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The Verb 'bri “to write” in Old Tibetan

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An examination of the verb 'bri ‘to write’ as it occurs in Old Tibetan texts reveals that the original conjugation was 'brii (pres.), 'brii (past), 'brii (inf.), 'brii (imp.). When Cc-clusters became reflexives (i.e., de > d and ke > k) the verbs 'brii ‘to write’ and 'bri ‘to ask’ became homophonous. As that point the prefixes b- of 'brii, 'bri, 'brii, 'bri as ‘to write’ was reanalyzed as part of the root, and extended by analogy to the spelling of the present stem, in order to graphically differentiate 'brii, 'brii, 'brii, 'bri ‘to ask’ from ‘to write’ (nearly spelled) 'bri, 'bri, 'bri, 'bri. This discovery is brought specifically to bear on the interpretation of line 68 of the east face of the treaty inscription of 821-822.

As the earliest attested of the Tibeto-Burman languages, Old Tibetan is not only important in the study of Tibetan language and history but also has unique importance for the entire Tibeto-Burman language family. Unfortunately most comparative studies which use Tibetan material rely on Classical Tibetan dictionaries rather than relying directly on Old Tibetan texts. Benedict in the first sentence of his discussion of the Tibeto-Burman b-prefix draws particular attention to the verb ‘brii ‘to write’ as an exception to the generalisation that Tibetan “prefix b- is characteristically found with the ‘perfect’ [past] root of verbs” (1972: 110; brackets mine). More recently Matsuo opines that Tibeto-Burman had a root *b-ray ‘draw / write’ (2003: 132). As will be shown here, the b- in the present stem of ‘brii ‘to write’ never represented a linguistic reality in Tibetan, and should therefore not be considered in comparative research. Many imperial Tibetan stone inscriptions refer to their own creation with a formula such as 'na rigna lo 'brii ‘written on the stela’. A reminiscent phrase occurs in the 68th line of the east face of the treaty inscription of 821-822, which stands before the Gzung-lag-khang in Lhasa, but instead of ‘brii the text has ‘brii. Richardson (1985: Index) sees this as an orthographic variant for ‘brii. He reads the text thus:

[68] 'na rigna lo 'de bka' dpun phyag// sna'i pho rgya thabs// gyu
[69] shi cung sngsg phyi tu// de choi dang// thub ram shes de bo'i yag tuu//
[70] li 'brii bo'a la stangs pas bjam so// (1985: 116)1.

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1) The work of Zender (2004) should put to rest once and for all that the semantics of the Tibetan verb stems has anything to do with ‘aspect’.

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And an examination of this inscribed stone pillar was made by the Chinese epo\-sou De tse'i, who has the rank of ‘Goi Shi Gang Shing, and Li Kri [sic.] P'u, who has the rank of Tsan Shan De P'u, and others (1985: 117).

Presumably one reason Richardson found his explanation persuasive is that 'dri and 'tri are homophonous in many modern dialects. However, it is improbable that they were homonyms at this early period. Also, the spelling bri is met with just a few lines earlier at line 65; it is unlikely both that an imperial inscription would contain a spelling mist-
ake, and that a single scribe would change his spelling erratically. Richardson suggests comparison with Thomas (1935-65: II, 74, lines 19 and 22), where the spelling 'dri occurs twice in a single document.


Copists for the Chinese scripture up to eighty scribes and twenty revisors were sent (1935-65: II, 76).

/ slad byis / bloo Khung ba'er khyeogs [22] wengas runsb dbang po lo bhrungs phyung sre / du dang in Be'di dar ma 'dri be'i lyi ge ... [25] p b ... yelb ste / phyug tgu nod tu gud // (1935-65: II, 74; italics and brackets in original).

Afterwards, Councilors Khong-ba'er and the other authorities having entered upon power, we once more beg to receive a signature for obtaining ... scribes copying Tibetan scripture (1935-65: II, 77).

Richardson and Thomas both give 'dri as an equivalent of 'tri in their indices, although nowhere in their corpora is the form 'tri actually attested; in contrast, the past 'bri and the future 'tri occur with some frequency. In the Old Tibetan contracts studied by Takeuchi the syllables 'bri po and 'dri each occur only once. Takeuchi sees 'bri as an orthographic mistake for 'briego 'the middle' (1995: 209-11). He explains that 'dri is a mistake for 'tri 'to write':

2. shu yon 'dri be'i shog shing yag rings nji byro' lung daw weng gi tag po na melis po vegs g.yan du 'lohad te // (1995: 180).

In order to pay the loan Shang he'sho borrowed in advance [from Bung dze-
weng] two hundred bolts of longholt cloth, which was in the hands of Bung dze-

Two dictionaries (Das 1902 and Zhang 1985) acknowledge 'dri as an alternative pres-
ent of 'tri. Now the Tibetan documents, but 'dri is found in the inscription with the transcription 'dri, corresponding to the Chinese 'dri.

In contrast, 'dri occurs in the text of 'dri.

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cut of bti. Not only does this ‘alternate’ prevail in Old Tibetan, but in all of the Old Tibetan documents hitherto studied ‘bti is nowhere found with the meaning ‘to write’, but ‘bti is found with this meaning at least four times.\(^5\)

In contrast to Richardson, Li and Coblin suggest that in the aforementioned inscription ‘bti has its expected meaning ‘to ask’, and is part of a larger syntagme ‘bti-ba’i snyan with the meaning ‘supervisor’. They read the text thus:

\[(99) \text{nbo \text{go} \text{rings} la \text{bdi bu} \text{snyan sng} / \text{ngs} \text{bdi-} \text{bo} \text{nya} \text{thabs} / \text{go} \]

\[(100) \ldots \text{yul} \text{bs} \text{la} / \text{do \text{tse} -} \text{chung} / \ldots \text{yul} \text{bs} \]

\[(70) \ldots \text{byas} \text{sa} / / (1987: 51 \text{brackets in original}).\]

As supervisors of the long stone, the Chinese envoys Do Tse’c (i.e. Tu Tsai), having the rank of ‘gu…, and ..., having… did ... (1987: 99; parenthetical comment in original).

The analysis of Li and Coblin is not wholly satisfactory. I am unable to confirm the meaning ‘supervisor’ for this concatenation of words. In addition, because the expression contains a genitive it would be more likely to have the sense “the snyan of the nbo rings la bdi bu” instead of “bdi bu’i snyan of the nbo rings”. If the meaning of ‘bti is indeed ‘ask’ the phrase must translate as “the Chinese envoys did the snyan (eye) of the asking to/ on/ at the long stone”. Finally, it is unclear how Li and Coblin would clarify the examples put forward by Thomas and Eveson.

I would like to suggest that Richardson’s analysis is correct, but that ‘bti is not a simple error, but rather the genuine early spelling of the present tense of the verb ‘to write’. This verb is plainly related to the noun ri-mo ‘a drawing’. The root of the verb can be either ri or bri, and if the root were bri we must account for the loss of the b in the word ri-mo. If however the root were ri, not only would the past bri and the future bri be regular, but the present stem ‘bri would be the expected result of the epanthesis *v > *bri*.

Li gives the following examples, and explanation to show that roots in ri have a present tense in ‘bti.

\[\text{‘srul ba} \text{ ‘to become putrid, rot’. pf. [past] \text{rug la draul, cf. rud ba} \text{ ‘to rot, get rotten’.}\]

\[\text{‘stdal ba} \text{ ‘to tear to pieces, rend asunder’, pf. [past] \text{rul or draul, cf. rud ‘rent, cleft’.}\]

\[\text{‘stdal pa} \text{ ‘to drag, pull along the ground’, pf. [past] draul, cf. rud ‘a falling or falling, mass (in landslide, avalanches)’.}\]

\[\text{‘stdal ba} \text{ ‘to be turned, rolled around’, pf. [past] \text{rdil, cf. ril ba ‘round, globular’.}\]

\[\text{‘shre ba} \text{ ‘to be mixed with’, pf. [past] \text{bhre, cf. xer ba, bhrs ‘to mix with, mingle’}.}\]

\(^5\) The documents collected in Chaps III and IV seem not to include relevant data. Instead we only have the words ‘bti’ to ask’ (SN284:98854 and P0236:0129) and ‘bti’ to diminish’ (90751:3752) and many occurrences of the word ‘bti’ a female yak’ (e.g. P0126:0140, P1069:00235, P1134:0291/2 etc.).
The perfective [past] de-forms are apparently analogical to the present de-forms, and have all but replaced the simple forms in h. (1959: 59; brackets mine, also compare Sprigg 1976: 16).

To these one could add *ding, sing* to be fixed, the topic of Li’s paper.

Most dictionaries give the imperative as bris, but Bamb Gran (1979) gives the voiceless form *bris*. However, in the previously mentioned Dunhuang document (Thomas 1935-65: II, 74) there are two instances of the imperative of *to write* spelled as ris. This form of the imperative reconfirms that the root of the verb is r and not bris.


A donation having been undertaken sometime in the Horse year, arising from the previously mentioned communication (7) it appeared that a Tibetan Shen russ-shuampa (Santo-thabrhva-prajia -phumnyld) in eight divisions, and a Chinese *brum-pa* in six hundred chapters, three division, should be copied (1935-65: II, 76).


... copy a Chinese tshe-dping-to-ma-mchis (Aprayntyug-siyu) ... (1935-65: II, 77)

Thus, in Old Tibetan the verb *to write* has the stems *bris* (pres.), *bris* (past), *bris* (fut.), *ris* (imp.). When Ce-clusters became retroflexes (i.e. *dr* > *d* and *hr* > *d*) the verbs *to write* and *to ask* became homophonous. After that sound change, the prefixes *b* of *bris*, *bris, ri*, *ris* *to write* was reanalyzed as part of the root, and extended by analogy to the spelling of the present stems, in order to graphically differentiate *bris, bris, bris, bris* to ask from *to write*, spelled at that time as now *bris, bris, bris, bris*.

References


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