

# Proto-Tibeto-Burman language

The **Proto-Tibeto-Burman language** is the reconstructed ancestor of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Among other researchers Paul K. Benedict and James Matisoff have made proposals for the reconstruction of this language.

## 1 Phonology according to Benedict and Matisoff

The phonology of Proto-Tibeto-Burman here is from James Matisoff's 2003 reconstruction, much of which is based on Paul K. Benedict's earlier reconstructions.

### 1.1 Consonants

Proto-Tibetan–Burman has at least 23 consonants (Matisoff 2003:15). Some descendants of Proto-Tibetan–Burman, especially the Qiangic languages, have developed dozens of sibilant fricatives and affricates.

Proto-Tibeto-Burman also has many final nasals, stops, and liquids.

### 1.2 Vowels

Proto-Tibeto-Burman vowels can be split into primary and secondary sets. Modern-day Tibeto-Burman languages have anywhere from five vowels (Written Tibetan and Jingpho) to dozens of monophthongs and diphthongs (Loloish and Qiangic languages) (Matisoff 2003:157). Matisoff (2003) also notes that languages which have greatly simplified or eliminated final consonants tend to have more vowels. The open front unrounded vowel \*a is by far the most common and stable vowel in Tibeto-Burman languages.

Matisoff (2003) reinterprets diphthongs from Paul Benedict's reconstruction as long vowels.

### 1.3 Preservation of stops

Sino-Tibetan languages go through a series of four stages in which final stops and nasals gradually decay (Matisoff 2003:238-239).

1. The six final stops and nasals, \*-p, \*-t, \*-k, \*-m, \*-n, \*-ŋ, are all intact. Written Tibetan, Lepcha,

Kanauri, Garo, and Cantonese are currently in this stage.

2. One or more final consonants have been reduced or dropped. In Jingpho and Nung, the velars (\*-k) are replaced by glottal stops (-ʔ), while in other languages they are completely dropped. In Mandarin Chinese, all final stops are dropped, and \*-m has merged with \*-n.
3. All final stops become glottal stops or constrictions (such as creaky voices), and final nasals may be replaced by nasality in the preceding consonant. Languages currently in this stage include modern Burmese and Lahu.
4. There are no glottal or nasal traces of former final consonants left in the syllables.

## 2 Phonology according to Gong Hwang-cherng

## 3 Syntax

Proto-Tibeto-Burman was a verb-final (subject–object–verb or SOV) language.

## 4 Morphology

### 4.1 Syllable structure

According to James Matisoff, Proto-Tibeto-Burman syllables typically consist of the following structure (Matisoff 2003:11-13).

$$\begin{array}{c} (P_2) — (P_1) — C_i — (G) — V(:) — C_f — \\ (s) \end{array}$$

- P<sub>1</sub>: first prefix - optional
- P<sub>2</sub>: second prefix - optional
- C<sub>i</sub>: initial consonant
- G: glide - optional
- V: vowel (optionally lengthened)

- C<sub>f</sub>: final consonant
- s: suffix - optional

The following types of changes in syllable structure have been attested in Tibeto-Burman languages (Matisoff 2003:155). (Note: “Sesquisyllable” is a word coined by James Matisoff meaning “one-and-a-half syllables.”)

- **disyllable**
  - disyllable => sesquisyllable
  - disyllable => complex monosyllable
  - disyllable => simple monosyllable
- **sesquisyllable**
  - sesquisyllable => disyllable
  - sesquisyllable => complex monosyllable
  - sesquisyllable => simple monosyllable
- **complex monosyllable**
  - complex monosyllable => sesquisyllable
  - complex monosyllable => simple monosyllable
- **simple monosyllable**
  - simple monosyllable => disyllable

Below are the *sources* of the syllable changes (i.e., reversal of the list above).

- **disyllable**
  - from sesquisyllable
  - from simple monosyllable
- **sesquisyllable**
  - from disyllable
  - from complex monosyllable
- **complex monosyllable**
  - from disyllable
  - from sesquisyllable
- **simple monosyllable**
  - from disyllable
  - from sesquisyllable
  - from complex monosyllable

## 4.2 Verbs

### 4.2.1 Verbal agreement

According to many authors such as James Bauman, George van Driem and Scott DeLancey, a system of verbal agreement should be reconstructed for proto-Tibeto-Burman. Verbal agreement has disappeared in Chinese, Tibetan, Lolo-Burmese and most other branches, but was preserved in Kiranti languages in particular. This is a topic of scholarly debate, however, and the existence of a PTB verbal agreement system is disputed by such authors as Randy LaPolla.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 4.3 Prefixes

Matisoff postulates the following derivational prefixes.

- **\*s-** — This root is used for the *directive, causative, or intensive*. It also appears in words for animals and body parts.
- **\*ʔa- / \*(ʔ)ə / \*ʔā / \*ʔaŋ / \*ʔak** — This glottal prefix is used for *kinship functions* and the *third person possessive*.
- **\*m-** — Before verb roots, this prefix signifies *inner-directed states or actions*, such as stativity, intransitivity, durativity, and reflexivity. Before noun roots, it is used as a third person possessive prefix.
- **\*r-** — Before verbs, this prefix is used as a “*directive*.” It is also used before a wide variety of semantically unrelated noun roots.
- **\*b-** — This prefix is often used before *transitive verbs*, and usually marks the past (with suffix \*-s, creating a \*b- -s *circumfix*) and future (with a null suffix).
- **\*g-** — This velar prefix has a *third person pronominal function* before noun roots. It is also used before a wide variety of semantically unrelated noun roots. Before verb roots, it is used for the *present and future tenses*. In Proto-Lolo-Burmese, the unvoiced velar prefix **\*k-** is used commonly used before *animal names*.

Other constructed prefixes include **\*l-** and **\*d-**.

## 4.4 Circumfixes

Circumfixes have also been reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman.

In Written Tibetan, s- -n and s- -d are collective circumfixes used in kinship terms (Matisoff 2003:453).

## 4.5 Suffixes

Three Proto-Tibeto-Burman dental suffixes, *\*-n*, *\*-t*, and *\*-s*, are highly widespread, but their semantics are difficult to reconstruct (Matisoff 2003:439). The suffixes *\*-s*, *\*-h*, and *\*-ʔ* are often developed into tones in many Tibeto-Burman languages, and are thus highly “tonogenetically potent” (Matisoff 2003:474).

- *\*-n* – This suffix has a variety of functions, including *nominalizing*, *transitivizing*, and *collectivizing* (or pluralizing). The nominalizing function is attested in *Lepcha* as -m or -n and in Written Tibetan as -n. The transitivizing form is rare, and has only been attested in *Kanauri*. Finally, the collectivizing/pluralizing function is found not only in many modern-day Tibeto-Burman languages, but also in *Old Chinese* as well.
- *\*-t* – This suffix is used as a *nominalizer*. It occurs in *Jingpho* as -t and Written Tibetan as -d. Other functions include *verbalizing noun roots* and making intransitive or stative verbs into *transitive* or *causative* ones (Matisoff 2003:457). In other cases, *\*-t* appears to have no obvious function. The *\*-t* suffix also occurs in *Old Chinese*, but its semantic function is unclear.
- *\*-s* – Not easily distinguishable from *\*-t*, this proto-suffix is preserved in written Tibetan, West Himalayish languages, Chepang, Kukish languages (as -ʔ) and some Qiangic languages. It can serve as a nominalizer (Qiang and Tibetan), *locative*, *subordinator* (Kukish languages), a *stative*, *inner-directed*, or “*middle*” meaning (Himalayish languages such as *Kanauri*), and *causative* (Kiranti and *Kukish* languages).
- *\*-k* – This velar suffix occurs in the *Kukish* languages and also in *Old Chinese*. Its semantic function is still unknown. However, Pulleybank assigns a *distributive* sense to the *\*-k* suffix, but only in relation to *pronominal* forms (LaPolla 2003:26).
- *\*ʔay* – This proto-morpheme means “to go”, and can be attached to various roots as a palatal suffix to signify *motion away from the deictic center*. This fully syllabic proto-morpheme has now been grammaticalized and reduced to palatal offglides in modern-day Tibeto-Burman languages.
- *\*ya* / *\*za* / *\*tsa* / *\*dza* – Meaning “child” or “little one”, this proto-morpheme appears in Tibeto-Burman languages as a palatal suffix (-j), and has also been reconstructed in several ways. Its purpose is mainly *diminutive*. Matisoff (2003) also notes that high front vowels tend to be used for diminutive functions.

- *\*-way* / *\*-ray* – This proto-copula can also appear as a palatal suffix (-j) and occurs in *roots carrying abstract grammatical meanings*, such as articles, pronouns, and deictics (Matisoff 2003:487).

## 5 Vocabulary

Among other researchers Paul K. Benedict and James Matisoff have proposed reconstructed vocabulary items. One resource for Matisoff’s proposals for Proto-Tibeto-Burman vocabulary reconstruction is his *Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus* (STEDT), based at the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley.

## 6 References

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