

The Verb ‘*bri* “to write” in Old Tibetan

HILL, Nathan W.
Harvard University

Reprinted from

JOURNAL OF ASIAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES No. 69

Research Institute for Languages and
Cultures of Asia and Africa

(ILCAA)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

2005.3

The Verb *bri* “to write” in Old Tibetan

HILL, Nathan W.

Harvard University

An examination of the verb *bri* ‘to write’ as it occurs in Old Tibetan texts reveals that the original conjugation was *dri* (pres.), *bris* (past), *bri* (fut.), *ris* (imp). When Cr- clusters became retroflexes (i.e. *dr* > *ḍ* and *br* > *ḍ*) the verbs *bri* ‘to write’ and *dri* ‘to ask’ became homophonous. At that point the prefix *b-* of *dri*, *bris*, *bri*, *ris* ‘to write’ was reanalyzed as part of the root, and extended by analogy to the spelling of the present stem, in order to graphically differentiate *dri*, *dris*, *dri*, *dris* ‘to ask’ from ‘to write’ (newly spelled) *bri*, *bris*, *bri*, *bris*. This discovery is brought specifically to bear on the interpretation of line 68 of the east face of the treaty inscription of 821-822.

As the earliest attested of the Tibeto-Burman languages, Old Tibetan is not only important in the study of Tibetan language and history but also has unique importance for the entire Tibeto-Burman language family. Unfortunately most comparative studies which use Tibetan material rely on Classical Tibetan dictionaries rather than relying directly on Old Tibetan texts. Benedict in the first sentence of his discussion of the Tibeto-Burman *b-* prefix draws particular attention to the verb *bri* ‘to write’ as an exception to the generalisation that Tibetan “prefixed *b-* is characteristically found with the ‘perfect’ [past¹] root of verbs” (1972: 110; brackets mine). More recently Matisoff opines that Tibeto-Burman had a root **b-rəy* ‘draw / write’ (2003: 132). As will be shown here, the *b* in the present stem of *bri* ‘to write’ never represented a linguistic reality in Tibetan, and should therefore not be considered in comparative research.

Many imperial Tibetan stone inscriptions refer to their own creation with a formula such as *rdo rings la bris* “written on the stele”. A reminiscent phrase occurs in the 68th line of the east face of the treaty inscription of 821-822, which stands before the Gtsug-lag-khang in Lhasa, but instead of *bris* the text has *dri*. Richardson (1985: Index) sees this as an orthographic variant for *bri*. He reads the text thus:

[68] *rdo rings la 'drI ba'I spyang yang// rgya'I pho nya thabs//gu*

[69] *shI cung shIng yod pa// do tshe'e dang// thab can shan de b+'u yod pa//*

[70] *li khri b+'u la stsogs pas byas so//* (1985: 116)².

Keywords: Old Tibetan, verb ‘to write’, epigraphy, verb conjugation, Tibeto-Burman

- 1) The work of Zeisler (2004) should put to rest once and for all that the semantics of the Tibetan verb stems has anything to do with ‘aspect’.

And an examination of this inscribed stone pillar was made by the Chinese envoys Do tse'e, who has the rank of 'Gu Shi Cung Shing, and Li Kri [sic.] B'u, who has the rank of Tsan Shan De B'u, and others (1985: 117).

Presumably one reason Richardson found his explanation persuasive is that 'dri and 'bri are homophonous in many modern dialects. However, it is improbable that they were homonyms at this early period. Also, the spelling *bri*s is met with just a few lines earlier at line 65; it is unlikely both that an imperial inscription would contain a spelling mistake, and that a single scribe would change his spelling erratically. Richardson suggests comparison with Thomas (1935-65: II, 74. lines 19 and 22), where the spelling 'dri occurs twice in a single document.

Rgya'i [d]ar ma 'dri ba'i yi ge [pa] bryad [cu] dang / zhu che ... [20] nyi shu la stsal te
// (1935-65: II, 74; brackets in original).

copyists for the Chinese scripture up to eighty scribes and twenty revisors were sent (1935-65: II, 76).

/ slad kyis / blon Khong bzher lastsogs [22] mngan rnams dbang po la khungs phyung ste
/ da dung tu Bod kyi dar ma 'dri ba'i [y]i ge ... [23] p ... thob ste / phyag rgya nod tu gsol
// (1935-65: II, 74; italics and brackets in original).

Afterwards, Councilors Khong-bzher and the other authorities having entered upon power, we once more beg to receive a signature for obtaining ... scribes copying Tibetan scripture (1935-65: II, 77).

Richardson and Thomas both give 'dri as an equivalent of 'bri in their indices, although nowhere in their corpora is the form 'bri actually attested; in contrast, the past *bri*s and the future *bri* occur with some frequency. In the Old Tibetan contracts studied by Takeuchi the syllables 'bri *po* and 'dri each occur only once. Takeuchi sees 'bri as an orthographic mistake for 'bring-po 'the middle' (1995: 209-11). He explains that 'dri is a mistake for 'bri 'to write':

2. *sku yon 'dri ba'i shog shog yug rings nyis brya' bung dze weng gi sug pa na mchis pa*
snga g.yar du 'tshal te / (1995: 180).

[In order to pay the loan Shang he-'do] borrowed in advance [from Bung dze-weng] two hundred bolts of long-bolt paper, which was in the hands of Bung dze-weng for the purpose of copying [sutras as] an offering (1995: 181; brackets in original, cf. also 182 n. 2).

Two dictionaries (Das 1902 and Zhang 1985) acknowledge 'dri as an alternative pres-

2) In this and all other citations of Tibetan I follow the "extended Wylie" transcription system, with the exception that the *gigu verso* is here written as <I>.

ent of *'bri*. Not only does this 'alternate' prevail in Old Tibetan, but in all of the Old Tibetan documents hitherto studied *'bri* is nowhere found with the meaning 'to write', but *'dri* is found with this meaning at least four times.³⁾

In contrast to Richardson, Li and Coblin suggest that in the aforementioned inscription *'dri* has its expected meaning 'to ask', and is part of a larger syntagme *'dri-ba'i spyan* with the meaning 'supervisor'. They read the text thus:

[68] *rdo [ring]s la 'dri ba'I spyan yang // rgya'I pho nya thabs // 'gu*

[69] ... *[yo]d pa // do tse'e dang // ... yod pa/*

[70]...*byas so //* (1987: 51 brackets in original).

As supervisors of the long stone, the Chinese envoys Do Tse'e (i.e. Tu Tsai), having the rank of 'gu..., and ..., having..., did ... (1987: 99; parenthetical comment in original).

The analysis of Li and Coblin is not wholly satisfactory. I am unable to confirm the meaning 'supervisor' for this concatenation of words. In addition, because the expression contains a genitive it would be more likely to have the sense "the *spyan* of the *rdo rings la 'dri ba'*" instead of "*'dri ba'I spyan* of the *rdo rings*". If the meaning of *'dri* is indeed 'ask' the phrase must translate as "the Chinese envoys did the *spyan* (eye) of the asking to/on/at the long stone". Finally, it is unclear how Li and Coblin would clarify the examples put forward by Thomas and Takeuchi.

I would like to suggest that Richardson's analysis is correct, but that *'dri* is not a simple error, but rather the genuine early spelling of the present tense of the verb 'to write'. This verb is plainly related to the noun *ri-mo* 'a drawing'. The root of the verb can be either *ri* or *bri*, and if the root were *bri* we must account for the loss of the *b-* in the word *ri-mo*. If however the root were *ri*, not only would the past *bris* and the future *bri* be regular, but the present stem *'dri* would be the expected result of the epenthesis **r* > *'dr*.

Li gives the following examples, and explanation to show that roots in *r* have a present tense in *'dr*.

'drul ba "to become putrid, rot", pf. [past] *rul* or *drul*, cf. *rul ba* "to rot, get rotten."

'dral ba "to tear to pieces, rend asunder", pf. [past] *ral* or *dral*, cf. *ral* "rent, cleft."

'drud pa "to drag, pull along the ground", pf. [past] *drud*, cf. *rud* "a falling or fall-en, mass (in landslide, avalanche)".

'dril ba "to be turned, rolled around", pf. [past] *dril*, cf. *ril ba* "round, globular."

'dre ba "to be mixed with", pf. [past] *'dres*, cf. *sre ba*, *bsres* "to mix with, mingle".

3) The documents collected in Choix III and IV seem not to include relevant data. Instead we only have the words *'dri* 'to ask' (S1284.v0005-6 and P0216,0120) and *'bri* 'to diminish' (S0751,37a2) and many occurrences of the word *'bri* 'a female yak' (e.g. P0126,0146, P1068,0082-83, P1134,0281-2 etc.).

The perfective [past] *dr-* forms are apparently analogical to the present '*dr-* forms, and have all but replaced the simple forms in *r-*. (1959: 59; brackets mine, also compare Sprigg 1970: 16).

To these one could add '*dring, rings* 'to be far', the topic of Li's paper.

Most dictionaries give the imperative as *bris*, but Bsam Gtan (1979) gives the voiceless form *phris*. However, in the previously mentioned Dunhuang document (Thomas 1935-65: II, 74) there are two instances of the imperative of 'to write' spelled as *ris*: This form of the imperative reconfirms that the root of the verb is *ri* and not *bri*.

[8] @// *rta'i / l[o'i] [d]us gcig tu sku yon tu bsngos [te] / bla'i mdzad – ya las byung ba / [B]o[d] kyī Shes rab* [9] '*[b]u[m] pa sde brgyad dang // Rgya'i 'bum pa bam po [d]rug brgya' [pa] sde gsum ris shig ches byungste* (1935-65: II, 73 italics and brackets in original).

A donation having been undertaken sometime in the Horse year, arising from the previously made communication (?) it appeared that a Tibetan *Shes-rab-'bum-pa* (*Śata-sāhasrika-Prajñā-pāramitā*) in eight divisions, and a Chinese '*bum-pa* in six hundred chapters, three division, should be copied (1935-65: II, 76).

[24] @ / ... *byang ... byungste / Rgya'i Tshe dpag tu ma m[chi]s, pa ...* [25] *ris shig ches byung ba [de]...* (1935-65: II, 74; brackets in original)
... copy a Chinese *tshe-dpag-tu-ma-mchis-pa* (*Aparimīṭāgūḥ-sūtra*) ... (1935-65: II, 77)

Thus, in Old Tibetan the verb 'to write' has the stems '*dri* (pres.), *bris* (past), *bri* (fut.), *ris* (imp.). When Cr- clusters became retroflexes (i.e. *dr* > *ḍ* and *br* > *ḍ*) the verbs 'to write' and 'to ask' became homophonous. After that sound change, the prefix *b-* of '*dri, bris, bri, ris* 'to write' was reanalyzed as part of the root, and extended by analogy to the spelling of the present stem, in order to graphically differentiate '*dri, dris, 'dri, dris* 'to ask' from 'to write', spelled at that time as now '*bri, bris, bri, bris*.

References

- Benedict, Paul (1972). *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*. Cambridge: at the University Press.
Bsam Gtan (1979). *Dag yig gsar bsgrigs*. Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khan.
Choix III (1990). *Choix de Documents Tibétains à la Bibliothèque National III. Corpus Syllabique*. Eds. Yoshiro Imaeda and Tsuguhiito Takeuchi. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale.
Choix IV (2001). *Choix de Documents Tibétains à la Bibliothèque National IV. Corpus Syllabique*. Eds. Yoshiro Imaeda et al. Tokyo: Institut de Recherches sur les Langues et Cultures d'Asie et d'Afrique (ILCAA) Université des Langues Étrangères de Tokyo.
Das, Sarat Chandra (1902). *A Tibetan English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms*. Eds. Graham Sandberg and A. William Hyde. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depôt, 1902; Delhi: Motilal-Banarsidass, 1995; Kyoto, Rinsen Book Company, 1988.
Li Fang-kuei (1959). "Tibetan Glo-ba-'dring." *Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren dedicata*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard. 55-9.

- Li Fang-kuei and W. South Coblin (1987). *A study of the old Tibetan inscriptions*. Special publications 91. Taipei: Academia Sinica.
- Matisoff, James A (2003). *Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman: System and Philosophy of Sino-Tibetan Reconstruction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Richardson, Hugh E. (1985). *A corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions*. James G. Forlong Series 29. Hertford: Royal Asiatic Society.
- Sprigg R. K. (1970). "Vyajñanabhakti, and irregularities in the Tibetan Verb." *Bulletin of Tibetology* 7.2. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. 5-20.
- Thomas, Frederick William (1935-65). *Tibetan literary texts and documents concerning Chinese Turkestan*. 4 vols. Oriental Translation Fund Publication. New series, vol. 32, 37, 40, 41. London: The Royal Asiatic Society.
- Takeuchi Tsuguhito (1995). *Old Tibetan Contracts from Central Asia*. Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan.
- Zeisler, Bettina (2004). *Relative Tense and Aspectual Values in Tibetan Languages: A Comparative Study*. Trends in Linguistics, studies and monographs 150. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Zhang Yisun (1985). *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo / Zhang Han Da Cidian*. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun kang / Minzu Chubanshe.