

## The phonological systems of Bhutan's endangered languages

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The languages of Bhutan have received little attention in academia, particularly with regard to phonology. However, recent research in Bhutan has brought some of these languages into light. This paper presents the phonological systems of nine languages of Bhutan in a comparative perspective. Despite the fact that these languages belong to different branches within Tibeto-Burman, their phonological systems are remarkably similar, suggesting that areal influence has played an important role in their development and, now, endangerment.

Eighteen Tibeto-Burman languages have been identified in Bhutan to date (van Driem 1998). Of these, six belong to the Central Bodish sub-family (e.g. Dzongkha), eight belong to the East Bodish (e.g. Dakpa) sub-family and four remain unclassified within Tibeto-Burman (e.g. Tshangla, Lepcha). This paper presents the phonologies of Dzongkha, Tasha-Sili, Kurtöp, Bumthap, Khengkha, Dakpa, 'Olekha, Lepcha, and Tshangla.

Dzongkha (van Driem 1998) contrasts voiced, voiceless and aspirated stops at five places of articulation, and has voiced and voiceless fricatives at two places of articulation. In terms of sonorant consonants, Dzongkha has one lateral, one rhotic, both of which may be voiced or voiceless, and four nasals. There are seven vowels, two registers of tone following all initial consonants, and level, glottalized tone versus falling tone. In addition, vowels may be long or short. In terms of syllable structure, Dzongkha has only simple onsets and mainly open syllables, though possible codas are *-m* and *-p*.

The East Bodish languages (van Driem 1998, (author) 2008, (author) 2010, field notes) have phonological systems similar to that of Dzongkha, except for the voiceless sonorants, which are found only in Dzongkha. Dakpa and 'Olekha have a relatively rich set of complex onsets while Kurtöp, Bumthap and Khengkha have fewer. The vowel systems of the East Bodish languages vary dramatically, though the tonal systems are the same: high/low register tone contrasts following sonorant consonants only. Vowels may also be short or long. Tasha-Sili, considered a dialect of Dzongkha, has a phonological system characteristic of East Bodish.

Lepcha (Plaiser 2007) and Tshangla (Andvik 2003) remain unaffiliated Tibeto-Burman languages. However, both languages have phonological systems similar to the East Bodish languages. Lepcha, Tshangla, and Kurtöp/Bumthap/Khengkha share the same consonant phonemes, with the exception of Lepcha, which has a labiodental fricative. Lepcha also differs from these languages in having eight vowels, where Tshangla and Kurtöp/Bumthap/Khengkha have five each. Lepcha and Tshangla are distinct from the East Bodish languages and Dzongkha in not having tone or contrastive vowel length.

While it is expected that languages in the same family would have similar phonological systems, we argue the striking similarities found in these endangered languages of Bhutan is in part due to convergence. With Dzongkha being the national language, the other languages have been under pressure, so to speak, to conform to the phonology of Dzongkha. We support this hypothesis by including a summary of the phonologies of Tibeto-Burman languages of neighboring North East India (author 2008), which are strikingly different from the Dzongkha prototype.