

# A Grammatical Sketch of Asur: A North Munda language

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## Abstract

Asur belongs to North Munda sub-branch of Austro-Asiatic languages which now has less than 10,000 speakers. This is a very first attempt at describing and documenting Asur language, therefore the approach of this paper is descriptive rather than that of answering research questions. The paper attempts to describe the grammatical features such as number, case, pronouns, tense-aspect-mood, negation, question formation, etc. of Asur language. It briefly touches upon the morphosyntactic and typological features of Asur, with the intent to present a concise overview of the language, which has so far remained almost untouched by documentary linguistics.

## 1 Introduction

The population of Asur (ISO-639-3) speakers in 2007 was 7,000 (Ethnologue, 2018). UNESCO (Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 2010) has classified Asur language as a 'definitely endangered' one. Asur is also known as Asuri and Ashree. Asur, Ho and Mundari are mutually intelligible as they belong from the group of Kherwarian languages.

## 2 Data collection and Methodology

Data for the present work has been recorded from native Asur speakers living in Bishunpur block, Gumla district in Jharkhand in India. Data was recorded mostly through interview method. Audio recorders were used for data recording; the audio files were segmented, transcribed and translated using (SayMore) software, which was also used for handling metadata related to Asur fieldwork and data collection, for analysis of data (Fieldworks) software was used (commonly known as FLEEx). For transcription IPA

(International Phonetic Alphabet); and interlinear glossing was followed for annotation, along with free translation in English.

## 3 Asur Morphosyntax

### 3.1 Word Order

Asur is a SOV (Subject Object Verb) language, It is interesting to note that Munda languages have departed from their non-verb final basic word order that is found in majority Austro-Asiatic languages (Jenny, Weber, & Waymuth, 2015) and have shifted to verb final basic word order like Indo-Aryan languages (Subbārāo, 2012). Example (1) is an intransitive sentence in Asur which shows the positioning of subject (S), object (O) and verb (V) in Asur.

1. ij kadri ke lel-l=ij  
1S Kadri ACC see-PST=1S  
S O V  
"I saw Kandri."

In Asur the Indirect Object (IO) comes before Direct Object (DO), but their positions are interchangeable and shown in (2) and (3).

2. ij lamta ke kitab ema-l=ij  
1S Lamta ACC book give-PST=1S  
S IO DO V  
"I gave book to Lamta."
3. ij kitab lamta ke ema-l=ij  
1S book Lamta ACC give-PST=1S  
S DO IO V  
"I gave book to Lamta."

### 3.2 Pronouns, demonstratives and pronominal clitics

Pronouns in Asur have three persons and three numbers (Singular, dual and plural). In Asur

language 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns for Dual and Plural have two further categories- inclusive (including the addressee) and exclusive (excluding the addressee). The 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular has different forms for non-honorific and honorific category, i.e. /am/ and /ape/ respectively. Table (1) shows the pronouns in Asur language.

Table 1: Pronouns in Asur

Persons	Singular	Dual	Plural
1 <sup>st</sup>	ij	alaŋ(inclusive)	abu(inclusive)
		aliŋ(exclusive)	ale(exclusive)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	am	aben	ape
2 <sup>nd</sup> Hon	ape	aben	ape
3 <sup>rd</sup>	ae	akin	aku

Demonstratives are words in a language that are used to indicate a referent's spatial or temporal distance from the spatial or temporal position of the speaker. Table (2) shows the demonstratives in Asur.

Table 2: Asur demonstratives

	Animacy	Singular	Dual	Plural
Prox	A	nui	nokin/nukin	nuku
	IA	neʔa, nea, niya		
Dist	A	huni	hokin/hukin	huku
	IA	hona		

Asur pronominal clitics attach to verbs or other constituents; it bears information about the subject and/or object of the sentence.

### 3.3 Number

Asur language distinguishes between animate and inanimate nouns. Asur animate nouns take the suffix /=ku/ or /=aku/ to pluralize as in sentence (8). For inanimate nouns quantifiers are used to show the sense of plurality. In Asur plural marker is optionally attached to the noun, it may also manifests on the verb as agreement marker or pronominal marker, without appearing on the noun.

### 3.4 Quantifiers

Quantifiers are used in a language to indicate quantity. Some of the quantifiers used in Asur are as follows:

1. /dʰer/ and /bagra/ “many” or “much”

2. /jama/ “all”
3. /miyaɖmin/ “even a single” or “even one” (generally used in negative sentences.)
4. /katiʔken/ “some/little” or “few” (may be used with count or mass nouns)

## 3.5 Case and postposition

Asur, being a SOV (Subject Object Verb) language is postpositional language like Indo-Aryan languages. The following are case and postpositional markers in Asur.

### 3.5.1 Nominative

Nominative case marks the Subject of the verb. Asur does not overtly mark nominative case, as can be seen in (1).

### 3.5.2 Accusative and Dative

Accusative and dative cases are cases given to noun by the verb. Asur uses /ke/ to mark accusative as well as dative as shown in examples (2) and (4).

4. g<sup>h</sup>oɾa ke cara eme-me  
horse DAT fodder give-IMP  
“Give fodder to the horse.”

### 3.5.3 Locative

Locative case is used to indicate location. Asur locative markers appear as /re/ or /ɽe/.

5. kitab ɽeɓal re edana  
book table LOC COP.PRS  
“Book is on the table.”

### 3.5.4 Instrumental

Instrumental case is used most often to indicate use of an instrument for completion of action; in the following example, instrumental case is used in Asur to indicate state of being hungry due to hunger.

6. ram ranjek te edaniya  
ram hunger INST COP.PRS  
“Ram is hungry”

### 3.5.5 Comitative

Comitative is an indicator of accompaniment. Sentence (7) exemplifies the use of comitative marker /lo/ in Asur.

7. ceja bilai lo ene? tan=ae  
child cat COM play Prog=3S  
“The child is playing with the cat.”

### 3.5.6 Ablative

Asur language uses ablative case markers /hare/ or /hare?/ and /tara/ for instances where separation of two people or things is implied, the markers can be used interchangeably.

8. ceja=ku oṛa? tara bahir uṛuṅ-n=aku  
child=3P house ABL outside come-  
ITR=3P  
“Children came out from the house.”

### 3.5.7 Genitive

Genitive markers have three forms in Asur i.e. -/ala/, /-ali/ and /-ra/ or /-rena/. The marker /-ra/ or /rena/ is used when the possessor is inanimate, /-ala/ is used when the possessor is animate but the object that is possessed is inanimate, /-ali/ is used when the possessor as well as the possessed are both animate as shown below.

9. kitab -ra/rena panna kal<sup>h</sup>ae -me  
book -GEN page flip -IMP  
“Turn pages of the book”

10. ram -ala oṛa?  
Ram -GEN house  
“Ram’s house.”

11. ram -ali behen  
Ram GEN sister  
“Ram’s sister”

Another kind of genitive marker is /t/ which is followed by the pronominal clitic, attaches to the possessor whether the possessed object is animate or inanimate.

12. mamu t=iṅ -ala oṛa?  
maternal uncle GEN=1S GEN house  
“My maternal uncle’s house”

### 3.6 Infinitives

Asur does not have a marker for infinitives. The verb without any tense/aspect marker is an indicator that the verb is infinitive. The verb for ‘sleep’ i.e /nindao/ is in infinitive form in the example below.

13. iṅ nindao nanam-tan=iṅ  
1S sleep want-Prog=1S  
‘I want to sleep. (I am wanting to sleep)’

### 3.7 Tense Aspect Mood

#### 3.7.1 Tense

All languages have ways of expressing time. Tense and aspect markings in Asur cannot be generated in a formulaic manner; it is morphologically very complex and inconsistent like Mundari; as described by Osada (2008) and Langendoen (1963).

[a] **Present tense:** In Asur language the present tense is unmarked or it may be said that it exists as null morpheme.

14. iṅ roj ul jom=iṅ  
1S everyday mango eat=1S  
“I eat mango every day.”

[b] **Past tense:** In Asur past tense is marked by /l/, /ne/ and /ke/. Sentences (15) and (16) are past tense sentences in Asur.

15. iṅ ul jom-l=iṅ  
1S mango eat-PST=1S  
“I ate mango.”

16. iṅ ul jom-ke-d=iṅ  
1S mango eat-PST-TR=1S  
“I ate mango.”

[c] **Future tense:** The future tense marker in Asur is /-ke/ which is homophonous with the past tense /-ke/ marker as shown in (17).

17. iṅ gapa ul jom-ke=iṅ  
1S tomorrow mango eat-FUT=1S  
“I will eat mango tomorrow.”

### 3.7.2 Aspect

Aspect gives information about the inside of the situation, or views the situation as a whole, or in phases, or informs whether the action was complete or not.

[a] **Progressive aspect:** Progressive aspect describes the internal structure of progression of a situation or event. In Asur /-tan/ is a progressive aspect marker for present tense, as in (13).

[b] **Perfect aspect:** Perfect aspect which, is also called complete aspect has three time points - the point of speech, the point of event and the reference time. The marker /-ta/ is used in Asur to mark perfect aspect.

18. inj ul jom-ta-d=iij  
1S mango eat-Perf-TR=1S  
“I have eaten the mango.”

### 3.7.3 Mood

Mood expresses attitude; grammatical inflections are used to convey the attitude related to what is being said.

[a] **Imperative mood** performs the function of forming command, request or advice. In Asur /-e/ is the imperative marker.

19. sen-am-e  
go-2S[-HON]-IMP  
“Go [-HON].”

[b] **Potential mood:** This mood indicated the speakers’ opinion about what he/she considers likely. In Asur the potential mood /hui/, appears after the verb as shown below.

20. inj hola ul jom-tahi-l=iij hui  
1S yesterday mango eat-Perf- POT  
PST=1S  
“I might have eaten mango yesterday.”

### 3.8 Compound verb

Compound verb is a kind of complex verb in which both polar and vector components are verbs. In the following Asur example (28) the

polar verb is on the left and vector verb is on the right and take all the inflections.

28. inj hor=ku ke ra? agu=ku=iij  
. 1 person=3 AC invit bring=3P=1  
S P C e S  
“I will call and bring people.”

### 3.9 Question

In Asur language the polarity questions i.e. questions that evoke a yes-no response can be formulated by changing the intonation of a declarative type sentence or with the help of polar question particle (PQP) /ci/.

21. am buru sen=am ci  
2S forest go=2S PQP  
‘Did you go to the forest?’

The basic interrogative particle (Q) forms in Asur are /oka/, /oke/ and /etan/, /eta/ which stand for “who” and “what” respectively.

22. oke~oke bajar sen-ne-n=akun  
Q~Q market Go-PST-ITR-P.INDF  
“Who all went to the market?”

23. am etan likk<sup>ha</sup>-tan=am  
2S Q write-Prog=2S  
“What are you writing?”

In Asur /ikin/ is an interrogative particle which is used in relation to time.

24. ikin bajao-tana  
Q time-Prog  
“What is the time? (What time is happening?)”

### 3.10 Negation

Negation marker in Asur is /kae/, /kae?/ or /ka/ and /ir/. Negation marker /kae/ or /ka/ can be roughly translated as “do not” as shown in (25) and /ir/ is used in the context of “will not” as shown in (26).

25. kami ka huiyo-n-a  
work NEG happen-ITR-IND  
“Work did not happen.”

26. am ir=am jome=am  
2S NEG=2S eat=2S  
“You will not eat.”



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## Appendix A. Basic Lexical Items of Asur

Sl.no.	English Word	Asur translation
1.	I	/iŋ/
2.	you (singular)	/am/
3.	he	/ae/
4.	we	/abu/
5.	you (plural)	/am/
6.	they	/aku/
7.	this	/niya/
8.	that	/hona/
9.	here	/noaʔɽe/
10.	there	/honaʔɽe/
11.	who	/oke/
12.	what	/etan/
13.	where	/okaɽe/
14.	when	/okahila/
15.	how	/etalakan/
16.	not	/kae/
17.	all	/jamma/
18.	many	/jameku/
19.	some	/kaʃiʔ/
20.	few	/tʰoɽe/
21.	one	/miyaɖ/
22.	two	/bariya/
23.	three	/peya/
24.	four	/cair/
25.	five	/pac/
26.	big	/baɽe/
27.	long	/jiliŋ/
28.	wide	/cakeɽ/
29.	thick	/gaɽha/
30.	heavy	/bojʰ/
31.	small	/cʰoɽe/
32.	tall	/usul/
33.	short	/tʰepre/
34.	narrow	/sakuɽ/
35.	thin	/patla/
36.	girl	/kuɽi/
37.	boy	/koɽa/
38.	man (human being)	/hoɽ/
39.	child	/ceɽa/
40.	wife	/hoɽaʔ/

41.	husband	/hoŋ/	87.	wing	/apaŋa/
42.	mother	/aya/	88.	belly	/lahiʔg/
43.	father	/baba/	89.	guts	/poŋa/
44.	animal	/janwar/	90.	neck	/hoŋoʔ/
45.	fish	/haku/	91.	back	/dea/
46.	bird	/oŋe/	92.	breast	/c <sup>h</sup> ati/
47.	dog	/seta/	93.	heart	/iyaʔ/
48.	deer	/saram/	94.	liver	/karja/
49.	rabbit	/kulahi/	95.	to drink	/nu/
50.	goat	/merom/	96.	to eat	/jom/
51.	pig	/sukri/	97.	to bite	/hab/
52.	louse	/siku/	98.	to suck	/cepeʔg/
53.	snake	/biŋ/	99.	to spit	/beʔg/
54.	tree	/siŋ/	100.	to vomit	/c <sup>h</sup> aŋ/
55.	forest	/buru/	101.	to blow	/om/
56.	stick	/hapa/	102.	to breathe	/sas/
57.	fruit	/joʔ/	103.	to laugh	/landa/
58.	mango	/ul/	104.	to see	/nel/
59.	seed	/bihin/	105.	to hear	/ayum/
60.	leaf	/sekam/	106.	to know	/paŋi/
61.	root	/jaiŋ/	107.	to think	/uihar/
62.	bark (of a tree)	/bakla/	108.	to fear	/bor/
63.	flower	/baha/	109.	to sleep	/nind/
64.	grass	/g <sup>h</sup> as/	110.	to live	/jiud/
65.	rope	/bayor/	111.	to die	/goeʔg/
66.	skin	/harta/	112.	to fight	/j <sup>h</sup> agŋa/
67.	meat	/sikaŋ/	113.	to hit	/d <sup>h</sup> esa/
68.	blood	/mayom/	114.	to cut	/ged/
69.	bone	/jaŋ/	115.	to split	/rupuŋ/
70.	fat (noun)	/itil/	116.	to stab	/jobao/
71.	egg	/bili/	117.	to scratch	/godar/
72.	horn	/diriŋ/	118.	to dig	/gotaʔ/
73.	tail	/calom/	119.	to swim	/pauraŋo/
74.	hair	/ub/	120.	to fly	/otaŋ/
75.	head	/boho/	121.	to walk	/sen /
76.	ear	/lutur/	122.	to come	/hijoʔ/
77.	eye	/med/	123.	to lie (as in a bed)	/gitiʔg/
78.	nose	/muhu/	124.	to sit	/duŋuʔ /
79.	mouth	/aha/	125.	to turn (intransitive)	/muhaŋd/
80.	lips	/lucir/	126.	to fall	/uyuʔ/
81.	tooth	/daŋa/	127.	to catch	/sab/
82.	tongue (organ)	/alaŋ/	128.	to squeeze	/cipud/
83.	finger nail	/rama/	129.	to wash	/d <sup>h</sup> oao/
84.	leg	/jaŋga/	130.	to wipe	/joʔ/
85.	knee	/mukŋi/	131.	to push	/tukun/
86.	hand	/ti/			

132.	to tie	/tol/	178.	new	/nawa/
133.	to sew	/roʔ/	179.	old	/mari/
134.	to count	/lek <sup>h</sup> a/	180.	good	/ba <sup>h</sup> iya/
135.	to say	/kah <sup>h</sup> i/	181.	bad	/k <sup>h</sup> arab/
136.	to sing	/siriŋ/	182.	rotten	/sia/
137.	to play	/eneʔg/	183.	dirty	/gaduŋ/
138.	to float	/capi/	184.	straight	/soj <sup>h</sup> /
139.	to flow	/tu/	185.	round	/gutaŋ/
140.	to freeze	/jamao/	186.	square	/caukuŋ/
141.	to swell	/mo/	187.	sharp (as a knife)	/d <sup>h</sup> ar/
142.	sun	/din boŋa/	188.	dull (as a knife)	/bok <sup>h</sup> a/
143.	moon	/canu/	189.	wet	/lepa/
144.	star	/ipil/	190.	dry	/rohoŋ/
145.	water	/daʔ/	191.	correct	/t <sup>h</sup> ik/
146.	rain	/bark <sup>h</sup> a/	192.	near	/hinaq/
147.	river	/nai/	193.	far	/laŋka/
148.	pond	/pok <sup>h</sup> ra/	194.	right	/jom/
149.	salt	/buluŋ/	195.	left	/peŋka/
150.	stone	/tuku/	196.	at	/re/
151.	sand	/bitil/	197.	in	/re/
152.	dust	/d <sup>h</sup> u <sup>h</sup> i/	198.	with	/lo/
153.	earth	/ot/	199.	and	/hetra/
154.	cloud	/badri/	200.	name	/numu/
155.	fog	/dh <sup>h</sup> ud <sup>h</sup> /			
156.	wind	/hoe/			
157.	ice	/rataŋ/			
158.	smoke	/sukul/			
159.	fire	/seŋgel/			
160.	ash	/toreʔg/			
161.	to burn	/jul/			
162.	road/path	/hora/			
163.	mountain/hill	/buru/			
164.	red	/lal/			
165.	green	/hariar/			
166.	yellow	/sasaŋ/			
167.	white	/pu <sup>h</sup> i/			
168.	black	/ka <sup>h</sup> ja/			
169.	night	/nida/			
170.	day	/din/			
171.	year	/sal/			
172.	today	/tisiŋ/			
173.	tomorrow	/gapa/			
174.	yesterday	/hola/			
175.	warm	/lolo/			
176.	cold	/t <sup>h</sup> aŋ/			
177.	full	/pereʔg/			

## Appendix B. Asur Phonology

Asur has consonant inventory similar to that of Mundari. The main difference is that Asur does not have voiced palatal nasal sound (Osada, 1992), (Osada, 2008) like Mundari. Asur language has the following consonants: (Khalid, 2020)

Plosives: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /t̪/, /d̪/, /k/, /g/. (/t/ and /d/ here are dental plosives.)

Like Mundari and few other Munda languages (Anderson, 2008) phoneme /g/ has an allophonic variation [ʔ] and glottal followed by unreleased /g/ sound, i.e [g<sup>1</sup>].

Aspirated plosives: /p<sup>h</sup>/, /b<sup>h</sup>/, /t<sup>h</sup>/, /d<sup>h</sup>/, /k<sup>h</sup>/, /g<sup>h</sup>/

Nasals: /m/, /n/, /ŋ/

Trill: /r/

Flap: /ɾ/

Fricative: /s/, /h/,

Approximants: /w/, /y/



Lateral approximants: /l/

Affricates: /tʃ/, /dʒ/ (written as /c/ and /j/ in the paper)

Aspirated affricates: /tʃʰ/, /dʒʰ/

Vowels in Asur are as follows: (Khalid, 2020)

Rounded: /o/, /u/

Unrounded: /i/, /e/, /a/

There are five vowels in Asur which have several allophonic variants, like /e/ may appear as [ɛ], /a/ may appear as [ə], [æ] or [ɑ] and /o/ may appear as [ɔ]. Vowel length is not phonemic in Asur, i.e. the change in vowel length does not affect the meaning of the word in Asur.

In Asur nasalization is not phonemic. It occurs usually on the vowels preceding or following nasal consonants like Mundari (Osada, 2008). Nasalization sound is also often heard in onomatopoeic words like /cũ cũ/ “sound of rat”, /kõ kõ/ “sound made by monkey” (Khalid, 2020).

Intra-syllabic consonant clusters are rarely seen in Asur.

### Appendix C. Some features of Asur

#### [a] Gender

The feminine and masculine categories of some words in Asur are phonologically independent, such as “cow” /gae/ and “ox” /urik/; “hen” /sim/ and “rooster” /kʰokhro/. Mostly there is a generic name for animals in Asur, but when the speaker needs to specify the gender of the animal the word /airra/ “male” or /eja/ “female” is used as an adjective.

Table A: Natural gender terms

Sl.no.	Words in English	Asur words	
		Masculine	Feminine
1.	boy/girl	/koʃa/	/kuʃi/
2.	monkey	/bandra/	/bandri/
3.	ass	/gad <sup>h</sup> a/	/gad <sup>h</sup> i/
4.	wild cat	/airra b <sup>h</sup> a:ʔo/	/eja b <sup>h</sup> a:ʔo/
5.	dog	/airra seta/	/eja seta/

Some typical Asur names have both male and female versions. The male name often ends with /a/ and the female names with /i/.

Table B: Male and female names of Asur people

Sl.No.	Male names	Female names
1.	/kandra/	/kandri/
2.	/lamta/	/lamti/
3.	/birsa/	/birsi/

Feminine occupational terms in Asur are derived from masculine occupational terms by suffixing /-in/, although occupational terms are mostly borrowed from Sadri. Occupation terms in Asur are shown in Table (C).

Table C: Occupational terms (masculine and feminine)

Sl.No	Masculine	Feminine
1.	/masʃar/ Teacher(M)	/masʃarin/ Teacher(F)
2.	/dʒraib <sup>h</sup> ar/ Driver(M)	/dʒraib <sup>h</sup> arin/ Driver(F)

#### [b] Inclusive and Exclusive markers in Asur

**Inclusive markers** are markers which are used to include more to the noun phrase. It can be translated as “also” in English. Indo-Aryan languages very frequently have this marker. In Hindi /b<sup>h</sup>i/ performs the function of inclusive marker. Sentence (a) shows inclusive marker /hoʔ/ in Asur.

- i. iŋ **hoʔ** sen=iŋ  
1S **INC** go=1S  
“Shall I also go?”

**Exclusive markers** can be roughly translated as “only” or “just”. Hindi also has Exclusive marker i.e /hi/. In (b) the the Asur exclusive marker /gi/ is used to emphasize the exclusivity of the subject.

- b. iŋ **gi** ot sen=iŋ  
1s **EXM** field go=1S  
“Only I will go to the field.”

#### [c] Transitivity marker

Asur marks intransitive sentences with /-n/ and transitive sentences with /-d/. Transitivity marker is a common feature of North Munda languages. This marker is also found in Mundari and has been termed “subject focus marker” and “object

focus marker” (Munda, 1971). These markers are not obligatorily present to mark transitivity and intransitivity in Asur language.

ii. abu ghoṭo jom-ke-**d**=abu  
1P Food eat-Perf-**TR**=1P  
“We ate food.”

iii. iṅ hola nir-ke-**n**=iṅ  
1S yesterday Run-PST-**ITR**=1S  
“I was running yesterday.”

#### [d] Causatives

The causativization marker /-ci/ in Asur, increases valency of the the verb by two, therefore this is the second causative marker.

iv. iṅ ceṅa ke towa uyu?-**ci**-l=iṅ  
1S child ACC milk Fall-**CAUS**-PST=1S  
“I made the child spill milk.”

#### [e] Conjunctive Participle marker

A participle is a form of non-finite verb which acts as adjective or adverb. Conjunctive participles are present in most Indian languages, and perform various functions. They may act like time adverb, manner adverb, reason adverb; they may also join clauses and give the sense of sequential action. The conjunctive participle marker in Asur is /k<sup>h</sup>ete/ or /k<sup>h</sup>e/ which can be used interchangeably, although /k<sup>h</sup>ete/ occurs more frequently.

v. iṅ dṛo? k<sup>h</sup>ete hi?  
1S walk **CPM** come.  
“We came walking.”