A Case Study on Consonant Clusters in Meiteilon and Bengali

Bobita Sarangthem, Ph.D.
Laishram Lokendro, M.Sc., MCA
&
P. Madhubala, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Meiteilon is a Tibeto-Burman language, and Bengali belongs to the eastern group of the Indo- Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. One of the goals of this paper is simply to highlight the consonant clusters found in Meiteilon and Bengali. In spite of belonging to two different language families, both share much in common, not only as verb final languages but also in consonant clusters. Interestingly, Meiteilon borrowed Bengali script for writing. Thus, it is important to discuss the similarities and differences of consonant cluster between the two languages. This paper also reflects the changes undertaken in writing the consonant cluster in Meitei *mayek* or the indigenous script. Nowadays, Meitei mayek writing system has been introduced to the schools of Manipur. In Meitei mayek writing system the consonant graphic variant is not adopted, instead Apun khudam (Ligature) is used to show consonant cluster.

Key words: Meileilon, consonant cluster, Meitei mayek, initial, medial, and borrowed.

1.0 Introduction

Meiteilon is spoken in the state of Manipur and also in the adjoining northeastern states of India. The word *meiteilon* is the local name of Manipuri language. Bengali is the language native to the region of Bengal, which comprises present-day Bangladesh and the Indian states West Bengal, Tripura and southern Assam. It is written using the Bengali script. With about 220 million native and about 250 million total speakers, Bengali is one of the most spoken languages, ranked seventh in the world (Bengali Language in Asiatic

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Society of Bangladesh 2003). While Meiteilon is spoken by about 12 million native speakers (*Students Britanica India* 2000:361-366) and it is the lingua franca of many different ethnic tribes of Manipur. It is also the official language of Manipur state along with English. Meiteilon has two writing system viz. i) using Meitei mayek or indigenous script and ii) using Bengali script. Before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the eighteenth century, the ancient Manipuri literature was written in Meitei mayek. The use of Bengali script was introduced only after the introduction of Hinduism. Since then using Bengali script for literature and newspaper is used. However, Meitei mayek writing system has been introduced in the schools of Manipur from the academic session 2005-2006 onwards in a phased manner (Surmangol, 2007).

2.1 Consonantal Phonemes

Since Meiteilon and Bengali language belong to two different language families, their inventory of consonants as well as vowels must have certain differences. The following tables illustrate the inventory of consonants of both the languages.

Consonantal phonemes of Meiteilon

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal
	V.less	V.ed	V.less	V.ed	V.less	V.ed	V.less	V.ed	V.less
Stops: Unaspirated Aspirated	p p^h	b b^h	t t^h	d d^h	c	j j^h	k k^h	g g^h	
Nasals		m		n				ŋ	
Fricative					s				h
Semi-vowels		w				y			
Lateral				l					
Trill				r					

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Table 1. Meiteilon consonantal phonemes

Consonantal Phonemes of Bengali

		Labial		Dental		Palatal		Retroflex		Velar		Glottal
		un-asp	Asp	un-asp	Asp	un-asp	Asp	un-asp	Asp	un-asp	Asp	
Stop	Voiceless	p	p^h	T	t^h	c	c^h	ʈ	$ʈ^h$	k	k^h	
	Voiced	b	b^h	D	d^h	Ɉ	$Ɉ^h$	ɖ	$ɖ^h$	g	g^h	
Nasal		m		N						ŋ		
Lateral				L								
Flaps				ɾ				ɽ				
Spirant/Fricative				S		ç						h

Table 2. Bengali consonantal phonemes
[Adapted from: Dimock, Bhattacharji & Chatterjee, 1976]

The consonants of Meiteilon are 24 (twentyfour) in number. All consonants occur in initial position. But, the voiced aspirated and unaspirated, i.e., /b d j g b^h d^h j^h g^h/ can occur in the initial position in the borrowed words only. In Meiteilon there is no retroflex sound. On the contrary, Bengali language has retroflex sound in Stop and Rhotic. There are 29 (twentynine) consonantal phonemes (Dimock, Bhattacharji & Chatterjee, 1976).

2.2 System of Clustering in Meiteilon

In Meiteilon, clusters of two consonants is possible. The first member is commonly Stop phonemes and also the Fricative /s/. The second member may be either semi vowel or liquid, i.e., /y w l r/, but they cannot occur in the initial position. In native words, the initial clusters are confined to a few phonemes in a small number of instances, that also with /k and k^h/. It is to be noted that it is possible for other phonemes like /k p t b p^h t^h g m n ŋ c and j/ can occur in the

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initial position with /r w y/ as second member, but those are commonly onomatopoeic words. It is marked with an asterisk (*) in the following illustration.

Illustration

Meiteilon			
Initial Cluster	Examples	Medial Cluster	Examples
1.	kwak 'crow'	1.	həykru 'gooseberry'
w-	krək-krək 'tightly'*	kr-	caŋkʰrəŋ 'a kind of weeds'
2.	kyamgəy 'name of a place'	2.	məŋgra 'sweet potato'
r-	kʰwaŋ 'waist'	kʰr-	sugnu 'name of a place'
3.	kʰrək- kʰrək 'extremely dry'*	3.	ngakcrəw 'akind of fish'
y-	kʰyaw 'dry quickly'	gr-	məyjraw
4.	gway 'name of a river'	4.	kəptreŋ 'spinning machine'
ʰw-	groŋ-groŋ 'roaring sound'*	gn-	laŋtʰrəy 'a kind of plant'
5.	ŋrəŋ- ŋrəŋ 'buzzing'*	5.	mətʰway 'soul'
ʰr-	ŋyaw- ŋyaw 'mewing'*	cr-	kaŋdrum 'a ball'
6.	crok-crok 'sound of moving water'*	6.	ədwaydə 'around there'
ʰy-	jri-jri 'slippering'*	jr-	məwpwa 'younger brother'
7.	jway-jway 'showering'*	7.	pompʰri 'a kind of blanket'
w-	trəŋ-trəŋ 'shining brightly	tr-	cumbrəy 'peach'
8.	(sun)*	8.	ləymram 'name of a place'
r-	tʰrok- tʰrok 'shaky'*	tʰr-	laysrəm 'a surname'
9.	prəp-prəp 'quickly'*	9.	
r-	pʰrəŋ- pʰrəŋ 'sudden jump or fly'*	tʰw-	
10.	brəŋ-brəŋ 'billowing'*	10.	
y-	myaw- myaw 'mewing'*	dr-	
11.		11.	
r-		dw-	
12.		12.	
r-		pw-	
13.		13.	
w-		pʰr-	
14.		14.	

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r-		br-	
15.		15.	
ʰr-		mr-	
16.		16.	
r-		sr-	
17.			
ʰr-			
18.			
r-			
19.			
y-			

Some borrowed words are found with /p t k b d g pʰ/ as first member and /l r/ as second member as initial clusters. For example; p + l = plet 'plate'; t + r = tren 'train'; k + l = klas 'Class'; pʰ + l = pʰlait 'flight'; etc.

Similarly, in the case of medial cluster also, only a maximum of two consonants are found. In Meiteilon, the medial clusters are formed by the consonantal phonemes /p t k pʰ tʰ kʰ b d c j g m s/ as first member and /r w/ as the second member. There is no final cluster in Meiteilon.

Under the native situation vowel epenthesis may occur between the two consonants of the consonant clusters, e.g., English 'front' = Meiteilon 'pʰərən'; English 'club' = Meiteilon 'kələp'; English 'horn' = Meiteilon 'horon'

2.3 System of Clustering in Bengali

According to P. Masica (1991), native Bengali (tôdbhôb) words do not allow initial consonant clusters except for borrowed (tôtshôm) words, i.e., words directly borrowed from Sanskrit, and also in the borrowings from foreign languages. Clustering of more than two consonants is also quite common in Bengali. The maximum syllabic structure is CVC and speakers often carry this restriction over to loan words. For example, geram (CV.CVC)

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instead of gram (CCVC) for the Sanskrit loan word 'village' or iskul (VC.CVC) instead of skul (CCVC) for the English word 'school' (Kar, 2009).

Final consonant clusters are rare in Bengali. Most final consonant clusters were borrowed into Bengali from English, as in lip^ht 'lift, elevator' and bêŋk 'bank' However, final clusters do exist in some native Bengali words, although rarely in standard pronunciation. One example of a final cluster in a Standard Bengali word would be *gônj,* which is found in the names of hundreds of cities and towns across Bengal, including *nôbabgônj* and *manikgônj.* In some eastern (Purbo) dialects, final consonant clusters consisting of a nasal and its corresponding oral stop are common, as in *chand* 'moon'. The Standard Bengali equivalent of *chand* would be *chãd*, with a nasalized vowel instead of the final cluster.

According to Linda, the cluster of Stops and Sonorants are acceptable clusters to the speakers of Bengali. The phoneme /ŋ/ and /r/ do not occur as first member and /h/ not as second member. The occurrence of syllable initial cluster is very restricted and coda clusters are generally disallowed (Linda, 2013). Medial consonant cluster are very common in Bengali language. **S**ome consonant clusters found in Bengali language are listed as follows.

Bengali			
Initial Cluster	Examples	Medial Cluster	Examples
1.	krimi 'worm'	1.	bakra 'twisted'
r-	klanti 'fatigue'	kr-	agra 'front'
2.	k^hris^htan 'christian'	2.	bajra 'thunder'
l-	gram 'village'	gr-	b^hadra 'sober'
3.	glas^h 'glass'	3.	ab^hra 'sky'
^hr-	tren 'train'	jr-	bykta 'expressed'
4.	draib^har 'driver'	4.	syamal 'green'
r-	tris^h 'thirty'	dr-	hyapa ' trouble'
5.	d^hrubotara 'north star'	5.	sab^hyata 'civilization'
l-	nritotto 'anthropology'	bhr-	mad^hyam 'medium'

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#	Cluster	Example	#	Cluster	Example
6.		proshno 'question'	6.		patt^{h}ya 'readable'
	r-	plabon 'flood'		byk-	balya 'childhood'
7.		brishti 'rain'	7.		kabya 'poetry'
	r-	blauj 'blouse'		sy-	hatya 'murder'
8.		mrittu 'death'	8.		bisvas 'faith'
	r-	stri 'woman'		hy-	ujjval 'bright'
9.		snan 'bath'	9.		jihva 'tongue'
	^{h}r-	spriha 'desire'		b^{h}y-	udvayi 'evaporating'
10.		sromik 'laborer'	10.		udvrtta 'excess'
	r-	hridoe 'heart'		d^{h}y-	
11.			11.		
	r-			t^{h}y-	
12.			12.		
	l-			ly-	
13.			13.		
	r-			by-	
14.			14.		
	l-			ty-	
15.			15.		
	r-			sv-	
16.			16.		
	tr-			jjv-	
17.			17.		
	n-			hv-	
18.			18.		
	pr-			dv-	
19.			19.		
	r-			dvr-	
20.					
	r-				

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2.3 *Apun khudam* (Ligature)

In Meitei mayek orthography, consonant clusters are indicated by *Apun khudam*. Apun khudam is a horizontal line below the clustering consonant graphemes to indicate the consonant cluster. Unlike in Bengali writing system, there is no change in the graphic structure of the consonant graphemes during the clustering. The change in graphic structure happens only to Lonsum mayek or syllable final consonant graphemes in Meitei mayek orthography. In the case of Bengali writing system, there are many instances in which we notice changes of graphic structure during consonant conjuncts or changes to show consonant clustering.

No consonant clustering is found in the final position. But, many Manipuri writers who use Bengali script use final clustering as similar to Bengali in writing borrowed words. This convention could not be realized in Meitei mayek orthography. For example: In Bengali *bulb* is written as bālb, in final clustering. In Meitei mayek orthography, it will be written as bələp. So, near pronunciation is the only means to write the borrowed word. The following table shows some more examples.

Cluster	Source	Bengali	Meitei mayek
-st	last (English)	lasṭ	las
-st	dost (urdu) 'friend'	dost	dos
-lt	belt (English)	belṭ	bel
-mp	lamp (English)	lêmp	lem

3. Conclusion

To conclude we can say that Meiteion has a limited number of consonant clusters in native words except in borrowed words. Similarly, Bengali language also has a limited number of possible clusters except for borrowed (tôtshôm) words. Despite the fact that these languages belong to different language families, the two languages share common features such as limited numbers of clusters in native words. Meiteilon literature written in Bengali script reflects similar patterns of writing clusters within the norms of the Bengali language.

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The differences between the two languages are seen obviously in Meitei mayek writing system. Vowel epenthesis is another phenomenon common to both.

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Bobita Sarangthem, Ph.D.
Department of Linguistics
Manipur University
Imphal
Canchipur - 795003
Manipur
India
bobitasarangthem@rediffmail.com

Laishram Lokendro., MSc, MCA
Imphal- 795001
Manipur
India
loken,lai@gmail.com

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P. Madhubala Devi, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Linguistics
Manipur University
Imphal
Canchipur – 795003
Manipur
India
pmadhubala@gmail.com

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