

Phonemic Analysis Of Kokborok Vowel System

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Abstract: The present study focuses to describe the phonemic analysis of Kokborok vowel system. Kokborok is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo sub-group, spoken mainly in Tripura, a northeastern state of India. The language is also spoken in some of the regions such as, Assam (Karimganj district), Dhaka and Chittagong hill areas of Bangladesh. As studied in many other Tibeto-Burman languages, the analysis of Kokborok vowel system mainly focuses on finding of vowel phonemes and diphthongs. Kokborok makes use of six vowel phonemes and three diphthongs. The vowel phonemes are distinguished based on their sounds uttered with tongue position, tongue height and lip positions. A vowel with a continually changing quality becomes diphthong.

Keywords: Kokborok, Vowel systems, Diphthongs, Tongue, Lip

I. INTRODUCTION

Kokborok is a language derived from the two components such as, 'Kok' which means 'language' and 'Borok' means 'person'. It is the language spoken in Tripura by the different tribal communities such as, Debbarma, Chakma, Koloi, Jamatia, Murasing, Rupini, Reang etc. The present language of study is the language spoken by Debbarma tribes in Rangamatia village under one of the districts namely, the Sepahijala of Tripura. The people speaking Kokborok language inhabit not only in the district but also spread in different areas of the state and even also outside the state, that is, Karimganj district, Dhaka and Chittagong hill areas of Bangladesh.

From linguistic point of view Kokborok belongs to Bodo-Garo sub-group of Tibeto-Burman (Benedict, 1972). Shafer (1966-74) classified Kokborok under Western Units of the Baric sub-division of Sino-Tibetan language family. However, Burling (2003) classified Kokborok under Bodo group of language which is now part of the Bodo-Koch.

II. VOWEL PHONEMES

Vowel phonemes are generally described in terms of the following criteria:

- ✓ tongue position: front, central and back;
- ✓ tongue height: high, mid and low;
- ✓ lip position: rounded and unrounded.

It is already mentioned that there are 6 vowel phonemes in Kokborok, viz. /i/, /e/, /i/, /a/, /u/, and /o/. They are shown in table 1 below.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ	u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Table 1: Kokborok Vowel Phonemes

III. ARTICULATORY DESCRIPTION

In the production of the vowel sounds such as, /i/, /i/, and /u/ the position of the tongue is high. However, the position of the tongue is in mid while producing the vowel sounds such as, /e/ and /o/. But in the production of the vowel sound /a/ the position of the tongue is low.

In the production of the front vowel sounds such as /i/ and /e/ the tongue is slightly forward in the mouth. For the central vowel sounds, /i/ and /a/ the central part of the tongue is raised. However, in the production of back vowel sounds, /u/ and /o/ the tongue position is towards the back in the mouth. Out of the vowel phonemes established in Kokborok the

phonemes appearing as the front vowels such as /i/ and /e/ and as the central vowels such as /i/ and /a/ are unrounded which is justified at the time of the production of their sounds based on lip position. Contrastingly the phonemes appearing as the back vowels such as /u/ and /o/ are justified as rounded vowels according to lip position. The following is the notable description of the vowel phonemes in kokborok.

- i- High, front, unrounded vowel
- e- Mid, front, unrounded vowel
- i- High, central, unrounded vowel
- a- Low, central, unrounded vowel
- u- High, back, rounded vowel
- o- Mid, back, rounded vowel

These six vowels are established on the basis of the following minimal pairs:

i/e :	/si/	'be wet'
	/se/	'change'
	/sip/	'fan/swing'
	/sep/	'press'
i/i :	/kicik/	'torn'
	/kicak/	'be red'
	/kiciŋ/	'friend'
	/kicaŋ/	'be cold'
i/u :	/si/	'be wet'
	/su/	'wash'
	/bisi/	'year'
	/busu/	'thorn'
i/u :	/kicaŋ/	'cold'
	/kucuŋ/	'be bright'
	/kicak/	'be red'
	/kucuk/	'height'

More minimal pairs are given below:

u/o :	/ulo/	'afterward'
	/ul/	'back'
	/ol/	'tax'
	/tuŋ/	'be hot'
	/toŋ/	'stay'
e/o :	/sek/	'snatch'
	/sok/	'be rotten'
	/helen/	'light'
	/holon/	'stone'
e/i :	/sep/	'press'
	/sip/	'fan/swing'
	/se/	'change'
	/si/	'be wet'
a/o :	/taŋ/	'touch'
	/toŋ/	'stay'
	/bal/	'carry'
	/bol/	'fire wood'
a/u :	/taŋ/	'touch'
	/tuŋ/	'be hot'

/ha/	'mud'
/hu/	'erase/wipe'

IV. DISTRIBUTION OF VOWEL PHONEMES

All the six vowel phonemes except the high central unrounded vowel, /i/ can occur initially, medially and finally. The vowel /i/ occurs only in medial position. Their distributions are discussed below one by one.

OCCURRENCE OF /i/

The high front unrounded vowel phoneme /i/ occurs in all the three positions i.e. initially, medially and finally. The occurrence of which in words is discussed below:

Initial occurrence:

/iŋ/	'neem tree'
/ilaŋ/	'knowledge'

Medial occurrence:

/misip/	'buffalo'
/kisiŋ/	'fan'

Final occurrence:

/pi/	'aunt'
/ri/	'cloth'
/tini/	'today'
/k ^h ali/	'next year'

OCCURRENCE OF /e/

The mid front unrounded vowel phoneme /e/ also occurs initially, medially and finally. The occurrence of this vowel phoneme is given below:

Initial occurrence:

/eren/	'lie'
/er/	'increase'
/eŋ/	'node'

Medial occurrence:

/cen/	'start'
/ben/	'spider'
/seŋ/	'sword'

Final occurrence:

/gele/	'melt'
/se/	'change'
/sele/	'lazy'

OCCURRENCE OF /i/

The high central unrounded vowel /i/ does not occur in all the three positions. It only occurs in medial position. Its occurrence in words are cited below:

Medial occurrence:

/kitui/	'sweet'
/kicaŋ/	'be cold'
/kicak/	'be red'
/kik ^h a/	'be bitter'

OCCURRENCE OF /a/

The occurrence of the low central unrounded vowel phoneme /a/ is found initially, medially and finally. Examples are given below:

Initial occurrence:

/aa/	'fish'
/ama/	'mother'
/ani/	'my'
/asu/	'orange colour'
/aŋ/	'I'
/amiŋ/	'cat'

Medial occurrence:

/tal/	'moon'
/bal/	'carry'
/sal/	'day'
/wak/	'pig'

Final occurrence:

/phaia/	'not coming'
/tuia/	'not taking'
/pia/	'bee'
/ha/	'mud'
/larima/	'butterfly'
/suima/	'bitch'
/ca/	'correct'
/tuima/	'river'
/malima/	'a kind of god'

OCCURRENCE OF /u/

The high back rounded vowel /u/ occurs in all the three positions. Examples are given below:

Initial occurrence:

/uwaŋ/	'a kind of animal'
/ur/	'crowd'
/uri/	'termite'
/ulo/	'later'
/ulsa/	'second'

Medial occurrence:

/buk/	'sharp'
/dua/	'wasting time'
/cuwak/	'wine'
/musuk/	'cow'
/cibuk/	'snake'
/duk/	'trap'
/budul/	'round'
/buphaŋ/	'tree'

Final occurrence:

/cucu/	'grandfather'
/asu/	'orange colour'
/cu/	'packing'
/bu/	'beat'
/busu/	'thorn'
/kusu/	'youngest'

OCCURRENCE OF /o/

The mid back rounded vowel phoneme /o/ occurs initially, medially and finally. The occurrence of this phoneme is shown below:

Initial occurrence:

/ok/	'stomach'
/omthai/	'naval'
/ocai/	'priest'
/oda/	'damage'
/ol/	'tax'
/okpuli/	'liver'

Medial occurrence:

/coŋ/	'tease'
/com/	'soak'
/cok/	'dig'
/nok/	'house'
/goŋ/	'bear'
/kog/	'fire'
/kok/	'language'
/hor/	'night'

Final occurrence:

/bo/	'he/she'
/do/	'request'
/moso/	'chilli'
/bobo/	'which one'
/tamo/	'what'
/khamo/	'burning'

V. DIPHTHONGS

Diphthongs are gliding vowels i.e. vowel sounds with continually changing the quality. From the point of view of their quality, vowel sounds are of two types- monophthong and diphthong. Monophthongs are pure vowels. A vowel that does not change in quality may be called a monophthong and a vowel sound with a continually changing quality may be called a diphthong.

Diphthongs in Kokborok are rare that Kokborok makes use of only three diphthongs, viz. /ai/, /oi/ and /ui/. These may be described according to the tongue and lip positions at the beginning and at the end of the glide. The chart below shows the gliding of vowels.

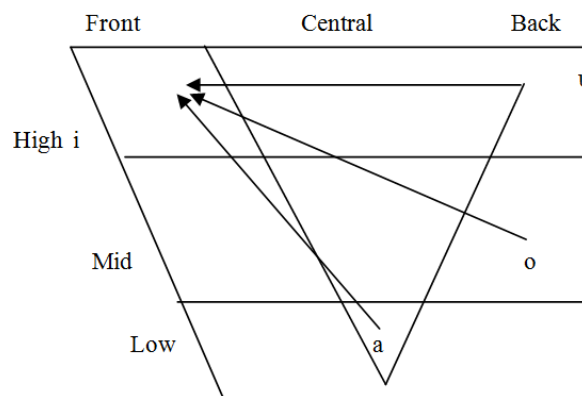


Table 2: Kokborok Diphthongs chart

VI. DISTRIBUTION OF DIPHTHONGS

All the diphthongs in Kokborok do not occur in all three positions, i.e. initial, medial and final. The diphthong /ai/ occurs initially, medially and finally. However, diphthongs, /oi/ and /ui/ occur only in word medial and final positions.

The distribution of these diphthongs are analysed as under.

OCCURRENCE OF /ai/

The diphthong /ai/ is a vowel glide. The gliding starts from the low central unrounded position and it moves to the direction of the high front unrounded position. This diphthong occurs initially, medially and finally as in the following manner.

Initially

/aiciri/	'early morning'
/aibi/	'elder sister'
/aitorma/	'start'
/ai/	'be dawn'
/aicuk/	'dawn'

Medially

/t ^h aipun/	'jackfruit'
/t ^h aiplok/	'a kind of fruit'
//t ^h aitop/	'jungle fruit'
/t ^h aicuk/	'mango'
/t ^h ailik/	'banana'

Finally

/t ^h ai/	'bear'
/pai/	'buy'
/p ^h ai/	'come'
/mai/	'rice'
/rai/	'cane'

OCCURRENCE OF /oi/

The description of the diphthong /oi/ can be identified as a vowel glide because the glidding begins from the mid back rounded position and moves to the direction of the high front unrounded position. This diphthong does not occur in word initial position. It occurs medially and finally as in the following examples.

Medially

/koilik/	'cat walk'
/boira/	'a kind of wild tree'
/koimuj/	'request'
/toilin/	'eagle'

Finally

/toi/	'aunt'
/koi/	'not stretch'
/loi/	'habit'
/soi/	'to agree'
/kokoi/	'bent'

OCCURRENCE OF /ui/

The diphthong /ui/ is a vowel glide. Its gliding begins from the position of the high back rounded and it moves to the direction of the high front unrounded position. The occurrence of this diphthong is not found in word initial position. It only occurs in word medial and final position. Examples are given below.

Medially

/muitu/	'vegetable'
/muihan/'meat'	
/muikhumu/	'mushroom'
/buisu/	'festival'
/muilok/	'gourd'
/tuima/	'river'

Finally

/bui/	'stranger'
/phui/	'uproot'
/mui/	'curry'
/sumui/	'fluet'

VII. CONCLUSION

The study of phonemic analysis of Kokborok vowel system concludes with the results from the above analysis that vowels in Kokborok except the high central unrounded vowel phoneme can occur in all the three positions- initial, medial and final. The occurrence of the high central unrounded vowel phoneme is totally absent in initial and final position of a word. It occurs only in word medial position. Thus distributionally the vowel phoneme /i/ is very rare comparing with other remaining vowels. Minimal vowel contrasts are shown with examples. Three diphthongs are very clear. All the diphthongs can occur in word medial and final positions but they never occur in word initial position except the diphthong /ai/.

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