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Book review

Tibetan
Philip Denwood. 1999. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam (xx + 372 =) 392 pp. US$ 99

Philip Denwood's new Tibetan grammar is the most recent contribution in a long tradition of linguistic studies which have made Tibetan the best documented of all Tibeto-Burman languages. The Tibetans have their own indigenous, centuries-old tradition of philological and linguistic thought which has left a legacy of numerous treatises on their language. In fact, the conceptual framework and history of Tibetan linguistic notions has in itself become a field of study for non-Tibetans. Yet let us restrict ourselves to works on the Tibetan language for and by non-Tibetans, a distinct and independent tradition of which Denwood's *Tibetan* is the most recent exponent.

Unlike many new grammars documenting hitherto undescribed languages, Philip Denwood's *Tibetan* has not appeared in a vacuum. Specimens of Tibetan script and a Tibetan word list were published by the burgomaster of Amsterdam Nicolaes Witsen as early as 1692. This was followed by a voluminous treatise on Tibetan by Augustinus Georgius in 1762, a Tibetan grammar and dictionary by Frederic Schrœter in 1826, and a highly eclectic Latinocentric grammar by the Hungarian traveller Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, alias Csoma Kőrösi Sándor in 1834. The first really sound grammar of Tibetan, however, was published in 1839 for the Imperial Russian Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg by Isaac Schmidt of Amsterdam, who spent a portion of his life living with the Kalmucks. Since the appearance of Schmidt's grammar, numerous primers, grammatical manuals and treatises on both Classical Tibetan and the spoken language have continued to appear at regular intervals. Yet not all of the subsequent accounts of the Tibetan language were successful in improving upon Schmidt's work in any significant way.

Since the very beginning of the 20th century, studies have also appeared in Western languages on the most far-flung dialects of Tibetan, which in many particulars deviate greatly from the Central Tibetan dialect spoken in the capital city of Lhasa. These numerous peripheral 'dialects' are often not mutually intelligible with Lhasa Tibetan, and in many cases it is more accurate, linguistically speaking, to treat them as distinct languages. Since 1981 most of the substantive documentation on far-flung Tibetan dialects has appeared in the form of hefty, handsomely published, black monographs in a series put out by the Vereinigung für Geschichtswissenschaft

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Hochasiens Wissenschaftsverlag at Sankt Augustin. Nevertheless more attention somehow always ends up getting devoted to the standard dialect. Even in recent decades Tibetologists have continued to churn out introductions to Classical Tibetan and grammars of the Central Tibetan dialect spoken at Lhasa. Denwood's *Tibetan* is one of the latter. Nonetheless there are many reasons to take special note of Denwood's book and even to recommend it as a textbook to students of Tibetan.

The beginning and concluding chapters of Denwood's *Tibetan* constitute the book's outer layer. After a preface, acknowledgements and a note on the transcription used, the first three chapters deal with Tibetan geography, history and dialectology respectively. At the other end, the book concludes with two chapters devoted respectively to Classical and pre-Classical Tibetan and to Tibetan texts in both these early phases of the language as well as in modern Lhasa Tibetan. The books ends with useful appendices, a sound bibliography, an index of grammatical particles and a general index. This balanced scholarly outer shell is a feature of the book's architecture which enhances its utility as a course book.

The two first chapters provide a balanced and well-structured first impression for students who have no detailed prior knowledge of Tibetan geography or history. Denwood's *Tibetan* is not a history textbook. Yet the first two chapters provide students with an orientation and exposure to the minimum required background knowledge for an informed and intelligent study of the language. An unsatisfactory detail in the map of the Tibetan language area on page v, however, is that the southeastern perimeter of the Tibetan speaking area has been drawn in a cavalier and overly meridional manner. The linguistic boundary meanders nonchalantly through vast regions of Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, northern Burma and Sìchuān where Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken belonging to the East Bodish, Hrusish, Kho-Bwa, Tani, Digarish, Midźuish, Nungish, Qiāngic and rGyal-rongic branches of the family. These tongues are not Tibetan in any sense. Whether this marginal inaccuracy is due to the cartographer or the author, it is fair to note that an expansionist view of the Tibetan dialect area is shared by many a Tibetologist.

Chapter Three introduces the student to the complex subject of Tibetan dialect classification, presenting an inventory of modern dialects and historical and regional written varieties of the language. Tibetan encompasses a good many heterogeneous and often mutually unintelligible dialects, and today a number of roughly congruent dialect classifications exist. The classification preferred by Denwood includes languages such as Dränjo and Dzongkha, whilst some other classifications recognise tonological, lexical and grammatical reasons for treating these South Bodish languages as a distinct group. Yet Denwood's well-chosen formulations and even-handed treatment would not offend even the most sensitive Bhutanese reader, let alone linguists who prefer to treat South Bodish languages as a separate group. The fascinating field of Tibetan historical phonology and grammar is not the main topic of Denwood's book. Yet Chapter Three offers the student a first taste of this wonderful field of inquiry, mentioning a few of the technical classificatory criteria and hinting at the intriguing patterns of regular sound change, semantic shift and grammaticalisation which underlie the deliberations of historical linguists.

The two final chapters provide a synoptic account of earlier stages of the language as well as bite-size text specimens of Classical, pre-Classical and modern Lhasa Tibetan. Students will benefit from such a well-rounded exposure to the language, even if they do not go on to pursue Tibetan historical grammar or study Classical texts. The list of Tibetan dialects in Appendix 1, the sampling of phonological inventories of several selected dialects in Appendix 2, the good bibliography, the index of grammatical particles and the general index likewise enhance the utility of Denwood's *Tibetan* as a learning tool.

A feature of Denwood's *Tibetan* which deserves special attention is the book's meaty core, which is contained in Chapters 5–13. Three aspects of the textbook recommend themselves highly to any student, its erudition, its user-friendliness and its refreshing new approach to Tibetan grammatical categories. After a seven-page Chapter 4, outlining the 'levels of analysis', i.e. script, phonology, grammar and lexicon, Denwood devotes a chapter to the Tibetan script, a chapter to Tibetan phonology, and seven chapters to Tibetan grammar and lexicon.

The presentation of the Tibetan dBu-can script in Chapter 5 is succinct and to the point. Yet for the remainder of the book Denwood uses transliteration instead of proper written Tibetan. This pedagogically indefensible choice is the book's only serious handicap. This shortcoming is exacerbated by Denwood's choice of Turrell Wylie's 1959 system for the transliteration of Tibetan dBu-can script. This is not just because Robert Shafer characterised Wylie's transliteration accurately as 'a provincial system' back in 1963, but because, if a student of the Tibetan language is compelled to use a system of transliteration to the exclusion of the Tibetan script, then Wylie's system is a bad choice. The Tibetan letter ཀ, sometimes improperly called the 'ha chung', is represented in Wylie's system as an apostrophe, which suggests a glottal closure or stop. In fact, the dBu-can letter in question represents the very opposite, i.e. the most open and least constricted setting of the glottis and vocal folds. It is unfortunate that Denwood's textbook consequently uses a diacritic apostrophe to represent a segment which the Tibetan phonologists who devised the dBu-can script chose to represent with a full letter in their native writing system.

The phonology in Chapter 6 is clearly presented and not weighed down by pretentious theoretical gobbledygook. The most striking aspect of the chapters devoted to script and phonology is that Denwood's description of Lhasa initials written in the native script as voiced plosives differs substantially from other accounts of these segments. The most notable recent Tibetan course books are Michael Hahn's 1971 *Lehrbuch der klassischen tibetischen Schriftsprache mit Lesestücken und Glossar*, which has seen several reprints, and the wonderful 1998 *Manuel de tibétain standard: Langue et civilisation*, written by Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje (i.e. gSang-bdag rDo-rje). The initial segments that are treated as voiceless and aspirated plosives, respectivly, followed by a low register tone in both Michael Hahn's *Lehrbuch* and Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje's *Manuel* are described by Denwood as unaspirated voiceless plosives and voiced plosives, respectively, followed by a low tone. On page 73 in a note between parentheses, Denwood makes passing reference to this discrepancy between the variety of Central Tibetan chosen as the basis for his book and the Tibetan of some other 'speakers not used as informants', although his

description of the difference is not quite accurate. An account of all such varieties of Lhasa Tibetan will no doubt have to await Roland Bielmeier's *Comparative Dictionary of Tibetan Dialects*, currently being compiled in Bern. In a similar vein, the phonetic font used throughout the book is not quite beautiful or easy to read, but suffice it to say that it is still virtually impossible to find a commercially available, truly well-done and comprehensive serif font of the letter symbols and diacritics devised by the International Phonetic Association.

Chapters 7–12 deal with the grammar of Tibetan. What I like most about Denwood's treatment is his erudition and his blending of insights from both traditional Tibetan scholarship and modern Western linguistics. For example, Denwood's 'subject marking particle' appears to have some relationship to the *gźan* and *bdag* categories of traditional Tibetan philology, involving agentivity, saliency, control and, more in particular, the subjecthood of volitional action of a transitive verb. Such topics have been explained in modern linguistic terms in the writings of people such as Scott Cameron DeLancey, Krisadawan Hongladarom, Anju Saxena, Nicolas Tournadre and myself. Denwood uses a number of felicitous new terms to describe grammatical features of Tibetan, such as 'non-thematised linking particles', 'echoed nominalising particles', 'subject-marking particle', etc. Whilst neologisms usually only compound terminological confusion, Denwood's use of terms is insightful and refreshing. In years to come Denwood's interesting treatment and presentation of Tibetan grammatical categories is the part of his book from which we are likely to draw the most useful lessons.

Two small oversights adversely affect the utility of this useful textbook, one seriously, the other superficially. The first is the lack of an audio disk. By contrast, Michael Hahn's *Lehrbuch* and Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje's *Manuel* both come with a soundtrack, and arguably an English-speaking learner of Tibetan might benefit as much by hearing the sound of the language as a Teuton or a francophone learner. Finally, John Benjamins, the publisher in Amsterdam, made no concession to good taste in choosing toxic day-glo magenta as the colour for the book, ensuring that *Tibetan* will remain a disturbing beacon of chromatic dissonance on any bookshelf or in any classroom. This might have been a venial transgression in the case of a book of little merit, or if the chosen hue had been just the slightest bit less noxious, but it may seriously compromise the aesthetic quality of life of the users of this most valuable and highly useful textbook. I can only recommend that users shield their eyes by putting a suitable wrapper on the book before use.

In conclusion, Denwood's *Tibetan* is a pleasant course book and a highly welcome addition to the textbooks available for learning the language. However, the didactically unfortunate use of transliteration to the exclusion of proper written Tibetan, the aberrant phonology of initials in the dialect upon which the description is based, and the lack of an audio disk are three features which might lead some instructors, including those at Leiden University, to prefer Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje's marvellous 1998 *Manuel de tibétain standard*. I can imagine, however, that in anglophone countries, particularly at an institution where the knowledge of French amongst the students might be deficient, some instructors would prefer Denwood's book. At $99 the book is reasonably priced for a hardbound textbook in its genre.

Despite the three shortcomings mentioned above, Denwood's *Tibetan* has much to recommend itself as a course book for students of the Tibetan language.

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