The Prosodic Profile of Black Mountain Mönpa
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Black Mountain Mönpa is an under-described Tibeto-Burman language of central Bhutan, spoken by approximately 500 speakers. The language has been difficult to classify within the Tibeto-Burman family, with van Driem (1995) first assessing the language to belong to the East Bodish branch (close to Tibetan) and then later determining it to be an isolate within the family (van Driem 2011). Hyslop (2016) confirms several unusual phonetic features – found primarily in the lexical domain of plants – offering further support to the isolate status of the language. Gerber (2020) identifies some phonological features that group Black Mountain Mönpa with other languages in the region as belonging to an old sprachbund. This talk presents a prosodic overview of Black Mountain Mönpa, with an aim to further our understanding of the historical development of the region while also contributing to prosodic typology. Data for this analysis come from a few months’ fieldwork in 2010 and 2023. There are no other publications pertaining to the language.

Black Mountain Mönpa has a rich set of phonemic contrasts. At the purely suprasegmental level, the language contrasts high versus low tone in monosyllables, as evidenced by the near minimal pair shown in (1) and (2). Current data suggest the contrast is only made following sonorant consonant onsets. A handful of words show phonemic nasalization of vowels, as evidenced by (3). Vowels may be long or short, as shown in (4). Data suggest the contrast is only available in open syllables.

In addition to tone, Black Mountain Mönpa displays a phonemic glottalization which can occur in the first syllable, as in (5) or in a later syllable, as in (6). While we represent this with a phonemic glottal stop, acoustically this contrast is usually realized as creaky voice across the entire syllable; see Figure 1.

Multisyllabic words can show initial stress, as in (7), or final stress, as in (8). Many of the words that fall into the latter category contain an initial vowel only, suggestive of the sesquisyllabic syllable type often associated with Austroasiatic languages (Matisoff 1973); however, instead of a schwa, this vowel is a fully realised low, back vowel.

In summary, Black Mountain Mönpa shows a prosodic profile that is also unique in the regional context. The apparent word tone on initial sonorant-initial only syllables appears to be like the tonal system of East Bodish languages, as does the minimal vowel length contrast (e.g. Hyslop 2017:§2-3) while nasalized vowels are found in Dzongkha, a Tibetic language spoken west of the region (e.g. van Driem 1998). Both Dzongkha and the East Bodish languages also have (exclusively) word-initial stress. Neither word-final stress nor glottalized syllables are found in adjacent languages, to our knowledge, though glottalized segments do occur in Dzongkha and other languages in Bhutan.

(1) lé ‘catch’  lâ: ‘come’
(2) ɲí ‘seven’  njè ‘fish’
(3) dō ‘hole’  rð ‘chase’
(4) ço ‘SFP’  çø: ‘sichuan pepper’
(5) ’hoʔma ‘3.SG.MSC’
(6) sxjø ’laʔ ‘leafy green type’
(7) ’kɡɡy ‘hen’
(8) a ’pən ‘grandmother’  a ’pʰøt ‘cotton’
Figure 1: Wave and spectrogram of sɔχoˈlaʔ, showing glottalised final syllable.

References