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The *e*-grade in Tibetan Honorifics

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Hill (2019a) compares Tib. *mkhan* 'know' with Chi. 見 *kenH* 'see' as evidence for the antiquity of ablaut in the Sino-Tibetan verbal system. Jacques (2020) raises objections to this comparison, which this article aims to answer. The proposed solution is that *-e-* grade and palatalization typical of Tibetan honorifics continue inherited present stems and that unpalatalized present *-e-* grades are of an analogical origin.

Keywords: *ablaut, Sino-Tibetan, verb morphology, sound change, palatalization*

Research on the history of the Tibetan verbal system relies on the foundation laid by Li (1933) and his student Coblin (1976). Their two papers, using internal reconstruction to eliminate most alternations seen in Tibetan verb paradigms, constitute what we may be called the 'standard theory' of Tibetan verbal pre-history.[1] A theory provides a conceptual framework to identify anomalous facts and in recent years, inspired by observations of Abel Zadoks,[2] I have collected and examined those verb forms that appear anomalous in the Li-Coblin framework (Hill 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). The first fruit of these lucubrations is the conclusion that Tibetan ablaut cannot be derived from synchronic affixes (Hill 2019b). In my recent book, as one piece of evidence for ablaut in the common ancestor of Tibetan and Chinese I compared Tib. *mkhan* 'know' with Chi. 見 *kenH* 'see' (Hill 2019a:43), tacitly assuming the reader would see the Tibetan *-a-* vowel and the meaning 'know' as suggesting an inherited past stem whereas Chinese reflects the inherited present stem. The *a*-grade in Tibetan verbs is typical of the past stem (pres. *gsod*, past *bsad*, fur. *gsad*, imp. *sod* 'kill, *sems*, *bsams*, *bsam*, *soms* 'think', etc.), so *mkhan* may continue an inherited stem. Since Greek οἶδα and Sanskrit *veda* are morphologically unreduplicated perfects to a verb 'see' but are used with present meaning 'know', Tibetan *mkhan* could likewise be a past formation of a verb 'see' used with present meaning 'know'.

Jacques (2020) reports me as having directly compared *mkhyen* 'know' (hon.) with 見 *kenH* 'see'; I did not. Jacques also credits Nicholas Bodman with comparing these two words, but Pulleyblank (1994:78), who does indeed compare *mkhyen* 'know' (hon.) with 見 *kenH* 'see', writes that this comparison is "not discussed by Bodman".[3] Jacques admits that this "comparaison semble très attractive du point de vue sémantique (οἶδα) et phonétique" but objects to it on morphological grounds, arguing that both the *-e-* vowel and the *-n* final in Tibetan are secondary. He explains, following 龔煌城 (1977), that *mkhyen* is the honorific equivalent of *mkhan* 'be an expert', whence it derives via the honorific infix -y-, which also induces the vocalic change.

1 Hill (2010:xv–xxi) restates the standard theory. Jacques (2012) speculatively traces the prehistory of some of its elements.

2 In this paper I am particularly in Abel's debt for pointing out to me (around 2015?) the probable antiquity of *mkhyen* and *gśegs* and their importance in explaining honorifics as inherited presents.

3 Ferlus (2003:272) and Schuessler (2007:304) repeat the same comparison.

Juxtaposing *mkhan* and *mkhas* 'be wise', he argues "que la racine de ces adjectifs est mk^{h}a-, et que -n et -s sont des suffixes." The comparison of *mk^{h}a- 'know' with Chinese 見 *kenH* 'see' is indeed less compelling than Pulleyblank's original proposal. Jacques points out that the -y- honorific infix is "limité au tibétain, et ne se retrouve dans aucune autre langue", a reason that he sees as confirming the recent date of the *-e-* in Tibetan and vitiating its correspondence with the *-e-* of Chinese. But the very innovativeness of the -y- infix in Tibetan is the thread which unravels Jacques' argument, for this -y- itself must have a history.

Let us look at a few Tibetan honorific verbs. As in other languages (e.g., Japanese) the honorifics show less allomorphy than do other verbs. For example, the non-honorific verb meaning 'do' has a full suite of four distinct verb stems, *byed*, *byas*, *bya*, *byos*, whereas its honorific equivalent has only two forms, namely *mdzad* in present, past, and future, with *mdzod* reserved for the imperative. Similarly, the honorific word for 'eat' has the four stems *za*, *zos*, *bzaḥ*, *zos* 'eat', whereas its honorific equivalent is the invariant *bźes* 'eat'. Note that 龔煌城 's (1977) -y- infix by no means fully explains the formation of honorific verbs. Consider *ḥdug* 'sit' versus *bźugs* 'sit' (hon.). The honorific is prefixed with *b-* and suffixed with *-s* in addition to being infixed with -y- (*dy > ź). Simultaneous prefixation with *b-* and suffixation with *-s* is generally characteristic of Tibetan past tense transitive verbs; the textbook example is *sgrub* 'accomplish' with the past stem *bsgrubs*. Other past-looking honorifics include *bźes* 'eat', *bźed* 'wish', and *bźeṅs* 'rise'; compare the non-honorifics *za*, *zos*, *bzaḥ*, *zos* 'eat', *ḥdod*, *dad* 'wish', and *len*, *blaṅs*, *blaṅ*, *loṅs* 'rise'.[4]

Paradoxically, the usual *-e-* vowel grade of the honorific verbs is typical of present stems (*byed*, *byas*, *bya*, *byos* 'do', *skyel*, *bskyal*, *bskyal*, *skyol* 'send, deliver', etc.) and other honorific verbs, in particular *skyems* 'thirst', look like presents. The most common honorific verb, *gśegs* 'go/come', is unambiguously an inherited present, since its *g-*, *-e-*, and *-s* (<*-d)—all three of them typical markers of the present stem—are lost in the archaic imperative *śog*. The strong evidence of this verb suggests that the present-looking honorifics are in fact inherited presents; the past-looking honorifics must be newer and derive from the inherited presents analogically. Thus, *skyems* is the inherited present of the verb *skem*, *bskams*, *bskam*, *skom* 'thirst', which, after *skyems* was specialized for honorific meaning, was renewed in the present with *skem*. Analogously one can reason that *mkhyen* is the inherited present of 'know' paired with a past *mkhan*. Either the *m-* seen in *mkhyen* and *mdzad* 'do' is since hoary antiquity a part of their roots or it is itself an element of honorific formation.[5] If the *m-* is an inherited 'honorific prefix', its presence on *mñel* 'tired' (hon.) paired with *ṅal* 'tired' needs no explanation. If the *m-* in *mkhyen* and *mdzad* has no morphological meaning, its mere presence in these two important honorific verbs may have contaminated *mñel*. In either case, from the pair *ṅal* and *mñel* it is easy to make our way back to pairs like *ḥdug* 'sit' and *bźugs* 'sit' (hon.). Before nasals the past prefix *b-* takes the form *m-* (Chang's law, see Hill 2019a:9, §12) as seen in verbs like *gnon*, *mnan*, *gnan*, *non* 'press' and *ñan*, *mñan* 'listen'. Thus, *mñel* permitted the reanalysis of '*e*-grade and *m-* prefix' as '*e*-grade and *b*-prefix'.

龔煌城 's (1977) -y-, while certainly a synchronic reality at one moment in the history of Tibetan morphology, probably originated as a result of the *-e-* vowel seen in particularly old present stems. Those presents in *-e-* that do not exhibit palatalization (*sems* 'think', *ḥded* 'drive, pursue') are probably analogically restored. A merit of this account is that, in addition to explaining the origin of the palatalization and *e*-grade that characterize honorifics, it can be used to explain the unpalatalized consonants before *-e-* in present stem verbs, and thus bring the second Tibetan palatalization closer to an exceptionless sound change conditioned by front vowels (Hill 2019a:233–234, §219j).

4 Note that *bźed* 'wish' must have formed when the *-o-* of *ḥdod*, *dad* 'wish' was still fully felt as a marker of the present stem, i.e., before the invariant verbs *ḥdod* 'want' and *dad* 'have faith in' had gone their separate ways.

5 If *m-* is inherited as an honorific prefix, we must of course explain its appearance in *mkhan* and *mkhas*.

As for *mkhas*, which plays for Jacques the important role of proving the *-n* in *mkhyen* and *mkhan* a suffix, it could be a back formation (e.g., *chen* 'great' : *ches* 'become big' : *mkhan* 'knowledgeable': X = *mkhas* 'become knowledgeable'), or possibly that both *mkhyen* and *mkhas* are ancient. In the former case *-n* is part of the root in both Tibetan and Chinese; in the latter case an **-n* formative of Sino-Tibetan provenance is far from an impossibility. In sum, I see no obstacle to the direct comparison of *mkhyen* 'know' with 見 *kenH* 'see'.

It is perhaps helpful to spell out the relative chronology of changes implied by the foregoing argument.

1. We start with verbs such as pres. *mkhen, past. *mkhan* and pres. *skems, past. *bskams*.
2. *e > *ye, yields pres. *mkhyen*, past *mkhan* and pres. *skyems*, past. *bskams*. Present verb forms at this time were likely already pragmatically common in honorific contexts.[6]
3. *mkhyen*, *skyems*, and other inherited presents (e.g., *gśegs*) separate off as stem invariant honorific verbs,[7] allowing for the coinage of the less opaque presents *mkhan* and *skems*. Presents such as *sems* 'think' (past *bsams*) and *ḫded* 'drive, pursue' (past *bdas*) date from this time.[8]
4. The *m-* of *mñel*, whether inherited or analogical in origin, is reinterpreted as an allomorph of *b-* ; *mñel* now formally relates to ṅal as an *e*-grade past stem.[9]
5. New honorifics in the guise of *e*-grade past stems come into being, *za* → *bzyes 'eat', *ḫdod* → *bdyed 'wish', *ḫdug* → *bdyugs 'sit', *len* → *blyeṅs 'rise'.
6. The clusters *zy-, *dy-, *ly- merge as *ź-*: *bzyes > *bźes* 'eat', *bdyed > *bźed* 'wish', *bdyugs > *bźugs* 'sit', *blyeṅs > *bźeṅs* 'rise'. The third of these changes, *ly- > *ź-*, is 'Benedict's law' (Hill 2019a:14–16, §15).

If the reader finds this argument a strain on credulity, bear in mind that the goal of this brief contribution is not to tell a watertight story about the prehistory of Tibetan honorifics, but instead merely to stay the dismissal of *mkhyen* 'know' compared to 見 *kenH* 'see'.

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6 As long as the change **e* > *ye preceded *-ew > -o (Hill 2019a:21, §22), it also accounts for the Tibetan palatalized initials that appear before the vowel *-o-* in the words *skyogs* 'ladle (n.)' and *ñog-ñoṅ* 'soft, tender' compared to Chi. 勺 *tsyak* < *t-qewk 'ladle (v.)' and Chi. 弱 *nyak* < *newk 'id'. One may similarly explain the palatalization of seen in *źo* 'yoghurt' (compare Japhug Rgyalrong *tɤ-lu* 'milk') through the changes *lyo < *lyew < *lew, but to do so I presume weakens the strength of the vocalic correspondence. The comparison of Tib. *glog* 'lightning' to Chi. 曜 / 燿 / 耀 *yewH* < *lewks 'shine' becomes mutatis mutandis less likely.

7 Of course 'inherited' is a relative concept. Since *gśegs* was unaffected by Dempsey's law *-eg > -ig (Hill 2019a:12–13, §14), it must itself have an earlier analogical origin.

8 Since *len* (past *blaṅs*) was probably coined as *leṅd at this time, we have here a terminus post quem for the change *-eṅd > -end.

9 This reanalysis of *m-* as *b-* is a terminus ante quem for Chang's law.

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藏語敬語中的 *-e* 級

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Hill (2019a) 以藏語 *mkhan*「知」和漢語 *kenH*「見」的比較作為漢藏語系中元音變換的古代證據。對於 Jacques (2020) 對這個比較的反對意見，本文提出的解決方案是：藏語敬語中典型的 *-e* 級和腭化繼續繼承了現在的詞幹，而未腭化的現在 *-e* 級則有著類比起源。

關鍵詞：元音變換、漢藏語系、動詞形態、音變、腭化

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