Simplification of CC Sequence of Loan Words in Sylheti Bangla

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:6 June 2013**

Abstract

This paper aims to give an Optimality Theoretic account of the consonant cluster simplification process which occurs in Sylheti Bangla (henceforth SHB), a dialectal variety of Bengali Language, by the emergence of epenthetic vowel before and between the initial consonant clusters in the adaptation of loan words. The study of the Syllable structure of this dialect makes it clear that native Sylheti words are free from initial consonant cluster which compels Sylheti speakers to simplify word initial consonant clusters in loan words through two processes—to insert a vowel medially when clusters consist of obstruent+sonorant sounds, called anaptyxis. For example, /bro.t̪o/ is simplified as /bɔr.t̪ɔ/ 'fast' and a vowel is put initially when clusters start with sibilant[s]+stop, for example, /stei.ʃn/ is pronounced as /iʃ.ti.ʃɔn/ 'station' as well as when it starts with sibilant[s]+nasal[m], for example, /smouk/ is articulated as /is.mouk/ 'smoke', known prothesis. The Optimality account of these two processes gives us a clear picture that in Sylheti dialect markedness constraint *COMPLEX^{ONS} is undominated which dominates faithfulness constraint DEP-IO. However, a detailed picture of the Optimality Theoretic account of these two processes is given in the main paper.

1. Introduction

Throughout history many languages have borrowed words directly or indirectly from other languages which are modified phonologically during the process of borrowing. It is noticed that when a language encounters a different phonological structure of lexical borrowings that is not part of its phonology, speakers of language find ways to replace or fix the structure so it can be pronounceable. In other words, speakers use different types of phonotactics in adapting loan words because of the different phoneme inventories, syllable structures and phonotactic

constraints existing between the loan words and recipient language. Generally in a language loan words undergo adaptations to cause the lexical items to sound more native and less foreign.

This paper will concentrate on how loan words with initial consonant clusters in Sylheti dialect became nativised through the cluster simplification process by the occurrence of vowel before and between the initial consonant clusters. Sylheti dialect has borrowed a lot of words with initial consonant clusters from languages like Sanskrit, Arabic, Hindi, Persian, and English, etc. If we look at the Syllable structure of Sylheti dialect it is noticed that the possible syllable structures are CV /ɸa/ 'leg', CVC /xam/ 'work', VC /am/ 'mango'. In this dialect, complex syllable types such as CCVC, VCC, CCVCC or CCCVC are not allowed since the dialect disprefers clusters. So we see that in SHB maximum syllable structure is CVC and Sylheti speakers carry this structure in the incorporation of loan words. In SHB initial consonant cluster is simplified through two processes—anaptyxis which emerges in the case of obstruent+sonorant clusters, for example, /bɔrt̪ɔ/ (CVC.CV) instead of /broṯo/ (CCV.CV) "fast" and another is prothesis which occurs in the case of sibilant+ stop clusters, for example, /iʃtiʃɔn/ (VC.CV.CVC) instead of /steiʃn/ (CCVV.CV) and also in the case of sibilant+bilabial nasal [m] clusters, for example, /ismail/ (VC.CVVC) instead of /smail/ (CCVVC).

2. Sylheti Bangla

Sylheti Bangla is actually the language variety of Sylhet district (which is also known as the Surma Valley) in the North-Eastern region of Bangladesh. It is also spoken in the three states of India — Tripura (the North Tripura district), Assam (the Barak Valley) and Meghalaya. Outside of Bangladesh or India, SHB is also widely spoken in the United Kingdom. It was formerly written in its own script, Sylheti Nagari, similar in style to Kaithi (a script which belongs to the main group of North Indian scripts of Bihar). Though nowadays it is almost invariably written in Bangla script but it differs from Standard Colloquial Bangla (henceforth SCB) and other varieties of Bangla in terms of accent, vocabulary and pronunciation, etc. This dialect has borrowed a lot of words from other languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Hindi, Persian and English, etc. One thing should be noted here is that though Sylheti Bangla actually harks back its origin to present Sylhet of Bangladesh, it also dominates in places like North Tripura and Barak

Valley of Assam. The variety of Sylheti in these places is a bit different from the original one. The present paper is concerned with the Sylheti spoken by people of North Tripura.

3. **Data of Vowel Epenthesis in Sylheti Bangla**

Examples of medial and before vowel epenthesis in the incorporation of loan words with initial consonant clusters in Sylheti Bangla are given below.

I. Medial vowel epenthesis in word initial obstruent+sonorant clusters of loan words in Sylheti dialect is given here.

Source language

Sanskrit	SHB	Gloss
/broɳo/	/bɔrɔn/	‘pimple’
/broṭo/	/bɔrṭɔ/	‘fast’
/sraḍ^{h}o/	/səraḍḍɔ/	‘funeral’
English		
/sleit/	/səlet/	‘slate’
/pleit/	/ɸəleiʈ/	‘plate’
/bleit/	/bəleiʈ/	‘blate’

II. Examples of vowel epenthesis before the initial sibilant+stop clusters of loan words in Sylheti dialect are given below.

Source language

English	SHB	Gloss
/steiʃn/	/iʃtiʃɔn/	‘station’
/skul/	/iʃkul/	‘school’
/speʃl/	/isɸeʃal/	‘special’

III. Initial vowel epenthesis can also be found in the case of initial sibilant[s]+nasal[m] clusters of loan words in Sylheti dialect.

Source language

English	SHB	Gloss
/smail/	/ismail/	'smile'
/smɔːl/	/ismɔl/	'small'
/smouk/	/ismouk/	'smoke'

4. Analysis of Data

From the above mentioned data it is noticed that how Sylheti learners use a strategy of vowel epenthesis to break up consonant clusters to make them easy to pronounce. It is also noticed that in Sylheti dialect loan words underwent some other changes including vowel epenthesis. However, this paper only concentrates on the changes of initial consonant clusters of loanwords.

In epenthetic process of SHB we find when clusters start with obstruent and sonorant sounds Sylheti speakers insert a vowel in between two consonants and when it starts with sibilant and stop sounds as well as sibilant+nasal[m] sounds, then vowel is added initially. However to decide the site for epenthesis we can refer Gouskova's work on "Falling sonority onset, loan words and Syllable Contact" (2002). In her paper she claims that according to the Syllable Contact Law in CVC languages a sequence of consonants with equal or falling sonority is split apart by initial epenthesis, whereas those with rising sonority relations are declustered through medial epenthesis. However, if we look into the epenthetic process of Sylheti dialect we find that Gouskova's claim is partially true because though Sylheti speakers allow internal epenthesis in the case of rising sonority, this process is not supported by one cluster pattern when sibilant /s/ is followed by more sonorous nasal sound/m/. In this rising sonority cluster initial epenthesis occurs rather than medial epenthesis. For example, /smail/ is simplified as /ismail/ 'smile'. However except this cluster pattern, i.e. sibilant[s]+bilabial nasal[m], in other examples of rising sonority clusters in Sylheti Bangla, internal epenthesis occurs to break up the clusters. For example /sleit/ is simplified as /səlet/ 'slate', /slim/ as /silim/ 'slim', /glɑːs/ as /gɔllaʃ/ 'glass'. So

we see that in Sylheti dialect initial epenthesis occurs not only in falling or equal sonority clusters but also in rising sonority clusters though examples are very few.

5. An OT Analysis of the Epenthetic Process in Sylheti Bangla

Optimality Theory is a development of Generative Grammar which shares its focus on the investigation of universal principles, linguistic typology and first language acquisition. According to Prince and Smolensky, in the Optimality Theory structure phonological constraints are ranked and violable. Constraints are typically in conflict in the sense that to satisfy one constraint implies the violation of another. Given the fact that no form can satisfy all the constraints simultaneously, there must be some mechanism selecting forms that incur 'lesser' constraint violations from others that incur more serious ones. This selectional mechanism involves hierarchical RANKING of constraints, such that higher ranked constraints have priority over lower ranked ones. While Constraints are universal, the rankings are not: differences in ranking are the source of cross-linguistic variation (Kager 1999).

It is evident from the data section 3 that occurrence of consonant clusters in word initial is not allowed in Sylheti dialect which indicates that markedness constraint $^{*}\text{COMPLEX}^{\text{ONS}}$ is the driving force behind this cluster simplification process in SHB. Other constraint that we need to refer for vowel epenthesis is the faithfulness constraint MAX-IO which wins over another faithfulness constraint DEP-IO as Sylheti speakers do not prefer deletion in the case of consonant cluster simplification. Another markedness constraint ONSET dominates faithfulness constraint CONTIGUITY to form the optimal output with medial epenthesis but in the case of optimal output with initial epenthesis we find the exact opposite picture of these two constraints, i.e. CONTIGUITY wins over ONSET because in the simplification process of sibilant+stop clusters as well as sibilant+nasal[m] clusters, speakers prefer initial epenthesis rather than medial epenthesis and deletion. Here I would like to account sonority sequencing constraint SYLLABLE CONTACT which Gouskova referred to in her paper (2002) to claim that this constraint determines epenthetic site by effecting rising sonority clusters to be split apart by internal epenthesis and falling or equal sonority clusters to be split apart by initial epenthesis because Syllable Contact Law prefers sonority to fall across a syllable boundary.

So, it is noticed that in Sylheti dialect the medial epenthesis between obstruent+sonorant clusters and the initial epenthesis before sibilant+stop clusters are the result of the dominant markedness constraint SYLLABLE CONTACT but this constraint is not active in the case of initial epenthesis before the sibilant+nasal[m] clusters. This observation makes it clear that while in previous two cases of vowel epenthesis in Sylheti dialect SYLLABLE CONTACT Law is the undominated constraint but in the latter case this constraint gets dominated by CONTIGUITY constraint. Another important thing is that in the respect of internal epenthesis between obstruent+sonorant clusters SYLLABLE CONTACT dominates faithfulness constraint CONTIGUITY but the constraint CONTIGUITY ensures initial epenthesis before sibilant+stop clusters while the constraint SYLLABLE CONTACT is not at stake. Now, if we discuss the ranking of constraints to account for internal vowel epenthesis, we find that constraints CONTIGUITY and DEP-IO need to be ranked lower than the constraint $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$, SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO and ONSET whereas to account for initial epenthesis in sibilant+stop clusters constraints $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$, SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO and CONTIGUITY need to be ranked higher than constraint ONSET and DEP-IO as well as in the case of initial epenthesis in sibilant+nasal[m] clusters constraints $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$, MAX-IO and CONTIGUITY need to be ranked higher than SYLLABLE CONTACT, ONSET and DEP-IO.

In the first case of vowel epenthesis in SHB constraints $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS,}$ SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO and ONSET, in the second case $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$, SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO and CONTIGUITY and in the third case among the higher ranked constraints $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$, MAX-IO and CONTIGUITY and among the lower ranked constraints ONSET and SYLLABLE CONTACT can be kept in dashed lines as the order of their ranking would provide the same result. However, all these constraints and their rankings in internal as well as initial vowel epenthesis are discussed below.

$^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$
'Onsets are simple' (Kager, 1999)

IV. DEP-IO
'Output segments must have input correspondents.' ('No epenthesis')
(Kager, 1999)

V. MAX-IO
'Input segment must have output correspondents. ('No deletion)
(Kager, 1999)

VI. ONSET
* [V ('Syllables must have onset') (Kager, 1999)

VII. CONTIGUITY
'Elements adjacent in the input must be adjacent in the output'
(Gouskova, 2002)

VIII. SYLLABLE CONTACT
'Sonority must not rise across a syllable boundary'
(Murray Vennman, 1983; Gouskova, 2002)

Thus the ranking of constraints to account for medial epenthesis in Obstruent + sonorant clusters and to account for initial epenthesis in sibilant+ stop as well as in sibilant + nasal [m] clusters is given in X, XI and XII respectively.

IX. *COMPLEX ^{ONS}, SYLLABLE CONTACT , MAX-IO, ONSET >> CONTIGUITY >> DEP-IO

X. *COMPLEX ^{ONS} , SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO, CONTIGUITY >> ONSET >> DEP-IO

XI. *COMPLEX ^{ONS} , CONTIGUITY, MAX-IO >> ONSET , SYLLABLE CONTACT >> DEP-IO

The medial epenthesis in the simplification of obstruent + sonorant clusters, the initial epenthesis in the sibilant+stop clusters as well as the initial epenthesis in the sibilant+nasal [m] clusters are given in the tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 1

Input: /broṯo/ 'fast' Optimal output: /bɔr.ṯɔ/ 'fast'

/broṯo/	*COMPLEX^{ONS}	SYLLABLE CONTACT	MAX-IO	ONSET	CONTIGUITY	DEP-IO
a. ☞/bɔr.ṯɔ/					*	*
b. /ɔb.rɔ.ṯɔ/		*!		*!		*
c. /bro.ṯo/	*!					
d. /ro.ṯo/			*!			

Here candidate a) is an optimal output because it satisfies all high ranking constraints *COMPLEX^{ONS} , SYLLABLE CONTACT, MAX-IO, ONSET. In candidate b) we find that it

appears with the initial epenthesis and thus violates two high ranked constraints SYLLABLE CONTACT and ONSET, so it gets ruled out. Candidate c) though satisfies most of the constraints still it gets ruled out as it violates the highest ranking constraint $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$. Candidate d) appears with the deletion of one consonant; therefore it satisfies the low ranked constraint DEP-IO but violates the crucially ranked constraint MAX-IO and thus loses its place.

Table 2

Input: /steiʃn/ 'station' Optimal output: /is.ti.ʃn/ 'station'

/steiʃn/	$^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$	SYLLABLE CONTACT	MAX-IO	CONTIGUITY	ONSET	DEP-IO
a. ☞/is.ti.ʃɔn/					*	*
b. /si.ti.ʃɔn/				*!		*
c. /stei.ʃn/	*!					
d. /tei.ʃn/			*!			

In this table candidate a) violates the constraints ONSET and DEP-IO, yet it still it takes the place of a winning candidate because it satisfies the higher ranked constraints. Candidate b) appears with internal epenthesis thus it gets ruled out violating the high ranked constraint CONTIGUITY. Candidate c) has been ruled out because it violates the highest ranking constraint $^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$ and candidate d) loses for violating the crucially ranked constraint MAX-IO.

Table 3

Input /smail/ 'smile' Optimal output: /is.mail/ 'smile'

/smail/	$^{*}COMPLEX^{ONS}$	CONTIGUITY	MAX-IO	ONSET	SYLLABLE CONTACT	DEP-IO
a. ☞/is.mail/				*	*	*
b. /si.mail/		*!				*
c. /smail/	*!					
d. /mail/			*!			

In this tableau candidate a) is a winning candidate as it does not have any fatal violation. Candidate b) has been ruled out because it violates the high ranked constraint CONTIGUITY.

Candidate c) violates the highest ranking constraint thus it loses and candidate d) gets ruled out because it violates the crucially ranked constraint MAX-IO.

5. Conclusion

The Optimality Theoretic account of initial consonant cluster simplification process in Sylheti Bangla theorized that this phonological process is not arbitrary, rather rule-governed. The declustering of the underlying onset of CC sequence of loan words also theorized that this dialect has strong non-preference for clustered onsets in this dialect. This article demonstrated how markedness constraint *COMPLEX acts as the driving force behind the consonant cluster simplification process in SHB. In fine, this article also delineated a clear picture of the reason behind the systematic error of Sylheti speakers in pronouncing loan words or foreign words correctly.

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