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TIBETAN WA-ZUR AND LAUFER'S LAW¹

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Abstract: Laufer's law, according to which proto-Tibetan *-wa monophthongized to -o in Old Tibetan, is almost universally accepted. However, Hill (2006) pointed out that this law seems to be contradicted by the existence of a genuine -wa rhyme in Old Tibetan: unless Old Tibetan -wa has a distinct origin, the sound law *-wa > -o cannot be valid. The present article proposes a simple solution to Hill's counterargument: Old Tibetan -wa comes from the fusion of two syllables.

Keywords: Old Tibetan; monophthongisation; Sino-Tibetan

In a recent paper, Hill (2006) shows that the well-accepted Tibetan sound change *-wa > -o is contradicted by the existence of genuine examples of -wa in Old Tibetan (henceforth OT).

This sound change was first suggested by Laufer (1898/1899[1972:120]), and it is accepted by Benedict (1972:34), Peiros and Starostin (1996) and Matisoff (2003). Comparison with other ST languages such as Burmese shows that Tibetan -o has several distinct origins. Here are several pairs of Tibetan/Burmese cognates and their reconstruction in Peiros and Starostin (1996, henceforth P/S)'s and Matisoff's (2003:167; 202; 224-6, henceforth M) reconstructions:

Tibetan	Burmese	P/S	M	Meaning
so	swa ³	*G ^w a (s-)	*-wa	tooth
mtho	thwa ³	*Tua	*-wa	handspan
tsho	chu ²	*chāw	*-ow	fat
ro	raw ² « withered »	*rāw(H)	*-aw	corpse
spro	pyau ²	*phriw	*-o	be pleased

Table 1: Correspondences of Tibetan -o

Although P/S and M reconstruct the rhymes of these examples in a very different way, they all agree that the -o :: -wa correspondence between OT and Burmese is to be reconstructed as *-wa/-ua, and that different reconstructions have to be proposed to account for the correspondences -o :: -aw and -o :: -u. Since many ST languages have -wa or a reflex thereof in the etyma belonging to the -o :: -wa correspondence set, P/S and M's solution, a sound change *-wa > *-o took place in proto-Tibetan, is the most logical one.

¹ I wish to thank Nathan Hill and two anonymous reviewers for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

However, as pointed out by Hill (2006), in Tibetan orthography the sign *wa-zur* indicates a medial *-w-*. Although the *wa-zur* is spurious in some words, especially in closed syllables, where it serves as a *mater lectionis*, evidence from modern dialects proves that it was pronounced in OT at least in some monosyllabic open syllable nouns such as *rwa* 'horn', *rtswa* 'grass', *zhwa* 'hat' and *vwa* 'fox'. Unless we can find an alternative origin for this OT rhyme *-wa*, we might therefore have to revise the commonly accepted reconstruction for this ST rhyme.

A possible way to explain away the origin of the rhyme *-wa* in OT comes from *-u* / *-wa* doublets. As pointed out by Schiefner (1852: 343), several *-wa* words have a *-u* variant. Three examples are known to me: *rwa* / *ru* 'horn', *grwa* / *gru* 'angle' and *zhwa* / *zhu* 'hat'. The *-u* and *-wa* variants do not show any significant difference in meaning in OT texts, as we find examples where both variants appear in antithetic sentences:

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|------------|--------|---------|-------------|-----|
| (1) | sha.ba | rwa | mang | ste | vgyen | tam |
| | deer | horn | many | CONVERB | fight? | or |
| | g.yag | ru | thunge | ste | vgyen-pa | |
| | yak | horn | short | CONVERB | fight?-NMLZ | |

blta-vo

see.FUTURE-ASSERTIVE

You can see: does the deer fight (better)¹, having many **horns**, or does the yak fight (better), having short **horns**? (PT1287, 502)

The likeliest explanation for these doublets is to assume a fusion between two syllables. Laufer (1898:199) thought that a disyllabic form with the stress on the first or the second syllable gave rise to these two variants: *rwa* < **ruwa*' and *ru* < **ru'wa*. I would suggest a different solution: the *-u* forms are the original ones, and the *-wa* forms are derived by addition of a suffix, the common nominal *-ba* / *-pa* found in many nouns such as *lci-ba* 'dung', *lag-pa* 'hand' etc². The medial *-w-* comes in fact from the *-u* of the first syllable:

- (2) *rwa* < **rua* < **ru* + *ba*
zhwa < **zyua* < **zyu* + *ba*
grwa < **grua* < **gru* + *ba*

¹ The form *vgyen* (in fact **vgyend* given the *-tam* allomorph of the following conjunction) is not attested in Classical Tibetan. Huang (1999:274) proposed to relate it to the verb *vgyed* (past *bkyes*) 'to dispatch, to fight a battle'. Our translation is only provisional.

² It might be related, but is distinct from, the deverbal *-ba* suffix.

This fusion would have taken place before the Tibetan script was created, but after the change **-wa* (-*o*). This explanation solves Hill's problem and saves Laufer's law.

The loss of the *-b-* as a result of syllabic fusion is not unknown in Tibetan. Hill (2008) pointed out examples such as the doublet *son* / *sa-bon* 'seed', where the first variant is clearly a fused form of the second variant *sa-bon*.

The existence of nouns of the form *Cu-ba* in OT (such as *yu-ba* 'handle, stalk') could appear to be counterevidence to the hypothesis proposed in this paper (as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer). However, the explanation for the existence of forms such as these is that the *-ba* suffix was added after the **-u+ba* > *-wa* fusion rule took place. Besides, it never applied to *deverbal* nouns such as *zhu-ba* 'petition' from the verb *zhu* 'to ask' (attested for instance in PT126:150, Hill 2009:49).

Likewise, the fact that some *-wa* words, such as *rtswa* 'grass' or *shwa* 'cleft lip', do not have any corresponding *-u* word is not a threat to our hypothesis. This simply means that the original form **rtsu* and **syu* has disappeared, leaving only the fused variant. Alternatively, these words could be loanwords from another language, borrowed after Laufer's law. The only problem which remains unexplained with the present theory is the *-wal-o* alternation in the form *vwa-dom* / *vo-dom* 'fox-pendant worn as a badge of dishonor' (Coblin 1994:118, Hill 2006:89), but since this example is isolated, we leave it to further research.

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**REVIEW OF A GRAMMAR OF JERO
BY JEAN ROBERT OPGENORT**

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A grammar of Jero. With a historical comparative study of the Kiranti languages, by Jean Robert Opgenort. Languages of the Great Himalayan Region, Vol 5. Leiden/Boston: Brill: 2005; ISBN 90-04-14505-2; 404 pages

Jero, also referred to as 'Jerung', 'Jerum', 'Zero', 'Zerum', and 'Jerunge', is a Kiranti language spoken in Okhlaḍhuṅgā and Sindhulī districts in eastern Nepal. The most recent population census (2001) reports only 271 speakers of Jero. Despite the small speech community, there are two dialects identified by Opgenort, namely that of Mohant āre or that of Āmbot e. Amongst the Kiranti languages, Jero's closest relative is Wambule, spoken just east of the Jero language area. The assumption of a particularly close relationship between Jero and Wambule was noted in Hansson (1991) and appears to be so close that Opgenort appeals some to ethnolinguistics in order to assert that Jero and Wambule are different languages.

This descriptive and comparative grammar is based on the author's previous research on Wambule, which resulted in a thorough, descriptive grammar (Opgenort 2004), including a detailed ethnography of the people and a collection of texts (neither of which is included in the current book). *A grammar of Jero*, consisting primarily of a phonological and morphological analysis, enriched with a wealth of comparative Kiranti data, is best viewed as a spin-off of Opgenort 2004. The analysis presented in the current volume is based on elicitation primarily, but this is strengthened by the author's previous in-depth description of Wambule, the fact that he worked with two consultants, and the fact that he was able to listen for usage in natural Jero conversations. Throughout the book, Opgenort often places Jero phenomena in a historical perspective and devotes a large section to comparative Kiranti research, making this contribution of obvious value to Kiranti specialists and those concerned with comparative/historical Tibeto-Burman linguistics in general. The phonological and morphological analysis itself is presented in seven chapters over 215 pages. The second half of the book consists of the appendices, including a Jero-English and English-Jero lexicon (104 pages), affirmative and imperative verbal paradigms (13 pages) and a thorough comparative Kiranti wordlist (62 pages).

Chapter One is an impressive introduction to Jero and the Kiranti languages in general. The author begins by identifying the various Kiranti languages and walks the reader through the history of phonological and lexical developments leading