GLIDES IN SHERPA

BURKHARD SCHÜTTELNDREYER

I. THE PROBLEM

The low front and back vowels in Sherpa have been a problem in the phonemic interpretation.

Kent Gordon in 'Sherpa Phonemic Summary' 1969, introduced six vowels /i, e, a, o, u/ and the co-vowels /y/ and /w/. In combining /y/ and /w/ with the two central vowels /a/ and /o/, which he labelled assimilating, the vowels were grouped as follows:

/ya/ [a]  [e]  [e̞]
/yə/ [ɛ]  [e̞]
/wa/ [a̞]  [o̞]  [o̞]
/wə/ [o]

This solution, however, created some problems in that palatalisation of the initial consonant and the co-vowel /y/ preceding /a/ and /o/ in some instances were not easily readable.¹

In order to overcome this problem an eight vowel system was introduced tentatively. The two additional phonemes were: /ɜ/ and /oxy.²

Further research resulted in a third solution consisting of six vowels without co-vowels.³ This, however, was possible only by interpreting the low back vowel, for instance, by a trigraph: [o̞] /o̞w/, as in /'i̞o̞w/ 'liver'.⁴

When this solution was set forth relatively few examples containing this vowel had been found. Since then we concentrated our work on the verbal system of Sherpa and a number of verb stems containing the low back vowel appeared. Most verbs in Sherpa are monosyllabic. Therefore representing the vowel slot of a monosyllabic verb stem by a trigraph
tends to obscure the structure of the verbal system. For that reason again an alternative was sought.

II. A PROPOSAL

Here we suggest a solution proposing the six vowel phonemes /ɪ, ɛ, a, a, o, u/ and co-vowels /y/ and /w/. The co-vowels, however, will not co-occur with the central vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/, as was suggested earlier, but with the mid front and mid back vowels /e/ and /o/.

The two co-vowels then, will lower the mid front and mid back vowels:

/ye/  [ɛˑ]   [mˑ]
/wo/  [ɔˑ]   [ɔˑ]

In order to account for the variants of /y/ and /w/ the following environments are relevant.

a. After /h/ and before /u/ and /o/
b. Elsewhere after /h/
c. Word-initial before /u/ and /o/
d. Intervocalic, adjacent to /ɪ/ and /u/

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<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
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<tr>
<td>/w/</td>
<td>6. [w]</td>
<td>7. [u]</td>
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The numbers of the chart above refer to the examples that follow.

1. [γ] voiced high front unrounded glide:

/"yàku/  [γək̚u] 'brother-in-law'
/"gyàmu/ [gγəˈmju] 'fat'
/"gyàp/  [gγəp̚] 'back side'

2. [˘γ] voiceless high front rounded glide:

/"rhyú/  [˘γuˑ] 'monkey'

3. [γ] voiceless high front unrounded glide:

/"khyýén/ [kγeˑn̥] 'having frozen'

4. [˘w] voiced high front rounded glide:

/"yul/  [˘w̚˘] 'village'

5. [i] voiced high front unrounded vocoid:

/"pêy/  [peˑ] 'I opened (it)'
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6. [w] voiced high back rounded glide:
   /"wbk/  [wɔk]  'under'
   /'klw/  [kɬw]  'do (Present/Future disjunct)

7. [u] voiced high back closed rounded vocoid:
   /'klwu/  [kɬu / k法律规定]  'did (you) do (it)?'

The examples above show that the variants of /e/ and /o/ following the co-vowels /y/ and /w/ respectively are lengthened.
There are a few cases of /ye/ that do not have lengthened variants, but rather a short one which is followed by an optional glottal stop.
   /"gye/  [ɡ法律规定]  'eight'
   /"wyə/  [w法律规定]  'there is'
   /"myə/  [m法律规定]  'there isn't'

The variants of /a/ by definition are inherently longer than variants of /a/ following a postconsonantal /y/. (See example 1 above.)
The stops p, t, d, g tend to be optionally palatalised preceding front vowels, especially /e/. This type of palatalisation, however, is subphonemic and therefore not reflected in the phonemic orthography.
Consider the following examples:
   /'gəken/  [ɡ法律规定 ɡ法律规定]  'teacher'
   /'dyə/  [d法律规定 /法律规定]  'here'
   /'pyə/  [p法律规定 /法律规定]  'rat'
   /'pé/  [p法律规定 /法律规定]  'open'
   /"tyə/  [法律规定 /法律规定]  'there'

A single /y/ following /n/ always indicates palatalisation of /n/.
(Formerly we had phonemicised [ɑ] by /ng/ which will be /ny/ hence-forth.) If two /y/ occur postconsonantally the first one will indicate palatalisation of the consonant, the second acts as a co-vowel. Thereby we differentiate the following pair:
   /'nyə/  [法律规定]  'my'
   /"nyyékoyək/  [法律规定法律规定]  'pot, vessel'

A single /y/ preceding /e/ after consonants other than /n/ may be regarded a co-vowel. If two /y/ occur the first one will signal palatalisation and the second one acts as a co-vowel.
   /'lyəmu/  [法律规定法律规定]  'nice'
   /'kyəpləə/  [法律规定法律规定]  'for giving birth'
   /"khyəni/  [法律规定法律规定]  'having frozen'
III. INITIAL CLUSTERING WITH /y/ AND /w/

The chart below demonstrates syllable initial clustering with /y/.

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<td>1.</td>
<td>py</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>ty</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>cḥy</td>
<td>7.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>dy</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>jy</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>sy</td>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Ŧy</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>ny</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>ly</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>lḥy</td>
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<td>16.</td>
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<td>17.</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>wy</td>
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</tbody>
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The numbers of the chart above refer to the examples below.

1. /'pyè'/ [p³̈ɾ̥ / p³̈ɾ̥] 'rat'
2. /"tyè'/ [t³̈ɾ̥ / t³̈ɾ̥] 'there'
3. /"tyèp'/ [t³̈ɾ̥p̥] 'to ask'
4. /'cyèp'/ [tˢ̄m̤p̥] 'to play'
5. /'kỳèp'/ [k̡̄m̤p̥] 'to give birth'
6. /"čhỳè'/ [tʰɛ̄ɾ̥] 'great (man)'
7. /"kʰỳěni/ [k̡̄m̤̥qi] 'having frozen'
8. /'dyè'/ [g³̈ɾ̥ / dɾ̥] 'here'
9. /"jỳèp'/ [dɾ̥p̥] 'to change'
10. /'gyèmu/ [g³̈ɾ̥mu] 'reddish-brown colour'
11. /'syè'/ [sɾ̥] 'mane'
12. /"zyèp'/ [s̡̄m̤p̥] 'to die'
13. /'nyè'/ [nɾ̥] 'my'
14. /"lỳèmu/ [lɾ̥mu] 'nice'
15. /"lḥyè/ [l³̈ɾ̥] 'navel'
16. /"ryù/ [r³̈ɾ̥] 'puppy'
17. /"rḥyù/ [r̡̄ɾ̥u̯] 'monkey'
18. /"wyè/ [wə̆ɾ̥] 'there is'

The following chart gives syllable initial clustering with /w/.