Reconstructing the history of the Tibetic languages

Based on the divergent functions which I found in Purik [1] (and subsequently many other dialects) for all four stems of transitive Written Tibetan verb paradigms, we may reconstruct [2] a Proto-Tibetan (PT) verb system in which labial-prefixed voiceless onsets (*p-K-*) conveyed a focus on the initial phase of an event (i.e. its instigation), nasal-prefixed voiced onsets (*N-G-*) on its final phase (i.e. its result), and unprefixed and aspirated voiceless onsets (*Kh-*) on the event as such (or the middle phase of an event).[1] PT verb stems were used without a suffix when they described a past event, and with the 'stative' -*s* suffix when they described the result of an event. Furthermore, verb stems appear to have been concatenated without a subordinator when they referred to different facets of an event.

Especially the last two features were crucial for understanding how evidentiality (i.e. verb forms indicating how one knows what is being profiled in a sentence) developed at a later stage of PT [3, 4], around the time the language spread across vast regions of Central Asia and the Himalayas together with the expanding Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries CE). Modern varieties exhibit various ways in which verb concatenations became evidentialized at that time. In some varieties, for instance, if a verb was followed by *song* 'went', it came to mean that the speaker directly witnessed a past event; if it was followed by the -*s* suffix and the verb *dug* 'was there', by contrast, it came to mean that the speaker inferred a past event from its result.

But the PT I reconstructed also sheds light on the origins of this language: The great semantic regularity with which five different onset clusters (*s-K-*, *p-K-*, *Kh-*, *N-G-*, and *z-G-*) appear to have been applied across verb roots suggests that PT developed out of a pidginized form of a West Himalayish language (likely the language of the Zhangzhung polity which Tibetans conquered in the 7th century CE) that was re-expanded into a full-fledged language under the influence of a Gyalrongic substrate [5].

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[2] Zemp, Marius. 2016. A functional reconstruction of the Proto-Tibetan verbal system. *Himalayan Linguistics* 2015(2): 88–135.
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https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opli-2017-0031/html
[4] Zemp, Marius. 2021. Traces of clause-final demonstratives in Old Tibetan. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 60 (New Research on Old Tibetan Studies, Proceedings of the Panel Old Tibetan Studies VI, IATS 2019): 398–438.
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[5] Zemp, Marius. 2018. On the origins of Tibetan. Proceedings of the 51st International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics (2018). Kyoto: Kyoto University.
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[2] This book was shortlisted for the Georg von der Gabelentz Award 2022, see https://linguistic-typology.org/georg-von-der-gabelentz-award/