



Bod yig kho nar yod pa'i khyad chos 'ga' zhig
(Some unique characteristics of written Tibetan)

Tsewang Lhamo

1. The basics of written Tibetan

Written Tibetan is alphabetical, with thirty consonants and four vowels. Thus there are 120 combinations of consonants with vowels which, in addition to the 30 consonants without vowel signs gives a total of 180, to which prefixes and suffixes may be added. But of the 180 which may all take suffixes, not all can have prefixes. The question of gender (masculine, feminine and neuter) is also discussed.

2. Phonetic characteristics of written Tibetan in relation to orthography

Written Tibetan has unique characteristics with respect to the way in which spelling relates to pronunciation. *Mgo-can* and *'dogs-can* may be pronounced, a feature that is not found in other written languages. Written Tibetan was based on the Tibetan language as it was spoken at the time. The evidence can be found in modern Tibetan dialects: for example, *Mgo-can* and *'dogs-can* are still pronounced in Gyarong dialect with slight changes. Therefore, it is clear that written Tibetan was founded based on the Tibetan language, but not based on Lantsa and Wartu. According to Gedun Chopel, Zhalu Lochen was the first scholar who suggests that written Tibetan was founded by using Lañwaas model. The evidence is irrefutable, and for the most part theories to the contrary have little scientific basis.