Towards a Definition of Local Orthographies of Bon Manuscripts: A Pilot Study

Abstract: Tibetan manuscripts in general, and Bon manuscripts in particular, are often characterised by orthographic inconsistencies and multiple contracted forms (Tib. bsdus tshig or bskungs yig). While these features may be a nuisance to the reader, they deserve to be analysed more systematically: it is possible that these heterodox spellings and other scribal peculiarities, far from being random errors, may represent local writing conventions. On the basis of an extended study of facsimile reproductions of Bon manuscripts from Bsam gling monastery in Dolpo, Nepal, this chapter aims to explore the best way forward towards defining local orthographic styles and other codicological features. A major starting hypothesis to be tested is that ‘heterographies’ may help us to detect oral and written modes of transmission.

1 Introduction

Since the early nineties, together with several Bonpo Geshes and monks,1 I have worked on a large number of facsimiles of Bon manuscripts, mostly published by Menri Monastery (Dolanji, India). Often these were published within the Library of Congress PL480 program2. Many of these facsimiles are reproductions of manuscripts from the library of Bsam gling Monastery in Dolpo, Nepal, on loan to Dolanji. The regional provenance of the text, possibly of the manuscript, is usually indicated in the metadata of the facsimile publication, but the exact earlier migratory routes and provenance of the original manuscripts are yet to be established clearly. There seems to be some system or regularities to the apparent idiosyncrasies in orthography and abbreviation (or better ‘contrac-

1 Amongst others, notably, Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, Namgyal Nyima Dagkar, and Kalsang Norbu Gurung.
2 Facsimile reproductions of Tibetan texts, mediated by E. Gene Smith within the frame of Public Law 480 (1954), based on an agreement between the United States and India, under the United States Food for Peace program. See http://digitaldharma.com/cast/3/57 (accessed on 30 August 2022).
deployed in these manuscripts. Occasionally, one can recognise different 
\textit{dbu med} (‘headless’) writing styles and even personal hands (author, copyist) 
that are shared between manuscripts.\footnote{In Tibetan called: 
\textit{bs dus tshig} or \textit{b skungs yig}, effectively serving both to save space and as a 
shorthand.} An erudite informant from Dol po told me that many of the orthographic particularities observed in the manuscripts 
seem to relate to local conventions in Dol po rather than being indicative of poor 
spelling.\footnote{For issues related to the identification of Tibetan handwriting see for example Dalton et al. 2007 or Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021, 32–34, 107–112. In recent years a number of helpful 
tools based on pattern recognition have been developed, including HAT 3 (Version 3.0.0) software 
developed by Hussein Mohammed at the CSMC (2020): http://doi.org/10.25592/uhhfdm.902; see 
also Mohammed et al. 2022.} While the Tibetan written language has been standardised at several 
periods, these standardisations remained limited. I annotated the major characteristics of the orthographic peculiarities that I observed by entering them into 
e-texts \textit{ad litteram},\footnote{Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, who originally hails from Dol po (where the mentioned Bsam 
gling monastery is located), was able to identify some of the hands, particularly those related to 
his own family lineage, and point out elements of the specific \textit{couleur locale} of Dol po spelling and style.} in non-emended text editions in Tibetan font (closest to diplomatic editions), and by duly recording in footnotes these presumed heteroglyphies, which may in fact be local orthographies (both indeed often in plural), 
and I also suggest emendations (which therefore may occasionally be hyper-corrections), 
usually with the help of literate native speakers (usually Bonpo monks and scholars). These apparent orthographic peculiarities deserve to be looked 
into more systematically. This paper is intended as a first and indeed still very 
modest contribution, a pilot study of sorts, scouting the best way forward towards 
defining local orthographic styles of Bon manuscripts, based on the e-text files 
that have accumulated in my research archive. I shall report on discernible patterns and regularities but avoid commenting on common deviations from the 
rather obvious fiction of the currently preferred Lhasa Tibetan spelling. Editions 
in e-text of the most revealing manuscripts will be made available through the 
website \textit{Rituals of the Bön Religion}.\footnote{TibBon 5–7: http://kalpa-bon.com/node/78. TibBon 1, 2 and 4 are available as an appendix 
to the author’s 1997 PhD thesis (Blezer 1997; see link in the bibliography) and follow a slightly 
different editorial policy: the original readings that have been emended in the main text were}
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Based these editions is not random. They are part of miscellaneous collections of presumably oral or aural teaching transmissions from the so-called (Zhang zhung) sNyan rgyud ([The] Aural Transmission [from Zhangzhung]). Some variants diverge so widely that they appear to be variant manuscript transmissions in their own right, paraphrases loosely based the same teaching tradition, of which the primary mode of transmission in most cases originally may indeed have been oral. Those diverging variants highlight differences in rendering of the same or of a similar ‘text’, which in those cases comes closest to an orally transmitted teaching, not a manuscript. Another, larger and broader sample would be needed to achieve statistical significance. In the following, the facsimiles are listed with their metadata (as included in the facsimile publication), which often include tentative references to regional provenance.

1. **TibBon 1** (probably produced in A mdo): Snyan brgyud bar do thos grol gsal sgron chen mo, in Zhi khro sgrub skor, pp. 605–691, facsimile: Delhi 1967;

2. **TibBon 2** (probably A mdo): Zhi khro bar do 'phrang grol gyi thos grol las byang bag chags rang grol, in dBang ldan zhu yi ring lugs kyi zhi khro'i sgrub skor, Vol. II, pp. 249–330, facsimile: Dolanji 1975 (=I-Tib 75-903251, IASWR microfiche nur SB 774);

3. **TibBon 3** Gsas mkhar rin po che spyi spungs zhi ba g.yung drung yongs su rdzogs pa'i 'phrin las, Karmay (1977), 29.7, Zogai 614 (K.71);\(^8\)


5. **TibBon 5** (from Bsam gling, Dol po): Ma bcos gnyug ma'i don bstan pa'i gdam pa and Bar do 'od inga ngos bzung ba'i man ngag\(^9\) both in Zhang zhung

moved to the footnotes and numerous, unproblematic contractions have been silently resolved. For this paper, these early editions were revisited, and the original readings were reintroduced into the main text, but not the common contractions. TibBon 1–4 are different manuscript versions of one teaching, as are TibBon 6–7. All these editions, except TibBon 3 (incomplete), will also be available on the mentioned website. Research on these texts was facilitated by a 1997–2000 research fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS).

\(^8\) TibBon 3 is a slightly different version of TibBon 1, 2 and 4, but has not yet been fully entered into an e-text file and edited, and therefore is not included in this analysis.

\(^9\) According to the colophon, Yang ngal dpal bzang (thirteenth–fourteenth century CE) received the teaching from Slob dpon gYung drung rgyal mtshan. While the lineage is known, be it shrouded in a long and nebulous pre-history, the authors of both texts remain unknown (and no mention of a manuscript at the time). The dating of Yang ston dpal bzang remains insecure; the present dates are based on contextual cross-referencing. Yang ston dpal bzang is considered to be the author of the Rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi rtsis byang thems yig rgyas pa, an overview of historical sources on the Zhang zhung sNyan rgyud lineage masters. Based on
TibBon 5–7 show the most numerous and most interesting variants. For those facsimiles, every orthographical peculiarity (or heterography) is marked and standardised readings are suggested in a footnote in the editions. To facilitate tracking, these footnotes numbers will additionally be referred to in footnotes to the sample Tibetan renderings below. Since the text of some of the manuscripts over time seem to have become corrupt to the point of becoming incomprehensible, occasionally, I also comment on an apparently corrupt passage or try to disentangle an obscure reading that would surely also puzzle other readers. The ‘heterographies’ will be juxtaposed to schoolbook ‘orthographies’, in Tibetan script.11

2 What to look for?

The main point of this article is to evaluate, based on this non-random sample of Bon manuscripts,12 whether recording apparent patterns of (mostly) orthographic
characteristics of Bon manuscripts, which I here should like to style ‘fingerprinting’, could contribute to our understanding of the transmission history and regional (or temporal) provenance of Bon manuscripts. ‘Fingerprinting’ could be complementary to more usual emic Tibetan scholarly and etic Tibetological resources, such as colophons, transmission histories (brgyud rim), records of teachings received (gsan yig) and other sources of metadata on textual transmission, such as data from informants, various genres of historical works, (auto) biographies etc, and also to etic Tibetological tools, such as content analysis, intertextuality, stemmatic analysis. Particularly intriguing is the prospect of having quantitative and qualitative data on local scribal and manuscript traditions that are ‘blind’, in the sense that that these data are not involved in traditional narratives on lineages and the like and thus appear without auctorial or researcher bias. This ‘fingerprinting’ may independently challenge or confirm some of the assumptions that are based on the mentioned emic and etic Tibetological resources. Aspects of textual transmissions that recommend themselves for closer analysis via these manuscripts are:

1. Frequency analyses: syllables, particles, words, phrases (obviously these frequencies mostly are independent of a manuscript or blockprint form in which a text is realised, and these analyses obviously recommend big data)
2. Phonetic peculiarities: these are ideal for pinning down regional features and a major starting hypothesis for this pilot study
3. Peculiarities in spelling: here one should distinguish dialectal or historical variants and plain errors
4. Abbreviations, bsdus yig/tshig or bskungs yig: frequency, types, typical irregularities; N.B.: the principle of economy may overrule phonetics here, as some of the examples will show: some prefer a shorter version above a orthographically correct one
5. Grammatical peculiarities
6. Palaeography and identification of hands

onward, over several research projects. Most of them I read carefully with the unstinting help of Menri Geshe Namgyal Nyima Dagkar, without whose learned assistance and keen eye I would not have been able to resolve many irregularities in spelling and corruptions in the texts. Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, the head teacher of the Menri Shedra, has been invaluable in resolving remaining problems. I of course take full responsibility for the errors in interpretation and emendation but can claim little merit for the parts that are right. The following paragraph is complementary to the standard reference work on Codicology, Paleography, and Orthography of Early Tibetan Documents published by Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016, fording later stages of Tibetan writing.
7. Page layout: number of lines, measurements of margins, frames, and other elements of the layout (examining paper types obviously would require liberal access to the originals)

8. Conventions for annotation, correction, and deletion

In this article I only shall consider items 2 through 5, all briefly and in varying levels of detail. For the relative frequencies of occurrences, the reader is referred to the text editions; but whenever a variant occurs more often than once, the number of occurrences appears in parentheses after the reference to the text location in the footnote. Several colleagues, such as Sam van Schaik, Brandon Dotson and one of the editors of this volume, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, have been working on items 6 through 8 for quite some time, with excellent results; this pilot study intends to be complementary to their efforts, looking at other aspects (2 through 5) and slightly different time periods.¹³ Specifically for Buddhist sources, Michael Radich has opened the first-mentioned item as a fruitful avenue for research with TACL.¹⁴ To the best of my knowledge, for Tibetan sources this computer-assisted, quantitative and statistical approach is still in its infancy. However, digital resources, for instance at the BDRC¹⁵ and THL,¹⁶ are presently growing exponentially and have been accumulating data to a point where computer-assisted quantitative and statistical approaches may become viable and perhaps even recommended options to pursue in the near future; hence this pilot study. Access to big data is obviously a prerequisite and we may indeed have reached that critical point of mass where, purely from a quantitative point of view, statistical analyses seem to have become real options. But this will put demands on qualifying editions in electronic form, which still remains a bottleneck and a desideratum. For that reason, statistical computation falls outside the scope of this article, which has had to focus on a small and non-random selection of sufficiently qualified input. Recommendations for such future engagements and critical reflection on research strategies, however, are part of the goals of this pilot study.

¹³ E.g., Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016 and Van Schaik 2007.
¹⁴ The TACL text analysis software suite, developed by Michael Radich and Jamie Norris, specifically designed for the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), but adjustable for other corpora (see https://pythonhosted.org/tacl/; this website and all others quoted in this article were accessed on 30 August 2022).
¹⁵ See https://www.tbrc.org/.
2.1 Phonetic peculiarities: possibly regional features

Initially, the inquiry into phonetic peculiarities and irregularities seemed to hold great promise, particularly for coming to grips with the complex oral *cum* written traditions of Bon manuscripts. Variant readings suggestive of oral transmission and written variants seemed helpful for separating one mode from the other more clearly, and also promised tools for using dialect features to localise manuscripts in view of their lineage histories, as far as they are known. The oral-written divide was therefore a starting hypothesis for this pilot. As I shall argue below, however, these initial hopes may have been only partly warranted.

As is well known, older Bon texts are notoriously difficult to date and (particularly when they are very early) often have long and complex histories, with multiple revisions. Even texts that appear to have genuinely early origins may be available only in surprisingly recent recensions. Their early readings and origins hide behind opaque and incremental layers of sometimes up to a millennium of additions and revisions; not to mention the copying, not always very careful, by scribes, who often will silently emend texts according to their own linguistic abilities and understanding (a clear and clean text, up to the latest standards, is usually preferred over an old, original reading). There is plenty of information on transmission of teachings, but very little on copyists and manuscripts. Manuscripts and people move about and copyists, obviously, do not necessarily hail from the same region as the original author(s). Bonpo lineages also often could not afford prestigious, sponsored, standardised and proof-read wood-carved editions. If they did (for example, the wood-carved version of *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* texts published by Lokesh Chandra and Tenzin Namdak, Delhi 1968), there are often indeed noticeable differences, resulting in higher-quality, proofed redactions. However, this is not always the case, as can be seen in the difference between the high quality of the blockprints of Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan’s collected works in his own Teng chen dgon wood-carved edition and the edition that was later typeset in metal type in the People’s Republic of China, which, according to the late Menri Abbot, Lung rtogs bstan pa’i nyi ma rin po che, involved barely literate lay people, often young girls, chatting and typesetting at the same time.

In any case, frequent renewal by copying of worn-out or damaged manuscripts often results in an increasingly opaque transmission, allows for intractable changes, and also invites alterations and corruptions. Indeed, a lower frequency of reproduction obviously also favours preservation of older readings.
(such as, based on preliminary comparisons, I strongly suspect to be the case with the *textus receptus* of the Bon *Bum bzhi* vis-à-vis that of the *Rgyud bzhi*).17

An additional complicating factor is that producing, copying or multiplying manuscripts often involves reading out a text aloud, while others write the recited text down.18 Therefore, dialect peculiarities may be less indicative of the author or area of origin of a text than one might perhaps be inclined to assume at first. Markers of local language influences indeed could have entered the complex history of transmission of Bon manuscripts at various points. For instance, the texts used for this analysis, the provenance of which is identified as (possibly) A mdo, PRC, in fact show relatively few Eastern Tibetan linguistic influences compared to those that are associated with Dol po; and this study takes into account fluke occurrences due to writing mistakes (such as, possibly, omitting the Tibetan diacritics for vowels; see, for example, the first instance below, where the omissions of the ‘*greng bu* (*e*)’ and *gi gu* (*i*) diacritics may be easily mistaken for different vowel renderings indicative of Eastern dialects).

- (A mdo?, TibBon 119): མུ་བོ་ མོ་བོ་ (cf. Dol po TibBon 7, below)
- (A mdo?, TibBon 220): འི་ཐྲི་ འི་ཐྲི་ (this may also be due to writing conventions, such as the style of rendering of *gi gu* (*i*) and ‘*greng bu* (*e*)’ diacritics?);
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): བྲ་ བྲོ་;21 cf. བྲ་ བྲོ་ (writing);22 བྲ་ བྲོ་ བྲོ་;23 བྲ་ བྲོ་,24 བྲ་ བྲོ་;25 བྲ་ བྲོ་ བྲོ་ (writing?);26 བྲ་ བྲོ་ བྲོ་,27 བྲ་ བྲོ་;28 བྲ་ བྲོ་ བྲོ་ (writing?29, also in TibBon 7);30 བྲ་ བྲོ་,31

17 See Blezer 2007 and 2012 (which includes a sample textual comparison, see p. 143).
18 While this information was shared by several of my informants and is occasionally alluded to in secondary sources (e.g., Silk 1994, 14), I am not aware of any detailed studies that are available in publication. Schaeffer 2014, 22 discusses vocalising texts while proofreading.
19 See TibBon 1, note 9; henceforth TibBon1:9.
20 TibBon2:37.
21 TibBon6:288.
22 TibBon6:7.
23 TibBon6:495.
24 TibBon6:530, 531 (2).
25 TibBon6:532.
26 TibBon6:173.
27 TibBon6:430.
28 TibBon6:7.
29 TibBon6:105.
30 TibBon7:115
31 TibBon6:371.
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2.2 Phonetic and spelling peculiarities: general features

During the workshop in Hamburg in March 2018, Sam van Schaik kindly pointed out to me that he has had to change his mind on what initially appeared to be oral features of irregularities in textual transmission. Apparently, even when copied by hand and without aural intermediaries, phonetic factors will still enter into the fray, because of the way in which the human brain processes language. Human language is typically first acquired through listening and vocalising, and we simply seem to be hard-wired that way. Also, when visually engaged in reading and writing, the auditory cortex is still involved (e.g., detectable in the motor activity, such as of the movement of the lips in silent reading). Phonetic mistakes, such as substitution with a phonetic equivalent (homophone) that is semantically different, are thus not necessarily indicative of oral transmission.

– (Dol po, TibBon 7): \(\text{Dol po, TibBon 7): }\)
– (A mdo, TibBon 1 & 2): \(\text{(A mdo, TibBon 1 & 2): }\)

32 TibBon7:166.
33 TibBon7:231, 246, 475, 921, 922 (5).
34 TibBon7:253.
35 TibBon7:296.
36 TibBon7:541.
37 TibBon7:708.
38 TibBon7:885.
39 TibBon7:418.
40 TibBon7:346.
41 See, for example, the initial hypotheses and research set up in van Schaik 2007, 183–208.
42 See, for example, Perrone-Bertolotti et al. 2012.
43 TibBon1:5, TibBon2:31.
44 TibBon2:23.
(Dol po, TibBon 5): 46, 47

(Dol po, TibBon 6): 48

(Dol po, TibBon 7): 49, 50, 51, 52

(writing): 53, 54

(writing): 55

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45 TibBon5:20, 21 (2).
46 TibBon5:53.
47 TibBon5:294.
48 TibBon7:174 and TibBon7:454.
49 TibBon5:235.
50 TibBon5:286.
51 TibBon5:317.
52 TibBon5:405.
53 TibBon6:319.
54 TibBon6:479.
55 TibBon6:636.
56 TibBon7:3.
57 TibBon7:25.
58 TibBon7:51, 53, 882 (3)
59 TibBon7:179.
60 TibBon7:183.
61 TibBon7:234.
62 TibBon7:291.
63 TibBon7:298.
64 TibBon7:321.
65 TibBon7:334.
66 TibBon7:385, 399, 400, 401 (4).
67 TibBon7:469.
68 TibBon7:436.
69 TibBon7:437, 696 (2).
70 TibBon7:439.
71 TibBon7:648.
72 TibBon7:756, 828 (2).
73 TibBon7:831.
74 TibBon7:835.
2.3 Peculiarities in spelling: scribal ‘errors’

Many of the instances below, and above, may also not be so much structural features of language production and manuscript transmission as simply indicate that in family lineages and small monastic environments not all copyists/writers were highly literate. Some variants are clearly due to typical dbu med (‘headless’; cf. sans serif) reading/writing errors, such as confusing graphemes that look similar specifically in dbu med; or also elisions (that is, not rendering letters); and, very frequently, a different understanding or lack of knowledge of sandhi rules for particles.

– (A mdo?, TibBon 1): འོ་ོ (typical dbu med copying problem);75
– (A mdo?, TibBon 2): ཐོན་ོ (elision);76
– (A mdo, TibBon 4): མོ་ོ (dbu med scribal problem; cf. TibBon 6: འོ་ོ);77
– (Dol po, TibBon 5): ཐོ་བ (and vice versa TibBon 6);78 འོ་ (TibBon 6);79
– (Dol po, TibBon 6): ཐོ་་ (da’o may be an dbu med copying problem: preceding tsheg);81 འོ་ (TibBon 7);82
– (For most of the samples): And indeed, following up on the last lemma, many sngon ‘jug and yang ‘jug consonants are dropped or, occasionally, also added;
– (For most of the samples): Ditto for superscripts;
– Also, note many switches between medial and surd consonants of the same class, occasionally including aspiration.

2.4 Peculiarities in spelling: idiomatic, ‘unclear status’, and scribal ‘peculiarities’?

In this category we find preferential spellings of technical terms (such as rtog pa vs rtogs pa below: i.e., dual and non-dual modes of understanding), which at

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75 TibBon1:12.
76 TibBon2:28.
77 TibBon4:57. TibBon6:405, 447
78 TibBon5:56, 225, 236, 385 (4); TibBon6:405, 447, 484, 487, 505, 507, 508, 535, 537, 560, 621, 626, 629, 662, 677 (15). Vice versa, TibBon6:463, 467 (2).
79 TibBon6:75, cf. 73 (1/2).
80 TibBon6:271.
81 TibBon7:184.
82 TibBon7:377.
some point in Bon (rdzogs chen) literature assumed special meaning and were systematically distinguished, but in later literature these technical terms may still appear confused (due to scribal inaccuracies). I have also included one entry to show the broad spread of ‘variant’ spellings, which, in the end, basically includes all possible spelling options in Tibetan (tog pa (rtogs pa), stog pa (gtogs pa)).

- (A mdo?, TibBon 2): ཞེས་ཐོགས་ (later, technical rdzogs chen terminology)
  cf. clearly erroneous spellings of the same, e.g. (Dol po, TibBon 6): ཞེས་ཐོགས་
  རྣམ་ཐོགས་
- Cf. also (Dol po, TibBon 7): སྒྲོལ་མ་ཐོགས་མ་,  སྒྲོལ་དུམ་ཐོགས་མ་,  སྒྲོལ་དུམ་ཐོགས་མ་

2.5 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): prescripts

Some of the alterations below are extremely frequent and occasionally appear almost at random. The second in the list, sngon 'jug 'a ↔ ma, is so common as to suggest a different preferred spelling (and also happens to appear very frequently in older Tibetan sources). In modern pronunciation, phonetically, they are roughly equivalent, but one may wonder whether, through time and space, they always were. We would need bigger data sets and would need to correlate those with metadata, such as time, region, scribe or scribal workshop and the like, in order to pursue this meaningfully. Here too, the biggest obstacle remains the need for non-emended and preferably tagged editions in electronic form, that, alas, are not customary practice for most colleagues, whether they be producing e-texts for their provisional private use or are involved in the production of e-texts at the major digital resource centres. Random distribution of variant spellings in extant Bon sources (which for organised Bon do not reach far beyond the tenth/eleventh century CE), barring any oral enclosures or preserved relics that give access to earlier linguistic phases, would argue against any high hopes for ever recovering the earliest Tibetan phonetic values of prescripts. However, later phonetic shifts, such as developments of tones and the weakening of pronunciation of prescripts, may be detectable. The data we have from Bon sources, particularly those that we

83 I am not sure when precisely, but Menri Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche informed me that he has not seen a clear distinction being made before the thirteenth century CE.
84 TibBon2:1.
85 TibBon6:540.
86 TibBon7:535.
87 TibBon7:572.
may presume to be early, deserve to be studied on a par with phonological transcriptions from Tangut and sources in Old Tibetan.\textsuperscript{88} This would need to be done in collaboration with linguists. In any case, I would advise against dismissing the variance observed in this particular section as mere spelling errors.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): sngon \textit{'jug} ba $\leftrightarrow$ ga \textit{n\ldots}, \textit{\ldots} (cf. TibBon 7 \textit{\ldots} \textit{n\ldots})\textsuperscript{89,90} but also: \textit{n\ldots}, \textit{\ldots} \textsuperscript{92}
- 'a $\leftrightarrow$ ma \textit{\ldots} \textsuperscript{93} but cf. \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{97} but cf. \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{98} and cf. \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{99}
- da'o $\leftrightarrow$ sa-mgo \textit{\ldots} (TibBon 6)\textsuperscript{100}
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): sngon \textit{'jug} ma $\leftrightarrow$ ga \textit{n\ldots}, \textit{\ldots} \textsuperscript{101}

### 2.6 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): superscripts

As in the previous category, many of the alternative spellings of superscripts\textsuperscript{102} also deserve to be taken seriously for the study of their possible phonological values in Tibetan dialects and in historical linguistics, in view of older language phases, rather than to be dismissed as mere spelling errors.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ra-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ ga'o \textit{\ldots} \textit{n\ldots} (also in TibBon 7,\textsuperscript{103} cf. also \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{104} \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{105} \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{106,107} \textit{n\ldots} \textsuperscript{108} (cf. vice versa,

\textsuperscript{88} Cf. Tai 2008.
\textsuperscript{89} TibBon5:197, 363, 404, 417 (5).
\textsuperscript{90} TibBon5:197, 363, 404, 417 (5).
\textsuperscript{91} TibBon5:4, 206 (2).
\textsuperscript{92} TibBon5:164.
\textsuperscript{93} TibBon5:32, 366 (2).
\textsuperscript{94} TibBon5:250.
\textsuperscript{95} TibBon5:331.
\textsuperscript{96} TibBon5:337.
\textsuperscript{97} TibBon5:350.
\textsuperscript{98} TibBon5:390.
\textsuperscript{99} TibBon5:400.
\textsuperscript{100} TibBon6:95.
\textsuperscript{101} TibBon6:440.
\textsuperscript{102} Meaning, superscribed letters \textit{(mgo: ‘head’)} in Tibetan orthography.
\textsuperscript{103} TibBon7:647, 935 (2).
\textsuperscript{104} TibBon7:713.
\textsuperscript{105} TibBon7:353.
\textsuperscript{106} TibBon7:456.
\textsuperscript{107} TibBon5:9.
TibBon 6: दर्िड़े भर्िड़े;\textsuperscript{108} also: दर्िड़े भर्िड़े;\textsuperscript{109} cf. also TibBon 7 दर् भर्\textsuperscript{110,111}
dर्िड़े भर्िड़े (cf. TibBon 7 दर् भर्\textsuperscript{112})
dर्िड़े भर्िड़े;\textsuperscript{113}
- ra-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ da’o छै छै\textsuperscript{114}
- ra-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ sa-mgo छै छै (TibBon 6, cf. TibBon7);\textsuperscript{115} छै छै;\textsuperscript{116} छै छै
(TibBon 7);\textsuperscript{117}
- (Dol po, TibBon 7): छै छै (semantic);\textsuperscript{118} but cf. छै छै;\textsuperscript{119} छै छै (cf. TibBon 6);\textsuperscript{120} छै छै (semantic);\textsuperscript{121}
- Cf. (Dol po, TibBon 6)\textsuperscript{124}: sa-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ ra-mgo छै छै (cf. TibBon 7 छै छै)
(semantic);\textsuperscript{125} cf. छै छै छै छै\textsuperscript{126} and vice versa छै छै;\textsuperscript{127}
- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ra-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ 'a छै छै;\textsuperscript{128}
- (ba+)ra-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ aspiration ming gzhi (A mdo, TibBon2);\textsuperscript{129}
- Also to be noted are certain rarer exchanges of (other) superscripts, such as
sa-mgo $\leftrightarrow$ la-mgo छै छै (Dol po, TibBon6);\textsuperscript{131}
- Cf. (Dol po, TibBon 5): elision छै छै (not discussed separately, only
mentioned as a class of elision).\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{108} TibBon6:220.
\textsuperscript{109} TibBon6:363.
\textsuperscript{110} TibBon7:328.
\textsuperscript{111} TibBon5:77.
\textsuperscript{112} TibBon5:191, 193, 195, 410, 415 (5).
\textsuperscript{113} TibBon5:330.
\textsuperscript{114} TibBon5:344.
\textsuperscript{115} TibBon6:58.
\textsuperscript{116} TibBon7:580.
\textsuperscript{117} TibBon7:619.
\textsuperscript{118} TibBon7:45.
\textsuperscript{119} TibBon7:57, 458, 653, 781 (4).
\textsuperscript{120} TibBon7:60.
\textsuperscript{121} TibBon7:112, 283 (2).
\textsuperscript{122} TibBon7:123.
\textsuperscript{123} TibBon7:140.
\textsuperscript{124} TibBon6:360.
\textsuperscript{125} TibBon7:34, 241, 446 (3).
\textsuperscript{126} TibBon7:713.
\textsuperscript{127} TibBon6:685.
\textsuperscript{128} TibBon5:29, 33, 266 (3).
\textsuperscript{129} TibBon2:20.
\textsuperscript{130} TibBon4:5.
\textsuperscript{131} TibBon6:273.
\textsuperscript{132} TibBon5:333.
2.7 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): final consonant

Perhaps the most remarkable part in this section concerns presumably archaic morphological features, which in some contexts (and usually only together with other such archaic features) are indicative of archaisms, for instance, the frequent appearance of a *rjes 'jug 'a*, a feature that is well-known from old Tibetan sources (such as from Dunhuang). Even in instances where the *rjes 'jug 'a* appears to be a feature that is not present in later spellings, it may also (instead) indicate regional (other) spelling preferences, possibly with phonetic value (which may once more caution against their usefulness as markers of antiquity by themselves). While, as mentioned, this particular feature is very prominent in Bon sources, it is not always clear whether these *rjes 'jug 'a* are always genuine heterographies pertaining to the locality of the manuscripts or whether they were perhaps crafted to make the text appear old.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): *rjes 'jug 'a* (cf. Dunhuang): ðæ ðæ;133 cf. ў ў;134 (cf. vice versa TibBon 7 ў ў;135 ў ў ў ў ў ў ў;136 ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў ў
2.8 Peculiarities in spelling (perhaps also phonetic?): subjoined letters

This section may have similar value for (historical) linguistics and regional language developments as have the previous two. The alterations between ha-btags ↔ sngonjug’a seem interesting for a possible assessment of (local) phonetical value of the sngonjug’a, which may be realized not just as a prefixed nasal (which is the common value in later Tibetan), but as aspiration of a voiced plosive consonant. The ya-btags ↔ sngonjug ga and rjesjug ga conform to regular shorthand bdsus yig or bskungs yig conventions.

– (Dol po, TibBon 5): ha-btags ↔ sngonjug’a ¹⁴⁸
– ha-btags ↔ sngonjug ma ¹⁵¹
– ya-btags ↔ sngonjug ga ¹⁵³, ¹⁵⁴
– But also rjesjug ga ¹⁵⁶, ¹⁵⁷

2.9 Abbreviations/Contractions

As is well known, a large number of bdsus yig or bskungs yig are used in Bon manuscripts, something that is particularly evident in TibBon 5, 6 and 7. Some are so numerous and common as effectively to replace the otherwise unabbreviated and ‘regular’ spelling (such as the ubiquitous final consonant ꞌr’, for final ꞌn’) and therefore defeat exhaustive annotation. There are many hand lists and reference works available for regular bdsus yig or bskungs yig and here I shall only mention some atypical, apparently deviating Bon examples (the extant hand lists notwithstanding, there would be merit in collecting them further from these and other Bon manuscripts, also with a view on taking stock of such peculiarities,

¹⁴⁸ TibBon5:7.
¹⁴⁹ TibBon5:78.
¹⁵⁰ TibBon5:365.
¹⁵¹ TibBon7:689.
¹⁵² TibBon5:294; Cf. 349.
¹⁵³ TibBon5:30; cf. bdsus yig.
¹⁵⁴ TibBon5:189, 264, 282, 321, 324, 326 (6); cf. bdsus yig.
¹⁵⁵ TibBon5:198; cf. bdsus yig.
¹⁵⁶ TibBon5:104.
¹⁵⁷ TibBon5:201.
¹⁵⁸ TibBon5:259.
by way of further ‘fingerprinting’). Bon manuscripts generally exhibit a greater
economy than the Buddhist manuscripts that I am familiar with, as seen in the
copious use of contractions, with the elision of elements that are usually retained
for secure identification (first item); but then there is also the use of elements
that seem superfluous (second item) or even erroneous (third item); and there are
miscellaneous oddities as well. Particularly intriguing is the last item: consist-
ently, the superfluous vowel diacritic gi gu seems to be added only if there is a rjes
’jug consonant present, with only one exception, in rather frequent occurrences;
there seems to be a pattern here.

- (A mdo?, TibBon 2): ‘economy’: ནོར་, usually: གཟུང་ ནོར་ོང་;\textsuperscript{159} ཆང་ ཉོར་ 

- (A mdo, TibBon 4): ག་ གོ་ (cf. 'dren pa) ག་ོ་;\textsuperscript{160} (Dol po, TibBon 5):

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ཁི་, ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ (see the ubiquitous use of
‘na log’ for ‘med’ here: ཁི་ ཁི་);\textsuperscript{161} ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ (is there a sense of
phonetic equivalence between ‘ja’ and ‘bya’, thus erroneously retaining a
ya-btags?);\textsuperscript{162} ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ (Dol po, TibBon 5):

- (Dol po, TibBon 7): ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ ཁི་ (the numeral 2 here seems to be used for sgra?)\textsuperscript{163}

- economy: (Dol po, TibBon 5): གཟུང་ གཟུང་ གཟུང་ and\textsuperscript{170} ཁི་ ཁི་;\textsuperscript{171} cf. ཁི་ ཁི་ and\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{159} TibBon2:24.
\textsuperscript{160} TibBon2:27.
\textsuperscript{161} TibBon4:62.
\textsuperscript{162} TibBon5:passim (64).
\textsuperscript{163} TibBon5:109.
\textsuperscript{164} TibBon5:119.
\textsuperscript{165} TibBon5:280.
\textsuperscript{166} TibBon7:198.
\textsuperscript{167} TibBon7:225.
\textsuperscript{168} TibBon7:299.
\textsuperscript{169} TibBon7:318.
\textsuperscript{170} TibBon5:17, 38, 44, 45, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 60, 62, 96, 100, 102, 159, 179, 186, 199, 209, 213, 215, 
216, 217, 218, 221, 222, 329, 358, 374, 384, 413, 414 (33).
2.10 Grammatical peculiarities

- Deviating or different use of particles, perhaps indicative of erosion of grammatical distinctions (e.g. genitive and ‘instrumental, agentive, or ergative’; almost at random; see the e-texts);
- Deviating use of the aspect of verbs (this is very frequent; see the editions).

Compare for example, the following brief passage from TibBon 5 in the facsimile (fols 336–337), in the edition (original readings), and with all variants normalised and short-hand contractions resolved (note the different conventions regarding the use of a final *tsheg* (inter-syllable dot) before the final *shad* caesura (‘period’); note also the greater economy of the original, in writing and in paper use:

Non-emended e-text, 336.7–337.4:

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...non-emended e-text...
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Normalised (Lhasa Tibetan):

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...normalised Lhasa Tibetan...
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3 Conclusions

Upon closer reflection, while the working hypothesis and hopes for pinning down oral and written modes of transmission based on examining peculiarities in orthography as found in Bon manuscripts may not have completely evaporated, they may have become a little fainter in the process of reporting and reflecting on these findings, since the matter of oral and written modes of transmission may be more convoluted than one might have presumed at first. Nonetheless, many of the deviating or alternative spellings and writing conventions still promise to provide useful data for historical linguistics of Tibetan and for our understanding of regional language developments.

The initial goal of evaluating the utility of morphological data in Bon manuscript traditions for ‘fingerprinting’ texts is complicated by the highly involved nature of the morphological variance, such as the entangled registers of oral and textual transmissions mentioned above: many of the variants need to be analysed on their own grounds, according to different ‘algorithms’ and ‘parameters’ (e.g., oral and/or written registers, old or new spelling, regional dialect differences, and scribal practices). Also, the very limited sample size, which moreover is far from random, is of course not amenable to any sweeping conclusions: one would need much bigger and also more diverse data sets. Moreover, the texts that are presently extant in our major repositories would require carefully planned tagging that retains and marks morphological peculiarities or rarities even when inputting texts. It stands to reason that most of the users of the mentioned repositories are primarily interested in matters of content. The considerable extra effort one would need to invest in preserving the exact readings of the original manuscript would only be relevant for that *rara avis* textual scholar who works on some type of text-edition or is involved in stemmatic analyses.

But even though such a big data project appears somewhat remote because of practical and technical difficulties, based on this pilot study I would argue that it is worth considering. The major caveat here is that one would have to convince
peers to start securing usable data sets for future analyses; no doubt a labour of love, both for the inputter and the advocate of the cause.

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Towards a Definition of Local Orthographies of Bon Manuscripts


