The Tangut imperial title

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Abstract: The Imperial title 剃颅 in Tangut is one of the rare Tangut words attested in both Tangut texts and Chinese sources. Using data drawn from Tangut texts and modern Qiangic languages closely related to Tangut, we propose an etymology for both syllables of this compound. The first syllable 剃颅 means ‘heaven’, but its original meaning was ‘the blue one’. The second one, 剃颅 ‘lord’, is a deverbal noun related to a verb root meaning ‘to judge, to discriminate’. This article not only explains the etymological origin of an important Tangut title, it also illustrates how comparative linguistics should be applied to faithfully reconstruct Tangut morphological alternations.

Keywords: Tangut, deverbal noun, tonal alternation, Rgyalrong

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The title of the Tangut Emperor, 晃虻ŋwər1 dzjw1, is one of the rare Tangut words attested in Chinese historical texts, variously transcribed as 兀卒, 烏珠 or 吾祖. It could translate Chinese 皇帝huangdi ‘Emperor’ in texts such as the Forest of Categories or the Newly Gathered Notes on Maternal Love and Filial Piety. The aim of this paper is to discuss the etymology of this important title, using Tangut texts and comparative data from Qiangic languages. Modern Qiangic languages used in this paper include Japhug Rgyalrong (spoken in R nga-ba district, Sichuan, see Jacques 2008) and Pumi (spoken in pockets in northern Yunnan and southwestern Sichuan).

The first element of this compound, 晃ŋwər1, is one of the words can be used to translate Chinese 天 tian ‘sky’, for instance in the expression 晃虻ŋwər1 khju1 ‘(The world) under the sky’. It is a noun, not an adjective, as the normal word order in Tangut is Noun-Adjective, even in compounds translated from Chinese2. However, as Nie Hongyin (2000:122-3) pointed out, it is clearly related to the adjective 青ŋwər1 ‘blue’ (Chinese 青qing), a cognate of Japhug Rgyalrong arŋi ‘blue’ (Jacques 2008:429) and probably Tibetan sngo. The adjective ‘blue’ commonly appears with ‘sky’ in all those languages (Chinese 青天qingtian, Tibetan dgung sngon3 or gnam sngon po and also Japhug Rgyalrong tامہ kyr içi, the abode of the Gods in traditional stories). The metonymical extension ‘blue’ → ‘sky’ is therefore quite straightforward. 晃虻ŋwər1 dzjw1 can be translated as ‘heavenly lord’.

The second element, 蛊dzjw1 is not restricted to translating Chinese 帝di ‘emperor’. For instance, in the Forest of Categories 3.3A, it is used to designate the dukes 公gong4 of the Spring and Autumn period. Up to now, nobody has proposed an etymology for this word.

However, 蛊dzjw1 is not isolated in the lexic on of the Tangut language. The hypothesis proposed in the present paper is that it is derived from the verb 蛊dzjw2 ‘to judge’. This verb occurs as an entry in the monolingual dictionary Wenhai, where it is defined in the following way:

(1) 蛊 蛊 蛊 蛊 蛊 蛊
1474  1183  5836  3708  4592  4480
jir da. khwu. phja phjo kar
2_77 2_56 2_51 1_20 2.44 2.73
diligent affair cut discriminate

To judge affairs and discriminate (right or wrong)

In all Tangut texts at my disposal, 蛊dzjw2 only appears in the compound 蛊虻dzjw2 dzjw2, never alone. This compound is a transitive verb that can be used with 蛊

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2 For instance, the name ‘Red Brows’ 赤眉chimei is translated into Tangut as 赤虻 bee2 njij1, with a reverted word order conform to Tangut syntax (Jacques 2007:55).
3 This expression appears in a bonpo ritual text studied by Samten G. Karmay, where it refers to the place of origin of a god: kye sngon gyi bskal pavi dang po la / dgung sngon mthon povi yar steng na / rgyal povi sku gcig bszhugs pa la / “In times past, above in the blue sky, there was a king.” (Karmay 1991:349; 372). There is maybe a play on words here between sngon ‘In former times’ and sngon ‘blue’.
4 The story in question is about the life of the famous statesman 晉文公 Jin Wen gong.
As Deng You was the governor of Wu district, he judged affairs in a very benevolent way.

We also find the nominalized form of this compound 蟬職事淙 with the suffix 淋 with the suffix 職事淙 (Leilin, 4.27B.4) meaning ‘judge (in charge of recording the crimes of convicts)’, corresponding to Chinese 決曹吏 Juecaoli. If the noun 蟬 is indeed related to 蟬 meaning ‘to judge, to discriminate, to decide’, its original meaning should have been likewise ‘the judge’ or the ‘the one who decides’, an apt description for a ruler.

Is this derivation phonologically possible? Gong (1988[2002:63-65]) pointed out long ago that tonal alternations in Tangut were involved in noun/verb derivations. One finds both tone 1 verbs corresponding to tone 2 nouns and tone 1 nouns corresponding to tone 2 verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dzej</td>
<td>horseman</td>
<td>dzej</td>
<td>to ride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khji</td>
<td>dagger</td>
<td>khji</td>
<td>to cut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.jar</td>
<td>daughter</td>
<td>.jar</td>
<td>to marry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zu</td>
<td>belt</td>
<td>zu</td>
<td>to tie up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa</td>
<td>shoulder</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>to carry on shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dzji</td>
<td>food</td>
<td>dzji</td>
<td>to eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tji</td>
<td>place</td>
<td>tji</td>
<td>to put</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sju</td>
<td>wardrobe</td>
<td>sju</td>
<td>to cover</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Tonal alternations in Tangut.

For many of these examples, we have no way to decide whether it is the noun which is derived from the verb or vice-versa. However, in a few case, thanks to comparison with other Sino-Tibetan, languages, it is possible to determine the direction of the derivation with certainty.

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5 The Chinese 攸 you is incorrectly transcribed as ߿ɕjiw, probably due to confusion with the similar-looking character 攸 shou. In the Notes on Filial Piety, this name is correctly transcribed (Jacques 2007:30).
First, among the pairs tone 1 noun / tone 2 verb, we find two examples which have clear cognates in Japhug Rgyalrong, allowing us to reconstruct the actual alternation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tangut</th>
<th>meaning</th>
<th>Japhug</th>
<th>meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>躏 wa 1.63</td>
<td>shoulder</td>
<td>-rpaʁ</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>躏 wa 2.56</td>
<td>to carry on shoulder</td>
<td>myr-rpaʁ</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>稣 .jar 1.82</td>
<td>daughter-in-law</td>
<td>-rzaβ</td>
<td>wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>稣 .jar 2.74</td>
<td>to marry (for a woman)</td>
<td>myr-rzaβ</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Tone 1 → Tone 2 derivation

In Japhug, a language which preserves old presyllables unlike Tangut, the two verbs in this table are derived from the nouns by addition of the prefix myr-. The striking parallelism between the two pairs of examples in Tangut and Japhug strongly suggests that the direction of derivation is the same in Tangut. We can even venture that the tonal alteration is probably a trace of the loss of an ancient prefix cognate to Japhug myr- in proto-Tangut.

The myr- prefix is found in five denominal verbs (Jacques 2008:67). The noun corresponds either to the instrument (to carry on shoulder), the place (to be in the middle) or the attribute (to become a wife).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-rpaʁ</th>
<th>shoulder</th>
<th>myr-rpaʁ</th>
<th>to carry on shoulder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-rzaβ</td>
<td>wife</td>
<td>myr-rzaβ</td>
<td>to marry (woman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-χγγ</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>myr-χγγ</td>
<td>to be in the middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ku</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>myr-ku</td>
<td>to be first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ργγγ</td>
<td>space in between</td>
<td>myr-ργγγ</td>
<td>to be in the middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The prefix myr- in Japhug

In denominator tone 1 → tone 2 derivations, the noun does not correspond to a fully potent agent in the resulting verb. The verb ‘to marry’ could seem to be a counterexample. However, in Japhug, although myrzaβ does have two arguments, it is not really a transitive verb for two reasons. First, the woman being married is not marked with the ergative. Second, in nominalized construction, the man she is married to is constructed with the oblique nominalizer prefix kɤ- , not the patient nominalizer kɤ- :

(3) ndzi-sy-myrrzaβ ra muw-pjɤ-pe
    3DU-NMLZ:OBL-marriage PL NEG-PSTIMPF-good
    The one to whom (her sisters) had been married were not good (Kunbzang, 117)

This shows that the myr- prefix does not derive denominal verbs of the type ‘to act as’, where the original nouns correspond to the agent of a transitive verb. In Tangut, it is more difficult to ascertain whether 稣 .jar 2.74 is transitive or not, as transitivity in this language is less strictly encoded in the morphology than in Rgyalrong languages.

Second, the verb 稣 dzeej 2.34 'to ride' has clear correspondences in Qiangic and

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6 Several types of vowel alternations in Tangut have been explained as the trace of older affixes, reconstructed like here on the basis of Qiangic comparison. See in particular Gong 1999 and Jacques 2009.
Lolo-Burmese languages (see Matisoff 2003:188), for instance Pumi dzêj (Perfective nə-dzêj)\(^7\). The verbal root is widespread is those languages, but no noun corresponding to 騩 dzej 1.37 'horseman, rider' is attested in any language but Tangut as far as we know. Therefore, 騩 dzej 1.37 must be a Tangut innovation, a deverbal noun derived from the verb 騩 dzej 2.34 'to ride'. Here we exactly have the opposite situation of the preceding case: a tone 1 noun derived from a tone 2 verb. The deverbal noun is clearly an agent noun 'the rider'.

On the basis of these data, two hypotheses can be proposed. First, 騩 dzjwi\(^1\) 'lord' could be the original root, and the verb 騩 dzjwi\(^2\) 'to judge' a denominal verb. Second, 騩 dzjwi\(^1\) 'emperor, lord' could be a deverbal agent noun from the verb 騩 dzjwi\(^2\) 'to judge'. The second hypothesis is more probable, because the semantic relationship between noun and verb corresponds better to the deverbal tone 2 → tone 1 derivation ('to ride' → 'the one who rides') rather than to the examples of denominal tone 1 → tone 2 derivation ('daughter-in-law' → 'to become (someone)'s daughter-in-law').

Therefore, we can conclude that 騩 dzjwi\(^1\) originally meant 'the judge, the one who decides, the one who discriminates', before acquiring its special meaning 'lord, emperor'. The verb 騩 dzjwi\(^2\) 'to judge' preserved its original meaning, though compounding with a close synonym to form the bisyllabic verb 騩 騩 dzjwi\(^2\) dzjj\(^2\).

Tangut has a very opaque morphology. Ancient prefixes and suffixes have disappeared due to phonological attrition, leaving only vowel, consonant and tonal alternations behind. Most of these alternations were not productive anymore in Tangut, and it is only through comparison with modern Qiangic languages, especially the Rgyalrong languages, that we can make sense out of them.

The present analysis of the Tangut title 騩 騩 ERGY dzjwi\(^1\) illustrates how future research in Tangut historical phonology and morphology should be done, and how Qiangic historical linguistics can contribute to the study of the Tangut empire.

References


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\(^7\) Dialect of Mudiqing 木底箐, Yongning 永寧, Ninglang 宁蒗 county, Yunnan (fieldwork by the author).

