Phonology of Bongcher

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Abstract

Bongcher is a small ethnic group of Tripura speaking a dialectal variant of Halam. The paper discusses the major features of Bongcher phonology. The phonetic inventory of Bongcher is discussed in the first three sections. While Section 1 and Section 2 present Bongcher vowels and diphthongs respectively, Section 3 deals with Bongcher consonants. In each of these Sections, the phonemic inventory of Bongcher is identified and a list of contrastive minimal or near minimal pairs are offered. Moreover, each of the phonemes is described while discussing the distributional pattern in detail. In Section 4, the syllable structure of Bongcher is dealt with. Section 5 discusses the consonant clusters and sequences and traces out the various positional occurrences. Section 6 deals with the supra-segmental phonemes, i.e., different tones perceptible in Bongcher. Finally, Section 7, while concluding the paper focuses on the salient phonological and distributional features of Bongcher.

Keywords: Bongcher, phoneme, contrasting pairs, distribution, syllable, tone]

Bongcher, a Sub-tribe of Halam

The *Bongcher*, also referred as *Bongshel* or *Bongshi*, is a sub-tribe of Halam, which has been derived from "bong" meaning "to cut into parts" and "cher" meaning "to sprout." Linguistically, Bongcher is one of the dialects of Halam language which belongs to the old Kuki sub-group of the Kuki-Chin group under Tibeto-Burman languages (Sailo, 1992). The paper discusses the major features of Bongcher phonology. The phonemic inventory of Bongcher consists of thirty five phonemes – six vowels, six diphthongs, twenty one consonants and two tones – which are discussed in the following sections.

1.   Vowels

There are six vowel phonemes in Bongcher which are as follows:

i	u
e	o
	ə
	a

The following is the list of vowel phonemes of Bongcher along with their description.

Phoneme	Allophone	Description
/i/	[i]	high front unrounded
/e/	[e]	high-mid front unrounded
/ə/	[ə]	mid central unrounded
/a/	[a]	low central unrounded
/u/	[u]	high back rounded
/o/	[o]	high-mid back rounded

1.1   Contrasting Pairs

Bongcher vowel sounds are established on the basis of the following minimal/sub-minimal pairs.

i/e	:	/ki/	'my'	/ke/	'leg'
u/o	:	/bu/	'rice' (uncooked)	/bo/	'leaf'
i/u	:	/pi/	'grandmother'	/pu/	'grandfather'
e/u	:	/leŋ/	'wander'	/luŋ/	'stone'
a/o	:	/dai/	'fence'	/doi/	'curd'
i/a	:	/pi/	'grandmother'	/pa/	'father'
i/o	:	/pi/	'grandmother'	/po/	'to carry'
e/ə	:	/semak/	'not going'	/səmak/	'husband residing in in-laws house'
e/a	:	/se/	'go'	/sa/	'eat'
e/o	:	/sel/	'mix'	/sol/	'tired'

ə/o	:	/sərat/ 'cow'	/korat/ 'hacksaw'
a/u	:	/la/ 'take'	/lu/ 'head'

1.2   Distributional Pattern

The distributional pattern of Bongcher vowel phonemes is clearly distinguished – while the vowels /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/ and /o/ occur at all positions, the vowel /ə/ generally occurs only in word-medial position; however, occurrence of the vowel /ə/ in initial and final position is rare. The following examples show the occurrence of the six vowels in various positions:

Phoneme	Word-Initial	Word-Medial	Word-Final
/i/	/iwom/ 'bear'	/tir/ 'arrow'	/thi/ 'blood'
/e/	/enro/ 'care for'	/sel/ 'mix'	/ke/ 'leg'
/a/	/arte/ 'chicken'	/tarpi/ 'mother-in-law'	/wa/ 'bird'
/ə/	/əi/ 'bite'	/sərat/ 'cow'	/mərsə/ 'chilli'
/u/	/upa/ 'elder-bro'	/purun/ 'garlic'	/ru/ 'bone'
/o/	/očai/ 'priest'	/kor/ 'ear'	/ro/ 'bamboo'

2.   Diphthongs

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Bongcher distinguishes six diphthongs. However, no triphthong is found in Bongcher. Six diphthongs available in Bongcher are as follows:

/ai/	as in	/kwai/	'beetle-nut'
/ui/	as in	/tui/	'water'
/oi/	as in	/poilani/	'day'
/ei/	as in	/numei/	'widow'
/au/	as in	/naute/	'child'
/ou/	as in	/khoulən/	'village head'

2.1   Contrasting Pairs

The Bongcher diphthongs, six in number, can be established on the basis of the following minimal or sub-minimal pairs. The examples given below denote a contrast between the two diphthongs.

ai/ui	:	/ai/	'crab'	/ui/	'dog'
ai/oi	:	/dai/	'fence'	/doi/	'curd'
ai/ei	:	/mai/	'face'	/mei/	'fire'
ai/au	:	/lai/	'astonished'	/lau/	'gourd'
ai/ou	:	/ĵai/	'happy'	/ĵou/	'Kuki tribe'
ui/oi	:	/ui/	'dog'	/oi/	'a sound' (to call)
ui/au	:	/lui/	'climb'	/lau/	'gourd'
oi/ou	:	/loi/	'medicine'	/lou/	'jum'
au/ou	:	/lau/	'gourd'	/lou/	'jum'

2.2   Distributional Patterns

All the Bongcher diphthongs do not occur in all the positions. The diphthongs in Bongcher chiefly occur in word medial and word final position. The occurrence of the Bongcher diphthongs in word initial position is, however, very restricted. The occurrences of the six diphthongs in the three positions are illustrated below:

Phoneme	Word-Initial	Word-Medial	Word-Final
/ai/	/aithiŋ/ 'ginger'	/maithum/ 'pumpkin'	/sai/ 'rice'(uncooked)
/ui/	/ui/ 'dog'	/tuiwa/ 'river'	/lampui/ 'road'
/oi/	/oi/ 'a sound' (to call)	/thoiro/ 'rub'	/kihoi/ 'know'
/ei/	- - -	/theihai/ 'mango'	/mei/ 'fire'
/au/	- - -	/naute/ 'child'	/moilau/ 'gourd'
/ou/	- - -	/khoupa/ 'chief'	/lou/ 'jum'

3.   Consonants

The phonemic inventory of Bongcher consists of twenty one consonantal phonemes as shown in the table given below:

Place of articulation		Bilabial		Dental		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
Manner of articulation		vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd	vl	vd
Plosive	Unaspirated	p	b	t	d					k	g		
	Aspirated	ph		th						kh			
Affricate								č	ĵ				
Fricative				s				š				h	

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **17:6 June 2017**
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Nasal	m	n			ŋ	
Trill			r			
Lateral			l			
Approximant	w		y			

3.1 Contrasting Pairs

The consonantal phonemes of Bongcher are established on the basis of minimal pairs and where minimal pairs are not available, sub-minimal pairs have been used for the purpose. Following is the list of minimal/sub-minimal pairs:

p/b	:	/pu/	'grandfather'	/bu/	'rice' (cooked)
t/d	:	/atai/	'late'	/adai/	'cold'
k/g	:	/kudal/	'spade'	/gudal/	'digging hoe'
p/ph	:	/pai/	'throw'	/phaiwo/	'storm'
t/th	:	/ata/	'custard apple'	/atha/	'good'
k/kh	:	/koŋ/	'waist'	/khoŋ/	'drum'
m/n	:	/mar/	'north'	/nar/	'nose'
m/ŋ	:	/kum/	'year'	/kuŋ/	'tree'

m/n/ŋ : /lum/ 'hot' /lun/ 'through' /luŋ/ 'stone'

č/ĵ	:	/čoŋ/	'speech'	/ĵoŋ/	'monkey'
s/š	:	/suŋ/	'lie down'	/šuŋ/	'sit'
s/h	:	/sem/	'blow'	/hem/	'beat'
r/l	:	/ram/	'jungle'	/lam/	'dance'
w/y	:	/wak/	'hog'	/yak/	'yak'

3.2 Distributional Pattern

The Bongcher consonantal phonemes can occur at various positions – initially, medially and finally in words. The following examples are given to show the occurrence of the consonantal phonemes in the three positions:

Phoneme	Word-Initial	Word-Medial	Word-Final
/p/	/pat/ 'cotton'	/kəpal/ 'forehead'	/phelep/ 'butterfly'
/b/	/bu/ 'rice' (cooked)	/ribik/ 'hide'	/ khələirubub/ 'dusk'
/t/	/tui/ 'water'	/naute/ 'child'	/sərat/ 'cow'
/d/	/dai/ 'fence'	/mitdum/ 'glow-worm'	- - -
/k/	/kiro/ 'return'	/ʃəkro/ 'to keep'	/ŋek/ 'all'
/g/	/gonta/ 'rhino'	/paŋak/ 'uncle'	- - -
/ph/	/phuŋ/ 'belly'	/phaiphin/ 'sand'	- - -
/th/	/thi/ 'blood'	/thirthi/ 'air'	- - -
/kh/	/khairo/ 'to split'	/rəkhai/ 'avoid'	- - -
/m/	/meŋ/ 'open eyes'	/mitmul/ 'eye-lash'	/iwom/ 'bear'
/n/	/naite/ 'child'	/tunu/ 'grandfather'	/phurun/ 'onion'

/ŋ/	/ŋa/ 'fish'	/rəŋai/ 'listen'	/rəthaŋ/ 'to ask'
/č/	/čoŋ/ 'speak'	/ročok/ 'to buy'	- - -
/ĵ/	/ĵai/ 'happy'	/iĵu/ 'rat'	- - -
/s/	/siŋir/ 'ant'	/mərsu/ 'chilli'	- - -
/ʃ/	/ʃam/ 'to call'	/monuʃu/ 'human'	- - -
/h/	/hem/ 'to beat'	/kuhui/ 'to rub'	- - -
/r/	/rumu/ 'eagle'	/korset/ 'deaf'	/thir/ 'iron'
/l/	/lum/ 'hot'	/lən/ 'big'	/ral/ 'thirsty'
/w/	/wa/ 'bird'	/tuiwa/ 'river'	- - -
/y/	/yak/ 'yak'	/maiyam/ 'room to keep rice'	- - -

4. Syllabic Patterns

As far as Bongcher is concerned, a syllable consists of a nucleus either with an onset or with a coda. Hence, the structure of the syllable in Bongcher may be defined as:

<u>+</u> consonant + vowel <u>+</u> consonant

Most of the native words in Bongcher are either monosyllabic or disyllabic words; though a handful of trisyllabic words can be found in Bongcher. However, Bongcher has very few tetrasyllabic words and most of the words which have tetra-syllables are in reality compound words. Here are few examples showing the syllabic structure of the Bongcher words:

4.1 Monosyllabic Words

v	:	/ui/	'dog'
cv	:	/wa/	'bird'
vc	:	/in/	'house'
cvc	:	/wak/	'hog'

4.2 Disyllabic Words

v-cv	:	/i-kəi/	'tiger'
cv-cv	:	/sa-nu/	'daughter'
v-cvc	:	/a-lum/	'warm'
cv-v	:	/la-ui/	'jackfruit'
cv-cvc	:	/mai-raŋ/	'plate' (for rice)
vc-cv	:	/ar-te/	'chicken'
cvc-cv	:	/wak-me/	'pork'
cv-cvc	:	/nu-paŋ/	'girl'
cvc-cvc	:	/leŋ-man/	'road-tax'

4.3 Trisyllabic Words

v-cv-cv	:	/a-wi-ni/	'today'
v-cv-cvc	:	/a-me-čaŋ/	'branch' (of a tree)
cv-cv-cvc	:	/tui-rə-dal/	'stream'

cv-cvc-cv	:	/mi-hek-rᴐ/	'to suspend'
cv-cvc-cvc	:	/bu-nek-təŋ/	'right' (opp. left)
cvc-cv-cv	:	/neŋ-ba-ti/	'earthen pot'
cvc-v-cv	:	/rəŋ-ai-rᴐ/	'to listen'

4.4   Tetrasyllabic Words

| vc-cv-cvc-cv | : | /in-mə-rək-te/ 'house-lizard' |

5.   Consonant Clusters and Sequences

A large number of consonant clusters and consonant sequences are possible; but the phonotactic constraints of a particular language usually determine the possible combinations of consonants in that language. As far as Bongcher is concerned, a few consonant clusters occur in syllable initial position, such as,

Stop + Liquid:

| /k/ + /l/ | /nar-kla/ | 'coconut' |
| | /čoŋ-kleŋ-tui/ | 'rainbow' |

However, a good number of consonant sequences can be found in the medial position. Moreover, consonant clusters are not present in syllable final position.

5.1   Consonant Sequences

In Bongcher, a variety of consonant sequences can be found where a maximum number of two consonants are permitted as medial sequence. The following table will explain the various combinatory possibilities of consonant sequences of two in Bongcher.

First Members	Second Members																				
	p	b	t	d	k	g	ph	th	kh	č	ĵ	s	š	h	m	n	ŋ	r	l	w	y
P			+		+													+			
B																		+			

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
T			+	+					+	+	+				+		+	+		
D																				
K	+	+	+								+				+		+			
G																				
Ph																				
th																				
kh																				
č																				
ĵ																				
s																				
š																				
h																				
m	+	+		+	+			+			+						+			
n					+				+	+				+		+	+			
ŋ	+	+	+		+			+				+			+		+		+	
r	+		+		+			+	+			+				+	+	+		
l	+				+						+							+		
w																				
y																				

Some examples of medial consonant sequences are as follows:

/p/ + /t/	/sap-ta/	'week'
/p/ + /k/	/nap-koŋ/	'big snail'
/p/ + /r/	/dep-ro/	'to send'
/b/ + /r/	/deb-ra/	'left'
/t/ + /ĵ/	/kut-ĵa-pha/	'palm of hand'
/t/ + /r/	/mit-ru-bu/	'eye-brow'
/t/ + /l/	/kut-lai/	'middle-finger'
/k/ + /b/	/thiŋ-tak-bo/	'tree-leaf'
/k/ + /t/	/bok-tui/	'breast-milk'
/k/ + /r/	/sak-ro/	'to sing'
/m/ + /p/	/lam-pui/	'road'

/m/ + /b/	/mum-bati/	'candle'
/m/ + /d/	/dum-de/	'glow-worm'
/m/ + /r/	/hem-ro/	'to strike'
/n/ + /h/	/an-hel/	'vegetable'
/n/ + /r/	/in-ro/	'see'
/ŋ/ + /p/	/taŋ-pui/	'mountain'
/ŋ/ + /b/	/neŋ-bati/	'earthen pot'
/ŋ/ + /t/	/čoŋ-kleŋ-tui/	'rainbow'
/ŋ/ + /th/	/thaŋ-than/	'mosquito'
/ŋ/ + /r/	/hoŋ-ro/	'to join'
/r/ + /k/	/nar-kla/	'coconut'
/r/ + /th/	/thir-thi/	'air'
/r/ + /s/	/mər-su/	'chilli'
/l/ + /r/	/hal-ro/	'to scold'

5.2   Geminates

The native root words in Bongcher show a few geminates. Here are a few examples:

/t/ + /t/	/kut-te/	'small finger'
	/kut-tin/	'finger nail'
	/kut-te-wok/	'ring-finger'
/r/ + /r/	/ĵor-ro/	'to sell'

6.   Tone

The language which has tone is a tonal language opposed to stress language where a change of tone does not bring about any change in meaning. Bongcher shows a two way tone contrast. A few examples showing the contrasts of tone are given below:

FALLING		RISING	
/lùŋ/	'heart' :	/lúŋ/	'stone'
/nì/	'day' :	/ní/	'sun'

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/làm/	'dance'	:	/lám/	'road'
/bèk/	'spider'	:	/bék/	'torn'
/kòŋ/	'waist'	:	/kóŋ/	'burn'

7. Conclusion

The phonemic inventory of Bongcher consists of thirty five phonemes out of which six are vowels, six diphthongs, twenty one consonants and two tones. Bongcher has phonemically two front vowels - /i/ and /e/, two central vowels - /a/ and /ə/, and two back vowels - /u/ and /o/. The vowels in Bongcher are all oral vowels and no nasal vowel can be found. The distributional pattern of Bongcher vowel phonemes is clearly distinguished – while the vowels /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/ and /o/ occur at all positions, the vowel /ə/ mostly occurs in word-medial position. The six diphthongs in Bongcher, which are all closing and falling in nature, rarely or never occur in closed syllables; on the contrary they chiefly occur at syllable-final position. While the diphthong /ai/, /ui/ and /oi/ can occur at all the positions, i.e., word-initial, medial and final positions, the other diphthongs /ei/, /au/, and /ou/ occur only at word-medial and final position. It is also to be noticed that the diphthong /ai/ occurs more frequently in Bongcher than the other diphthongs.

The phonemic inventory of Bongcher consists of twenty one consonantal phonemes. The consonants, according to the manner of articulation can be grouped into two broad sections – the stops and the continuants. The consonants, as a whole, include nine stops and twelve continuants. The stops show voiced-voiceless and aspirated-unaspirated contrast. Among the continuants, there are three nasals, three fricatives, two affricates, one trill, one lateral and two approximants. The nasals, the trill, the lateral and the approximants are all voiced while the three fricatives are all voiceless and the affricates show voiced-voiceless contrasts. In terms of the place or point of articulation, Bongcher consonants can be distinguished as bilabial, labio-dental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal. It is evident that five of the Bongcher consonants are bilabial and five are dental, four velar and three palatal, three alveolar and one glottal.

Most of the consonant phonemes of Bongcher occur at the word initial position. Phonemes in initial position of syllables are more numerous than those found finally. In Bongcher, word final consonants are fewer in number than word initial consonants. The consonant phonemes which occur at word final position are /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/. Besides the nasals, the consonants which occur at syllable-final position are the stops /p/, /t/ and /k/ and the liquids /r/ and /l/ and that too in a very few words.

The syllabic pattern found in Bongcher is (C)V(C) or $C_{0-1}VC_{0-1}$ which means that in a Bongcher syllable there can be zero to one consonant in the beginning and zero to one in the end where the V element, i.e., the Vowel is obligatory and the C element, i.e., the Consonant is optional. However, the majority of the Bongcher words have the CV structure, i.e., they are open syllables; VC pattern are of very low frequency in Bongcher. Moreover, native Bongcher words ranges chiefly from monosyllabic to trisyllabic; most of the tetrasyllabic and pentasyllabic words are either compound words or loan words.

As far as Bongcher is concerned, no consonant cluster occurs in syllable initial position. Again, consonant clusters are also not present in syllable final position except loan words. Nevertheless, consonant clusters are found very rarely in the medial position. However, in Bongcher, a variety of consonant sequences can be found where a maximum number of two consonants are permitted as medial sequence. The native root words in Bongcher also show a few geminates.

Bongcher has two tones – falling and rising, which can occur with all the vowels, except mid central vowel /ə/. In single syllable words, the contrast between rising and falling tone is quite clear than the words with two or more syllables.

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