

## Central Vowels of Urali and Other Dravidian Tribal Languages in the Microlinguistic Area: A Typological Study

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After the introduction of the existence of Dravidian family of languages by Alexander Campbell in the year 1816, it was Robert Caldwell who originally came from Scotland wrote the first comparative grammar of Dravidian languages. After this monumental work of Caldwell to a greater extent it was revealed to the world about the existence of a separate and highly developed group of languages called Dravidian family of languages which has approximately 222 million speakers. These many people speak 27 languages and several other tribal languages / dialects. Caldwell's comparative grammar made several scholars to develop interest in the studies of Dravidian languages. Subsequently, several of them wrote descriptive grammars of Dravidian languages spoken in India which include many tribal languages spoken in the southern part of India. In south the Western Ghats area which includes the Nilgiri belt has several Dravidian tribal languages.

Apart from Southern part of India, India as a country has several languages and has extensive multilingualism. Having seen the linguistic diversity and multilingualism in India, Emeneau while discussing about the concept India as a linguistic area, had stated that any area which includes languages belonging to more than one family but showing traits in common which are found not to belong to the other members of (at least) one of the families. (M. B. Emeneau, Source: Language, Vol. 32, No. 1, Jan. - March 1956, pp. 3-16). Since Western Ghats area which includes the Nilgiri belt has several tribal languages, after the concept of India as a linguistic area put forth by Emeneau, in the year 1980 both Diffloth and Zvelebil have identified certain features of diffusion and convergence among the various local languages of the Nilgiris and advocate for the study of Nilgiri areal studies using the term Microarea. (Zvelebil in *Dravidian Linguistics an introduction*, 1990) and this concept was further explored by Emeneau and he could identify extensive polyglottism and bi/multilingualism in the Nilgiris which is unique to this part of the Western Ghats. Subsequently, he made an attempt to identify Nilgiris as

a linguistic area and mentioned that this area can be termed as a *linguistic micro area*. (Emeneau, 1985).

With this introduction if we look into one feature of centralized vowels in the Tribal languages of Nilgiris, we could find lot of variations and irregularities in the phonemic system of the tribal languages spoken in this area. For instance, IruLa, one of the Nilgiri languages, has the entire system of centralized vowels /i, ë, ä, ö, ü/ as phonemes. Diffloth and Zvelebil, 1968 cited in Gnanasundaram and Rangan (eds.) 2015.

In many languages, irregularities are observed by the scholars who worked on these languages. In general, the centralized vowels are phonemes in many tribal languages spoken in the Nilgiris (Kapp, 1987). In addition to this, Kapp has stated that in the tribal language PalukuRumba spoken in the Periyar District of Tamil Nadu, he could identify two centralized vowels [i, ë] but only at the allophonic level. Also, the frequency of the lexical forms involving centralized vowels are very less. (Gnasundaram and Rangan (eds.) 2015, pp.340).

Balakumar, 1993 also claims that the PalukuRumba language he has worked on has the centralized vowels [i, ë] only at the allophonic level. He further claims that centralized vowels are in the process of losing the characteristics of the centralized nature owing to the influence of the dominant language Tamil. This means the frequency of the lexical forms involving centralized vowels are becoming less if we study the language diachronically.

Emeneau has recognized centralized vowels in ToDa, e.g., İb ‘needle’, öw ‘seven’, tü ‘honey making insect’.

When we look into the works of various scholars it is identified that at least 6 tribal languages of Nilgiris (Irula, aalukuRumba, paalukuRumba, JenukuRumba, sholiga, toDa) have centralized vowels.

### **Centralized Vowels in U:ra:Li**

Apart from the above languages, another tribal language U:ra:Li spoken by the community named U:ra:Li settled in the Sathyamangalam Taluk of Erode District of Tamil Nadu situated in the tri-junction hill tracts of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, at an altitude of 1105 meters above the mean sea level too have centralized vowels. This speech form as per the study is the dialect of Irula. In this variety three vowels / ë ä, ü/ are in phonemic level and the remaining two vowels [i, ö] are in the allophonic level. (Sam Mohan Lal 1982). Mohan Lal has stated in his book that the change of two centralized vowels from its phonemic status to the allophonic status is mainly due to the influence of the dominant language Tamil. Balakumar too

has observed this. While discussing about the status of Irula language Periyalwar and Ganasundaram have stated that Irula has total 12 dialects. (Periyalwar and Gnanasundaram, 2015. p.158). We do not have enough data to verify the status of the centralized vowels in these dialectal forms.

As per the available information, it can be stated that this micro linguistic area has lot of fluidity in the use of centralized vowels. If we look into this phenomenon in detail, it is possible to identify the language movement and language loss in this micro linguistic area. In addition to this it will be useful to study microscopically other areas of language too.

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