

Tibetan *e*-grade present stems

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Tibetan verbs with the root vowel *-a-* exhibit several ablaut patterns in their stem variations. Traditionally, these stem alternations are seen as recent developments, not valuable for reconstructing the Trans-Himalayan verbal system (Coblin 1976). Some verbs retain *-a-* in the present (e.g., √cag break', pres. *hchag*), others have *-e-* (e.g., √bya do', pres. *byed*), and some *-o-* (e.g., √sad kill', pres. *gsod*). The traditional analysis attributes present *-e-* to a suffix *-d* (*byad > *byed*) and present *-o-* to a prefix *g-* (*gsad > *gsod*). I previously rejected this explanation for presents in *-o-* (Hill 2019b); here I address those in *-e-*.

e-grade presents and the suffix *-d*

The most straightforward cases of present stem *-e-* ablaut occur with verb roots in open syllables or with coronal finals.

- *byed, byas, bya, byos* 'do'
- *skyel, bskyal, bskyal, skyol* 'convey, escort'
- *sel, bsal, bsal, sol* 'clear'¹

Coblin proposes that the *-d* seen most clearly in *byed* gave rise to the *-e-* ablaut in general (1976, 53-53). He maintains that after coronals this suffix should be preserved as the so called *da-drag*, although his own concrete hunt for such *da-drags* is only preliminary. After *-m*, *-b*, and *-g* his ablaut causing *-d* suffix manifests as *-s*.

- *sems, bsams, bsam, soms* 'think'

¹ This verb has an alternative present stem *gtsal*.

- *hgebs, bkab, dgab, khob* ‘cover’
- *hgegs, bkag, dgag, khogs* ‘block’
- *sñegs, bsñags, bsñag, sñogs* ‘chase, pursue’ (Hill 2014)
- *gśegs, —, —, śog* ‘go’ (ibid.)

Verb roots ending in velar nasals fall into two subpatterns. In the first, the velar nasal is fronted to a dental.²

- *hdren, drañs, drañ, droñs* ‘pull’³
- *len, blañs, blañ, loñs* ‘take’

In the second, the velar nasal remains; only one verb partakes in this second pattern.

- *hgeñs, bkañ, dgañ, khoñs* ‘fill’

Coblin explains the first pattern with a sound change **nd > nd* and the second with the suggestion that “velar initials may have arrested” this change (1976, 59).

As a rule of thumb, when we witness the realization of a grammatical category in both a transparent and an opaque form, the transparent form is analogical and the opaque form inherited; consider the plurals of ‘spouse’ (spouses) and ‘louse’ (lice). On the basis of this principle, we may suspect that the present *hgeñs* is analogical. Indeed, because Dempsey’s law changed inherited **-en* into *-in* and inherited **-eg* into *-ig* (Hill 2019a, 12-13, §14), the present *hgeñs* ‘fill’ cannot be inherited

² This appearance of root *-ñ* as stem *-n* also happens in verbs with *i-u* ablaut, for example *hbyin, phyuñ, dbyuñ, phyuñs* ‘withdraw’ (Coblin 1976, 58), but this phenomenon is not under investigation here.

³ Bielemeier (2004) explains this ablaut pattern as independent coincidental suppletions. This explanation is unconvincing. First, suppletions are typically obvious at inspection (*good, better; go, went; hgro, soñ* ‘go’; *hoñ, śog* ‘come’). Second, no force is at hand to account for these suppletions conspiring to take the guise of a pattern. Why do we see the same root initial consonant among the stems of a suppletive paradigm or the same vowel grade in the present stem across verbs? Bielemeier proposes that the written language and Amdo dialects share these odd suppletions whereas the pattern of independent verbs seen in other dialects is original. To me it is obvious that the reverse is the case, just as *drag, draw, and draft* descend from the same Old English verb. In presuming Western dialects are most archaic Bielemeier has applied Teeter’s law.

and neither can *hgegs* ‘block’, *sñegs* ‘chase, pursue’, or *gśegs* ‘go’ (see Hill 2014). These presents could however easily have been remodeled on the basis of *hgebs*, *bkab*, *dgab*, *khob* ‘cover’ or the like, i.e. *bkab* : *hgebs* :: *bkañ* : X, X = *hgeñs*.⁴ In other words, there is no need to presume that velar initials blocked Coblin’s proposed change *ñd > nd. Whether this change took place at all is the question that next demands our attention.

The -n in such presents as *hdren* ‘pull’ and *len* ‘take’ is surely explainable ultimately as an assimilation of an original velar nasal to something, but there is room to doubt whether the -d of *byed* ‘do’ is the culprit. Coblin himself points out that his e-grade triggering suffix is missing in the following verbs:

- *skem*, *bskams*, *bskam*, *skoms* ‘dry’⁵
- *ltem*, *bltams*, *bltam*, *ltoms* ‘fill’⁶
- *hdem*, *bdams*, *gdam* ‘choose’⁷

I am able to add the following two verbs, for which the lexicographical tradition strongly endorses the absence of a final -s.⁸

- *lteb*, *bltabs*, *bltab*, *ltobs* ‘fold’

⁴ As the present of ‘fill’ the lexicographical tradition is divided on whether there is an -s in this form, but the older sources point more strongly in favor of *hgeñ* (Hill 2010, 48). However, this question is not exactly germane since the form is in any case not inherited, and *hdem* would have served just as well as *hgebs* as an analogical model.

⁵ In fact, as discussed below, I think the inherited present of this verb is *skyems* ‘thirst’, a fact that helps Coblin, since *skyems* ends with an -s.

⁶ Few of the sources collected in Hill 2010 give this verb and those that do instead offer the presents *ltam* and *ltoms*.

⁷ The lexicographical tradition wavers between *hdems* and *hdoms* as the imperative (Hill 2010). The *Wörterbuch der tibetischen Schriftsprache* (Franke et al. 2005–) gives only lexicographical sources for *hdems*, but has some textual attestations for *hdoms*; I would have expected **doms* but this form is unattested.

⁸ A reviewer proposes that these five verbs gained their present -e- vowel on analogy with *byed* (presumably after post-consonantal -d and -s had merged). Although not quite formalizable as four-part analogy, this explanation is possible. Nonetheless, the evidence of *gsin* and *ldig*, discussed anon, still suffice to disprove that -d caused the -e- ablaut.

- *rdeb, brdabs, brdab, rdobs* ‘slam’⁹

As noted by Uray (1953, 44), final *-s* is orthographically unstable and lexicographical sources differ haphazardly over whether *-s* appears in a particular present stem. This instability cuts in two directions. On the one hand, it means that Coblin’s association of *e*-grade with a final suffix *-d* (manifesting as *-s* after *-g*, *-b*, and *-m*) cannot be considered secure. But, on the other hand, the potential counterevidence to his generalization is likewise insecure. What the discipline requires is a comprehensive study of present stem final *-d* (*-s*) on the basis of as large as possible corpus of Old Tibetan documents.

We find further evidence against crediting *e*-grade to the influence of *-d*, by turning again to verbs with final velar roots. I have argued that there are cases where inherited presents in *-ig* (< *-eg) and *-in* (< *-eñ) are discernible (Hill 2014).

- *gsin* (→ *sen*),¹⁰ *bsaṅs, bsaṅ, soṅs* ‘cleanse, purify’
- *ldig* (→ *ldeg*), *blags* ‘teeter, incline’

We are now in a position to recognize *hgyin*, with the specialized meaning of ‘make oneself puffed up’ as the inherited present stem that analogical *hgeṅs* ‘fill’ replaced.

- *hgyin* (→ *hgeṅs*), *bkaṅ, dgaṅ, khoṅs* ‘fill’

The three ancient *e*-grades *gsin*, *ldig*, and *hgyin* escaped leveling through semantic specialization. None of the three ends in *-s*, and this fact strongly suggests that this suffix played no role in triggering *e*-ablaut.

⁹ Following the logic of Hill 2023, it would be easy to argue that the inherited paradigm of this verb is *sdeb, brdabs, brdab, sdobs*, but since the lexicographical tradition is unanimous that *sdeb* ‘conjoin’ has no final *-s*, this modification will not strengthen Coblin’s case.

¹⁰ Note that the inherited stem *gsin*, along with *gségs*, —, —, *śog* ‘go’, disproves Coblin’s idea that *g-* induces *-o*-ablaut (see Hill 2019b, 234).

e-grade and palatalization of the root initial

I have argued that some honorifics also began life as inherited e-grade presents (Hill 2022).

- *skyems* (→ *skem*),¹¹ *bskams* ‘dry up’¹²
- *mkhyen* (→ *mkhan*), *mkhan* ‘know’ (Hill 2022)

The form *hgyiñ* conforms with the pattern of palatalization after velars also seen in *skyems* and *mkhyen*.

The -y- that accompanies the present stem vowel -e- in such examples is doubtless ancient, and one may wonder whether in some verbs it analogically spread throughout the four stems. In particular, perhaps *skyel* ‘convey, escort’ is an inherited present stem etymologically related to *bskal* ‘be long’ (of time or distance).¹³

In my previous treatment of the forms *gsiñ* and *ldig*, I made no mention of the failure of palatalization in these forms (Hill 2014). For *ldig* this failure is a consequence of the fact that Benedict’s law (*ly > ž-) preceded Dempsey’s law (*-eg > -ig) (Hill 2019a, 15, §15d). An analogous explanation is also available for *gsiñ*, which avoided the secondary Tibetan palatalization because at the time this change took place the *s-* appeared before an -e- and not before an -i- (Hill 2019a, 16-17, §16 and 234-234, §219). The following verbs, mentioned above, show that -e- did not induce palatalization in a dental root initial.

- *ltem*, *bltams*, *bltam*, *ltoms* ‘fill’
- *hdem*, *bdams*, *gdam* ‘choose’
- *lteb*, *bltabs*, *bltab*, *ltobs* ‘fold’
- *rdeb*, *brdabs*, *brdab*, *rdobs* ‘slam’

¹¹ Following the logic of Hill 2023, one can further propose that the inherited verb was *skyems*, *brkams*, *brkam*, *skoms*, which is reflected in the dictionaries with the three separate verbs *skyems*, *skem*, and *rkam*.

¹² Compare *skom*, *skoms* ‘be thirsty’.

¹³ The fact that the latter verb has only the one form and that it is intransitive despite having the *b-* prefix characteristic of transitives, gives succor to this suspicion. In view of the unpalatalized Kurtöp cognate *bù* ‘do’ for Tibetan *byed* ‘do’, one may also speculate that in this verb too the medial -y- analogically spread from the present stem to the rest of the paradigm.

On the question of whether *-e-* palatalized labial initials, I find little relevant evidence, but perhaps the noun *(h)phyen* ‘flatulence’ can be seen as the inherited present of *hphen*, *hphaŋs*, *hphañ*, *phoñs* ‘expel’.

Thus, we can conclude that at an early date *-e-* induced palatalization of velars but not of *s-* or *l-* or dentals.

Conclusions

This paper challenges the traditional attribution of the *e*-grade to a suffix *-d*. Through an examination of the relevant verb forms and the interplay of sound change and analogy, it becomes clear that the *e*-grade presents and the suffix *-d* are originally distinct phenomena.

Most velar final *e*-grade presents are analogical renewals (*hgeñs*, *sñegs*, *gśegs*) but some inherited *e*-grade presents (*gsiñ*, *ldig*, *hgyiñ*) avoided analogical leveling due to semantic specialization.

The *-e-* of the *e*-grade palatalized root initial velars (*skyems*, *mkhyen*, *hgyiñ*), but not *l-*, *s-* or root initial dentals. It is unclear what happened with palatals, but if the proposal that *(h)phyen* ‘flatulence’ is the inherited present of *hphen*, *hphaŋs*, *hphañ*, *phoñs* ‘expel’ has any merit, this etymology would suggest that labials did palatalize.

Returning to the change of *ñ* to *n* seen in *hdren* and *len*, as far as the current discussion allows for comment, all that can be said is that whatever factor operated to change *-ñ* to *-n* in these words, its operation preceded Dempsey’s law.

Tentatively, I propose that the *-y-* in the paradigms of *skyel*, *bskyal*, *bskyal*, *skyol* ‘see off’ and *byed*, *byas*, *bya*, *byos* ‘do’ were analogically extended from the present stem throughout the paradigm. I have also remarked in passing that the two verbs *rdeb*, *brdabs*, *brdab*, *rdobs* ‘slam’ and *sdeb*, *bsdebs*, *bsdeb*, *sdobs* ‘adjoin’ are specializations of an inherited paradigm *sdeb*, *brdabs*, *brdab*, *sdobs*.

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