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Some Observations on the Characteristics of Assamese Language

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Abstract

The paper attempts to analyze and present some of the important phonological, morphological and syntactic characteristics of Assamese language. The paper highlights that there are thirty one phonemes in Assamese including twenty three consonant phonemes and eight vowel phonemes. It is noticed that the voiceless velar fricative /x/ is a unique development and typically indigenous to Assamese which is not found in any Indian language. It is observed that the relevant morphological inflections found in a verb phrase are aspect, tense and person agreement marker. It is noticed that aspect occurs before tense and is the closest element to the verb. The paper highlights that the verbs in Assamese are not marked for present tense whereas they are marked for past tense by –isil and future tense by –ib. The paper observes that negation in Assamese is expressed morphologically with the help of a negative morpheme –na by prefixing it to the verbs. It is claimed that Assamese has a small class of Negative Polarity Items (NPI) and they are marked by –O. The paper finally examines some other morpho-syntactic aspects of Assamese including definiteness, case marking, passivization, subordination and question formation.

Keywords: characteristics, phonemes, inflections, verb phrase, marker, negative polarity items, morphologically, morpho-syntax, syntactically, word order.

Introduction

Assamese is the major language spoken in the northeastern part of India. It is the official language of the state of Assam and is spoken and used by the majority of the people living in and around Assam. Assamese belongs to the Indo-European family of language. It is observed that in Assam, there are languages belonging to all the four major language families spoken in the subcontinent: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austric and Dravidian. Assamese is the major language spoken in Assam and a sizable population speaks it as a second language in and around the state. It is primarily spoken in the districts of Brahmaputra valley in Assam. Moreover, it also serves as a lingua franca among the different speech communities in the entire northeastern region. As there are numerous dialects and subdialects in Arunachal Pradesh which are mutually unintelligible, Assamese is used as a link language for inter-tribe communication. Many Naga tribes in Nagaland as well speak another form of hybrid Assamese, very popularly known as Nagamese (Naga + Assamese), a harmonious blend of Naga dialects and Assamese.

Assamese has historically originated from the Old Indo-Aryan dialects, but the exact nature of its origin and growth is not very clear as yet. It is supposed that Assamese evolved from a MagadhiPrakrit in the east that gave rise to four Apabhraṁśa dialects: Rāḍha, Vaṅga, Vārendra and Kāmarūpa (Chatterji 1970). The KāmarūpaApabhraṁśa spread to the east keeping north of the Ganges, and is represented in north Bengal at present by North Bengal dialects, and in the valley of Assam by Assamese. North Bengal and Assam did not get their language from Bengal proper but directly from the west. MagadhiApabhraṁśa, in fact, may be considered as spreading out eastwards and southwards in three directions (Kakati 1972). The impact of the Austric and Tibeto-Burman languages on Assamese can never be ruled out and the language as is found today is distinguished by many special features on its own and presents substantial modifications in the area of phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary.

Linguistic Characteristics

In this section, we shall attempt to briefly discuss and present the morpho-phonemic and morpho-syntactic characteristics of Assamese language.

The number of phonemes in standard Assamese is drastically reduced as compared to Sanskrit, the root language of Assamese. There are twenty three consonant and eight vowel phonemes in

standard Assamese. Among the consonant phonemes, the voiceless velar fricative /x/ is a unique development and typically indigenous in nature which is not found in any Indian languages. Consonant clusters occur initially, medially and finally. Clusters of two or three consonants may be permitted initially and medially, while clusters of two consonants only may occur finally (Goswami and Tamuli 2003). Phonemic germination of consonants is also permitted in Assamese. Out of the eight vowel phonemes, three are front, one is central and four are back vowels. Assamese neither has short vowels nor has long vowels as it does not maintain the length distinctions among the vowels. All vowels maintain similar length depending on the positions in which they occur. There are twenty four possibilities of syllable structure out of which vowel nucleus with consonant clusters as coda or onset are very rare. The position of the primary stress is either the first or the second syllable.

Assamese morphology does not involve inflections for number and gender. Derivation is effected by various processes that include prefixation, suffixation, zero modification (Bloch and Trager 1942), compounding and change of consonant and vowel phoneme. As far as nominal inflections are concerned, the relevant categories are personal deixis for a small class of relational nouns and definiteness and case for nominals in general. The relevant categories for verbal morphological inflections are aspect, tense and person. Personal deixis is morphologically expressed in Assamese, as opposed to its expression through analytic means in other languages. The formal contrast is neutralized between the deictic centres of second person honorific and third person. Nouns of relationship can take regular case inflections – with or without the definitives – only after taking the personal deictic inflectional suffixes (Goswami and Tamuli 2003).

Definiteness in Assamese is expressed by a set of definitive morphemes that are suffixed to nominals, numerals and demonstrative pronouns. The definitive morphemes apart from signaling definiteness also function as classifiers to impose a classification on the nouns, demonstrative pronouns etc. to which they are attached. This classification is based on semantic features that range from animate-inanimate, male-female, dimensionality, and size to respect-gradation and emotional colouring. The definitive morphemes of Assamese belong to two classes – singular definitives and plural definitives, depending upon the definiteness relating to single or multiple referents. The singular definitives are mutually exclusive with the plural definitives in respect of distribution. Another important strategy that Assamese uses for plural formation is the use of an

9

indefinite plural morpheme *kei-* that is in a mutually exclusive relationship with the numerals and other plural definitives.

The grammatical category of case is both a morphological and syntactic category in Assamese that is correlatable with the various classes of nouns and pronouns. All nominals must undergo case inflections to become eligible for use in a sentence. Case inflections are affixed as the rightmost elements in the nominals. The case inflections for nominative, accusative, instrumental, dative, genitive and locative are *-e/ø, -ak, -re/di, -loi, -ar* and *-at* respectively. The genitive and locative cases allow certain postpositions to occur after the nominals and then express a variety of functions such as ablative, comitative, instrumental, adjectival comparative and adverbial comparative.

As far as verbal morphology is concerned, a finite verb in Assamese is marked for aspect, tense and person which occur in the sequence as: verb + aspect + tense + person. Assamese finite verbs are not marked for number and gender agreements. Aspect in Assamese is expressed both morphologically and periphrastically and it occurs immediately after the verb and before tense marker. Habitual aspect is not overtly marked in Assamese and an imperfective vs perfective distinction is maintained. The imperfective aspect is marked through the periphrastic expression *-iās* (e.gmoilikh-iās-o / I-nom write-prog be-agr / I am writing) whereas the perfective aspect is marked morphologically (e.g. moilikh-il-o / I-nom write-perf-agr / I have written). The perfectivity of perfect aspect is marked by *-il* whereas the perfectivity of resultative aspect is marked by *-is*.

Tense inflection in Assamese occurs immediately after aspect in the verb phrase if there is any overt aspect marker. Present is unmarked whereas past and future are marked for tense in Assamese. Past is marked by *-isil* (e.glikh-isil-e / write-past-3[rd]agr / wrote) and future is marked by *-ib* (e.glikh-ib-a / write-fut-3[rd]agr / will write). Even though there is no number and gender marker, there is person marker in Assamese. Person is inflectionally marked as the rightmost element in the verbal. The first, second and third person pronouns are all marked by the personal suffixes. However, the distinction between second person (honorific) and third person is neutralized in all the tenses. The alternation between *-e* and *ø* (zero) marker in the third person is determined by the transitivity status of the verb.

Negation in Assamese is expressed morphologically by prefixing the negative morpheme *-na* to the verbs. An interesting and unique feature of negativization in Assamese is that there is

assimilation between the vowel of the negative morpheme and the first vowel of the verb to which the morpheme is attached. The first vowel sound of the verb is copied on to the negative morpheme when the morpheme is prefixed to the verb (e.g. na+māt = nāmāt (don't call), na+di = nidi (don't give), na+dekh = nedekh (don't see) etc.). The negative morpheme is always prefixed to the rightmost verb in the verb phrase. If there is one main verb, the morpheme is prefixed to that verb and if there is more than one verb, the morpheme is prefixed to the rightmost verb (e.g. na + likh + ib +a = nilikhiba (will not write), likh + ina + thāk + ib +a = likhināthākiba (will not be writing) etc.). There is a small group of words (e.g. kāko, kato, kono, eko, ketiyāo etc.) called Negative Polarity Items (NPI) which occur in a sentence only when negative morpheme is present. It is observed that the NPIs in Assamese are marked by – O as each NPI word ends with – O; and if – O is not present, each NPI word has different meaning and can occur without Negative morpheme (Sarma 2003).

Passivization in Assameseis done morphologically by suffixing the inflection -ā with the main verb. Unlike the tense inflection which is suffixed with the rightmost verb, the passive inflection -ā is always suffixed with the leftmost verb, that is, the main verb. Causativization is expressed morphologically in Assamese by adding the inflection -uwā to the main verb. Causative inflection -uwā is also suffixed with the leftmost verb, that is, the main verb. Assamese uses morphological causative for causativization process. In Assamese verb phrase, the main verb is always followed by the auxiliary verb and the order in the verb phrase is main verb, aspect, auxiliary, tense and person agreement.

Like the other Indo-Aryan languages, the pattern of word-order in Assamese is S-O-V but the pattern of word-order is relatively free. It is observed that the main verb always precedes the auxiliary verb. Assamese is a head-final language which is exemplified in various constructions of the language as for example noun phrase precedes postpositions and modifiers precede nouns. Subject in Assamese usually takes nominative case and is marked by the inflection -e when it plays agentive role but it is not case marked when it does not take agentive role. It is noticed that subject also takes accusative case with the verb lāg 'want/need' and takes genitive case when the subject acts as a possessor or experience. Object is marked accusative case with the inflection -(a)k when the object refers to a human noun. If the object does not refer to a human noun, it is not marked with the accusative case.

Subordinate clause in Assamese is formed by using the subordinators *je* and *buli* which occur at both clause-initial and clause-final positions. A subordinate clause can either precede or follow a main clause. The subordinator *je* is used when the subordinate clause follows the main clause. On the other hand, the subordinator *buli* is used when the subordinate clause precedes the main clause. Therefore, *je* and *buli* are in complementary distribution.

Question formation in Assamese does not involve auxiliary/wh-movement like English. An interrogative particle *ne* or *neki* is used after the verb to form yes-no question whereas K-words like *Ki* (what), *Kat* (where), *Kiya* (why), *Ketiya* (when), *Kenekoi* (How) etc. are used in a sentence to form wh-questions.

Conclusion

We have briefly discussed some of the characteristics of Assamese language in relation to phonology, morphology and syntax. It is noticed that /x/ is a typical and unique phoneme in Assamese which is not found in any Indian language. We have observed that the morphological inflections found in the verbal are aspect, tense and person agreement markers. Assamese does not show number and gender agreement. Perfective and imperfective aspectual opposition is observed in Assamese. Perfective is often marked morphologically whereas imperfective is marked periphrastically. It is noticed that present is unmarked whereas past and future are marked for tense in Assamese. We also observe that aspect occurs before tense and is closest to the verb. Negation is expressed morphologically and the negative morpheme – na is always prefixed to a verb. There is an assimilation between the vowel sound of the negative morpheme and the first vowel sound of the verb to which the morpheme is prefixed. It is noticed that Passivization is done morphologically by suffixing the inflection -*ā* with the main verb. The word order in Assamese is relatively free, although it follows SOV pattern.

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