CONSONANT CLUSTERS AND SYLLABIC STRUCTURES
OF MEITEI

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Introduction

One of the most striking features of Meitei word morphology is the number and nature of medial consonant clusters; up to three consonants are permitted medially. Word initially, a maximum number of two consonants is allowed, while word finally no consonant clusters occur. Meitei is also rich in its variety of syllables as well as length of syllable sequences in a word; up to seven syllables are allowed in a word. The present paper is an attempt to look into the consonant clusters and syllabic structures of Meitei keeping in mind the universals proposed by Greenberg (1978). It is to be noted that since the article by Greenberg refers only to initial and final clusters, we could not make use of it for the medials. The paper is divided into two parts. In part one, we have dealt with the pattern and sequence of consonant clusters. In the second part, the syllabic structure of Meitei is considered. It is to be noted that semivowels are being treated as consonants for functional reasons.

0.1 Clusters

As mentioned earlier, Meitei has only initial and medial consonant clusters. Meitei has 24 consonant phonemes all occurring in initial position. They are:

\(/p/ \quad /t/ \quad /c/ \quad /k/\)
\(/ph/ \quad /th/ \quad /kh/\)
\(/b/ \quad /d/ \quad /j/ \quad /g/\)
\(/bh/ \quad /dh/ \quad /jh/ \quad /gh/\)
\(/s/ \quad /h/\)
\(/m/ \quad /n/ \quad /y/ \quad /n/\)
\(/l/ \quad /w/\)
\(/r/\)

The list also includes phonemes occurring in borrowed words.

1.1 Initial clusters

Meitei clusters do not allow more than two consonants initially in a word. The second member of the cluster is always a liquid or a semivowel (i.e., y, w, r, l). For this reason these themselves cannot be the first member of the

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1 The data for this paper was collected from the spoken language of approximately forty native speakers of all ages, sex, and professions living in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, India. Interviews, questionnaires, narratives, songs, and dialogues were used.

We are thankful to all our Meitei informants for patiently bearing with us.
consonant cluster. Other consonants which can be the first member of an initial cluster are /m, n, bh, th, jh, gh/. The following table will explicate the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Members</th>
<th>Second Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>dh</td>
<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kh</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The occurrence of /p, d, dh/ and /g/ as the first member is found only in borrowed words. As voiced aspirates in the language occur in borrowed items only, the absence of voiced aspirates + consonant is easily explainable. Consider the following examples:

1. **Stop + liquid or semivowels**

   - **pl-** [plet] 'plate'
   - **br-** [brukə] 'brush', [brɪj] 'semen'
   - **phr-** [phrəj] 'jumping of fish when taken out of the water'
   - **tr-** [treta] 'an age'
   - **dw-** [dwarkə] 'name of a sacred place'
   - **dr-** [draṃ] 'drum'
   - **dhy-** [dhyan] 'meditation'
   - **dhr-** [dhrubə] 'pole star'
   - **cr-** [crap] 'sound of cutting cloth'
   - **jw-** [jwəl] 'yoke'
   - **jr-** [jro] 'sound of water fall'
   - **ky-** [dymgəy] 'name of a village'
   - **kw-** [kwak] 'crow'
   - **kr-** [krisnə] 'Lord Krishna'; [krok] 'attachment'
   - **kl-** [kəs] 'class'
   - **khy-** [khyaw] 'quickly'
   - **khw-** [khwən] 'waist'
   - **khr-** [christə] 'Christ'
   - **gy-** [gyən] 'consciousness'
   - **gr-** [gram] 'metric gram'
   - **gl-** [glas] 'glass'
2. Fricative + liquid/semivowel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hy-</th>
<th>[hyagen]</th>
<th>'August'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sw-</td>
<td>[swamji]</td>
<td>'preceptor'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sl-</td>
<td>[slet]</td>
<td>'(writing) slate'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Nasal + liquid/semivowel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ηγ-</th>
<th>[eyaw]</th>
<th>'mewing'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ηρ-</td>
<td>[grep]</td>
<td>'yesterday'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, almost all the clusters with initial voiced stops seem to have been borrowed in the language at one time or another, with the result that many patterns have only one or two examples each and these are restricted to borrowed or onomatopoetic words.

Let us now look into some of the relevant universals suggested by Greenberg and see how far examples from Meitei to substantiate the arguments.

1.2 Phonological Universals and Meitei

Universal 20. Two successive voiced sonants are always followed by a vowel in initial systems and preceded by a vowel in final systems. Meitei offers only one example to support this thesis: /grαγ/ 'yesterday'.

Universal 29. In initial systems the existence of at least one sequence of voiced obstruent + semivowel implies the existence of at least one sequence of unvoiced obstruent + semivowel. Meitei does offer parallel examples. Consider:

/gyan/ : /kyaŋγay/
/dhyan/ : /khyaw/, /khwaŋ/, /kwak/

Universal 33. In initial systems, the existence of at least one cluster consisting of nasal + liquid implies the existence of at least one cluster consisting of obstruent + liquid. Consider the following example from Meitei in support of the universal:

/grαŋ/ : /krisnә/, /klas/, /glas/, etc.

Universal 37. In initial systems the existence of at least one cluster consisting of obstruent + nasal implies the existence of at least one cluster consisting of obstruent + liquid... The remainder, except for SANTEE, have obstruent + liquid while obstruent + nasal combinations are lacking. Meitei also allows obstruent + liquid but not obstruent + nasal. Consider: /klas/, /glas/, /plet/, /phәŋ/, etc.

Universal 39. Every language with initial clusters contains at least one cluster with an initial consonant in the dental-alveolar region. Though examples for universal 39 are few yet they need mentioning here.

/treta/, /dwarka/, /dhrub/, etc.

All these words are borrowings from neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages.
The above analysis indicates that trill /r/ is most common sound to occupy the second member position of initial consonant clusters in Meitei.

2.1 Medial clusters

Unlike initial consonant clusters, there is a wide variety of medial consonant clusters in Meitei. Consider Table 2 for the various combinatorial possibilities of medial consonant clusters of two. The table includes the geminates also. As can be seen in the case of two-consonant clusters, the first member position can be occupied by a large number of voiceless consonants. Exceptions are /h/ and /c/, the latter occurs only as a geminate unit. No aspirates can occur as the first member. Voiceless aspirates occur only as second members of the cluster. Voiced aspirates do not occur in clusters at all is suggestive of the fact that all the words with medial clusters are native words.

2.2 What follows are the examples of each -CC- structure of Meitei.

**Voiceless stop + consonant**

- **-pc-** thupcinb 'to fold'
- **-ph-** apphaba 'good'
- **-pkh-** capkhatpa 'to question'
- **-pm-** kumpalle 'tiny'
- **-ps-** kapsinbə 'to shoot inside'
- **-ph-** luphanbə 'to cause to sink or drown'
- **-tp-** apətpa 'rotten'
- **-tc-** khutcəppi 'pinch'
- **-tph-** yotphal 'anvil'
- **-tth-** kattrkəpə 'sacrifice'
- **-tl-** khutlinba 'to organise a party'
- **-tr-** satrən 'chess'
- **-tm-** sətəmən 'selling price'
- **-tn-** cətnəbəi 'custom'
- **-ts-** khutsa 'finger'
- **-ty-** sətyə 'catch'

- **-kp-** pəkəpə 'suitable, appropriate'
- **-kc-** cəkə 'process of eating'
- **-kph-** lakphəm 'venue'
- **-kkh-** lukkha 'left over (edible)'
- **-kl-** likli 'bottle'
- **-km-** lakminiəbə 'companion'
- **-kn-** məknə 'wrestling'
- **-ks-** təkəsi 'regret'
- **-khr-** pakhrə 'widower'

**Voiced stop + trill**

- **-br-** kəbrən 'silk'

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2 The only exception we could find is /kh/ in /pakhrə/ 'widower'.