Khasi Clusters and Greenberg's Universals

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In his well-known 1965 paper on initial and final consonant sequences, Greenberg, in what was clearly a preliminary search for 'universals' or 'quasi-universals' in this field, proposes a number of what he cautiously terms 'generalizations' regarding initial and final consonant clusters based upon a sample of some 100 languages. Khasi is cited on two occasions as seeming to offer counter-evidence to certain rules of cluster formation which are otherwise almost universally applicable to his sample. In both instances, Greenberg notes that the phonetic description in his sources is not sufficiently detailed for him to be able to decide whether the exceptions are valid or not. It is the purpose of this paper to provide further phonetic information which demonstrates that Khasi does indeed supply an exception to the general rule in one case, but that in the other, there is no such exception.

To take the latter case first: Greenberg states that an earlier observation of Trnka's concerning the non-occurrence of sequences which differ in only one feature is valid on the whole for sequences involving 'differences in laryngeal adjustment such as voicing, voicelessness, and glottalization.'[1] He goes on to note that Khasi initial *td* appears to be an exception here. Not so. Khasi /t/ and /d/ differ in two features: both in laryngeal adjustment, voice vs. voicelessness, and in the place of articulation, dental vs. alveolar. Khasi /t/ is dental whereas /d/ is alveolar, as in some other languages of the South East Asian area, such as Vietnamese, Khmer, Malay, N. Sulawesi. It is our Western habits that incline us automatically to assume that /t/ and /d/ are a pair, differentiated only by the presence or absence of voice. Careful phonetic observation demonstrates that this is not the case in Khasi, which has a strong tendency to avoid homorganic clusters.[2] Khasi therefore does not afford an exception to the general rule in this instance. Examples such as *tdong* 'tail' and *tnat* 'twig' (where *n* is alveolar) exhibit heterorganic initial clusters, consisting of segments differentiated from each other by *two* or *three* features respectively.

The second instance quoted by Greenberg concerns his generalization No. 21 which states:

> Except for voiced nasal followed by homorganic unvoiced obstruent, an unvoiced consonant or sequence of unvoiced consonants in initial

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[1]A wider generalization made by Trnka about the non-occurrence of sequences of phonemes differentiated by a mark of correlation was earlier observed by Trubetzkoy to be invalid as far as nasal and voiced homorganic stops were concerned.

[2]For a fuller account of Khasi clustering patterns see Henderson 1976.

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