

Amdo Tibetan Learning Resources

A Review Article

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A description and review of three language-learning resources available for the Amdo dialect of Tibetan is offered, due to the recent publication of two new materials.¹ To begin with, I will introduce the Amdo region and its dialect.

Indigenous populations of people speaking varieties of Tibetan can be found within China, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, and India. The entire region in which Tibetans make up a large portion of the local population can be referred to as “ethnic Tibet,” which is nowadays commonly divided into three cultural-linguistic regions: Kham (KHams), Amdo (A mDo) and U-Tsang (dBus gTSang). An alternative system combines the regions of Kham and Amdo to form Mdokham (mDo KHams), whilst separating the region of Ngari (mNGa Ris) from U-Tsang (Gruschke 2004). The first classificatory system better reflects general patterns of difference, particularly linguistic variation and is used here.

The linguistic-cultural realm of Amdo today occurs entirely within the People’s Republic of China. It is divided between Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces. Within Qinghai, the prefectures of Guoluo/Golog (mGo Log),² Hainan/Mt-solho (mTSHo lHo), Huangnan/Malo (rMa lHo), Haibei/Mtsoshang (mTSHO Byang), and Haixi/Mtsonuv (mTSHo Nub) contain large numbers of Amdo Tibetan speakers. At the county level, the following counties also contain significant numbers of Amdo Tibetan speakers: Huangzhong County (Xining Municipality), Xunhua Salar

Autonomous County, Hualong Hui Autonomous County, Minhe Hui and Monguor (Tu) Autonomous County, Huzhu Mongghul (Tu) Autonomous County, and Ping’an and Ledu Counties (all within Haidong Region). Within Gansu Province, Gannan/Ganlo (Kan lHo) Prefecture contains large numbers of Amdo Tibetan speakers. Tianzhu/Huari (dPa’ Ris) Tibetan Autonomous County also contains some Tibetan speakers, as well as a large number of Tibetans who speak the local Chinese dialect as their mother tongue. Within Sichuan, Amdo Tibetans are found within Aba/Ngawa (rNGa Ba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. Nomadic people within Luhuo/Drango (Brag mGo), Serta/Sirda (gSer rTa), and Serxu/Sershul (Ser SHul) counties also speak Amdo Tibetan.

Statistics given for the number of speakers of Amdo Tibetan range between 800,000 (Sung and lHa Byams rGyal 2005) and one and a half million (Norbu et al. 2000). Accurate figures are difficult to settle on, because Amdo Tibetan is not only the first language of Tibetans within these areas, but also traditionally operated as a lingua franca between other ethnic groups, such as Hui, Han, Monguor, and Mongols, a function which is rapidly being replaced by *putong hua*, or Modern Standard Chinese. Another factor which makes gathering accurate statistics difficult is that certain groups which are not classified as Tibetan actually speak Amdo Tibetan as their mother tongue; for instance, most of the Mongols of Hennan Mongol Autonomous County, Malo or the Tibetan-speaking Hui (*zang hui*) in Hualong County, Haidong Region. To further complicate matters, some who are classified as Tibetan and live within the realm of Amdo do not speak the Amdo Tibetan dialect (for example, the “Baima/Dwags Po” Tibetans in Pingwu and Nanping Counties, Sichuan and Wen County Gansu [Upton 2000], or the Tibetans living in Joni [Co ne], in Ganlo. Both Baima and Joni Tibetans speak their own unique Tibetan dialects).

Despite this confusion, we can confidently say that a reasonably large number of people on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan cultural realm *do* speak Amdo Tibetan, and that learning this dialect therefore opens up a large range of communicative and learning chances. Furthermore, with the gradual opening up of once-closed Tibetan regions to foreigners, the opportunities for foreigners to communicate with and learn from Amdo Tibetan speakers is better now than ever before. Within the entire Amdo region, the only regions currently closed to foreigners are the counties of Darlag/Darlag (Dar Log), Baima/Padma (Pad Ma),

1 Norbu, Kalsang, Karl A. Peet, dPal lDan bKra shis, and Kevin Stuart: *Modern Oral Amdo Tibetan. A Language Primer*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000. 324 pp. ISBN 978-7734-7895-4. Price: \$ 126.00.

Sung Kuo-ming and lHa Byams rGyal: *Colloquial Amdo Tibetan. A Complete Guide for Adult English Speakers*. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 2005. 538 pp. ISBN 7-80057-557-8. Price: 108.00 RMB.¥.

gTSo sGrig Pa and gZungs ’Bum Thar: *The Eye-Opening Auspicious Amdo Dialect Instructional Book*. Lanzhou: Gansu Nationalities Press, 2006. 544 pp. ISBN 7-5421-1137-X. Price: 22.00 RMB.¥.

2 Here and with other place names, *pinyin* is given first, followed by an approximation of the Amdo Tibetan pronunciation, and the Wiley transliteration of the literary Tibetan in brackets.

and Gade/Garde (dGa' bDe) in Golog and the monastery of Sertar Larung Gar in Sertar County, Ganzi, Sichuan.

And what exactly is there to be learnt in Amdo? Amdo is often portrayed by Chinese, Westerners, and Tibetans alike, as a frontier region – a Wild West, inhabited by uncouth cowboys and backward peasants. This image, whilst quaint and entertaining, is far from the truth. A list of significant historical and contemporary figures from Amdo shows the region's importance in the Tibetan religious, artistic, and intellectual worlds: TSong KHa Pa (founder of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, from Huangzhong), the fourteenth Dalai Lama (from Ping'an), the tenth Panchen Lama (from Xunhua), dGe 'Dun CHos 'PHeI (monk, historian, poet, artist, inventor, and translator, from Rebgong), dGe bSHs SHes Rab rGya mTSHo and TShe brTan Zhabs Drung (two famous Gelugpa scholars from Xunhua who lived in the 20th century), ZHabs dKar TSHogs Drug Rang Grol (yogic practitioner from Rebgong), and sKal lDan rGyal mTSHo (Gelugpa teacher, poet, and composer from Rebgong who lived ca. 400 years ago). Recent Amdo figures include Don 'Grub rGyal (author, from Jianta), Pad Ma TShe brTan (novelist and maker of first ever Amdo Tibetan language film), sMan bLa sKyabs (comedian, lyricist, and social commentator), ZHogs sTon (secular modernist author), 'Ju sKal bZang (poet from Golog), dPal Mo (feminist, poet, and teacher), Sangs rGyas rGya mTSHo (novelist and poet who rose to fame after writing about a widespread snow-disaster in 1994), Dor ZHu gDong Drug sNYems bLo (teacher and widely published nonfiction author), as well as the leading exemplars of the Amdo mandolin musical style – Huangun (dPal mGon) and Debi (bDud Bhe). As well as having produced many famous Tibetans, Amdo also contains many important religious and cultural sites, such as Labrang (bLa Brang, an important Gelugpa monastery famous for its educational facilities and as a site of musical innovation), Rebgong (famous for its THang KHa paintings and art schools, as well as for producing famous religious scholars), rDe TSHa (famous throughout Tibetan areas for its monastic education), and Bya KHYung (famous for being the site where TSong KHa Pa received his first religious training).

A number of language-learning resources are currently available for people who want to access this heritage and learn to communicate in Amdo Tibetan. Before launching into a description of these resources, it is first necessary to emphasise two important features of the Amdo Tibetan di-

allect. First, Amdo Tibetan is an oral language. Tibetans from Amdo and, for instance, U-Tsang, can communicate with one another by writing in Tibetan, but their way of pronouncing the same written words, and even individual syllables, is very different. Moreover, there are numerous lexical items in Amdo Tibetan that do not appear in written Tibetan. Secondly, it is also important to realize that Amdo Tibetan is not a single, standard dialect. Though all Amdo Tibetans can understand one another reasonably well, there are variations in how they pronounce certain words, as well as local peculiarities of vocabulary. Broadly speaking, Amdo Tibetan can be divided between nomadic and agricultural subdialects. However, these subdialects show variation from place to place, particular among the agricultural subdialects. These two factors – Amdo Tibetan's orality and its nonstandard nature, are important and recurrent features in terms of the various language-teaching materials' merits.

As a final note before offering a description and review of materials, I want to point out that I am reviewing these materials from the perspective of a language learner, not a linguist. Analysis of the linguistic merits of the various books is beyond the scope of this work. I have been learning Amdo Tibetan for 22 months (as of June 2007), and have used all three of the language resources described herein, in a variety of educational settings, with a variety of teachers. My review of the materials is based on this experience.

"Modern Oral Amdo Tibetan. A Language Primer" (Deng Rabs A mDo'i KHa sKad) was published in 2000 by Edwin Mellen Press, and was written by Kalsang Norbu, Karl A. Peet, dPal lDan bKra shis, and Kevin Stuart. The two Tibetan authors are both from farming areas (Xunhua and Rebgong, respectively) and are consequently speakers of the agricultural subdialect. The book contains forty lessons (each of approximately six pages) organised into three units: phonetics; nouns, adjectives, and simple verbs; and complex verbs. Each lesson contains a combination of the following elements: texts, dialogues, drills, new words, English translations, grammatical notes, and exercises. The book also contains an introduction which introduces the Amdo region and dialect, as well as providing a survey of previous studies of the Amdo dialect. There are six appendices in the book: the Amdo phonetic system; root verb inflection; linking verbs, possessive/existential verbs, auxiliary verbs; Tibetan-English word list; place names and proper names; and an English-Tibetan word list. The last section in the book is a reference

list. There are five accompanying audio CDs with the book.

Price (US\$ 126.00) is the biggest problem with this book. This places it out of reach of most students. However, several features of the book make it a highly desirable language learning resource. First, the book is written from a student-centred pedagogical perspective. The lessons progress logically and evenly from simple to more complex. The drills, texts, dialogues, and exercises are structured in such a way that they draw attention to and exemplify salient grammar points. Moreover, they are interrelated and overlap in a manner that makes for effective absorption of new material. As well as being pedagogically organised, material is also pragmatically organised. Useful words and phrases are introduced first, so that the learner can explain their name, age, and place of origin before they acquire such terms as “umbrella” or “butter flower.” Finally, it is necessary to note that “Modern Oral Amdo Tibetan” is intended as a language primer only and not a complete course.

“Colloquial Amdo Tibetan. A Course for Adult English Speakers” (A mDo'i KHa sKad) by Sung Kuo-min and lHa Byams rGyal, and published by the China Tibetology Publishing House in 2005, does not indicate where the Tibetan author is from, and it is not clear which subdialect this author speaks. This book is organised into twenty-one lessons. Each lesson is approximately twenty pages long and contains a dialogue, vocabulary, grammar notes, cultural notes, key sentence patterns, and exercises. In addition to the core material of the lessons, there is also an introduction which contains information on the Amdo region and dialect, as well as four appendices (answers to exercises, verb conjugations, pronouns: written and spoken forms, and Tibetan place names), a glossary, an Amdo Tibetan–English word list, an English–Amdo Tibetan word list, a grammar index, and a bibliography. There are two CDs of audio material to accompany this book.

Among the book's problems is the large amount of space devoted to English texts. The grammar notes are long, complicated, and difficult to follow for the nonlinguist. The cultural notes also take up much room. Although these notes would certainly be useful for a person studying Amdo Tibetan from abroad, a person visiting or living in Amdo could learn the sum total of the cultural notes in about two weeks of careful observation and probing conversation. It would be better to present these materials in the target language rather than English. Another problem with this book is that the audio materials are occasionally out of synch with

the book. Finally, calling this book a “Complete Course” is an overstatement. Upon completion of this book, the learner would be able to have simple, mostly functional conversations in Amdo Tibetan. Two positive features of this book make it worthwhile. Firstly, the key sentence patterns are useful in acquiring flexible sentence structures (although it would perhaps be more useful if there was no accompanying English, and the learner was left to translate the sentences for themselves). Also the inclusion of answers for exercises makes this a good self-study tool.

“The Eye-Opening Auspicious Amdo Dialect Instructional Book” (A mDo'i sKad Kyi Krid Yig sKal bZang Mig 'Byed) was written by gTSo sGrig Pa and gZungs 'Bum THar and published in 2006 by the Gansu Nationalities Press (Kan Su'u Mi Regs dPe sKru Khang). This book has eighty-one lessons, which range between two and almost twenty pages long. For the English-speaking learner, the only other usable part of the book is the Tibetan–Chinese–English word list at the back of the book.

This book has many problems and it would be practically impossible for someone who didn't already read Tibetan to learn the Amdo phonetic system from this book, without the assistance of a native Amdo Tibetan-speaking teacher. There are no explanatory notes in English, only in Tibetan. Secondly, this book does not employ a student-centred pedagogical method. The student will find this book disorganised and occasionally overly difficult. The progression of the lessons is impractical and uneven, sometimes requiring vast leaps of understanding on behalf of the learner. Although grammar notes are present in the chapters, they are in Tibetan, thus, if the learner is to understand anything, the presence of a native, literate teacher is again necessitated. Not enough time is spent on basic conversational language before advancing to the very interesting, but somewhat impractical, arenas of Tibetan history, religious philosophy, and love songs. As a learning resource for a beginner, this book is of limited value. However, for someone who has already completed one of the two above books, and who has access to a literate native teacher, this text presents excellent opportunities for expanding one's knowledge of Amdo Tibetan culture.

As a final note, I would like to compare the texts on three criteria. The first is the extent to which the language presented by each text defers to the written form of Tibetan at the expense of the oral. Of the three, “The Eye-Opening Auspicious Amdo Dialect Instructional Book” is the

worst culprit for presenting written rather than oral forms. Given the fairly high illiteracy rates amongst Amdo Tibetans, this gives one a toolkit of almost useless terminologies, and learning such terms often actually impedes one's ability to communicate. Both "Modern Oral Amdo Tibetan" and "Colloquial Amdo Tibetan" do a better job of sticking to the oral form.

Secondly, it is possible to look at each text with regards to how well it represents a "standard" Amdo dialect. Having studied each text with several different teachers, I can attest that all three present problems. Each copy of these books that I own is littered with crossing-outs, rewriting, marginalia, etc. When using any of these texts, don't expect every teacher or every interlocutor to agree with the given pronunciations. The most important thing is internal consistency, and all three texts maintain this well.

Finally, I add a point about the use of loanwords in Amdo Tibetan. Amdo Tibetan, being in a contact zone between Tibetan and several other languages, is more strongly influenced by external factors than, for instance, the Tibetan spoken in U-Tsang. In particular, Chinese loanwords are prevalent. Often where a Tibetan literary form exists, Amdo Tibetan-speakers will employ the Chinese word in oral discourse. This is particularly the case for words of recent origin. Therefore, the Chinese term *dian hua* (telephone) is often used in favour of *KHa Par*, and *piao* (ticket) is used instead of *Pa Se*. Whilst I believe that in such cases it is better to defer to the literary forms, it is also important that the learner be aware of the Chinese forms which people most commonly employ. Of the three texts, "Modern Oral Amdo Tibetan" does the best job. "Colloquial Amdo Tibetan" is not far behind, but certain Chinese terms are only included in the glossary rather than within the lessons. Finally, "The Eye-Opening Auspicious Amdo Dialect Instructional Book" defers to the literary in every case, and does not include Chinese loan words.

Used in conjunction, with careful cross-checking and with a teacher who is a native speaker of Amdo Tibetan, by students who are flexible and accepting of some contradictions and inconsistencies, the three materials above provide the language learner with an excellent opportunity to learn Amdo Tibetan. In turn, speaking Amdo Tibetan opens up a whole fascinating world and a myriad of learning opportunities. For those who are interested in learning Amdo Tibetan in an official university course, Amdo Tibetan language courses are currently available at the following institutions: University of Helsinki (Helsinki, Finland), Qinghai Normal University and Qinghai Nationalities University (Xining, China), Northwest Nationalities University (Lanzhou, China), Humboldt University (Berlin, Germany), and the Institute for Oriental Languages (Paris, France).

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