

Inflixes in Assamese: Towards the Resolution of a Controversy

Champakali Talukdar
*Associate Professor, Department of Assamese,
Cotton University*

Abstract: The smallest meaningful unit of a language is called a morpheme. The morphemes may broadly be divided into two categories: free morphemes and bound morphemes. The free morphemes can express their meanings in isolation; but the bound morphemes, though meaningful, cannot suggest their meanings independently. They can give their meanings only when they are added to a free morpheme. The bound morphemes are also regarded as affixes. From the positional point of view, the bound morphemes or affixes may be of three types: prefix, infix and suffix. It is admitted by all that the Assamese language abounds in prefixes and suffixes; but it is a matter of long lasting controversy whether the language possesses any infixes. Some grammarians opine that Assamese has infixes while some others deny the existence of the same in the language. This paper is an attempt to investigate this disputed issue of infixes in Assamese and to arrive at a logical conclusion about it.

Key Words: morpheme, affix, free morpheme, bound morpheme, prefix, infix, suffix, sandhi, etc.

Introduction

Structural linguistics became more popular during the mid-twentieth century and since then bound morphemes or affixes came to be analyzed in line with that. Prior to that, the traditional grammars approached the issue from a purely descriptive point of view. The infixes, as the very name suggests, occur in the middle of the bases or stems and derive new words. The number of languages having infixes is few and far between in the world. The uses of infixes are found only in a handful of languages belonging to the Semitic and Austric language families. The Indo-Aryan languages, as a rule, lack infixes. There are a few grammarians who are of the view that Assamese has infixes; but a critical analysis of the basic features of infixes shows that the language actually does not have this type of affixes. The few examples cited by them as Assamese infixes do not fulfil the conditions of infixes. Assamese, in the main, is a suffix-dominated language.

Objectives of the Study

The issue of infixes in Assamese has been a highly debatable one. For nearly the last four decades, the graduate and post-graduate level students in Assamese as well as general readers, have been facing much confusions over this. The source of this confusion lies in the arguments for and against the existence of infixes in Assamese. The present paper considers the whole issue thoroughly and critically and thereby tries to contribute a bit to put the issue at rest.

Area of Study

The paper does not deal with the bound morphemes or affixes in detail. It engages in an introductory discussion of the positional variants of affixes in general and the issue of infixes in particular with reference to Assamese.

Sources of Study

Relevant published books and articles constitute the main corpus of sources of study. In this respect, mentions may be made of Leonard Bloomfield's book *Language*, E.A.Nida's *Morphology*, H.A.Gleason's *An introduction to Descriptive Linguistics*, and Golok Chandra Goswami's *Structure of Assamese in English*. Among the books published in Assamese, the noteworthy ones are Upendra Nath Goswami's *Asamiya Bhasar Vyakaran*, Golok Chandra Goswami's *Asamiya Vyakaranar Moulik Bichar*, Lilabati Saikia Bora's *Asamiya Bhasar Ruptattva*, Ramesh Pathak's *Vyakaran Aru Prakriti Vijnan*, and Arpana Konwar's *Bhasavijnan Upakramanika*. Some materials available on the internet have also been considered.

Method of Study

Both descriptive and analytic methods have been applied in the preparation of this research paper.

Main Discussion

Morphemes: Affixes, and for that matter infixes, belong to the category of morphemes. It is, therefore, necessary to have a preliminary idea of morphemes before embarking on any discussion about affixes and their sub-divisions. According to the eminent morphologist E.A. Nida : "Morphemes are the minimal meaningful units which may constitute words or parts of words"(Nida, E.A., 1949, p.1) such minimal or smallest unit may consist of one or more sounds. As for examples of morphemes, Nida has cited the forms -ish, -ly, -re, -de, and -un that are added to the English forms boy, like, ceive, mand, and tie respectively. H.A. Gleason defines morphemes as the smallest meaningful unit which cannot be reduced any further without destroying or altering the meaning (Gleason, H.A., 1976, p.67). It has already been pointed out that the morphemes may either be free or bound. For example, the Assamese words মানুহ, চকু, হাত, মাছ, গছ, ঘৰ, চাউল etc. are free morphemes. On the other hand, the Assamese Forms such as -বোৰ, -বিলাক, -জন, -গৰাকী, -ঈ, -ৰী, -ৰ, -ত etc. are bound morphemes.

Affixes: In reality, the bound forms may be regarded as affixes, They are the smallest meaningful units of a language which cannot be used independently in sentences. They can express their meanings only when added to stems or free forms. In the words of H.A. Gleason: "Affixes may be added directly to roots, or to constructions consisting of a root plus one or more other morphemes" (Gleason, H.A, 1976, p.59).

From the positional point of view, affixes may be of three types: prefix, infix and suffix. Prefixes are added before the stems or bases while the suffixes are added after the stems or bases. Infixes, on the other hand, always occur within the bases or stems. From the functional point of view, affixes may be classified into inflectional affixes and derivational affixes.

Infixes: According to E.A.Nida, infixes occur within the roots (Nida, E.A, 1949, p.69). Introduction to Modern Linguistics defines an infix as : "An infix is a morpheme which is inserted into the stem with which it is associated"(Gleason, H.A., 1976, p.73).

There are only a few languages that have infixes. Infixes are found only in a limited number of languages of the Semitic and Austric families. In the Egyptian Arabic language of the Semitic family, new words are formed by inserting infixes within the roots consisting of three consonants. Some examples :

- i) k t b 'write'
- k a t a b 'he wrote'
- k a t i b 'writing (person)'
- k i t a b 'book' (Nida, E.A., 1949, p.69)
- ii) g l s 'sit'
- g a l a s 'he sits'
- g a l i s 'sitting(person)'(Nida, E.A., 1949, p.68)

In the Tagalog language (the standard form being Philipino) of the Austronesian branch, we come across examples of infixes; for example:

- i) s u : l a t 'a writing'
- ii) s u m u : l a t 'one who wrote'

The affix -mu- is the infix in the above example (Bloomfield, Leonard, 1994, p.218).

- iii) g u l a y 'greenish blue'
 - g i n u l a y 'green vegetable'
- (Gleason, H.A., 1976, p.73)

In the above example, -in- is the infix.

In the Khmer language belonging to the Austro-Asiatic branch, there are seven infixes.

Of these, only one example is cited below:

- i) c a m 'to watch'
- c m a m 'watchman'

Here, -m- is the infix.

In the Malayan and Indonesian languages, there are three infixes in each; they are -el- -em- and -er-. Examples :

- i) g e m b u n g 'bloated'
- g e l e m b u n g 'bubble'
- ii) c e r l a n g 'luminous'
- c e r m e r l a n g 'brilliant'
- iii) g i g i 'tooth'
- g e r i g i 'serration'

(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org> accessed on 03.12.2022)

Instances of infixes used in the Bontoc language prevalent in the Philippines are as follows :

- i) f i k a s fumikas
- f u s u l fumsul

(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org> accessed on 03.12.2022)

Infixes are also available in the Hoken-Seri language. In this language, a plural word may be formed by inserting an infix into the singular word; for example :

i c 'plant'

i t o o c

Here, the -too- is the infix.

Two more examples :

i t i c did she/he plant it?

i t i t o o c did they sow it?

(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org> accessed on 03.12.2022)

In the Greek language, the word /lamban?/ (meaning 'I take') is formed by adding the affix -m- inside the word /lab/. Gleason has termed this affix -m- as an infix (Gleason, H.A., 1974, p.73).

Conditions for an Infix

An affix must fulfil certain conditions to be recognized as an infix. They are as under:

- i) The affix must occur within the stem or base itself.
- ii) The affix that occurs within the stem or base must form a new word.
- iii) The infix does not increase or decrease the number of sounds in the original stem or base.
- iv) The compensatory lengthening of vowels is not to be regarded as an infix.
- v) The appearance of a sound within the stem or base due to Sandhi(juncture) cannot be considered as an infix.
- vi) The process of vowel replacement must not be regarded as an infix, because it results in a discontinuation of the stem or base.
- vii) A bound from occurring in the midst of two or more bound forms cannot be labeled as an infix.
- viii) A replacive morpheme is also not be confused with an infix. In this respect E.A.

Nida remarks : "Certain morphemes replace parts of stem. These are structurally different from the additive morphemes, which are added to the stem"(Nida, E.A. 1949, p.71). As regards replacive morphemes, Nida has cited the example of the English singular number word 'foot' which is turned into a plural word 'feet' by replacing the medial short vowel /u/ of the singular form with the long vowel /i:/ in the plural form.

The Issue of Infixes in Sanskrit

The Indo-Aryan languages possess prefixes and suffixes, but not infixes. Of course, some grammarians argue that Sanskrit has infixes. In Sanskrit, while conjugating the verbal roots belonging to the Rudhadi Gana by adding the four inflectives (Lat, Lot, Lang and Vidhiling), a cerebral -n- or dental -n- occurs in the midst of the verbal root *ब्रू* ; e.g. *ब्रू* *ब्रू*ङि *ब्रू*ङ *ब्रू*ङति (Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1993, p. 86). Though from the positional point of view this cerebral -n- or dental -n- seems to be an infix, actually it has not derived any new word. This cerebral -n- or dental -n- is the result of Sandhi. Hence, it cannot be accorded to the status of an infix. The same may be said about the conjugation of the verbal roots belonging to the Kradi and Svadi Ganas. It can, therefore, be safely concluded that infixes are not to be found in Sanskrit also.

The Issue of Infixes in Assamese

Nobody has ever disagreed that Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, has abundant use of prefixes and suffixes. But it is a highly controversial issue whether Assamese has infixes or not.

The traditional Assamese grammars have elaborately dealt with the prefixes and suffixes of the language, but they are silent on the issue of Assamese infixes. Even they have not mentioned the very word 'infix'. The issue does not figure in Kaliram Medhi's historical grammar Asamiya Vyakaran Aru Bhasatattva and Banikanta Kakati's thesis Assamese : Its Formation and Development.

The issue of Assamese infixes has emerged ever since the introduction of structural method in the study of Assamese. It is necessary to analyze the positional varieties of affixes in structural linguistics. That's why, the issue of infixes constitutes an important theme in structural linguistics.

It was Upendra Nath Goswami who first introduced structural method in the study of Assamese. He, for the first time, unequivocally declared in his Asamiya Bhasar Vyakarana that infixes are available in Assamese (Goswami, Upendra Nath, 1981, p.10). According to Goswami, infixes are those affixes that occur within free forms and bound forms. For example, in the Assamese word *কিতাপকেইখনৰ* the affix *-কেই-* is the infix. Similarly, in the Assamese word *মানুহকেতবোৰ* the affix *-কেত-* is the infix (Goswami, Upendra Nath, 1981, p.10) . Goswami remarks emphatically that any bound form which occurs within a free form on the one hand and a bound form on the is to be regarded as an infix. But it is evident

at the first sight that the forms -কেই- and -কেত- referred to by Goswami have not fulfilled the very first condition of an infix , i.e. these forms have not occurred within the bases or stems. According to Bhagban Maral, the form -কেই- is, in fact , a quantifier functor. He also argues that a quantifier functor can never be regarded as an infix (Maral, Bhagaban, 1987-88, p.30).

Golok Chandra Goswami, a structuralist Assamese linguist, has clearly stated in his Asamiya Vyakaranar Moulik Bichar, that the affixes provided by Upendra Nath Goswami as examples of Assamese infixes are not infixes at all (Goswami, Upendra Nath, 1993, p.87) . According to Golok Chandra Goswami, the form -কেই- which has been regarded as an infix by Upendra Nath Goswami, cannot be termed even as an affix. He also remarks that this particular form cannot even be included into the category of subroot morpheme; it is actually a root in itself (Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1993, p.87) .

Really speaking, the form -কেই- has been derived from the pronominal root -ক-(k).

Some such derived forms are:

ক - ই = কি	(What)
ক - এও = কেও	(Some one)
ক - ওন = কোন	(Who)
ক - এত = কেত	(Many, Some)
ক - এতিয়া = কেতিয়া	(When)
ক - এনে = কেনে	(Which like)
ক - এই = কেই	(How many)

(Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1982, pp.236-37)

Bhagban Maral has logically stated that from morphemic point of view, the Assamese quantifiers, classifiers and modal functors can never be given the status of infixes. These are, in reality, function words, they are used to construct nonce-forms. In structural analysis, the Assamese quantifiers, classifiers, plurality deixis limiters, modal functors, etc. are quite difficult to allot fixed positions of use. That is why morphemic analysis becomes problematic in respect to these forms (Maral, Bhagaban, 1987-88, p.30).

It is to be noted that whereas Golok Chandra Goswami, in his Asamiya Vyakaranar Moulik Bichar, has clearly rejected the existence of infixes in Assamese, he himself suffers from some sort of self-contradiction when he says that some intransitive verbal roots in Assamese can be transformed into transitive ones by replacing the medial vowels of the intransitive verbal roots. He has cited these examples in support of his contention:

মৰ (ম্ অ ব্)	মাৰ (ম্ আ ব্)
চৰ (চ্ অ ব্)	চাৰ (চ্ আ ব্)
তৰ (ত্ অ ব্)	তাৰ (ত্ আ ব্), etc.

(Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1993, p.150)

Goswami's argument is that the replacement of the medial vowel -?- of the verbal

roots by -?- generates altogether new verbal roots. So he says that if this vowel -?- is considered as an infix, then it would be the single and rare instance of infix in Assamese (Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1993, p.151) E.A. Nida declared it long ago that a singular word can be transformed into a plural one with the help of replacive morphemes and such replacive morphemes are not to be regarded as infixes; e.g. foot>feet, tooth > teeth, etc. Again, Goswami remarks in another place that the process of number change inherent in words like foot- feet, goose-geese, etc. should be accepted as derivation by phonemic change (Goswami, Golok Chandra, 1993, p.151). In the similar way, there are certain verbs in English in which change of tenses may be effected by changing the internal vowels, e.g. stand--stood; sing--sang, etc. Ramesh Pathak has termed such changes as replacive morphemes (Pathak, Ramesh, (1988,p.36).

If Golok Chandra Goswami regards the vowel -আ- as an infix that transforms the intransitive verbal roots into transitive ones, then we see that the same does not fulfil certain conditions of an infix; e.g. :

- i) It does not occur inside the stem or base by bifurcating it.
- ii) It does not create a new word by changing the original meaning of the stem or base.
- iii) The insertion of the -আ- breaks the continuity of the stem or base.

In the light of the above observations, it becomes quite clear that the -আ- is by no means an affix.

Upen Rabha Hakacham has termed the above -আ- as a replacive morpheme (Rabha Hakacham, 2015, p.3). Arpana Konwar has clearly denied the existence of infix in Assamese. She argues that the forms -কেই- and -কেত- do not occur by bifurcating the base or stem মানুহ in words like মানুহকেইজনমান, কিতাপকেইখনমান, মানুহকেতবোৰ,, etc. (Konwar, Arpana, 2002, p.121). Ramesh Pathak also clearly opines that there are no infixes in Assamese (Pathak, Ramesh, 1988, p.42) . He says that in the word মানুহকেইজন the form -কেই- has not occurred within the word by breaking the stem or base মানুহ. He wonders if the forms /কেই, জন, মান, এৰে/, etc. are regarded as infixes, then what would be the structure of a language that is suffix-dominated (Pathak, Ramesh, 1988, p.42).

On the other hand, Lilabati Saikia Bora has unambiguously rejected the status of infix to the forms -কেই- and -খন-; but at the same time she has accorded to the form -আ- the status of infix in line with Golok Chandra Goswami (Saikia Bora, Lilabati, 2006, pp.12-13). She has even added some more examples of new words formed by replacing the medial vowel -অ- for -আ- e.g. নল - নাল, তল - তাল, etc. If her contention is to be accepted, then we will have many more words of this sort in Assamese; e.g.: ঢল - ঢাল, ফল - ফাল, কম - কাম, কল - কাল, তল - তাল, জল - জাল, বখ - বাখ, লগ - লাগ,, etc.

In this case, we think, it is not logical to lay all emphasis merely on the structural aspect of the Tadbhav words completely ignoring their course of historical evolution. As the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky has rightly pointed out, we will have to accept sentences

like "The colorful green ideas sleep furiously" which are structurally correct but semantically nonsensical, if we adopt a purely structural approach rejecting the semantic aspect of a words and sentences.

From the above discussion, we may come to these conclusions:

- i) There is no infix in Assamese.
- ii) The Assamese forms -কেই- and -কেত- mean "how many/how much". They are, in fact, roots or stems or bases in themselves. They are not affixes, and for that matter, not infixes at all.
- iii) Though roots or stems or bases, the forms -কেই- and -কেত- have limitations in their applications. There are only a few instances where these forms may be used independently. In most cases, they are used in combination with other roots.
- iv) The forms -কেই- and -কেত- may be regarded as compound words consisting of two parts: ক - এই = কেই and ক - এত = কেত Thus the nucleus of these and some other words of the same type may be identified as ক.
- v) The medial vowel -আ- that transforms intransitive verbal roots into transitive ones, as have been claimed by Golok Chandra Goswami and Lilabati Saikia Bora, cannot be accorded the status of an infix. The particular transitive verbal roots as cited by Goswami and Bora, have not been derived from the alleged intransitive verbal roots. In reality, the intransitive and transitive verbal roots mentioned by them belong altogether to two different categories.

References

Assamese Books

- Goswami, Upendra Nath. (1981). Asamiya Bhasar Vyakaran. Moni Manik Prakash, Guwahati
- Goswami, Golok Chandra. (1993). Asamiya Vyakaranar Moulik Bichar(extended). Bina Library Guwahati.
- Konwar, Arpana. (2002). Bhasa Vijnan Upakramanika. Banalata, Dibrugarh.
- Pathak, Ramesh. (1988). Vyakaran Aru Prakriti Vijnan. Bina Library, Guwahati.
- Rabha Hakacham, Upen. (2015). Asamiya Rupaattvar Bichar. Assam Publishing Company, Guwahati.
- Saikia Bora, Lilabati. (2006). Asamiya Bhasar Rupaattva. Banalata, Dibrugarh.

English Books

- Bloomfield, Leonard. (1994). Language (Reprint). Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi.
- Chomsky, Noam. (1975). Syntactic Structures. Mouton & Co, B.V. Publishers, The Hague.

Gleason, H.A. (1976). An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics. Oxford IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi.

Goswami, Golok Chandra. (1982). Structure of Assamese. Dept. of Publication, Gauhati University, Guwahati.

Nida, E.A. (1949). Morphology. University of Michigan Press.

Verma, S. K. & Krishnaswami, N.(2000). Modern Linguistics. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Assamese Article

Maral, Bhagaban.(1987-88). Asamiya Vyakaranar Moulik Bichar in Thakuria, Ramcharan(Ed.) Prabhasika, The Linguistic Society of Assam, Vol.III, No.s 1&2.