

The Manipuri Vowels

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Abstract

Introduction:

Vowels: A voiced segment characterized by generalized friction of the air passing in a continuous stream through the pharynx and opened mouth, with relatively no narrowing or other obstruction of the speech organs. There are 6 vowels in Manipuri language. They are: i, e, ə, a, u, o

Manipuri vowels are classified as (i) High, mid, low or close, half-close, half-open and open according to tongue-height (ii) Front, central and back according to tongue advancement and (iii) rounded and unrounded according to lip spreading.

Example of Manipuri vowel /i/:

During the articulation of the Manipuri vowel /i/, the front of the tongue is raised as high as possible, without touching the hard palate. The lips are spread and the opening between the jaws is narrow. It is a high, front, unrounded vowel. It occurs in all positions: initially, medially and finally.

ice	-	sister
kibə	-	to fear
pi	-	tear

Besides these vowels the Manipuri language have their respective vowel glides, otherwise known as Diphthongs. They are: /əy/, /əw/, /ay/, /aw/, /oy/, /uy/.

Example of Manipuri diphthong /əy/:

The Manipuri diphthong /əy/ is articulated by starting the glide from the position of the vowel /ə/ which is a central unrounded vowel between half-close and half-opened towards the position of /i/, a high, front, unrounded vowel or towards the semi-vowel /y/. It can occur in all positions.

əy	-	I
ləybə	-	to buy
kəy	-	tiger

Conclusion: The Manipuri vowels and diphthongs can occur in all the positions of the Manipuri language. However the Manipuri Diphthong /ay/ and /aw/ is not found in the initial position of this language.

According to David Crystal a vowel is “a sound made without closure or audible friction (which can function as the centre of a syllable). Lionard Bloomfield also defines vowels as “modifications of the voice sound that involve no closure, FRICTION or contact of the tongue or lips. They are ordinarily voiced.”

Daniel Jones in his “An Outline of English Phonetics” defines vowels as “a voiced sound in forming which the air issues in a continuous stream through the pharynx and mouth, there being no obstruction and no narrowing such as would cause audible friction”.

J. D. Connor in his “Better English Pronunciation” has stated about the vowels: “vowels are made by voiced air passing through different mouth-shapes; the differences in the shape of the mouth (are) caused by different positions of the tongue and the lips”. From this statement it is clear that the production of vowels depends fully on the degree of raising the tongue without causing friction or closure, on the part of the tongue that is raised and whether the lips are kept spread, open or rounded. Depending on those three conditions vowels are classified as (i) high, mid, low or close, half-close, half open and open according to tongue-height (ii) Front, central and back according to tongue advancement and (iii) rounded and unrounded according to lip-spreading.

Basing on these classifications, below are given

Chart of Manipuri Vowels

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

Unrounded

Rounded

From the above charts of Manipuri Vowels, we find that there are only 6 vowels in Manipuri. They are: i, e, ə, a, u, o

Besides these Vowels, this language have their respective vowel-glides, otherwise known as Diphthongs. We shall discuss this later. For the present we shall begin with the description of the details of the Vowels of Manipuri language.

Details of Manipuri Vowels :

The Manipuri vowel /i/ :

In the production of Manipuri vowel /i/, the front of the tongue is raised as high as possible, without touching the hard palate. The lips are spread and the opening between the jaws is narrow. It is thus a high, front, unrounded vowel. It occurs in all positions : initially, medially and finally :

Initial occurrence

/id^həu/ = my grand mother

/ice/ = my sister

/ibə/ = to write

Medial occurrence

/kibə/ = to fear

/pibə/ = to give

/sibə/ = to die

Final occurrence

/pi/ = tear

/hi/ = boat

/mi/ = human being

The Manipuri Vowel /e/ :

During the articulation of the Manipuri vowel /e/, the front of the tongue is raised in the direction of the hard palate to a position between the half-close and half-open positions. The lips are neutral and the opening between the jaws is medium. So this Manipuri vowel is a mid-front unrounded vowel. Regarding its distribution, it occurs initially, medially and finally :

Initial occurrence

/elaŋbəm/ = a surname

/eka/ = one

/ekagari/ = bi-cycle

Medial occurrence

/tekpə/ = break

/tenəwa/ = parrot

/cenbə/ = to run

Final occurrence

/ce/ = paper

/cətle/ = has gone

/kəlle/ = has saved

The Manipuri Vowel /ə/ :

To produce this Manipuri Vowel /ə/, the tongue is raised towards the roof of the mouth which is between the hard palate and the soft palate, to a height between the half-close and half-open position. The lips are spread and the opening between the jaws is narrow. Thus it is a mid, central, unrounded vowel between half-close and half-open position. It occurs in all the positions, initially, medially and finally :

Initial occurrence

/əmə/ = one

/əni/ = two

/əŋaŋ/ = child

Medial occurrence

/tən/ = bread

/lən/ = wealth

/hən/ = maggot

Final occurrence

/tabə/ = fall

/cabə/	=	eat
/pabə/	=	read

The Manipuri vowel /a/ :

To produce this vowel the central part of the tongue is raised towards the roof of the mouth which is between the hard palate and the soft palate and to a height between the open and half-open position. The lips are spread and the opening between the jaw is wide. Thus it is a low, central, unrounded vowel between open and half-open position. As regards its distribution, It occurs in all the positions:

Initial occurrence

/adə/	=	over there
/apel/	=	apple
/alu/	=	potato

Medial occurrence

/məcak/	=	material
/cak/	=	rice
/lan/	=	war

Final occurrence

/ka/	=	room
/na/	=	ear
/ya/	=	teeth

The Manipuri vowel /u/ :

The production of this vowel sound, the fore part of the back of the tongue is raised towards the soft-palate to a height between the half-close and close position. The lips are rounded and the opening of the jaw is narrow comparatively. So it is a untralisd high, back, rounded vowel between close and half-close position. It occurs in all the positions :

Initial occurrence

/ubə/	=	to see
/una/	=	leaf
/umaybi/	=	eagle

Medial occurrence

/pisum/	=	eye brow
/gun/	=	quality
/yerum/	=	egg

Final occurrence

/məcu/	=	colour
/məku/	=	owl
/cətlə/	=	go

The Manipuri Vowel /o/ :

To produce the Manipuri vowel /o/, the back of the tongue is raised between half-close and half-open position. The lips are spread and the opening of the jaws is medium. Hence, it occurs in all the positions: initially, medially and finally.

Initial occurrence

/oyna/	=	left
/obə/	=	vomit
/oja/	=	teacher

Medial occurrence

/mækhol/	=	sound
/kok/	=	head
/p ^h ol/	=	result

Final occurrence

/t ^h əro/	=	lily
/caro/	=	eat
/lak-o/	=	come on

The Manipuri Diphthongs

A diphthong is defined as “an independent vowel-glide not containing within itself either a ‘peak’ or a ‘trough’ of prominence. By vowel-glide we mean that the speech-organs start in the position of one vowel and move in the direction of another vowel. By independent we mean that the glide is expressly made, and is not merely an unavoidable concomitant of sounds preceding and following.....

A diphthong must necessarily consist of one syllable” (Daniel Jones, ‘An outline of English Phonetics’. 2001, p.-58). Following J.D.O. Connor and host of others, we can define a diphthong more precisely and concisely as “a glide from one vowel to another which, as a whole, acts like one of the long, simple vowels.”

A diphthong is represented in phonetic transcription by a sequence of two letters (digraphs), the first letter representing the commencement of the glide and the second representing its termination or its direction of movements.

Sometimes the termination is represented by the semi-vowels /w/ and /y/ in place of /u/ and /i/ by some writers; but here in this work we shall take resort to semi-vowel termination of Manipuri Diphthongs as they are preferably used in most of the books of phonology of this language.

In Manipuri language there are six diphthongs :

/əy/, /əw/, /ay/, /aw/, /oy/, /uy/

The Manipuri Diphthongs may also be further grouped into two as follows :

- (i) those which glide towards /y/ : /əy/, /ay/, /oy/, /uy/
- (ii) those which glide towards /w/ : /əw/, /aw/

Details of the Diphthongs

The Manipuri Diphthong /əy/

This Manipuri Diphthong /əy/ is articulated by starting the glide from the position of the vowel /ə/ which is a central unrounded vowel between half-close and half-open towards the position of /i/, a high, front unrounded vowel or towards the semi-vowel /y/. It can occur medially and finally but rarely initially :

Initial occurrence

/əy/ = I

Medial occurrence

/ləybə/ = to buy

/pəybə/ = to heap

/cəybə/ = to scold

Final occurrence

/ləy/ = flower

/kəy/ = tiger

/pəy/ = spleen

The Manipuri Diopthong /ay/:

At the time of articulating the Manipuri diphthong /ay/, is articulated by starting the glide from the central unrounded vowel /a/ towards /i/ or the semi-vowel /y/. It may occur medially and finally in a word but not initially :

Medial occurrence

/paybə/ = to hold

/haybə/ = to swing

/maybə/ = the priest

Final occurrence

/pay/ = to read

/lay/ = picture

/nay/ = pus

The Manipuri Diopthong /oy/:

During the articulation of Manipuri Diphthong /oy/, the glide begins from /o/ between half-close and half-open and proceeds towards /i/ or the semi-vowel /y/. It can occur initially, medially and finally :

Initial occurrence

/oybə/ = become

/oy/ = left

Medial occurrence

/koybə/ = round

/k^hoybə/ = curve

Final occurrence

/loy/ = exite

/koy/ = beard

The Manipuri Diphthong /uy/

The Manipuri Diphthong /uy/ is articulated by starting the glide from the position of back, high unrounded vowel /u/ and then proceeding towards the position of the high front unrounded vowel /i/ or the semi-vowel /y/. It can occur in all the three positions: initial, medial and final.

Initial occurrence

/uy/	=	to see
/uybə/	=	to drowse

Medial occurrence

/k ^h uybə/	=	to fade
/əkuybə/	=	of longer duration

Final occurrence

/luy/	=	is difficult
/huy/	=	dog

The Manipuri Diphthong /əw/:

During the articulation of this diphthong /əw/, the glide is from the central unrounded vowel /ə/ towards the back-rounded vowel /u/ or the semivowel /w/. As regards its distribution this diphthong can occur in all three positions: initial, medial and final. The initial occurrence however is very rare in comparison with the remaining two:

Initial occurrence

/əw/	=	yes
/əwwat ^h əbi/	=	papaya

Medial occurrence

/əŋəwbə/	=	white
/əcəwbə/	=	big
/əpəwbə/	=	coarse

Final occurrence

/p ^h əw/	=	paddy
/ləw/	=	paddy plant
/nəw/	=	rudder

The Manipuri Diphthong /aw/:

During the articulation of this diphthong /aw/, the glides from the position of the central unrounded vowel between open and half-open /a/ towards the back rounded vowel /u/ or the semivowel /w/. Regarding its distribution, it occurs medially and finally but not initially:

Medial occurrence

/k ^h awbə/	=	to reap
/lawbə/	=	shout
/kawbə/	=	to forget

Final occurrence

/t^haw/ = oil
/paw/ = news
/kaw/ = bull

Conclusion:

The Manipuri vowel phonemes can occur in all the positions i.e. initial, medial and final position. However the initial occurrence of vowel phoneme /e/ is found very rare in Manipuri language. This vowel phoneme is found in borrowed words only. In case of Diphthongs, the Manipuri Diphthong /əy/ is found very rare in the initial occurrence of the Manipuri language. However the Manipuri Diphthong /ay/ and /aw/ is not found in the initial position of this language.

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