

**SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
PUBLICATIONS IN LINGUISTICS AND RELATED FIELDS**

Publication Number 51

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PAPERS
ON
DISCOURSE

JOSEPH E. GRIMES, EDITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
THE SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
1978

ISBN 0-88312-061-5

**Copyright 1978 by Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc.
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-18496**

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The Case of the Added Schwa

Dorothy Leal

Abstract

Word-final *a* may be added to any Chitwan Tharu word ending with a consonant. In normal rapid conversation, it is absent much of the time. Different tellings of the same story have *a* at different places. Even though no pattern has been found to explain this seemingly random variation, in each telling, final *a* is added to approximately 33% of the words that have this possibility. Furthermore, the frequency of final *a* is in each case correlated with the segments of the plot. In narrative, then, addition of final *a* behaves as a variable frequency rule whose parameter is set by position within the plot.

In Chitwan Tharu¹ the phoneme *a*² has a peculiar behavior in that it may be added to consonant-final words and also may be added between consonants in a cluster. Its point of stability and contrast in a word is in the first syllable, preceded by a consonant. The problem is to discover when the word-final addition occurs; I assume for the moment that addition to break up consonant clusters obeys the same conditions.

In normal rapid conversation, final *a* is absent much of the time. It is almost always added when special emphasis—excitement, disapproval, stress and such—is to be conveyed. This much seems clear. The following example is illustrative: *ethaara dina mora bahut bhukh lagalail* (many days my big hunger struck/) 'It's been many days; I'm very hungry.' Here, *a* has been added to *ethaara*, *dina* and *mora*. *a* could have been added to *bahut* and *bhukh* as well, but was not in this example.

¹Chitwan Tharu is an Indo-Aryan language spoken by approximately 25,000 persons according to the 1971 Nepal census. It is spoken by a group of people calling themselves 'Tharu' and living in the Chitwan district of southern Nepal. Tharus in other areas speak different languages, including Bhojpuri Tharu, Dang Tharu and maybe others as well; but a comprehensive linguistic survey has not yet been conducted.

The language helpers for this study were Ram Kissan Rawat, a 25 year old man of the village of Devauli, Devauli Panchayat, Chitwan, and Hatana Mahatu, also of Devauli.

This research was conducted in 1973 in a workshop sponsored jointly by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Institute of Nepal and Asiatic Studies, Tribhuvan University. The workshop was directed by Joseph E. Grimes.

²According to the Tharu phonemic summary (D. Leal 1972), Tharu has the following phonemes: p, t, T (retroflex), c (alveopalatal affricate), k; ph, th, Th, ch, kh; b, d, D, j, g; bh, dh, Dh, jh, gh; m, n, nG (velar); mh, nh, nGh; s; l, r; lh, rh; w, y, h; i, u, e, o, a (mid central), aa (low central). All vowels except *a* may be nasalized. Nasalization is indicated by *N* following the vowel as in *iN*. The major allophonic variation concerns *D* and *Dh*, which phonetically are [r] and [r^h] respectively word medially and finally, and [d] and [d^h] respectively word initially.

When there are many places where *a* could be added, it appears that it is not added to all those places.

The example cited previously was taken from one of two stories that were elicited, one from each of our two Tharu language helpers. I had each language helper tell his story a number of times over the space of several days. I found that the actual words on which *a* was added varied from telling to telling. The example given earlier also came out *ethaar dina mora bahuta bhukh lagalail; ethaara dina mor bahut bhukha lagalail; ethaar dina mor bahuta bhukha lagalail*. The meanings for these examples are the same as given previously; however, the places where *a* occurs vary, except for *dina*, on which *a* was always added. The reasons for this are not clear.

Despite this seemingly random variation, for which no pattern has yet been found, there is a definite common factor in the stories: in each telling, final *a* is added to approximately 33% of the words that have this possibility. The average holds even though, as shown above, it is not possible to predict which words the process will affect, even for sentences in which the words are identical. A moving average covering five lines throughout the text shows that fewer and fewer instances of *a* are added toward the end, and there is often complete absence in the last paragraph. The high point of addition comes shortly after the beginning.

I also computed separate averages for each plot segment in the stories (Propp 1958). The plot is divided into the major segments of complication and resolution. The nuclear element in the complication is the lack or the villainy, which indicates the problem to be resolved. Instances of added *a* in this element are generally higher than the 33% mean. Within the resolution, those segments in which the hero leaves and in which he returns victorious have a lower instance of added *a* than the mean. The contest, in which the hero and the villain are set against each other, seems to have about the mean number of additions of *a*.

In other words, addition of final *a* behaves as a variable frequency rule (Labov 1969) whose parameter is set by position within the plot (Grimes 1975). Other types of stories, as well as conversations and discourses of various natures may control *a* addition in a different way; this remains to be investigated.

I suspect that rhythm and stress interact with *a*, especially on a sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph basis. If this turns out to be true, it will be an additional factor that governs the appearance and disappearance of *a* in Chitwan Tharu. The solution to the added *a* in word-final position is also likely to be the solution to its appearance and disappearance in consonant clusters.