

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:nai/	'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:

/biu/	(festival)	+	/e'/	(nominativiser)	=	/biwe'/
/tou/	(cooking pot)	+	/i'/	(intensifier)	=	/tow'i':/
/ko:/	(boy)	+	/e'/	(nominativiser)	=	/kowe'/
/su:/	(at present)	+	/o:/	(intensifier)	=	/suwo:/

The gemination of the two alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/ sometimes results in the production of /tc/ and /dz/. Again, when /s/ and /z/ are preceded respectively by /t/ and /z/, /s/ and /z/ become affricates /tc/ and /dz/, e.g.,

/matsik/	=	(mattcik)	'small sword'
/adzi:/	=	(addzi:)	'small'
/asi/	(water) + /e'/	(nominativiser)	= /asse'/ = [attce']
/pe'zi/	(kind of poisonous leaf) + /e'/		= /pe'zze' = [pe'ddze']

The glottal fricative /h/ occurs in one of the dialects as an allophone of /s/ in intervocalic positions, e.g., /gasor/ 'clothes used as 'wrappers' = [gahor]. It does not occur in any other environment. Thus, it is quite clear that [w], [tc], [dz], and [h], which are of secondary nature, cannot be accorded phonemic status in the language.

5. Consonant clusters and gemination:

Clusters of only two consonants occur in Mising and they occur only in word-medial positions. Clusters do not form part of a syllable. The two members of a cluster belong to two different syllables, e.g., /jab-go/ 'door'; /ap-ta/ 'hunting'; /lam-te/ 'road' etc.

Gemination in Mising may be defined simply as a consonant cluster consisting of two identical consonants on both sides of a syllable boundary, e.g.

/ap-pi:/ 'four'; /zab-bo/ 'gander' etc.

There are ninety-one consonant clusters in the language. In one of the dialects, viz. Sa:yang, the number of consonant clusters is one hundred and three; the twelve clusters which occur in this dialect and not in the others are the clusters of /i/ followed by /t, d, k, g, m, n, ny, ng, s, z, r, j/. The ninety-one clusters (including geminates) are:

/p/, /t/, /k/ followed by /p,t,k,s/	=	12
/b/ followed by /b,d,g,n,ny,ng,m,l,z,r,j,/	=	11
/d/ followed by /b,d,g,z/	=	4
/g/ followed by /b,d,g,n,ny,l,z,r,j/	=	10
/m/ followed by /p,t,k,b,d,g,m,n,ny,ng,l,s,z,r,j/	=	15
/n/ followed by /p,t,k,b,d,g,m,n,ny,ng,l,s,z,r,j/	=	15
/ng/ followed by /k,g,m,n,ng/	=	5
/l/ followed by /p,b,l/	=	3
/r/ followed by /p,t,k,b,d,g,m,n,ny,ng,l,s,z,r,j/	=	15
/j/ followed by /j/	=	1

It can be seen that no clusters can be formed with /ny,s,z/ as first member. There may be a few more clusters with /j/ as first member, if the diphthongs /ai,oi,ui,e'i/ are treated as /aj,oj,uj,e'j/.

6. Vowels and diphthongs:

Mising has a well-balanced vowel system of four front, four back and six central articulations. The spreading and rounding of lips are not very prominent.

6.1 The front vowels:

/i:/ and /i/ are the long and short high unrounded vowels slightly lower than cardinal /i/. The quantitative difference affects their quality. Thus, /i:/ is slightly higher than /i/. They occur in all three positions. /e:/ and /e/ are the long and short mid unrounded vowels, lower than cardinal /e/. There is hardly any qualitative difference between the two. They occur in all three positions.

6.2 The back vowels:

/o:/ and /o/ are the long and short rounded vowels in the half-open position, much lower than cardinal /o/. There is hardly any qualitative difference between the two. /u:/ and /u/ are the long and short rounded vowels approximating the position of cardinal /u/. The long /u:/ is higher than the short /u/. All the four back vowels occur in all three positions.

6.3 The central vowels:

/a:/ and /a/ are the long and short unrounded low vowels. The long /a:/ is lower and 'backer' than the short /a/.

/e:/ and /e/ are the mid unrounded long and short vowels. There is hardly any qualitative difference between the two. /i:/ and /i/ are the long and short high central vowels. /i:/ is higher than /i/. All the six central vowels occur in all three positions.

6.4 Contrasts illustrated:

/i/	/kinam/	'to be sick'
/i:/	/ki:nam/	'to pull'
/e/	/kenam/	'to take a bite'
/e:/	/ke:nam/	'to hook'
/o/	/konam/	'to ask (for something)'
/o:/	/ko:nam/	'to ferry across'

/u/	/kuna <u>m</u> /	'to shout'
/u:/	/ku: <u>na</u> m/	'to be sour'
/a/	/ka <u>na</u> m/	'to have'
/a:/	/ka: <u>na</u> m/	'to see'
/e/	/ke <u>na</u> m/	'to take (someone's) side'
/e:/	/ke: <u>na</u> m/	'to prepare (curry)'
/i/	/ki <u>na</u> m/	'to tell (a story)'
/i:/	/pi: <u>na</u> m/	'to reach', 'to suffice'

6.5 Vowel length in the word-final position:

Like the loss of voiced-voiceless opposition of stops in the word-final position, vowels too lose the short-long contrast in this position. Minimal pairs in the language showing the short-long phonemic contrast word-finally are hard to come by, one pair being

/ake/	'some'
/ake:/	'a bunch of thread'

However, the native speaker realises the short-long opposition in both production and perception, and the addition of suffixes makes the opposition obvious. Thus, the long vowel in /ko:/ 'boy' may not be prominent when the word is uttered alone, but it stands out clearly when we add the definite article suffix /de':

/ko:/	+	/de'/	=	ko:de'/	'the boy'.
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But the freedom of occurrence with length in the final position is not shared equally by all the vowels. The front vowels /i:/ and /e:/ occur in a large number of words; /o:/, /e:/ and /i:/ occur chiefly in monosyllabic words which are far from numerous; /a:/ and /u:/ occur in rare cases.

6.6 Diphthongs:

The vowel system in Mising includes eighteen diphthongs, viz;

- (i) Diphthongs ending in /i/ = /ai,oi,ui,e'i/
- (ii) Diphthongs ending in /a/ = /ea,oa,ua,e'a,i'a/
- (iii) Diphthongs ending in /o/ = /ao,i'o/
- (iv) Diphthongs ending in /u/ = /iu,au,ou,e'u,eu/
- (v) Diphthongs ending in /i' = /ai', e'i'/

The two members of some of these diphthongs, i.e. /ea,oa,ua,e'a,i'a,ao,i'o/ belong to different syllables.

6.7 Three vowel-clusters:

If we leave aside the cases of glides from /u/, as the second member of a three-vowel cluster, to /a,oi,e'/, which results in the production of the

semi-vowel /w/, there will be just one instance of triphthongisation, that is /ai'e'/.

7. Syllabic structure:

The syllable in a Mising word may be represented as (C)V(C). There are no initial or final consonant clusters, as has already been noted. The syllable types are:

- | | | | | | |
|-------|-----|--------|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| (i) | V | /i:/ | 'blood' | /e:/ | 'yes' |
| (ii) | CV | /no/ | 'you' | /ro:/ | 'morning' |
| (iii) | VC | /a:m/ | 'paddy' | /i:r/ | 'gorgeous' |
| (iv) | CVC | /ga:m/ | 'chieftain' | /nom/ | 'you' (accusative) |

7.1 Structure of dissyllabic words:

The vast majority of the underived forms of words in the language is dissyllabic. The two syllables in those words may combine in the following ways:

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----------|--------------------|---|---|---|-----|--------|------------|
| V | + | V | /i'a/ | 'bamboo' | : | V | + | VC | /ai'n/ | 'gold' |
| V | + | CV | /ongo/ | 'fish' | : | V | + | CVC | /agom/ | 'language' |
| CV | + | V | /tao/ | 'a Mising surname' | | | | | | |
| CV | + | CV | /do:nyi/ | 'the sun' | | | | | | |
| CV | + | VC | /loum/ | 'three days' | | | | | | |
| CV | + | CVC | /kopak/ | 'banana' | | | | | | |
| VC | + | CV | /appi:/ | 'four' | | | | | | |
| VC | + | CVC | /argom/ | 'rust' | | | | | | |
| CVC | + | CV | /kampu/ | 'white' | | | | | | |
| CVC | + | CVC | /sormon/ | 'crocodile' | | | | | | |

8. Supra-segmental features:

Word-stress is rather weak in Mising. The stress is realized consistently in the second syllable. Examples are:

/a "ppi:/ /a "ppi:ko/ /a "ppi:kolang/ /a "ppi:komi' lo:min/. Sentence stress is often indicated by correlated morphemes, e.g. /no "woi ta "nije'n/ "Are you *alone* a man?"

Mising is not a tone language.

Two degrees of intonation can be heard, i.e. rising and falling. But the realization of these differs from dialect to dialect, sometimes from village to village.