PHOM PHONOLOGY AND WORD LIST

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The Tibeto-Burman languages that are often referred to as the *Northern Naga* or *Konyak* languages are spoken along the extreme northeastern border of India on both sides of the boundary that divides the Indian states of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.[1] From north to south, this group of languages includes Tangsa, Nocte and Wancho in Arunachal Pradesh, and Konyak, Phom, and Chang just to the southwest in Nagaland. Starting, it seems, with Shafer (1955), a number of linguists have noted resemblances that suggest a special relationship between these Northern Naga languages and the Bodo-Koch languages. The latter (which have often, though misleadingly, been referred to as the "Bodo-Garo" group) are scattered to the west and south of the Northern Naga area, primarily in the northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura.[2] In addition, several linguists have suggested that Jingphaw also has a special tie with both the Northern Naga and the Bodo-Koch groups (Benedict 1972, 1976; Burling 1971, 1983). Jingphaw is found primarily in northern Myanmar but the language is spoken all the way from Yunnan in southwest China to northeastern India (where it is known as "Singpho"). The evidence for the historical grouping of Northern Naga, Jingphaw and the Bodo-Koch languages within the larger Tibeto-Burman family has been marshaled most thoroughly and persuasively by Walter French

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[2] The Bodo-Koch languages, also sometimes called *Barish*, include three main subgroups: 1. **Koch** (including Atong, Rabha and Koch itself), 2. **Bodo** (including Kachari, Kokborok, Lalung and Bodo proper), and 3. **Garo**. It is clear that the Garo and Bodo branches are more closely related to each other than either is to the Koch branch, and if "Bodo-Garo" is to be used at all, it should refer to the subgroup that does not include Koch (Burling 1959). In northeast India, all of these languages, including Koch, are generally referred to simply as the "Bodo" group.

(1983), and the evidence now seems to be sufficiently strong that any remaining skeptics must assume the burden of disproof. We believe the Northern Naga languages are substantially closer to Jingphaw and to the Bodo languages than to other Tibeto-Burman languages. The Northern Naga group is less closely related even to the other so-called "Naga" languages than it is to Bodo-Koch and Jingphaw.

The study of the Northern Naga languages, and their comparison with other languages, has been hampered by the lack of good descriptions of their phonology and by the unclear transcriptions used in the available dictionaries and word lists. French had to use transcriptions that, among other things, completely failed to show distinctions of tone. Indeed, his sources did not always even indicate whether or not the languages have contrasting tones. Since French presented his study, Nagaraja (1994) has given us the first description of a Northern Naga language where tones are shown, and the purpose of this paper is to give (somewhat more limited) data for a second Northern Naga language. The next article in this issue (Burling and Wangsu) gives similar data for a third Northern Naga language, Wancho.

One of us (it will come as no surprise to readers to learn that it is Phom) is a native speaker of the Phom language. He has participated for several years in efforts by his community to standardize Phom orthography, and his special concern is effective Bible translation. Burling has long had an interest in the Bodo-Koch languages, and has wanted to extend his investigations to the Northern Naga languages. Together, we have worked out an analysis of the phonological system of Phom and assembled a list of core vocabulary. It is this material that we now present. We hope it will provide a better basis for future comparative work than the materials that have previously been available.

Phom does turn out to be a tone language, and like many such languages of East and Southeast Asia, its sound system is most easily described in terms of its syllables and their parts: 1. Initial consonants, 2. Vowels, 3. Final consonants, 4. Tones. Phom has many one-syllable words and it is easy to find minimal pairs that illustrate most phonological contrasts. Longer words are also found in abundance, but adjacent syllables have only limited phonological influence upon one another; for the most part the phonology of polysyllables can easily be described in terms of their constituent syllables. We find no evidence of limitations on the kinds of syllables can stand beside one another.

Thus, for example, word-initial and word-final consonant clusters are all but nonexistent in Phom (but see below), but a wide range of consonant sequences can be found in the middle of words. All these apparent "medial clusters", however, are simply formed from the final consonant of one syllable followed by the initial consonant of the next. We have found no restriction on

which consonants can occur together across a syllable boundary, except for the limitations set by the range of initial and final consonants that can occur in a single syllable. A modest amount of assimilation occurs across syllable boundaries (see below), but a description of the phonology of the syllable goes a long way toward describing the phonology of words as well. In the following paragraphs we consider, in turn, the four constituents of the syllable.

2.0. SYLLABLE-INITIAL CONSONANTS

The distinctive consonants that can occur as syllable initials are shown in Table 1. It is also possible for a syllable to have no initial consonant at all.

p^h	t^h		k^h	
b	d	č	g	
m	n	ñ	ŋ	
		ʃ		h
w	y	ʒ	l	

Table 1. Syllable-initial consonants.

Phom has two series of stops, voiceless aspirated and unaspirated. These appear at the bilabial, apical (immediately post-dental), and velar positions. As word initial, the unaspirated stops are somewhat less voiced than the voiced stops of English. More precisely, voice onset time is just a bit later than in English. When following a voiced sound in the previous syllable of the same word, however, these stops may be fully voiced, and to emphasize their contrast with the aspirated series, we symbolize the unaspirated series as /b, d, g/. Symbolizing the unaspirated stops in this way would permit us to omit the explicit indication of aspiration in the other series, but aspiration is strong, and we continue to indicate it both as a way of emphasizing the contrast and of showing the difference between syllable-initial and syllable-final stops.

In addition to its stops, Phom has an unaspirated palatal affricate, symbolized here as /č/. This has the same conditions for voicing as the unaspirated stops. An expectation of symmetry leads one to look for an aspirated affricate as well, but there is none.[3] Four nasal consonants can also occur as initials. They are articulated in the same positions as the stops and the affricate, and we symbolize them as /m, n, ñ, ŋ/.

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3   This same asymmetry exists in standard Jingpho. [Ed.]

/ʃ/ is a voiceless palatal spirant very similar to the initial of English *shadow* and *shoe*.

/ʒ/ is the voiced equivalent of /ʃ/ but the tongue is drawn so far back that it can sound quite rhotic. It has somewhat less friction than /ʃ/ but decisively more than /y/. We do not have examples of /ʒ/ before /o/ or /ɔ/.

/w/ is a bilabial continuant virtually identical to English /w/. In all of our examples it occurs before either /o/ or /ɔ/. This means that it is in complementary distribution with /ʒ/ and, strictly speaking, [w] and [ʒ] could be considered to be allophones of the same phoneme. We keep them separated here because they are strikingly different phonetically, and because L. Amon Phom finds it difficult to think of them as the "same" sound.

/y, h/ and /l/ are all very similar to the English phones that are usually represented by the same letters.

In addition to these simple consonants, a handful of Phom words begin with sequences that could be heard as clusters. These all have /l/ as the second consonant. These apparently adjacent consonants are less tightly fused than the constituents of English clusters, however, and they are quite rare. We interpret them as two consonants separated by a very short /ɛ/: $bɛ^{55}lɔŋ^{55}$ 'jackfruit'; $mɛ^{55}li^{55}$ 'medicine'.

3.0. VOWELS

The vowels of Phom are more difficult than either the consonants or tones, but the language can be described as having ten simple vowels and six diphthongs. See Table 2.

3.1. Simple vowels

/i/. High, front, unrounded. This vowel is higher in open syllables and before /ʔ/ than in syllables closed with other consonants. i^{33} 'blood'; $ʃin^{33}$ 'turn'; $ñi?^{33}$ 'day'.

/e/. Higher mid, front, unrounded. e^{33} 'speak'; $čæŋ^{55}nen^{55}$ 'turtle'; e^{55} 'see'.

/ɛ/. Lower mid, unrounded. This vowel is a bit front of central, but not so far front as /e/. It can sound a bit like an English schwa, though it can be more strongly accented than the English vowel, and it is a bit further front. $nɛ^{33}$ 'not'; $mɛ^{33}lʌy^{55}$ 'where?'; $yoŋ^{55}yɛn^{31}$ 'stream'.

/æ/. Low, front-central, unrounded. This vowel is slightly farther front than the vowel that most English speakers use in *father*, but by no means as far front as the vowel of such English words as *hat*. We symbolize it here by /æ/ in order to differentiate it from another vowel which is a bit further back, and for which we need to reserve /a/. $čæ^{55}$ 'new'; $læŋ^{55}$ 'dyed cane'; $ñæ?^{33}$ fish.