

INTRODUCTION

Monks, these two things conduce to the confusion and disappearance of the Dhamma. What two?

The wrong expression of the letter [of the text] and wrong interpretation of the meaning of it. For if the letter be wrongly expressed, the interpretation of the meaning is also wrong. These two things conduce to the confusion and disappearance of the Dhamma.

—“Duka Nipāta,” *Āṅguttara-nikāya*

This section provides a brief overview of basic points of grammar, categories, and concepts relevant to the study and mastery of the Tibetan language and particularly to understanding the roles and functions of Tibetan verbs. In the process, reference will be made to terms and classical Latinate categories in English (and Sanskrit) grammar. Although brief definitions of some more obscure terms will be provided, it is assumed that the reader has at least a working knowledge of these terms.

What this is not, however, is a theoretical description of Tibetan grammar—either as historical/evolutionary speculation or as a prescriptive “ideal” form. In this regard, the presentation that follows is fundamentally “descriptive” in that it presents patterns of usage of Tibetan verbs and auxiliary constructions along with qualitative descriptions of those patterns, making reference to established categories in linguistic classification.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT TRANSLATING THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE

Grammar can be divided into two distinct, though related, areas of study: morphology and syntax. Morphology concerns itself with how words are formed out of smaller units (“morphemes”), while syntax is concerned with the manner in which words are combined to form phrases and sentences. Both of these can involve speculative research into diachronic linguistics (that is, the evolution of the language over time), though given the premise of the consistency and homogeneity of classical literary Tibetan, the domain of this work is restricted to synchronic linguistic analysis (that is, the works in the language viewed as a timeless coherent whole). In addition, the primary