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—$S_O V S_P O$ (B3-4). And with an infinitive construction in Bhoi the main subject occurs at the very end—VVOS (B5).

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) \textit{u leyt ‘he goes’ ka la leyt} \textit{he go she past go} ‘she went’

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

(S3) \textit{u ksew u la be? ya u myaw} \textit{m. dog m. past chase obj m. cat} ‘the dog chased the cat’

(S4) \textit{ka kinthey ka la leyt kloykloy} \textit{f. woman f. past go slowly} ‘the woman went slowly’

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

(B1) \textit{ley na ‘I go’ la? ley na} \textit{go I past go I} ‘I went’

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

(B3) \textit{u ksaw la? be? u ha ka myaw} \textit{m. dog past chase m. to f. cat} ‘the dog chased the cat’

(B4) \textit{ka kanthey ley panchayt} \textit{f. woman go quickly} ‘the woman goes quickly’

(B5) \textit{ley thiet kot u} \textit{go purchase book he} ‘he goes (to) purchase a book’

\textit{Noun class agreement markers}

Standard Khasi classifies nouns with \textit{u} ‘masc.sg’, \textit{ka} ‘fem.sg.’, and \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{ha ‘to’}.

\textit{Function markers}

Standard Khasi uses \textit{ya} to mark direct objects (S2,3,5) and \textit{ha} to mark indirect objects (S2).

\textsuperscript{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 ditransitive verb (B2). The direct object of a ditransitive 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)  
\[ u-m \text{ daŋ leyt} \]  
he-neg. dur. go  
‘he is not going’

(S6a)  
\[ u \text{ khlém leyt} \]  
he neg. go  
‘id.’

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

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

(B7)  
\[ chem ley re ka \]  
part. go neg. she  
‘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)  
\[ ka \text{ khlém leyt} \]  
she neg. go  
‘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)  
\[ la-no \text{ u-n wan} \]  
fut-when he-fut come  
‘when will he come?’

(S8b)  
\[ min-no \text{ ka la wan} \]  
past-when she past come  
‘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 uie (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  ‘the girl came yesterday’
       f. girl   f. past come yesterday

(S12b) u khinna? u-m bam  ‘the boy doesn’t eat’
       m. child  m.-neg. eat

(S12c) u ksew u la be? ya u myaw  ‘the dog chased the cat’
       m.dog    m. past chase obj m. cat

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

(B12b) u khanna? bam re u  ‘the boy doesn’t eat’
       m.boy    eat neg.he

(B12c) u ksaw la? be? 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) ṇa pin-lon yu u ban bam  ‘I made him eat’
       I caus-be obj him inf. eat

(S13b) ki pin-lon yu u ban ssgap  ‘they made him hear’
       they caus-be obj m. inf. hear

(S13c) phi pin-lon yu ka ban trey  ‘you made her work’
       you(sg) caus-be obj her inf. work

(S13d) ka pin-lon yu u ban thiah  ‘she made him sleep’
       she caus-be obj him inf. sleep

(B13a) pan-bam ṇa u  ‘I made him eat’
       caus-eat I him
(B13b) pan-deyt na u
caus-drink I him
'I made him drink'

(B13c) pan-sŋap 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-sow
he ? give past obj f. book to f.-her
'he gave the book to her'

(L3) u ksow 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 tyɔp
f. woman f. ? go past obj quickly
'the woman went quickly'

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

(L6) u sʔen u khey ba u səkri ban dayt khɔy? wa? ba ga səw
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 ra wa? ba ga pisa ka kmu yon səw
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 səw the form bə- 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 qa ˈ1sg’, ḏi ˈ1pl’. In Langrin they are ye or a ˈ1sg’, hi ˈ1pl’. The 2nd person pronouns are much the same in Standard and Langrin Khasi. The Standard Khasi 3rd person pronouns are u ˈ3msg’, ka ˈ3fsg’, ki ˈ3pl’, but in Langrin they are u ga gi respectively.

Possessive pronoun construction

In Standard Khasi the possessive pronoun construction is regularly PossMk [jov ] – Pron (S14). Langrin uses a similar PossMk[yov ] – 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 -səw is used (L10). səw is also used in some non-possessive pronoun positions (L2, 6, 19, 20).

(S14) ka kinthej jonj-u
     f. female of-him  ‘his girl’

(L8) ga yep yonj-ye
     f. house of-me  ‘my house’

(L9) ga khun yonj-phi
     f. daughter of-you(sg)  ‘your daughter’

(L10) ga kmu yonj-səw
     f. mother of-him/her/them  ‘his/her/their mother’

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 chəy dayt rye
     she past go neg.  ‘she did not go’

(L13) u su? 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 khondap 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 chøy (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) iyēn
   he past give obj f. money to f. mother in (f.) house
   ha ka por phra baje mīnta 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 īn ha īnpor
   past give her f. money to f. mother his at house at period
   phra baje mīnta 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 yon ĥow ha
   he ? give past f. money to f. mother of self at
   yon ha ga por phra baje mōnty gamōy?
   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 minnɔw, 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) minnɔw u su? wa
    interr.  he fut.  come
    ‘when will he come?’

(L18) ga lu? wa wa? minnɔw
    she ?  come past interr.
    ‘when did she come?’

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 – Cause-dummy – V – ObjMk – Actor (L19, 20). Like Standard Khasi, Langrin treats the Actor as Object.

(L19) ye pin-tɔw sa bo-sɔw
    I caus-?  eat obj-3rd
    ‘I am making him eat’

(L20) ga lu? pin-yok thayt bo-sɔw
    she ? caus-?  sleep obj-3rd
    ‘she made him sleep’

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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