Phonological Processes in The Reang Dialect of Kokborok: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract:

The Reang, alternatively known as 'Bru' is the second largest indigenous community in the north-east Indian state of Tripura. 'Kaubru' or 'Reang' as spoken by the afore mentioned group of people is one of the eight dialects of Kokborok. As a result of dialectical difference, instances of miscommunication between the native speakers of Reang and that of the other dialects of Kokborok is often noticed. The primary reason of this difference the several phonological processes which are applied by the native speakers while nativizing the actual Kokborok words. The present study promises to factor out the linguistic mechanisms that cause the dialectical differences.

Keywords: Reang, Bru, Indigenous language, Phonological processes, Morphophonemics.

1. Introduction

Reang is the primary means of communication of the people known by the homogenous term 'Reang' as their socio-cultural and linguistic identity. This group of people are also known by the alternative name 'Bru' and hence the language they speak is 'Kaubru'. It is one of the eight dialects of Kokborok. The native speakers of Reang are residing in the several parts of the north-east Indian state of Tripura, mostly under the sub-divisions of Bakafa, Shantir Bazar, Karbook, Amarpura, Kanchanpur etc. According to the census report 2011, the state is home to 1,88,220 Reang speaking lives. Apart from Tripura they are also found in the neighbouring state of Mizoram and Assam.

The researcher has found some existing work on Reang dialect including documentary record and research articles. However, no extended work has been done on the supra-segmental tier of the dialect. The present study aims to take a venture on this research gap. The analysis has been done on the basis of primary data only. The praimary data were collected from the native Reang speakers through observation method while the speakers' conversation among themselves and the researcher's interaction with them. Moreover, the researcher is familiar with the dialect: he is efficient in understanding and speaking in the dialect.
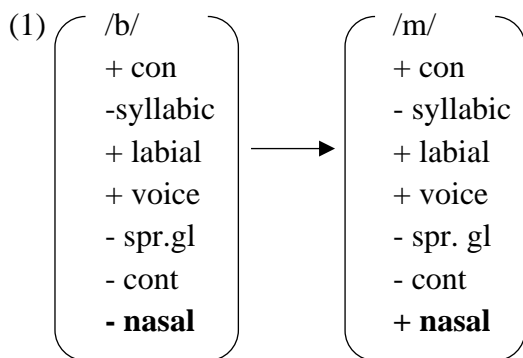
The paper has been designed as following. The Section-1 titled Introduction introduces the dialect understudy i.e. Reang and its native speakers. The section fleshes out the five existing phonological process of the dialect. They have been defined alongwith appropriate examples. Section-3 namely Discussion deals with how the distinct process function while nativizing Kokborok words into Reang dialect. The final section i.e. Conclusion winds up the findings of the research study.

2. Phonological processes

There are five phonological processes noticed in Reang. It is assumed that the processes work as the phonotactic mechanism for figuring out the dialectical variation between the dialect and its mother language Kokborok. Let us have a look at each of the processes.

2.1 Nasalisation

The process of replacing a non-nasal consonant with the nasal ones is known as nasalisation. To be specific, voiced non-nasal bilabial /b/ is substituted with the bilabial nasal /m/. This is because there is only one distinctive feature [+/- voice] that differentiates the two phonemes. In the morphophonemics in Reang, nasalisation is frequently noticed. The illustration below represents nasalisation process in the language.

(1)

/b/
+ con
-syllabic
+ labial
+ voice
- spr.gl
- cont
- nasal

→

/m/
+ con
- syllabic
+ labial
+ voice
- spr. gl
- cont
+ nasal

2.2 Elision

In Oxford Dictionary, elision is defined as "the act of leaving out the sound of part of a word when it is spoken". According to Carr (2007), "[Elision is] a process in which a segment is not pronounced". Some of the common examples of elision are- leaving out the sound /l/ in wa:k 'walk', /t/ in lɪsən 'listen' etc. In the languages like English, consonant sounds in general undergo elision. Whereas, the occurrence of vowel elision has frequently been noticed in the language understudy.

2.3 Coda deletion

Deletion of consonant(s) from the coda position is a common phonological process across languages. The native speakers of a language adopt this process as a phonotactic mechanism while nativizing the borrowed words from a foreign language. The present researcher has come across a phenomenon that coda is least preferred by the native speakers of Reang dialect. The picture of leaving out coda consonant(s) has been observed while pronouncing the standard Kokborok words as well as the ones borrowed from other languages such as English and Bengali.

2.4 Vowel lengthening

Lengthening of a vowel can be understood as the substitution of a short vowel by a long one in a syllable. This is because the vowels are categorised as either long or short vowel, and it is not possible to extend or reduce their length. Across the languages, vowels lengthened mainly as a subsequence of coda deletion: a phenomenon often termed as 'compensatory lengthening' (Hayes:1989). To quote its proprietor, "Compensatory lengthening can be defined as the lengthening of a segment triggered by the deletion or
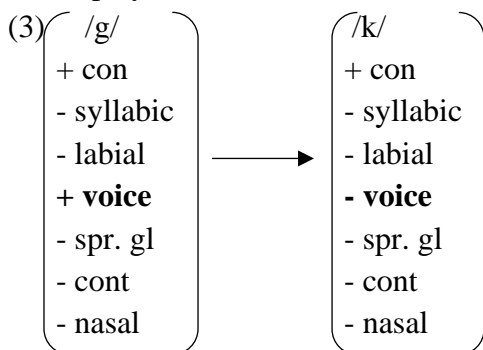
shortening of a nearby segment" (ibid: p. 260). For the better understanding of the concept, consider the following examples from Latin:

(2)　　*kasnus → ka:nus　　'grey'
　　　　*kosmis → ko:mis　　'courteous'
　　　　*fideslia → fide:lia　　'pot'　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Hayes 1989:260)

In (2) above we notice that deletion of sonorant /s/ in the non-ultimate syllables causes lengthening of the preceding vowels. As a result of lengthening, the actual length of the syllables is maintained. Therefore, the duration of articulating those syllables or the entire words is realised as equal pre and post coda deletion. Since there is no difference of length among the monophthongs in Reang, vowel lengthening takes place by replacing the monophthongs with diphthongs. This is supported by the fact that diphthongs in this language are considered as equivalent to that of the long vowels in the languages like English.

2.5 Devoicing

Devoicing is the process of substituting a voiced consonant with its voiceless counterpart. The process takes place in the coda position in most of the languages. In Reang, interestingly, devoicing of phonemes are observed in the onset. As of the present study, the voiced velar stop /g/ in the onset gets replaced by the voiceless /k/. The distinctive features of the two velar stops involved in onset devoicing in the language are displayed below.

(3)
$$\begin{bmatrix} /g/ \\ +\,\text{con} \\ -\,\text{syllabic} \\ -\,\text{labial} \\ \mathbf{+\ voice} \\ -\,\text{spr. gl} \\ -\,\text{cont} \\ -\,\text{nasal} \end{bmatrix} \longrightarrow \begin{bmatrix} /k/ \\ +\,\text{con} \\ -\,\text{syllabic} \\ -\,\text{labial} \\ \mathbf{-\ voice} \\ -\,\text{spr. gl} \\ -\,\text{cont} \\ -\,\text{nasal} \end{bmatrix}$$

3. Discussion

3.1 Nasalisation + Elision + Coda deletion

It is presumed that the phonological processes discussed in the previous session are existing in the core of the prosodic grammar of Reang. Thus, the processes come into force as the phonological mechanism for showcasing dialectical variation from Kokborok. The distinct variations are produced as a result of either one or more than one process. The researcher has found the maximum of three phonological processes functioning altogether to get the native Reang variety of the certain Kokborok words. One of those instances is CV.CVC disyllabic words which begin with the voiced bilabial non-nasal stop /b/. This type of words undergoes phonotactic changes at three levels: (i) the onset of the left edged syllable undergoes nasalisation process and hence is replaced by the bilabial nasal /m/; (ii) being caused by vowel elision, the nucleus of the first syllable gets omitted. The process is legalised by the fact that the dialect concerned does allow consonant cluster in contrast to its mother language i.e. Kokborok. This reduces the actual

word size of disyllables into monosyllabic ones; (iii) the consonant in the coda position of the right edge syllable is deleted as they least preferred by the native speakers. Consider the following examples.

(4) a. bɔt̪ʰɔp → mt̪ʰɔ   'nest'
     b. bɔsɔk → msoʊ   'tree top'
     c. bʊbar → mba   'flower'
     d. bʊkʊr → mkʊ   'skin'

3.2 Nasalisation + Elision

The disyllabic words of CV.CV type with voiced bilabial stop /b/ at the onset of the first syllable from the left undergo two phonotactic changes, namely nasalisation and elision. The mechanism applies in case of CV.CVC words. However, one must notice here that the coda consonant of the second syllable has to be a nasal /m[1] n ŋ/. Any other consonant at this position gets deleted as shown in (cf. 4).

(5) a. büt̪a → mt̪a   'elder brother of 3P'
     b. büt̪ʊɪ → mt̪ʊɪ   'egg'
     c. büt̪ʰaɪ → mt̪ʰaɪ   'fruit'
     d. bücaŋ → mcaŋ   'waist'
     e. bʊkʊŋ → mkʊŋ   'stick CL'

3.3 Elision

Elision (specifically vowel elision) is one of the frequently occurring phonological process in Reang. This phonotactic mechanism comes into force if the words are of CV.CV type other than /b/ at the onset of the left edge syllable or/and CV.CVC words other than /b/ at the onset of the first syllable, and a nasal at the coda position of the second syllable. Moreover, it is worthy to mention at this point that vowel elision in this language takes place iff (i) it is at the nucleus position of the first syllable in a disyllable, and (ii) it is a monophthong. A diphthong functioning as nucleus of a syllable does not undergo elision. The issue is confirmed by the data showcased in (cf. 10a, c) and (cf. 11a).

(6) a. külaɪ → klaɪ   'easy'
     b. küsa → ksa   'ulcer'
     c. mʊlaɪ → mlaɪ   'radish'
     d. münam → mnam   'stinky'
     e. bülaɪ → blaɪ   'leaf'
     f. bɔlɔŋ → blɔŋ   'jungle'
     g. sɪlaɪ → slaɪ   'gun'

3.4 Elision + Coda deletion + Vowel lengthening

Three phonological processes viz. elision, coda deletion and vowel lengthening function together for the nativization of disyllabic with voiceless velar stop /k/ in the coda of the right edge syllable. To be precise, deletion of the coda triggers the preceding vowel to be lengthened. In the process the reduction of a mora value caused by deletion is compensated with the extra mora which is brought by the lengthened vowel. Since all the monophthongs are considered a short vowel (=mono moraic) in Reang, the substitution is

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[1] Refer to the data in (cf. 4.d).

done with the diphthongs as the latter is measured to carry two moras in a syllable. The researcher has found the following points in this regard: If velar /k/ is preceded by-

(i) low central vowel /a/, it is replaced by diphthong /aü/;

(ii) mid-low back vowel /ɔ/, it is replaced by /aʊ/;

(iii) high back vowel /ʊ/, it is replaced by /oʊ/.

(7)   a. münak → mnaü   'darkness'

       b. kɔlɔk → klaʊ   'long/tall'

       c. sɪkɔk → skaʊ   'thief'

       d. sɪlʊk → sloʊ   'leech'

3.5 Elision + Coda deletion

In case of CV.CVC words having liquids /l r/ as coda of the right edge syllable, it is noticed to have two phonotactic mechanisms functioning together. The processes involved in this regard are elision and coda deletion. Let us have a look at following examples.

(8)   a. küpal → kpa   'forehead'

       b. küt̪al → kt̪a   'new'

       c. kɔsɔl → ksɔ   'look alike'

       d. sɛlɛr → slɛ   'lazy'

3.6 Coda deletion + Vowel lengthening

Coda deletion and vowel lengthening work together for the nativization of CVC monosyllabic words. As it has already been discussed in (3.4) earlier, vowel lengthening in this regard takes place as the subsequent of coda deletion of velar stop /k/. Consider the examples below.

(9)   a. nɔk → noʊ   'house'

       b. lɔk → laʊ   'long'

       c. hʊk → hoʊ   'jhum'

       d. sɔk → saʊ   'to burn'

       e. mɔk → maʊ   'sad'

3.7 Coda deletion

While nativizing CV.CVC words into native Reang, the coda of the second syllable gets deleted. However, no phonotactic change takes place in the initial syllable. Look at the following examples.

(10)   a. t̪ʰaɪcʊk → t̪ʰaɪcʊ[2]   'mango'

       b. can̪d̪ʊk → can̪d̪ʊ[3]   'a thread wore on waist'

       c. maɪd̪ʊl → maɪd̪ʊ   'rice ball'

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[2] & [3] it is an exceptional issue noticed in the language that the preceding vowels do not undergo lengthening after the deletion of velar coda /k/. It defies the cases shown in (3.4 and 3.6).

3.8 Devoicing

Devoicing means the substitution of a voiced consonant with an unvoiced one. Generally, coda devoicing has been observed across the languages. It is an exceptional yet interesting fact in the language understudy as onset devoicing is found instead of coda. As par the present research, only the devoicing of velar stop /g/ is noticed to have replaced by its voiceless counterpart /k/.

(11) a. gaɪrɪŋ → kaɪrɪŋ   'a hut'
   b. genḏa → kenḏa   'male piglet'
   c. gɔbɛŋ → kɔbɛŋ   'a frog'

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion, we get the following points.

1. there are five phonological processes in Reang dialect. The processes are nasalisation, elision, coda deletion, vowel lengthening, and devoicing;
2. nasalisation, elision and coda deletion function together while adapting CV.CVC words with /b/ at the onset of the first syllable and a consonant as coda other than the nasals;
3. elision, coda deletion and vowel lengthening work in tandem in case of the disyllabic words with velar stop /k/ as the coda of the right edge syllable;
4. CV.CVC disyllables with liquids /l r/ as coda of the second syllable undergo elision and coda deletion;
5. in case of disyllables having voiced velar stop /g/ as the onset of the left edge syllable, the segment undergoes devoicing and hence gets replaced by its voiceless counterpart.

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