



# The Many Tongues of the Dragon

*Bhutan's languages and dialects provide an insight into a rich culture that has overcome the difficulties of a scattered population*

Nineteen distinct languages are spoken in Bhutan, if we include English, which is widely used and well spoken. Dzongkha is the most well known; as the national language, it is deeply rooted in Bhutan's history. A native to western Bhutan, it has for centuries served as the language of government.

All the languages of Bhutan belong to the great Tibeto-Burman language family, except for English and Nepali. Tibeto-Burman encompasses more than 300 languages, including Burmese, Chinese, Tibetan and most native languages of Nepal, Sikkim, north-eastern India and south-western China. Linguistic surveys and population genetic studies carried out under the auspices of the royal government of Bhutan have begun to shed light on the population pre-history of the country and the origins of Bhutan's remarkable linguistic diversity.

Dzongkha is influenced by and, indeed, related to, Chöke, the liturgical language. Chöke is known outside Bhutan as classical Tibetan. Yet Dzongkha is different from Chöke, and Dzongkha is not Tibetan. A language of the South Bodish branch, Dzongkha



is the product of many centuries of independent evolution on Bhutanese soil. By the same token, English is not German even though English is a Germanic language and the Angles and Saxons only crossed over to the British Isles relatively recently, in the fifth century.

The closest relative of Dzongkha is Dränjoke, the language of the native highland populace of neighbouring Sikkim. Of the languages of Bhutan, only four are more or less closely related to Dzongkha and Tibetan. Cho-ca-nga-ca-kha is spoken in the central part of the Kurichu Valley. Lakha is spoken in and around Säphu in the north of the Black Mountains. Brokpa is spoken by the yak herders of Mera and Sakteng. And Brokkat is spoken by an estimated 300 people, only in the village of Dur in the Bumthang district.

Less closely related to Dzongkha are the East Bodish languages. All seven East Bodish languages are spoken in Bhutan, although two of them are also spoken in nearby parts of Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. The East Bodish languages can be quite different from each other and they preserve old features of interest to historical linguists. They are Bumthang, Kheng, Kurtöp, Mangde, Chali, Dzala and Dakpa. (See map.)

Within East Bodish, we can identify Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtöp as forming a cluster of related languages. Likewise, Dzala and Dakpa form a related cluster, whereas Mangde and Chali are quite distinct from the rest. The archaic Mangde language is known by quite a few different local names, something which may confuse an interested outsider. Dzala is spoken chiefly in Bhutan, but is also spoken in mTsho-sna County in Tibet, just across the border. Dakpa is spoken in a few villages in eastern Bhutan but the language is mainly spoken in Tawang, a former vassal state of Tibet (bordering north-eastern Bhutan) that now forms part of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The predominant language in the south-eastern quadrant of the country is Tshangla, also known as Sharchop. This robust and thriving tongue is heard throughout the kingdom as much as Dzongkha or English. Tshangla is also spoken outside of Bhutan in portions of Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. The Tshangla language is currently classified in a group by itself but, one day, linguists may be able to show a particular affinity to one of the Tibeto-



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Burman language groups of north-eastern India or south-western China.

The three most unusual languages of Bhutan are decidedly Lhokpu, Gongduk and Black Mountain Mönpa. All three of these languages are endangered to the point of extinction. From a comparative linguistic point of view, each of the three languages represents a distinct branch within the great Tibeto-Burman language family.

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Gongduk exhibits the most complex conjugation of any language in Bhutan and displays unmistakably-archaic Tibeto-Burman features. The Gongduk language shares some roots with ancient Chinese, which it does not share with any other Tibeto-Burman language, such as the Gongduk word for pig, don. At the same time, a good many Gongduk words do not appear to be obviously Tibeto-Burman at all, which makes the language a bit of a puzzle. When linguists have figured out how the pieces came to

fit together they will have unveiled a portion of Bhutan's population pre-history.

Monkha is a language spoken by people who call themselves Mönpa and live in several widely scattered enclaves in the least accessible part of the Black Mountains. The language clearly has a lot of East Bodish vocabulary, but it is not clear whether or not this component of the language was borrowed in the hoary past. In grammar and phonology, Black Mountain Mönpa is remarkably different from the East Bodish languages proper. Population genetic studies have also shown that the Mönpa trace their paternal ancestry to some ancient aboriginal people of the Indian subcontinent. This language community, too, therefore presents an intriguing puzzle.

The Lhokpu, also known as Doya, are a people of diminutive stature living in the forested foothills of south-western Bhutan. Their language is in a class by itself. The phonology of loan words in the language shows that, in the distant past, the Lhokpu must have been exposed to a form of Bodish more archaic than Dzongkha. The Lhokpu have highly endogamous marriage practices and consequently show the most distinct genetic profile of any of the Bhutanese language communities.

Finally, two languages of Bhutan are spoken more widely outside of the country than inside Bhutan. Lepcha is spoken in just a few villages in south-western Bhutan, but is the aboriginal language of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where it is still spoken. Nepali, the majority language in Nepal, is spoken along Bhutan's southern belt, where it is called Lhotshamkha, or "southern border language." Nepali settlers first began to settle in this part of Bhutan at the beginning of the 20th century, in the wake of the British policy of actively promoting Nepali settlement in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and the Duars in the second half of the 19th century.

Population genetic and linguistic studies have begun to unravel how the language communities of Bhutan have become so incredibly diverse. The biological ancestors of all Tibeto-Burman language communities have evidently inhabited the country since the last Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago. The antiquity of the population has preserved much of the genetic diversity and the long period of habitation in a complex topography has enabled great linguistic diversification. Left in peace for millennia, Bhutan has preserved a rich and varied ethno-linguistic heritage.

