

# The sound system of Nàvakat

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe the basic sound system of Nàvakat, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Nako village in Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh, India). This is the first attempt to describe the sound system of any Upper Kinnaur language. The analysis presented here shows that Nàvakat exhibits many features which are typically associated with Tibetan. It shows especially close affinity with the sound systems of Tibetan varieties such as Tabo and Ladakhi. In all these respects, it differs from the sound system of Sangla Kinnauri – a West Himalayish Kanauri variety spoken in Lower Kinnaur.

Keywords: Nàvakat, Tibeto-Burman, Kinnaur, Tibetan, sound system

## 1. Introduction: Nako village and its inhabitants

Nako is a small, high-altitude village (3 600 m above sea level) in Upper Kinnaur in the Himachal Pradesh state in India.<sup>1</sup> Like a green oasis amidst its immense, dry, and barren mountainous surroundings,<sup>2</sup> it is situated in the north-east corner of the Kinnaur district. It is about 100 km north-east of Recong Peo, the district seat of Kinnaur. It belongs administratively to the Hangrang sub-tahsil of the Poo tahsil in Kinnaur district. As Nako is located within the Restricted Zone region in India, foreign nationals are required to seek an Inner Line permit to visit this village.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2001 Indian census report,<sup>4</sup> Nako had 118 households, with a total population of 494 (236 males and 258 females). The population traditionally belongs to two social communities: the Scheduled Caste community and the Scheduled Tribe community (according to the Indian Constitution). The latter is the largest group in the village, with a total population of 454 (204 male and 250 female) (2001 census report). The Scheduled Caste community consisted of a total of 12 individuals (7 male and 5 female) (2001 census report).<sup>5</sup> Unlike in the Lower Kinnaur region, in Nako, both communities speak the same Tibeto-Burman language.

The village is known as *nau* among its residents. The official name of this village is “Nako”, which will also be the term used here to refer to this village, following

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<sup>2</sup> The highest peak near Nako is Leo Pargil (6 791 m).

<sup>3</sup> For access to areas close to the Indian border with China an Inner Line permit is required. In Kinnaur this applies to parts of Upper Kinnaur (e.g. Nako), while areas in the Lower Kinnaur region (e.g. Sangla, Recong Peo, Kalpa) do not require this permit.

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Census of India* online (retrieved 5 January 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The remaining 28 had indicated some other affiliation.

the wishes of my language consultants. Locals call their language [*nàvaká(t)*] (*nàu* ‘place name’ + *ká(t)* ‘speech’). Its transliterated form “Nàvakat” will be used here to refer to the language of this village.<sup>6</sup>

All Tibeto-Burman languages of Upper Kinnaur are in a sorry state with respect to their documentation. Even the most basic linguistic description of these languages is lacking. The language of the Nako village is mentioned only in the following works, where some data can also be found: Saxena (2011), Saxena and Borin (2011, forthcoming), and the *Comparative dictionary of Tibetan dialects* (CDTD; Bielmeier et al. in prep.).<sup>7</sup>

## 2. A linguistic description of the sound system of Nàvakat<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this paper is to describe the basic sound system of Nàvakat. This is the first attempt to describe the sound system of any Upper Kinnaur language. The analysis presented here is based on direct-elicited data and narratives. The direct-elicited material was primarily collected from Mr. Padam Sagar, a native of the Nako village. The narratives were collected from older Nàvakat speakers. The analysis presented here shows that Nàvakat exhibits many features which are typically associated with Tibetan. It shows especially close affinity with the sound systems of Tibetan varieties such as Tabo and Ladakhi. In all these respects, it differs from the sound system of Sangla Kinnauri – a West Himalayish Kanauri variety spoken in Lower Kinnaur.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1 Consonants

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d	ʈ ɖ		k g	
Aspirated plosive	p <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>	ʈ <sup>h</sup>		k <sup>h</sup>	
Nasal	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
Fricative		s z		ʃ ʒ <sup>10</sup>		h
Affricate		ts dz		tʃ dʒ		
Aspirated affricate		ts <sup>h</sup>		tʃ <sup>h</sup>		
Lateral		l				
Trill		r				
Approximant	v			j		

<sup>6</sup> When interacting with people from outside Kinnaur, Nako villagers refer to themselves as *kínora* or as *kínori*. When they communicate with people who are from Middle and Lower Kinnaur, they communicate in Hindi and describe themselves as belonging to the *Nako* village. But when they communicate with people from Upper Kinnaur, they refer to themselves as *nàova* and their village as *nàu*.

<sup>7</sup> I express my deepest gratitude to Roland Bielmeier for providing me access to his CDTD database (Bielmeier et al. in prep.).

<sup>8</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: 1SG = first person singular pronoun, 2SG.NHON = second person non-honorific pronoun, 3SG.NHON = third person non-honorific pronoun, HON = honorific, INTR = intransitive, PFV = perfective and TR = transitive.

<sup>9</sup> West Himalayish is a sister subgroup of Tibetic (or Tibetan) in the Tibeto-Kinnauri branch of Tibeto-Burman, and Kanauri is one of four branches under West Himalayish, according to both the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) and DeLancey (1985).

<sup>10</sup> The articulation of [ʃ] actually varies between [ʃ] and [ʂ]. The same is the case concerning the articulation of [ʒ].

## Illustrations of consonant pairs

/p/ : /b/	<i>pénba</i>	‘Saturday’	<i>bám̐ba</i>	‘lamp’
/p/ : /p <sup>h</sup> /	<i>páŋ</i>	‘tree’	<i>p<sup>h</sup>áŋ</i>	‘spindle’
/t/ : /d/	<i>tà</i>	‘now’	<i>dàtfa</i>	‘to chase’
/t/ : /t̥/	<i>tá</i>	‘stallion’	<i>tá</i>	‘hair (head)’
/t/ : /d̥/	<i>tàŋmo</i>	‘cold’	<i>dùmpo</i>	‘thick (with round objects)’
/t <sup>h</sup> / : /t <sup>h</sup> /	<i>t<sup>h</sup>úkpa</i>	‘soup (traditional)’	<i>t<sup>h</sup>úkpa</i>	‘quarrel’
/k/ : /k <sup>h</sup> /	<i>káŋba</i>	‘leg’	<i>k<sup>h</sup>áŋba</i>	‘house’
/s/ : /ʃ/	<i>sáktfa</i>	‘to collect, to hoard’	<i>fáfa</i>	‘to tear (TR)’
/tʃ/ : /dʒ/	<i>tʃɛŋa</i>	‘fifteen’	<i>dʒɛŋgu</i>	‘green’
/tʃ/ : /tʃ <sup>h</sup> /	<i>tʃú</i>	‘ten’	<i>tʃ<sup>h</sup>ú</i>	‘water’
/k/ : /g/	<i>kúnma</i>	‘thief’	<i>gúnga</i>	‘winter’
/ts/ : /dz/	<i>tsáktfa</i>	‘to sieve, to strain’	<i><sup>n</sup>dzáktfa</i>	‘to climb’
/ts/ : /ts <sup>h</sup> /	<i>tsá</i>	‘bottom’	<i>ts<sup>h</sup>ám</i>	‘meditation’
/s/ : /ts <sup>h</sup> /	<i>sá</i>	‘grass, vein’	<i>ts<sup>h</sup>á</i>	‘salt’
/s/ : /z/	<i>sè(r)tfa</i>	‘to say’	<i>zè(t)tfa</i>	‘to forget’
/ts/ : /tʃ/	<i>tsán</i>	‘nest’	<i>tʃám</i>	‘north’
/m/ : /n/	<i>má</i>	‘wound’	<i>ná</i>	‘nose’
/n/ : /ŋ/	<i>ná</i>	‘nose’	<i>ŋá</i>	‘five’
/m/ : /ŋ/	<i>mán</i>	‘medicine’	<i>ŋán</i>	‘early’
/n/ : /ɲ/	<i>nám</i>	‘sky’	<i>ɲámbo</i>	‘together’
/m/ : /ŋ/	<i>nám</i>	‘when’	<i>nàŋ</i>	‘inside’
/x/ : /l/	<i>ràma</i>	‘goat’	<i>làma</i>	‘path’

The word-final stops seem to be slowly disappearing in Nàvakat. They are either realized as a voiceless stop or they remain unreleased. For this reason the word-final stops are presented within parentheses “( )” in the examples. At the present stage of its development though, it is still possible to identify the word-final consonant in slow speech and, when asked, the language consultants were able to identify the consonant. When the same stop occurs in initial or medial position, it is articulated more clearly. In a very few cases, the loss of a final stop correlates with a compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel, e.g., *tʃá*: ‘iron’ vs. *tʃákt<sup>h</sup>a(p)* ‘fireplace made of iron’.

<i>gjà̀(t)</i>	‘eight’	<i>tʃála(k)</i>	‘thing’
<i>jò(p)</i>	‘many (countable)’	<i>gjà̀(p)</i>	‘behind’

The final consonant in recent loanwords is, however, articulated more clearly. For example, *i:nt* ‘brick’ (Indo-Aryan loanword), *bɛlt* ‘(modern) belt’.

Nàvakat retroflex consonants are not distinctly retroflex. This seems to be the reason why they often are perceived as alveolar stops. Furthermore, they are sometimes perceived as one segment (a retroflex consonant), but at other times as a sequence of two segments – an alveolar stop followed by an [r].<sup>11</sup> The latter is indicated as “(r)” in examples. For example, *t(r)ò* ‘wheat’, *<sup>n</sup>d(r)ùl* ‘snake’.

Similarly, although aspiration is phonemic in Nàvakat, the intensity of the aspiration is relatively low. Even Indo-Aryan loanwords containing aspiration, e.g., *b<sup>h</sup>agva:n* ‘god’, *b<sup>h</sup>a:la:* ‘spear’, are pronounced with only a slight aspiration.

<sup>11</sup> In many cases, this reflects their historical origin in consonant clusters.

An alternation between [p], [p<sup>h</sup>] and [b]; [t], [t<sup>h</sup>] and [d]; and [t], [t<sup>h</sup>] and [d] is found when the consonant occurs word-initially and the first syllable has a low tone. For example, *bàl* ~ *p<sup>h</sup>àl* ~ *pàl* ‘wool’, *bètlu* ~ *p<sup>h</sup>ètlu* ~ *pètlu* ‘manner’, *bèma* ~ *p<sup>h</sup>èma* ~ *pèma* ‘sand’, *bètfa* ~ *p<sup>h</sup>ètfa* ~ *pètfa* ‘to do’, *dùtpa* ~ *t<sup>h</sup>ùtpa* ~ *tùtpa* ‘to smoke’.

## 2.2 Prenasalization

There are some instances of prenasalization in Nàvakat.

Minimal pairs: Prenasalization			
<i>dàmdza</i>	‘to tie’	<i><sup>n</sup>dàmdza</i>	‘selection’
<i>dàtfa</i>	‘to chase’	<i><sup>n</sup>dàtfa</i>	‘to chew’
<i>t<sup>h</sup>y(t)pa</i> , <i>t<sup>h</sup>ù(t)pa</i>	‘smoke’	<i><sup>n</sup>dytpa</i>	‘knot’
<i>dyn</i> , <i>dùn</i>	‘seven’	<i><sup>n</sup>dyn</i> , ( <i><sup>n</sup></i> ) <i>dùn</i>	‘front’

## 2.3 Vowels

Short vowels:

i (y)	( <b>ɨ</b> )	u
e (ø)	a	o

Long vowels:

i: (y:)	( <b>ɨ:</b> )	u:
e: (ø:)	a:	o:

Illustration of vowels

/i/ : /e/	<i>kirkir</i>	‘round (small objects)’	<i>kérker</i>	‘standing position’
/e/ : /a/	<i>t<sup>h</sup>étpo</i>	‘big’	<i>t<sup>h</sup>átpa</i>	‘penalty’
/a/ : /o/	<i>k<sup>h</sup>á</i>	‘mouth’	<i>k<sup>h</sup>ó</i>	‘3SG.NHON’
/o/ : /u/	<i>só</i>	‘tooth’	<i>sú</i>	‘who’
/i/ : /u/	<i>t<sup>h</sup>i(k)</i>	‘word’	<i>tù(k)</i>	‘poison’

The status of [y], [ɨ] and [ø] in Nàvakat is unclear. There are no minimal pairs found in my database. As the following examples illustrate, the front and central rounded vowels mostly occur, when they are followed by [t], [d], [r], [n], and [l]. In some cases these non-back rounded vowels and the back rounded vowel occur as two possible variants.

<i>t<sup>h</sup>(t)pa</i> , <i>tù(t)pa</i>	‘smoke’	<i><sup>n</sup>dytpa</i>	‘knot’
<i><sup>n</sup>dyl</i> , <i><sup>n</sup>dùl</i>	‘snake’	<i>lu(t)pa</i> , <i>lù(t)pa</i>	‘cough’
<i>bøenu(t)</i>	‘womb’	<i>surtu(p)</i> , <i>súrtu:(p)</i>	‘ring’
<i>dùlma</i> , <i>dólma</i>	‘a name’	<i>súr</i> , <i>súr</i>	‘piece’
<i>súr</i> , <i>sùr</i>	‘corner’	<i>k<sup>h</sup>ø(t)</i>	‘2SG.NHON’
<i>kárjøl</i>	‘cup’	<i>t<sup>h</sup>ødun</i>	‘a girl’s name’
<i>nønpø</i> , <i>nónpø</i>	‘sharp, pointed’	<i>nøtfun</i> , <i>nòtfun</i>	‘younger brother’
<i>sányun</i> , <i>sányøn</i>	‘seed’	<i>sévun</i> , <i>sévøn</i>	‘itch’

There are, however, also some cases where the front and central rounded vowels occur, even though the vowels are not followed by one of the aforementioned consonants.

<i>gòemo, gòemo</i>	‘night’	<i>kòela(k), kòela(k)</i>	‘cloth’
<i>tʃʰøe</i>	‘religion’	<i>lèdui, lèdui</i>	‘initiation ceremony’
<i>gjàza</i>	‘to have sex’	<i>matsʰøva, matʃøva</i>	‘unripe’

There is free variation between close-mid and open-mid vowels.

<i>lép, lép</i>	‘arrive (HON)’	<i>tʃʰétpo, tʃʰétpo</i>	‘big’
<i>só, sɔ</i>	‘tooth’	<i>zòza, zɔza</i>	‘to make’

Length is phonemic in Nàvakat.

<i>kʰá</i>	‘mouth’	<i>kʰá:</i>	‘snow’
<i>gà</i>	‘saddle’	<i>gà:</i>	‘better’
<i>ná</i>	‘nose’	<i>ná:</i>	‘day after tomorrow’
<i>lù</i>	‘music’	<i>lù:</i>	‘tradition, custom’

Apart from this, there are also instances where a sequence of two vowels appears. Some vowel combinations found in the dataset are as follows:

[au]	<i>bâu</i>	‘teacher’	[eu]	<i>éu</i>	‘breast’
[iu]	<i>líu</i>	‘flute’	[oa]	<i>bòa</i>	‘foam’

Finally, the vowel preceding a nasal is often nasalized in Nàvakat, but nasalization is not phonemic.<sup>12</sup>

<i>fákta.n, fáktã:</i>	‘everyday’	<i>gùã, gòã</i>	‘egg’
<i>tã(ŋ)</i>	‘PFV’	<i>tʃʰúrgã:</i>	‘blister’

## 2.4. Tone

Tone is phonemic in Nàvakat in that there are minimal pairs where the only distinguishing linguistic feature is the tonal distinction. Such pairs display a difference in intonation as well as in pitch, with the vowels with a low tone displaying a fall-ing-rising tonal contour and the vowels with a high or neutral tone exhibiting a level tonal contour.

Minimal pairs: Tone

<i>là̃m</i>	‘path’	<i>lá̃m</i>	‘shoe’
<i>nà̃m</i>	‘when’	<i>nám</i>	‘sky’
<i>mà̃</i>	‘1SG’	<i>má</i>	‘wound’
<i>ŋà̃</i>	‘1SG’	<i>ŋá</i>	‘five’

In the following instances the difference in transitivity is indicated by means of tone:

<sup>12</sup> In cases where the nasalization is predictable (i.e. with vowels preceding a nasal consonant), it is not marked in the examples.

<i>kòndza</i>	‘to put on (INTR)’	<i>kóndza</i>	‘to put on (TR)’
<i>kùktfa</i>	‘to bend (INTR)’	<i>kúktfa</i>	‘to bend (TR)’
<i>fä:fa</i>	‘to blow (INTR)’	<i>fä:fa</i>	‘to blow (TR)’
<i>lùktfa</i>	‘to untie (INTR)’	<i>lùktfa</i>	‘to untie (TR)’

At the same time, the tonal distinction is predictable to a large extent. This is consistent with the correlates of the tonal distinctions found in Tibetan; i.e., the main tonal distinction is found only in the first syllable, where plain nasals and liquids correlate with low tone, but nasals and liquids with preradicals correlate with high tone (Huang 1995; Zeisler 2004: 250–257). Vowels following word-initial voiced consonants tend to have low tone. A slight aspiration on the first syllable correlates with the presence of the low tone.<sup>13</sup> The tone of the first vowel determines the tone of the following syllable. While the tonal distinction is distinctly audible in lexical items when spoken in isolation, in free speech the tonal differences are not so distinct; instead the main distinctive feature is primarily the tonal contour.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

In short, the sound system of Nāvakat exhibits many features which are typically associated with the sound system of Tibetan (see Huang 1995). It shows especially close affinity with the sound systems of Tibetan varieties such as Tabo and Ladakhi (Zeisler 2011; Bielmeier et al. in prep.). On the other hand, it differs substantially from the sound system of Sangla Kinnauri – a West Himalayish Kanauri variety spoken in Lower Kinnaur. This is consistent with the findings presented by Saxena (2011) and Saxena and Borin (2011), where a systematic lexical and grammatical comparison of a number of Tibetan and West Himalayish varieties clearly showed that the three Upper Kinnauri varieties Poo, Kuno, and Nāvakat are much closer linguistically to Tabo and Ladakhi than to Sangla Kinnauri or other Tibeto-Burman languages of Lower and Middle Kinnaur.

While the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) classifies the Upper Kinnaur Poo variety – and presumably also Nāvakat – as Bhoti Kinnauri, a West Himalayish Kanauri variety close to Sangla Kinnauri, the findings presented here and in our earlier investigations are strongly consistent with the proposals concerning the genetic relationship of these languages (e.g., Bailey 1909) which suggest that Nāvakat (and also the Tibeto-Burman varieties of Poo and Kuno) should be classified as Tibetan rather than West Himalayish Kanauri varieties.

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<sup>13</sup> Some phonological correlates to tone split noted in Sino-Tibetan languages are: breathy voice, pre-nasalization, fortis and lenis articulation of consonants, vowel length, and tenseness (Hombert 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Similar observations have also been made for the Ladakhi varieties Gya and Shara (Zeisler 2011).

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