

A Short Note on Mising Phonology

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1. The language:

MISING is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by about half a million Misings (or, Miris as they have been generally known) residing in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, and Darrang in the state of Assam as well as in some areas of the Siang district of Arunachal. Its closest cognates are the vernaculars of the Adis in the Siang and Lohit districts of Arunachal, particularly the speech-forms of the Pasis, Padams, Pangis, Miangs, Minyongs, etc. The languages of some other communities of Arunachal, (e.g. the Hrussos [= Akas], the Nisis [= Daflas], the Gallongs and the Mishmis) are more distantly related to Mising. Owing to the absence of written records, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the prototype of these languages, and, to the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made so far to do anything of the kind. It may not, however, be all that difficult to reconstruct an Adi-Mising prototype, but, again, no comparative studies of these speech forms have been done which would have made a reconstruction possible.

Mising has a few varieties within it, e.g. Oyan, Dambug, Delu, Moying, Pagro, Sayang, and Somuang - these names representing the various social groups in the Mising community. The varieties show some phonological, morphological, and lexical divergences, but hardly any syntactic variation. No Mising ever has much difficulty in understanding any of these varieties.

Although Mising folklore is fairly rich, the language is yet to have a stable written tradition. Sporadic attempts have been made over the years to publish books and journals, but there has never been any vigorous literary effort on the part of the Misings. They are still conducting experiments through Roman and Assamese scripts to evolve a good writing system for the language.¹

2. The phonemes:

Mising has a phonemic system of fifteen consonants and fourteen vowels. Of the fifteen consonants, six, all unaspirated, are stops. The nine continuants include four nasals, two fricatives, one lateral, one trill, and

¹ Now they have decided to opt for the Roman script; but this decision has to be ratified by the government of Assam if Mising is to be introduced as a medium of instruction at the primary stage of education.

one frictionless continuant. The fourteen vowels may neatly be divided into two halves--seven long and seven short. Each of the seven short vowels has its long counterpart. Of these seven, two are front, two back, and three central.

Apart from these phonemes, a few more sounds ([w], [h], [tʃ], and [dʒ]) are heard in the language. But none of these sounds has phonemic status.

The phonemes are given below in tabular form. Phonemes /p,t,k,s/ are voiceless, the rest are voiced.

2.1 The Consonants

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Stops	p b	t d			k
Nasals	m		n	ny	ng
Lateral			l		
Trill			r		
Fricatives			S Z		
Frictionless Continuant					j

2.2 The Vowels

	Front	Central ²	Back
High	i:, i	i:, i'	u:, u
Mid	e:, e	e:, e'	o:, o
Low		a:, a	

3. The stops:

The stops are produced by light contacts between articulator and point of articulation. Thus for /p, b/, there is a soft bilabial contact, for /t, d/ a soft apico-dental contact and for /k, g/ a soft dorsovelar contact. In other words, the 'plosion' in the case of these Mising plosives is very mild, and so they are to some extent unlike the English plosives in the manner of articulation.

All the stops occur freely in word-initial and word-medial positions.

Examples are:

/po:pi'r/	'butterfly'
/tati'g/	'toad', 'frog'

² The non-low central vowels were transcribed as ɜ and ə in my original dissertation.

/ko:kang/	'children'
/babi'ng/	'a kind of arum'
/do:de:/	'peacock'
/gunggang/	'harp made of bamboo', etc.

In word-final positions, the voiced-voiceless contrast is neutralised. It is not easy to decide whether word-final stops in Mising are the voiceless /p,t,k/ or the devoiced forms of /b,d,g/. On strictly phonetic principles we should say that only /p,t,k/ and not /b,d,g/ occur finally in Mising. But, when morphophonemic considerations are brought in, it is possible to think of word-final /p,t,k/ as fully devoiced forms of /b,d,g/. Let us see what happens to the following words when the Third Person nominative suffix -e' is added to them.

/talap/	('onion', 'garlic')	+	(-e')	=	/talabe'/
/tabat/	('sugarcane')	+	(-e')	=	/tabade'/
/porok/	('hen')	+	(-e')	=	/poroge'/

This is like German 'bund' which is phonetically [bunt], but which becomes [bund] when it is followed by the morpheme (-es): [bunt] + (es) = [bundes]. If, however, we leave aside morpho-phonology at this point, it can be safely concluded on phonetic principles that /b,d,g/ do not occur in word final positions.

3.1 The nasals:

There are four nasals, viz. /m,n,ny,ng/ in the language, of which /m,n,ng/ occur in all three positions. /ny/ occurs only in initial and medial positions. In one of the dialects of Mising, /ny/ occurs only in medial positions. Although it is unmistakably a phoneme in the language, its occurrence is not very frequent. Some examples are:

Initially and medially

/na:mo/	'elder sister-in-law'
/na:noi/	'father's younger brother's wife'
/nge'nggong/	'crawling about'
/nya:nyi/	'mother-in-law'; 'father's sister'; 'mother's brother's wife'

Word-finally

/rokom/	'early in the morning'
/rokon/	'the other morning'
/rokong/	'to move across stealthily'

3.2 The lateral and the trill:

The voiced alveolar lateral /l/ is of the clear kind and occurs in all three positions, though its occurrence in the final position is rather infrequent. The trill /r/ is slightly unstable in quality and has a number of idiolectic variations ranging from the rolled quality to that of a frictionless continuant. It also occurs in all three positions. Examples are:

Initially and medially

/lolat/	'moonlight'
/ru:ruai/	'din'

Finally

/amal/	'(jocular for) money'
/do:mi'r/	'sky'

3.3 The fricatives:

There are just two fricatives in the language, /s/ and /z/, the friction, as in the case of 'plosion' of the stops, being mild. Both the sounds occur in initial and medial positions. /s/ occurs finally in certain onomatopoeic words and loan-words from Assamese, but /z/ does not occur finally. Final /z/ in loan-words is changed into /s/. Examples are:

Initially and medially

/Si:sang/	'adolescent'
/Zo:zibi'li'ng/	'lizard'

Finally

/bakos/	'box'
/koros/	'expenditure'

3.4 The frictionless continuant:

The voiced lamino-palatal semivowel /j/ occurs in all three positions, e.g., /ja:jo/ 'grandmother', /kaj/ 'come, (let's...)'.

4. Additional consonant sounds:

It has already been mentioned that /w/, /tc/, and /dz/ occur as phones in the language, though not as phonemes. When there is a transition from /u/ to /a,o,i,e/, the resultant phone is the semivowel /w/. Again, when a morpheme ends either with /o:/ or with /u:/ and is linked with a suffix beginning with a vowel, the linking is done by the insertion of /w/ which replaces the vowel length. Examples are: