

# Exploring inter-dialectal mutual intelligibility and SDA in Assamese

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## Abstract

Inter-dialectal Mutual Intelligibility can be defined as the rate at which speakers of different dialects understand each other. And, the process in which the speakers of a dialect (D1) acquire a different dialect (D2) of what they consider the same language is referred to as Second Dialect Acquisition. This study examines both phenomena in the context of four dialects of Assamese from the Indo-Aryan family. It also explores a possible relationship between them. The general conclusions are that inter-dialectal mutual intelligibility in Assamese is asymmetric, and a high rate of such asymmetry between a non-standard dialect (D1) and Standard Assamese (D2) results in better rates of D2 acquisition in the classroom by native speakers of D1(s).

Keywords: Assamese, dialectology, asymmetric intelligibility, second dialect acquisition, language education

## Introduction

Theoretically, mutual intelligibility (henceforth, MI) is an important criterion that distinguishes Dialect from Language. Although one might posit the occurrences of mutually unintelligible dialects in the spoken form to counter this criterion, such varieties can still be justly termed dialects of a language if they share a common written form. The many regional, social, and ethnic dialects of Assamese— spoken in north- eastern India, despite variations in morpho-phonology, syntax, and vocabulary, share a written form and their speakers are mutually intelligible. However, the degree of this MI is unknown.

In classroom Second Dialect Acquisition (henceforth, SDA), the learners are children who come to school speaking non-standard dialects as their D1. Their speech is usually markedly different from the target language of the education system, i.e., the standard variety. Moreover, since dialects are considered to be more similar and mutually intelligible than languages, the process of SDA is considered to be easier than Second Language Acquisition. But there is an immense lack of any teaching approaches or special programs designed for the acquisition of the standard variety as the D2 by educational institutions. Most classes on reading and writing in any language are conducted in the standard variety assuming prior knowledge of the D2 by all children— native speakers of the standard as well as non-standard dialects. This holds true for education imparted in Assamese as well.

The lack of existing research on either phenomenon as well as on a possible relationship between them in the context of Assamese, or in any regional language in India, led to the present study.

### **Methodology**

Four regional dialects— Standard Assamese (SA), Central Assamese (CA), Kamrupi (KA), and Goalparia (GA), located in a continuum from the geographical east to the west, were considered for the study. To study inter-dialectal MI, a Functional Testing approach was used. Texts were collected from 6 speakers from each dialect (1 male and 1 female speaker from 3 locations). These texts included words, sentences, and a free speech sample in the speaker's native variety along with one common passage in the standard variety. 132 listeners (2 speakers per listener) were asked to listen to these texts and their comprehension was tested. Intelligibility was calculated based on the rates of comprehension of:

- i.) For a speaker—the 11 listeners who listened to their text.
- ii.) For the overall intelligibility of a dialect—the 66 listeners who listened to texts from that dialect.
- iii.) For the intelligibility of one dialect w.r.t another—the 18 listeners from the second dialect who listened to texts from the first.

To examine the phenomenon of SDA in Assamese, due to CoVid-19 travel restrictions, only the records of marks obtained by students in the subject of Assamese from 8 schools in the four dialect-areas were collected online from educators of the schools and analyzed. A total of 480 students of the 6th grade across three academic sessions were included.

### **Results and discussion**

From the analysis of the data collected through the Functional Testing method, the overall rates of intelligibility of the four dialects were found to be: SA= 68%, CA=70%, KA= 58%, and GA= 54%. In other words, the dialects which are most and least intelligible among speakers of Assamese are the dialects closest to and farthest from SA—CA and GA respectively. The rates of intelligibility of the two western dialects, which vary structurally from SA, are the lowest.

The inter-dialectal MI in Assamese, as illustrated in Figure 1, is highest between the neighboring dialect-pairs of SA-CA and CA-KA. The difference in intelligibility towards each other is only 4 % in both cases. But, the inter-dialectal MI between the geographically separated pairs of dialects, which also vary greatly in vocabulary, is low and asymmetrical. In the case of SA, the asymmetry in its MI with KA and GA is 12% and 11% respectively. The rate of asymmetry, however, is the highest between CA-GA at 15 %.

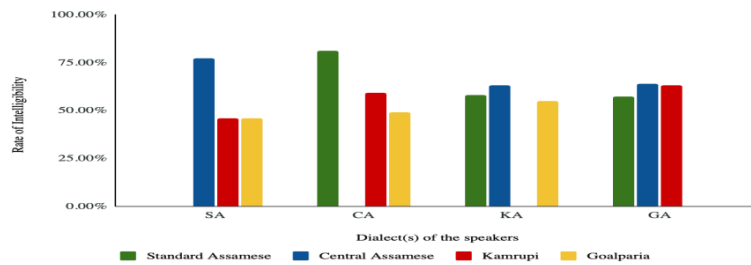


Figure 1. Rate of Inter-dialectal Intelligibility among Assamese speakers.

To examine SDA in the context of Assamese, a group analysis of the data collected from the schools was conducted. Based on their scores, the 120 students from each dialect were sorted into four groups of 0-30, 31-50, 51-79, and 80-100 marks. A comparison of the grouping of all four dialects revealed that the students who spoke the western non-standard dialects of KA and GA as their D1 showed better rates of acquisition of SA as the D2 during classroom SDA. The highest concentration of students for the dialects of CA, KA, and GA were found to be in the ranges of 31-50, 51-79, and 80-100 marks respectively. In other words, the average performance of the students in SDA seems to improve as the geographical distance between the D1 and D2 increases and the asymmetry in the rates of inter-dialectal MI between SA and the non-standard dialects becomes higher. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Moreover, the rate of D2 acquisition in school for speakers of different Assamese dialects seems to be inversely proportionate to the rate of intelligibility of the dialects. As seen in Figure 3 below, the dialect with the highest rate of intelligibility (CA) is the one with the worst performance in SDA whereas the dialect with the lowest rate of intelligibility (GA) is the best-performing in SDA.

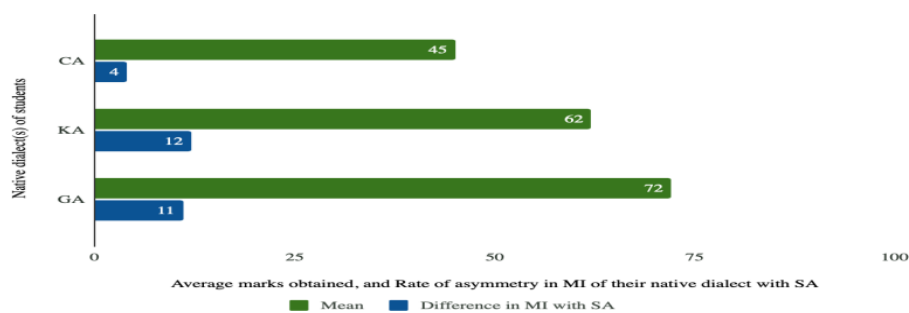


Figure 2. The relationship between inter-dialectal mutual intelligibility of non-standard dialects with SA and the process of SDA in Assamese.

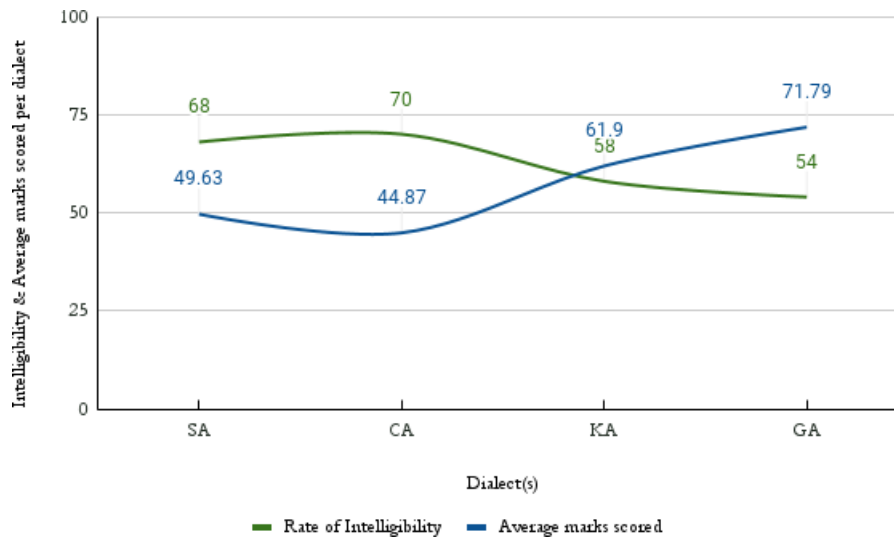


Figure 3. The relationship between overall intelligibility of Assamese dialects and SDA in Assamese.

In conclusion, the geographical location of dialects seems to play an important role in determining the rates of both inter-dialectal MI and classroom SDA. In this case, increasing geographical distance between SA and the 3 non-standard dialects implies greater structural variation from SA and hence, a lower rate of MI but a higher rate of SDA. And, the possibility of the rates of SDA in a language being related to the rates of dialectal intelligibility also opens up interesting avenues of research in Intelligibility Studies as well as in Language Education.

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