

Vowel Harmony in Chiru

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to describe vowel harmony in Chiru. Chiru is an endangered Kuki-Chin language of Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson 1904) spoken by 8599 speakers (Census of India: 2011). *Harmony* is a term used in phonology to refer to the way the articulation of one phonological unit is influenced by another unit in the same word or phrase (Crystal 1997). An analogous notion is that of assimilation. The two main processes are consonant harmony and vowel harmony. Interestingly vowel harmony is found only in a few languages among Kuki-Chin groups, viz., Biate, Chiru etc. Most of the Kuki-Chin languages like Thadou, do not have vowel harmony. The vowel harmony in Chiru mainly occurs in pronominal prefixes and genitives of the first and third persons, causative prefixes, numeral prefixes and a few disyllabic words. This phonological process in Chiru is due to the regressive assimilation of vowels in which the vowel phoneme in the first syllable is influenced by the vowel phoneme in the following syllable to become identical to each other in a word.

Keywords: Chiru, Kuki-Chin, Vowel harmony

Introduction

Chiru, the language spoken by the Chiru people, belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson 1904). Chiru is one of the thirty-three recognised tribal languages of Manipur. The total population of Chiru speakers is only 8599 (census of India: 2011). The language has close affinities with other Kuki-Chin languages, viz., Ranglong, Aimol, Kom, Chorei, Darlong, Hrangkhoh, Sakachep, etc. The native speakers of Chiru settle in 12 villages situated in Kangpokpi, Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts of Manipur and 1 village in Cachar district of Assam. Since the Chiru people settle in different locations of Manipur and Assam and their villages are a distant apart from one another, the Chiru speakers of one village are not in frequent contact with the Chiru speakers of the other villages. Rather, they

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are more frequently in contact with the speakers of other languages settling in their respective neighbouring villages. This may eventually lead to a great variation in the language spoken by the native speakers from one village to another. Moreover, it is evident that there are some borrowed words from words from other languages which have replaced the original terms in Chiru. Therefore, the documentation and description of the language are highly required to preserve the language.

Personal Pronouns

Before discussing vowel harmony, it will be worthwhile to introduce the personal pronouns and clitics in Chiru. The personal pronouns and clitics in Chiru are provided in Table 1 and table 2 respectively as follows:

	1st Person exclusive	1st Person inclusive	2nd Person	3rd Person
Singular	<i>kei</i>		<i>naŋ</i>	<i>ama</i>
Plural	<i>keini</i>	<i>keini</i>	<i>naŋni</i>	<i>amani</i>
Dual	<i>kadin</i>	<i>nadin</i>	<i>naŋdin</i>	<i>adin</i>

Table 1. Personal pronouns in Chiru

	1st person exclusive	1st person inclusive	2nd person	3rd person
Singular	<i>ka-</i>		<i>naŋ-</i>	<i>a-</i>
plural	<i>ka-</i>	<i>na-</i>	<i>naŋ-</i>	<i>a-</i>
Dual	<i>ka-</i>	<i>na-</i>	<i>naŋ</i>	<i>a-</i>

Table 2. Clitics in Chiru

Vowel Harmony

Harmony is a term used in phonology to refer to the way the articulation of one phonological unit is influenced by another unit in the same word or phrase (David Crystal 1997). An analogous notion is that of assimilation. The term vowel harmony is synonymous with the term ‘metaphony’. The term ‘umlaut’ is used for regressive vowel harmony. Metaphony is the

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general term while umlaut and vowel harmony are subtypes of metaphony. In this article, the term ‘vowel harmony’ is used for regressive vowel harmony. Most of the agglutinative languages have vowel harmony. Interestingly vowel harmony is found only in a few languages among Kuki-Chin groups, viz., Biate, Chiru etc. Most of the Kuki-Chin languages like Thadou, Paite, Kom, Purum, Koireng etc. do not have vowel harmony. In languages with vowel harmony, there are constraints on which vowels may be found near each other. Prefixes and suffixes usually follow vowel harmony rules. The vowel harmony in Chiru mainly occurs in pronominal prefixes and genitives of the first and third persons, causative prefixes, numeral prefixes and a few words within the stem. This phonological process is due to the regressive assimilation of vowels in which the vowel phoneme in the first syllable is influenced by the vowel phoneme in the following syllable to become identical to each other in a word. The vowel harmony in Chiru is represented schematically in the following diagram (Figure1).



Figure1. Schematic diagram of vowel harmony in Chiru.

In Figure1, the vowel V₂ causes the preceding vowel V₁ to assimilate and become identical to each other. Thus, the two vowels are said to be in harmony. The vowel that causes the vowel assimilation is termed as ‘trigger’ while the vowel that is assimilated is termed as ‘target’.

Genitives and Pronominal Prefixes

The vowels in the genitives and pronominal prefixes consistently change to assimilate with the trigger vowel in the root of the word. The genitives in Chiru *ka-* ‘my’ and *a-* ‘his/her’ can change as *ki-*, *ku-*, *ko-*, *ke-* and *i-*, *o-*, *e-*, *u-* respectively according to the types of vowels in the root or stem. But the vowel in the second person pronominal prefix and genitive case *naŋ-* ‘your’ does not assimilate with the vowels of the root or stem of the word. The vowel harmony of genitives is given in the table 3.

Genitives	Gloss		Root /stem	Gloss		Vowel Harmony	Gloss
<i>ka-</i>	‘my’	+	<i>pu</i>	‘grandfather’	→	<i>kupu</i>	‘my grandfather’
<i>ka-</i>	‘my’	+	<i>ni</i>	‘aunt’	→	<i>kini</i>	‘my aunt’
<i>ka-</i>	‘my’	+	<i>vɔn</i>	‘stomach’	→	<i>kɔvɔn</i>	‘my stomach’
<i>ka-</i>	‘my’	+	<i>der</i>	‘trousers’	→	<i>keder</i>	‘my trousers’
<i>a-</i>	‘his/her’	+	<i>mó</i>	‘hair’	→	<i>omó</i>	‘his/her hair’
<i>a-</i>	‘his/her’	+	<i>nú</i>	‘mother’	→	<i>unú</i>	‘his/her mother’
<i>a-</i>	‘his/her’	+	<i>mík</i>	‘eye’	→	<i>imík</i>	‘his/her eye’
<i>a-</i>	‘his/her’	+	<i>ké</i>	‘leg’	→	<i>eké</i>	‘his/her leg’

Table 3. Chiru vowel harmony in genitives

Similarly, the vowels in the pronominal prefixes of Chiru are also harmonized according to the types of vowels in root or stem. Table 4 provides the vowel harmony of pronominal prefixes of Chiru.

Pronominal prefixes	Gloss		Root /stem	Gloss		Vowel Harmony	Gloss
<i>ka-</i>	‘I’	+	<i>múk</i>	‘see’	→	<i>kumúk</i>	‘I see’
<i>ka-</i>	‘I’	+	<i>sít</i>	‘touch’	→	<i>kisít</i>	‘I touch’
<i>ka-</i>	‘I’	+	<i>tór</i>	‘push’	→	<i>kotór</i>	‘I push’
<i>ka-</i>	‘I’	+	<i>rei</i>	‘say’	→	<i>kerei</i>	‘I say’
<i>a-</i>	‘s/he’	+	<i>múk</i>	‘see’	→	<i>umúk</i>	‘s/he sees’
<i>a-</i>	‘s/he’	+	<i>sít</i>	‘touch’	→	<i>isít</i>	‘s/he touches’
<i>a-</i>	‘s/he’	+	<i>tór</i>	‘push’	→	<i>otór</i>	‘s/he pushes’
<i>a-</i>	‘s/he’	+	<i>rei</i>	‘say’	→	<i>erei</i>	‘s/he says’

Table 4. Chiru vowel harmony in pronominal prefixes

Vowel Harmony in Numerals

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The numerals in Chiru from one to ten are preceded by prefixes. In Chiru, there is a tendency that monosyllabic words particularly adjectives take affixes to become dissyllabic. Usually the third person clitic form *a-* is prefixed to any monosyllabic word to become dissyllabic. The vowels in the prefixes are harmonized by the vowel in the root excepting four, five and seven which are already disyllabic. Table 5 gives the Chiru vowel harmony in numerals as follows:

prefix	Root	Before Vowel harmony	After Vowel harmony	Gloss
<i>a-</i>	<i>k^hat</i>	<i>ak^hat</i>	<i>ak^hat</i>	‘one’
<i>a-</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>adi</i>	<i>idi</i>	‘two’
<i>a-</i>	<i>t^hum</i>	<i>at^húm</i>	<i>ut^húm</i>	‘three’
	<i>milí</i>	<i>milí</i>	<i>milí</i>	‘four’
	<i>rəŋə</i>	<i>rəŋə</i>	<i>rəŋə</i>	‘five’
<i>a-</i>	<i>rup</i>	<i>arup</i>	<i>urup</i>	‘six’
	<i>siri</i>	<i>siri</i>	<i>siri</i>	‘seven’
<i>a-</i>	<i>ret</i>	<i>aret</i>	<i>eret</i>	‘eight’
<i>a-</i>	<i>kó</i>	<i>akó</i>	<i>okó</i>	‘nine’
<i>a-</i>	<i>səm</i>	<i>asəm</i>	<i>əsəm</i>	‘ten’

Table 5. Chiru vowel harmony in numerals

Causative Prefix

The causative prefix in Chiru is *ma-* in which the vowel is changeable according to the vowel of the root. When another prefix precedes the causative prefix, both the vowels in the prefixes are harmonized by the trigger vowel. Table 6 provides the Chiru vowel harmony in causative prefix as follows:

Prefix	Gloss	Causative	Root	Gloss	Vowel harmony	Gloss
		<i>ma-</i>	<i>cəm</i>	‘jump’	<i>məcəm</i>	‘cause to jump’

		<i>ma-</i>	<i>cɛ</i>	‘wake’	<i>mɛcɛ</i>	‘cause to wake’
		<i>ma-</i>	<i>sit</i>	‘touch’	<i>misit</i>	‘cause to touch’
<i>ka-</i>	‘I’	<i>ma-</i>	<i>cɔm</i>	‘jump’	<i>kɔmɔcɔm</i>	‘I cause to jump’
<i>a-</i>	‘s/he’	<i>ma-</i>	<i>cɛ</i>	‘wake’	<i>ɛmɛcɛ</i>	‘s/he causes to wake’

Table 6. Vowel harmony in causative prefix

Vowel Harmony within Stem

There are a few words in Chiru in which the vowels across the syllable within the stem are harmonized. This occurs exceptionally in a few words and not common in the language. This phonological process is also caused by regressive assimilation of the preceding vowels triggered by the syllable final vowel. Table 7 shows the Chiru vowel harmony within stem.

Before vowel harmony			After vowel harmony	
Chiru	Gloss		Chiru	Gloss
<i>pat^hen</i>	‘God’	→	<i>pet^hen</i>	‘God’
<i>rosem</i>	‘a cultural musical instrument’	→	<i>resem</i>	‘a cultural musical instrument’
<i>selaŋdar</i>	‘a violin-like cultural musical instrument’	→	<i>salaŋdar</i>	‘a violin-like cultural musical instrument’

Table 7. Vowel harmony within stem

Conclusion

Chiru, unlike other Kuki-Chin languages, viz., Thadou, Paite, Kom etc, has vowel harmony. This phonological process in the language is due to the regressive assimilation of the target vowel by the trigger vowel within a word. Vowel harmony in Chiru mainly occurs in genitives, pronominal prefixes, causative prefixes, numerals from 1 to 10 and a few words within the stem. In all the categories mentioned above, the vowel harmonies are only of regressive type. There are only a few words in Chiru in which vowel harmony occur within the stem. But this is sporadic and is not commonly found occurring in Chiru.

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