

Extractive Greed versus Reciprocal Relations: Reflections on Teaching Tibetan Language in the West

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Abstract: This thought-piece aims to highlight the fact that there is a systematic way to study the written Tibetan language by calling into question the common practice of non-Tibetan scholars reading, translating, and analyzing some of the most sophisticated Tibetan Buddhist texts after they have learned Tibetan just for a few years. It also argues that poetry has served as an effective teaching methodology in Tibetan language and grammar for many centuries.

Keywords: Tibetan language, teaching, reciprocity, reflection.

Exploring a larger issue through a story

Sometimes we need a story to get to the bottom of issues, because larger issues always affect the lives of individuals in invisible ways. Hopefully we can turn stories into awareness, and then awareness into more tangible actions. Consider, for example, this story. Ganla was a respected Tibetan scholar, and he had taught Tibetan history at a Tibetan college in India. In 2015, he was invited to teach Tibetan language at a university in the United States. Ganla was

excited at the prospect of pursuing a new career in the States. However, he said that it was truly painful to leave his two young kids and his wife behind, with the hope that they would join him soon. With a heavy heart, Ganla embarked on a new journey with both excitement and uncertainty.

One day in the US, two to three months into his new job, Ganla and I had lunch together. I asked him about his teaching experiences. Ganla said that it was going ok, and then I asked, “How are your students?”

“Students here are very greedy (རྣམ་པ་ཚ་བོ་འདྲག),” Ganla jokingly replied, and then he continued, “Some of my American students have studied Tibetan language for only one to two years, but they want to read and analyze some of the most difficult texts in Tibetan Buddhism. But this is like a toddler wishing to compete in the Olympics. There is a systematic way to study the Tibetan language.”

Ganla had planned to teach Tibetan gradually and systematically, but whenever a student approached him and asked him to explain the meaning of a specific Tibetan text, he had to translate almost everything into English for them. Ganla said, “*They hired me as a Tibetan teacher, but they expected me to translate everything.*” More puzzling for Ganla was that even the beginners wanted to read highly sophisticated Buddhist texts.

Ganla felt that he was not being treated as a teacher of Tibetan language, instead, he felt that he had come all the way from India, leaving his family behind, only to translate for the American students and assist with their research projects. Ganla also didn’t sense students’ love for the Tibetan language, as a lover of Tibetan language would enjoy the sound and feel of carefully crafted turns of phrase or musically arranged Tibetan words on their tongues. Although Ganla said, “Students here are very greedy” somewhat jokingly, what disappointed Ganla the most was his discovery that the students were studying Tibetan as a way to extract something from the Buddhist texts as fast as they could.

As time went by, Ganla refused to translate and honestly told them that there was no way that they could understand these texts without seriously studying Tibetan language first. Students were not happy to hear this truth. Many then dropped his class and complained that Ganla's English was not good enough. By the end of the year, Ganla was told by his department that his position wouldn't be renewed due to low enrollment. Within a year, Ganla had to leave the teaching position.¹

“There is a systematic way to study the Tibetan Language.”

I would like to invite you to explore some of the issues in Ganla's story in regard to how the written “classical” Tibetan language is being taught, how Tibetan studies scholars are being trained, and how Tibetan teachers are being treated in western academic institutions. What is “classical Tibetan”? Why is classical Tibetan not taught in Tibetan schools and monasteries but so valorized in Western academic institutions? Why are most western academic institutions not following the Tibetan language teaching methodologies used by Tibetan schools and students? Yet it is common sense for Tibetan scholars of Tibetan language that there is a systematic and effective way to study the written Tibetan language. *It does not start with reading sophisticated Tibetan Buddhist texts, and the idea that one can read such texts upon learning Tibetan language for one to two, or even three years is inconceivable.*

So, what did Ganla mean when he said that there is a systematic way to study the written Tibetan language? As a Tibetan who studied written Tibetan from an early age, I learned that traditional Tibetan scholars developed sophisticated teaching methodologies. For example, Tibetan grammarians long ago established a tradition of summarizing key principles of Tibetan grammar in poetic verses. Once one has memorized the key principles of Tibetan grammar,

1 I would like to clarify and acknowledge that there are other cases where teachers from Tibet or India have created robust programs for teaching Tibetan language in western academic institutions. However, they are also often expected to assist the research projects of their students and professors by helping with major translations with very little credit.

one can apply them to write proper sentences in Tibetan. Yet in the West, writing in Tibetan is not a major concern for Tibetan studies scholars and students because they can just write in English about Tibetan texts and issues in order to become an expert in Tibetan studies. I wonder if any English Departments in the West would hire someone who could just read old English texts such as those by Shakespeare or Chaucer but who could not converse and write in contemporary English.

One may also argue that foreigners who learn Tibetan only start when they are older than eighteen or twenty so they can't memorize the basic Tibetan grammatical principles in poetic verses. I disagree with this point because when Tibetan students start learning English in high school, they don't attempt to read, let alone analyze some of the most sophisticated texts in the English language upon learning English just for one or two years. They are better off first following the most effective ways to study the English language, and then learning to read simple stories in order to lay a solid foundation.

In English, it is commonly understood that studying the forty-two letter sounds, or what is known as phonics, is the most effective way to crack the alphabetical code of English reading. Many schools in the West are increasingly teaching phonics to their students (both native and nonnative English speakers) from day one. Even high school students struggle with reading if they don't have a good grasp of letter sounds in English. As Ganla pointed out, there is also a systematic and scientific way to effectively study the written Tibetan language. It starts with learning the Tibetan writing system, followed by the vowels, and then memorizing མགོ་ཅན་གསུམ། ར་མགོ་ལ་མགོ། ས་མགོ། and འདྲོགས་ཅན་གསུམ། ཡ་བཏགས། ར་བཏགས། ལ་བཏགས། and finally it gradually moves to studying eight different Tibetan རྩམ་དབྱེ། (cases or 'declensions.')

One great example of a textbook that teaches Tibetan grammar in poetic verses is *Words of Thonmi*² (མོན་མེད་ཞལ་ལུང་།) authored by Tse tan zhabs drung ཚེ་ཏན་མཁས་བླུང་། (1910-1985), and I highly recommend that both Tibetan and non-Tibetan language learners thoroughly study *Words of Thonmi*. One will enjoy

2 Some audio teachings on *Words of Thonmi* are available at <https://ti.tibet3.com/edu/online-course/2018-04-27/27652.html> (accessed in January 2024).

learning both Tibetan grammar and poetry through *Words of Thonmi*, and it will lay a solid foundation for one's future endeavors to read and analyze sophisticated Tibetan Buddhist texts. For English language resources on Tibetan grammar, Tony Duff's *The Great Living Tree; Tibetan Grammars: Beginner's Level Tibetan Grammar Texts by Yangchen Drhpay Dorjie*; and *Tibetan Grammar: Sit's Words: A Medim to Advanced Level Grammar Text* are highly recommended.

Another ignored aspect of Tibetan language in western academic institutions is poetry, which has served as an effective teaching methodology in Tibetan language and grammar for centuries. Both Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, postcolonial scholar of African languages and literatures, and Lama Jabb, Tibetan scholar of Tibetan literature, have pointed out that poetics, the musicality, or stylistic form of any language in practice, is as important as the meanings it codes. If so, how will only training to read and understand the meaning of Tibetan texts allow us to attend to the musicality of Tibetan language and all that entails? Far from just a form of artistic expression, poetic forms have been central to Tibetan language teaching methodologies. For example, Tibetan grammarians long ago established a tradition of summarizing key principles of Tibetan grammar in poetic verses, in the same way that Tibetan Buddhist scholars such as Tsongkapa (1357-1419) or Sapan (1150-1203) summarized their key philosophical findings in poetic verses.

I would also like to point out that the written Tibetan language from as early as the fourteenth century is not very different from today's written Tibetan language. However, in English, the language of Shakespeare and Chaucer is vastly different from contemporary written English. Perhaps the valorization of so-called classical Tibetan in Tibetan Studies in the West is partly an imposition of an understanding of the history of English language.

A Tibetan teacher once jokingly told me that scholars of Tibetan Buddhist Studies in the West know the meaning of terms such as རྩམ་འབྱོར། (hermit) but many don't know the meaning of དཔལ་འབྱོར། (economy). This joke does say something about the Western scholars' deep interests in Buddhist texts and traditions versus their relative lack of concern about the lives of contemporary Tibetan societies and people, e.g., the economy or the wellbeing of Tibetans.

As Sara Jacoby pointed out in this volume, “It is not enough to translate written Tibetan without also learning how to speak it; without this fluency we cannot ask questions of the greatest Tibetan language experts. But this is not the only gain that learning to speak Tibetan for those of us who grow up speaking other languages brings; building relationships with others in and through the Tibetan language reshapes one’s sense of self, time, humor, hospitality, and much more.” It is worth quoting this long passage because Tibetologists or scholars of Tibetan Buddhist studies should recognize their debt to the cultural treasures that they study and should acknowledge an obligation to reciprocate in appropriate ways. Gift and hospitality have to be reciprocated, otherwise, relationships are doomed to collapse.

Heartfelt words are not always sweet

Tibetan scholars and students in Tibet often have a very generous reading of the works of Western scholars on Tibetan Studies, claiming, “Although their Tibetan language skills are limited, they have very good research methodologies.” This is partly true because modern academic criteria expect the scholar to start with solving a specific research problem by focusing on a very specific topic, which has to go beyond just accumulating and reporting facts. Most Western scholars are well trained in this type of academic methodology. However, such academic training is somewhat different from the expectations placed on a great Tibetan scholar (མཁས་དབང་), someone who is well-versed in the Five Major Sciences (inner science, logic, language, medicine, and arts and crafts), and the Five Minor Sciences (synonyms, mathematics and astrology, performance and drama, poetry, and composition).

By focusing on Ganla’s story, I would like to raise more difficult questions with the aim of turning the questions into awareness, and then awareness into more tangible actions. As the Tibetan saying goes, heartfelt words are not always sweet (ཤར་བའི་ཚིག་ལ་སྐྱན་མོ་ཟེད།). Is it academically ethical to expect Tibetan teachers to provide translation services for both rising and established western scholars of Tibet? Can we instead give dual author attribution to any

individual who played a major role in the work of translating Tibetan texts and other materials? Why are scholars of Tibetan studies so passionate about translating Tibetan texts into English but not the other way around? Do they also have a responsibility to contribute to the vitality of the Tibetan language by translating their own works into Tibetan?

In this volume, Tsehuajab Washul raised the importance of translating non-Tibetan academic research methods and writing into Tibetan by inviting both Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholars to create more knowledge in the Tibetan language. I would like to amplify his sentiment by inviting both Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholars to add more vitality to the Tibetan language in this way.

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