

## Phonemes of Hmar

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### Abstract

A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech in a language that distinguishes one word from another. In Hmar, the /s/ in *sun* ‘lead’ and the /z/ in *zun* ‘urine’ represent two different phonemes. The present paper is an attempt to describe the phonemic inventory of Hmar language in terms of the number of vowels, consonants and diphthongs including their distribution and arrangement in the language. The study will also investigate whether Hmar exhibits the phonological features of other Tibeto-Burman languages or not.

**Keywords:** Hmar, Phoneme, Allophone and Diphthongs.

### 1. Introduction

Hmar is the name of a language, the group of people who speak the language. There are many tribal languages spoken in the state of Assam like Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, Reang, Missing, Rongmei, Aimol, Chiru, Zeme, Kuki, and many others. One such language is Hmar; Hmar is one of the undescribed, undocumented endangered languages of Assam. Bradley (1997) in his article ‘Genetic classification of Kuki-Chin-Naga Languages’ classified Hmar under ‘Old Kuki of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Hmar has close affinities with other Kuki-Chin languages of the North East, viz. Aimol, Kuki/Thadou, Ranglong, Mizo, Rangkhoh, Kharam, Chiru, etc. They have their rich culture but very few books and articles are written in their language. Hmars are scattered in different parts of North-eastern states. In Manipur they are located in the East Imphal District of Imphal Municipal Park. Hmar speakers are scattered over a vast area comprising

Northern Mizoram, some parts of N.C. Hills (Dima Hasao) and Fulertal, Cachar District of Assam.

The total population of Hmar in the Census of India is 98,988 (2011). Hmar language is an officially recognized language. Hmar is taught in schools and junior colleges in many North Eastern states. They use Roman Script for their orthography. The phonemic inventory of Hmar shows the distinctive sound occurring in Hmar speech.

The phonological system of Hmar is presented below based on the collected data. The study is confined to Hamr spoken in N.C. Hills (Dima Hasao) District of Haflong town and Fulertal, Cachar District of Assam.

### **1.1.Review of Literature**

Some works on Hmar studies include *Hmar Tolung –A study of Hmar History and Genealogy* by Keivom, Louis. (1990) and *Hmar Grammar* by Baruah Dutta P.N. and Bapui, V.L.T. (1996). However, their works do not show a clear presentation of Hmar phonemes.

### **1.2. Methodology**

The data for the present study was collected through several visits to N.C. Hills (Dima Hasao), District of Haflong town, and Fulertal, Cachar District of Assam. The data for the present study is based on the primary source obtained through field work. However, secondary materials like books, journals and articles etc. are also used in a small amount. The primary method of data collection was direct elicitation and group discussion. The speech data were collected and recorded from the native speakers of Hmar for closer observation.

## **2.0. Phonemic Inventory of Hmar**

The phonemic inventory of Hmar consists of thirty-five phonemes of which thirteen vocalic phonemes, namely six monophthongs and seven diphthongs, twenty consonants and two tones. The phonemes of Hmar can be classified in the following categories:

### **2.1. Segmental Phonemes**

2.1.1. Vowels (6)

2.1.2. Diphthongs (7)

2.1.3. Consonants (20)

## 2.2. Supra-segmental Phonemes

2.2.1. Tone (2)

### 2.1.1. Vowels

Hmar has an inventory of six vowel phonemes i.e., /i, e, ə, a, o, and u/. The vowels in Hmar are oral. The six vowel phonemes in the language are illustrated in Table 1.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ə	u
Mid	e		o
Open		a	

Table 1 Vowel phonemes in Hmar

From the above table, it can be stated that all the vowels in the language are oral and voiced. It is also noticed that vowel length is not phonemic in the language.

ei	ai	au	ou	oi	iu	ui
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Table 2: Diphthongs in Rongmei

### 2.1.2. Consonant

The inventory of consonant phonemes of Hmar is given in Table 2:

	Bilabial -voice +voice		Labio-dental -voice +voice		Alveolar -voice +voice		Palatal -voice + voice		Velar -voice + voice	Glottal
<b>Stops</b>	p	b			t	d	c	ɟ	k	
	p <sup>h</sup>				t <sup>h</sup>				k <sup>h</sup>	
<b>Nasals</b>	m		n					ɲ		
<b>Fricatives</b>			f	v	s	z				h
<b>Lateral</b>						l				
<b>Trill</b>						r				

Table 3 Consonant phonemes in Hmar

### 2.1.1.1. Contrasting Pairs

The contrasting pairs of vowel and consonants are described in the following sections:

#### Vowels

The above six vowels of Hmar are established on the basis of the following minimal pairs:

/i/~u/      /pi/      ‘father’s mother’      /pu/      ‘father’s father’

/i/~e/      /sim/      ‘lid’      /sem/      ‘division’

/e/~a/      /sem/      ‘division’      /sam/      ‘hair’

/a/~ə/      /ban/      ‘arm’      /bən/      ‘pillar’

/u/~o/      /ru/      ‘bone’      /ro/      ‘burn’

#### Consonantal Contrastive Pairs

/p/~b/      /pil/      ‘sink’      /bil/      ‘circle’

/p/~p<sup>h</sup>/      /pu/      ‘father’s father’/p<sup>h</sup>u/      ‘spray’

/k/~k<sup>h</sup>/      /koŋ/      ‘waist’      /k<sup>h</sup>oŋ (diŋ)/      ‘to weave (cloth)’

/t~/t <sup>h</sup> /	/tum/	‘try’	/t <sup>h</sup> um/	‘dress’
/t~/d/	/tan(din)/	‘to cut (hair)’	/dan/	‘law’
/c~/j/	/ci/	‘salt’	/ji/	‘always’
/f~/v/	/far (din)/	‘to leak (a pot)’	/var/	‘wise’
/m~/n/	/sum/	‘mortar’	/sun/	‘afternoon’
/n~/ŋ/	/t <sup>h</sup> in/	‘liver’	/t <sup>h</sup> iŋ/	‘wood’
/s~/z/	/sun/	‘noon’	/zun/	‘urine’
/s~/h/	/si/	‘rotten’	/hi/	‘this’
/l~/r/	/lu/	‘head’	/ru/	‘bone’

### 2.1. 1.2. Distribution of Vowel Phonemes of Hmar

All the six vowels occur in all three positions of the word as seen in the following:

Vowel	Initial	Medial	Final
/i/	/int <sup>h</sup> im/ ‘darkness’	/alin/ ‘big’	/t <sup>h</sup> li/ ‘wind’
/e/	/enro/ ‘to see’	’/mei/ ‘fire’	/pate/ ‘uncle’
/a/	/asul/ ‘naughty’	/ram/ ‘ground’	/kuva/ ‘betel nut’
/ə/	/əron/ ‘peacock’	/t <sup>h</sup> əler/ ‘desert’	/t <sup>h</sup> ə/ ‘muscle’
/o/	/ole/ ‘crocodile’	/mol/ ‘mad’	/so/ ‘there’
/u/	/utok/ ‘toad’	/puk/ ‘cave’	/ru/ ‘rain’

### 2.1. 2. Diphthongs

Diphthong is a vowel sound that starts near the articulatory position for one vowel and moves toward the position for another. On the basis of collected data seven diphthongs in Hmar have been identified, of the six diphthongs, four involve glide [I] and other three are towards [u]. These diphthongs can be called falling diphthongs, i.e. the first element is more prominent than the second.

	Diphthongs	Initial	Medial	Final
(i)	/ei/	/eini/ ‘ourselves’	/leilak/ ‘stair’	/dei/ ‘cold’
(ii)	/ai/	/aieŋ/ ‘haldi’	/t <sup>h</sup> laici/ ‘seed’	/bufai/ ‘rice’
(iii)	/au/	-	/hausə/ ‘rich’	/t <sup>h</sup> au/ ‘fuel’
(iv)	/oi/	/oidiŋ/ ‘to believe’	/k <sup>h</sup> oili/ ‘to boil’	/nau/ ‘child’
(v)	/ou/	-	/coidiŋ/ ‘to carry’	/liŋkou/ ‘shoulder’
(vi)	/iu/	-	/tium/ ‘danger’	/kiu/ ‘elbow’
(vii)	/ui/	-	/tuiri/ ‘cholera’	/tui/ ‘water’

Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ are more common than others, i.e., they occur frequently in native Hmar words. It is also observed that the diphthongs in Hmar occur in the closed syllable.

### 2.1.3. Distribution of Consonant Phonemes

There are twenty (20) consonantal phonemes in Hmar language, i.e., /p, b, t, d, k, p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>, c, ɟ, f, v, s, z, h, m, n, ŋ, l and r/ across five contrastive points of articulation: bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal. They are further categorized into six types: stops, nasals, fricatives, lateral, and trill in terms of their manner of articulation.

Hmar has ten stops consisting of unaspirated voiceless /p, t, c, ɟ, k/, aspirated voiceless stops /p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>/ and unaspirated voiced /b, d/, which lack their aspirated counterpart /b<sup>h</sup>, and d<sup>h</sup>/.

Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, aspiration is phonemic in the language, and voicing is also one of the distinctive features in the case of consonantal phonemes in Hmar.

There are three nasal sounds /m, n, and ŋ/. All of them occur in all three positions, viz., initially, medially and finally. Other consonant sounds in the language which include fricatives /s, z, f, v and h/ and a palatal a lateral /l/ and a trill /r/. However, no semi-vowels are noticed in Hmar spoken in Assam valley.

Consonant	Initial	Medial	Final
/p/	/pi/ 'father's mother'	/cokpoldiŋ/ 'to mix'	/cup/ 'lung'
/b/	/bak/ 'bat'	/savom/ 'bear'	--
/t/	/tin/ 'claw'	/utok/ 'toad'	/kemit/ 'ankle'
/d/	/dil/ 'lake'	/vəduŋ/ 'river'	--
/k/	/kel/ 'goat'	/kekor/ 'trouser'	/bak/ 'bat'
/p <sup>h</sup> /	/p <sup>h</sup> ər/ 'leprosy'	/bup <sup>h</sup> al/ 'hay'	--
/t <sup>h</sup> /	/t <sup>h</sup> iŋ/ 'wood'	/som <sup>h</sup> i/ 'comb'	--
/k <sup>h</sup> /	/k <sup>h</sup> ok/ 'echo'	/donk <sup>h</sup> o/ 'watermelon'	--
/c/	/ci/ 'salt'	/əthlaici/ 'seed'	--
/ɟ/	/ɟeldiŋ/ 'to tickle'	/mitjɔl/ 'eyelid'	--
/f/	/faŋma/ 'cucumber'	/mafu/ 'sugercane'	--
/v/	/var/ 'light'	/əvar/ 'bright'	--
/s/	/səi/ 'elephant'	/faksin/ 'to taste'	--
/z/	/zoŋ/ 'monkey'	/məzu/ 'rat'	--
/h/	/ha/ 'tooth'	/saiha/ 'tusk'	--
/m/	/mei/ 'fire'	/lomdiŋ/ 'to thank'	/sum/ 'cloud'
/n/	/ni/ 'father's sister'	/sundiŋ/ 'to prick'	/sun/ 'lead'
/ŋ/	/ŋa/ 'fish'	/ceŋk <sup>h</sup> a/ 'bitter guard'	/luŋ/ 'stone'
/r/	/ru/ 'rain'	/parte/ 'flower'	/mur/ 'beak'
/l/	/luŋ/ 'stone'	/milim/ 'picture'	/mul/ 'feather'

### 2.2.1. Tones

Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, Hmar is a tonal language. Tones are the supra-segmental features, and it plays a very significant role in the phonological system of Tibeto-Burman languages in general and Hmar language in particular. By changing the pitch of tone, the same word indicates a difference in meaning. Tone is phonemic in this language. Hmar has two tones, i.e., high and low tones, which are contrastive to each other by the significant pitch differences.

For the present work, the study of tone is made only in the mono-syllabic words. The two tones in the language are given below:

Tones	words	Gloss
( <sup>h</sup> )	/bú/	'rice'

( )	/bù/	‘nest’
( )	/dáj/	‘other’
( )	/dàŋ/	‘prevent’
( )	/leí/	‘tongue’
( )	/leì/	‘reason’

It is clear from the above that both the tones can occur in the word initial, medial and final positions of the words.

### 3. Conclusions

On the basis of the present phonemic analysis of Hmar, spoken in the Assam area, the following conclusions can be drawn.

(i) Hmar has six monophthongs /i, e, ə, a, o and u/ in its phonemic inventory. All the monophthongal vowels occur in all the positions of the words.

(ii) Hmar does not have non-syllabic vowels i.e., they can be a nucleus of the Hmar syllable and all the vowels in the language are oral and voiced.

(iii) The vowels /e and u/ have allophonic variation. The other phonemes have only one allophone.

(iv) There are six diphthongs / ei, ai, au, oi, ou, iu and ui / which occur both in open syllables rather than the closed one.

(v) There are twenty (20) consonantal phonemes in Hmar language, viz., /p, b, t, d, k, p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>, c, ʃ, f, v, s, z, h, m, n, ŋ, l and r/ across five contrastive points of articulation: bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal.

(vi) Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, three nasals /m, n, and ŋ/ are found in the language and the occurrence of /ŋ/ in the initial position of a syllable or word is one of the typological features of Hmar.

(vii) Tone is phonemic in this language. Hmar has two tones viz., high and low tone, which are contrastive to each other by the significant pitch differences.

(viii) Hmar segmental phonemes viz., vowels and consonants are evaluated in terms of binary distinctive features.

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