

# THE MORPHOPHONOLOGY OF THANGMI: A TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGE OF NEPAL

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1. INTRODUCTION. The Thangmi (Nepali *Thāmī*) are an ethnic group who number at least 35,000 and inhabit the central eastern hills of Nepal. The Thangmi claim to be autochthonous to the upper reaches of Dolakhā district as well as to the eastern valleys of Sindhupālcok district, and they speak a Tibeto-Burman language which has two distinctly recognisable and mutually unintelligible dialects. The greatest concentration of ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the language are in these two districts.

Thangmi most probably occupies a genetic position somewhere between the Kiranti or ‘Rai’ group of languages spoken in the east of Nepal, and the Newar language as spoken in Dolakhā bazār and around the Kathmandu valley. The Thangmi language exhibits certain grammatical features reminiscent of the Kiranti languages (Turin 1998), but has a lexicon more closely allied to Newar (Turin 2004). A point worthy of note is that the Thangmi feel next to no affinity to the Rai-Kiranti peoples living to their east, but talk rather of cultural, social and linguistic associations with the Newar of Dolakhā and the Kathmandu valley beyond.

There is also a Thangmi community in north-eastern India, largely concentrated in and around Darjeeling, which is the product of an emigration earlier this century from high-altitude villages in Dolakhā. According to the *Ethnologue* of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Grimes 1978), there is also a Thangmi-speaking population in Tibet, although I was unable to verify this interesting proposition on a recent trip to Tibet (summer 2005).

The morphophonological regularities which are attested throughout the Thangmi language, or within a defined grammatical category, are the topic of this short article. While the actual realisations of specific morphemes are analysed in the my forthcoming grammar of Thangmi (Turin, forthcoming), they are discussed here only if their morphophonological forms are conditioned by factors which appear to be widespread throughout the Thangmi language. In line with established convention, morphemes and allomorphs are represented between morpheme brackets, as in <-si> (REF). Such a form is considered to be the underlying representation which may then undergo environmentally conditioned modifications. A phonetic form is represented in square brackets, as in [ʃi], and a phonologically correct representation is italicised with no brackets, as in *si*.

2. REMNANTS OF A LIQUID-NASAL ALTERNATION. Thangmi displays the remnants of what may be a defunct liquid-nasal alternation. Unlike Yamphu, which still attests an alternation of liquid initials in suffixes and auxiliary verbs (Rutgers 1998: 40), Thangmi retains a mere handful of examples of a system which may once have been more productive. The four instances of liquid-nasal variation attested in modern spoken Thangmi show an alternation between the voiced, apico-alveolar approximant /l/ [l] and the voiced, retroflex nasal continuant /ŋ/ [ŋ], as shown below:

|                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <lyuŋ ~ liŋ ~ ŋiŋ>        | stone, rock             |
| <kili ~ kiŋi>             | faeces, excrement, shit |
| <lukumbasya ~ ŋukumbasya> | behind, back            |
| <lore ~ ŋoneŋ>            | jackal                  |

While the alternation of /l/ and /ŋ/ is most commonly heard in the forms shown above, older monolingual Thangmi speakers use /l/ and /ŋ/ interchangeably in scores of native Thangmi words. In particular, popular alternations include <lu ~ ŋu> ‘later, after’ and <lumsa ~ ŋumsa> ‘to sink into water’ (both Sindhupālcok dialect). These alternates are rejected by younger speakers.

3. ASSIMILATION. Verb stems and nouns that end in a voiced, velar nasal [ŋ] are morphophonologically ‘weak’. This weakness entails that under certain conditions, the segment does not retain its regular phonological identity but assimilates to the segments that follow, bringing about a regular alternation in the verb stem or nominal final. Before a short, mid-open, unrounded front vowel /e/ [ɛ], a voiced, velar nasal final is subject to regressive assimilation for place of articulation. The result is a palatalised /ny/ [ɲ], as in the following five examples:

|                         |                              |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>wany-eŋ-du</i>       | they’re coming up from below |
| [waɲeŋɖu]               |                              |
| <waŋ-eŋ-du>             |                              |
| come.from.below-pAS-NPT |                              |
| <i>dany-eŋ-no</i>       | they sought                  |
| [ɖaɲeŋno]               |                              |
| <daŋ-eŋ-no>             |                              |
| seek-pAS-3→3/PT         |                              |

|  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| <i>lony-eŋ-ŋa-n</i><br>[loŋeŋŋan]<br><loŋ-eŋ-ŋa-n><br>do-pAS-1s-PT | they did [it] to me  |
| <i>nany-e</i><br>[naŋe]<br><naŋ-e><br>you(s)-ERG                   | you (singular) (ERG) |
| <i>su-bany-e</i><br>[ʂubaŋe]<br><su-baŋ-e><br>who-Pp-ERG           | who (plural) (ERG)   |

This assimilation is represented by the following rule:

$$\Sigma /ŋ/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ny/ \quad / \quad \_ /e/$$

**4. THE MORPHOPHONOLOGY OF INTERVOCALIC APPROXIMANTS.** When followed by a vowel-initial verbal agreement suffix, Thangmi open-stem verbs are realised with an intervocalic glide, either /h/, /y/ or /w/, an example of which is *amiy-Ø-an* (sleep-sAS-3S/PT) ‘he/she/it slept’, from *ami-sa* ‘to sleep’. The rules governing each vowel cluster combination are presented alongside illustrative examples below. The rule governing a vowel-initial verbal agreement suffix following an open-stem verb ending with a short, open, unrounded, front vowel [a] is as follows:

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \Sigma /ah/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /a/ \\ \_ /o/ \\ \_ /u/ \end{array} \right\} \\ \Sigma /ay/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /e/ \\ \_ /i/ \end{array} \right\} \end{array} \right\}$$

For the rule

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ah/ \quad / \quad \_ /a/$$

examples include:

*thah-an*

he/she/it became

[tʰafian]

<tha-Ø-an>

be-sAS-3S/PT

*cawah-an*

he/she/it walked

[tsawafian]

<cawa-Ø-an>

walk-sAS-3S/PT

For the rule

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ah/ \quad / \quad \_ /o/$$

examples include:

*ŋah-o!*

say it!

[ŋafio]

<ŋa-o>

say-s→3/IMP

*tortah-o!*

leave it!

[tɔrtafio]

<torta-o>

leave-s→3/IMP

For the rule

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ah/ \quad / \quad \_ /u/$$

examples include:

*ŋah-u-n-uŋ* I said  
 [ŋaɦununŋ]  
 <ŋa-u-n-uŋ>  
 say-3P-1s→3-1s→3/PT

*cyah-u-no* he/she/it ate  
 [tsjaɦuno]  
 <cy-a-Ø-u-no>  
 eat-sAS-3P-3→3/PT

For the rule

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ay/ \quad / \quad \_ /e/$$

examples include:

*ŋay-eŋ-du* they say  
 [ŋajɛŋdu]  
 <ŋa-eŋ-du>  
 say-pAS-NPT

*usyay-eŋ-an* he/she/it danced  
 [uʂjajɛŋan]  
 <usya-eŋ-an>  
 dance-pAS-3S/PT

For the rule

$$\Sigma /a/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ay/ \quad / \quad \_ /i/$$

examples include:

*ray-i-n* we came  
 [rajɪn]  
 <ra-i-n>  
 come.from.level-1pPS-PT

*thay-i-du*                    we are  
 [tʰajɪɖu]  
 <tha-i-du>  
 be-1pPS-PT

The rule governing a vowel-initial verbal agreement suffix following an open-stem verb ending with a short, mid-open, unrounded front vowel [ɛ] is as follows:

$$\Sigma /e/ \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \Sigma /ey/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /a/ \\ \_ /e/ \\ \_ /i/ \end{array} \right\} \\ \Sigma /eh/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /u/ \end{array} \right\} \\ \Sigma /ew/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /o/ \end{array} \right\} \end{array} \right\}$$

For the rule

$$\Sigma /e/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ey/ \quad / \quad \_ /a/$$

an example is:

*ikhey-an*                    it crowed  
 [ikʰɛjan]  
 <ikhe-Ø-an>  
 crow-sAS-3S/PT

For the rule

$$\Sigma /e/ \rightarrow \Sigma /ey/ \quad / \quad \_ /e/$$











For the rule

$$\Sigma /u/ \rightarrow \Sigma /uy/ \quad / \quad \_ /e/$$

an example is:

|                    |            |
|--------------------|------------|
| <i>cabuy-eŋ-du</i> | they carry |
| [tsabuŋeŋdu]       |            |
| <cabu-eŋ-du>       |            |
| carry-pAS-NPT      |            |

For the rule

$$\Sigma /u/ \rightarrow \Sigma /uy/ \quad / \quad \_ /i/$$

an example is:

|                |            |
|----------------|------------|
| <i>nuy-i-n</i> | we laughed |
| [nujm]         |            |
| <nu-i-n>       |            |
| laugh-1pPS-PT  |            |

For the rule

$$\Sigma /u/ \rightarrow \Sigma /uw/ \quad / \quad \_ /a/$$

an example is:

|                           |                           |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>yuw-an</i>             | he/she/it came from above |
| [juwan]                   |                           |
| <ju-Ø-an>                 |                           |
| come.from.above-sAS-3S/PT |                           |

For the rule

$$\Sigma /u/ \rightarrow \Sigma /uw/ \quad / \quad \_ /o/$$



|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| <i>săiy-eŋ-no</i><br>[ʃaɪjeŋno]<br><săi-eŋ-no><br>know-pAS-3→3/PT  | they knew         |
| <i>karăiy-i-n</i><br>[kaɪɾim]<br><karăi-i-n><br>shout-1pPS-PT      | we feel [hungry]  |
| <i>nasăiy-o!</i><br>[naʃaɪjo]<br><nasăi-o><br>hear-s→3/IMP         | listen!           |
| <i>kăiy-u-du</i><br>[kaɪjuɖu]<br><kăi-Ø-u-du><br>remove-sAS-3P-NPT | he/she/it removes |

The rule governing a vowel-initial verbal agreement suffix following an open-stem verb ending with the diphthong /ei/ is as follows:

$$\Sigma /ei/ \rightarrow \left\{ \Sigma /eiy/ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \_ /a/ \\ \_ /u/ \end{array} \right\} \right\}$$

Examples include:

|   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| <i>kheiy-an</i><br>[k <sup>h</sup> eɪjan]<br><khei-Ø-an><br>spill-sAS-3S/PT         | it spilled       |
| <i>kheiy-u-no</i><br>[k <sup>h</sup> eɪjuno]<br><khei-Ø-u-no><br>pour-sAS-3P-3→3/PT | he/she/it poured |



*urouh-u-du* he/she/it calls  
 [urɔʊɦuɖu]  
 <urou-Ø-u-du>  
 call-sAS-3P-NPT

Younger Thangmi speakers of the Dolakhā dialect with increasing fluency in Nepali sometimes disregard the morphophonology of open verb stems when the initial of the following verbal agreement suffix is the same vowel as the verb stem. In such cases, younger speakers lengthen the vowel of the verb stem, as shown in the examples below:

*tha-an* he/she/it became  
 [tʰaːn] rather than [tʰafian]  
 <tha-Ø-an>  
 be-sAS-3S/PT

*ne-eŋ-to-le* having ground  
 [neːŋtole] rather than [nejɛŋtole]  
 <ne-eŋ-to-le>  
 grind-pAS-TPP-PCL

*ari-i-n* we were afraid  
 [arɪːn] rather than [arijn]  
 <ari-i-n>  
 be.afraid-1pPS-PT

*to-o!* dig!  
 [toː] rather than [toɦo]  
 <to-o>  
 dig-s→3/IMP

*ɖapuh-u-du* he/she/it spies  
 [ɖapuːɖu] rather than [ɖapuhɖu]  
 <ɖapu-Ø-u-du>  
 spy-sAS-3P-NPT

Thangmi speakers from the village of Piskar in Sindhupālcok district insert a glottal stop in the place of a glide. This intervocalic hiatus prevents diphthongisation. The phenomenon of a hiatus is not attested elsewhere in Sindhupālcok, and is also rejected by speakers of the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi. The following three examples demonstrate this glottalisation:

*thaʔ-an* he/she/it became  
 [tʰaʔan] rather than [tʰafian]  
 <tha-Ø-an>  
 be-SAS-3S/PT

*toʔ-o!* dig!  
 [toʔo] rather than [tofo]  
 <to-o>  
 dig-s → 3/IMP

*yuʔ-an* he/she/it came from above  
 [juʔan]  
 <ju-Ø-an>  
 come.from.above-SAS-3S/PT

**5. SYNCOPE.** Syncope is internal deletion involving the omission of sounds from within a word. In Thangmi, vowel syncope is a feature of both the Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok dialects when a verb stem has the following structure:

C V /r/ V

In such instances, as shown in the examples below, the first vowel may be syncopated. While both vowel syncope and vowel retention are attested, the rate of omission increases with connected or flowing natural speech:<sup>1</sup>

*dorok-an ~ drok-an* he/she/it ran  
 [dɔrɔkan ~ drɔkan]  
 <dorok-Ø-an>  
 run-SAS-3S/PT

*serek-an ~ srek-an* he/she/it got up  
 [ʃerɛkan ~ ʃrɛkan]  
 <serek-Ø-an>  
 arise-SAS-3S/PT

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<sup>1</sup> The same is true in English, in which some cases of syncope are conventions which speed up or simplify speech patterns, as in [ˈsekɹɪtri] rather than [ˈsekɹɪteri] ‘secretary’.

## 6. ABBREVIATIONS.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| A agent (of a transitive verb)            | p plural                                 |
| ABL ablative                              | P patient (of a transitive verb)         |
| ADH adhortative                           | PCL participial                          |
| CAUS causative                            | PERM permissive                          |
| CLF non-human numeral classifier          | PFG perfect gerund                       |
| CON continuous background activity suffix | PM patient marker                        |
| DIM diminutive                            | Pp pronominal plural                     |
| ERG ergative                              | PRT particle                             |
| FEM feminine, female gender               | PSG present gerund                       |
| FOC focus particle                        | PT preterite                             |
| (G) glide                                 | REF reflexive                            |
| GEN genitive                              | REP reported speech particle             |
| IMP imperative                            | s singular                               |
| IND individuating suffix                  | S subject                                |
| INF infinitive                            | TPP transitive preterite participle      |
| INS instrumental                          | vs. versus                               |
| IPP intr. preterite participle            | ∅ zero-marker                            |
| LOC locative                              | [...] phonetic transcription             |
| MALE masculine, male gender               | /.../ phonemic transcription             |
| NEG negative                              | <...> morpheme/allomorph                 |
| NPS neg. participial suffix               | < derives from                           |
| NPT non-preterite                         | → direction of a transitive relationship |
| OPT optative                              | ~ alternates with                        |
|   | 1 first person                           |
|   | 2 second person                          |
|   | 3 third person                           |
|   | Σ stem                                   |

## 7. REFERENCES.

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