Migration patterns, legends and historical records
Quentin Devers

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This book is an introduction to the family of languages derived from Old Tibetan. These languages are spoken on the Tibetan plateau, in the Himalayas and the Karakoram. The Tibetic-speaking area is nowadays located in six countries: China, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Some of the smallest languages are seriously endangered, and likely to disappear soon. In the first chapters, sociolinguistic and anthropological aspects of the Tibetic societies are presented, as well as information about the main religions of the Tibetic area – Buddhism, Bon, and Islam. The book includes a presentation of the main phonological and grammatical characteristics found in the Tibetic languages, and also provides information about the Tibetan script and the written languages used in the area. A whole chapter is devoted to dialectology and the presentation of the main linguistic characteristics for each section of the Tibetic area – Southeastern, Eastern, Northeastern, Central, Southern, South-western, Western, and Northwestern. The book also includes a historical and comparative dictionary presenting the main lexical differences between the modern languages, as well as their etymologies in Classical Tibetan. It presents the lexical correspondences between the major Tibetic languages: Central Tibetan, Tsang, Amdo, Kham, Dzongkha, Lhoke (Sikkim), Sherpa, Balti, Central Ladaks, Purik and Spiti. In order to explain the interactions with other language families, we have provided a presentation of the contact languages, which essentially belong to other Tibeto-Burman branches, as well as Sinitic, Mongolic, Turkic, Indo-Aryan, Iranian, Germanic (English) and Burushaski language families. This work includes three appendices. The first two deal with toponymic information and provides the names of the main mountains, rivers and lakes of the Tibetic area. The third appendix includes several detailed maps presenting the locations of the Tibetic languages and dialects. It also offers maps of the natural and human environments, as well as the administrative units of the area.

Nicolas Tournadre is a linguist, member of the Academic Institute of France (IUF), and Professor emeritus at Aix-Marseille University. During the last 35 years, he has conducted extensive fieldwork research in Tibet and the Himalayas, as well as in Central Asia. He has been an invited keynote speaker in numerous conferences, and has given talks on the five continents. Among his prominent publications are: *Ergativité en tibétain moderne: Approche morphosyntaxique de la langue parlée* (Ergativity in Modern Tibetan, morphosyntactic approach of the spoken language) (1996), *Le Manuel de Standard Tibétain* [with S. Dorje] (2003), *Le grand livre des proverbes tibétains* [with F. Robin] (2006), *Sherpa-English and English-Sherpa dictionary* [with L. N. Sherpa, G. Chodrak and G. Oisel] (2009), *Le prisme des langues* (2014) and *Vegetal meditations and mineral reflections* (2022).

Hiroyuki Suzuki (D. Litt. in linguistics) is a lecturer in Chinese language studies at Kyoto University, Japan. He has conducted fieldwork for more than 20 years in the eastern Tibetosphere, focusing on minority languages and communities. His main research interests are descriptive linguistics, geolinguistics, dialectology, and sociolinguistics of the languages in the Tibetosphere. He is the author of the following monographs: *Dongfang Zangqu zhuyuyan yanjiu* [Study on languages in the eastern Tibetosphere] (2015), *100 linguistic maps of the Swadesh word list of Tibetic languages from Yunnan* (2018), and *Geolinguistics in the eastern Tibetosphere: An introduction* (2022). He is also the co-editor of *Linguistic atlas of Asia* (2021) and *The Oxford guide to the Tibeto-Burman languages* (forthcoming).

The book includes originals maps designed by Xavier Becker and digitized by Alain Brucelle.

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The Tibetic Languages: 
An introduction to the family of languages 
derived from Old Tibetan
About the authors:

• Nicolas Tournadre is professor emeritus of linguistics at Aix-Marseille University and member of the Academic Institute of France (IUF).

• Hiroyuki Suzuki is a linguist, specialist of the Tibetic languages and geolinguistics, currently a Lecturer in Chinese language studies at Kyoto University, Japan.

About the contributors:

• Randy J. LaPolla is Professor of Linguistics at Beijing Normal University, China, and Senior Associate at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He wrote the foreword of the present book.

• Xavier Becker is a former Professeur Agrégé of geography. He designed seven original maps for this book and contributed to the elaboration of the map indexes.

• Alain Brucelle is a former Professor at the École Nationale des Sciences géographiques, Paris, and a specialist in geographic information systems (GIS) and cartography. He carried out the digitization of the maps.

• Quentin Devers is an archaeologist at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS, Paris). He specialized in the archaeology of Ladakh and contributed to the North-Western section Migration patterns, legends and historical records.

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on their religion. In some marginal cases, one also encounters hybrid names made of both Tibetan and Persian or Arabic roots.


9.10.1. Migration patterns, legends and historical records

Ladakh is located at the strategic crossroad of nearly unavoidable routes leading to the Tibetan high plateau, which was once the production center of a variety of precious commodities such as gold, pashmina, musk, salt and iron. These resources were circulated along routes passing through Ladakh in direction of major trading centers, such as Khotan and Yarkand, located on the so-called southern Silk Road, the regions along the northwestern corridor of the Pamir and Hindukush ranges such as Gilgit, the Swat valley, Gandhāra and the Wakhan corridor and regions of the northern subcontinent such as Kashmir, Jammu, Kushtwar, Mandy, Lahul and Kinnaur (Rizvi 1999; Devers 2017). Unsurprisingly, various populations have coexisted and succeeded one another in Ladakh. Among the groups that we are able to trace, in addition to the Tibetans, there have been Dardic settlers, predominantly Brogpa, and also Shina. There have also been Turkic groups (Horpa), coming primarily from the Pamir corridor and from the Tarim basin. In some parts of the Dras and Suru valleys, there have additionally been Kashmiri and other Dardic populations. Finally, there used to be so-called ‘Mon’ communities, locally said to have come from Himachal Pradesh. As can be expected from such situation, numerous toponyms in Ladakh are not of Tibetan origin – examples are villages like Hemis, regions like Purik, and most probably Ladakh itself. As a testimony of this critical commercial location and diverse populations, Ladakh is the area of the Tibetan plateau with the greatest variety of
scripts observed in rock inscriptions. In addition to the use of Tibetan script, we find historical inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭhi, Brāhmī, Chinese, Sogdian, Tokharian, Arabic and Śāradā scripts.\footnote{For examples of Kharoṣṭhi and Brāhmī inscriptions see: Francke 1907. For examples of inscriptions in Sogdian, Tokharian, Arabic and Śāradā, see: Volta 1994, 1995, 1999; Sims-Williams 1993; Francke 1907; Jina 1997: 53–55.} It is also the area with the highest density of archaeological remains, being for fortifications, rock art, temple ruins, pre-Buddhist funerary sites, etc.

In the past, we can observe material differentiation between the eastern and western Indus valley: remains from the eastern parts, sometime associated by oral tradition to past Mon populations, display significant shared traits with the the Tibetan Plateau; remains from the western parts, commonly associated by oral tradition to Brogpa, Horpa and Balti populations, display stronger kinks with the Pamir corridor. A transitional area of mixed influences lies in the central belt that extends from the Indus-Zanskar confluence to the confluence with the Gya brook. Parallel territorial variations can be outlined in Zanskar, Nubra and Purik, whereas in the westernmost fringes of the latter, Kashmiri and Shina influences are further noticeable (Devers 2018).

As can be expected in a country of considerable trading and mining wealth, these territories, as delineated by considerable material remains, evolved over the centuries, often considerably. Whereas ancient fortifications or toponyms relatable to the Brogpa can be found in all parts of northern Purig as well as in the Indus valley from Baltistan to the confluence with the Gya brook, Brogpa populations are now strictly confined to the lowest reaches of the Indus river, downstream of Hanu. More strikingly, the Mons have entirely vanished from the country.

Prior to the tenth century, the history of the territory corresponding to present-day Ladakh is largely unknown. We know that to the east, on the Tibetan high plateau, was Zhangzhung and to the west, along the Pamir corridor, was Balur (alt. Bolor). The exact borders of these two ancient kingdoms are unknown. In the light of the geographical distribution of the material remains that have been found, we may
postulate that a frontier between them lay in central Ladakh. In other words, the Ladakh as we know it now may have been divided between two larger kingdoms. A domain covering both eastern and western Ladakh seems to have emerged only in the tenth and eleventh centuries under the name Maryul, when the West Tibetan kingdom of Ngari Skorsum progressively brought these territories under its control (Devers et al. 2016; Devers forthcoming b). An alternative name for Maryul was Mangyul, the two names being apparently interchangeable.79 Ladakh, on the other hand, appears to have then been only the name of a subdivision of Maryul around Alchi, from where the Namgyal dynasty originated.80 When this dynasty took control of Maryul in the mid-sixteenth century, the name Ladakh seems to have progressively been applied to the country as a whole.

9.10.2. Linguistic groups of the NW section

In 2011, Zeisler proposed a classification of the NW languages into two major groups: གཤམ་སྐད་ GSHAM SKAD sham-kā locally pronounced /Shamskat/ i.e. the ‘language of Lower Ladakh’ and གྱེན་སྐད་ GYEN SKAD Gyen-kā, locally pronounced /Kenhat/ i.e. ‘language of Upper Ladakh’. Unlike most other dialect groups of the Tibetic area, the Highlanders speak ‘innovative dialects’ while Lowlanders speak ‘archaic dialects’. Zeisler (2011) proposed the following description:

“According to phonetic features alone, the various dialects spoken in Ladakh are presently classified [by Bielmeier 2004 and others] roughly in two main groups:

• Western Archaic Tibetan: the non-tonal ‘conservative’ dialects of the north-eastern and central areas: Baltistan, Purik, Lower Ladakh, Nubra, and Leh, showing initial and final consonant clusters.

• Western Innovative Tibetan: the ‘innovative’ dialects of the south-eastern areas: Upper Indus, Changthang, and Zanskar, where the clusters have been reduced and tonal features can be found.”

79. For instance, in the seals of documents emitted by Nyima Namgyal found in Purig during surveys with Nils Martin, the Namgals present themselves as the “rajas of Mangyul” (RNAMGYAL MANGYUL RAJA).

80. Howard was probably the first scholar to understand that Maryul and Ladakh were not synonymous: Howard 2005: 136–137. See also: Denwood 2008: 13; Devers forthcoming a.