RGYALTHANG TIBETAN OF YUNNAN:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan is divided into four major dialects: *ütsāŋ*, which includes Lhasa Tibetan; *tö*, such as Ladakhi and Balti Tibetan; *amdo*, a northeastern dialect; and *khams*, a southeastern dialect. All these dialects and subdialects differ greatly from one another. Most work on Tibetan dialects, except for Lhasa, concentrate merely on phonetic and phonological systems. Only a few works, (e.g. Sun 1993) have been devoted to grammatical topics. A comprehensive picture of the grammatical system of Tibetan drawn from the various dialects still awaits further research.

Rgyalthang is a Khams language spoken in Zhongdian county,[1] Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, N.W. Yunnan, People's Republic of China. Diqing lies to the south of the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau. Other than Tibetans, there are several other minority groups residing in this area, such as Han, Yi, Naxi, Bai, Lisu, and Pumi. Tibetans outnumber these groups. There are more than 100,000 Tibetans in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The main concentrations are in Zhongdian and Deqin counties. Other minority groups, especially the Lisu, live along the Mekong river. Most Hans work in offices or own businesses such as retail stores, and live in the capital city of the prefecture called *dẓīadāŋ dzōŋ*. The Tibetans grow barley, wheat, and potatoes for a living. Most of the families raise animals such as yaks and pigs, and pick mushrooms and "wide asparagus" (*ʔūbūŋ*) in the summertime.

[1] Zhongdian county is divided into Da Zhongdian and Xiao Zhongdian, called Rgyalthang and Yangthang respectively. Xiao Zhongdian is about 40 minutes by car from Da Zhongdian. Its main population is Tibetan, and the language used there is a sub-dialect of Rgyalthang.

Unlike other places in Yunnan, Zhongdian is quite unknown. The area had been closed to foreigners until a few years ago, when it was opened up for individual foreign tourists and a few fortunate researchers. This is a reason why few scholarly works have been published on Rgyalthang Tibetan. The first publication on Rgyalthang phonology, as far as I know, is by a local scholar, Wang Xiaosong, who turned out to be my main language consultant (cf. Wang, this issue). Other publications (Corlin 1978, 1980) are anthropologically oriented, dealing with house symbolism and the kinship system respectively. Unfortunately, these anthropological works were not based on data collected in the sociocultural milieu of the Rgyalthang people in Yunnan, but rather on data obtained from a few Rgyalthang families who had immigrated to Switzerland.

The data used in this paper were collected during a period of fourteen days in October 1995, and of 45 days from May to June 1996, in Zhongdian County. Additional data were obtained from a Rgyalthang speaker invited to work in Bangkok for 18 days in January 1997. The main informants are Wang Xiaosong (Tshering Dbang'dus), aged 47, and Sonam Rgyatso, aged 70. Both are local scholars working mainly on a famous local epic called *Gling Gesar*, and thus are among the few people in Zhongdian who have had the opportunity for higher education.

This paper aims at presenting a preliminary linguistic description of Rgyalthang with a focus on the grammatical system of the language. Like other Tibetan dialects, Rgyalthang exhibits complex grammatical features associated with the verbs, such as evidentiality, person marking, and aspectual marking. Unlike Lhasa Tibetan, however, Rgyalthang has object (accusative) marking, in addition to ergative marking. This raises the question of the origin and development of these case patterns. A description of the language's phonological system is given in Section 2. Section 3 presents correspondence patterns between Written Tibetan and Rgyalthang Tibetan so that the development of Rgyalthang consonants can be seen more clearly. Section 4 outlines some of the salient features of Rgyalthang Tibetan grammar, namely case marking and indexical categories. In particular, I raise the question of whether Rgyalthang is an ergative language, and discuss the notion of person marking extensively.

2. OUTLINE OF PHONOLOGY

2.1 Consonants

Rgyalthang Tibetan is rich in consonantal phonemes (44 altogether). All can occur in syllable initial position. However, the glottal stop occurs only in a few monosyllabic words, e.g. ʔu 'to do' and ʔu 'to borrow'. This consonant

is also common as the initial of the first syllable of disyllabic words such as *ʔăpō* 'stomach', *ʔălē* 'cat', and *ʔăsū* 'grandmother'. See Figure 1.

p	ts	t	tʂ	tɕ	k	ʔ
ph	tsh	th	tʂh	tɕh	kh	
b	dz	d	dʐ	dʑ	g	
nb	ndz	nd	ndʐ	ndʑ	ng	
m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
m̥		n̥		ɲ̊		
		s	ʂ	ɕ		h
		z	ʐ	ʑ		
		ɬ				
		l				
		r				
w				j		

Figure 1. Rgyalthang Tibetan initial consonants.

The syllabic structures of Rgyalthang are simple. There are no initial clusters, except for those with prenasalization. Only nasals can occupy the syllable final position. The consonantal inventory is quite complex when compared to that of Lhasa Tibetan. For example, prenasalized stops, voiced obstruents, and voiceless nasals do not occur as phonemes in Lhasa Tibetan. The phonological complexity of Khams dialects like Rgyalthang has been reported elsewhere, e.g. for 'Bathang (Gesang Jumian 1989), Sde-dge (Yu 1948), and Hsi-ning (Gō et al. 1954).

There are four tonemes in Rgyalthang Tibetan. The following symbols are used to represent the tones: / ‾/ = high tone or 55, / ˇ/ = rising tone or 13, / ^/ = mid-rising-falling tone or 231, and / ˋ/ = falling tone or 51. An allotone / _ / 11 replaces the rising pitch of the first syllable of a disyllabic word. This tone also occurs in unstressed syllables. Grammatical morphemes, such as case postpositions, or auxiliary verbs which express grammatical meanings, carry no tones. For example, the underlying tone of the number one *tɕi* is falling, but when it modifies a head noun to indicate indefiniteness, it has no tonal marking. In the same way, when this form appears as a suffix to the main verb indicating perfective aspect, it has no tone.

Examples[2]:

/p/:

| | pî | 'Tibet' |
| | pə̄ | 'hair (body); to move'* |

/ph/:

| | phù | 'to be affected, e.g. by an illness' |
| | phě | 'piggy' |

/b/

| | bǎ | 'to hide; wave'† |
| | bî | 'to arrive' |

/nb/

| | nbə̄ | 'insect;worm'* |
| | nbī | 'abundant; plentiful'* |

/m/

| | mū çīŋ | 'red' |
| | mǐ dìu | 'flower' |

/m̥/

| | m̥ēŋ | 'medicine' |
| | m̥ī | 'ripen; well-cooked' |

/w/:

| | wǎ | 'boat; fox'† |
| | wàŋ | 'to give (a bride); to send' |

/ts/:

| | tsōŋ | 'to sell' |
| | tsà | 'to strain, sift, filter |

/tsh/:

| | tshǐ | 'puppy' |
| | tshǔ | 'grandchild' |

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[2] I have selected these examples carefully so that they do not overlap with those given in Wang 1996. Those that also appear in Wang are marked with *. Those that appear in Wang but are given with extra meanings are marked with †.