

Suffixes and Finding the Root Letter of a Syllable

By David Curtis

Our journey learning to read the Tibetan script continues. We will have reached this preliminary goal when we have learned the seven elements that are the possible building blocks of any Tibetan word or syllable. These elements are the root, suffix, second suffix, vowel, subscript, prefix, and superscript. In previous articles, we have presented the roots, the vowels, the superscripts, the subscripts and the prefixes. Five of the seven elements are thus completed. Now, on to the sixth element – the suffixes! In this article we will also look at the rules for finding the root of any syllable.

Suffixes

Ten of the thirty consonants can also be suffixes. The Tibetan term for suffix is *jen juke*. It is comprised of the two terms *je* meaning “after” and *juke* meaning “enter.” (When put together, these two syllables come to be pronounced *jen juke* following a pronunciation rule explained in the last article.) Suffixes are those consonants that can occur after the root letter of a syllable. The ten suffixes are GA, NGA, DA, NA, BA, MA, AH, RA, LA, and SA (see Figure 1). Six of the ten operate in a very straightforward manner and affect the pronunciation of the syllable to which they are attached in very much the same way as a final consonant on an English word does. The remaining four suffixes cause special pronunciation changes to the vowel of the syllable, and we will discuss them in a subsequent article.

The Six Suffixes That Do Not Cause Pronunciation Changes

Now I will explain how six of the consonants – GA, NGA, BA, MA, AH, and RA – function as suffixes of a Tibetan syllable. See Figure 2 for the Tibetan spelling, pronunciation, and English translation of each of the following example words.

GA as a suffix is sometimes pronounced as a final K on the syllable, is sometimes pronounced as a final G, or sometimes it causes a glottal stop and is itself not pronounced at all. These variations depend on the dialect of Tibetan being spoken. For now it will be fine if we pronounce it as a final *k* would be in English. In the Tibetan word *DAK*, which means “pure,” we have the root letter DA followed by the suffix GA. The vowel and the tone of the DA are sounded as usual and the suffix GA adds a K sound to the end, so the resulting pronunciation is “dak.”

NGA when pronounced alone is the most difficult consonant for native English speakers to articulate. When it is a suffix, however, NGA is very easy because it is pronounced just like a final *ng* in an English word. For example, if we have the root letter RA followed by the suffix NGA, the resulting syllable would be *rang* – pronounced just like the English word “wrong.”

The suffix BA is pronounced like a final *b* or *p* in English. I suggest going with *b* at this point. A syllable with the root letter YA followed by suffix BA would be pronounced “yob,” rhyming with the English word “rob.”

THE TEN SUFFIXES		PRONOUNCING THE SUFFIXES		
	Suffix	Pronunciation	Example	
ག	GA	Sometimes silent; sometimes with slight <i>k</i> sound	དག་	DA GA DAK (or DA) (pronounced “dah”) <i>pure</i>
ང	NGA	Like the final <i>ng</i> in “sing”	རང་	RA NGA RANG (pronounced “wrong”) <i>self, own</i>
བ	BA	Like <i>b</i> ; sometimes like <i>p</i>	ཡབ་	YA BA YAB (or YAP) (pronounced “yob”) <i>father</i> (honorific)
མ	MA	Like the final <i>m</i> in “him”	ཡུམ་	YA shabkyu YU MA YOOM (rhymes with “room”) <i>mother</i> (hon.)
འ	AH	Silent except when it takes a vowel sign (discussed later)	མཁའ་	MA “O” K’A A K’A (pronounced “khah”) <i>sky</i>
ར	RA	Like the final <i>r</i> in “car”	དར་	DA RA DAR (pronounced “dahr”) <i>silk</i>
ལ	LA			
ས	SA			

Figure 1

Figure 2

FINDING THE ROOT LETTER OF A SYLLABLE

1.	རྒྱུད་	RA GA-TA GA YA-TA GYA shabkyu GYU DA GYÜ (<i>Tantra</i>) - ག་ is the Root
2.	ཡུམ་	YA shabkyu YOO MA YOOM (<i>mother</i>) - ཡ་ is the Root
3.	ཅན་	CHA NA CHEN (<i>possessing, having</i>) - ཅ་ is the Root
	(a) གཡམག་	GA -"O" YA GA YAK (<i>yak, a Himalayan ox</i>) - ཡ་ is the Root
	(b) སངས་	SA NGA SA SANG (<i>purified</i>) - The first ས་ is the Root
4.	འཇགས་པ་	A-"O" P'A GA SA PAK, PA : PAK-PA (<i>noble; noble one</i>) - པ་ is the Root

Figure 3

Suffix MA is pronounced just like a final *m* in English. The root letter YA with a shabkyu below and a suffix MA following would be pronounced “yoom.” It is the honorific or respectful term for *mother*. For instance, Prajnaparamita is called YOOM CHEN MO (The Great Mother). She is said to be the mother of all the Buddhas, for Prajnaparamita is the ultimate wisdom and all Buddhas are born of or come from that wisdom. Therefore we refer to her with the honorific term for mother: YOOM.

Suffix AH is the simplest of the ten suffixes: it is silent and in no way affects the pronunciation of a syllable. For example, the three-letter syllable which is the word for sky has a silent prefix MA, the root letter KH'A, and the silent suffix AH. Since both the prefix and suffix are silent, this leaves only the root letter KHA to be pronounced.

Finally the suffix RA is pronounced exactly like a final *r* in English. A word with root letter DA followed by the suffix RA is pronounced “dar,” like in the English word *dark* without the *k*.

Finding the Root Letter of a Syllable

The root letter has a significant influence on the pronunciation of a syllable, and it is the letter under which a word is found in the Tibetan dictionary. Therefore, being able to determine the root letter is crucial for the reader of Tibetan. Every syllable has a root letter; and any one of the thirty consonants can be a root. If a syllable has just one consonant, that consonant is, of course, the root letter. The rules for finding the root of every other possibility follow. We saw earlier that a Tibetan syllable can only have four letters running horizontally to the left of the *tsek*, the dot that follows each syllable. Figure 3 contains examples of each of the six rules explained below.

The Rules for Finding the Root Letter

1. If there is a stacked letter, i.e. one containing a superscript, a subscript or both, in the syllable, then the root letter is found within that stack. Subscripts and superscripts can only be affixed to root letters. If we can spot one of them, we can instantly identify the root letter. Example: GYÜ (*ga* is the root).



ARHAT

Dra chome pa

Literally “foe destroyer,” the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word “arhat.” Meaning “one who has defeated the enemy – the inner foes of greed, hatred, and delusion.” It can refer to someone who has achieved the goal of the Shravaka or Pratyeka-Buddha. The term can, however, be used in reference to a Bodhisattva or even the Buddha. The *arhat* was the ideal of early Buddhism: the person who had achieved Nirvana but not full and complete enlightenment.

2. If there is a vowel sign, it is necessarily on the root letter if the syllable is a bona fide word. (There are cases where a grammatical particle may be affixed to a word and that particle can also take a vowel sign. In such a case, this grammatical particle with vowel would *not* be a root letter. This will be explained in detail in a subsequent article). Example: YOOM (*ya* is the root).

3. If there is neither a stacked letter nor a vowel sign, and the syllable is composed of just two letters, the first letter is always the root. Example: CHEN (*cha* is the root).

In a three-letter syllable, there are two choices for the root letter:

(a). If there is neither a stacked letter nor a vowel sign in a three-letter syllable *which is without a second suffix SA*, the root is the second letter. Example: YAK (*ya* is the root).

(b). If there is neither a stacked letter nor a vowel sign in a three-letter syllable *which has a second suffix SA*, the first letter is the root. Example: SANG (*sa* is the root).

4. In a four-letter syllable, the root letter is *always* the second letter. Example: PAK of the word PAK-PA (*pa* in the first syllable is the root).

We are now drawing very close to having accounted for all the elements necessary to read the Tibetan script. Help and a lot more information about learning Tibetan are available at www.tibetanlanguage.org. ☸