosodic, roles for symbols that had been devised for consonantal or vocalic purposes, or, in the case of C(a)symbols, both. I would suggest that there is room for a further symbolization category in addition to the alphabetic and syllabic, namely, a prosodic category, and, further, that one should not expect a script to be exclusively alphabetic, syllabic, or logogrammatic, but to be mixed, its components being drawn from several categories of symbolization. (1985:114-115)

Sprigg (1978) had previously sketched his analysis of the traditional Tibetan writing system as a 'compound of alphabetic and syllabic components'.

The Tibetan orthography was created for (and with) Classical Tibetan, but it is also used to represent Modern Literary Tibetan, which is based on the phonologically highly evolved Central or Lhasa dialect. The modern pronunciation (especially for monosyllables) can still be derived fairly reliably from the writing by rules which reflect diachronic sound changes in some way—with the reservation that we cannot be entirely sure of the pronunciation of Tibetan at the time the writing system was developed and codified. The application of classical Tibetan orthography to modern Central Tibetan is an example of putting 'new wine into old bottles', due as much to the blind workings of sound laws as to the considered labours of grammarians. The resulting writing system has elements from all three of Sprigg's categories, and in particular a well-furnished prosodic symbolisation category, as well as a fourth, redundant category of graphs which correspond to nothing at all in the modern Central Tibetan pronunciation (but not necessarily in other dialects). Most cases of letters prefixed to or written above unvoiced root

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297

letters (probably all if only monosyllables are taken into account) would be examples of this redundant category.

The Tibetan script has recently been applied to another modern dialect, Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, by Bhutanese grammarians educated in the classical Tibetan tradition. The development of modern written Dzongkha (WDz) began in 1961, with Bhutan's first five-year plan. Until then, Dzongkha was uniquely a spoken standard; the corresponding official written language was Classical Tibetan (WT), known in Bhutan as Chokey (Dz <sup>H</sup>*choe-ke*, WT *chos-skad* 'religious-language'). (Bhutanese still use the expression 'written in Dzongkha' to refer to texts written either in Chokey or in Modern Dzongkha.) Modern Literary Tibetan, the modern written standard used in Tibet and among Tibetan refugee communities, is not used in Bhutan, but Modern Central Tibetan pronunciation has its importance as the conventional pronunciation used in reading Chokey texts. It is often referred to in Bhutan as 'Chokey pronunciation' for this reason. In fact, of course, it is no closer than modern Dzongkha pronunciation is to the actual pronunciation (whatever this may have been precisely) that was current in Tibet a thousand years ago and which is reflected in Chokey orthography.

The basic principles of modern Dzongkha orthography were first established in 1971 by Lopon Pemala in his *New method Dzongkha handbook* (Naro et al. 1985), written in Chokey, and (with minor differences) illustrated in the *Dzongkha dictionary* (Bhutan 1986). Dzongkha orthography makes concessions to Dzongkha pronunciation in cases where this is strikingly different from modern Central Tibetan pronunciation, but otherwise it sticks to Chokey spellings as far as possible, preserving graphs which are redundant from the point of view of Dzongkha phonology, and differentiating graphs whose pronunciations have merged. This is not seen as a defect in Bhutan, as the Dzongkha grammarians explicitly intend written Dzongkha to serve as a bridge to Chokey.

As mentioned above, both Dzongkha (Dz) and Central Tibetan (CT) have undergone sweeping phonological changes since the classical orthography was established. (In the examples which follow, CT pronunciation is taken from Goldstein (1975) and Dzongkha from Mazaudon and Michailovsky (this volume). The Dzongkha pronunciations given are those of monosyllables; the same WT syllables may be pronounced somewhat differently in Dzongkha compounds.) In reading Modern Literary Tibetan, and in giving modern Central Tibetan pronunciation to Chokey texts, these diachronic changes are expressed in the Tibetan system of spelling aloud. For example, to give the spelling of WT *bya* 'bird' (CT /*chə*/) one says something like '*ba* with *ya* underneath is /*chə*/.' Dzongkha has preserved this spelling; for the WT cluster *by-* Dzongkha has a different, but equally regular pronunciation rule, so Dzongkha speakers can simply say '*ba* with *ya* underneath is <sup>L</sup>*bjha*'. Even so, they might hesitate, because this seems to be in contradiction with 'Chokey pronunciation'. But the Dzongkha pronunciation *bjh-* ([*pʃ*]) is simply not found in 'Chokey pronunciation' (i.e. in modern Central Tibetan), so no other spelling is available or felt to be necessary.

In the case cited above, where a Dzongkha pronunciation has diverged uniformly from Central Tibetan, but without merging with another Central Tibetan pronunciation, WT orthography has been preserved in Dzongkha. Changes in orthography have been resorted to where the Dzongkha pronunciation of a WT graph differs from the CT pronunciation, but corresponds to the CT

pronunciation of a different WT spelling. To cite one example, WT **bras** 'rice' would be spelled out in Central Tibetan thus: 'with prefixed **a-chung**, **ba** with **ra** underneath is pronounced /t̪a/; /t̪a/ with following **sa** is /t̪ɛ̃/'. The Dzongkha word <sup>3</sup>*bja*: 'standing paddy' has the same etymology, but in Dzongkha (1) reflexes of the WT cluster **br-** have most often merged with those of WT **by-**, and (2) WT final **-s** does not usually produce umlaut. Here again, one might have kept the WT spelling and changed the pronunciation rules to 'with prefixed **a-chung**, **ba** with **ra** underneath is <sup>L</sup>*bja*, followed by **sa** is <sup>3</sup>*bja*.'. There are two reasons for not doing so: (1) the contradiction with 'Chokey pronunciation' would be shocking to literate Bhutanese, and (2) the proposed Dzongkha pronunciation rules do not apply to some words for which CT pronunciations have apparently been borrowed. For example, WT **br-** has the Dzongkha reflex *dr* (i.e. a retroflex [d̪], the regular CT reflex), rather than *bj-* in Dzongkha <sup>3</sup>*dru*: 'dragon' (WT **brug**, CT [t̪ü]), and WT final **-s** corresponds to umlaut in Dzongkha <sup>1</sup>*se*: 'prince' (WT **sras**, CT /s̪ɛ̃/). In Dzongkha orthography, these words keep their WT spellings, while the spelling of 'standing paddy' has been modified to WDz *'byā* (the macron transliterates subscribed **a-chung**) to reflect the pronunciation.

In Dzongkha words like <sup>3</sup>*bja*: 'standing paddy', the WT final **-s** has not produced umlaut (as we have noted above), but it has left two other prosodic traces: length and level contour. The first of these, length, is represented by subscribed **a-chung** in the WDz spelling *'byā*, although some experts consider this to be a needless complication and write simply *'bya*. It is not clear to me whether subscribed **a-chung** can also be taken as a reliable indicator of contour or not; if its use were limited to words where WT **-s** has not produced umlaut on a non-front vowel it would always correspond to level contour. The WT final **-g** corresponds unambiguously to length and level contour, without umlaut, in Dzongkha pronunciation, but writing 'standing paddy' as *'byag* would no doubt be considered perverse. (Dz <sup>3</sup>*na*: 'barley' (WT **nas**, CT /n̪ɛ̃/) has at least once been written as WDz **nag** (anonymous 1977:29), but it is usually written as WDz *nā* or *na*).

Some common phonological divergences of Dzongkha from CT which have led to changes in Dzongkha orthography are the following: reflexes of WT medial **-r-** (in clusters following velar and bilabial initials) have often merged with those of medial **-y-**, e.g.:

Dz <sup>3</sup>*bja*: 'standing paddy', WDz *'byā*, WT **bras**, CT /t̪ɛ̃/

Dz <sup>L</sup>*bju* 'grain', WDz *'byu*, WT **bru**, CT /t̪ü/

Dz <sup>H</sup>*ca* 'hair', WDz *skya*, WT **skra**, CT /t̪ā/

In other cases it has simply been dropped:

Dz <sup>4</sup>*bue*: 'snake', WDz *sbul*, WT **sbrul**, CT /t̪üü/

Many words with unprefix nasal or continuant initials in WT are high-register in Dz, and so are written with a prefix in WDz, e.g.:

Dz <sup>2</sup>*nap* 'black', WDz *gnagp*, WT **nag-po**, CT /n̪aŋo/

Dz <sup>2</sup>*ue*: 'region', WDz *gyul*, WT **yul**, CT /y̪üü/

Where the vowel is *i* in such cases, the reversed *i*-symbol (WT **gi-gu log-pa**) is sometimes used instead of an etymologically unattested prefix to indicate high tone, as in <sup>H</sup>*mi* 'person' (WT **mi**,

CT /*m̄i*/), written as WDz *mi* (with reversed *i*). (The significance of reversed *i* in old Tibetan inscriptions is a subject of controversy.) The WT clusters *sng- sn- sm-* are often realised, and spelt, with initial *h-* in Dz:

Dz <sup>2</sup>*hoem* 'blue', WDz *honm*, WT *sngon-po*, CT /*ŋ̄õnpõ*/

Dz <sup>1</sup>*hum* 'oil', WDz *hum*, WT *snum*, CT /*n̄um* /

Lopon Pemala (Naro et al. 1985) discusses all of these and many other categories of examples.

In at least one case, Dzongkha pronunciation seems to have led Dzongkha orthography to a spelling based on a doubtful etymology. The Dzongkha word <sup>3</sup>*gho*: 'man's robe' seems to correspond perfectly to WT *gos* 'garment' (CT /*qh̄õö*/); it is another example in which WT *-s* does not produce umlaut in Dzongkha. But instead of spelling it as *gos*, or as *go* (with subscribed *a-chung* to represent vowel length without umlaut, on the model of 'paddy' above), Dzongkha orthographers write WDz *bgo*, corresponding to the WT verb 'to wear'. This implied etymology accounts directly for the lack of umlaut, but not for the devoiced initial, the length, or the level contour: it would lead us to expect a Dzongkha form \*<sup>L</sup>*go* (homophonous with 'door', WT *sgo*, CT /*qõ*/) instead of <sup>3</sup>*gho*.

A fundamental feature of Tibetan orthography is the use of a point (WT *tsheg*) to separate syllables. This function is preserved in WDz, which means that spelling changes have been necessary wherever a WT disyllable has been telescoped into a Dzongkha monosyllable. In such cases, Dzongkha orthography simply squeezes the old suffix (or an initial representing it) in before the *tsheg* at the end of the old first syllable, to represent the final of the new Dzongkha monosyllable, for example:

Dz <sup>4</sup>*nyim* 'sun', WDz *nyim*, WT *nyi-ma*, CT /*ñimə*/

Dz <sup>2</sup>*phou* 'belly', WDz *phow*, WT *pho-ba*, CT /*phōwaa*/

Dz <sup>2</sup>*p̄ceu* 'forehead', WDz *dpyalw*, WT *dpral-ba*, CT /*t̄ēēwa*/

Dz <sup>2</sup>*thap* 'rope', WDz *thagp*, WT *thag-pa*, CT /*thāqpa*/

Dz <sup>1</sup>*ka:m* 'leg', WDz *rkangm*, WT *rkang-pa*, CT /*qāṅpa*/

Dz <sup>1</sup>*tim* 'heel', WDz *rtingm*, WT *rting-pa*, CT /*t̄iṅqə*/

Dz <sup>2</sup>*sim* 'younger sister (of male)', WDz *sringm*, WT *sring-mo*, CT /*s̄iṅmu*/

Dz <sup>3</sup>*goem* 'mare' WDz *rgodm*, WT *rgod-ma*, CT /*qōma*/

Final or postfinal *-w* is written where Dzongkha has a diphthong in *u*, and postfinal *-p* where the new monosyllable ends in *p*. Postfinal *-m* is used where the new monosyllable ends in *m*, regardless of the old suffix-initial. This latter usage is not entirely consistent, however; at least one word is pronounced with final *m* but written with postfinal *-p* after a nasal:

Dz <sup>1</sup>*chim* 'liver', WDz *mchinp*, WT *mchin-pa*, CT /*ch̄impə*/

Some Dzongkha scholars insisted to me that one could hear a final [p] in this word; perhaps this perception corresponds to the level glottalised tone (but this is shared by 'heel' and 'leg').

Some Dzongkha orthographers write not only the suffix initial but also the suffix vowel in these expanded Dzongkha syllables. This is of course not relevant to the WT suffixes *-pa* and

**-ma** whose vowel has no explicit orthographic representation in any case. It becomes noticeable with the WT suffixes **-po** and **-mo**, for example:

Dz <sup>2</sup>*ka:p* 'white', WDz *dkarp*, WT ***dkarpo***, CT /qāāpo/

I have heard such spellings justified on the grounds that the vowel had an *o*-colouring, which I could not hear. Of course they do serve to preserve one more element of the WT spelling.

It may be noted, finally, that the spelling of Dzongkha initials has led to new spellings for individual words, but not to innovations in the traditional rules concerning possible combinations of letters. But final *-w* and the postfinals *-p*, *-m*, and *-w* (to say nothing of the vowel *o* over postfinal *-p* and *-m*) are all innovations with respect to the traditional canons. Even the use of subscribed ***a-chung*** to represent length is an innovation in native words, since this graph is reserved for Sanskrit loans in WT.

