

Manipuri (Meetei Mayek) writing system

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Abstract: This paper makes an attempt to describe the spelling of the Manipuri (Meetei mayek). The present writing system is not a standardized spelling one due to lack of scientific study of this language. Even though Manipuri spelling corresponds with its pronunciation it has a problem to face the spelling of loanwords which do not find in indigenous Manipuri words. In Manipuri writing system thirty five letters are used. Among them, twenty seven letters (alphabet) are known as Ipi Mayek and the remaining eight letters are lonsum mayeks (unreleased letter). In Manipuri writing, lonsum mayek (unreleased letter) represents as unreleased sound at the end of a word or morpheme. If the letter that has no its lonsum mayek is found at the end of a word or morpheme, Ipi mayek is used for it. There is a new finding in spelling in loanwords which do not find in indigenous writing system.

I. Introduction

Manipuri language is a Tibeto-Burman language of Sino-Tibetan family. It is a schedule language of India. It is understand and spoken by both the valley and hill people. It is also used as a communicative language (lingua franca) among the different tribes of Manipur. It is the only Tibeto-Burman language of India which has its own script to represent the language. The present Manipuri spelling is not standardised form. Many loan words have been imported in this language via Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Sanskrit and Burmese from different source languages in course of time. Some specific characters are found in Manipuri loan words which are not found in Indigenous Manipuri words. Besides this, the language has free variation of two consonants [l] and [n]. They can occurred only at the final position of a morpheme or word.

II. Spelling in Manipuri writing system

Spelling is an element of orthography and prescriptive element of a language. It is the writing of a word or words with all necessary letters and diacritics present in an accepted standard order. In Manipuri writing system, there are twenty four consonant phonemes, six vowels, six Diphthongs, eight cheitap iyekes. Besides this Manipuri writing also uses eight lonsum, including seven consonant lonsum and one vowel lonsum and three khudam iyekes. The twenty four consonant phonemes are l /p/, h /t/, a /k/, i /p^h/, w /t^h/, g /k^h/, c /b/, b /d/, y /g/, n /b^h/, m /d^h/, I /g^h/, f /m/, k /n/, q □ □ □ □, j /c/, s /s/, v /□/, d /l ʒ /r/, t /h/, /w/, r /y/, and z /□^h/.

Out of the twenty-four consonants seven consonants have their own lonsum mayeks and the remaining seventeen consonants do not have their own lonsum mayeks. The seven consonant lonsum mayeks are A/□ /, F/ m/, L /□ /, D/l/, K /n/, H/t/, and S / □ /. In Manipuri writing system, these seven consonant lonsum mayeks can represent the unreleased sound at the final position of a word. The seven consonant lonsums are given below with examples.

Meetei script	Phonemic transcription	gloss
IEA	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘gray hair’
oSgED	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘garden’
fiF	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘place’
sPL	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘curse’
hPK	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘music’
IPH	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘lake’
wES	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘bridge’

In Manipuri writing, lonsum mayek (unreleased letter) represents the unreleased sound of a word or morpheme. If the letter that has no lonsum mayek which occurs at the end of a word or syllable, where Ipi mayek is used for it. These words are mainly of loan words only. The Ipi mayek which can occur at the end of a word or syllable are b,d,s,g,r,t^h and j, etc.

Meetei script	Phonemic transcription	gloss
stx	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘city’
hEdEc	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	□ ‘pay’
uEiYs	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘office’
uEw	□ □ □ □ □ □	‘chock’

xsYb □□□□□□□ ‘receipt’
 hxcUv □□□□□□□□□□ ‘water-melon’

In Manipuri there are six vowel phonemes. They are u /□ /, uP / a /, o /□ /, uE /o /, uQe / and p / u /. Among the six vowels, three vowels (u ,o ,p) /□ ,i,u /are Ipi mayek and remaining three are formed by adding matra to the Ipi mayek as (uQ,uP,uE)/□,a,o/.i.e uf□□□□□□ ‘one’,ofP□□□□□ ‘mother’,pK□□□□□ ‘ice’,uPO□□□□□ ‘income’,udPOjY□□□□□□□□□□ ‘cardamon’,.There is only one vowel lonsum in Manipuri spelling. It is vowel lonsum O / i /. Example dPO / lai / ‘picture’. In Manipuri spelling there are six diphthongs .Out of six diphthongs two are made by Ipi mayek with matra i.e uW /□ □ /, uR /□ u / and othe four diphthongs are formed by one Ipi mayek and one vowel with matra i.e uPp /□ □ □ /, uPO / ai /,uEO /oi / and pO / ui /. examples are lPp□□□□□ ‘news’, fPO /□ □ □ □ / ‘face’,gEO /□ □ □ □ □ / ‘bee’, tUO /□ □ □ □ / ‘dog’, dW /□ □□ ‘flower’ and fR /□ □ □ □ / ‘woman’.

In Manipuri spelling there are eight cheitap mayeks. They are o /e /, E /□ □/, U / u /,R /□ u / W /□ □ / P / □ / Y / □ / and T / □ /. Out of eight cheitap mayek seven are vowel matras and one is consonant matra. The eight cheitap mayeks are attached to consonant and vowel letter. They are as follows.

Meetei script	Phonemic transcription	gloss
o /e /jQ	/□ □/	‘paper’
E □□ □/fEK	/□ □ □/	‘pillow’
U /u /aUK	/□ □ □/	‘twenty’
R /□ u /fR	/□ □ □/	‘women’
W /□ □ /fW	/□ □ □/	‘fire’
P /□ / fPO	/□ □ □/	‘face’
Y /□ / fY	/□ □ /	‘human’
T /□ / kUT	/□ □ □/	‘stone’

In Manipuri spelling the use of cheitap mayek is very common. There are two forms of writing cheitap mayek as (a) the attachment of one cheitap mayek to a letter of a word and (b) the attachment of two cheitap mayeks to a letter of a word. For example attachment of one cheitap mayek i.e. f +W= fW /m□ i/ ‘fire’,f +T = fT /m□ □ / ‘dream’, andalso the attachment of two cheitap mayeks to a letter i.e. a+ P+T= aPT /k□ □ / ‘mosquito’, g+ P+T= gPT /k^h□ □ / ‘pan’,The writing order between atap (P) and nung (T), atap is attached to the letter first and nung follows it i.e. PT/a□ /, ET/o□ /, UT/u□ /and YT/i□ /.(Wakoklol hillel thilel amailol pukok puya).

Additional examples of attachment of one cheitap mayek:

Meetei script	Phonemic transcription	gloss
o /e /lQ	/□ □ /	‘a type of umbrella’
E /□ □ □/EK	/□ □ □/	‘cage’
U /u /hU	/□ □ /	‘body hair’
R /□ u /kR	/□ □ □ /	‘oar’
W /□ □ jW	/□ □ □ /	‘stick’
P /□ /sP	/□ □ /	‘animal’
Y /□ /tY	/□ □ /	‘boat’
T /□ /lUT	/□ □ □ /	‘hour’

Additional examples of attachment of two cheitap mayeks to a letter.

Meetei script	Phonemic transcription	gloss
oT /e□ /dQTc	/□ □ □ □ □ /	‘to move’
ET /□ □ □/ETc	/□ □ □ □ □ /	‘boast’
TU /u□ /hTU	/□ □ □ /	‘back’
PT /a□ /dPT/a□ /		‘net’
YT /□ □ /fYT /□ □ □ /		‘name’

III. Use of Khudam Mayek:

In Manipuri spelling three khudam mayeks are used. They are ‘lum’ (.) as tone mark, ‘apun () cluster mark and ‘cheikhei’ (.) full stop mark. Lum (.) is used as a marker of tone.

Meetei script alphabet	Roman	Source language	phonemic transcription	gloss
usP	asa	a:□a (Sanskrit)	/asa/	‘hope’
pIPO	upai	u:pa:y (Sanskrit)	/upai/	‘means’
sPsK	sas□ n	□a:san (Sanskrit)	/sas□n/	‘administration’
udU	alu	a:□ □ (Hindi)	/alu/	‘potato’
btY	d□ hi	d□ hi (Hindi)	/d□hi/	‘curd’
aEcY	kobi	kobi (Assamese)	/kobi/	‘cabbage’
Meetei script alphabet	Roman	Source language	phonemic transcription	gloss
dPSyED	langgol	la□ gol (Bengali)	/la□gol/	‘a plough’
cbkPF	badnam	b□ dnam (Bengali)	/b□ dnam/	‘discredit’
cvPx	bajar	b□ jar (Bengali)	/b□ □ □ □ /	‘market’
ba:za:r(Persian)				
jEO	Choi	coi (Burmese)	/coi/	‘unit of Myanmar 1.6kg’
oSxQv	Ingrej	i□ rej (Bengali)	/i□ rej/	‘Englishman’
		ingles (Portuguese)		
sxas	Sarkas	s□ rk□ s (English)	/sarc□ s /	‘circus’
		circus(Latin)		

In Manipuri language some loan words are used indirectly from the source language. Some examples are given below. Roman

Meetei script alphabet	Roman	Source language	phonemic transcription	gloss
aWkrP	keinya	kanya (Sanskrit)	/k□ inya/	‘bride’
lxYgP	pariksa	p□ riksa (Sanskrit)	/p□ rik'a/	‘examination’
sEO	soi	s□l (Bengali)	/soi/	‘signature’
gUxUF	khurum	Khorom (Assamese)	/k ^h urum/	‘wooden sandal’
hEdEc	tolob	t□ l□ b (Bengali)	/tolob/	‘salary’
	sa:bun (Hindi)	/sapon/		‘soap’
yYdPs	gilas	glas (English)	/gilas/	‘glass’
lEdYs	polis	p□ lis (English)	/polis/	‘police’
	politia (French)			
sYiPO	siphai	sipa:i (Bengali)	/sip ^h ai/	‘a soldier’
		sipa:hi(Persian)		
uPxLYK	arpin	a:lpi:n (Bengali)	/arpin/	‘a pin’
		alfinete (Portuguese)		

IV. Spelling of Manipuri Consonant cluster

It is a combination of two consonants within a syllable or in other word, utterance of two sounds at a time. Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, Manipuri has three consonant cluster i.e. initial, medial and final clusters. There is no final cluster in indigenous Manipuri words. Final clusters are found in loan words only. In Manipuri Script, the cluster is marked by an underlined which is called ‘apun’ in Meetei script. The examples of Manipuri consonant cluster are as follows.

Initial cluster

In the initial cluster, the cluster of consonant are occurred at the initial position of a word. The consonant phoneme k+w>kw, k^h+w>k^hw, s+w i.e.

Meetei script	phonemic transcription	gloss
k+w> kw	: a + e> a e: aePAdW □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘vanda coerulea’
kh+w> k ^h w	: g + e> g e: g ePO —□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘all/whole’
h+w>k ^h w	: g + e> ge: gePS □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘waist’
s+w>sw	: s + e> se: sePOb —□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘here’

Medial cluster

In the medial cluster, the cluster of consonant are occurred at the medial position of a word. The consonant phoneme p+r>pr, k+r>kr, kh+r>khr, b+r>br i.e.

Meetei script	phonemic transcription	gloss
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b+r> br : c + x> cx:	acxSjPA/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘mulberry’
k+r> kr : a + x> ax:	dWaxA/7□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘crack’
kh+r>khr : g + x> gx:	jPSgxS/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘fern’
b+r> br: c + x > cx:	jUFcxW/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘peach’
p+r> pr : l + x> lx:	aEFlxQA/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘oenanthe javanica’

Final cluster

The final clusters are found in Manipuri loanwords. But the occurrence of final cluster is rare in comparison to initial and medial cluster. Examples are given below:

Meetei script	phonemic transcription	gloss
k+s> ks : a + s> as: yxiYAs	/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / graphics□ □	‘designs’
n+c> ns : k + j> kj: cxPKs	7□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / branch□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □	‘a part of something’

In the word ‘branch’ the consonant cluster is occurred at the final as cxPKs/brans/. Here, the sound / c / is replaced by the nearest equivalent sound / s /. In Manipuri in the final cluster, the first letter out of two clusters consonant is written by lonsum mayek if the sound has lonsum mayek.

There are some loan words which have no final cluster in pronunciation but writing in Meetei script it is written as final cluster form. They are as follows with examples.

Meetei script	phonemic transcription	gloss
t+r> tr : h + x> hx: fKhx	/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / mantra□ □	‘incantations’
t+r> tr : h + x> hx: vKhx	7□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / jantra□ □	‘music’
t+r> tr : h + x> hx: sPhx	/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / satra□ □	‘student’
t+r> tr : h + x> hx: yEhx	7□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / gotra□ □	‘clan or caste’
t+r> tr : h + x> hx: lhx	/□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ / patra□ □	‘paper’

V. Free variation in Manipuri spelling

Free variation in linguistics is the phenomenon of two (or more) sounds or forms appearing in the same environment without a change in meaning and without being considered incorrect by native speakers. ‘Free variation in phonology, referring to the substitutability of one sound for another in a given environment with no consequent change in the words meaning, as when a speaker articulates a word like sit with an unreleased or a released plosive or different pronunciation’- (David Crystal, July 2008 6th Edition). Manipuri spelling has its free variation. When two consonant phonemes that / l /and / n /in the initial position they establish as different phonemes but when these two phonemes occur at final position they become free variation in Manipuri language. Some examples are given below:-

Meetei mayek	Phonemic transcription	gloss
dYD / dYK	/lin/ ~ /li/	‘snake’
hUxQD /hUxQK	/turel/~ /turen/	‘river’
utD/ utK	/□ h□ /~ /□ h□ n	‘old man’
Meetei mayek	Phonemic transcription	gloss
kYSwRxQD/ kYSwRxQK	/□ □ □ □ □ □ urel/~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ uren/	‘emperor’
oSgED/ oSgEK	/□ □ □ □ □ □ /~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ /	‘garden’
dED /dEK	/lol/~ /lon/	‘language’
dFcQD/ dFcQPK	/l□ mbel/~ /l□ mben/	‘way’
dPD/ dPK	/□ □ /~ /□ □ n	‘war’
aED/aEK	/□ □ /~ /□ □ n/	‘utensil’
fgED/fgEK	/□ □ □ □ □ □ /~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ /	‘sound’
IPSyD/IPSyK	/□ □ □ □ □ □ /~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ n/	‘strength’
dD/dK	/□ □ /~ /□ □ n	‘wealth’
ffD/ffK	/m□ m□ l/~ /m□ m□ n/	‘cost price’
fIPD/fIPK	/m□ pal/~ /m□ pan/	‘boarder’
aWwQD/aWwQK	/□ □ □ thel/~ /□ □ □ then /	‘market’
hUxYD/hUxYK	/□ □ □ □ /~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ /	‘drain’
dWID/dWIK	/□ □ □ □ □ □ /~ /□ □ □ □ □ □ /	‘fencing’
gD/gK	/□ □ □ l/~ /□ □ □ n	‘balance’
fIUD/fIUK	/m□ pul/~ /m□ pun/	‘bundle’
fgD/fgK	/m□ kh□ l/~ / m□ kh□ n/	‘types’
fgUD/fgUK	/m□ kh□ l/~ / m□ kh□ n/	‘hole’
fxED/ fxEK	/m□ □ □ l/~ / m□ □ □ n/	‘layer’

VI. Conclusion

This study will be a permanent record of Manipuri language. It will be useful to the new researchers and new learners. No one had work in this field in the past. From the above discussion on the spelling of Manipuri (Meetei mayek), there is a corresponding relationship between writing and its pronunciation. Manipuri language has eight lonsum mayeks (unreleased letters) to represent eight letters, when they occurred at the final position of a morpheme or a word. In present Manipuri (Meetei Mayek) writing system, the used of retroflex letter is not found. In Manipuri, apun (cluster mark) indicates the cluster letters of the morpheme or word. In Manipuri loan words, if the phonemes [b], [d], [g] and [r] are occurred at the final position of a morpheme or word, they are represented by Ipi mayeks not lonsum due to lack of unreleased letter of the representation of lonsum. In some specific way of writing of loan words, there is replacement of sound by its nearest equivalent Ipi mayek sound. No addition of atap [a] is used in present Manipuri writing system.

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