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## A wealth of tongues

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For a small country, Bhutan owns a disproportionate number of languages/dialects

**Ethnologue 16th Edition:** There may be 23 languages spoken in Bhutan, of which 16 could be local to Bhutan, according to a Bhutanese scholar, who is a research associate at Cambridge University, UK.

Dr Karma Phuntsho said the 16th edition of Ethnologue, the comprehensive catalogue of the world's languages, lists 25 languages for Bhutan, while George van Driem, a linguist at Berne University, lists 19 languages as spoken in Bhutan, including Tibetan and Nepali. "George van Driem is more authoritative because, when I look at the Ethnologue, there are few languages I can't verify that can be treated as languages," he said.

The distinction Dr Karma Phuntsho draws between language and dialects is, if they are mutually un-intelligible, they are definitely languages not dialects; but even if they are mutually intelligible, like Khengkha and Bumthangkha, when there are significant difference in structures of words and grammar, it is also counted as different languages.

In a chapter of his ongoing book where he writes about the 'Many Tongues' in Bhutan, he states that many people wonder if one is mistaking a dialect for a language. It is not difficult to imagine Bhutan's linguistic diversity, after understanding its geo-social segregation.

"Nevertheless, as a general guideline, let us consider two vernaculars as dialects of the same language, if they are mutually intelligible to their speakers without much difficulty, and their basic syntactical patterns and vocabulary are the same," he writes.

While there is no clear idea how the Ethnologue and George van Driem distinguished language and dialect, somehow they seem to follow the same distinction as defined by Dr Karma Phuntsho.

"Going by that logic, I think there'd be at least 16 languages, which are local to Bhutan, of the 23 languages spoken in Bhutan," Dr Karma Phuntsho said.

In his book 'Language policy in Bhutan', George van Driem lists *Dzongkha*, *Chocha-Ngacha-kha*, *Brokpa*, *Brokkat*, *Lakha*, *Bokey* (Tibetan) under central Bodish languages; *Bumthangkha*, *Khengkha*, *Kurtoepkha*, *Nyenkha* (*Henkha*, *Mangdebikha*) *Chalikhka*, *Dzalakha*, *Monpa* (*Olekha*), *Dakpakha* are classified under east Bodish languages; while, under other Bodic languages of Bhutan, he lists *Tsangla* (*Sharchopkha*), *Lhopa*, *Gongduk*, *Lepcha*; and under Indo-Aryan, he lists Nepali (*Lhotsamkha*).

The Ethnologue has an additional six to the George van Driem list, with *Adap*, *Lunanakha*, *Nupbikha*, *Tseku*, *Kurux*, and *Layakha*.

Dr Karma Phuntsho lists 23 spoken languages of Bhutan, adding Kurux, Limbu-Tamang-Sherpa, Hindi and English to George van Driem's list of 19.

He said, while he cannot verify some languages listed in the Ethnologue as of Bhutan's, referring to *Tseku*, he thinks *Adap* would be a dialect of Dzongkha. He says *Nupbikha*, spoken in some parts of Trongsa, is a dialect of Bumthangkha, and not a language of Bhutan, as listed in the Ethnologue.

"Ethnologue records *Adap* as a language, but I don't know whether it's a different form of Dzongkha, or a dialect of Dzongkha," Dr Karma Phuntsho said. "But Nupbikha I'd say is a dialect to Bumthangkha, because a bumthap can understand everything said in *Nupbikha*."

Except the foreign languages of Nepali, Tibetan, Hindi, English, Kurux, Lepcha, Limbu-Tamang-Sherpa, spoken in Bhutan, the rest of the 16 languages are local to Bhutan, according to Dr Karma Phuntsho.

But he also said it does not necessarily mean that some of the local languages in Bhutan are not spoken outside Bhutan. People of Pemakoe in Arunachal Pradesh, India, speak *Tsangla*, *Brokey* of Merak and Sakteng is spoken by Monpas in Tawang, India.

“That we have so many languages is literary wealth, because from language comes all rituals, jokes, proverbs, puns and idioms,” Dr Karma Phuntsho said.

By **Samten Yeshi**

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AUS \$	56.50	58.05
Sing \$	44.10	45.35

Courtesy BNB

## [The burning question: What started the blaze?](#)



Initial inquiries seem to rule out the usual short-circuit suspect «His Majesty examines the sacred artifacts

that were salvaged. The air reeked of charred wood, as thick black smoke continued to loom above the ruins of the traditional Wangduephodrang dzong. Almost 18 hours after the fire engulfed it, the embers of the timber that once made up the ancient fortress were still burning around [\[Read more\]](#)

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