

NEUTRAL VOWELS IN LANGUAGES OF DIFFERENT TYPES

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The appearance (insertion) and disappearance (deletion) of such neutral vowels like, [ə], [ʌ] etc. in the phonetic structure of a lexical and morphological unit is a popular phenomenon in languages of the world.

Not a few researchers have considered this on-and-off phenomenon of the neutral vowels. They interpreted it as a behaviour of the internal structure of the language. This can be read in research works on the pronunciation of Russian /l/, German /2/, Armenian /3,4/, Kanmyt /5/, Alutor /6/, Chukot /7/, etc. But until now, very few researches have focussed on the comparison of the neutral vowels' behaviour among different languages. Nor have they considered it under a typological point of view.

This phenomenon can be observed from different levels and different linguistic aspects. The neutral vowels behave in various ways which are manifested in the opposition between the actual performance and the underlying structure. In many languages, there was seen a complicated relation between the phonetic (phonological) structure and morphological structure and between the synchronic status and the diachronic status.

In this paper, the neutral vowels are treated under the typological point of view. Basing on the available data of the Soviet languages (Russian and Far-Eastern languages) and the Vietnamese languages (Vietnamese national languages and tribal languages), the following comments can be made:

1. As far as inflexional languages say, Russian, are concerned, the phonological structure of which is non syllabic⁽¹⁾, it is popular to have neutral vowels on and off under various forms, bearing various functional values. For example the sound deletion in natural speech like: zaxoxotal --> zaxxtal 'burst out laughing'; xorošo --> xrašo 'good' /l, pp 115-124/. In some cases the insertion or dropping of a neutral vowel e or o (called "running" vowels in Russian) bears certain value phonologically and morphologically. In these cases it is not only shown in the pronunciation of the word but also in its spelling. For example: v rot /vo rtu 'into/ in the mouth'; polezen /polezna / polezno 'useful' (positive, negative, neutral), etc. Beside, the insertion or deletion of a vowel in Russian, is done to meet poetic purposes. For example, in a poem by G. Gorbobskij there are two rhymes in question : iz bukv/

zvukov 'from the letters / sounds'. To meet the rhythm and the melodic agreement of a verse, the reader has either to insert a neutral vowel like o [ʌ] in between k-v of the former word or to drop that between k-v of the letter. Or in A. Xlevnikov, to make chislo 'a number' go well with smyslo 'significance', the author has deleted the neutral vowel o, even in spelling : smysl/chisl /8/.

2. On the contrary, the appearance and disappearance of the neutral vowels in the isolating languages such as Vietnamese are stably regulated.

In Vietnamese speech, the neutral vowels like o are never inserted or deleted at random since the phonological structure of a word is stable. There are few phenomena like lộ Be Em (B-M: Bí Mật 'secret') -- lộ BEM 'open secret', etc. This is due to the sound gliding in fast speech. But the above mentioned behaviour is not popular because in natural speech the pronunciation of to 'lo' mo' (or lo 'to' mo') 'inaccurate' and the like is kept the same as it should be, without any sign of o [ə] deletion. The insertion of [ə] is found in the Vietnamized foreign words eg. gramme (French) is pronounced as gò-ram (or gam when it is fully Vietnamized).

The isolating features of words in Vietnamese manifest themselves by not accepting any kinds of on - and - off behaviour of the sounds in the syllable structure, neutral vowels included.

3. But in many other languages, the behaviour of the neutral vowel is of great variety. The following events are noteworthy to observe:

3a. In various agglutinate languages such as the Far Eastern languages in the Soviet Union, the phonological structure is quasi-syllabic (where the syllable boundary does not coincide with the morphological boundary, where the simple syllable structure of CVC is applied). It is popular in those languages that their neutral vowels are deleted in natural speech. For example:

In Alutor:	<u>tílem</u>	--->	<u>tílm</u>	'sea eagle'
	<u>qelavul</u>	--->	<u>qlavul</u>	'husband'/6, p.107/
In Kanmyt:	<u>modon</u>	--->	<u>modn</u>	'tree'
	<u>asahan</u>	--->	<u>axon</u>	'evening'/5, p.127/
In Burat:	<u>tologoj</u>	--->	<u>tolgoj</u>	'head'
	<u>jabaxa</u>	--->	<u>japxa</u>	'go' /9, p.15/

But in slow speech, with careful pronunciation their full forms are recovered, i. e. their phonological structure is not at all broken. On the other hand, if we assume that most of the changes in a language start from natural speech, these phenomena are a sign of a tentative new syllable structure that possibly contains a consonant cluster: CC -. During a long time in contact with Russian (a language with various kinds of complex consonant clusters) this process can

be even speeded up.

3b. An opposite bias is seen in many of the tribal languages in Vietnam. They are originally isolating languages with a quasi-syllabic phonological structure (i.e. the syllable boundary coincides with the morphonological one, but some of their words contain a consonant cluster: CC). In these languages in the pronunciation of a complicated syllable, it is customary for the speakers to insert in between CC of a cluster a neutral vowel like [ə] or /ʌ/ (hereafter ə). For example:

In Chút : Kzo ----> kəzo 'wind'
 rka ----> rəkə 'chicken'/10, p.103/

In Poong : pdet ----> pədət 'tooth'
 tkei ----> təkai 'girl' (2)

In Pupeo : kmei ----> kəmei 'girl'
 tdau ----> tədau or dau 'person' (2)

It is noted that the insertion of [ə] is not done in fast speech at random. This phenomenon is considered to be a tentative change of the phonological structure: the consonant clusters are gradually eliminated by this insertion of a neutral vowel. That the speakers of these languages are being more and more exposed to the Vietnamese language is a strong stimulant in this process. (3)

More observations and more comparative researches will make the picture of the neutral vowel behaviours more clear. They will also make it possible for a check-up, and a detailed description of this phenomenon observed from different languages.

FOOTNOTES

(1) With the criteria on syllable phenomenon, the concerned languages are classed into 4 types: (I) sound structure (e.g. Russian, English etc.), (II) quasi-sound structure (e.g. Arabic, Indonesian, etc.), (III) quasi-syllabic structure (e.g. Khmer, Tibetan Old, etc.), and (IV) syllabic structure (e.g. Vietnamese, Sine, etc.). This kind of classification is presented in Towards a typological classification according to syllable criteria, 4th Conference of the Socialist countries on Oriental languages, Hochiminh city, Nov. 1986, printed in "Ngon ngu", Hanoi, 1988, No 1, and in "Vietnam. Social Sciences", Hanoi, 1990, No3.

(2) The phenomenon without any related reference are those observed by the author of this paper through field work.

(3) Pham Duc Duong: "In Chut and Poong, the monosyllable words

are of two structural types: CCVC and CVC. Due to the contact with other monosyllable languages, the words with CCVC structure are pronounced into two separate syllables. This pronunciation give way to the appearance of a short vowel" /10, p.103/.

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