

## **Phonological Processes in Barak Valley Meitei**

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### **Abstract**

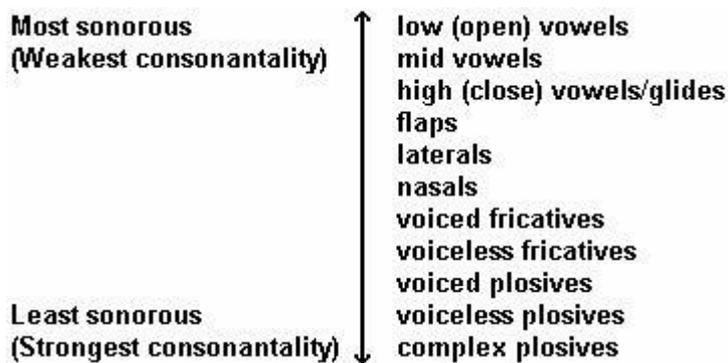
The paper presents select phonological processes found to occur in Barak Valley Meitei (hence forth BVM) using a descriptive framework. The idiosyncratic phonological feature of BVM is the substitution of /ɟ/ in the place of /j/ in word initial position. This is not found to occur in other positions except as allophones after /ə/ prefixation. Phonological processes occurring in the language such as Lenition, Apocope, Elision, and Vowel harmony lend the language a more distinct quality and the paper attempts to account for these phenomena.

Barak Valley Meitei is a geographical dialect of Meitei spoken in the Cachar District of Assam. This population of Meitei speakers (1,40,500 as per the report of the Manipuri Development Council, 2011) was placed in the state of Assam from Manipur by an exodus triggered more than 200 years ago due to the Burmese Invasion of Manipur (1819-1825). Most speakers are multilingual as they interact on a daily basis with speakers of Bengali (Indo-Aryan) and other ethnic communities that co-exist in the same area like Hmar, Rongmei and Mizo which are Tibeto-Burman. English, Bengali and Hindi is a part of the educational curriculum and speakers are acquainted with the use of these as well as other neighbouring languages. There is a variation in the language due to religious and cultural background and this study is based on the Hindu section of the BVM community.

- 1. Lenition:** Lenition traditionally refers to the ‘weakening’ of a sound segment. Lenition is a term used in phonology to refer to a weakening in the overall strength of a sound, whether diachronically or synchronically; opposed to fortition. Typically, lenition involves the change from a stop to a fricative, a fricative to an approximant, a voiceless sound to a voiced sound, or a sound being reduced (lenite) to zero. For example, the initial mutation in Celtic languages shows lenition in such cases as Welsh *pen* ‘head’ becoming *ben* ‘(his) head’ (Crystal 2008: 274). Lenition can

involve such changes as making a consonant more sonorous (vowel-like), causing a consonant to lose its place of articulation which turns a consonant into a glottal consonant like /h/ or /ʔ/ or even causing a consonant to disappear entirely. Often the term is extended to various other processes, such as loss of aspiration, shortening of long segments and monophthongization of diphthongs, which represent ‘weakening’ in some intuitive sense (Trask, 1996: 201).

According to Sonority Hierarchy,



(From Burquest and Payne 1993 <http://www-01.sil.org>)

### 1.1. Change of /j/ to /ɟ/

The main phonological difference between Standard Meitei and Barak Valley Meitei is that in standard Meitei there are no native words that begin with /j/. Whereas in Barak Valley all such words beginning with /j/ in standard Meitei are replaced with the /ɟ/.

<i>Standard Meitei</i>	<i>Barak Valley Meitei</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
jerum	ɟerum	egg
ja-bə	ɟa-bə	agree
jon-bə	ɟon-bə	sell
jaŋkok	ɟaŋkok	winnow
jen	ɟen	chicken
jen-bə	ɟen-bə	distribute
ju	ɟu	alcohol
jum	ɟum	house

The palatal stop /ɟ/ is found to change into the palatal approximant /j/ in an intervocalic environment when a pronominal affixation takes place on a noun and still behave like phonemes. But affixations of other morphemes which are not pronominal do not strictly follow this intervocalic rule. For example,

/ja/ ‘teeth’	/ mə-ja/ ‘his/her tooth’ 3 <sup>rd</sup> P-tooth
/jum/ ‘house’	/nə-jum/ ‘his /her house’ 2 <sup>nd</sup> P-house
/jum/ ‘house’ /ja/ ‘teeth’	*/nə-ɟum/ */nə-ɟa/

**Note:** \* is a notation for an ungrammatical utterance.

/ja/ ‘teeth’ becomes /ne-ja/ ‘your tooth’, /nə-ɟa/ is not a grammatical utterance. Affixation of morphemes on nouns or any other grammatical class does not allow the substitution of /ɟ/. In the case of verbs, there is an exception. When the attributive /ə-/ is attached to verbs starting with /ɟ/, both /j/ and /ɟ/ can be used in free variation. Both are grammatically correct and acceptable to the speakers.

/jon-bə/ sell-nzr ‘to sell’	/ə-jon-bə/ ATT-sell-NOM ‘The ones that are sold.’	/ə-jon-bə/ ATT-sell-NOM ‘The ones that are sold’
/jek-pə/ draw-NOM ‘To draw’	/ə-jek-pə/ ATT-draw-NOM ‘A drawing/ painting’	/ə-jek-pə/ ATT-draw-NOM ‘A drawing/ painting’
/ja-bə/ agree-NOM ‘To agree’	/ə-ja-bə/ ATT- agree-NOM ‘Agreement’	/ə-ja-bə/ ATT- agree-NOM ‘Agreement’
/jai-bə/ roast-NOM ‘to roast’	/ə-jái-bə/ ATT-roast-NOM/ ‘Roasted’	/ə-jái-bə/ ATT-roast-NOM/ ‘Roasted’

/jɛŋ-bə/ look-NOM 'to look'	/ə-jɛŋ-bə/ ATT-look-NOM/ 'seen/ 'the one being observed'	/ə-jɛŋ-bə/ ATT-look-NOM/ 'seen/ 'the one being observed'
/jù-bə/ leak-NOM 'to leak'	/ə-jù-bə/ ATT-leak-NOM 'leak'(N) 'leaky one'	ə-jù-bə/ ATT-leak-NOM 'leak (N)' or 'leaky one'
/jòk-pə/ rear-NOM	/ə-jòk-pə/ ATT-rear-NOM 'adopted(+human)' or 'reared one'	/ə-jòk-pə/ ATT-rear-NOM 'adopted(+human)' or 'reared one'
/jòt-pə/ swallow- NOM 'to swallow'	/ə-jòt-pə/ ATT-swallow-NOM 'swallowed one'	/ə-jòt-pə/ ATT-swallow-NOM 'swallowed one'

## 1.2. Change of /k<sup>h</sup> / to /h/

The plural morpheme for human subjects is /-k<sup>h</sup>oi/ in Standard Meitei which changes to /hoi/ in Barak Valley utterance. This process of lenition that is taking place here is that the aspirated stop sound /k<sup>h</sup>/ loses its place of articulation and changes to a softer sound /h/.

(SM) əi-k<sup>h</sup>oi > (BVM) əi-k<sup>h</sup>oy (unchanged)

I-PLU

'We'

But in,

SM: tomba-k<sup>h</sup>oi-gi

BV: tomba-hoi-gi  
tomba-PL-GEN

'Of Tomba's family'

Similarly,

SM : ləta-k<sup>h</sup>oi-də

BV: ləta-hoi-də  
ləta-PL-LOC

'At Lata's place.'

In a similar manner, we find the following occurrences such as,

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Standard Meitei	BVM	Gloss
mə-k <sup>h</sup> oi-gi 2 <sup>nd</sup> P	moi	‘theirs’
caoba-k <sup>h</sup> oi-gi chaoba-PL-GEN	caoba-hoi-gi chaoba-PL-GEN	‘Chaoba’s (PL)’
caoba-k <sup>h</sup> oi-də chaoba-PL-LOC	caoba-hoi-də chaoba-PL-LOC	‘At Chaoba’s’
meri-k <sup>h</sup> oi-gi meri-PL-GEN	meri-hoi-gi meri-PL-GEN	‘Mary’s (PL)’
meri-k <sup>h</sup> oi-də meri-PL-LOC	meri-hoi-də meri-PL-LOC	‘At Mary’s’
əmu-k <sup>h</sup> oi-gi amu-PL-GEN	əmu-hoi-gi amu-PL-GEN	‘Amu’s (PL)’
əmu-k <sup>h</sup> oi-də amu-PL-LOC	əmu-hoi-də amu-PL-LOC	‘At Amu’s’
əbe-k <sup>h</sup> oi-gi abe-PL-GEN	əbe-hoi-gi abe-PL-GEN	‘Abe’s (PL)’
əbe-k <sup>h</sup> oi-də abe-PL-LOC	əbe-hoi-də abe-PL-LOC	‘At Abe’s’

Thus, according to the Sonority hierarchy, the transition of the voiceless aspirated stop /k<sup>h</sup>/ into the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ shows an increase in the sonority hierarchy of the sound segment. Kingston (2008) argues that the purpose of lenition is to reduce the extent to which a consonant interrupts the stream of speech and not to minimize the articulatory effort the speaker must expend in pronouncing that consonant. Lenition is not the reduction of effort in speech but an increase in the sonority of sound segments due to proximity with vowels or more open consonants. Lenition achieves this purpose by increasing the affected consonant’s intensity. In Meitei and in Barak Valley Meitei speech this transition takes place at the suffixation of a plural morpheme for [+human] nouns.

/k<sup>h</sup>/ → /h/

Although the sound varies according to the variety but, in this case, it is triggered by a morphological process of plural morpheme suffixation where the voiceless aspirated stop /k<sup>h</sup>/ changes to a voiceless glottal fricative /h/. The sound segment changes its place of

articulation and manner of articulation as well. In formal and literary settings the Barak Valley speaker might follow the utterance as in the Standard variety but colloquial speech shows the occurrence of /hoi/ instead of /k<sup>h</sup>oi/ which is a common characteristic of the variety.

## 2. Elision

“Elision is a term used in phonetics and phonology to refer to the omission of sounds in connected speech. Both consonants and vowels may be affected, and sometimes whole syllables may be elided. Unstressed grammatical words, such as ‘and’ and ‘of’, are particularly prone to be elided, as when the f is dropped in cup of tea (cf. cuppa tea), or the /a/ and /d/ are dropped in boys ‘n’ girls. Within polysyllabic words, the vowels and consonants in unstressed syllables regularly elide in conversational speech of normal speed, e.g. camera (/ˈkɑmərə/), probably (/ˈprɒblɪ/), February (/ˈfebrʊəri/). Complex consonant clusters are also often reduced, e.g. twelfths becoming /twelθs/ or /twelfs/. Several intricate patterns of influence can be demonstrated.” (Crystal 2008: 166).

Suffixation of /-gi/ as a morpheme having a genitive function leads to the elision of /g/ from the morpheme as in,

2.a. əsi-gə-gi-di > əsigəi-di > sigəi-di  
 this-CONJ-GEN-EMP  
 ‘From here onwards.’ ^

The graphs of the utterances and transition in speech are given below:

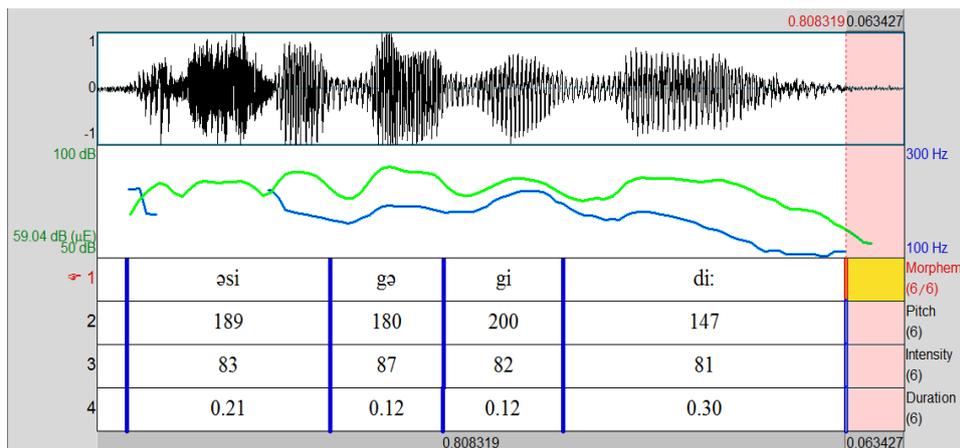


Fig.2.a

The above figure is a pitch track of the complete form of the utterance before any of the changes have taken place, each morpheme is distinctly observable.

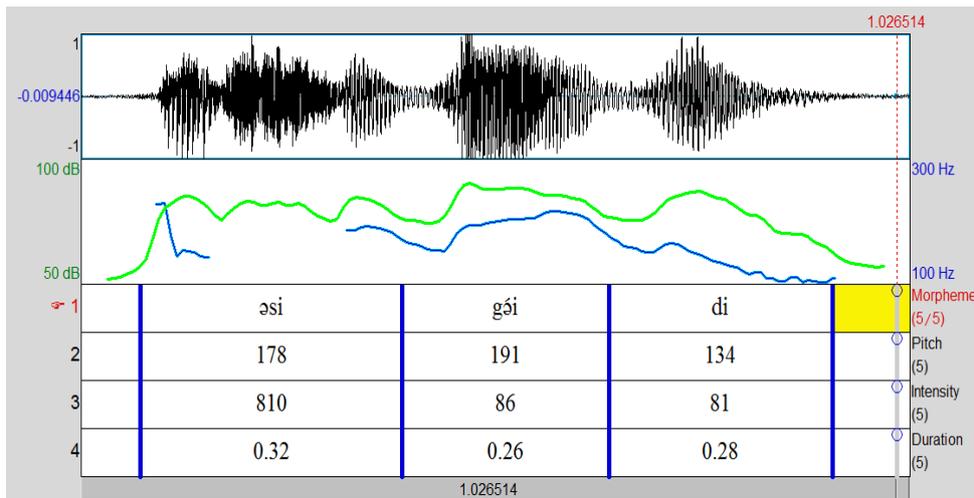


Fig. 2.b

In Fig 2.b, we can see that /g/ has been dropped from the /gi/ morpheme and the vowels are observed to be in a single morpheme.

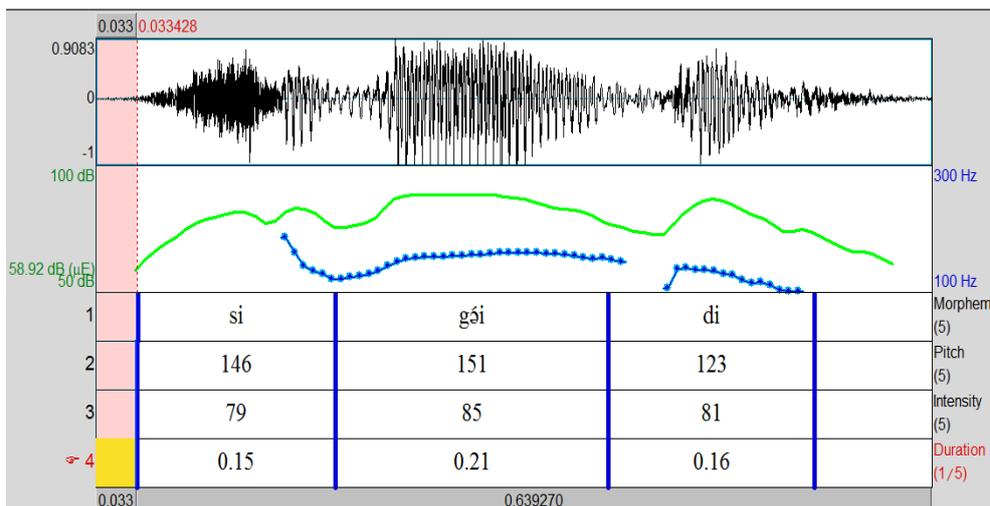


Fig.2.c

Fig. 2.c. is the pitch track of /si-gái-di/ where the utterance is the same as Fig 2.b. but the initial vowel has also been dropped.

#### 2.d. ədu-gə-gi-di > ədu-gái-di > ədúidi

Det-conj-GEN-emp

‘... and then.’

During conversations or narrations, the next sentence usually begins with /ədúidi/ and is very common in usage. The frequency of the usage and occurrence of the phrase has resulted in the above form. Similarly,

2.e. mə-k<sup>h</sup>oj-gi-dəgi > mói-dəgi > mói-dái

2ndP-pl-GEN-abl

‘From them.’

The /g/ gets dropped for

2.f. əi-nə filter kup-pəm-bə-gi > əi-nə filter kup-pəm-bái

I-nom filter cover-PST-NOM-GEN

‘I used (it) to cover the filter.’

2.g. /ma-gi/ > /mái/

2<sup>nd</sup> P-GEN

His/her.

Elision of /g/ is a common occurrence when genitive /-gi/ is suffixed to verbs and adjectives such as given below:

ha:p-pə-gi> put-NOM-GEN	ha:p-pái	‘because of putting’
səm-bə-gi> join-NOM-GEN	səm-bái	‘because of joining’
la:k-pə-gi > come-NOM-GEN	la:k-pái	‘because of coming’
túm-bə-gi > sleep-NOM-GEN	túm-bái	‘because of sleeping’
lik-pə-gi > less-NOM-GEN	lik-pái	‘because of being less/ miserly’
lòi-bə-gi > finish-NOM-GEN	lòi-bái	‘because of finishing’
wa:ŋ-bə-gi > tall-NOM-GEN	wa:ŋ-bái	‘because of tallness.’
mot-pə-gi > dirty-NOM-GEN	mot-pái	‘because of dirtiness.’

### 3. Apocope

Apocope is the loss or omission of one or more segments from the end of a word. It occurs as a general rule when a segment is deleted at a particular environment which is at the end of the word. In this case it is the deletion of an unstressed vowel /ə/ in the case suffix /-nə/. After deleting the vowel, if the sound at the coda position is a voiced stop; it also gets dropped as it is a general rule in Meitei which does not exhibit the occurrence of voiced stops at the coda position. When suffixation of a morpheme takes place at the end of a root word, the vowel sound is often dropped and the vowel in the preceding syllable develops a stress in the utterance. The meaning of the deleted sound or morpheme is although incorporated into the root word.

3.a. /ədu-mai-nə/ > /dumàin/

that-manner-adv

‘ In that manner.’

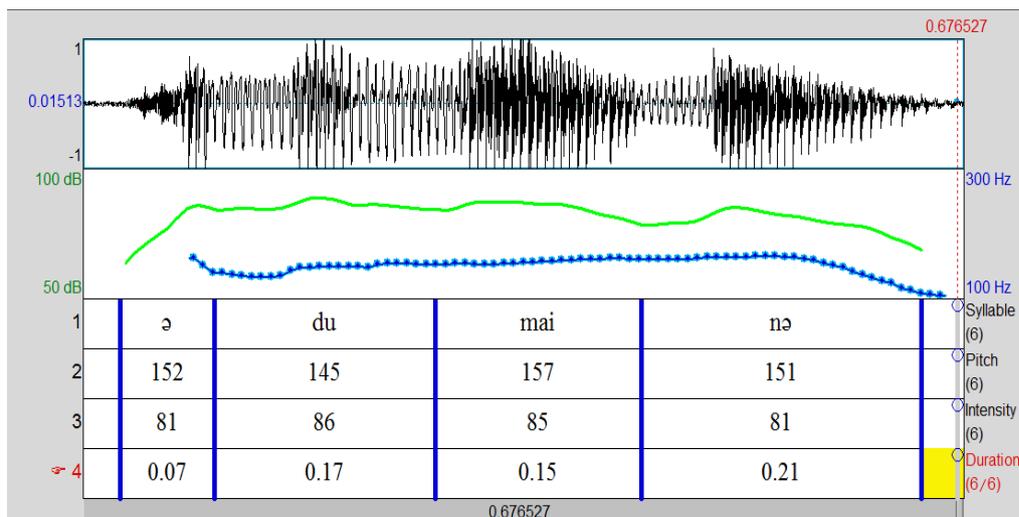


Fig.3.a.

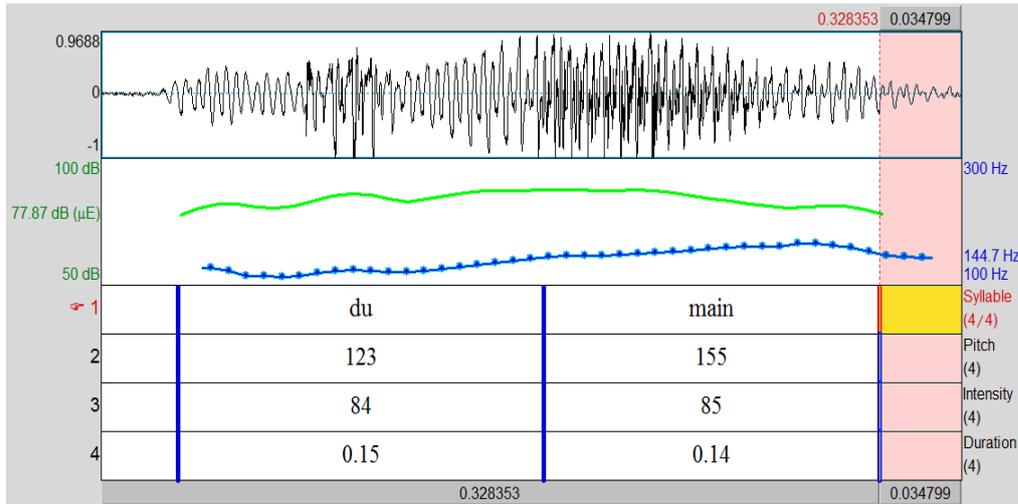


Fig.3.b

In the figures 3.a and Fig. 3.b the process of Apocope is clearly seen where the final vowel is dropped.

3.c. /li:-li-nə/ > /lí:-lin/  
 narrate-narrate-conj narrate-narrate-conj  
 'As (I) narrate...'

3.d. /má-nə/ > /má:/  
 2<sup>nd</sup> P-nom 2<sup>nd</sup> P-nom  
 'By him'

3.e. /hai-nə/ > /ha:in/  
 'say-adv'  
 'It is said so.'

3.f. /əsi-gum-bə/ > /əsi-gum/  
 this-kind-NOM this-kind-NOM  
 'Of this kind.'

In the above example, the morpheme suffix is the nominalizer /-bə/. Chelliah (1994) has attested for this “possibility of application of such rules in fast speech which obliterate word boundaries and initiate the grammaticization of stems to affixes.” The suffix is

completely deleted but the stress in the word retains the semantic content of the absent morpheme. In this case, since Meitei does not allow voiced stops in the coda position, the entire morpheme has been deleted along with the unstressed vowel but the meaning of the deleted morpheme is still inherent in the word.

#### 4. Vowel harmony

“Vowel harmony in general means that the successive vowels agree in certain features. Firth’s dispute with traditional systems (especially phonemes) at the expense of structure drew attention to the sub-phonemic components of speech and to the extent to which such features may spread across successive segments. Vowel harmony is not just a matter of vowel articulation but of pervasive tongue or lip settings that must affect intervening consonants as well.” (Clark & Yallop, 1995: 399-400). Vowels can be affected by neighbouring vowels for height, roundedness or fronting.

The verbs in Meitei get a deictic meaning by the attachment of the morpheme /-sin/ which has an indication of an action that takes place in an inward motion or introspective manner. The literary or standard form is /-sin/ which changes into /-sən/ due to the influence of the consecutive vowel. In the environment where a nasal sound precedes /-sin/, /s/ changes into /j<sup>h</sup>/. The following are examples in the nominative form from Standard Meitei and Barak Valley Meitei:

<i>S.Meitei</i>	<i>BVM</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
cɪŋsinbə	cɪŋ <sup>h</sup> ənɓə	‘pull inwards’
pəŋsinnəbə	pəŋ <sup>h</sup> ənəbə	‘act stupid’
nɪŋsɪŋbə	nɪŋ <sup>h</sup> əŋbə	‘remember’
p <sup>h</sup> ajɪnbə	p <sup>h</sup> ajənɓə	‘catch, hold captive’
tɪnsinnəbə	tɪŋ <sup>h</sup> ənnəbə	‘mix, add’
kəwsɪnbɪju	kəwsənɓɪju	‘call inside (honorific)’
paisɪnbə	paisənɓə	‘hold’
ceksinnə	ceksənnə	‘carefully, cautiously’
ŋawsinnəbə	ŋawsənnəbə	‘up to mischief’
hanɪnbə	hanɪnɓə	‘fill up’

The following figures illustrate the utterance of /ciŋsinbə/ and /ciŋ<sup>h</sup>ənbə/ where the closed high vowel /i/ changes to central vowel /ə/ and the sibilant /s/ changes to /ʃ<sup>h</sup>/.

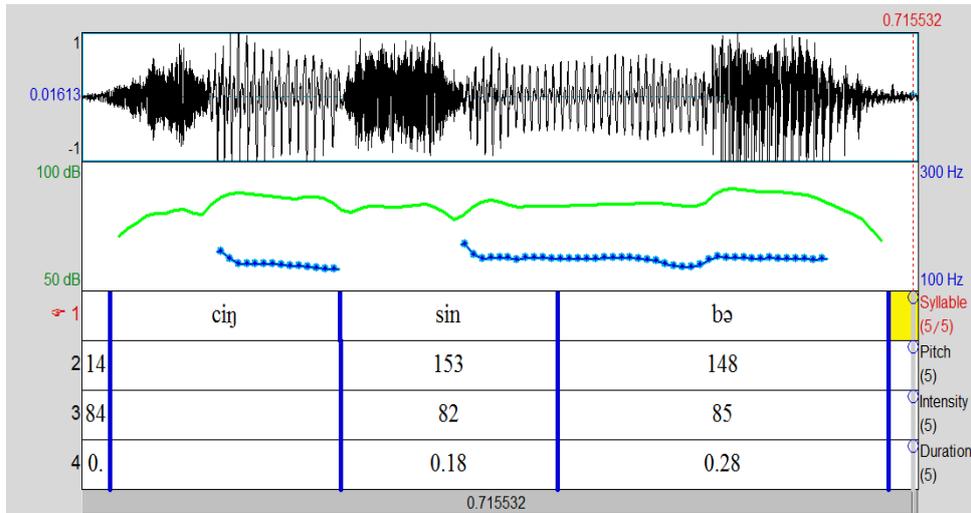


Fig. 4.a

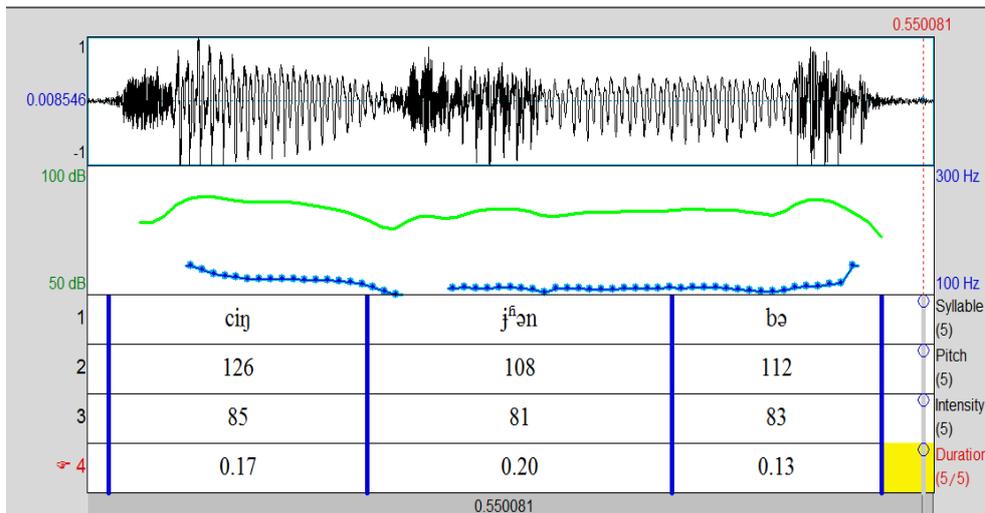


Fig.4. b.

The same phenomena of the closed high vowel /i/ changing to the central vowel /ə/ and the sibilant /s/ changes to /ʃ<sup>h</sup>/ is also observed in the imperative form:

ciŋsillu	ciŋ <sup>h</sup> əllu	‘pull inwards’
pəŋsinnəsəllu	pəŋ <sup>h</sup> ənəsəllu	act stupid’
niŋsiŋu	niŋ <sup>h</sup> əŋu	‘remember’
tinsillu	tiŋ <sup>h</sup> əllu	‘mix, add’
kəwsillu	kəwsəllu	‘call inside’
p <sup>h</sup> ajillu	p <sup>h</sup> ajəllu	‘catch, hold captive’

paisillu	paisəllu	‘hold’
ceksillu	ceksəllu	‘carefully, cautiously’
hanjillu	hanjəlu	‘fill (it) up.’

Chelliah (1997: 70) mentions that in Meitei, alternation of vowels with schwa may occur in certain places as in

a. ojsinnu	b. ojsənnu	‘may it be’
c. tələb	d. tolob	‘salary’.

/-sin/ and /-sən/ are said to be in free variation in the Standard variety (Singh, 1989: 113). In Barak Valley Meitei though, it is /-sən/, /-ɟən/ and /ɟʰən/ occur in natural speech and is not an occasional alternation like the occurrences in Standard Meitei.

The usage of /sin/ and /jin/ occurs in Barak Valley Meitei speech used in formal settings or conscious speech or while referring to literary sources. From the above data, it is observed that /s/ changes to /ɟ/ and /j/ changes to /ɟʰ/ if it precedes a nasal consonant. This alternation is not present in the Standard code. Thus, in Barak Valley Meitei /-sən/ changes to /-ɟʰən/ if it occurs after a nasal.

## Conclusion

“Phonological structure is affected by use in that articulatory accommodations occur as the result of real language use. This is the sense in which grammar can be said to be emergent.” (Bybee 2001: 16). The speech of the Barak Valley Meitei speakers show such patterns where sounds are assimilated, deleted or dropped which is characteristic of the variety. The prevalence of phonological processes that simplify and delete sounds has lent the language an informal sounding character. There is also more scope for voicing of voiceless native sounds due to proximity to Indo-Aryan languages. As it is a geographical dialect, these phenomena are found to commonly occur which gives it a distinct sound in comparison to the Standard or formal variety.

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