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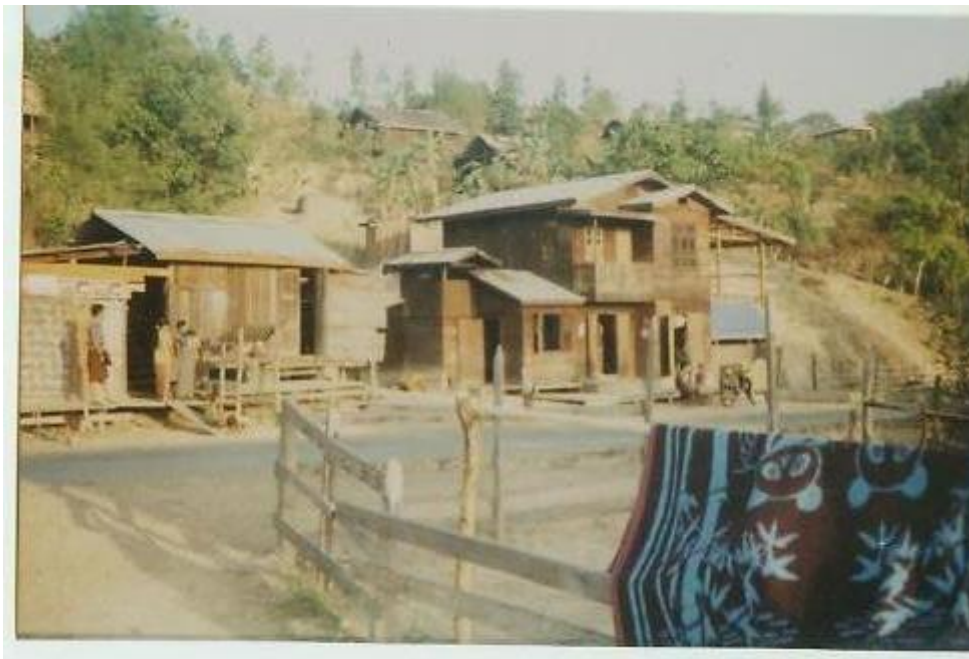
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A Brief Introduction to the Sound System of Sizang, a Kuki-Chin Language

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A Sizang Village

Abstract

This paper attempts to present the sound system of Sizang, a Kuki-Chin language. By phonemic status is meant the distinctive function a speech sound or tone performs in keeping words (with their meanings) apart. The contrastive pairs demonstrate the phonemic status of the sounds concerned. Tones, vowels and consonants are dealt within that order to offer relatively extensive and reliable information on the sound system of Sizang. An inventory of the phonemes and allophones of Sizang, specifying their distribution and showing diagrammatically the consonant and vowel phonemes along with their place and manner of articulation are discussed as part of articulatory description..

Introduction

Sizang is a Kuki-Chin language of the Tibeto-Burman family. It is spoken by approximately 10,000 speakers in the Chin state of Myanmar and in north-eastern states of India. Manipur has many ethnic groups having their own ethnic identity. Sizang speaker are found in the southern direction of Manipur state, namely, Moreh, an international border town located on the Indo-Myanmar road south east of Imphal. Moreh is in India, and five kms away from this town is the Tamu town, its Myanmarese counterpart, where Sizang speakers are found in large numbers.



A Sizang Home

In this paper an attempt is made to delineate the characteristic features of the sound system of Sizang, based on a lexicon eliciting from our informant Mr. Khampum (45yrs), a native speaker of Sizang, a resident of Tamu Town.

This paper attempts to present an inventory of the phonemes and allophones of Sizang, specifying their distribution and showing diagrammatically the consonant and vowel phonemes along with their place and manner of articulation. The segmental and supra-segmental phonemes are comprehensively given on account of articulatory description.

An Inventory of the Phonemes

1. Consonants

		Bilabial		Labio-dental	Alveolar		Velar		Glottal	
		Unasp.	Asp.		Unasp.	Asp.	Unasp.	Asp.	Unasp.	Asp.
Stops	Voiceless	p	p ^h		t	t ^h	k	k ^h		
	Voiced	b			d					
Nasals		m			n		ŋ			
Fricatives	Voiceless				s					h
	Voiced			v	z					

There are sixteen consonant phonemes in Sizang. The phonemic consonant inventory of Sizang by place and manner of articulation is given in Table 1.

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Table 1. Sizang Consonantal phonemes.

Vowels

There are six vowel phonemes in Sizang.

The articulatory description of the phonemic vowels of Sizang is given in Table 2.

	Front		Central		Back	
	Rounded	Unrounded	Rounded	Unrounded	Rounded	Unrounded
High		i			U	
Mid		e		ə	O	
Low				a		

Table 2. The vowel phonemes

Diphthongs

In addition to the simple vowels, Sizang has nine diphthongs, seven of which are falling diphthongs whereas the remaining two are rising diphthongs. Diphthongs never occur with any final consonant.

Falling diphthongs are:

1. /əy/- The diphthong /əy/ glides from the articulatory position for the mid-central unrounded vowel /ə/ to that for the high front unrounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: phəy ‘thigh’; vəy ‘lakh’.

2. /ey/- The diphthong /ey/ glides from the articulatory position for the mid-front unrounded vowel /e/ to that for the high front unrounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: key ‘I’; ley ‘tongue’.

3. /ay/- The diphthong /ay/ glides from the articulatory position for the low central unrounded vowel /a/ to that for the high front unrounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: pay ‘go’; tay ‘run’.

4. /**oy**/- The diphthong /oy/ glides from the articulatory position for the mid back rounded vowel /o/ to that for the high front unrounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: noy ‘breast’; hoy ‘fair’.

5. /**uy**/- The diphthong /uy/ glides from the articulatory position for the high back rounded vowel /u/ to that for the high front unrounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: uy ‘dog’; khuy ‘cow’.

6. /**əw**/- The diphthong /əw/ glides from the articulatory position for the mid-central unrounded vowel /ə/ to that for the high back rounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: thəw ‘house fly’; təw ‘sit’.

Consonant Phonemes	Position
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7. /**aw**/- The diphthong /aw/ glides from the articulatory position for the low-central unrounded vowel /a/ to that for the high back rounded vowel, the former being more prominent.

Examples: thaw ‘fat’; ŋaw ‘frown’.

Rising diphthongs are:

1. /**ia**/- The diphthong /ia/ glides from the articulatory position for the high-front unrounded vowel /i/ to that for the low central unrounded vowel /a/, the latter being more prominent.

Examples: hisia ‘this’; koysia ‘which’.

2. /**ua**/- The diphthong /ua/ glides from the articulatory position for the high-back rounded vowel /u/ to that for the low-central unrounded vowel /a/, the latter being more prominent.

Examples: ŋua ‘rain’; khua ‘village’.

3. Distribution of Consonants

The occurrence of the consonantal phonemes at the initial position, medial position and the final position are listed in Table 3.

	Initial	Medial	Final
/p/	pəŋ 'wall'	ləmpɪ 'street/ road'	top 'to smoke'
/t/	tul 'thousand'	ətəŋ 'light'	khət 'one'
/k/	kaŋ 'white'	bokbɔn 'brinjal'	vok 'pig'
/p ^h /	phəlbi 'winter'	siphu 'horse'	--
/t ^h /	thum 'three'	sathaw 'butter'	--
/k ^h /	khət 'one'	zakhət 'hundred'	--
/b/	bənla 'banana'	nakba 'nose-ring'	--
/d/	dim 'full'	peaŋdəp 'shoes'	--
/m/	mul 'body hair'	thamən 'reward'	khəm 'gold'
/n/	nú 'mother'	lupna 'bed'	mən 'catch'
/ŋ/	ŋu 'bone'	loŋtɔl 'throat'	zaŋ 'northern side'
/v/	vom 'black'	khovak 'light'	--
/s/	si 'salt water'	əsɔŋ 'inside'	--
/z/	zin 'guest'	ŋilzəŋ 'intestine'	--
/h/	ha 'teeth'	sahun 'skin'	--
/l/	lu 'head'	sali 'seven'	pil 'clever'

Table 3. Distribution of Consonant phonemes.

4. Syllable Final Consonants

Only seven consonants can occur as syllable finals. Many syllables are open, having no final consonants at all. From Table 3, it may be noted that the syllable final consonants are /-p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ and /l/. The unaspirated stops /-p/, /-t/ and /k/ are unreleased, and they bring the syllable to an abrupt end. Vowels in closed syllable are shorter than in open syllables. The lateral and the nasals are otherwise unremarkable. Consonants do not occur after diphthongs.

5. Distribution of Vowels

The occurrence of the vowel phonemes at the initial position, medial position and the final position are listed in Table 4.

Vowel Phonemes	Position		
	Initial	Medial	Final
/i/	in 'house'	hiŋ 'green'	ni 'sun'
/e/	eŋ 'yellow'	kel 'goat'	ole 'crocodile'
/ə/	ən 'rice'	səm 'hair'	--
/a/	ak 'fowl'	nay 'near'	pá 'father'
/o/	om 'chest'	ŋoŋ 'neck'	toso 'oak'
/u/	uy 'dog'	kul 'twenty'	telŋu 'ribs'

Table 4. Distribution of vowel phonemes.

5. Allophones of Consonantal Phonemes

In Sizang, stops in word final position are never released. Release is not distinctive in voiceless unaspirated stops, because release and non-release are always in complementary distribution. Hence, they become allophones of the same phoneme.

The phonetic values of the allophones are, in most cases, conditioned by their occurrence or the phonetic environment.

It is observed that the voiceless unaspirated stop /t/ is never found before a high front vowel /i/ but phonetically as [c] representing the voiceless alveolar affricate produced by forming a [t] and releasing it slowly through as [s]. Similarly the voiceless aspirated stop /tʰ/ is never found before a high front vowel /i/ but phonetically as [č] representing the voiceless alveopalatal affricate produced by forming a t-like stop followed closely by an alveo-palatal fricative [š]. However, the Sizang [c] and [č] produce certain amount of friction which is much less than the amount noticed in the production of the English affricate.

Illustration

A. Unaspirated stops

1. /p/ → [p̚] / ___ #; e.g. ip ‘pocket’, kəp ‘to cry’
→ [p] elsewhere; e.g. pəŋ ‘wall’, ləmpi ‘road’
2. /t/ → [c] / ___ i; e.g. ti ‘salt’, tilte ‘saliva’
→ [t̚] / ___ #; e.g. kʰut ‘hand’, pet ‘bite’
→ [t] elsewhere; e.g. top ‘to sip’, ətaŋ ‘light’
3. /k/ → [k̚] / ___ #; e.g. vok ‘pig’, səzuk ‘reindeer’
→ [k] elsewhere; e.g. kaŋ ‘white’, ənkəm ‘mustard’

B. Aspirated stops

The three aspirated stop /pʰ, tʰ, kʰ/ vary in the quantum of aspiration, depending upon their phonetic environment. Initially, these aspirated stops [pʰ], [tʰ], [kʰ] are heavily aspirated; but medially even though fully aspirated, they lack much of the tenseness that is usually found in initial position. The phoneme /tʰ/ has an important allophonic variant i.e. /tʰ/ → [č] / ___ i; e.g. tʰiŋ ‘tree’, tʰi ‘dead’.

C. Voiced stops /b, d /

The voiced stops [b], [d] have no important variants in the language, except the lip protrusion depending on the vowel that follows.

D. Nasals /m, n, ŋ/

The nasals [m], [n], [ŋ] are unreleased in the final position and sounds relatively longer than its occurrence elsewhere.

E. Fricatives

/v, s, z, h /

The fricatives [v], [s], [z], [h] have no important variants in the language, except the lip protrusion depending on the vowel that follows.

F. Lateral /l/

The lateral [l] has no important variants in the language, except the lip protrusion depending on the vowel that follows.

Tones

In Sizang there are three tones, viz., i) Level tone, ii) Rising tone and iii) Falling tone. These tones are also easily attestable by minimal pairs. The three contrastive tones in a syllable are illustrated in Table 5. The level tone is left unmarked above the vowel whereas the rising tone is marked as / ˊ / above the vowel and the falling tone is marked as / ˋ /, above the vowel.

The Level tone maintains an even pitch. The duration of the vowel carrying the level tone is relatively longer than the vowel carrying the falling tone. There is a perceptual decline of the pitch in the production of falling tone. It is shorter than the level tone, and it also ends abruptly. The rising tone starts from the level pitch and then there is a sharp pitch rise. The rising tone is accompanied by tenseness and it sounds louder than the remaining two tones

Table 5

Level tone	Rising tone	falling tone
1. saŋ ‘school’	sáŋ ‘received’	sàŋ ‘height’
2. hay ‘mango’	háy ‘cup’	hày ‘late’
3. tul ‘thousand’	túl ‘second hand’	tùl ‘feeding’
4. vot ‘work’	vót ‘cold’	vòt ‘leech’
5. ley ‘tongue’	léy ‘earth’	lèy ‘bridge’

Vowel length is conditioned by Tone. It is not the vowel length but the length or duration of the tone which accompanies them. It is also noted that sometimes the length and height of the same tone is different. This condition is by the environment; hence it is regarded as phonetic and does not provide grounds for identification as a

separate toneme. In some examples tones change their colour, i.e. according to the context in which they occur, and this process is quite common.

Example: /pá/ 'father' /əpa/ 'his/her father'

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper is an attempt to serve as a basis for further investigation in the language of Sizang. The study presented here will also provide a systematic linguistic study of Sizang which remains neglected till date. It is also evident that the phonology of a language provides the basic data for the researchers working on any aspect of the language.

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