

The prefix *g-* and *-o-* ablaut in Tibetan present verb stems

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Abstract

The prevailing internal reconstruction of the Classical Tibetan verbal system accounts for all ablaut phenomena as innovations triggered by erstwhile segmental affixes. The traditional account cannot be correct, because the paradigms of nine verbs show *-o-* in the present stem without *g-* and a further three verbs show *g-* in the present without *-o-*.¹

Keywords

Tibetan verb – ablaut – verb morphology – Tibeto-Burman

1 The present stem ‘o’ ablaut and the *g-* prefix

Li Fang-Kuei founded the scientific study of the Tibetan verbal system with his important 1933 paper on internal reconstruction, with the major reigning theory of Tibetan verbal history established in a follow up paper by his student W. S. Coblin (1976). As discussed below, in one of his last publications, Li sowed the seeds for the undoing of this theory (Li & Coblin 1987: 161 n. 9). Thus, Li Fang-Kuei is both the alpha and the omega of the standard theory of the history of the Tibetan verbal system and it is a just tribute to his lasting impact on our field to sketch out in more detail the ramifications of his 1987 observation.

With slight disagreements in detail Shafer (1950–1951: 1024), Nishida (1958: 39), Coblin (1976: 55) and Jacques (2012: 219) propose that a prefix **go-* or **g-* induces the ‘a’ to ‘o’ ablaut in the present stem of Tibetan verbs. For example, Jacques compares the purported **g(o)-* in Tibetan with the present prefix *ku-* < **ko-* of Japhug Rgyalrong (2012: 221–222). An association between *g-* and ‘o’ in the present stem is apparent in many verbs (e.g. pres. *gsod*, past *bsad*, fut. *gsad*, imp. *sod* ‘kill’). These scholars explain the absence of a *g-* prefix in the present of other verbs (e.g. *skoñ*, *bskañs*, *bskañ*, *skoñs* ‘fulfill’) with the reconstruction of a prefix **g*, subsequently lost through regular sound change. The change in question, ‘Coblin’s law’ (Hill 2011: 446) specifies that a consonant (here *g-*) is lost in a complex cluster that is phonotactically

1 I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the European Research Council for supporting this research under the auspices of ‘Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language and the State’ (ERC Synergy Project 609823 ASIA). I would also like to thank Abel Zadoks, who first convinced me of the inadequacy of the traditional account of ablaut in the Tibetan verbal system, including the main proposal of this paper, namely that *g-* does not induce *-o-* ablaut. In particular, Abel drew

impossible in Old Tibetan. For example, Coblin reconstructs the present of ‘fulfill’ as *gskañ > *gskoñ > skoñ (1976: 55–57), in which *gsk > sk- is an instance of his law.

Coblin himself notes three verbs that violate the generalization that a *g-* prefix correlates with an ‘o’ ablaut in the present (1976: 56 note 1).²

ḥjog, ḅzag, g̣zag, ẓogs ‘place’
ḥdogs, ḅtags, g̣dags, tḥogs ‘tie’
šoñ, ḅsañs, ḅsañ, soñs ‘empty’

There are several further counterexamples, in which ‘o’ ablaut in the present stem occurs without a *g-* prefix.

ḥgog, bkag, dgag, khog ‘block, hinder’
ḥdoms, gdams, gdam, ḥdoms ‘advise, explain’
ldon, blan, glan, lon ‘answer’
ḥdod, dad ‘want’
ḥdor, dard ‘endanger’
phog, ḥphags ‘strike’

The first two in this list are found in all of the dictionaries, but the remaining four require further discussion. Apart from these verbs in which *-o-* occurs without *g-*, there are also verbs that have a *g-* in the present that does not coincide with ‘o’ ablaut, namely *g̣ségs*, —, —, *śog* ‘go’, *gsiñ* (<*gseñ), *bsañs, bsañ, soñs* ‘cleanse, purify’, *gdal, bdal, bdal*, ‘spread’ (trans.), and *gstsal, bstsal* ‘clear’.³

For the presents *ḥjog* and *ḥdogs*, according to Coblin “we can only guess that these forms may have undergone some sort of analogical change based perhaps on those paradigms which mark present forms with *ḥ-*” (1976: 56 note 1).⁴ The supposition of analogical developments as the explanation for *ḥjog* and *ḥdogs* is not credible. Because these are the only common verbs that show *ḥ-* and *-o-* in the present with ‘a’ in the past, a four part analogy will never yield the attested form. For example, attempts with *ḥjug, bcug, g̣zug, chug* ‘insert’ or *ḥjab, ḅzabs, g̣zab, ḥjobs* ‘lie in ambush’ yield *ḥjag rather than *ḥjug*.

fut. *g̣zag* : pres. X :: fut. *g̣zug* : pres. *ḥjug*
 X = *ḥjag
 past *ḅzag*, fut. *g̣zag* : X :: past *ḅzabs*, fut. *g̣zab* : pres. *ḥjab*
 X = *ḥjag

my attention to the morphological significance of *ḥdod, dad* ‘want’ and *g̣ségs* ‘go’. My final thanks go to the anonymous reviewers, whose comments helped improve the paper substantially.

- 2 Coblin also gives a fourth verb *ḥchog, bcags, bcag, chogs* ‘walk, tread’ as an example of ‘o’ ablaut without a *g-* prefix in the present, but Hill (2010: 86–87) lists only *ḥchag* and not *ḥchog* for the present of the verb ‘walk, tread’.
- 3 On *g̣ségs*, —, —, *śog* ‘go’ and *gsiñ, bsañs, bsañ, soñs* ‘cleanse, purify’ see Hill (2014). For attestations of *gstsal, bstsal* ‘clear’ see Hill (2012: 25).
- 4 The lexical sources compiled by Hill all support the presents *ḥjog* and *ḥdogs* (2010: 99, 149). If *ḥjog* and *ḥdogs* are analogical creations, the inherited presents (presumably *g̣zog and *gdogs) have died without a trace. Note that *ḥdogs* is attested in the ‘Prayers for the foundation of the De ga yu tshal monastery’, which dates to circa 822 (cf. Kapstein 2009): *yon phul-baḥi*

Because *h̄jog* and *h̄dogs* are not explainable as analogical developments they must be inherited.

For the verb *śoñ*, *bśaṅs*, *bśaṅ*, *śoṅs* ‘empty’ Coblin suggests the present *śoñ* reflects the loss of the prefix *g-* in the modern languages (1976: 56 note 1). In addition to *śoñ* ‘empty’, Hill offers *gśoñ* and *gśaṅ* as alternative presents for this verb (2010: 288). The present *gśoñ* appears to confirm Coblin’s speculation that *śoñ* is a late form, reflecting the simplification of clusters in spoken varieties of Tibetan. While possible, this explanation is ad hoc; many Tibetan dialects, such as that of Lhasa, eliminate all initial clusters (DeLancey 2003: 272), but this development rarely influences orthographic practices. An alternative explanation is that *śoñ* is the inherited form and *gśoñ* is the product of analogy. The verb *gsob*, *bsabs*, *bsab*, *sobs* ‘repay’ serves nicely as the analogical inspiration.⁵

past *bśaṅs*, fut. *bśaṅ*, imp. *śoṅs* : pres. X :: past *bsabs*, fut. *bsab*, imp. *sobs* : pres. *gsob*
X = *gśoñ*

Coblin’s suggestion that *gśoñ* is the original form appears unlikely.

2 *ldon*, *blan*, *glan*, *lon* ‘reply’

A previous study demonstrates the existence of a verb *ldon* / *glon*, *blan*, *glan*, *lon* ‘reply’ (Hill & Zadoks 2015), but leaves open whether *ldon* or *glon* is the original stem of the verb. Because an analogy such as *bsad* : *blan* :: *gsod* : X = *glon*, easily accounts for the origin of *glon*, whereas an analogy to motivate *ldon* is not apparent, *ldon* can be taken to be the original form.

3 *hdod*, *dad* ‘want’

Although the lexica compiled in Hill 2010 unanimously divide *hdod* ‘want’ (Hill 2010: 138) and *dad* ‘have faith’ (Hill 2010: 150), both with invariable stems, Jäschke refers to *dad* as a “secondary form of” *hdod* (1881: 249), finding the meaning ‘wish’ in the *Mdzaṅs-blun* and also identifying this stem in the word *skom-dad* ‘thirst’ (1881: 249). Examples 1 and 2 confirm the meaning Jäschke identifies.

- (1) *bdag rab-tu byuñ-bar dad-na / bdag-gi pha-mas ma gnañ-na / bdag-gi lus h̄di gžan-du skye-bar bgyi-baḥi slad-du rañ h̄chiḥo sñam-nas /*

If I want to become a monk and my parents do not agree, then I shall die and afterward this body will be born as another. (*Mdzaṅs-blun*, Derge Kanjur, vol. 74, p. 146b)

*yon-bdag chen-po byaṅ-cub-kyi sems-daṅ ldan-žñ dkon-mcog-gsum-kyi skyabs mdzad-pha blon chen-po žaṅ khri-sum-rje-daṅ / žaṅ chen-po lha bzaṅ / lta-bu dkon-mchog-gsum-gyī skyabs-su che-ba saṅ slad gñis ma byuñ-ste / sññ chen-pos kun-la phan h̄dogs-pha h̄dī mañ-po kun-la phaṅs-sñ gces-par / / Hereafter there shall not arise two who are great in the preservation of the Three Jewels, who are like the great patrons who offer gifts, having a mind of Bodddhi, acting for the preservation of the Three Jewels, the great minister Žaṅ khri sum rje and the great žaṅ (cf. Dotson 2004) [minister] Lha-bzaṅ. These [two] do benefit (*phan h̄dogs*) for all with a kind heart, valuing and cherishing the many. (PT 16, 28v4–29r1)*

5 The *g-* prefix of the alternative present *gśaṅ* is less easy to explain as an analogical development, but this form, failing to exhibit the present ‘o’ ablaut, is not relevant to the discussion at hand.

TABLE 1 negation of *hdod* and *dad* in the Kanjur⁶

	mi	ma
hdod	586	44
dad	27	372

- (2) *rab-tu hbyuñ-bar dad-pas pha-ma-la phyi phyag htshal-nas / sañs-rgyas gañ-na-ba der soñ-ste /*
Because he wanted to become a monk, he paid his parting respects to his parents and went to where the Buddha was. (*Mdzañs-blun*, Derge Kanjur, vol. 74, p. 153a)

Further confirming evidence is available in the Old Tibetan version of the story of Rama.

- (3) *bdag ma dad-na / skyes-pa sus bdag-la reg-pa tsam-gyis tshig-par gyur-chig-par dmod-pa bor-ro //*
She cursed that should any human merely touch me without me wanting, he will catch fire. (10L Tib J 737.1, ll. 155–156)

The pattern of negation of these two verbs in the Derge Kanjur supports the identification of *dad* as a past stem and *hdod* as a present (cf. Table 1). Whereas *hdod* is primarily negated with *mi*, as is typical of a present stem, *dad* is primarily negated with *ma*, as is typical of a past stem.⁷

4 *hdor, dard* ‘endanger’

Li Fang-Kuei (Li & Coblin 1987: 161 n. 9) and Dotson (2013: 333, n. 19) suggest that the verb *hdor* seen in the phrase *srog hdor-ba* ‘to endanger life’, has the past stem *dard*.⁸

- (4) *bstan-pho yab khri lde gtsug-rtsan-gyi sku-la dard-te dguñ-du gśegs-so /// btsan-pho sras khri sroñ lde-brtsan-gyi sku-la ni dard-du ñe*
They endangered the life of the emperor, Khri-lde gtsug-rtsan, the father, and he passed away. The life of the emperor, Khri-sroñ lde-brtsan, the son, was almost endangered. (Žol insc, ll. 8–12, cf. Li & Coblin 1989: 143, 158)
- (5) *btsan-po mched gñis-la // Moñ Sñon-po glo-ba riñs-pa / Zu-tse glo-ba ñe-bas dkuñ bel-nas // btsan-po mched gñis-kyi sku-la ma dar-par // Moñ Sñon-po bkun ste //*
Moñ Sñon-po became disloyal to both the emperor and his brother. Zu-tse, being loyal, revealed his plot and killed Moñ Sñon po before he had endangered the life of both the emperor and his brother. (*Old Tibetan Chronicle* = Pt 1287, ll. 201–202, cf. Dotson 2013: 373, 280)

6 I have omitted examples of *tha mi dad* (x250) as irrelevant. I have also weeded out nouns that end in *-ma* before the verb *hdod*, i.e. *gtor-ma* (x6), *mtshan-ma* (x2), *slob-ma* (x1), *lhag-ma* (x2), *go-ta-ma* (x1), *chuñ-ma* (x4). In addition two cases of *ma hdod* are present stems used in the imperative, i.e. *ma hdod cig* (x1) and *ma hdod śig* (x1).

7 The existence of the honorific *bzed* ‘desire’ < *bjed /bdjed/ further suggests that *-o-* is not the root vowel in *hdod*.

8 Coblin instead interprets *dard* as the past of *dar* ‘spread’ (Li & Coblin 1987: 161–162 n. 9).

The verb *ḥdor, dard* ‘endanger’ provides further evidence for -o- in the present stem in the absence of *g-*.

5 *phog, ḥphags* ‘strike’

The Old Tibetan version of the story of Rama, version A, at line 191 has the phrase *rgyal-po ltad-mo-la yeñs-nas / mdaḥs ma ḥphags-ste*, which de Jong translates “The king, distracted by the scene, did not shoot an arrow.” (1989: 29), understanding *ḥphags* as “an obvious mistake for” *ḥphañs* (1989: 119). Paleographically the substitution of -ñ with -g is unlikely. Another possibility is to understand *ḥphags* as the past stem of the verb *phog* ‘strike’, yielding a translation such as ‘The king, distracted by the scene, his arrow did not strike.’ De Jong appropriately compares an earlier passage (6) with similar wording.

- (6) *Tshañs-pas bkaḥ stsaḥd-pa // « sñid gsum dbañ byed ñed-las myed / stoñ khams myi ḥdaḥ mdaḥs ḥphañs des myi phog / » ches gsuñs-nas pyod ches gśeḡs-pa-dañ //*
 Brahma said: ‘Nobody but me reigns over the three worlds. An arrow shot, not passing beyond the thousand worlds, it will not strike (me).’ Having said this he went with great haste. (IOL Tib J 737.1, ll. 29–30)

However, by comparing *mdaḥs ma ḥphags-ste* to *des myi phog* ‘it will not strike’ with a change of tense and the use of an anaphoric pronoun in place of *mdaḥs*, rather than to *mdaḥs ḥphañs* ‘the arrow shot’, without negation, the parallel serves just as easily to support the proposal here. If one accepts the suggestion that *ḥphags* is the past of *phog*, then the verb *phog, ḥphags* ‘strike’ is another case where the present with -o- does not coincide with *g-* (which would appear as *d-* before a labial).

6 Conclusion

In sum, there are nine verbs in which -o- ablaut occurs in the present stem without a *g-* prefix and there are three verbs in which a *g-* prefix occurs in the present stem without -o- ablaut.

‘o’ ablaut without a *g-* prefix

ḥgog, bkag, dgag, khog ‘block, hinder’
ḥjog, bźag, gźag, źogs ‘insert, place’
ḥdoms, gdams, gdam, ḥdoms ‘advise, explain’
ḥdod, dad ‘want’
ḥdor, dard ‘endanger’
ḥdogs, btags, gdags, thogs ‘bind, tie’
ldon, blan, glan, lon ‘answer’
phog, ḥphags ‘strike’
śoñ, bśaḥs, bśañ, śoḥs ‘empty’

g- prefix without 'o' ablaut

gdal, bdal, bdal, 'spread' (trans.)
gsiñ (<*gseñ), *bsaṅs, bsañ, soṅs* 'cleanse, purify'
gśegs, —, —, *śog* 'go'
gstsal, bstsal 'clear'

There is no doubt that in the majority of verbs a prefix *g-* correlates with 'o' ablaut. However, it is a basic methodological principle of historical linguistics that irregular morphology preserves archaisms (Meillet 1925: 25).⁹ Thus, the evidence presented in this paper renders this correlation of *g-* with 'o' ablaut untenable as an explanation for the origin of 'o' ablaut in the present stem of Tibetan verbs.¹⁰

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9 Even single verb forms are sometimes of paramount significance for an entire family; witness Vedic *śáyē* 'lies' (Clackson 2007: 146).

10 Liberated from the preconception that Tibetan ablaut is innovative, it is easy to find comparative evidence that may require the reconstruction of ablaut to the proto-language: witness Tib. *mkhan* 'know', Chi. 見 *kenH* < *k^hen-s 'see'; Tib. *mthoñ* 'see', Bur. *mrañ* 'see'; Tib. √lag (*klog, blags, klag, lhog*, see Hahn 1999) 'read', Chi. 讀 *duwk* < *C.l^hok 'read (v)'; Tib. *ñal* 'rest', Chi. 卧 *ngwaH* < *ŋ^hojs 'lie down'; etc. Such ablaut patterns across languages require further study.

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藏語現在詞幹g-前綴卻和變異-o-元音

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摘要

現行古典藏語動詞體系的內部構擬方案，一致認為所有動詞的元音變異現象均源於往昔成音段詞綴造成的音韻創新。這種傳統的解釋不可能正確，因為有九個動詞的現在詞幹沒有g-前綴卻仍然出現變異-o-元音，而有三個動詞的現在詞幹有g-前綴卻不出現變異-o-元音。

關鍵詞

藏語動詞、元音變異、動詞形態、藏緬語