The Limbu s-final and t-final verb roots
after Michailovsky 1979 and Weidert 1982

R.K. Sprigg

O. Taplejung and Panthar dialects

I had originally chosen Taplejung as the most suitable place in Limbu for a research programme into the phonetics and phonology of Limbu planned for the early part of 1956 in order to concentrate on a northern dialect; but I chanced to meet a young Limbu author and poet, Kajiman Kandangwa, who persuaded me to go to Panthar instead, where I could count on help from his friends in studying the language as spoken in the eastern part of the Limbu area, towards Ilam. Through Kandangwa I came to make the acquaintance of the Chief Magistrate of Ilam, Kharga Bahadur Nembang (or Nembahang), better known at that time as Ilam Double Subbah, who offered me his hospitality at the village of Sartap, in the Panthar area of the District then known as Dhankuta, and arranged for one of his relations, the late Randhoj Nembang, to come over each day from the neighbouring village of Imbung (or Yongbong), and patiently instruct me in the pronunciation of Limbu, which he knew how to write in the script of the Limbus, the Kiranti script (cf. Sprigg 1959).

Double Subbah's prestige and support were a big advantage to me, and gave my phonological analysis of the verb in the Panthar dialect of Limbu a flying start; but I have since learnt, from the work of Michailovsky (1979) and Weidert (1982), that, if I had gone to Taplejung as originally planned, I should have found the dialects of that northern and north-eastern area of Limbu, the Tamur Khola dialects, more regular in the phonetic exponency of their phonological categories, and therefore probably more conservative, than the Panthar dialect, on which I had spent four or five weeks in January and February, 1956 (for an account of part of the data collected at that time, short-quantity verbs, see Sprigg 1966).

1. s-final roots, velar

The comparative irregularity in the Panthar dialect that I have referred to in section (O) above can be readily seen in certain phonetic features of the root and suffix in two sub-categories, the velar sub-categories, of a type of verb root that can conveniently be termed s-final. Indeed the irregularity is such that, at first sight, 's-final' must seem to be a misnomer for these Panthar sub-categories because the final part of the root syllable and the initial part of the suffix in the following examples, [-kh- -(k)kh- -ykgh-], do not contain any sound resembling [s] or [z], an alveolar or an alveolo-palatal fricative; on the contrary, those sequences of sounds are velar throughout, ending in a voiceless aspirated plosive, which is preceded by either (i) a long vowel, as in
[-V:kh-], (ii) a voiceless velar plosive, as in [-V(k)kh-],
with the first [k] bracketed to show that [-khh-] occurs only
in slow-tempo utterances, (iii) a short vowel and voiced
velar nasal, as in [-Vŋkh-], and (iv) a long vowel and voiced
velar nasal, as in [-Vŋkŋh-]; e.g. (column 1: imperative ([−ε]));
column 2: 3rd-person object ([−u-/−o−]); column 3: 1st-person
past ([−aŋ])

i. [tɔi:khɛ] ʔa:khu? la:khaŋ
ii. [kɪ(k)khe] kɛɛ(k)khu? lɛ(k)khaŋ
iii. [kʊŋkhe] kʊŋkhaŋ tʊŋkhaŋ
iv. [mɛŋkɛŋkhe] keɡeŋkhu: loŋkhaŋ

i. cool it he pulls it out I danced
ii. rock it you turn it over (he) turned me over
iii. rear him I brought him up I wrestled
iv. do not weigh it you prevented it I told my name.

In the above examples the suffix is vowel-initial, [−ɛ],
[−u−]/[−o−], and [−aŋ], whence the term vowel-initial junction;
the roots at (ii) and (iii) belong, respectively, to the root
classes 11 and 12 of Sprigg 1966 (437), which is an analysis
of short-quantity verb lexical items only, and does not,
therefore, include long-quantity verbs such as those at (i)
and (iv).

Prompted by the velarity that is such a prominent feature
of the junction of root final and suffix initial in velar-
final roots such as these I put them into a prosodic class that
I termed k (Sprigg 1966, 448-9, but exemplified there only
from short-quantity roots, as in (ii) and (iii) above), and
thereby separated them from the s category of final that I
was setting up to deal with the syntagmatic relations of
sibilants in roots containing bilabial and 'tongue-front'
consonants. To some extent my reason for keeping the velar
type phonologically separate, even though I had realized that
these velar-final roots were complementarily distributed in
relation to the bilabial-final and 'tongue-front'-final roots,
was that the difference between the velars and the two latter
was phonetically so great that I felt it would be rather
extreme to put them into the same phonological class. It was
not until recently that I learnt, from Michailovsky 1979, of
the grammatical role of the S suffix (Michailovsky prefers to
treat -S as a suffix 'attached to Limbu verbal roots' (l))
embracing tongue-back (or velar) root finals equally with
'tongue-front' and bilabial, as transitive versus the intransitive
function of his postfinal ɓ (1979, 3, 15-19; cf. the prosodic
class z of Sprigg 1966, 448-9), and versus his T-suffix verbs
too (1979, 22-4). In a prosodic analysis such as this,
congruence of the phonological with the grammatical level
should be allowed to over-ride a difference at the phonetic
level, however great that phonetic difference may appear to be.
A more important influence on my analysis at that time, though, was the undue significance that I attached to a speciously orthodox example in my data of a [-ks/ɕ] root, in such forms as [θvksɛ] 'make (him) fight', [θvksɐŋ] '(he)
made me fight' (Sprigg 1966, root class 14 (437)). I now believe this lexical item to be an inter-dialectal loan; but at that time, in my ignorance of the northern Limbu dialects, I felt justified in accepting it as an example, the only velar example, of the s prosodic type of final, and therefore classified it prosodically as -كس (449-50). That decision forced me to classify the quite numerous examples of [-(k)kh-], etc. (Sprigg 1966, root class 11 (437); e.g. (ii) above) otherwise than as s-final; but in this article I propose to treat the [θvksɛ/s-] lexical item as lying outside what one might call 'original' Panthar Limbu; in which case it should not be allowed to dictate the prosodic and phonematic analysis of the main stratum of that dialect.

2. s-final roots, (a) bilabial cluster, (b) single alveolar and alveolo-palatal, (c) 'tongue-front', both single and cluster

If, then, I treat the [θvksɛ/ɕ-] verb lexical item as an unassimilated loan from another dialect, it is in the other three phonetic sub-categories of s-final verbs, the bilabial-cluster, the alveolar and alveolo-palatal, and what I have termed the 'tongue-front', especially the two former, that the phonetic justification for the syntagmatic term s is to be found, because the root classes belonging to the two former categories all have either an alveolar or an alveolo-palatal fricative ([s, ɕ]), according to environment, in vowel-initial junction, the junction of the root with a vowel-initial suffix, (a) [-psɛ/-] and [-msɛ/-], (b) [-V:sɛ/-, -Vs:ɛ/-], and (c) friction ([sɛ/-]) as a component of a voiceless alveolar or alveolo-palatal (aspirated) affricate, [-tsh-]/[-tɕh-], [-t(ː)tsh-]/[-t(ː)tɕh-], and [-ntsh-]/[-ntɕh-]; e.g. (col. 1: imperative [ [-ɛ]; col. 2: 3rd-person object ( [u-, -ə-]); col. 3: 1st-person past [ [-aŋ]])

a. i. [mɛχi:pɛɛmɛ] kɛha:psu: kha:psaŋ
   ii. [ʔipɛɛ] thapsaŋ? khepsaŋ
   iii. [ti:mɛɛ] ti:msɛu? -
   iv. [tɔmɛɛ] keʔamsu? tɛmsaŋ

i. do not be mean you made him cry I yawned
   ii. sleep I throw him (wrestling) he heard me
   iii. smoke (meat) he smokes (meat)
   iv. join --- together you warm it he caught me.

The roots at (ii) and (iv) belong, respectively, to the classes 18 and 17 of Sprigg 1966, 437, in which long-quantity verb
lexical items, such as those at (i) and (iii), are distinguished but not analysed (433-6).

b. i. [jo:ge] kejo:su? jo:saŋ]
   ii. [le:ge] les:u?
   i. satisfy (him) you satisfy him he satisfied me
   ii. know it he knows it.

The root at (ii) is an example of root class 19 of Sprigg 1966 (437), classified as s-final on pp. 448-9.

c. i. [me:he:tše:he:ne] phẽ:ṭshaŋ? (ne:wa) phe:ṭshaŋ]
   ii. [phœ(ŋ)ṭše] ke:phœ(ŋ)ṭshu? phœ(ŋ)ṭshaŋ]
   iii. [pœntše] nœntshu?
   i. do not forget it I squash it flat I forgot
   ii. employ him you employ him he employed me
   iii. put a finish on he keeps it by

There are no long-quantity examples of [-ntʃ/-ntʃh] in my data; the roots at (ii) and (iii) are examples, respectively, of root classes 9 and 10 of Sprigg 1966 (437), but with a change of translation from 'bevel' to 'put a smooth finish on', the sense of the Nepali verb ठाँच

3. Tamur Khola root-final -S and S-cluster verbs

Michailovsky 1979 does not go into phonetic detail; but the seven types of 'final consonants or clusters' -S, -PS, -TS, -KS, -MS, -NS, and -JS, in a complete list of twenty-two (2), seems closely to resemble the seven Panthar s finals exemplified in (1)-(2) above; e.g. CI:KS, AI:KS, LA:KS, LE:KS, HIN:KS, HA:PS, TUK:S, PHOTS, NONS (15, 17-19, 22-4, 26; 'cool, uproot, dance, turn over, rear, cause to weep, assemble (a fire), hire, keep leftovers'). In view of the suspect status of [thœks/-] in the Panthar dialect, discussed at (1) above, it is interesting to note 'THKS "incite to fight"' among his examples.

Michailovsky's examples are drawn from the Tamur Khola dialects only; Weidert's, on the other hand, include both Tamur Khola and Panthar; e.g.

P. cakkhe?, thee:khe?, soŋhe? ]
   -?ipsʉ?, ?aapse?, tœmsʉ?, seesʉ?
glossed, respectively, as (Sg. Impv.) wear, tear, sell, sleep,