

Sylheti Intonation: a preliminary account

Sylheti (ISO 15924) is an Indo - Aryan language spoken in the Surma and Kushiara valleys of Sylhet Division in Bangladesh and the Barak valley region of Assam, India. The language has a diaspora of around 11 million speakers in the native countries (Simard et al. 2020) but is debatably regarded as a dialect of Bengali (Rasinger, 2007). It is also argued to be phonologically and grammatically different and unintelligible to other Bengali dialects (Chalmers, 1996; Chatterji, 1926). Sylheti was known as the language of the Surma Valley during the 6th century AD and had a distinct script (Chowdhury, 1998; Gupta, 1968), known as the Nagari script which is claimed to have originated around the beginning of 14th century A.D (Chatterji, 1926). It resembles spoken Sylheti to a large extent and has been revived for educational purposes (Thaut, 2012). Despite the large number of speakers, the language is vulnerable because of the preponderance of Bengali (Bangla), which is the official language and a perceived consanguineous prestige marker in both the native countries (Simard et al. 2020). Due to these reasons, the number of speakers has been steadily dwindling in the native countries of India and Bangladesh. There is no printed comprehensive dictionary or grammar of the language, mainly due to the political history that views Sylheti as a ‘dialect’ of standard Bengali in both Bangladesh (Faquire, 2012) and India (Simard et al. 2020). This paper addresses the phonetic and phonological properties of tone and intonation in Sylheti. Sylheti is considered as a variety of Eastern Bangla. The historical development of this language instantiates a reduced phoneme inventory; primarily due to the phonological process of deaspiration [+spread glottis], and partially due to spirantization and deaffrication (Gope & Mahanta, 2015). Subsequently those changes resulted in a two way tonal contrast (Gope & Mahanta, 2014). Since tone languages are known to have f₀ based intonation (Gussenhoven 2004), the interaction between tone and intonation in tone languages demands a systematic inquiry. A set of 50 sentences were recorded from 6 native speakers. The Speakers were in the 45-55 age group, 3 male and three female. The speakers considered here are all bilingual Bengali and Sylheti speakers. The data was recorded in the Cachar district of Assam. The dataset was prepared with a variety of lexical tonal combinations to study the basic intonational structure of Sylheti and observe lexical tone alterations if any. Although we present only the declarative sentences here, our corpus consists of wh questions, yes-no questions and topicalised utterances.

Sylheti has been shown to have tones but Bengali, the language which the speakers use in school, college and other formal contexts, does not have any lexical tone. It is interesting to study Sylheti intonation in this context, as it is possible that intonation will be influenced by Sylheti-Bengali bilingualism..

In our analysis of Sylheti intonation we would like to show that while Sylheti retains the tone of lexically contrastive tones in the word medial positions. In word initial and word final positions in words which have no tonogenetic basis, the intonational effects are clearly seen. In diagram 1 and diagram 2, then the difference between the two tones is clear. Of particular relevance here is also the Bengali intonational structure. In Bengali, Accentual phrases or phonological phrases are right aligned to a high boundary tone and that the most obiquitous structure of the phonological phrase is L*H. Ths can be seen in Sylheti as well, in words where there are no high tones in the words. As seen in figure 1, in all the non-final phonological phrases, the boundary is right aligned to a High tone. In the sentence ((àmì) PP(sàna)PP (xăi-si)PP)IP both àmi and sàna have right aligned high intonational boundaries.

In our analysis, we propose that Sylheti has the features of a pitch accent system, where some words are differentiated based on the level of pitch. However, the connection between stress,

pitch and accent is yet to be explored in greater detail. Secondly, we will use the diacritic *t* to indicate words where tonal distinctions are made. Finally in Sylheti, sentences, declination is quite apparent – the left edge of an IP is much higher than the right edge, irrespective of tonal differences. The IP final boundary is always L*L% or H*L%. Phonological phrases are either L*H or L(t)* or H(t)* or L*H or H*. We will also discuss the distribution of tones in interrogative utterances with wh questions as well as polar yes-no questions and analyze the intonational properties of Sylheti as exhaustively as possible.

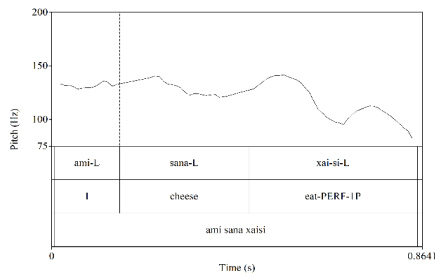


Figure 1. Speaker: Female; Age: 55
(*ami*) PP(*sana*)PP (*xai-si*)PP)IP
I cheese eat- perf -1P
'I ate cheese'

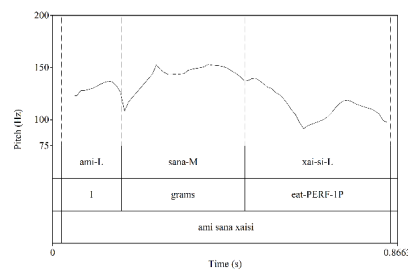


Figure 2. Speaker: Female; Age: 48
ami sana xai-si
I grams eat- perf -1P
'I ate grams'

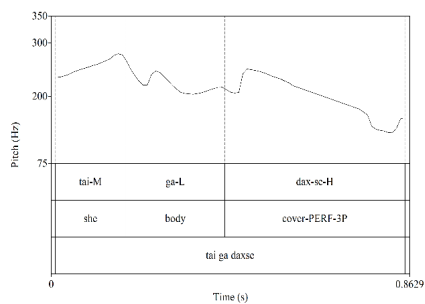
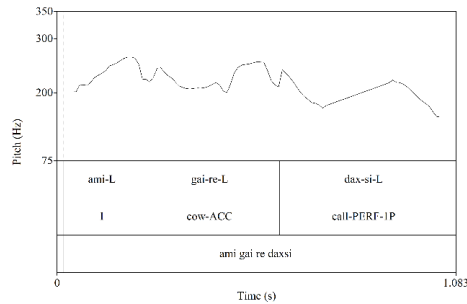


Figure 3. Speaker: Female; Age: 55
ami gai-re dax-si
I cow-ACC call-perf 1P
'I called the cow'



Speaker 4: Female; Age: 48
tai ga dax-se
she body cover-perf 3P
'She covered (her) body'

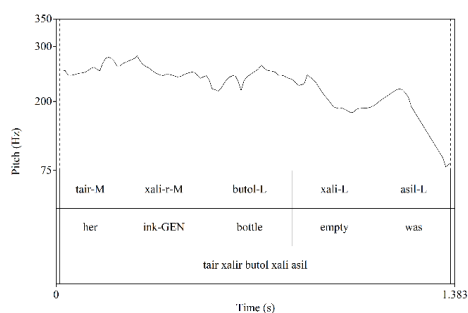


Figure 5. Speaker: Female; Age: 48
tair xali-r butol xali asil
her ink-GEN bottle empty COP-PST
'Her ink bottle was empty'

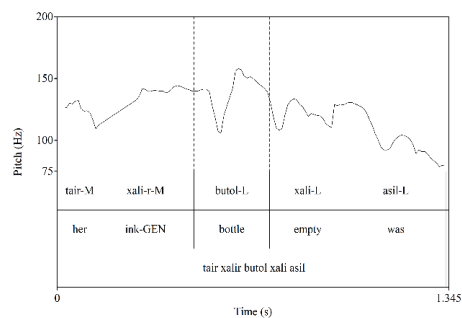


Figure 6. Speaker: Male; Age: 55
tair xali-r butol xali asil
her ink-GEN bottle empty COP-PST
'Her ink bottle was empty'