

Loanwords in Manipuri and their impact

Hajarimayum Subadani Devi
Manipur University, Imphal, India

1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Manipuri language

The Manipuri language is spoken primarily in the valley region of Manipur, a state in North-East India, in the adjoining Indian states of Assam, Tripura, and in the neighboring countries Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is the mother tongue of the Meitei and is known locally as Meiteilon; the name itself is a compound of Meitei 'Meitei' and lon 'language.' The language is the lingua franca of 29 other different ethnic groups of Manipur (Yashawanta Singh 1995). It is spoken by about 60% of the state population (38th Annual Report 2003:77). According to the Students Britannica India (Britannica India 2000:361-366), there are 11,80,000 native speakers of Manipuri. Manipuri, along with English, are the official languages of Manipur state.

The Manipuri language and literature has been increasing in prestige. In 1972 the Sahitya Akademi, the highest body of language and literature of India recognized Manipuri (Manipuri Sahitya Parisad 1986:82). Since August 20, 1992, Manipuri has been one of India's national languages and was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India by the 71st amendment; it is the first Tibeto-Burman languages of India to have been included. Chatterjee (1979) commented on Manipuri's rich and vast literature.

Manipuri belongs to the Tibeto-Burman subgroup of Sino-Tibetan languages, but its precise subgrouping in Tibeto-Burman is not yet

clear. According to Grierson (1904) Manipuri is a link language between the Kuki-Chin languages and the Kachin languages. Shafer (1955, 1966) included it under a separate branch called Meithei, which Shafer placed under the Kukish section of his Burmic division of Tibeto-Burman. Benedict (1972) subgrouped the language in the Kuki-Naga subgroup of the Kachin group of the Tibeto-Burman. Burling (2003), however, resisted prematurely subgrouping Manipuri, leaving it as a distinct entity outside the Kuki-Naga grouping.

1.2. The Manipuri writing system

Manipuri writing system is alphabetic (Gopendro 1998). It has two writing systems, a traditional system, which is written with ancient, indigenous letters called 'Meitei Mayek' and a modern writing system, written with Bengali letters. The ancient native Manipuri script, Meitei Mayek dates back to the 15th century A.D. (Bhat and Ningomba 1995:2). Meitei Mayek is the system in which all of the ancient Manipuri literature (scripture) was written before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th century A.D. The modern Bengali-based system is of recent origin and was introduced in Manipur only after its adoption of Hinduism in the 18th century A.D. This is now the dominant writing system and is employed in most of the modern publications, including literature and newspapers. However, of late, there is revivalist movement supported by the state government attempting to popularize the traditional system.

1.3. Manipuri phonology

The phonology of Manipuri language may be broadly divided into two layers, an older layer associated with old and native Manipuri words and a more modern phonology which includes numerous loan-words borrowed from other languages along with the structural changes these have brought. In the older phonology, there were six vowels, six

diphthongs and fifteen consonants (Subadani 1987; Gopendro 1998). In the modern Manipuri phonology, the same six vowels and six diphthongs remain but the number of consonants has increased to 24, nine more consonants having been added (Subadani 1987; Gopendro 1998). The source of the additional consonant phonemes is the many loanwords from Sanskrit, Hindi, and Bengali, three Indo-Iranian languages, which entered the Manipuri lexicon during the period from the early 15th century A.D. to the end of the 19th century A.D. These loanwords produced phonetic changes in the native Manipuri language, giving birth to nine new consonant phonemes: the voiced plosives /b/, /d/, and /g/, the voiced affricate /j/, the flap /r/, and the so-called voiced aspirates /bh/, /dh/, /gh/, and /jh/ (Subadani 1987; Yashawanta 2002). The six vowels, the six diphthongs of Manipuri are shown in Chart I and the 24 consonant phonemes are shown in Chart II.

Chart I: Vowels and diphthongs

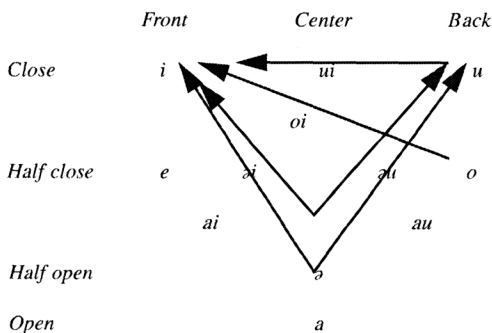


Chart II: Consonants

	bilabial	dental/ alveolar	pre-palatal	palatal	velar	glottal
plosives						
voiceless unaspirated	p	t			k	
voiceless aspirated	p ^h	t ^h			k ^h	
voiced	*b	*d			*g	
voiced aspirated	*b ^h	*d ^h			*g ^h	
affricates						
voiceless unaspirated				c		
voiced				*j		
voiced aspirated				*j ^h		
nasals	m	n			ŋ	
lateral		l				
flap		*ɾ				
fricatives		s				h
approximates	w			y		

[Consonants marked with * are loan phonemes.]

1.4. Manipuri tone

Manipuri is a tone language with two phonemic tones: a level tone and a falling tone. Every vowel of Manipuri carries one of the two tones. The pitch (frequency) of level tone is lower than the pitch of the falling tone; thus some authors (e.g., Chelliah 1997) have termed the level and falling tones low and high, respectively. The level tone is usually unmarked while falling tone is marked as /'. Both tones appear initially, medially and finally, but the level tone is much more frequent than the falling tone. Suffixes and prefixes in Manipuri have no tone associated with them.