Comptes-rendus

A review of Nicolas Tournadre, *Le Prisme des Langues, Essai sur la diversité linguistique et les difficultés des langues*, L'Asiathèque, Paris, 2014, 349 pages.

Reviewed by

Bai Yunfei
(Rutgers University)

Only once in a great while does a scholarly work manage to grab the general public's interest in linguistics with such a high degree of scientific rigor and humanistic spirit. This book excels in its scope of investigation, dealing with a vast variety of linguistic families, Indo- and non-Indo-European alike. The author demonstrates an impressive ability in working across a constellation of sources, all of which are duly annotated. As a renowned polyglot, Nicolas Tournadre's linguistic expertise is all the more commendable given that he often carries out his analyses in plain French prose accessible even by those not trained in the relevant fields of academia. Moreover, it is readily evident that the abundance of first-hand examples supplied in this book are the fruits of years of field study in targeted communities where the peculiarities of relevant languages are to be encountered. Clearly, it is the author's willingness to immerse himself in the culture of others, however much it may be considered marginal or insignificant, and his eagerness to interact with people via their own modes of communication that form the humanistic bedrock of *Le Prisme des Langues*.

Not surprisingly, Tournadre's approach to the diversity of languages differs in many regards from Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, which tends to homogenize our perception of languages. As the book's provocative title indicates, Tournadre appears to espouse a weaker form of linguistic relativity by mounting an apology for the metaphoric "prism" that each language is supposed to carry. The book opens with an anecdote: by quoting Chomsky's own words, the author separates the linguists who just "like languages" from those "veritable humanist polyglots" who "love languages." In so doing, he also quite smartly debunks the popular misconception of linguists as invariably "humanistic" polyglots, while crediting the latter with the virtue of "falling in love" with the singularity of languages and not merely seeing linguistic activity as a universal human function (pp. 13-14). This differentiation, albeit methodological per

Bai Yunfei, A review of Nicolas Tournadre, *Le Prisme des Langues, Essai sur la diversité linguistique et les difficultés des langues*", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 36, Octobre 2016, pp. 251-258.

se, appears also to convey an ideological overtone that keynotes many incisive arguments of this book.

Indeed, by tracing the pros and cons surrounding the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Tournadre defines himself as belonging to that cohort of neo-relativists represented by A. Wierzbicka, G. Deutscher, and quite expectably C. Hagège. In support of Wierzbicka's assumption that languages express their areas of special interest not only through vocabulary but through grammar as well, the author turns to Tibetan for some of the most compelling examples one may find in the book. For instance, if both English and French distinguish volitional from non-volitional verbs, as evidenced by the opposition between *regarder* and *voir* in French and that between "to slide" and "to slip" in English,[1] in Tibetan this differentiation of intentionality affects not just the lexicon but also the syntax (p. 201). Such, for instance, is the case with *ngas sha bzas-bzhag* (I ate some meat without knowing it and I finally realized what I did) and *ngas sha bzas-paying* (I ate some meat in an intentional, controllable way). Although *za* (to eat) or *bzas* (the inflected form of *za* in the past tense) is used mostly as a volitional verb and thus should be followed in Tibetan by volitional auxiliaries such as *giyod, giying,* or *paying* (assuming a first-person subject), under certain circumstances it can also be paired with the inferential and non-intentional auxiliawry *bzhag*, albeit with a differing shade of meaning (p. 202).

This syntactic need to specify the intentionality of actions doubtlessly sets Tibetan apart from many other languages. That said, from a lexical point of view there might be even more dissimilarities to take into account. The author reminds of the myriad of words in Italian describing the different types of pastas as well as the multiplicity of Chinese terms referring to kinship (pp. 207-208). Likewise, one may expect Tibetans to develop a rich vocabulary for yaks (p. 210), yet their relative paucity of terms for types of fish is less well-known. In this respect, Tournadre argues that compared with Chinese people, who are keen to eat both fresh- and saltwater fishes, Tibetans do not seem to share this gastronomic appetite on both geographic and religious grounds (pp. 208-209). Indeed, a noticeable originality of Tournadre's analysis is his systematic recourse to comparative perspectives when demonstrating linguistic relativity as an indisputable

[1] One may argue that the opposition between "to slide" (intentional) and "to slip" (non-intentional) here is somewhat problematic since we often hear news reporters say "shares slid to an all-time low," which no one would understand as "the stock market intentionally plummeted to an all-time low." Idem for the verb "to slip": although generally non-intentional, it is frequently used as an intentional verb in sentences like "he slipped a note under the door" or, more figuratively, "she slipped some bad jokes into her boring and interminable speech."

universal phenomenon. Moreover, he not only emphasizes the gaps between Western and non-Western languages in their respective perceptions of the world, but also draws our attention to some previously understudied discrepancies between non-Indo-European languages per se, particularly those between Chinese and Tibetan. It is no exaggeration that this comparative approach often provides surprising results, not only for specialists of linguistic typology but for tibetologists and sinologists as well.

One example may suffice here. The author points out that among the four most commonly used methods of lexical construction—*unité lexicale non-analysable* (non-analyzable lexical unity), *la dérivation* (derivation), *la composition* (composition), and *l'emprunt* (borrowing)—*la composition* is "perhaps the most economic and easiest to assimilate" (pp. 273-274). He then illustrates this privileged status of composition by providing a list of catchy compounds in English, followed by a list in Chinese and one in Tibetan (pp. 274-275). Interestingly, it so happens that seven of the twelve Tibetan compounds listed by Tournadre are morphologically analogous to their Chinese equivalents, which are also compounds.[2] This is the case with *mig-lpags* (Ch: "眼皮" *yanpi*, eyelid; literally, eye skin), *shing-lpags* (Ch: "树皮" *shupi*, bark; literally, tree skin), *chu-mig* (Ch: "泉眼" *quanyan*, the mouth of a spring; literally, spring eye), *mig-shel* (Ch: "眼镜" *yanjing*, eyeglasses; literally, eye glasses), *lha-khang* (Ch: "神堂" *shentang*, shrine; literally, gods' house), *dngul-khang* (Ch: "银行" *yinhang*, bank; literally, silver house), and *tshong-khang* (Ch: "商店" *shangdian*, shop; literally, business house) (p. 275). Although similar morphology might have arisen in both languages independently, we are still tempted to wonder whether some of these Tibetan compounds are in reality calques of Chinese terms that have appeared in great numbers since the 1950s. If so, they cannot be simply and indiscriminately considered neologisms issuing from an indigenous process of lexicon elaboration. And the odds are particularly high regarding some newly-coined technical terms such as *mig-shel* (eyeglasses) and *dngul-khang* (bank), to which we may also add *glog-klad* (computer), *'khyag-sgam* (refrigerator), and *me-'khor* (train), which are respectively modeled on the Chinese words "电脑" *diannao* (literally, electronic brain), "冰箱" *binxiang* (literally, ice box),[3] and "火车" *huoche* (literally, fire vehicle). These loanwords are viewed poorly by some purists in the Tibetan diaspora for political reasons, but the difficulty of removing them from the daily

[2] This convergence, however, seems to have gone unnoticed.

[3] Interestingly, English has the word *icebox* as well, though the term has fallen out of use. In fact, iceboxes predated refrigerators and in this respect the Chinese compound *binxiang* could be a calque from English.

vocabulary of Tibetans in exile may in turn simply confirm Tournadre's thesis that composition is perhaps the most economic method of lexical construction and easiest to assimilate, and consequently the hardest to cast off.

Indeed, Tournadre is well cognizant of the ideological considerations affecting lexical borrowing between languages. To illustrate such effects, he underscores the *don-sgyur* (sense-for-sense translation) method adopted by Tibetan translators of the Buddhist canon who chose to render Sanskrit terms such as *Buddha* and *bodhisattva* respectively as *sangs-rgyas* (literally, purified and developed) and *byang-chub-sems-dpa'* (literally, pure spirit hero) based on their meaning in the source language. By contrast, many other Asian languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Burmese, and Vietnamese, favored phonetic transliteration over semantic interpretation of Buddhist terminology (p. 127). But Tibetan translators were unwilling to assimilate Sanskrit terms phonetically, which would have left these dictions semantically alien. This domesticating translatorial stance contrasts with the prevalence of the so-called *ra-ma-lug skad* (Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech; literally, speaking half-goat half-sheep) widely spoken by the current generation of Tibetan city dwellers in Tibet. Tournadre has already made thorough study of *ra-ma-lug skad* in his oft-cited article, "The Dynamics of Tibetan-Chinese Bilingualism."[4] Yet in *Le Prisme des Langues*, he goes further by situating this linguistic phenomenon within a larger picture. He notes that besides Chinese, Tibetans have also borrowed from Hindi and English, depending on their place of residence (p. 128). This form of hybrid speech, characterized by its constant inter-lingual code switching and linguistic instabilities, bears some resemblance to the Arabic-French mixed speech used by Maghreb immigrants in France, as well as to the English-influenced Spanish spoken by Latino communities in North America (p. 123).

Despite this succinct note, one may regret that Tournadre does not tap more deeply into the forms of *ra-ma-lug skad* employed by Tibetans living outside Tibet. Yet we may hope that the author, who surely has the ability and interest, will pursue this matter further. In the meantime, I would like to suggest a few hints in that direction based on the linguistic data I collected during a recent field trip to North India.

Ra-ma-lug skad, also referred to as *sbrags-skad* (mixed language) in the Tibetan diaspora, is a form of Tibetan-Hindi-English hybrid speech that appears to be widely used in the Mcleod Ganj suburb of

---

[4] Nicolas Tournadre, "The Dynamics of Tibetan-Chinese Bilingualism," *China Perspectives*, vol. 45, January-February 2003, 30-36.

Dharamsala. It tends to affect more the *gzhis-chags phru-gu* (literally, kids of the settlements), who are in fact the second or third generation of Tibetan exiles born and raised in India or Nepal. But *gsar-'byor-ba* (new arrivers) escaping Tibet as adults may also quickly pick up this form of hybrid speech after spending some time in India. Like the *ra-ma-lug skad* spoken in Tibet,[5] lexical borrowings primarily concern substantives. For example, most of my interlocutors understood perfectly the English words for university degrees such as B.A, M.A, and Ph.D, but only a few knew the equivalents of these terms in Tibetan, which are *rig-gnas rabs-'byams-pa*, *gtsug-lag rab-'byams-pa*, and *'bum-rams-pa*. Leaving aside the relatively elevated vocabulary, youngsters also have a tendency to mix Tibetan with English even when speaking so-called *za-skad 'thung-skad* (speech for eating and drinking), a case in which the need for lexical borrowing seems less justifiable. For example, I once overheard a Tibetan gentleman tell his friend, *Sunday la ngas khyed-rang la invite gcig byed giyin* (I will invite you on Sunday). The insertion of two English dictions here, namely "Sunday" and "invite," is not very necessary. The speaker could, moreover, have avoided this blend of linguistic codes by reformulating his sentence either as *gza'-nyi-ma la ngas khyed-rang la mgron-'bod byed giyin* (ordinary register) or as *gza'-nyi-ma la ngas khyed-rang sku-mgron la gdan-'dren zhu giyin* (honorific register). As far as Hindi is concerned, we may cite *aaloo* "आलू" (potato), which commonly replaces the Tibetan word for potato, *zhog-khog*. Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear people supplant *tshes* (date) and *bdun-phrag* (week) with the Hindi words *taareekh* (तारीख) and *haphta* (हफ़्ता). In addition to nouns, *sbrags-skad* also involves adverbs and adjectives. Such is the case with the Hindi adverb *pura* (पूरा), which occasionally replaces *tshang-ma* (all) in a sentence like *nga-tsho pura dpe skyid-po byung* (all of us had a lot of fun), but which should be corrected as *nga-tsho tshang-ma dpe skyid-po byung* if mixed speech is to be avoided. Equally popular is the Nepali adverb *pani* पनि (also), which would appear in a sentence like *nga pani 'gro giyin* (I am also going there), whereas an unalloyed way to express the same idea would be *nga yang 'gro giyin*.

When asked why they would speak "half-goat half-sheep," most of my Tibetan interlocutors replied that the usage of hybrid speech is somewhat *dpe-gsar 'dra-po* (literally, fashion-like). Yet all of them admitted at the same time that it was a very bad "fashion." This ambivalent attitude is noteworthy since it indicates that the ground-gaining *sbrags-skad* (Tibetan-Hindi-English hybrid speech) used by Tibetan

[5] Ibid., 30-36.

residents in the Mcleod Ganj district reflects more a personal and voluntary choice than the necessity of coping with a political or economic urgency. It is also no exaggeration to say that the speakers of *sbrags-skad* are also running against the ideological pressure exerted by advocates of the *pha-skad gtsang-ma* (literally, pure Father Tongue) movement who strive to preserve the linguistic identity of Tibetans living in and outside Tibet.

The dynamics of bilingualism can at times take subtler forms than mixed speech. In this respect, Tournadre notes the sinicization of several Tibetan toponyms such as *smed-ba* and *dar-tse-mdo*, which were respectively replaced by Hongyuan (红原) and Kangding (康定) (p. 120). Certainly, Hongyuan (literally, red plain) evokes the Red Army that marched through the region in the 1930s, while Kangding (literally, Kham pacified) conjures up the quelling of Tibetan rebellions in the Kham region by the Qing general Zhao Erfeng. Although Tournadre quite rightly recalls the ideological considerations lurking behind re-naming tactics, it is a pity he does not mention how Tibetans have reacted, from the side of the ruled, to the Chinese neologisms imposed on them. In fact, Tibetans tend to have systematic recourse to satirizing adaptations in response to political use of the language endorsed by the Chinese government, and they are keen to play the game. Once again, Tournadre certainly has the expertise and interest to delve more deeply into the subject; in addition to his excellent analysis of *ra-ma-lug skad*, a glance into the linguistic resistance of the Tibetan populace to the Chinese official language would considerably enrich our understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Tibetan bilingualism. Here I would like to offer a few hints for their heuristic value only.

First, we may cite the Tibetan nickname for *Bayi zhen* "八一镇" (Bayi sub-district), which is the urban center of the *Nying khri* prefecture (Chinese: *Linzhi diqu*林芝地区; Tibetan: *Nying-khri sa-khul*) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. This town was baptized *Bayi* "八一" (literally, eight one) mainly because its name purveyor intended to pay homage to the birthday of the Communist army on August 1, 1927. Tibetan word-meisters, however, have paraphrased *Bayi* into a witty catchphrase: *gya-mi brgyad bod-pa gcig* (literally, eight Han Chinese and one Tibetan). Undoubtedly, this new epithet quite aptly reflects the demographic reality of the urban centers of the *Nying khri* prefecture, where currently Han Chinese form the absolute majority of the local population.

The ridicule of the ideological fiction induced by the official Chinese language can at times acquire a harsher tone, such as in the case of Tibetan writer Tsering Woeser, who intentionally and phonetically "translated" the Tibetan term for the Cultural Revolution—*Rig-gnas*

gsar-brje—back into Chinese as *renlei shajie* (人类杀劫), literally meaning in Chinese "the deadly calamity of humanity."[6] Indubitably, in a society where the pressure of censorship persists, wordplays as an outlet of discontent often take the form of coded terms. For instance, during my stay in Lhasa in 2012 I recorded the odd formulae *tsha-lu-ma la ngal-gso rgyag-pa* (literally, to take a rest in tangerines). In Tibetan, this phrase rolls off the tongue and gives an air of playfulness, yet in reality it conceals a deeper sense. More precisely, the Tibetan word *tsha-lu-ma* (literally, tangerine) refers not to the fruit tangerine as it may appear but to police stations, since the Chinese words for "tangerine" (*juzi*, 桔子) and "police station" (*juzi*, 局子) are homophones. And so the hidden meaning of this phrase is "to get arrested by the police"! Indeed, this veiled lexical reference to Chinese appears to craft a political euphemism that turns unpleasant experiences into picturesque abstractions. Interestingly, this wizardly wittedness in forging puns based on intra-lingual homophony or inter-lingual phonetic closeness is also shared by Tibetans living in the diaspora. One may cite, for example, the sarcastic epithet for New York City. More precisely, the English "New York City" has been playfully transliterated into *mi'i-gyog grong-khyer*, literally meaning "the city of people's servants." In fact, many Tibetans who immigrated to New York City from the diaspora ended up finding low-paying jobs either in Asian restaurants or as baby-sitters, certainly giving them a frustrated sense of being servants in that city.

Since his analysis of political incursion forms the thrust of Tournadre's well-rounded argumentation, he should be wholeheartedly thanked for mapping out the extreme diversity of ideological contexts at play in inter-lingual lexical borrowing and eventually in the making of mixed languages. Accordingly, it seems quite logical that he would display a sense of misgiving vis-à-vis the homogenizing definition of Creole languages, as he clarifies that this linguistic phenomenon is deeply embedded in the historical circumstances of the slave trade and plantation economy (p. 128). For Tournadre, all languages are creolized to some point, yet it would be of little interest to overgeneralize the notion of *créolité* or "Creoleness." From that he further points out that real Creole languages are often typologically heterogeneous, allowing no mutual understanding, and are all in all "numerically scarce on the scale of world languages" (p. 129).

This line drawn by the author between mixed speeches such as *rama-lug skad* and Creole languages is doubtlessly sensible and scientifically grounded. Indeed, nowadays the notion of *créolité* tends to be

[6] Cf: Tsering Woeser, *Shājié - Forbidden memory. Tibet during the Cultural Revolution*, Taiwan, Dakuai wenhua, 2006.

misused, if not abused, by postcolonial critics who at times appear to lack the positive competence in dealing rigorously with this question of linguistic hybridity. To some extent, this notion of *créolité* acquires so much ideological positivity that it ends up eliding some glaring differences between hybrid languages respecting their generative contexts. In this regard, Tournadre's note on the Creole language goes far beyond the sole domain of typology, as it elicits reflections on issues of such seemingly irrelevant areas as ethnography or literary criticism. As far as the latter is concerned, we may rethink the universal applicability of this post-colonial, one-size-fits-all cultural hybridity based on the Antilles model. We may also wonder whether this ecstatic vision of *créolité* or *antillanité* is too narrow to apply to other geographical contexts such as East Asia, where nationalism has always maintained its ideological currency. In other words, if some Francophone theoreticians of post-colonialism tend to enshrine hybridity as the cultural "norm," would their Tibetan counterparts perceive this much-cherished *créolité* in the same affirmative way? Needless to say, such correlation would be aberrant since any form of integration and assimilation, including a linguistic one, would seriously endanger the national identity of diasporic Tibetans and consequently undermine their hopes of self-determination.

Given the myriad of linguistic data treated by Tournadre and his admirable erudition, a reviewer, even himself a polyglot, might feel obliged to focus only on certain aspects of this learned work. Meanwhile, it goes without saying that even someone who knows nothing about linguistic typology could benefit greatly from the author's analytic insightfulness. In short, Tournadre should be wholeheartedly thanked for this vulgarized yet encyclopedic book, born out of a scholarly commitment that has prompted him to travel tirelessly around the world and work over a veritable tsunami of materials with such painstaking care. Certainly, the scientific rigor, humanistic spirit, and easy accessibility of *Le Prisme des Langues* makes it a must read for all those who find themselves dazzled by the complexity and beauty of the languages of our world.