<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autor/In</th>
<th>Beitrag</th>
<th>Seitennummer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David B. Honey</td>
<td>The Rise of the Hsiung-nu. Some Historiographical, Anthropological, and Philological Considerations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siegbert Hummel</td>
<td>Wilhelm Radloff zum 75. Todestag. Würdigung seines opus magnum zur Orchon-Expedition, zugleich als Weg- und Sachweiser durch das Werk</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George van Driem</td>
<td>The Phonologies of Dzongkha and the Bhutanese Liturgical Language</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bettina Zeisler</td>
<td>Ergativ, Passiv and Antipassiv. Entwicklungen im Tibetischen</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margret Causemann</td>
<td>Der 'Dzam-thaṅ dkar-chag der gesammelten Werke des rJe-btsun Tāranātha</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika Veit</td>
<td>Einige Bemerkungen zur Bedeutung der Biographie des Altan Qan für die Geschichte der Mongolen des 16. Jahrhunderts</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Weiers</td>
<td>Die historische Dimension des Jade-Siegels zur Zeit des Mandschuherrschers Hongtaiji</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ījaqa Čimedдорж (Hohhot)</td>
<td>Die 14 Briefe Galdans an den 5. Dalai Lama und an die Fürsten von Koke Nor</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Mingchao † und Guo Chonglin (Harbin)</td>
<td>Typen und kulturelle Beziehungen der Epen der nordasiatischen Völker in der Endphase</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classical Tibetan is the liturgical language of Bhutan. The language is referred to in Bhutan as Чхо ‘language of the dharma.’ The main factor determining the pronunciation of Чхо in Bhutan is the phonology of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Dzongkha is the native language of most of western Bhutan and represents the direct descendant of Old Tibetan on Bhutanese soil. Dzongkha is the р’ха ‘language’ of the dzong ‘citadel,’ military strongholds throughout Bhutan which housed the ruling elite. The differences between the phonologies of Dzongkha and Чхо are best understood in terms of the phonology of Dzongkha. Traditional Чхо grammar still exerts a strong normative influence on the way Bhutanese literati perceive Dzongkha. The phonology of the liturgical language also influences the way educated native speakers of Dzongkha think about the phonology of their own language and determines the literary pronunciations of learned words in formal registers of speech. Since many, if not most, speakers of Dzongkha are Bhutanese whose native tongue happens to be one of the country’s seventeen other indigenous languages, the Dzongkha pronunciation of these speakers is furthermore coloured by their respective native phonologies.

Dzongkha and Чхо are given both in the native Bhutanese ’Ucen script and in the official romanization known as ‘Roman Dzongkha.’ This system of transcription, devised by the author, was adopted by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 1991. This romanization is not a transliteration of the indigenous orthography in ’Ucen script, but a phonemic representation based on the standard dialect of the national language. Phonetic transcriptions are given between square brackets in International Phonetic Alphabet with the superscripts (\(H\)) and (\(L\)) indicating the high and low tones respectively.

1. The phonology of Dzongkha

There are two register tones in Dzongkha, and these are to some extent predictable in ways which will be explained below. Dzongkha has eight vowels:

\[
\begin{align*}
i & = \text{i} \\
\text{ü} & = \text{u} \\
\text{ë} & = \text{ö} \\
\text{o} & = \text{ö} \\
\text{å} & = \text{ä} \\
\text{a} & = \text{a}
\end{align*}
\]
Vowel length is distinctive. The vowels ä [æː], ö [œː] and ü [yː] marked by a diaeresis or नास्तकी धार्मिक tshà ’nyì, are inherently long. Vowels before final -ng are long, e.g. धार्मिक gang [gân]H ‘bull, ox,’ धार्मिक chang [tʃan]H ‘beer,’ धार्मिक tshongkha [tʃɔŋkʰa]H ‘shop,’ धार्मिक meng [mɛŋ]H ‘name,’ धार्मिक hing [hɪŋ]H ‘heart.’ Elsewhere vowel length is indicated by an accent circonflexe or नास्तकी धार्मिक chhî, e.g. a vs. ā. The phonetic difference between short vowels and their long counterparts is not only one of duration, but also of timbre, e.g. धार्मिक map [mâp]H ‘husband’ vs. धार्मिक māp [matp]H ‘red,’ धार्मिक sep [sep]H ‘yellow,’ धार्मिक tsip [tsip]H ‘stone wall’ vs. धार्मिक tsip [tsiːp]H ‘astrologer,’ धार्मिक phop [phɔp]H ‘put something down’ vs. धार्मिक phôp [phɔːp]H ‘cup,’ धार्मिक ku [ku]H ‘honorific prefix for parts of the body’ vs. धार्मिक kû [kʊː]H ‘gourd used as a scoop.’ The short vowels /e/ and /o/, in particular, tend to be somewhat more open in closed syllables. The diachronic factors conditioning lengthening give every appearance of being complex.

Dzongkha distinguishes voiceless, aspirated, voiced and devoiced plosives and affricates. Devoiced initials are indicated by a circular diacritic called नास्तकी धार्मिक thi, e.g., धार्मिक g, d, j, bj, zh. Devoiced initials historically derive from voiced initials and, in phonetic terms, are accompanied by the low tone and followed by breathy phonation in the following vowel, e.g. धार्मिक kou [kou]H ‘leather,’ धार्मिक kho [kʰo]H ‘he,’ धार्मिक go [go]L ‘door,’ धार्मिक gō[kɔː]L ‘Bhutanese male garb.’

Sibilants can be voiceless, voiced or devoiced, e.g. धार्मिक sum [sum]H ‘amulet, talisman,’ धार्मिक z’am [zəm]L ‘bridge,’ धार्मिक zám [zaːm]L ‘well bred.’

sibilant initial or initial /r/ are in the low tone, e.g. ཉར bau [bau]L ‘goitre,’ ཉན drön [tër]L ‘mule,’ ཉན drön dzâu [dzaːu]L ‘crunchy puffed rice (served with Bhutanese tea),’ ཉན bjéem [ptʃɛːm]L ‘sand,’ ཉན žôm [zaːm]L ‘young,’ ཉན z’ou [soʊ]L ‘sickle,’ ཉན ra [ra]L ‘goat.’ Syllables beginning with a vowel, a nasal or voiced liquid other than /r/ can be either high or low tone. In these syllables, high tone is indicated with an apostrophe at the beginning of the syllable, e.g. ཉ nga [ŋɑ]L ‘I, me’ vs. ཉ nga [ŋɑ]H ‘five,’ ཉ lo [lo]L ‘year, age’ vs. ཉ lo [lo]H ‘cough,’ ཉ yâ [jaː]L ‘above’ vs. ཉ yâ [jaː]H ‘yak,’ ཉ wang [wɑː]L ‘Thimphu Valley’ vs. ཉ wang [wɑː]H ‘spiritual empowerment,’ ཉ tong [tɔː]L ‘come’ vs. ཉ tong [tɔː]H ‘milk,’ ཉ mi [mi]L ‘fire’ vs. ཉ mi [mi]H ‘yeti.’ Elsewhere, tone is left unmarked. The Dzongkha continuant initials are:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>high</th>
<th>low</th>
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<tr>
<td>velar nasal</td>
<td>’ng ng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palatal nasal</td>
<td>’ny ny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dental nasal</td>
<td>’n n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bilabial nasal</td>
<td>’m m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palatal glide</td>
<td>’y y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apical continuant</td>
<td>hr r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced lateral</td>
<td>’l l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lateral continuant</td>
<td>lh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labiovelar glide</td>
<td>’w w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiceless aspirate</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vowels

| closed front vowel | ’i i |
| closed rounded front vowel | ’ü ü |
| closed rounded back vowel | ’u u |
| half-open front vowel | ’e e |
| half-open rounded front vowel | ’ö ö |
| half-open rounded back vowel | ’o o |
| open front vowel | ’ä ä |
| open back vowel | ’a a |

The diëresis above the letters ä, ö and ü in Roman Dzongkha is used to distinguish the vowel in ཉ ng shä [ʃaː]H ‘wander’ from the vowel in ཉ ng shê [ʃeː]H ‘know,’ the vowel in ཉ ng dö [dœː]H ‘sit’ from the vowel in ཉ do [do]L ‘stone,’ and the vowel in ཉ ng lu [lu]L ‘sheep’ from the vowel in ཉ ng lü [lyː]L ‘compost.’
The vowels a, o and ü in Dzongkha arose, as in modern Tibetan, through apophony conditioned by old syllable-final -"] -d, ] -l, ] -n and -s -s, still represented in modern orthography. Whereas all four finals resulted in apophonic o ] [ < o] and u ] [ < u], apophony of original a variously yielded e, ê and a.

Old final -d in Dzongkha usually gave rise to e, e.g., རྟུ་ 'show,' རྟུ་'inspect,' རྟུ་'forget,' རྟུ་'measure, size, moderation,' seldom to à or e, e.g., རྟུ་'eight,' རྟུ་'do,' རྟུ་'dzene' in modern orthography.

2. The phonology of Bhutanese Chöke

The phonology of Chöke as spoken by native speakers of Dzongkha differs from that of Dzongkha in several respects.

The Old Tibetan post-consonantal glide /l/, or ra-ta, which in modern Tibetan gave rise to retroflex initials has in Dzongkha in some cases led to palatalization of initials other than velars, e.g., Dzongkha རྟོ་'hair (on scalp)' vs. Chöke རྟོ་'barley vs. Chöke རྟོ་'work,' Dzongkha རྟོ་'cliff owl' vs. Chöke རྟོ་'cliff owl,' Dzongkha རྟོ་'wealth, resources' vs. Chöke རྟོ་'wealth, resources.' In some cases the modern vowel has yet to be explained, e.g., Dzongkha རྟོ་ 'head of a geo, or block of villages,' Dzongkha རྟོ་'ex-, former, retired,' alongside formal Chöke རྟོ་'ex-, former, retired,' alongside formal

The consonants -t, -l and -k are retained as finals in Chöke and correspond to orthographic final -d, -n -l and -g. The vowel ā occurs in Chöke only before orthographic final -s. Otherwise, apophony of original a gives rise to e, and the vowel è only arises from lengthening of original e.

These differences are illustrated by the sample text below. This text is the Zhölthün, a sacred prayer reserved for certain members of the Bhutanese Royal Family to whom the prayer was given by His Holiness the late བོད་ཀྱིས་རྒྱ་མཚོད་ Dölgo Khentse Rinpoche. The interlinear transcription in Roman Dzongkha represents the Western Bhutanese pronunciation of the liturgical language. This prayer contains mantras the very sound of which is held to have magical power. A translation of the prayer, which is Tantric in content, is not provided here. A proper translation with the required philological and buddhological interpretation and commentary falls beyond the scope of the present article.

In view of the recent introduction of the authors’s system of romanization which was only adopted as the official romanization by the Royal Government of Bhutan in September, 1991, there appears to be some consensus amongst Bhutanese who have started using the romanization as to what constitutes a word. They apply their native speaker intuitions to the liturgical language as well, and this is reflected in the way certain syllables below are written as a single word, whereas others are not.

The liturgical pronunciations indicated are those of རྡོ་ རྗན་ ལྕེ་ ཐི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ ལྡྲེ་ གཞན་ "Gasep Karma Tshering, formerly Dzongkha newsreader of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, well known for his exemplary pronunciation of Dzongkha. Karma Tshering was educated in the Bhutanese liturgical tradition in the prestigious lamasery school at ལྟ་ཞིང་ སྤྱི་ལུག་ སྤྲིའི་ ཆེན་ སྤྱིོས་ སྤྱི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ སྤྱིོས་ སྤྱི་ སྤྱི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ " Semtokha1 near the Bhutanese capital Thimphu, where he received his schooling in Classical Tibetan and a wide variety of Buddhist disciplines. The author was first asked to provide a romanization of this prayer in 1990

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1 The name may be translated as ‘place of gleaning by the mind,’ but the original toponym is allegedly རྡོ་ རྗན་ རྡོ་ རྗན་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ "Srimotokha which means ‘upon the devil’s belly’ and is tied to a legend about རྡོ་ རྗན་ རྡོ་ རྗན་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ ཡི་ བསྟན་ བྱུང་ འབྲུང་ "Ngal-drung Nga’wang ’Namgä having slain a powerful demon at the site in the early seventeenth century and built his fortress on its belly. ARIS (1979), however, gives the spelling Srin-mo rDo-kha.
for use at the royal palace at Dechechö’ling just outside Thimphu. This he did with the kind assistance of Karma Tshering who patiently and conscientiously narrated the text numerous times for the author.

2 The subscript \( ñ \), which appears twice in Dzongkha, represents the long vowels in Sanskrit dākinī. The same convention is used on occasion to represent a long vowel in modern Dzongkha. The subscript \( ñ \), however, appears to be spurious.

3 Contrary to what one might expect, the pronunciation is ‘upel, and not ‘utpel. A possible explanation for such instances is that certain liturgical terms very familiar to speakers in their colloquial or Dzongkha form might be felt to be overly artificial in a strict liturgical pronunciation. In fervent prayer the modern Dzongkha form may on occasion be heard to replace the proper liturgical pronunciation Phakpa Cenrezik.

4 Here too, the pronunciation petnyi rather than petnyir is contrary to expectation. See footnote 3.
42 George van Driem

De drööt ötphung 'longd'o röl.

Thukkar nyiteng hri 'mar thar.

Pakmet zhö'ingkün chappar thrö.

Thuksok hrira thim zii'ìn ket.

Rangdrööl rang'wang thoppar j'ur.

Thukkai ötmar cakcuyi.

Rap kül dakla chak dung'i.

Özh'u5 thikle 'marpo ni.

Thimpä 'nyfsu metpar j'ur.

Rikpa rang shar tshenmai lha.

'Ngal korlä barwei öt.

Ten 'yoi 'ngökün 'wang dü nä.

Detong jurmet lhencikkê.

'Om kuru kulle hri sowa hâ.

'Mikj'oai semyit 'wangmet d'u.

Ketcik dünd'u lhakpai möt.

Yungdru tsam j'ur 'nyingg'o ru.

'Om kuru kulle gel'lön bangkhor sarwawasham kuru hri sowa hâ.

'Nyí met 'lodä chenpor del.

'Nötcüt yeshë rölpar shar. 'Om 'á hung.

5 Here one would have expected the pronunciation ötzh'u. See footnote 3.
3. Liturgical pronunciations in the spoken language

There are also numerous differences in pronunciation between Dzongkha and Chöke, of which many examples have been provided above. As we have seen, these differences may result from palatalization, e.g., Dzongkha гла ‘go’ vs. Chöke гла dro, or from the different results of apophony and the loss of finals, e.g., Dzongkha སྲི ‘kill’ vs. Chöke སྲི set, Dzongkha སྲི ‘send’ vs. Chöke སྲི kel. A systematic correspondence not yet mentioned is that of a voiced initial in Chöke corresponding to a voiceless or aspirate initial in Dzongkha, e.g., Dzongkha སྲི སྲི da cap ‘shoot arrows’ vs. Chöke སྲི སྲི da jap, Dzongkha སྲི སྲི phü ‘give, proffer [honorific]’ vs. Chöke སྲི bül. Often the differences between Dzongkha and Chöke are lexical in nature, e.g., Dzongkha སྲི སྲི be ‘do’ vs. Chöke སྲི སྲི jêt, Dzongkha སྲི སྲི ‘tell, say’ [<_Tib. སྲི ‘teach’] vs. Chöke སྲི jöt.

Another salient difference is that many originally bisyllabic words in Old Tibetan and Chöke have collapsed into monosyllables in Dzongkha, e.g., Dzongkha སྲི སྲི སྲི gap ‘king’ vs. Chöke སྲི སྲི gelpo, Dzongkha སྲི སྲི thap ‘rope’ vs. Chöke སྲི སྲི thakpa. Examples have already been presented above, and the phenomenon has been extensively discussed in the literature (MAZAUDON and MICHAILOVSKY 1989, VAN DRIEM 1992a: 100–102). This phenomenon appears to be connected to the rise – in some Dzongkha dialects and restricted to certain syllable types – of a contour tone distinction in addition to the register tone distinction already discussed, but, as with vowel lengthening, the complex factors conditioning this secondary tonal distinction are not yet understood.

Many Chöke pronunciations are widely used in spoken Dzongkha, particularly in learned discourse. The prescribed pronunciation taught in lamaseries and traditional Bhutanese schools has until recently been the Chöke pronuncia-
tion, and in the case of the many students who are native speakers of a Bhutanese language other than Dzongkha the Chöke pronunciation is often the only one they have learnt, whereas native speakers of Dzongkha may also often cultivate the more erudite Chöke pronunciation. In certain cases, the Chöke pronunciation is the only one in use, e.g. ང་མགུལ་ Künsel, Bhutan’s national weekly, or ཚེས་འབུང་ Tashel Detshen ‘Bhutan Tourism Corporation.’ The Dzongkha pronunciation ‘Tashā Detshe’ is currently considered boorish, although it might one day become standard.

In many cases, both the Chöke and the Dzongkha pronunciations are acceptable and used in the appropriate style register. The colloquial རིགས་སྒྲུབ་ Dru Gākhap ‘Bhutan,’ ཤུ་རུལ་ ནག་ Paro Tātsha ‘Tiger’s Nest Sanctuary of Paro’ and གནས་འབུས་ Pende Druzhung ‘Royal Government of Bhutan’ are equally as acceptable as the more formal རིགས་སྒྲུབ་ Dru Gelkhap, རིགས་སྒྲུབ་ ནག་ Padr'o Taktshang and གནས་འབུས་ Pelden Druzhung. Sometimes the Chöke and Dzongkha pronunciations are the same, e.g. རིགས་སྒྲུབ་ Sonam Lākhung ‘Agriculture Department’ or རིགས་སྒྲུབ་ Jangthrin Lākhung ‘Bhutan Broadcasting Service.’

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