

## **PHONOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY OF NORTHEAST INDIA\***

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The area extending from Nepal in the north to Orissa in the south has been suggested by Ebert (1993) to have developed common features in some of the languages of the four distinct families represented there (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman). The aim of my paper is to present a phonological survey of the languages of an enlarged area, extending in the east to the border of Burma, thus including the Indian states of West Bengal and of Assam, the eastern states of India, Bangladesh and Bhutan as well.<sup>1</sup>

In the domain of phonology some typologically marked features can be discovered in the four language families. For a first impression see Table 1 below, which compares the inventories of consonant phonemes of a representative of each family.

The similarity of the four inventories is obvious. Three of the phonological features to be examined in this paper are clearly visible in each language: a retroflex series of consonants, a breathy voiced plosive series, and a scarcity of fricatives.

The aim of my paper is to examine five phonological features that suggest themselves as characteristic for the area under investigation. These are the following:

1. retroflex phonemes
2. few fricatives

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<sup>1</sup> According to Grierson (1903-28) the Tai language family as a fifth genetic unit is represented by two living languages (Aiton and Khamti) and one extinct language (Ahom) in India. I included Khamti in my survey, but apart from that I did not take the Tai languages into consideration.

3. breathy voice
4. creaky voice and related phenomena
5. initial velar nasal

The selection of the features is mainly based on lists proposed in the past, three of which (the first, third and fourth) are found, e.g., in Ramanujan and Masica (1969).<sup>2</sup> Masica (1976:187) quotes a further four features that have been postulated as areal features for South Asia: nasalized vowels; affricate opposition (*ts* vs. *tʃ*); syllabic structure and phoneme distribution; and tendency to initial stress. He denies or questions the validity of these four features. The list of features examined in this paper is confined to those that are rare enough, compared to the world's languages, to produce significant statements.

The languages included in the investigation are listed alphabetically in Appendix I, where they are presented along with bibliographic sources. I have tried to select at least one member of each sub-branch of the language families represented in the area, as shown in Appendix II. The classification is not very deep, especially in the case of Tibeto-Burman languages, where I mainly follow DeLancey (1987). This results in a survey over a range of 38 languages<sup>3</sup> in the area in question, plus 26 languages of neighbouring areas, added by way of comparison. In reflecting on the historical development, only four of the six language families mentioned in the appendix are more closely examined, since the other two (Tai and Miao-Yao) play only a peripheral role in our area.

Two maps document the findings. Map 1 is a schematic representation of each of the languages of our area (and of the nearest neighbours) by squares, arranged roughly geographically. The squares contain the respective values for each feature, so that any exception is indicated. A key to the abbreviations of the languages is provided in the alphabetical list in Appendix I.

Map 2 situates our area in a slightly larger context and gives a somewhat more precise location for the languages. The map shows the attempt to plot correspondent isoglosses, neglecting minor deviations. Exceptions are marked by superposed small numbers, referring to the particular feature (e.g. 4 = language that shows a value for the feature of creaky voice contrary to what is implied by the isogloss).

<sup>2</sup> Other previous work on phonological typology relevant for our area includes Henderson (1965) for Southeast Asia and Michailovsky (1988) for Nepal. Both studies check an almost complete set of phonological features. Masica (1991:131) comments on the phonological properties of Indo-Aryan in comparison with the other languages of South Asia.

<sup>3</sup> Including two dialects of Bengali (the dialect of Chittagong besides the colloquial standard) and two dialects of Kurux (Dhangar Kurux in Nepal, as well as the variant spoken in South Bihar).

1. **Indo-Aryan: Bengali**  
(Ferguson & Chowdhury 1960)

p	t	ʈ	c	k
ph	th	ʈh	ch	kh
b	d	ɖ	j	g
bh	dh	ɖh	jh	gh
m	n			ŋ

ʃ

l

r ɽ

[w] [j]

2. **Tibeto-Burman: Thulung**  
(Allen 1975)

p	t	ʈ <sup>4</sup>	c	k	(?) <sup>5</sup>
ph	th	[ʈh]	ch	kh	
b	d	ɖ	j	g	
bh	dh	[ɖh]	jh	gh	
m	n			ŋ	

s h

l

r (ɽ)

w j

3. **Austro-Asiatic: Kharia**  
(Biligiri 1965)

p	t	ʈ	c	k	(?)
ph	th	ʈh	ch	kh	
b	d	ɖ	j	g	
bh	dh	ɖh	jh	gh	
(ʈb) <sup>6</sup>	(ʈd)	(ʈj)			

m n (ŋ) ɲ ŋ

s h

l

r ɽ (ɽh)

w j

4. **Dravidian: Kurux**  
(Pfeiffer 1972)

p	t	ʈ	c	k	?
ph	th	ʈh	ch	kh	
b	d	ɖ	j	g	
bh	dh	ɖh	jh	gh	

m n (ŋ) ŋ

s x h

l

r ɽ (ɽh)

w j

Table 1. Four consonant phoneme inventories

<sup>4</sup> Retroflex phonemes are rather rare in Thulung. Allen (1975:14f) notes that aspirated retroflexes have been attested only in three words, and initially the voiceless retroflex ʈ occurs only in three items.

<sup>5</sup> Symbols between parentheses are allophones, whereas symbols between square brackets have low functional load.

<sup>6</sup> The status of the preglottalized consonants is controversial. They may be regarded as phonemes (Pinnow 1959).

