

Consonant Gemination and Compensatory Lengthening in Asamiya
dialects : Contemporary standard and Central Assam.

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1. INTRODUCTION : This paper attempts to investigate into the process of Gemination as manifested in the Contemporary standard Asamiya dialect (CSD) and examine the intricate process of compensatory lengthening of vowels in the Central Asamiya group of dialects (CAD). These two features demarcate the two types of dialects under study, because gemination of consonants and compensatory lengthening of vowels do not occur in the CAD and the CSD respectively.

The Contemporary standard Asamiya dialect is rooted in the Sibsagar dialect in East Assam, mainly because of the efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries who came and settled there during the beginning of the 19th century¹. "The Missionaries made Sibsagar in Eastern Assam the centre of their activities and used the dialect of Sibsagar for their literary purposes" (Kakati 1941 : 15). It was finally made the official language of Assam by the Britishers in 1872, and was accepted as a standard norm by the entire Asamiya linguistic community. Over the years, this Sibsagar dialect has evolved into a distinct form with the continuous influence of the rest of the Asamiya dialects and other indigenous languages of this area² and partly because of the shift of activity from Sibsagar to Guwahati (currently the capital of Assam) in western Assam, from the beginning of this century, thereby giving rise to its present form - the CSD.

The group of Asamiya dialects spoken primarily in the

districts of Marigaon and Nagaon and in some parts of Jorhat and Sonitpur districts also of Central Assam share certain distinguishing features which mark it different from the rest of the Asamiya dialects. I have referred to this group as the Central Asamiya dialects.

2. I shall begin with the analysis of consonant gemination in the CSD followed by an analysis of Compensatory lengthening in the CAD.

2.i. For the purpose of negotiating the process of gemination between the consonants in the dialect, various consonant phonemes are shown in the chart below :

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Unaspirated				
stops	p b	t d	k g	
Aspirated stops	ph bh	th dh	kh gh	
Nasals	m	n	N ³	
Fricatives		s z	x	h
Approximant		r		
Lateral		l		

2.ii. A list of contrastive pairs of words illustrating the phonemes are given below :

CONTRASTS⁴ :

(a) /p/r/b/:/ph/:/bh/:/m/

/pur/ 'to fill'

/bur/ 'to drown'

/ph u r/ 'stroll' (2 pa. sg/pl. simp. pres. Hon₃)

/bh u r/ 'a bamboo raft'

/mur/ 'head'

(b) /t/:/d/:/th/:/dh/:/n/:/s/:/z/:/k/:/g/:/kh/:/gh/

/tam/ 'copper'

/dam/ 'price'

/th a m/ 'to stop'

/dh a m/ 'a hōly place'

/nam/ 'name'

/sam/ 'to see' (1 pa. sg/pl. fut)

/zam/ 'to go' (1 pa. sg/pl. fut).

/kam/ 'job'

/gam/ 'sing' (1 pa. sg/pl. fut.)

/kh a m/ 'eat' (1 pa. sg/pl fut).

/gh a m/ 'sweat'

(c) /r/ : /l/

/ruti/ 'bread'

/luti/ 'scmmersault'

(d) /k/ : /g/ : /N/

/Sika/ 'rat'

/Siga/ 'broken'

/Si Na/ 'a type of leech'

2.iii. DISTRIBUTION :

(a) All the consonant phonemes except /N/, occur at all positions in a word.

(b) /N/ occurs word medially and finally only.

2.iv. Gemination of the consonants :

All the consonants except /N z x h r/ and the aspirates can form geminates in the dialect, as in-

/pp/ - /sappOn/ 'fifty six'

/bb/ - /sabbis/ 'twenty six'
 /tt/ - /uttOr/ 'answer'
 /dd/ - /adda/ 'gossip'
 /kk/ - /dh ikkar/ 'disgust'
 /gg/ - /biggan/ 'science'
 /mm/ - /zimma/ 'custody'
 /nn/ - /unnois/ 'nineteen'
 /ss/ - /assax/ 'assurance'
 /ll/ - /dilli/ 'place name'

3. Rules governing gemination in CSD are as follows :-

- (i) Geminated consonants of the underlying form⁵ are retained in the CSD. It can be shown as underlying VCCV : VCCV (where V is a vowel and C is a consonant).

	<u>Underlying</u> :		<u>CSD</u>
/pp/	/harappa/	/harappa/	'name of place'
/tt/	/patta/	/patta/	'licence for holding land'
/kk/	/mOkka/	/mOkka/	'place name'
/ll/	/ullasa/	/ullax/	'happiness'
/mm/	/zimma/	/zimma/	'custody'
/nn/	/OnnO/	/OnnO/	'cooked rice'

- (ii) In the underlying form, a consonant occurring as a first member in cluster with the bilabial continuant /w/ in word medial position, changes to geminates in the CSD. It can be shown as underlying VCWV > VCCV, as in

<u>Underlying Form</u>	<u>CSD</u>
/ritwik/	/rittik/ 'noun'
/horidwar/	/horiddar/ 'place name'

/viswas/	/bissax/ 'faith'
/vidwan/	/bidan/ 'learned'

- (iii) In the CSD, geminates are also derived by assimilating the underlying /cy/ cluster, that is, a consonant followed by a palatal continuant /y/, in word medial positions. The rule is underlying VC₁YV > VCCV in the CSD. It is also interesting to note that the frontal unrounded high vowel /i/ is inserted before the /cc/ sequence in the CSD, if the immediately preceding vowel is other than /i/⁶. The rule is (a) underlying vc₁yv > viccv in the CSD, where the preceding vowel is not /i/. (b) If the preceding vowel is /i/, then the rule is underlying icyv > iccv in the CSD⁷.

The following examples prove the above mentioned rules Rule 3 (iii) (a).

<u>Underlying</u>	<u>CSD</u>	
/py/prapyo/	/praippO/	'due'
/by/kabyo/	/kaibbO/	'epic'
/ty/natyo/	/naittO/	'theatre'
/dy/adyo/	/aiddO/	'initial'
/ky/bakyo/	/baikkO/	'sentence'
/gy/bhagyO/	/bhaiggO/	'destiny'
/ny/vinyas/	/binnax/	'analysis'
/sy/basyo/	/baissO/	'speech'
/ly/balyo/	/baillO/	'childhood'

Rule 3 (iii) (b).

/py/somipyo/	/xomippO/	'near'
/by/dibyo/	/dibbO/	'light'
/ty/bityo/	/bittO/	'finance'

<u>Underlying</u>	<u>CSD</u>	
/dy/ /vidya/	/bidda/	'knowledge'
/ky/ /manikyo/	/manikkO/	'jewel'
/gy/ /bigyan/	/biggan/	'science'

4. The CAD has three vowel heights and front, Central and back places of articulation, where the back vowels are rounded and the front and central unrounded :

	FRONT UNROUNDED	CENTRAL UNROUNDED	BACK ROUNDED
High	i i:		u u:
Lower-Mid	E E:		O O:
Low		a a:	

i. Contrasts⁸ :

i-E-a-O-u: til 'sesame', tEl 'oil', tal 'palm fruit', tOl 'below', tul 'hermitage'. i-i:, E-E:, a-a:, O-O:, u-u: -- bi:x 'a zodiac sign', pEt 'stomach - pE:t 'ghosts and spirits', pan 'betel-leaf', pa:n, 'life', bO:t 'fasting' - bOt 'to grind (2 pa, sg/pl)', dut 'messenger' - du:t 'rapid-movement'.

5. Phonemic length of all the vowel phonemes in CAD is derived from the compensatory lengthening of all the vowels in certain positions. The rules governing such compensatory lengthening of the vowels are discussed below:

Rule i : Geminates of the underlying form which is retained in the CSD (see 3 i) are lost in the CAD. This process of degemination is accompanied by the compensatory lengthening of the vowel that belong to the same syllable. It can be shown as

underlying VCCV > V:CV in the CAD (where V is a vowel and C is a consonant). e.g.

	<u>Underlying Form</u>	<u>CAD</u>
'light Indian classical music'	/toppa/	/tO:pa/
'twenty six'	/sabbis/	/sa: bis/
'licence for holding land'	/patta/	/pa: ta/
'west'	/possim/	/pO: sim/
'place name'	/dilli/	/di:li/

Rule ii : In the underlying form, a consonant occurring as a first member in cluster with the bilabial continuant /w/ in word medial position, which changes to geminates in the CSD (see 3 ii), is lost in the CAD resulting in the compensatory lengthening of the vowel of the preceding syllable, as in -

	<u>underlying Form</u>	<u>CAD</u>
'personal name'	/ritwik/	/ri:tik/
'learned'	/vidwan/	/bi: dæ/
'faith'	/viswas/	/bi: sax/

Rule iii : The underlying /Cy/ cluster, that is, a consonant followed by a palatal continuant /Y/, in word medial position, changes to geminates due to assimilation in the CSD (see 3 iii). However, the underlying /Y/ is lost in the CAD. This loss of /Y/ is compensated by the lengthening of the vowel of the preceding syllable. If the vowel in question is other than /i/, then an /i/ is inserted after the lengthened vowel. This insertion of the high unrounded front vowel can be considered as a compensatory effect of the loss of /Y/.

The rules are (a) underlying VCYV > ViCCV, where the vowel in question is other than /i/, (b) If the vowel in question is /i/, then the rule simply is underlying iCYV > I:CV in the CAD.

The following examples prove the above mentioned rules :-

Rule 5 (iii) (a) :

<u>Underlying Form</u>		<u>CAD</u>
/by/ 'epic'	/kavyo/	/ka: ib0/
/ty/ 'truth'	/soty0/	/x0:it0/
/dy/ 'initial'	/ady0/	/a: id0/
/ky/ 'sentence'	/bakyo/	/ba: ik0/
/gy/ 'destiny'	/vagyo/	/bh a:ig0/
/bhy/ 'habit'	/obhyas/	/0:ibhax/
/sy/ 'crop'	/sosyo/	/X0: is0/
/ly/ 'childhood'	/balyo/	/ba:i10/

Rule 5 (iii) (b) :

/dy/ 'knowledge'	/vidya/	/bi:da/
/sy/ 'disciple'	/sisyo/	/xi: s0/
/khy/ 'famous'	/bikhyat/	/bi:xat/
/ty/ 'personal name'	/aditya/	/adi: t0/

Rule (iv) : The voiced alveolar approximant phoneme /r/ has limitations in occurrence in the CAD, which distinctly separates this dialect from the GSD, where /r/ occurs in all positions in a word. In CAD /r/ occurs only in word initial positions. In word medial and final positions /r/ does not occur. In word medial and final positions /r/ is deleted. As a result of this /r/ deletion in

such positions in CAD, the vowel that belonged to the same syllable is lengthened, as in -

(a) WORD MEDIALY :

	<u>CSD</u>	<u>CAD</u>
'colour'	/bOrnO/	/bO:nO/
'in shambles'	/zirno/	/zi:nO/
'picketing'	/dhOrna/	/dhO:na/
'mirror'	/arsī/	/a:si/
'that means'	/Orthat/	/o:that/
'jealousy'	/irxa/	/i:xa/
'male student'	/satro/	/satO:/
'traveller'	/zatri/	/zati:/
'thirty'	/tris/	/ti:s/
'personal name'	/bhrigu/	/bhi:gu/
'life'	/pran/	/pa:n/
'creator'	/srOstha/	/sO:sta/
'love'	/prem/	/pE: m/
'enjoyment'	/phurti/	/phu:ti/

(b) WORD FINALLY :

	<u>CSD</u>	<u>CAD</u>
'to hit' (2 pa, sg/pl.simp.pres. Hon 3)	/mar/	/ma:/
'powerful'	/bir/	/bi:/
'a thief'	/sur/	/su:/
'bone'	/har/	/ha:/
'traditional Asa- miya Muslim songs'	/zikir/	/ziki:/

	<u>GSD</u>	<u>CAD</u>
'fence'	/ber/	/bE:/

:: NOTES ::

1. Sibsagar was the capital of the Ahom Kings who ruled Assam during the period.
2. According to the last 1971 census there are about 220 languages spoken in the North Eastern part of India, belonging mainly to the following families - The Indo-Aryan represented mainly by Asamiya, Tibeto-Barman languages like, Boro, Garo, Rabha, Mishing, Mitei, Mizo, Angami, Apatani and many more, siamese - chinese languages like Khamti, Phakiyal, Khamiang and Turung and the representative of the Austric group is Khasi.
3. For convenience in typing N is used for the velar nasal.
4. Contrasts are given word initially. For /N/ however it is given word medially as it never occurs word initially.
5. "Assamese is an Indo-Aryan language originated from the vedic dialects, and therefore, a sister of all the northern Indian languages of the country. But the exact nature of the origin and growth of the language is not very clear as yet. It is supposed that like other Aryan languages Assamese was also born from Apabhramsa dialects developed from Magadhi Prakrit of the eastern

group of Sanskritic languages' (Goswami 1982: 3).

6. The insertion of /i/ in such position in CSD can be considered as a compensation for the loss of /y/ of the underlying form.

7. This rule is applicable to all the aspirated consonant phonemes except /ph/ and /gh/, as well. The loss of /y/ after an aspirate of the underlying form in the CSD is compensated by the addition of the unaspirated counterpart in the CSD. If the immediately preceding vowel is not /i/, then an /i/ is inserted before such a sequence, as in -

	<u>Underlying Form</u>	<u>CSD</u>
'habit'	/obhyas/	/oibbhax/
'chapter'	/odhyai/	/oiddhai/
'narration'	/akhyan/	/aikkhan/

If the immediately preceding vowel in such sequences is /i/ in the underlying form, then the loss of /y/ is compensated by the addition of the unaspirated counterpart only, as in -

Underlying	bikhyat	>	bikkhat	'famous'
			in CSD.	

8. The diphthong phonemes of CAD have not been included in this study.

:: ABBREVIATIONS ::

CSD	:	Contemporary standard dialect
CAD	:	Central Assam dialects
Sg	:	Singular
Pl	:	Plural
Simp	:	Simple
Pres	:	Present
fut	:	future
pa	:	person
Hon ₃	:	Least Honorific

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