
REVIEW: *LANGUAGE VARIATION AND CHANGE IN AN AMDO TIBETAN VILLAGE: GENDER, EDUCATION AND RESISTANCE*

Reviewed by Zoe Tribur (University of Oregon)



Jermay J. Reynolds. 2012. *Language Variation and Change in an Amdo Tibetan Village: Gender, Education and Resistance*. PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, ix+187p, <https://goo.gl/5dBbDA>, accessed 11 June 2016.

Following the quantitative tradition of sociolinguistic research pioneered by such scholars as William Labov, Walt Wolfram, and Penelope Eckert, Reynolds presents a detailed, coherent analysis of the social parameters behind a specific on-going sound change, the merger of syllable final bilabial nasal (m) with alveolar coronal nasal (n), in one small farming community in Qinghai Province. His is certainly not the first such study on Tibetan sound change. It is also not the first study to investigate the merger of (m) into (n), which is a prominent feature of so-called "farmer" dialects of Amdo Tibetan (Hua 2005).

The results of Reynolds' study suggest that the distribution of the merged [n] and non-merged [m] variants of the variable (m) is associated with speaker age and also with language ideology, as the innovative variant [n] is more frequent in the speech of young speakers, who seem to be leading the on-going change. It appears less in speakers who report a positive identification with Tibetan language.

The sound change that is the focus of Reynolds' paper and Spearhead,¹ the community where it is occurring, exist within a larger sociolinguistic context of two traditionally identified sociolects in Amdo Tibetan, "farmer" dialects and "nomad" dialects. While the two lects are identified by the traditional subsistence means and lifestyles

Tribur, Zoe. 2017. Review: Language Variation and Change in an Amdo Tibetan Village: Gender, Education and Resistance. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:150-158.

¹ "Spearhead" is a pseudonym (44).

of their speakers, there are clear structural types that serve to broadly differentiate one speech variety from the other (Hua 2002; Padma Lhun'grub 2009). These broad structural differences have emerged primarily as a result of divergent patterns of language change, namely a conservative tendency shared across dialects spoken by traditional semi-migratory pastoralists, and an innovative tendency shared across those spoken by traditional sedentary agriculturalists (Green 2012). While all Amdo Tibetan dialects have undergone sound changes since the period during which Written Tibetan was created and standardized (ca. 650-850 CE), farmer dialects in particular seem to have gone through more changes compared with nomad dialects, particularly sound mergers which, resulting as they do in a reduction of the phonemic inventory, represent structural simplification. Language varieties with higher rates of change (i.e., innovative varieties) also tend to undergo a higher rate of simplifying changes (Dahl 2004).

Thus, hypothetically, farmer dialects are not only more prone to change but, in terms of overall structural complexity, they should be "simpler"¹ on some level than nomad dialects. At the level and scale of broad, long-term historical trends, structural complexity of language varieties seems to be correlated with two distinct, yet interconnected social conditions: social network size/density (Milroy 2004), and relative number of adult language learners (McWhorter 2007). At the level of synchronic variation or short-term change (within one or two generations), the distribution of innovative as opposed to conservative structures is correlated to social-demographic factors such as gender, age, education level (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972; Eckert 2000) and, of

¹ The notion of relative complexity is a contentious issue in linguistics. This is true even for linguistic structural domains that seem to obviously lend themselves to easy quantification, such as phonetics-phonology. For example, in terms of both segment inventory and syllable structure, Mandarin Chinese would seem to be a "simpler" phonology than English. However, once tones are added to the picture (as any Chinese speaker of even the most basic competency knows they must), the total inventory of phonemically contrastive syllables is considerably larger and more complex. McWhorter, Dahl, and others have proposed a rough rule of thumb, so to speak, for determining relative complexity: ease of acquisition for adult learners.

course, the linguistic background of speakers. Reynolds concentrates on one farmer dialect, focusing on the sociolinguistic parameters that condition the kind of variation that occurs within a shorter timeframe, at the scale of individual speakers' lifetimes. His research provides valuable insight into the individual behaviors and social conditions that drive large-scale, typological shifts in language structure that, for example, led to the development of distinct sociolects of Amdo Tibetan associated with farming vs. nomadic communities.

For scholars working in any field, how to identify and talk about the languages spoken in Tibetan areas, sometimes by non-Tibetans, is by no means a trivial dilemma. Genetically speaking, Tibetan - spoken across a large, contiguous geographic area by communities of speakers that can be isolated from one another but nonetheless maintain consistent economic, cultural, and kinship ties - is sometimes described as a dialect continuum (e.g., Chirkova 2007:412). Varieties such as Amdo Tibetan are considered dialect groups that consist of smaller individual dialects, such as the Spearhead dialect. These, in turn are related to one another and differ from one another to varying degrees. On the other hand, certain of these dialect groups, including Amdo Tibetan, possess "language-like" features. For example, the dialects within Amdo Tibetan share most or all of their verbal morphology with each other, including many morphemes not shared by Tibetan varieties belonging to other dialect groups. In other words, Amdo Tibetan has features associated with being a distinct language.

The picture of Tibetan internal diversity is somewhat clarified by the adoption of the label "Tibetic" and the phylogenetic terminology that goes with it. Consequently, Tibetic, envisioned as a purely linguistic science device, is a separate clade, or branch, within the Trans-Himalayan (formerly Sino-Tibetan via Tibeto-Burman) language family. Tibetic languages are the next level of classification with "language" here referring to a genetic unit, as opposed to a social or political unit. Under Tibetic languages fall the next level of genetic classification: dialects. Based on this system, Amdo Tibetan is a Tibetic language and Spearhead is an Amdo Tibetan dialect.

From a linguist's perspective, the above system allows for a coherent and orderly description of language variety and variation by breaking diversity down into hierarchical levels of dialect, language, branch, family, and so-on, based on the yardstick of presumed genetic relationships as opposed to geographic or typological criteria. Furthermore, it neatly side-steps the problem of mutual intelligibility, which is at best an unreliable indicator of linguistic difference. In the case of Tibetan, whose six million plus speakers encompass a wide range of linguistic registers, literacy, and multilingualism but who tend to share a strong, unitary ethnolinguistic identity, mutual intelligibility is practically useless. Reynolds points out that whether or not a native Tibetan speaker finds a particular Tibetan variety intelligible depends as much on the speakers' background, including literacy level, as on the actual degree of structural dissimilarity between varieties (6-7). Aside from generally aiding communication about Tibetan diversity, the name "Tibetic" itself would seem to have the added benefit of removing the discussion of language a step away from ethnicity and culture.

As Chirkova (2007) notes, notions of culture and ethnic identity are directly and implicitly connected to language. One consequence of this is that discussions of linguistic diversity within China are frequently influenced by non-linguistic concerns.¹ Tibetic, therefore, would seem to be a term that has only linguistic significance. Thus, we can speak of Tibetans as speakers of Tibetic languages, such as Amdo Tibetan, and non-Tibetic languages, such as Namuyi, genetically classified as Qiangic (Bradley 1975; Lakhi et al. 2007). We can also speak of Tibetic languages spoken by non-Tibetans, such as Dzongkha, spoken in Bhutan. These nuances are often lost in translation in the adherence to traditional descriptors of Tibetan and related speech varieties.

¹ By way of example, Chirkova (2007:409-410) mentions the drawn out debates about whether Baima, a speech variety of the Qiangic branch of Trans-Himalayan (formerly Sino-Tibetan) spoken in Sichuan Province, should be labeled a language or a Tibetan dialect.

There are good reasons to reject the above system. While it makes it easier to communicate with linguists and other academics who are unfamiliar with Tibetan, those who are familiar may find the use of new terms and labels needlessly obfuscating. More seriously, there is concern that the adoption of terminology differentiating levels of linguistic genetic diversity, originally intended to sidestep ethnicity and culture, risks generating confusion and misunderstanding around these very issues, or even, in some speakers' eyes, outright harming communities. Language is independent of, yet interconnected with all other aspects of human social life, as sociolinguistic studies such as the one under review, make abundantly clear. Because it concerns linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, we can expect that the discussion of Tibetan's genetic classification will continue to be debated into the future. We cannot, therefore, afford to discount the diverse and evolving perspectives of community members.

At 187 pages, *Language Variation* consists of seven concise chapters and a bibliography. In addition to providing background information on Amdo Tibetan - where it is spoken and who speaks it - Chapter One situates the research topic in the larger contexts of sociolinguistics and linguistic research on Tibetan. Regarding Amdo Tibetan's genetic affiliation and phylogenetic status, Reynolds follows the classification of Hua (1991), Zhang (1993), Bradley (1997), and Padma Lhun'grub (2009), who divide modern Tibetan into five major dialects. According to this system, Amdo Tibetan is a Northwestern dialect. While he does not mention the existence of other classificatory systems, most notably Tournadre's (2008:2014) advancement of the Tibetic genetic grouping, Reynolds does address the issue of internal diversity within Tibetan, including touching on the additional complications that result from the existence of different registers of Written Tibetan.

Chapter Two presents an overview of the theoretical approaches implemented for this study. Beginning with a summary of Labov's work and the field of research it inspired, Reynolds also discusses more typologically-concerned sociolinguistic research exemplified by scholars such as Trudgill and McWhorter. Chapter

Three focuses on the sociolinguistic and cultural conditions of Spearhead and includes a discussion on developing language ideologies around Tibetan and Chinese that affect the area.

Chapter Four details the research methods and statistical analysis the author employed for this study. Data was collected from sixty speakers of Spearhead Amdo Tibetan, fifty-two of whom were born in Spearhead. The rest were born elsewhere. All are native speakers of Amdo Tibetan. Twenty-five participants are reported as being literate in Written Tibetan (with a wide range of proficiency levels represented). The remainder are illiterate. The usefulness of Written Tibetan literacy as a variable (relative to other social variables of sex, etc.) in this particular study was partially hampered by the fact that all female participants over forty were illiterate. Study participants were further divided into categories according to age, sex, occupation, and education level (in addition to Tibetan literacy). Literacy in Chinese was not examined separately from education level as a parameter. Audio-recorded sociological interviews were conducted with participants. This also provided data for auditory analysis. Reynolds' analysis included a total of 3,052 tokens of the variable syllable-final (m), averaging forty tokens per speaker. In addition to analyzing the distribution of [n] and [m] variants of this variable relative to social parameters, Reynolds also took care to analyze the phonological, prosodic, and lexical environments in which variants occurred.

Chapter Five presents and analyzes the results of the study, giving an overview of identifiable production patterns. All speakers produced some tokens of the merged variant [n] (90). Not surprisingly, linguistic constraints, specifically the height of the preceding vowel, are the strongest predictor of whether a speaker used a merged or non-merged variant. Of the social factors, age was the most strongly correlated individual factor. Merging was highest, approaching seventy percent in the twenty-thirty age group (97). However, literacy, age, and sex were all found to be highly interactive. Thus, illiterate female speakers as a group had the highest rate of merging (99), while among the male participants, age was a more important factor (100).

Among young speakers (thirty or under), literacy, and not age, was the most important factor (112-114). In fact, young literate speakers were found to disfavor the [n] variant at a rate most similar (but not quite as high) as that of men above sixty.

Chapter Five then goes on to investigate likely explanations for the diverging production patterns, including observations on the role of gender in sociolinguistic changes observed elsewhere in the world, such as Nichol's (1976) study on Gullah. Eventually, Reynolds concludes that, while the theories that have emerged from similar socio-variationist studies contribute to an analysis of his study's results, it is equally necessary to consider the local social conditions under which these more broadly understood sociolinguistic constraints emerge and interact in Spearhead. Reynolds concludes that language ideology presents a unifying element influencing the patterns observed for all three parameters - sex, age, and literacy.

Chapter Six further elaborates on language ideology in the wider sphere of Amdo Tibetan and explores how it manifests in specific production behaviors of speakers.

To my knowledge, this is the first study to approach the problem of diachronic change in Tibetan by seeking its roots in socially conditioned synchronic variation. As such, it represents an important contribution to the fields of sociolinguistics as well as Tibetan linguistics.

REFERENCES

- Bradley, David. 1975. Nahsi and Proto-Burmese-Lolo. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 2(1):93-150.
- _____. 1997. Tibeto-Burman Languages and Classification in David Bradley (ed) *Papers in Southeast Asian Linguistics* 14:1-71.
- Chirkova, Katia. 2007. Between Tibetan and Chinese: Identity and Language in the Chinese Southwest. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30(3):405-417.

- Dahl, Östen. 2004. *The Growth and Maintenance of Linguistic Complexity* 71. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2000. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity in Belten High*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Green, R. Jeffrey. 2012. Amdo Tibetan Media Intelligibility. *SIL International Electronic Survey Report* 19.
- Hua Kan 华侃. 1991. *Han zang yuyan gailun 汉藏语言概论 [Overview of Sino-Tibetan Languages]*. Beijing 北京: Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社 [Peking University Press].
- _____. 2005. Lun zangyu he hanyu zai lishi yin bian zhongde yixie xiangsi xianxiang 论藏语和汉语在历史音变中的一些相似现象 [Similar Developments in the Historical Phonology of Tibetan and Chinese]. *Xibei minzu daxue xuebao 西北民族大学 [Northwest Nationalities University Journal]* 3:40-46.
- Labov, William. 1966. *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- _____. 1972. The Social Motivation of a Sound Change. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, 1-42. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lakhi Libu, Brook Hefright, and Kevin Stuart. 2007. The Namuyi: Linguistic and Cultural Features. *Asian Folklore Studies* 66:233-253.
- McWhorter, John H. 2007. *Language Interrupted: Signs of Non-Native Acquisition in Standard Language Grammars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milroy, Lesley. 2004. Language Ideologies and Linguistic Change in Carmen Fought (ed) *Sociolinguistic Variation: Critical Reflections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 161-177.
- Nichols, Patricia C. 1976. *Linguistic Change in Gullah: Sex, Age, and Mobility*. PhD diss Stanford University.

- Padma lhun'grub བུ་ལྷན་གསུམ་ 2009. *A mdo'i yul skad kyi sgra gdangs la dpyad pa ཨ་མདོ་འབྲུག་སྐད་ཀྱི་སྐད་གདངས་ལ་དཔྱད་པ་ [A Phonological Analysis of Amdo Tibetan Dialects]*. Zi ling ཟླ་ལིང་།: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang ཟླ་ལིང་མཚོ་སྐོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐད་ཁང་ [Mtsho sngon Nationalities Press].
- Tournadre, Nicolas. 2008. Arguments Against the Concept of 'Conjunct'/'Disjunct' in Tibetan in B Geburtstag, Brigitte Huber, Marianne Volkart, and Paul Widmer (eds) *Chomolangma, Demawend und Kasbek. Festschrift für Roland Bielmeier zu seinem 65. International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies*, 281-308.
- _____. 2014. The Tibetic Languages and Their Classification in Thomas Owen-Smith and Nathan Wayne Hill (eds) *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics, Historical and Descriptive Linguistics of the Himalayan Area. Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs* 266:105-130.
- Trudgill, Peter. 1972. Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich. *Language in Society* 1(2):179-195.
- Zhang Jichuan 张济川. 1993. *Zangyu fangyan fenlei guanjian 藏语方言分类关键 [Essential Typology of Tibetan Dialects]* in *Minzu yu wen lunwenji- qingzhu Ma Xueliang xiansheng bashi shouchen 民族与文论文集—庆祝马学良先生八十寿辰 [Essays on Ethnicity and Writing - in Honor of Ma Xueliang's Eightieth Birthday]*. Beijing 北京: Zhongyang minda chubanshe: 中央民大出版社 [Central Nationalities University Press], 297-309.