

On the origins of uvulars in Tibetic languages

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Abstract

This study reviews four competing explanations for the origins of uvulars in Tibetic lects, making a specific case study of modern uvular preinitial reflexes of Old Tibetan *g-/d-*. The first explanation is from [Huang \(2012\)](#), who claims that uvulars were phonologically present in Pre-Tibetan, and thus at least some of the uvulars in modern Tibetan lects descend from this Pre-Tibetan strata. Her argument is predicated on the hypothesis that Tibetic lects broke up into different languages before Old Tibetan was reduced to writing in the 7th century AD. The second explanation is from [Hill \(2010\)](#), who argues that uvulars are not inherited from Pre-Tibetan but are the result of language contact with Qiangic and/or Mongolic languages. Differing from Huang's explanation, Hill's explanation rests on the theory that all modern Tibetic lects descend from Old Tibetan. The third explanation, which is a revision of Hill's explanation, is that some uvulars naturally evolved after the breakup of Old Tibetan into the various Tibetic lects; though some uvulars are the result of language contact, they are not entirely the result of language contact. The fourth explanation is that in Old Tibetan *ɣ* and *g-/d-* were in velar and uvular free variation, and thus uvulars do come from Old Tibetan, but originating from phones and not phonemes. The first three explanations are scientific hypotheses; i.e., they can be tested through evidence and are falsifiable. The final explanation (appealing to free variation) is not a testable hypothesis; it is not a falsifiable idea. After examining the evidence on the timing of the breakup of the Tibetic lects, Huang's hypothesis is eliminated, leaving only Hill's explanation and 'Explanation 3' standing. Data used in this study come from the author's own fieldwork (Stau, G.yukhog), [Bielmeier et al. \(2018\)](#) (Amdo, Balti, WAT), [Bielmeier et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#) (Amdo, Balti, WAT), [Hua \(2001\)](#) (Amdo), [Honkasalo \(2019\)](#) (Geshiza), [Lai \(2017\)](#) (Khroskyabs), and [Jacques \(2015\)](#) (Japhug).

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