
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:4 April 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

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Phonology of Rongmei

Pauthang Haokip

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Abstract

The paper presents a preliminary analysis of the phonology of Rongmei, a Tibeto-Burman language of Northeast India. Rongmei is reported to have at least three geographical dialects: Tamenglong dialect, Imphal dialect and Cachar dialect. The data for the present analysis is collected in and around Silchar town, the main trade centre for three districts of Cachar, Hilakandi and Karimganj districts of southern Assam. This paper discusses the segmental phonology of Rongmei, the syllable structure and the tones of Rongmei.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

Keywords: Phonology, Rongmei, Zeme, Tibeto-Burman language

1. Introduction

The paper attempts to present the phonology of Rongmei (a.k.a Kabui or Kapwi by the *Linguistic Survey of India*, hereafter referred to as *LSI* in short) spoken in Barak Valley of Southern Assam (see map 1. below). Ever since the publication of *LSI* in (1903), Rongmei along with other Liangmai and Zemei has been treated as belonging to the Naga subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman family. But of late, Burling (2005) has strongly argued about the validity of the term ‘Naga’ forming a separate coherent subgroup within the Tibeto-Burman family and chooses to call them under different geographical names.

Thus, Burling grouped together Rongmei, Liangmai and Zeme under the separate Zeme group. The number of Rongmei speakers in Cachar by the time of *LSI* was estimated to be around 3,073. By now the number of Rongmei speakers in Barak Valley might have doubled, but it difficult to get reliable sources to ascertain the exact number of speakers.

Rongmei is reported to have at least three geographical dialects: Tamenglong dialect, Imphal dialect and Cachar dialect. The data for the present analysis is collected in and around Silchar town, the main trade centre for three districts of Cachar, Hilakandi and Karimganj districts of southern Assam. These three districts are collectively referred to as Barak valley after the name of principal river ‘Barak’ which has its origin somewhere in Tamenglong district of Manipur and flows into Cachar district of Assam before it enters the Sylhet province of Bangladesh. The intense contact which existed between the Rongmei and a local variety of Bengali *Sylheti* for many decades might have influenced the language to a considerable extent. Thus, it is not surprising to find many

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

lexical items which are borrowed from Bengali.



Map 1. Barak valley and surrounding states

Rongmei is taught in Manipur and Nagaland up to primary level, but not in Assam. Most Rongmei children go to English medium schools although Bengali medium schools are well spread throughout the region. Most elderly people can read and write Bengali written in Bengali script. The *LSI* gave a very imperfect account of the grammar of Rongmei along with a specimen and wordlists collected by Babu Bisharup Singh. But, a section on the phonology of the language has not been discussed. Since then, no linguist has ever attempted to describe the language until an amateur practitioner and a priest Fr. Francis who learnt the language during his stay in Tamenlong district of Manipur published the first dictionary *The Anglo-Rongmei Dictionary* based on the Tamenglong dialect.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

This article is arranged as follows: section 2 discusses the segmental phonology of Rongmei consonants and vowels. Section 3 discusses the syllable structure. Section 4 discusses the lexical tones of Rongmei. The last section discusses the conclusion and findings of the Rongmei phonology in a nutshell.

2. Segmental phonology

2.1. Consonant¹

The distinctive consonants that can occur as onset and coda are shown in Table 1.

	onset consonants			coda consonants		
voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t	k	p	t	k
voiceless aspirated stops	p ^h	t ^h	k ^h			
voiced stops	b	d	g			
voiceless affricate		ts				
voiceless fricative		s	h			
voiced fricative		z				
nasals	m	n	ŋ	m	n	ŋ
rhotic		r				
lateral		l				
semi-vowel				w		j

Table 1. Consonant phonemes of Rongmei

Rongmei has a total of 20 consonants of which 18 appear as syllable onsets, while 8 appear as codas. The horizontal rows represent the manner of articulation, while the vertical columns refer to the place of articulation, i.e. labial, alveolar and velar. Three series of stops, voiceless unaspirated, voiceless aspirated and voiced unaspirated appear at bilabial, alveolar and velar positions. In addition to its stops, Rongmei has one voiceless unaspirated affricate, symbolized here as *ts*. An expectation of symmetry leads one to look for an aspirated affricate as well, but there is none. Three fricatives appear at

¹ Yashawanta & N. Singh (2012) treat the voiceless alveolar affricate /ts/ as palatal stop /c/. They also treat the alveolar fricative /s/ as palatal fricative, but employ the symbol /s/.

alveolar and glottal positions. One lateral and one rhotic each appear in alveolar place of articulation. Three nasal consonants can also occur in bilabial, alveolar and velar positions.

2.1.1. Consonants and their allophones

Few allophonic variations have been noticed. The phoneme /p/ or /p^h/ is sometimes pronounced as [f] in onset position by Rongmei speakers residing in Ziribam. All the voiceless unaspirated stops are unreleased when they occur as syllable codas. Lastly, the phonemes /s/ and /z/ are realized as [ʃ] and [ʒ] before [i].

2.1.2. Onset consonants

Stops

The contrast between voiceless unaspirated stops are shown in (1) with the help of minimal pairs.

unaspirated stops

- (1) a. /p-/ pà:j ‘bow’
b. /t-/ tà:j ‘harvest’
c. /k-/ kà:j ‘house’

The contrast between voiceless aspirated stops are shown in (2) with the help of minimal pairs.

aspirated

- (2) a. /p^h-/ p^hà:j ‘available’
b. /t^h-/ t^hà:j ‘know’
c. /k^h-/ k^hà:j ‘venom’

Rongmei also contrasts voiceless unaspirated, voiceless aspirated and voiced stops at bilabial, alveolar and velar place of articulation as shown in (3), (4) and (5) below.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

bilabial

- (3) a. /p-/ pàk 'running'
b. /p^h-/ p^hàk 'blast'
c. /b-/ bàk 'breaking'

alveolar

- (4) c. /t-/ tù 'eat'
d. /t^h-/ t^hù 'steaming'
e. /d-/ dùk 'far/madness'

velar

- (5) e. /k-/ kwàk 'forgive'
g. /k^h-/ k^hwàk 'peal'
h. /g-/ gwàk 'pig'

Nasals

The three nasals of Rongmei are illustrated with the help of minimal pairs in (6) below.

- (6) a. /m-/ màŋ 'dream' mà:j 'fire' mjàn 'insert'
b. /n-/ nàŋ 'you' nà:j 'to have' njàn 'late'
c. /ŋ-/ ɲàŋ 'lean' ɲêj 'thatch' ɲjàn 'hoof'

Fricative and affricate

There are no palatal stops or palatal fricatives in Rongmei. There is a single affricate /ts/ which some speakers palatalize it as /tʃ/ as in *tsànà:j ~tʃànà:j* 'seven'. We write /ts/, which is the most commonly recorded. Although, Rongmei does not have /f/, and its equivalent voiced counterpart /v/, it does have /s/ and its voiced equivalent /z/ in addition to voiceless glottal fricative /h/. The contrast between the fricatives at different places of articulation is provided with the help of minimal pair in (7), (8) and (9) below.

Alveolar fricatives

- (7) a. /s/ sɛŋ ‘tall’
b. /z/ zɛŋ ‘slow’

Alveolar and glottal fricatives

- (8) c. /z/ zàŋ ‘drink’
d. /h/ hàŋ ‘around’
- (9) e. /s/ sjàn ‘money’
f. /h/ hjàn ‘surplus’

Lateral and rhotic

Rongmei has one lateral and one rhotic each at the alveolar place of articulation only in onset position. The contrast between the two is shown below with the help of minimal pairs.

- (10) a. /r/ ràm ‘land’ rwà:j ‘bird’
b. /l/ làn ‘property’ lwà:j ‘finish’

2.1.3. Coda consonants

As shown in table 1. The coda may consist of the stops *p, t, k*, nasals *m, n, ŋ* and semi-vowel *w* and *j*. The contrast for *w* and *j* is not found in coda position. See section 2.2.2. for the discussion on why the glides *w* and *j* are treated as coda consonants. The phonemic status of the voiceless unaspirated stops and nasals can be further established in coda position with minimal pairs as in (11) and (12) below.

Stops coda

- (11) a. /p-/ zìp ‘sleep’ l àp ‘cutting chilies into half’
b. /-t/ zìt ‘in a flash’ l àt ‘word’
c. /-k/ zìk ‘tender shoot’ l àk ‘tire/fatigue’

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip
Phonology of Rongmei

	<u>Nasal coda</u>		
(12) d.	/-m/	ràm	‘land/area’
e.	/-n/	ràn	‘better’
f.	/-ŋ/	ràŋ	‘shock’

2.2. The vowel² system

Rongmei can be described as having five monophthongs vowels as shown in Table 2.

i	u
e	o
a	

Table 2. Rongmei vowels

The Rongmei vowel phonemes may be described in phonetic terms as follows.

/i/	Close, front, unrounded vowel	[i]
/u/	Close, back, rounded vowel	[u]
/e/	Close-mid, front, unrounded vowel	[ɛ]
/o/	Close-mid, back, rounded vowel	[ɔ]
/a/	Open, central, unrounded vowel	[a]

The close-mid, front, unrounded vowel /e/ and the close-mid, back, rounded vowel /o/ are phonetically realized as [ɛ] and [ɔ] respectively. All the vowels are phonetically pronounced as long in open syllable. The vowel /a/ and /o/ are realized phonetically as long vowels before *y* and *w* or the nasal *n*, e.g. *kà:j* ‘house’, *k^hò:j* ‘bee’ and *bà:n* ‘arm’. The open, central, unrounded vowel /a/ is raised to a mid, unrounded central vowel [ə] in closed syllables like *kəp* ‘cry’. All the vowels phonemes of Rongmei

² The inventory of vowel phonemes adopted here differs from that of Jashawant and Naor Singh (2012:156) in that they include schwa ə as one of the vowels in their inventory and contrasted it with *i* in words *ni* ‘wish’ and *nə* ‘near’ in support of their claim. The contrast between schwa ə and low central unrounded vowel *a* is not found in my data.

are found to occur in open syllable. It must be noted here that, though vowel length is not phonemic in the language, vowels /a/ and /o/ tend to be long before a sonorant consonants, e.g. *p^hò:j* ‘grass’, *p^hà:j* ‘thigh’, *rwà:j* ‘bird’, *là:j* ‘pot’ *kàgà:n* ‘time’. Vowel length in such cases is always accompanied by low tone.

2.2.1. Minimal pairs: vowels

The minimal and near minimal pairs in (13) establish the phonemic status of these vowels.

- (13) a. /i/ bí ‘yam’
 b. /u/ bù ‘moon’
 c. /e/ bè ‘bent’
 d. /o/ bò ‘Q. marker’
 e. /a/ bà ‘dung’

The vowels /i/, /u/, /e/, and /a/ occur in closed syllable ending in velar nasals /ŋ/ and /k/ as shown by the minimal pairs in (14).

- (14) a. /i/ pìŋ ‘afraid’ mìk ‘eye’
 b. /u/ pùŋ ‘swollen/bulge’ mùk ‘ink’
 c. /e/ pèŋ ‘outside’ mèk ‘brother-in-law’
 d. /o/ ----- -----
 e. /a/ pàŋ ‘foolish’ màk ‘negative marker’

2.2.2. Diphthongs

There are two types of diphthongs, those converging on a close front vowel and those converging on a close back vowel as shown in Figure 1.

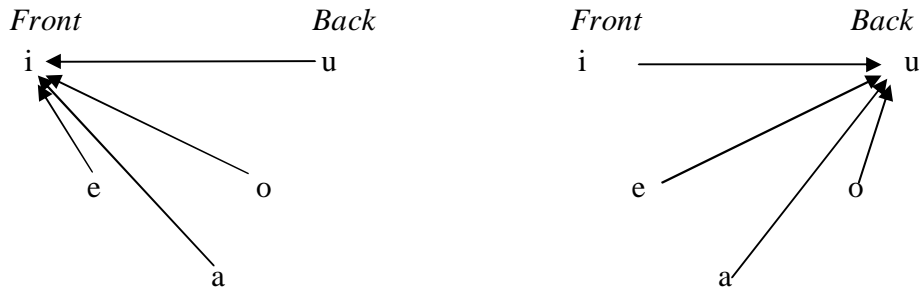


Figure 1. Direction of the vowel-glide

The following are examples of vowel vowel-glides towards /i/.

Diphthongs	example	gloss
/ui/	dù <i>i</i>	‘water’
/ei/	p ^h è <i>i</i>	‘cloth’
/ai/	kà: <i>i</i>	‘house’
/oi/	p ^h ò: <i>i</i>	‘grass’

Following are examples of vowel-glides towards /u/.

/iu/	hìu	‘feather’
/eu/	anèu	‘afterward’
/au/	sàu	‘thorn’
/ou/	ròu	‘bone’

A question arises whether the high, front unrounded off-glide vowel /i/ and the high, back rounded off-glide /u/ should be treated as the second member of a diphthong (VV) or as a consonant glide coda (VC). Interpreting the off-glide as the second member of a diphthong would add a three member vowel (C) V: V syllable type as shown in affecting long vowel examples like *kà:i* ‘house’. Treating the off-glide as a final consonant would pattern with existing codas in (C) V: syllables and simplify the syllable structure inventory. Therefore, V-i and V-u combinations are treated as VC combinations with /w/ and /j/ as codas. It may be further noted here that these V-i and V-u combinations only function as single tone-bearing units.

3. Syllable structure

The Rongmei syllable consists of a nucleus and an onset and may include a coda. The syllable canon of Rongmei syllable is given in Figure 2.

[(C₁) (C₂) V (:) (C₃)] T

The minimal syllable type is a single vowel. C₁ is an optional onset; all the onset consonants listed in Table 1. can occur in this position. The second optional consonant is C₂ is a glide and only the two vowels can occur in this position. V is the obligatory nucleus of Rongmei syllable, (:) is optional vowel length. C₃ is an optional coda restricted to voiced nasals, voiceless stops and semivowels.

The different types of Rongmei syllables are shown below with example.

V	à	‘first person possessive pronoun’
V:C	à:j?	‘I/myself’
CV	bà	‘dung’
CVC	làt	‘word’
CV:C	bà:n	‘arm’
CCVC	pwâk	‘rat’

Jashawanta & Naor Singh (2012: 179) provide *um* ‘keep in mouth’ as their only example of VC syllable. But my informants told me that no such word exists in the language and the meaning of ‘keep in mouth’ is *bàm*. It is to be noted here that the only consonant that can occur as in final position is the glottal stop.

Rongmei permits complex onsets of the type CG where C can be any member of unaspirated stops, voiceless aspirated stops, nasals, fricatives and liquids and G from the two the glides /w/ and /j/. Examples of complex onsets recorded in the data are illustrated below.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

pj	pjàn	‘satisfied’	tsw	limtswàŋ	‘star’
bj	bjàŋ	‘cheek’	gw	gwàk	‘buffalo’
bw	bwàk	‘brain’	nj	njàŋ	‘sand’
phw	phwàn	‘white’	nw	nwà:j	‘fat’
pw	pwàn	‘air’	khw	khwàŋ	‘drum’
thj	thjàm	‘tempt’	rw	rùj	‘cane’
rj	rjàŋ	‘rope’	lw	kà:jlwàŋ	‘village’
rw	karwàŋ	‘colour’	sw	swàn	‘weak’
mw	mwàŋ	‘cloud’	zw	zwàŋ	‘sell’
tsj	tsjàŋ	‘branch’	gw	gwàt	‘shave’

Phonetic clusters of /ts/ and /t/ are the result of the tendency of /a/ to delete when it is followed by liquid in the onset of a following syllable. Thus, ‘wonderful’ may be pronounced as *tsàrìn* or *tsrìn*, ‘spider’ as *pàŋtsàrà* or *pàŋtsrà* and ‘angel’ as *bàntsàrà* or *bàntsrà*.

The status of glottal stop

The final glottal stop, unlike their counterpart plosives co-occur with final sonorants forming a complex coda like *-jʔ*, *-wʔ* and *-ŋʔ* as in *nèjʔ* ‘sun’, *tàwʔ* ‘stone’, *zàŋʔ* ‘drink’. A similar situation of the unusual final glottal stop of this nature has been also reported from a number of Kuki-Chin languages - Daai Chin (Helga-So-Hartmann 2009), Mizo and other Kuki-Chin languages (Henderson 1948). The final glottal stop has been treated differently within the Kuki-Chin languages. For instance, Henderson is of the opinion that the glottal stop in Lushai plays a double role — as a realization of syllabic shortness and also as a final plosive. Hyman and VanBik (2002) Hyman and VanBik (2004) treat such combinations as glottalized sonorants rather than sequences of a sonorant and a glottal stop. Hartmann further argues about the possibility of treating final glottal as an autosegment, occurring on the tone tier and not just as another kind of consonant. Drawing evidence from (Burling 1992 and Daunmu, 1994 on Garo), she went on to say that “Laryngeals/glottal are well known in Asian languages, as in some

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:4 April 2014

Pauthang Haokip

Phonology of Rongmei

instances, having an association with tone, either occurring with certain tones or being a feature of a tone” (Hartmann 2009: 39). The solution she offers for Daai Chin for the unusual final –CC (jʔ, wʔ) would be to remove the final glottal stop from the consonant tier and represent it at the tonal tier.

Like Daai Chin, Rongmei unusual final glottal stop of the type (wʔ, jʔ or nʔ) is also found to occur on with a low tone but never with a high tone. Thus, taking cue from the above hypothesis, the most elegant way of treating the unusual final glottal stop stated above is to treat them under the tonal tier.

Pre-nasalization

Pre-nasalized sounds are inconsistently recorded in the data especially in unconscious speech. My informants when asked to repeat the data sometimes pronounced them with pre-nasalized sound sometimes without the pre-nasalized sound. Some of examples where pre-nasalized sounds are commonly recorded are given below.

ⁿ thwàŋ	‘praising’	ⁿ dwàŋ	‘accompany’	ⁿ bùt	‘dust’
ⁿ tsìn	‘fog’	ⁿ kùpùj	‘cat’	ⁿ thùk	‘deep’
ⁿ bùŋ	‘curve’	ⁿ tsù	‘cold’	ⁿ thàn	‘python’
ⁿ tìp	‘dip’	ⁿ rjàk	‘comb’	ⁿ sù	‘thick’
ⁿ rù:y	python’	ⁿ thjàk	‘to clear throat’	ⁿ dwàk	‘confess’
ⁿ thèk	‘stop’	ⁿ zwàn	‘follow behind’	ⁿ khùk	‘bitter’

Pre-nasalized has been recorded mostly with low tone syllables. It is not certain whether pre-nasalization is influence by tone, dialectal feature and or is in the initial stage of becoming a full-fledged phoneme.

4. Tone

The current analysis posits two tones in Rongmei, viz. high and low tones. Throughout this study the two tones are marked over the vowel, e.g. [á]=high tone and [à]=low tone.

Tonal contrast

bú	'enough'	bù	'pulse (n.)'
gwán̄	'to crawl'	gwàn̄	'king'
záw	'monkey'	zàw	'wine'
p ^h á:j ³	'throw'	p ^h à:j	'horizontal'
bún̄	'container'	bùn̄	'curve'
bán̄	'under'	bàn̄	'close'
tsín̄	'to become ice'	tsin̄	'hill'
thwán	'praising'	n ^h t ^h wàn	'tomorrow'
pán	'distance'	pàn	'mushroom'

No suspicious minimal pairs have been found with stopped syllable (ending in *p*, *t*, *k*). Also, no high tones were recorded with the stopped syllable. In most cases, short vowel before a stopped syllables carry a low tone. The following examples are illustrative.

nàp	'cooked rice'	làt	'speak/word'	gùk	'ginger'
zìp	'sleep'	dàt	'balance'	kàp	'cry'
sàt	'pull'	tàt	'go'	gì?	'skin'
mùk	'forget'	nùk	'mucus'	pàt	'go'

Both the two tones are recorded in open syllables as shown below.

³ There is a tendency for low tone to fall from a higher position in *j* coda if the preceding vowel is a low central vowel *a*.

<i>Rising</i>	<i>Low</i>
tsé ‘paper’	bù ‘moon’
sí ‘dog’	bà ‘dung’
lú ‘song’	nù ‘mucus’
pé ‘umbrella’	t ^h ù ‘seed’

Closed syllables ending in nasals are mostly recorded or analysed as having either rising or low tone.

<i>Rising</i>	<i>Low</i>
tán ‘iron’	sìm ‘house flies’
núm ‘forest’	tàm ‘chutney’
t ^h ún ‘bamboo shoot’	pùm ‘body’
asán ‘deer’	p ^h ùm ‘duck’

Concluding remarks

This paper offers a preliminary analysis of Rongmei phonology. As a result this paper cannot claim to be an exhaustive study approaching the full-scale phonology of the dialect. Altogether, 20 consonants and five vowels have been established. Of the total number of consonants only the voiceless unaspirated stops /p, t, k/, the nasals /m, n, ŋ/ and semi-vowels /w/ and /j/ occur in coda position. The vowels /e/ and /o/ are phonetically realized as [ɛ] and [ɔ] and the vowel /a/ is raised to central vowel [ə] in closed syllables. Again, based on the direction of vowel glide, four diphthongs have been established. At the level of syllabic structure, seven syllable types are recorded in the data, viz. V, V:C, CV, CVC, CV:C and CCVC. The only permissible complex onsets recorded are those in which the first member is either an unaspirated stops, voiceless aspirated stops, nasals, fricatives and liquids and the second member selected from the two the glides /w/ and /j/. In the area of tone, two lexical tones, viz. high and low have been established and that too in monosyllabic words. But the tonal behavior of disyllabic,

affixes and phrases have not analysed. It is the wish of the author to carry out a full-scale study of the tones of Rongmei in near future.

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===== **Colophon**

I am indebted to Rongmei speaking friends for enthusiastically sharing their language with me and patiently answering all my questions. In particular I would like to thank Judi Rongmei, P.G Kakhanlung and Paul Gonmei with whom I had many hours of fruitful discussion and recording. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Amos Teo and T.Temsunungsang for their valuable comments and suggestions. The present work on

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:4 April 2014**
Pauthang Haokip
Phonology of Rongmei

Rongmei has been supported by UGC, New Delhi. The author is solely responsible for any errors and omissions of fact.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:4 April 2014**

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