

Aspects of Mru phonetics and phonology

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On the basis of ongoing fieldwork, this talk will describe the phonetics and phonology of the variety of Mru spoken in southeastern Bangladesh.

Syllables have the approximate structure (C')(C)V(V)(C). In this schema, the optional initial C' represents the areally ubiquitous preposed half-syllable. The optional V in the nucleus represents either the second half of a diphthong, or length associated with non-checked tonal status (see below) in open or sonorant final syllables. The optional final C exhibits predictable neutralizations (e.g., no voicing or aspiration of stops, absence of fricatives).

Syllables are obligatorily associated with tones, which involve at least four contrasts (possibly more) in open syllables, although a genuine minimal quadruplet is still forthcoming, e.g.:

53 unchecked	fu:m 'three'	
53 checked	fum 'mortar'	maj 'fire'
33 (checked?)	fum 'to lose'	maj 'tail'
31 unchecked	ma:j 'fog'	
24 unchecked	t'ŋa 'five'	
423 (checked?)	t'ruk 'six'	

These tonal contrasts are not evenly distributed according to syllable type (e.g., for stop-final syllables, there appears to only be a contrast between the 53 checked and 33 tones, with a handful of 423 exceptions). Open syllables show the full range of tonal contrasts. Furthermore, the bottom two tones also have a restricted distribution (extremely rare in monosyllabic/non-compound forms or forms without initial half-syllables). Hence, it is hoped that further simplification in the tonal analysis will be possible.

The consonantal system presents no real surprises compared to other area languages, although there is a relative dearth of fricatives. There are also no voiceless sonorants. The vowel system includes non-front unrounded vowel contrasts which are frequently attested in neighboring languages.

The talk will provide recorded illustrations of the distinctions noted here. Given time, it will also consider a couple of alternative orthographies used in the Bangladesh context (one developed in conjunction with missionary activities and the other of indigenous provenance) in light of the phonological analysis presented.