

**Topic Analysis #2: Tibetan Buddhism and Language**

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### Introduction

This paper will discuss the linguistics of the Buddhist population living in the region known as Tibet, located between modern-day China and other nations such as Nepal and Bhutan. These branches of the Classical Tibetan vary greatly regarding their phonetics and pronunciation, along with differences in grammar.

Tibetan languages cannot all be classified together into a single language with a few dialects, due to the major differences between the groups of languages in the area. A few of the dialects stemming from the language now known as Classical Tibetan (in which parts of the traditional Buddhist canon was translated into a language many Tibetans could understand) carry many of the same attributes yet often varying in the degree to which the written text and spoken word correlate in regard to actual spoken sounds.

Some anthropologists had previously defined types of Tibetans as sub-groups of other languages groups, such as the Kham, Amdo, Ü-Tsang branches, each with their many languages and interpretations of Buddhism. The main point of note in this explanation is that while the languages of Tibet are diverse, they are related through their past connection in some way – whether from religion or direct linguistic proximity – to Classical Tibetan and the Tibetan Buddhist religion.

The cultures of the people in the region have had major influence on the differences found between each of the languages found in Tibet. Standard Buddhism and its modification by folk religions such as *Bon* resulting in the Tibetan variation of Buddhism have had major influence on the languages of the region. As the major religion of the area in the modern day, many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism and the languages spoken by its adherents are interconnected

due to the relationship between the history of the common languages and the canonical scripture of Tibetan Buddhism.

One other point of note is the influence of Sino and Indic languages on those found in the region of Tibet. Due to the proximity of the land masses, naturally Tibetan languages are highly influenced in their phonology by Chinese languages and their most common scripts come from a proto-Indic one. While sharing little else with their neighbors, these linguistic features in their culture are still very present.

### **Theoretical Framework of Authors**

The authors of the literature concerning the Tibetan languages often assume the frameworks of cultural ecology – which contends that the culture is shaped by its environment – and further functionalism. The reason functionalism must be included is, no matter which of the Tibetan languages one observes, they are always closely related to the influence of their landscape (isolating them from surrounding regions) and the religion, Tibetan Buddhism.

Cultural ecology is “a theoretical approach that attempts to explain similarities and differences in culture in relation to the environment”<sup>1</sup> This clarifies how the language (in a way symbolized in this definition as culture) is influenced by the culture it is a part of (or the environment it is formed by).

Also explained is how the framework Tibetan languages are considered under is described well by functionalism: “Functionalism considers a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits.”<sup>2</sup> Tibetan languages cannot be examined without a holistic approach as they are created so solely from the other cultures and languages coming together.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, *Cultural Anthropology* (Libre Texts, 2023) Section 3.5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Section 3.3.

Trying to describe them without first describing their neighbors and the cultural context under which they exist would result in an inadequate understanding of the language itself.

### **Emic Perspectives**

While essentially all the Tibetan languages have some relationship to Tibetan Buddhism, “It is important to be understood [...] that speaking Ladakhi never meant to be a Buddhist, as a certain group of Tibetan people who preserve and speak fluent Tibetan is not Buddhist.”<sup>3</sup> The deep roots of each of the languages in Tibetan Buddhism as observed in literature and language families does not describe the reality of life for many Tibetans. Simply speaking a language upon which an esoteric religion is mounted doesn’t by necessity mean that one is an adherent of the religion. While understanding the connection between many of the most common Tibetan languages and the Buddhism found in Tibet is essential to the study of these languages, it is also vital to consider the differences between the Tibetan languages.

The Tibetan languages are often broken into three distinct groups, which can further be split into dozens of dialects each. Due to the linguistic influences on each of these groups, major differences have arisen between them. As a basic example, pronunciation has varied greatly from point to point in the region: “[...] Ladakhi people take pride in the fact that their dialects represent the original language, as they pronounce most of the superscribed and suffixed consonants of the written language, which have become silent in most of [the] other Tibetan varieties.”<sup>4</sup> People speaking each of these languages can often have difficulty in understanding people from different parts of the region simply because of how the languages became different due to such dramatic isolation from one another. This is somewhat similar to how Romantic

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<sup>3</sup> Namgial, Eshey, *Ladakhi: An off Shoot of Classical Tibetan Language* (Dharamshala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2018) 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

languages branched from the Vulgar Latin of the Roman Empire; the languages of Tibet branched in some way from Classical Tibetan and evolved separately.

### **Etic Perspectives**

As studied by linguistic anthropologists, Tibetan appear to be somewhat homologous, especially in its stemming from Classical Tibetan: “This Classical Tibetan is the ‘new’ canonical language of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment as set by the ortho-graphic (and perhaps also the language) reforms of the eighth Tibetan king, Khri-lde srofi-btsan [...] (815-841), in A.D. 816.”<sup>5</sup> As all the modern variants come from this standardized version of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, they must inherently be closely related in vocabulary, grammar, and even phonetics (which is not entirely the case in reality).

Classical Tibetan arose from the need to have a standardized language to translate Buddhist scripts into: “[...] Classical Tibetan, the language of the Tibetan translations of the Mahāyāna Buddhist canon as well as of other original texts, chiefly on religious, medical, historical, and grammatical subjects.”<sup>6</sup> It became common among the literary and spiritually elite of Tibet shortly after its creation, and thus was taught in some way to many people across the region and was a major influence on most of the contemporary Tibetan vernaculars.

### **Conclusion**

The modern Tibetan languages have had major influence from sources such as the Classical Tibetan established in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the “alphabets” of Indic scripts yet have evolved on their own to become distinct and often not mutually intelligible. While Tibetan Buddhism is closely tied to nearly all the languages found in Tibet, speaking one doesn’t mean

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, Roy Andrew, *A Grammatical Sketch of Classical Tibetan* (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1970) 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

one will strictly practice Tibetan Buddhism. Many vocabularies and spellings are shared among the languages of the area, yet pronunciation varies greatly depending upon the degree of variation between the spelling and actual spoken word. These languages share many characteristics with Classical Tibetan, which was created from the ancestors of all the Tibetan languages, for translation and scholarly uses, so that such knowledge could be widespread throughout the region. Modern Tibetan languages are the result of a rich history in religion, cultural influences from surrounding nations, and isolated evolution.

## References

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