SEKE PHONOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
THREE SEKE DIALECTS*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Seke language is a member of the Tamangic group, which also includes Tamang, Gurung, Thakali, Manangba, Nar-Phu, and Chantyal.\(^1\) The existence of this language has been reported in many articles, both ethnographical and linguistic.\(^2\) However, there has not been much research on the language itself.\(^3\) Despite the fact that Fürer-Haimendorf (1975) already pointed out that this language is similar to Thakali (see also Gauchan & Vinding 1977:101), it is still often considered to be a dialect of the Tibetan language.\(^4\)

The Seke language is spoken in five villages: Tangbe, Tetang, Chuksang, Chaile, and Gyakar, which are all located in the Upper Mustang, Nepal.\(^5\) The

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1 'Tamangic' is a term used by Michael Noonan (e.g., Noonan 1997, 1998, to appear a, to appear b, Noonan et al. 1998), and this seems to be now more widely used than 'Gurung branch' (Shafer 1955) or 'TGTM' (e.g., Mazaudon 1973b, 1978, 1996).


4 For instance, the most recent publication of Ethnologue (the 14th edition) lists Seke as a dialect of Lopa, which is a dialect of Tibetan spoken in the Upper Mustang.

5 Among those five villages, Tetang is the biggest. According to my informants, whose figures may not be so accurate, there are about 70 houses (including about 20 houses for rent) in Tetang, and the population is 350-400. The second largest village is Chuksang, which has about the same number of houses, with a population of approximately 300. Tangbe is next, and the other two, Chaile and Gyakar, are the smallest. In Gyakar, there are about 30 houses (those where people still live number only 13), and the population is approximately 40-50. A significant number of the Seke-speaking people are now out of the villages, either permanently or temporarily, particularly in winter. Many of them live in Pokhara, and quite a large number are staying in foreign countries to earn income. This is particularly true for the Tangbe people. They form a large community in Jomsom, where there are about forty Tangbe households (Vinding 1998:24 notes “The first Tangbetan settled in Jomsom around the
Upper Mustang is divided into the Upper Lo and the Lower Lo, which is also known as Baragaon. The Seke-speaking area is situated in the upper part of Baragaon and is surrounded by Tibetan-speaking villages: to the north the Lopa speaking area (the Upper Lo), and to the south the Baragaonse speaking area including Kagbeni, Jharkot, Muktinath. The Seke language is now spoken in the aforementioned five villages only, but presumably it was once spoken in other Baragaon settlements, too. Evidence for this was presented in Ramble 1997: "[there are] Se-skad toponyms in the Muktinath Valley, and what appear to be Se-skad residues in the dialects of certain villages ..." (Ramble 1997:504); "until the last generation -- and, in two cases, at the present time -- the language in which the territorial divinities of several Tibetan speaking villages were annually propitiated was not Tibetan but Se-skad" (ibid.). In fact, one of my Chukhsang informants remembers that when she visited Khingar and Phalyak about 50 years ago, she found several old people speaking Seke.\(^6\)

The term Seke is in fact a Tibetan word (WT *se-skad*) which is used by Tibetan-speaking people in the Upper Mustang to designate not only the dialects spoken in the aforementioned five villages, but also all of the non-Tibetan dialects spoken in the Thak Kola region. According to Ramble 1993:299, 1997:501, the designation extends even to Tamang, Gurung and Manangba.\(^7\) Since, however, there is no other name, I decided to follow anthropologists such as Michael Vinding who use this term to designate specifically the languages spoken in these five villages.

This paper deals with the speech of Tangbe, Tetang and Chuksang. Among them, Tangbe is the most divergent. My Tetang and Chuksang informants told me that it is much easier for them to understand Thakali dialects than the speech of Tangbe. It seems to me that this is primarily due to the innovative verb morphology of Tangbe. According to my Tetang, Chuksang and Gyakar informants, the speech of Chuksang and Chaile are basically the same, and the speech of Gyakar is also quite similar to these, although there are several minor differences. Therefore, the speech of the five villages can be divided into three groups: 1) Tangbe, 2) Tetang, 3) Chuksang, Chaile, Gyakar. This linguistic distinction corresponds to an ethnological tripartition described by Vinding 1979:203; that is to say, the members of those three groups do not ideally intermarry. It is said that the people of Gyakar used to form a distinct endogamous group, and this is probably why the speech of Gyakar is slightly different from Chuksang and Chaile.

\(^6\) The exact same information is reported in Vinding 1998:54, fn. 45.

\(^7\) For more about the etymology of Se, see Ramble 1997.
Despite the differences among the three dialects, they share many common features. One of the most important features is that all three dialects preserve the old final velar stop relatively well. A number of lexical items appear to be Tibetan in origin, and it is often the case that these show irregular tonal correspondences among Tamangic dialects.

In this paper, I will describe the phonological systems of the Tangbe, Tetang and Chuksang dialects and examine the phonological correspondences, not only among them, but also with other Tamangic languages and dialects, particularly to three Thakali dialects spoken in the area geographically closest to where the Seke dialects are spoken, as well as to Western Tamang and Eastern Tamang, which Mazaudon (1996) postulates to be genealogically closest to Thakali.

2. TONE

Like all the other Tamangic languages except Chantyal (cf. Noonan et al. 1998:2, Noonan to appear a), all three dialects of Seke have a four-tone system. The basic character of the Seke tone system is not different from those of other Tamangic dialects. For those who are not familiar with Tamangic tone systems, see Mazaudon 1973a, 1973b, 1978; Hari 1969, Hari et al. 1970. The Tangbe tone system is described in Honda (to appear), which follows Mazaudon’s (1973a, 1973b, 1978) analysis of the Risiangku dialect of Eastern Tamang and other Tamangic dialects.

According to Mazaudon’s analysis, the domain of the Tamangic tone is not the syllable but the phonological word, and there are four word-tone classes. She calls them tones 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively. The four tones can be distinguished by their pitch contours. The phonetic values of the four tones vary from dialect to dialect. Using Chao Yuen-ren’s tone letters, Mazaudon identifies the phonetic values of the four tones in eight Tamangic dialects as follows:

**Tamangic Tone (Mazaudon 1978:165)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>RI</th>
<th>TL</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>GH</th>
<th>NG</th>
<th>TU</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>SY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55/44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44/33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>33/22</td>
<td>33/22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33/22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>33/22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RI: Risiangku (Eastern Tamang), TL: Taglung (Eastern/Central? Tamang), SA: Sahu (Western Tamang), GH: Ghachok (Western? Gurung), NG: Ngawal (Manangha), TU: Tukche (Tamang Thakali), MA: Marpha (Mawatan Thakali), SY: Syang (Yhulkasompaimhi Thakali)³

Except in Taglung, Ngawal and Marpha, there is a major contrast between the two high tones (tone 1 and tone 2) and the two low tones (tone 3 and tone 4). Under the high tones, unaspirated stops and affricates that occur in word-initial position are usually realized as voiceless. Under the low tones, on the other hand, they are usually realized as voiced, and the vowel occurring in the word-initial syllable is pronounced with breathy voice. Because of those features, the high-low distinction is easy to hear.\(^9\) This is also the case for the three Seke dialects. For all of my Seke informants, the distinction between the high tones and the low tones is clear, and there is no confusion at all. The phonetic values of the four tones have not been measured in any dialects of Seke, but those in Tangbe can be inferred from the data provided by Mazaudon (1996) as follows:\(^10\)

**Tangbe Tone**

**High tone**

- 54 \(54\text{mēr} \) ‘tail’
- 43 \(43\text{kra} \) ‘head/hair’, \(44\text{tsho} \) ‘lake’, \(43\text{nāp} \) ‘door’, \(43\text{nāp} \) ‘snot’, \(43\text{sē} \) ‘tooth’

**Low tone**

- 21 \(20\text{dō} \) ‘enemy’, \(21\text{tāp} \) ‘needle-holder’, \(21\text{mē} \) ‘cow’
- 11 \(11\text{gi} \) ‘one’, \(11\text{kje} \) ‘work’, \(11\text{go} \) ‘wheat’, \(11\text{pre} \) ‘eight’, \(10\text{bo} \) ‘beer mash’

On the other hand, neither the distinction between the two high tones, nor the one between the two low tones can be so easily made. One of my Tangbe informants can differentiate those contrasts relatively well; nevertheless, the number of minimal pairs that she can identify is quite small. Similarly, in the speech of all of the other Seke informants, there are few such minimal pairs. For this reason, this paper uses the tone numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4 whenever it is possible to identify them; otherwise, the symbols \(\text{h}\) and \(\text{l}\) are used to represent the high tone (either tone 1 or tone 2) and the low tone (either tone 3 or tone 4), respectively.

3. **SYLLABLE STRUCTURE**

Like all other Tamangic dialects, the syllable structure in Tangbe, Tetang, and Chuksang can be represented as \((C_1)(C_2)V(C_3)\), where \(C_1\) is the initial consonant, \(C_2\) is the medial consonant, \(V\) is a vowel (sometimes a long vowel) and \(C_3\) is the final consonant.

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9 In Taglung, Ngawal and Marpha, on the other hand, this high-low distinction is not so clear. In Taglung and Marpha, for instance, tone 4 is quite high (in both dialects tone 4 is 51) and, as a result, unaspirated stops and affricates occurring in the initial position of tone 4 words are usually realized as voiceless (cf. Mazaudon 1973b:86), e.g., Marpha [tim] (cf. Syang [di⁸m]) ‘house’.

10 Some of the data provided in Mazaudon 1996 differ from my own fieldnotes (cf. Honda to appear, fn.5).