

WANCHO PHONOLOGY AND WORD LIST

Robbins Burling
University of Michigan

Mankai Wangsu
BSI Translation Centre, Shillong, India

1.0. INTRODUCTION

This article is intended as a companion to the preceding article by Burling and Phom on the Phom language.¹ Like Phom, Wancho is one of the so-called “Northern Naga” languages. It is spoken in the extreme southeastern tip of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, just across the state border that divides Arunachal from Nagaland. Phom and Wancho are closely related languages but they are by no means mutually intelligible. They are separated geographically by Konyak, the best known of the northern Naga languages and the one with the largest number of speakers. Speakers of Phom and Wancho rarely have any reason to learn each other’s languages, but both find it reasonably easy to learn to speak Konyak and they sometimes do so. One of the authors of this article, Wangsu, is a native speaker of the Wancho language and, like L. Among Phom, he is interested in standardizing the orthography of his language in order to achieve effective Bible translation. We have worked together to understand the phonology of the language and to assemble a list of core vocabulary. This paper is the product of that collaboration.

Like Phom, Wancho is a tone language and, as with Phom, it is convenient to describe the phonology in terms of its syllables and their parts: 1. Initial consonants, 2. Vowels, 3. Final consonants, 4. Tones. Assimilation across syllable boundaries is a rather more complex and active process in Wancho than in Phom, and tones sometimes change when syllables are used together in compounds. Before dealing with these topics, however, the phonology of individual syllables needs to be considered.

¹ This issue, pp. 13-42. Burling would like to thank the Fulbright Foundation for the generous support that allowed him to return to work in northeastern India after a gap of no less than forty years.

2.0. SYLLABLE-INITIAL CONSONANTS

The consonants that can occur as syllable initials are shown in Table 1. A few syllables lack an initial consonant entirely. Wancho differs from Phom in having three series of stops rather than just two: voiceless aspirated, voiceless unaspirated, and voiced. Each of these occurs in the three familiar articulatory positions (bilabial, apical, and velar), as do the unremarkable nasals. Most of the nine stops are found in a large number of words, but, strangely, /g/ is exceedingly rare. Indeed, Wangsu has been able to think of only a single word that he pronounces with /g/: **a⁴⁴ga⁴⁴** 'five'. There can be no doubt that this word has a voiced velar stop, however, so it must be included in the inventory of consonants. Some Wancho speakers use /g/ in a few other words.

p ^h	t ^h			k ^h
p	t	ts	č	k
		s	ʃ	
b	d	z	ʒ	(g)
m	n			ŋ
β	l			h

Table 1. Syllable-initial consonants.

/ts/ and /č/ are voiceless unaspirated affricates, alveolar and palatal respectively (/č/ is considerably less aspirated than English /č/) and, as shown in Table 1, Wancho lacks aspirated affricates. The voiceless sibilants /s/ and /ʃ/ are articulated in much the same positions as /ts/ and /č/, and they sound very much like English /s/ and /ʃ/. /z/ and /ʒ/ are also articulated in roughly the same positions. They are both voiced, but /ʒ/ has somewhat less friction than English /ʒ/, though more than English /y/. /ʒ/ and the onglide that initiates several diphthongs (symbolized here as /y/) are articulated in a similar position, but they differ in their degree of friction. The consonant /ʒ/ has considerable friction, while the onglide /y/ does not. Wancho /ʒ/ does not have the marked rhotic quality of the /ʒ/ of Phom.

/β/ is a voiced fricative, more bilabial than English /v/. Its acoustic impression is intermediate between English /w/ and /v/. Wancho /β/ is clearly distinct from the onglide that is symbolized here as /w/ and that is a component of several diphthongs (see below). Just as consonantal /ʒ/ has more friction than the onglide /y/, so /β/ has considerably more friction than /w/. /l/ is a

voiced lateral and /h/ is a glottal fricative. Both are very much like the corresponding consonants of English.

The initial consonants can be illustrated by the following examples.

p ^h	p^ha⁴⁴	'tick' (insect)	d	da⁵²	'untie'
t ^h	t^haw⁴⁴	'papaya'	z	zaŋ¹¹	'field'
k ^h	k^haŋ⁵²	'head'	ʒ	ʒan⁵²	'iron'
p	puŋ⁵²	'granary'	g	a⁴⁴ga⁴⁴	'five'
t	ti⁵²	'water'	m	mak⁵²	'spider'
ts	tsa⁵²	'twenty'	n	nok⁴⁴	'village'
č	čoŋ⁴⁴	'worm'	ŋ	ŋo⁴⁴	'banana'
k	kya⁴⁴	'white'	β	βan⁴⁴	'fire'
s	saʔ⁴⁴	'cooked rice'	l	le⁵²	'tongue'
f	fa⁴⁴	'rot'	h	ham¹¹	'walk'
b	ban⁵²	'ten'			

3.0. VOWELS

Wancho can be described as having six simple vowels and nine distinctive diphthongs, as shown in Table 2. By comparison with Phom, its vowels are relatively transparent. Three of the diphthongs are rising, having either /y/ or /w/ offglides. The other six are falling, three with /y/ onglides and three with /w/ onglides. We have failed to find other combinations of glides with vowels. Phonetic [n̄] can be found in syllable-initial position in Wancho, but only when followed by one of a limited set of vowels.² However, [y] can follow most, perhaps all, of the initial consonants, so we find it more parsimonious to interpret the [y]s as onglides, the first part of three rising diphthongs, rather than as the second part of a large number of initial clusters.

i		u	ay	ɰy	aw
	ɰ				
e		o	yi	ye	ya
	a				
			wi	wa	wo

Table 2. Vowels and diphthongs.

² We do not recognize a Wancho phoneme /n̄/. This is unlike the analysis of Phom in Burling and Phom (this issue), where such a phoneme is recognized.

3.1. Simple vowels

/i/. High front unrounded. This vowel is lower in closed than in open syllables. **hi**⁴⁴ 'dog'.

/ʌ/. Mid central unrounded. This vowel is not unlike the vowel of English *but* (although it is closer to the American than to the British version of this vowel). It is not really a schwa, though it does have some schwa-like features. It is sometimes very short, and syllables with /ʌ/ are especially likely to pick up a final consonant by assimilation to the initial of the following syllable (see the discussion of assimilation below). It can be more tense and more stressed than a proper schwa, however. **maŋ**¹¹ 'name'.

/u/. High back rounded. Like /i/, this vowel is usually slightly lower in closed syllables than in open ones, but the difference is not great. **bu**⁵² 'itch'.

/e/. Mid front unrounded. This vowel is considerably less common than the other five simple vowels. **le**⁵² 'tongue'.

/a/. Low central unrounded. This is just slightly to the front of most pronunciations of the English "a" in *father*. **ha**⁴⁴ 'firewood'. Wangsu has a nasal /ã/ in the word **a⁵²pã**⁴⁴ 'listen'. This is the only word in the language that he pronounces with a nasal, although there are other dialects of Wancho in which nasals are found in other words as well. This may be an example of dialect borrowing.

/o/. Most often this vowel is lower mid, back, and rounded. Before syllable-final /m/ and /p/, however, it is centralized, and articulated higher, further front, and with less rounded lips than otherwise. As a result, it approaches the pronunciation of /ʌ/. /ʌ/ and /o/ contrast in most positions, but not before /m/ and /p/. On strictly distributional grounds, therefore, this allophone could be grouped either with /ʌ/ or with /o/. Wangsu's strong intuition is that it should be grouped with /o/ rather than /ʌ/, so that is the way we transcribe it. Except when occurring before /m/ or /p/, /o/ sounds much like the vowel in English *long*. Before /m/ or /p/ it is intermediate between the vowels of English *cup* and *long*, or even a bit closer to *cup*. **ho**⁴⁴ 'kick'; **a⁴⁴zom**⁵² 'three'.

3.2. Diphthongs

/ay/. A diphthong that begins with a low central unrounded vowel and then moves toward high front. It is very similar to the vowel in English *pie*. Like several of the diphthongs, /ay/ does not occur in closed syllables. **pay**⁴⁴ 'cotton'.

/ʌy/. A diphthong that begins with a mid central vowel and moves toward high front. Phonetically this is very close to the Phom vowel that in the previous paper was also transcribed as /ʌy/. **maɣ**⁴⁴ 'meat'.