Introduction

Two important books on comparative Sino-Tibetan that were published in the seventies, Paul Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan Conspectus* (1972) and James A. Matisoff's *Variational Semantics in Tibeto-Burman* (1978), cite a number of Garo words in a sufficiently confusing transcription to remind me that the available data on this language (Bodo Group of Northeastern India) can be misleading to those who have not worked with it themselves. It may be useful, therefore, to offer a few notes about conventional Garo spelling (as used, for instance, in Garo dictionaries) and about the relevant aspects of Garo phonology, so that Tibeto-Burmanists can make the best use of available Garo materials.

In order to keep things sorted out, I will use "__" for spellings used by Benedict or Matisoff; *underlining* for conventional Garo spelling; [ ] for a transcription with more phonetic detail than is needed either for practical spelling or for abstract phonological purposes; and // for examples in a more abstract phonological form—the more or less "phonemic" transcription that, I suggest, would be most useful for comparative purposes.

Consonants

Garo is rare among Tibeto-Burman languages in lacking contrastive tones. As in many tone languages, however, the syllable is a crucial phonological unit, and it is easiest to organize a description of Garo phonology around the various parts of a syllable: initial consonants, final consonants, and vowels. The possible initial consonants and consonant clusters, in a loose phonetic transcription, are shown in Table I. The raised h's indicate that voiceless stops are aspirated (even in clusters). The items in parentheses are relatively rare. Although n "clusters" occur in a few very common words (e.g. gni 'two'; kna- 'hear'; sni 'seven') there are good reasons for
denying them or sl the status of genuine clusters—a point to which I will return later. Initially the lateral [l] occurs only in a few recently borrowed words such as [lem] 'lamp' and [lekʰa] 'paper,' and unsophisticated Garos typically pronounce these words with their ordinary flapped [r] instead: [rem, rekʰa]. Thus [l] has a distinctly marginal status as an initial. By [#] I mean to indicate that syllables can occur without any initial consonant at all.

The system of initials contains two obvious and genuine gaps: [ŋ] does not occur initially, and there is no voiced counterpart of [s]. The [z] of borrowed words regularly turns into Garo [j].

With only a few transparent exceptions, conventional Garo spelling follows the symbols given above very closely: 1) ch = [č]; 2) j = [j]; 3) aspiration is not indicated. Since prevocalic voiceless stops are always aspirated, it would be largely redundant to indicate aspiration explicitly, and Garos do not do so. (But see below for problems with medial consonants).

Garo has a richer collection of final consonants than many Tibeto-Burman languages, but still, it is less extensive than their set of initials. Table II is artificially abstract in one respect (to be explained shortly) but it is the easiest place to begin. [p', t', and k'] are unvoiced, unaspirated and, except as required for the articulation of a later syllable, unreleased, and the symbol
Table II  Final Consonants

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{p} & \text{t} & \text{k} \\
\text{m} & \text{n} & \text{ŋ} & \text{l} & \text{#} \\
\text{i} & \text{ŋ} & \text{ŋ} & \text{l} & \text{ʔ} \\
\end{array}
\]

[\text{#}] can be used as an explicit reminder that these are unaspirated and unreleased. These stops are, therefore, quite different phonetically than any of the prevocalic consonants. I used to believe that it was important to identify them with one or another set of initial stops, but I am no longer of that opinion. Garos always write these stops with a simple \text{p}, \text{t} and \text{k}, so it is easy to imagine that they are somehow the "same" as initial \text{p}, \text{t} and \text{k}, but I see no reason, except as it affects the interpretation of conventional Garo spelling, to identify finals with initials.

Post-vocally, Garo has a lateral [\text{l}], but no flap [\text{r}]. Since unsophisticated Garo speakers never have an initial lateral and never have a final flap, an old-fashioned phonemicist would point out that [\text{r}] and [\text{l}] are in complimentary distribution, and since they are phonetically quite similar, he would conclude that they should be regarded as members of the same phoneme. This is how I handled the matter in my grammar of Garo (1961) but I was then an old-fashioned phonemicist. I now believe that initial and final consonants in Garo, as in many other Tibeto-Burman languages, should be regarded as quite different creatures and not forced into the same framework. Garos write \text{r} initially and \text{l} finally, and there is some virtue in following their unambiguous practice (especially when we come to medials). This also makes it easy to transcribe the borrowings of sophisticated Garos who occasionally do use initial [\text{l}] in borrowed words.

[\text{m}, \text{n}, \text{ŋ}, \text{and l}] can occur together with a glottal stop. Phonetically it is difficult to assign the stop to
a clear position either before or after its partner, since the glottal stop seems to occur right in the middle of the nasal or lateral. Garos conventionally indicate the glottal stop with an apostrophe ' and when it co-occurs with [m, n, ɳ, l] they write the apostrophe second: m', n', ɳ', l'. This is an adequate spelling convention and it is the spelling used in all dictionaries that show the glottal stop at all, but, for reasons to be given shortly, I prefer to write the glottal stop before its associated consonant. Thus, for linguistic purposes, I would prefer to transcribe these finals as /n/, ṅ/, ɳ/, ɭ/.

Possibly because of the absence of contrasting tones and the corresponding reduction in contrast, Garo is relatively rich, among Tibeto-Burman languages, in polysyllabic words. Thus, in addition to word initial and word final consonants, we find numerous medial consonants and clusters. All medials, however, can be readily analyzed into a sequence of one final consonant or cluster followed by an initial consonant or cluster. I know of no restrictions upon such sequences and I know of no medials that cannot be interpreted in this way.

The phonetic differences between initial and final consonants do open the possibility of some medial contrasts that do not exist at the beginning or end of a word. Thus [kʰatʰa] 'word,' and [kʰatʰa] 'run' are in contrast. The obvious phonological interpretation of this situation is to distinguish these words by the position of the syllable boundary: /ka-ta/ 'word'; /kat-a/ 'run.' Garos spell these two words identically, however, and from the spelling alone it is impossible to know where the syllable boundary lies. Often, though not always, however, syllable boundaries correspond to morphological divisions, and this can help to locate the syllable boundaries. Thus the final /a/ of /kat-a/ 'run' is a verb suffix, while /ka-ta/ 'word' is a borrowed term and it cannot be analyzed into smaller parts.