Tibetan *-as > -os

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Abstract: Both Jacques (2010) and Zeisler (2015) propose explanations for the synchronically unexpected past *zos of the Tibetan verb 'eat'. After evaluating their proposals, this essay suggests that *zos is the regular outcome of a sound change *as > -os, the results of which were erased through analogy in almost all other verbs.

Tibetan verbs showing stem ablaut typical have -a- in the present and -o- in the past, e.g. 'kill' with present gsod, past bsad, future gsad, and imperative sod. The verb 'eat' with the stems za, *zos, bzaḥ, zo has the opposite pattern showing -o- in the present and -a- in the past. Following Meillet's (1925: 25) principle that irregular morphology preserves archaisms, Guillaume Jacques (2010) proposes that *zos is a fragment of erstwhile agreement morphology in Tibetan. His proposal has not proven popular. Randy LaPolla (2012: 120) objects to the importance that Jacques places on this one verb. LaPolla’s objection is misplaced for two reasons. First, single verb forms are sometimes of paramount significance for an entire family; witness Vedic śāye 'lies' (Clackson 2007: 146). Second, 'eat' is not the only Tibetan verb to show this pattern. Hill (2014) draws attention to three further verbs that appear to show a vowel -o- in the past, viz. ḡ deṅ, ḡoṅ, —, —'disappear', ḡ chaḥ, ḡ chos, ḡ chaḥ, ḡ cho 'chew, gnaw', and łaṅ, loṅ s, laṅ 'finish' (cf. Hill 2010: 89, 148, 279). In addition to LaPolla, Zeisler (2015) also rejects Jacques' explanation of *zos, instead arguing that *zos is borrowed into the paradigm of 'eat' from the cognate potentialis verb 'be able to eat'. Of the additional verbs that Hill (2014) notes, Zeisler (2015: 43-44), points to the confused and contradictory reports of the indigenous lexicographical tradition for 'disappear' and 'finish' to speculate that Hill conflates separate verbs. Zeisler finds 'chew' “most interesting, particularly as it seems to display the same pattern as the verb za 'eat’” but regrets that it is “not very well attested” (2015: 44). She notes two attestations of a present stem ḡ cha, both in the phrase rus-pa gle ḡ cha ‘the bones, fodder for the gle’ (Pt 1194, 11. 62-3 and IOL Tib J, r68).

Zeisler fails to consult the Wörterbuch der tibetischen Schriftsprache, which provides ample attestations of this verb. The Wörterbuch, a research project of the Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, started in 1954, began publication in 2005, and at the time of writing in July 2015 has grown to 24 fascicles.
reaching bsäol. This dictionary supersedes all previous Tibetan lexicographical work in coverage and scientific rigor. To showcase the excellence of this resource I quote the three relevant entries in extenso.

*bcaḥ* fut. zu ↓²ḥ ḍḥaḥ beißn, kauen, essen; ~ *ba* Nahrung, Getränk, Saufen; *bzaḥ* ~ Speisen und Getränk, Essen.

*bzaḥ* ~ *daḥ* ni na *bzaḥ* ... gsol (metr.) „er gab Speisen und Getränk sowie Kleider“ (Anav 1: 89,15); *bzaḥ* *ba* *daḥ* ~ *ba* gya nam pa „Oppiges Fressen und Saufen“ (Prav 187,7); *bzaḥ* *ba* *daḥ* btuṅ İ *daḥ* ~ *ba* rnam pa *sna* tshogs „verschiedenartige Speisen, Getränke, und Nahrung (skt. bhojya)“ (Suv 95,21); *bzaḥ* ~ de *bźin* btuṅ *ba* ŋid .. rab tu *bzaḥ* (metr.) „Essen und ebenso auch Triken soll man zu sich nehmen“ (Hev 1.6.20a); *so* *yi* dag byed ~ *bar* bya (metr.) „menn soll [die Zweige] zum Reinigen der Zähne kauen“ (Ahs 1.2.3b): *mgś bo na bas ḡ di mi ~* (metr.) „bei Erkrankungen des Kopfes soll man dies nicht essen“ (Ahs 1.2.4b); *bzaḥ* *ba* *daḥ* / ~ *ba* ... kyis yaṅ dag par tshim par byas nas „als er sie mit Speisen und Getränken völlig zufriedengestellt hatte“ (ViśṬ 76,36).

Lex. *bzaḥ* *ba* *daḥ* ~ *ba* ma *ḥ* oṅ s *par* lhuṅ bzed mi bzed ṇāṅgata khādantiye bojanīye pātram upānāmāyīs yāmaḥ „solange die Zeit zu essen oder zu trinken nicht gekommen ist, werden wir nicht die Bettelschale inhalten“ (Mvy 8569): *gźib pa* ni *sos* ~ *ba* lces ḡ jib pa *bźib pa*: mit den Zähnen beißen, mit der Zunge saugen „(Kloṅ D 736,6).

²ḥ ḍḥaḥ fut. ↑²bcaḥ knabbern, kauen, essen; vgl. ↓²ḥ chos.

rtsa *ba* ḡ bras bu ~ *ba* *daḥ* (metr.) „Wurzeln und Früchte knabbern“ (Prav 51.21): *rus la* ~ *baḥ* i *rus* kyaṅ dkon (metr.) „Knochen sind selten, sogar für diejenigen, die sie essen“ (gZer 510,6).

Lex. ~ ≅ sos *ldad* pa *sogs* (Dagy).

²ḥ chos essen, kauen; vgl. ↑²ḥ ḍḥaḥ

~ *sam* *zos* na ḍes bya *ba* ni ḍkog mar kham gis *mid* naḥ o „gekaut oder gegessen bedeutet: man schluckt die Speise den Hals hinunter“ (K5 297a6).

Lex. khādita „gekaut“ (in Mvy 7040); ~ *pa* ≅ carvita (Ak 288.60); ~ *pa* ≅ myaṅ s pah am *zos* pah i don du *ḥ an* *snaḥ* „wahrgenommen oder erscheint auch i. S. v. gegessen“ (brDa); ~ *pa* ≅ *zos* *pa* (TTC).

As the reader sees, the Wörterbuch falls short of labeling ḍḥ chos the past of ḍḥ ḍḥaḥ but the equation of ḍḥ chos-pa with *zos*-pa in the sources cited provides evidence that ḍḥ chos is a past stem.

A few passages from the Kanjur further confirm that ḍḥ ḍḥaḥ, ḍḥ chos, and bcaḥ belong to the same verb and are respectively present, past, and future.
A monk shall go into isolations for three purposes, defecation, urination, and chewing on toothpicks. After a monk has chewed a toothpick, he is to wash with water which has not been thus discarded. (K8, Vol. 13, 310a)

Also, if a nun chews and eats what is to be chewed and eaten when the time is not full, this is a transgression. (K4, Vol. 9, 14b)

The Kanjur also attests the imperative, which the Wörterbuch omits.

Zeisler’s explanation that *zos and *ḥ chos are borrowed form a potentialis paradigm is possible, but poorly motivated. The postulated independent verbs *zos 'to be able to eat' and *ḥ cho 'be able to chew' are as far as I know unattested. It is unclear why speakers would target the past stem and not some other form for this replacement by borrowing from a potentialis. It seems unlikely that an inherited bzas would yield to such a borrowing, since analogical pressure (e.g. bsams, bsgrubs, etc.) reinforces it as the expected form. The distribution of *zos in peripheral dialects versus bzas in the center (Zeisler 2015: 46) suggests that *zos is the archaism. In addition, syllable structure weighs against Zeisler’s proposal of borrowing the potentialis as a past stem. In an earlier paper, where she first draws attention to the potentialis, Zeisler (2002) notes the potentialis verbs chod 'able to cut', sod 'able to kill', lon 'able to take', and sngos 'able to catch'. These verbs are all closed syllable whereas the two verbs that show -or ablaut in the past have open syllable roots. Perhaps this distribution is coincidence, but, perhaps not. An account of this distribution is a plus for any explanation of the ablaut seen in 'eat' and 'chew' and Zeisler’s explanation does not garner this plus.

Presuming that Jacques would see *ḥ chos as additional evidence for erstwhile agreement, his explanation accounts for the attested phonological distribution. He offers three concrete possibilities for the phonological development of the -
os in zos; 1. *zaus > zos, 2. *zau > *-zo with -s added by analogy, 3. *zasu > zos, presumably with an intermediate phase such as *zosu (2010: 47). None of these laws leads to -o- in closed syllable roots. Consider the verb √lāṅ 'take' len, blaṅ s, blaṅ ā, loṅ s; the three proposals all produce the attested past: 1. *blaṅ us > blaṅ s, 2. *blaṅ u > *blaṅ → blaṅ s, 3. *blaṅ su > blaṅ s. These proposals require one to consider all transitive past stems ending in -as as analogical developments. Thus, in the verb 'do' byed, byas, bya, byos, the innovative past byas replaced inherited *byos, which was lost without a trace. A verb such as 'think' sems, bsams, bsam, sams serves as an analogical model for byas, viz. bsam : bya :: bsams : X = byas.

Each of Jacques’ proposals has ramifications for Tibetan historical phonology in general. The first proposal requires a sound change *-us > -s, that operated after *-au- > -o-, to avoid *zaus developing to *zas instead of zos. This sound change leaves unexplained why some words still contain -us, such as rus 'bones'. The second and third proposal require the lost of final -u, a not implausible change per se, but one which gives rise to the problem that words such as bu ‘son’, su ‘who’, and ḥ bru ‘grain’ did not undergo the change. Zeisler reasonably objects to the third proposal that if *asu becomes -os then one might expect *isu to develop to *esu or another outcome other than the -is seen in verbs such as ’do’ bgyid, bgyis, bgyi, gvis (2015: 46). Each of Jacques’s proposals is rather complicated and partly unmotivated in its details. Ockham’s razor favors abandoning the insistence on a *-u- suffix and accepting a simpler sound change, namely *as > -os.

The proof of a phonological account for the forms zos and ḥ chos is whether the account explains idiosyncrasies other than those that served as its motivation. A change *-as > -os has the advantage of explaining the invariant verb ltos ‘look to, attend to’ as the inherited past of lta, bltas, blta, ltos ‘look at’. An original paradigm lta, ltos, blta, ltos closely parallels za, zos, bzaṅ, zo and the innovative past bltas parallels the innovative past bzas. Postulating an inherited paradigm zlo, *zlas > zlos, bzla, zlos similarly reconciles the two verbs zlo, bzlas, bzla, zlos ‘say, repeat’ and zlos (invariant) ‘repeat’. The pair of verbs dgaṅ ‘be happy’ and dgos ‘need, want’, both of invariant conjugation, suggests an intransitive verb with the conjugation dgaṅ, dgos, lacking a distinct future and imperative as non-volitional verbs do. In a more complicated case, for the verb smra, smras, smra, smros ‘say’ we predict an inherited past stem *smros. Although *smros does not exist as a separate verb, there is an invariant verb smos ‘say, call’ which the Dag yig gsar sgrigs sees as additionally an alternative present (sic) of smra. One may legitimately speculate that smos is a regular phonetic development from

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3 The ensuing discussion proceeds with the hypothesis *-as > -os, but most of the argument still holds mutatis mutandis using Jacques’ more complicated phonological proposals.
Just as Jacques’ proposals must either account for words ending in -u or -us, so too the proposal *as > -os must account for all instances of -as in the language. Analogy within a paradigm explains verb forms ending in -as, but cannot explain the case markers or nouns that have this rime. The case markers -las and -nas pose no particular problem. They are derived by the suffixing of -s to the case markers -la and -na (Simon 1941: 385). This suffixation occurred after the change *as > -os. Nouns that end in -as arose after the application of this sound change, whether through borrowing or through derivation. For example, a nominalizing -s forms the noun ltas ‘omen’ from the verbal root √lta ‘see’; compare skyems ‘beer, libation’ from √skyem ‘be thirsty’ (Beyer 1992: 118). The supposition that *-as > -os is an old change answers the objection that ltas ‘omen’ does not relate to ‘look’ transparently enough to suggest a recent formation. Similarly, *zas ‘food’ derives via suffixation from √za ‘eat’. Such nouns as skas ‘stairs’, las ‘deed’, nas ‘barely’, sh as ‘pillow’, and ras ‘cotton’ lack recognized cognates elsewhere in the family.⁶ Tibetan ḥ bras ‘rice’, deriving from *h mras according to Simon’s law (Hill 2011: 448-449), has a Chinese cognate 粥 ljeH < *[m]l-a-r⁶ smashed (21-26g) ‘rice’. In this case, Tibetan final -s likely originates from the *-ts cluster seen in Chinese.⁷ If this explanation is correct, then final *-ts simplified to -s only after the change *-as > -os. The anteriority of *-as > -os to *ts > -s provides further support for an early operation the former. The Kurtöp cognates bū ‘do’, pū ‘borrow’, zū ‘eat’, chū ‘devour’ the generalized past forms cognate to Tibetan *byos (replaced by byas), *rñoś (replaced by brñoś), zos, and ḥ chos further support an early date for the change *as > -os since it must have occurred prior to the split of Tibetan and the East Bodish languages (Hyslop 2011: 55-56, 1247, 143).⁸ In sum, the comparative evidence poses little obstacle to, and potentially supports, the proposed change *-as > -os.

The inherited paradigms proposed here, together with brief remarks on

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4 The relationship between smra, smos, and the additional verbum dicendi with the stems rma, rmas requires further attention.

5 There are a few verbs which synchronically speaking have a root final -s (mkhas ‘know’ (v.), glas ‘change one’s residence’, ḥ gas, bkhas, dgas, khos ‘split (vt.)’, ḥ gas, gas ‘split (vi.)’, ḥ gras ‘feel revulsion, be unhappy’, brñoś ‘ridicule, belittle’, ḥ thas ‘hard, firm’, gdas ‘speak’, gnas ‘stay (v.)’, place (n.)’, spras, spras, spras, spros ‘adorn, decorate’, bas-pa ‘finished, complete’, ggas ‘prepare to, be about to’), but the possibility remains that this -s was originally a past tense suffix in these conjugations.


7 Sagart (2014) points to a similar correspondence in the pair Tibetan rus, ‘bone’ and Chinese 律 luit < *[r]ut (31-18c) ‘pitch pipe’, with the complication that Chinese is missing final *s.

8 Gong’s (2002[1995]: 115) proposal to relate Tibetan rdzas ‘thing, object’ to Chinese ⤈ dzhul < *[m-s-]raʔ-s (0971a) ‘serve; service, affair’ is neither semantically nor phonetically compelling.
subsequent developments, are as follows:

√za 'eat'
  pres. za
  past. zos (exists alongside analogical bzas)
  fut. bzah
  imp. zo

√ḥ cha 'chew'
  pres. ḥ chaḥ
  past. ḥ chos
  fut. bceḥ
  imp. ḥ cho

√lta 'look at'
  pres. lta
  past. ltos (continues as separate invariant verb 'look at, attend to', replaced by analogical bltas)
  fut. blta
  imp. ltos

√zla 'say, repeat'
  pres. zla
  past. zlos (continues as separate invariant verb 'repeat', replaced by analogical bzlas)
  fut. bzla
  imp. zlos

√dga 'be happy'
  pres. dgaḥ (continues as separate invariant verb 'be happy')
  past. dgos (continues as separate invariant verb 'need, want')

√smra 'say'
  pres. smra
  past. smos (continues as separate invariant verb 'say, call', replaced by analogical smros)
  fut. smra
  imp. *smos (obsolete, replaced by analogical smras)

√bya 'do'
  pres. byed
  past. *byos (replaced by analogical byas, but compare Kurtöp cognate bù 'do')
  fut. bya
  imp. byos
\(\sqrt{r\text{\text{"n}}}a\) ’borrow’

pres. \(r\text{\text{"n}}a\)
past. *\(r\text{\text{"n}}\text{s}\) (replaced by analogical \(br\text{\text{"n}}\text{s}\), but compare Kurtöp cognate \(\text{\text{"n}}\) ’borrow’)
fut. \(br\text{\text{"n}}a\)
imp. \(\text{\text{"n}}\text{s}\)

Abbreviations

Ahs = Vogel (1965)
Ak = Vidyābhūṣaṇa (1911)
Anav = Hofiinger (1982–1990)
brDa = Dge bšes chos kyi grags pa (1957)
Dagy = Dagyab (1966)
Dag yig gsar sgrigs = Tsan chung (1979)
gZer = Tenzin Namdak (1965)
Hev = Snellgrove (1959)
Kloṅ D = Chandra (1973)
Mvy = Ishihama and Fukuda (1989), but following the numbering of Sakaki (1916)
Prav = Eimer (1983)
Suv = Nobel (1944)
TTC = Zhang (1985)
ViśṬ = Schneider (1993: 74-270)

References


Tenzin Namdak.


