Abstract

Reading in Tibetan is notoriously difficult. Native speakers and second language learners alike struggle with literacy and reading comprehension. For a language with such a rich literary heritage, this poses a problem. How can students of Tibetan literature engage with these sophisticated texts when reading fluency is so difficult to obtain? The key, paradoxically, lies not in studying “harder texts” or “more texts”—but in Tibetan speech.

Speech is the foundation of human language. Speech is found in all cultures; writing is not. In those cultures that do write, children are able to speak before they can read and write. And, writing is not but a symbol for speech: graphemes which represent phonemes. Still, “learning to read” in the Tibetan context too often focuses on the skill of decoding (of converting graphemes to phonemes). The missing ingredient has been comprehension—understanding the meaning of the words, not merely reciting their sounds.

Connecting sound to meaning requires using words readers already know. Words they use, in context, in their everyday speech. The way to literacy education (for both native speakers and second language learners) thus lies in a foundation in spoken language. By collecting and analyzing a speech corpus of Tibetan, we can begin to create the reading materials early readers of the Tibetan language need to begin developing reading comprehension...
1. Suffering

Reading in Tibetan is hard, as anyone who has tried learning how can attest to.

Title Slide

From Speaking to Reading

The role of spoken language research in Tibetan language literacy

goo.gl/7hHTnc

1. Suffering

Reading in Tibetan is hard.
An informal survey conducted by Esukhia found that more than 75% of students found Tibetan “harder” than other languages they’d studied.

Nobody polled thought it was “easier”.

If we use the metaphor of mountain climbing, learning how to read Tibetan often involves heading straight towards the peak.

Just as many climbers gave up climbing Everest—and many who didn’t died in the attempt—many readers give up reading Tibetan, and many others fail in the attempt.

How many of you have friends, colleagues, or classmates who have “given up” reading or studying Tibetan language due to the difficulties?
2. Cause

But there are reasons learning Tibetan are hard. And, by gaining an understanding of what those reasons are, we gain an understanding of what methods & materials might help the beginning reader of Tibetan gain a foothold, and wind their way up the mountainside...

2a. Diglossia

The first reason learning to read Tibetan is hard is that there is a big gap between “how Tibetan is spoken” and “how Tibetan is written”. This gap forms in every language, but it is especially pronounced in diglossias—because of the strength & influence of traditional, religious literatures (in this case, the Tibetan Buddhist Canon).
What is a diglossia? A diglossia is when a language has a strong contrast between the language used for formal, prestigious, literary purposes on one hand and informal, everyday, common uses on the other. So while we can distinguish between the kind of language used for speech versus the kind used for writing, both are still living forms used by native speakers.

How did this diglossia form? If we look back in history, the Tibetan writing system was a transparent orthography when it was founded. There was a one-to-one relationship between the sounds of 7th century Tibetan speech (its phonemes) and the symbols of 7th century Tibetan writing (its graphemes).

Of course, we don’t have audio recordings of 7th-century Tibetan, but we have plenty of reason to believe this is true. For one, there are old transliterations of Tibetan into other languages that reflect how it was pronounced; for two, we have our common sense that tells us that making a writing system doesn’t usually include adding purposeful complexities or inconsistencies; and third, as we will see, we have the variety of pronunciations in modern Tibetan languages.
To re-iterate, ‘Standard Tibetan writing’ and ‘Standard Tibetan speech’ are one-in-the-same dialect in the 7th century. Tibetan is written down just as it was spoken. Its spellings, vocabulary, and syntax all reflected how Central Tibetan was being spoken at that time.

But of course, Tibetan changed, as all languages do. However, the language had the backing of the Tibetan Empire. The Empire gave both authority and resources to language work. There are 3 great language reforms recorded in the history of the Tibetan language in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries.

These were official committees organized by the King and they made updates to spellings and vocabulary in the written standard.

From the textual record, we can see the trend of how Tibetan pronunciation begin changing. Specifically, we see “phonological leveling”—where complex clusters of sounds become simpler.

For example, in the 9th century, most cases of the “mya” sound become simply “ma”—“myi”, people, becomes “mi” and “myay”, fire, becomes “may”. In the 10th century, the spelling for 20—“gnyis bcu”—becomes “nyi shu”.
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Changes in Pronunciation (Central Tibetan)

1) Silencing of initial & final sounds in certain consonant combinations
   a) ... as "night" /n-necht/ (Middle English) ⇒ "night" /niht/ (Modern English)
   b) नवाणा/navana/ (Balti) ⇒ नवाणा/navana/ (Central)

2) Palatalization of certain consonant combinations
   a) ... as "got you" becomes "gotcha"
   b) "g" /gya/ (Balti) ⇒ /j/ (Central)

Thus, the transparent orthography of 7th century Tibetan has become an opaque orthography.

Research point: Children learn to read in transparent orthographies faster than children learning to read in opaque ones. For example, German-speaking children learn to read measurably faster than English-speaking children.

Some of the major changes in how Central Tibetan is pronounced over the years includes the silencing of prefix and suffix letters in syllables; the palatalization of some consonant combinations; and tone as a new feature.
Thus, the gap—the diglossia—between "how Tibetan is spoken" and "how Tibetan is written" came about due to natural language change.

But it means that spellings contain letters that aren't spoken; the vocabulary uses words that have fallen into disuse; and the grammar has patterns not found in everyday speech.

These all add up to make the transition from "speaking Tibetan" to "reading Tibetan" difficult.

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<th>2b. Pedagogy</th>
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<td>The second reason learning to read Tibetan is difficult is the pedagogy—or teaching methods—used in formal education.</td>
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The method used in universities — Grammar-Translation — comes from a time and place where it wasn’t even designed to be a way to study language.

Around 1700, the European vernaculars replaced Latin in education, but people continued to study Latin grammar as a sort of mental exercise. Latin, as a living language that was used for *communication* in both speech and writing, was lost.

Due to its failure to impart real language skills to students, the method fell out of favor. Many were designed to take its place in the 1900s, and have found some success; so much so that Grammar-Translation, as a way to study language, has been all but abandoned in serious language programs.

It lives on only in the Classics departments, where it is firmly entrenched for the study of “dead” languages like Latin.
One thing that is clear is that language isn’t simply knowledge of vocab plus grammar rules.

There is a difference between “studying how a bike works” (studying grammar rules of a language) and actually riding a bike (being able to use and understand language).

The reason Grammar-Translation fails to be a real method that imparts real language skills is that language is an interdependent set of skills; in particular, speaking and listening are the basis for reading and writing. So, a method that completely ignores speaking and listening skills doesn’t help a student learn to really read and write.
To explain why, I’d like to try a small experiment. If I say the word, “apple,” to you, what happens? What comes to your mind? The answer is, for most people, the picture or image of an apple.

In other words, our everyday sense experiences are represented in our minds by sense imagery (mental pictures). These are associated with speech sounds, which are represented by graphic symbols (text).
To learn a word, we have to encounter it many times; we need habitual exposure to the sounds in meaningful contexts.

The job of reading, then, is extracting back out from symbol to speech to an actual sense experience—an act of making sense. Words make sense when they literally make sense.

Let’s try an experiment. Close your eyes for me, and I’ll say a few words, and tell me what you experience. Okay? Focus on your experience of the following. Here is the first set of words: “crisp, juicy apple”. Crisp, juicy apple. Got it? Okay, and here is the second set of words: “mushy, wormy apple.” Mushy wormy apple. What was your experience?
3. Cessation:
We can make reading in Tibetan easy

So this brings us to point 3: cessation. It’s possible to make learning to read in Tibetan easy. Or, at least, we can make it easier. We can take what we know about language, what it is, and how it works, and we can take effective pedagogy that is research-based, and apply it to “learning to read in Tibetan”.

4. Path:
Making reading easy means clearing a path

And, we do that by clearing a path through the obstacles we outlined above. We use modern pedagogy — rather than outdated Grammar-Translation — to help us overcome the obstacles of diglossia.
How would we make learning to read in Tibetan easy? By breaking it down into measured, reasonable steps. Instead of expecting beginners to aim directly for the top of the mountain, we give them realistic goals, useful tools, a well-marked pathway, and well-established base camps.

First, we address the lack of SPEECH, SOCIAL, and SENSE in pedagogy by developing a strong foundation in Tibetan speech in social contexts. During this stage, we also focus on addressing diglossia in spelling: we read widely, but we do not “read to learn”—we don’t read in order to learn new words! Instead, at the beginning stages of literacy, we simply “learn to read”. We learn the spelling patterns of speech we already know. We habituate ourselves to these spellings by encountering them many many times in contexts we fully understand.
Step 2:
- Building Vocabulary & Grammar by "Reading to Learn"
- Extensive Reading in vernacularized, leveled literature

Establishing base-camp
(9,000+)

Step 3:
- Fluent reading vocabulary, grammar, discussing, debating, & writing in depth & in

In language, reaching the peak & not giving up.
(13,000 - 20,000+)

Integrating
Leveling Texts

Making reading easy means providing level-appropriate material.
DEMO: Tools for leveling Tibetan learning materials
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goo.gl/7HHTnc