

Foreword

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This massive tome is a distillation of more than thirty years of fieldwork by the two authors on the many linguistic varieties spread across Western China, Tibet, Northeast India, Northwest India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal that can be shown to be descendants of Old Tibetan. The authors are two of the most dedicated fieldworkers I know of, each having investigated dozens of varieties and worked with hundreds of people in some of the toughest areas of the world to do fieldwork in. I have had the chance to interact with the authors over the years while they were working on this book, first conceived of by Nicolas Tournadre in the early 1990s, and have enjoyed hearing about the adventures they had while doing the fieldwork. They also refer to work by other authors as well in completing this survey to make it more comprehensive.

The main goal of the work is to present a comprehensive overview picture of the life and languages of the speakers of the many language varieties that can be traced back to Old Tibetan. It not only presents the linguistic data, but also includes survey information about the peoples who speak these languages: their ethnic designations and locations, their religions, their lifestyles and livelihoods (and differences in the speech of speakers who have different livelihoods), their sociolinguistic practices, such as the use of honorifics, and their contact with speakers of other languages and its effects. It also includes an extensive discussion of the origins, uses, and styles of the Tibetan script. For this reason the book will also be of use to anthropologists, sociologists, historians, language typologists (Chapter 7 is a typological overview of what does and does not appear in the phonologies of the different varieties, and Chapter 8 is a typological overview of the grammatical features found), and historical linguists generally, as well as specialists on Tibetic languages and cultures.

A second goal of the work is to allow those who know Classical Tibetan (which is the later literary language) to understand the correspondence rules between Classical Tibetan and the modern varieties, so that they can easily learn those varieties. The discussion of this aspect is framed within a larger discussion of the historical development of Literary Tibetan in general and the morphological features of Classical Tibetan. The mutual influence of Literary Tibetan and the modern varieties is also discussed.

The main part of the book (Parts 2 and 3) is the linguistic overviews, not only in Chapters 7 and 8, which are phonological and grammatical outlines of the languages as a whole, as well as a discussion of the phonological changes that have occurred and their geographical distribution, to explain the differences between the Old and Classical Tibetan forms and the modern forms, but also in Chapter 9, which presents the classification of the varieties and gives their phonological and grammatical characteristics. The lexical features of the Tibetic varieties are also covered in depth, along with a historical and comparative glossary with English index.

Chapter 9 is a detailed classification of the Tibetic varieties. The discussion starts off with a review of earlier proposals for classifications and the justification for the new proposal. The different varieties are then grouped into sections with geographic names, such as the 'Southeastern Section', and information about the linguistic and ethnic groups of each section, the sociological and sociolinguistic situation in the section, the geographic boundaries and historical extensions and migrations relevant to each section, the number of speakers in each section, a full-color map of their locations, and the phonological and grammatical characteristics of each section are given. A wealth of information is presented in this long chapter. This internal classification is then followed (in Chapter 10) by a discussion of the place of Tibetic in the Sino-Tibetan stock generally and its genetic and contact relations to certain neighboring languages more specifically. In this chapter the idea of a 'Tibetosphere' is argued for, and the languages within this sphere of influence are discussed. There is also a lengthy discussion of how to distinguish a Tibetic language from a non-Tibetic language, using lexical, phonological, and morphological cognacy.

The book also includes three appendices and the references cited round out the volume. The first appendix provides elements of the geography and a list of the main mountains, rivers and lakes of the Tibetic area. The second appendix, “Elements of toponymy”, is a discussion of the different formatives used in the place names in the different areas where Tibetic speakers live. The study of toponyms has become a hot topic in linguistics, and this will aid those working in this field, but also help those working in the various areas where the Tibetic languages are spoken to understand the meaning of the place names.

The third appendix contains seven beautiful original maps produced by Xavier Becker and digitized by Alain Brucelle. The maps highlight different aspects of the region, e.g. the languages and dialects, the administrative divisions, and the Tibetic linguistic sections. The map of the languages and dialects is also accompanied by an index with all the dialect names and locations. The third appendix also lists the administrative units of the Tibetic area, gives the names of all of the provinces, cities, towns, counties, and districts in the countries where speakers of Tibetic languages live. The names are given in Tibetan and the relevant local language (e.g. Chinese, Nepali and Hindi-Urdu).

In all this is an incredibly rich compilation of information about the Tibetic languages that will be useful for anyone wanting to get an overview of the whole branch, or wanting to find details about the varieties spoken in a certain area, or wanting to understand the history of the branch, or looking for the typological regularities found in the branch, or a dozen other purposes. The authors should be congratulated and thanked for producing such a volume, the fruit of so many years of arduous work to benefit the scholarly community.