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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 15:9 September 2015**
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Phonology of Syriem

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Abstract

Syriem is a member of the Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman family spoken approximately by 700 speakers in five villages of Barak Valley (Southern Assam), viz. Balisor (Kuki Punji), Noksa (Nengpur), Bagbahar, Syriem Kho and Nagathol. Nothing substantial is known about the language/tribe either from the colonial writers or from any other anthropological sources. The present paper discusses the phonological structure of the language.

Key words: Syriem language, Kuki-Chin, Assam

Introduction

Syriem (a.k.a) *Fyriem* is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin sub group spoken in five villages of Barak valley (Southern Assam), namely, Balisor (Kuki Punji), Noksa (Nengpur), Bagbaar, Syriem Kho and Nagathol. The language is spoken roughly by 600-700 speakers. The speakers of Syriem are composed of various Kuki-Chin languages/dialects: Aimol, Changsen (Thadou), Chongloi (Thadou), Kholang, Rangkhol, Tollai, etc. who no longer speak their ancestor languages/dialect or have given up using their languages in favour of Syriem which is believed by the speakers to have evolved out of the mixture of many Kuki-Chin languages/dialects who have come to live together in their present day settlement over hundred years ago. The language is facing a severe threat from the dominant Bengali which is widely spoken all around the Barak Valley and in the adjoining regions.

Syriem Syllable Structure

Syriem words are largely monosyllabic. There is one-to-one correspondence between the syllable and the morpheme boundary, especially for function morphemes. But it is not to say that words are entirely monosyllabic. The bisyllabic stem consists of two units. Usually the first

functions as a prefix and the other as a root. A large number of words are recorded which contain both the prefix and the root. The most commonly recorded bisyllabic stems include the person markers which occur before a noun, verbs and adjectives.

noun	*verb*	*adjective*
kà pá 'my father'	à t^{h}ák 'to itch'	à sên 'red
à pŭu 'your grandfather'	à t^{h}îı 'to die'	à dŭm 'blue'
à pîı 'his/her grandmother'	à lŭut 'to enter'	à băŋ 'black'

As shown below, different morphemes may function as a prefix for the same category of semantic field or the same semantic field may be represented by the same grammatical morpheme (prefix).

Prefix	words		kinds of prefix
ın-	ìn vâan	'sky'	celestial body prefix
	ìn klîŋ	'earthquake'	----------
	în lîŋ	'thorn'	plant prefix
sa-	sâ kôor	'horse'	animal prefix
	sâ lôoy	'buffalo'	……
	sâ râat	'cow'	.....
sı-	sì ăal	'fox'	animal prefix
hrı-	hrì méy	'tail'	----------
	hrì măŋ	'dream'	noun prefix
	hrì băal	'flower'	.....
ka-	kà bêeŋ	'cheek'	body part prefix
	kà zâaŋ□kôm	'back'	.....
	kà dâar	'shoulder'	.....
ki-	kì zù	'rat'	animal prefix
	kì rùul	'snake'	.....
	kì rěel	'hail'	
k^{h}e-	k^{h}è mál	'thigh'	body prefix

	k^{h}è bûur	‘knee’	.....
	k^{h}è tôot	‘foot’	.....
an-	àn nêm	‘low’	stative verb prefix
	àn sâaŋ	‘high’	.....
	àn vôoy	‘withered’	.....
va-	và bù	‘nest’	bird prefix
	và tsé rîk	‘sparrow’	.....
	và took	‘duck’	.....
a-	à kôŋ	‘to be thin’	stative verb prefix
	à dŏŋ	‘shallow’	.....
	à t^{h}âay	‘to be fat’	.....
ro-	rò tòoy	‘bamboo shoot’	plant prefix
aa-	àa hŭu	‘wet’	stative verb
	àa ŋĕey	‘sharp’	.....
	áa pà lôŋ	‘uncle’	kinship prefix

Contrary to the above bisyllabic stem in which the first constituent is a root, Syriem bisyllabic stem can also have a stem cluster in which the second constituent functions as a suffix. In most commonly encountered bisyllabic stem, the second constituent usually the post verbal morpheme -*roo* functions as imperative marker. In isolation, all the verbs are capable of taking the post verbal suffix –*roo*. Some examples are given below.

tàp roo	‘to cry’	^{h}nûuy roo	‘to smile’
în roo	‘to drink’	hăay roo	‘to breath’
dŏon roo	‘to answer’	pâay roo	‘to carry’

Numeral System

The numeral system of Syriem with the exception of *seven*, *nine* and *ten* is formed with numeral classifiers which function as prefixes to the root numeral as shown below.

ìn k^{h}àt	‘one’	kì rùk	‘six’

pʰà nîɪ	‘two’	sàrĭ	‘seven’
în tʰùm	‘three’	kì rîet	‘eight’
în lîɪ	‘four’	kŏ	‘nine’
rî ŋâ	‘five’	sôm	‘ten’

Note that the *sa* in *sari* is not treated as a numeral classifier because if the word is split into two, neither of the parts carries any meaning or grammatical function.

Vowel Length

Like many other Kuki-Chin languages, Syriem too has the contrast for short and long vowel in closed syllable. All vowels are generally long in open syllable but never contrastive. Short and long vowel contrasts are found both in smooth and stopped syllable. Syllables which end either vowel or sonorant are termed as smooth syllable. On the other hand, syllables which end in unreleased stops are termed as stopped syllable. The contrasts between short and long vowel in smooth syllables are provided with help of minimal and near minimal pair.

Smooth Syllable		**Closed Syllables**	
sàm	‘hair’	pŏp	‘wound’
sâaŋ	‘paddy rice’	tsŏop	‘suck’
lòy	‘not’	ʈàp	‘weep’
lôoy	‘to take’	ʈrâap	‘to winnow’

Consonant Phonemes

There are twenty-six consonant phonemes in Syriem representing seven distinctive places of articulation and six distinctive manners of articulation. Syriem has four series of plosives, three series fricatives and nasals, two glides and one affricate, lateral and trill. Syriem has the retroflex /ʈ/. The consonant phonemes are listed in Table 1 below according to place and manner of articulation. Phonemic symbols are presented in plain face; orthographic symbols used in the text and in language examples are given in italic face, in parentheses.

	BILABIAL	LABIO-DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	RETROFLEX	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
Plosivevl.	p *(p)*		t *(t)*	ʈ		k *(k)*	ʔ *(q)*
vl.asp	p^h*(ph)*		t^h*(ph)*			k^h*(kh)*	
vd.	b		d				
Affricate			ts				
Fricativevl.		v *(v)*	s				h
vd.			z				
Nasalvl.	m̥ *(hm)*		n̥ *(hn)*				
vd.	m *(m)*		n *(n)*			ŋ *(ng)*	
Lateral vl.			l̥ *(hl)*				
vl.			l				
Trillvl.			r̥ *(hr)*				
vd.			r				
Approximant	w				J		

Table 1. Consonant system of Syriem

Stops

The stops series occurs at five distinctive places of articulation: bilabial, alveolar, retroflex, velar and glottal. The voiceless unaspirated and aspirated stops are maintained only in bilabial, alveolar and velar places of articulation. Except the retroflex and glottal stop, the rest of the stops series have a contrast between aspirated and unaspirated phonemes. The contrasts between the voiceless unaspirated stops and voiceless aspirated stops are given below with minimal and near minimal pairs:

/p/		/p^h/	
pâa	'father'	p^hàa	'spread'
/t/		/t^h/	
tûu	'grandchildren'	t^hûu	'word'
/k/		/k^h/	
kò	'nine'	k^hò	'village'

Voicing is restricted to bilabial and alveolar stops. The contrast between unaspirated and aspirated stops also contrasts with voiced stops as in the examples below:

p/p^{h}/b		t/t^{h}/d	
pôuŋ	‘increase’	tàm	‘many’
p^{h}ôuŋ	‘spreading news’	t^{h}ěm	‘touch’
bôuŋ	‘milky white’	děmrò	‘to oppose’

Only the voiceless unaspirated stops /p, t, k,ʔ/ occur in final position. The voiceless unaspirated stops are always unreleased in coda position. The contrast between unaspirated and aspirated voiceless stops with the exception of /ʔ/ is shown in the example below:

k^{h}àp	‘block’	sàp	‘cleaning’
ìnk^{h}àt	‘one’	sàt	‘pull/drag’
k^{h}ăk	‘throat’	sàk	‘to sing’

A glottal stop is analysed as a phoneme even though it is restricted to coda position as the final element of a word. In word final position the glottal stop has complete closure and full articulation and is significant, e.g. *kìlôʔ* ‘to vomit’, *vàăʔ* ‘crow’, *vàayp^{h}òʔ* ‘umbrella’, *tàksŏʔ* ‘smallpox’

Fricatives and affricate

Syriem has one affricate and five fricatives. The alveolar affricate is analyzed as forming a separate series from the stops, because unlike the stops, affricate does not occur in coda position. In the case of this affricate, the phoneme /ts/ occurs as a unit even though these two phonemes /t/ and /s/ occur as separate phonemes elsewhere. The fricatives on the other hand demonstrate three distinctive places of articulation, viz. labio-dental, alveolar and glottal.

Voicing in fricative series is limited to labio-dental and alveolar fricatives. The voiced fricative /v/ lacks it voiceless counterpart /f/. Though the term ‘glottal fricative’ is somewhat misleadingly used as historical label, it is used in this paper to describe a voiceless segment that is unspecified for place of articulation and occurs only in onset position. In terms of occurrence

too, the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ occurs relatively infrequent compared to other consonant phonemes.

The contrast between fricatives with affricate in major syllable is illustrated below.

s/z		s/v		ts/z		s/h	
sŏoŋ	'to cook'	sûun	'day'	tsàaŋ	'in motion'	sâa	'animal'
zôoŋ	'monkey'	vúun	'skin'	àzàaŋ	'light weight'	hàa	'teeth'

Nasal

As shown in Table 1, Syriem has three nasals which occur in three places of articulation: labial, alveolar and velar places of articulation. The nasals occur initially and finally as onset and coda. Minimal pairs that contrast the three nasals in onset and coda positions are given below:

Onset position		**Coda position**	
mâay	'pumpkin'	łâam	'to dance'
nâay	'child'	łâan	'sweat'
ŋâay	'longing for'	łâaŋ	'mountain'

In addition to three nasals, Syriem has pre-aspirated nasals at bilabial and alveolar places of articulation, e.g. *ʰmìŋ* 'name', *ʰnàar* 'smell'.

Lateral and Trill

Syriem has one lateral /l/ and one trill /r/ both of which occur in the alveolar region. Both of these contrasts with the voiceless fricative /ɬ/, e.g. *lăa* 'song', *ròtôy* 'bamboo', *łăa* 'wing'.

Approximants

In this analysis, the front high unrounded vowel /i/ is treated as an approximant glide /y/ which is found to occur only in final position. Some examples are: *hèey* 'language', *têy* 'to sit', *pʰûuy* 'to launder', and *kʰôoy* 'bee'.

Vowel Phonemes

There are five vowel phonemes which may appear both short and long. In this paper long vowels are written as double. As shown in the table below, the vowel phonemes fall neatly in three height positions high, mid and low.

High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Table 2. Vowel System of Syriem

Again in terms of the position of the tongue and lip, the vowel phonemes may be divided into round and spread (unrounded) respectively. Thus the vowel phonemes, *i, ii, e, ee* are front unrounded vowels while the vowels *u, uu, o, oo* are back unrounded vowels. The short a and long *aa* are central low vowels. The high front unrounded vowels *i, ii* and high back rounded vowels, *u, uu* are pronounced in the same way they would be pronounced in the phonemic chart. The front mid unrounded vowels, *e, ee* and back rounded vowels *o, oo* on the other hand are phonetically realized as [ɛ], [ɛː], [ɔ], and [ɔː]. The short central low vowel a is phonetically realized as [ʌ] except before glottal stop and long central low vowel *aa* is phonetically realized as [aː]. Syriem has two diphthongs, *ie* [ye] and *uo* [wo],e.g. *kî rîet* 'eight', *sùksîen* 'reduce', *àtsîer* 'skinny'; *pûon* 'cloth' *hûon* 'garden', etc.

Syriem has five vowels which may appear either as short or long. Long vowels are written here as double, e.g. *aa*. The contrasts for each of the vowels in different syllables are provided below with the help of minimal and near minimal pairs.

	Open syllable	**Closed syllable** (sonorants)	**Closed syllables** (stops)
i/ii	t^{h}îı 'blood/to die'	ahĭıŋ 'foul smell'	k^{h}ìt 'tie'
e/ee	t^{h}êe 'spilling'	hĕem 'beating'	k^{h}èk 'peeling(beans)'
u/uu	t^{h}ùu 'rotten'	ahûum 'solid'	k^{h}ùt 'hand'

o/oo	tʰòo ‘to do’	hòom ‘punctual’	kʰòk ‘peeling(skin of animal or tree)
a/aa	tʰăa ‘strength’	hàam ‘to yawn’	inkʰàt ‘one’

Tone

Syriem is a tonal language in which every syllable carries one of the three underlying tones. In isolation, three tones have been established: rising (low to high rise), falling (high to low fall) and low tone (fairly level but downslide before a pause). The three tones are marked over the vowel, e.g. [ă]=rising tone, [â]=falling tone and [à]=low tone. The occurrences of each of the three contrastive tones are provided below.

łîı ‘wind’	în ‘house’	ŋă ‘fish’
ałĭı ‘pus’	ìn ‘drink’	rıŋŋâ ‘five’
łì ‘to obstruct’	ĭntsûŋ ‘type of instrument’	ŋàak ‘to wait’

Low Tone

Low tone occurs in both open and closed syllables.

Open rhyme	**Nasals**	**Liquid**	**Stopped syllables**
bùu ‘cooked rice’	kùm ‘year’	kʰùur ‘cave’	nàp ‘mucus’
kʰò ‘village’	sòlàm ‘east’	pʰùuy ‘dry’	mìt ‘eye’
tʰùu ‘rotten’	ʰmìŋ ‘name’	ŋàay ‘to hear’	kʰùt ‘hand’

Rising Tone

Rising tone occurs both in open and closed syllable. The open syllable has no restriction on the types of vowel. In closed syllables both short and long vowels can be found with nasals and stopped syllables.

Open rhyme	**Nasals**	**Liquid**	**Stopped syllables**
rŭu ‘bone’	săm ‘hair’	ŭy ‘dog’	vŏk ‘pig’
nŭu ‘mother’	vŭun ‘skin’	mŭul ‘feather’	tsŏp ‘suck’

łăa ‘wing’ t^{h}ĭiŋ ‘wood’ t^{h}ĭır ‘iron’ lŭut ‘enter’

In closed syllables with rising tone, the final consonant is restricted to voiceless stop series *p, t, k*, the nasal series *m, n, ŋ* lateral *l*, trill *r* and approximant *y*.

Falling tone

Falling tone can occur with both open and closed syllables. In closed syllables both short and long vowel can occur with nasals and stopped syllables.

Open rhyme	**Nasal**	**Liquid**	**Stopped syllable**
sâa ‘animal’	zôoŋ ‘monkey’	k^{h}ôoy ‘bee’	łôk ‘brain’
t^{h}ûu ‘word’	anthêŋ ‘clear’	tsîıl ‘saliva’	êk ‘excreta’
t^{h}îı ‘blood’	ındôn ‘to ask’	nâar ‘nose’	tûum ‘who’

Conclusion

The Kuki Chin people originally migrated from China centuries ago and settled around the plain areas, and then moved around the Chin Hills. Syriem belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, Kuki-Chin Sub-group.

Syriem includes twenty-six consonant phonemes and five vowel phonemes. Vowel length is contrastive only in closed syllables. All consonants can occur word initially, but only ten can occur word finally. There are two diphthongs, /ua/ and /ia/. Monophthongs can occur word initially, word medially, and word finally but diphthongs can only occur medially and finally. There is no heavy restriction on the co-occurrence of initial consonants with vowels. Almost all consonant phonemes can appear in a syllable initial position with monophthongs as well as diphthongs except the glottal stop. The phoneme /ts/ occupies a single consonant position. Syriem does not permit consonant clusters. Open syllables which have long vowels become short when they attach to another syllable to create a compound word.

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