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REVIEW ARTICLE

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BOOK REVIEWS

A History of Sanskrit Grammatical Literature in Tibet.
Vol. 2., Assimilation into indigenous scholarship
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The book under review is the second volume of Pieter Verhagen’s (PV) fundamental study on the Sanskrit grammatical literature in Tibet. While the first volume, Transmission of the canonical literature (published by Brill in 1994; see The Tibet Journal 21, No. 4 (1996), pp.75-76) deals with the texts belonging to the second of the two Indo-Tibetan Buddhist canons, bsTan 'gyur, the present book surveys the non-canonical grammatical literature, which includes (i) revisions of canonical texts, (ii) translations of texts which do not form part of bsTan 'gyur, and (iii) original Tibetan works.

The volume consists of two main chapters and a number of appendices. Chapter 1 offers a complete survey of 61 non-canonical grammatical texts written in Tibet. The history of the grammatical literature is divided into three periods, from the ninth century AD onwards: (section 1.1) ‘pre-classical’ (9th–10th c.), (1.2) ‘classical’ (11th–14th c.) and (1.3) ‘post-classical’ (15th–20th c.). Within each period, the texts are further grouped into two categories, the canonical (in section 3 this place is occupied by ‘revisions of canonical translations’) and the extra-canonical. This makes the title of the chapter ("Indigenous and extra-canonical Tibetan literature of the Sanskrit grammar") somewhat confusing and requires a terminological remark. In fact, “and” should be omitted since it may create the wrong impression that the main subdivision is one between the indigenous and the extra-canonical texts. This is in fact not the case of course: all grammatical works in question are (at least partly) indigenous and do not belong to the canon in the strict sense of the word. Although the texts discussed in sections 1.1.1 and 1.2.1 are called ‘canonical’, the distinction (which, apparently, cannot be drawn with accuracy in some cases) is rather between the texts which bear some relation to the canon2 and those which are more independent of it. Perhaps a more appropriate terminological distinction would be that between para-canonical and extra-canonical works, both opposed to the canonical texts in the strict sense of the term (these texts are the subject of the first volume).

The pre-classical period includes 6 texts, beginning with gNas brgyad chen po 'rtsa ba (a synoptic discussion of eight, rather randomly selected, linguistic notions, such as types of compounds and nominal cases, dating from the early ninth century). The classical period encompasses 15 text plus 5 texts unavailable to the author and therefore only mentioned but not described. The post-classical period covers 40 texts: 15 revisions of canonical translations and new translations and 25 works originally written in Tibetan.

The description of each text opens with their Tibetan and Sanskrit title and contains information about the authorship and summary of content. Some texts, foremost those which are particularly relevant for the analysis of the Tibetan grammatical tradition and/or have been the subject of PV’s separate research, are described and characterized in extenso. In some case, the author provides large quotations of relevant fragments, commenting upon the most interesting theoretical points. Thus, nearly ten pages (pp.19-28) are devoted to the well-known Indo-Tibetan lexicon Bye brag tu rtogs byed chen po (Skt. Mahāvyutpatti). The author provides the complete quotation of the section on the grammatical terminology and the declension paradigm of Skt. vykṣa- ‘tree’ with its Tibetan equivalents, a classification of terms and comments on the general features of the grammatical terminology in this text, noticing its rather unbalanced character. 16 pages (pp.37-53) are occupied by the description of an important text of the classical period, sMra sgo, presumably written by Smṛtijñanakīrti.
PV discusses, in particular, the problem of its authorship, indigenous character (translation or original text?) and relation to the indigenous grammatical literature. On the basis of the analysis of its content, PV offers a plausible and attractive hypothesis that sMra sgo incorporates "two discrete segments: <...> (1) the triad yi ge'i tshogs, min gi tshogs and tshig gi tshogs", translated from Sanskrit (and then perhaps edited) by Smrţiţhanakārī, and (2) an indigenous text on the grammar of the Tibetan particles written by the same author (pp.43-44).

Quite extensive is also the discussion of the post-classical extra-canonical text Legs par sbyar ba'i sgra'i hstan bcos tsanda pa'i rnam bsdad brda sprod gYun lugs rgya mtshor 'jug cii legs bsdad rin chen 'dren pa'i gru rdziis by Si tu Chos kyi 'byun gnis, dating to the middle of the 18th century (pp.169-180), which is a detailed commentary on Ĉandravyā-karaṇā, containing a large amount of information on the history of the Sanskrit grammar. PV gives a detailed survey of this treatise and, on the basis of it, reconstructs a supposed set of works which might be available to its author.

Chapter 2, "Indic models of description in Tibetan indigenous grammar", focuses on the ways of assimilation of the descriptive techniques developed within the Sanskrit grammatical tradition to the needs of the Tibetan grammar. Section 2.1 contains general remarks on the structural methods and terminology developed in Tibet in the course of the adaptation of the Sanskrit grammatical works. It opens with a convenient summary of the terminology, providing in fact a Tibetan-Sanskrit (-English) linguistic dictionary, and then briefly discusses the most important features of the Sanskrit grammatical works which are relevant for the Tibetan grammatical tradition. These includes śūtra style ("the brevity and virtual incomprehensibility without the assistance of additional exegesis", p.223) and the importance of the ordering of rules etc., briefly mentioning main differences between the two traditions.

In the next two section PV concentrates on two particular topics which are quite felicitously chosen for illustration of the methods of the Tibetan grammarians, phonological description and case grammar. Section 2.2, "Phonological description", opening with a useful terminological list, offers an excellent survey and explanation of the phonological methods used by Tibetan grammarians (for instance, phoneme ordering and referring to phoneme by covert labels). Section 2.3 deals with one of the most elaborated upon topics of the Indo-Tibetan grammatical tradition, case grammar. As is well-known, the Sanskrit kārakas represent one of the most impressive achievements of the Old Indian science, essentially anticipating the apparatus of semantic roles, developed by the European linguistics as late as by the middle of 20th century. PV pays special attention to the peculiarities of the treatment of case and case syntax in the Tibetan tradition, as compared to the Sanskrit one. Thus, he notes a "somewhat unusual treatment of Sanskrit case grammar <...> in the gNas bgyad chen po" (an early pre-classical text) and commentary on it, gNas bgyad kyi 'grel pa. In particular, in the fact that the first and third kārakas (nö-bo'i tshig and byed pa'i tshig) are both rendered as 'agent' (accordingly, PV tentatively translates them as 'subject'/'agent'?) and 'instrument'/'agent'?), the author sees confusion of interpretations, which is said to result from the insufficent competence in Sanskrit in this early period of Sanskrit studies in Tibet (p.289). A few pages later, PV arrives at similar judgements for two texts which belong to the most important treatises of indigenous Tibetan grammar, Sum cu pa and Tûgs kyi 'jug pa, which, according to the author, "do not clearly and explicitly differentiate between 'agent' and 'instrument'" (p.294). Such conclusions may be unjustified, however. It seems that the author's discussion of the issues of case grammar, particularly of the agent/instrument distinction, would greatly benefit from turning to matters of ergativity in Tibet—of which we find no mention in the chapter. In particular, an ergative perspective might be a clue to the interpretation of the above-mentioned first and third kārakas nö bo'i tshig and byed pa'i tshig in gNas bgyad chen po and gNas bgyad kyi 'grel pa. It might be claimed that perhaps, the former refers to the subject (agent) of an intransitive clause (thus corresponding to the absolutive case), while the latter may represent both the instrument and
agent of a transitive clause (both expressed by the ergative-instrumental case postposition kyis/gyis/gis/-s). A similar solution might be possible, mutatis mutandis, for *Sum cu pa* and *r'iags kyi 'jug pa*. Although in Pāñinian Sanskrit we do not find exact structural parallels to the Tibetan ergative construction, late (post-Vedic) Sanskrit does attest predecessors of the later (Middle and New Indo-Aryan) ergative pattern, constructions with passive perfect participles in -ta/-na- and instrumental of the agent, starts to acquire some subject properties, thus being a half-way subject. In general, an important task (which of course goes beyond the scope of the book under review) would be to clarify how the Tibetans established the relationships between their standard ergative pattern and constructions with the absolutive object in the clause-initial position (which, as Tillemans and Herforth (1989: 83-91) argue, may be the analogue of the passive construction in the nominative-accusative languages), on the one hand, and three Sanskrit patterns, standard nominative-accusative, standard passive (e.g. with the passive presents with the suffix -ya-) and late Sanskrit ‘pre-ergative’ construction with participles in -ta/-na- and instrumental of the agent, on the other.

There are eleven appendices. The first ten represent a selection of grammatical texts. Appendices A and B are Tibetan lists of some relevant grammatical works. C through F, and I, pertain to case grammar. C is a selection of the relevant fragments from Sanskrit texts, Pāñini’s Asādhyāyī, Čāndrā and Kātāntra; others are quotations from Tibetan text). G, H (which contain full texts of two grammatical works, *brDa sprod pa'i gzün gi sīnī po gsal ba rai 'grel brda sprod sīnī po ches ches gsal ba dan bcas pa* by Dpañ B lo gos bstan pa and *Legs sbyar gcen pa'i gnad bsdus mgnil pa'i leags sgrots rai groi* by *Jam dbyaṅs bṣad pa*’i) and J are of more general nature. The last appendix, K, contains *addenda et corrigenda* to the first volume of the handbook (Verhagen 1994).

The volume concludes with an ample bibliography (about 440 titles) and 6 indexes. These include indexes of personal names, terms and titles for both Sanskrit and Tibetan. Unfortunately, there is no index of linguistic notions and (English) terms discussed—which would be of great help for any historian of linguistics.

Like the first volume, the book under review belongs to the most important monographic studies of the last few decades on the Indo-Tibetan grammatical tradition. PV’s survey conveniently summarizes the relevant literature, being rich in detailed discussions and comments. Together, the two volumes form an impressive academic achievement, a complete analytical survey of the Sanskrit grammatical literature as adopted in Tibet. This is an excellent guide for a study of the Tibetan grammatical tradition, which helps one to find his or her way in the ocean of the original Tibetan texts and secondary literature. The book is highly recommended for researchers of the Indo-Tibetan grammatical tradition and for Tibetan and Sanskrit scholars in general.

Notes

1. I am much indebted to I.V. Manevskaia (St. Petersburg/Leiden) for valuable remarks and comments on an earlier draft of this review.

2. For the classical period, these are two texts “which are included in the *bsTan ‘gyur*, but which are, <...> [as PV argues], at least in part written in Tibetan, not translated into Tibetan” (p.37). For the post-classical period, these are both revisions of canonical translations and “translations bearing no relation to the canon” (p.102). The relation to the canon of the four ‘canonical’ texts of the pre-classical period (pp.6-28) is not sufficiently explained.


References


—Leonid Kulikov