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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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Burmese</th>
<th>P/S</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>swa₁</td>
<td>*Gʷa (s-)</td>
<td>*-wa</td>
<td>tooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mtho</td>
<td>thwa 3</td>
<td>*Tua</td>
<td>*-wa</td>
<td>handspan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tsho</td>
<td>chu²</td>
<td>*chāw</td>
<td>*-ow</td>
<td>fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ro</td>
<td>raw² « withered »</td>
<td>*fʰw(H)</td>
<td>*-aw</td>
<td>corpse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spro</td>
<td>pyau²</td>
<td>*phɾi̞w</td>
<td>*-o</td>
<td>be pleased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

* I wish to thank Nathan Hill and two anonymous reviewers for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
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 point ed out by Schiefner (1852: 343),
several -wa words have a -u variant. Three examples are known to me:
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’ etc.\(^2\) The medial -w- comes in
fact from the -u of the first syllable:

(2) rwa < *rua < *ru + ba
zhwa < *zyua < *zyu + ba

\(^1\) The form vgyen (in fact *vgyen 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 rtsa ‘grass’ or shwa ‘clef 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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