

Phonological Adaptations of Some English Loanwords in Sylheti

Kh. Dhiren Singha & Md. Ishaque Ahmed
Assam University, Silchar

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Abstract

Sylheti is one of the dialects of Bengali which is mainly spoken in the Sylhet district of present Bangladesh. It is also spoken in the Northeastern part of India particularly in the Barak Valley of South Assam, Tripura, United Kingdom, United States and some of the Gulf countries in the Asian sub-continent. There are 11 million speakers of Sylheti throughout the globe, including 8,000,000 speakers in Bangladesh (Mikael, 2007). Like many other languages/dialects of the world, the contemporary Sylheti borrowed a large number of loanwords from English language in different semantic domains particularly name of objects, cultural, administrative, official, and technical terms to fulfill their day to day communication. However, when they borrow lexical items from English, lot of phonological changes has taken place to fit into the phonological structure of the Sylheti. So the present paper is a humble attempt to discuss the phonological adaptation of English loanwords in Sylheti spoken in Karimganj district of South Assam.

Keywords: Sylheti, Bengali, Indo-Aryan, South Assam, loanwords, phonological adaptation

1. Introduction

The study of loanwords has become prevalent during the past decade. For example, a recent issue of *Lingua* in 2006 was devoted to loanwords, while a special issue of the *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* (2008, issue 4) concentrated on the discussion of loanword phonology in East Asian languages. Interestingly, most recent studies on loanwords have focused on how the

segments of the source languages are incorporated into the recipient languages (e.g. Kang 2003, Kenstowicz 2001, Yip, M. 1993). However, it is comparatively less well studied area in the languages of Indian sub-continent neglecting the fact that most of the Indian languages borrowed a large number of loanwords from English in different semantic domains as English became the common donor language in the globe. Similarly, the contemporary Sylheti borrowed a large number of loanwords from English language in different semantic domains particularly name of objects, cultural, administrative, official, and technical terms to fulfill their day to day communication. However when they borrow lexical items from English, lot of phonological changes has taken place to fit into the phonological structure of the Sylheti. So the present paper is a humble attempt to discuss the phonological adaptation of English loanwords in Sylheti spoken in Karimganj district of South Assam. More specifically, the present paper focuses on the basic strategies that Sylheti used in adapting the foreign elements in terms of phonemes or syllables.

2. Background of the Language

Sylheti is one of the dialects of Bengali, an Indo-Aryan language which is mainly spoken in the Sylhet district of present Bangladesh (Grierson, 1903). It is also spoken in the Northeastern part of India particularly in the Barak Valley of South Assam, North Tripura district of Tripura, United Kingdom, United States and some of the Gulf countries in the Asian sub-continent. There are over 10,000,000 speakers of Sylheti throughout the globe, including 8,000,000 speakers in Bangladesh (Mikael, 2007). Some scholars considered that Sylheti is a distinct language due to significant differences from Standard Bengali and lack of mutual intelligibility among the duo. In support to the above view, it can be stated that undoubtedly Sylheti was formerly written in its own script, *Sylheti Nagri*, similar in style to *Kaithi* with minor variations. Nowadays it is almost invariably written in *Bengali script* because of various socio-political reasons.

Vowel length is phonologically non-significant. The CV is the most common syllabic structure in the language. Generally, no consonant clusters are found in Sylheti. Surprisingly a very few consonant clusters are noticed in the variety due to deletion of unstressed vowels such as *geram* > *gram* ‘village’, *tiripti* > *tripti* ‘satisfy’. Like Assamese and Standard Bengali, the

category of number in Sylheti has no longer remained grammatical i.e., no agreement is noticed between verb and its argument for different numbers. Unlike the standard Bengali, Sylheti makes use of gender distinction in pronoun particularly in the case of the singular third person personal pronoun such as *he* 'he' and *tai* 'she' as the same grammatical feature is commonly found in Assamese (and its various dialects), one of the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages. In this connection, Grierson (1903) stated that "The inflections also differ from those of regular Bengali, and in one or two instances assimilate to those of Assamese". Agreement is one the typological features of Sylheti as the verb agrees with its subject arguments for different persons and genders. Sylheti is an agglutinating and V-final language with dominant SOV order.

3. Corpus

Many loanwords in our analysis came from the data collected from the conversation, folk tales, short stories, and narratives. The native speakers of Sylheti read all the words he/she was familiar. The native speakers of this variety also provided additional loanwords that they knew. The secondary data was collected in the form written materials like books, dictionaries, etc., through library works. The recorded data were later transcribed by the authors for the consistent analysis of the phonological changes that have taken place in the borrowed words from English in Sylheti.

4. Brief overview of the Phonology of Sylheti

The overview includes a brief description of the phonological structure of Sylheti in terms of consonant inventory, vowel inventory and syllable structure.

4.1. Phonemic Inventory

The phonemic inventory of Sylheti consists of 34 segmental phonemes, with 29 consonants and 5 vowels as illustrated in the following sections:

4.1.1. Consonant

Sylheti has 29 consonantal phonemes. On the basis of point of articulation consonants can be divided into bilabial, dental, palatal, retroflex, velar and glottal. In terms of manner of articulation, the consonants can be further sub divided into stops, fricatives, nasals, lateral, trill, tap or flap and semivowels. Sylheti has seventeen stops i.e., /p, b, p^h, b^h, t, d, t^h, d^h, c, ṭ, ṭ^h, ḍ, ḍ^h, k, k^h, g, g^h/, four fricatives /s, ś, z and h/, three nasals /m, n and ŋ/, three liquids /l, r and ɾ / and two semi-vowels /w and j/. The inventory of consonant phonemes in Sylheti is illustrated in Table 1:

→POA	Bilabial	Dental	Palatal	Retroflex	Velar	Glottal
↓MOA	UA AS	UA AS	UA AS	UA AS	UA AS	UA AS
Voiceless	p p ^h	t t ^h	c	ṭ ṭ ^h	k k ^h	
Stops						
Voiced	b b ^h	d d ^h		ḍ ḍ ^h	g g ^h	
Voiceless		s	ś			h
Fricatives						
Voiced		z				
Nasals	m	n			ŋ	
Lateral		l				
Trill		r				
Tap		ɾ				
Semi-Vowels	w		j			

Table1: Consonant phonemes in Sylheti

4.1.2. Vowels

Sylheti has an inventory of five vowel phonemes, namely, /i, e, a, o, and u/. All the vowel phonemes in Sylheti are oral. Length is not phonemic in the language. The five vowel phonemes in the variety are illustrated in Table 2:

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Table 2: Vowel Phonemes in Sylheti

4.2. Syllable Structure

The syllable in Sylheti consists of an onset and a nucleus and may include a coda where C represents a consonant, and V a vowel, and the only obligatory component is the vowel nucleus. The nucleus vowel may be either monophthong or diphthong. The onset is composed of (C₂) and the coda is (C₁). The canonical form of the syllable in Sylheti can be generalized as (C₂)V(V₁)(C₁). The parentheses show optional elements. Examples of possible syllable sharps in the language are illustrated in the following table.

Gloss	Sylheti	Syllable sharps
he	<i>he</i>	VC
mango	<i>am</i>	VC
gourd	<i>lau</i>	CVV
song	<i>gan</i>	CVC
village	<i>gram</i>	CCVC
bean	<i>uri</i>	VCV

Table 3: Syllabic Sharps in Sylheti

5. Adaptation Processes

It is a well-known fact that when a word is borrowed into another language, the loanword undergoes certain modifications to fit into the phonological structure of the recipient language.

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Similarly, the process of borrowing words from English into Sylheti is accompanied by adaptation of the English words into the phonological structure of Sylheti. The various adaptation processes involved in the course of borrowing loanwords from English into Sylheti are described in the following sections.

5.1. Vowel Shifting

(a) The central mid unrounded /ə/ vowel changed to the mid back rounded vowel /o/ in English loanwords in Sylheti as illustrated in the following examples with phonological rules:

$\begin{array}{c} \text{ə} \\ \left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{syllabic} \\ - \text{high} \\ - \text{low} \\ - \text{back} \\ - \text{round} \\ + \text{reduced} \end{array} \right) \end{array}$	→	$\begin{array}{c} \text{o} \\ \left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{syllabic} \\ - \text{high} \\ - \text{low} \\ + \text{back} \\ + \text{round} \\ - \text{reduced} \end{array} \right) \end{array}$
<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/dɒk.tə/	/dɒk ^h .tɔ/	‘doctor’
/maː.stə/	/maːstɔ/	‘master’

(b) The front lower mid unrounded vowel /æ/ became the front mid unrounded vowel /e/ in English loanwords in Sylheti as illustrated in the following examples with given phonological rules:

$\begin{array}{c} \text{æ} \\ \left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{syllabic} \\ - \text{high} \\ + \text{low} \\ - \text{back} \\ - \text{round} \\ - \text{tense} \end{array} \right) \end{array}$	→	$\begin{array}{c} \text{e} \\ \left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{syllabic} \\ - \text{high} \\ - \text{low} \\ - \text{back} \\ - \text{round} \\ + \text{tense} \end{array} \right) \end{array}$
<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/sæd/	/sed/	‘sad’

/sæləd/

/sələd/

‘salad’

(c) The mid central unrounded vowel /ʌ/ becomes the mid back rounded vowel /ɒ/ in English loanwords in Sylheti as exemplified in the following examples with the given phonological rules:

Λ (+ syllabic) - high - low - front - round - tense	→	\mathbf{O} (+ syllabic) - high - low - front + round + tense
English	Sylheti	Gloss
/dʒʌg/	/dʒɒg/	‘jug’
/mʌg/	/mɒg/	‘mug’
/tʌb/	/tɒb/	‘tub’
/rʌbəʔ/	/rɒbər/	‘rubber’

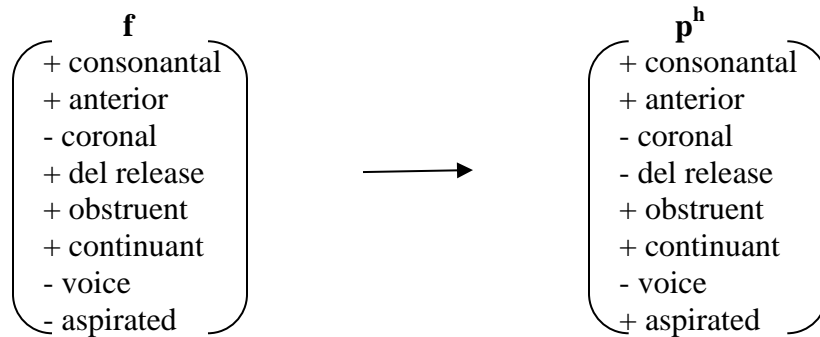
(d) The high front unrounded vowel /i/ becomes high back rounded vowel /u/ in English loanwords in Sylheti. It is also noticed that the vowel shifting of this type is not frequently found in English loanwords in Sylheti as evidenced by the availability of single example as demonstrated below:

\mathbf{i} (+ syllabic) - low - mid - back + tense - round	→	\mathbf{u} (+ syllabic) - low - low + back + tense + round
English	Sylheti	Gloss
/biskit/	/biskuʔ/	‘biscuit’

5.2. Consonant Shifting

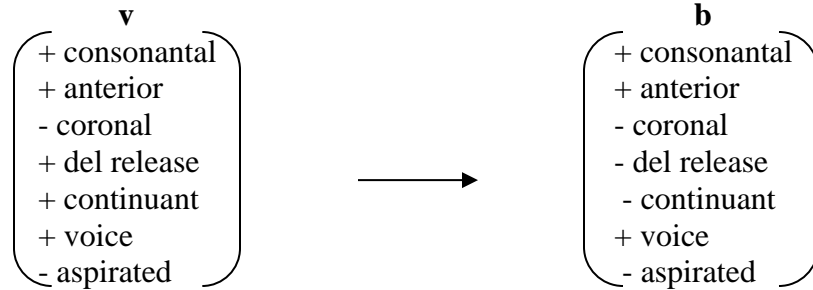
Like many other Indian languages, Sylheti does not have labio-dental fricatives in its phonological structure. Therefore, the English labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/ are generally substituted by the voiceless aspirated bilabial stop /p^h/ and the voiced bilabial stop /b/ in English loanwords in Sylheti respectively. Interestingly, the sifting of consonant is found in both onset and coda position of the syllable. The various processes of consonant shifting in English loanwords in Sylheti are illustrated in the following sections:

(a) The voiceless labio-dental fricative /f/ became the voiceless aspirated bilabial stop /p^h/ in English loanwords in Sylheti as illustrated in the following examples:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/tʃi:f/	/tʃip ^h /	‘chief’
/fæn/	/p ^h en/	‘fan’
/fɒtbɔ:l/	/p ^h ut _ɪ .bol/	‘football’

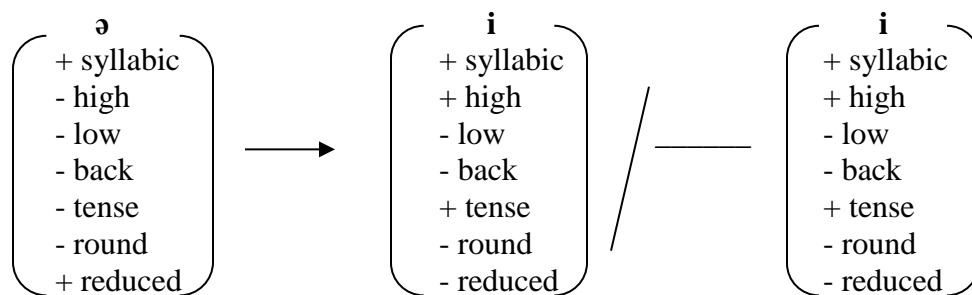
(b) The voiced labio-dental fricative /v/ became the voiced bilabial stop /b/ in English loanwords in Sylheti as summarized in the following examples:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/veɪkənsi/	/bekensi/	‘vacancy’
/veɪkənt/	/bekent/	‘vacant’
/vedʒamə/	/bedʒina/	‘vagina’

5.3. Vowel Harmony

A type of assimilation which plays an important role in many languages is called harmony. Most commonly this affects vowels (Spencer, 1996). This is true in the case of Sylheti as well. In some of the English loanwords in Sylheti, the high vowels of the final syllables influence the vowels of the first syllables which have the same tongue height rather than their backness distinctions. In other words, vowel harmony takes place between contiguous syllables i.e., the vowel of first and the second syllable as can be seen in the following example.



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/məʃi:n/	/miʃin/	‘machine’

It is worth mentioning here that this type of phonological adaptation is rarely found in English loanwords in Sylheti as evidenced by the availability of single example as shown above.

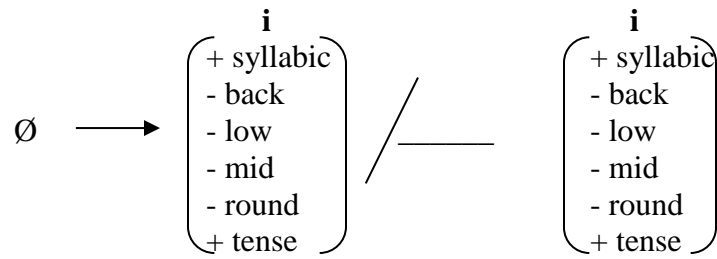
5.4. Vowel Insertion

Insertion or addition of vowel sounds is also one of the common phonological processes in the phonology of English loanwords in most of the Indian languages. Similarly, a number of English loanwords in Sylheti exhibit the process of vowel insertion. As in many other Indian languages, Sylheti usually does not permit *tr-*, *dr-*, *gl-*, *kr-*, *kl-*, *sk-*, *st-*, *sp-*, *sl-* clusters in the beginning of a word because of the difficulty in pronunciation. Therefore, the vowels /i/, /o/ and /e/ are being added to break the initial cluster of English to make it easier to pronounce such loanwords by the Sylheti speakers. More specifically, the addition of vowels may be in the initial or non-initial positions of the English loanwords to nativize the syllabic structure of source language (English) to fit into the syllabic structure of recipient variety (Sylheti) in the form of either VC or CV(C) structure. The various processes of vowel insertion in English loanwords in Sylheti are illustrated in the following sections:

(a)

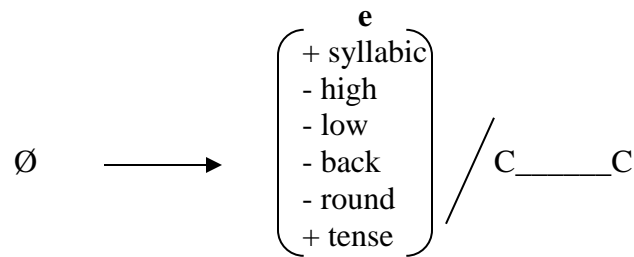
∅	→	$\left. \begin{array}{c} \mathbf{i} \\ + \text{syllabic} \\ - \text{low} \\ - \text{mid} \\ - \text{back} \\ - \text{round} \\ + \text{tense} \end{array} \right\} \text{ / } \text{ ______ CC}$
<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/sku:l/	/iskul/	‘school’
/steɪfn/	/ist,iʃon/	‘station’
/spr:d/	/ispiq/	‘speed’
/sti:l/	/ist,il/	‘steel’

(b)



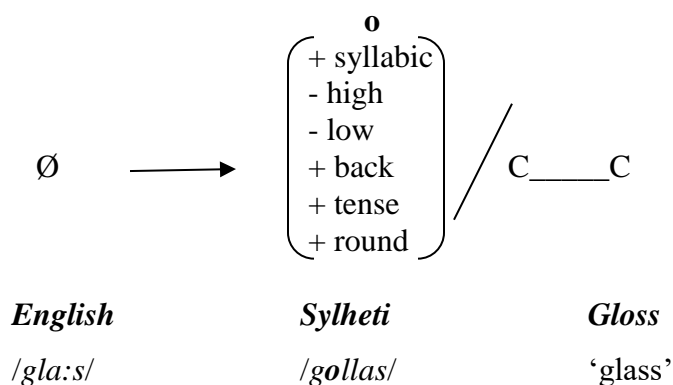
<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/kri:m/	/kirim/	'cream'
/kɪk/	/kɪkɪk/	'click'
/kɪp/	/kɪlɪp ^h /	'clip'
/slɪp/	/sɪlɪp ^h /	'slip'

(c)



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/drem/	/derein/	'drain'
/trem/	/terein/	'train'
/dres/	/dɛres/	'dress'

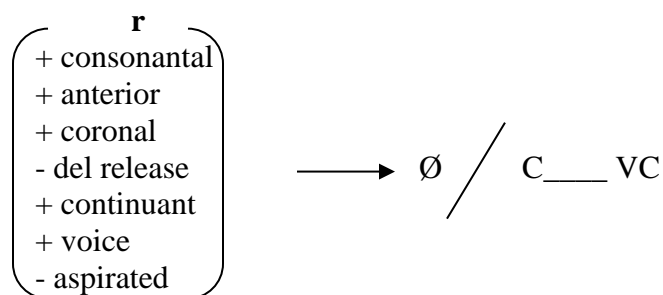
(d)



5.5. Consonant Deletion

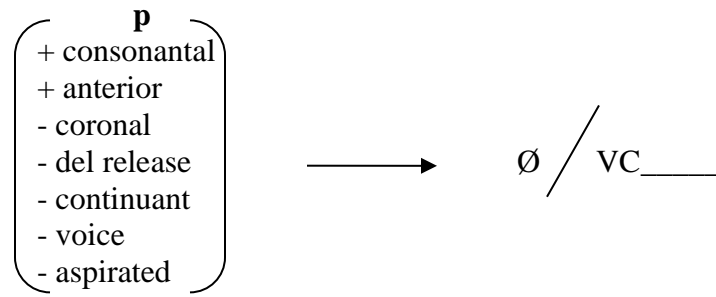
It is generally accepted that the consonant deletion plays a significant role to nativize the syllabic structure of source language to fit into the syllabic structure of a recipient language or a dialect. The same phonological adaptation is commonly found in English loanwords in Sylheti. Thus the syllable final or non-final consonants are being dropped in English loanwords in Sylheti to break up the initial or final clusters of English to get the permitted syllabic structure of Sylheti in the form of either CV or CVC as can be seen in the following examples:

(a)



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/lʌɪbrəri/	/laiberi/	'library'
/prezɪdənt/	/p ^h esiden/	'president'
/trʌk/	/tak ^h /	'truck'

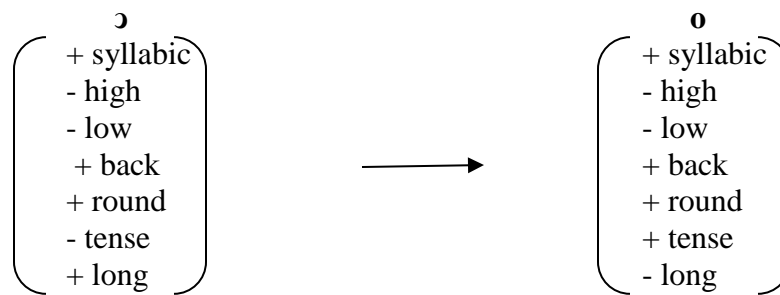
(b)



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/læmp/	/lem/	'lamp'
/pʌmp/	/p ^h am/	'pump'

5.6. Vowel Shortening

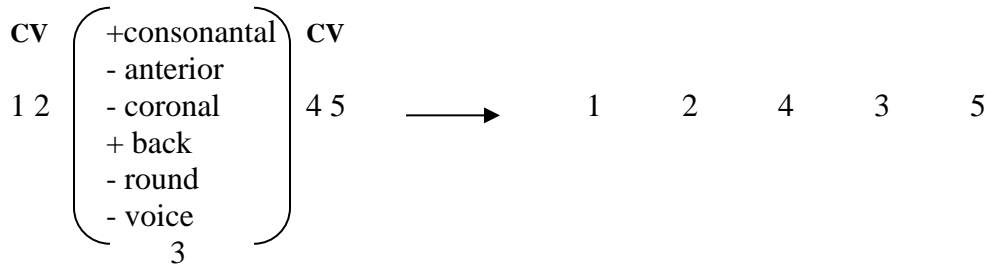
Like standard Bengali and Assamese, Sylheti does not contrast long vs. short distinction in the case of vocalic phonemes. Naturally, the long vowel of English becomes short ones probably before the voiceless stop sounds in the borrowed words in Sylheti. However, this type of phonological adaptation is rarely found in English loanwords in Sylheti as evidenced by the availability of single example as illustrated below:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/ʃɔ:t/	/sot/	'short'

5.7. Metathesis

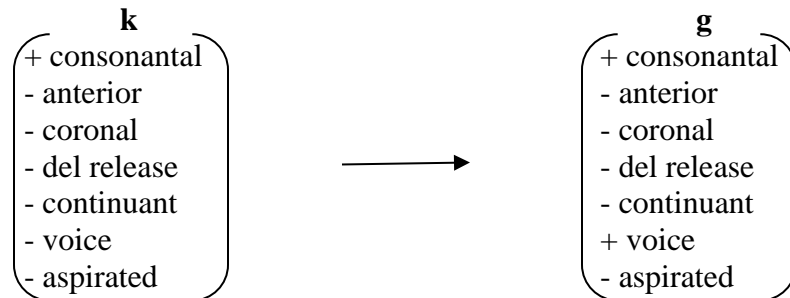
A few of English loan words in Sylheti shows the interchange of two consonants i.e., the sequence of stop /k/ plus sibilants sounds /s or ś / in English becomes sibilants /s or ś / plus stop /k/ in Sylheti Bengali. It may be the reason that the sequences of said consonants are not permitted in syllabic structure of Sylheti so that the same sequence of sounds interchange to get permitted syllabic structure of Sylheti as shown in the following examples:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/tæk.si/	/teski/	‘taxi’
/rɪk.ʃɔ:/	/riśka/	‘rickshaw’
/æksɪdənt/	/eskiɔn/	‘accident’
/lektʃə/	/leskar/	‘lecture’

5.8. Voicing

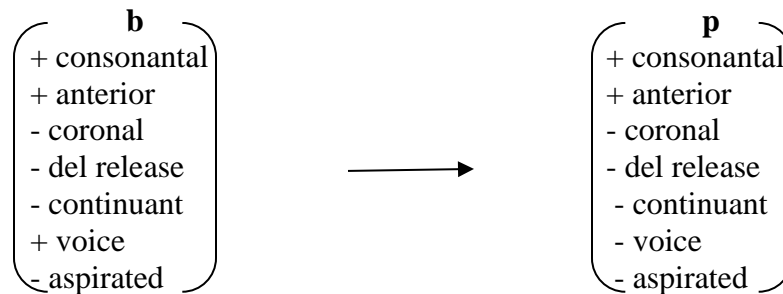
A few English loanwords in Sylheti show the voicing assimilation, the voiceless stops /k/ and /p/ in English loanwords become voiced in intervocalic position i.e., in between two vowels as illustrated in the following examples:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/sɪkənd/	/seɡent/	‘second’
/pɒkɪt/	/p ^h oɡeɪ/	‘pocket’
/pækɪt/	/p ^h egɪt/	‘packet’

5.9. Devoicing

In Sylheti, the voiced stops cannot occur in the final position of a word or a syllable. Consequently, in English loanwords in Sylheti, the unaspirated voiced stops /b, d, & g/ are substituted by their voiceless counterparts /p, t, & k/ word finally as illustrated in the following examples:



<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/tʌb/	/top/	‘tub’
/pæd/	/pet/	‘pad’
/bæg/	/bek/	‘bag’

5.10. Aspiration

Generally, the voiceless stops /p, t, & k/ are aspirated in the initial position of a syllable in Sylheti except in a few cases. Consequently, the voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop /p/ became aspirated in English loanwords in Sylheti as summarized in the following examples:

<p>p</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> + consonantal + anterior - coronal - del release - continuant - voice - aspirated </div>	<p>→</p>	<p>p^h</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> + consonantal + anterior - coronal - del release - continuant - voice + aspirated </div>
<i>English</i>	<i>Sylheti</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
/pəli:s/	/p ^h uli/	‘police’
/pʊdər/	/p ^h audar/	‘powder’
/pʊər/	/p ^h awar/	‘power’

6. Conclusions

From the above analysis, it can be stated that Sylheti speakers are used to borrow English loanwords to fulfill their day to day communication. Like many other instances of loanwords in the languages of the world, most of the English loanwords in Sylheti are nouns. Consequently, loan adjectives, verbs and adverbs are not noticed in English loanwords in Sylheti. The adaptations of loanwords are not random and there are systematic phonological rules to represent the adaptation of English loanwords in the variety. In other words, the English Loanwords were nativized to fit into the phonological structure of Sylheti. As a result, the phonological processes like vowel shifting, vowel harmony, vowel insertion, consonant shifting, vowel shortening, voicing, devoicing and aspiration are established systematically.

Abbreviations and symbols

AS Aspirated

C Consonant

del Delayed

POA	Place of Articulation
MOA	Manner of Articulation
UA	Unaspirated
V	Vowel
Ø	Zero
→	Become

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Kh. Dhiren Singha, M.Phil., Ph.D.
Department of Linguistics
Assam University
Silchar-788011
Assam
India
dhirensingha@rediffmail.com

Md. Ishaque Ahmed, PhD Scholar
Department of Linguistics
Assam University
Silchar-788011
Assam
India
isthaquebdp@gmail.com