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### THE MEDONG DIALECT OF MELANAU: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE PHONOLOGY

Beatrice Clayre

#### INTRODUCTION

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Two previous studies have been made of the language. One of the Dalat dialect by I.F. Clayre in 1970-71 (I. Clayre 1970), the other of the Mukah dialect by Robert Blust in 1971, but not published until later (Blust 1988). This study of the Medong dialect arose out of the need to establish a consistent orthography for Dr. H.S. Morris's book on 'The Oya Melanau: traditional ritual and belief, which I was editing at the time.'<sup>1</sup>

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A good orthography (spelling system) has a separate symbol for every significant (or phonemic) sound in the language. There are three stages to achieving such a goal.

1. The data is collected in phonetic script. The International Phonetic Alphabet (revised to 1993) was used for this, and by convention all phonetic data are enclosed in square brackets, [ ].

2. The phonetic data are analysed and interpreted to discover the patterns (each language has its own patterns), and the significant sounds (or phonemes) of the language. Phonemic data are written between oblique brackets (or slashes), //.

3. An orthography based on the phonemes of the language is prepared.

The present study of the Medong dialect is, of necessity, preliminary since time in Sarawak was limited. Attention was concentrated on those sounds causing most difficulty in the spelling of Melanau, and these were undoubtedly the vowels and diphthongs. An effort was made to document the maximum variation that could occur in the vowels. In this work, I was very ably assisted by retired teacher, Gregory bin Buji, who spent many hours working with me to compile charts and lists, and who assiduously cross-checked all my transcriptions and conclusions.

This account of the Medong dialect of Melanau, will look first at the structure of the word (§1), and then of the syllable (§2). Problems concerning

the interpretation of some of the data will then be discussed (§3). The phonemes of the language will be listed, and described, together with their distribution patterns and lists of contrasts (§4-6). There is a section discussing the best way to represent the phonemes of the language in the orthography (§7), and finally a note on some of the differences observed between the Mukah and Medong dialects (§8).

## 1.0 THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORD IN MEDONG

1.1 *The minimum word in Medong* consists of one syllable, for example (1):

(1) [id] /id/ 'fan'; [suk] /sak/ 'red'; [tug] /tug/ 'rice mortar';  
[tɑ:] 'belian tree'

1.2 *The maximum expansion of a Medong word* consists of four syllables, in fact, such words are comparatively rare, and a typical word consists of two syllables.

(2) Examples of two to four syllable words in Medong

Two syllable words

[balak] /balak/ 'banana'; [migiʔ] /migiʔ/ 'fetch', [luŋun] /luŋun/  
'coffin'

Three syllable words

[səludan] /seludan/ 'conduit', [pəŋuməʊ] /pəŋamew/ 'ghost'

Four syllable words

[sələmatək] /selamatek/ 'leech', [kələpəyən] /kelapayang/  
'wing'

1.3 *Stress* falls predominantly on the final syllable of the word, and is marked by rising pitch (particularly noticeable on words spoken in isolation) as well as increased amplitude. In some two syllable words, the stress seemed to fall evenly on both syllables, and this may have been the result of a primary vowel in the first syllable. Lack of time prevented further investigation, but such levelling of stress was noted in words like [dibə<sup>1</sup>] /dibey/ 'no', 'not' (even stress) in contrast to [dəbə<sup>1</sup>] /debey/ 'oneself' (stress on final syllable).

The final syllable is the only syllable in which the diphthongs and the full inventory of the vowels of the language can occur, this is further confirmation that it is the stressed syllable in Medong.

1.4 *Abbreviations.* The final stressed syllable of a Medong word will be referred to as the nuclear syllable (represented as S), and the non-final syllables

as prenuclear syllables (represented as *s*). The Medong word may therefore be diagrammed as follows (3):

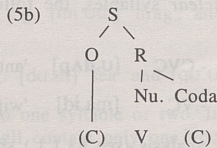
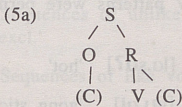
- (3) monosyllables                    S  
 two syllable words                s S  
 three syllable words            s s S  
 four syllable words            s s s S

The structure of the Medong word is summarised in diagram (4) in which the syllables are numbered counting back from the nuclear syllable. This numbering system will be used throughout the paper. Brackets indicate that a syllable is optional.

- (4) (s<sub>4</sub>) (s<sub>3</sub>) (s<sub>2</sub>) S<sub>1</sub>

## 2.0 THE SYLLABLE IN MEDONG

2.1. A syllable consists of an optional onset (O), and a rhyme (R). The onset, or first segment of a syllable, is always a consonant (C). The rhyme is the most important part of the syllable and it consists of a nucleus which is always a vowel (V) with or without a coda, which is a closing consonant (C). Only one vowel is permitted in each syllable. The structure of the syllable is shown as a diagram (5).



A syllable consisting of a consonant onset and a vowel rhyme, (CV), but no coda or closing consonant is called an open syllable. A syllable ending in a consonant (CVC or VC) is called a closed syllable. Some syllables consist of a vowel only with no onset and no closing consonant, and are represented simply as V.

2.2. *CV patterns.* Languages permit only certain combinations of vowels and consonants in their words and syllables. This survey suggests that in Medong there are differences between the consonant and vowel (CV) patterns

permitted in nuclear and prenuclear syllables. In prenuclear syllables, the only patterns recorded are V and CV. In nuclear syllables, CVC, and VC also occur (6). The examples in (7) illustrate the CV patterns recorded in Medong. The syllable break will be indicated by a fullstop (.), and the relevant syllable will be in bold.

(6) Patterns of consonants and vowels permitted in pre-nuclear syllables (s) and nuclear syllables (S).

s (pre-nuclear)                      S (nuclear)

CV    CV

V    CVC

V

VC

2.2.1. In the *prenuclear* syllables the following CV patterns were permitted (7):

- |          |                   |                |                  |              |
|----------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| (7) CV.- | [t <b>u</b> .kλd] | 'climb'        | [d <b>a</b> .at] | 'sea'        |
| V.-      | [a.b <b>u</b> n]  | 'spirit house' | [i.n <b>u</b> t] | 'sago paste' |

2.2.2. In *nuclear* syllables, the following CV patterns were permitted (7a, b):

- |      |       |                  |        |                            |              |
|------|-------|------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------------|
| (8a) | -.CVC | [u.d <b>ʌ</b> p] | 'ant'  | [l <b>a</b> .s <b>u</b> ʔ] | 'hot'        |
|      | -.VC  | [ma. <b>i</b> d] | 'wipe' | [g <b>u</b> . <b>a</b> l]  | 'gong stick' |

Further analysis (see §3.1.1.) showed that lengthened vowels could be interpreted as filling one vowel slot. This allows for the additional pattern of CV in the nuclear syllable (8b). The length, indicated by the symbol, **ː**, in (8b) is entirely predictable.

- |      |      |                           |                |                            |            |
|------|------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|------------|
| (8b) | -.CV | [t <b>a</b> ː]            | 'belian tree'  | [l <b>a</b> .b <b>u</b> ː] | 'pumpkin'  |
|      | -.V  | [n <b>u</b> . <b>a</b> ː] | 'we two excl.' | [p <b>a</b> . <b>i</b> ː]  | 'stingray' |

Monosyllables are nuclear syllables. The patterns recorded in monosyllables are: CV, CVC, and VC (see (1)). Only one monosyllable consists simply of a V syllable. This was the monosyllable [a] which means a

'person' or 'persons'. In my data, this word always occurs with another noun, for example: [ɑ̃ ɲɑ̃t] 'an elder'; [ɑ̃ binU] 'a person who has died a violent death', [ɑ̃ pɑ̃sɑ̃wɑ̃] 'married couple'. It has been interpreted as a proclitic since no evidence was recorded to suggest that it could stand alone. (Proclitic: 'a monosyllable closely attached...to a following word'...O.E.D.)

It will be apparent that a greater variety of CV patterns occurs in the nuclear syllable than in the prenuclear syllable (6). Prenuclear and nuclear syllables are also differentiated by the vowels which can occur in them (§6.2).

**2.3. Consonant clusters.** The CV patterns of Medong never permit consonant clusters in the language, that is two consonants occurring together (CC). One reason for this is that the prenuclear syllable can never end in a consonant (see (6-7)). Borrowed words, however, may contain such clusters, as for example: [ilmU] from Malay and Arabic *ilmu* 'knowledge'. Malay words with medial consonant clusters consisting of a nasal sound and a stop (e.g. nt, mb etc.) were regularly rendered in Medong without the nasal sound, as for example: [tɑ̃giri:] 'mackerel' cf. Malay *tenggiri*, or [dʒɑ̃tɑ̃ŋ] 'heart' cf. Malay *jantung*. In other words, \*(C)VC.CV(C) patterns do not occur in the language, except in some loan words.

**2.4. Vowel clusters.** It will already be apparent from some of the examples in (7) and (8), that Medong permits vowel clusters or sequences of vowels (VV). The following have been noted (see Appendix):

1. Sequences of unlike vowels, e.g. [mɪ.ʊd.] 'drag', and [nʊ.ɑ̃:] 'we two excl.'
2. Sequences of like vowels, e.g. [dɑ̃.ɑ̃t] 'sea' and [gʊ.ʊn] 'forest'

Vowel clusters may belong to one syllable or two. In §2.1. it was stated that in Medong a syllable will contain only one vowel. This, and the fact that in VV sequences the second vowel is always in the final syllable, i.e. the stressed nuclear syllable, allows them to be interpreted as sequences of two vowels (see §3.1.2).

VV sequences occur across the syllable boundaries of  $s_2.S_1$  but none were recorded across the boundaries of  $s_3.s_2$ . Thus the pattern CV.CV.VC, as in [pɑ̃.tʊ.ɑ̃b] 'yawn' is permitted, but not \*CV.VC.(C)V(C) or \*CV.V.(C)V(C). The former is not allowed because VC patterns are not permitted in prenuclear syllables (see (7)), while the latter could give rise to a sequence of three vowels which also appears to be unacceptable in the language, since no sequences of more than two vowels has been recorded (see 3.2.4.).