Khasi dialects: a typological consideration

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Most of the typological studies so far have assumed that the language or dialect under consideration is homogeneous with respect to the feature being examined. But it would be interesting to find out how uniform a language really is with regard to typological features. In this paper an attempt has been made to present some of the major typological divergences found in some dialects of Khasi.

Khasi is a member of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. It is spoken mainly in the state of Meghalaya by around six hundred thousand speakers and has many dialects. A variety of Khasi spoken around Cherrapunji in the southern part of the state has been used in schools, newspapers, literary activities, etc., and has generally been considered the standard form of Khasi. So whenever the term “Khasi” is used by itself it refers to this variety. So far most of the works on Khasi have been on this standard variety. But there are varieties that are very divergent from Standard Khasi, and in this paper we look at Bhoi Khasi, spoken in the Nongpoh subdivision in the north-west of Meghalaya, and at Langrin Khasi, spoken in the west Khasi Hills. Only syntactic aspects are discussed in this paper, as phonological aspects have been discussed in a separate paper (Nagaraja 1990).

A. Bhoi Khasi

Sentence word order

Standard Khasi has as its normal order Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) (S1-5). But Bhoi normally has VSO order with a pronoun subject (B1-2). With a noun subject Bhoi fronts the noun; if the verb is transitive a subject agreement pronoun is placed after the verb—$S_nVSP_O$ (B3-4). And with an infinitive construction in Bhoi the main subject occurs at the very end—VVOS (B5).

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Seminar on Typology of Syntactic Structures and of Language Use, at CIIL Mysore, April 1989.

2 It is well known that one variety of a language gets prominence over other varieties due mainly to non-linguistic reasons. Once a variety gets prominent status, gradually it gets the “language” tag, and all other varieties are relegated to a non-prominent position with labels such as dialect, sub-dialect, colloquial, etc.

3 Data is based on a questionnaire and so is limited. Many aspects need further clarification.

MON–KHMER STUDIES 23: 1-10
(S1) *u leyt* ‘he goes’ *ka la leyt* ‘she went’  
   he go she past go

(S2) *u la ay*⁴ *ya ka kot ha ka* ‘he gave the book to her’  
   he past give obj f. book to her

(S3) *u ksew u la be? ya u miyaw*  
   m. dog m. past chase obj m. cat

(S4) *ka kinthey ka la leyt kloykloy* ‘the woman went slowly’  
   f. woman f. past go slowly

(S5) *u leyt ban hied ya ka kot* ‘he goes to purchase a book’  
   he go inf. purchase obj f. book

(B1) *ley ḥa ‘I go’ la? ley ḥa ‘I went’*  
   go I past go I

(B2) *la? ay u ka kot ha ka* ‘he gave the book to her’  
   past give he f. book to her

(B3) *u ksaw la? be? u ha ka miyaw*  
   m. dog past chase m. to f. cat

(B4) *ka kanthey ley panchayt* ‘the woman goes quickly’  
   f. woman go quickly

(B5) *ley thiet kot u* ‘he goes (to) purchase a book’  
   go purchase book he

**Noun class agreement markers**

Standard Khasi classifies nouns with *u* ‘masc.sg’, *ka* ‘fem.sg.’, and *ki* ‘common pl.’ These occur before all nouns (S2-5) and may stand alone as a pronoun subject before every verb (S1-5) or as a pronoun indirect object after *ha* ‘to’ (S2).

Bhoi Khasi uses the same classifiers but with non-identical class membership, e.g. it classifies ‘cat’ as feminine. Bhoi also requires a classifier before nouns except before the object of a complex verb (B5). With a fronted noun subject and a transitive verb Bhoi requires an agreeing pronoun subject after the verb (B2, 3, 5, 11). The pronoun indirect object may be used after *ha* ‘to’.

**Function markers**

Standard Khasi uses *ya* to mark direct objects (S2,3,5) and *ha* to mark indirect objects (S2).

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⁴ Length is not marked in this paper.
Bhoi Khasi uses *ha* to mark the direct object of a simple transitive verb (B3) or the indirect object of a bitransitive verb (B2). The direct object of a bitransitive verb (B2) or of a complex verb (B5) is left unmarked.

**Infinitive marker**

Standard Khasi marks an infinitive with *ban* (S5). In Bhoi an infinitive is unmarked (B5).

**Negative marker**

In Standard Khasi the negative marker is preverbal *im~ -m~ khlem* (S6,7). In the past tense the preverbal particle *shim* is also used (S7). In Bhoi the negative marker is postverbal *re*, and the preverbal particle *ci~ chem* is also used with it (B6,7).

(S6)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{u-m } \text{daŋ leyt} \\
\text{he-neg. dur. go}
\end{array}
\]
‘he is not going’

(S6a)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{u } \text{khlem leyt} \\
\text{he neg. go}
\end{array}
\]
‘id.’

(S7)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ka-m } \text{shim la leyt} \\
\text{she-neg. part. past go}
\end{array}
\]
‘she did not go’

(B6)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ci } \text{ley re } \text{u} \\
\text{part. go neg. he}
\end{array}
\]
‘he is not going’

(B7)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{chem ley re } \text{ka} \\
\text{part. go neg. she}
\end{array}
\]
‘she did not go’

Standard Khasi has an alternate negative construction (S7a) in which, as in Bhoi, the past tense marker is not used.

(S7a)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ka } \text{khlem leyt} \\
\text{she neg. go}
\end{array}
\]
‘she did not go’

**Interrogative time marking**

In Standard Khasi time questions are indicated by prefixing *la* ‘future’ or *min* ‘past’ to *no* ‘when’ (S8a,S8b). It should be noted that *la* when not attached to *no* marks ‘past’ tense (S1-4, 7, 8b, 10). In Bhoi only *min* is used with *no* (B8a, B8b).

(S8a)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{la-no } \text{u-n wan} \\
\text{fut-when he-fut come}
\end{array}
\]
‘when will he come?’

(S8b)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{min-no } \text{ka la wan} \\
\text{past-when she past come}
\end{array}
\]
‘when did she come?’
(B8a) minno ci wan u
    when fut come he
    'when will he come?'

(B8b) minno la? wan ka
    when past come she
    'when did she come?'

**Objective marker**

Standard Khasi uses *ya* to mark the direct object in a bitransitive sentence (S9). Bhoi leaves the direct object unmarked (B9).

(S9) u la ay ya ka kot ha ka
    he past give obj. f. book to her
    'he gave a book to her'

(B9) la? ay u ka kot ha ka
    past give he Ø f. book to her
    'he gave a book to her'

In an interrogative sentence questioning the direct object Standard Khasi prefixes *ya* to the interrogative *no* (S10). Bhoi just uses the question word *ue* (B10).

(S10) ya-no phi la khot
    obj-who you(sg.) past call
    'whom did you call?'

(B10) uie khut phi
    whom call you(sg.)
    'whom did you call?'

In a causative sentence Standard Khasi marks both the intermediate agent and the direct object with *ya* (S11). Bhoi leaves the intermediate agent unmarked and marks the direct object with *ha* (B11). Apparently animate nouns take the *ha* objective marker, while other nouns do not.

*ha* in Standard Khasi is an indirect object marker (S9). In Bhoi it functions as an indirect object marker in a bitransitive sentence (B9), as the marker of direct object in a causative sentence (B11), or as a locative preposition (B11a).

(S11) u s?iem u la pha? ya u sakri ban khot ya ka
    m. king m. past send obj m. servant inf call to her
    'the king sent a servant to call her'

(B11) u s?em pha?-khut u ka ha u sakri
    m. king send-call(past) m. her obj. m. servant
    'the king sent a servant to call her'

(B11a) ha in
    in house
    'in the house'
Subject marking

In Standard Khasi when a noun is used as subject it occurs at the beginning of the sentence and is followed immediately by its agreement marker before the verb (S12a-c). In Bhoi the subject agreement marker occurs regularly after the verb (B12a-c).

(S12a) ka khinna? ka la wan minhinnin
    f. girl    f. past come yesterday

(S12b) u khinna? u-m bam
    m. child    m.-neg. eat

(S12c) u ksew u la be? ya u myaw
    m. dog    m. past chase m. cat

(B12a) ka khanna? kinthey la? wan ka hinnin
      f. girl    female    past come f. yesterday

(B12b) u khanna? bam re u
      m. boy    eat neg.he

(B12c) u ksaw la? be? u ha ka myaw
      m. dog    past chase m. obj f. cat

Causative constructions

Standard Khasi forms a causative sentence by putting a causative prefix on the verb ‘to be’, and putting an infinitive marker before the main verb, with the sentence thus having the form Causer – Caus-be – ObjMk – Actor – Inf – V (S13a-d). Bhoi simply puts the causative prefix on the main verb, giving a sentence form Caus-V – Causer – Actor, using no verb ‘to be’, object marker, or infinitive marker (B13a-d). Note that Standard Khasi marks the Actor here as the direct object, Bhoi doesn’t put a marker on the Actor.

(S13a) ŋa pin-log ya u ban bam
        I caus-be obj him inf. eat

(S13b) ki pin-log ya u ban srgap
        they caus-be obj m. inf. hear

(S13c) phi pin-log ya ka ban trey
       you(sg) caus-be obj her inf. work

(S13d) ka pin-log ya u ban thiah
       she caus-be obj him inf. sleep

(B13a) pan-bam ŋa u cause-eat I him

    ‘I made him eat’
(B13b) pan-deyt na u
caus-drink I him
‘I made him drink’

(B13c) pan-snap ki u
caus-hear they him
‘they made him hear’

(B13d) pan-trey phi ka
caus-work you(sg) her
‘you made her work’

B. Langrin Khasi

Sentence word order

Langrin and Standard Khasi have basically similar SVO word order (L1-5, S1-5), though with some minor differences.

(L1) u dayt ga dayt wa?
he go she go past
‘he goes’ ‘she went’

(L2) u lu? i wa? ba ga kot ka ga-saw
he ? give past obj f. book to f.-her
‘he gave the book to her’

(L3) u ksəw u kluŋ ba ga miyu
m. dog m. chase obj f. cat
‘the dog is chasing the cat’

(L4) ga ganthu ka lu? dayt wa? ba tyəp
f. woman f. ? go past obj quickly
‘the woman went quickly’

(L5) u dayt chəy-kot
he go purchase-book
‘he is going to purchase a book’

(L6) u ʃen u khey ba u səkri ban dayt khəy? wa? ba ga saw
m. king m. send obj m. servant inf. go call past obj f. her
‘the king sent a servant to call her’

(L7) u lu? i wa? ba ga pisa ka kmu yon saw
he ? give past obj f. money to mother of him
‘he gave money to his mother’

Verb phrase order

In Standard (and Bhoi) Khasi the past tense marker precedes the verb (S1-4). In Langrin the past tense marker follows the verb (L1, 2, 7). The meaning of the Langrin morpheme lu? isn’t clear, but it always precedes the verb and always cooccurs with the past tense marker, so perhaps it is a modification of past tense.
Function markers

Standard Khasi uses *ya* to mark direct objects (S2, 3, 5). Langrin Khasi uses *ba* (L2, 3, 6, 7), but the *ba* is not obligatory (L5). When compounded with the pronoun *sow* the form *ba-* is used (L19, 20).

Standard and Bhoi Khasi use *ha* to mark indirect objects (S2, B3). Langrin appears to use *ka* (L2, 7), but the picture from other data is not clear.

Pronouns

The Standard Khasi 1st person pronouns are *na* ‘1sg’, *ni* ‘1pl’. In Langrin they are *ye* or a ‘1sg’, *hi* ‘1pl’. The 2nd person pronouns are much the same in Standard and Langrin Khasi. The Standard Khasi 3rd person pronouns are *u* ‘3msg’, *ka* ‘3fsg’, *ki* ‘3pl’, but in Langrin they are *u* *ga* *gi* respectively.

Possessive pronoun construction

In Standard Khasi the possessive pronoun construction is regularly PossMk [jor:] – Pron (S14). Langrin uses a similar PossMk[yor:] – Pron construction for 1st and 2nd person pronouns (L8, 9); but for 3rd person the usual 3rd person pronouns are not used, but rather a bound form *-sow* is used (L10). *sow* is also used in some non-possessive pronoun positions (L2, 6, 19, 20).

(S14) ka kinthey jor-u f. female of-him
     (L8) ga yen yor-ye f. house of-me
     (L9) ga khun yor-phi f. daughter of-you(sg)
     (L10) ga kmu yor-sow f. mother of-him/her/them

Negative marker and placement

For negation Standard Khasi uses a particle suffixed to or following the subject (S6, 6a, 7). Langrin Khasi normally uses a postverbal particle *rye* (L11-13, 15). Langrin also has a postverbal negative *ciluk* (L14); the difference between it and *rye* is not clear.

(L11) u dayt rye he go neg. ‘he is not going / does not go’
     (L12) ga chay dayt rye she past go neg. ‘she did not go’
     (L13) u sul dayt rye he fut. go neg. ‘he will not go’
(L14) gi dayt wa? ciluk 'they have not gone' they go past neg.

In a transitive clause Standard Khasi puts the negative between the pronoun or pronominal element and the verb. Within this, if the construction is in present or past tense, the negative marker morphologically becomes part of the subject pronoun or pronominal marker (S15a); if it is in future tense the negative marker occurs after the future marker (S15b). Langrin, in a transitive clause, puts the negative between the verb and the direct object (L15).

(S15a) ka khinna? ka-m shim la trey ya ka kam f. female f.-neg. part. past do obj f. work 'the girl did not do the work'

(S15b) ka khinna? ka-n im trey ya ka kam f. female f.-fut. neg. do obj f. work 'the girl will not do the work'

(L15) ga khöndëp ga su? chri rye ba ga kam f. girl f. fut. do neg. obj f. work 'the girl will not do the work'

**Time marking**

Both Standard and Langrin Khasi mark present tense with zero (S1, 5, 6, 12b; L1, 3, 5, 11). Standard Khasi marks past tense with preverbal la (S1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8b, 10, 11, 12). Langrin marks past tense with preverbal chay (L12) or postverbal wa? (L1, 2, 4, 7, 14, 16, 18); the difference between these two is not clear. Standard Khasi marks future tense with preverbal (i)n (S15b). Langrin marks future tense with preverbal su? (L13, 15, 17).

Time and location phrases, in all three of these dialects, are placed at the end of the sentence (S16, B14, L16).

(S16) u la ay ya ka pisa ha ka kmie ha (ka) iyen he past give obj f. money to f. mother in (f.) house ha ka por phra baje minta ka miet at f. time eight o'clock today f. night 'he gave the money to his mother in the house at 8 o'clock tonight'

(B14) la? ay u ka pisa ha ka bey u ha in ha inpor past give her f. money to f. mother his at house at period phra baje minta miet eight o'clock today night 'he gave the money to his mother in the house at 8 o'clock tonight'

(L16) u lu? i wa? ga pisa ha ka kmu yen sëw ha he ? give past f. money to f. mother of self at yen ha ga por phra baje montoy gamöy? house at f. time eight o'clock today night 'he gave the money to his mother in the house at 8 o'clock tonight'
Interrogative time marking

Standard Khasi prefixes *la* or *min* to *no* to form a time question (S8). Langrin uses a general interrogative *minnaw*, with the tense markers in their usual positions (L17, 18). As in Standard Khasi, Langrin *lu?* occurs with past time but is of unclear meaning (L2, 4, 7, 16, 18).

(L17) *minnaw u su? wa*  
   interr. he fut. come

(L18) *ga lu? wa wa? minnaw*  
   she ? come past interr.

Causative construction

Standard Khasi uses a causative prefix *pin* on ‘be’, plus an infinitive on the intransitive main verb (S13). Langrin puts a causative prefix on a dummy (?) verb, followed immediately by the main verb, giving a sentence form Causer – Causdummy – V – ObjMk – Actor (L19, 20). Like Standard Khasi, Langrin treats the Actor as Object.

(L19) *ye pin-taw sa bo-saw*  
   I caus-? eat obj-3rd

(L20) *ga lu? pin-yok thayt bo-saw*  
   she ? caus-? sleep obj-3rd

C. Summary

In summary it may be noted that the Langrin dialect is closer to Bhoi than to the standard dialect in some aspects, especially in negation. But in sentence word order, noun agreement, case marking, and interrogative construction Langrin is closer to Standard.

The above differences and similarities show only some of the possibilities, and a more detailed analysis of the grammars is needed before we can arrive at a complete picture of the differences between these dialects.

This paper has made an attempt to show the complexity of the problem of identifying a dialect as belonging to a particular language. If the differences between these three Khasi dialects are so significant, the differences that would be introduced by other dialects of Khasi (there are many dialects) would make the typological picture considerably more complex. In such a situation any generalization about a language that is based on a single dialect should be considered highly premature.
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