

A Phonological Sketch of the Koch Language

Satarupa Dattamajumdar
dattamajumdards@gmail.com

Abstract

Koch is a language of the Bodo group belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The language is mainly spoken in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. The UNESCO report mentions Koch as 'Definitely Endangered'. Koch has been dealt with in the retrospective literature from the point of view of comparative vocabulary, history and social structure, dialectal variations, language pedagogy and bilingualism. But a phonological account of the Koch language is yet to be studied. Therefore, the present paper attempts to provide a brief sketch of the Koch phonology. Although there are six varieties of the Koch language, the present paper studies the phonology of the language depending upon the Harigaya variety of Koch. The data of the present paper was collected during field investigation in the Tura, Garo Hills of Meghalaya from the Koch informants who are mainly the speakers of Harigaya variety.

Key Words - contact, endangered, ethno-linguistic, Harigaya, phonemic, Tibeto-Burman

1. Introduction

Koch is a language belonging to the Bodo group of Tibeto-Burman language family. The language is mainly spoken in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. In Assam Koch speakers inhabit in Goalpara, Nagaon, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Bongaigao, Barpeta, Baksa, Udalguri, Karbi Anglong and Golaghat districts. In Meghalaya the language is spoken in West Garo Hills, South-West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills and East Khasi Hills Districts. Koch people are found in the northern part of West Bengal and also in Bangladesh. According to 2011 census the speaker strength of Koch in India is 36,434. Koch community is the bilingual speakers of Assamese, Bengali, Garo, Hindi, and English. Impact of Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese and Bengali due to the prolonged contact situation is evident in the language structure of Koch. This has made the language vulnerable to language shift. The UNESCO report mentions Koch as 'Definitely Endangered'. According to Kondakov (2013) there are six distinct dialects of Koch, viz., Wanang, Koch-Rabha (Kocha), Harigaya, Margan, Chapra and Tintekiya. Kondakov (2013:24) states, "The relationship between the six Koch speech varieties are rather complex. They represent a dialect chain that stretches out from Koch-Rabha in the north to Tintekiya Koch in the south." It has been reported during my field investigation that there are nine ethno-linguistic varieties of Koch. These are Harigaya, Wanang, Tintekiya, Margan, Chapra, Satpariya, Sankar, Banai and Koch Mandai (also mentioned in Kondakov, 2013:5). As a traditional religious practice, the Koch people follow animism and also worship Sakti god of Hinduism. Christianity is also followed by some Koch-Rabha people.

Koch has been dealt with from the point of view of comparative vocabulary from the middle of the 19th century, viz., Hodgson (1847), Williamson (1869), Beams (1872), Damant (1880), Grierson (1903), Shafer (1974), Bradley (1997), Burling (2003), mainly for the purpose of classification of the language. Scholars like Chatterji (1951), Majumder (1967), Koch (1984), Chakravorty (2007) dealt with the history and social structure of the Koch speech community. It was Kondakov and Koch (2009), Mondol

(2010), Koch (2013), Kondakov (2013), Koch (2016), Kondakov (2018) which essentially dealt with the lexical items of the language and word structure keeping in view dialectal variations, language pedagogy and bilingualism. Dattamajumdar (2002) dealt with the socio-linguistic profile of the Koch language with a list of basic vocabulary items of the language. But a phonological account of the Koch language is yet to be studied. Therefore, the present paper attempts to provide a brief sketch of the Koch phonology.

It is pertinent to mention here that although there are six varieties of the Koch language (mentioned earlier), the present paper studies the phonology of the language mainly depending upon the Harigaya variety of Koch. The data of the present paper was collected during field investigation in the Tura, Garo Hills of Meghalaya from the Koch informants who are mainly the speakers of Harigaya variety, although interaction with speakers of other varieties of Koch were also carried out.

2.Vowels

There are six vowel phonemes in Koch. As the length and nasalization of the vowels cannot be determined from my limited data of Harigaya variety of the language, these cannot be treated as phonemes of the language.

The following table represents the vowels of the Koch language.

Koch Vowels			
	Front Unrounded	Central Unrounded	Back Rounded
High	i		u
High-mid	e		o
Low-mid			ɔ
Low		a	

Each of the vowels has been described and exemplified below in terms of the following parameters.

1. Part of the tongue involved in the articulation
2. Height of the tongue that is raised during articulation
3. Position of the lips (that is, rounded or unrounded) during articulation

1. /i/ is a front high unrounded close vowel. It occurs in the initial, medial and final positions of a word. The examples are given below.

/iɔ / ‘it’

/kiriŋ/ ‘seed’

/misi/ ‘buffalo’

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /kin/ 'to shout'
/kan/ 'body'
- II. /ʃi/ 'blood'
/ʃo/ 'to go'

2. /e/ is a front high-mid unrounded half- close vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/enda/ 'worm/caterpillar'

/hen/ 'crab'

/ne/ 'bee'

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /hen/ 'crab'
/hun/ 'cotton'
- II. /bek/ 'all'
/bak/ 'conversation/ to speak'

3. /a/ is a central low unrounded open vowel. The language attests this vowel in all the three positions of a word – initial, medial and final which are exemplified below.

/akuk/ 'grasshopper'

/rambu/ 'cloud'

/na/ 'fish'

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /far/ 'night'
/fir/ 'fox'
- II. /na/ 'fish'
/ne/ 'bee'

4. /u/ is a back high rounded close vowel. The vowel occurs in all the positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/usm/ 'tortoise'

/purun/ 'goat'

/madzu/ 'woman'

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /sum/ ‘salt’
/sam/ ‘grass’
- II. /ruŋ/ ‘boat’
/riŋ/ ‘to understand’

5. /o/ is a back high-mid rounded half-close vowel. The occurrence has been observed to be in the initial, medial and final positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/ok/ ‘belly’

/top/ ‘nest’

/soso/ ‘mosquito’

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /soŋ/ ‘village’
/siŋ/ ‘waist’
- II. /ok/ ‘belly’
/ak/ ‘front’

6. /ɔ/ is a back low-mid rounded half-open vowel. The vowel occurs in all the three positions of a word. Examples are given in the following.

/kɔrɔt/ ‘sugarcane’

/ʃɔkɔt/ ‘wine’

/iɔ/ ‘this/it’

The phonemic status of the vowel can be had from the contrastive distribution presented below.

- I. /sɔn/ ‘tapeworm’
/san/ ‘day’
- II. /sɔŋ/ ‘village’
/suŋ/ ‘mind’

3. Consonants

There are twenty-one consonant sounds in Koch. A table determining the point and manner of articulation of the Koch consonants are presented below.

3.1 Koch Consonants

	Bilabial vl. vd.	Labio dental vl. vd.	Alveolar vl. vd.	Alveo- Palatal vl. vd.	Velar vl. vd.	Glottal
Stop Simple	p b		ṭ ḍ		k g	
Stop Aspirated	p ^h		t ^h d ^h		k ^h g ^h	
Affricate Simple				tʃ dʒ		
Fricative			s			h
Nasal	m		n		ŋ	
Lateral			l			
Trill			r			
Frictionless Continuant	w					

Each of the consonantal sounds of the language has been dealt with examples in the following.

1. /p/ is a voiceless bilabial stop occurring in the initial, medial and final positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/pumʃi/ ‘dew’

/nampar/ ‘wind’

/panhɔlop/ ‘bark’

The examples of the consonant in contrast are given in the following.

I. /pan/ ‘stem’
/kan/ ‘body’

II. /ɖupu/ ‘snake’
/duku/ ‘creel / basket to hold fish’

2. /b/ is a voiced bilabial stop of Koch. The occurrence of the sound is in word initial and medial positions. Examples are cited below.

/barupan/ ‘banyan tree’

/ɖebɔr/ ‘left’

/ɖeba/ ‘bedbug’

The examples of the consonant in contrastive distribution are presented in the following.

- I. /bak/ 'to speak'
/ʃak/ 'to kindle'

- II. /krab/ 'six'
/kraŋ/ 'feather'

3. /t/ is a voiceless alveolar stop. Its occurrence is found to be in word initial, medial and final positions which are exemplified below.

/tuŋto/ 'heat'

/haʔər/ 'earthquake'

/raŋfut/ ~/ raŋpʰut/ 'graze'

The phonemic status of the consonant is justified below from the contrastive distribution.

- I. /taũ/ 'bird'
/haũ/ 'father-in-law'

- II. /bat/ 'to throw'
/bak/ 'conversation'

4. /d/ is a voiced alveolar stop. The sound occurs in word initial and medial positions which are exemplified below.

/diŋʔarani/ 'thunder'

/hadel/ 'clay'

/harduŋ/ 'cave'

The examples of contrastive distribution of the sound are presented below.

- I. /dam/ 'group'
/ʔam/ 'three'

- II. /ʃadam/ 'foot'
/ʃakam/ 'arm'

5. The sound /k/ is a voiceless velar stop. The consonant is found to occur in word initial, medial and final positions. Examples are given below.

/kaŋka/ 'cotton'

/hakaʃepa/ 'valley'

/ʃarek/ 'ground'

The examples of contrastive distribution of the consonant are given below.

- I. /kan/ 'to wear'
/man/ 'to get'

- II. /wak/ 'pig'
/war/ 'fire'

6. /g/ is a voiced velar stop in Koch. The sound occurs in word initial and medial positions. Examples are given below.

/gisin/ 'winter'

/gəŋgomari/ 'cloth for upper part of the body'

/gis/ 'nine'

The occurrence of the consonant in contrastive distribution is presented below.

- I. /guĩ/ 'beetelnut'
/kuĩ/ 'dog'

- II. /gap/ 'colour'
/rap/ 'to make'

7. /p^h/ is a voiceless aspirated bilabial stop. It occurs in initial and medial positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/p^ha/ ~ /fa/ 'teeth'

/lep^han/ ~ /lefan/ 'Koch lady's dress/skirt'

/p^haŋ/ ~ /faŋ/ 'bush'

The contrastive distribution of the sound can be seen from the following examples.

- I. /p^hui/ ~ /fui/ 'to come'
/kuĩ/ 'dog'

- II. /p^har/ ~ /far/ 'night'
/war/ 'fire'

8. /t^h/ is a voiceless aspirated alveolar stop. It is found in both word initial and medial positions. Examples are given in the following.

/t^ha/ 'vein'

/ma^th^op/ 'organization'

/bant^hai/ 'boy'

The sound in contrastive distribution is exemplified below.

I. /t^{hi}/ ‘to die’
/tʃi/ ‘blood’

II. /t^{hun}/ ‘lung’
/hun/ ‘cotton’

9. /d^h/ is voiced aspirated alveolar stop. It is found in both word initial and medial positions. Examples are given in the following.

/d^habat/ ‘to break’

/bed^hoka/ ‘ugly’

/d^her/ ‘back/rear’

The contrastive distribution of the sound is exemplified below.

I. /d^hoko/ ‘fish pot’
/t^hoko/ ‘tasty/ delicious’

II. /d^hena/ ‘arm’
/p^hena/ ‘foam’

10. /k^h/ is a voiceless aspirated velar stop. The consonant occurs in the initial, medial and final positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/k^hirit/ ‘louse’

/wak^handin/ ‘flute’

/bebak^h/ ‘all’

The occurrence of the sound in contrastive distribution is exemplified below.

I. /k^hap/ ‘grip’
/rap/ ‘to make’

II. /k^hu/ ‘fume’
/dʒu/ ‘to sleep’

11. /g^h/ is a voiced aspirated velar stop. The consonant occurs in the initial and medial positions of a word. Examples are given below.

/g^hop/ ‘cave’

/g^hili/ ‘fish pot’

/sraŋg^huraŋ/ ‘slogan’

The occurrence of the sound in contrastive distribution is exemplified below.

- I. /g^hul/ ‘to mix’
/ɖul/ ‘period from Feb-Mar’

- II. /g^hat/ ‘scale’
/p^hat/ ‘to vomit’

12. /tʃ/ is a voiceless alveo-palatal affricate occurring in word initial and medial positions. Examples are given below.

/tʃarek/ ‘low’

/muʃi/ ‘juice’

/tʃəlpək/ ‘soul’

The consonant in contrastive distribution is exemplified below.

- I. /haʃur/ ‘mountain’
/hapur/ ‘to scold’

- II. /tʃak/ ‘leaf’
/ɖak/ ‘to pluck’

13. /dʒ/ is a voiced alveo-palatal affricate which occurs in word initial and medial positions. Examples are given below.

/dʒitʊŋ/ ‘buttock’

/madʒu/ ‘woman’

/dʒikam/ ‘afterwards’

The consonant in contrastive distribution is shown below.

- I. /dʒeŋ/ ‘grass’
/peŋ/ ‘to attack’

- II. /dʒu/ ‘to sleep’
/lu/ ‘to bathe’

14. /s/ is a voiceless alveolar fricative consonant of the language. It occurs in word initial, medial and final positions. Examples are given in the following.

/san/ ‘day’

/gisiŋ/ ‘winter’

/gis/ ‘nine’

Examples of the consonant in contrastive distribution are presented below.

- I. /sam/ 'salt'
/bam/ 'to bow'

- II. /wasi/ 'axe'
/wari/ 'protection'

15. /h/ is a glottal fricative that occurs in word initial and medial positions. Examples are given below.

/harduŋ/ 'cave'

/mahoŋ/ 'face'

/həloŋ/ 'skin'

The phonemic status of the consonant is exemplified below.

- I. /han/ 'yam'
/kan/ 'body'

- II. /haũ/ 'father-in-law'
/taũ/ 'bird'

16. /m/ is a voiced bilabial nasal stop. The sound occurs in word initial, medial and final positions. This is exemplified below.

/mækəɾ/ 'eye'

/asumpri/ 'guava'

/lam/ 'road'

The contrastive distribution of the consonant is shown below.

- I. /maĩ/ 'paddy'
/taĩ/ 'fruit'

- II. /hem/ 'drum/
/hen/ 'crab'

17. The phoneme /n/ is a voiced alveolar nasal occurring in all the three positions of a word - initial, medial and final. Examples are given below.

/ne/ 'bee'

/randi/ 'widow'

/rasan/ 'sun'

The phoneme in contrastive distribution is presented below.

I. /na/ 'fish'
/p^ha/ ~/fa/ 'teeth'

II. /mani/ 'father's sister'
/masi/ 'millet'

18. /ŋ/ is a voiced velar nasal consonant. /ŋ/ can occur in word medial and final positions in Koch, which are exemplified below.

/adʒoŋ/ 'younger brother'

/nakuŋpar/ 'nose ring'

/kreŋ/ 'bone'

The consonant in contrastive distribution is exemplified below.

I. /aŋ/ 'I'
/ak/ 'front'

II. /boŋ/ 'five'
/bor/ 'to burn'

19. /l/ is an alveolar lateral sound which occurs in word initial, medial and final positions. Examples are presented below.

/loŋtai/ 'stone'

/panhɔlop/ 'bark'

/bukʃil/ 'clothing'

The consonant is found to be in contrastive distribution from the following examples.

I. /lam/ 'road'
/ɖam/ 'mat'

II. /bal/ 'to go back'
/bak/ 'to speak'

20. /r/ is an alveolar trill which can occur in all the three positions of a word. This is exemplified below.

/rambu/ 'cloud'

/wartʃu/ 'smoke'

/lampar/ 'air'

The phoneme in contrastive distribution is presented below.

I. /par/ 'flower'
/pan/ 'stem'

II. /war/ 'fire'
/wak/ 'pig'

21. /w/ is a voiced bilabial frictionless continuant. It is found to occur word initially and medially, which are exemplified below.

/waŋtʃi/ 'mother's sister's husband'

/kawəi/ 'monkey'

/kawar/ 'crow'

The phoneme in contrastive distribution is presented below.

I. /awa/ 'father'
/aga/ 'before'

II. /war/ 'fire'
/par/ 'flower'

4. Some Observation

The phonological study of the Koch language reveals the impact of the languages like Bangla and Asamiya, the two major Indo-Aryan languages. Koch speech community came in contact with these two neighboring languages for a long period, the influence being superstrate. Although Koch is a Tibeto-Burman language, the borrowing from the Bangla language especially at the vocabulary level is evident in the study of the lexical items. In this connection Kondakov and Koch (2009: ii) states, "Koch has common Tibeto-Burman roots and it is akin to several other languages of the area, such as Rabha, Garo, Bodo and others. Due to a prolonged contact with the Indo-Aryan languages Koch has acquired certain features from those languages, especially with regard to its vocabulary. In spite of this fact the Koch language has preserved its distinct identity." Instances of such borrowing is found to be attested in many cases which are enumerated in the following.

1. Occurrence of /d/, /g/, /p^h/, /t^h/ and /d^h/ in word final position is not attested in the Koch words of Tibeto-Burman origin. It is found only in the borrowed words from Indo-Aryan languages.
2. Being a Tibeto-Burman language, occurrence of the labio-dental fricative /f/ is likely to be present in the language. But due to the influence of the Indo-Aryan languages especially Bangla which attests bilabial aspirated stop /p^h/, /f/ seems to have been replaced by /p^h/ in many cases. Free variation of the use of /p^h/ and /f/ in the same word by the same speaker is observed during data collection. This has been exemplified earlier in the present discussion of the /p^h/ sound. Therefore, /f/ is not considered a phoneme of Koch in the present discussion.
3. /b^h/ seems to be a borrowed sound in Koch from Indo-Aryan languages. For example, the words like /ab^hadra/ 'immoral', /gab^h/ 'pregnant' found in the Koch language are of Indo-Aryan origin. As a result, words with /b^h/ sound is quite scanty in Koch. So phonemic contrast of /b^h/ is also not found in the language.

4. The voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ is often found to occur in free variation with the palatal fricative /ʃ/ sound. As /ʃ/ is not found to occur in contrastive distribution, it is not considered to be a phoneme of the Koch language. On the other hand, /ʃ/ is a phoneme of Bangla. The free variation of /s/ and /ʃ/ in Koch can be ascertained to be the influence of the Bangla language.
5. Although occurrence of velar nasal /ŋ/ in the word initial position is a characteristic feature of the Tibeto-Burman languages, Koch does not attest words with /ŋ/ in the word initial position. This seems to be a structural influence of the Indo-Aryan languages.
6. The central vowel schwa /ə/ is observed to be an allophonic variation of /a/ as evident in the example like /səɾ/ ~ /sar/ ‘iron’, and in such other words.

However, this phonological account of Koch is based on my limited data and entails scope for more exhaustive enquiry. It is hoped to reveal more subtle observations on Koch speech sounds with further enquiries.

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