

Phonemes of Asuri

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the existing phonemes in the Asuri language.

The Asuri speakers live in and around the Chota Nagpur area, which falls under Gumla District of Jharkhand State. Asuri is closely associated with Mundari Language, which falls under the Munda family. The Munda family of languages spoken in India is divided into two groups, namely, North Munda and South Munda. The Asuri belongs to the North Munda group. Asuri has a small number of speakers living in the midst of other major languages like Hindi, Sadri, Mundari and Santali. The Sadri acts as a lingua-franca in the region. All the Asuri speakers are bilingual. They speak Asuri in their home domain and Sadri in all other socio-economic contexts. The modernization process leads to ignoring the Asuri Language. It is found that Asuris are more inclined to use Sadri, which probably may lead their language towards endangerment.

Key Words: Asuri, Phoneme, Allophone and Diphthongs,

1. Introduction

Asurs are the early settlers of the Chota Nagpur area of Gumla District which falls under the Jharkhand State. The Asur people are stout, muscular, and medium in height. Traditionally they are the iron smelters. They used to extract iron ore from the rocks around. Asurs are omnivorous, and they eat any animal. Animal and birds are scanty wherever the Asur people live. Due to the introduction of the modern education system, a slow change has appeared among the Asurs. Generally, Asurs live in separate villages. However, due to availability of temporary employment opportunities a few Mundari and Kurux/Orang families also live in Asuri villages. They work as laborers for loading the natural resources.

Asur people speak Sadri which is the lingua franca of ChotaNagpur area which is a mixed form of Hindi, Munda and Dravidian languages. Mundari, Santali, Ho, Kurux/Orang and Hindi language speakers live together in the same area and hence a common language of Chotanagpur called Sadri emerged as a link language. So, losing the original vocabulary of their language and gaining the vocabulary of other languages in the area could not be avoided. Asurs were earlier worshippers of nature around; nowadays they have started worshipping the idols like other Hindus. A few persons and families have converted to Christianity also.

According to *Census of India* 2001, Asuri speakers are in total 16,600 and they live in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Odisha states. According to *Wikipedia*, Asuri is a minor Munda Language, which has two dialects, namely, Brijia and Majhwar. Munda languages are subdivided into two groups, namely, North Munda and South Munda in India. Asuri belongs to the North Munda group. Asuri is closely associated with Mundari Language. According to Diffloth (1974), Mundari, Ho, Bhumij, Koda, Birhor, Kol and Asuri are very close to each other. According to Grierson, G. A. 1903, *Linguistic Survey of India* Vol. IV, Asuri belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of Munda group

Austro-Asiatic,

Munda Group,

Southern Munda & North Munda,

Asuri

The *UNESCO* has listed Asuri Language under Definitely Endangered category, which means “Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home”. That is, Asuri Language is not spoken by the younger generation even in their home domain. Asuri mother tongue speaker’s vocabulary is getting thinner day-by-day. However, present researcher tried to use the native vocabulary of Asuri to identify the phonemes in the language. This work would help the future generation in documenting and revitalizing their language.

1.1. Asuri: An Endangered Language

The following points justify the Asuri is a minority or endangered language of Chota Nagpur area which falls under Gumla District of Jharkhand State, India.

(i) Like many other tribal people, Asuri do not have their indigenous script and no attempt has been made to devise the orthography of this language by governmental or non-governmental agencies.

(ii) There is no written literature; their literature remains oral until date.

(iii) No dictionary, grammar, wordbook, or primer in the language which can be used in the formal education system.

(iv) Lack of formal education in the language. Children of this language group had their schooling in Hindi and English.

(v) There is no printed media in the language.

(vi) There is no radio or television programme in Asuri language.

(vii) The younger generation of Asuri people do not use lexical items related to indigenous flora and fauna including medicinal plants, festivals, games, food habits, counting systems, name of the season, name of the week, craftsmanship, fishing, hunting, etc.

(vii) Discontinuance of their old age traditional/cultural practices in the form of folk songs, folk dances, proverbs, folk medication, fishing, hunting, craftsmanship, games and political system.

(viii) Small number of speakers.

(ix) Inter-community marriage.

(x) Liberal use of loan words in their day-to-day life.

(xi) Asuri is highly influenced by the dominant language, Sadri.

1.2. Methodology

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The data for the present study was collected in several visits to the Asuri inhabiting areas of Chota Nagpur area, mainly from Gumla District of Jharkhand State. The data for the present study is based on the primary source. However, secondary materials like books, journals and articles, etc., are also used. The primary method of data collection was direct elicitation and group discussion. The speech data was collected and recorded from the native speakers of Asuri through close observation. The present work provides the phonemic description of Asuri language.

2.0. Phonemic Inventory of Asuri

There are thirty-one (31) phonemes in Asuri. Out of which, twenty-six (26) phonemes are segmental and five (5) are supra-segmental. The phonemes of Asuri may be classified under the following categories:

(A) Segmental Phonemes

a. Vowels (5)

b. Consonants (21)

(B) Supra-segmental Phonemes

Length (5)

2.1. Vowels

Asuri has an inventory of five vowel phonemes /i, e, a, o, and u/. The vowels in Asuri are oral. Vowel length is phonemic in the language. The five vowel phonemes in the language are given in Table 1.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Open		a	

Table 1 Vowel phonemes in Asuri

2.1.1. Description and Distribution of Vowel Phonemes of Asuri

All vowels occur in all three positions of the word.

/i/ High front unrounded short vowel, it occurs in all three positions of the words.

Initial

/injot/ 'light'

Medial

/bilai/ 'cat'

Final

/kuri/ 'girl'

/i:/ High front unrounded long vowel, it occurs only in word medial position which is one of the typological features of Austro-Asiatic languages shared by Asuri.

Medial

/i:g/ 'animals excretion'

/ni:r/ 'run'

/bi:| / 'snake'

/e/ Mid front unrounded short vowel, it occurs in all three positions. However, it is more frequent in the middle position than in the final position.

Initial

/ene:g/ 'dance'

Medial

/merom/ 'goat'

Final

/ore/ 'bird'

/e:/ Mid front unrounded short vowel, it occurs initially and medially.

Initial

/e:ɖi/ ‘heel’

Medial

/te:ŋ/ ‘up’

/a/ Low front unrounded short vowel, it occurs in all three positions. However, occurrence of the medial position is more than the final position.

Initial

/aɪnd/ ‘name of a clan’

Medial

/apara/ ‘wing’

Final

/ora/ ‘house’

/a:/ Low front unrounded long vowel, it occurs initially and medially.

Initial

/a:ril/ ‘hail’

Medial

/pa:j/ ‘eagle’

/o/ Mid back rounded short vowel, it occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/ora/ ‘house’

Medial

/boto/ ‘foam’

Final

/tuyo/ 'stream'

/o:/ Mid back rounded long vowel, it occurs only in the initially and medially.

Initial

/o:re/ 'bird'

Medial

/balo:m/ 'spear'

/u/ High back rounded short vowel, it occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/utu/ 'cooked vegetable'

Medial

/ayugo/ 'sunset'

Final

/tundu/ 'hill peak'

/u:/ High back rounded short vowel, it occurs in the word initially and medially .

Initial

/u:d/ 'mushroom'

Medial

/ju:r/ 'cattle'

All segmental monophthongs and suprasegmental length vowels distribution are given below with help of following table.

Phonemes	Initially	Medially	Finally
i	✓	✓	✓

i:	X	✓	X
e	✓	✓	✓
e:	✓	✓	X
a	✓	✓	✓
a:	✓	✓	X
o	✓	✓	✓
o:	✓	✓	X
u	✓	✓	✓
u:	✓	✓	X

Table 2: Distribution of vowel Monophthongs in Asuri

2.2. Consonants

There are twenty one consonantal phonemes: /p, b, t,d, ʈ,d, c, j, k, g, ʔ, s, h, m, n, ŋ, l, r, ɾ, w and y/. Not all the consonantal phonemes occur in all three positions of the word. A few consonants, namely, glottal stop and velar nasal, do not occur in the initial position. It is also interesting to note that the non-occurrence of /ŋ/ and /ʔ/ in the initial position is one of the areal features shared by Munda languages such as Asuri, Ho, and Bhumij. Alveolar trill and labiodental semivowel do not occur in the final position. The alveolar flap and palatal semivowel do not occur in the initial and final positions.

The inventory of consonant phonemes of Asuri is given in Table 3.

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Retroflex		Palatal		Velar		Glottal
	-voice	+voice	-voice	+voice	-voice	+voice	-voice	+voice	-voice	+voice	
Stops	p	b	t	d	ʈ	ɖ	c	j	k	g	ʔ
Fricatives		s									h
Nasals	m			n				ɲ			
Lateral				l							

Trill	r
Flap	r
Semivowels	w y

Table 3 Consonant phonemes in Asuri

2.2.1. Description and Distribution of Consonantal Phonemes of Asuri

/p/ Voiceless bilabial stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/peya/ ‘three’

Medial

/pepila/ ‘butterfly’

Final

/mike:p/ ‘once’

/b/ Voiced bilabial stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/bitil/ ‘sand’

Medial

/timbiḍi/ ‘panther’

Final

/kara:b/ ‘bad’

/t/ Voiceless alveolar stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/tayom/ ‘after’

Medial

/cito:m/ 'sunshine'

Final

/sahamat/ 'agreement'

/d/ Voiced alveolar stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/da:ru/ 'liquor'

Medial

/indra/ 'well'

Final

/bi:d/ 'wall'

/ʈ/ Voiceless retroflex stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/ʈomta/ 'throat'

Medial

/puʈu:s/ 'name of a tree'

Final

/girha:ʈ/ 'granary'

/ɖ/ Voiced retroflex stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/ɖaid/ 'branch of a tree'

Medial

/damɖu/ 'kind of a fish'

Final

/la:d/ 'bread'

/c/ Voiceless palatal stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/ciya/ 'chicken'

Medial

/cecak/ 'small pox'

Final

/ni:c/ 'stingy'

/j/ Voiced palatal stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/jono/ 'broom'

Medial

/pinjra/ 'cage'

Final

/ayupsa:nj/ 'evening'

/k/ Voiceless velar stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/keʃega/ 'bitter'

Medial

/ʈuku/ 'stone'

Final

/saɖək/ 'road'

/g/ Voiced velar stop consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/gendra/ 'cloth'

Medial

/ dogo/ 'saliva'

Final

/toro:g/ 'ash'

/ʔ/ Voiceless glottal stop consonant. It occurs in the medial and final positions.

Medial

/noʔa/ 'this'

/miaʔd/ 'one'

Final

/joʔ/ 'fruit'

/ daʔ/ 'water'

/s/ Voiceless alveolar fricative consonant. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/siriŋ/ 'song'

Medial

/sasaŋ/ 'yellow'

Final

/tamras/ 'guava'

/h/ Voiceless pharyngeal fricative. It occurs initially and medially.

Initial

/haku/ 'fish'

Medial

/saɖhu/ 'son-in-law'

/ m / Voiced bilabial nasal. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/ mayəŋ/ 'day-after-tomorrow'

Medial

/hurmusu/ 'honey bee'

Final

/la:m/ 'palm'

/n/ Voiced alveolar nasal. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/nahar/ 'canal'

Medial

/nunu/ 'breast'

Final

/bihin/ 'seed'

/ŋ/ Voiced velar nasal. It occurs in the medial and final positions.

Medial

/puŋd̪i/ 'white'

Final

/si:|/ 'tree'

/l/ Voiced alveolar lateral. It occurs in all three positions.

Initial

/lo:ha/ 'urine'

Medial

/ala|/ 'tongue'

Final

/u: l/ 'mango'

/r/ Voiced alveolar trill. It occurs in the initial and medial positions.

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Initial

/rabang/ ‘cold’

Medial

/pokra/ ‘pond’

/r/ Voiced alveolar flap. It occurs only in the medial position.

Medial

/ora/ ‘house’

/w/ Voiced labio-dental semivowel. It occurs in the initial and medial positions.

Initial

/ wigya:n/ ‘science’

Medial

/piluwa/ ‘insect’

/ y / Voiced palatal semivowel. It occurs only in the medial position

Medial

/kaniya/ ‘not’

/ayugo/ ‘sunset’

The occurrence of all consonantal phonemes has been drawn schematically in the following diagram:

Phonemes	Initially	Medially	Finally
P	✓	✓	✓
B	✓	✓	✓
T	✓	✓	✓
D	✓	✓	✓
t	✓	✓	✓
d	✓	✓	✓

C	✓	✓	✓
J	✓	✓	✓
K	✓	✓	✓
G	✓	✓	✓
?	X	✓	✓
S	✓	✓	✓
H	✓	✓	X
M	✓	✓	✓
N	✓	✓	✓
D	✓	✓	✓
L	✓	✓	✓
R	X	✓	✓
r	X	✓	X
W	✓	✓	X
Y	X	✓	X

Table 4: Distribution of Consonant Phonemes in Asuri

2.3. Allophones

An allophone is any of various acoustically different forms of the same phoneme. The back high unrounded vowel /i/ has two allophones [i] and [ɪ].

[i] (tense high back rounded vowel)

i

[ɪ] (lax lower high back rounded vowel)

[i] The tense high back unrounded vowel occurs word finally.

/e:ɖi/ [e:dɪ] ‘heel’

/ga:tɪ/ [ga:tɪ] ‘nail’

[I] The lax lower high back unrounded vowel occurs elsewhere.

/eid/	[eId]	‘cure’
/sia:d/	[sIa:d]	‘old’
/indra/	[Indra]	‘well’
/iŋ/	[Iŋ]	‘I’

The phoneme mid front unrounded vowel /e/ has two allophones [e] and [E].

[e] (Mid front unrounded vowel occurs in final position.)

e

[E] (Lower mid unrounded vowel occurs in non-final position.)

[e] The mid front unrounded vowel only occurs in word final position.

/tɛdre/	[tɛdrE]	‘thunder’
/to dɛ/	[toŋdE]	‘a few’

[E] The lower mid front unrounded vowel occurs in non-final position.

/eneg/	[EnEg]	‘dance’
/eid/	[EId]	‘cure’
/ tɛŋ/	[tɛŋ]	‘up’
/ kɛtɛga/	[kɛtɛga]	‘bitter’
/neuta/	[nɛUta]	‘invitation’

The researcher has come across only two allophones based on the recorded data. All the other phones have only one allophone.

2.4. Diphthongs

Diphthong is a vowel sound that starts near the articulator and moves toward the position for another. There are six diphthongs in Asuri, spoken in Chota Nagpur area of Jharkhand. Of the six diphthongs, three involve glide [I] and other three are towards [u]. These diphthongs can be

called falling diphthongs, i.e., the first element is more prominent than the second one. All the diphthongs can occur in word medial position of the words, which is a common feature in most of the Indian languages.

/ ai/ occurs in all three positions the words.

Initial

/aina/ 'mirror'

Medial

/baid/ 'doctor'

Final

/murai/ 'radish'

/ei/ occurs in all three positions of the words.

Initial

/eid/ 'cure'

Medial

/pein/ 'revolt'

Final

/bilei/ 'egg'

/au/ occurs in all three positions of the words.

Initial

/aur/ 'and'

Medial

/cauḍa:yi/ 'breath'

Final

/paharau/ 'mutiny'

/eu/ occurs only in the medial position of the words.

Medial

/neuta/ ‘invitation’

/oi/ occurs only in the medial position of the words.

Medial

/goignai/ ‘dead’

/ou/ occurs only in the medial position of the words.

Medial

/boura/ ‘beetle’

Like in many other Austro Asiatic languages, the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ are more common than others. That is, they occur frequently in native Asuri words. It is also observed that the diphthongs in Asuri occur both in open and closed syllable.

3. Conclusion

On the basis of the detailed phonemic analysis of Asuri, spoken in Chota Nagpur area, the following conclusion can be drawn.

(i) Asuri has five monophthongs /i, e, a, o and u/ in its phonemic inventory. All the monophthongal vowels occur in all the positions of the words.

(ii) Asuri does not have non-syllabic vowels, i.e., they can be a nucleus of the Asuri syllable and all the vowels in the language are oral and voiced.

(iii) There are twenty one consonantal phonemes i.e., /p, b, t,d, t̪ ,d̪, c, j, k, g, ʔ, s, h, m, n, ŋ, l, r, ɾ, w and y/. All the consonantal phonemes do not occur in all three positions of the word. A few consonants, namely, glottal stop and velar nasal do not occur in the initial position. It is also interesting to note that the non-occurrence /ŋ & ʔ/ in initial position is one of the areal features shared by Munda languages such as Asuri, Ho, and Bhumij. Alveolar trill and labio-dental

semivowel do not occur in the final position. The alveolar flap and palatal semivowel do not occur in the initial and final positions.

(iv) The presence of voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ is noticed in the language while its voiced counterpart is missing.

(v) Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, three nasals /m, n, and ŋ/ are found in the language and the occurrence of /ŋ/ in the initial position of a syllable or word is absent. This is one of the typological features of Munda group of languages exhibited by Asuri.

(vi) The vowels /i and e/ have allophonic variations. The other phonemes have only one allophone.

(viii) There are six diphthongs /ai, au, ei, eu, oi, and ou/ which occur both in open and closed syllables in the language.

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