Language Sciences 69 (2018) 80–97

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langsci

Tonal polarity in Sylheti in the context of noun faithfulness

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 October 2017
Received in revised form 26 June 2018
Accepted 30 June 2018
Available online 20 July 2018

Keywords:
Noun faithfulness
Tonal polarity
Tone
Sylheti

ABSTRACT

The extant literature (Smith, 2000a,b, 2001, 2002) on differences between nouns versus verbs in phonology has shown that nouns enjoy a privileged status in exhibiting phonological contrasts and processes at the expense of verbal domains. In this paper, we show from original work on Sylheti tones that verbs exhibit exceptionally marked tonal polarity and dominant suffixes which are not seen in nouns. This does not lead to more contrasting patterns in nouns but nouns are faithful. Noun faithfulness can be taken care of by a general faithfulness constraints. Verbs however, need a conjoined markedness and faithfulness constriant ranked higher than the general Faithfulness and Markedness constraints, showing the presence of a putative marked structure in verbs than in nouns.
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1. Introduction

Typically initial syllables, roots and stressed positions are linguistically strong whereas unstressed syllables and affixes are the linguistically weak positions. Optimality Theory, in its most canonical form, allows for Markedness (M) constraints to constrain contrasts and Faithfulness (F) constraints to preserve them. In the presence of domain faithfulness, the grammatical category of noun has been shown to exhibit what is known as noun Faithfulness, where nouns are preferred sites for phonological contrasts rather than other categories. As explicated in Smith (2002) "Cases where nouns license phonological contrasts not supported elsewhere in the language can thus be accounted for with the ranking NF » M » F, a subcase of the general pattern for domain-specific faithfulness effects." Smith's analysis makes some strong predictions about the nature of noun Faithfulness in languages; it predicts that verbs will never present a superset of contrasts, as the noun Faithfulness constraint is universal and salient in all languages. This falls out of a special licensing that nouns possess to demonstrate privileged behaviour. Smith (2000a,b, 2001) proposes that nouns exhibiting special faithfulness properties can be accounted with a high ranking noun Faithfulness constraint ranked above the domain general markedness and faithfulness constraints. This is expressed as noun Faithfulness » Markedness » Faithfulness. According to this proposal the category of nouns is specially licensed in grammars to exhibit patterns not found elsewhere in the language. This is the so-called privileged behavior of nouns. A case may be made for such a demonstrated privileged status to be considered 'marked' (as forms that do not follow the well-formedness properties observed in the rest of the language or also when these forms are compared to the typology of unmarkedness in languages) even though it is analysed as domain special faithfulness. In Fukuoka Japanese, nouns are required to have an accent and not verbs, showing special phonological status in nouns rather than verbs.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2018.06.010
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In Sylheti, the verbal domain allows dominant suffixes which are absent in the nominal domain. Sylheti verbal suffixes could be argued to belong to the 'dominant category' as proposed by Kiparsky (1973, 1982, 1984) and Inkelas (1998). The 'dominant suffixes' idiosyncratically transform or delete the structure of tone or stress of the base they are attached to, often but not necessarily substituting a new pattern in place of the deleted structure. Sylheti tone assignment in morphologically derived words requires the root and the suffix to have different tones. Nominal roots, which are always specified for a tone (L or H) combine with suffixes where the tone is never specified – leading to LH or HL combinations. Since there are only two tones, if the suffix has a dominant High tone as in the verbal suffixes, the root is bound to change its tone to meet the requirement of tonal opposition, resulting in the LH pattern. When the verbal suffix **[-sɛ]** is added the root changes to either surface Low or High and the suffix is High when the surface tone of the root is Low and High when the surface tone of the root is High.

The paper has the following organization: Section 1 presents the background of the important aspects of this paper: Sylheti phonology and tonal polarity across langauges. This section also presents the methods and materials adopted to conduct the experimental investigation on tonal polarity in Sylheti. Section 2 presents the results obtained from different affixes in nouns and verbs. Section 2.1 dels with the results of nominal affixes and Section 2.2 discusses the results of verbal affixation. We conclude with a brief OT analysis in Section 3, followed by a conclusion in Section 3.1.

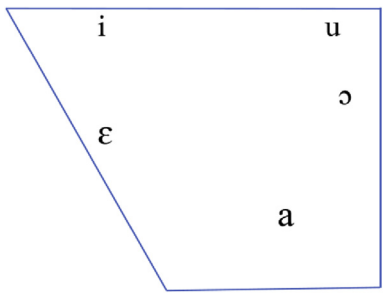
1.1. A brief sketch of Sylheti phonology and with its tonal properties

Sylheti is an Indo-Aryan language spoken by about 11 million people in India and Bangladesh (Hammarström et al., 2017). Sylheti is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language, primarily spoken in the Sylhet division of Bangladesh, the Barak valley of the Indian state of Assam and in the northern parts of the state of Tripura in India. Along the linguistic continuum of eastern Indic languages, Sylheti occupies an ambiguous position, where it is considered a distinct language by many and also as a dialect of Bengali or Bangla by some others.[1] Its unique features, which are significantly distinct from standard Bengali, are found within its phonology as well as other aspects of grammar. Its phoneme inventory differs from the inventory in the Standard dialect of Bangla or its closest varieties (Khan, 2010). Also noteworthy is the development of tones due to loss of the breathiness and aspiration contrast. Therefore, the historical development of Sylheti can be said to exhibit a significant reduction in the phoneme inventory of the language, predominantly due to the loss of underlying breathiness and aspiration contrasts (referring to the voiced and voiceless stops respectively[2]): both voiced and voiceless aspirated stops became unaspirated ([d̪ʰan > **d̪**án] 'paddy', [ʈʰala > **ʈ**álá] 'plate'), and the voiceless labials spirantized to homorganic fricatives ([por] > [**ɸ**òr] 'read', [pʰul] > [**ɸ**úl] 'flower)', and the velar stop became a velar fricative ([kali] > [**x**àlì] 'ink', [kʰal] > [**x**ál] 'drain/channel'). The post-alveolar affricates (both aspirated and unaspirated) also spirantized to alveolar fricatives ([tʃa] > [**s**à] 'tea', [tʃʰuti] > [**s**útí] 'holiday', [dʒal] > [**z**àl] 'net', [dʒʰal] > [**z**ál] 'spicy'). Among the voiceless stops, only the dental and retroflex stops remained stops (Gope and Mahanta, 2015; Gope, 2016). We present the Sylheti consonant (Table 1) and vowel inventories (Table 2) below:

Table 1
Consonants in Sylheti.

Manner of Articulation	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop/Plosive	b	t̪ d̪		ʈ ɖ		g	
Nasal	m	n				ŋ	
Fricative	ɸ		s z		ʃ	x	h
Approximent			r				
Lateral			l				

Table 2
Vowels in Sylheti.



[1] The SOAS Sylheti project https://sylhetiproject.wordpress.com/eine-seite/ recognizes the large numbers of Sylheti speakers in UK who do not speak Bengali. The project members are actively involved in developing and promoting teaching and learning materials in Sylheti as well as developing the Sylheti Nagori script which went out of circulation since mid 20th century.

[2] While we recognize that the voiced aspirates in Indic languages are not really aspirates but a certain type of phonation, we will refer to this property of voiced aspirates as 'aspiration' reflecting the similar loss in both the voiced and voiceless series in the rest of the paper.

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