

The derivation of the Tibetan present prefix *g-* from *h-*

According to the *communis opinio* whether a Tibetan verb takes the prefix *g-* or *h-* in its present stem is arbitrary (e.g. Coblin 1976, Beyer 1992: 164-177, Hill 2010: xv-xxi). Implicitly this view suggests the two prefixes have distinct origins, like the Latin perfect for which some verbs continue the inherited aorist whereas other continue the inherited perfect (Weiss 2009: 409-414). For those who subscribe to the conventional understanding of the Tibetan present, the task remains to explain the origin of *g-* and *h-*. Here, I pursue an alternative, namely that these two prefixes have the same origin and their distribution is originally phonologically conditioned.¹

The following table, giving the number of occurrences of verbs with both prefixes, strongly suggests that *h-* is the original initial, which fortified to *g-* before voiceless acute initials.² The major exception to the pattern is the prevalence of the prefix *h-* with verbs of root initial *ts-*.

Root initial		Verbs with prefix <i>h-</i>	Verbs with prefix <i>g-</i>	Percentage with prefix <i>g-</i>
Voiceless acutes				
	s	0	8	100%
	ʃ	0	2	100%
	ś-	3	7	70%
	t-	4	5	55.5%
	c-	9	5	35.6%
	ts-	10	1	9.1%
Other initials				
	ź-	3	2	40%
	z-	4	1	20%
	g-	15	3	16.6%

¹ The statistics of the distribution of these two prefixes in Tibetan verbs used here come from Hill 2010. I have adjusted XXX with reference to Hill 2005, Jacques 2010, and Hill and Zadoks 2015.

² The table does not consider verbs of invariant inflection, because in these the *g-* or *h-* might be part of the root. Before *-n-* only *g-* occurs, but there is only one example *gnon mnan mnan non* 'suppress, defeat'.

	p-	7	1	12.5%
	b-	12	1	7.7%
	d-	10	1	9.1%
	ǰ	6	0	0%
	k	4	0	0%
	dz	3	0	0%
	r	3	0	0%
	l	4	0	0%

If we assume that *h*- regularly changed to *g*- before voiceless acute initials, this gives us 26 cases³ of *h*- before voiceless acutes and nine cases of *g*- before other initials that are in need of explanation. Three examples, one each with root initial *d*-, *p*-, and *b*-, can be dismissed, since a look at the complete infection shows that *g*- (*d*- before labials) is in fact here not a present prefix but part of the root.

gdañ, gdañs, gdañ, gdoñs 'open' *dpog*

dpags dpag dpogs 'measure, asses' *dbrol,*

dbral, dbral, dbrol 'puncture, tear'

I have no explanation for the remaining six examples of the *g*- where it is not expected. Greater philological exploration of the stems as they occur in context is clearly called for.

dgar, bkar, dkar, khor 'separate'

dgod, bgad, bgad, dgod 'laugh'

dgroñ, bkroñs, dgroñ, dgroñs 'kill'

gżar, bżar, gżar, gżor 'shave' *gżu,*

bżus, gżu, gżus 'strike, beat'

gzab, bzabs, gzab, gzobs 'strive, exert one's self' Here

are the 26 unexpected examples of *h*-.

³ The two presents *gso* and *htsho* compete as the present of 'nurture', so the 100% statistic for roots in *s*- is not quite true.

ḥthag, btags, btag, ḥthog 'weave' *ḥthu,*
btus, btu, thus 'gather' *ḥthuñ, btuñs,*
btuñ, ḥthuñs 'drink' *ḥthog, btogs, btog,*
ḥthogs 'pick, pluck' *ḥchag, bcags, gcag,*
chogs 'walk' *ḥchañ, bcañs, bcañ, choñs*
'hold' *ḥchab, bcabs, bcab, ḥchobs*
'conceal, hide' *ḥchiñ, bciñs, bciñ, chiñs*
'bind, tie' *ḥchib, bcibs, bcib, chibs* 'ride
a horse' *ḥchir, bcir, bcir, chir* 'press,
squeeze' *ḥchu, bcus, bcu, chus* 'draw
water' *ḥchol, bcol, bcol, chol* 'entrust,
charge with' *ḥchos, bcos, bcos, chos*
'make ready, prepare' *ḥchags, bśags,*
bśag, śog(s) 'confess' *ḥchad, bśad,*
bśad, śod 'tell'
ḥchi, śi, ḥchi 'die'
ḥtshag, btsags, btsag, tshogs 'strain, filter' *ḥtshañ,*
btsañs, btsañ, tshoñs 'press, squeeze' *ḥtsham,*
btsams, btsam, tshoms 'abuse, mistreat' *ḥtshal,*
btsal, btsal, ḥtshol 'greet, prostrate' *ḥtshir, btsir,*
btsir, tshir 'wring out' *ḥtshem, btsems, btsem,*
tshems 'sew' *ḥtshog, btsogs, btsog, ḥtshogs*
'cudgel' *ḥtshoñ, btsoñs, btsoñ, tshoñs* 'sell'
ḥtshod, btsos, btso, tshos 'cook' *ḥtshol, btsol,*
btsol, tshol 'search for'

Joanna Bialek (2018: 317-9) points out that originally the present stem of 'die' was *śi* and not *ḥchi*. She draws attention to three pieces of evidence. First, the Old Tibetan compound *skye-śi*

'transmigration' combines the present stem *skye* 'be born' with the presumably present stem *śi* 'die'. Second, in the phrase *myi myi śi ħi yul* "a land of men who do not die" (PT 1134, l. 43) the negation marker *myi*, which can only precede the present and future but not the past, is used with *śi*. Third, in the phrase *na-la myi bstan-na śir ħgro* 'If [you] will not explain [it] to me, I am going to die.' (PT 1287, ll. 31-32), because the verb *ħgro* selects only for the present and future in infinitive constructions (Garrett et al. 2013: 37), *śi* must not be past. Thus, the verb *ħchi, śi, ħchi* 'die' need not be seen as a true exception to the generalization that the prefix *g-* rather than *ħ-* occurs before the voiceless acute root initials.

The verbs *ħthu, ħthag, ħthog, ħchu, ħchib, and ħchos* are probably denominative, respectively from *thu* 'hem', *thags* 'garment', *thog* 'tip', *chu* 'water', *chibs* 'horse', and *chos* 'dharma'. They are analogical creations postdating the change of *ħ-* to *g-*. I am not aware of any obvious denominal verbs that take the prefix *g-* in their present. If these denominal derivations for *ħth-* and *ħch-* are accepted, there remain 19 examples unexplained; of these ten have root initial *ts-*, seven have root initial *c-*, and two root initial *ś-*.

An alternative explanation for the phonetic conditioning of *ħ- > g-* is to restrict the conditioning environment to only voiceless fricatives. Under this alternative proposal, the 17 examples of *ħ-* before *ts-* and *c-* become regular, but the 11 examples of *g-* before *t-*, *c-*, and *ts-* become irregular and the two examples of *ħ-* before *ś-* remain irregular. It does not seem judicious at the moment to choose between these two alternative hypotheses, but instead to simply conclude that it is likely that prefix *g-* derives from *ħ-* and that further philological work (of the type discussed for 'die') is required to add clarity to the situation. When we recall that *ħ-* represents [ɣ] (Hill 2009), the change *ħ- > g-* before voiceless fricatives is straightforward dissimulatory fortition.

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