

# **A Phonological Sketch of Sorbung, an Undescribed Language of Manipur**

subfields: phonology; language description; historical and comparative linguistics

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This paper presents a sketch of the phonology of Sorbung, a previously undocumented Tibeto-Burman language spoken by members of the Tangkhul ethnicity living in Sorbung village in the southern region of Ukhrul District, Manipur, India. While the language appears similar to the “Southern Tangkhul” from which Brown (1837) published a short word list, and is spoken by ethnic Tangkhuls, it does not appear to be part of the Tangkhulic subgroup proposed by Mortensen and Miller (Mortensen and Miller 2009a; Mortensen and Miller 2009b) and shares some lexical and phonological affinities with Kuki-Chin languages. This paper introduces Sorbung to the scholarly community through an outline of its phonological inventory (in terms of minor syllables, onsets, rimes, and tones), phonological alternations, and phonotactic properties. The sketch is based on word-list data elicited by the first author from a single speaker of Sorbung.

As in Tangkhulic languages, sesquisyllabic words are common in Sorbung. Unlike Tangkhulic languages (Mortensen and Miller 2009b), the obstruent onsets of sesquisyllables do not dissimilate in laryngeal features from the following onset. The vowels in minor syllables may be absent entirely, leading to clusters or, in the case of /ʔ(a)-/, preglottalized consonants. This noteworthy pattern illustrates, synchronically, a possible diachronic mechanism for the development of new consonant series, registers, and tones in Southeast Asian languages (e.g. ʔC > CC > C<sup>h</sup>).

The Sorbung onset inventory is given in (1). In stops, there is a three-way laryngeal contrast (voiced, voiceless, voiceless aspirated) except among velars. The inventory of known rimes is given in (2). Sorbung mid and low vowels can be grouped into long-short pairs. In closed syllables, these often correspond to long-short contrasts in Proto-Kuki-Chin (Vanbik 2009) and Proto-Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff 2003). Root-final stops alternate in voicing depending on their phonological and morphological context. Like many Kuki-Chin languages, but unlike Tangkhulic languages, Sorbung has the rising sonority diphthongs /ua/ and /ia/ from Proto-Tibeto-Burman glide-vowel sequences (e.g. *thiar* ‘iron’ < PTB \**syi:r*, *cuap* ‘spleen’ < PTB \**tsywap* ‘lung’). The details of the Sorbung tone system are not yet worked out in full, but it has three contrasting lexical tones (H, M, and L) and a robust tone sandhi system.

While reports from consultants lead us to believe that a language similar to Sorbung is spoken with considerable uniformity in a significant segment of southern Ukhrul District, we have not been able to document this directly. We hope that, with the presentation of this description and the circulation of the accompanying word list (~500 words), other linguists will become aware of Sorbung and the issues this language variety raises for Tibeto-Burman and Southeast Asian linguistics. Aside from general descriptive interest, this paper has implications for comparative Tibeto-Burman, theoretical phonology, and the study of language and ethnicity in Southeast Asia.

## Tables

### (1) Sorbung Onsets

Segments in parenthesis represent non-contrastive positional variants.

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m	n		ŋ	
Plosive	p p <sup>h</sup> b	t t <sup>h</sup> d	c (ɟ)	k k <sup>h</sup> (g)	ʔ
Fricative	(v)	s	ʃ		h
Trill		r			
Approximates		l	j	w	

### (2) Sorbung Rimes

–0	–r	–m	–n	–ŋ	–p	–t	–k
	ar	am	an	aŋ	ap	at	ak
aa	aar	aam	aan	aan	aap	aat	aak
		em	en	eŋ		et	ek
ee				eeŋ			EEK
	or	om	on	oŋ			ok
oo		oom	oon	oon	oop		ook
	ir	im	in	iŋ	ip	it	ik
ii			iin	iin	iip	iit	
	ur	um	[ʊn]	uŋ		[ʊt]	
uu	uur	uum		uun	uup		uuk
uu							
au							
ai							
ia	iar	iam		ian			iak
ua	uar	uam	uan	uan	uap	uat	uak
iu		ium					iuk
uo							

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