

On the non-Tibetan nature of the East Bodish languages of Bhutan

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Abstract: The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is home to many different ethnolinguistic groups. Some of these groups of people speak Tibetic languages, such as Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Other groups speak languages that are as different from Tibetan as, say, Hindi and English are from each other. A group that falls in the middle of the Tibetic-non-Tibetic cline is the East Bodish language sub-family. East Bodish languages show some remarkable similarities to Tibetic languages on the surface, but closer examination reveals much of this similarity may be due to borrowing and influence. The aim of this article is to examine some lexical and morphological features of the East Bodish languages in a comparative light. In doing so, we illustrate that the relationship between Tibetic and East Bodish languages is complex.

1. Introduction

The languages of Bhutan are often assumed to be Tibetan dialects, perhaps due to some of the apparent cultural similarities with Tibet and the fact that a version of the Tibetan writing system is employed to represent Bhutan's national language, Dzongkha. However, the linguistic situation of Bhutan is, in fact, much more complex. van Driem (1998) outlines nineteen different languages of Bhutan, all of which have their own unique histories. van Driem's (1998) analysis places all languages indigenous to Bhutan within different branches of the Tibeto-Burman family. Dzongkha, the national language, and a few other languages are identified as being Central Bodish languages, or descendants of Old Tibetan. Several languages are identified as occupying an unknown position within Tibeto-Burman; these include Tshangla, Black Mountain Mönpa, Lhokpu and Gongduk. The Bhutanese sub-family with the largest number of languages is the East Bodish group, comprising Khengkha, Henke, Bumthap, Kurtöp, Dzala, Dakpa and Chali.

The aim of this article is to consider the relationship of the East Bodish languages to Tibetic languages. For the purposes of this article, it can be assumed that Tibetic is more or less identical to van Driem (1998)'s Central Bodish; thus, Dzongkha can be considered to be a Tibetic language but the East Bodish languages cannot. There has been considerable debate surrounding the classification of Tibetic languages, but Tournadre (2008) proposes some specific diagnostics which can be applied to a language in order to ascertain whether or not the language can be considered to be Tibetic. First, he proposes that a Tibetic language should share a set of core vocabulary items including numerals, main colors, body parts, and other terms. Second, the cognate words should have regular reflexes.

Although East Bodish languages have been shown elsewhere to constitute their own group outside of Tibetic (Michailovsky and Mazaudon 1994; DeLancey

2008; Hyslop 2008, 2013), there is still confusion over the classification of these languages, in large part due to the many apparent similarities with Tibetic languages (e.g. see DeLancey 2008 for an overview). The aim of this article is to present some additional evidence that separates the East Bodish languages from Tibetic languages. In particular, this article takes lexical and morphological data from East Bodish languages and examines it in-depth. With an in-depth comparison across the different languages, we can be more certain about what reconstructs to the parent language for East Bodish, referred to as Proto East Bodish. We can then consider those facts within the context of Tibetic languages, for a better sense of how similar East Bodish languages are to Tibetic. As will be suggested at the end, it is likely many of the apparent similarities to Tibetic are due to borrowing, and are not representative of the parent language(s) of the modern East Bodish languages.

This article has the following structure: §2 offers an introduction to the East Bodish languages; §3 presents a preliminary phonological analysis; §4 presents some morphological evidence that separates East Bodish from Tibetic; and §5 offers a brief summary and conclusion.

2. Overview of the East Bodish languages

Of the nineteen languages in Bhutan, seven belong to the 'East Bodish' family of the larger Tibeto-Burman family. The term 'East Bodish' was first used by Shafer (1954) to identify a cluster of languages which appeared to be closely related to Tibetan, but were not Tibetan dialects. As shown in Hyslop (2013), the East Bodish languages are lexically united by a set of numerals and a few other core vocabulary items. To date, a handful of East Bodish languages have been identified, including the majority of the languages indigenous to Central and Eastern Bhutan (e.g. Bumthap, Kurtöp, etc.), the adjacent region in Tibet (e.g. Cuona Menba) and some languages in Arunachal Pradesh (e.g. Dakpa). The general understanding in the field has been that the parent of East Bodish languages would have been a sister language to Classical Tibetan, making the modern day East Bodish languages 'cousins' to the Tibetan dialects, including Dzongkha (e.g. Bradley 1997). The exact placement of East Bodish within Tibeto-Burman remains unknown, a fact which is compounded by the dearth of published research on East Bodish languages.

The East Bodish language group comprises seven languages which are spoken in an area that ranges from the shared Indian-Bhutan border, just north of the point where the Brahmaputra river turns south into Bangladesh, as far east as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, and north into Tibet. This region spans elevations of as low as 300m in the south, and upward of 7,000m in the North. Inhabited areas range from 300m to approximately 4,000m (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The East Bodish languages

Hyslop (2013) offers a more detailed overview of the languages and proposes a preliminary internal phylogeny, shown in Figure 2. Note that 'Phobjip' is a particular dialect of Henke.

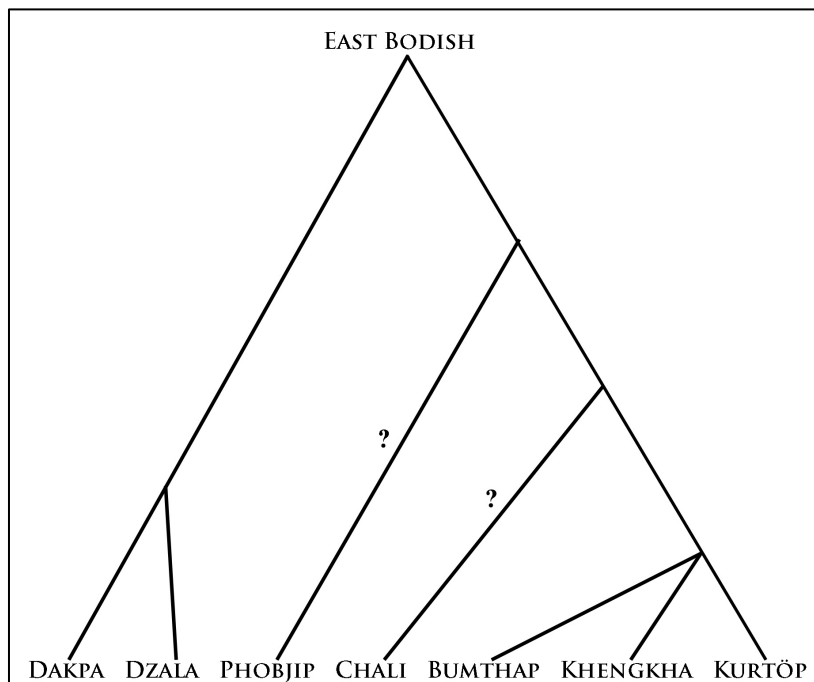


Figure 2. Tentative internal phylogeny of the East Bodish languages (Hyslop 2013)

Much of the data presented in Hyslop (2013, to appear)¹ is repeated below, in order to offer an impression of East Bodish lexicon. Table 1 presents some forms for East Bodish body parts and related terminology. Many of the forms will be familiar to those who are familiar with Tibetic languages, such as the Bumthap word for ‘hair’ and the Kurtöp word for ‘bone’. On the other hand, some words appear different than in Tibetic languages, such as the Bumthap and Khengkha word for ‘tooth’.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
‘tooth’	wá	wá	wá	kwa	kwa		wá ~ ó
‘hair’		ʈa	rá	kra	kra	rá	rá
‘blood’		ke:ʔ	ka:	kak	ka:		
‘waist’	k ^h ret	ʈ ^h et	k ^h rat	k ^h rat	ʈ ^h at	ketpa	
‘hand’	lá:	la:	ja:	jak	ja:	jaʔ	la:
‘nose’		ná	ná	náphaŋ	nabli		
‘knee’		pukum	pusum		putmoŋ		pøhø
‘bone’	ruspa	rý	rospa		rotpa		rot ^h o
‘head’	gokti	gokte	gujuŋ	gujuŋ	gujuŋ	gujuŋ	gunu
‘eye’	melon	me:ʔ	mi:		mek	mé:ʔ	
‘leg’	lɛmin	leme	tawa		tawa		

Table 1. East Bodish body part terminology

Table 2 presents some East Bodish animal terms. Again, it will be obvious that some forms are similar to what is found in Tibetic languages, such as the Phobjip word for ‘dog’. On the other hand, the word for ‘bear’ in all languages is different than what would be expected for a Tibetic language.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
‘otter’		rém	rám		kram		
‘horse’	te	te	ta	ta	ta	ta	ta
‘hen’	k ^h awa	k ^h a:			k ^h aga	k ^h aga	k ^h om
‘bear’	wam	wəm	wam				
‘dog’	k ^h i	k ^h i	k ^h wi	k ^h wi	ϕi	k ^h wi	c ^h y
‘mouse’	ju	matsaŋma	ŋíja				
‘deer’	k ^h aça	k ^h aça	k ^h aça		kaça	k ^h aça	
‘snake’		mrekaliŋ	po		po		by

¹ Much of the data presented in Hyslop (2013, to appear) has been drawn from person field notes, but other forms have been drawn from van Driem (1995, 2007) and the 2009 Field Methods class on Dzala, taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara. See Hyslop (2013, to appear) for full sources of data. Data here, as well as in those publications, are represented in IPA; tone is predictably high following voiceless consonants and low following voiced consonants. When tone does not fit this pattern, it is marked as such. For example, high tone will be marked following voiced sonorants and low tone will be marked following voiceless obstruents.

Table 2. East Bodish body animals

Table 3 provides basic color terms for East Bodish languages. The word for ‘white’ is similar across all the languages, and also similar to the Tibetic cognate (*dkar.po*). The words for ‘red’ and ‘black’, however, may not be cognate across all East Bodish languages.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
‘red’	<i>lju</i>	<i>lew</i>	<i>jinti</i>	<i>jinti</i>	<i>jinti</i>		
‘white’	<i>k^hér</i>	<i>k^heru</i>	<i>k^harti</i>		<i>k^harti</i>		<i>kat</i>
‘black’	<i>mlɛŋbu</i>	<i>mlɛŋ:pu</i>	<i>junti</i>				

Table 3. East Bodish body colors

Temporal adverbs are shown in Table 4. Again, there is some similarity in forms for many terms, such as ‘year’, but not all, such as ‘tomorrow’.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
‘yesterday’	<i>daŋ</i>	<i>daŋ</i>	<i>daŋniŋ/ daŋna</i>		<i>daŋla</i>		<i>dōl</i>
‘year’	<i>níŋ</i>	<i>níŋ</i>	<i>néŋ</i>	<i>néŋ</i>	<i>jéŋ</i>		<i>né:</i>
‘today’	<i>dɛç</i>		<i>dasum</i>	<i>dusum</i>	<i>dasum</i>		<i>dasu</i>
‘tomorrow’	<i>nogor</i>	<i>noŋor</i>	<i>jampa</i>	<i>jambat</i>	<i>jampa</i>		<i>nɛmba</i>

Table 4. East Bodish temporal adverbs

East Bodish numerals are presented in Table 5. The data show a mostly coherent set of numerals found across the languages. Many of these appear similar to Tibetic languages, such as the word for ‘three’ and ‘six’. Other numerals, such as ‘seven’, are clearly not related to ‘seven’ in Tibetic languages.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
‘one’	<i>t^hi</i>	<i>t^he</i>	<i>t^he:</i>	<i>t^hek</i>	<i>t^hek</i>	<i>t^he</i>	<i>t^hi</i>
‘two’	<i>nei</i>	<i>nai</i>	<i>zon</i>	<i>zon</i>	<i>zon</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>zøn</i>
‘three’	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum</i>
‘four’	<i>bli</i>	<i>bri</i>	<i>ble</i>	<i>ble</i>	<i>bla</i>	<i>bre</i>	<i>bre</i>
‘five’	<i>lɛŋe</i>	<i>lɛŋe</i>	<i>jaŋa</i>	<i>jaŋa</i>	<i>jaŋa</i>	<i>jaŋa</i>	<i>laŋ</i>
‘six’	<i>krò</i>	<i>ɖoʔ</i>	<i>ɖò:</i>	<i>grok</i>	<i>gro</i>	<i>ɖoʔ</i>	<i>ɖo</i>
‘seven’	<i>nís</i>	<i>ní</i>	<i>ní(s)</i>	<i>nyít</i>	<i>nyít</i>	<i>ní</i>	<i>nís</i>
‘eight’	<i>kèt</i>	<i>gɛt</i>	<i>ʃat</i>	<i>ʃat</i>	<i>ʃat</i>	<i>ʃat</i>	<i>gæ</i>
‘nine’	<i>dugu</i>	<i>dugu</i>	<i>dogo</i>	<i>dogo</i>	<i>dogo</i>	<i>dugu</i>	<i>dok</i>
‘ten’	<i>ciŋnəi</i>	<i>cí</i>	<i>c^he</i>	<i>c^he</i>	<i>c^he</i>	<i>c^he</i>	<i>k^hepc^he</i>
‘twenty’	<i>k^həli</i>	<i>k^halit</i>	<i>k^hedi</i>	<i>k^haet^hek</i>	<i>k^haide</i>	<i>k^het^he</i>	<i>k^hedi</i>

Table 5. East Bodish numerals

The final table in this section, Table 6, presents some East Bodish personal pronouns. The second person singular forms and third person plural forms, in particular, appear unlike what would be expected for a Tibetic language.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bu	Kh	Ch	Ph
1.SG	<i>ŋe</i>	<i>ŋe</i>	<i>ŋat</i>	<i>ŋat</i>	<i>ŋa/ŋat</i>	<i>ŋat</i>	<i>ŋa</i>
1.PL	<i>ŋar</i>	<i>ŋata</i> (INCL) <i>ŋara</i> (EXCL)	<i>ner</i> (INCL) <i>net</i> (EXCL)	<i>ŋet</i>		<i>ne</i>	
2.SG	<i>i</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>wit</i>	<i>wet</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>í</i>	<i>yi</i>
2.PL	<i>ir</i>	<i>ita(ŋ)</i> (INCL) <i>ira(ŋ)</i> (EXCL)	<i>nin</i>	<i>win</i>			
3.SG	<i>be</i>	<i>be</i>	<i>k^hit</i>	<i>gon/k^hit</i>	<i>gon</i>	<i>k^hi</i>	<i>k^hi</i>
3.PL	<i>ber</i>	<i>beta(ŋ)</i> (INCL) <i>bera(ŋ)</i> (EXCL)	<i>bot</i>	<i>bot</i>			

Table 6. East Bodish pronouns

3. Preliminary comparative lexical analysis

With some relevant background in place, we now turn to an analysis of the East Bodish lexical data, in the context of Tibetan. Because the East Bodish languages show considerable variation within the sub-group, it is more prudent to compare reconstructed East Bodish forms with Written Tibetan. The linguistic reconstructions, drawn from Hyslop (to appear), are based on the *comparative method*, a means to reconstruct proto forms for a parent language based on modern daughter languages and guided by a number of principles. Some of these principles are: 1) plausible sound change; 2) as few sound changes as possible; 3) aim to fill gaps rather than create an unbalanced system; 4) reconstruct new phonemes only if absolutely necessary; 5) consider correspondences that are phonetically similar; 6) consider complementary distribution for phonetically 'spurious' pairs (Crowley 1991). Tibetan forms are drawn from Jäschke (1881).

We find that there are a set of words which reconstruct to forms different than Written Tibetan, as illustrated in Table 7.

Proto-East-Bodish	Written Tibetan	English
*kram	sram	'otter'

*wam	dom	'bear'
*gal	'gro	'go'
*dot	gnyid	'sleep'
*ra	yong	'come'
*mla	mda	'arrow'
*khwe/*tshi	chu	'water'

Table 6. A comparison of selected reconstructed East Bodish forms with Written Tibetan

As the data show, the forms reconstructed to the East Bodish parent language for 'otter', 'bear', 'go', 'sleep', 'come', and 'arrow' are different than what is found in Written Tibetan. In some cases, there are similarities, suggesting a closer relationship between Tibetan and East Bodish languages, such as 'otter' and 'arrow'. Other words, on the other hand, are completely unique, such as 'sleep' and 'come'.

It is not possible to reconstruct all forms to Proto East Bodish, however. Consider the data in Table 7:

Krt	Bum ²	Kh	Ch	He	Da	Dz	English
ne	ni	ni	t ^h anman		plaŋ	praŋ	'sun'
nésang	'nemo	keme			muip		'wife'
ma	mai	mai			k ^h em	k ^h em	'house'
yampa	jambat	jampa		nemba	nogor	nongor	'tomorrow'
zha	zhra	ʃa	ʃa	áʃi		di ~ dzi	'what'
áu	áu	áu	gaŋ	úda		ga	'where'

Table 7. Selected East Bodish terms which cannot be reconstructed to Proto East Bodish

Note that if we compare the words for 'sun', 'wife', 'house', 'tomorrow', 'what' and 'where' we find that there are not obviously cognate forms across the East Bodish languages. Without cognate forms it is not possible to reconstruct a given form to Proto East Bodish, making comparison with Tibetan a futile exercise for these words. Consider the East Bodish words for 'ten':

Krt	Bum	Kh	Ch	He	Da	Dz	English	Dzongkha
c ^h e	c ^h e	c ^h e	c ^h e	k ^h epc ^h e	ciŋnei	ci	'ten'	k ^h epc ^h e (archaic)

Table 8. East Bodish term which may reconstruct but proves to be a borrowing

² The Bumthap word for 'what' has been taken from van Driem (1995). The phonetic value for <zhr> is a voiced apical trilled fricative.

Table 8 shows East Bodish words for the numeral ‘ten’, plus the Dzongkha reflex. On first pass, it appears the East Bodish words for ‘ten’ are quite similar, with the Kurtöp, Bumthap, Khengkha, and Chali and Henke forms being identical. The Dakpa and Dzala forms also begin with a palatal stop, suggesting they may be related, though an explanation would need to be sought to account for the lack of aspiration. However, the Henke form proves to be of crucial importance. The form [k^hepc^he] is identical to the archaic Dzongkha word for ‘ten’ [k^hepc^he], literally [k^he] ‘twenty’ plus [pc^he]. Although the Dzongkha form has fallen out of use, it must have been borrowed into East Bodish languages at a time when it was productive. Presumably, after being borrowed into East Bodish languages, Bumthap, Khengkha, Kurtöp and Chali shortened the word by deleting the first syllable and leaving simply [c^he] in its place. Crucially, the word [k^hepc^he] cannot be made by East Bodish parts, as the East Bodish word for ‘half’ consists of a labial stop plus rhotic initial, as in Kurtöp [p^hretse]. Thus, even words which may appear to reconstruct to East Bodish, may turn out to be borrowings pending deeper understanding of the languages.

4. Preliminary comparative morphological analysis

DeLancey (2008) demonstrates several aspects of Kurtöp grammar which are remarkably similar to Written Tibetan. These are summarized in Table 9.

Kurtöp	Written Tibetan	Gloss
-ki ~ i	-kyi	GENITIVE
-ki ~ i	-kyis	ERGATIVE
-ro ~ go ~ o ~ to ~ do	-ru	LOCATIVE
-pa ~ wa ~ sa	-ba	NOMINALIZER

Table 9. Apparent Tibetan and Kurtöp morphological similarities (extracted from DeLancey 2008)

DeLancey points out that, for the most part, the allomorphy found in the Kurtöp forms is remarkably similar to that in the Tibetan forms, providing evidence for an apparent close relationship between Kurtöp and Tibetan. However, if Kurtöp and Tibetan are close relatives, it must also be the case that the East Bodish languages are close relatives with Tibetan. In order to be more certain, we need to see whether the forms and allomorphy found in Table 9 indeed reconstruct to Proto East Bodish. If they do not reconstruct, it is likely that the apparent similarities between Kurtöp and Tibetan shown in Table 9 have been borrowed from Tibetan into Kurtöp.

If we begin with a comparison of ergative and genitive forms in the East Bodish languages, we are presented with a complex picture, as summarized in Table 10.

Gloss	Da	Dz	Ku	Bum	Kh	Ch	Ph
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ERG	-si	-(g)i	-li, -gi, -i	-li	-gi, -i	
GEN	-ku	-ku	-gi, -i, -li, -		-li	-u
			ci			

Table 9. Ergative and genitive affixes in the East Bodish languages (based on Hyslop 2013 with some additions)

Taking the ergative forms first, we see that several possible forms are found in the East Bodish languages, including forms with a velar initial as well as forms that begin with a fricative or lateral. It seems unlikely that these forms are cognate, despite the fact that the vowel is shared across the forms. In other words, there is no known sound change that creates a correspondence between Dakpa /s/, Kurtöp /g/ and Bumthap /l/, for example. As a further complication, when we look at a wide range of Kurtöp data in depth, we see that a form /-li/ is present, in addition to the Tibetan-like forms /-gi ~ i/. Keeping in mind that Kurtöp and Bumthap are closely related (cf. Figure 2), it seems more likely that the immediate parent to Kurtöp and Bumthap actually used /-li/ as the ergative. Given this observation, and the fact that, in any case, /-gi/ (corresponding to DeLancey 2008's *-ki*) could not easily be reconstructed to Proto East Bodish, it seems more prudent to suggest that Kurtöp ergative /-gi ~ i/ is a borrowing from a Tibetic language.

Turning to the genitive, we see a picture similar to what we saw for the ergative, but even more variation within the genitive forms found across the languages. With so much variation, it is not possible at present to reconstruct a particular form as the genitive to Proto East Bodish.

The apparent similarity between the Kurtöp locative /-ro/ and Tibetan locative /-ru/ also becomes problematic on further analysis of the data. While it is true that the Kurtöp locative /-ro/ tends to be conditioned by the phonological shape of the word it attaches to (see Hyslop 2011, 218), it is not always predictably so. In fact, it appears that /-ro/ and /-ko/ are in free variation following vowels. This is a feature that is unique to Kurtöp, and perhaps explained by a possible merger of two locative forms (cf. Tshangla locative *-ko*; see Andvik 2010).

As DeLancey (2008) pointed out, Kurtöp has a nominalizer (see Hyslop 2011 for a description of its uses) that has the allomorphs /-pa/ ~ /-wa/ ~ /-sa/, which is similar to Written Tibetan³. However, further research finds that Khengkha does not have this allomorphy at all; all forms are /-pa/ regardless of phonological shape of the stem⁴. In fact, the allomorphy is not even found in all dialects of Kurtöp; the southernmost variety, spoken in Tangmachu, also uses only /-pa/ as the cognate nominalizer.

³ DeLancey (2008) points out that Written Tibetan *-ba* corresponds with Kurtöp /-wa/ in these contexts. Kurtöp /-sa/ is presumably innovative, which DeLancey argues to be conditioned by a *-s* suffix used in perfective aspect on Tibetan stems.

⁴ Based on data collected by the 2013 Linguistics Field Methods class taught at the Australian National University.

5. Conclusions

This article has aimed to show that the East Bodish languages, though superficially similar to Tibetic languages in many ways, are not as Tibetan-like as may seem at first glance. Through a comparative approach, we find several aspects of the East Bodish languages which separate them from the Tibetic languages. Looking at a limited set of the lexicon, we saw that several forms cannot be easily reconstructed to East Bodish and thus are not possible to compare with Written Tibetan. Of the forms that do reconstruct, we showed that many were different than in Written Tibetan; some of these appeared cognate, while others appeared to be completely different. Finally, there was one example of the numeral 'ten' which appeared similar across the languages, but on closer inspection was shown to be borrowed from Dzongkha at an earlier stage in the languages' development.

Examining morphology was more complex and the study necessarily more limited. However, we were able to show that many forms which appeared to be shared between Kurtöp and Tibetan are in fact most likely similar due to borrowing. Much of the allomorphy found in Kurtöp, for example, cannot be easily reconstructable to Proto East Bodish.

While the languages of Bhutan have no doubt been under the influence of Tibetic languages over the centuries, this article has provided some evidence suggesting the similarities are often more apparent than real. Further and more in-depth linguistic research will shed more light on the development of the East Bodish languages and their relationship with the neighboring Tibetic languages. There is no doubt Tibetic languages have had a profound influence on the linguistic development of Bhutan, and detailed, in-depth comparative studies are the key to understanding what those influences have been.

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