



Segmental Phonemes in Molsom

Pradip Molsom

Guest Lecturer, Department of English,
Ramthakur College, Agartala, West Tripura

gpradipmolsom@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is a description of segmental phonemes in Molsom, a minuscule language spoken in Tripura. There are eighteen vowels in Molsom and they are categorized as monophthongs and diphthongs. Nine monophthongs in Molsom are /ɪ, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u, ʊ, ʌ/. They are all short. Molsom has nine diphthongs divided into two groups: i-ending /aɪ, ɔɪ, oɪ, uɪ, ʊɪ/, and u-ending /eʊ, aʊ, ɔʊ, oʊ/. The language has twenty consonants of which nine are voiceless and eleven voiced. According to manners of articulation, it has plosives, fricatives, nasals, lateral, glides and trill. With regard to places of articulation, it has bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal.

Keywords: Molsom, Vowels, Monophthongs, Diphthongs, Consonants

1.1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the segmental phonemes in Molsom. No proper work has been done earlier by way of documenting the segmental phonology of Molsom as is attempted to be accomplished here. As a matter of presentation vowels are dealt with first, and consonants follow next. It is anticipated that this modest work would inspire many interested scholars to delve more into segmental phonemes in Molsom.

1.2 Vowels

Ladefoged and Maddieson (1996:281) define vowel as 'a segment with the features [+syllabic, -consonantal], with [-consonantal] sounds being defined as those that do not have a central obstruction of the oral tract.' It is [+syllabic], because it functions as the nucleus of a syllable.

Natural languages must have vowels as without a vowel no syllable can be formed. However, in some languages there are more vowels than in others. The least number of vowels in a language is three: /ɪ, a, u/ (cf. Hockett 1955, Lass 1984). Vowels are primarily oral though in some languages underlying vowel inventory includes nasal vowels too. Both types have monophthongs and diphthongs (cf. Figure 1).

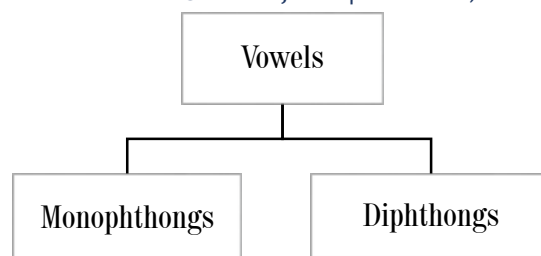


Figure 1 Classification of Vowels

Nasal vowels being rather marked let us keep them at bay to begin with.

As Catford (1988) observes, vowels are more precisely specified in terms of three parameters: vertical tongue-position (high-low), horizontal tongue-position (front-back), and lip-position (unrounded and rounded).

1.3 Monophthongs in Molsom

A monophthong is a pure vowel unlike to a diphthong. The latter is a vowel sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable. Nine monophthongs are noted in Molsom and they are all short: /ɪ, e, ɛ, a, ʊ, o, ɔ, u, ʌ /. Figure 2 shows their positions in the vowel zone followed by relevant discussion describing the vowels.

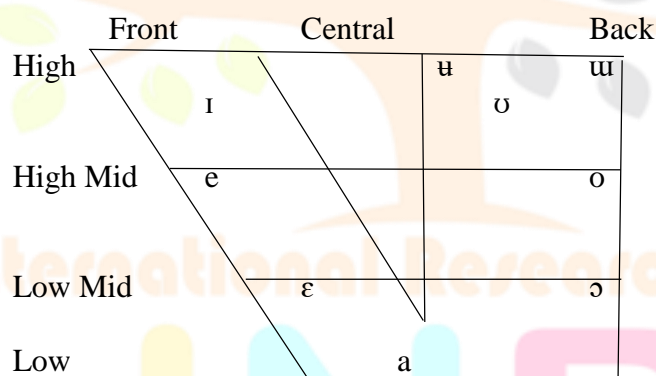


Figure 2 Monophthongs in Molsom

1.3.1 Description of Molsom monophthongs

Each of the nine monophthongs in Molsom can be described as in Table 1 in addition to the elaborations in (1-3) thereafter.

Monophthongs	Description
ɪ	Front High Unrounded
e	Front High Mid Unrounded
ɛ	Front Low Mid Unrounded
ʊ	Back High Rounded
u	Back High Unrounded
o	Back High Mid Rounded
ɔ	Back Low Mid Rounded
ʌ	Central High Rounded
a	Central Low Unrounded

Table 1 Description of Molsom monophthongs

Vowels are described canonically in terms of three parameters: a) horizontal tongue-position, b) vertical tongue-position and c) lip position. Molsom monophthongs can be specified in terms of these three positions as is shown in (1-3).

1. Horizontal tongue-position (front, mid, back)

- a. Front Vowels: /ɪ, e, ε/
- b. Central Vowel: /ʊ, a/
- c. Back Vowels: /ʊ, ʉ, o, ɔ/

Vowels in (1a) are called 'front' because they are pronounced with the front part or blade of the tongue. Likewise, those in (1b) are produced with the middle or central part of the tongue. (1c) enlists the back vowels since this time the rear part of the tongue is put in service.

With reference to the second parameter i.e., tongue height or the vertical tongue-position, Molsom vowels fall into three subcategories as shown in (2).

2. Vertical tongue-position (high, mid, low)

- a. High vowels: /ɪ, ʊ, ʉ, ʊ/
- b. Mid vowels: /e, ε, ɔ, o/
- c. Low vowel: /a/

High vowels in (2a) are articulated with the tongue in the high position close to the upper palate. Low vowels (2c) are so called because during their articulation the tongue lies lowest within the mouth: Molsom has only one such vowel. Those vowels produced with the tongue remaining in an intermediate position between high and low are called mid vowels. Molsom has four of them (2b).

Universally languages utilize rounding, or non-rounding, of lips as an essential articulatory characteristic of vowels. Molsom too follows suit as shown in (3).

3. Lip-position (rounded and unrounded)

- a. Rounded Vowels: /ɔ, o, ʊ, ʉ/
- b. Unrounded Vowels: /ɪ, e, ε, a, ʉ/

In line with the crosslinguistic practice, Molsom unrounded vowels outnumber the rounded ones by one. The language stands out in having a back high unrounded vowel – a marked feature combination – in /ʉ/. /ʉ/ too enjoys a special status in Molsom -- being a high central rounded vowel.

1.3.2 Distribution of Molsom monophthongs

Molsom monophthongs can occur freely in all the positions of words. However, one exceptional monophthong viz. central high rounded vowel /ʉ/ is predominantly medial in occurrence. Let us look at the occurrence of Molsom monophthongs in words.

Monophthongs	Initial	Medial	Final
ɪ	ɪp 'undisclosed'	p ^h ɪt 'sweep'	pɪ 'grandmother'
	ɪn 'house'	mɪt 'eye'	tɪ 'say'
e	ek 'excreta'	k ^h et 'paddy field'	be 'bean'
	et 'nagging'	p ^h et 'release'	se 'go'
ɛ	ɛt 'dashing'	tɛt 'thrash'	lɛ 'and/with'
	ɛn 'look'	dɛt 'solid'	-----
o	or 'chicken'	pɔt 'pull'	pɔ 'father'
	om 'stay'	-----	tɔ 'weaving'
o	ok 'vomit'	k ^h ot 'pill'	po 'alike'
	-----	tɔt 'appear'	ro 'bamboo/rain'
u	um 'chase'	mɔt 'pump'	mu 'saw'
	uŋ 'slow'	p ^h uŋ 'begin'	t ^h u 'rotten'
u	uŋɪ 'they'	suɪk 'keep'	-----
	uɪɪ 'we'	buɪk 'little'	-----
u	-----	k ^h uk 'break'	-----
	-----	kəl 'stir'	-----
a	al 'salty'	k ^h at 'one'	k ^h a 'bitter'
	an 'curry'	cat 'torn'	ca 'right'

Table 2 Distribution of Molsom monophthongs in word

There is no long vowel in Molsom. In other words, vowel length is non-distinctive in the language.

1.4 Diphthongs in Molsom

Diphthong is a vowel sound formed by the combination of two vowels in single syllable: the sound begins as one vowel and moves towards another as in *coin*, *loud*, and *side* in English. To note Catford (1988:115) 'a sequence of different vowels, within one and the same syllable, is called a diphthong.' Molsom has nine diphthongs classified into two groups: i-ending and u-ending. Relevant discussion on them presented below.

1.4.1 i-ending diphthongs: /aɪ, ɔɪ, oɪ, ʊɪ, ɪɪ/

There are five i-ending diphthongs: /aɪ, ɔɪ, oɪ, ʊɪ, ɪɪ/ presented in Figure 3 below. In other words, front high vowel zone is the most haunted area for diphthongs in Molsom: as many as five of them end in /ɪ/ -- an unmarked vowel across languages.

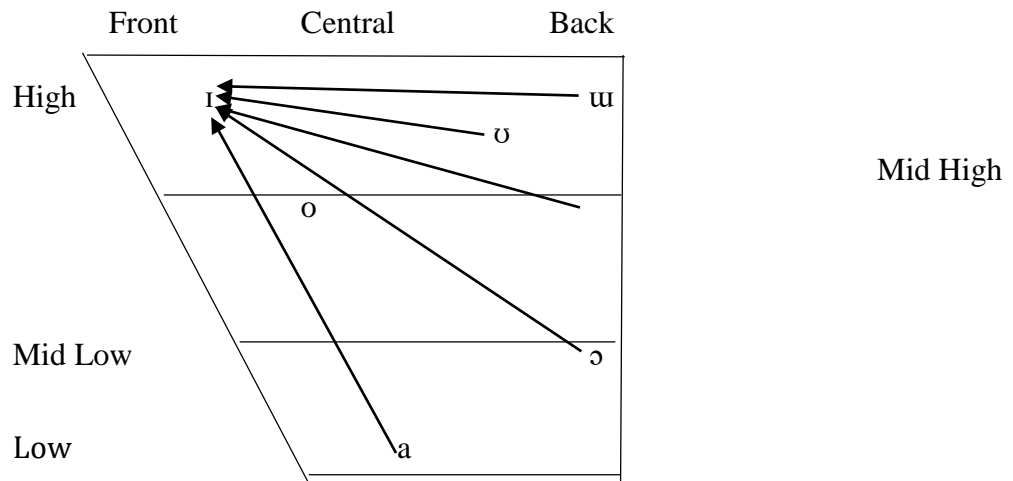


Figure 3 r-ending diphthongs of Molsom

1.4.1.1 Distribution of r-ending diphthongs

Molsom r-ending diphthongs occur only in the initial and final positions of words. However, word initial instances of such diphthongs are very limited. This is substantiated by the examples in Table 3.

r-ending diphthongs	Initial	Medial	Final
ai	----	----	pai 'throw'
	----	----	wai 'lost'
ɔi	ɔi 'crab'	----	p ^h ɔi 'pluck'
	----	----	tɔi 'late'
oi	oi 'pain'	----	k ^h oi 'bee'
	----	----	hoi 'know'
ɔi	ɔi 'dog'	----	pɔi 'include'
	----	----	tɔi 'water'
ui	ui 'bite'	----	bui 'hide'
	----	----	mui 'fire'

Table 3 Distribution of r-ending diphthongs in Molsom in word

1.4.2 ʊ-ending diphthongs: /eʊ, aʊ, ɔʊ, oʊ/

Figure 4 shows the articulatory postures of the ʊ-ending diphthongs in Molsom namely /eʊ, aʊ, ɔʊ, oʊ/.

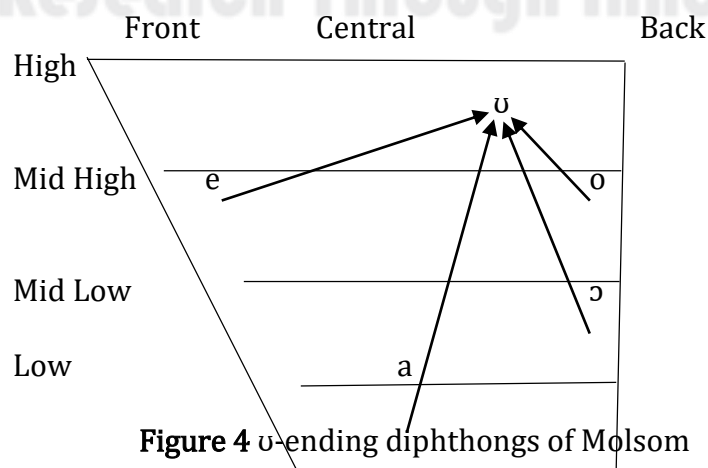


Figure 4 ʊ-ending diphthongs of Molsom

1.4.2.1 Distribution of u-ending diphthongs

In Molsom all the u-ending diphthongs occur word finally.

u-ending diphthongs	Initial	Medial	Final
eu	-----	-----	leu 'curse'
	-----	-----	zeu 'fry'
au	-----	-----	kau 'stretch'
	-----	-----	lau 'bow'
ɔu	-----	-----	cɔu 'mistake'
	-----	-----	bɔu 'mouth'
ou	-----	-----	ŋou 'white'
	-----	-----	lou 'medicine'

Table 4 Distribution of u-ending diphthongs of Molsom in word

It is intriguing to note that all the nine diphthongs in Molsom /aɪ, ɔɪ, oɪ, uɪ, ʊɪ, eu, au, ɔu, ou/ end in either of the two high vowels /ɪ/ and /ʊ/.

1.5 Consonants in Molsom

Let us have a brief look at the commonly accepted facts about the consonants in Molsom. Molsom has twenty consonants. They are categorized in terms of voicing, their respective places and manners of articulations. Nine are voiceless and eleven are voiced. According to manners of articulation, the language has plosives, fricatives, nasals, lateral, glides and trill. With regard to places of articulation, it has bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal. Consider Table 5 below.

Manner of articulation	Vibration of Vocal Cords	Places of articulation					
		Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosives	Voiceless	p p ^h	t t ^h		c	k k ^h	
	Voiced	b	d			g	
Fricatives	Voiceless			s			h
	Voiced			z			
Nasals	Voiced	m	n			ŋ	
Lateral	Voiced			l			
Glides	Voiced	w			j	(w)	
Trill	Voiced			r			

Table 5 Consonants in Molsom

1.5.1 Distribution of Molsom consonants in words

Molsom consonants are found to occur in words reasonably liberally. However, their occurrence is restrictive word finally. Tables 6-11 below bear out this observation.

1.5.1.1 Distribution of Plosives

Plosives	Initial	Medial	Final
p	paṭ ‘cotton’	rupol ‘busy’	cap ‘cry’
	pon ‘cloth’	campoi ‘friend’	k ^h ap ‘block’
p ^h	p ^h ɛŋ ‘all’	rup ^h ol ‘applying’	-----
	p ^h ui ‘begin’	luŋp ^h on ‘funeral ceremony’	-----
b	bak ‘share’	rubak ‘sharing’	-----
	ber ‘fence’	ruben ‘slapping’	-----
t	ṭan ‘cut’	roṭok ‘fight’	miṭ ‘eye’
	ṭor ‘tight’	ruṭum ‘kissing’	boṭ ‘boil’
t ^h	ṭ ^h at ‘kill’	paṭ ^h un ‘god’	-----
	ṭ ^h o ‘rotten’	paṭ ^h ui ‘beetle leaf’	-----
d	ḍon ‘rules’	ruḍoi ‘playing’	-----
	ḍoi ‘wet’	-----	-----
c	col ‘fall’	micil ‘spit’	-----
	cap ‘cry’	rucaŋ ‘helping’	-----
k	kel ‘goat’	ṭaksə ‘body’	suuk ‘keep’
	koṭ ‘hand’	sakər ‘horse’	rik ‘heavy’
k ^h	k ^h uk ‘break’	mok ^h o ‘cough’	-----
	k ^h loo ‘evening’	ruk ^h o ‘disease’	-----
g	gəṇṭi ‘kitchen’	-----	-----
	gəjam ‘guava’	-----	-----

Table 6 Distribution of Plosives

1.5.1.2 Distribution of Fricatives

Fricatives	Initial	Medial	Final
s	som ‘ten’	muuser ‘lime’	-----
	suŋ ‘sit’	rusoŋ ‘high’	-----
z	zak ‘shy’	muuzək ‘saving’	-----
	zəl ‘strength’	ruuzar ‘spreading’	-----
h	hə ‘teeth’	ruhal ‘quarrel’	-----
	haro ‘come’	ruhem ‘fighting’	-----

Table 7 Distribution of Fricatives

1.5.1.3 Distribution of Nasals

Nasals	Initial	Medial	Final
m	mor 'mouth'	ɪmɔ 'what'	lom 'hot/warm'
	mor 'pluck'	rimil 'picture'	ɬum 'kiss'
n	neŋ 'sand'	hɪnan 'here'	ɬan 'cut'
	nɔ 'mother'	cunən 'there'	ben 'slap'
ŋ	ŋɔ 'fish'	riŋɪk 'breathe'	cɔŋ 'language'
	ŋam 'brave'	ruŋɬuɪ 'unite'	caŋ 'help'

Table 8 Distribution of Nasals

1.5.1.4 Distribution of Lateral

Lateral	Initial	Medial	Final
l	loŋ 'stone'	mɔloŋ 'boat'	bɔl 'potato'
	loi 'climb'	relep 'chopping'	ɬɔl 'lazy'

Table 9 Distribution of Lateral

1.5.1.5 Distribution of Glides

Glides	Initial	Medial	Final
w	wɔm 'black'	rowɔt 'ashes'	-----
	wɔk 'pig'	ɬɔwar 'door'	-----
j	-----	gɪjan 'knowledge'	-----
	-----	gojam 'guava'	-----

Table 10 Distribution of Glides

1.5.1.6 Distribution of Trill

Trill	Initial	Medial	Final
r	roɬ 'pick'	mɔrɔɪ 'intoxicate'	bor 'blessing'
	ro 'rain/bamboo'	sɪriŋ 'quiet'	zor 'sell'

Table 11 Distribution of Trill

1.6 Conclusion

This paper has unearthed the segments in Molsom. The findings play a pivotal role in documenting the phonemes of the language. Furthermore, this lays the foundation for future researchers for dealing better with the phonological properties in Molsom.

References

Catford, J. C. *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics*. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2001.

Collins, Beverley and Inger M. Mees. *Practical Phonetics and Phonology*. 2nd ed.,
Routledge, 2008.

Jones, Daniel. *An Outline of English Phonetics*. 9th ed., Kalyani Publishers, 1972.

Ladefoged, Peter and Ian Maddieson. *The Sounds of the World's Languages*. Blackwell
Publishers, 1996.

Lass, Roger. *Phonology: An Introduction to Basic Concepts*. Cambridge University Press,
India Binding House, 1984.

