

PHONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF SPITI

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Spiti belongs to Tibetan group of Himalayan branch of Tibeto—Burman sub-family of the Tibeto-Chinese family of languages. Spiti, locally known as Piti, is spoken in the Spiti Valley of the Lahul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. Sten Konow in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (Vol. III, part I) postulates three branches within Tibetan group of languages viz. Western, Central and Eastern. Under Western Tibetan are listed Balti, Purik, Ladakhi and Lahul; Spiti Nyamkat, Jad, Garhwal, Kagate, Sherpa, Danjong-ka (Bhotia of Sikkim), Lhoke (Bhotia of Bhutan) are listed under central Tibetan. Kham is the sole member of Eastern Tibetan. Spiti is closely related to Lhasa Tibetan, the lingua franca of Tibet. The total number of speakers of Spiti is 7052 according to the village census of 1971. The census report of 1961 puts the figure at only 33, which seems erroneous. I personally visited the whole valley and found that the population in all 47 villages is about 6,000 (Summer 1972 and 1973 field trips). The written form of the language (which is in Tibetan characters) is known as Bhoti or Bhotia.<sup>1</sup>

The Spiti Valley remains cut off from the rest of the world for more than six months during the snow fall season. The contact with other people in the adjoining areas is limited to the summer season. The influence of Indo-Aryan languages has not been observed in the language under study. The contact with Lahual and Ladakh is also negligible since those valleys are also separated by high mountains.

The present study is the first linguistic work on the spoken language of Spiti and deals with the phonetic and phonemic structure of the segmental and suprasegmental sounds. Among the segmentals seven vowels and thirty-one consonants have been established. Three tones, three pitch-levels of intonational phonemes, three terminal contours, three junctures, and nazalization are found among suprasegmentals.

Spiti speech sounds may be classified into vowels and consonants.

<sup>1</sup>Bhotia is a cover term for many languages of Sino-Tibetan group of languages.

Vowel Chart

	Unrounded Front	Central	Rounded Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low	ɛ	a	ɔ

Phonemic Contrasts:

The vowels in Spiti differ in frequency as well as in distribution. The vowels /ɛ, ɔ/ occur significantly less in the initial positions. /ɛ, ɔ/ do not occur word initially at all whereas /i, e, u, a, o/ occur in a very limited number of words. The phonetic contrasts in the available positions are given below:

Initially:	/i/	/i/	'this'
		/iwi/	'grandmother'
	/e/	/ey/	'pop-corn'
	/u/	/u/	'husband'
		/uyak/	'noise'
	/a/	/apa/	'father'
		/amo/	'fox' (female)
Medially:	/o/	/òt/	'shine'
		/òrdɔ̃/	'deep'
	/i/	/sir/	'to filter'
	/e/	/ser/	'gold'
	/ɛ/	/sɛr/	'to speak'
	/u/	/sur/	'incense'
	/o/	/sor/	'anger'
Finally:	/ɔ/	/sɔr/	'an idol made of earth'
	/a/	/kàr/	'a type of dance'
	/i/	/mí/	'man'
	/e/	/m̃e/	'pillow shape place'
		/tsé/	'to play or to dance'
	/o/	/khó/	'he'
	/ɛ/	/m̃ɛ/	'fire'
		/r̃ɛ/	'begger'

Finally (Cont'd)	/a/	/ča/	'iron'
		/yá/	'oxide'
		/tá/	'horse'
	/ɔ/	/pɔ́/	'to mix' (imp.)
	/u/	/phú/	'cave'

#### Phonemic Distribution Chart

	<u>i</u>	<u>e</u>	<u>ɛ</u>	<u>a</u>	<u>u</u>	<u>o</u>	<u>ɔ</u>
Initially	+	+	-	+	+	+	-
Medially	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Finally	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

#### Phonetic Description of Vowel Phonemes and their Allophonic Variations

Vowels in Spiti display a wide range of phonetic variations. First of all we shall point out that the general norms of variants applicable to all the vowel classes and sub-classes.

- (1) All the vowels are pure and have a distinct syllabic nuclei.
- (2) Vowels preceded and followed by nasal consonants are nasalized. This nasalization is considered automatic and hence not marked in the phonetic transcription.
- (3) Phonemic nasalization is heavier than the automatic one.
- (4) Vowels with rising tone are shorter than those which occur with falling tone
- (5) Tense vowels characteristically occur in falling tone syllables, whereas lax vowels occur in rising tone syllables.
- (6) Length in all the vowels is allophonic except /ɔ/ which does not exhibit lengthened allophones.

#### Allophonic Variations

/i/ has all the following allophones [i:], [i], [i]

[i:] high, front, unrounded, long, tense, occurs: (i) finally in monosyllabic words; e.g. /ñi:/ 'two'

(ii) In disyllabic open syllable words if the vowel in the final syllable is dissimilar

e.g. /miče/ [mi:če] 'life'  
 /pika/ [pi:ka] 'spring'

[ɨ] high, central, unrounded. This occurs before /y/

e.g. /khiyú/ [khiyú] 'moustache'  
 /iyú/ [iyú] 'teat'

[i] high, front, short, unrounded. This occurs elsewhere.

e.g. /iwi/ [iwi] 'grand mother'  
 /izu/ [izu] 'like this'  
 /min/ [min] 'name'

/e/ has the allophones: [e], [ø], [e:]

[e] mid, front, unrounded, short, lax, this occurs in closed syllables.

e.g. /ser/ [ser] 'gold'  
 /den/ [den] 'mat'  
 /senmo/ [senmo] 'nail (body part)'

[ø] mid, front, rounded, short, lax. This occurs:

(i) initially followed by a semi-vowel;

(ii) after mid, back, rounded vowel.

e.g. /ey/ [øy] 'popcorn (made of barley)'  
 /zoe/ [zø] 'do (imp.)'  
 /toewa/ [toøwa] '(he) saw'

[e:] mid, front, unrounded, long, tense. This occurs elsewhere.

e.g. /beta/ [be:ta] 'mate'  
 /demo/ [de:mo:] 'good'  
 /de/ [de:] 'rice'  
 /če/ [če:] 'tongue'

/E/ has the following allophones: [E], [E:]

[E] low, front, unrounded, short, tense. This occurs in closed syllables:

e.g. /phEt/ phEt<sup>1</sup> 'half'  
 /zimEt/ [zimEt<sup>1</sup>] 'family'

[E:] low, front, unrounded, long, lax. This occurs elsewhere.

e.g. /mEmE/ [mE:mE:] 'grand father or old man'  
 /pÈto/ [pE:to:] 'calf'  
 /mÉ/ [mÉ:] 'fire'  
 /rÉ/ [rÉ:] 'to beg'

/u/ has the following allophones: [ü], [u:], [u]

[u] high, back, unrounded, short, lax. It occurs initially.