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# Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages IV

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# 0. INTRODUCTION

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Looked at from the perspective of a better studied language family such as Indo-European, the results of Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics are meagre. Before considering the causes of this circumstance or the need for its remedy, a brief meditation on the merits of historical linguistics in general is in order because even affected scholars such as Tibetan historians, Burmese anthropologists, or Chinese archaeologists have little appreciation for what historical linguistics has to offer their respective disciplines. Two examples from the much more thoroughly studied domain of the Indo-European language family demonstrate the value of comparative research.

In Book 18 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope displays herself to the suitors dressed in finery, despite her hatred for them and her disinterest in remarrying. She herself wonders about why she takes this odd action. As shown by Stephanie Jamison, this behavior can be clarified in light of the Sanskrit legal tradition.[1] The appropriate form of marriage for a woman whose husband is missing and presumed dead in classical Indian literature is the *svayaṁvara*, 'self-choice'. The phases of this rite include the assembly and entertainment of suitors, the display of the bride, the announcement and holding of an athletic contest. The *svayaṁvara* of Draupadī in the Indian epic the *Mahābhārata* even more closely parallels Penelope's; her future husband also disguises himself as a beggar during the contest and battles the suitors following it. In this context Penelope's presentation of herself to the suitors is a routine component of the remarriage ritual, rather than an inexplicable plot twist.

In addition to difficult plot points in the great epic traditions of the world, the comparative method solves minute difficulties in verb morphology. The Sanskrit verb forms its perfect by reduplicating the initial consonant of the verbal root, e.g. √pac 'cook' perf. *papāca*, √mṛ 'die' perf. *mamāra*. However, much to the consternation of first-year Sanskrit students, velar consonants do not reduplicate as velars, but rather as palatals √kṛ 'do' perf. *cakāra* (not *kakāra), √gm 'go' perf. *jagāma* (not *gagāma).

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[1] Jamison, Stephanie. "Penelope and the Pigs: Indic Perspectives on the Odyssey." *Classical Antiquity* 18.2 (1999): 227-272.

It is impossible to explain this irregularity from the perspective of Sanskrit alóne. In this case the solution to the Indian problem is found in Greece. The Greek perfect also forms with reduplication, but differs from the Sanskrit in two illuminating respects. The reduplicated syllable takes the vowel e rather than a, and velars remain velars in the reduplicated syllable just as one would expect, e.g. *graphō* 'write' perf. *gegraptai*. Because a Greek 'e' regularly corresponds to 'a' in Sanskrit, there is no obstacle in supposing that Sanskrit once had an 'e' in the reduplicated syllable. The change of velars to palatals before the vowel 'e' is very common in the world's languages. The perfect of Sanskrit √kr 'do' was originally the completely regular *ke-kor-e. Later the vowel 'e' conditioned the change of 'k' to 'c' yielding *cekore. Finally, the vowels 'e' and 'o' in these positions changed to 'a' and 'ā' in Sanskrit yielding the anomalous attested *cakāra*.

The comparative method is a powerful tool, and there is no reason to think its fruits will be any less abundant in the Tibeto-Burman family. The Newar verb also has its irregularities, the Tibetan epic its anomalous plot points. However, Tibeto-Burman comparative studies have not developed to the point where the evidence of related languages has been brought effectively to bear on these issues.

Tibeto-Burman comparative linguistics has too often amounted to no more than the comparative study of words rather than of languages. Linguists consults hundred year old dictionaries rather than keeping abreast of current scholarship, and do not trouble to confront the literature and history of the speakers of these languages. Even such touchstones of methodological rigour such as exceptionless sound laws and the comparison of irregular morphology have been neglected in favour of nebulous 'allo-famic' relationships. Such an approach rends historical linguistics from its relevance to other humanistic disciplines and cripples its chances for success.

While an Indo-Europeanist in the course of his education is expected to develop a strong reading knowledge of at least Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit and will have read firsthand running text in all of the older Indo-European languages, the average working Tibeto-Burman linguist is familiar only with the one language that particular researcher works on. Even a knowledge of the secondary languages French, German, Chinese, and Japanese cannot be taken for granted.

This sad state of affairs is not entirely the fault of practitioners in the field, but also of the infrastructure of the humanities in academia. Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit are conveniently studied at almost every large research

university in the world, and while the number of institutions offering such languages as Avestan, Church Slavonic, Old Irish, and Hittite is not large, it is also not small. In contrast those institutions offering all three of the oldest Tibeto-Burman languages, Classical Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese, can be counted on one hand. Perhaps more importantly, almost no student of Classical Chinese is ever overtly confronted with the notion that knowledge of Burmese could be useful in his studies.

In founding the Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages Symposium it was the vision of Christopher Beckwith to address this situation and to encourage the kind of collaboration that will lead to the development of Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics. The first three symposia took place within the auspices of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. The most recent symposium, a selection of papers from which appears in this volume, took place at the School of Oriental and African Studies in conjunction with the International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics. The expanding attendance at this workshop bespeaks the promise of our approach.

This volume not only includes a selection of the papers presented in London, but also papers solicited from scholars unable to attend, whose research complements the topics covered. Not only are the more widely studied Tibeto-Burman languages Burmese, Tangut, and Tibetan amply represented in these pages, but significant strides are taken in the essays of Ikeda and Krech, toward the decipherment of the fragmentarily preserved Nam and Pyu languages. Papers range in their focus from the literary (Ishikawa, Plaisier) and anthropological (Jacques) to the phonological and palaeographic (Arakawa, Hill, Krech). In addition to papers on a wide range of Tibeto-Burman languages Christian Bauer contributes a paper on the history of the Mon language, which, because of its close contact over millenia with Burmese and other Tibeto-Burman languages, is of great significance to the endeavor at hand.

It was to my delight that at the workshop one potential example came to light of the benefits of our approach, paralleling the kind of discovery made by Jamison for the Greek epic. Lepcha *delúk* stories, although modelled after Tibetan *ḥdas-log* stories, often contain presentations of the afterlife quite at odds with standard Tibetan Buddhist accounts. They share, however, features, such as an upstream voyage, with pre-Buddhist Tibetan funerary ritual texts. Such similarities may well be creditable to retained archaisms rather than cultural borrowing. There can be no doubt that this volume and subsequent workshops will uncover more veins of fruitful com-

parative inquiry. If a reader of these lines, opening the volume to consult a specific essay, lingers on a paper concerning a language or from a disciplinary perspective outside his normal purview, the *raison d'être* of the work will have been amply satisfied.