

FIELDWORK ON THE MLABRI LANGUAGE:
A PRELIMINARY SKETCH OF ITS
PHONETICS

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The present report deals with the phonetics of the Mlabri ("Mrabri") language spoken by a small hill tribe in Northern Thailand. This informal sketch gives an impressionistic phonetic survey of the vowel and consonant systems; more definitive analyses of this and other aspects of the language will be worked out later by the research group, viz. Professor Søren Egerod, Professor Therapan L. Thongkum, and the present author.

In September of this year the author of the present sketch had the opportunity of joining a fieldwork project set up by Professor Søren Egerod* and Professor Therapan L. Thongkum**, and to participate in a two weeks' trip to the province of Nan in northern Thailand. The object of study was the language of the hill tribe which is known as "The Spirits of the Yellow Leaves" or Phi Tong Luang, but which is also - more properly - referred to as Khon Pa, "Men of the Forest", a Thai designation which is considered appropriate by the tribal people themselves. - This is the tribe and the language also known as Yumbri (Bernatzik 1938) or Mrabri (Kraisri 1963)¹, the latter term reflecting the designation mla? bri? (literally the equivalent of Thai khon pàa) which we found to be used by our informants.

The tribe in question has been studied only on a few occasions, and the fieldwork done previously did not include an investigation of the language by professional linguists, the scanty information available in the literature being the work of anthropologists and others (cf. Bernatzik 1938; Kraisri

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1963; Trier 1981²). The origin of this tribe, and its ethnic affinities with other tribes, must still be considered as enigmatic; it would lead too far to refer to the various speculations about these issues here. As for the language it has been pointed out by Kraissri (1963, p. 182) that "the Yumbri and Mrabri languages are close to Mon-Khmer languages and they should belong to this group", and recent handbooks classify the language with the Khmuic branch of the Mon-Khmer family. However, the exact nature of this affinity has not been definitely stated so far. One reason for this is that comparativists have not had access to extensive data given in an accurate transcription and comprising not only single words but also syntactic constructions of various kinds. Kraissri's data and linguistic comparisons (1963) are highly valuable in their own right, but since the words were rendered in Thai letters it takes a bold restatement, like the one ingeniously performed by Smalley (1963), to arrive at an approximation to a strictly phonetic or phonemic transcription. Needless to say, a first-hand study involving a.o. a thorough phonemic analysis is a necessary prerequisite to comparative and typological work of a more definitive kind.

It is estimated by the local authorities that today there are only between 80 and 90 members of this tribe left (including children). Since its material culture represents an extremely low level of technology (the tribesmen are food-gatherers and to some extent hunters), this small population is very vulnerable. It may thus be doubted that their language will survive very long.

With the aid of the local Welfare Department we succeeded in getting into contact with three male speakers of Mlabri, who in spite of their general reluctance to approach permanent settlements consented to staying with us and informing about their language. Unfortunately, one of them turned out to be attacked by illness so that he had to discontinue his cooperation with us after some hours, but the other two informants were with us during most of our stay. - Thus, in total, we had constant contact with speakers of the language for eleven days. (In addition to these three male speakers we had a brief encounter with one more man and two women, who did not seem ready to engage in any communication with us, however.) The linguistic data was elicited primarily by Professor Therapan via the medium of Central or Northern Thai (of which the informants understood some) assisted by an interpreter speaking the Meo or Hmung language (of which they also had some passive or active knowledge). Towards the end of our stay we had proceeded so far that we could ask very simple questions to them in Mlabri, which enormously stimulated their interest in communicating with us. On the whole, however, it must be kept in mind, when considering this and other sources of information on the language, that there are considerable problems with regard to social interaction and effective communication in dealing with this language.

The purpose of the present sketch is to report - on a low level of ambition - on some aspects of the phonetics of this language, as it immediately presented itself to us. The account is based on field-notes of an impressionistic kind and on preliminary discussions during the trip. The presentation is largely confined to inventories of vowels and consonants, which - even in an extremely tentative presentation like the present one - may be of some typological interest. The most obvious and non-controversial phonemic distinctions are reflected in the survey, but on other points the phonemic interpretation is deliberately left quite open (this is true, e.g., of quantity), and in principle what is given here is a relatively broad phonetic transcription of the "sounds" of the language rather than a phonemicization in a strict sense. A more penetrating and more comprehensive account must await the opportunity of the joint group to perform a systematic study of the entire bulk of data (including tape recordings in which all words and sentences elicited from our informants are said twice or mostly several times by each informant). It must be emphasized that the information given in this sketch is open to thorough revision as our work with the data proceeds.

In its contents, the present sketch reflects the joint work of the research group, but the presentation is coloured by the author's background as a phonetician without any schooling in Mon-Khmer linguistics. Thus the present author is alone responsible for the format of presentation (as well as possible errors in the wordforms given³). The more general emphasis of the project being on allround typology and genetic comparison (and hence also on lexicon), the present comments should, of course, not be taken as a real status report.

As for the general rhythm of the language there are two immediately striking features, viz. (1) the occurrence of pretonic syllables and (2) the differences in vowel length (and to some extent consonant length).

(1) The minimum rhythmical unit, which is also the typical structure of individual words (lexemes) consists of a stress-syllable with or without a preceding pretonic syllable ("minor syllable", "pre-syllable"), cf. [kɛh] 'goat-antelope (Nemorhaedus)', [kʰn'di:ŋ] 'navel', [r'phɛ:p] 'butterfly'. The phonological structure of pre-syllables is typically strongly reduced compared to that of stress-syllables⁴, even though a pre-syllable often reflects the phonological material of the following stress-syllable in a kind of reduplication, as in [ŋl?'ŋlɛ?] 'neck', sometimes with a kind of weak tap occurring as a substitute for the full vowel: [kr'l'ki:l] 'knee'.

There are also several lexical items which contain more than one full-vowel syllable. In this case the last syllable seems to have always the main stress: [khi?'dw:n] 'mygale (Melopaeus albostriatus)', [jak?'da:r] '(species of) squirrel'. We are not yet sure about the relevance of degrees of stress (e.g. weak versus secondary stress) on the non-final syllable(s) of a word.

(2) Vowel-length is at least to a very considerable extent a function of rhythm, the vowels of final (strongly stressed) syllables being often extremely long, and the vowels of pre-syllables extremely short, whereas a range of intermediate length is found in other cases, e.g. in utterance-medial full-vowel syllables. The extreme duration of vowels in some utterance-final syllables constitutes one of the most striking phonetic characteristics of the language (also cf. Trier 1981), as does the brevity and reduction of some pre-syllables. - Consonants also occur with varying degrees of length but the differences are not nearly as striking as with vowels.

It is tempting to try to reduce not only stress but also vowel and consonant length to a non-phonemic status by assuming that the distribution of these prosodic features is a matter of position within the utterance (or phrase): a syllable occurring before a major break tends to have both stronger stress and longer duration than the preceding syllables. There is some support to the assumption that length is a feature of the syllable since there is in some cases a vacillation between pronunciations with a somewhat lengthened vowel and pronunciations with a somewhat lengthened syllable-final consonant. However, we have not so far been able to account for the variation and especially the more or less consistent differences in length we hear, cf. that there are lexical pairs like [diŋ] 'older sibling' versus [ʔdi:ŋ] 'gaur' or [poɪ] 'blanket' versus [po:ɪ] 'barking deer'.

In the following, words that typically occur with a very long vowel or a long consonant are written accordingly (with [:]), and words with a sound which is variable or at least not short are sometimes written with half-length (i.e. [·]), but in view of the really rather puzzling variation we have encountered it does not make sense at this preliminary stage to try to arrive at a consistent transcription.

The vowels (in syllables that are not reduced) seem to form a symmetric pattern of 10 (or possibly 11) items, there being clearly four distinctive degrees of aperture and in the other "dimension" a distinction between a front-unrounded series, a mid/back-unrounded series, and a back rounded series:

i	ɯ	u
e	ɤ	o
ɛ	ʌ	ɔ
	a	

The uppermost row, viz. [i ɯ u], are comparable in "auditory height" (Ladefoged) to Cardinal Vowels no. 1 and no. 8 but are slightly lowered in comparison with these. The next row, [e ɤ o], are somewhat diphthongized half-close vowels whose

final portion glides towards a closer vowel quality, perhaps especially in the case of [e] and [o] ([e^l], [o^o]). The row [ε ʌ ɔ] are rather open vowels in the range of Cardinal Vowels no. 3 and no. 6 or slightly more open.

We are not at present sure about the analysis of the "lower" end of the system: the range of variation associated with the item symbolized as [a] here, is quite large, and it cannot be excluded that there are two phonemes involved. Moreover, the boundary between [a] and [ʌ] is not quite easily drawn, especially with regard to unstressed syllables.

To the extent that a reduplicating pre-syllable exhibits any vowel at all that vowel is typically somewhat raised compared to the full vowel of the following syllable (unless the latter is a high vowel). Moreover, there is some colouring of the first vowel by the second, at least in terms of rounding. In this paper such vowels are rendered as a raised schwa.

Examples of the ten vowels are: [bri·ʔ] 'forest', [ʔje·k] 'bee', [twer:] 'rabbit', [ʔw:ŋ] 'bull-frog' (Thai word), [wɜ:k] 'water', [pɪʌ·k] 'to hiccup', [ju:k] 'rice', [co:k] 'big knife', [boŋ'bo:ŋ] 'big', [ba:k] 'to dig deeply'.

As for the consonants the inventory of contrastive single items is not uniquely defined (at this stage, at least) since a number of features such as aspiration, glottalization and prenasalization permit alternative analyses, i.e. in terms of unit phonemes or in terms of consonant clusters. In the presentation below the former approach is implied so that a maximum number of manners of articulation emerge (which seems immediately most informative from the point of view of phonetic typology).

It will be seen that there are four (clearly distinctive) places of articulation: labial, dental, prepalatal and velar, plus laryngeal in the case of [ʔ h]. There are four well-defined classes: stops, nasals, glides and liquids (laterals and trills); sibilants also occur, but these constitute a special problem (see later). The stops exhibit (at least) four manners of articulation: voiceless aspirated, voiceless unaspirated, plain voiced, and glottalized voiced (often implosive); the voiced:voiceless distinction is also found with nasals, glides and liquids, and the difference plain: glottalized is also found with glides.

The terms "glottalized" and "voiceless", as used here, must be further qualified. The glottalization in question is associated with the onset of the consonant, [ʔb ʔd] being fully voiced and often clearly implosive, and [ʔw ʔj] being likewise preglottalized and fully voiced. - Voicelessness in continuants is not in fact the same thing as voicelessness in stops. In articulatory terms it may be more meaningful to correlate the voiceless continuants with the aspirated than with the unaspirated voiceless stops (we have not had any

possibility of investigating the production of any of these consonant types, however). Another thing, which complicates the analysis, is that we sometimes hear a very slight voiceless phase before or in the beginning of otherwise voiced continuants; it must be further investigated whether this is distinctive and what it reflects.

Phonetically it would be possible to add one more row of stops, viz. prenasalized voiced stops [^mb], etc.). However, even if these items are distinct from plain voiced stops it seems problematic to include them in the chart as long as we have not drawn a clear boundary line between material which reflects a reduced pre-syllable and material which uniquely belongs to the onset of the stress-syllable.

With these reservations in mind the initial consonants can be presented as follows, the slots that are marked off by parentheses representing items that might perhaps be expected from the point of view of pattern congruity, but which are not attested (or at least not safely attested) in the data considered so far:⁵

ph	th	ch	kh
p	t	c	k
b	d	ʃ	g
?b	?d	()	()
ᵐ	ᵑ	()	ᵑ̥
m	n	ɲ	ŋ
ʷ		()	
w		j	
?w		?j	
	ʎ ()		
	l r		

and: ? h

The items rendered as [ch c] constitute the most confusing part of the whole consonant system. We hear a range of more or less affricated prepalatal or lamino-alveolar obstruents, and even true sibilants occur, most often with audible aspi-

ration ([s^h], and the like). However, we have noted a considerable variation in the speech of each informant, as well as an idiolectic difference between our two main informants, and so far we do not find any basis for positing a contrast between a sibilant phoneme and the palatal stops. It is, however, worth noting that as phonetic entities sibilants occur quite frequently in this language (at least with some speakers).

Initially in pre-syllables the inventory of consonants is reduced. In this position we have noted an apparently free variation between voiced and voiceless stop articulation (this is not reflected in the transcriptions given here).

Syllable-finally (in syllables with a full vowel) there is only one (distinctive) series of stops and one series of nasals as well as glides, the inventory being as follows:

p	t	c	k
m	n	ɲ	ŋ
w		j	
		ɕ	
	!	()	
	l	r	

and: ? h

The most problematic items in this position are the continuants rendered as [ɕ] and [h]. The former is more or less sibilant in character and apparently palato-alveolar; a striking feature of this sound is its very lax articulation, which makes it sometimes resemble [h] after the high front vowel. In this position [h] has a somewhat [ç]-like quality, whereas after high back vowels it approaches [x].

The consonants tabulated above for initial and final position may be illustrated by the following words (note that, as stated above, the length marks do not reflect any attempt at notational consistency):

Stops, initial position:

[ɸ'pʰe:p] 'butterfly', [tho:k] 'bamboo with big and long-jointed leaves (Bambusa tulda)', [che:ʔ] 'head louse', [kʰiʔ'dw:n] 'mygale', [po:l] 'barking deer', [ta:l] 'sun', [t(ɸ)'ce:l] 'mushroom', [ko:c] 'large bamboo rat', [cə'bu:t] 'pig', [diŋ] 'older sibling', [ʒak] 'to go, walk', [ga:t]

'to tighten', [ᵐbra:w] 'coconut', [ᵐdrʌ'ʔ] 'to belch', [ᵐʃʌʃ] 'fragrant, strong', [ᵐgaʃ] 'nine', [ʔbʌ(·)n(·)] 'thick', [ʔdi:ŋ] 'gaur'.

Stops, final position:

[kɛp] 'stone', [tʌ'ka:t] 'to have fever', [ʔa:c] 'bird', [ʃak] 'to go, walk'.

Nasals, initial position:

[ŋʌŋ] 'to bleed', [ŋɛl·] 'rat', [ŋu:h] 'to stay', [mʌ:ʔ] 'reticulated python', [no:l] 'lineated silver pheasant (Eupoclamus lineatus)', [na:k] 'tightly', [ŋa(·)m(·)] 'to listen'.

Nasals, final position:

[la(·)m(·)] 'tree', [ʔbʌ(·)n(·)] 'thick', [brap] 'dog', [jo:ŋ] 'male person'.

Glides, initial position:

[kom'wə:p] 'to yawn', [wə:k] 'spirit', [jo:ŋ] 'male person'.

Glides, final position:

[ᵐbra:w] 'coconut', [rwa:j] 'tiger'.

Liquids, initial position:

[ləŋ] 'bracelet', [le·h] 'to come', [ra:p] 'to run after'.

Liquids, final position:

[kra:l] 'species of squirrel', [ta:l] 'sun', [twɛr:] 'rabbit'.

Laryngeals, initial position:

[ʔul·] 'mousedeer (chevrotain, of the genus Tragulus)', [hot] 'to fall'.

Laryngeals, final position:

[mʌ:ʔ] 'reticulated python', [ŋu:h] 'to stay'.

In addition to the "single" consonants and vowels tabulated and exemplified above the language exhibits a variety of consonant clusters and diphthongs. These will not be dealt with in the present sketch.

As a final remark it may be appropriate to point to the remarkable similarity of the sound system as sketched here with that posited for "Yumbri" by Smalley on the basis of Bernat-zik's material (Smalley 1963). Thus the basic principles of his restatement, in which he drew heavily on typological comparisons with the phonologies of Mon-Khmer languages, seem to be corroborated.

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NOTES

1. It has not been shown with certainty to what extent the terms "Yumbri" and "Mrabri" refer to the same tribe and to the same language (which we assume to be the case).
2. We are very grateful to Dr. Jesper Trier, Moesgaard Museum (Denmark), who generously put his own tape recordings of the language at our disposal.
3. For technical reasons it was possible only to subject a first draft of this paper (which employed a somewhat different transcription) to scrutiny by all members of the research group.
4. As pointed out by Professor Therapan there is often a possibility of interpreting the consonants here treated as syllabic in a different way, viz. as the first element of a consonant cluster.
5. According to Professor Therapan a skewness in the consonant system similar to the one depicted here is quite normal in the case of preglottalized stops and voiceless sonorants in Mon-Khmer languages. Note also that it is phonetically very plausible that the system is richer with anterior articulation than with non-anterior articulation.

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