

LEPCHA ORTHOGRAPHY: AN EARLIER AND A LATER STAGE

RICHARD KEITH SPRIGG

It is remarkable that the language of the Lepchas, with only 34,894 speakers recorded for it in 1909, “roughly estimated as follows: – Sikkim...25,000; Darjeeling...9,894” (*Linguistic survey of India* III/1 p.233), when Nepali was just beginning to oust the numerous tribal languages of Sikkim and eastern Nepal, should be so prominent in Sino-Tibetan reconstruction; but both Bodman (1980, 1988) and Chang and Chang (1975) have made quite wide use of Lepcha cognates. Indeed, Chang and Chang (1975:398) declare that “the frequent usefulness of comparisons with Lepcha will be apparent in our discussions below”. One of Bodman’s (1980:73) examples, “*ta-rók* ‘six’, Tibetan *drug*, Chinese **C-rùk*”, appears in §2.2.1 below. Where romanised, all my Lepcha examples are in accordance with Mainwaring (1876), though with slight modifications, including those cited from Grünwedel’s editing of Mainwaring (1898).

It is because of this fairly wide use of Lepcha in Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan reconstruction that I consider variation in Lepcha spelling to be important. If Lepcha cognates are to be reliable for this purpose, inconsistencies in spelling need to be accounted for; otherwise they are liable to cause confusion to specialists in this field.

The Lepcha language is also remarkable for having a script of its own, a distinction that it shares with only two other languages of the Himalayas, Newari and Limbu (see Sprigg 1983:306-308 and Sprigg 1986:27-29). The Lepcha script, it has been claimed, was devised by the third Rajah of Sikkim, Chador Namgyal (1700–1717) (Risley 1894:13). If this account of its origin is correct, the script had been in existence for at least a hundred years by the time that the two earliest datable texts known to me were written; they are eyewitness accounts of the murder of the Lepcha Prime Minister of Sikkim, in 1826 (Risley 1894:19), and together form item 190 in the Foreign Department’s ‘Persian’ section of the National Archive, Delhi, dated 14 April 1828. The one I have cited in this article, as item (i), is headed *gyá-mú-nun shu* ‘submitted by Gyamu’. Twenty-one years later, in 1849, came a short statement of accounts, which I have published in Sprigg (1983); this is my source (ii). The next sources that I have used are printed: Colonel (later General) G.B. Mainwaring’s grammar (Mainwaring 1876) and his dictionary (Mainwaring 1898). These two sources, (iii)

David Bradley, ed. *Papers in Southeast Asian linguistics* No.14:
Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayas, 175-182.
Pacific Linguistics, A-86, 1997.

© Richard Keith Sprigg

and (iv), are approximately one hundred years old. Finally, as a contemporary source, my source (v), I have drawn on my typescript copy of Tamsang (1994).

The interesting thing for me about these five sources, jointly extending over a period of 165 years, is that the later sources show fairly systematic differences in spelling from the earlier sources. I interpret these differences as evidence of a move away from a Tibetan model at an earlier stage of the language's orthography towards a later stage in which the model is closer to the Devanagari script, used for Hindustani and Nepali.

Since space is limited, it is necessary to keep comments on the fifteen types of variation to the minimum, and let the chronological order of the change, (i) 1828, (ii) 1849, (iii) 1876, (iv) 1898, and (v) 1994, speak for itself.

1. FINAL VOWEL ([ə:]); CHANGE FROM -a TO -â

I have used the circumflex to romanise "a sort of circumflex...called *rân*" (Mainwaring 1876:5), which Grünwedel has accounted for as a loan word from Tibetan, *sgron* 'cover, lay over, adorn':

	issue	cause to issue	know	date	pool	warm	certain	hand
i.	<i>pla</i>	<i>plya</i>	<i>ya</i>					
ii.				<i>tsha</i>	<i>da</i>			
iii.	<i>pla</i>		<i>ya/yâ</i>		<i>da</i>	'â	<i>nga</i>	('â-) <i>ka/kâ</i>
iv.	<i>pla</i>	<i>plya</i>	<i>ya/yâ</i>	<i>tsha</i>	<i>da</i>	'a' â	<i>nga/ngâ</i>	('â-) <i>ka/kâ</i>
v.	<i>plâ</i>	<i>plyâ</i>	<i>yâ</i>	<i>tshâ</i>	<i>dâ</i>	'a		<i>ka</i>

1.1 GRAMMATOLOGY AND THE SYMBOLS FOR -a AND -â

The above examples show a close relationship between the -a spelling and the -â spelling for these vowel-final lexical items, so close that one spelling can easily develop into the other; but from the point of view of grammatical categories the two types of spelling are very different: the -â type of spelling, as in *yâ* $\tilde{\epsilon}$ 'know', for example, is alphabetic; and the two sounds have their own separate symbols, the syllabic vowel sound ([ə:]) being symbolised by the circumflex-like superscript symbol *rân*. The -a spellings, on the other hand, are diphonic; and the two sounds of *ya* ϵ 'know' have a single symbol; so both the initial sound and its following syllabic vowel sound ([ə:]) share this symbol.

In Lepcha it is only that single syllabic-vowel unit, pronounced [ə:], that is (or used to be in 1828 and 1849) symbolised diphonically, the other syllabic vowel units having each its own alphabetic symbol; Japanese, on the other hand, makes much wider use of the diphonic category, for all five syllabic vowels, in forty out of the fifty members of the *gojuu on*; for example *ka, ki, ku, ke, ko, ya, yu, yo, wa, wo*, leaving only *a* and *o, u*, and the various forms of *i* and *e*, and the final consonant -*n* to monophonic symbolisation.

The example *ya* or *yâ* $\epsilon/\tilde{\epsilon}$ 'know' in the above table, like a number of other verbal items that have a vowel-final root, has an inflected form in *-m*, for example *yâm-bo* $\tilde{\epsilon}$ $\iota\circ$ 'one acquainted with'; cf. also *á-'âm* 'warmth' (Mainwaring 1876:100, 111), *plâm-bo* 'going forth', *plyâm kón* 'let it issue' (Mainwaring 1898:228). These inflected forms are consonant-final ([ə:m]) and, as such, are invariably spelt with the *rân* vowel symbol. Possibly this obligatory spelling *-âm*, with the *rân* symbol, for these consonant-final inflected forms made it easier for this same alphabetic spelling to spread to their corresponding root forms, helping to promote the change from *-a* to *-â*.

2. FINAL CONSONANT ([-am/p/t/n/r/l; -ɔk/ŋ; -ɛm/p/t/n/r/l])

2.1 FINAL [-am/p/t/n/r/l]; CHANGE FROM *-am/p/t/n/r/l* TO *ám/p/t/n/r/l*

2.1.1 [-am]; CHANGE FROM *-am* TO *-ám*

	three	-ing	altogether	Lingdam (?slope crown)
i.	<i>sam/sám</i>	<i>-bam/bám</i>		
ii.	<i>sam/sám</i>		<i>gun-jam</i>	<i>líng-dam</i>
iii.	<i>sám</i>	<i>-bám</i>		
iv.	<i>sam/sám</i>	<i>-bam/bám</i>	<i>gun-jám</i>	<i>dám</i>
v.	<i>sám</i>	<i>-bám</i>	<i>gun-jám</i>	<i>dám</i>

2.1.2 [-ap]; CHANGE FROM *-ap* TO *-áp*

	-teen	bury	noose-trap	short	knock together
ii.	<i>thap</i>				
iii.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>lap</i>			
iv.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>lap/láp</i>	<i>tap/táp</i>	<i>map</i>	<i>bap/báp</i>
v.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>láp</i>	<i>táp</i>		<i>báp</i>

2.1.3 [-at]; CHANGE FROM *-at* TO *-át* (BUT IN SOME WORDS *-ât*)

	prime minister	blow	earth	mouldy	copulate
i.	<i>sháng-zat</i>				
iii.		<i>mat</i>	<i>fat</i>		
iv.	<i>chóng/chang-zât</i>	<i>mat/mut</i>	<i>fat/fát</i>	<i>mat/mát</i>	'at/'át
v.	<i>cháng-zât</i>	<i>mát</i>	<i>fát</i>	<i>mát</i>	'át

2.1.4 [-an]; CHANGE FROM -an TO -án

	having	burn	drink (n.)	watcher	warm
i.	-bán				
iii.	-bán/ban	fan	'á-than	ran-bo	
iv.	-ban/bán	fan/fán	'á-than	ran-bo	'an
v.	-bán	fán	('á-thóng)	(róng-bú)	'án

2.1.5 [-ar]; CHANGE FROM -ar TO -ár (BUT IN SOME WORDS -âr)

	therefore	price	rust	rotten	prosper
i.	'ar-nun				
ii.		far/fár			
iii.	'âr-nun	fár			
iv.	'âr-nun	fár	far/fár	sar/sár/ser	tar/tár
v.	'âr-nun	fár	fár		tár

2.1.6 [-al]; CHANGE FROM -al TO -ál

	new	dibble	tomorrow	fall off
iii.	'al	mal	lúk-kal	
iv.	'al/'ál	mál	lúk-kal	fal/fál
v.	'ál	mál	lúk-kál	

2.2 FINAL [-ɔk/ŋ]; CHANGE FROM -ak/ng TO -ók/ng

2.2.1 [-ɔk]; CHANGE FROM -ak TO -ók

	seven	six	pour	target	stomach	hurt	befall
ii.	ka-kyak	ta-rak					
iii.	ka-kyak	ta-rak	lak	mak	ta-bak	dak	zak
iv.	ka-kyak	ta-rak	lak	mak	ta-bak	dak	zak
v.	ka-kyók	ta-rók	lók	mók	ta-bók	dók	zók

2.2.2 [-ɔŋ]; CHANGE FROM -ang (nyín-dó) TO -óng

	now	upon	stone	Lepcha	tiger
i.	'á-lang				
iii.	'á-lang	'á-plang	lang	róng	sa-thang
iv.	'á-lang	'á-plang	lang	róng/rang	sa-thang/thóng
v.	'á-lóng	'á-plóng	lang	róng	sa-thóng

2.3 FINAL [-em/p/t/n/r/l];

change from *-yam/p/t/n/r/l* to *-(y)em/p/t/n/r/l*;change from *c/j/nyap*, etc. to *c/j/nyep*, etc.2.3.1 [-em]; CHANGE FROM *-yam* TO *-(y)em*

	play	put on	wrist/upper arm	ball of thread
iv.	<i>lyam</i>	<i>dyam</i>	<i>ka-tyam</i> /'á-)kâ-tyám	<i>ki-tyam</i>
v.	<i>lem</i>	<i>dem</i>	<i>ka-tyem</i>	<i>ki-tem</i>

2.3.2 [-ep]; CHANGE FROM *-yap* TO *-ep*, AND FROM *cap* TO *cep*

	smear	bore	along with
iv.	<i>lyap</i>	<i>cap</i>	<i>dyap/dyep</i>
v.	<i>lep</i>	<i>cep</i>	<i>dep</i>

2.3.3 [-et]; CHANGE FROM *-yat* TO *-(y)et*, AND FROM *nyat* TO *nyet*

	two	about to	father-in-law
i.	<i>nyet</i>		
ii.	<i>nyat</i>		
iii.	<i>nyat</i>	<i>det</i>	'á-fyat
iv.	<i>nyat</i>	<i>dyat/d(y)et</i>	'á-fyat
v.	<i>nyet</i>	<i>det</i>	'á-fyet

2.3.4 [-en]; CHANGE FROM *-yan* TO *-(y)en*, AND FROM *j/nyan* TO *j/nyen*

	faith	bad	listen	enemy/warfare
ii.	<i>yuk-dyan</i>			
iii.	<i>den</i>	'á-jan	<i>nyan</i>	<i>fyan</i>
iv.	<i>dyan/den</i>	'á-jan/jen	<i>nyan</i>	<i>fyan/fyen</i>
v.	<i>den</i>	<i>jen</i>	<i>nyen</i>	<i>fyen</i>

2.3.5 [-er]; CHANGE FROM *-yar* TO *-yer*, AND FROM *nyar* TO *nyer*

	thunderbolt	wane	mud	sunset
i.	<i>sa-dyar</i>			
ii.		<i>nyar</i>		
iii.	<i>sa-dyar</i>		<i>suk-vyar</i>	
iv.	<i>sa-dyar/dyer</i>	<i>nyer</i>	<i>suk-vyar/vyer</i>	<i>tsuk-kyar/kyer</i>
v.	<i>sa-dyer</i>	<i>nyer</i>		<i>tsuk-kyer</i>

2.3.6 [-el]; CHANGE FROM -yal TO -(y)el, AND FROM j/nyal TO j/nyel

	pronounce	weary	roll down	feathers	gums
iii.	<i>jal</i>	<i>pyal</i>			
iv.	<i>jal/jel</i>	<i>pyal/pyel</i>	<i>tyal/tyel</i>	<i>myal/myel</i>	<i>nyal/nyel</i>
v.	<i>jel</i>	<i>pyel</i>	<i>tel</i>	<i>mel</i>	<i>nyel</i>

In this section (§2.3) the vowel is [e] throughout, that is front, spread, and half-open; this vowel contrasts with a half-close vowel [e], in the case of lexical items having a final plosive or nasal consonant (for example *-em/p/t/n* versus *-em/p/t/n*), but not in the case of those having a final rolled or lateral consonant, [-er/l]. This means that such lexical items as *sadyar* ‘thunderbolt’ and *nyar* ‘wane’, and *jal* ‘pronounce’ and *nyal* ‘gums’, can be written with either an *-ar* or an *-er* spelling, or an *-al* or an *-el* spelling, without confusing one lexical item with another; but Tamsang’s spellings with *-em/p/t/n* under-symbolise Lepcha phonology; they fail to distinguish the [e] vowel unit from the [e] vowel unit (except where the initial consonant is nasal, in which case there is no such distinction; see Sprigg 1989:226).

2.4 GRAMMATOLOGY AND THE SYMBOLS FOR -am AND -ám, ETC.

From the grammatological point of view the *-am/p/t/n/r/l* spellings of §2.1 above are just as different from the *-ám/p/t/n/r/l* spellings as the *-a* spellings are from the *-â* spellings of §1. and §1.1; and the same is true of the *-ak/ng* spellings of §2.2 versus the *-ók/ng* spellings, and the *-yam/p/t/n/r/l* spellings of §2.3 versus the *-em/p/t/n/r/l*; only the pairs of vowel symbols are different. The lexical items in which *-a-* is used all make use of the diphonic category as regards the initial consonant and the vowel, with the result that *sam* ‘three’, for example, and *dak* ‘hurt’ have a single diphonic symbol for [sa-] and [dɔ-] (سأ, دأ), while the later spellings, with a separate symbol in each case for the vowel (سأ, دأ), have alphabetic spellings. The same principle is at work for forms such as *lyam* ‘play’ (لأ), for [le-], but with a contribution towards symbolising the vowel from *-y-*, a postscript symbol in Lepcha writing.

3. CHANGE OF SPELLING OR CHANGE OF PRONUNCIATION

Lepchas themselves are sometimes disconcerted by these variations. While reading with me through the text of Hooker’s accounts (1849, my source (ii), A.R. Foning, of the Kalimpong Lepcha Association, and author of *Lepcha, my vanishing tribe* (Foning 1987), was astonished to find the word for ‘three’ spelt not *sám*, the spelling that he was used to, but *sam*. He concluded that since the spelling *-a* represents a long half-close central spread vowel ([æ:]) when it occurs in final position, as in the word *da* ‘pool’, it must be the same for *-a-* when it occurs in consonant-final words as well, as in the word *sam* in this text; therefore the change in spelling from *sam* to *sám* must also, following his view, represent a change of

pronunciation from [sə:m] to [sam]. I, on the other hand, concluded that only the spelling had changed, from *sam* to *sám*, between 1849 and the present time, while the pronunciation had remained the same during that time, as [sam]; and I was able to support my conclusion from the fact that the writer of these accounts had been inconsistent: though he had used the spelling *sam* on lines 1, 17, 29, 33 and 34, he had used *sám* on line 10 (Sprigg 1983:315). A somewhat similar variation occurs in the word for 'price', which he has spelt *far* on line 12 but *fár* on lines 4, 8, 9, 11, 25 and 29; and this I see as further support for my view that, as regards *a* and *á*, the writer's orthographic practice was not fixed.

I further believe that the *-am* spelling in *sam* 'three' (མཚུ) is based on such models from Tibetan, spoken and written by Sikkim's neighbours to the north and to the east, as *sram* 'otter' (སྐྱམ) and *bsam* 'thought' (བསམ), both of which have the final [-am] in their pronunciation. In vowel-final Lepcha lexical items this same vowel sound, [a], is invariably symbolised by *-á*, as in *khá* 'score' and *dá* 'rest', from my source (i) (1828), and *rá* (name of the second month) and *-ká* 'to', from my source (ii) (1849) (ཡཱ , ཟཱ , མཱ), whence the final sequence of sounds [-am] can equally well be symbolised by *-ám*. After a period of alternation, when the writers of my sources (i) and (ii), in 1828 and 1849, hesitated between the *-am* spelling and the *-ám*, and in fact used both spellings in *sam* and *sám* and in *-bam* and *-bám* (མམ , མམཱ , མམ , མམཱ), an alternation that Mainwaring's dictionary recorded fifty years later, in 1898, the *-ám* type of spelling seems to have prevailed, and is the only spelling to occur in [am]-final lexical items in Tamsang's (1994) dictionary .

The predominance of the *-ám* over the *-am* spelling means that the Tibetan-like spelling for [-am], using *-am*, has been superseded by a spelling after the fashion of the Devanagari script, used for the nearby languages Nepali and Hindi, in which words with final [am] are symbolised by *-ám* (alternatively *-ām*), with a letter for the vowel [-a-], for example *nám* 'name', *ghám* 'sunshine', and *kám* 'work' (नाम , धाम , काम), and also after the fashion of the Bengali and Maithili scripts, all of which scripts are in use immediately to the west and to the south of the Lepcha-speaking area. This observation can stand equally well for the other consonant-final lexical items, in [-ap/t/n/r/l], considered in §2.1 above; and, with a change of vowel symbol to *ó*, it can stand for the [-ɔk/ŋ] of §2.2 and, with a change of vowel symbol to *e*, for the [-em/p/t/n/r/l] of §2.3.

REFERENCES

- Bodman, Nicholas C.**, 1980, Proto-Chinese and Sino-Tibetan: data towards establishing the nature of the relationship. In Franz van Coetsem and Linda R. Waugh, eds *Contributions to historical linguistics: issues and materials*, 33-199. Leiden: Brill.
- 1988, On the place of Lepcha in Sino-Tibetan: a lexical comparison. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 11/1:1-26.
- Chang, Betty Shefts and Kun Chang**, 1975. Gyarong historical phonology. *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology*, Academia Sinica 46/3:391-524.
- Foning, Arthur**, 1987, *Lepcha, my vanishing tribe*. New Delhi: Sterling.

- Grierson, George Abraham, ed.**, 1909, *Linguistic Survey of India*, III. (reprinted 1967, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass)
- gyá-mú-nun shu**, 1828, National Archive, Foreign Department, Persian Section, item 90 (Delhi).
- Mainwaring, George Byres**, 1876, *A grammar of the Róng (Lepcha) language*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press.
- 1898, *Dictionary of the Lepcha language*. Revised and compiled by Albert Grünwedel. Berlin: Unger.
- Risley, H.H. ed.**, 1894, *Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Calcutta: Bengal Government Secretariat.
- Sprigg, Richard Keith**, 1983, Hooker's expenses in Sikkim: an early Lepcha text. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46/2:305-325.
- 1986, The syllable finals of Tibetan loan words in Lepcha orthography. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 9/1:27-46.
- 1989, Oral vowels and nasalized vowels in Lepcha (Rong) as the key to a puzzling variation in spelling. In Jeremy H.C.S. Davidson, ed. *South-East Asian linguistics: essays in honour of Eugénie J.A. Henderson*, 219-235. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Tamsang, Kharpo**, 1994, *Lepcha-English encyclopedic dictionary*. Kalimpong: Mani Press.