

A Brief Phonological Outline of Kakching

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Abstract

Manipuri, locally known as Meiteilon is one of the oldest and advanced Tibeto-Burman languages of the Northeast India (Grierson, 1903). Manipuri is the mother tongue of three major groups of people in Manipur, namely the Meiteis, the Panghals (Muslims) and the Lois and it is the only medium of communication among the 29 different tribes of Manipur. Therefore, it is considered as *Lingua Franca* of the region. Manipuri has four major dialects namely Andro, Phayeng, Sekmai and Kakching. All these dialects phonologically and lexically vary from the standard dialect of Manipuri spoken in Imphal valley. Kakching dialect of Manipuri is mainly spoken in Kakching district of Manipur. It is situated in the Southeastern part of Manipur and it is about 44 km from the capital of Manipur, Imphal and 70 km from the border areas of India and Myanmar. According to 2001 Census of India, Kakching had a population of 28,746. Kakching being a dialect of Manipuri exhibits some of common grammatical features of standard Manipuri, at the same time it has shown many grammatical features different from the standard Manipuri. Thus the present paper is a humble attempt to explore the brief phonological structures of the Kakching dialect of Manipuri, i.e., inventory of vowels, consonants, and tones, consonant clusters, and syllabic structures.

Keywords: Tibeto-Burman, Manipuri, Kakching, Phonology.

1. Introduction

Manipuri, locally known as Meiteilon is one of the oldest and advanced Tibeto-Burman languages of the Northeast India (Grierson, 1903). Manipuri is the mother tongue of three major groups of people in Manipur, namely, the Meiteis, the Panghals (Muslims) and the Lois and it is the only medium of communication among the 29 different tribes of Manipur. Hence, it is

considered as *Lingua Franca* of the region. In 1992 Manipuri became the first Tibeto-Burman language to receive the recognition of the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution. Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India, Manipuri has four major dialects, namely, Andro, Phayeng, Sekmai and Kakching. All these dialects phonologically and lexically vary from the standard dialect of Manipuri spoken in Imphal valley. Kakching dialect of Manipuri is mainly spoken in Kakching district of Manipur. It is situated in the Southeastern part of Manipur and it is about 44 km from the capital of Manipur, Imphal and 70 km from the border areas of India and Myanmar. In terms of population and development, Kakching is the second biggest town in Manipur next to Imphal. However, it has the highest literacy rate in the state of Manipur. As of 2001 Census of India, Kakching had a population of 28,746.

‘Lois is believed to be one of the earliest bands of settlers in Manipur. They were those subdued people who paid tributes to the Meitei kings and remained unassimilated in the Meitei fold. Hence the name Loi was given to them’ (Sanajaoba 1998:148). The linguistic fieldwork in the Loi village was generally very sensitive and sometimes considered offensive. The villagers thought that the research scholar came to their village to laugh at them. The villagers also tried to conceal their speech variation and most of them said they spoke the same variety as that of the standard one. “The Meiteis and Lois however resemble each other so closely that they are indistinguishable for all intent and purposes. Though they preserve as a social identity, the Lois have been part and parcel of the Meitei society and most of the Pre-Hindu customs and practices are preserved by them till these modern times” (Sanajaoba 1988:148).

The present study attempts to explore briefly the phonological structures of the Kakching dialect of Manipuri, i.e., inventory of vowels, consonants, and tones, consonant clusters, and syllabic structures.

2. Phonemic Inventory

The phonemes of Kakching consist of sixteen (16) consonant phonemes and six (6) vowels. The phonemes of the dialect are illustrated in the following sections.

2.1. Vowels

Kakching exhibits the basic six-vowel system found in most of the Tibeto-Burman languages and their dialects. The six-vowel phonemes of the dialect are *i*, *e*, *ə*, *a*, *o* & *u*. These vowels can be categorized into three levels of tongue height: high, mid and low, a three way contrast of *i* & *e* front vowels, *ə* & *a* central vowels and *o* & *u* back vowels. These are also distinguished in terms of the parts of the tongue raised. The vowel phonemes of Kakching dialect are given in the following table.

	front	central	back
High	i		u
Mid	e	ə	o
Low		a	

Table 1-Vowel Phonemes of Kakching

From the above illustration, it can be stated that all the vowels in the dialect are oral and voiced. It is also noticed that vowel length is not phonemic in the dialect.

2.2. Consonants

There are sixteen consonant phonemes in Kakching dialects. According to their place of articulation consonants can be categorized into bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal. They can be further categorized into seven types: stops, nasals, fricatives, lateral, trill and semi-vowel in terms of their manner of articulation. Kakching dialect has sixteen consonant phonemes. Of these sixteen consonant phonemes, seven are stops *p*, *t*, *c*, *k*, *p^h*, *t^h*, *k^h*, two fricatives *s*, *h*, three nasals *m*, *n*, *ŋ*, one lateral *l*, one trill *r* and two semi-vowels *w*, *y* respectively. The consonant phonemes of Kakching dialect are illustrated in the following table:

		Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
		Vl	Vd	Vl	Vd	Vl	Vd	Vl	Vd	Vl	Vd
STOPS	UNASP	p		t		c		k			

	ASP	p ^h		t ^h				k ^h			
NASALS			m		n				ŋ		
FRICATIVES						s				h	
LATERAL				l							
TRILL				r							
SEMI-VOWEL		w				y					

Table 2-Consonant phonemes in Kakching

From the above illustration, it is seen that the consonant inventory of Kakching is different from the Standard Manipuri. More specifically, the Kakching dialect doesn't have the voiced stops *b, d, g, j*. However the standard Manipuri has both the voiceless *p, t, k, c* and voiced stops *b, d, g, j*. It seems that Kakching has only Proto-Tibeto-Burman stops **p, *t, *k* and **c* (Matisoff, 2003). This is one of the typical phonological features of Kakching which is totally different from the Standard Manipuri. It is also important to note that the unaspirated and aspirated voiced stops *b, d, g, j, b^h, d^h, g^h* are only found in the loan words rather than in the indigenous lexical items.

2.3. Diphthongs

Besides the six simple vowels, the following diphthongs have been recorded in Kakching as illustrated in table 3.

ai	ui	əi	oi
au	au		

Table 3- Diphthongs in Kakching

2.4. Tones

Tone is a term that refers to the distinctive pitch level of a syllable. As many other Tibeto-Burman languages and their dialects, Kakching dialect is also a tonal dialect. It has two tones, namely, high and low as illustrated in table 4. It is worth mentioning here that the inventory of tone in Kakching is similar to that of Standard Manipuri.

High /	Low \
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/i/ 'blood'	/i/ 'thatch'
/ú/ 'tree'	/ù/ 'see'

Table 4 – Tones in Kakching

3. Distribution of Phonemes

3.1. Vowels

In Kakching dialect, vowel phonemes can't occur in all the three positions in different syllabic structures. In other words, the vowels *i*, *a*, *u*, *o* can occur initial, medial and final positions of words except *e* and *a*. More specifically, the vowels *e* and *a* occur in medial and final positions of words. The distributions of vowel phonemes in Kakching are illustrated in the following examples:

	Initial	Medial	Final
/i/	/isiŋ/ 'water'	/siŋ/ 'firewood'	/mi/ 'spider'
/e/	-	/ceŋ/ 'rice'	/ce/ 'paper'
/ə/	/əmə/ 'one'	/ləw/ 'paddy field'	/əmə/ 'one'
/a/	-	/ ^h an/ 'knife'	/ma/ 'bed bug'
/u/	/ut/ 'ash'	/puk/ 'belly'	/hu/ 'poison'
/o/	/oi/ 'left'	/mon/ 'pillow'	/so/ 'key'

3.2. Consonants

All the consonantal phonemes of Kakching cannot occur in all three positions. Out of sixteen consonants, the voiceless unaspirated stops *p*, *t*, *k*, nasals *m*, *n*, *ŋ* and liquids *l*, *r* occur in all three positions and the rest of the phonemes never do the same. All the consonantal phonemes in the dialect occur in word initial & medial position. The distribution of consonant phonemes in Kakching can be described in the following section.

	Initial	Medial	Final
/p/	/pi/ 'tears'	/ipa/ 'father'	/t ^h op/ 'brain'
/t/	/ta/ 'spear'	/ita/ 'friend'	/mit/ 'eye'
/c/	/cu/ 'sugar cane'	/ucek/ 'bird'	-
/k/	/ka/ 'room'	/heikru/ 'gooseberry'	/cak/ 'cooked rice'
/m/	/mi/ 'person'	/əmə/ 'one'	/yum/ 'house'
/n/	/na/ 'ear'	/əni/ 'two'	/lon/ 'language'
/ŋ/	/ŋa/ 'fish'	/iŋa/ 'june'	/nuŋ/ 'stone'
/l/	/la/ 'basket'	/nala/ 'drain'	/lil/ 'snake'
/r/	/rəŋ/ 'colour'	/turen/ 'river'	/har/ 'manure'
/w/	/wa/ 'bamboo'	/hawai/ 'bean'	-
/y/	/ya/ 'tooth'	/mayai/ 'middle'	-
/s/	/sa/ 'animal'	/məsiŋ/ 'number'	-
/p ^h /	/p ^h i/ 'cloth'	/məp ^h am/ 'place'	-
/t ^h /	/t ^h a/ 'moon'	/məthak/ 'above'	-
/k ^h /	/k ^h oi/ 'bee'	/waik ^h u/ 'crab'	-
/h/	/hi/ 'boat'	/əhiŋ/ 'night'	-

3.2.1. Syllable Initial Consonants

Almost all the consonants in Kakching can occur in syllable initial positions. Figure 1 shows the overview of the initial occurrence of consonants in Kakching.

p	p ^h	t	t ^h	k	k ^h	c	
m		n		ŋ			
		s					h
		l					
		r					
w							y

Figure1: Syllable Initial Consonants

/p/	/pi/	‘tear’
/p ^h /	/p ^h ak/	‘mat’
/t/	/tin/	‘insect’
/t ^h /	/t ^h oŋkan/	‘gate’
/k/	/kacən/	‘corner’
/k ^h /	/k ^h əruŋbi/	‘cockroach’
/c/	/cəkoy/	‘dance’
/m/	/muŋsen/	‘mirror’
/ŋ/	/ŋəmək/	‘snacks’
/s/	/sapan/	‘figure’
/h/	/hipan/	‘side of boat’
/l/	/ləy/	‘flower’
/r/	/ray/	‘judgments’
/w/	/wa/	‘bamboo’
/y/	/yum/	‘house’

3.2.2. Syllable Final Consonants

In Kakching, only eight consonants are found at the end of the syllable as illustrated in the following figure.

p	t	k
m	n	ŋ

l
r

Figure 2: Syllable Final Consonants

/p/	/kəp/	‘be cry’
/t/	/ut/	‘ash’
/k/	/cak/	‘cooked rice’
/m/	/thum/	‘salt’
/n/	/in/	‘fishing net’
/ŋ/	/kaŋ/	‘mosquito’
/l/	/lil/	‘snake’
/r/	/bor/	‘bridegroom’

3.3. Diphthongs

Out of the six diphthongs, the three diphthongs *ui*, *əi*, *oi* can occur in all three positions. However, all the diphthongs can occur in medial and final positions of words. The distribution of diphthong in Kakching is illustrated in the following examples:

	Initial	Medial	Final
/au/	-	/pauk ^h um/ ‘answer’	/pau/ ‘news’
/ai/	-	/kaiba/ ‘break’	/kai/ ‘where’
/oi/	/oiba/ ‘happening’	/loiba/ ‘complete’	/koi/ ‘beard’
/ui/	/uiba/ ‘dozing’	/kuiba/ ‘long duration’	/hui/ ‘dog’
/əi/	/əi/ ‘i’	/ləirik/ ‘book’	/ləi/ ‘god’
/əu/	-	/ləubuk/ ‘paddy field’	/p ^h əu/ ‘paddy’

4. Consonant Clusters

Consonant cluster is the combination of two consonants in a syllable (Catford, 1988). Benedict (1972) rightly pointed out that “Tibeto-Burman consonant clusters, found only in root initial position, are of two types: (a) stop or nasal + liquid (r~l) (b) consonant (or cluster of foregoing type) + semi-vowel (w~y).” This is true in the case of Kakching as shown below:

<i>kw-</i>	<i>/kwa/</i>	‘betel nut’
<i>ky-</i>	<i>/kyamgəy/</i>	‘name of a place’
<i>k^hw-</i>	<i>/k^hwa /</i>	‘waist’
<i>sw-</i>	<i>/sway/</i>	‘nervousness’
<i>pr-</i>	<i>/kompret/</i>	‘vegetable’
<i>t^hr-</i>	<i>/laŋt^həy/</i>	‘medicinal plant’
<i>kr-</i>	<i>/ləykrək/</i>	‘crack’
<i>k^hr-</i>	<i>/pak^hra/</i>	‘widower’
<i>br-</i>	<i>/cumbrəy/</i>	‘a kind of fruit’
<i>dr-</i>	<i>/k^hoŋdrum/</i>	‘vegetable’
<i>gr-</i>	<i>/məŋgra/</i>	‘sweet potato’

From the above illustrations, we notice that Kakching permits up to two consonants in an initial syllable. In other words, no word in Kakching begins with more than two consonants. Thus the maximum number of segments in the word-initial consonant cluster is two in the dialect. More specifically, the three consonant clusters are not allowed in any position of a word. It is also observed that no final consonant cluster is found in Kakching just as in many other Tibeto-Burman languages or dialects do (Abbi & Mishra, 1985).

5. Syllabic Structure

Like Standard Manipuri, Kakching syllable consists of a nucleus which may be preceded by onset or followed by a coda. The nucleus consists of a vowel or diphthong. It is worth mentioning that the onsets may be simple or complex. It is also observed that CV pattern is the most common pattern in the dialect. However, the single vowel in Kakching can form a syllable, morpheme and a word as such *í* ‘thatch’ and *u* ‘tree’. Here, the symbol V and C represents the

vowels and the consonants respectively. The basic syllabic structures in Kakching are summarized below:

	Words	Gloss
V	<i>í</i>	‘thatch’
VC	<i>ut</i>	‘ash’
CV	<i>ka</i>	‘room’
CVC	<i>cak</i>	‘cooked rice’
CCV	<i>kwa</i>	‘betel nut’
CCVC	<i>kwak</i>	‘crow’

6. Conclusion

Form the above analysis, it can be concluded that Kakching, as a dialect of Manipuri, exhibits some of common grammatical features with standard Manipuri. At the same time it has shown many grammatical features different from Standard Manipuri as stated below.

(i) There are sixteen consonantal phonemes in Kakching dialect. Of these sixteen consonant phonemes, seven are stops *p, t, c, k, p^h, t^h, k^h* two fricatives *s, h* three nasals *m, n, ŋ* lateral *l*, trill *r* and two semi-vowels *w, y* respectively.

(ii) The consonant inventory of Kakching is different from the inventory of Standard Manipuri. More specifically, the Kakching dialect doesn't have the voiced stops *b, d, g, j*. However Standard Manipuri has both voiceless *p, t, k, c* and voiced stops *b, d, g, j*. It seems that Kakching exhibits only Proto-Tibeto-Burman stops **p, *t, *k and *c*.

(iii) As many other Tibeto-Burman languages and their dialects, Kakching is also a tonal dialect. It has two tones, namely, high and low. The inventory of tone in Kakching is similar to the inventory of Standard Manipuri.

(iv) Out of the six diphthongs, the three diphthongs *ui*, *əi*, *oi* can occur in all three positions. However, all the diphthongs can occur in medial and final positions of words.

(v) Like Standard Manipuri, Kakching syllable consists of a nucleus which may be preceded by onset or followed by a coda. The nucleus consists of a vowel or diphthong. The CV pattern is most common pattern in the dialect. However, the single vowel in Kakching can form a syllable, morpheme or word as in *í* ‘thatch’, *ù* ‘tree’.

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