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# INCIDENCE OF THE VOICED RETROFLEX LATERAL APPROXIMANT / ɭ / IN RELLI LANGUAGE: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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## Abstract

Relli, an indigenous endangered language of India is the focus of the present study. It is described by Ethnologue as one of the vulnerable languages which need linguistic attention. Since the language is a script-less language, working on the language is only possible way to preserve, enhance, use and prevent from extinction. This can be achieved by collecting language data as audio recordings, transcribing and analysing the data phonetically or phonemically. The present study attempted this on one of the consonants, voiced lateral retroflex approximant / ɭ /. Incidence of the target sound indicates that it is a phoneme in the Relli language as it contrasts with voiced lateral approximant / l /. Additionally, data shows that the target sound is available only in the medial position of the word.

**Keywords**: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, voiced lateral retroflex approximant, Relli, phonemic analysis, minimal pairs, near minimal pairs

## Introduction

Relli (alternative spelling 'Reli') is the name of an indigenous endangered language in India. The Relli speakers are predominantly located in the coastal districts of north Andhra Pradesh. Their language is coded by Ethnologue as (iso 639 rei) (Ethnologue: Reli 2025). Their population is over one lakh fifty thousand. Their language does not have a script. So, the literature available is very scarce as it is based on oral tradition being passed on from generation to generation. To know, revive and work on this language, one has to rely solely on its sound system.

Moreover, there is a lot of influence of the surrounding dominant languages (Telugu and Oriya). Since the people are located in Andhra Pradesh, there is an influence of Telugu on Relli. At the same time, influence of Oriya can also be observed causing ambiguity of its taxonomical classification. Ethnologue classified Relli as Indo-Aryan language (Ethnologue 2024). However, its category as a Dravidian language needs to be verified. This is because

in Relli language, there are a lot of loan words from Oriya as well as Telugu. Even morphemes of these two languages (Oriya and Telugu) can be observed in Relli usage. In addition to this there are false friends as well. This less known language needs attention in as many aspects of language like phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc. initially, which can become a basis for further progress in the language development activities like working on orthography, dictionary making etc.

In the Indian languages, the presence of retroflexes increase from north to south. In the Indo-Aryan languages like Sindhi (Pandey 2014, 292), Hindi (Ohala 1994, 35), and even in Classical Sanskrit (Pandey 2014, 580), there is no incidence of voiced lateral retroflex approximant / ɭ /. However, this phoneme can be observed in both Oriya (Pandey 2014, 275), an Indo-Aryan language and Telugu (Baskaraarao and Ray 2017, 232), a Dravidian language. Moreover, this voiced lateral retroflex approximant / ɭ / is available in all the major Dravidian languages, making its presence a common feature among the Dravidian languages like Telugu (Pandey 2014, 155), Tamil (Keane 2004, 111), Kannada and Malayalam (Pandey 2014, 131). Studies on retroflexes can provide insights into the classification of the Relli language to some extent. Finding of the presence of retroflexes can contribute to a part of establishment of phonemes of Relli language. Thus, when the basic linguistic aspects of the Relli language are studied and analysed, it helps in preservation of this endangered language (Ethnologue, Endangered Languages 2021), avoiding its vulnerability of extinction, and there by preventing loss of culture. So, the present work focuses on identifying the incidence of voiced lateral retroflex approximant / ɭ / in Relli phonetic data.

**Methodology**

The paper has investigated the presence of voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / in Relli language. To identify whether the symbol is a phoneme or not (or an allophone), the technique of minimal pairs is employed on the contrastive distribution, one of the principles of phonemic analysis by C F Hockett (Hockett 1958, 107-111). In addition to Hocket's principles, technique like 'near minimal pairs' is also taken from the research study by Pramod Kumar (Kumar 2012, 41) since the present study is relevant in terms of language endangerment.

**Data collection**

The collection of data was carried out carefully by selecting the informants with specific attributes that do not contribute to research bias. A total number of 20 informants from remote locations of Relli speaking region were selected for the data collection. These informants were interviewed for about 15-20 minutes with the help of language consultant.

**Data Collection Tools**

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire comprising 14 questions covering incidents related to everyday life was used in the interview to elicit spontaneous speech, natural utterances in Relli language.

**Recording Device**

The informants' responses were audio recorded using a voice recorder and were saved as MP3 files for further analysis.

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**Transcription of the data**

The audio recorded data were played multiple times using an audio player software in a computer. The utterances were carefully listened and all the phonemes that were perceived from the audio recordings were noted down from all the informants. This is carried out in the presence of the Relli speaking language consultant to avoid any mistake in listening to the audio and also identify slip of the tongue, mistakes in speech, gap fillers, non-phonetic utterances and other unusual speech acts.

**Identification of the incidence of the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ /**

The target phoneme was looked for in the transcribed data carefully. The presence of the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / in initial, medial and final positions of isolated words uttered by the informants was carefully examined. The presence of the target phoneme was crosschecked with the language consultant for confirmation. It was also carefully examined and all the incidences of voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / was differentiated from the occurrences of voiced lateral approximant / l /

**Data Analysis**

From the collected data, the utterances featuring the phoneme under observation, the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ /, is tabulated showing the occurrence of the sound in the initial, medial and final positions in the following table.

| S. No. | Phoneme | Initial | Medial | Final | Gloss | Informant and Question number |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | peɭ̪ai | 0 | 1 | 0 | got married | 1,4 |
| 2 | kaɭ̪annu | 0 | 1 | 0 | of all (the months / seasons) | 1,6 |
| 3 | kuːɭ̪eː | 0 | 1 | 0 | labour | 1,13 |
| 4 | naːɭ̪eːki | 0 | 1 | 0 | (catch phrase) | 1,13 |
| 5 | konnaːɭ̪ɭ̪u | 0 | 1 | 0 | some days (some time) | 2,1 |
| 6 | ammoɭ̪ɭ̪u | 0 | 1 | 0 | mother (and her associates) | 4,4 |
| 7 | keɭ̪ɭ̪alaŋke | 0 | 1 | 0 | makers | 4,10 |
| 8 | peɭ̪ɭ̪i | 0 | 1 | 0 | wedding | 5, 4 |
| 9 | d̪aɭ̪ɭ̪i | 0 | 1 | 0 | give | 7,4 |
| 10 | keɭ̪ɭ̪aːɾud̪e | 0 | 1 | 0 | did (when they) | 8,1 |
| 11 | keɭ̪ɭ̪aːɾu | 0 | 1 | 0 | did | 8,1 |
| 12 | paɭ̪ɭ̪u | 0 | 1 | 0 | fruits | 9,1 |
| 13 | ʋaːɭ̪ɭ̪aku | 0 | 1 | 0 | to them | 9,3 |
| 14 | ʋaːɭ̪ɭ̪a | 0 | 1 | 0 | their | 9,3 |
| 15 | pagaɭ̪amene | 0 | 1 | 0 | jujube fruits | 10,6 |
| 16 | paɭ̪ɭ̪aːlallu | 0 | 1 | 0 | plates | 10,10 |
| 17 | kaɭ̪ɭ̪ilallu | 0 | 1 | 0 | all yesterday | 10,10 |

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| S. No. | Phoneme | Initial | Medial | Final | Gloss | Informant and Question number |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18 | ɖi:pa:ʋaɭi | 0 | 1 | 0 | Diwali | 11,5 |
| 19 | ɕɹi:ka:kuɭam | 0 | 1 | 0 | Srikakulam | 12,14 |
| 20 | ʋe:ɭa:ŋginɨipaʈnam | 0 | 1 | 0 | Velanginipatnam | 14,5 |
| 21 | baŋga:ɭa: ɖumpalo: | 0 | 1 | 0 | in potato | 14,10 |
| 22 | okaʋe:ɭa | 0 | 1 | 0 | perhaps | 15,14 |
| 23 | kaɭja:ɳa | 0 | 1 | 0 | wedding | 16,2 |
| 24 | kaɭja:ɳam | 0 | 1 | 0 | wedding | 16,2 |
| 25 | ʋeɭɭipo:ʈa: | 0 | 1 | 0 | I will go | 16,11 |
| 26 | kaɭa:su: | 0 | 1 | 0 | class (job / work) | 17,6 |
| 27 | maŋgaɭa | 0 | 1 | 0 | barber | 18,2 |
| 28 | go:ɭi:lu | 0 | 1 | 0 | tablets | 18,14 |
| 29 | ʋeɭaʈa:m | 0 | 1 | 0 | we will go | 19,11 |
| 30 | kʰa:ɭi:ga: | 0 | 1 | 0 | freely | 20,9 |
| 31 | ʋa:ɭɭu | 0 | 1 | 0 | they | 20,13 |
| | **Total** | **0** | **31** | **0** | | |

**Table 1: List of utterances comprising the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ /**

Table 1 lists out all the available utterances with the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / from the collected data. These are unique words and are listed only once. The repetitions are not listed in the table. There are a total of 31 words. These words are uttered by 17 different informants. This clearly indicates that the utterance voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / exists in the phonemic inventory of the Relli speakers.

The table clearly indicates that the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is neither available in the initial position of the word nor in the final position of the word. It is to be noted that the target sound occurs only in the medial position of the word.

The most important part is, to find out whether this utterance is a phoneme, or not. To figure out this, Hocket's principle of contrastive distribution is employed on a minimal (rather near minimal) pair.

Out of these 31 words, one word is forming a near minimal pair as presented below:
**/ ɭ / vs / l /**
The voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / stands in contrast with the voiced lateral approximant / l /.

(1) /okaʋe:ɭa/ 'perhaps'
(2) /ʋe:la/ 'thousands'

This near minimal pair demonstrates that the sounds / ɭ / and / l / are phonemes in this language.

It may be noted that the above point number (2) is taken from the collected data to show the contrast between / ɭ / and / l /. This near minimal pair is taken instead of a minimal pair as there is no other pair of words that make a contrast as these two words from the data do. Further exploration of the Relli corpus might result in finding a Telugu loan word like /ʋeːɭa/ which means 'time'.

From the above example point number (1) and (2), it can be clearly observed that the voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is in contrastive distribution with the voiced lateral approximant / l /forming a (near) minimal pair. Hence, it can be understood that voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is a phoneme in Relli.

**Discussion / Findings**

Based on the collected data, the present study highlights the following findings. More than 15% informants were not listed in the table (Table 1) showing the phoneme, voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ /. This indicates that the target phoneme is not a frequently occurring phoneme in the Relli language. Though the frequency of occurrence of voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is less, the presence of voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is observed the collected data. Most of the words comprising voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / do not have minimal pairs. The voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / does not occur in the word initial and final positions. The voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / occurs in the word medial position only. The voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / is a phoneme in Relli as it contrasts with its non-retroflex counterpart, voiced lateral approximant / l /.

**Conclusion**

Identifying phonemes in a language is the key to establish phonemes in it. To conclude from the above observations, Relli has features like voiced retroflex lateral approximant / ɭ / which is generally a feature of the Dravidian language family. This opens up a lot of areas to explore the language and to establish various features of the language. This enables to place the language in the taxonomical classification with informed choices. In addition, all the basic aspects of language like phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics are to be explored. Thus, an indigenous endangered language like Relli can be preserved, used, and studied; there by guarding the culture of Relli people which contributes to the overall linguistic, ethnic and cultural richness of India.

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