

Dzongkha

Dzongkha is the official language of Bhutan, a small nation near Nepal in the Himalayas. Although learned by all Bhutanese in school, Dzongkha is spoken as a native language by only 5--8000 people in western Bhutan. The speaker recorded here is a native speaker of Sharchagpakha, but his second language competence in Dzongkha seems excellent. In classification, Dzongkha is grouped with Sherpa and Sikkimese, among others, into the Southern division of the Tibetan languages. Tibetan is the name given to a major division of the Bodish languages, all of which are united with the East Himalayan languages, and perhaps also with the isolate Dhimal, in a higher-level unit called Bodic within the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family ("Bodish languages" 1992). Dzongkha reportedly has 48 percent lexical similarity with Sharchagpakha ("Bodish languages").

The consonants of Dzongkha

Dzongkha has an extremely rich system of obstruents, with plosives in four places of articulation for each of three manners of articulation, and two different affricates exhibiting the three manners. The aspirated series seems lenis rather than fortis, often exhibiting voiceless fricative allophones. This system is essentially the same as Sharchagpakha.

The retroflex plosives are in free variation with corresponding retroflex clusters [ʈ, ʈʰ, ɖ].

The fricatives also are distinguished along a fortis/lenis dimension; voicing is unimportant in [z, ʒ] provided the articulation is lax.

All consonants are possible as initials (possibly excepting /w/), and most occur intervocally. In final position, however, the only obstruents occurring are the fortis [p, k]. Final plosives are accompanied by a glottal closure, and may be alternately articulated as a glottal stop.

fortis	p	t	ts	tʃ	ʈ	k
lenis	b	d	dz	dʒ	ɖ	g
aspirated	p ^h	t ^h	ts ^h	tʃ ^h	ʈ ^h	k ^h
fricatives		s		ʃ		h
		z		ʒ		
nasals	m	n			ɲ	ŋ
liquids				r	l	
					ɭ	
glides	w					j

1	[p]	[patʃam]	"a dance"
2		[paʃumgo]	"you should remain happy"
3		[dapa]	"container"
4	[p ^h]	[p ^h adʒo]	"go to (something)" (imperative)
5		[p ^h ap]	"pig"
6		[sap ^h a]	"pig that is reared in the home"
7	[b]	[bamɪn]	"bull"
8		[bamari]	"take this" (vocative)
9		[taba]	"to step on"
10	[t]	[ta]	"to see; horse"
11		[toza]	"eat food" (imperative)
12		[p ^h ata]	"see (something)" (imperative)
13	[t ^h]	[t ^h um]	"spoon"
14		[t ^h ariŋ]	"far away"
15		[k ^h ot ^h a]	"tired"
16	[d]	[datsi]	"cheese"
17		[datʃap]	"perform archery" (imperative)
18		[beda]	"you can do it"
19	[l]	[la]	"hair"
20		[lo]	"ostentatious"
21		[uʃa]	address form
22	[t ^h]	[t ^h ɪkʃɪk]	"correct"
23		[t ^h a]	"blood"
24		[saʃ ^h am]	"record of land"
25	[d]	[dʌk]	"dragon"
26		[dʌ]	"enemy"
27		[kaɖɪn]	"to thank"
28	[ts]	[tsa]	"plants"
29		[tsawa]	"most important thing"
30	[ts ^h]	[ts ^h a]	"salt"
31		[ts ^h atɔktɔk]	"very hot (weather)"
32	[dz]	[dzam]	"pot"
33		[dzampa]	"bridge"
34	[tʃ]	[tʃoxa]	"to alter"
35		[tʃowa]	"to feel sad"
36	[tʃ ^h]	[tʃ ^h am]	"a dance"
37		[tʃ ^h ap]	"rain"
38	[dʒ]	[dʒaɪɪ]	"poor (quality)"
39		[dʒamp ^h fy]	"enemy"
40	[k]	[kawa]	"pole"
41		[kadʒa]	"an order, decree"
42		[ʃɪŋka]	"cut down the tree" (imperative)
43	[k ^h]	[k ^h ap]	"needle"
44		[k ^h ɪm]	"house"
45		[sak ^h am]	"to acclimatize"

46	[g]	[gawa]	"happy"
47		[galim]	"where"
48		[saga]	"ginger"
49	[s]	[sa]	"soil"
50		[sap]	"new"
51		[waŋsa]	"illuminated"
52	[z]	[zaw]	"fried rice"
53		[zuk]	"face"
54		[toza]	"eat food" (imperative)
55	[ʃ]	[ʃa]	"meat"
56		[ʃarɔkpa]	"hunter"
57		[kafa]	"deer"
58	[ʒ]	[ʒuk]	"sit" (vocative)
59		[ʒɪ]	"eat" (vocative)
60		[sak ^h aʒa]	"leave it on the table" (imperative)
61	[h]	[halenu]	"astonished"
62		[hup]	"to drink in a gulp"
63		[tsaxa]	"migrants to the south"
64	[m]	[mi]	"fire"
65		[mɪp]	"to spoil, destroy"
66	[n]	[namba]	"tomorrow"
67		[namdʒu]	"when are you going?"
68		[namlanu]	"day breaks" (verbal expression)
69	[ŋ]	[ŋa]	"fish"
70		[ŋima]	"sun"
71	[ŋ]	[ŋə]	"drum"
72		[ŋamɔ]	"animal"
73	[l]	[la]	"hill; please"
74		[latsa]	"colour"
75		[tʃola]	"a depression (state of being)"
76	[ʎ]	[ʎa]	"deity"
77		[ʎomɪn]	"southern lands"
78		[tʃ ^h ɔla]	"religious writings"
79	[r]	[ra]	"goat"
80		[raw]	"horn"
81		[kara]	"colourful painting"
82	[j]	[jap]	"father"
83		[jak]	"yak"
84	[w]	[(w)olɪ]	"under"
85		[dawa]	"moon"
86		[ʃawa]	"reindeer"

Vowels and diphthongs

i	y	u
ɪ		
ø		o
a		

The high vowels are quite close; the back vowel /o/ is more often pronounced as [ɔ], while the front vowel /ɪ/ seems to be a freely varying mid vowel showing the two allophones [ɛ, ɪ].

1	/i/	[ima]	"chili pepper"
2		[di]	"this"
3	/ɪ/	[fɪ]	"glass"
4		[dɪ]	a place holder in speech

Continued on Tape #2

5		[dʒodɪ]	"going"
6	/a/	[tsawa]	"focal point"
7		[da]	"arrow"
8		[dawa]	"moon"
9	/u/	[fuk]	"strength"
10		[du]	"poison; there is"
11		[ʒuk]	"sit" (vocative)
12	/o/	[ola]	"crow"
13		[do]	"stone"
14		[oka]	"hole"
15	/y/	[ɥɪ]	"village"
16	/ø/	[ts ^h ø]	"taking advantage"
17		[tʰø]a]	"religious writings"
18	[aw]	[aw]	"brother"
19	[aj]	[aj]	"mother"
20	[ɪj]	[kɪj]	"calling (someone)"
21	[ou]	[soulo]	"finished"
22		[pou]	"incense"
23	[aj]	[tajtʰuŋ]	"pony"
24		[kaji]	an expression, "oh"

Voice quality and vowel registers

Dzongkha has been characterized as a two-tone language (Pommaret 1990). More accurately, it should be viewed as having two voice qualities, or registers, applying to its vowels. These can be termed tense voice (written as [ː]) and lax voice (written as []). The vocal melody, or pitch, does not operate distinctively in the fashion of a tone language. The distribution and organization of these voice qualities is not yet clear to me, but it seems to be related to the occurrence of a fortis or lenis obstruent in the syllable onset; fortis obstruents are in general followed by tense voice vowels, and lenis obstruents are followed by lax voice vowels. The only environment where the voice qualities can operate independently in a phonologically distinctive manner is that following an initial nasal (see examples 18, 19, 20, and 21 below). The following list illustrates the relationship between initial obstruents and vowel quality in Dzongkha.

1	[baː]	"to carry"
2	[bap]	"dripping"
3	[p ^h ap]	"pig"
4	[taː]	"to see"
5	[tup]	"ok"
6	[daː]	"enemy"
7	[ta]	"hair"
8	[dʒɪː]	"to commune with elders"
9	[tʃ ^h ap]	"rain"
10	[gaːŋ]	"mountain"
11	[guk]	"to bend"
12	[gaː]	"happiness"
13	[kap]	"cover"
14	[sa]	"soil"
15	[sək]	"to beat"
16	[ʃoː]	"playing cards"
17	[ʃuk]	"strength"
18	[mɔː]	"is it?" (tag question)
19	[mɔ]	"women"
20	[naːŋ]	"to give"
21	[naŋ]	"inside"

References:

"Bodish languages," (1992) in *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford U. Press.

Egli-Roduner, Susanna (1987) *Handbook of the Sharchhokpa-lo/Tsangla*, Thimphu, Bhutan: Helvetas.

Pommaret, Françoise (1990) *An Illustrated Guide to Bhutan*, Hong Kong: The Guidebook Company.