

THE PHONEMIC STATUS OF / æ / IN RELI LANGUAGE AND ITS EFFECTIVE USE WHILE TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

Relli, a language spoken by over 150000 people is a script-less endangered indigenous language of India which is focused in the present work. Ethnologue describes it as the vulnerable language that needs special attention on its linguistic aspects. Unless this script-less language is paid due attention, it is highly impossible to revive, improve, and avoid its extinction. This study attempts to initiate such a kind of special attention by collecting Relli language data in the form of voice recordings, followed by transcription and analysis to check incidence of the sound / æ / so as to use it while teaching English to the native speakers (students) of Relli. Results clearly indicate that the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is a phoneme of Relli and it is found to be distinct from the other vowels of Relli. It is remarkable to find that this target sound is present only in the medial and final positions of Relli words in the given data. One of the striking features of Relli is the availability of the / æ / sound, which paves the way to effective teaching of English phoneme / æ / to the native Relli speakers.

Keywords: phoneme, teaching English, front unrounded semi-open vowel, Relli, minimal pairs, sub-minimal pairs

Introduction

Relli (alternate spelling 'Reli') is the name of an indigenous endangered language in India. Its speakers are primarily found in the coastal districts of north Andhra Pradesh. Their language code given by Ethnologue is (iso 639 rei) (Ethnologue: Reli 2025). Their population is over one hundred and fifty thousand. The literature of Relli is mainly available in spoken form only since it does not have

a script. There is no official orthographic representation for the Relli utterances till date. Any language with such conditions is always prone to suffer vulnerability. In order to preserve, revive and work on this language, it is advisable to start with what is available, the sounds (the spoken form) of the language. As the Relli language is not well known and used by a smaller number of people, there is a possibility for this language to lose its existence if not addressed properly. So, it is of utmost importance to pay attention to study the basic language aspects like phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, which becomes a base to make advances in the language development activities like working on script and writing monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, writing grammar to stabilise the language.

In addition, after establishing the phonemes of a language (mother tongue), it also becomes easier to compare the sounds present in that language with the sounds of English, which can be of a great help while teaching the sounds of English that are also available in the mother tongue of the learners by using the technique of association (Gordon 1965). So, the present study attempts to find if the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is available in the phonemic inventory of Relli speakers and, if it is a phoneme in Relli. Then, the phoneme can be used in teaching of the phoneme / æ / of English effectively.

Methodology

This paper is intended to find out the phonemic status of front unrounded semi-open vowel /æ/ in Relli and use this information appropriately to teach English pronunciation. The study focuses on understanding whether / æ / is a phoneme or an allophone of another phoneme in Relli. To determine this, the principles of phonemic analysis by C F Hockett (Hockett 1958, 107-111) are employed. As finding minimal pairs for vowel phonemes in any language is not an easy task, the technique of minimal pairs and also sub-minimal pairs is used in the principle of contrastive distribution which is taken from a research study by Pramod Kumar (Kumar 2012, 35) since the present study is similar in terms of language preservation and development.

Data collection

Data is collected from 20 selected informants with specific characteristic features from remote places of Relli speaking locations to get optimum results from the collected data avoiding any false positive results. Since there is no mutual intelligibility between the researcher and the informants due to linguistic reasons, a

language consultant facilitated in the interviewing process which took about 20 minutes per informant. Identifying vowels is not similar to that of identifying consonants and there was a need to add more words to the data collected from informants. This was carried out with the help of language consultant by directly checking for minimal pairs.

Data Collection Tools

Questionnaire

To collect Relli utterances in spontaneous speech, a questionnaire was prepared with fourteen questions based on mundane activities was used to ask the informants in order to elicit responses through an interview. Additionally, language consultant was interviewed in a semi-structured interview to form minimal pairs and sub-minimal pairs.

Recording Device

The responses of the informants and the language consultant's input were captured using a voice recording device and the recorded data files with .mp3 extension were stored in a computer for analysing the data.

Transcription of the data

An audio player software was used to listen to the audio recordings with the help of a computer. Much care was taken by repetitively listening the audio files to identify every unique uttered sound. All the available phonemes in the audio utterances were transcribed. Mistakes in speech, tongue slips, gap fillers, and other non-speech sounds were carefully distinguished and avoided in the transcription with the help of the language consultant who is a native speaker of the Relli language.

Searching data for the presence of the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ /

The front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / phoneme was carefully searched for in the informants' data that was transcribed. Selected words for analysis were listed in Table 1. Additionally, language consultant's contribution focusing the target sound was also added to the list in a separate table (Table 2). The incidence of the front unrounded semi-open vowel /æ/ was searched for in the three positions of the individual words, i.e., initial, medial and final positions. Confirmation of the presence of the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / was validated with the language consultant. It was also cautiously inspected and all the incidences of the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / was contrasted with the front unrounded close-mid

long vowel / e: / and the front unrounded open long vowel / a: /. These examples were provided by the language consultant.

Results and Analysis of Data

Utterances from the collected data that features the phoneme under study (the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ /), are presented in the following table (Table 1) showing the incidence of the target sound in three different positions (initial, medial and final positions) of the words.

| S. No. | Phoneme | Initial | Medial | Final | Gloss | Informant and Question number |
|--------|----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | mæt̪t̪e | 0 | 1 | 0 | to me | 1,4 |
| 2 | b ^h æjila | 0 | 1 | 0 | got married | 1,4 |
| 3 | bæ | 0 | 1 | 0 | wedding | 1,4 |
| 4 | sæa:nima:nigala | 0 | 1 | 0 | she stopped coming | 1,4 |
| 5 | t̪eɑ:t̪æ | 0 | 0 | 1 | four | 1,4 |
| 6 | pɑ:t̪æ | 0 | 0 | 1 | five | 1,4 |
| 7 | kæt̪omæt̪e | 0 | 1 | 0 | where (nowhere) | 1,4 |
| 8 | kænuga:mubelle | 0 | 1 | 0 | what village is | 1,4 |
| 9 | bæɾeɪt̪eigala | 0 | 1 | 0 | wedding set right | 1,4 |
| 10 | kænʈa | 0 | 1 | 0 | something | 1,4 |
| 11 | gæɾa | 0 | 1 | 0 | (at) house / home | 1,4 |
| 12 | gæɾa: | 0 | 1 | 0 | (in the) house | 7,3 |
| 13 | d̪æɾo | 0 | 1 | 0 | fever | 7,3 |
| 14 | kæt̪a: | 0 | 1 | 0 | (no)thing | 7,4 |
| | Total | 0 | 12 | 2 | | |

Table 1: Selected list of utterances from the collected data comprising / æ /

Utterances that are available with the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / from the collected data are furnished in Table 1. The list comprises of the words that are unique

and without redundancy. A total number of 14 words are listed. It is evident from the table (Table 1) that the target phoneme, the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ /, is present in the informants' phonemic inventory. The table also indicates that the target phoneme is available in the medial and final positions only.

Similarly, the data provided by the language consultant was analysed to present the phonetic transcription of the words and the occurrence of the target phoneme in initial, medial and final positions was tabulated below (Table 2).

| S. No. | Phoneme | Initial | Medial | Final | Gloss |
|--------|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|
| 1 | gæteo | 0 | 1 | 0 | Tree |
| 2 | dæne | 0 | 1 | 0 | did not give |
| 3 | t ^h æne | 0 | 1 | 0 | did not stay |
| 4 | g ^h æ:io | 0 | 1 | 0 | House |
| 5 | tælo | 0 | 1 | 0 | Oil |
| 6 | pæ | 0 | 0 | 1 | Decay |
| 7 | b ^h æva:io | 0 | 1 | 0 | Business |
| 8 | b ^h æ | 0 | 0 | 1 | Wedding |
| 9 | mæq ^h o | 0 | 1 | 0 | Cloud |
| 10 | æko | 0 | 1 | 0 | Pour |
| | Total | 0 | 8 | 2 | |

Table 2: List of utterances taken from the language consultant comprising / æ /

Table 2 also indicates that the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is available in the medial and final positions of the words and it is not observed in the initial position of any word. One striking feature is to be noted that both the tables (Table 1 and Table 2) indicate same positional availability and unavailability of the target sound in the words.

The most important part is, to find out whether the target sound is a phoneme, or not. To figure it out, Hocket's principle of contrastive distribution is employed on a minimal pair and sub-minimal pair.

The data selected for the present study listed in both the tables (Table 1 and Table 2) together contain 24 words. One of the 24 words was found to form a sub-minimal pair and another word was found to form a minimal pair which are presented as follows.

/ æ / vs / e: /

The front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is found to be contrasting with / e: /.

(1) / ʌæko / 'to pour'

(2) / ʌe:ku / 'sheet' (asbestos / metal)

The example given above showing point number (1) and (2) clearly distinguishes / æ / from / e:/ exhibiting contrastive distribution, forming a sub-minimal pair.

/ æ / vs / a: /

The front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / clearly contrasts with / a: /.

(3) / tælo / 'oil'

(4) / tɑ:lo / 'wait' (informal)

The point numbers (3) and (4) unambiguously show that / æ / is in contrast with / a: / by forming a minimal pair. Therefore, this makes it clear that the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is a phoneme in Relli.

Discussion / Findings

The collected data and the data provided by the language consultant collectively highlights the following findings. It is found that the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is present in the Relli phonemic inventory. Majority of the words comprising the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / were found to be not having minimal pairs. It is to be noted that the front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / was found to occur in the medial and final positions of the words in the data. This phoneme was not observed in the initial position of the word from the collected data. The front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is a phoneme in Relli as it contrasts with / e: / and / a: /.

With these linguistic findings regarding the presence of / æ / in Relli, some suggestions can be made for the benefit of the native Relli students who are learning English.

Since / æ / is a phoneme in Relli, the same can be used to teach and learn the / æ / sound of English as well. While mastering / æ / sound in English is difficult for many Indian students due to unavailability of the sound in Indian languages (in their mother tongues). This challenge can be overcome by the English learners who are the native speakers of Relli if similarities with the help of examples are drawn between Relli and English / æ / sounds.

The technique of association is very effective while teaching and learning in general (Gordon 1965). The same can be employed in teaching the / æ / sound of English vowels (learning an unknown sound of a target language with the help of a well-known sound from mother tongue.). Association of the / æ / sound between English and other Indian languages is impossible and can be misleading. For example, the English word 'bank' transcribed /bæŋk/ is difficult for Telugu (a Dravidian language) speakers as they tend to pronounce it as /bja:ŋk/ and Hindi (an Indo-Aryan language) speakers also face problems as they tend to pronounce it as /baɪŋk/ or /beŋk/ (Kachru 2006, 16). This can never be a problem if the sound / æ / is associated with English words and Relli words. For example: / æ / as in / g^hæ:ɔ / 'house', / gæ:ɔ / 'tree', /ɪæko/ 'to pour', / t̪ælo / 'oil' etc.

Introducing a strange sound (unavailable in Indian languages) like / æ / in English (Roach 2004, 242) to the Indian students by the teachers can be done with ease, when the technique of association is employed. This approach enables the native Relli speaking students of English to master the / æ / sound of English easily and effectively.

Conclusion

Considering the above findings, it is very clear that the target sound, front unrounded semi-open vowel / æ / is obviously present in the phonemic inventory of the Relli speakers and this study concludes that / æ / sound is a phoneme in Relli. It can also be concluded from the data that the / æ / sound in Relli words is available in the medial and final positions but not in the initial position. Moreover, by establishing / æ / as a phoneme in Relli, it is easy and effective to teach the / æ / sound of English for the native speakers of Relli by using association technique.

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