

Syllable Structure of Great Andamanese

Narayan Kumar Choudhary
Centre for Linguistics,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
choudhary_narayan@rediffmail.com

Abstract

Great Andamanese is an endangered language of the Andaman Islands with a speaker population of about 7 people. Great Andamanese is considered as one of the oldest languages. The people of these Islands have lived here for thousands of years, completely isolated from the hustle and bustle of the world around. These people, belonging to the Negrito stock (Hagelberg et. al., 2003, Thangaraj et. al., 2005), have been considered as primitive tribe by the Indian government, thus assigning a special status to the hunter and gatherer communities of the Andaman Islands.

The Great Andamanese is a SOV language with post-positions and modified-modifier noun phrase structure. The comparative studies done so far on the languages of Andaman Islands (Manoharan, 1989, 1997, Abbi, 2005, 2006) suggest that these languages are a different group altogether, not conforming to any of the existing language families.

No work on the syllable structure of these languages has been carried out. In the present paper we will be focusing on the syllable structure of Great Andamanese, which hopefully will cater to the needs of the comparative study of the language under study.

The Great Andamanese a generic term assigned to the ten language communities that were thriving in the Islands a hundred years ago. As the population diminished with the contact with the 'civilized people', the present population is only a token representative of the ruler community of the Andaman Islands, dominated by the Jeru tribe.

Introduction

The Andaman Islands for long have been a myth to most of the Indians. The Andamans in the Raj era also signified a great source of havoc among the common masses as it was known as the *Kalapani*. The Cellular Jail, now a national memorial monument, which served as the home for many of the great Indian freedom fighters is the only object that most of the Indians know of the Andamans.

However, there are many more things that are captivating both the tourists as well as researchers of all hue and cry in the Andamans. Not only this group of around 250 islands have a unique environment accompanied with some *Andaman only* flora and fauna, this tropical land is also inhabited by some of the oldest hunter-gatherer tribes of the world

that can be compared with only the aboriginals of Australia or the bushmen of the African origin.

The Tribes: Historical Contacts

There are four tribes in the Andaman Islands, all of Negrito stock. These are the Great Andamanese, the Jarwas, the Onges and the Sentenelese. The earliest record of the Islands can be found in the Ptolemy's (2nd c. AD) world map, I-Tsing (672AD). Marco Polo (14th c.) also makes a mention of these people, rather with a sense of fright. Besides several other the westerners of the yore, these Islands have been known as the Handuman to the Malyasians, reminding the character of Hanuman of the *Ramayana*. The people of Southern India, especially the Tamils have had a contact with these people for long.

The Great Andamanese

The Great Andamanese had for long been more numerous and dominant over other tribes and virtually ruled the landmass. But with the advent of the British settlement, both penal and for other purposes, the Great Andamanese first came in contact and eventually diminished very rapidly due to several diseases that spread in them through contact. The calamity was so much that when the administration resettled the Great Andamanese in 1970 there were only 23 left which were finally put in a small island named Strait Island. The Great Andamanese have been living there since.

Linguistic Heritage

The Andamanese, like any other *aboriginal tribe*, are very poor in terms of linguistic heritage. As a hunter gatherer community, the need to record language never occurred. Among all of the four tribes, only the Great Andamanese have been linguistically studied to some extent. The earliest linguistic work of any importance goes to M.V. Portman (1887) followed by E.H. Man (1919). Later, Manoharan (1989), Abbi (2001).

The Number of Syllables in a Word

Great Andamanese has an agglutinating type of morphology and uses affixation predominantly both in the noun morphology and in the verb morphology (see Manoharan, 1989, Abbi, 2006, Choudhary, 2006). The definition of a word in Great Andamanese thus takes on this too, if we take word paradigm (Hockett, 1958, Robins, 1959) into consideration. Using all the affixes to the verb root, the number of syllables in Great Andamanese verb phrase (*taken as a word in the study of this language and does not imply what it means in the syntactic tree of the generative paradigm*) can be up to 7 or even more. Similarly in the noun phrase, it can be up to 8 or more. This can be depicted with the following table:

Table1. An Overview of the number of syllables in Great Andamanese

Monosyllabic	Disyllabic	Trisyllabic	Tetrasyllabic	Pentasyllabic	Hexasyllabic	Septasyllabic
ʃup /basket n./	/tɔya/ 'stand v.'	/bilik ^h u/ 'god n.'	/tɔuterbɛ c/ 'cloud n.'	/t ^h utconnep ^h obe/ 'I do not go	/ŋut ^h utbat ^h eb amo/ 'if you beat	/taŋut ^h utunp ^h otɛʃe/ 'you did not

				<i>vp.</i> '	me <i>vp.</i> '	make me give <i>vp.</i> '
/ko/ 'bow <i>n.</i> '	/ili/ 'pee <i>v.</i> '	/ontəplə / 'one <i>adj.</i> '	/u ^h uncik om/ 'he comes to me <i>vp.</i> '	/o ^h obəyam o/ 'if he asks me'	/alep ^h aircək ol/ 'Lephai's good face <i>np.</i> '	
/u/ '3SG <i>pron.</i> '	/kənmə / 'ant <i>v.</i> '	/təjiyo/ 'food <i>n.</i> '	/d̪ilet̪mo bik/ 'ball-acc <i>np.</i> '	/t ^h uitertako m/ 'I will tell him <i>vp.</i> '		

The canonical syllable structure of Great Andamanese

The canonical Great Andamanese syllable is moderately complex with a structure that can be depicted as (C) (C) V (C). This is illustrated in the following table:

Table 2. Syllable Structure Typology of Great Andamanese

	Open		Closed	
	Template	Example	Template	Example
Light	CV	/ku/ 'burn'	VC	/eb/ 'take'
	V	/u/ '3SG'	CVC	/ʃup/ 'basket'
Heavy	VV	/ie/ 'pain'	CVVC	/kəel/ 'later'
	CV:	/ka:-ra/ 'rise'	CV:C	/p ^h ɔ:t/ 'bamboo'
	CVV	/bɔi/ 'ask'	VVC	/ɔ:t/ 'bat'
	CCV	/kriŋkɔʃo/ 'Strait Island'	VCC*	NA ¹

Going by the standard terminologies of Onset, Rhyme, Nucleus and Coda, the canonical syllable structure can be depicted as shown in figure 1.

Constraints on the Onsets

¹ However, Manoharan (1989) takes into account the semivowels coming in the coda position in examples like /kɛyp/ 'red mud', /ɛn-d̪a:yc-col/ 'last' etc. The case of approximants is typically fuzzy in the data collected by me and I am of the view that the approximants as presented here be taken as approximants having a V value not C. For example the word /kɛyp/ will be rendered in my data as /kɛip/ i.e. having a diphthongal value.

The onset in the most of the it come with a cluster of two phonemic consonants in these consonants can be onset occurring at the coda position two cases so far, these are However, it is possible that consonants as in cases like I would say, is /**ɲo**/) or /**cyal**/. consonants like /**c**/ or /**ɲ**/, no diphthong having the after a consonant has been This proves that the process and not phonemic.

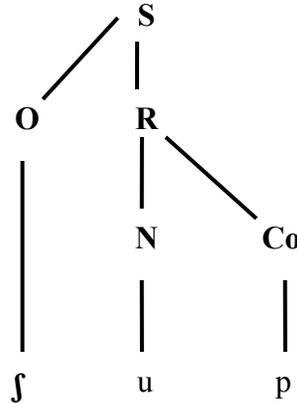


Fig. 1. /ʃup/

syllable is C and rarely does consonants. There are 22 Great Andamanese and all of of the syllable. The clusters has been encountered only at /**kriŋ-kə-ʃo**/ and /**ra-u-fro**/. the semivowels function as /**ɲyo**/ (of whose correct form, And except for the palatal where a vowel or any property of being palatalized evidenced by this researcher. of palatalization is phonetic

Thus the consonant clusters found at the onset positions are /**kr-**, **fr-**, **ɲy-**, and **cy-**/. This conforms to the sonority hierarchy of the consonant clusters at the onset positions. This much evidence does not seem to be enough to say that the onset position comprises of clusters that makes the syllabic structure a little complex. However, to formalize the clusters above, it would be enough to say that the onset in Great Andamanese syllable can be two consonants of which the initial can be obstruent and the final can be either a liquid /**r**/ or a glide /**y**/.

Constraints on Codas

The codas in Great Andamanese syllables are predominantly a single consonant. (However, Manoharan is of a different view *see footnote above*) and all the consonants can also occur at the coda position.

The Nucleus

The nucleus in Great Andamanese syllable is the only element that gives its structure a fair amount of complexity. With diphthongs and a probably vowel length taking the position of the nucleus, the nucleus can be either V (single vowel), V: (lengthened vowel), or VV (diphthongs) (*see examples above in Table 2*). Only the vowel can take the position of nucleus and no syllabic consonants can be evidenced.

Syllabification in Great Andamanese

As the three main components of the syllable in Great Andamanese have been dealt with, the syllabification remains to be systematized. If the word happens to be of one syllable, the structure discussed above will fit in, but with the words having more than one syllable i.e. is more than one nucleus, it is the constraints on the onset and the codas that will be helpful. Let us take for example the following cases:

Simple Syllables

1. /u/
2. /ku/
3. /eb/

Complex Syllables

4. /ie/ 5. /ka:ra/ 6. /p^hɔ:r/ 7. /bɔi/ 8. /ɔ:t/ 9. /kriŋkəʃə/

The syllabic tree diagram for these words will look like the following:



Fig. 2.

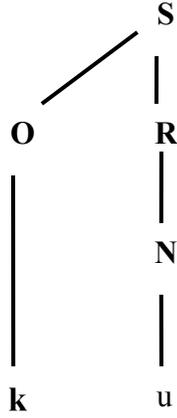


Fig. 3. /ku/

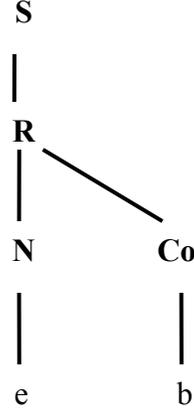


Fig. 4. /eb/



Fig. 5.

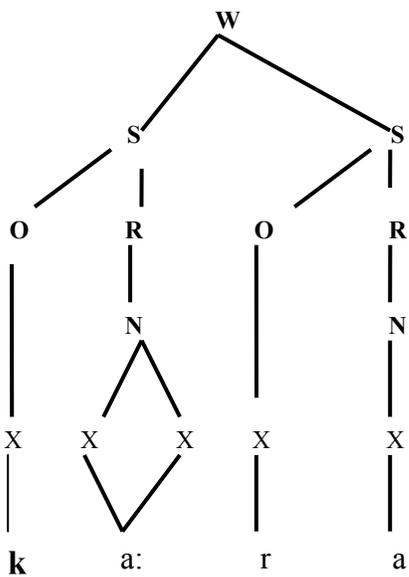


Fig. 6. /ka:ra/

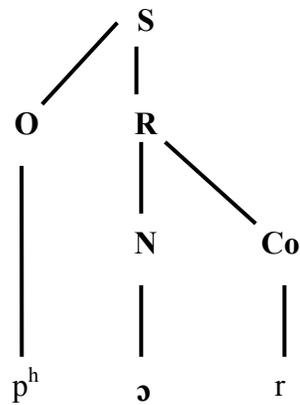


Fig. 7. /p^hɔ:r/

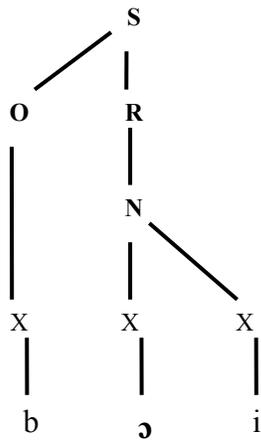


Fig. 8. /bɔi/

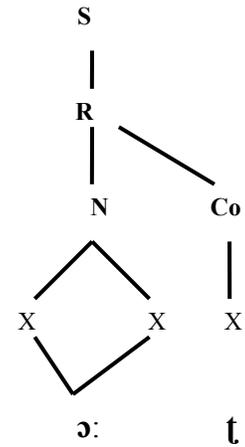


Fig. 9. /ɔ:t/

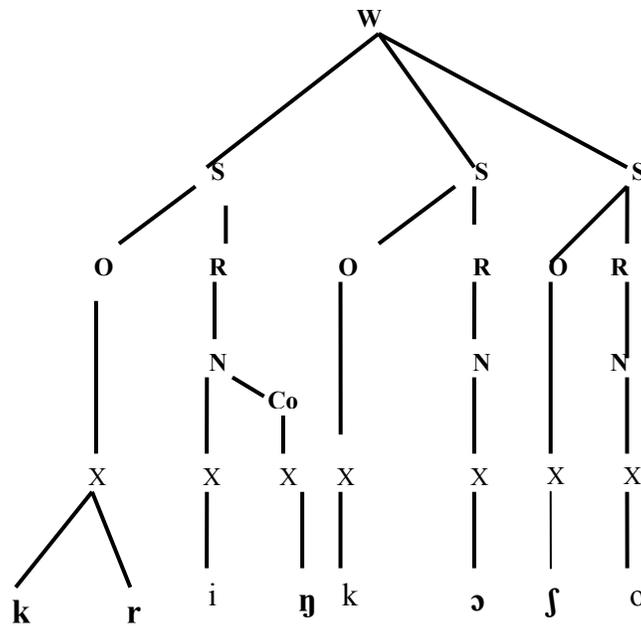


Fig. 10. /kriŋkɔʃo/

Conclusion

The canonical syllable structure of Great Andamanese is (C)(C)V(C). It has a predominantly simple and moderately complex structure. The complexity arises mainly due to complex structure of the nucleus which may have the presence of diphthongs that are numerous and partly due to vowel length (*the status of which has not yet been confirmed*). The complexity may also arise due to the rare but possible CC structure of the onset.

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