

ORAL VOWELS AND NASALIZED VOWELS IN LEPCHA (RONG):
AS THE KEY TO A PUZZLING VARIATION IN SPELLING

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1. Lepcha and related languages

Lepcha has been classified by Shafer (1955:104-7; see also Henderson 1957, 1963) as belonging 'rather precisely' to the same 'section' as the Lushai (cf. Henderson 1948) and the Tiddim and 'Teizang Chin languages (*idem*, 1957, 1963, 1965), though not to the same 'branch' of that 'section'; he sub-classified Lepcha as belonging to the Ao 'unit' of the Northern Naga 'branch' of Kukish, with Tengsa Naga as the language most closely related to it (Shafer 1955:106, 109). Earlier L.A. Waddell (1899:42 ff.)¹ had proposed the Arleng (or Mikir) language, spoken in the Garo and Khasia hills, as the most closely related language to Lepcha, and since Shafer classified Mikir as forming a 'branch' of Kukish, Waddell's proposal would still place Lepcha within Shafer's Kukish 'section'; but the list of comparisons of Lepcha with thirteen other languages, including Lushai and Mikir (and four reconstructed languages) by Bodman (1968) shows Lepcha as most closely related to a language, or language group, that Shafer classifies not as Kukish, or even Burmic, but as belonging to the Misingish 'section' of the Bodic 'division', the Adi group of languages, formerly termed Abor-Miri, spoken in the new state of Arunachal Pradesh.

According to these three views, Lepcha, spoken in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, is a western outlier, separated by three or four hundred miles from the languages to the east to which it is most closely related; and Shafer (1955:109-10) asks:

Were the Rong left behind when the Northern Naga Branch (and perhaps all the Kukish peoples) migrated from the Himalayas to their present location on the Indo-Burmese border, or are the Rong a remnant left behind from a time when the Northern Naga extended clear across the Valley of Assam?

P.K. Benedict (1972:7-8) on the other hand, associates Lepcha with the Magar language, to the west, in west-central Nepal:

Dzorgai (western Szuchuan), Lepcha (Sikkim), and Magari (Nepal) all appear to be closer to Tibetan-Kanauri than to any other nucleus. Lepcha (or Rong) ... might equally

well be regarded as a separate nucleus linking Tibetan-Kanauri with Bahing-Vayu and groups on the south.

Finally, and especially because of Henderson's research interest in Khasi (1967) it should be mentioned that R.A.D. Forrest (1962:333) attempted to classify Lepcha as partly Austro-Asiatic:

... it will be seen that Rong has in common with Austro-asiatic languages as large a proportion of its phonetically identifiable prefixes as those languages have with each other. If there remains any doubt as to the reality of the Austroasiatic provenance of this feature in Rong, the probability of its affinity is corroborated by a plentiful series of lexical correspondences.

He supports this claim with a list of 70 Lepcha lexical items and their proposed Austroasiatic cognates, of which 22 are from Khasi; and the most remarkable of which are:

(i) 'Water: R. uñ ['*uŋ* in my romanization], Khasi um, Riang om, Palaung om, Hua Miau au', (ii) 'Dog: R. kǎ-ju [*ka-ju* in my romanization], Khasi ksew, Stieng sǝu, Biat ǎo, Riang sho, etc.', (iii) 'Dung: R. ít ['*it* in my romanization], Khasi cit, Khmer ǎc, Bahnar ik, Stieng ech, Biat ǎc, etc.' [*ibid.*, 333-4].² 'It is clear that we have in Rong a very mixed form of speech, ... it is much less easy to determine whether the Austroasiatic or the older Tibeto-Burman (or Tibetan?) stratum is the more fundamental.' [*ibid.*, 335].

From these four conflicting attempts at classifying Lepcha, it is clear that its precise classification is still something of a mystery, from which my present phonetic, phonological, and grammatical observations may possibly derive an interest that the number of speakers of Lepcha would not justify: Siiger (1967:33) gives the number of Lepchas in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal as 25,780 according to the 1931 census, of whom about 13,000 were estimated to be in Sikkim, but it does not follow that all 25,780 spoke Lepcha; and in any case, by now, some two generations later, the number of speakers must have declined under the influence of Nepali.³

2. Variation in spelling

I have found it useful to present these observations of mine in the form of an orthographic problem. The late General Mainwaring refers to the pronunciation of the vowel symbol *o* as follows:

ᱚ ᱜ ᱟ has the sound of *o* in *no*, as: ᱚᱜᱚ ᱵᱟᱨᱟ, mother,
ᱚᱜᱚ ᱵᱟᱨᱟ father, ᱚᱜᱚ ᱵᱟᱨᱟ I &c.

The Lepchas are apt to pronounce this letter as *u*, and hence when writing, to confound it with **ʌ** *ú*, this error should be avoided, and corrected in the Lepchas (Mainwaring 1876:9).

In some instances, this 'error' appears to be due to an attempt to assimilate loanwords from Tibetan; e.g. '*yok* 'work' (Tib. *g.yog*) (Mainwaring 1876:95); cf. '*yúk* (Macdonald 1899, in Grierson 1909:244); *thop* 'receive' (Tib. *thob*) (Mainwaring 1876:88); cf. *thúp* 'getting' (Macdonald, *op.cit.*: 242). These variant spellings correspond to differences in pronunciation, e.g. *ʔjok* versus *ʔjuk*, *thop* versus *thúp*, in which the former phonetic form of each pair is an attempt to imitate a Tibetan pronunciation, while the latter is more in keeping with ₄ the vowel distinctions of what one might term 'original' Lepcha.

The examples of variation in spelling that I wish to try and account for in this article, however, are not the same as the half-assimilated loanwords such as '*yok*/'*yúk* and *thop*/*thúp* cited in the preceding paragraph, for, on the one hand, there is, in their case, no variation in pronunciation parallel to the variation in spelling, and, on the other, the variation results from the important distinction in Lepcha between syllables containing nasalization as a vowel feature (and therefore nasality as an initial-consonant feature) and syllables containing an oral vowel (and therefore only oral syllable-initial consonants), e.g. *ngo* 'fish' (Mainwaring 1876), but *ngú* (Sitling 1929; Tamsang 1981); '*á-mo* 'consonant', 'mother' (Mainwaring 1876; Sitling 1929), but '*á-mú* (Sitling 1970; Tamsang 1981); *fa-ngo* 'five' (Mainwaring 1876; Sitling 1929; Tamsang 1981), but *fa-ngú* (Sitling 1970), with which can be compared *fo* 'bird', *cho* 'book', *cú* '(snow) mountain', *prú* 'Bhutan', for which there is no variation in spelling. It is this distinction that I have taken as the subject of this study; and I have further limited it to open syllables.

3. Open syllables and open/closed-syllable lexical items

The characteristic qualities of the vowel units that need to be phonologically distinguished are (i) for oral vowels:

i:, *e:*, *ɛ:*, *ɯ:*, *ə:*, *a:/ɑ:*, *u:*, *o:*, *ɔ:*,⁵

and (ii) for nasalized vowels:

ĩ:, *ẽ/ẽ:*, *ỹ:*, *ã/ã:*, *ũ:/ũ:*, *õ:*;

but (iii) for closed syllables they are:

i/ɪ, *e*, *ɛ*, *ɯ/ʏ*, *ə:*, *a/ɑ*, *u/ʊ*, *o*, *ɔ/ɒ*

(where alternatives are given, the vowel sounds concerned are complementarily distributed in relation to differences in initial

consonant, especially palatal and palatalized versus the other types of initial consonant, and to differences in final consonant, velar versus labial and dental, and liquid versus nasal and plosive), e.g.

(i)	(ii)	(iii)
i: <u>lí</u> , <u>lí</u> ⁶	ĩ: <u>nyí</u> , <u>nyí</u>	ɪ <u>díng</u> , <u>díng</u>
e: <u>ye</u>	ẽ: <u>nye</u>	e <u>lem</u>
ɛ: <u>gye</u> , <u>gyal</u> / <u>gye</u>	ĩ: <u>mâ</u> , <u>ma</u>	ɛ <u>lem</u> , <u>lyam</u>
u: <u>yu</u>	ũ: <u>má</u>	ʏ <u>gum</u>
ə: <u>yâ</u> , <u>ya</u> / <u>yâ</u>	ũ: <u>ngũ</u> , <u>ngo</u>	ə: <u>lâm</u>
a: <u>dá</u>	õ: <u>nyó</u>	a <u>mát</u>
u: <u>'ú</u>		u <u>súk</u>
o: <u>tho</u>		o <u>rok</u>
ɔ: <u>gô</u>		ɔ <u>nóng</u>

- (i) 'speak', 'chew', 'win', 'descend', 'know',
'sleep', 'fry', 'put', 'happy'
- (ii) 'have', 'afterwards', 'call', 'hide',
'stew', 'borrow'
- (iii) 'stand', 'pile up', 'play', 'is', 'fly', 'do',
'make', 'read', 'go'

The vowels ɪ, ʏ, and u are characteristically closed-syllable vowels, though they are shared with the open-syllable type when nasalized.

Open/closed-syllable lexical items

A number of verb lexical items have both open-syllable and closed-syllable forms: (a) the open-syllable forms when