The prefix $g$- and -o- ablaut in Tibetan present verb stems

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Abstract

The prevailing internal reconstruction of the Classical Tibetan verbal system accounts for all ablaut phenomena as innovations triggered by erstwhile segmental affixes. The traditional account cannot be correct, because the paradigms of nine verbs show -o- in the present stem without $g$- and a further three verbs show $g$- in the present without -o-.

Keywords

Tibetan verb – ablaut – verb morphology – Tibeto-Burman

1 The present stem ‘o’ ablaut and the g- prefix

Li Fang-Kuei founded the scientific study of the Tibetan verbal system with his important 1933 paper on internal reconstruction, with the major reigning theory of Tibetan verbal history established in a follow up paper by his student W. S. Coblin (1976). As discussed below, in one of his last publications, Li sowed the seeds for the undoing of this theory (Li & Coblin 1987: 161 n. 9). Thus, Li Fang-Kuei is both the alpha and the omega of the standard theory of the history of the Tibetan verbal system and it is a just tribute to his lasting impact on our field to sketch out in more detail the ramifications of his 1987 observation.

With slight disagreements in detail Shafer (1950–1951: 1024), Nishida (1958: 39), Coblin (1976: 55) and Jacques (2012: 219) propose that a prefix *go- or *g- induces the ‘a’ to ‘o’ ablaut in the present stem of Tibetan verbs. For example, Jacques compares the purported *g(o)- in Tibetan with the present prefix ku- < *ko- of Japhug Rgyalrong (2012: 221–222). An association between g- and ‘o’ in the present stem is apparent in many verbs (e.g. pres. gsod, past bsad, fut. gsad, imp. sod ‘kill’). These scholars explain the absence of a g- prefix in the present of other verbs (e.g. skoṅ, bskaṅs, bskan, skoṅs ‘fulfill’) with the reconstruction of a prefix *g, subsequently lost through regular sound change. The change in question, ‘Coblin’s law’ (Hill 2011: 446) specifies that a consonant (here g-) is lost in a complex cluster that is phonotactically
impossible in Old Tibetan. For example, Coblin reconstructs the present of ‘fulfil’ as *gskaṅ > *gskoṅ > skoṅ (1976: 55–57), in which *gsk > sk- is an instance of his law.

Coblin himself notes three verbs that violate the generalization that a g- prefix correlates with an ‘o’ ablaut in the present (1976: 56 note 1).²

- hjog, bḍag, gḍag, ḏogs ‘place’
- ḏdogs, btags, gdags, thogs ‘tie’
- ʂon, bṣaṅs, bṣaṅ, ʂoṅs ‘empty’

There are several further counterexamples, in which ‘o’ ablaut in the present stem occurs without a g- prefix.

- ḏgog, bkgag, dkgag, khog ‘block, hinder’
- ḏdoms, gdams, gdam, ḏdoms ‘advise, explain’
- ldon, blan, glan, lon ‘answer’
- ḏdod, dad ‘want’
- ḏdor, dard ‘endanger’
- phog, ḏphags ‘strike’

The first two in this list are found in all of the dictionaries, but the remaining four require further discussion. Apart from these verbs in which -o- occurs without a g-, there are also verbs that have a g- in the present that does not coincide with ‘o’ ablaut, namely gṣegs, —, —, ʂog ‘go’, gṣiṅ (<*gṣeṅ), bsaṅs, bsaṅ, soṅs ‘cleanse, purify’, gdal, bdal, bdal, ‘spread’ (trans.), and gstsal, bstsal ‘clear’.³

For the presents hjog and ḏdogs, according to Coblin “we can only guess that these forms may have undergone some sort of analogical change based perhaps on those paradigms which mark present forms with h-” (1976: 56 note 1).⁴ The supposition of analogical developments as the explanation for hjog and ḏdogs is not credible. Because these are the only common verbs that show h- and -o- in the present with ‘a’ in the past, a four part analogy will never yield the attested form. For example, attempts with hjug, bcug, gḍug, chuṅ ‘insert’ or ḏjab, bḍabs, gḍab, ḏjobs ‘lie in ambush’ yield *ḥjag rather than hjog.

| fut. gḍag : pres. X :: fut. gḍug : pres. hjug |
| X = ḏhjag |
| past bḍag, fut. gḍag : X :: past bḍabs, fut. gḍab : pres. hjab |
| X = ḏhjag |

² Coblin also gives a fourth verb ḏchog, bcags, bcag, chogs ‘walk, tread’ as an example of ‘o’ ablaut without a g- prefix in the present, but Hill (2010: 86–87) lists only ḏhchag and not ḏchog for the present of the verb ‘walk, tread’.

³ On gṣegs, —, —, ʂog ‘go’ and gṣiṅ, bsaṅs, bsaṅ, soṁs ‘cleanse, purify’ see Hill (2014). For attestations of gstsal, bstsal ‘clear’ see Hill (2012: 25).

⁴ The lexical sources compiled by Hill all support the presents hjog and ḏdogs (2010: 99, 149). If hjog and ḏdogs are analogical creations, the inherited presents (presumably *gḍog and *gḍogs) have died without a trace. Note that ḏdogs is attested in the ‘Prayers for the foundation of the De ga yu tshal monastery’, which dates to circa 822 (cf. Kapstein 2009): yon phul-baḥi
Because *ḫjog* and *ḥdogs* are not explainable as analogical developments they must be inherited.

For the verb *śoṅ, bśaṅ, bśaṅ, śoṅs* ‘empty’ Coblin suggests the present *śoṅ* reflects the loss of the prefix *g*- in the modern languages (1976: 56 note 1). In addition to *śoṅ* ‘empty’, Hill offers *gśoṅ* and *gśaṅ* as alternative presents for this verb (2010: 288). The present *gśoṅ* appears to confirm Coblin’s speculation that *śoṅ* is a late form, reflecting the simplification of clusters in spoken varieties of Tibetan. While possible, this explanation is ad hoc; many Tibetan dialects, such as that of Lhasa, eliminate all initial clusters (DeLancey 2003: 272), but this development rarely influences orthographic practices. An alternative explanation is that *śoṅ* is the inherited form and *gśoṅ* is the product of analogy. The verb *gsob, bsabs, bsab, sobs* ‘repay’ serves nicely as the analogical inspiration.\(^5\)

\[
\text{past } bśaṅs, \text{ fut. } bśaṅ, \text{ imp. } śoṅs : \text{ pres. } X : \text{ past } bsabs, \text{ fut. } bsab, \text{ imp. sobs : pres. } gśob \\
X = gśoṅ
\]

Coblin’s suggestion that *gśoṅ* is the original form appears unlikely.

2  \hspace{1cm} **Ildon, blan, glan, lon** ‘reply’

A previous study demonstrates the existence of a verb *Ildon / glon, blan, glan, lon* ‘reply’ (Hill & Zadoks 2015), but leaves open whether *Ildon* or *glon* is the original stem of the verb. Because an analogy such as *bsad* : *blan : gśod* : *X = glon*, easily accounts for the origin of *glon*, whereas an analogy to motivate *Ildon* is not apparent, *Ildon* can be taken to be the original form.

3  \hspace{1cm} **Ḥdod, dad** ‘want’

Although the lexica compiled in Hill 2010 unanimously divide *ḥdod* ‘want’ (Hill 2010: 138) and *dad* ‘have faith’ (Hill 2010: 150), both with invariable stems, Jäschke refers to *dad* as a “secondary form of” *ḥdod* (1881: 249), finding the meaning ‘wish’ in the *Mdzaṅs-blun* and also identifying this stem in the word *skom-dad* ‘thirst’ (1881: 249). Examples 1 and 2 confirm the meaning Jäschke identifies.

(1)  
**bdag rab-tu byuṅ-bar dad-na / bdag-gi pha-mas ma gnaṅ-na / bdag-gi lus ḫdi gźan-du skye-bar bgyi-baḥi slad-du raṅ ḫchiḥo sñam-nas /**  
If I want to become a monk and my parents do not agree, then I shall die and afterward this body will be born as another. (*Mdzaṅs-blun*, Derge Kanjur, vol. 74, p. 146b)

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\(^5\) The *g*- prefix of the alternative present *gśaṅ* is less easy to explain as an analogical development, but this form, failing to exhibit the present ‘o’ ablaut, is not relevant to the discussion at hand.
Because he wanted to become a monk, he paid his parting respects to his parents and went to where the Buddha was. (Mdzaṅs-blun, Derge Kanjur, vol. 74, p. 153a)

Further confirming evidence is available in the Old Tibetan version of the story of Rama.

She cursed that should any human merely touch me without me wanting, he will catch fire. (10L Tib J 737.1, ll. 155–156)

The pattern of negation of these two verbs in the Derge Kanjur supports the identification of dad as a past stem and ḥdod as a present (cf. Table 1). Whereas ḥdod is primarily negated with mi, as is typical of a present stem, dad is primarily negated with ma, as is typical of a past stem.7

**4 ḥdor, dard ‘endanger’**

Li Fang-Kuei (Li & Coblin 1987: 161 n. 9) and Dotson (2013: 333, n. 19) suggest that the verb ḥdor seen in the phrase srog ḥdor-ba ‘to endanger life’, has the past stem dard.8

They endangered the life of the emperor, Khri-lde gtsug-rtsan, the father, and he passed away. The life of the emperor, Khri-sroṅ lde-brtsan, the son, was almost endangered. (Ţol insc, ll. 8–12, cf. Li & Coblin 1989: 143, 158)

Moṅ Sṅon-po became disloyal to both the emperor and his brother. Zu-tse, being loyal, revealed his plot and killed Moṅ Sṅon po before he had endangered the life of both the emperor and his brother. (Old Tibetan Chronicle = Pt 1287, ll. 201–202, cf. Dotson 2013: 373, 280)

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6 I have omitted examples of tha mi dad (x250) as irrelevant. I have also weeded out nouns that end in -ma before the verb ḥdod, i.e. gtor-ma (x6), mtshan-ma (x2), slob-ma (x1), lhag-ma (x2), go-ta-ma (x1), chuṅ-ma (x4). In addition two cases of ma ḥdod are present stems used in the imperative, i.e. ma ḥdod cig (x1) and ma ḥdod šig (x1).

7 The existence of the honorific bźed ‘desire’ < *bǰed /bdʲed/ further suggests that -o- is not the root vowel in ḥdod.

8 Coblin instead interprets dard as the past of dar ‘spread’ (Li & Coblin 1987: 161–162 n. 9).
The verb ḫdor, dard ‘endanger’ provides further evidence for -o- in the present stem in the absence of g-.

5  phog, ḫphags ‘strike’

The Old Tibetan version of the story of Rama, version A, at line 191 has the phrase rgyal-po ltad-mo-la yeṅs-nas / mdaḥs ma ḫphags-ste, which de Jong translates “The king, distracted by the scene, did not shoot an arrow.” (1989: 29), understanding ḫphags as “an obvious mistake for” ḫphaṅs (1989: 119). Paleographically the substitution of -ṅ with -g is unlikely. Another possibility is to understand ḫphags as the past stem of the verb phog ‘strike’, yielding a translation such as ‘The king, distracted by the scene, his arrow did not strike.’ De Jong appropriately compares an earlier passage (6) with similar wording.

(6) Tshaṅs-pas bkaḥ stsald-pa // « srīd gsum dbaṅ byed ŋed-las myed / stoṅ khams myi ḫdah mdaḥs ḫphaṅs des myi phog / » ches gsuṅs-nas pyod ches gšegs-pa-daṅ //

Brahma said: ‘Nobody but me reigns over the three worlds. An arrow shot, not passing beyond the thousand worlds, it will not strike (me).’ Having said this he went with great haste. (101 Tib J 737.1, ll. 29–30)

However, by comparing mdaḥs ma ḫphags-ste to des myi phog ‘it will not strike’ with a change of tense and the use of an anaphoric pronoun in place of mdaḥs, rather than to mdaḥs ḫphaṅs ‘the arrow shot’, without negation, the parallel serves just as easily to support the proposal here. If one accepts the suggestion that ḫphags is the past of phog, then the verb phog, ḫphags ‘strike’ is another case where the present with -o- does not coincide with g- (which would appear as d- before a labial).

6  Conclusion

In sum, there are nine verbs in which -o- ablaut occurs in the present stem without a g- prefix and there are three verbs in which a g- prefix occurs in the present stem without -o- ablaut.

‘o’ ablaut without a g- prefix

.hpog, bkag, dgag, khog ‘block, hinder’
.hhog, bžag, gžag, žogs ‘insert, place’
.ḥdoms, gdams, gdam, ḫdoms ‘advise, explain’
.ḥdod, dad ‘want’
.ḥdor, dard ‘endanger’
.ḥdogs, btags, gdags, thogs ‘bind, tie’
.ldon, blan, glan, lon ‘answer’
.phog, ḫphags ‘strike’
.šoṅ, bšaṅs, bšaṅ, śoṅs ‘empty’
There is no doubt that in the majority of verbs a prefix $g$- correlates with ‘o’ ablaut. However, it is a basic methodological principle of historical linguistics that irregular morphology preserves archaisms (Meillet 1925: 25). Thus, the evidence presented in this paper renders this correlation of $g$- with ‘o’ ablaut untenable as an explanation for the origin of ‘o’ ablaut in the present stem of Tibetan verbs.

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9 Even single verb forms are sometimes of paramount significance for an entire family; witness Vedic śāye ‘lies’ (Clackson 2007: 146).

10 Liberated from the preconception that Tibetan ablaut is innovative, it is easy to find comparative evidence that may require the reconstruction of ablaut to the proto-language: witness Tib. mkhan ‘know’, Chi. 见 kenH < *kˤen-s ‘see’; Tib. mthon ‘see’, Bur. mran ‘see’; Tib. རིང (klog, blags, klag, lhag, see Hahn 1999) ‘read’, Chi. 読 duwk < *C.Pok ‘read (v.)’; Tib. nal ‘rest’, Chi. 睡 ngwaH < *ŋˤojs ‘lie down’; etc. Such ablaut patterns across languages require further study.
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摘要

現行古典藏語動詞體系的內部構擬方案，一致認為所有動詞的元音變異現象均源於往昔成音段詞缀造成的音韻創新。這種傳統的解釋不可能正確，因為有九個動詞的現在詞幹沒有g-前綴卻仍然出現變異-o-元音，而有三個動詞的現在詞幹有g-前綴卻不出現變異-o-元音。

關鍵詞

藏語動詞、元音變異、動詞形態、藏緬語