CAUSATIVES IN RABHA

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This paper is a discussion of the form and function of three causative structures found in the Rôngdani (or Rongdani or Rongdania) dialect of Rabha, a Tibeto-Burman language (Bodo-Garo branch) spoken mainly in the Goalpara District of Assam in Northeast India. One of the three structures, the Active or Direct causative takes the form of a prefix, and is no longer productive. The other two are suffixes transparently derived from verbs in analytical constructions: the Directive causative (-tak < tak ‘make’), and the Manipulative causative (-tan < tan ‘put’).

Keywords: Rabha, Bodo-Garo, Tibeto-Burman, causatives, morphology

1. THE LANGUAGE AND THE LANGUAGE AREA

Rabha (pronounced by native speakers as rába) is a Tibeto-Burman language belonging to the Boro-Garo branch. It is very closely related to Garo, Boro, and Tiwa (earlier known as Lalung). Burling (1959:439) makes a further branching within what he then called the Bodo group: a Bodo-Garo branch and a Koch branch. Phoneme correspondences would require that Rabha be placed along with Koch (Joseph 1988:646).

The Goalpara District of Assam, lying between the Brahmaputra to the north and the State of Meghalaya to the south, is the present homeland of the Rabhas. It is here that speakers of the Rôngdani (spelt usually as Rongdani or Rongdania) dialect, to which the data presented here belongs, live. Besides this area, Rongdani speakers are found in the contiguous areas in Meghalaya, where the Garo Hills meet the Brahmaputra valley or the plains of Assam. Rabha
people are also found to the east of this territory, in the Kamrup District. However, these people, called Pati Rabhas, have completely given up their language in favour of Assamese. This process of language shift is occurring in more and more villages. There is another group of Rabhas, known generally as Mayturi (sometimes spelt also as Maituri or Maituria) Rabhas, who are found in a few villages along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra. There exists yet another group of Rabhas, called the Kocha or Koch Rabhas, on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, almost directly opposite to the Rabha area to the south of the Brahmaputra. While Róngdani and Mayturi are mutually intelligible, and in fact merge into each other, neither Róngdani nor Mayturia is mutually intelligible with Kocha Rabha.

2. **RABHA PHONOLOGY**

2.1 **The Rabha phonemic inventory**

I present below, in summary, the Rabha phoneme inventory.

2.1.1 **Consonants**

\[
\begin{align*}
p & \quad t & \quad c & \quad k \\
ph & \quad th & \quad kh \\
b & \quad d & \quad j & \quad g \\
m & \quad n & \quad e \\
r & \\
l & \\
s & \quad h
\end{align*}
\]

2.1.2 **Vowels**

\[
\begin{align*}
i & \quad i & \quad u \\
e & \quad o \\
a
\end{align*}
\]
The symbols $<c>$ and $<j>$ represent voiceless and voiced affricates, respectively, that can be realized as alveolar or alveo-palatal segments. Among the consonant phonemes /e/ alone does not occur as syllable initial. The syllable finals form a much smaller set, and they are /p, t, k, m, n, e, r, l, s/. Aside from the monophthongs given, Rabha has the following diphthongs: $ai, ao, au, ï, ui, eo, eu$, and $oi$.

2.1.3 **Tones**

Rabha has two tones: a high tone and a low tone. In polysyllabic words the high tone can occur on any of the syllables of the word. The low tone, on the other hand, occurs always on the last syllable of polysyllabic words, making all the preceding syllables neutral with regard to tone. This situation allows us to leave the low tone unmarked in all instances, as done in this paper. An acute accent marks the high tone. Suffixes and prefixes do not have any inherent tone.

2.2 **A rule of progressive consonant assimilation in Rabha**

The dative /-na/, the past /-nata/, the infinitive /-na/ and the future /-no/ morphemes of Rabha have a set of allomorphs. The distribution of the allomorphs of all these morphemes is phonologically conditioned in a uniform manner. The above forms occur following a vowel or /r, l, s/; the initial /n-/ of the above morphemes becomes /m-/ and /e-/ following the stops /p/ and /k/ respectively; and all of them drop the initial /n-/ following a nasal (-m. -n. -e). The question of being preceded by /t/ does not occur because when a root that has a final /t/ is followed by a suffix having an initial consonant, as is the case with any of these morphemes, the /t/ is deleted (see 4.2b). In order to make the reading of Rabha examples closer to the actual spoken Rabha the actually occurring allomorphs have been used in each instance.
3. FORMAL ANALYSIS OF THE RABHA CAUSATIVES

Causative formations “add a new argument that represents a notional causer” (Palmer 1994:214), and “there is (i) marking on the verb (whether morphological or periphrastic), (ii) the addition of a Causer in the subject position, (iii) demotion of other arguments, and (iv) a causal meaning” (Palmer 1994:218).

Analyzed on these criteria Rabha has three types of causatives, all of which are morphologically marked. Two of these are suffixal morphemes: (1) -tak, and (2) -tan. The forms tak and tan are also lexical verb roots meaning ‘make’ and ‘put’ respectively. That the causative suffixes are related to and have been grammaticalized from verb roots is a normal process of grammaticalization, although the lexical meaning is greatly altered in the suffixes. Leaving aside the semantic differences, which will be treated later, the suffixes are glossed CAUS (for causative) in the interlinear translation and as ‘caused’ in the free translation in this section. In later sections, however, the free translation will be given accurately according to the semantic nuance of each causative formation.

(1)  u-be       ae-o      hat-ina  
     3sg-DEF1sg-ACC     market-ALL

rée-tak-eata

go-CAUS-PAST

‘He caused me to go to the market.’

(2)  cae       oroe-o     cusar  khó-tak-eata?  
     who     3pl-ACC     well     dig-CAUS-PAST

‘Who caused them to dig the well?’

(3)  isor       sam-o      dim-tan-a  
     God         grass-ACC     grow-CAUS-PRES

‘God causes the grass to grow’