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How to write Shertukpen (Sherdukpen) Language ?

François Jacquesson

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How to write Shertukpen (Sherdukpen) Language ?

François Jacquesson

These pages are an abridged version of the first parts of my book (2015): *An Introduction to Sherdukpen Language*.

Those who are interested to know

which letters I used to write the language will go directly to section 1.2.

Those who want to know for which reasons I selected these letters (and relevant sound units, or phonemes), are welcome to read part 2.

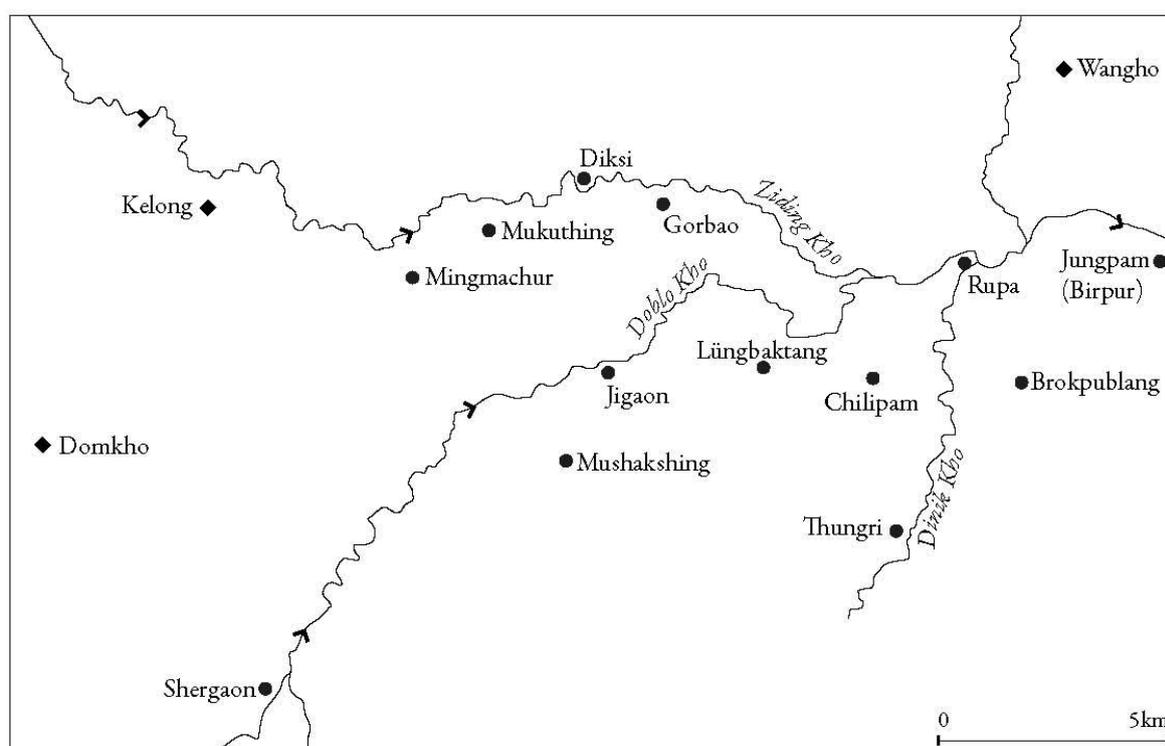
Languages are not pronounced in the same way among all speakers. This is also true for Shertukpen. The language described here, is the language used, mostly, among the Thong clans in Rupa, with whom I was mainly in contact. Descriptions of other varieties are of course welcome.

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1. Introduction

1.1. General context

Sherdukpen language, as defined below, is spoken by c. 4000-5000 persons in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh (in West Kameng district), in the North-East corner of India. Bhutan is close by (30 km) to the west, and the Chinese (Tibetan) border is 70 km north as the crow flies, about 250 km by road, after passing the great monastery of Tawang. Access to the rest of India is southwards, to Assam, the capital city of which is reachable in 8 or 9 hours with a good car. Sherdukpens had, for a long time and until 30-40 years ago, a regular three month winter stay in a host region of Assam; they packed everything, gathered cattle, left their villages, formed a long file and journeyed southwards for two or three days; this was called *besme*. Winter was passed down the hills, in Assam. When spring approached, bamboo huts were abandoned, the file was formed again but upwards, and the population came back to the villages - between 1500 and 2000 m. high. Many people still remember that stage of the year. They were children or youngsters at that time, and their memories of those winters are very lively and happy.



Map 2. The Sherdukpen country (Doimara is not indicated). Sherdukpen villages are shown by dots. Domkho and Kelong are 'Monpa' localities; Wangho is a Bugun village.

The word 'Sherdukpen' is a recent coinage, which the British government of India supported, and which is widely adopted locally, with two provisos. First, literate people prefer to write *Shertukpen*, or *Sertukpen*, closer to the actual pronunciation. The name reflects the two components of the community. The main group is the *Tukpen* (in the nearby Monpa language 'Tukpon'), living in the little town of Rupa (*Thõ thük - thük* means 'village') and the surrounding ten villages, the bigger ones being Jigaon (*Zagang*) and *Thungre*. The smaller component, a bit farther west towards Bhutan, is Shergaon (*Sẽ thük*), an isolated big village which everybody considers as founded by the main core of Rupa

people, in a remote past. The two words, *Sē* and *Tukpen*, or *Ser* and *Tukpen*, give Sertukpen, adapted as Sherdukpen.

The language of Rupa and the surrounding villages can be considered as ‘Standard Sherdukpen’, although the real Standard is now the language of Rupa town, which has lost its tones. The language is still very much spoken, and most children do speak it fluently. We will see later (7.3) what problems beset the transmission of the language. The language is not written, except in a few official documents printed by the Tukpen Village Council (TVC), which acts as the official Secretariat for the Village local authorities; and by some literate people, who try to adapt an English writing of Hindi.

The Shergaon people, the *Sē-ji*, speak a very close dialect, and both groups can understand each other without any difficulty. Although the Tukpen Council (as its name indicates) does not interfere in Shergaon affairs, inter-marriages are frequent. The Shergaon speech (*Sē-ji nyuk - nyuk* means ‘speech’) is considered very gentle, “with a nice tune”, by Rupa people who often consider their own speech as “mixed”.

It is true that half the population of Rupa is “foreign”, mostly Nepali workers and Adivasi servants (Adivasi here means people from the Tea Gardens¹). Moreover, Indian Army camps are settled in very many places around Rupa – but relations between Army personnel and Sherdukpens, apart from Canteen shops, do not seem to be very close. Hindi is widespread indeed, and this language often appears in Sherdukpen conversations, except among older people. The more so among people who have followed a longer schooling, but this category often speaks English as well. Moreover, the generation who is now 50 or more often knows Assamese, because schools in this part of Arunachal first were in Assamese, before shifting to Hindi or English. There is no local newspaper or radio: Rupa is too small. Indian TV is everywhere, and Indian or English-language clips are watched on mobile phones.

Rupa developed considerably since Independence, as photos by Verrier Elwin and others show very well. In the 1950s, there were about 40-50 houses in Rupa, surrounded by jungle and ‘cactus’. The very few old beautiful stone-wood-bamboo houses that are left now amid the small world of concrete are a drawing testimony of the Old Rupa. The great expansion came with the timber business, during the 1970s and 1980s, an indirect consequence of the 1962 Chinese Aggression, after which the Indian Army built roads to Assam. Big money was made at that time, especially by families who owned the land, i.e. mostly Thong families. In 1993, the Supreme Court of India decided to stop a business that had dramatically transformed the landscape and eroded the slopes. These were dark times for the newly rich families, and stories run of ex-prosperous Thongs who secretly laboured at night, in order not to be seen during the infamous act of working. Since 2000, an entrepreneurial re-birth came with cash-crops, tomatoes and kiwis, and this benefitted a wider group of people. A major source of big money is ‘contracts’, mainly in the road/bridge building etc. either for the Indian State or the Army, as elsewhere in India. Yet prosperity, at least for the well-to-do families, is still linked with land ownership, a hot topic, and contributes keeping most Chao families away from benefits. This unequally spread prosperity has brought a large group of “foreign” workers in Rupa and around, as I said before.

¹ These people’s ancestors, mostly Munda language speakers, had been brought here from Orissa and neighbor states by the British planters, to work in the thriving tea plantations. Most of them lived a rather secluded life and hardly mixed with the local population.

There are a number of small villages around Rupa, all of them now reachable by more or less motorable road. Two of them are formed of Bhutanese people recently admitted (1990) into the lower clans of Sherdukpen society; they still speak 'Monpa' as well as Sherdukpen. The other villages have a longer pedigree of Sherdukpen. All are included into the local tax system (*chhkhok*). The bigger and most important one is *Thungre* (or Thongre), an old village where many of the rich families of Rupa have lands and friends. The difference between centre (Rupa) and surrounding villages also partly reflects the traditional and still perceptible cleavage between the Thong higher clans (*Thong*) living now mainly in Rupa, Jigaon and Shergaon, and the lower Chao ones (*Chhao*) who live partly in Rupa but mainly in the small villages.

Another Sherdukpen dialect (Sartang) is spoken, after a break in continuity, to the north, mostly in the three villages of Rahung², But (now Jirigaon) and Khoina. This dialect is distinct and to some extent difficult for Tukpen people. It is possible to hear Tukpen and Sartang people shifting to easier Hindi when speaking with each other. However, the closeness in speech is obvious to any speaker of Standard Sherdukpen who happens to visit these places – but there are not many visitors. These villages have long been considered 'Monpa'³, and they are now politically considered as Sartang, a specific category.

The higher clans of Sherdukpens, the *Thong* clans, agree that their ancestors came from far places in Tibet, according to a "migration model" that is frequent in North-East India and elsewhere. The founder-hero, Asu Japtong (Asu Gyaptong), is supposed to have come through these Sartang villages with his warrior band. In some places, you may be shown stones or trenches that are supposed to be related to his stay there. Priests (*zizi*) from these Sartang villages were for a long time considered as the best specialists in ritual, and were regularly invited to perform at ceremonies in Rupa. They were considered powerful and dangerous. In this scenario, the lower clans of present-day Sherdukpens, the *Chhao* clans or some among them, are supposed to have had their ancestors in situ, and to be the first inhabitants of Sherdukpen country. We will give indications about Shergaon and Rahung/Khoina speeches when possible. Some comparative comments will then be added - but this book is not about historical linguistics.

1.2. Writing Sherdukpen

Writing Sherdukpen implies special care for the 13 or 14 vowels; this will be described more fully in parts 1.1., 1.2., 1.3. below.

There are seven oral vowels: a, e, i, o, ö, u, ü.

All have a nasal counterpart: ã, ě, ĩ, õ, õ̃, ũ, ü̃.

Each nasal vowel is written like the corresponding oral one, plus a "tilde" above it.

	as in:
a	la, 'leg', aha 'yellow', ba 'fire'
e	be'e 'no', nese 'paddy'
ě	sě 'iron', ě ² -pa 'know', herě 'ribs'
i	nyi 'who', abi 'grandmother', ami 'mother'
ĩ	ihĩ 'root, nerve', chĩ-ba 'make sound'
o	zo' 'upper floor', abo 'father', oho 'blue'

² Whose inhabitants are considered to have come from Khoina, with a strong addition of Monpa people.

³ A cover term for a number of different people living on the fringe of Tibet.

ö	azö 'white', hatö 'picnic'
o	ta khö'-pa 'spit'
õ	dõ 'demon', chhõ-ba 'wash', gö 'monitor lizard'
u	su 'meat', du 'son', abu 'brother'
ũ	achũ 'black', asũ 'plain, flat', jũ 'house platform'
ü	skü 'now', bü-ba 'carry on back', gü 'wealth'
ũ	ũ-ba 'wipe', hũ-ba 'drop smthg', gũ 'leather'

The only real groups of vowels seem to be /ao/ and /iao/.

For consonants, we use 23 (groups of) letters:

b, ch, chh, d, g, h, j, k, kh, l, m, n, ng, p, ph, r, s, t, th, w, wh, y, z.

It is also possible to write 'ts' and 'tsh' instead of 'ch' and 'chh'.

In order to make a difference between short (or 'checked') and longer vowels, we write the short ones with an apostrophe:

	long	short	
blood	ha	ha'	food, rice
water	kho	kho'	stick
get up	yao-	yao'-	steal
monitor lizard	gö	gö'	rope bridge

The checked vowels are often pronounced slightly higher.

For details and explanations, see chapter 2. Phonology.

1.3. Word analysis

This grammar intends to explain how the language is built, how sentences and words are made. For this reason, we divide long words into their component units, and try to give explanations about what these units mean. For instance, instead of *Gatamji* 'Khoina people', we write *Gatam-ji*, making clear that *Gatam* means one thing ('Khoina') and *ji* another ('group, people'). Another example is *dacha* 'don't run!', which we write *da-cha* because *da-* here gives the negative meaning, and *cha* 'run'. In order to illustrate facts and problems, we give numerous examples. For instance:

wa ong-ba dükhüng-go gu ram-ba-ũ I came after he had gone
s3 go-Pf after-Loc s1 come-Pf-Ps

The first line gives the Sherdukpen sentence, divided in units, then a translation. Under the Sherdukpen sentence come 'glosses': indications about the meaning of each unit. Some glosses are clear, like 'go', 'after', 'come'. Some others are about grammar, and are given in a shortened form, for instance 's3' means 3rd person singular, Loc 'locative ending' (one indication of place or time), Pf 'perfect' because the *-ba* ending means a state of things arrived at (and is often translatable as a present tense). A

complete list of these shortened glosses is given below under § 5. Glosses begin with a capital letter, except indications of person⁴.

1.4. The technical lexicon and its conceptual basis

My opinion is that books should be readable, and that any superfluous show of technicalities is to be thrown overboard. Yet, things that are different have to be indicated as such, and this often requires names or labels. Since it is hardly convenient (for art or memory) for instance to label suffixes by numbers only, tradition and convenience conspire to give them names that suggest a meaning, or something like a meaning. So, a suffix *-lo* whose meaning, when added to a noun, is that some creature comes from that place or thing, a suffix which will often be translated in English by ‘from’ – will not be labelled ‘from’ but ‘ablative’. Why?

Two benefits. The obvious one is that ‘ablative’ is not English but common to all trained linguists, be they Chinese, French or Mexican: it escapes the difficulties that you automatically meet with ‘from’ when such a meaning is not worded like in English, but in a quite different way. Let us give one example. In the *Iliad* by Homer, written in a pretty old and mixed dialect of Greek, somebody tells about some children and uses the phrase⁵ *hoi hethen exegenonto gunaikôn te thnêtaôn* ‘who were issued from him and mortal women’. It combines two different ways of indicating ‘where-from’ (ablative). ‘From him’ is *hethen*: *he* ‘he’ and the postposition *-then* ‘from’. This is very much like in Sherdukpen, where you add *-lo* after a noun. But ‘and from mortal women’ is *ex-* (prefixed to the verb *genonto*) *gunaikôn te thnêtaôn* where the meaning ‘from’ is indicated by both the *ex-* and the *-ôn* at the end of noun *gunaikôn* and adjective *thnêtaôn*, except that *-ôn* also indicates there are several of them. Now, this is very different from Sherdukpen or English, and also from *hethen* just before. Several techniques are used, in the same language, in the same phrase; one that you can see as more simple, the other one as rather complicated. Since they have the same meaning, you have to indicate both techniques under one designation only, and it looks highly commendable not to suggest one of them is ‘better’. So, one will use a technical term, ‘ablative’.

There is another benefit. This term ‘ablative’ belongs to a group of technical terms describing directional movements, among which ‘ablative’ is contrastive. It indicates movement-from, while other terms indicate ‘movement-to’, ‘movement-in’ etc. Here, to explain those terms, we use ‘from’, ‘in’ etc. but many languages have more possibilities and it may become necessary to describe these specific movements with a complete and refined description. This description cannot be displayed complete every time you meet the technique that indicates that movement, and here again a technical term is welcome.

That once said, we have to admit that there exists in language description a far more shady area. This is when you have to use general concepts or ideas without being sure they fit the language you describe. A good example is ‘time’. Some philosophers like Aristotle or Kant decided, with some interesting reasons, that it is difficult or perhaps impossible to think of the world which we live in, without two basic notions, time and space. Consequently, one is inclined to look into languages, to discover how time and space are modelled or expressed by people. We have just suggested that ‘space’ is treated in different ways, but at least we can see where it is at hand, and how it is described. Since we can agree that there is something like ‘space’, we can look for its expression in many languages,

⁴ Writing ‘S3’ instead of ‘s3’ for singular 3rd person would be consistent with the principle that glosses begin with a capital, but S and P in grammatical glosses often mean ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’.

⁵ *Iliad* 20.305.

and compare them. It works, or to a point. We perhaps should not push it too far, yet there is a wide area where a number of people agree about what 'space' is, and about the varieties of possibilities languages provide for expressing 'it'.

The problem looks harder with 'time'. Most people who went to school would probably say, on request, that time is concerned with past, present, future. We have regrets, and expectations; tomorrow sounds different from yesterday. A number of landmarks, sun, moon and memories, help us to 'map' time and part of this mapping – as the term 'mapping' suggests – is space-like. In that view, time looks like a thin and stretched bit of space we can run along, at least by thinking. The difficulty is, when we again look into languages to discover how 'time' is worded, that it is not very clear. A great number of other thoughts seem to interfere. In English, for instance, there is a striking contrast between 'past', usually (but not at all consistently) marked with *-ed* on verbs, and 'future' where you have to add a verb *will* and, if you insist on good English, *shall*. It is not difficult to realize that 'you will write' is a kind of special result of 'you want to write', which is confirmed by the polite way it is expressed when I do it: the 'will' is replaced by the 'wish' suggested by the now rare verb *shall* or its past, *should*. The result is that, in English, 'past' and 'future' are not symmetrical, as we see from the way they are expressed. 'Future' needs care, a special extra-verb, or even two of them, while 'past' needs only a flat suffix, or is half hidden in the vowels like in *give* and *gave*. 'Future' is clean, with its special auxiliary verb, but *will write* then borders on many other areas like *would write*, *should write*, *can write*, *must write*, all kinds of important nuances to which future belongs, much more than it borders 'past'. Actually, the group of nuances makes a fine set, where the person acts, feels, interferes, wishes, etc. And this makes a quite different category or a quite different concept from 'past'.

Once doubt begins, it is hard to stop it. After all, 'past' is not at all like 'future'. Past is finished, is (or was) something real even if it was dreams: at least I did dream those dreams. 'Future' is very different and even if I am a man of prudent expectations, they have that cotton-like resilience I cannot expect from my memories! Then, can I reasonably admit that 'past' and 'future' can be put up together and be combined in something that is 'time'? It looks all very hazy. Even without being too much a philosopher, one easily sees or feels how shaky is the combination. It does not seem so obvious, after all, that 'future' becomes 'present', and then 'past'. There is some very queer gastric or digestive metaphor hiddenly working in this tube-like process!

Should we reject 'time' in linguistic description? We should. Shall we do it? Hum. Readers would usually see what sort of things we mean when we write 'time', and how else should we indicate that kind of concern? Should we devise another 'mapping' of life and languages? Certainly, but how? Obviously 'time' has the dark quality of a default concept: we would wish a better one and a more lucid way of seeing things – except that we only have a wish on one side and 'time' on the other. Since we are describing languages, by which people are supposed to express their views, we could try to devise philosophical concepts improving on 'time', that would be based on this or that language, on Sherdukpen for instance. But would it stick to Sherdukpen, and the more faithful to Sherdukpen language forms it would be, the more obscure or misleading for other readers. Moreover, would it stick so well to Sherdukpen? We just described what happened with English: can we say that the way English language is shaped, 'expresses' the way English-speaking people think or feel? Certainly not! First because we do not change our views so easily when we shift from one language to another: a language is a set of constraints all right, but not so much... if it were, we would become very ill every time we shift from one language to another! Also, English and all languages are not really built as a house or a pyramid. We saw that for the 'past', English has a number of techniques, the *-ed* technique with variants (*wanted*, but *heard*, *did*, *thought*) and many more tricky ones (*set*, *cast*; *ran*, *gave*, *saw*): which one does 'express' English lore correctly? The question is absurd. A category of 'time' that would

stick to English, would stick to what exactly? The result of this last exploration is bewildering. It boils down to a sad consequence: we use concepts we are unable to justify, but also unable to substitute.

The good question now seems to be another one: how can we understand anything, since we seem to work with such spooky tools? Is it really because of 'tradition'? Are we really so much pasted or glued to old pages, that our wings are unable to make us escape from the cage? That would explain the bad sides of tradition, but not how we can manage nevertheless, and still less why we can so clearly criticize what we live by. The explanation is that terms do not come alone. For all its fuzziness, a term like 'time' is seen as one piece only in a larger game where, not only the neighbouring 'space', but their areas of use ('verbs', 'adverbs', 'adpositions' etc.) efficiently contribute to clear up meanings. A term like 'past' is certainly debatable, as well as 'present', 'future' and many others – but taken together and used in a description with examples, the reader soon realizes how their very imperfect frontiers come, more or less, to make provisional maps. If you use 'future' by itself, you never know what your reader may understand, and you are lost. But for instance in a contents page, the reader may make one's ideas about how terms are juggled with each other, or set against each other – or the metaphor of N-dimensional space you may find more familiar.

In a way, this makes Kant (or perhaps a simplified view of what he wrote) turned inside out. The philosopher Kant researched what in the mind is indispensable for perceiving the world. Although he admitted that the objects we perceive are the indispensable stimulus for thought, he reasoned that they were not sufficient and could not explain alone how we think; there should be conceptions somehow before these objects or at least different from them; these conceptions with the objects we perceive would make intelligence possible. His favourite examples for helping us to realize that some ideas do not depend on the objects we perceive, are 'all changes must have a cause' and the fact that, according to him, when imagining an object we can dispense with colour or reflections, resilience or weight, but not with the 'space occupied by the object'; these two examples already suggest, if not contain, his idea that basic thought cannot do without space and time. In Kant's method, space and time are what imagination or thought cannot do without; somehow they are what is left when all else is relaxed. So, space and time appear as general conditions for the understanding of anything.

Yet, 'space' and 'time' are something different for the people who write grammars, and certainly for people who read them. Here 'space' and 'time' operate as super-labels for describing specific things, not all of them. 'Space' will be useful only if you contrast it with something else, for instance 'agency' or 'gender', because in a collection of available affixes you have to classify which is which. The same is true with 'time', although it often concerns verbs (but never only verbs) rather than nouns, because for instance among the possible affixes to a verb, some may suggest something like time, but others do suggest different criteria like person, number of agents of patients, reciprocity, negativity etc. In such a descriptive and contrastive context, 'space' and 'time' are not categories for a general understanding of things or events, but categories that help classify a group of forms into subsets.

The reason why we use terms like 'space' and 'time' in grammatical description is then rather different from what we mean by 'space' and 'time' in a more general manner. 'Space' in grammar has to do with 'space' in general, but relatively, only in that measure it helps sorting out things; this or that suffix or grammatical pattern will be described under the label 'space' because it (rather) has to do with space, not because it describes space nor really places things in space. This becomes obvious when we compare languages. The ambition regarding space is different from language to language, and very often, there are side effects with forms that are supposed to describe 'space'. A typical example, also valid for Sherdukpen, is with demonstrative pronouns or adjectives. Often, they are described as 'closer' or 'farther' to or from the speaker or his/her representative; this does suggest a description of space. Yet, in most cases these demonstrative words do not tell if the designated thing or person is

closer or not, but just provide a listing effect, for instance when you ask ‘do you prefer this or that?’ a question that has rarely to do with distance but with colour, form, taste or any contribution to choice. Most notably, in English and often, ‘that’ is a neutral form and ‘this’ is a marked one; this is why it makes (or may make) a difference if you ask ‘have you seen that?’ or ‘have you seen this?’, once again without any distance ingredient. ‘Space’ is then a difficult category, and can rarely be taken at face value; the same is true with time. The bigger the concept, the bigger the risk to have it used in an unexpected way.

We could perhaps learn something for such an delusive principle. As within language, where words do mean something, but do it all the more when working in the flow of speech or in the elaboration of narrative, so without the language when we use words to pinpoint phenomena and when we try to sort out ‘how it works’. Language description, either when we write it or when we read it, teaches us a reasonable skepticism: ‘person’ does not mean ‘person’, ‘time’ does not mean ‘time’, ‘space’ does not mean ‘space’, these words sound like masks in some *Commedia dell’Arte* or other comedy, but this is the firm principle of theater. A mask looks unconvincing when alone, yet things change when the intrigue is running.

1.5. Abbreviations and glosses

Nearly all abbreviations are given in the two charts below. The first chart gives abbreviations in alphabetical order; the second one gives words or suffixes in alphabetical order. Other abbreviations are for personal pronouns: s1 s2 s3 denote 1st, 2nd and 3rd person singular; p1 p2 p3 for plural.

For an analytical list of grammatical suffixes, see chapter 5. The last column of the chart gives the chapter and section where the grammar point is discussed.

1.5.1. Alphabetical list of abbreviations in glosses

A	-’o	agent marker	2.1.1
Abl	-la, -lo	Ablative	2.2.3
Adl	-ro	Adlative (Khoina)	2.2.3
Adv	-no	Adversative topic	2.2.4
An	-zing	until now	2.6.10
Cnt	-bo	Continuative	2.6.6
Com	-la	Comitative	4.7.3
Cv	-ro	Converb	3.1
Dbt	bam	Doubt	2.6.2
Df	d ^o -, n ^o -	Defence (Ng Imperative)	1.2.4, 2.8
Dir	-ta, -to	Direction	
Ds	-rang	Distributive indefinite	2.1.5
Du	-zing	Dual (with pronouns)	2.1.1
Ext	-thě	Extensive	2.5.8
F	-mu	feminine	
Fac	-chhi-	Factitive	2.5.3
Fe	-mat	female on N	
Ft	-mu	future	2.6.8
Gp	-na	Gap in time fut/past	2.6.9
Ind	-nya.ĩ	Indefinite pronoun	2.1.5
Int	-ni, -ĩ	Interrogative	2.2.3
Ip	-mo	Imperative	2.4.8

Ipf	-ma	Imperfective aspect	2.4.4, 2.6.5, 2.6.8
Ite	-da-	Iterative	2.5.6
Loc	-go	Locative	2.2.3
NCn	-raĩ, -rẽ	Negation of continuative	
Ng	b ^o -, m ^o -	Negation	1.2.4, 2.8
NGp	-do	No gap in time fut/past	2.6.9
NGp-Fut	-do-m		2.6.8
NgL	bo'ó	negative locative predicate	2.8
NgN	be'e	negative predicate	2.8
NTm	-la	Non witness	2.6.5
O	-ni, -ĩ	patient marker	2.1.1.
Obl	-che'	Obligative: 'must'	2.5.7
Obl-Fut	-che'-ma		2.6.8
Pf	-ba, -pa	Perfective aspect	2.6.5, 2.6.7
Pfp	-ba-ũ	past tense	2.6.7
Po	-bu	Availability, possibility	2.5.9
Po	-lan	From now on	2.6.10, 2.5.10
Pos	-ũ, -õ	Possessive, genitive	2.2.1
Pros	-ra'a	Prosecutive	3.2
Ps	-õ	Past	2.6.7
PsR	-nyi	Past recent	2.6.7
Qn	-a, -ã	Question	2.1.4
Rec	-di'	Reciprocal, reflexive	2.5.4/5
Ref	-ji	Reflexive	2.1.2
Sp	-po	Specifier, with nouns	2.6.1.
T	-gi	Topic	2.2.4, 2.6.1

1.5.2. Alphabetical list of affixes

-a, -ã	Qn	question mark	2.1.4
b ^o -, m ^o -	Ng	Negation	1.2.4, 2.8
-ba, -pa	Pf	Perfective aspect	2.6.5, 2.6.7
-ba-ũ	Pfp	past tense	2.6.7
bam	Dbt	Doubt	2.6.2
be'e	NgN	negative predicate	2.8
-bo	Cnt	Continuative	2.6.6
bo'ó	NgL	negative locative predicate	2.8
-bu	Po	Availability, possibility	2.5.9
-bu		for years past	4.2
-che'	Obl	Obligative: 'must'	2.7
-che'-ma	Obl-Ipf		2.7
-chĩ	Abi	Abilitative	2.7
-chhi	Fc	Factitive	2.7
-chho	Cap	Capacitative	2.7
d ^o -, n ^o -	Df	Defence (Ng Imperative)	1.2.4, 2.8
d ^o --ni		for days past	4.2
-da-	Ite	Iterative	2.5.6

-di'	Rec	Reciprocal, reflexive	2.5.4/5
-do	NGp	No gap in time fut/past	2.6.9
-do-m	NGp-lpf		2.6.8
-ji		people	4.3.1
-ji	Ref	Reflexive	2.1.2
-gi	T	Topic	2.2.4, 2.6.1
-go	Loc	Locative	2.2.3
-la, -lo	Abl	Ablative	2.2.3
-la	Com	Comitative	4.7.3
-la	NTm	Non witness	2.6.5
-lan	Po	From now on	2.6.10, 2.5.10
lin-		for days to come	4.2
-ma	lpf	Imperfective aspect	2.4.4, 2.6.5, 2.6.8
-mat	Fe	female on N	
min-		for years to come	4.2
-mo	lp	Imperative	2.4.8
-mu	Ft	future	2.6.8
-mu	F	feminine	
-na	Gp	Gap in time fut/past	2.6.9
-na-m	Gp-lpf		2.6.8
-na, -ã	Qn	Question	
-ni, -ĩ	O	patient marker	2.1.1.
-ni, -ĩ	Int	Interrogative	2.2.3
-no	Adv	Adversative topic	2.2.4
-nya.ĩ	Ind	Indefinite pronoun	2.1.5
-nyi, ĩ	Pst	Past recent	2.6.7
-õ	Ps	Past	2.6.7
-'o	A	agent marker	2.1.1
-po	Sp	Specifier, with nouns	2.6.1.
-ra'a	Pros	Prosecutive	3.2
-raĩ, -rẽ	NCn	Negation of continuative	2.6.3
-rang	Ds	Distributive indefinite	2.1.5
-ro	Adl	Adlative (Khoina)	2.2.3
-ro	Cv	Converb	3.1
-ru	Def		
-ta, -to	Dir	Direction	2.1.6
-thẽ	Ext	Extensive	2.5.8
thi		also	2.2.5
-ũ, -õ	Pos	Possessive, genitive	2.2.1
-zing	Du	Dual (with pronouns)	2.1.1
-zing	An	until now	2.6.10

2. Phonology

This chapter is devoted to the sounds of the language. Some of these sounds are found in many languages, but some others are rare. We would like to praise the Sherdukpen people who suffered repeated questions about sounds, when they were anxious to teach the meanings. We remember one evening with Tsering and Khandu Thongdok, who gathered elderly experts around a bokhari, and I spoiled the feast by harassing them with questions about rare sounds like /ě/, /ĩ/ and /õ/ (see hereafter). They were amused. More recently, Dorje Khandu Thongon, with the help of his wife Pema Chhom, took a careful interest in checking the accuracy of my chart of sounds, and the whole glossary – a rare feat. Many people took care of repeating words and sentences several times: to all of them, thank you.

2.1. Phoneme lists and minimal pairs

2.1.1. Initials and finals

Some sounds (phonemes) are not found, or rare, in the beginning of words, or are never found at the end of syllables. It is then useful to make two lists.

1/ Initials

m	b	p	ph	w	wh
n	d	t	th	l	
	g	k	kh	y	
ny	z	s		r	
	j	ch	chh		h

a	e	i	o	ö	u	ü
	ě	ĩ	õ			ũ

2/ Finals

a	e	i	o	ö	u	ü
(ã)	ě	ĩ	õ	õ	ũ	ũ

ao
aõ

m	p		
n	t		
ng	k	r	'

Comparing these two lists, we can guess for instance that the 'ng' sound is rare or never at the beginning of words, but can be found in the ending. On the contrary, 'ny' is found in the beginning, but never at the end.

2.1.2. Minimal pairs

In order to make sure which sounds are different, you have to find examples that make the difference. For instance *lü* and *lu* mean different things (respect. 'body' and 'mountain'), then you may feel confident that the sound /u/ and the sound /ü/ are not the same. Another example: *cha!* means 'run!' and *chha!* means 'buy!'. It follows that /ch/ and /chh/ are significantly different sounds, and that you must catch this difference if you speak Sherdukpen. Words in pairs like *lu* and *lü*, or *cha* and *chha*, are

called minimal pairs. Of course you can contrast more than two words, as we have done in the charts below.

Vowels

In the first chart, we find 9 different words, all with sound /g/+ vowel. This helps showing that these 9 vowels are distinct. The same process applies in the following charts.

a	ga	we
ao	gao	reliquary necklace (< Tibetan)
i	gi	(topic in grammar)
o	go	saddle
ö	gö	rope & cane bridge
ō	gō	monitor lizard
u	gu	l
ü	gü	wealth, gü-ba 'like, love'
ũ	gũ-ba	make faces, transform oneself

a	ha	blood; ha' 'food, rice'
e	he'-pa	spread (water, ash etc.)
ĩ	hĩ	flat land; hĩ-ba 'getting well'
o	ho'-pa	pull out something, be hanging; chop
ö	hö-ba	peel (skin)
ũ	hũ'	salt
ü	hü-ba	drop, let drop

ao	khao	akhao 'elder', khao-ba 'snatch'
e	khe'-pa	cry
i	khi	cane
o	kho	water
ö	khö'-pa	to spit
u	khu	five
ũ	ba-khũ	charcoal
ü	ba-khü	smoke

a	la'	leg, foot
e	lele'	beauty
ě	slě	spleen
i	li'	bow
o	lo	south ; lo-ba 'plant(seeds)'
u	lu	mountain
ü	lü	sacred stone & its inhabitant

o	pho'	yeast
ö	phö	flag
u	phu	mountain god
ũ	phũ	tiger

ü	phü	insect, phü-ba 'present, offer'
---	-----	---------------------------------

a	sa'	poison
ao	sao	hyena
e	se	rhino
ě	sě	iron
i	si	grass, fodder
ĩ	sĩ-ba	smell (bad)
o	so'-pa	speak
õ	sõ	ten
ō	sō	Sichuan pepper, 'jabrang'.
u	su'	meat
ũ	sũ	a draw-bridge
ü	sü-ba	meet
ū	sū	a little bit of something

ě	thě-	take
i	thi	this
o	tho'	oil
õ	thõ thük	Rupa
ö	thö	bridge
ü	thü	that other side
ū	thū	thū-ba 'cover with basket'

a	za-	laugh
ao	zao-	mix
e	ze-	eat (highly honorific)
i	zi'	Fr. carquois
ĩ	zĩ-	lead (the way)
o	zo'	upper floor
õ	zõ-	clear the guilt
ö	zö-	stay aside
ō	zō:	goat

Putting those charts together, we find:

	a	e	ě	i	ĩ	o	õ	ö	ō	u	ũ	ü	ū	ao
g	+			+		+		+	+	+		+	+	+
h	+	+			+	+	+				+		+	
kh		+		+		+	+	+		+		+		+
la	+	+	+	+		+				+		+		
ph						+	+			+	+	+		
s	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+
th			+	+		+	+	+				+	+	
z	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+					+

All vowels that are found after the same consonant (in the same line above) are contrastive. For instance, the fact that /u/ is different from /ü/ is clear because both occur after /l/ or /kh/ or /g/ or /s/⁶.

If we look at the four /o/, /õ/, /ö/, /ȭ/, the difference

- between /o/ and /õ/ is proved because both occur after /kh/, /h/, /s/, /z/;
- between /o/ and /ö/, because both occur after /kh/, /g/, /z/;
- between /o/ and /ȭ/ because both occur after /s/, /z/;
- between /õ/ and /ö/ because both occur after /kh/, /z/;
- between /õ/ and /ȭ/ because both occur after /s/, /z/;
- between /ö/ and /ȭ/ because both occur after /z/.

In the same way, the chart helps checking which vowels can be proved distinct or not, from the lists of words above. Before concluding, we have to take into account new lists.

Oral / nasal contrast

	e	ě	
beauty	lele	slě	spleen
rhino	se	sě	iron
give birth	ke-ba	kě	near
	i	ĩ	
to die	i-ba	ĩ-ba	to wipe
grass, fodder	si	sĩ-ba	smell bad
	o	õ	
to see	o-ba	õ'õ	dry
blue	oho	dahõ	vegetable (a species)
tax	kho	ba-khõ	charcoal
(imperative suffix)	mo	mõ	butter
be hanging (cloth)	no-ba	anõ-du	slowly, softly
to speak	so-ba	sõ	ten
to write	zo-ba	zõ-ba	clear the guilt
	ö	ȭ	
cane & rope bridge	gö	gȭ	monitor lizard
	u	ũ	
potato	ju	jũ	platform bef. house
	ü	ũ̄	
spiritual son	rübi	rũ̄	thick jungle
wealth	gü	gũ̄	make faces, transform
meet; suffocate	sü	sũ̄	ait little

The ö / ě contrast

	ě	ö	
near	kě	chökö'	bee (species of)

⁶ This is a shortcut. The meaning is: because both vowels occur after /l/ in words having distinct meanings, etc. See above.

	ě	õ	
liver	ěchhě	dõchhõ'	wasp (a big species)

and

o-ba	to see
õ'-pa	to be in hurry
õ-ba	to be dry

Several points remain unclear. Some will be settled in later sections.

Consonants

	i-ba	to die
b	abi	grand-mother
d	di'-pa	ik-khat di'-pa 'arm wrestling'
j	ji'	others
g	gi	(topic)
kh	khi'	cane
l	li	bow
m	ami	mother
n	nini	sun
ny	anyi	female of other clan
r	ri-ba	burn
s	si	grass
t	jati	spear
th	thi	this
chh	achhi	father
y	yi-ba	distribute
z	zi	urine

Contrast for alveolars and affricates:

ch	cha-ba	to run
chh	chha-ba	to buy
z	za-ba	to laugh
s	sa'	poison

n / ny

softly	anõ-du	anyõ	proper, properly
shoes	nunu	nyu	fish
(interrogation)	ni	nyi	who?

Some pairs for the final check are (see 1.2.1.):

fire	ba:	ba'	present, be there
water	kho:	kho'	stick
blood	ha:	ha'	food, rice
get up	yao:	yao'	steal
dice	su:	su'	meat

monitor lizard	gö:	gö'	hanging bridge
nature's call	hũ:	hũ'	salt
urine	zi:	zi'	Fr. carquois

A rare sound is /jy/, probably from /j/ + /iao/ as in *jiao* 'thief', different from *diao* 'yesterday'.

2.2. The vowels

We will here describe some touchy points about vowels, and their groupings.

The full range of contrasting vowels is:

a	e	i	o	ö	u	ü
ã	ẽ	ĩ	õ	õ̃	ũ	ũ̃

With one frequent diphthong /ao/ and a rare one /aõ/:

ao
aõ

2.2.1. Vowel length, pitch, tones

Tones still exist in three villages: Düksü, Mukhuting, Gorbao. They are also more or less audible among older people elsewhere, but not systematically. They disappeared in the bigger villages like Jigaon or even Thongre, and cannot be often heard in Rupa. The influence of Assamese and Hindi is probably the cause for this transformation. Since this description is about Rupa's speech, tones are not taken into account. Rarely, you can find in Rupa words with an "abnormally long vowel", for instance in *alêdu* 'pretty' or *yî-di'-pa* 'distribute property'.

What can be heard systematically, at least among elder people, or in the speech of those among the younger ones who have learnt the language carefully or with their grand-parents, is a difference between vowels that are abruptly stopped, and vowels that are not. The easiest description is to say that some vowels are 'short' and that others are 'long', but this does not convey the real sound. It is more exact to say that some vowels sound 'shortened' or 'checked', while others are not. In this book, the shortened ones are written with an apostrophe: *tha'* is with a shortened vowel, while *tha* is not.

Easy examples are (see also: 1.1.2. Minimal pairs, 1.3. Consonants):

	'long'	'short'	
fire	ba	ba'	present, be there
mother's sister	anyi	anyi'	brains
reptile	gö	gö'	hanging bridge
food	ha	ha'	blood
nature's call	hũ	hũ'	salt
<i>du ke-ba</i> give birth	ke	ke'-	charge, burden
water	kho	kho'	stick
Assam plains	nyu, nyũ	nyu'	fish
be itching	o-	o'-	kill
cattle, cow	spu	spu'	owner
dice	su	su'	meat
bridge	thö, thẽ	thö'-	throw
get up	yao	yao'	steal
urine	zi	zi'	Fr. carquois

prayer	nying	nyüng	breast, milk
(topic)	gi	gü	wealth; to swallow
cane	khi	ba-khü	smoke
bow	li	lü	inhabitant of sacred stone
women coming from the same clan	miring	mürüng	jackal, fox
sun	nini	nünü	baby

NB : nunu 'shoes'

The vowel /ü/ is frequent although in many cases younger generations pronounce /i/ instead. A word like *skü* 'now, presently' (**ski* is never heard) is frequent in the speech of everybody. A word like *phü* 'insect' (a better gloss is 'small animal' since spiders also are *phü*) can have a more central or less rounded vowel, but never a decided [phi], as far as we know. Yet, in bi-syllabic nouns with /i/ and /ü/, it may be difficult to discern the right sequence: /i-i/, /i-ü/, /ü-i/, /ü-ü/, and good speakers are required to give their advice.

Vowels /ö/ and /õ/

bö	ginger like plant
böchhö'	gun
gö, gë	monitor lizard
gö'	hanging bridge
khö'-pa	eject, spit; stear, mix
khro-ba	open (a box)
nö'-pa	harm
ö-ba	be in hurry
thö'-pa, the'-pa	throw
chökö	a wasp
chhö ram-ba	wake up
Chhölö, Chhëlä	Chilipam
zö-ba	stay aside

The Lexicon gives a rather small collection of /ö/. Younger speakers tend to pronounce /e/ instead of /ö/, and /ë/ instead of /õ/, for instance in *thö* or *nethö*. The Sherdukpen autonym *mõ* is now often pronounced *më*. When visiting the former settlement in Rochong, R. K. Karma described the ladder, *hing löthö*, with which one ascended, in times past, the upper platforms where the youngsters passed the night; D. K. Thongon re-pronounced it as *hing lëthë*, but was corrected by his elder. Confusions between /ö/ and /ë/ can also be heard, as the charts show.

The sound /õ/, the nasalized version of /ö/, is found in:

chhȫ-ba	wash (cloth)
chhȫ-ba	wake (somebody)
dõ	demon
döchhȫ	a big wasp
hȫsu	coriander
lȫthȫ, nȭthȫ	ladder
mõ	Sherdukpen
sõ, sõĩ	Sichuan pepper
thõ, thë	bridge

th [̄] ō-ba	sleep (for birds only)
z [̄] ō	goat

The final /i/ which is heard in the ever-present *sō̄r* (the Sichuan pepper that Assamese people call *jabrang*, and that played an important role in the trade between Assam and Rupa) is a problem, complicated by the relatively strong variation in the pronunciation of this word. It may be the result of an older /sön/; see 1.1.3 § 3.

Other consonants, such as *r, also seem to have played a role, but this chapter refrains from etymological discussion. The /ō/ is rare among younger speakers, who regularly substitute /ē/, and the same is true with /ü/ often substituted by /i/.

Vowels /ĩ/

The existence of /ĩ/ as a phoneme is clear. Several examples follow /h/. Here is a list:

angyĩ'	handle of knife
achhĩ	sweet
hĩ	flat land, plain
hĩ-ba	fall down
ihĩ	root, nerve
ĩ-ba	wipe, clean
chĩ	mucus
chĩ-ba	to make sound
zĩ-ba	lead

Vowel /ã/

The case of /ã/ is more embarrassing. It is heard in few cases, especially when it seems that /n/ or /ng/ has been lost. Examples are:

(1) *lok-dão*, a rapid-speech form, see /lok-dango/ in Jigaon;

(2) *nyakhã* or *nyakha* or *nyakho* 'where?';

(3) *skü-ã*, for *skü-nã* or *skü-na* 'now';

(4) *khãi* '20' – a form that has a number of local variants, among which *khan* and *khoan*, the [n] and nasalization of which might be explained by the Khoina form *kho-han* with *han* meaning '1'.

The *ã* form for *han* 'one, 1' is very widespread. Among numerous examples: *alangaĩ* 'a little' (*alang han*), or *jepoãĩ* 'much, a quantity' (*jepo-han*).

2.2.3. Vowel groups

The /ai/ group is rarely found. The /ai/ in *Ai-meme* 'grand-parents' certainly is a short form for *ayo*, one term for 'grand-mother'. *Baidong* 'singer ritual group', although not a Tibetan word, is probably a borrowed word. *Jowai* '100' and *khãi* (and variants) '20' are shortened forms, and would be more appropriately written *jo-ãĩ* and *kha-ãĩ* or *kho-ãĩ*, where *ãĩ* < *han* 'one'.

The /ao/ diphthong is common, and the /iao/ group is found in a few words. This /ao/ is not always a straightforward diphthong. For instance, there is a phonetic difference between *yao-ba* 'steal, rob' and *yao-ba* 'wake up'. The first one is accented on [a], not the second, which should perhaps be written /yawo-ba/. I know only one example of /aõ/: *haõ* 'salty plot of land'.

A few examples of /ao/:

achhao	sharp
akhao	eldest
chhao	the 'lower clans'
chhao'	nivrea, fish poison
dochhao	mouth
khao	door (house).
phao-ba	to dry
sao-ba	look for
tao-ba	to climb
zao-ba	to fry on fire

Examples of /iao/ are:

diao	yesterday
jiao	thief
khiao	flying cat
miao	chest
phiao	knot

Other vowel groups beginning with /i/ do not seem to occur. But we have to take into account the /ny/ consonant. Maybe the origin of, for instance, *diao* is *di-yao; and we could imagine a similar historical development for the few other cases; but *diao* etc. is a better writing for the actual pronunciation.

The /uo/ group is found in *juõ* 'dumb, stupid' and *suo* 'ox'; it might be analyzed as /uwo/.

2.2.4. Words beginning with vowels

Except for /a/, a prefix with a grammatical role, vowels are not common at the beginning of words. In our lexicon, the distribution is:

a	91	ã	
e	2	ẽ	4
i	22	ĩ	1
o	17	õ	1
ö	1	õ	
u	7	ũ	
ü		ũ	1

A few observations are needed.

The number of words beginnings with /i/ is important only because of the numerous compounds with *ik* 'hand, arm'. If we do not include them, the count falls to 7.

The number of words beginnings with /o/ is reduced to 9, if we exclude the forms where /o/ is the phonetic variation of /a/ under the influence of a following rounded vowel, for instance *ojo* (< *ajo*) 'high', *oho* (< *aho*) 'blue', *ohomiya* (from Assamese < *ahomiya*) 'Assamese', *oyung* (< *ayung*) 'shadow', *ochho* (< *achho*) 'on the right', *ozu*, a technical variant of *azu*.

The same remark is valid with /u/. Words beginning with phonemic /u/ are *uhu* 'ceremony' (arguably), *uk-pa* 'hide', *ung* 'three', *ur-ba* 'provoke pain'.

In the Lexicon, we wrote some of these words two times, for instance *ajo* and *ojo*. So they are found here in our ‘census’. The reason is, that although the /a/ variant exists, a proportion of people would look for these words under the other vowel. Depending on local tradition, the proportion can be higher or lower. We did not indicate the /a/ variant when it is not heard, even if we could have reasons to think it is etymological. A good example is *ehék* ‘red’, which comes from *a-hek but is never heard **ahék*.

Words beginning with a nasal vowel are rare. See *ẽ-ba* ‘ride’, *ě'-pa* ‘know’ (and its derivative *ědi'pa*), *ĩ-ba* or *ũ-ba* ‘wipe, clean’ and *õ'õ* ‘dry’. Note that all are or are derived from mono-phonemic verbs.

2.3. The consonants

2.3.1. Nasal initials

The four points of articulation (m, n, ny, ng) are clearly distinguished, although the existence of *ng-* as an initial is disputable and (as far as this research could reach) is found only in *ngüng-lingma-thok*, the name of a creeper. Its appearance can be due to ‘Monpa’ or Tibetan influence: the language spoken in Kalaktang and Dirang has words with *ng-* in the beginning, as in Tibetan. In Standard Sherdukpen, we have /ng/ between vowels in very few cases: in *lok-dango* ‘bag’ (in Jigaon), *běngo* ‘deaf’, and last but not least *thongõ* - the name of one of the most influential clans in Shedukpen country, although the traditional writing as ‘Thongon’ has induced a [thong-gon] pronunciation, criticized by many⁷; it is not difficult to hear the true pronunciation *thongõ*, sometimes *thonga*, when listening to everyday conversation.

/ny/ is well attested. It may be discussed if this /ny/ is found before /i/, but it is clear in most other cases: speakers, when questioned, insist that ‘sun’ is *nini* (not **nyinyi*), that ‘who’ is *nyi* (not **ni*) etc. It can be found before all oral vowels. Some /ny-/ probably come from /ngy-/, as in the case of /nyit/ ‘two’; one case of /ngy/ is in /angyĩ/ ‘handle of knife’.

2.3.2. /b/ and /m/, /d/ and /n/

In many words, initial /b/ or /m/ depend on the speaker, perhaps on his or her home place. This can affect nouns for things like ‘banana’, /musung/ or /busung/, for times like *masang* or *basang* ‘tomorrow’, *mik* and *bik* ‘to blow’, *mekhe-ta* or *bekhe-ta* ‘to the left’; or names of clans as in *Mejiji* or (less common) *Bejiji*. However, not all names beginning in /b/ can convert in /m/, far from it. The subject has to be investigated. Is it the trace of an older prenasalized consonant /mb/?

One important case is the (rare) *m^o-* form of the negative prefix *b^o-*.

The same phenomenon occurs with some words beginning with /n/: /nese/ and /dese/ ‘paddy’ (latter is preferred), /n^achhao/ and /d^achhao/ (latter is preferred) ‘mouth’, /duphung/ and /nuphung/ ‘dark, night’. In the *Khiksaba Bakho* (see 7.2.2), sentence 5, we hear: *lu-lo ma na-na* ‘do not bring bamboo from the mountain’; *na-na* ‘do not bring’ is for more common *da-na* (defence + bring).

We wonder if some /g/ could have had a /ng/ variant; but, as we said before, the status of initial /ng/ is highly arguable. The word for ‘I’ (1st person pronoun) is *gu* (written Tibe. nga), and ‘five’ is *khu* (written Tib. l-nga).

⁷ Elders and people interested in Sherdukpen lore all agree that the true pronunciation is /thongõ/ or /thonga/. They may discuss the final vowel, which many think should be /a/, but there is a complete agreement on /ng/, against /ng-g/. The ‘English’ writing is the reason for the introduction of /ng-g/ among younger people.

2.3.3. Aspirated initials: ph, th, kh

/ph/ is often heard [f] but can be uttered in all possible ways between [f] and [ph]. /th/ is clearly distinct from /t/, and /kh/ from /k/, /chh/ from /ch/. Literate Sherdukpen speakers never hesitate about telling you if the consonant is to be written with or without ‘h’.

Aspirated initials are more common than non-aspirated.

Concerning initials, /w/ and /wh/ are rare but distinct from one another: *whu* ‘bird’ (‘bird’ is /fua/ in Bugun language), *whan* ‘new’ (mainly under its *awhan* form), *juwhu* ‘young man’.

2.3.4. Affricates: ch, chh, j

Note about a problem with orthography (not with pronunciation).

The orthography for *ch* and *chh* can certainly be criticized, although it is customary for Hindi-speaking people who write with the Latin alphabet⁸. Some Sherdukpen literate people prefer to write respectively *ts* and *tsh*, not without good reasons because the writing *ch*, because of the ‘h’, suggest an aspiration that does not exist; in the *chh* writing, the first ‘h’ actually means that the ‘c’ is not a ‘c’ but a /ts/, while the second ‘h’ is a true indication of aspiration – a rather strange system.

/ch/ is realized with the tongue pushed in front, while /chh/ is more palatal than dental. They may be phonetically driven to respectively [tʃ] and [tʃh]. Hindi pronunciation habits and Tibetanized manners (or mannerisms) are influential there. For this reason also, although a logical transcription would be “Chering”, it seems more convenient to write *Tsering*.

/j/ also is between [dz] and [dʒ].

2.3.5. Consonant /h/

A good number of words begin with /h/, a frequent phoneme in the language, in all dialects (see Lexicon); /h/ is also found between vowels, notably in colour names, *ehék* ‘red’, *oho* ‘blue’, *aha* ‘yellow’ – actually cases of roots beginning in /h/, with the *a*-prefix. A word difficult to pronounce is *hěřě* ‘ribs’, because the shortened first vowel brings a /hr/ cluster.

2.3.6. Final consonants

Final consonants are (see 1.1.1.) by rough order of frequency: ng, k, n, m, t, p, r. No final /l/ occurs, although inside words some speakers ‘float’ between /r/ and /l/, for instance in *labrang* / *lablang*, see Clusters (1.5.2.).

Syllab final /r/ appears in:

argo	limestone
chandar	(name of a god)
chhoskor	water-mill (< Tib.)
dornok	pants
dungkar	conch (< Tib.)
ergo	bell rope
gor	cubit

⁸ Although the phrases ‘English letters’, ‘English alphabet’, are common in India, because most Indian people come to know this alphabet through English, it is far better to go back to the standard designation ‘Latin alphabet’. English people, as many other people in Europe, received it from Roman conquerors.

Gorbao	(name of Village)
gormu	a round shaped surface
jogar	Plains people
jur jur	heaping (in containers)
kartham	culture, lore
kor	hoe (cf. Tib. 'jor)
kharbo	intestine envelope
la'-nardong	shin
lorjang	a singers' group
marchang	rice beer with butter (< Tib.)
marso	skin of some animals
ortong	neck
phor	fencing post
sar	east (< Tib.)
Sartang	the Rahung-Khoina people
Ser-pa	Shergaon people
sorbo	leaves fallen from trees
Srahor	Doimara (place name)
sumbar	cannon
ter-ba	throw (with the hand)
ur-ba	provoke pain
yokor	spindle
yoksar	neck of animals
yur-ba	bring down (in bee hunting)
Yuser	a quarter of Rupa
zor-pu	horse with a white spot

The status of the syllable final /'/ is clear. Phonetically, it is pointed by speakers themselves with the help a few standard examples, the favorite one being /ha/ 'blood' vs. /ha'/ 'food', where the contrast is variously described as of height, pitch, or sheer enthusiasm; speakers who have a knowledge of tones tend to use this description, but we doubt it really fits the facts although it is true that, as for instance in Garo, the checking /'/ is correlated to a higher pitch. The checking /'/ is never found with another final consonant⁹. It triggers the de-voicing of following suffixes, the most common being *-ba* (becomes *-pa* after /'/) and *-bo* (becomes *-po*). The same change occurs after unvoiced finals /p/, /t/, /k/, not after /m/, /n/, /ng/, /r/. It is easy to spot a checking /'/ in the end of verb roots, by requesting speakers to pronounce them with a convenient suffix (if the *-pa* variant comes up, it is a sure sign that the final vowel of the root is followed by /'/), while it is a more lengthy process with other parts of speech. Consequently, on that point, the Lexicon can be considered reliable for verbs, not so much elsewhere; in the Lexicon, verbs are written with *-ba* or *-pa* in order to stress that fact.

2.4. Syllables and word analysis

2.4.1. About words and phrases

Many syllables sound the same although they have a different meaning - such is the description by Sherdukpens themselves. Maybe this shyness is aggravated by the loss of tones in Rupa and bigger villages, but I guess that even with a language with tones, their idea would remain the same: they do not feel completely at ease with isolated words, nouns or verbs or other parts of speech, and they easily propose sentences or phrases in order to help delineating a better definition. Those who have a

⁹ In Miju Mishmi for instance, checked nasals (such as /'ng/) are very common.

feeling for grammatical precision remarked that a lexicon should include phrases; otherwise, words would remain difficult to describe, or would be lost in a variety of possible meanings.

The answer of standard lexicography is to open a new line when the same syllable or root give a clearly distinct meaning: we decide that this is a different word, with the same sound. There is of course a proportion of arbitrariness in such decisions, but it is a safe procedure. Nevertheless, it is true that, especially with monosyllabic roots of verbs, the identification of a verb without a context is close to impossible.

2.4.2. Syllable endings

The Lexicon (here reduced to c. 1600 words¹⁰) was searched for possible syllable endings. Numbers are given below. It should be stressed that such countings give only an approximation.

Vowels:

a	e	i	o	ö	u	ü	ao	
98	64	119	171	16	138	57	53	=716
ã	ě	ĩ	õ	ȫ	ũ	ǖ	aõ	
0	28	13	43	13	29	10	2	=138

To which add :

iao
4

Moreover, a number of non-standard vocalic endings are found:

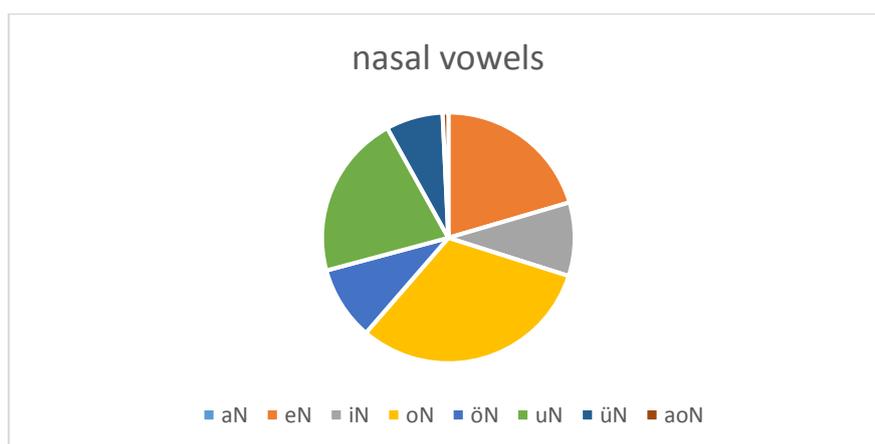
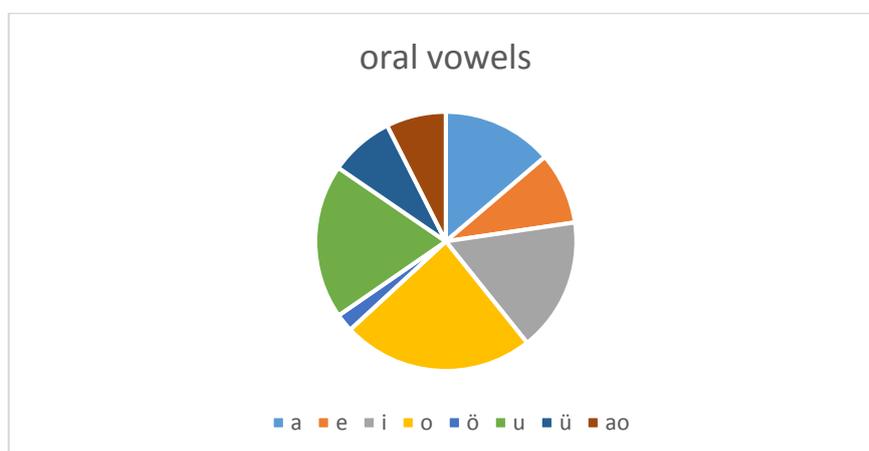
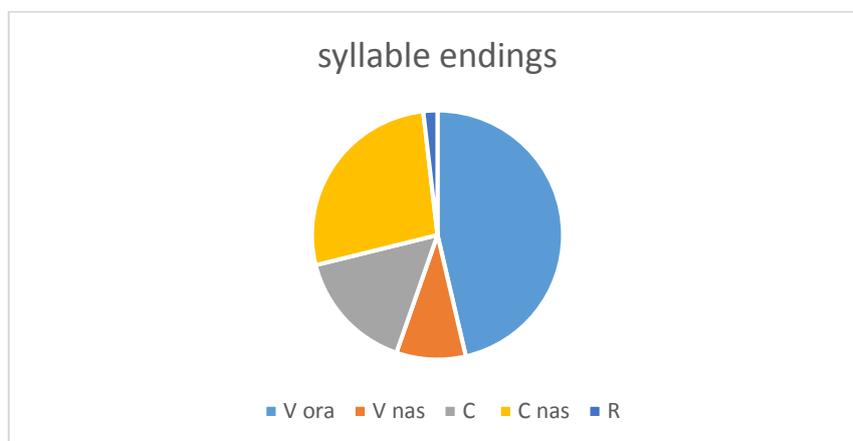
ai	Jowai
aĩ	adu-nyaĩ, aĩ, yanlaĩ, khãĩ or khaĩ
ěi	ik kuěi
iũ	riũ
uõ	juõ

Consonants:

	-m	-n	-ng	-r	-p	-t	-k	total
-a-	34	48	72	9	22	21	22	
-e-	1	2	26	5	3	13	13	
-i-	3	17	55		1		33	
-o-	21	4	49	9	11	5	59	
-u-	1	0	53	5			26	
-ü-	1	1	30			1	14	
					37	40	167	244
				28				28
	61	72	285					418
								690

¹⁰ Words or suffixes that appear several times have been counted only one or two times, depending on their use.

Three diagrams follow. In the 1st one, are given the proportions of oral (V ora) and nasal (V nas) vowels, of voiceless (C) and nasal (C nas) consonants, and /r/ (R). In the 2nd and 3rd are shown the details of the proportions for oral vowels and nasal vowels.



2.4.3. Syllable onsets

Vowels:

a	e	i	o	ö	u	ü	
109	2	23	20	1	8	0	=163
ã	ẽ	ĩ	õ	õ	ũ	ü	
0	4	1	2	0	0	1	=8

Consonants:

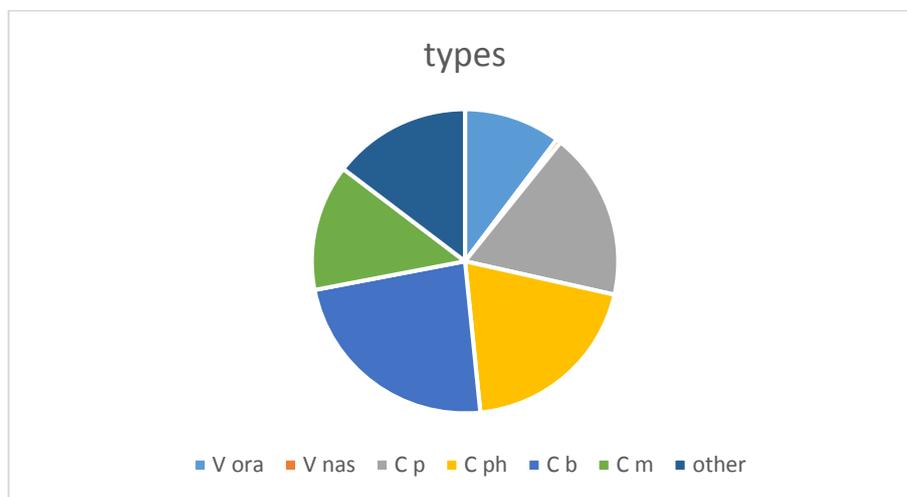
p	t	k	ch	s	
24	43	38	49	130	284
ph	th	kh	chh		
64	60	101	92		317
b	d	g	j	z	
97	83	60	70	66	376
m	n	ng	ny		
95	59	1	59		214

To be added:

l	r	w	wh	y	h	
69	46	18	1	48	51	233

Although the partition of the 3rd category under 'to be added' is somewhat arbitrary, it is useful to present a schema for them.

The 'Types' diagram that follows displays the proportion of these categories: oral vowels (V ora), nasal vowels (V nas), voiceless consonants (C p), aspirated consonants (C ph), voiced consonants (C b), nasal consonants (C m), and the rest (l, r, w and wh, y, h).



It should be noted that a vast majority (89 %) of syllabic onsets are with a consonant. This is all the more striking since most words beginning with a vowel (approx. 114 / 171 in the Lexicon, c. 66 %) actually have the a- prefix.

These statistics are to be read with care, and interpreted with due caution: the Lexicon from which they are derived is c. 1600 words only. Moreover, some words are repeated more than others if they

happen to produce compounds¹¹. For instance *ik* ‘hand, arm’ is found 15 times because there are 14 compounds beginning with this root; they form the major part of the 21 words beginning with /i/.

2.4.4. Mono-syllables, verbs and nouns

Most verb roots and a good number of nouns are 1-syllable. More nouns are 2-syllable, and in this case, we either have a real compound and each syllable is pronounced, or a strong accent on the last syllable which tends to reduce the first vowel to a short copy of the next vowel (see 1.5.2)

Examples of verb roots are:

ban-	have a dream
dan-	know
dap-	adopt
dok-	big
dok-	burn (jungle)
dūk-	put on (jacket)
düng-	sit down
jing-	sleep
jor-	attach
ě'-	know
hĩ-	fall down
hin-	lie down
hung-	be afraid
i-	die
ke-	give birth
ku-	chew
kha-	enter, go in
khe'-	cry
khe'-	squeeze, milk
khi-	stand up
khik-	put on (necklace)
khit-	éternuer
khok-	put on (belt)
khong-	carry
khop-	conceal, cover
khö'-	spit
khung-	be hungry
khyi'-	quake (earth)
khyom-	drop (smthg)

lan-	look at
le'-	stop, block
len-	take over
ling-	drink
lo-	spread (seeds)
long-	completed
lu-	bless
mat-	lie down
mik-	blow
mok-	fight
na-	bring
nap-	cover, put on shawl
no-	stretch
nö'-	be possessed
nyu-	thirsty
nyung-	desire, want
nyü'-	put on (pants)
o-	see
o'-	kill
õ-	dry
ö'-	be in hurry
ong-	go
phi-	present, offer
phing-	full
phong-	sacrifice
ra'-	prepare, cook
ram-	come
rek-	shoot (bow)
reng-	feel cold

There are some examples of nouns with one syllable:

ba	fire		hek	louse
ban	dream		hĩ	flat land, plain
bao	upper ground		hing	wood, tree
bũ	a sp. of tree		hõ	duck
dang	vegetable		hũ	nature's call
dõ	demon		hũ'	salt
du'	child		ik	arm, hand

¹¹ For the counting of onsets, we included all entries of the Lexicon.

jang	north		khao	door
ji'	stranger		kheng	horn
jo	tea		khi	cane
jok	wool		khik	necklace
jong	grass		kho:	water
ju	potato		kho'	stick, rod
gam	box, trunk		khū	garden
gō	reptile		ya	dung
gong	stem (plant)		yak	yak
gū	wealth		yam	house
ha'	food, rice		yo'	clothes
ha	blood		yuk	basket (one sort)

2.5. Morpho-phonemics & consonant clusters

2.5.1. Reduced first vowel: the problem

Consider the following contrast:

gu no zilik ram-bo I feel angry
s1 Adv angry come-Cnt

gu no zi lik ram-bo I'll go for a pee
s1-Adv urine pass come-Cnt

In the first example, the word *zilik* should be pronounced with its first syllable short, [zlik]. In the second example, the word *zi* 'urine' has its own accent.

When a noun or a verb form has two identical vowels (for instance *chholo* 'elder brother of father'), the first vowel is normally strongly reduced or erased (we hear *chh^olo* or even *chhlo*). This give a strong iambic turn (short syllable + long syllable) to the language – a feature which happens to be common in South-East Asia¹². Some examples with 'full' and 'short' pronunciation:

full	short	
baccha	pchha	chicken
bachham	pchham	snake
bazao	bzao	thorn
bechhē	pchhē	worms (in meat)
bisi	psi [pfj]	four, 4
bichi'	pchi'	pine tree
bocholō	bcholō	sparrow
chökō	chkō	bee
chheple	chhple	flat, pressed flat
chhoko'	chhko'	spoon
chholo	chhlo	older male of same clan
chhulung	chhlung	hole
dochhao	d ^o chhao	mouth
duphung	dphung	night

In the discussion that follows, we will write

- C for consonant

¹² This is what Jim Matisoff calls a sesquisyllabic pattern. Sesqui- is a Latin term that means 'a half plus one'.

- V	full vowel
- v	reduced vowel

A consequence of the strong accent on the last syllable should be (we would expect it to be) the formation of new consonant clusters (see 1.5.2): instead of CvCV, we would have CCV. An example is the word *chhokok* ‘a group of citizen paying tax together’; the word is actually pronounced *chh^okok* or *chhkok* (CvCVC or CCVC). Why do we write *chhoko* and *chhokok*, instead of *chhlo* and *chhkok*? Because in slow speech, the first vowel is heard, although shorter than the second one. The degree of pronunciation of first syllables in slow pronunciation heavily depends on the speaker: some know that *chhlo* (CCV) is actually *chhoko* (CvCV), some do not. Most people do know, and would admit that in all cases the first syllable is shorter. After a few generations we would expect numerous words like *chhlo* (CCV) or like *chhkok* (CCVC), with no trace of the possible *chhoko* or *chhokok*. Yet, very few consonant ‘solid’ clusters appear in the present-day language, and the speakers still consider those words to be with two syllables.

Real consonant clusters at the beginning of words do exist. They are typically formed with /s/ + consonant, such as *spu* (CCV) ‘cow, cattle’ or *stu* (CCV) ‘horse’: no speaker would think of them as **supu* (CvCV) and **sutu* and they are never pronounced in this way. Comparative linguistics shows that in the past they indeed were **supu* and **sutu*¹³, but since nobody ever pronounces them that way even in slow speech, it seems quite inappropriate to write them with two syllables. However, the degree of pronunciation of those first syllables also depends on phonetic factors. Clusters CCV are more easily pronounced CvCV before /r/ and /l/: *sri* ‘sacred stone’ is *siri* in slow speech, and *slě* is also given as *sělē* ‘spleen’. When /s/ is followed by a /p/, /t/, /k/ consonant, we usually have a “true” CCV word.

Since this phenomenon is observed only when the two vowels are identical, it is quite possible to describe the facts in a different way. We may consider that the first syllable is reduced and has no vowel of its own, only an echo from the next vowel. In this alternative presentation, we should write *chh^okok* ‘taxation group’ or *s^olüng* ‘heart’, with a small sign ‘^o’ indicating an echo vowel, whose actual sound depends entirely upon the next true vowel. This would be more accurate, but more difficult to read. We retained the description with ‘^o’ only in grammatical explanations.

2.5.2. Short vowels in grammatical prefixes

Verb roots are mostly mono-syllabic (see 1.4.4.), and verb forms are usually made with prefixes or suffixes attached before or after the verb root. Negative markers are prefixed, either in imperative or in declarative sentences (see 2.8. and 2.9.). The result of Negation + Verb root is a two-syllable derivative¹⁴, for instance *ling-* ‘drink’ and *bi-ling-* ‘not drink’. The stress or accent is then on the second syllable (the verb root), and the first syllable (the negative prefix) is shortened to the point of having only a reduced vowel (b^ling-¹⁵) or no vowel (*bling-*). This vowel is heard as a shortened copy of the next full vowel, viz. the vowel of the verb root (See 1.5.1.) Since it is only an ‘echo-vowel’, the negative prefix *b-* does not have its own vowel. But since, it has a short vowel nevertheless, the ‘colour’ of which

¹³ In both these cases, the first syllable *su-* come from a root meaning ‘animal’. A ‘memory’ of this root in Sherdukpen is found in *su* ‘meat’.

¹⁴ It is useful here to make a distinction between compounding and derivation. A compound (the result of compounding) is build with two words of about the same status, for instance *phudo* associating two kinds of deities, *phu* and *do*. A derivative, resulting from derivation, is built of a root and an affix.

¹⁵ We write the first /i/ smaller, in order to suggest it is shorter or quicker.

will depend on the next vowel, we have to write this prefix with a small sign indicating the ‘echo vowel’. Here I use a small circle: b° .

In the same way, the shortened vowel with the negative imperative prefix d° is represented in this book by a small circle. For instance the negative imperative of *khe-* ‘cry’, d° -*khe-* is heard as $d^\circ khe-$ with a very short /e/ in the first syllable because the root verb is with a vowel /e/. The same form with the verb *lan-* ‘look’ is d° -*lan-* and sounds as $d^\circ lan!$ ‘don’t look’, with a short /a/. The reason for this device, is that we do hear a vowel, although a short one, with these prefixes; but we cannot say which one until we know with which verb the prefix comes.

2.5.3. Short vowels in nouns

For the noun prefixes b° - and g° -, see 2.3.1. In the previous cases, the phonetic shortening of the first syllable is connected with its grammatical status: the first syllable is not a word with a meaning, only a prefix. This is distinct from compounding, where the two parts of the compound have or had a semantic value and are sounded, for instance with *lo-blang* ‘deity residence’. Other examples are *khomi* ‘citizen’ (etymologically ‘tax-payer’, from *kho* ‘tax’ and *mi* ‘person’), *khodō* ‘crocodile’ from *kho* ‘water’ and *dō* ‘monster, demon’. In such compounds, the speakers are often able to discern and explain each element. When a noun is written with two different vowels, this is a sign that the first one is not shortened¹⁶. Yet, this is further complicated by the “semi-prefix” status of some frequently used roots.

A nice example is the ‘paddy family’: *nese* ‘paddy’, *nichhi* ‘husk’, *nodop* ‘husked rice’. It is clear that the three nouns are compounded with a n° - root broadly meaning ‘paddy’, the vowel of which is so reduced as to be only an echo of the next one. The same conclusion would be arrived at, if we were to consider the numerous nouns denoting ‘big animals’ and beginning with s° -, a prefix that comparative Tibeto-Burmese linguistics shows related to or identical with *su* ‘meat’¹⁷.

sdung	monkey
ska	sheep
skan	boar
ski	deer
sobo, sbo	porcupine
spu	cow, cattle
stong	elephant
stop	mouse, rat
stu	horse
stung	bear
sumu, smu	mithun, buffalo
suwo, suo	ox, bull

In both cases, a syllable that has or had the full status of a noun, with sound and meaning, developed into something like a prefix, both for the sound (reduced to a copy vowel) and the meaning (expanded to a category).

2.5.4. Names for numbers in 11 to 17.

See 4.1.

¹⁶ Some words, usually ‘ideophones’ (words, for instance, where repetition suggests a stronger meaning) have a double syllable, both full: *susu* ‘different’. Such is the case in baby talk (see: 4.6.).

¹⁷ Perhaps should we also think of *suak* ‘pig’, *sao* ‘hyena’, *se* ‘rhino’.

10	sõ
11	sahan
12	sinyik [s ^h nyik]
13	s ^u ũ [suũ]
14	samb ⁱ si
15	sangkhu
16	sangkhüt, saïkhüt
17	sangsit, saïsit
18	sõ sarjat
19	sõ dekhü
20	khan, khãĩ

This list in Standard Rupa speech shows (1) that the word for ‘ten’ is *sõ*, (2) that this word is transformed when compounded with unicts. For 11, 12, 13, ‘ten’ is reduced to *s^o*- as the copy vowel shows; from 14 to 17, it seems that a /san/ basis operates, although the /n/ is adapted to the following consonant; for 18 and 19, *sõ* reappears.

A similar but weaker adaptation occurs in names for days and years (see 4.2.), to a point that depends on the speaker: some speakers do assimilate and say *lingkhit*, some do not and say *lin khit*.

2.5.5. Hunting for clusters

In many cases, the first vowel is strongly reduced, and sounds as a short copy of the next vowel. So, *sumu* ‘mithun, wild cattle’, is often pronounced *s^umu* with a reduced first vowel, or *smu*. In this way, pseudo consonant clusters are formed, sometimes difficult to discern from the true ones. *Spu* ‘cattle’ or *stu* ‘horse’ are never pronounced with a first short vowel (**s^upu* or **s^utu*), although on comparative grounds the *s^u*- in these words is quite comparable to the *s^u*- in *sumu* ‘wild cattle’. It is clear that the quality of the micro-vowel depends on the character of the consonant that follows, and that it is easier to hear the first vowel in *sumu* because of /m/ than in *stu*, because of /t/. For the same phonetic reasons, it is easier to perceive the micro-vowel *b^ulu* ‘council’. If this is true, there is no phonemic distinction between the first (*spu, stu*) and the second (*smu, blu*) pair of words, then no grammatical feature to separate them.

It is often possible to show that the reduced first vowel, that has now become a copy of the next vowel, was in earlier times a vowel in itself. For instance in a number of compounds the first syllable of which is *a-*. In the following names of colours: *aha* ‘yellow’, *ehék* ‘red’, *oho* ‘blue’, it is clear that the first vowel is the *a-* prefix of ‘adjectives’, now modified, like in *abě* ‘other’ or *ablo* ‘tasty’. The noun *ihĩ* ‘root, nerve’ is probably from *a+hĩ*, but good speakers insist that the first vowel is /i/, not /ĩ/; *uhu* ‘prayer’ may be from *a+hu*. In all these cases, the consonant is /h/, but the same vowel reduction occurs with other consonants, as in *ayung* ‘shadow, soul’ often pronounced *oyung* or *uyung*, or *ojo* ‘high’ which certainly is from *ajo*.

In words like *khla-po* ‘go-between’ or *khleŋ-thong* (the name of a sub-clan), it is difficult to state if *khla* and *khleŋ* are from older **khala* and **kheleng*, and impossible to see if the first syllable had a distinct vowel in the past. The word *besme* ‘winter migration’ is probably to be analysed *be+s^eme* since no Sherdukpen syllable ends in /s/. The word *kamrang* ‘anyway’ probably belongs to the *-rang* group of words with distributive meaning (see *mu-rang, nyi-rang*), but it is difficult to know if it is *kam+rang* or *ka+m^a+rang*.

On a list of 73 cases of such clusters, 31 have a second component /r/, 24 have a second component /l/. We give a few examples of those two types, then the remaining cases.

b	r	brop	hearth
j	r	jiring [dʒring]	people, man
h	r	herē [hrē]	rib(s)
m	r	mi-ring [mring]	sister
s	r	siri [sri]	sacred stone
b	l	bulu [blu]	council, community
ch	l	buchulung [pchlung]	cockroach
kh	l	khala-po [khlapo]	middleman
m	l	malang [mlang]	fruit
s	l	sělě [slě]	spleen

Other cases

s	b	sobo [sbo, zbo]	porcupine
g	d	godong [gdong]	pit (natural pit in soil)
s	d	ik-sdop	finger ring
s	d	sodop [sdop, zdop]	paddy (husked) var. <i>nodop</i> .
th	g	thogo [thgo]	here (see: thi)
ch	k	chokö [chkö]	bee, living in tree-holes
s	m	sumu [smu]	mithun
kh	n	khini [khni]	auntie
kh	n	khunu [khnu, khnũ]	Aka or Miji people
ph	n	pheně [phně]	itching, irritation
b	s	bisi [pʃi]	four, 4
d	s	tese [che], dese	paddy, unhusked
s	t	sütü [stü]	cloud (sinti SH)
b	th	batha [ptha]	dog
b	ch	bacha [p°cha]	hen
b	ch	bacham [pcham]	snake
b	z	bizik [bzik]	flea
g	z	gazang [g°zang]	hair (on head)

2.6. Morphophonemic smaller points

2.6.1. Phonetic variation in a few roots

The grammatical suffix paradoxically changes the word that it follows in the case of some personal and demonstrative pronouns. See 2.2.1. and 2.2.3. for details. As far as the personal pronouns are concerned, the results differs according to dialect, but the principle holds good: s1 *gu* and s2 *nang* are mostly affected. This trend is found in numerous languages. Here is a sentence displaying the same variation in s3 *wa*, a less common occurrence.

() wo-'o gu-ni an-do-chhi-baũ he was told by me
 s3-A s1-O tell-NGp-Fac-Pfp

For *thi* 'this' (perhaps *thü* is the basic form), the range of variation is wide. The chart gives an idea.

	expected form	actual forms
this one	* <i>thi-wa</i>	<i>thu-wa, thwa, tha</i>
here	* <i>thi-go</i>	<i>thügo, thogo, thgo, thkho</i>

2.6.2. Phonetic variation in a few suffixes

A small number of grammatical postponed morphemes show a phonetically triggered variation. See 2.5.3. There are small and wide variations.

A (unique?) case of wide variation is the locative suffix. Although the degree of assimilation depends on the speaker, one may hear:

- ko after unvoiced stops (k, t, p etc.)
- kho after aspirated stops (kh, th, ph), e.g. *thkho* < *thü-go*.
- go after vowels and /r/, /l/
- ngo after nasals (n, m, ng)

A few cases of small (binary) variation are found:

ba / pa /pa/ only after unvoiced stops (-p, -t, -k), and glottal /' / included;
/ba/ after nasals (-m, -n, -ng) and -r.

The same is true with *-bo / -po*.

A few other suffixes show a variation, but it does not seem to be conditioned by phonetics, only by rapid speech.

2.6.3. han > aĩ

One frequent but puzzling realization is /ãi/. The intriguing fact is that no phoneme /ã/ seems to be functional in the language (see 1.2.2). We hear [ã] when there is /a/ in nasal contexts, but no phonemic status can be assigned to it. The solution to the small enigma is that /ãi/ is a 'modern' pronunciation of /aĩ/. This diphthong comes from *han* 'one':

nuphu haĩ, nuphu nyik jao-na-ma he can stay 1 or 2 nights.
night one, night 2 stay-Gp-lpf

See the description of indefinite pronouns in 2.2.5.

2.6.4. Other notes

The Defense form of na- 'bring' usually is na-na (Not *da-na). See 1.3.2.

Verb roots ending in /m/ often exhibit a [n] variation when before a alveolar consonant. With 'to come', one says *ram-ba* but *ran-la*; with 'to tell', one hears *am-baũ* 'he said' but *an-do-baũ* 'he just said'.

2.7. Pronunciation and society

Dialects have been touched upon in the introduction and will be briefly discussed later, but it should be noted in this chapter about phonetics and phonemics that older people often have /ü/ and /ö/ where younger ones have /i/ and /e/ or /ẽ/, respectively; and that the elders have /ũ/ and /õ/ where younger people have /ĩ/ and /ẽ/.

elder	e	ẽ	i	ĩ	ö	õ	ü	ũ
younger	e	ẽ	i	ĩ	e	ẽ	i	ĩ

So, where elders have 8 distinct phonemes, younger people often have 4 only. Younger people often agree, with variations in shame, that they simplify the 'more beautiful' pronunciation of their elders. In this book, we follow the 'older pronunciation'¹⁸. The role of Hindi phonemics in this 'simplification' is obvious. Moreover, most foreign people with whom we could talk (Bugun for instance, whose language is not phonemically easy) admit that Sherdukpen pronunciation is difficult.

Another but quite different problem is the Tibetanizing fashion. Among the previous generations (see 7.3.), say until the Chinese Aggression (1962), Tibetan was a fashionable language and being able to

¹⁸ The problem we describe here is different from the existence of tones in the language of some older people.

speak and to write it was a classic sign of the elite. After the border was closed, things changed; yet Tibetan folklore and lore remained somehow influential and, also through Monpa regions (conspicuously in Shergaon), the pronunciation of names is gladly ‘tibetanized’. The name of the hero Asu Japtong can be heard either as [japtong], [dʒaptong] or [dʒyaptong] and [gyaptong], and some people told us one should say [gyapteng]. Names of characters or roles in performances are a possible field for exploring this topic.

2.8. Quick speech

We are sorry to offer here only a few remarks for a topic that seems extraordinarily important. Because Sherdukpen language is, most of the time, easy to reduce to monosyllabic units, we can often understand which stuff a compounded word is made of, and we can, at the same time, realize how these units are modified when the compound is pronounced ‘rapidly’ - and that means normally. Let us try to make the point very clear. When you describe (or write) a monosyllabic language or a language where each syllable maintains its shape and status, writing consists in putting each syllable in its right place, in its turn. Now, Sherdukpen is not like that. Many words are made of a number of syllables, sometimes as many as 4 or 5. Normally, each syllable is useful in its own way, as a kind of brick in the building, and has to be identified clearly. But in some cases, the compound makes a unit in itself, and neither the speaker nor the listener has to analyze the components in order to understand it. This is especially true with pronouns (personal, demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite). Although it is quite possible to discern the different elements which build up such pronouns when they are pronounced in slow speech (a rather formal experience, of course, but a possible one), yet in normal speech the multisyllabic pronouns are ‘taken for granted’ as such, pronounced in one move, and the syllabic borders of the compounding units disappear.

This is a rather common process. In written languages for which we have old documents that show (more or less) how the language was pronounced two or three centuries before, we can see how some words ‘imploded’ so to speak, and how a strong stress on one syllable shortened the other syllables, so that a word which, some centuries before had 4 syllables, now has only two or one. For instance the English word *captain*, two syllables, comes from a Latin word *capitāneus* which had 4 or 5. What happened? This was a foreign word, borrowed because of military practice; it had a strong accent on the long *ā* in the middle, and English usage made that syllable still longer, while it eliminated those just before and just after; the first syllable, although less prominent, remained and the word has now two syllables. The main point is that we know the Latin word, and some other stops in that journey through forms and time, because they were written in documents. But the hundreds of languages in the Himalayas, with few exceptions like Tibetan, Kashmiri, Lepcha in Sikkim, Ahom in Assam, Meithei in Manipur, Burmese of course, are usually not written and for the vast majority of them we do not know how the language was spoken in the past. It would seem, then, that the present stage of a language like Sherdukpen is some snapshot that we can take when we listen to it now, record it, study it, write it.

Yet, the truth is very different. A language is not as solid as a statue or a stone monument. It is always diverse not only because it is spoken by different people, older and younger, urban and village-folks, grandmothers and young students, but also because each speaker has different ways of using the language. When friends talk to us, they take care of pronouncing carefully, even without noticing it sometimes; but suppose a Sherdukpen friend comes in, then the rhythm of the conversation will change very much, words will become swift and short, and a kind of artistry with speed will be appreciated. What is important for us here, is that formal speech (we mean public formal speech by elders, by gaonburas or important members, or by Asu dochhao during Khiksaba festival) is slow. It is not only full of flowery expressions, it is also dramatically slow (and low, sometimes difficult to hear!).

Because of this tradition maybe, or some other reasons as well, Sherdukpen elder people can speak both ways: the slow speech, and the quick normal speech. When you ask a question, they will slow down and explain, because slow speech maintained very clearly the component units of the words. But in in the normal flow, you would hardly hear them, just the synthesized result.

Quick speech may give us an idea of what will be the language soon. There are children that only know that quick shortened speech. But slow speech, formal speech, maintains the old building bricks in their own place, and Sherdukpen people can usually tell you, by intentionally slowing down their speech, what the units are in words. This is not exactly being bilingual; it is something different, because slow speech and quick speech ARE the same language. Culture is most aptly described, perhaps a bit provocatively: having several cultures. When you are not the child of only one world, when you are able to look at your birth-place with love and with distance, when you can play with the instruments of intelligence (which are words, phrases, sentences, puns, jokes, careful allusions in a speech), then, this is culture.