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## **Problems of Assamese Speakers Learning Manipuri**

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# PROBLEMS OF ASSAMESE SPEAKERS LEARNING MANIPURI

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In this paper we analyze the problems of Assamese speakers learning Manipuri. Supportive data were collected from the teachers whose first language is Assamese language, who learn Manipuri at the North Eastern Regional Language Centre located in Guwahati, Assam.

One of the problems that Assamese speakers face when they learn Manipuri is related to the difference in pronunciation and the number of segmental phonemes (vowels, diphthongs, and consonants) and supra-segmental phonemes (tone). This paper highlights only the problems created by the differences between the segmental phonemes (vowels, diphthongs and consonants) and supra-segmental phonemes, especially the tone.

To analyze the pronunciation systems of Manipuri and Assamese, this paper looks at the orthographic systems of both the languages.

## The Orthographic Systems of Manipuri And Assamese

Orthographically, according to the present Manipuri existing writing system (Bengali-Assamese script), there are 14 vowel letters i.e., অ আ ই ঈ উ ঊ ঋ ঌ এ ঐ ও ঔ অং অঃ (linguistically all of them can not be described as vowels), and 41 consonant letters i.e., ক খ গ ঘ ঙ চ ছ জ ঝ ঞ ট ঠ ড ঢ ণ ত থ দ ধ ন প ফ ব ভ ম য র ল র শ ষ স হ ঝ ড় ঢ় য় ং ঃ ঁ ং .

However, Assamese uses 11 vowel letters i.e., অ আ ই ঈ উ ঊ ঋ এ ঐ ও ঔ and 41

consonants letters i.e., ক খ গ ঘ ঙ চ ছ জ ঝ ঞ ট ঠ ড ঢ ণ ত থ দ ধ ন প ফ ব ভ ম য ঝ ল র শ ষ স হ ঝ ড় ঢ় য় ং ঃ ঁ ং . In the set of consonants, the letter ব is used in different shape in Manipuri i.e., ব . This is similar to the Bengali letter. On the other hand, the Assamese letter ব is used in Manipuri while the same is not used in Bengali. So it can be said that, to a large extent, the script used in Manipuri writing system is the combination of Bengali and Assamese scripts.

### **Differences in Pronunciation of Letters Cause Some Difficulties**

Not only the above differences in the number and shapes of letters but also the differences in the pronunciation system of vowels and consonants cause difficulties to Assamese speakers learning Manipuri.

Manipuri speakers pronounce the consonants with the inherent vowel অ /ə/ (mid, central, unrounded vowel). However, Assamese speakers pronounce the consonants with the inherent vowel অ' /ɔ/ (lower-mid back rounded vowel). For this reason, Manipuri word কৰি /kəri/ 'what' is pronounced as /kɔri/ by the Assamese speakers.

Another problem relates to the pronunciation of Manipuri verbal noun forms. For example, চাবা /cabə/ 'eat' is written with the matra া /a/ in the final position, although it is not pronounced. But the learners read this as /caba/. On the other hand, when a derivative suffix is added the matra া is deleted. For example, চাবদগী /cabədəgi/ 'from eating'. This matra া deletion for making a derivative word is a big problem in writing and reading for the Assamese learners. They always tend to write it without the matra া (deletion process).

There is an exception of matra া deletion process that is, the matra া is pronounced in the final position of a word. For example, উনা /una/ ‘leaf’, উনাগী /unagi/ ‘of leaf’, মচা /məca/ ‘small’, মচাদু /məcadu/ ‘that small’ etc.

At present, there is no use of ্ (halanta) for the unreleased sound in the Manipuri writing system. Instead of using *halanta* ্ a matra া is used with the released sound to differentiate it from the unreleased sounds. These processes of writing become very problematic to the L2 learners.

### **Sounds of Spoken Manipuri**

Spoken Manipuri has 48 speech sounds or phonemes (inclusive of suprasegmental phonemes). There are 24 consonants, 6 vowels and their tone counterparts, namely, high and low (12 speech sounds), and 6 diphthongs and their tone counterparts, namely, high and low (12 speech sounds).

The tone variations, high and low, are not represented with any diacritic marks in the orthographic design. The letters of Bengali-Assamese’s short and long vowels are used to represent the Manipuri tone system. This practice is not so scientific. For example:

#### **Graphemes Representation of Tone system**

ই, ি	Low tone
ঈ, ী	High tone
য়	High tone (as a counterpart of low tone ই) (not in the initial syllable of a word)
উ, ু	Low tone

ও High tone (as a counterpart of low tone উ) (not in the initial syllable of a word)

উ, ু High tone

The first three make one set of tone counterparts and the last three make another set of tone counterparts to represent the tone system in Manipuri. On the other hand, rest of the graphemes for vowels, অ, আ, া, এ, ে, ঐ, ়ে, ও, ো, and ঔ, ৌ have no counterparts to represent the tone system. So, to comprehend the speech sound of Manipuri pronunciation, a lot of practice is needed.

In comparison to Manipuri language, Assamese language has 23 consonants and 8 vowels and 2 diphthongs but there is no tone system.

A comparative chart of Manipuri and Assamese Vowel qualities is given below:

**Manipuri vowels**

**Assamese vowels**

/i/	(High, front, unrounded)	/i/	(High, front, unrounded)
/e/	(Mid, front, unrounded)	/e/	(Higher-mid, front, unrounded)
/o/	(Mid, back, rounded)	/o/	(Mid, back, rounded)
/u/	(High, back, rounded)	/u/	(High, back, rounded)
/a/	(Low, central, unrounded)	/a/	(Low, central, unrounded)
/ə/	(Mid, central, unrounded)	*	
*		/ɔ/	(Lower-mid, back rounded)
*		/ɒ/	(Low, back, half-rounded)
*		/ɛ/	(Lower-mid, front, unrounded)

\* stands for no counterpart.

The first five vowels /i/, /e/, /o/, /u/, and /a/ are similar to Manipuri and Assamese. Having difference in the number of vowels and vowel qualities between the two languages, many problems are created for Assamese speakers while learning Manipuri.

### Some More Specific Problems with Vowels

One big problem is that the mid-central unrounded vowel /ə/ is not used in Assamese. So, Assamese speakers have difficulty in pronouncing this vowel at the word level, if they have not done exhaustive practice. Instead of this vowel, they usually use /ɔ/ in the initial and /ɒ/ in the medial and final position of a syllable or a word. In other words, the Assamese vowel /ɔ/ and /ɒ/ are used to represent Manipuri vowel /ə/ depending on the position of the word. The initial /ə/ in a syllable is represented by /ɔ/ and if it occurs in the medial and final position of a syllable or a word it is represented by /ɒ/. The Assamese vowel /ɛ/ is used to represent Manipuri vowel /e/ in the medial position of a word.

### A Comparative Reading Styles of Manipuri and Assamese Vowels

	Manipuri Reading	Assamese Reading
অ	soro-o / ə	ɒ
আ	soro-a / a	a
ই	rəsə-i / i	rhɔrsɒ-i
ঐ	dirgə-i / ī	dirghɒ-i
উ	rəsə-u / u	rhɔrsɒ-u
ঊ	dirgə-u / ū	dirghɒ-u

ৰ	rəsəri /ri	ri
ৱ	dirgəri /ri	*
এ	e	e
ঐ	əj	ɔi
ও	o	o
ঔ	ou	ɔu
অং	soro-o ənuŋsar	*
অঃ	soro-o birsago	*

In this paper two Manipuri vowel /ə/ and /e/ and three Assamese vowels /ɔ/, /ɔ/ and /ɛ/ are discussed exhaustively since these vowels create maximum problems to the learners.

Examples:

/ə/

অফবা	/əp <sup>h</sup> əbə/	‘good’ is pronounced by Assamese as	/ɔp <sup>h</sup> ɔbɔ/
অচৌবা	/əcəwbə/	‘big’ is pronounced	„ as /ɔcɔwbɔ/
অশাংবা	/əsaŋbə/	‘long’ is pronounced	„ as /ɔsaŋbɔ/
অতেনবা	/ətenbə/	‘short’ is pronounced	„ as /ɔtenbɔ/

/e/

চে	/ce/	‘paper’ is pronounced by Assamese as	/ce/
লেন	/len/	‘hail’ is pronounced	„ as /len/

তেন	/ten/	‘bow’ is pronounced	„	as	/tɛn/
মতেং	/mɔtɛŋ/	‘help’ is pronounced	„	as	/mɔtɛŋ/
য়েংবা	/yeŋbə/	‘watch’ is pronounced	„	as	/yɛŋbɔ/

The Manipuri vowel /e/ is pronounced as it is by Assamese speaker if it occurs in the initial or final position of a word. However, if it occurs in the medial position of a word, then it is pronounced like /ɛ/.

One common problem for Assamese speakers learning Manipuri is that they are unable to produce isolated vowel syllable in the word final position. For example:

লাকই	/lak-i/	‘has come’ is pronounced as	/laki/
তাকই	/tak-i/	‘has taught’ is pronounced as	/taki/
লাকউ	/lak-u/	‘come (command)’ is pronounced as	/laku/
তাকউ	/tak-u/	‘teach (command)’ is pronounced as	/taku/

### Manipuri Diphthongs

Another problem faced by Assamese learners is diphthongs. In Manipuri there are six diphthongs and their six tone counterparts. They are, əj, əw, aw, aj, oj, and uj. But in Assamese, Phonemically there are no diphthongs although /i e o u/ form phonetic diphthongs in unstressed position after another vowel, or in between vowels. (Goswami, Golockchandra 1982 : 118). In his book he used the term vowel cluster predominantly. He further says that there are nineteen two-vowel clusters that form two syllable nuclei in all occurrences: /ie iɛ ia iɔ iʊ ɛa ɛɔ aɛ aɔ and, /ɔɔ oe oa oɔ oʊ ue ua uɔ uɔ/. According to him, there may be clusters even with five vowels in Assamese.

Among the six Manipuri diphthongs, two pose great problems to Assamese speakers.

These are /əj/ and /əw/.

/əj/

লৈ /ləj/ 'flower' is pronounced by Assamese as /lɔj/

কৈ /kəj/ 'tiger' is pronounced as ,, /kɔj/

চৈ /cəj/ 'stick' is pronounced as ,, /cɔj/

হৈ /həj/ 'fruit' is pronounced as ,, /hɔj/

মৈ /məj/ 'fire' is pronounced as ,, /mɔj/

/əw/

লৌবা /ləwbə/ 'to take' is pronounced as /lɔwbɔ/

পৌবা /pəwbə/ 'coarse' is pronounced as /pɔwbɔ/

কৌবা /kəwbə/ 'to call' is pronounced as /kɔwbɔ/

হৌবা /həwbə/ 'to start' is pronounced as /hɔwbɔ/

তৌবা /təwbə/ 'to do' is pronounced as /tɔwbɔ/

However, the other four Manipuri diphthongs *aw*, *aj*, *oj*, and *uj* are pronounced as a vowel sequence by the Assamese speaker. For example,

/aw/

পাউ /paw/ 'news' is pronounced as /pa-u/

খাউ /k<sup>h</sup>aw/ 'bag' is pronounced as /k<sup>h</sup>a-u/

/aj/

পাই /paj/ 'read' is pronounced as /pa-i/

তাই /taj/ 'listened' is pronounced as /ta-i/

/oj/

ওই /oj/ 'left' is pronounced as /o-i/

হেই /hoj/ 'yes' is pronounced as /ho-i/

/uj/

হুই /huj/ 'dog' is pronounced as /hu-i/

ফুই /p<sup>h</sup>uj/ 'beat' is pronounced as /p<sup>h</sup>u-i/

### Problems Caused by Tones

Another problem faced by Assamese speakers learning Manipuri is tone. Tone is very prominent in Manipuri language. Tone is a phonetic or phonological unit belonging to a set distinguished or primarily distinguished by levels of or by changes in pitch. (Matthews, P. H. 1997).

Traditional orthography system using Bengali-Assamese script used to identify the tonemes: high tone and low tone by using different sets of vowels, namely, long and short vowels and semivowels. For example,

মি /mi/ 'spider' (low tone)      মী /mi/ 'man' (high tone)

পাইবা /pajbə/ 'to fly' (low tone)      পায়বা /pajbə/ 'to hold' (high tone)

পুবা /pubə/ 'to carry' (low tone)      পূবা /pübə/ 'to borrow' (high tone)

Sometimes this practice is not scientific in some cases. For example, পাবা /pabə/ ‘to read’ (low tone) and পাবা /pàbə/ ‘thin’ (high tone). These two words have same spelling but different tones and meanings. Some other examples are;

1. a. তাবা /tabə/ ‘to fall’  
b. তাবা /tàbə/ ‘to listen’
2. a. লাকপা /lakpə/ ‘to come’  
b. লাকপা /làkpə/ ‘to snatch’
3. a. লৈবা /ləjbə/ ‘to live’  
b. লৈবা /ləjbə/ ‘to buy’

Like the above examples, Manipuri language has 6 vowels and their tone counterparts and 6 diphthongs and their tone counterparts. A learner, thus, should know the tone system and word meaning.

### **Problems Regarding Consonants**

There are twenty four consonant phonemes in Manipuri. On the other hand, there are twenty three consonant phonemes in the Standard Colloquial Assamese. (Goswami, Golockchandra 1982 : 31) Consonant charts of Manipuri and Assamese are:

### MANIPURI CONSONANTS CHART

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.
Unaspirated	p	b	t	d	c	ɟ	k	g		
Aspirated	p <sup>h</sup>	b <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>	d <sup>h</sup>		ɟ <sup>h</sup>	k <sup>h</sup>	g <sup>h</sup>		
Spirants					s					h
Nasals		m		n				ŋ		
Lateral				l						
Trill				r						
Approximant		w				j				

### ASSAMESE CONSONANTS CHART

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.	vl.	vd.
Unaspirated	p	b	t	d			k	g		
Aspirated	p <sup>h</sup>	b <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>	d <sup>h</sup>			k <sup>h</sup>	g <sup>h</sup>		
Spirants			s	z			x			h
Nasals		m		n				ŋ		
Lateral				l						
Trill				r						
Approximant		w				j				

The manner of uttering consonants is quite different between the two languages. Thus, it creates pronunciation problems for the Assamese speakers learning Manipuri. Generally,

consonants are pronounced with inherent vowel /ə/ in Manipuri while Assamese use an inherent vowel /ɒ/. (Traditionally some people read Manipuri words using Assamese reading style, using the inherent vowel /o/ but it does not coincide with the actual pronunciation of the language.

### A Comparative Reading Styles of Manipuri and Assamese Consonants

	Manipuri reading	Assamese reading
ক	kə	kɒ
খ	k <sup>h</sup> ə	k <sup>h</sup> ɒ
গ	gə	gɒ
ঘ	g <sup>h</sup> ə	g <sup>h</sup> ɒ
ঙ	ŋə	uŋɒ
চ	cə	prɔt <sup>h</sup> ɔm sɒ
ছ	sə	ditɪɒ sɒ
জ	bərgəjə/j <sup>h</sup> ə	bɔrgɪɒ zɒ
ঝ	j <sup>h</sup> əhə	z <sup>h</sup> ɒ
ঞ	niyə	niyɒ
ট	tə	murd <sup>h</sup> ɔniyɒ tɒ
ঠ	t <sup>h</sup> ə	murd <sup>h</sup> ɔniyɒ t <sup>h</sup> ɒ
ড	də	murd <sup>h</sup> ɔniyɒ dɒ
ঢ	d <sup>h</sup> əhə	murd <sup>h</sup> ɔniyɒ d <sup>h</sup> ɒ
ণ	murd <sup>h</sup> əniyə	murd <sup>h</sup> ɔniyɒ nɒ
ত	tə	dɔntiyɒ tɒ
থ	t <sup>h</sup> ə	dɔntiyɒ t <sup>h</sup> ɒ

দ	də	dɔntiɔ dɔ
ধ	d <sup>h</sup> əhə	dɔntiɔ d <sup>h</sup> ɔ
ন	nə	dɔntiɔ nɔ
প	pə	pɔ
ফ	p <sup>h</sup> ə	p <sup>h</sup> ɔ
ব	bə	bɔ
ভ	b <sup>h</sup> ə	b <sup>h</sup> ɔ
ম	mə	mɔ
য	əntəstəj <sup>h</sup> ə/j <sup>h</sup> ə	untɔstɔ zɔ
র	əntəstərə/rə	rɔ
ল	lə	lɔ
ঝ	wa	uɔb bɔ
শ	talabisə/sə	talibɔ sɔ
ষ	mund <sup>h</sup> yəsə	murd <sup>h</sup> iniɔ sɔ
স	dandesə	dɔntɔ sɔ
হ	hə	hɔ
ক্ষ	k <sup>h</sup> iyə	k <sup>h</sup> iyɔ
ড়	dorbindu	dɔybindu rɔ
ঢ	dorbinduhə	d <sup>h</sup> ɔybindu rɔ
য়	əntəstəyə/yə	untəstɔ iyɔ
ং	ənɔŋsar	anusar
ঃ	bisargə	bixorgɔ
ঁ	candabindu	cɔndrɔbindu

The above reading style of Manipuri consonant phonemes is also sometimes pronounced ক as ko, খ as k<sup>h</sup>o, etc. by some people, but it is the blind imitation of Bengali-Assamese reading style and it is not supported by Manipuri word writing and reading styles. These reading styles are also not exactly same as in Bengali-Assamese because they are read as ক as kɔ, খ as k<sup>h</sup>ɔ etc.

At the time of word reading, the inherent vowel is dropped when a secondary symbol or another vowel is added in Manipuri as well as in Assamese. In the case of Assamese, inherent vowel is retained in word final position to certain exceptions (Baruah, P.N. Dutta, 1992). On the other hand, in the case of Manipuri, if consonants /p, t, k, m, n, ŋ, l/ occur in a syllable or word final position without any secondary symbol, then it becomes *half sound* (except in loan words), which means an unreleased sound.

### **Productive Nature of Consonants in the Initial Position**

In Assamese, all consonants except /ŋ, w, j/ occur in the initial position of a word. However, the use of these phonemes in the initial position is very productive in Manipuri. The production of /ŋ, w, j/ phonemes in the initial position is a big problem for Assamese people.

The difficulties of producing these phonemes in the initial position can be analyzed as follows:

In Assamese velar nasal voiced /ŋ/ does not occur in the initial position of a word but it occurs in medial and final positions. If /ŋ/ occurs in the word initial position, there is a mispronunciation. Assamese speakers produce the sound as uŋ, nɔ or ɔ. For example;

<b>Word</b>	<b>Manipuri pronunciation</b>	<b>Pronunciation made by Assamese</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
ঙসি	/ŋəsi/	/nɔsi/ or /ɔsi/	‘today’
ঙৰাং	/ŋəraŋ/	/nɔraŋ/	‘yesterday’
ঙা	/ŋa/	/uŋa/	‘fish’

In Assamese /j/ does not occur in the initial position of a word but in medial and final positions. So, mispronunciation is found if /j/ occurs in the word initial position. Assamese speakers utter the sound as u, a or ɔ. For example;

<b>Word</b>	<b>Manipuri pronunciation</b>	<b>Pronunciation made by Assamese</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
যুম	/jum/	/um/	‘house’
যান্না	/jamnə/	/amna/	‘many’
যোং	/joŋ/	/ɔŋ/	‘monkey’

Manipuri ৰ /w/ does not occur in Assamese words in the initial position but in medial and final positions. If ৰ /w/ occurs in the word initial position there is a mispronunciation. Assamese speakers produce the sound as b or wɔ. For example,

<b>Word</b>	<b>Manipuri pronunciation</b>	<b>Pronunciation made by Assamese</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
ৰা	/wa/	/ba/ or /wɔa/	‘word,’
ৰাৰী	/wari/	/bari/ or /wɔari/	‘story’
ৰাই	/waj/	/bai/ or /wɔai/	‘husk’

## Difficulties with Graphemes

On the other hand, the phonetic value of the following graphemes is different between Manipuri and Assamese. So it is a problem to Assamese speakers learning Manipuri.

The grapheme চ /c/ is pronounced as /s/ by the Assamese. Thus the pronunciation of চ /c/ always make a problem to Assamese trainee learning Manipuri. For example,

Word	Manipuri pronunciation	Pronunciation made by Assamese	Gloss
চৎপা	cətpə	/sɔtpɔ/	‘to go’
চংবা	cəŋbə	/sɔŋbɔ/	‘to enter’
চোৎপা	cɔtpə	/sɔtpɔ/	‘to be wet’

In this manner Assamese people write চিমেন্ট /siment/ for the word ‘cement’, but if we write it in Manipuri writing style, it will be সিমেন্ট /siment/. Another example is চেলুন /səlu:n/ for ‘saloon’ in Assamese, and Manipuri writing style is সেলুন /səlu:n/. চেপটেম্বৰ /septembər/ for ‘September’ in Assamese, and Manipuri writing style is সেপটেম্বৰ /septembər/.

Manipuri palatal fricative voiceless sound স, শ, ষ /s/ is pronounced as velar fricative sound /x/ by the Assamese. For example,

Word	Manipuri pronunciation	Pronunciation made by Assamese	Gloss
শনাউ	/sənaw/	/xɔnau/	‘calf’
সনা	/səna/	/xɔna/	‘gold’
মশা	/məsa/	/mɔxa/	‘body’
সৰ্ম্মা	/sərma/	/xɔrma/	‘a title’

Manipuri palatal plosive voiced sound জ /j/ is pronounced as alveolar fricative voiced sound /z/ by the Assamese. For example:

Word	Manipuri pronunciation	Pronunciation made by Assamese	Gloss
জগোই	/jəgoj/	/zɔgoj/	‘dance’
লাইজ	/ləjjə/	/ləjzɔ/	‘water’
খুজাই	/k <sup>h</sup> uʃaj/	/k <sup>h</sup> uzaj/	‘glass’

### Phonological Problems Faced by Assamese Speakers Learning Manipuri

The following points are the main problems made by Assamese speaker learning Manipuri.

1. Unable to use Manipuri inherent mid-central unrounded vowel /ə/ in the production of consonants. Tendency to pronounce with inherent lower mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/.
2. Unable to pronounce Manipuri mid-central unrounded vowel /ə/ in isolation. Tendency to replace it by lower-mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/.
3. Unable to pronounce mid-front unrounded vowel /e/ in the medial position of a syllable. Tendency to replace it by lower-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/.
4. Unable to pronounce isolated vowel syllable in the word final position.
5. Unable to pronounce some diphthongs. Tendency to replace by vowel sequence.
6. Unable to pronounce /ŋ/, /w/ and /j/ in the initial position.
7. Grapheme /c/ is pronounced as /s/.
8. Grapheme /s/ is pronounced as /x/ in the initial position.
9. Unable to pronounce unreleased consonant in the final position of a syllable or a word, since the orthographic representation is not so scientific to represent the unreleased sound.

10. Unable to differentiate between high and low tone. Tendency to replace these tone variation by short and long vowels.

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