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The Syllable Structure of Poula: A Descriptive Overview

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ABSTRACT

Poula is one of the three varieties of languages spoken by the Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland, with majority of the speakers residing in parts of Manipur. The other two languages spoken by the tribe are Chokri and Khezha. This study will lay emphasis on the variety of Poula spoken in Phek district of Nagaland. It is descriptive in nature and the data were collected from native speakers in and around Phek district. The syllable structure of Poula is moderately complex. It is basically monosyllabic with V, CV, CCV structures. Interestingly, polysyllabic words are mostly compound words. All languages require syllable nuclei and, in most languages, onsets are preferred yet optional. As in the case of Poula, it permits both opened syllable and closed syllable, however, closed syllables are not very productive. Minimally, syllables in Poula consist of a vowel as in /*i*/ 'we' and maximally it consists of a complex onset of two consonants and a vowel nucleus C_1C_2V.

Keywords: Syllable Structure, Closed Syllable, Open Syllable, Poula, Nagaland

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to discuss the different types of syllables and syllable structure in Poula. The syllable structure of Poula is moderately complex. It is basically monosyllabic with V, CV, CCV structures. Interestingly, polysyllabic words are found to be mostly compound word forms. All languages require syllable nuclei and, in most languages, onsets are preferred yet optional. As in the case of Poula, it permits both opened syllable and closed syllable, however, closed syllables are not very productive. Minimally, syllables in Poula consist of a vowel as in /*i*/ 'we' and maximally it consists of a complex onset of two consonants and a vowel nucleus C_1C_2V.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected during field visits to Zhavame village and from Poula speakers residing in Kohima district. The researcher employed both structured and unstructured interviews conducted in natural settings, complemented by participant observation. Secondary data were sourced from books, journals, articles, websites, souvenirs, and dissertations, offering a broad range of perspectives relevant to the topic.

3. Linguistic Ethnography of Poula

The Chakhesangs are a Naga tribe who primarily inhabit the Phek district of Nagaland along with Pochury tribe who consider the district their tribal headquarters. The name Chakhesang itself reflects three abbreviations; *'Cha'* which stands for Chokri, *'Khe'* for Khezha and *'Sang'* for Sangtam. This present study focusses on Razeba range as a point of departure for studying the Poula language. The range is a small one consisting of only three villages and a town who identify ethnically as Poumai. They are Zhavame, Zelome, Tsüpfüme, and the town of Razeba with approximately only 6,000-10,000[1] Poula speakers in Nagaland itself. The Poumais are classified as a sub-group of Chakhesang who in turn are further classified as a sub-group of the larger Tenyimia community. Poula language behaves differently from the slightly bigger languages of Chakesangs - Khezha and Chokri, both morphologically and syntactically.

The roots of Poumai language and culture can be traced to the oral tradition that holds the belief that the migratory roots of the tribe originated when one of their forefathers thrust his walking stick on the ground at the meeting place[2]. The etymology of the term *'pou'* refers to the name of the *'great-great-grandfather'* from whom all Poumais were believed to have descended, and the term *'mai'* means *'a person'*. In due course of time, this stick took root and sprouted into a large tree (wild pear) called '*Khyataobi*'. The people of *Khyako*, called *Tenyimia* by the people of Nagaland, hold this tree as a sacred entity till today and in if any branches break, they observe *genna*[3] with utmost solemnness. As such, we can see how

[1] 2011 General Census report of India
[2] A place in Makhel
[3] Genna is a term used technically by anthropologists to describe a class of social and religious ordinances based on sanctions which derive their validity from a vague sense of mysterious danger which results from disobedience to them.

ancestral legacy plays an important role in the creation of language and how oral tradition, in the absence of any chronicled history, mixes itself with the culture and language of the tribe.

Considered a part of the Tenyimia group, Poumai also adheres to the oral tradition that stipulates the origin and migration of their community from Makhel. The Makhel[4] community, which comprises of those tribes who migrated from Makhel to other places, exhibit similarities in language structure and cultural practices. Some of these tribes have settled in different parts of Manipur while others have settled in Nagaland.

4. Conceptual Framework

To date, no linguistics work has been found in this variety of Poula. It was only in 2021 that a small booklet titled 'Poula Primer Dictionary' was published by the Poula literature committee which is the first written literature in the language. Besides this, a few linguistics works are available in the variety spoken in Manipur, with the exception of Veikho (2014) (2021), Veikho & Khyriem (2015) and Veikho & Sarmah (2018); except Veikho (2021), which provides a more detailed analysis of the grammar of Poula, the other works provide a preliminary phonological description of Poula, Consonants and Vowels.

5. Syllable and Syllable Structure

According to Peter Roach (2009), a syllable can be defined both phonetically and phonologically, that is, the way it is pronounced and the way it functions in a language. For David Abercrombie (1965) "a syllable is a movement, mostly an audible movement". A syllable is a unit of organization for a sequence of speech sounds typically made up of a syllable nucleus (most often a vowel) with optional initial and final margins (typically, consonants). Syllables can be Monosyllabic, Disyllabic, Trisyllabic and Polysyllabic. Those syllables whose rhyme is made up of a nucleus followed by a consonant and which ends in consonants are called closed syllables and those syllables whose rhyme is made up of a nucleus and which ends in vowels are called open syllables.

According to Yule (2006), a syllable must contain a vowel or vowel-like sound, including diphthongs. Vowels are almost always the nucleus of a syllable (Denham et. al 2019). The basic elements of the syllable are the onset (one or more consonant) followed by the rhyme.

[4] Believed to be the birthplace of the Tenyimia

The rhyme consists of a vowel, which is treated as the nucleus, plus any following consonant(s), described as the coda. Given below are the possible monosyllables in Poula:

σ	**Word**	**Gloss**
V	*e*	'yes'
CV	*tə*	'necklace'
CCV	*pʌi*	'needle'

In Poula, the syllable structure does not follow the pattern proposed by Clements and Keyser (1983). While they suggest that the basic syllable types in all languages include CV, V, CVC, and VC, Poula deviates from this framework. Poula lacks the VC syllable type but does possess CV and CVC syllable types.

This deviation is significant because according to Clements and Keyser, any language that has the VC syllable type must also have CV and CVC syllable types. However, this is not the case for Poula, as it lacks the VC structure. This highlights the unique nature of Poula's syllable structure compared to the generalizations proposed by Clements and Keyser. Given below are the different types of syllable structure in Poula.

5.1 CV Syllable Structure

Poula exhibits a significant occurrence of the CV (consonant-vowel) structure compared to other syllable structures within the language.

Eg: /ʤə/ 'water'

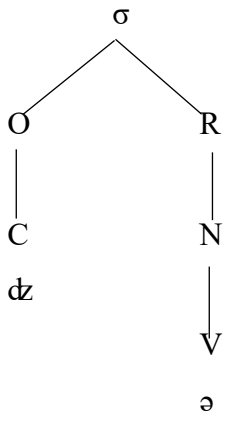


Figure 1. CV Syllable Structure

5.2 V Syllable Structure

In Poula, the V (vowel) syllable structure is notably present in personal pronouns and responsive words.

Eg: /i/ 'I'

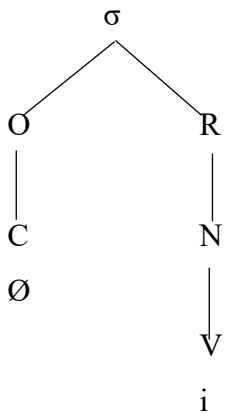


Figure 2. V Syllable Structure

5.3 CVC Syllable Structure

The CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) pattern in Poula is identified as relatively non-productive. This study has observed that closed syllabic structures, represented by a consonant-vowel-consonant sequence, occur primarily with the voiced alveolar approximant.

Eg: /məɹ/ 'mouth'

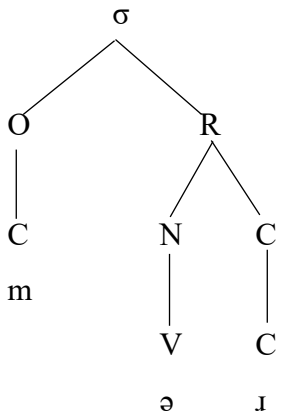


Figure 3. CVC Syllable Structure

5.4 CCV Syllable Structure

The CCV syllable structure refers to a syllable that contains two consonants followed by a vowel. This structure is common in Poula, particularly with stops and the alveolar approximant.

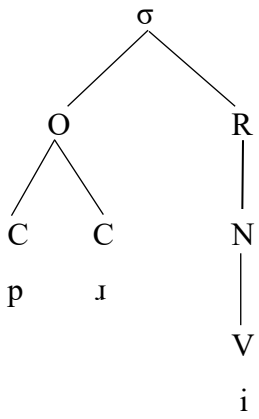


Figure 4. CCV Syllable Structure

In Poula, syllables exhibit a range from minimal to maximal complexity. Minimally, syllables can consist of only a vowel, as seen in the V structure of the word /i/ meaning 'I'. At the other end of the spectrum, syllables can reach maximal complexity, consisting of a complex onset of two consonants and a vowel nucleus, as exemplified by the CCV structure found in /pɹe/ meaning 'cup'. Diphthong nuclei in Poula occur in open syllable types of monosyllabic words when preceded by one or more consonants, as in the CVV structure of /kʰao/ meaning 'tiger'.

The syllable structure of Poula can also be represented by the hierarchical structure given in **Figure 5.**

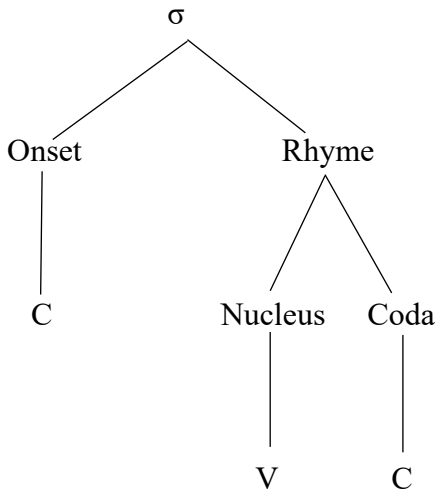


Figure 5. Canonical Syllable Structure

The diagram above illustrates the syllable structure in Poula, ranging from minimal to maximal complexity. A Poula syllable can minimally consist of a monophthong vowel nucleus and can maximally consist of a pair of consonantal onsets (C) & (C) and a diphthong nucleus (V1, V2). A disyllabic word in Poula having CVCV would invariably be split up as CV~CV for eg., /du.si/ 'fig' and not CVC~V */dus.i/ or C~VCV */d.usi/. Similarly, a trisyllabic word /mə.hə.hə/ will have a syllable structure CV.CV.CV and not CVC.VCV or CV.CVC.V.

The possible syllable structures in Poula such as monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic and polysyllabic are illustrated in **Table 1.**

Table 1. Permissible Syllable Structure

Syllable Type	**Syllable Pattern**	**Poula**	**Gloss**
Monosyllable	CV V	vo i	'pig' 'I'
Disyllable	CVV.CCV CV.CVC	kie.tɪə pi.kʰəɪ	'parrot' 'pillow'
Trisyllable	CV.CV.CV V.CCV.CV	ŋa.la.və a.tɪo.me	'plantain' 'player'
Polysyllable	CV.CV.CV.CV V.CV.CV.CV	da.ɹu.so.ha a.du.me.na	'doctor' 'prince'

5.5 Types of Syllables

Thurgood and La Polla (2007), mentions that the Proto-Tibeto-Burman languages was monosyllabic in nature. Likewise, syllable structure in Poula is mostly monosyllabic and disyllabic which is considered as a generic feature of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Poula permits both open and closed syllable, though the production of closed syllable is limited to certain words and its occurrence is rare. The canonical syllable structure in Poula consists of four types viz., monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic and polysyllabic words.

5.5.1 Monosyllabic

Poula, like many Tibeto-Burman languages, is primarily monosyllabic in nature. This means that words are typically composed of a single syllable. In this context, an open and closed syllable structure is observed, where a syllable consists of a vowel or a vowel with one or more consonants before or after it. Open monosyllabic words in Poula can function as the peak of a syllable. **Table 2** illustrates some examples of monosyllabic words Poula.

Table 2. Monosyllables

Monosyllable	**Gloss**	**CV Pattern**
i	'I/me'	V
pe	'grandmother'	CV
sa	'shawl'	CV
məɪ	'mouth'	CVC
tɪa	'to cry'	CCV

5.5.2 Disyllabic

Disyllabic words in Poula, characterized by having two syllables, play a fundamental role in the language's lexicon. **Table 3**, provides a compilation of disyllabic words in Poula.

Table 3. Disyllables

Disyllable	**Gloss**	**CV Pattern**
u.ʤo	'yesterday'	V.CV
li.kʰo	'kitchen'	CV.CV
mə.təu	'necklace'	CV.CVV
ɪə.məɪ	'gate'	CV.CVC
va.kʰəɪ	'scratch'	CV.CVC

5.5.3 Trisyllabic

Trisyllabic words in Poula are highly productive and the segment typically consists of either one consonant and one vowel, two consonants and one vowel, or one consonant and two vowels, as shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Trisyllables

Trisyllabic	**Gloss**	**CV Pattern**
i.tʰɹu.me	'we'	V.CCV.CV
məɪ.su.ʃi	'chilly'	CVC.CV.CV
kʰao.pɹi.tao	**'**terror'	CVV.CCV.CVV
ba.mo.tu	'finger'	CV.CV.CV
li.mu.via	'sorrow'	CV.CV.CVV

5.5.4 Polysyllabic

Polysyllabic words in Poula, consisting of three or more syllables, are typically categorized into root words and derived words. Open polysyllabic words are prevalent in the language. **Table 5** illustrates some examples of polysyllabic words in Poula.

Table 5. Polysyllables

Polysyllabic	**Gloss**	**CV Pattern**
bu.kru.pa.a.fə	'owl'	CV.CCV.CV.V.CV
mə.ɹə.sə.kʰao	'scorpion'	CV.CV.CV.CVV
a.lə.sa.ʂə	**'**piles'	V.CV.CV.CV
la.ɹə.pʰɹə.me	'student'	CV.CV.CCV.CV
ki.pɹi.sə.tsu.me	'gardener'	CV.CCV.CV.CCV.CV

As indicated in the data above, the syllable structure in Poula exhibits distinct characteristics depending on its position within a word. At the word-initial position, the syllable

structure tends to be more closed, meaning that it often begins with a consonant or consonant cluster before the vowel nucleus. In contrast, at the word-final position, the syllable structure is more open.

Table 6 provides examples of open-classed syllable structures in Poula, highlighting the prevalence of open syllables in the language.

Table 6. Opened Classed Syllables

Open Classed Syllables	**Gloss**	**Syllable Pattern**
a.tʰɹau	'strength'	V.CCVV
a.ʧə.na	'third'	V.CV.CV
a.tɹəu.na	'thruth'	V.CVV.CV
a.ɹəu	'sixteen'	V.CVV
a.du.me.na.nao.təu	'princess'	V.CV.CV.CV.CVV.CVV

In Poula, closed-classed syllable structures are characterized by the presence of one or more consonants following the vowel nucleus. This pattern contrasts with open-classed syllables, where the syllable ends with a vowel nucleus without any following consonant. Examples of closed-classed syllable structures in Poula are provided in **Table 7**.

Table 7. Closed Classed Syllables

Closed Classed Syllable	**Gloss**	**Syllable Pattern**
kʰəɹ	'starve'	CVC
məɹ	'mouth'	CVC
va.kʰəɹ	'scratch'	CV.CVC
ɹə.məɹ	'gate'	CV.CVC

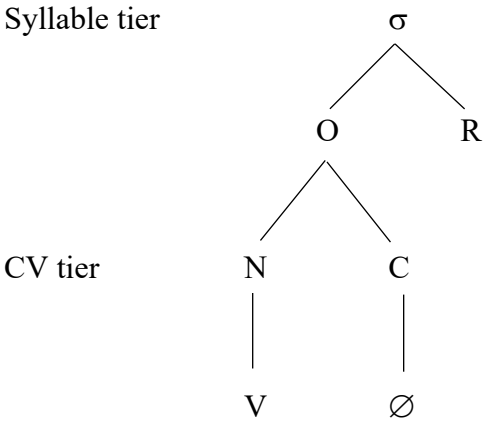
5.6 Syllable Weight

According to Katamba, F. (1989), the consensus today is that more important than the traditional classification of phonological systems in terms of open and closed syllable is their classification in terms of Syllable Weight. In many languages, a factor that determines the applicability of certain phonological rules is the weight of the rhyme. Syllable weight comprises of two kinds: light or weak syllable and heavy or strong syllable. Poula exhibits both light and heavy syllable. The illustration of light and heavy syllables in Poula is based on Katamba, F. (1989) which is explained below with examples:

5.6.1 Light Syllable

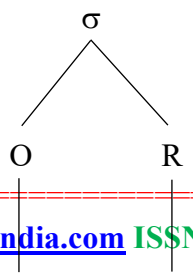
Katamba, F. (1998), defines that, a syllable is light is it contains a non-branching rhyme in which the rhyme contains a short vowel. In other words, a Light syllable is one whose rhyme is made up of nucleus consisting of a vowel or a vowel followed or preceded by a maximum of one consonant. Examples are given below:

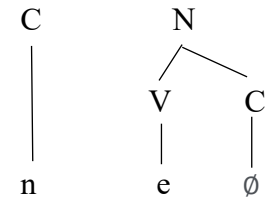
i) A Light Syllable with a single vowel nucleus



/i/ 'I'

ii) A Light Syllable with an onset and a nucleus.





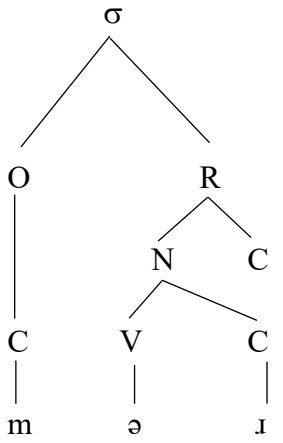
/ne/ ‘you’

Figure 6. Light Syllable

5.6.2 Heavy Syllable

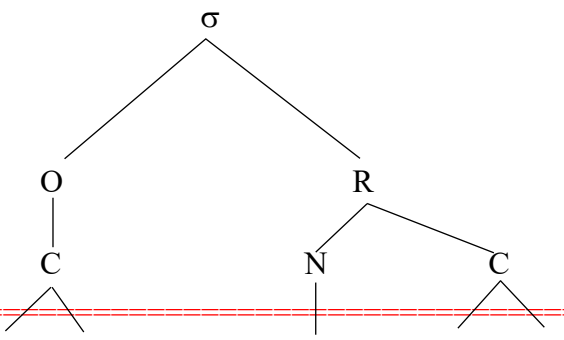
According to Katamba, F. (1998), a syllable is heavy if it contains a branching rhyme in which the rhyme contains either: i) a long vowel or a diphthong optionally followed by one or more consonant(s), or ii) a short vowel followed by at least one consonant. Thus, a heavy syllable is a syllable whose weight is more than a mora. In a heavy syllable, the rhyme consists of more than one segment of a nucleus. Consider the following examples:

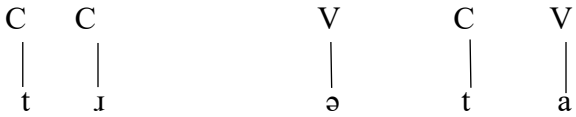
i)



/məɹ/ ‘mouth’

ii)





/tɹə.ta/ ‘leader'

Figure 7. Heavy Syllable Structures

In Poula, the syllable structure is primarily monosyllabic, with words typically consisting of a single syllable. Syllables can be open, ending in a vowel, or closed, with consonants following the vowel nucleus. Disyllabic words, which have two syllables, are mostly root forms of words, similar to monosyllables. Polysyllabic words consist of root words and derived words, and closed polysyllabic words are not found in Poula.

6. Summary and Conclusion

With thorough and systematic investigation, the paper begins with a brief introduction about the language and a conceptual literature review of previous works. With very limited work available on this variety of Poula, this paper is a serious attempt to examine the different syllable structures and types in the language. The above discussion demonstrates that the vowel is the obligatory element necessary for having a well-structured syllable in Poula. CV, CCV, CVCV are found to be the most frequent syllable types whereas, the CVC syllable types are the least frequent syllable structure. Minimally, syllables in Poula can consist of a single nucleus as in /i/ ‘I’ and the maximal syllable can consist of a complex onset of two consonants and a vowel nucleus as C_1C_2V. The C_1 slot of the onset cluster can be filled by any consonant whereas, the C_2 slot can be filled only by the voiced alveolar approximant. This study has also noted that the closed syllabic structure occurs only with voiced alveolar approximant.

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