

# Borrowed Language: Passive Assimilation or Active Incorporation of Modern Concepts

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## 1. How much of Ladakhi is still Ladakhi?

*Modern times* madlap sipa nang tyuris Ladakse *economy*-la mangpo *change* costok. Daksa *education* mangseang *important* gyurtok. *Lekin education problem* shrante inok. *Sikul-i* nangla *teacher* kacik mene Gyagarne inok. Di *teacher*-la Ladakse *culture-i* skorla *interest* minduk. Cia zerna Ladakse skat mishesok. Yang *kitab-i* nangla Gyagare gyalraps nang *mathematics* nang *science-i* skorla driste inok, *magar* Ladakse gyalraps yang Ladakse thrimse skorla mane driamenok. *Governmental primary sikul-i* nangla *kitab madlap class* shnga tsukpa Ladakse skat *medium* inok, tenepharla *middle sikul-i* nangla *kitab gyat* tsukpa *Urdu medium* inok, tenepharla *English medium* inok. Thrugua *English* gyalla mishesok. Yang *examination* songte *shaet* lophruk mangpoa *failure* yonganok. *Shaet* lo mangpo silte *magar government job* mithobok, *pene* mangpo mithobok. Yang *private sikul-i* nangla *first class*-nepharla *English medium* inok. Budyik sila *tem* minduk. Defia thrugua Ladakse skat kule kulea tsapik tsapik rjedok. Khyokthongun *hoṭ l-i* nangla *kopi* thungcesia dzomste, *happy*-nanyampo dukna, khongi *problem*, *girlfriend*, *music*, *car* lasoks tshangme skorla spera tangna *English* nang *Urdu* manpo kolinok.<sup>1</sup>

For those who are not familiar with the remaining Ladakhi words, the main point might be paraphrased as follows: It is only at governmental primary schools (in Leh district) that the Ladakhi language is used for teaching. The medium language of middle schools is Urdu, while English is the medium

1. Transliteration, as well as phonological transcriptions of Ladakhi and Tibetan, correspond to the Wylie system, except for the following diacritics: dots below d, n, and t indicate retroflex articulation, bars on vowels indicate phonological high pitch in Modern Tibetan (pitch distinction applies only to first syllables), but vowel length in Hindi and Persian. Correct pronunciation of English loanwords is rendered in English orthography which is, together with transliterations from other languages, marked through underlining.

language of higher education. Private schools start with English from first class. Some schools offer in addition the possibility of learning Tibetan script, but for many pupils it is not worth the extra time, and therefore the result is that these pupils, although being generally well-educated, might be illiterate in their own language. Even those who have learned the Tibetan script are often very weak in reading and writing skills and have little or no knowledge of the grammar of their language. Young people mixing many English and Urdu expressions into their speech start to forget the Ladakhi equivalents, if they ever learned them.

Witnessing this type of speech in Ladakh, one could become rather worried about the future of the Ladakhi language, and the situation is even worse than described, as I am not yet able to identify and represent all the words of Urdu or Hindi provenience. Quite often those I interviewed could simply not remember the Ladakhi words for what they were discussing with me in English, because they never learned to think about the modern world in their own language. As government, administrative bodies, and the law were controlled by the Dogras, Kashmiris, and Indians for more than a hundred years, most Ladakhis do not have a word of their own for justice or fairness, lawyers or judges, etc. Often, copying their teachers or some officials, they use Urdu or English terms, which, especially in the case of English, can be quite bewildering, e.g., *sikul* for school (as in the opening paragraph).

Loanwords are not only used in technical language or for rather new things like *raidī* (radio) or *jaz* (Hindi/Urdu *jahaz* = aeroplane) where coined expressions like *lhunghrin* (air-message), or *namtru* (sky-ship) seem to be too oldfashioned or scholarly. Loanwords sneak into everyday conversation like *tem* (time) for *tus* as well as for the auxiliary verbs *long* (to have time) and *ran* (to be the time for...); *magar* and *lekin* (Hindi/Urdu: but, however) for *inang*, *happy* for *skitpo*, *table* for *coktse* (which, by the way, originates from Chinese), *colour* or *rang* (Hindi/Urdu) for *khatok*, *hotl* (hotel) or *rastrant* (restaurant) for *zakhang*, *soal* (Hindi/Urdu *savāl* = question) for *driwa*, *let* (light, electricity) for *ot* and *hlok*, *on-coces* (to turn on), *ban-coces* (to turn off) for which *tsukces* and *catces* (or *satces*) could be used. Children are called by anglicised names: *Pami* for *Padma*, *Doli* for *Dolma*.

This trend is reinforced by the politics of the radio station where they say that the scholarly Tibetan words were too difficult to understand for common people and thus English loanwords are used instead (but I wonder whether the villagers *do* understand them more easily when they hear them the first time?). Thus, in 1994, when they had cases of pestilence in Delhi, the English word 'plague' (which is rather a cover term for epidemic diseases)

was used in the Ladakhi radio news instead of one of the several Tibetan terms that you can find in Jäschke's dictionary: *gnyan* for pestilence, '*go-nad*, '*go-ba'i nad*, '*go-ba'i rims*, *ngan-rims* or *rims-nad* for epidemic disease.

## 2. Under economic and social pressure borrowing of words may lead to a complete language shift

The phenomenon of borrowing words from another language is nothing unusual for living languages. We are talking of a 'dead language', when this process of enriching the vocabulary has come to an end or is kept going on only artificially like in Latin or in Sanskrit. Through the ages, Tibetan and Ladakhi have absorbed many words mainly from economic contact, while the more abstract terminology of the Buddhist religion was almost completely translated or paraphrased into Tibetan. Laufer (1916) lists more than three hundred loanwords in Tibetan from Indian, Persian, Arabic, Uiguric, Turkic, Mongolian, Chinese, and even European sources. Most of them concern names of vegetables, spices, medical herbs and minerals, animals, but also items of dress, like, e.g., *tibi*: 'hat' (from Hindi *ṭopī*-) and *pabu*: 'woollen shoe' (from Persian *pāpōsh*). However, if the borrowing is not kept within a certain limit, e.g., to imported items, or is not restricted

to the acquisition of socioculturally new ['modern'] functions, usually H[igh]-type (formal, literary- and status-related) functions, but leads to the displacement of speakers from their 'traditional' L[ow]-type (informal, spoken and intimate) functions,<sup>2</sup>

and if this process is left unattended, the donor language

associated with [...] increased status [...] competes with and also begins to erode the remaining functions originally allocated to the language(s) previously employed by the speech community.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the point will be reached sooner or later, where the receiver language, having lost its former identity, is overwhelmed by and totally assimilated into the donor language.

Assimilation itself is not a catastrophe, but the situation which forces the assimilation might be one. For example, perhaps it is felt that the shift to a

2. Fishman 1989: 2ff.

3. Ibid. 1989: 3.

new identity might provide better economic chances? Likewise some Ladakhis seem to believe that power and wealth are related to modernisation and that modernisation is related through knowledge and science to the main languages used in India, including English, while the Ladakhi language and culture are associated with poverty, backwardness, and uselessness. If they were right, then the best solution would be a total switch to English or Urdu. Why? Because, as their examination results show, Ladakhi students cannot compete with native Urdu speakers and those whose social environment is versed in English. In the past, and for similar reasons, the people of Ladakh underwent a process of total assimilation: the first inhabitants of Ladakh were Dardic speakers who were colonised by the Tibetans between the 7th and 9th century and later were ruled by descendants of the last Tibetan king. Today, only a small group of Dardic speakers are left in Ladakh and their educational situation is just as inadequate as that of Ladakhi speakers in Kargil district where no education in the mother tongue is provided.

### 3. Word composition and derivation, an alternative to the borrowing of words

Assimilation, however, is not the only option for a minority. Cultural novelties and new technical terms might be integrated or incorporated into the language by using its inner devices for so-called loan translations or calques. Tibetan and Ladakhi have the possibility to produce compound words, which in most cases offer quite a vivid description of the entity they refer to: like *lhungthrin* (written as *rlung-phrin*): 'air-message' for radio, i.e., a message that comes through the air, or *mekhor* (written *me-'khor*): 'fire-wheel' for a steam engine, i.e. wheels that are driven by fire, *namtru* (written *gnam-gru*): 'sky-ship', i.e., a vehicle that moves through the sky, etc. For modern technology, Tibetans have coined the words *thūūkoo* or *thūūiceè* that would be *thrulchor* or *thrulchas* in Ladakhi (written '*phrul-'khor*, '*phrul-chas*): 'magic wheels', 'magic tools', for machine and thus *tsūrū thūūiceè* (*rtsis-rig*: 'mathematics') or *Lōktsū thūūiceè* (*glog-rtsis*: 'electrical calculation') for computer which could be *tsisrik thrulchas* or *loktsis thrulchas* in Ladakhi. Personally, I think the use of *thrul*: 'magic' in this connection, though sounding a little bit naive, expresses the truth precisely: usually nobody really understands how these things work. The Tibetan *lotsawas* or translators extensively used calques of this type when translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit.

Two strategies might be followed while coining new expressions. In India, language reformers usually draw upon the most ancient and/or holy layer,

be it Old Tamil<sup>4</sup> or Sanskrit.<sup>5</sup> But if the modern spoken language has developed to such an extent that it is rather distant from the ancient model, reconstructions might risk being artificial and unintelligible and might not be accepted by the majority of the speech community.<sup>6</sup> The pre-communist Chinese language reformers therefore chose the other way. Though there was the shining example of Classical Chinese, they did not make any attempt to model the new expressions on the basis of Classical Chinese. The phonetical basis was the prevailing Peking dialect, while the vocabulary was based on the main northern dialects.<sup>7</sup>

Coining adequate expressions needs some intellectual effort, but Ladakhis are quite lucky as they could simply take over the expressions developed by the Tibetans under Chinese command. On the other hand, these new expressions need to be propagated in the media (radio and newspaper, e.g., *Ladags Melong*) and in the schools, in order to substitute one trend with another. These efforts will only bear fruit if a larger percentage of the population is committed to such developments. To a certain degree it is then even possible to revert the process of assimilation and to replace loanwords which have been used for a long time, with the original language. Take as an example the situation of my own German language.

#### 4. Language shift — reversement is possible

In Germany, up until the 17th century, the language of the Church, education, science, and law was Latin and then later, increasingly, French. Even Martin Luther, the great religious reformer, who because of his translation of the Bible into German is held to be the father of modern High German, had in fact first published in Latin his theses of dissent with the Church. It was not until 1687 that the first scholarly lecture was held in German instead of Latin. As a result of this attitude, German had only been used for trivial everyday conversation, but even then many fashionable French words were mixed into it.

But from the 17th century on, the middle classes — mainly teachers and officials — started to organise themselves, more or less with success, in associations to rescue or 'purify' the German language. Many words could

4. Zvelebil 1984.

5. Balbir 1983, Boulton 1983.

6. Boulton 1983.

7. Hagège et al. 1983.

not be substituted, because the proposed expressions were too long, not precise enough, or because the loanwords were too well established. However, at least the language of administration could be reformed, e.g., in 1874 about 760 loanwords concerning transport and postal services were replaced by German expressions like long-distance-speaker for telephone.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays it is a matter-of-course that we receive our education in our mother tongue, even at university level, although except for the textbooks almost all publications are in English, the new language of the sciences. I should add, however, that in recent decades, along with the introduction of new communication technologies, it has become quite trendy to use English terms. In Germany, unfortunately, this carelessness about the native tongue can spread into all domains because we no longer have private associations or public institutions for the purpose of protecting and maintaining the German language as they have, for example, in France where the *Academie Française* started quite a radical campaign against loanwords.

##### 5. The key to successful education — is education in the mother tongue

During my highschool days, I remember well my resentment when technical terms (mostly derived from Latin or Greek) started to be introduced to describe, for example, German linguistics. This, despite the fact that German equivalents existed. I am still convinced that I can understand things better, even the most abstract phenomena, when they are explained in German. I find philosophical texts especially plausible when presented in German, while, conversely, totally obscure in English. And I think I share this experience with many people. For this reason I fear that, in the long run, Ladakhis need to make a choice: either educate totally in their own native language, or adopt another language, for example, Urdu or English, so that their children can understand what they are taught.

That Ladakh is a small country with approximately 155,000 inhabitants is no argument against the use of Ladakhi as the medium of school education. Compared to India, Danmark with 5.2 million inhabitants is a small country too, but all education is in Danish. Also, Greenland, which is a dominion of Danmark with autonomous administration, has only about 35,000 Eskimo or Inuit inhabitants. Since 1979, however, Greenlandic or Kalaallisut has been

8. von Pohlenz 1984. Unfortunately this example (which is the only one that is easy to copy into English) is an example of a term which was not acceptable to the common people. Thus we paid fees for the 'long-distance-speaker' even though we used the 'telephone'!

the official language and is the language used for teaching in primary schools. The Inuit have developed a genuine 'living' literary tradition. At the University in Nuuk, the capital city, Kalaallisut is at least partially used.<sup>9</sup> A similarly small minority with connections to Danmark are the 45,000 partly self-governing inhabitants of the Faroe Islands. Their language, Faroese which is related to Danish, has developed from a mere 'dialect' to a national language which is used by the authorities and on the radio. It is taught at least in the primary schools and has led to an abundant literary production.<sup>10</sup>

But other minority communities of Inuit in Alaska are less fortunate and could serve as an example of what might happen when the medium of education is not the mother tongue and if there is no cultural counterweight: a total language shift from Inuit to English within four generations only:

Inuit unilingual great-grandparents, bilingual grandparents (with Inuit dominance), bilingual parents (with English dominance) and English unilingual children.<sup>11</sup>

## 6. Why Ladakhi should not be replaced by (classical) Tibetan

There have been a few attempts to establish Tibetan schools in Ladakh as well as in Spiti, where the children study *budyik*, i.e., Tibetan script, as a compulsory subject. However the medium language for the main subjects is — again — at best, English, and the *budyik* turns out to be a sort of Classical Tibetan. I hope that I do not hurt the feelings of the Ladakhi scholars with my critical attitude towards these projects. There are two counter-arguments: First, Classical Tibetan like Sanskrit and Latin is a language that is no longer spoken (if it ever was) especially not for lay purposes. Second, the Ladakhi language has had its own development, being rather like a sister that contributed to the perfection of the Classical language, e.g., through the work of Lotsawa Rinchen Bzangpo, than a wayward daughter of Classical Tibetan. Thus there are quite some differences in phonology as it can be seen in the word *ltsangkhan*: 'beggar' where the first part of the word is related to Classical Tibetan *slong-ba*: 'to beg' (likewise the verb *slob-pa*: 'to teach' might be pronounced *ltsapces* in western Ladakh). The main difference can be found in grammar, especially if one compares the formation of the verb stems, cf. the following Classical Tibetan (CT) and Ladakhi (L) verbs: a) 'to cover', b)

9. Dorais 1994.

10. Hagström 1989.

11. Dorais 1994: 227.

'to give, throw, send', and c) 'to put into, shut, let someone do something':

	Present	Past	Future	Imperative
CT	<u>'gebs-pa</u>	<u>bkab</u>	<u>dgab</u>	<u>khob</u>
L	<i>kapces</i>	<i>kaps</i>	---	<i>kop</i>
CT	<u>gtong-ba</u>	<u>btang</u>	<u>gtang</u>	<u>thong</u>
L	<i>tangces</i>	<i>tangs</i>	---	<i>tong</i>
CT	<u>'jug-pa</u>	<u>bcug</u>	<u>gzhug</u>	<u>chug</u>
L	<i>cukces</i>	<i>cuks</i>	---	<i>cuk</i>

There are lexical differences as well, e.g., *khyongces*: 'to bring' (perhaps a contraction of *'khyer yongces*: 'to come carrying') or *khyelces*: 'to be able to pass' which are not found in Classical and Modern Tibetan. Compare also *ldances*: 'to become, grow' with Classical Tibetan *ldan-ba*: 'to be near to, to have, to get' and *silces*: 'to study, read' with Classical Tibetan *gsil* or *bsil*: 'to cut into pieces'.

Though it remains important that children are given the opportunity to study 'real' Tibetan or *chosskat* (the language of Religion), I do not see any advantage in introducing Classical Tibetan — which is a 'foreign', i.e., not the 'native' language — as the medium of education and modern literature. Theoretically, there should be no difficulties in writing down Ladakhi. Only a few modifications of *budyik* would be necessary. However, in the past, Ladakhi scholars almost developed an aversion to the modest modifications introduced by the Christian convert Joseph Gergan, not to mention the more scientific, but obviously too radical, proposals of the likewise Christian Eliyah Tsetan Phuntsog, to abolish the 'mute' prefixes and the 'superfluous' second vowel sign. Many Ladakhi scholars apparently view such ideas as a challenge to their religion and culture.<sup>12</sup> But in the wake of a much more threatening language shift, there are some arguments for the rising of Ladakhi *phalskat*, or ordinary language, to the status of a literary language.

12. Bray 1994.



It was already stated by Joseph Gergan and Eliyah Tsetan Phuntsog that the identification of *budyik* with *chosskat*, and thus with Buddhism, would discourage the Muslims from accepting *budyik* for writing.<sup>13</sup> For this reason it seems necessary to develop a modern literary style which is exclusively meant for lay purposes such as education and modern literature, and which is close to the spoken language. In this connection it is interesting to look at the policy of the Buddha himself. Buddha and his early followers explicitly used the narrative styles and the language of the common people as a skilful means, *upāya* (Tibetan *thabs*) for preaching the doctrine. The entire Buddhist canon is based on the immediate oral tradition. Later, when Buddhism spread to Central Asia the translation of the Buddhist texts lead to a 'vernacular revolution', that is, to the rising of the local oral '*phalskat*' to the status of written '*chosskat*' — even to the neglect of an already existing highly prestigious literary style like Classical Chinese.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, from the Buddhist principle of *upāya* (skilful means) it would follow that even the religious language, *chosskat*, should from time to time be revised in accordance with the development of the common oral language. All the more, the modification of *budyik* according to the *phalskat* would be a *must* for the purpose of education and modern affairs. Giving *phalskat* the status of a literary language could turn out to be a skilful means of maintaining the language and thus preserving the Ladakhi culture. Such an effort was made in Bhutan. Since 1971, the Tibetan orthography was reformed in several steps according to pronunciation and grammar of the national language, and nowadays *Dzongkha* (the language of the forts, *rdzong*) is not only taught in schools but is also used by the government.<sup>15</sup>

## 7. How Ladakhi could be written

In the beginning, when Thönmi Sambhota (or whosoever) designed the Tibetan script, it was a skilful means of representing the phonemes or the pronunciation of the Tibetan language of that time. This scholarly character of *budyik* has had its own 'subversive' tradition in Ladakh, as laymen for the most did not learn much more than the phonemic principle of the script. This resulted in some Tibetan scholars complaining: 'The Ladakhi people

13. Ibid. 1994.

14. Mair 1994.

15. Imaeda & Pommaret 1990; Dorji 1994.

know how to write but they do not know at all.<sup>16</sup> Though it would be a scientific ideal to write only what is to be heard and not to use several graphemes or signs for the same sound,<sup>17</sup> this solution does not seem to be the most skilful means of representing Ladakhi as it would lead to a complete break with the Tibetan tradition.

Rather, it seems useful to retain the traditional Classical Tibetan orthography for names and main words, so that a Tibetan or Buthanese reader will be able to recognise them. An exception should be made for those words where the pronunciation is totally different and cannot be deduced from the Classical spelling, cf. the above example of *ltsangkhan* and *slong-ba*. The spelling of verbs and grammatical particles could be partly reduced according to the pronunciation, thus: *kyedi* (or *kyede*): 'your, (by) you' could be written *khyed-di*, 'your', but *khyed-dis*, '(by) you' instead of *khyed-kyi* and *khyed-kyis*; *tangat*: 'I give' could be written *(b)tang-nga'ad* instead of *gtong-ba yod*; *tong*: 'give!' could be written *tong* instead of *thong*. The 'mute' verbal prefixes 'a- (i.e., the a-chung) and b-, if used, should not vary in the present and past tense forms.

An excellent model for modern Ladakhi writing is the book: *A Lower Ladakhi version of the Kesar saga*.<sup>18</sup> All those to whom I had the opportunity of showing my personal copy, agreed that it was 'very nice' because of its fine style and because it was '**our language**'. For similar reasons, attempts were made recently in Tibet to derive a standard literary language that would be intelligible and acceptable to all speakers in all regions on the basis of the Kesar epic since — as is generally known — 'it has gone beyond the limit of dialects', was 'composed by common people', and 'was passed down from generation to generation'.<sup>19</sup>

If, on the other hand, any modification of the *budyik* according to the *phalskat* would be rejected by the Buddhist scholars of Ladakh and the use of the Tibetan script as identified with the *chosskat* would be resented by the Muslim Ladakhis, then alternatively writing in Roman, *devanāgarī* or Arabic letters could be developed on purely phonologic principles. Experiments of writing the Balti language in characters that seem to be partly derived from the Roman, partly from an Indian alphabet, and partly from fantasy, date

16. Ridzong Shastrul Lobsang Tshultrim Chosphe, a well known scholar at the turn of the century, quoted by Thupstan Paldan (Cultural Academy, Leh).

17. Koshal 1976.

18. Francke 1905-41.

19. Jiangbian Jiacao 1994: 1020f.

back as far as the 15th century.<sup>20</sup> However, the *devanāgarī* and Arabic script would face difficulties in representing the consonant clusters of Ladakhi, while the Roman script would be handicapped by the necessity to use either diacritics or two or even three letters for single consonants. Thus *budyik* is the only skilful means to represent the Ladakhi *phalskat*.

## 8. Conclusion

As long as there is a choice between a rather resignative and passive assimilation to the western way of life, and an active integration or incorporation of the modern concepts into one's own culture, then the second alternative is to be preferred. As it is said in the Kesar epic:

lcugguna maskyilna yalga songste minyan lo  
chungngunla manyanna chenmo songste minyan lo

If it is not bent while it is a shoot, it will not be possible  
[to bend it] when it has become a bough.  
If it was not possible for the small one, it will not be  
possible when it has grown-up.

For the Ladakhi language this means that a constant effort should be made — ideally by every Ladakhi and not just some experts — to transform the newcoming words and to give second thoughts to those which have already been adopted. Since the Ladakhi language, due to its genuine development, is quite different from Classical Tibetan, I would **not** recommend a Tibetani-sation of education, but rather a Ladakhisation based perhaps on the dialect of Leh, but open enough to tolerate and even foster the eastern and western, southern and northern variants.

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20. LSI 1909: 33f.

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