

## THE VOWEL SYSTEM OF MAO

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes the vowel inventory of Mao language. The speakers of the language are also known as Mao. They were mainly inhabited in the Senapati district of Manipur. Mao is included to the Tibeto-Burman language family. An attempt is made to find out the vowel sounds and diphthongs of this language. As the other languages have, Mao also found six (6) vowel phonemes. The vowel phonemes are such as /i, e, a, ə, o and u/. The difference among the vowel sounds are whether front or back of the mouth and the position of the lips are rounded or opened when it is pronounced.

**Keywords:** Mao, Vowel, Front, Central, Back.

### INTRODUCTION

The speaker of Mao language is known as the Mao. It is a small tribe inhabiting in the northern hill district of Manipur. The villages lie in a compact group on the Manipur Naga Hills Frontier. The Mao lived a simple life very close to nature and also to one another in the community.

Few scholars like G.A. Grierson (1903), Mao included in the Naga Kuki group of the Tibeto- Burman language family. Benedict P.K (1972) describe that Mao belongs to the Naga group of Sino –Tibetan language family. And Robert Shafer (1974) also describes Mao as in the Luhupa unit in the eastern branch under the old Kukish section of Burmic division of Sino Tibetan.

According to Scott Delancy (1987) Mao belongs to the Naga group under the Assam Burmese section of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Ethnoculturally, Mao is with the Nagas of Nagaland being closely related to the Angami Nagas (P.P. Giridhar 1994). The some features like phonology and syntax are closer to Angami Nagas.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Mao language is one of the Naga Kuki groups of language. It is closely connected with the western Naga languages. More than thirty three Tibeto - Burman languages are found in Manipur only. Out of these languages a few of them have officially recognized. There are also a few written works on Mao language such as "*Mao Naga Grammar*" by P.P. Giridhar (1994). In his work, he mentions about the grammar of Mao language i.e.: phonology, morphology and syntax respectively. Daniel. M. (2008) he also had written about the "Socio-cultural and religious life of Mao Naga tribe".

## ARTICULATION

In Mao language, six vowel phonemes can be established as /i, e, ə, a, o and u/. These vowel phonemes are generally classified in terms of three main articulatory dimensions viz: i) the degree to which the mouth is opened, ii) the position of the highest part of the tongue and iii) the position of the lips.

In the high vowels such as /i/ and /u/, the position of the tongue is high in the mouth. The mid vowels like /e/, /ə/, and /o/, the position of tongue is in mid and the low vowel/a/, the tongue position is low in mouth. In the horizontal axes, front vowels /i/ and /e/, the tongue is forward in the mouth. The central vowels, /ə/ and /a/, the position of the tongue in central part is raise and in the back vowels i. e. /u/ and /o/, the position of tongue is also towards the back of the mouth. The front and central vowels i.e. /i, e, a, and ə/ are known as unrounded vowel phonemes and back vowels i. e. - /u/ and /o/ are known as rounded vowel phonemes. It is shown as below:

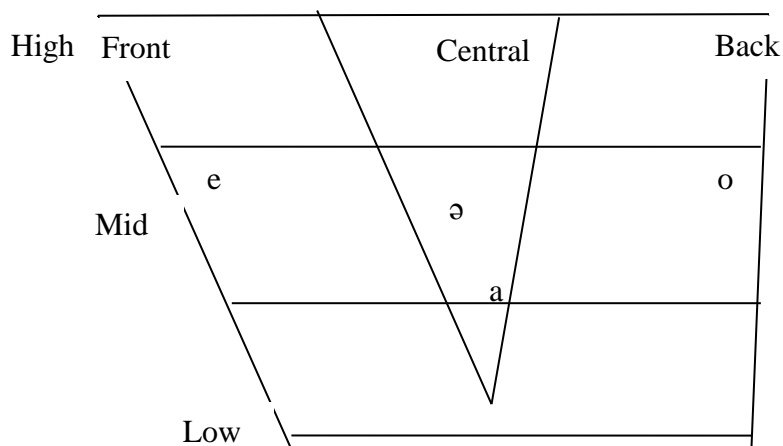


Fig. Vowel Chart of Mao

The above vowel phonemes can be established on the basis of the following minimal pairs:

|     | Mao  | Gloss   |
|-----|------|---------|
| ə/a | kosə | 'three' |
|     | kosa | 'cat'   |
| u/o | ovu  | 'star'  |
|     | ovo  | 'pig'   |
| i/e | upi  | 'head'  |
|     | upe  | 'glass' |

### Occurrence of Vowel phonemes

The six vowel phonemes of Mao language i.e. /i, e, ə, a, o and u/ occur at all positions initial, medial and final positions. The positions of six vowel phonemes can be discussed as in the following examples.

#### Initial Occurrence of /i/:

|     | Mao | Gloss       |
|-----|-----|-------------|
| /i/ | idu | 'yesterday' |
|     | ino | 'low'       |
|     | inu | 'village'   |

#### Medial Occurrence of /i/:

|     | Mao  | Gloss   |
|-----|------|---------|
| /i/ | pike | 'ant'   |
|     | pisu | 'hair'  |
|     | sija | 'honey' |

**Final Occurrence of /i/:**

|     | Mao  | Gloss    |
|-----|------|----------|
| /i/ | kupi | 'duck'   |
|     | mari | 'animal' |
|     | umi  | 'fire'   |

**Initial Occurrence of /e/:**

The initial occurrence of vowel phoneme /e/ is very rare to compare with other phonemes.

|     | Mao | Gloss |
|-----|-----|-------|
| /e/ | e   | 'yes' |

**Medial Occurrence of /e/:**

|     | Mao                | Gloss    |
|-----|--------------------|----------|
| /e/ | bet <sup>h</sup> o | 'arm'    |
|     | heməi              | 'eyelid' |
|     | henjər             | 'tear'   |

**Final Occurrence of /e/:**

|     | Mao                  | Gloss  |
|-----|----------------------|--------|
| /e/ | kət <sup>h</sup> e   | 'dead' |
|     | kolak <sup>h</sup> e | 'fox'  |
|     | pike                 | 'ant'  |

**Central vowels:**

During the production of central vowels, the central part of the tongue is raised. The central vowels of Mao are /a/ and /ə/ as follows.

Occurrence of central vowel /a/

**Initial Occurrence of /a/:**

|     | Mao   | Gloss   |
|-----|-------|---------|
| /a/ | aləco | 'stand' |
|     | arke  | 'widow' |

**Medial Occurrence of /a/:**

|     | Mao  | Gloss    |
|-----|------|----------|
| /a/ | kahe | 'cloud'  |
|     | mari | 'animal' |
|     | make | 'cold'   |

**Final occurrence of /a/**

|     | Mao  | Gloss     |
|-----|------|-----------|
| /a/ | kosa | 'eat'     |
|     | uba  | 'hand'    |
|     | coha | 'buffalo' |

## Occurrence of central vowel /ə/

**Initial occurrence of /ə/**

|     | Mao                 | Gloss    |
|-----|---------------------|----------|
| /ə/ | ət <sup>h</sup> epo | 'behind' |
|     | əja                 | 'before' |
|     | ədə                 | 'what'   |

**Medial occurrence of /ə/**

|     | Mao  | Gloss     |
|-----|------|-----------|
| /ə/ | uməi | 'feather' |

|  |                    |           |
|--|--------------------|-----------|
|  | kət <sup>h</sup> e | 'dead'    |
|  | nəni               | 'trouser' |

**Final occurrence of /ə/**

|     | Mao   | Gloss    |
|-----|-------|----------|
| /ə/ | uprə  | 'face'   |
|     | ukibə | 'toilet' |
|     | kosə  | 'three'  |

Back vowels: During the production of back vowels, the back of the tongue is raised toward the soft palate. The descriptions of the back vowel of Mao are /o/ and /u/.

Occurrence of Back vowel /o/

**Initial Occurrence of /o/:**

|     | Mao | Gloss  |
|-----|-----|--------|
| /o/ | ovo | 'pig'  |
|     | ovo | 'pig'  |
|     | ovu | 'star' |

**Medial Occurrence of /o/:**

|     | Mao  | Gloss     |
|-----|------|-----------|
| /o/ | coha | 'buffalo' |
|     | nosu | 'temple'  |
|     | kosa | 'eat'     |

**Final Occurrence of /o/:**

|     | Mao  | Gloss  |
|-----|------|--------|
| /o/ | coko | 'nine' |

|  |        |        |
|--|--------|--------|
|  | kodopo | 'far'  |
|  | poŋo   | 'five' |

Occurrence of back vowel /u/

#### Initial Occurrence of /u/:

|     | Mao               | Gloss   |
|-----|-------------------|---------|
| /u/ | uk <sup>h</sup> e | 'tiger' |
|     | usi               | 'dog'   |
|     | umi               | 'fire'  |

#### Medial Occurrence of /u/:

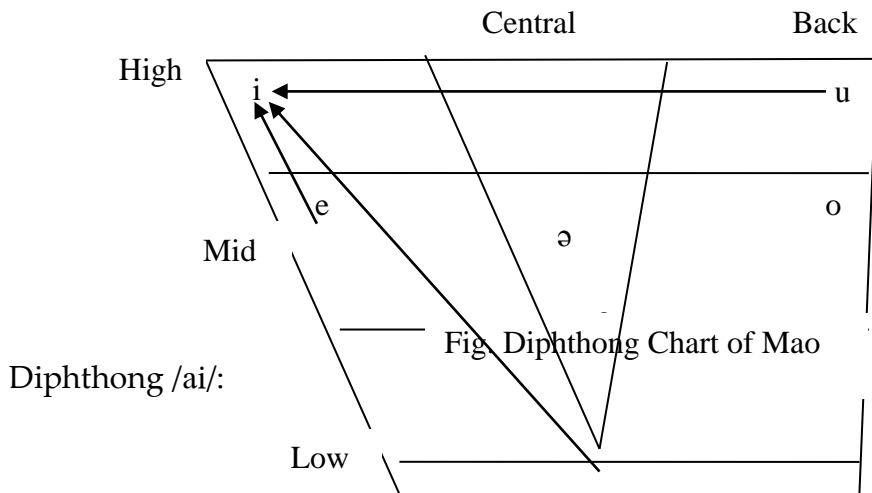
|     | Mao  | Gloss   |
|-----|------|---------|
| /u/ | kuri | 'river' |
|     | kumu | 'neck'  |
|     | nubi | 'ear'   |

#### Final Occurrence of /u/:

|     | Mao  | Gloss   |
|-----|------|---------|
| /u/ | pisu | 'hair'  |
|     | rahu | 'bird'  |
|     | uhu  | 'tooth' |

#### Diphthongs of Mao

In the previous section, we have discussed about the vowel phonemes of Mao language. Diphthong is a vowel sound with continually changing the quality. It may be described by indicating the position of tongue and the lips in the beginning and at the end of the glide. In Mao, diphthongs are found in rare case. It has three distinctive diphthongs. Such as /ai/, /ei/ and /ui/ as shown below.



The Mao diphthong /ai/ can be described as a vowel glide which begins from the central unrounded low position and moves in the direction of the front unrounded high vowel.

Distribution of diphthong /ai/: The diphthong /ai/ can occur only in the final position. For examples:

|      | Mao   | Gloss     |
|------|-------|-----------|
| /ai/ | ulai  | 'bee'     |
|      | umai  | 'feather' |
|      | nabai | 'twin'    |

Diphthong /ei/:

The diphthong /ei/ can be described as a vowel glide which begins from the front unrounded mid position and moves in the direction of the front unrounded high vowel position.

Distribution of diphthong /ei/: It is occurred only limited number in the medial and final position. Examples are given below.

|      | Mao                 | Gloss    |
|------|---------------------|----------|
| /ei/ | oramei              | 'god'    |
|      | tabei               | 'dinner' |
|      | ceik <sup>h</sup> r | 'air'    |



Diphthong /ui/:

The diphthong /ui/ can be described as a vowel glide which begins from the back rounded high position and moves in the direction of the front unrounded high vowel position.

Distribution of diphthong /ui/: It is occurred only at the final position of the syllable.

For examples:

|      | Mao   | Gloss    |
|------|-------|----------|
| /ui/ | ətui  | 'sister' |
|      | kətui | 'black'  |

## Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is found that Mao language has six vowel phonemes. They are /i, e, ə, a, o and u/. These vowel phonemes can occur in all positions i.e.; initial, medial and final positions (examples: - /inu/ 'village', /pik<sup>h</sup>ro/ 'forehead', /pisu/ 'hair' etc). The initial positions of vowel /e/ and /a/ are very rare to compare with other phonemes (examples /e/ 'yes', /aləco/ 'stand' and /arke/ 'widow'). The medial and final positions of vowel phonemes /e/ and /a/ have abundantly found. In addition, we have attempted to study the diphthongs of this language. But unfortunately the diphthongs of this language are found in rare case. The maximum numbers of words are ended with a vowel sound.

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