

Chapter 3 : MANIPURI

² Manipuri (also called Meiteilon, Meiteiron, Meetei and Meithei; Meithei in Linguistic literature) is the official language of the state of Manipur, India. It is the mother tongue and the first language of the ethnic group Meitei (Meetei). However, apart from Meiteis who follows Hinduism and the Meiteis following the traditional religion of Sanamahi, Meitei Pangals, i.e., Manipuri Muslims also return Manipuri as their mother tongue. In 1992 it became the first Tibeto-Burman (TB) language to receive recognition as an official, or “scheduled,” language of India. Although Manipuri native speakers mostly reside in the state of Manipur, there are native speakers in the neighbouring north eastern states of India, notably in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, and West Bengal. In India, the total number of people who returned Manipuri as their mother tongue numbers 1,270,216 out of which 1, 110, 134 speakers reside in Manipur (census of India, 1991). There are approximately 1.9 million speakers of Manipuri, who used the language as a lingua franca among the 29 different ethnic groups of Manipur. There are Manipuri speakers in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well though their number is very less as compared to that of Manipur.

Manipuri has its own script, locally known as Meitei Mayek. Manipur state and its surround are the locus from which the Tibeto-Burman family spread and diversified, making the genetic assignment of the region’s languages very difficult. During the 19th and 20th centuries, different linguists conjectured that Manipuri belonged to one of several TB subdivisions. In the early 21st century, the consensus view placed

² Most contents of this section are from the source: http://tabish.freeshell.org/eeeyek/mani_intro.html, and <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/362352/Manipuri-language> accessed and retrieved on 23/02/2014

Manipuri in its own subdivision of the so-called Kamarupan group—a geographic rather than a genetic designation but one that must suffice until more definitive information becomes available.

Nonetheless, Manipuri clearly has the genetic features of the Tibeto-Burman group. These include three positional occurrences of the velar nasals, widespread stem homophony, semantic bleaching of verbs, duplication or elaboration, final particles, the predominance of aspect rather than tense, a lack of gender marking verb-final word order, and agglutinative verb morphology, with extensive suffixation and limited prefixation.

3.1 ORIGIN AND INFORMATION OF MANIPURI LANGUAGE

Manipuri belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The Sino-Tibetan family branches out into the Siamese-Chinese and the Tibeto-Burman sub families based on the word order –the Siamese-Chinese has SVO word order while the Tibeto-Burman has SOV pattern, where S stands for Subject, V stands for Verb, and O stands for Object.

A schematic diagram of the Sino-Tibetan language family is given below:

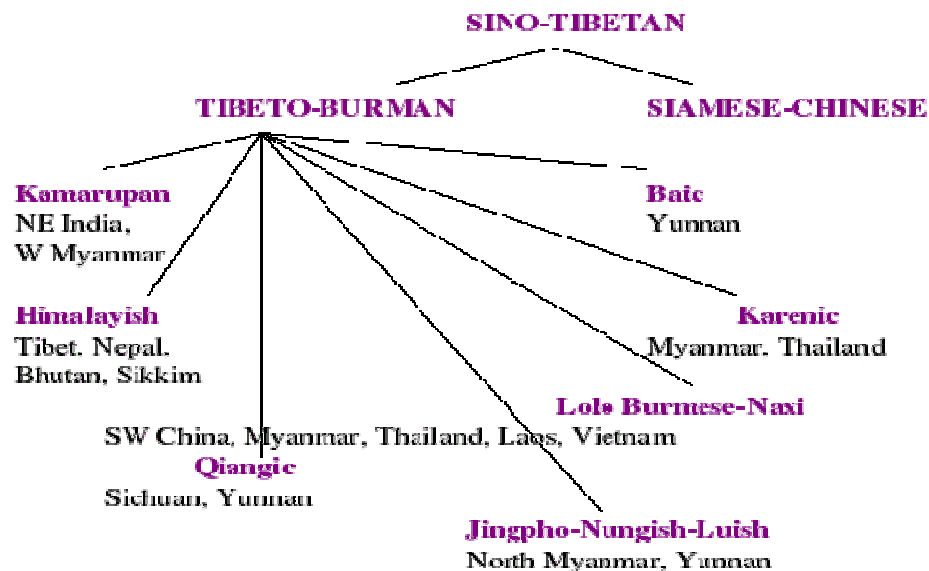


Figure 3-1: Schematic diagram of Sino-Tibetan
(Adapted From <http://stedt.berkeley.edu/html/stfamily.html>)

Manipuri falls in the geographically determined group Kamarupan. Kamarupan is further sub grouped into Kuki-Chin-Naga, Abor-Miri-Dafla and Bodo-Garo subgroups. Although it has been generally acknowledged that Manipuri does not readily fit into any of these subgroups (along with Mikir and Mru), the traditional classifications put Manipuri in the Kuki-Chin-Naga subgroup. However, within Kuki-Chin-Naga, Manipuri is classified as a distinct group on its own (Grierson: 1903-28) under the heading *Meithei*, on the basis of the facts that it was already a major literary language of the Kuki-Chin-Naga group and that it had characteristics that differentiated it from both the Kuki-Chin languages proper as well as the Naga languages. There is still a need of collection of more data from other languages to determine the exact position of Manipuri within Kamarupan.

Meiteilon has been recognized as the Manipuri language by the Indian Union and has been included in the list of scheduled languages. Manipuri is taught as a subject up to the Post-graduate level (Ph.D.) in Universities of India, apart from being a medium of instruction up to the undergraduate level in Manipur.

It may be worthy of mention that Hinduism was introduced as a state religion only in the reign of Meidingngu Pamheiba (Garibniwaj) in the late eighteenth century, while pre-Hindu Meitei chronicles can be dated back to 33 AD.

The advent of Hinduism in Manipur had a considerable influence on the language, in that a lot of Indo-Aryan elements entered the language as borrowings. The Standard dialect, which is based on the Imphal dialect (Grierson 1903) is significantly different from the dialects spoken in Kakching, Andro, Sekmai and the Yaithibi dialect. The latter dialects are comparatively not influenced by Bengali or Sanskrit. The Pangal dialect is another main dialect of Manipuri.

3.2 LINGUISTIC FEATURES

Manipuri shares genetic features of Tibeto-Burman(TB) group of languages. Phonemic tone, Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, agglutinative verb morphology, and tendency to reduce disyllabic forms to monosyllabic ones, are some of the typological features shared by Manipuri with other TB languages. But the pronominal marking on verb which is considered an original trait of TB languages is not present in Manipuri. However the presence of the pronominal markers on nominal

category words which is regarded as the remnants of TB pronominal feature is present in the language. Other linguistic features noteworthy for our study here are its rich, extensive and complex verbal morphology, a really good number of suffixation and a limited prefixation in the morphological word structure. The language has no distinct demarcation between morphology and syntax and the concept of subject is rather implicit in the sense that it can either be deleted or understood. Only the noun class is distinct, other classes are formed by affixation to a verb root which is a bound root.

3.3 WRITING SYSTEM AND SOUND SYSTEM

Manipuri language has its own script called “Meitei Mayek” script. But the script is not used for writing the language. The current Manipuri writing system is by using Bengali script. Manipuri is written from left to right and top to bottom. Manipuri uses 15 consonants and 6 vowel phonetic sounds. Later, develops r sound as allophone of lateral ল/l, and voiced consonants ব/bə, দ/də, জ/jə and গ/gə are derived from the voiceless counterparts of প/pə, ত/tə চ/cə, and ক/kə, making the number of consonants to 20. Due to the influence of neighboring languages another 4 sounds (ভ/b^h, ধ/d^h, ঝ/j^h and ঞ/g^h) were developed. The modern linguistic finding reveals that the total number of sounds in modern Manipuri is 30 phonemes plus 6 diphthong like sounds and 2 tones. The consonant clusters can occur only in the initial position of a syllable. There are only three independent vowels and remaining vowels dependent upon a consonant. The two tones of Meiteiron are:

Level: unmarked

Falling: / ˘ /

The following table shows the letters in the Bengali alphabet used for writing Manipuri language.

Vowels

Table 3-1: Bengali vowel symbols used in written Meiteiron

অ/ə	আ/a	ই/i	ঈ/I
উ/u	ঊ/uu	ঋ	
এ	ঐ	ও	ঔ
	অং	অঃ	

The following table shows Bengali consonants, used for writing Manipuri script.

Consonants

Table 3-2: Bengali consonant symbols used in written Manipuri

ক	খ	গ	ঘ	ঙ
চ	ছ	জ	ঝ	ঞ
ট	ঠ	ড	ঢ	ণ
ত	থ	দ	ধ	ন
প	ফ	ব	ভ	ম
য	র	ল	শ	ষ
স	হ	ড়	ঢ়	য়
ৎ	ং	ঃ	ঁ	

The Manipuri phonemes and their corresponding Bengali letters are given in the following tables:

Table 3-3: Manipuri consonants and corresponding Bengali letters

	Bengali letter	Manipuri phoneme
1	প	pə
2	ফ	ph
3	ব	bə
4	ভ	bhə
5	ত, ঙ, and ট	tə
6	থ and ঠ	thə
7	দ and ড	də
8	ধ and ঢ	dhə
9	চ	cə
10	জ and য	jə
11	ঝ	jhə
12	ক	kə
13	খ	khə
14	গ	gə
15	ঘ	ghə

16	ম	mə
17	ন, ণ and ঞ	nə
18	ঙ and ং	ŋə
19	শ, স, ষ, and ছ	sə
20	হ	hə
21	ৱ	wə
22	ৱ, ৱ, and ৱ	rə
23	য়	y
24	ল	lə

Source: L. Sarbajit Singh, et. al. 2007

Table 3-4: Manipuri monophthongs and corresponding Bengali letters

Bengali Letters	Manipuri Phonemes
*ই, and ঐ	³ i
এ	e
আ	a
অ	ə
ও	o
*উ and ঊ	³ u

Source: L. Sarbajit Singh, et. al. 2007

Table 3-5: Meiteiron diphthongs and corresponding Bengali letters

Manipuri Phonemes	Bengali Letters
**ai	–
əi	⁴ ঐ
**oi	–
**ui	–
**au	–
əu	⁴ ঔ

Source: L. Sarbajit Singh, et. al. 2007

³ More than one Bengali alphabet is used to represent a Meiteiron phoneme (*marks).

⁴ Some diphthongs of Meiteiron does not have equivalent in Bengali (**marks).

There are only three separate vowel symbols in the manipuri script, which are pronounced independently. To indicate a vowel sound other than the implicit one, a vowel sign (cheitap) is attached to the consonant. Explicit appearance of a cheitap in a syllable overrides the inherent vowel. Three cheitaps, out of seven used in manipuri, can exist above, one below and the remaining three to the right of the consonant to which it is applied to. There are equivalent cheitaps for all the vowels. These matras/chetaps can exist above, below, to the right or to the left of the consonant to which it is applied.

Table 3-6: Dependent vowel signs (Matra/ Cheitap)

Bengali vowel	Equivalent cheitap/ matra	Example
আ	া	কা
ই	ি	কি
ঈ	ী	কী
উ	ু	কু
ঊ	ূ	কূ
ঋ	্ৰ	ক্ৰ
এ	ে	কে
কৈ	ৈ	কৈ
ও	ো	কো
ঔ	ৌ	কৌ

The chapter discussed a brief overview of the origin of Manipuri language, language affinity, its linguistic features, and the currently using writing system of the language. In addition to this the various Manipuri phones and its corresponding written representations using Bengali script is discussed in length.