

Identity of Meiteilon Segmental Phonemes

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Introduction

Manipuri, also known as Meiteilon, the native tongue of the Meiteis, is a member of the Kuki-Chin group of the Arakan-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. **M. A. Pie & F. Gaynor**, 1954 and **Grierson** (1908) considered it to be a link between Kuki-Chin languages and Kachin languages. **Shafer** (1966) included it under a separate branch called Meithei, which comes under Kukish section of the Burmic division. Geographically, Manipuri is the connecting link between the two important members, i.e., Tibetan and Burmese. The Himalayan, Assam (Indic language) and Naga groups of the Tibeto-Burman Sub-family separate Manipuri in the North and Northeast from the Tibetan. In the South and Southeast, there are Kuki-Chin and Kachin groups of the sub-family between the two sister languages, i.e., Manipuri and Burmese. Grierson LSI, (part-III, Vol. III) mentions that it sometimes agrees more closely with Burmese, and even with Tibetan, than with the Kuki-Chin languages proper. Nevertheless, Manipuri is intimately related to Burmese, Tibetan and in some ways, with Chinese. We have to make a note of the fact that Manipuri and its three sister languages developed on parallel lines with their peculiar dialectal predispositions and often developed contradictory idiosyncrasies.

1. Meiteilon Speech Sounds

Despite having dialectal variations Manipuri has twenty four consonant sounds including /z^h/, which is found only with /z^hal / ‘cymbal’, twelve vowel sounds of which six pure vowels and six diphthongs under segmental phonemes, and two tones under suprasegmental phonemes, i.e., level and falling. Suprasegmental phoneme is not discussed here in this article.

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2.1. Meiteilon Vowels

There are twelve vowel sounds in Meiteilon. The vowel contrast is close and open systems. Vowel qualities are comfortably changed at the morphophonemic level.

2.1.1. Meiteilon Pure vowels (Monophthongs)

There are six pure vowel sounds. Out of these, two are high vowels, three are mid vowels and one is central low vowel. The mid position of the vowel area may be further sub-classified as higher mid, mean-mid and lower mid. There is no front rounded vowel sounds. All the rounded vowel sounds are back vowels. They are illustrated below:

Meiteilon Vowel Chart

	Front	Central	Back
	Un-rounded	Un-rounded	Rounded
High	i		ʊ
Higher mid	e		o
Lower mid		ə	
Low		a	

2.1.2. Meiteilon Diphthongs

Of the six diphthongs, four of them ended in / i / and the remaining two end in / u / respectively. They are given below.

/ əi ai ui oi əu au /

2.2. Meiteilon Consonants

Twenty-four consonant sounds are used in Meiteilon. Out of them, twelve are stops; three are nasals, five fricatives, one lateral, one tap and two approximants. All the stops have voiced and voiceless distinctions at each point of articulation. Moreover, they have aspirated and un-aspirated qualities. The followings are the consonant sounds:

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List of 24 consonant sounds

(Meiteilon Consonant chart,(I.Robindro Singh,2002)

		Bilabial		Dental		Dento-alveolar		Alveoar		Palatal		Labio-valar		Velar	
		vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd
P L O S I V E S	Unasp	p	b	t	d									k	g
	Asp	p ^h	b ^h	t ^h	d ^h									k ^h	g ^h
Nasals			m				n								ŋ
F r i c a t i v e s	Unasp					s		c	z						
	Asp								z ^h						h
Lateral							l								
Tap							r								
Approximants											j		w		

3. A Phonological Description of Meiteilon

I. Meiteilon Vowel phonemes

/i/ High, front, un-rounded vowel

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/e/	High-mid, front, un-rounded vowel
/ə/	Mid, central, un-rounded vowel
/o/	High-mid, back, rounded vowel
/u/	High, back, rounded vowel
/a/	Low, central, un-rounded vowel

Manipuri has six pure vowel phonemes. Among them, / u / and / o / are back rounded vowels, while front vowel / i / and / e / and central vowels / ə / and / a / are un-rounded. The vowels / i / and / u / are high, / e /, / ə / and / o / are mid and / a / is low.

II. Manipuri Consonant Phonemes

/m/	Bilabial, nasal, voiced, plosive. / mənəm / ‘smell’
/n/	Dento-alveolar, nasal, voiced, plosive. / na / ‘ear’
/ŋ/	Velar, nasal, voiced, plosive. / ŋa / ‘fish’
/p/	Bilabial, un aspirated, voiceless, plosive. / pi / ‘tear’
/b/	Bilabial, unaspirated, voiced, plosive. / bənan / ‘spelling’
/p ^h /	Bilabial, aspirated, voiceless, plosive. / p ^h i / ‘clothe’
/b ^h /	Bilabial, aspirated, voiced, plosive. / b ^h abok / ‘audience’
/t/	Dental, unaspirated, voiceless, plosive. / ta / ‘spear’
/t ^h /	Dental, aspirated, voiceless, plosive. / t ^h abəl / ‘moonlight’
/d/	Dental, unaspirated, voiced, plosive. / dosi / ‘oil thread’
/d ^h /	Dental, aspirated, voiced, plosive. / d ^h up / ‘incense’
/k/	Velar, unaspirated, voiceless, plosive. / kok / ‘head’
/k ^h /	Velar, aspirated, voiceless, plosive. / k ^h ut / ‘hand’
/g/	Velar, unaspirated, voiced, plosive. / gulen / ‘catapult bullet’

- /g^h/ Velar, aspirated, voiced, plosive. /guha / ‘well’
- /s/ Dento-alveolar, voiceless, fricative. / samu / ‘elephant’
- /c/ Alveolar, voiceless, fricative. /cənəm/ ‘garlic’
- /z/ Alveolar, voiced, fricative. / zəgoi/ ‘dance’
- /z^h/ Alveolar, aspirated, voiced, fricative. /z^hal/ ‘cymbal’
- /h/ Velar, voiced, fricative. / hik /‘louse’
- /l/ Dento-alveolar, voiced,lateral. / la/ ‘plantain leaf’
- /r/ Dento-alveolar, voiced, tap. / rumal / ‘handkerchief’/ləiraŋ ‘flower’
- /j/ Palatal, voiced, approximant. /ja / ‘tooth’
- /w/ Labio-velar, voiced, approximant. /wak^həl / ‘thought’

3.1. Distribution and Contrasting pairs of Manipuri Phonemes

All the pure vowels except/a/can occurs at all the word positions. As an exception, the phoneme / a / occurs at the word initial, /au /, in the Jiri dialect of Barak valley, meaning literally the first paddy crop of the season when there is double cropping.

I. Vowel Phonemes (Monophthongs)

/ i e a ə u o /

Manipuri Gloss

- / piba / ‘male’
- / penbə / ‘satisfaction’
- / panbə / ‘fair complexion’
- / pənbə / ‘delay’

/ punbə / 'tie'
/ponbə / 'dependence'

II. Contrasting Pairs

/ i / & /e /

/ in / 'net'
/ eka /* 'ace' (loan words)

/ liŋbə / 'planting systematically'
/ lenbə / 'move'

/ məci / 'horn'
/ məce / 'his/her) elder sister'

/ i / & /a /

/ lin / 'snake'
/ lan / 'war'

/ likli / 'bottle'
/ likla / 'dew'

/ i / & /ə /

/isa/ '(my) body'

/əsa/ 'hope'

/isiŋ/ 'water'

/isəŋ/ 'moss'

/ i / & / u /

/ina/ 'thatch leaf'

/una/ 'leaf'

/lik/ 'necklace'

/luk/ 'meal'

/məci/ 'horn'

/məcu/ 'colour'

/ i / & / o /

/ibə/ 'write'

/obə/ 'vomit'

/pibə/ 'give'

/pobə/ 'lost the game'

/si/ 'die'

/so/ 'key'

/ e/& /a /

/ seŋbə / 'clean'

/ saŋbə / 'long'

/ ine / 'maternal aunt'

/ ina / 'leaf of straw/thatch leaf'

/ e /& / ə /

/ nembə / 'dwarf'

/ nəmbə / 'print' press)

/ e /& /u /

/eka / 'ace (loan)'

/ uka / 'crossing frame'

/menbə / 'to block the hole/to mend'

/munbə/ 'to take possession illegally / to snatch'

/ce / 'paper'

/cu / 'sugar cane'

/ e / & / o /

/ len / 'hail'

/ lon / 'language'

/ a / & /ə /

/ haŋbə / ‘open’

/ həŋbə / ‘ask’

/ a/ &/u /

/pambə/ ‘like’

/pumbə/ ‘rotten’

/məpa/ ‘father’

/məpu/ ‘grandfather’

/ a/&/o /

/laŋ/ ‘net’

/loŋ/ ‘a type of spear with multi arrow’

/ ə/&/u /

/ənna/ ‘a coin used in the ancient time in Manipur’

/unna/ ‘leaf’

/cəna / ‘chana’ (a type of bean)

/cuna/ ‘sugar cane leaf’

/mɑpən/ 'nine'

/məpʌn/ 'bundle'

/ ə/&/o /

/ək^haibə / 'something like wood broken into pieces.'

/ok^haibə/ 'stir'

/ləŋ/ 'thread'

/loŋ/ 'a fishing net'

/ u/&/o /

/ʌbə/ 'see'

/obə/ 'vomit'

/pʌnbə/ 'tie'

/pɒnbə / 'dependence'

/məpu/ 'owner'

/ məpɔ / 'way of losing the game'

3.1.2. Distribution of Meiteilon Diphthongs

Out of the six diphthongs, the four diphthongs, namely, / oi əi əu ui / occur elsewhere in the word position, but /ai / appears in the word initial position only to a limited extent whereas, it appears at the final word position to a large extent. The diphthong / au / never appears in the word initial position except in the Jiri dialect of Manipur.

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/ oi /	/ oina /	‘left hand’
	/ t ^h oibə /	‘winner’
	/ t ^h əroi /	‘snail’
/ əi /	/ əik ^h oi /	‘we’
	/ ləinaŋ /	‘muddy water’
	/ mərəi /	‘argument’
/ əu /	/ əuraibə /	‘reading’
	/ həugətpə /	‘wake up’
	/ ləu /	‘technique’
/ ui /	/ uin /	‘a kind of tree’
	/ ui /	‘a kind of bamboo’
	/ hui /	‘dog’
/ ai /	/ ain /	‘law’
	/ laibək /	‘forehead’
	/ minai /	‘servant’
/ ai /	/ lai /	‘god/picture’
	/ ləikai /	‘locality/ neighbor’
/ au /	/ pau /	‘news’
	/ məpau /	‘news of someone’

3.2. Meiteilon Consonant Contrasts and Their Distribution

I. Distribution of Meiteilon Consonants

In Meiteilon, the consonant phonemes such as / k c t p l r j m n ŋ / occur in all the word positions, namely, initial, medial and final.

/ k /	/ kəmlak /	‘calf’
	/ kəkceŋ /	‘ant’
	/ kək /	‘head’
/ c /	/ ca/	‘tea’
	/ həkcaŋ/	‘body/health’
	/ caməc/	‘spoon’
/ t /	/ təl /	‘bread/ roti’
	/ mətəm /	‘time’
	/ licət /	‘character’
/ p /	/ pi /	‘tear’
	/ məpan /	‘flower’
	/ mərup /	‘friend’
/ l /	/ ləm /	‘land’
	/ kalək/	‘knee pit’
	/ mənɪl /	‘steam’
/ r /	/ rumal/	‘handkerchief’
	/ kurak	‘butterfly’
	/ sur /	‘tune’
/ j /	/ ja/	‘tooth’
	/ məjai /	‘middle’
	/ ləi/ləy/	‘tongue’
/ m /	/ miraŋ/	‘spider net’
	/ məmməl/	‘cost’
	/ ləm /	‘land’
/ n /	/ na/	‘ear’

	/ləinəm/	‘fragrance of flower’
	/lin/	‘snake’
/ŋ /	/ŋa/	‘fish’
	/məŋal/	‘light’
	/ləiraŋ/	‘flower’

But the consonant phonemes /k^h g j t^h d d^h p^h s w
b b^h / can occur in the initial and medial word positions. The phonemes
/d^h b^h g^h z^h / occur in loan words only.

/k ^h /	/k ^h ut/	‘hand’
	/məik ^h et/	‘matchbox’
/g /	/gari/	‘vehicle’
	/məŋgol/	‘verandah’
/s/	/samu /	‘elephant’
	/usop/	‘feast’
/z /	/zagoi/	‘dance’
	/moza/	‘socks’
/t ^h /	/t ^h əmbal/	‘lotus’
	/p ^h əmt ^h on/	‘rank’
/d /	/dukan/	‘shop’
	/gəda/	‘mace’
/d ^h /	/d ^h ərmə/	‘religion’
	/gəd ^h a/	‘donkey’
/p ^h /	/p ^h i/	‘cloth’
	/ləp ^h oi/	‘banana’

/ s /	/sannəpot /	‘toy’
	/usa /	‘branch of the tree’
/ h /	/hameŋ /	‘goat’
	/məhi /	‘liquid’
/ w /	/wari/	‘story’
	/laiwa/	‘name of an eatable bamboo/message of God’
/ b /	/basi/	‘flute’
	/laibək /	‘forehead’
/ b ^h /	/ b ^h abok/	‘audience’
	/ səb ^h a /	‘council’

However, the two aspirated consonant phonemes such as / g^h / and /z^h / occur in the word initial position only.

/ z ^h /	z ^h al	‘cymbal’
/ g ^h /	g ^h əri	‘clock’

Note that the consonant phonemes, / k^h p^h t^h c g g^h d d^h /, do not have transparent sounds at the final position of the words.

II. Contrasting Pairs of Meiteilon Consonants

/ m	n	ŋ /
/ ma /		‘bug’
/ na/		‘ear’
/ŋa /		‘fish’

/ m n /
/miŋ / 'name'
/niŋ / 'buttock'
/məmaŋ / 'front'
/mənaŋ / 'sleepy liquid'
/məpʊm/ 'whole thing'
/məpʊn/ 'bundle'

/ m ŋ /
/məsi/ 'this'
/ŋəsi/ 'today'
/ həimaŋ/ 'name of a winter fruit having sour taste'
/ləiŋaŋ/ 'red soil'
/ləik^hom/ 'mud'
/ləik^hoŋ/ 'foot of the flower'

/ n ŋ /
/nəu/ 'oar'
/ŋəu / 'palate'
/ləinaŋ / 'muddy water'
/ləiŋaŋ / 'red soil'

/ p p^h /
/ pi/ 'tear'
/p^hi / 'cloth'

/məpəi/ 'heap'
/məp^həi/ 'thigh'

/ b b^h /
/but / 'boot shoe)
/b^hut / 'ghost'

/ t t^h /
/ta/ 'spear'
/t^ha/ 'moon'
/mətəu/ 'manner'
/mət^həu/ 'duty'

/ d d^h /
/gəda/ 'mace'
/gəd^ha/ 'donkey'

/ c s /
/ ca/ 'tea'
/ sa/ 'animal/meat'

/ ica/ '(my) issue'
/ isa/ '(my) body'

/ z z^h /

/ zəgoi/ 'dance'

/ z^hal / 'cymbal'

/ k k^h /

/koi/ 'moustache'

/k^hoi/ 'bee'

/kok / 'head'

/k^hok / 'a kind of bamboo'

/ləika/ 'corner of the petals'

/ləik^ha/ 'below part of the tongue'

/ s z /

/sibə/ 'die'

/zibə/ 'living beings'

/ t c /

/tin/ 'insect'

/ cin/ 'mouth'

/mətu/ 'skin hair of animals)'

/məcu/ 'colour'

/ l r /

/pɔtləm/ 'ingredience'

/porəm/ 'technique'

/w j/

/wa/ 'bamboo'

/ja/ 'tooth'

However, the consonant phonemes /g g^h/ are not found in their contrastive pairs in written as well as spoken Manipuri.

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