

Prominence in Mundari Disyllables and Inflected Polysyllabic Nouns

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In this paper, we describe our preliminary findings from an ongoing study of intonation in Mundari, an Austroasiatic language spoken by some two million people in at least four dialects. Here we present a comparative analysis of the system of prominence attested in two such dialects, viz. Hasada? and Naguri. We use as a basis for this preliminary study disyllabic forms of any function and polysyllabic nouns that are inflected for a variety of case, possession, etc. categories. Future studies will cover the significantly more complicated system of intransitive and transitive verb forms.

When examining previous studies on Mundari, one encounters a wide array of perspectives—there are almost as many different analyses as there have been analysts. Thus, according to [1, 2] and [3], Mundari is a stress language, while [4] considers it to be a pitch accent language. Moreover, [5] claims that in disyllabic words the accent is on the first syllable, with (lexical) exceptions. [3] also claims that Mundari stresses the second syllable in disyllabic words if it is of the shape $C^1V^1C^2V^2$ or $C^1V^1C^2V^2C^3$ but in words of the shape $C^1V^1C^2C^3V^2$, stress falls on the initial syllable, suggesting a QS iambic system. If the word is trisyllabic, stress falls on the 2nd syllable regardless of the shape according [3]. Further, [1] finds that only if the final syllable is closed, it is accented, otherwise it is the initial syllable in disyllabic words, thus QS trochaic. Most recently, [6] states that if a word is trisyllabic, stress can only be on the second or the third syllable: on the third syllable if that is not a suffix, otherwise it falls on the second syllable in Mundari trisyllabic words, but never on the first syllable, regardless of syllable weight. Also, [4] states that “in Mundari a phonological word maximally consists of three syllables”. However, these previous studies are impressionistic and not verified by instrumental analysis, nor supported with statistical data.

Overall, it has been assumed that all Munda languages show a trochaic pattern of prominence [7, 8, 9], but recent instrumental analyses of Sora [10, 11, 12] and Assam Santali [13], supported by statistical data, suggest that these two sister languages to Mundari rather consistently show second syllable prominence. The prominence is cued by intensity, duration and/or fundamental frequency on the second syllable.

In this report we offer a new instrumental analyses of Mundari focusing for this study on disyllables and inflected polysyllabic nouns. We compare these findings with the claims made in the literature about the language, as well as with the findings from the more recent studies on related languages. This includes the role of quantity sensitivity (if any) in determining patterns of prominence, what the acoustic cues of prominence in Mundari are and how they conspire to encode the prominent syllable, and whether the maximal phonological word is three syllables or not. We also compare these results with an exercise in writing words by native speakers that speaks to the fact that psychological "reality" of word shapes and boundaries may not coincide with phonoprosodic data on the nature of the word in Mundari. All data are taken from field notes.

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