Today, I’d like to discuss the Paradox of a Global, Standard Tibetan.

The Paradox that I’m pointing to here is one of diglossia; that “Standard Tibetan writing” has been a highly conservative, frozen, glacial form of the language since at least the 10th century, whereas “Standard Tibetan speech” is continuing to change, evolve, and flow, diverging further and further from the literary standard.

In other words, if we ask the question, “What is ‘Standard Tibetan’”? We don’t have a single, cohesive answer.

“Standard Tibetan writing” is a different dialect—and perhaps even a different language— than “Standard Tibetan speech”.

The Paradox of a Global Tibetan

Ruination & Revival in Standard Forms of the Tibetan Language

What is “Standard Tibetan Writing”? 
To explore a bit more about this, let’s start our story at the beginning.

Tibetan writing dates to the 7th century CE. The King of Central Tibet, Songtsan Gompo (གཞི་རྒྱལ་པོ་), unifies and conquers and creates the Tibetan Empire.

His empire-building projects include the cultural imports of both Buddhism and a system of writing from India.

According to tradition, a scholar by the name of Tönmi Sambota is sent to India for this exact purpose. He invents the script and codifies the grammar and teaches it to the King upon his return.

The important thing to note is that Tibetan writing at this time is a transparent orthography. There is 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”.

9th century CE

- King Tri Relpachen:
  - myi → mi, mye → me
  - shind-tu → shin-tu
  - de'a-la'a-ni'a → de-la-ni

In the 10th century, the spelling for 20—“gnyis bcu”—becomes “nyi shu”.

10th century CE

- Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo at behest of King of Guge:
  - gnyis-bcu → nyi-shu
To return to our metaphor of water—Tibetan writing sprung up in the 7th century as a transparent orthography. Its symbols accurately reflected how 7th century Tibetan—of Central Tibet, where the King was from and his Empire based—was actually spoken.

This glacial ice was thawed once every 100 years, but, with the fall of the Tibetan Empire, froze around the 10th century.

Meanwhile, however, Tibetan speech has continued flowing for 1,000 years after that...

So what we see now is a modern standard writing that is heavily influenced by the traditional norms that have not been updated since the 10th century. Spelling and vocabulary use are especially affected. Generally, new spellings and new word use in writing is discouraged; when a standard spelling exists, it is used; and, generally, when a standard vocabulary word exists, it prevails.

For a couple quick examples: “child” is pronounced “pu-gu” by speakers of standard speech, but still spelled “phru-gu”; in vocabulary, the standard speech term for “food” is “kha-lag” at a rate of 9:1, but the choice for writing tends toward “za-ma” at a ratio of 3:1.
First, let’s look at a broader question: What is Tibetan speech?

Despite how “Tibetan” is commonly talked about—as “Tibetan”—the truth is that “Tibetan” is not the name of one language, but of a group of languages and dialects.

According to work by Tournadre, there are 25 mutually incomprehensible Tibetan languages. Within these languages, there are more than 200+ distinct dialects.

Generally, however, “Standard Tibetan Speech” is simply equated with the language of Central Tibet.

Tournadre himself writes:

‘Standard Tibetan’ is “the language spoken in Central Tibet in the region of Lhasa, as well as among the diaspora community. [This lingua franca] allows Tibetans living in other regions... to communicate with one another whatever their native dialect.

And, as we saw above, literary norms are tied to a 1,000 year-old dialect of Central Tibetan. Yet Central Tibetan Speech shows
First, let's take a closer look at some of these changes; then, let's explore the claim that Diaspora Tibetan is Central Tibetan. After that, I'll get into the implications that language change—and how the spoken standard is emerging—has for a 'Standard Tibetan'.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in Pronunciation</th>
<th>Central Tibetan</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Silencing of initial &amp; final sounds in certain consonant combinations</td>
<td>- as “knight”</td>
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<td>(Middle English)</td>
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<td>2) Palatalization of certain consonant combinations</td>
<td>- as “got you” becomes “gotcha”</td>
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<td>&quot;bval&quot;</td>
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To the first point, silencing of prefix or suffix letters in syllables. This is a common type of language change across languages; the basic rule is that easy pronunciations are favored over difficult ones—the principle of least effort.

In English, for example, we have lost our initial “k” sound whenever there is a prefix combination “kn-”, as in “knight”, “knife”, and “know”. We know that this “k-” was pronounced, and our evidence includes spelling, loanwords in other languages (the French “canif” for pen-knife), and the fact that this combination still exists in other Germanic languages.

In Tibetan, we see similar silent letters forming as our “kn-” and “-gh” examples from English: The initial “r-” in words like “rgya”, the initial “s-”, and the initial “d-” and “b-” and final “-s” in “dbyangs”. Here we can listen to a language that has retained these sounds—in this case Balti—in comparison to the silent letters in Central Tibetan.

To the second point, some pronunciation changes happen between two sounds and many of these are caused by palatalization. Similar to how English “-gh” become “-f” in some cases, like “laugh” (moving from gutteral to labiodental), sounds also sometimes move from one place in the mouth to another.

Here, the “pya” sound (and other bilabials followed by a “y”) have moved to the palate and are pronounced “cha”.

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1) Silencing of initial letters

a. ... as “knight” /k-neecht/ (Middle English) ⇒ “knight” /nait/ (Modern English)
b. “k” /krol/ (Balti) ⇒ “k” /kral/ (Central)
c. “k” /krol/ (Balti) ⇒ “k” /krol/ (Central)
d. “krol” /byangs/ (Balti) = “krol” /byang/ (Central)

2) Palatalization

a. “k” /krol/ /phyal/ /byal/ (Balti) ⇒ “k” /krol/ /cha/ /jol/ (Central)
b. ... as “got you” becomes “gotcha”
But language change doesn’t just mean loss and simplification. You can imagine that if languages changed naturally, but only got simpler, there would be no language left!

Instead, what generally happens is simplification in one feature drives complexities in other features. In Central Tibetan, tone, as an aspect of accentuation, has evolved. This feature is unique to the Central Tibetan dialects. Here, the first four letters of the alphabet. First, in Amdo pronunciation (no tone), then in Central (with tone).

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.
In general, “Diaspora Speech” is simply equated with “Standard Tibetan”...

However, there are a couple of issues with the view that Central Tibetan simply equals Settlement Tibetan.

While Central Tibetan might be the basis for Settlement Tibetan (due to prestige and early migration), language change is actually accelerated in the Diaspora—the Tibetan settlements of India and Nepal.

This is a result of language & dialect mixing; social & institutional changes; and changes in occupation & physical environment.
To the first point: Remember that there are 25 Tibetan languages that are mutually incomprehensible; yet, because there is a pan-Tibetan cultural identity, these speakers end up mixing in the Diaspora.

So while the first wave of Tibetans to India and Nepal were Central Tibetans, later migrations of Tibetans were not. More recent data suggests that Kham and Amdo speakers actually outnumber Central speakers in the diaspora!

These speakers—even those in schools—are not formally or explicitly taught Central Tibetan speech. Instead, the Standard Speech of the Diaspora is being developed informally and naturally, by real speakers in real contexts, who are adjusting their speech in order to be understood. (This is called Communication Accommodation Theory in the literature; also see Dialect Leveling).

For example: Speakers do not add complexity to their speech if simplicity will do. This means that Diaspora speech does not adhere to the strict tones of Lhasa or Central Tibetan. Common features of phonology across dialects remain (accentuation), but uncommon ones are not always adopted.

In English, for example, I readily switched from saying “pop” to saying “soda” when I moved from the Midwest to the West Coast, just as Settlement Tibetan speakers readily replace “zama” with “khalag”. However, I never did adopt the distinction between “pen” and “pin”—it is one I have trouble hearing, much less reproducing!
Social & Institutional

Intensifying this language and dialect mixing is the fact that migration is often done on an individual basis, and educational opportunities are quite often boarding schools. This leads to a shift towards multi-lingual and dialectical peer groups rather than tightly-knit and monolingual kinship groups.

This results in less cross-generational speech exposure, in a single mother tongue, for children in the Diaspora, whose main conversation partners are other children their own age. This has led to dialects that vary even in the Diaspora itself, from settlement to settlement, and even school to school.

One example of language change happening in the Diaspora: the leveling of verb tense. In many verbs, the present tense form is used in all tenses for speaking, relying on the evidential structure—the helping verbs that follow the main verb—to relay information about time.

For example, in writing: "You ate all the food." but in speaking: "The bread's all been eaten, right?"
Another is the loss of specific verbs in favor of general verbalizers. In other words, favoring verbs like “do” or “make” or (in Tibetan) “send” much more frequently than would be common in Central Tibetan, or another Tibetan language.

For some specific examples, a Diaspora speaker might say “to make a house” ག་ལ་མ་ལ་པ་rather than “to build a house” གདང་ལ་བ་ལ་པ་; “to send a letter” ག་ལ་བ་བ་ལ་བ་rather than “post a letter” ག་ལ་བ་བ་ལ་བ་; or “make separate” rather than “separate” ག་ལ་མ་ལ་པ་ལ་བ་ལ་བ་.

Changes in occupation and environment also affect language use. A Nomad, for example, might have a rich vocabulary of different types of mountains—ones that are covered in boulders, shale, sand, or forest. This vocabulary becomes useless if he opens a cafe in Nepal. He now needs words for different types of coffees and their grinds.

We also see a big shift in traditional Tibetan occupations—Nomad, Farmer, and Monastic—to Secular Education and Business in the diaspora. A child receiving a secular education will learn and use different words than a child in a monastery. And so on! There are very big differences in both the physical and occupational environment of the Tibetan speaker and the Diaspora speaker.
And, while Chinese loanwords are appearing in China, English loanwords appear in the diaspora.

For example: English words used in Diaspora Speech include:
- bill, wechat, computer, sugar, battery, juice, palak, PDF

So a Standard Tibetan Speech evolved rapidly in the Diaspora from dialect leveling. This new dialect—while based on Central Tibetan—is not Central Tibetan. It is a standardized dialect that shows variance in sounds, words, and grammar.

Ex.: Loanwords

Loanwords are being adopted for new technologies, products, and communicative contexts:

- In the Diaspora, these tend to be English, Hindi, or Nepali:
  - Bill, WeChat, computer, sugar, battery, juice, palak (greens), PDF, jola (bag)...
What does this mean for literacy in the Standard Written dialect? Reports from the Diaspora claim very high literacy levels; we also know that education levels in the Diaspora are higher. Certainly the quantity of literacy and education are higher in the Diaspora.

We might expect, then, that the quality of literacy is similarly improved—that a Standard Speech has helped, or at least not hurt, the learning of a Standard Writing.

And yet, this doesn’t seem to be the case. When we measure quality of literacy—that is, when we don’t simply ask “Are you literate or illiterate?”, but measure real reading levels—we come to the surprising conclusion that education levels have no effect on literacy levels!

In other words, there is no correlation between the more and higher education of the Diaspora and real reading comprehension.
So we might ask, are there any other factors that do correlate with higher reading comprehension? And the answer is yes. There are two factors that are predictive of high reading comprehension:

1) Using literary Tibetan to read and write on a regular basis;  
2) And being born and raised in Tibetan-speaking China (rather than in the Diaspora).

In this graph, we can see that, even among educated native speakers, a full 1/3rd admit to never using written Tibetan for anything at all; indeed, the literary language of choice in the Diaspora is English. Young Tibetans born in India who write poetry, publish newspapers, or chat online using text are much more likely to use English than Tibetan.

Meanwhile, if we compare reading levels of native-speaking Tibetans, we see a clear correlation: those who score poorly in reading comprehension tend to be born and raised in the Diaspora; those who score highly in reading comprehension tend to be born and raised in Tibetan-speaking China.
To summarize, the Standard in Tibetan writing does not equal the Standard in Tibetan speaking. There are major differences in spelling, vocabulary, and syntax. In the linguistics literature, this language situation is called **diglossia**.

**Diglossia** leads to low levels of literacy across Tibetan-speaking populations (38% illiteracy in T.A.R., for example).

This diglossia is intensified in the Diaspora—the processes of **natural language standardization** are not governed by rational actors, but by speakers speaking in real communicative contexts. **Dialect leveling** leads to further divergence from the literary standard; and this has a measurable affect on reading comprehension levels across native speakers.

Further, we can extrapolate and say that the microcosm of the Diaspora—less than 1 million of some 6 million total Tibetans—acts as a kind of testing grounds to predict what will happen inside Tibetan-speaking China. As more Tibetans become mobile, and communication takes place across more dialects more often; and as more Tibetan children attend boarding schools inside China; **natural language standardization** in spoken Tibetan will happen in a predictably similar way.

What remains to be seen is if how Tibetan speech communities will respond, and what the future of literacy in the Tibetan language may be...
A. The Problem: "Standard Writing" is not the same as "Standard Speech".

B. What is "Standard Writing"?
   a. Tibetan writing dates to the 7th century, Tibet Empire
   b. It was a transparent orthography (1:1, sound to symbols)
   c. Spelling & Vocabulary updated in 9th, 10th, & 11th centuries
   d. Spelling changes show trends that continue (like phonemic changes)
   e. But, standards freeze; as a result, Tibetan Empire, modern writing remains highly conservative, esp. in spelling & vocabulary.

C. What is "Standard Speech"?
   a. What is "Tibetan Speech"? It is our "Tibetan language"; there are 25 Tibetan languages (that are not mutually intelligible)
   b. "Standard Speech" is equated with one of these languages: Central Tibetan
   c. Central Tibetan was used to new & change since the 19th century
      i. Laos: Silencing of consonant combinations, like how "bright" — "yell"
      ii. "Parallel"; like how "it's in" is pronounced "it's in"
      iii. New Features: Times arise; Embroider verb structures arise.
   d. Consequences: transparent orthography — opaque, negatively affecting literacy.

D. What is "Glimpse Speech"? (A term that has come to change)
   i. Native Language: "Standard Speech" developers realize this mixing of Tibetan languages & dialects; speakers work to understand words & intended meaning.
   ii. Communication accommodation across languages
   iii. Social / Institutional Changes: A move from monolingual; close-knit families — multilingual users groups changes language.
   iv. Occupational / Environment: A move from traditional norms; former/morality — student / business / NGO changes language
   v. These major shifts all affect language sounds, words, & grammar.

E. Consequences:
   i. We expect a positive correlation between grade level & reading/testing; in Diaspora, there is no correlation between education & literacy.
   ii. Instead, 2 things correlate w/ literacy: a) measured age, b) place of birth
   iii. Use of "Dipped Speech" Tibetan report never using written language.
   iv. Good readers tend to be Tibetan; poor readers are India-based.

F. What does that mean for a Global Tibetan?
   a. Crossing languages creates major change in the lives of people; affects the way, when, where, when, and why of language
   b. Standardization as a natural process, is language change; for Tibetans, this intensifies diglossia, widening the gap between "how Standard Tibetan is spoken" and "how Standard Tibetan is written" — paradox of two "Standard Tibetans".
   c. What will happen as Tibetan-speaking peoples, more and more frequently, cross linguistic barriers inside Tibetan-speaking China?