

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PHONOLOGICAL VARIATIONS BETWEEN Kūṛux AND Kuṇḥa

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Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa are North Dravidian indigenous languages spoken by the Oraon and Kisan communities, respectively, in the Chotanagpur plateau, primarily in Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and in areas outside India, including Nepal and Bangladesh. The origin myths of both communities reveal that both communities sprang from a common proto-language. Baxla (2015) states 75% of the vocabulary has a similarity index between the two languages. The present study highlights the phonological variations between the two languages. It provides a clear understanding of the phonological systems of both languages, in particular, and of Dravidian studies in general.

Keywords: Kūṛux, Kuṇḥa, insertion, vowel length, deletion

1. Introduction

The Kūṛux and Kisan are the North-Dravidian languages. The Oraon tribe people speak Kūṛux, and the Kisan tribe speaks Kisan or kuṇḥa (in this article, henceforth the language name will be read as kuṇḥa instead of Kisan). It is believed that both the communities, Oraon and Kisan, have sprung from the same ancestry. The Oraon community is majorly populated in Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, and in some districts of Nepal and Bangladesh. The 2011 Census of India records the population of the Oraon people as 19,88,350. Despite having a good number of speakers, the reality of language use in the family and other domains appears to be very low. The intergenerational transmission of the language is cut off in many Oraon families. UNESCO's list of endangered languages grades the Kūṛux language as 'vulnerable'¹ category. One among the notable causes is language shift, may be that Oraons are switching towards other dominant languages such

as Hindi, Sadri², Odia, and other Indo-Aryan languages.

Kisan people (Kuṇḥa language speakers) are found in the districts of Sambalpur and Sundargarh in Odisha, Palamu in Jharkhand, as well as Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling in West Bengal. The 2011 Census of India records the population of the Kuṇḥa speaker as 2,06,100.

1.1 Alternate names and dialects

There is a slight variation between these two languages, as it is said in the Ethnologue (2019) that 'Kisan and Oraon languages have 73% intelligibility' (Eberhard et al., 2009). There is a narrow gap between these two languages. Hahn (1911, p. xiv) is of the view that "Kūṛux is not divided into dialects". There are differences in pronunciation and grammar across the various regions in India. Grierson (1904) lists Kisan, Dhangar, Kol, etc. dialects under Kūṛux, which seems to be the name of their occupations. Grierson (1904) notes that a separate dialect is spoken in Gangpur, known as Berga Oraō, which is also referred to as Kisan. Malto is spoken in the

¹ The term "vulnerable" is used to grade a language when 'most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).'

² It is a lingua franca within the different tribal communities mainly spoken in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Bengal, Assam.

Rajmahal area, which is considered the sister of Kūṛux. The language called Dhangar/Jhangar is spoken in Nepal and is also considered a dialect of Kūṛux. The alternate names for Kūṛux are Kadukali, Kurka, Kūṛux, Urang, Oraon, Uraon. The Kisan or Kuṇḥa language is also known by other names, as listed by Ethnologue (2019), namely Birhor, Koda, Kola, Kora, Kuda, Kunha, Kunhar, Kunna, Kunrukh, Kunuk, Mirdha, Morva, Nagesia, and Nageswar.

1.2 Linguistic situation in the tribal community

There are other community people who live close by to Oraon and Kisan people in the villages, viz. Munda, Kharia, Lohra, Ganda, Kondh, and other tribal people. These people speak their own languages. There is a good social bond among all the tribes in the villages. All are invited to the village functions and meetings, religious ceremonies, and any other public gatherings, which are particularly addressed by Sadri, an Indo-Aryan language, the lingua franca within these tribal communities. Sadri has a significant impact on the tribal communities. They have welcomed other communities and made their most used language in their daily lives.

2. Dravidian language family

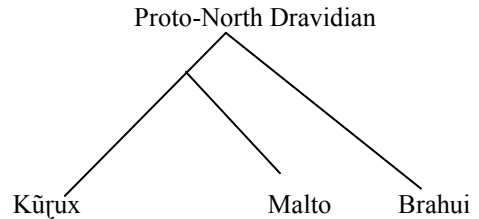
There are more than 200 million speakers of Dravidian languages, ranking this language family fifth among the world's languages. There are approximately twenty-six (Krishnamurti, 2003, p. 19) Dravidian languages; among these, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada are recognized as literary languages due to their extensive written heritage, while over twenty Dravidian languages fall under the non-literary category.

In 1816, the English civil servant Francis Whyte Ellis recognized the Dravidian languages as a distinct language family. After Whyte, Robert Caldwell was the first one to name this language family as Dravidian in 1856. Earlier this term, it was used only for the Tamil language and the Tamil-speaking community. Later, it was extended to encompass the generic term for all languages belonging to the Dravidian family.

Krishnamurti (2003, p. 19) classifies Dravidian languages into four subgroups, viz. South Dravidian, South-central Dravidian, Central Dravidian, and North Dravidian.

The North-Dravidian languages are mainly found in the northern part of India. This group includes Kūṛux, Malto, Brahui, and Kisan, or Kuṇḥa and Dhangar, which are treated as variants of Kūṛux

Figure 1: Proto-North Dravidian



3. Phonological commonalities between Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa

3.1 Vowel length

The vowel length distinction is found in both Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa as part of Dravidian characteristics. This feature is found in the Dravidian languages. Following are the examples.

(1)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>e:p</i>	<i>e:pu</i>	‘rope’
	<i>me:d</i>	<i>me:du</i>	‘body’
	<i>na:ɽi</i>	<i>na:ɽi</i>	‘fever’

3.2 Nasalisation

The nasalisation is phonemic in Kūṛux. Pfeifer (1972) finds nasalisation /~ / with all vowels except /ə/. Both nasalisation and vowel length can go together. There are instances where the vowel length and nasalisation occur together. Hahn (1911) and Grignard (1924) have also stressed the availability of nasalization in the language. The nasalisation is found prominently in Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa as in (2).

(2)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>pū̃p</i>	<i>pū̃pu</i>	‘flower’
	<i>gē̃ṇe</i>	<i>gē̃ṇe</i>	‘duck’
	<i>kā̃ṇ</i>	<i>kā̃ṇ</i>	‘rafter’

In the above examples, it is clear that there is nasalization in Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa. The nasalised vowels and non-nasalised vowels are phonemic in nature. In this connection, more data is required to explore them in the context of minimal pairs.

4. Phonological variations between Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa

The phonological processes include (a) whole segment process and (b) modification type process.

4.1 Whole segment process

The whole segment process affects the segmental structure of a word. This process involves insertion, deletion, Metathesis, Syllabification, disyllabification, coalescence. It occurs at the phonological level.

4.1.1 Insertion

This process of insertion can take place in the initial, medial and final position of the word. Insertion in the initial position is called prosthesis, in the medial position is called epenthesis (*anaptixis* for vowel insertion and *excrecence* for consonant insertion in the medial position of a word), and insertion in the final position is called paragoge.

There are both vowel and consonant insertions in Kuṇḥa in the final position. This process is called paragoge as stated above. Following are the examples.

(3)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>e:p</i>	<i>e:pu</i>	‘rope’
	<i>kiss</i>	<i>kissu</i>	‘pig’
	<i>nerr</i>	<i>nerru</i>	‘snake’
	<i>be:k</i>	<i>be:ku</i>	‘salt’

In the examples, the vowel high back rounded /u/ is added in Kuṇḥa. The above examples are the process of insertion of a phoneme. The words ending with the consonant in Kūṛux, the exact words add the low back unrounded vowel /u/ in Kuṇḥa. The phonological rule for this can be written as in (4).

$$(4) \quad \phi \rightarrow u / C(C) _$$

In the case of consonant insertion, the insertion of the alveolar trill /r/ or the consonant in the word-final position is limited in number. There is an instance of voiceless alveolar trill /r/ getting inserted in Kuṇḥa in the word final position as in (5).

(5)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>ne:</i>	<i>ner</i>	‘who’

4.1.2 Deletion

Deletion is also called elision. In this process, a segment is deleted in a given context. Deletion process is aphaeresis (deletion of a segment in the initial position), syncope (deletion of a segment in the medial position), and apocope (segment deletion in the word final position). There are examples of syncope in Kuṇḥa while analyzing the words from Kūṛux as in (6).

(6)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>nalak^h</i>	<i>nalk^hu</i>	‘work’

In the above example, /*nalak^h*/ → /*nalk^hu*/ from Kūṛux to Kuṇḥa. The vowel segment /a/ is deleted to form a consonant sequence.

There is another type of syncope happening in both Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa as in (7).

(7)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>eṇḡyɔ</i>	<i>eṇḡyɔ</i>	‘1SG.GEN. mother’
	<i>niṇḡyɔ</i>	<i>niṇḡyɔ</i>	‘2SG.GEN.mother’

The above examples are complicatedly formed. The word /*eṇḡyɔ*/ ‘my mother’ is formed with root /*e:n*/ ‘I’ + genitive (suffix) /-*g^hay*/ + (root) /*ayɔ*/ ‘mother’. The first rule is of assimilation, /*e:n*/ + /*g^hay*/ = /*eṇḡ^hay*/ ‘1SG.GEN.’

$$(8) \quad n \rightarrow \eta / _g$$

The second rule involves deletion, /*eṇḡ^hay*/ + /*ayɔ*/ = /*eṇḡyɔ*/ ‘my mother’. Here, the aspiration on the genitive case suffix is lost, and the deletion of the following vowel and semivowel /*ay*/ . Similar process is involved with the second word /*niṇḡ^hay*/ + /*ayɔ*/ = /*niṇḡyɔ*/ ‘your mother’.

There are other phonological whole-segment processes, such as syllabification, desyllabification, and coalescence.

4.1.3 Syllabification

In the syllabification phonological process, a consonant takes the place of the nucleus in the syllable. In this type of process, a vowel gets deleted between a sonorant consonant sound and the sonorant sound becomes syllabic. Following are the examples.

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|---------------|-------------------|
| (9) | Kūṛux | <i>embas</i> | ‘1SG.GEN. father’ |
| | Kuṇḥa | <i>embas</i> | ‘1SG.GEN. father’ |
| | Kūṛux | <i>nimbās</i> | ‘2SG.GEN.father’ |
| | Kuṇḥa | <i>nimbās</i> | ‘2SG.GEN.father’ |

4.1.3 Desyllabification

In this process, a syllabic consonant or a vowel becomes non-syllabic. In a sequence of two vowels in a word, one of those becomes non-syllabic. Sometimes that vowel becomes a semivowel. In this language, the desyllabification process does not seem to be prevalent. Further study may be required to find examples of this process.

4.1.4. Coalescence

In this process, two segments fuse to form a new segment. In many languages, the vowel coalescence is marked in order to avoid the occurrence of a sequence of vowels. Further research may be required to get examples related to this process in this language.

4.1.3 Metathesis

The order of the segments changes in Metathesis. There are some examples in Kisan which is metathesized. Following are the examples.

- | | | | |
|------|--------------|--------------|--------|
| (10) | Kūṛux | Kuṇḥa | Gloss |
| | <i>ekase</i> | <i>eske</i> | ‘how’ |
| | <i>endra</i> | <i>ender</i> | ‘what’ |
| | <i>aur</i> | <i>aru</i> | ‘and’ |

The above examples show that segments change their order when it comes to Kisan. In the beginning, the Kūṛux word /*ekase*/ ‘how’ goes through the vowel deletion process and becomes /*ekse*/ and finally occurs as /*eske*/ in Kuṇḥa by changing its order. In a similar

way, /*aur*/ becomes /*aru*/ ‘and’ which is borrowed from the IA.

4.2 Modification type phonological processes

According to Pandey (n.d.) the modification type off phonological processes increases the allophones in the phonemic system of a language. This process includes co-occurrence, co-articulation, manner of articulation, place of articulation, transitional, laryngeal types, syllable-based, and articulatory.

Among these phonological processes, co-occurrence is mainly found in Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa words.

4.2.1 Co-occurrence

The co-occurrence is a modification process which takes place when the segments occur together. The co-occurrence process mainly includes assimilation and dissimilation processes.

4.2.1.1 Assimilation

In this process, a sound segment takes the features of a neighbouring segment. The feature of either the preceding or following segment in a word can influence the sound, making it more similar. Accordingly, there can be progressive assimilation and regressive assimilation. In Kūṛux, progressive assimilation is observed. Following are the examples.

- | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| (11) | Kūṛux | Kuṇḥa | Gloss |
| | <i>eng^hay</i> | <i>eng^hay</i> | ‘1SG.GEN.’ |
| | <i>niṅg^hay</i> | <i>niṅg^hay</i> | ‘2SG. GEN.’ |
| | <i>engyɔ</i> | <i>engyɔ</i> | ‘1SG.GEN. mother’ |

The above examples demonstrate progressive assimilation. The roots /*e:n*/ and /*ni:n*/ receive the genitive case marking /-*g^hay*/. Therefore, the roots ending with the phoneme dental nasal /*n*/ get assimilated with the following voiced velar stop /*g*/. As a result dental nasal /*n*/ is becoming velar nasal /*ŋ*/. The phoneme changes its place.

In the examples /*engyɔ*/ and /*niṅgyɔ*/, there are assimilation and deletion processes involved. The roots /*e:n*/ ‘1SG.’ and /*ni:n*/ ‘2SG.’ get the

genitive case marking /-g-/ and then /ayɔ/ 'mother'. It can be shown in the following manner: /e:n/ + /g^hay/ + /ayɔ/ = /eɲgyɔ/ 'my mother'.

There are words like /iŋgri/ 'my brother', where the assimilation process is involved, also in the word /niŋgri/ 'your brother'. The root /e:n/ '1SG.' and /ni:n/ '2SG.' get assimilated by the vowel /-i/.

4.2.1.2 Dissimilation

In dissimilation, the similar segment becomes less similar to the previous one. There are examples in Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa.

(a) The voiced velar stop /g/ in Kūṛux becomes voiceless velar stop /k/ in Kuṇḥa. Following are the examples.

(12)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>nasgo</i>	<i>nasko</i>	'sister in law'
	<i>pacgi</i>	<i>packi</i>	'old'
	<i>ɔsga</i>	<i>ɔska</i>	'mouse'
	<i>pagsi</i>	<i>paksi</i>	'yoke'

The above examples show that the voiced velar stop /g/ in Kūṛux is continuously changing to voiceless velar stop /k/ in Kuṇḥa when the mentioned sound is followed by voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ and voiceless palatal affricate /c/. More data is needed to confirm this process.

(b) Voiceless velar fricative /x/ becomes glottal fricative /h/ in Kuṇḥa. Following are the examples.

(13)	Kūṛux	Kuṇḥa	Gloss
	<i>tixil</i>	<i>tihil</i>	'rice'
	<i>xekk^ha</i>	<i>hekk^ha</i>	'hand'
	<i>mōxna</i>	<i>mōhna</i>	'to eat'

Hahn (1911, p. 125) differentiates between Kūṛux voiceless velar fricative /x/ and Kuṇḥa voiceless glottal fricative /h/. Hahn (1911, p. 125) opines that "standard Oraon has the guttural /kh/ the Berge: -Oraons pronounce it as /h/. For example; /*khedd*/ → /*hedd*/ 'foot'. The above examples from both languages show that the phoneme /x/ in Kūṛux is changing to /h/ in Kuṇḥa. The rule for this phonological process can be shown as in (14).

$$(14) \quad x \rightarrow h / \text{ ___ }$$

The phoneme /x/ is changing to /h/ in both initial and medial position in the word.

(c) Loss of voiceless glottal stop /ʔ/ in Kuṇḥa. Following are the examples.

(15)	Kūṛux	<i>bar^ʔa:ldan</i>
		come.1SG.PRS.IPFV
	Kuṇḥa	<i>bara:ldan</i>
		come.1SG.PRS.IPFV
	Kūṛux	<i>ci^ʔdan</i>
		give.1SG.PRS.HAB.
	Kuṇḥa	<i>ci:dan</i>
		give.1SG.PRS.HAB.

The voiceless glottal stop /ʔ/ is mainly found in Kūṛux. The Kuṇḥa data indicate that this sound is omitted in their daily speech. The phonological rule for this can be written as in (16).

$$(16) \quad ʔ \rightarrow \emptyset / (C) _ (V)$$

5. Conclusion

The Oraon and Kisan people are multilingual. They are conversant with other Indo-Aryan languages, such as Sadri, Odia, Hindi, and Bengali, depending on the geographical space where they reside. Due to the contact, there are convergence and divergence features between these languages.

In this paper we have observed that there are some commonalities and differences in the level of phonology within Kūṛux and Kuṇḥa. The phonological processes (a) whole segment process and (b) modification type process are found in it. Insertion, deletion, metathesis, assimilation, and dissimilation are observed in the paper currently being analyzed. This paper is ongoing research work. This requires further study to validate the exact occurrence of phonological processes within these languages.

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