

Lateral Approximants and its Phonetic and Phonological Realization in Bangla and Malayalam

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Abstract

This paper is a study on structural distribution of lateral consonants in Bangla and Malayalam for identifying the nature of mother tongue interference in case of lateral approximants in Bengali diaspora in Kerala. In Malayalam, there are two lateral approximants, which are phonemic in nature, [l] and [ɭ]. While in Bengali, there is one phoneme [l] having three realisations as [l], [ɭ] and [ɻ] which are allophonic in nature.

Keywords: Approximants, lateral, Malayalam, Bangla.

1. Introduction

Though all the most Indian languages have a unique alphabetic system, their linguistic characteristics are different in many respects. The phonic and allophonic nature of each language provides its word structure. The existence of distinctive phonemes may have different allophones which serve a distinctive part of linguistic behavior of that language. Since the articulation of syllables are on accordance with the phonetic characteristics of sounds combination, it is normal speech behavior of any native speaker to produce the structured phonological combination of their language while they speak another language, as the whole language faculty function in well-defined order. So conscious effort is necessary to overcome these phonetic features.

In this paper, we investigate the phonetic realization of lateral sounds that affects greatly when a Bengali speaks Malayalam. Though, there is only one lateral approximant, the alveolar lateral /l/, is available in Bangla, it has different phonetic realization; the retroflex and dental variable of /l/ may be functioned as a distinctive phonetic feature of Bengali language. This

feature reflects in their Malayalam pronunciation, as the phonological characteristics of laterals in Malayalam is different from that of Bengali. Their distribution is contrastive in nature. Moreover, its occurrence is possible in all the three contexts, initial, middle, and final, though the structural distribution of alveolar laterals both in Bengali and Malayalam are different. This paper investigates the nature of its phonological manifestation, in the case of lateral approximants, in both languages and also identifies the nature of mother tongue interference caused when a person belongs to the Bengali diaspora speaks Malayalam.

2. The Phonological Distribution of Alveolar Lateral Approximant in Bengali

At the initial position, the most frequent manifestation of syllabic structure of /l/ is with /ɔ/, the central open-mid rounded vowel, which is considered as the most prominent vowel in Bengali language, in the rate of occurrence in all contexts. And this vowel is absent in Malayalam where the vowel /a/, which is also a central vowel, is at the first position in the frequency of occurrence in all the three positions, initial, middle, and final. This nature of syllabicity in both languages causes major challenge in the Bengali diaspora in Kerala. A tendency to pronounce /ɔ/ instead of /a/ is evident in their pronunciation. Even though the alveolar lateral approximant /l/, as a phoneme, is available in both languages, its syllabic structure is greatly different.

So, the influence of Bengali language is reflected when a person belongs to Bengali diaspora speaks Malayalam. The most identifiable phonetic difference between Bengali /ɔ/ and Malayalam /a/ is all the initial /la/ sound is substituted with the rounded /ɔ/ in middle and final position. This roundness nature may consider as the most prominent phonetic feature of Malayalam pronunciation among the Bengali diaspora in Kerala. The tongue is slightly retracted, and the lips are rounded while pronouncing /la/ at the initial, middle, and final positions. The phonological distribution of /l/ with the corresponding vowels other than initial and final positions are intervocalic in all the intermediate syllables in both languages. But there are certain exception in the context of clusters both in Bengali and Malayalam. In case of /la:/, the influence of /ɔ/ is not evident, as /aa/ is also a prominent vowel in Bengali.

The other syllables like /lo:/, /lee/ are other noticeable syllables at the initial position in Malayalam. Words with other syllables at the initial position are very less in number. They are used to write loan words in Malayalam. As in the case of Malayalam, the most frequently occurring vowels other than /ɔ/ is /o:/ and /la:/ in Bengali; both are available in the two languages. The vowel length in Bengali is not phonemic, but allophonic. But in Malayalam it is phonemic. Hence, in this study, much attention is not given to vowel length.

2.1. For substantiating this syllabic nature, a list of words with the positions discussed above is given below. The Malayalam pronunciation of Bengali is also listed after that in order to establish the general trend of Bengali diaspora in Kerala.

1. /lɔʔ/ 'to take'
2. /lɔŋka/ 'chillies'

3. /lɔŋa/ ‘bamboo pola’
4. /lɔklɔk/ ‘expressing the lolling state’
5. /lɔŋon/ ‘an auspicious time’
6. /labɽa/ ‘mixed vegetable curry’
7. /lalima/ ‘redness’
8. /lalon/ ‘nurture’
9. /lokkho/ ‘aim’
10. /lokkhi/ ‘lakshmi’

The above-mentioned phonological structure of Bengali is greatly influenced when a native Bengali pronounce Malayalam words. Tongue, in this context, is positioned in such a way to articulate the corresponding syllables that are available in Bengali language. The choice of substitution is on the basis of its phonetic similarities.

2.2 /la/ > [lɔ]

1. /layam/[lɔyam] ‘blending’
2. /laksyam/[lɔksyam] ‘aim’
3. /lamghanam/[lɔmghanam] ‘violation’
4. /lahari/[lɔhari] ‘intoxication’
5. /lahala/[lɔhala] ‘riot’

2.3 /la:/ = [la:]

1. /la:ghavam/[la:ghavam] ‘silliness’
2. /la:bham/[la:bham] ‘profit’
3. /la:yani/[la:yani] ‘solution’
4. /la:lanam/[la:lanam] ‘fondling’
5. /la:vanam/[la:vanam] ‘salt’

2.4 /lo:/= [lo:]

1. /lo:kam/ [lo:kam] ‘world’
2. /lo:lam/ [lo:lam] ‘fragile’
3. /lo:ham/ [lo:ham] ‘metal’
4. /lo:canam/ [lo:canam] ‘eye’
5. /lo:ri/ [lo:ri] ‘lorry’

3. Occurrence of /l/ at the Intermediate Position

The major occurrence of /l/ extends to the intermediate position in both languages; at the initial and final position, its occurrence is phonologically restricted. The occurrence of /l/ at the second syllable initial position are considered for the present study. Here is a list of such words from Bengali language.

1. /pɔlaf/ ‘flower’

2. /gɔlaf/ ‘glass’
3. /tɔla/ ‘under’
4. /lɔlona/ ‘beautiful lady’
5. /tʃʰɔlona/ ‘deception’
6. /lalima/ ‘redness’
7. /lalɔʃa/ ‘greedy’
8. /ɔlɔʃ/ ‘lazy’
9. /ɔloukik/ ‘supernatural’

3.1 Considering the syllabic structure of alveolar lateral approximant in Malayalam, all the syllables mentioned above, as in the case of Bengali words, except /lɔ/ is also available in the language. So, the prominent influence of mother tongue while pronouncing Malayalam words by a person belonging to Bengali diaspora in Kerala is in the case of /lɔ/, as in the event of /l/ at the initial position. Since there are identical syllabic structures available in Malayalam, their pronunciation is perfect in all other referred conditions. Here is a list of Malayalam words with its corresponding Bengali pronunciation with the alveolar lateral approximant /l/ at the second syllable initial position.

1. /kala:pam/ [kala:pam] ‘conflict’
2. /tula:m/ [tula:m] ‘month name’
3. /nila:vu/ [nila:vu] ‘moonlight’
4. /kala:layam/ [kala:layam] ‘marriage’
5. /talo:lam/ [talo:lam] ‘chuckle’
6. /a:lo:chana/ [a:lo:chana] ‘thinking’
7. /kalo:tsavam/ [kalo:tsavam] ‘art festival’
8. /me:lo:ttu/ [me:lo:ttu] ‘upward’

3.2 The Alveolar Lateral Approximant /l/ at the Word Final Position

The occurrence /l/ in Malayalam is mostly restricted to certain grammatical contexts like verbal noun, locative case marker, conjunctive marker which are very common in everyday use. In Bengali language also the words ending with /l/ is common. Following is the list of words with /l/ at word final position with three different onset position.

1. /tɔpobɔl/ ‘the power of penetration’
2. /ɔbikɔl/ ‘Duplicate’
3. /utkɔl/ ‘Orissa’
4. /uɣɔl/ ‘brightness’
5. /ɔpʰɔl/ ‘unfruitfulness’
6. /ɔkal/ ‘improper time’
7. /utʰɔl/ ‘wave movement’
8. /kɔmol/ ‘lotus’
9. /ucchol/ ‘swelling up’

10. /ɔmbol/ ‘acidity’
11. /kɔmbol/ ‘blanket’
12. /ol/ ‘bulbous plant’

3.3 The occurrence /l/ in Malayalam is mostly restricted to certain grammatical contexts like verbal noun, locative case marker, conjunctive marker which are very common in everyday use. The following are the examples of Malayalam words with /l/ at the final position and its corresponding Bengali pronunciation.

1. /Ka:val/ [ka:val] ‘temple’
2. /u:nja:l/ [u:nja:l] ‘swing’
3. /takil/ [takil] ‘musical instrument’
4. /Vakki:l/ [vakki:l] ‘lawyer’

There is no considerable difference exists in the pronunciation of /l/ at the word initial position, even though, certain identifiable difference is evident in the articulation of other syllables with in the words.

3.4 Lateral Retroflex Approximant [ɭ] at the Word Final Position

But words with lateral retroflex approximant /ɭ/ at the word final position is also available in Malayalam. Its occurrence is mostly restricted in certain grammatical contexts like pronouns, plural marker, adverbs, and also in the case of certain suffixation. So, its usage is also high in day-to-day communication. It seems difficult to a Bengali to articulate /ɭ/ at the final position, as the allophone /l/ does not occur at the word final position. So, it is a natural linguistic behavior to a Bengali speaker to articulate the alveolar lateral approximant instead of retroflex lateral approximant /ɭ/, which functions as an allophone only at the context of retroflex sounds. Eg. /uɭto/ ‘opposite’, /paɭta/ ‘reverse’. A normal Bengali cannot articulate this sound in a different context. The following are the list of Malayalam words of this kind with its Bengali pronunciation.

1. /avaɭ/ [aval] ‘she’
2. /niɳkaɭ/ [niɳkal] ‘you’
3. /va:l/ [va:l] ‘sword’
4. /kuttikal/ [kuttikal] ‘children’
5. /malaya:ɭikal/ [malay:aɭikal] ‘malayalees’
6. /appo:l/ [appo:l] ‘then’
7. /ka:ɳumpo:l/ [ka:ɳumpo:l] ‘when I will see’
8. /kaɳɔppo:l/ [kaɳɔppo:l] ‘when I saw’

4. The Allophonic Distribution of /l/

4.1 /l/ -Voiced Apico Pre-palatal Retroflex Lateral Approximant

In general, the retroflex lateral approximant is available in both languages. But there exists slight difference in their place of articulation. In Bengali, it is voiced apico prepalatal retroflex approximant. Irrespective of this difference, each sound shares common acoustic

features. So, perception of these sounds is more identical. So, it is not a task for a Bengali speaker speaking Malayalam words with the retroflex lateral consonant. But the influence of mother tongue is also playing its role even in the case of these very similar sounds. The distribution of /l/ in Bengali is allophonic in nature; it serves as an allophone of the alveolar lateral approximant [l] and it is assimilated as /l/ at the context of retroflex sounds. So, the use of /l/ is restricted with such contexts. In the case of Malayalam, its distribution is phonological. In Bengali, the allophonic distribution of /l/ is only available at the intermediate position. Eg. /ulʈo/ ‘opposite’, /palʈa/ ‘reverse’. Occurrence of such context is absent in Malayalam.

4.2 /l/ The Lamino-dental Approximant

As in the case of retroflex lateral approximant, the distribution of /l/ is also allophonic in nature. The alveolar lateral approximant /l/ is assimilated as /l/ at the context of the preceding dental consonant, eg. /polʈa/ ‘name of a place’, /calʈa/ ‘sour vegetable’, /polʈe/ ‘wick’, /alʈa/ ‘a beauty aid’, all these words are very common in everyday use. Such phonological context is also available in Malayalam. The following gives the list of Malayalam compound words with alveolar lateral approximant and the adjacent dental plosive.

1. /vayalʈaɖam/ [vayalʈaɖam] ‘paddy ridge’
2. /a:ltara/ [a:ltara] ‘altar’
3. /ka:yalʈaɖam/ [ka:yalʈaɖam] ‘backwater ridge’
4. /kaltittʌ/ [kaltittʌ] ‘fodder’

Even though alveolar lateral approximant is available in Bengali, it cannot be articulated at the context of dental plosive as pronounced by a native Malayalee. This is because of their speech behavior to articulate dental lateral approximant at the context of dental plosive.

Conclusion

Considering the nature of occurrence of laterals, the laterals in Bengali and Malayalam occur mostly on certain distinctive phonetic environments, we could identify certain divergences as well as similarities in the phonological conditioning of its syllabic manifestation. The syllabicity of a language may act as the main cause of mother tongue interference, though identical phonemes are available in different languages. The tongue of a native speaker regulated in such a way to articulate the syllabic nature of that language. In case of Malayalam spoken by a person belongs to Bengali diaspora in Kerala, the mother tongue influence is caused by the syllabicity of Bengali language. The three lateral approximants of Bengali language are structured in a well-defined phonological environment, which is absent, in certain extent, in Malayalam. So possible substitution is made by a native Bengali speaker to cope with the phonetic characteristics of Malayalam; the absence of Phonological structure in a language is substituted with the more phonetically identifiable syllables.

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