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NOTES ON THE PROTO-KHERWARIAN VOWEL SYSTEM*

0. INTRODUCTION

This paper re-examines the vocalic system of the Kherwarian languages (including Santali, Mundari, Ho, etc.) which are spoken in the Chotanagpur plateau area in eastern India. My main concern has been the reconstruction of the Proto-Kherwarian vowel system on the basis of the comparative method since I read a paper on this subject (Osada 1984) at the 88th meeting of the Linguistic Society of Japan at Keio University, June 1984. In that paper I proposed a five-vowel system for Proto-Kherwarian (Osada 1984) instead of the seven-vowel system set up by several scholars (Pinnow 1959, Zide & Munda 1966, Munda 1968).

In 1989 Mr. Minegishi, Associate Professor in the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo, Japan, did field research on the Singhbhum dialect of Santali under the auspices of the ILCAA — CIIL (Central Institute of Indian Languages) joint research project. According to him, the Singhbhum dialect has a six-vowel system: /i, e, a, ə, o, u/ (Minegishi 1990) while the dialect described by Bodding has an eight-vowel system: /i, e, ɛ, a, ə, o, u/ (Bodding 1929, Sebeok 1943).

When Mr. Minegishi showed me this data, it struck me that the vowel correspondences between the two dialects of Santali should be examined, since nobody has used this dialect for the reconstruction of Proto-Kherwarian. I have been able to collect the relevant data from Mr. Ganesh Murmu, who had worked as an informant for the Singhbhum dialect with Mr. Minegishi.

In this paper I will present the new data on the vowel correspondences between three Kherwarian languages, viz. two dialects of Santali, and Mundari. As a result I propose a new hypothesis on Proto-Kherwarian vocalism.

1. THE VOWEL SYSTEMS IN KHERWARIAN

The Kherwarian languages consist of Santali, Mundari, Ho, Asur, Bhumij, Birhor, Korwa and Turi. The Kherwarian languages are divided into two groups, viz. Santali and Mundari-Ho. The latter group also includes Asur,
Bhumij, Birhor, Korwa and Turi. These languages are traditionally considered to be minor dialects of Mundari. Santali, Mundari and Ho have been well-studied mainly by the missionaries. The data on the other Kherwarian languages are still scanty.

As far as the vowel system is concerned, the languages belonging to the Mundari-Ho branch of Kherwarian, including the so-called minor dialects, have a five-vowel system (Bhattacharya 1975: 40–58), while Santali as given by Bodding has an eight-vowel system.

The Santals are one of the largest tribes in India. According to the Census of India 1981 the Santali speakers are more than four million. The information on Santali dialects is still very poor. Fortunately we have been able to collect the data on the Singhbhum dialect thanks to Mr. Minegishi. The vocalic system in the Kherwarian languages is as follows:

1. The Santali described by Bodding: henceforward Sa(B) (Sebeok 1943). /i, e, æ, a, ɔ, o, u/.
2. The Singhbhum dialect of Santali: Sa(S) (Minegishi 1990). /i, e, a, ɔ, o, u/.
4. Ho (Deeney 1975). /i, e, a, o, u/.
5. Korwa (Bahl 1962) /i, ï, e, a, ā, o, u, ū/.
7. Turi (Ponette: personal communication, see Osada 1991) /i, e, a, o, u/.

For Birhor, Korwa and Turi we have information only on the vowel phonemes. These languages, and Asur and Bhumij have not yet been adequately described. Further, we do not use the Ho material, notwithstanding the rich data available, because there is no difference in vowel correspondences between Mundari and Ho.

Strictly speaking we cannot reconstruct the Proto-Kherwarian vowel system until we have sufficient data on all the Kherwarian languages. Although we do not have that as yet we can at least supply new data on the Singhbhum dialect of Santali. This is important because our hypothesis is supported by the data from this dialect.

We will, therefore, reconstruct the vowels of Proto-Kherwarian by