

“Studying Tibetan is practicing the Dharma!”

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF TIBETAN SYLLABLES

- 𑄂 BA Prefix
- 𑄃 SA Superscript
- 𑄄 GA Root Letter
- 𑄅 RA Subscript and Vowel
- 𑄆 BA Suffix
- 𑄇 SA Second Suffix

PHONETICS: DROOP
TRANSLITERATION: BSGRUBS

Figure 1

THE FOURTEEN RA-TA'S

𑄄	KA RA-TA	TRA
𑄃	K'A RA-TA	T'RA
𑄄	GA RA-TA	DRA
𑄅	TA RA-TA	TRA
𑄃	T'A RA-TA	T'RA
𑄄	DA RA-TA	DRA
𑄅	NA RA-TA	NA
𑄄	PA RA-TA	TRA
𑄃	P'A RA-TA	T'RA
𑄄	BA RA-TA	DRA
𑄅	MA RA-TA	MA
𑄄	SHA RA-TA	SHA
𑄅	SA RA-TA	SA
𑄅	HA RA-TA	HRA

Figure 2

Subscripts Concluded and Word Order

By David Curtis

We could say that learning to read the script is to studying Tibetan what completing the preliminary practices is to practicing the Dharma. Learning to read the Tibetan script, however, usually takes a person just forty or fifty hours. And along with learning the script, one learns some fundamentals of the grammar, some basic vocabulary, and how to use the dictionary. This is the subject of this series of articles.

With this column we will complete the fourth of the seven stages on the journey of learning to read Tibetan: the subscripts. We will look briefly at how words are put together to form phrases.

Figure 1 re-introduces our paradigm word. It is made up of the seven elements, the learning of which comprises the seven stages of learning to read. It is a word pronounced *droop* and means “accomplished or finished.” Looking at *droop*, we see the root, the vowel, and the superscript – all elements we have presented in previous articles. We also see the subscribed *RA*, which we will now discuss.

The RA-TA Subscript

The last of the four subscripts or letters that can be written beneath other letters are the RA-TAs. *RA* can be subscribed under four consonants in the form of a slash. This slash is the final stroke of the *RA* consonant itself. When we studied the superscripts, we saw that when it is written above other consonants as a superscript, the *RA* is written in the form of the top half of

the consonant *RA*. Now, here, when it is subscribed, it occurs as the bottom half of the *RA*. *RA* is the first letter in the seventh row of the thirty consonants.

If we begin by consulting *Figure 2* (the Fourteen RA-TAs), we can see that *RA* can be subscribed beneath each of the four consonants of the third row of the syllabary. We begin here because the changes caused by the subscript *RA* are most logical when applied to the consonants of this, the *TA* row. When we subscribe *RA* beneath a *TA*, we are creating the combination of a *TA* sound with a *RA* sound. This is not unlike the combination of “t” and “r” in an English word such as *trail*. Similarly the combination of the *TA* sound plus the *RA* sound in Tibetan makes the sound *TRA*. This combination is spelled like all the other stacked letter combinations – from the top down: *TA RA-TA=TRA*.

The second letter in the *TA* row is the breathy, high *T'A*. This *T'A* in combination with a subscribed *RA* is spelled *T'A RA-TA=T'RA*, so pronounced with strong aspiration or breathiness. The third letter in the *TA* row, the *DA*, when combined with a *RA-TA*, is spelled *DA RA-TA=DRA*. And the last letter in the row, *NA*, when combined with a *RA-TA*, is spelled *NA RA-TA=NA*. For each of the above combinations, the pronunciation is given in bold.

Although in some cases the logic is not transparent, it can be seen that when referring to the consonants

above the dividing line in the syllabary, if a letter from the first column takes a RA-TA, it will be pronounced **TRA**, a letter from the second column will be **T'RA**, and one from the third, **DRA**. For the fourth column letters, the RA-TA does not affect pronunciation.

Nor does it for the *SHA* or *SA*. However the *HA* with a subscribed RA-TA is pronounced **HRA**.

The Fourteen RA-TAs take some practice, but recognizing these patterns can make learning them easier. Like the other subscripts, any of the RA-TAs can be seen with vowel signs and or superscripts. Now that we have presented them, we have completed our discussion of the Four Subscripts.

Of the seven elements of Tibetan (the roots, suffixes, second suffixes, vowels, subscripts, prefixes, and superscripts), we have now discussed four of them, namely the roots, the vowels, the superscripts, and the subscripts.

Word Order

Before going on to discuss the seven elements further, I would now like to talk a bit about word order in Tibetan. Most, if not all, languages of the world can be divided into two categories in terms of their word order: Subject-Verb-Object languages or Subject-Object-Verb languages.

English is a Subject-Verb-Object language. We can see this in the simple sentence "She reads French." *She* is the subject, *reads* the verb, and *French* the object. Tibetan, however, like Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and German, as well as many other languages, is a Subject-Object-Verb language. So in Tibetan the word order would be *She French reads*.

A further difference between English and Tibetan is that in Tibetan the adjectives are often

found after the word they modify. So, whereas in English we say *hot tea*, in Tibetan we would find *tea hot*.

Also, in Tibetan, that which we call a preposition in English comes *after* the word it modifies, so we call it a postposition. In English we say "in water," whereas in Tibetan we would find "water in." Look to *Figure 3* to see some examples of Tibetan word order using simple vocabulary which employs the word elements we have studied so far.

In example (a) we see that the word order is noun-adjective-preposition. As already noted, the adjective will come after the modified word in Tibetan (making the preposition in effect a postposition).

In example (b) the word order is noun-preposition-noun-adjective. So we have a preposition/postposition after a noun (making a prepositional phrase) and then a noun followed by an adjective. This word order exhibits an important feature of Tibetan syntax: modifiers tend to follow the word they modify. Also we notice there is nothing in the Tibetan phrase pluralizing the word *horse*: in English the translation reads as *five horses*. In Tibetan, if it is clear from the context that a word is plural, there is no need to indicate a word's plurality. In contrast, in English a noun must agree in number with its adjective. Furthermore, we find no word in the Tibetan for *the*. Articles, too, are unnecessary in Tibetan. In fact there is no word for *the* in Tibetan. Some people say that because of these types of language features, Tibetan is minimalist when it comes to grammar.

In our next article we will present the fifth in the seven stage process of learning to read Tibetan. We are getting closer to finishing our "preliminaries" in Tibetan and to being able to read. Our goal is in sight. ☉

དཀྱིལ་མོར་

KYL KHOR

The common Dharma term *mandala* is one of several words that beginning Dharma students think is Tibetan. But it is actually a Sanskrit term which the Tibetans translated as *kyil khor*. The two Tibetan words that make up this term are *kyil* which means *center* and *khor* (pronounced "core") which means *periphery* or *surroundings*.

Not unlike many important Dharma concepts, *kyil khor* has several layers of meaning. A *mandala* or *kyil khor* usually refers to a deity and the dimension or world of that deity. *Kyil khor* also refers to something circular such as the sun or moon disk that deities are often described as sitting upon.

EXAMPLES OF WORD ORDER IN TIBETAN PHRASES

Within a Tibetan phrase, each word is spelled out separately. Each word's pronunciation then appears in boldface. Once each word has been spelled, the entire phrase is then pronounced

a. སྐྱིལ་མོར་

SA GA-TA GA NARO GO, DA DRENGBOO DAY, LA GO DAY LA (for the complete pronunciation of the word)

GO	DAY	LA
door	that	in

In that door

b. རིལ་མུ་ལྔ་

RA GIGOO RI, LA, RA-TA TA, LA NGA-TA NGA RI LA TA NGA (for the complete pronunciation of the word)

RI	LA	TA	NGA
mountain	on	horse	five

five horses on the mountain

Figure 3

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