

Simplification in Initial Consonant Clusters: A Comparative Study of Tibetan Dialects

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Modern Tibetan dialects display a wide variety of word-initial consonant sequences, which can be traced back through the very conservative writing system to Old Tibetan initial clusters consisting of up to four consonants. The Old Tibetan clusters have been simplified to at least some extent in all of the modern dialects, the most extreme case of which is Lhasa Tibetan where the syllable structure has been reduced to allow only singleton onsets. A comparative analysis of approximately twenty dialects of modern Tibetan leads to an analysis of the syllable structure of the original written form in which a core onset consisting of a consonant plus optional rhotic or glide could be augmented by attaching another single consonant or consonant cluster consisting of obstruent plus rhotic as an adjunct to the prosodic word.

Reduction of the consonant sequences in the modern dialects has followed two vectors. The core onset clusters have tended towards simplification by coalescence, resulting in palatal or retroflex affricates (from *Cj* and *Cr* clusters, respectively), in the Central dialects (which includes Lhasa Tibetan) and Eastern dialects. In the Western dialects, coalescence is less complete, and many of the cluster realizations are still evident. This is represented in an OT analysis by a gradual demotion of the UNIFORMITY constraint with respect to constraints governing the relative acceptability of *Cr* and *Cj* onset clusters. The adjunct consonants and adjunct clusters, on the other hand, have been largely deleted without affecting the retained onset consonants in the Central dialects. In both the Eastern and Western dialects, however, reflexes of many of the original consonants are still evident. In gross terms, the loss of the adjunct consonants is represented within OT by the demotion of MAX with respect to a constraint militating against adjunct consonants. Low-ranking MAX affects the adjunct consonants while deletion of core onset consonants is protected by high-ranking CONTIG. The interaction of the two relatively simple reduction processes outlined in this paper result in the wide variety of clusters found in the modern dialects of Tibetan.