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.[1] 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.[2]

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).[3]

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_nVS_pO (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.

(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   myaw*   'the dog chased the cat'
       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   ŋa   'I go'   la?   ley   ŋa*   '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   myaw*   'the dog chased the cat'
       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) *u-m   daŋ leyt*   'he is not going'
      he-neg. dur. go

(S6a) *u   khlem   leyt*   ' id.'
      he   neg.   go

(S7) *ka-m   shim   la   leyt*   'she did not go'
      she-neg. part. past go

(B6) *ci   ley   re   u*   'he is not going'
      part. go   neg. he

(B7) *chem leyt re   ka*   'she did not go'
      part. go   neg. she

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

(S7a) *ka   khlem   leyt*   'she did not go'
      she   neg.   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) *la-no   u-n   wan*   'when will he come?'
      fut-when he-fut come

(S8b) *min-no   ka   la   wan*   'when did she come?'
      past-when she past come

(B8a) *minno   ci   wan   u*   'when will he come?'
       when   fut   come   he

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

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 gave a book to her'
       he   past   give   obj.   f.   book   to   her

(B9)   *la?   ay   u   ka   kot   ha   ka*   'he gave a book to her'
       past   give   he Ø f.   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 *uie*
(B10).

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

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

     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 khinnaʔ ka la   wan minhinnin*   'the girl came yesterday'
      f. girl   f. past come yesterday

(S12b) *u khinnaʔ u-m   bam*   'the boy doesn't eat'
      m. child   m.-neg. eat

(S12c) *u ksew u la beʔ ya u myaw*   'the dog chased the cat'
      m.dog   m. past chase obj m. cat

(B12a) *ka khannaʔ kinthey laʔ wan ka hinnin* 'the girl came yesterday'
      f. girl   female   past come f. yesterday

(B12b) *u khannaʔ bam re u*   'the boy doesn't eat'
      m.boy   eat   neg.he

(B12c) *u ksaw laʔ beʔ u ha ka myaw* 'the dog chased the cat'
      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, nor 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-loŋ ya u ban bam*   'I made him eat'
      I caus-be obj him inf. eat

(S13b) *ki   pin-loŋ ya u ban sŋgap*   'they made him hear'
      they caus-be obj m. inf. hear

(S13c) *phi   pin-loŋ ya ka ban trey*   'you made her work'
      you(sg) caus-be obj her inf. work

(S13d) *ka pin-loŋ ya u ban thiah*   'she made him sleep'
      she caus-be obj him inf. sleep

(B13a) *pan-bam ŋa u*   'I made him eat'
      caus-eat I   him

(B13b) *pan-deyt ŋa u*   'I made him drink'
      caus-drink I him

(B13c) *pan-sŋap ki u*   'they made him hear'
      caus-hear they him

(B13d) *pan-trey phi ka*   'you made her work'
      caus-work you(sg) her

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 waʔ*
      he   go   she go   past
      'he goes'   'she went'

(L2) *u   luʔ i   waʔ ba   ga   kot   ka   ga-sɘw*
      he   ?   give past obj f.   book to   f.-her
      'he gave the book to her'

(L3) *u   ksɘw u   kluŋ ba   ga   miyu*
      m.   dog m.   chase obj f.   cat
      'the dog is chasing the cat'

(L4) *ga   ganthu ka   luʔ dayt waʔ ba   tyɘp*
      f.   woman   f.   ? go   past obj quickly
      'the woman went quickly'

(L5) *u   dayt   chɘy-kot*
      he   go   purchase-book
      'he is going to purchase a book'

(L6) *u   sʔeɲ u   khey ba   u   sɘkri ban dayt khɘyʔ waʔ ba ga sɘw*
      m.   king m.   send obj m.   servant inf. go   call past obj f. her
      'the king sent a servant to call her'

(L7) *u   luʔ i   waʔ ba   ga   pisa   ka   kmu   yoŋ sɘw*
      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 *luʔ* 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 *sǝw* the form *bǝ-* 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 *ŋa* '1sg', *ŋi* '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 [*joŋ*] – Pron (S14). Langrin uses a similar PossMk[*yoŋ*] – 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 *-sǝw* is used (L10). *sǝw* is also used in some non-possessive pronoun positions (L2, 6, 19, 20).

(S14)	*ka*	*kinthey*	*joŋ-u*	'his girl'
	f.	female	of-him	
(L8)	*ga*	*yeɲ*	*yoŋ-ye*	'my house'
	f.	house	of-me	
(L9)	*ga*	*khuŋ*	*yoŋ-phi*	'your daughter'
	f.	daughter	of-you(sg)	
(L10)	*ga*	*kmu*	*yoŋ-sǝw*	'his/her/their mother'
	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 is not going / does not go'
	he	go	neg.	
(L12)	*ga*	*chǝy*	*dayt*	*rye*	'she did not go'
	she	past	go	neg.	
(L13)	*u*	*suʔ*	*dayt*	*rye*	'he will not go'
	he	fut.	go	neg.	

(L14) *gi   dayt   waʔ   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   khinnaʔ   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   khinnaʔ   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   khəndəɲ   ga   suʔ   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 *chəy* (L12) or
postverbal *waʔ* (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 *suʔ* (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)   iyeŋ*
       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) *laʔ   ay   u   ka pisa   ha   ka bey   u   ha   iɲ   ha   iɲpor*
       past   give her f. money   to   f. mother his at   house at   period
       phra   bəje   minta   miet
       eight o'clock today   night
       'he gave the money to his mother in the house at 8 o'clock tonight'

(L16) *u   luʔ   i   waʔ   ga   pisa   ha   ka   kmu   yoŋ   səw   ha*
       he   ?   give past   f.   money   to   f.   mother of   self   at
       yeɲ   ha   ga   por   phra   bəje   məntəy gaməyʔ
       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 *minnəw*, 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) *minnəw u su? wa*   'when will he come?'
     interr. he fut. come

(L18) *ga lu? wa   wa? minnəw*   'when did she come?'
     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 – Caus-dummy – V – ObjMk – Actor (L19, 20). Like Standard Khasi, Langrin treats the Actor as Object.

(L19) *ye pin-təw sa bə-səw*   'I am making him eat'
     I   caus-? eat obj-3rd

(L20) *ga lu? pin-yok thayt bə-səw*   'she made him sleep'
     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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