

The Vowel System of Maola

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I. Introduction

The Maos inhabit the northern part of Manipur State of India, bounded by similar Naga tribes such as the Angami and Chakhesang tribes in the north, the Maram naga tribes in the west and south, and the Tankhul and Poumai tribes in the east. The Maos are also known as Memei or Ememei, in their own language. According to Grierson (1903), Maola is included in the Naga Kuki group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Benedict P.K. (1972) described that Maola belongs to the Naga group of Sino-Tibetan language family. According to Scott Delancy (1987) Maola belongs to the Naga group under the Assam Burmese section of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Ethnoculturally, the Mao is with the Nagas of Nagaland being closely related to the Angami Nagas (P.P.Giridhar 1994)

There are so few written works on Maola such as ‘Mao Naga Grammar’ by P.P.Giridhar (1994). ‘The Mao English Dictionary’ by Fr. Dr. William Nepuni (2014). George van Driem (2001) put the Mao language as one of the Angami-Pochuri languages classified as an independent branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Daniel.M. (2008) has also written about the ‘socio-cultural and religious life of Mao Naga tribe’.

II. Articulation

In Maola, six vowel phonemes can be established as /i, e, ə, a, o, u/. These vowel phonemes are generally classified in terms of three main articulatory dimensions viz.

- i. The degree to which the mouth is opened.
- ii. the position of the highest part of the tongue and
- iii. The position of the lips.

In the high vowels such as /i/ and /u/, the position of the tongue is high in the mouth. The mid vowels like /e/, /ə/, and /o/, the position of tongue is low in the mouth. In the horizontal axes, front vowels /i/ and /e/, the tongue is forward in the mouth. The central vowels, /ə/ and /a/, the position of the tongue in central part is raised and in the back vowels i.e.: /u/ and /o/, the position of tongue is also towards the back of the mouth. The front and central vowels i.e. /i, e, a and ə/ are known as unrounded vowel phonemes and back vowels i.e. /u/ and /o/ are known as rounded vowel phonemes. It is shown as below:

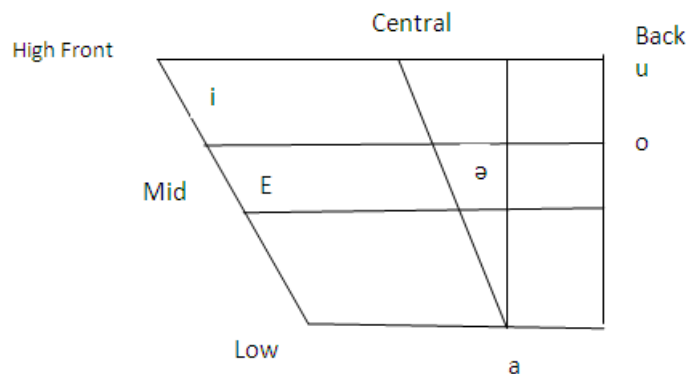


Fig: Vowel Chart of Maola

Minimal Pairs of Vowels

The above vowel phonemes can be established on the basis of the following minimal pairs:

ə/a	osə	‘breath’
	osa	‘shawl’
u/o	ovu	‘star’
	ovo	‘pig’
i/o	ozi	‘share’
	ozo	‘face’

a/o	tala	'throat'
	talo	'easy'
i/e	mati	'salt'
	mate	'sorry'
a/e	mada	'folk yell'
	made	'basket'

Occurrence of Vowel phonemes

The vowels in Maola are / i, e, ə, a, o and u/. Not all of them are found in all position of words. The vowels /i, e, ə, a and o / occur in all position, i.e. initially, medially and finally and the vowel /u/ occur only medially and finally. Even though the vowel /e/ occurs initially, its frequency in the initial position is very limited. The initial occurrences of /i, ə, e, a and u/ are very few in number or rare when compared to the vowel/o/. The vowel /o/ is found maximum in the initial position. In Manipuri (Metelion), initial occurrence of /e/ and /a/ are rare (Singh2000) whereas, in Chothe, all the vowel phonemes can occur initially (Singh 2008). The positions of the six vowel phonemes can be discussed as in the following examples.

The front vowels

/i/ The production of the vowel /i/ may be described as :

- (i) The front of the tongue is raised to the highest position but does not touch the palate.
- (ii) The lips are spread.
- (iii) The soft palate is raised.
- (iv) The soft palate is raised.

Occurrence of /i/ : It occurs at initial , medial and final positions.

Examples:

Initial	Medial	Final
inu 'village'	pito 'cucumber'	oleli 'inside'
idu 'yesterday'	pikhra 'bat'	obi 'trunk'
izho 'today'	piki 'ant'	osi 'dog'

/e/: The movement of the speech organs in the production of the vowel is as follows:

- (i) The front of the tongue is raised but the height it reaches is little lower.
- (ii) The lips are spread.
- (iii) The soft palate is raised.
- (iv) The vocal cords vibrate.

Occurrence of /e/: It occurs at medial and final positions.

Examples:

Initial	Medial	Final
e 'yes'	hedzə 'tears'	kohe 'problem'
eprə 'elephant'	khebi 'stag'	ne 'suckle'
	belu 'november'	kase 'collision'
	ideko 'last year'	kade 'barking'

The central vowels:

During the production of central vowels, the central part of the tongue is raised. The central vowels of Maola are /a/ and /ə/ .

/a/: The position of the speech organs during which the production of the vowel may be described as:

- (i) The centre of the tongue is lower than its neutral position.
- (ii) The lips are spread.
- (iii) The soft palate is in its raised position.
- (iv) The vocal cords vibrate.

/a/: It occurs at initial, medial and final positions.

Examples:

Initial	Medial	Final
athi 'who'	kahi 'near'	kasa 'friend'
ai 'me/I'	kavabvə 'lamp'	kata 'marshy'
aila 'myself'	oramei 'god'	kaka 'cross'
atami 'we'	prakolo 'evolution'	asa 'happy'

/ə/: The movement of the speech organs during the production of this vowel can be described as:

- (i) The centre of the tongue is raised little higher than /a/.
- (ii) The lips are slightly spread.
- (iii) The soft palate is raised.
- (iv) The vocal cords are in vibration.

/ə/: It occurs at initial, medial and final positions.

Examples:

Initial	Medial	Final
əra 'bark'	dzəhe 'umbrella'	phitsə 'heel'
əpo 'break'	osəri 'windpipe'	bobvə 'stomach'
əna 'but'	ojəphe 'universe'	nosə 'temple'
əpri 'to crack'	kakrəco 'talking'	mosə 'liver'

The back vowels: During the production of back vowels, the back of the tongue is raised towards the soft palate. The descriptions of the back vowel of Maola are /o/ and /u/.

/o/: The position of the speech organs during the production of this vowel is described as:

- (i) The height of the back of the tongue is the same as the height of the front of the tongue for /e/. It is a little lower than the height for /u/.
- (ii) The lips are rounded.
- (iii) The soft palate is in its raised position.
- (iv) The vocal cords vibrate.

/o/: It occurs at the medial and final positions.

Examples:

Initial	Medial	Final
oha 'religion'	movu 'king'	kovo 'bamboo'
osi 'dog'	nobi 'ear'	vətho 'banana'
oratu 'camel'	mozo 'equal'	odo 'field'
ofu 'deer'	fomoro 'garlic'	olo 'song'

/u/: The production of this vowel may be described with the following movements of the speech organs:

- (i) The back of the tongue is raised to the highest position as in the case of /i/.
- (ii) The lips are rounded.
- (iii) The soft palate is raised.
- (iv) The vocal cords are in vibration.

/u/: It occurs at the medial and final position.

Examples:

Medial	Final
ovuni 'sand'	obu 'place'
oruna 'weapon'	cu 'peep'
otucə 'stable'	nolu 'young'
khubu 'gun'	oru 'war'

Diphthongs of Maola

Diphthongs are very rare in this language. In Maola only the diphthong /əi/ is found. In this diphthong the tongue glides from the first vowel to the second vowel and the second vowel is more prominent.

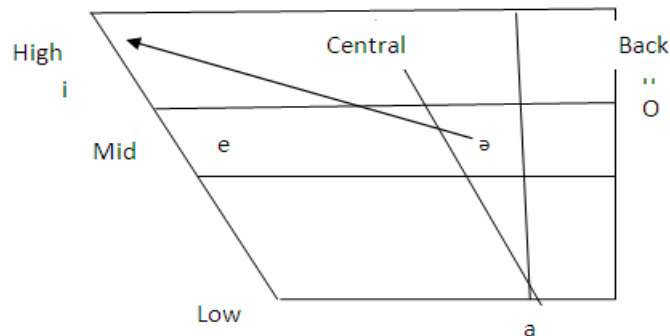


Fig: Diphthong Chart of Maola

Diphthong /əi/:

The diphthong /əi/ can be described as a vowel glide which begins from the front unrounded mid position and move in the direction of the front unrounded high vowel position.

/əi/: It can occur only at the final position.

Examples:

Final	
kotsəməi	‘old’
kahəi	‘two’
kaʃəməi	‘announcer’
nekoboməi	‘enemy’

III. Conclusion

This paper briefly shows the six vowel phonemes of Maola. They are /i, e, ə, a, o and u/. Not all the vowel phonemes can occur at the initial, medial and final positions of words. Only the vowels /i, e, ə, o and a/ can occur in the initial position. The vowel /u/ cannot occur at the initial position. The initial position of vowel /o/ is found maximum in this language. In addition only the diphthong /əi/ is found in this language. It is also found that the maximum words in this language end with a vowel sound.

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