Phonological System of Medieval Manipuri

Takhellambam Debachand Singh

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Abstract

Manipuri is one of the oldest languages of Tibeto-Burman Languages family, spoken in Manipur, a north-eastern state of India. Manipuri has a long history of its own of about 2000 years old history. Manipuri was written in its own script, **Meetei Mayek**. But it was replaced by Bengali script in the late 19th and early part of 20th century. Oldest record of the written document in Manipuri is traced back as early as 14th century. But during the reign of King Garibniwaz, most of the written documents were burnt down publicly. Then some of the oldest books in Manipuri were rewritten during his period. So while trying to study the historical reconstruction of Manipuri, we face a lot of problems. A few scholars already made attempt to study the history of Manipuri. Still nobody has written a comprehensive history of Manipuri. In

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this paper I have tried to study the phonological structure of Manipuri during the period of King Garibniwaz, so called *medieval period* in the history of Manipuri.

Conversion to Hinduism

During the reign of King Garibniwaz, an important historical episode took place. Conversion to Hinduism and burning down of Manipuri manuscripts took place. During the same period Hindu-religion based art and literature were encouraged. Books related to new state religion were written in this period, mostly translated from Sanskrit and Bengali. These incidents influenced a lot of people in Manipur and these also influenced Manipuri language.

Introduction

Manipuri (Meeiteilon) belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Dr. G. A. Grierson (1904) placed Manipuri with Kuki-Chin-Naga group as a distinct group on its own, named as "Meithei" in his **Linguistic Survey of India vol.-III part-III**. But Robert Shafer (1974) placed Manipuri under Kukish section of Burmic Division of Sino-Tibetan language family as distinct language. Paul Benedict (1972) classification put Manipuri in the Kuki Naga sub-group of Kachin group. Burling (2003) put it as a separate sub-group of Kachin group.

Manipuri is the only Tibeto-Burman Language spoken in North-East India which has its own indigenous script. G.A. Grierson remarked that Meithei (Meeiteilon) is the chief language of Manipur Valley and has apparently had a long and independent development. Manipuris are mentioned in the Shan chronicles as early as 777 AD, probably owing to the fact that it had developed into a literary language, and also because their form of speech gave the impression of possessing a peculiarly archaic character.

Manipur Valley and Meithei Clans

Manipur Valley is the core region where distinctive Manipuri culture and way of life took shape. The valley of Manipur was divided into small kingdoms under the rule of distinct groups of people particularly the noted seven clan dynasties such as Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, Chenglei and Khaba-Nganba. Among these clans and other smaller groups Mangang clan emerges as the most powerful and gradually merged with other clans by

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subjugating the other clans to form a nation-state known as Meithei by the end of 17th century. The present Manipuri Language evolved out of the traditional Meitei language, the speech of the politically dominant group of Manipur.

Initial Contact with Indo-Aryan Languages and Loss of Royal Patronage for Meithei Script

First contact between Manipuri and Indo-Aryan Languages is traced back to 15th century during the regime of Meidingu Kiyamba (1467-1508). During his reign, Hindu Brahmins migrated into Manipur and they became a part of Meitei society. But it is only in the reign of Meidingu Charairongba (1697-1709), Meidingu Charairongba was formally initiated to Hinduism. *Meetei Mayek* (the indigenous script of Manipuri) lost its royal patronage. Many scripture and historical documents written in Meetei Mayek were burnt down publicly. Later Bengali script was adopted for the official and public use. Due to the adoption of Vaishnavism (Hinduism), there were changes in many dimensions. Present Manipuri vocabulary is quite different in forms from the archaic vocabulary. Many words were added to Meitei lexicon from Hindi, Sanskrit and Bengali, etc.

From the perspective of history, the development of Manipuri language may be divided into three periods. They are:

- 33- 1709 AD: Early Period

- 1709- 1819 AD: Medieval Period

- 1819- Till date: Modern Period.

Medieval Manipuri

Medieval Manipuri is mainly influenced by the newly adopted religion both culturally and linguistically. Therefore the official language of the state gradually lost its prestige; languages such as Sanskrit and Bengali gained prestige. Many religious or ritual ceremonies were performed in these languages. The king was in great favour to propagate the new religion. As a consequence of this, numerous books written in ancient Manipuri were burnt down. New

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books were written based on Hindu religion and also many Hindu religious books were translated into Manipuri.

Although the religious faith of the King of Manipur was strong enough to influence the Manipuri society towards the new religion, and many different religious and literary texts were translated and transliterated into Manipuri, the native literary trend of Manipuri continued to flourish. But they lost their prestige, however. Yet they carried their pursuits on their own ways. In the medieval period, so, there were two different kinds of written text emerged, i.e. texts written in ancient Manipuri with little influence of Bengali and text which were strongly influenced by Bengali, mostly related to Hindu religion. For example, **"Sanamahi Laikan," "Samsok Ngamba," Chothe Thangwai Pakhangba," Takhel Ngamba," Langlon," "Awa Ngamba," "Phamlon,"** etc. are written based on Manipuri history and cultural ideology. On the other hand, there were a number of manuscripts found, which were mainly translated from the holy books of the Hindus, such as Mahabharata and Ramayana. For example, "**Ramayan gi Arnaya Kanda**," "**Sunder Kanda**," "**Langka Kanda**," "**Ram Nongaba**," "**Birat Santhuplon**," "**Langoi Sagol Thaba**," etc., are translated into Manipuri. Another kind of literature we find in this period is the story written in Manipuri based on history.

The general characteristic of the first kind of texts found in this period is that these texts were very much free from the loan words from other languages. These texts were inclined towards the ancient language of Manipur. A few loan words and phonemes were found in these texts. But the second type of texts is full of loan words, since these texts were translated from those literatures which are related to the newly adopted religion of Manipur. Therefore many Sanskrit and Bengali words were freely used in these texts. For example, following lines are from the "**Ashwamedha**"

> *"…Shree Krishna nam: hari hayahe shree guru thoikhoiba sana khuya thambal lei hakchang leida pakna hanna hanna khurumjarak ke…"*

In the above line we notice many loan words were freely used. Another contrasting example is from "**Langthabalon**"

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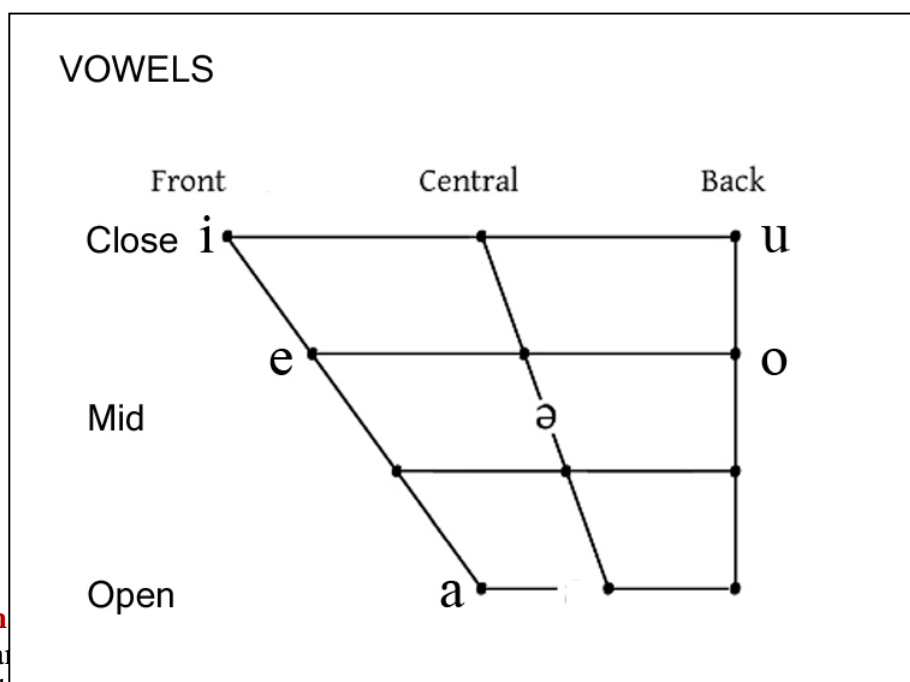Phonological System of Medieval Manipuri

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"...thang pi lanthapana yaosompika angom chanu leima khupika yangkoisuga thongpam chanuka angoupa yimkhu chanuka thangta khumanthem chanuka tarukma pannatana yaosompina kongyampa pok a. angom chanu leima khupina sana eelenkhanpa pok a. yangkoi suna sanarempa pok a. thongpam chanuna loichangampa pok a. angoupa yimkhu chanuna kwakpa thawanthapa pok a. thangta khumanthem chanunalamyangmei pok a..."

In the later example we notice that it is free from loan words. But we see new phonemes in the texts.

Phonology of Medieval Manipuri

There are six vowels, six diphthongs and fifteen consonants in Old Manipuri (H. Binodkumar Sharma, 2006). During the period from early 15th century to late 19th century Manipuri had added new phonemes and many loan words also entered Manipuri. In the medieval period, nine consonants were added to Manipuri phonological system. They are /b/, /bʰ/, /d/, /dʰ/, /g/, /gʰ/, /j/, /jʰ/ and /r/ (H. Binodkumar Sharma) . The phoneme of Medieval Manipuri is given below.

Vowels

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DIPTHONGS

<div style="border:1px solid black">

ai,   əi,   oi,   ui,   əu, au

</div>

CONSONANT

Plosives	p	p^h	b	b^h	t	t^h	d	d^h	k	k^h	g	g^h
Affricates			c		j	j^h						
Nasals	m		n		ŋ							
Laterals					l							
Flap					r							
Fricatives			s		h							
Approximant			w		y							

DISTRIBUTION OF PHONEMES

VOWELS

	Initial	Medial	Final
/i/	/ita/ "my friend (female)"	/yimom/ "my daughter"	/pari/ "my son"
/e/		/timen/ "spare"	/tʰoukao e/ "forget his duty"
/a/	/atunoŋki/ "for that day"	/lahan/ "a period of time"	/ita/ "my friend(female)"
/o/	/ondenkʰiba/ "to go back"	/kʰoynou/ "my friend(female)"	/ŋak o/ "keep it"
/u/	/ungoinuŋ/ "in my heart"	/luren/ "head"	/huimu/ "name of a person"
/ə/	/əsaiŋei/ "a period of time"	/nəmda/ "in my back"	/pampə/ "tiger"

Consonants

	Initial	Medial	Final
/p/	/poirei/ "name of meetei"	/məpuŋyai/ "in the middle"	/mitkup/ "a moment of time"
/pʰ/	/pʰeira/ "lap"	/tanpʰaŋba/ "to get"	

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/b/	/bramha/ "name of Hindu God *Bramha*"	/yəibi/ "soul"	
/bʰ/	/bʰakti/ "respect"	/garbʰa/ "womb"	
/k/	/koloi/ "name"	/korou/ "a day"	/yemlak/ "between the house"
/kʰ/	/kʰoiyəm/ "God"	/nəkʰoŋ/ "your leg"	
/d/	/darsan/ "look"	/nadairem/ "your man/servant"	
/dʰ/	/dʰyan/ "meditation"	/radʰa/ "name of person"	
/g/	/gwa/ "betel nut"	/yaŋgoi/ "horse"	
/t/	/taŋja/ "snake"	/nakʰuton/ "your ring finger"	/ihut/ "in place of me"
/tʰ/	/tʰoukaobə/ "to forget your duty"	/niɳtʰi/ "name of river"	
/c/	/coinou/ "Gold"	/pamaca/ "sons of same father"	
/j/	/jagoi/ "dance"	/tʰoujəl/ "blessing"	/jubaraj/ "prince"

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/m/	/məsabi/ "her husband"	/leimə/ "women/queen"	/siŋbum/ "whole day/year"
/n/	/noŋhamba/ "to wait"	/pantʰou/ "father"	/lan/ "war"
/ŋ/	/ŋayokpʰu/ "container keeping fish"	/moŋba/ "human being"	/maləŋ/ "air"
/l/	/laŋmai/ "land of *Luwang*"	/waŋlen/ "time"	/lahal/ "day before yesterday"
/r/	/ram/ "name of Hindu God *Rama*"	/məpari/ "his son"	
/s/	/senbi/ "Meetei name of *Burma*"	/məsiŋ/ "number"	
/h/	/haorei/ "direction"		
/w/	/waŋlei/ "wine"	/əwaŋba/ "height"	
/y/	/yaipi/ "soul"	/məyim/ "his house"	/məhay/ "fruit"

 All the vowel phonemes can occur in the initial position except the vowel /e/. For example:

/ita/ "my friend (female)"

/atunoŋki/ "for that day"

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/ondenkʰiba/ "to go back"

/uŋoinuŋ/ "in my heart"

/əsaiŋei/ "a period of time"

Most consonant phonemes can occur in the initial position. But some phonemes, mostly the loan phoneme, can't occur. They can be at the initial position only with the loan words. For example:

/bʰakti/ "respect"

/darsan/ "look"

/dʰyan/ "meditation"

/gwa/ "betel nut"

/jagoi/ "dance"

/ram/ "name of the Hindu God *Rama*"

The entire consonant phonemes can occur in initial and medial positions freely. But all of them cannot occur in the final position. For example, the consonant phoneme /p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/ and /y/ cannot occur in the final position. But the remaining consonants can be at the final position.

/mitkup/ "a moment of time"

/yemlak/ "between houses"

/ihut/ "in place of me"

/jubaraj/ "prince"

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/siŋbum/ "whole day/year"

/lan/ "war"

/maləŋ/ "air"

/lahal/ "day before yesterday"

/məhay/ "fruit"

Phonotactic Rules of Medieval Manipuri

1. All the phonemes in Medieval Manipuri can occur freely in the medial position.
2. All the vowel phonemes can occur in the initial position but vowel /e/ cannot occur in the word initial position.
3. Most consonant phonemes can occur in the initial position. But the lone phoneme such as /b/, /d/, /dʰ/, /g/, /r/ occurs in initial position with lone words only.
4. All the consonant phonemes cannot occur in the final position. A few consonants can occur in the final position. They are /p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/ and /y/.

Conclusion

This study is the preliminary study about the nature of the phonological system of Medieval Manipuri. In this paper I have tried to outline the basic structure of the phonological structure of that particular period with emphasis on the vowels and consonants of Manipuri and their occurrence. I hope more research will present a more elaborate picture of the phonological structure of Medieval Phonological System.

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