

Nominal Honorific Compounds in Tibetan

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Introduction

In current usage it seems that the term “classifier system” is employed to refer to phenomena that involve some kind of overt marking of different noun classes when nouns belonging to different classes are counted. This seems to be the requisite condition for a classifier system, even though the noun classes are not necessarily manifested solely when nouns are being counted. Noun class systems in which noun classes are not manifested when the nouns in question are being counted, or in which such a connection with counting is clearly not primary, are usually labeled as being “gender systems.”

Classifier systems are found in most languages of Southeast Asia and East Asia, and in many Amerindian languages, including Salishan languages such as Lillooet,¹ although one may perhaps argue that in Salishan languages the morphemes and morphological processes involved are not primarily connected with counting objects, but only peripherally so. In East Asia/Southeast Asia the existence of classifier systems seems to be one of the areal features that has the widest distribution over a vast continuum stretching from Japan through Burma and even into Malaysia. Since this vast area contains languages that belong to several different language families it seems reasonable to suspect that this feature was somehow diffused from language to language.

This diffusion cannot be demonstrated in every case, but it can be shown, for example, that both Korean and Japanese have borrowed Chinese morphemes to use as classifiers. For example, in Japanese the Chinese loanword *hon* is used as a classifier for cylindrical objects, and *mai*, another Chinese loanword, is used for flat objects. At the same time Japanese uses some native morphemes as classifiers, but the majority of morphemes used as classifiers in Japanese are clearly Chinese loans. Although many Sino-Tibetan languages have classifier systems, this feature is not found in all the languages belonging to this family, and even in those languages in which it is found it is not very evenly developed. All Sinitic languages, Burmese, and Karen languages have this feature in a well developed complex form, but Kachin, for example, has a very rudimentary classifier system, and those Sino-Tibetan languages that are spoken on the periphery of the East Asia/Southeast Asia linguistic area tend not to have this feature at all. In addition, this feature may have

¹ I want to express here my heartfelt gratitude to Larry Thompson and Terry Thompson not only for introducing me to Salish studies and making it possible for me to do field work on the Lillooet language, but for being my mentors and good friends for these past twenty years.

been a relatively recent development in Sinitic.² All this may perhaps indicate that Sino-Tibetan languages which have this feature may have been only the recipients and transmitters of this feature, not the original source from which this particular feature spread to other languages.

Classical Tibetan, as well as Modern Lhasa Tibetan, does not possess a classifier system as this term is currently defined. However, as will be shown below, Modern Lhasa Tibetan has developed a system of noun classes that manifests itself only in honorific compounds and does not manifest itself in counting at all. This being the case, perhaps one should simply say that Tibetan has developed a type of gender system and leave it at that. Indeed, the Tibetan system is very much centered on body parts and body movements and functions rather than on object shapes as the more familiar classifier systems are. Still, there are enough similarities between the usual classifier systems of the languages belonging to the East Asia/Southeast Asia linguistic area and what we find in Tibetan that one is tempted to say that this areal feature has entered Tibetan “through the back door” so to speak. In any case, whatever one may eventually decide to call such a system as that found in Tibetan, the system in question is of great interest from the typological point of view and therefore deserves a much closer look.

Tibetan Honorific Compounds

Although the system involves not only nouns, but verbs and pronouns and to a lesser degree adjectives and adverbs as well, basically the Tibetan system of honorifics is built around nouns, more precisely, around honorific “prefixes”³ which are added to plain or informal forms of nouns in order to derive honorific forms from the latter. These prefixes are easily recognizable as being members of a closed set of nouns and verbs which are underived, lexical (i.e. mono-morphemic) honorifics. That is, they are independent forms which can stand alone as words and have honorific force. Thus, what we call ‘prefixation’ here is actually a kind of derivational compounding with the first stem of the compound acting as a kind of “prefix.” Which honorific prefix is used to derive a particular honorific form depends mostly on the semantic category of the noun stem to which the honorific prefix is being added.

Perhaps a few examples here will help clarify what is meant:

The Tibetan noun which means ‘hand’ happens to have two variants, *lag.pa.*,⁴ the plain form, and *phyag.*, the honorific form. Thus, there is no need to derive a

² For discussion of the development of classifiers in Chinese and the hypothesis that Chinese may have been influenced by Tai languages in the development of classifiers see Erbaugh (1986).

³ More accurately, we should refer to these as ‘prefixed elements’ since they are clearly still root morphemes, not affixes.

⁴ All Tibetan forms are cited using the romanization system developed by Wylie (1959). It should be noted that Modern Lhasa Tibetan pronunciation is as far removed from the traditional spelling, if not even more so, as Modern French pronunciation is from French spelling.

The Tibetan data cited in this article is taken from the various grammars and dictionaries which are cited in the references.

special honorific form for ‘hand’ by using the plain form and a prefix. On the other hand, a noun like *sgog.pa.* ‘garlic’, does not have a lexical honorific equivalent, and one has to use *bzhes.sgog.*, a form derived by adding *bzhes.* (honorific ‘to eat’) as a prefix to the stem *sgog.* ‘garlic’.⁵

Note that *phyag.* (honor. for ‘hand’) can be used as a prefix to derive honorific forms of nouns whose meaning has something to do with ‘hand’. For example:

lag.skor. ‘prayer wheel’ (plain) vs. *phyag.skor.* (honor.)

In the above example the first element of the plain word happens to be the plain form for ‘hand’, *lag.*, and the honorific equivalent, *phyag.*, simply replaces it. Note also that although one may well argue that garlic is something which we can handle by hand, one cannot make an honorific form for ‘garlic’ by prefixing *phyag.* to *sgog.*

At the basis of the Tibetan honorific system there is a large number of lexical pairs consisting of a plain form and an honorific form which are not morphologically related in any way, though there are some such pairs in which there is a phonological resemblance between the plain and the honorific form—these may be remnants of some derivational processes that long ago ceased being productive.⁶

Most of these lexical pairs consist of nouns, but there is also a fairly large number consisting of verbs. As one might expect, both nouns and verbs which have underived honorific counterparts have to do with body parts and common, everyday objects, as well as common actions such as going, eating, etc. The less common the object or action, the more likely it is that the honorific noun or verb counterpart for its name will be a derived, morphologically complex form.

It is for the most part also evident that the plain forms are the “unmarked”, older vocabulary since it is the plain forms that have clear cognates in related languages. For example, Tibetan *mig.*, ‘eye’, (plain form) is clearly cognate with the Classical Chinese word for ‘eye’, and the Tibetan *lag.*, ‘hand’ (plain form), is just as clearly cognate to Burmese *le’* (written *lak*). On the other hand, one is hard pressed to find cognates in related languages for the honorific members of these pairs. We shall have occasion to refer again to this when we discuss how such a system may have come into being.

The following are the most commonly encountered pairs involving body parts:

1. *mgo.* (plain) vs. *dbu.* (honor.) ‘head’

<i>zhwa.mo.</i>	:	<i>dbu.zhwa.</i>	‘hat’
<i>skra.gshad.</i>	:	<i>dbu.gshad.</i>	‘comb’
<i>mna’.</i>	:	<i>dbu.mna’.</i>	‘oath’
<i>lcang.lo.</i>	:	<i>dbu.lcang.</i>	‘pigtail’

⁵ The nominal suffix *pa* is dropped from the derived form because Tibetan canon strongly favours disyllabic words. This phenomenon is discussed later in this article.

⁶ The pair of words meaning ‘water’ may have had its origin in some such moribund morphological process: *chu.* ‘water’: *chab. id.* (honor.)

2. *lce.* (plain) vs. *ljags.* (honor.) 'tongue'
lud.pa. : *ljags.lud.* 'phlegm'
tshwa. : *ljags.tshwa.* 'salt'
rtsis. : *ljags.rtsis.* 'arithmetic'
gong.rin. : *ljags.gong.* 'price, value'
3. *mgrin.pa.* (plain) vs. *mgul.* (honor.) 'neck, throat'
lba.ba. : *mgul.lba.* 'goitre'
byi.ru. : *mgul.byi.* 'coral'
thub.chi. : *mgul.thub.* 'button'
skye.rgyan. : *mgul.rgyan.* 'necklace'
4. *lag.pa.* (plain) vs. *phyag.* (honor.) 'hand'
las.ka. : *phyag.las.* 'action, deed'
rdo. : *phyag.rdo.* 'stone'
g'yu. : *phyag.g'yu.* 'turquoise'
smyu.gu. : *phyag.smyu.* 'pen'
lag.rtags. : *phyag.dngul.* 'silver, money'
rtsis.tho. : *phyag.tho.* 'account book'
5. *sna.* (plain) vs. *shangs.* (honor.) 'nose'
sna.phyid. : *shangs.phyid.* 'handkerchief'
sna.thag. : *shangs.thag.* 'snuff'
6. *lus.* (plain) vs. *sku.* (honor.) 'body'
rgyan.cha. : *sku.rgyan* 'ornament'
ras. : *sku.ras.* 'cotton cloth'
sdig.pa. : *sku.sdig.* 'sin'
'og.jug. : *sku.jug.* 'shirt'
rtsed.mo. : *sku.rtsed.* 'game'
mgron.po. : *sku.mgron.* 'guest'
rus. : *sku.rus.* 'caste, lineage'
7. *rna.ba.* (plain) vs. *snyan.* (honor.) 'ear'
skad.grags. : *snyan.grags.* 'fame'
so.byis. : *snyan.byis.* 'man's earring'
8. *mig.* (plain) vs. *spyän.* (honor.) 'eye'
mig.sher. : *spyän.sher.* 'spectacles'
mig.chu. : *spyän.chab.* 'tear'
mig.dmag. : *spyän.dmag.* 'chess'
9. *snying., yid., sems.* (plain) vs. *thugs.* (honor.) 'heart, mind'
dogs.pa. : *thugs.dogs.* 'suspicion'
'gyod.pa. : *thugs.'gyod.* 'remorse'
snying.rus. : *thugs.rus.* 'zeal'
bsam.pa. : *thugs.sems.* 'opinion'
sems.'khral. : *thugs.'khral.* 'anxiety'
10. *so.* (plain) vs. *tshems.* (honor.) 'tooth'
so.dreg. : *tshems.dreg.* 'tartar, plaque'
so.nying. : *tshems.nying.* 'gums'
11. *rkang.pa.* (plain) vs. *zhabs.* (honor.) 'foot'
o.mo.su. : *zhabs.su.* 'sock'
rkang.rjes. : *zhabs.rjes.* 'footprint'
rkub.kyag. : *zhabs.kyag.* 'seat, chair'
rkub. : *zhabs.phongs.* 'anus, buttocks'

12. *kha*. (plain) vs. *zhal*. (honor.) 'mouth, face'

<i>thang.ka.</i>	:	<i>zhal.thang.</i>	'picture'
<i>kha.chu.</i>	:	<i>zhal.chu.</i>	'saliva'
<i>dra.kya.</i>	:	<i>zhal.kya.</i>	'saucer'

Another fairly large category consists of verbs that express common actions, etc. (But, as we shall note, these verbs may appear as prefixes with noun stems to derive honorific nouns, not only verbs).

13. *za.ba*. (plain) vs. *bzhes*. (honor.) 'take, receive, eat'

<i>tha.mag.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.tha.</i>	'tobacco'
<i>sli.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.sli.</i>	'pear'
<i>'bras.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.'bras.</i>	'rice'
<i>kho.tse.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.tse.</i>	'chopsticks'
<i>a.rag.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.rag.</i>	'spirits, alcohol'
<i>thur.ma.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.thur.</i>	'spoon'

14. *'dug.pa*. (plain) vs. *bzhugs*. (honor.) 'exist, reside, live'

<i>'bol.gdan.</i>	:	<i>bzhugs.'bol.</i>	'mattress, cushion'
<i>zhag.sa.</i>	:	<i>bzhugs.zhag.</i>	'stage (on a journey)'
<i>gral</i>	:	<i>bzhugs.gral.</i>	'class in school'

15. various plain equivalents vs. *gsol*. (honor.) 'put on garment, eat, drink'

<i>grod.khog.</i>	:	<i>gsol.grod.</i>	'stomach'
<i>lcog.tse.</i>	:	<i>gsol.lcog.</i>	'table'
<i>thab.tshang.</i>	:	<i>gsol.thab.</i>	'kitchen'
<i>phogs.</i>	:	<i>gsol.phogs.</i>	'pay, salary'
<i>ja.</i>	:	<i>gsol.ja.</i>	'tea'
<i>mar.</i>	:	<i>gsol.mar.</i>	'butter'
<i>sman</i>	:	<i>gsol.sman.</i>	'drug'
<i>ja.ldong.</i>	:	<i>gsol.ldong.</i>	'churn for tea'

16. *zer.ba*. (plain) vs. *gsung*. (honor.) 'speak, talk'

<i>skad.</i>	:	<i>gsung.skad.</i>	'speech'
<i>gzhes.</i>	:	<i>gsung.gzhes.</i>	'song'
<i>rnam.thar.</i>	:	<i>gsung.thar.</i>	'biography'
<i>lab.stangs.</i>	:	<i>gsung.stangs.</i>	'pronunciation'

17. *nyal.ba.*, *shi.ba*. (plain) vs. *gzim*. (honor.) 'sleep, die'

<i>zhu.mar.</i>	:	<i>gzim.zhu.</i>	'lamp'
<i>khang.nang.</i>	:	<i>gzim.khang.</i>	'abode, house'
<i>khyi.</i>	:	<i>gzim.khyi.</i>	'dog'
<i>sgo.</i>	:	<i>gzim.sgo.</i>	'door'
<i>spos.</i>	:	<i>gzim.spos.</i>	'joss stick'
<i>nyal.gzan.</i>	:	<i>gzim.gzan.</i>	'blanket'

18. *skye.ba*. (plain) vs. *'khrung*. (honor.) 'be born'

<i>chang.sa.</i>	:	<i>'khrung.sa.</i>	'marriage, wedding'
<i>skye.tshes.</i>	:	<i>'khrung :tshes.</i>	'birthday'
<i>lung.ba.</i>	:	<i>'khrung.sa.</i>	'native land'

19. *'gro.ba.*, *'ong.ba*. (plain) vs. *pheb*. (honor.) 'go, come'

<i>lam.ka.</i>	:	<i>pheb.lam.</i>	'path, journey'
<i>skas. dzeg.</i>	:	<i>pheb.skas.</i>	'staircase'
<i>jam.pa.</i>	:	<i>pheb.jam.</i>	'bridge'
<i>gru.</i>	:	<i>pheb.gru.</i>	'ship'
<i>lam.rogs.</i>	:	<i>pheb.rogs</i>	'fellow traveller'

	<i>'gro.stongs.</i>	:	<i>pheb.stongs.</i>		'gait'
	<i>mgyogs.dpyong.</i>	:	<i>pheb.dpyong</i>		'sedan chair'
20.	<i>mthong.ba.</i> (plain) vs. <i>gzigs.</i> (honor.)				'see'
	<i>zla.tho.</i>	:	<i>gzigs.tho.</i>		'almanac'
	<i>bltas.mo.</i>	:	<i>gzigs.mo.</i>		'show'
21.	<i>rjed.pa.</i> (plain) vs. <i>bsnyel.</i> (honor.)				'forget'
	<i>dran.gso.</i>	:	<i>bsnyel.gso.</i>		'reminder'
	<i>brjed.tho.</i>	:	<i>bsnyel.tho.</i>		'inventory'
22.	<i>'phrad.pa.</i> (plain) vs. <i>mjal.</i> (honor.)				'meet'
	<i>thug.phrad.</i>	:	<i>mjal.phrad.</i>		'meeting'
23.	<i>na.ba.</i> (plain) vs. <i>snyung.ba.</i> (honor.)				'be sick'
	<i>gzug.</i>	:	<i>snyung gzug</i>		'pain'
24.	<i>shes.pa., rig.pa., go.ba.</i> (plain) vs. <i>mkhyan.</i> (honor.)				'know, understand'
	<i>mngon.shes.</i>	:	<i>mngon.mkhyen.</i>		'foreknowledge'

Note that above we have an example of a rare honorific 'suffix' rather than a 'prefix'.

Finally, there is a miscellaneous category which includes names of various common things:

25.	<i>skad.</i> (plain) vs. <i>bka'.</i> (honor.)				'word, speech'
	<i>lung.bstan.</i>	:	<i>bka' lung</i>		'soothsaying'
	<i>zhib.dpyod.</i>	:	<i>bka' zhib</i>		'inquiry'
	<i>lan.</i>	:	<i>bka' lan.</i>		'message, answer'
	<i>'dzin.</i>	:	<i>bka' 'dzin. or phyag. dzin'</i>		'contract'
26.	<i>chu.</i> (plain) vs. <i>chab.</i> (honor.)				'water, fluid in general'
	<i>gcin.pa.</i>	:	<i>chab.gsang.</i>		'urine'
	<i>chu.snod.</i>	:	<i>chab.snod.</i>		'water vessel'
	<i>chu.gzhāng.</i>	:	<i>chab.gzhang.</i>		'bath'
27.	<i>rta.</i> (plain) vs. <i>chib(s).</i> (honor.)				'horse, mount'
	<i>sga.</i>	:	<i>chibs.sga.</i>		'saddle'
	<i>gseb.</i>	:	<i>chibs.gseb.</i>		'stallion'
	<i>rta.lcag.</i>	:	<i>chibs.lcag.</i>		'whip'
	<i>rtswa.skam.po.</i>	:	<i>chibs.rtswa.</i>		'hay'
28.	<i>ming.</i> ('name') (plain) vs. <i>mtshan.</i> (honor.)				'mark, good quality, virtue, name'
	<i>ming.chen.po.</i>	:	<i>mtshan.chen.po.</i>		'famous'
29.	<i>sha.</i> (plain) vs. <i>skrum.</i> (honor.)				'meat' (food)
	<i>khu.ba./sha.khu.</i>	:	<i>skrung.khu.<skrum.khu.</i>		'meat soup, sauce'
	<i>sil.pan.</i>	:	<i>skrum.sman.</i>		'chili pepper'
30.	<i>ro.</i> (plain) vs. <i>spur.</i> (honor.)				'corpse'
	<i>ro.sgam.</i>	:	<i>spur.sgam.</i>		'coffin'

There are a number of interesting observations which we can make about the above data. First, we should note the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of the categories which manifest themselves in the distribution of the honorific prefixes. Although by and large the categories are based on the semantic properties of the nouns involved, very often it is difficult to tell why a certain noun stem gets the honorific prefix it does, and occasionally there is a morphological ambiguity since a given stem can be prefixed by different honorific prefixes sometimes with, and sometimes without, a difference in meaning.

For example, stems referring to edible things very naturally fall into the honorific 'food' category which takes the honorific prefix *bzhes*. 'eat' (cf. category #13 above). This category is not limited to edible things, however, but includes eating utensils like chopsticks and things which are not actually eaten but are otherwise ingested, like pipe tobacco (*gang.jag: bzhes.jag*).

In addition, there is a competing category which takes *gsol*. as a honorific prefix and which also largely contains edibles and ingested substances like tea (*gsol.ja.*) and butter (*gsol.mar.*)

The word for 'contract' may have either *bka'.'dzin*. or *phyag.'dzin*. as its honorific form; that is, it may belong either to the 'speech' category or the 'hand' category. Perhaps this is because originally there may have been a difference between a written and verbal contract.

Another stem that takes alternative honorific prefixes is *snying*. 'heart', which can take either *thugs*. ('mind, heart, soul') or *sku*. ('body'). This alternation, too, may have reflected some difference in meaning (e.g., 'spiritual' vs. 'physical'), but it was not possible to ascertain this at the time of writing.

The somewhat arbitrary nature of these categories is very strongly manifested in the case of the category which takes *gzim*. ('sleep, die' ; cf. category #17) as the honorific prefix. Most of the forms included in this category have very little to do with either sleeping and dying but seem to reflect more a rather broad field of 'domestic' or 'household' objects like doors, houses, padlocks, and dogs. Thus in some instances the Tibetan honorific categories approach the same degree of arbitrariness as that found in the gender systems of such Indo-European languages as Russian and Latin.

The second set of observations involves the formal or mechanical aspects of the derivational process involving prefixation. Foremost among these is the very strong preference for disyllabic forms which sometimes leads to curious results. This tendency is a general phenomenon of Tibetan and is not limited to derivation of honorific forms alone but manifests itself in all types of compounding.

If a plain form consists of a single syllable, the addition of an honorific prefix results in a preferred disyllabic form, and further change is unnecessary and even undesirable. For example:

ja. : *gsol.ja.* (honor.) 'tea'

However, if the plain form is already disyllabic, as is very likely on account of the strong tendency toward disyllabic words, then one of the two syllables of the plain form is usually dropped after the honorific prefix is added. Which syllable will be dropped and which will be retained depends on a number of factors. Since the phenomenon under discussion is not confined to honorific forms we shall limit our discussion here to cover only the main aspects.

If the second syllable is some kind of a suffix (usually a nominal suffix *pa./ba.*) then it is dropped, and the stem morpheme remains. Much of nominal suffixation in

Tibetan carries very little semantic load and serves primarily as a source for 'filler' syllables for forming disyllabic words out of monosyllabic ones.⁷

bum.pa. : *phyag.bum.* (honor.) 'vase'

If the plain form is a compound in which the first element is considered to be the plain equivalent of the honorific prefix itself, there is no real problem: the honorific prefix simply replaces that element, and the resulting form, being disyllabic, need not adjust any further.

lag.skor. : *phyag.skor.* (honor.) 'prayer wheel'
(lit. 'hand' + 'wheel')

Occasionally, when both the first and the second syllable of a compound are stems which have an honorific equivalent, both are replaced by their honorific equivalents:

mig.chu. : *spyan.chab.* (honor.) 'tear' (lit. 'eye' + 'water')

If both syllables are some kind of stems (as in compounds) or a part of a single stem, the situation becomes somewhat problematic, and it is interesting to observe how Tibetan resolves the problem.

The problem is partially resolved on the basis of the following principle: the morpheme that carries less semantic load or has a secondary, modifying function is deleted.

zla.tho. : *gzigs.tho.* (honor.) 'almanac' (lit. 'month' +
'register, catalogue')
ras.skud. : *phyag.skud.* (honor.) 'cotton thread'
(lit. 'cotton' + 'thread')

Note that such a resolution potentially leads to lexical neutralization in the honorific form: a compound such as 'silk thread' will according to the stated principle also come out as *phyag.skud.* and will be then totally indistinguishable from the honorific form for 'cotton thread'.

Sometimes neutralization occurs simply because there is only one honorific equivalent to a number of plain forms which refer to somewhat different things and not because of the deletion of a differentiating member of the compound:

dug.log. : *na.bza'* (honor.) 'dress, raiment'
chu.pa. : *na.bza'* (honor.) 'coat'

In the case of compounds in which the morphological structure is not clear, as is often the case with foreign loanwords, very often it is the first syllable which is dropped:

kho.tse. (plain) < Chinese kuaizi : *bzhes.tse.* (honor.) 'chopsticks'
o.mo.su. (plain) < Mongolian : *zhabs.su.* (honor.) 'sock'
a.rag. (plain) < Hindi-Urdu ? : *bzhes.rag.* (honor.) 'spirit, alcohol'

⁷ Even to this general process there is an exception: *bgad.mo.* 'laughter': *zhal.mo.* (honor.) Since *mo.* is a very common nominal suffix, one would expect *bgad.*, the stem morpheme, to be retained and the suffix *mo.* to be deleted.

But, as one might expect, there is much confusion in case of loanwords, and therefore one may find quite a few examples where it is the first syllable of the foreign word that is kept, and the last syllable dropped.

<i>lcog.tse.</i> < Chinese <i>zhuōzi?</i>	:	<i>gsol.lcog.</i> (honor.)	‘table’
<i>hor.kha.</i> < Hindi	:	<i>bzhes.hor.</i> (honor.)	‘hookah’

In some cases any deletion would lead to an ambiguous honorific form, and therefore no deletion takes place even though this results in a non-optimal trisyllabic word. For example, the Tibetan word for ‘tea brick’ cannot drop its second syllable (which is the morpheme meaning ‘brick’) because the resultant form would then be completely identical to the honorific form for ‘tea’ (*gsol.ja.*). If on the other hand the first syllable were dropped and the second kept, the resultant form *gsol.bag.* (honor. + ‘brick’) would perhaps appear rather strange as ‘hon. ingestible brick’:

<i>ja.bag</i>	:	<i>gsol.ja.bag.</i> (honor.)	‘tea brick’
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There are also a few honorific forms that solve the problem by telescoping two syllables into one syllable rather than by deleting one syllable or another.

<i>shu.gu.</i>	:	<i>phyag.shog.</i> (honor.)	‘paper’
<i>sgo.nga.</i>	:	<i>bzhes.sgong.</i> (honor.)	‘egg’

Finally, in a few cases, the honorific form and the plain form have nothing in common morphologically, very often because the plain form is just so impolite that a totally unconnected euphemism replaces it:

<i>rkub.</i>	:	<i>zhabs.phongs.</i> (honor.)	‘anus, buttocks’
<i>gcin.pa.</i>	:	<i>chab.gsang.</i> (honor.)	‘urine’

There are also a few such cases which cannot be blamed on euphemism:

<i>lham.</i>	:	<i>zhabs.chags.</i> (honor.)	‘shoe’
<i>mgron.po.</i>	:	<i>thugs.spro.</i> (honor.)	‘feast’

Besides the relatively rich system of derivational prefixes there are also some honorific suffixes that do not function as a kind of classifiers for nouns. These are mostly title-like affixes that are found in almost all languages as tokens of politeness. Here is the most common one:

lags. ‘general title of respect like Mr., Mrs., etc.’

Examples:

<i>jo.jo.</i>	:	<i>jo.lags.</i> (honor.)	‘elder brother’
<i>dge.rgan.</i>	:	<i>dge.rgan.lags.</i> (honor.)	‘teacher’

Adjectives and adverbs (which are both derived from nominals in Tibetan) have very few honorific counterparts and do not figure prominently in the honorific system.

Examples:

<i>ming.chen.po.</i>	:	<i>mtshan.chen.po.</i> (honor.)	‘famous’ (lit. ‘name big’)
<i>ngan.po.</i>	:	<i>thugs.ngan.po.</i> (honor.)	‘bad, wicked’
<i>kya.re.kyo.re.</i>	:	<i>sku.kyor.kyor.</i> (honor.)	‘feeble’

However, there are a few adjectives and adverbs that have underived, lexical honorific counterparts:

<i>mgyogs.po.</i>	:	<i>rtsol.po.</i> (honor.)	'quick'
<i>mgyogs.por.</i>	:	<i>rtsol.por.</i> (honor.)	'quickly' ('quick' + terminative case)
<i>yag.po.</i>	:	<i>bzang.po.</i> (honor.)	'good'

Historical Development

Although the scope of this paper does not permit a thorough discussion of this question, a few remarks about the historical development of the Tibetan system of honorifics are in order.

The Tibetan data cited above concentrates mainly on the honorific forms that figure in the derivation of honorific compound forms in nouns. If other honorific forms were added to the list one would be surprised to see what an impressive number of doublets involving plain forms and morphologically simple honorific counterparts there are in Tibetan. The question that naturally comes to mind is where did all the lexical material for this copious honorific vocabulary come from.

As has already been pointed out, it appears to be easier to find cognates of the plain variants in other Sino-Tibetan languages than of the honorific equivalents. This leads to the conclusion that the plain forms are in some sense unmarked, un-derived, original vocabulary, whereas the honorific forms are either borrowings from somewhere or have their origin in some sort of language-internal elaboration. Of course, this is not a very convincing argument since it rests on the shaky premise that since one has not been able to find any cognates for the honorific counterparts there aren't any to be found. Still, it seems that we must somehow explain the origin of the honorific forms rather than the origin of the plain forms since the plain forms are logically basic and universal.

Since honorific language is very often borrowed from another, more prestigious language (e.g. Norman French vocabulary in English, Khmer vocabulary in the Thai royal language) it may be that at least some of the Tibetan honorific lexicon is borrowed from outside. An examination of the Tibetan honorifics, however, has not so far yielded examples of such borrowings from any sources, even though Tibetan has, according to Laufer (1918), indeed borrowed much from other languages. At this point, however, it would seem that the development of Tibetan honorifics was not in any way influenced by any other language or languages.

In a few cases we may speculate that the honorific form is derived from the plain form by some kind of derivational affixal process. This may be the case in such phonologically similar pairs as the pair for 'water' (*chu.* vs. *chab.*) in which both forms share the same initial consonant or the pair for 'hand' (*lag.* vs. *phyag.*) in which they share the same vowel and syllable-final consonant.⁸ Since, however, only a few pairs of this type can actually be found, this avenue of inquiry is not a very promising one.

⁸ Zhang (1975:11) suggests that *phyag.* < **ph-lag*, i.e. it is derived from the plain form *lag.* by the prefixation of *ph-*. Zhang points out that although Classical Tibetan has initial cluster *bl-*, there are no clusters like *phl-* probably because *l* > *y* after voiceless aspirated stop initials.

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