

Preservation vs innovation in Brokpa

Is innovation contact-induced or is it a natural drift?

1. Statement of the problem

Whether innovation is a contact-induced motivation or a natural drift is a question worth investigating. Brokpa is a minority language in Bhutan. Innovations in Brokpa reflect, and contribute to, the structural diversity within Bodish language group as well as within the higher Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman) language family.

2. Where is Brokpa spoken?

Brokpa is spoken in Bhutan where 19 languages are spoken and in Northeast India where more than 200 languages are spoken. The total number of Brokpa speakers are estimated at 5000.

Bhutan is situated on the Eastern edge of the Himalayas and shares a common border with Tibet to the north. Bhutan also shares quite a long border with India touching three states— Arunachal Pradesh to its east, Sikkim to its west, and Assam to its south.

3. Language classification

Brokpa is a Central Bodish language (van Driem 1991, 1994, 1998; Shafer 1955, 1966; Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2019). There are 441 languages within the Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman) language family, out of which 84 are Bodish and 39 are Central Bodish (Eberhard et al. 2019).

Besides Brokpa, there are five other Central Bodish languages spoken in Bhutan, namely Dzongkha, Cho-ca-nga-ca-kha, Brokkat, Lakha, and Tibetan (B'ökha).

van Driem (2003, 2011) provides a 'Fallen Leaves' model of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic phylum, provided in Figure 1.



Figure 1. van Driem's 'Fallen Leaves' model of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic phylum

Based on Shafer (1955, 1966), van Driem (2003, 2011), Tournadre (2014), and Eberhard et al. (2019), the subgrouping of Bodish languages can be represented in Figure 2. The number inside the parenthesis indicates the total number of languages within that subgroup. A language without number indicates that there is no other member and that language forms a subgroup by itself.

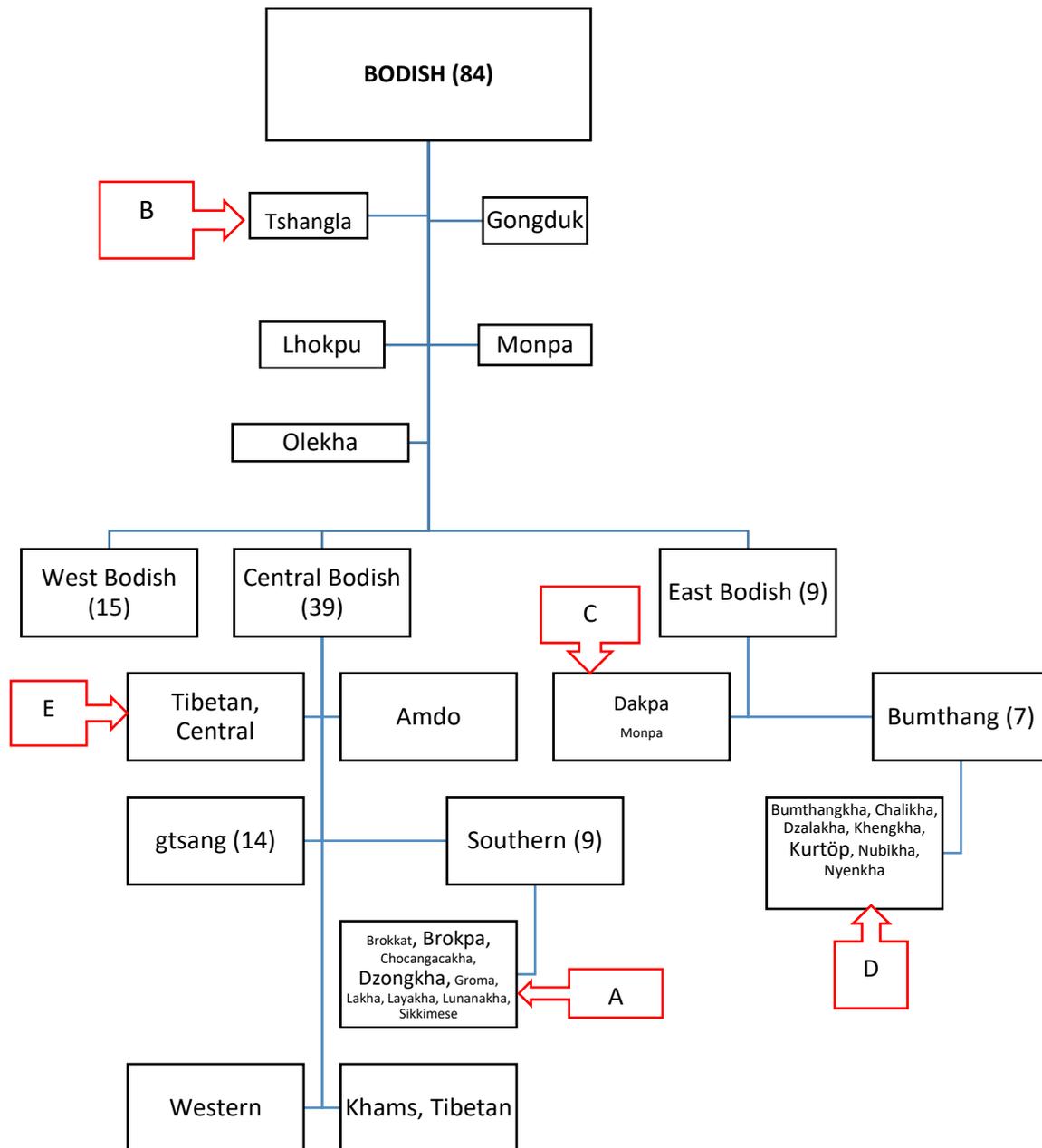


Figure 2. Subgrouping of Bodish languages

4. Language contact situation

Brokpa is spoken in direct contact with Tshangla and Dakpa in Eastern Bhutan, both of which belong to different subgroups. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, Tshangla forms a subgroup by itself, on a par with Central Bodish, East Bodish, and West Bodish, which are further divided into different subgroups and member languages.

Dakpa, which is in close contact with Brokpa in Bhutan as well as in Northeast India, belongs to East Bodish (Shafer 1955, 1996; van Driem 1991, 1994, 1998; Hyslop 2013, 2017).



Map 1. *Languages of Bhutan* (Wikimedia Commons n.d.)

Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan and is used for official communication and interethnic interaction. It is also taught in school. Besides the national language Dzongkha, Tshangla is a majority language of Bhutan. In particular, Tshangla is used as a common language in Eastern Bhutan where Brokpa and other languages including Dakpa, Dzala, Chali, Chocangaca, and Khengpa are spoken.

Brokpa is mutually unintelligible with Modern Tibetan just like other Bhutanese languages are; however, Brokpa speakers tend to have a better command of Classical Tibetan than the speakers of other Bhutanese languages.

5 Preservation and innovation

Brokpa (BR), Dzongkha (DZ), Classical Tibetan (CT), Tshangla (TS) and other languages spoken in Bhutan and the adjoining areas resemble one another in many categories and constructions. They show similarities in many areas of phonology, grammar, and lexicon. Since these languages are genetically related, some at the lower level and some at the higher level, they share forms and patterns (Aikhenvald 2007).

At the same time, BR differs markedly from other Trans-Himalayan languages, both close and long-distance genetic relatives, in all areas of grammar and lexicon. BR appears to be more archaic and conservative than many Central Bodish languages in the neighbourhood. BR preserves several features of proto-Tibeto-Burman such as clusters of initial consonant plus glide, contrast between long and short vowels (Matisoff 2003). BR tends to preserve much of the phonological, such as onset and coda clusters, which are only retained in the written forms of CT and DZ but are lost altogether in their spoken forms.

At the same time, there is a mass of evidence suggesting BR has undergone innovation in many areas of grammar and lexicon and BR is a distinct language mutually unintelligible with all her related languages. However, BR is not free from the diffusion of grammatical patterns that characterize the Bodish languages within the Trans-Himalayan family. BR and other Bodish languages can be said to be passing through what Sapir (1921) referred to as 'parallelisms in drift'.

5.1 Personal pronouns

The personal pronouns of BR, DZ, and CT are provided in Table 1 and the person pronoun system of TS in Table 2. The angular brackets < > indicate graphemic representation (of CT).

Table 1 Personal pronouns in BR, DZ, CT

		BR		DZ		CT	
		SG	PL	SG	PL	SG	PL
1		<i>ŋa</i>	<i>ŋi</i>	<i>nga</i>	<i>ngace</i>	<nga>	<nged>
2		<i>k^hyo</i>	<i>k^hyi</i>	<i>chö</i>	<i>chä</i>	<khyod>	<khyed>
3	MASCULINE	<i>k^ho</i>	<i>k^hoŋ</i>	<i>kho</i>		<kho>	
	FEMININE	<i>mo</i>		<i>mo</i>	<i>khong</i>	<mo>	<khong>
HONORIFIC				<i>nâ</i>	<i>nâ-bu</i>		

Table 2. TS personal pronouns

	SINGULAR	DUAL	PLURAL
1	<i>jang</i>	<i>aching</i>	<i>ai</i>
2	<i>nan</i>	<i>naching</i>	<i>nai</i>
3	<i>ro</i>	<i>roktshing~rokching</i>	<i>rokte</i>

BR, DZ, and CT share the root forms of personal pronouns, with BR and DZ undergoing sound changes (innovation) to make number distinctions. TS has completely different forms.

BR and DZ have just sg/pl distinction but they do not have dual pronouns. TS has developed a dual form in all persons.

DZ has innovated an honorific form in its pronoun paradigm.

5.2 Plural marking

The morphemes marking plural in these four languages are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Plural markers in BR, DZ, CT, TS

BR	DZ	CT	TS
=ba(k), =ts ^h u, =zu, =su	=châchap (only human-nouns)	<rnam>, <tsho>	=ba(k)
=ts ^h aŋ, =saŋ (associative)	=tshu (both human and non-human nouns)	<dag> (collective)	

BR and DZ share the plural form =ts^hu, a vowel shift from the CT <tsho>. BR has innovated more allomorphic variants. BR also has innovated associative plural =ts^haŋ ~ =saŋ, as in (1) and (2). The associative plural is generally marked on proper names, kinship terms, and nouns with human reference and has the meaning or 'X and X's associate(s)' (Moravcsik 2003; Aikhenvald 2015).

(1) te num ŋa=i ?ot ?ani ?azaŋ = ts^haŋ

PART night 1sg=GEN DEM aunt uncle=AS.PL

lok yar-ga-soŋ

again run-go-PERFV.DIRECT

'So, at night, my those parents-in-law and all went back'

(2) ?azaŋ çi-m-gin = ts^haŋ ?un ya=la dok-p^hi-na

uncle die-LK-NOMZ1 = AS.PL before up=LOC arrive-NOMZ2-FACTUAL

'In the past, (my) late uncle and all have been up there (Tibet)'

Interestingly, BR also shares the TS plural marker =*bak* [bɛʔ]. It is reasonable to infer that BR has borrowed this plural marker from TS because the form =*bak* is completely different from the native Central Bodish plural form =*ts^hu* ~ =*tsho*.

5.3 Consonant clusters

BR allows stop plus liquid and stop plus glide clusters in the onset position. It also allows stop plus fricative and nasal plus fricative clusters in the coda position, albeit marginally. Allowable consonant clusters in onset and coda positions in BR are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Onset and coda consonant clusters in BR

ONSET CLUSTERS		CODA CLUSTERS	
BR WORD	MEANING	BR WORD	MEANING
<i>preŋbu</i>	poor	<i>ʔotɕins</i>	like this/that
<i>p^hrædo</i>	jealousy	<i>dʒikɕ</i>	to be afraid
<i>brunæ</i>	placenta	<i>doks</i>	to arrive
<i>ploi</i>	to roll	<i>yɔŋs</i>	to approach

TS allows a series of two consonants in the initial position (Andvik 2010); TS has completely different forms, without onset clusters, for some lexemes. DZ has no consonant clusters (Watters 2018).

A comparison of some lexemes which are cognates in BR, CT, and DZ is drawn in Table 5.

Table 5. Reduction of BR onset clusters in CT, DZ, and TS

BR	CT	DZ	TS	MEANING
<i>bru</i> [bru]	< 'bru > [dʒu:]	< 'byu > [bdʒu]	<i>budaŋ</i>	grain
<i>gleŋ</i> [gleŋ]	< glang > [lɑŋ]	< glang > [lɑŋ]	<i>dʒats^ha</i>	ox
<i>p^hræ</i> [p ^h re:]	< phrad > [t ^h æ]	< 'phyad > [ptɕ ^h e:]	<i>rum</i>	to meet
<i>bræŋtoŋ</i> [brɛŋ.toŋ]	< brang > [dʒɑŋ]	< byangkhog > [bdʒɑŋk ^h o:]	<i>bræŋtoŋ</i>	chest

Only BR preserves the consonant clusters in these lexemes. In CT and DZ, although the clusters are indicated in the written forms, they are no longer found in the spoken forms. TS has separate lexical items provided in Table 5 other than *braŋtoŋ* 'chest'. TS retains much of the stop plus liquid (CC) clusters in the onset position.

However, BR also displays tendency for reducing the consonant clusters, e.g. *tsambrok* ~ *tsamɔo*: 'pasture', *tabraŋ* ~ *tabaŋ* 'horse race', *gleŋ* ~ *gəleŋ* 'ox'. This tendency in BR to reduce consonant clusters can be interpreted as parallelism in drift with other languages in question.

6 Tone prosody

BR has two register tones distinguished by pitch height. Register tone is contrastive in lexemes with sonorant-initials only, as provided in Table 6. Obstruent initials are inherently higher register or inherently lower register.

Synchronically, pitch distinction on obstruent-initials is only allophonic in BR; the lexemes with obstruent initial are distinguished by phonation contrast.

Table 6. Contrastive tone on sonorant-initial lexemes in BR

LOW TONE		HIGH TONE	
<i>man</i>	'negative copula'	<i>mán</i>	'medicine'
<i>nup</i>	'to set'	<i>núp</i>	'west'
<i>ŋu</i>	'cry'	<i>ŋú</i>	'silver'
<i>na</i>	'fish'	<i>ná</i>	'edge'
<i>yar</i>	'run'	<i>yár</i>	'borrow'
<i>lo</i>	'age'	<i>ló</i>	'lung'
<i>wor</i>	'hole'	<i>wór</i>	'power'

This phenomenon of contrastive tone on sonorant-initials is an instance of parallel development in all these related languages, although they may be in different stages of tonogenesis.

6.1 Tonogenesis

Synchronically, voicing and aspiration contrast in syllables with obstruent-initials appears to be quite robust in BR. The process of tonogenesis by way of losing initial voicing contrast even in obstruent-initials has been reported in other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Sani, a Loloish language (JAM 1979:27, as cited in Matisoff 2003).

As shown in Table 6, BR makes two pitch contrast (register tones), applying on syllables with sonorant-initials, and four plosive manner contrast. DZ is same like BR with two pitch contrast and four plosive manner contrast.

Some Bodish languages from other subgroups, such as Dongwang (Bartee 2007), are reported as having three-way pitch contrast (low, mid, and high) and four plosive manner contrasts. KT has three plosive manner contrasts and two contrastive pitch, but, unlike BR and DZ, KT is reported to be developing contrastive pitch on syllables with fricative-initials also (Hyslop 2017).

Tonogenesis in Brokpa can be considered a parallelism in drift with other related languages.

6.2 Pitch assimilation

Brokpa has a process of leftward shift of high pitch which can be called 'pitch assimilation'. If a verb root begins with a lower pitch initial, it takes the negation prefix *ma-* with low pitch; but if the root has high pitch initial, then the high pitch shifts leftward to the negation marker *má-*, as shown in Table 7.

This pitch assimilation applies to lexemes with sonorant-initials (with lexically contrastive tone) as well as to lexemes with obstruent-initials with high pitch (but without lexically contrastive tone). Therefore, I am calling it 'pitch assimilation' instead of 'tone spreading'.

Table 7. Regressive pitch assimilation in BR

BEFORE ASSIMILATION		AFTER ASSIMILATION		
<i>ma-yar</i>	NEG-run	<i>má-yúk</i>	NEG-shake	triggered by high-tone sonorant-initial
<i>ma-gya</i>	NEG-do	<i>má-lúk</i>	NEG-pour	
<i>ma-Bro</i>	NEG-escape	<i>má-ploi</i>	NEG-roll	triggered by inherently high-register obstruent-initial
<i>ma-gu:</i>	NEG-move	<i>má-ɕer</i>	NEG-separate	

The transfer of high tone from the root to the negative prefix is reported for KT (Hyslop 2017). The pitch assimilation from the root to the negative prefix is also found in DZ and TS, although the individual authors do not mention it.

Pitch assimilation can well be a parallelism in drift.

7 Borrowings from TS to BR

Borrowing of forms from TS contribute to the diversity of grammatical elements in BR. Some potential TS loans in BR, associated with its grammatical systems or discourse-pragmatic functions, are provided in Table 8.

Table 8. Potential Tshangla loans in the grammatical systems of Brokpa

GRAMMATICAL SYSTEM	BR FORM	TS FORM	MEANING	NATIVE BR form
GRAMMATICAL NUMBER	= <i>bak</i>	= <i>bak</i>	plural	= <i>ts^hu, ts^haŋ</i>
NOMINALIZATION	- <i>kan</i> (- <i>k^han</i> , - <i>gan</i>)	- <i>k^han</i>	A/S 'agentive' nominalizer	- <i>mi</i>
QUANTIFIERS/INTENSIFIERS	<i>zɛpa</i>	<i>dzɛpa</i>	much, many	<i>dakya, yor</i>
	<i>samsim</i>	<i>samasimi</i>	a little, a fair bit	<i>tɕ^hezik, nuŋku</i>
POSTPOSITIONAL RELATOR	<i>sakke</i>	<i>sakken, sakpo</i>	until	<i>ts^hunts^hon</i>
TOPIC	= <i>ta</i>	= <i>ta</i>	topic	= <i>di ~ = ti</i>

Although the native forms of the plural marker and agentive nominalizer are not completely replaced, the loan forms are used more frequently. The loan form of the plural marker = *bak* is found in (3) and (4).

- (3) p^hama = **bak** = k^{hi} d̥ö-ton-næ parpunts^han = **bak** = k^{hi}
 parent = PL = ERG counsel-show-SEQ sibling = PL = ERG
 d̥ö-ton-næ
 counsel-show-SEQ
 'Parents give advice, siblings give advice'

- (4) mí t̥eloŋ doriri = **bak** purt̥çin ts^hur = la yoŋ-næ
 person young energetic = PL all hither = ALL come-SEQ
 'All young and energetic people came towards this side'

The native plural form = ts^hu~zu~su is found in (5):

- (5) yák = **zu** t̥ok^her-ga-li d̥ou ʒuŋma = raŋ p^hiriri
 yak = PL stampede-go-NOMZ2 like tail = EMPH wagging
 'Just as the yaks stampede with their tails wagging (furiously)'

We also find some cognate forms of grammatical elements in BR and TS, as in Table 9.

Table 9. Cognate forms in BR and TS

GRAMMATICAL SYSTEM	BROKPA FORM	TSHANGLA FORM	MEANING	REALIZATION
NEGATION	<i>ma, mi</i>	<i>ma, mi</i>	negation	prefix
CONJUNCTION	<i>daŋ</i>	<i>daŋ</i>	and	enclitic
NOMINAL DEMONSTRATIVE	<i>ʔoti</i>	<i>ot^hu</i>	this	word
	<i>ʔup^hi</i>	<i>unu</i>	that	word
CLAUSE LINKING	<i>ʔonæ</i>	<i>onagai</i>	then	word
CASE MARKING	<i>gi</i>	<i>gi</i>	ergative, genitive, instrument	enclitic
RELATORS	<i>naŋ</i>	<i>naŋ</i>	inside	word
	<i>bar</i>	<i>bar</i>	middle	
	<i>ʃio:</i>	<i>ʃiok</i>	under	
INTERJECTION	<i>láma, yaláma láma k^hyen</i>	<i>láma, yaláma láma k^hyen</i>	wow (lit. lama, lama up there, lama knows)	
	<i>dzai</i>	<i>dzai</i>	good grief	
IDIOPHONES	<i>tsaktsik</i>	<i>tsaktsik</i>	knick-knack	
	<i>tɕ^hamtɕ^him</i>	<i>tɕ^hamtɕ^him</i>	flimflam	
ONOMATOPOEIA	<i>ʈ^huŋʈ^huŋ</i>	<i>ʈ^huŋʈ^huŋ</i>	crane	
	<i>kupi</i>	<i>kupi</i>	cuckoo	
	<i>yákpa</i>	<i>aba</i>	crow	

8 Conclusion

As is the case with other minority languages in Bhutan, evidently, BR has been undergoing a great deal of innovation within the last five hundred years or so, particularly after its separation from the Tibetic-speaking areas in Southern Tibet. We have also seen that BR has borrowed many lexical items, and some grammatical elements, from other languages such as TS. As a result, BR shows so many similarities in lexical (and grammatical) forms and constructions with languages of the same subgroup as well as with those belonging to different subgroups.

Aikhenvald and Dixon (2001) provide five explanations for languages showing similarities in forms and patterns: (i) universal properties or tendencies; (ii) chance; (iii) borrowing or diffusion; (iv) genetic retention; and (v) parallel development (or convergent development).

The similarities in forms, functions, construction patterns, grammatical categories that we have seen in these languages can be due to a combination of these factors. Since these languages belong to the same genetic family at a higher level, the question of 'chance' similarities does not arise. Other than (ii), all other phenomena will play a role, albeit in varying degrees. A summary of preservation and innovation in BR is provided in Table 10.

Table 10. Preservation and innovation in BR

FEATURE	PRESERVATION	INNOVATION	PARALLELISM IN DRIFT	COMMENT
personal pronouns	✓			innovation in undergoing sound change to mark plural
plural marking		✓		allomorphic variants; borrowing from TS
consonant clusters	✓			lost in DZ; some in TS
tonogenesis			✓	
pitch assimilation			✓	
lexical borrowings		✓		

Based on the synchronic prosodic and grammatical features, BR certainly is an archaic language historically rich in consonant clusters with a relatively simple prosodic system. At the same time, the synchronic prosodic and grammatical features also provide evidence in favour of a number of innovative processes in this language.

Among others, BR is losing its consonant clusters and developing additional complexities including lexical tones. While it is difficult to clearly discern every particular innovation in BR, without any doubt, every innovation could be a combination of contact-induced motivation and parallelism in drift.

ABBREVIATIONS

1	1 st person	LOC	locative
ALL	allative	NOMZ1	lexical nominalizer
AS.PL	associative plural	NOMZ2	grammatical nominalizer
DEM	demonstrative	PART	particle
EMPH	emphatic	PERFV	perfective
ERG	ergative	PL	plural
GEN	genitive	SEQ	sequential
LK	linker		

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