

TIBETAN WA-ZUR AND LAUFER'S LAW*

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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 (2003:167;202;224-6, henceforth M)'s 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 » | *rīw(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

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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.

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* < *ruwá and *ru* < *rúwa. 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) | <i>rwa</i> < *rua < *ru + ba |
| | <i>zhwa</i> < *zyua < *zyu + 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.

grwa < *grua < *gru + ba

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 -wa/-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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