

# The problem of aspirates in Central Khmer and Northern Khmer

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## O. Introduction

The term Northern Khmer refers to the sizeable Khmer–speaking population concentrated primarily in Northeastern and Eastern Thailand. They were first so named by William A. Smalley (1964). The Northern Khmer usually refer to themselves as Upper Khmer /khmɛɽ lv/.<sup>1</sup>

The term Central Khmer refers to the Khmers in Cambodia. They are called Lower Khmer /khmɛɽ krɔ:m/ by the Northern Khmers, but they themselves use the term /khma:ɛ kraɔm/ for the Khmers in south Vietnam.

## 1. Aspiration in Central Khmer

Aspiration in Central Khmer occurs with initial stops [p<sup>h</sup>], [t<sup>h</sup>], [c<sup>h</sup>], [k<sup>h</sup>]. These are true two–phoneme /CC/ clusters /ph, th, ch, kh/ since unaspirated stops and aspiration can occur as independent phonemes.

Aspirated stops can be split by infixes, which also shows the independence of the aspiration from the stop.

|          |                  |            |          |
|----------|------------------|------------|----------|
| /thom/   | ‘big’            | /tɔmhom/   | ‘size’   |
| /chi:an/ | ‘to step’        | /cəŋhi:an/ | ‘a step’ |
| /khi:t/  | ‘to draw a line’ | /kəŋhi:t/  | ‘a line’ |

But the aspiration that occurs after stops in the sequence [C<sup>h</sup>C] is phonemically a predictable part of a two–phoneme /CC–/ cluster. The sequence may not be interpreted as a three–phoneme /CCC–/ cluster since the aspiration in the sequence [C<sup>h</sup>C] is not contrastive, it is only a junctural feature between the initial

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to David and Dorothy Thomas for their suggestions and assistance in writing this paper. The Northern Khmer data in this paper is based on my own speech, as spoken in the area of Nabua Village, Muang District, Surin Province, but I also got other helpful examples from Thomas et al (1981). The Central Khmer data in this paper is based on the speech of Ms. Hinh Pohn-Nha Wutthanee. She was about 39 years old at the time of my research (1987). She had lived in Phnom Penh since she was born until the age of 30. She finished high school in Phnom Penh. At the present time she lives in Bangkok. I also collected and checked data with another informant, a 31 year-old man Mr. Rattana, from Phnom Penh. Data from Henderson (1952) was rechecked with my informants.

stop and the following consonant. All the consonant phonemes except alveolar trill /r/ and glottal fricative /h/ can occur as the second consonant.

|          |                        |         |         |                       |              |
|----------|------------------------|---------|---------|-----------------------|--------------|
| /pteah/  | [p <sup>h</sup> teah]  | ‘house’ | /cka:ɛ/ | [c <sup>h</sup> ka:ɛ] | ‘dog’        |
| /plɔw/   | [p <sup>h</sup> lɔw]   | ‘road’  | /cmuah/ | [c <sup>h</sup> muah] | ‘name’       |
| /tpo:al/ | [t <sup>h</sup> po:al] | ‘cheek’ | /kɲom/  | [k <sup>h</sup> ɲom]  | ‘I’          |
| /twi:a/  | [t <sup>h</sup> wi:a]  | ‘door’  | /kmaw/  | [k <sup>h</sup> maw]  | ‘dark,black’ |

Thus in Central Khmer [h] may be interpreted as a full phoneme /h/ everywhere except that in the sequence [C<sup>h</sup>C] it is only an aspirated juncture.

## 2. Aspiration in Northern Khmer

Aspiration in Northern Khmer occurs with initial stops. The sounds [p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, c<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>] are true two–phoneme /Ch/ clusters /ph, th, ch, kh/ like central Khmer, since

a) the two elements can occur independently in the same position:

|        |               |
|--------|---------------|
| /ta:/  | ‘grandfather’ |
| /cam/  | ‘to memorize’ |
| /kan/  | ‘to carry’    |
| /puah/ | ‘snake’       |

• *unaspirated initials*

|           |               |
|-----------|---------------|
| /hat/     | ‘to practice’ |
| /ləhɛ:/   | ‘to rest’     |
| /məho:p/  | ‘food’        |
| /rəha:ɛc/ | ‘to be torn’  |
| /pria/    | ‘priest’      |
| /wiah/    | ‘to operate’  |

• *(–h–) in initial, medial and final position*

b) the aspirates can be split by a vocalic infix:

|          |                        |   |           |                     |
|----------|------------------------|---|-----------|---------------------|
| /phɔʔ/   | ‘mud’                  | > | /pəhɔʔ/   | ‘fish’ <sup>2</sup> |
| /phɛ:h/  | ‘[sound]’ <sup>3</sup> | > | /pəhɛ:h/  | ‘careless’          |
| /thom/   | ‘big’                  | > | /təhom/   | ‘size’              |
| /chi:an/ | ‘to step’              | > | /cəhi:an/ | ‘a step’            |
| /khet/   | ‘to draw a line’       | > | /kəhet/   | ‘a line’            |
| /khɛ:/   | ‘moon’                 | > | /kəhɛ:/   | ‘like full moon’    |

<sup>2</sup> A kind of pickled salty fish which looks like mud.

<sup>3</sup> Sound of punishment by hitting.

(c) there is contrast in non-affixed pairs:

|          |                  |           |                   |
|----------|------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| /phi:am/ | 'an arm stretch' | /pəhi:am/ | 'at dawn'         |
| /thuŋ/   | 'hard soil'      | /təhuŋ/   | 'greatly'         |
| /chɔ:/   | 'to tell a lie'  | /cəhɔ:/   | 'to be wide open' |
| /kha:t/  | 'to be torn'     | /kəha:t/  | 'a kind of tree'  |

The unsplit aspirates (/ph/, etc.), however, cannot take the optional /-rə-/ described in Sec.3, only the split aspirates (/pəh/ etc.) can take it.

Unlike Central Khmer, the aspirated sequence [C<sup>h</sup>C] in Northern Khmer is a three-phoneme /C<sup>h</sup>C/ consonant cluster. The [h] in [C<sup>h</sup>] is a full phoneme /h/ since there are two-consonant clusters /CC-/ that contrast with these three-consonant clusters /ChC-/. The aspiration is not automatically triggered in Northern Khmer.

| /ChC-/  | [C <sup>h</sup> C] | ≠ | /CC-/  | [CC-]                    |
|---------|--------------------|---|--------|--------------------------|
| /phlet/ | 'just a moment'    |   | /plet/ | 'flirtingly'             |
| /phle:/ | 'fruit'            |   | /ple:/ | 'to translate'           |
| /thnam/ | 'medicine'         |   | /tnam/ | 'a plant'                |
| /chnaŋ/ | 'pot'              |   | /cnaŋ/ | 'a cut off piece'        |
| /chnam/ | 'year'             |   | /cnam/ | 'a mark'                 |
| /khnɔr/ | 'jackfruit'        |   | /knɔr/ | 'rat'                    |
| /khla:/ | 'tiger'            |   | /kla:/ | 'stripes, lines on palm' |

### 3. Historical development of aspiration in Northern Khmer

The unaspirated two-consonant cluster /CC-/ in Northern Khmer is not a Proto Khmer feature; it is the result of phoneme loss, as can be seen by comparison with Central Khmer. This derived two-consonant cluster /CC-/ thus introduces a contrast with the original [C<sup>h</sup>C] /CC/ cluster, making the aspiration in [C<sup>h</sup>C] phonemic /ChC/.

| Central Khmer |                      | Northern Khmer       |                   |
|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| /dɔmnam/      |                      | /tnam/               | 'plant'           |
| /tnam/        | [t <sup>h</sup> nam] | /thnam/              | 'medicine'        |
| ↓             |                      |                      |                   |
| /crɔnaŋ/      |                      | /cnaŋ/               | 'a cut off piece' |
| /cnaŋ/        |                      | [c <sup>h</sup> naŋ] | 'pot'             |
| ↓             |                      |                      |                   |
| /kɔldɔl/      |                      | /knɔr/               | 'rat'             |
| /knɔl/        | [k <sup>h</sup> nɔl] | /khnɔr/              | 'jackfruit'       |
| ↓             |                      |                      |                   |
| /crɔnam/      |                      | /cnam/               | 'to make a mark'  |
| /cnam/        | [c <sup>h</sup> nam] | /chnam/              | 'year'            |

Many disyllabic words in early Khmer (and as attested in Central Khmer) have become monosyllabic in Northern Khmer by dropping all but the first consonant in the presyllable. This has created a great number of clusters in Northern Khmer. The three main processes involving the development of the phoneme /-h-/ in Northern Khmer are the loss of presyllabic /-VN-/, the loss of presyllabic /-rV-/ and the loss of /-V-C-/.

It should be noted that in many dialects of Northern Khmer, including that of the author, /-rə-/ can be optionally inserted in any CC– presyllable [CC – CrəC]. This would return some words to their original CrəC– form (see 2. below).

### 1. Loss of presyllable vowel and nasal /-VN-/

| Central Khmer | Northern Khmer |                        |
|---------------|----------------|------------------------|
| /pɔnmɑ:n/     | /pma:n/        | ‘howmuch’              |
| /paŋwɑh/      | /pwɑh/         | ‘to help’ <sup>4</sup> |
| /tɔmpeaŋ/     | /tpiaŋ/        | ‘young bamboo’         |
| /tɔmpi:a/     | /tpi:a/        | ‘to chew’              |
| /tɔmpɛ:c/     | /tpe:c/        | ‘to be bald’           |
| /cɔmŋɑ:/      | /cŋɑ:/         | ‘sickness’             |
| /cɔmnɛh/      | /cnɛh/         | ‘knowledge’            |
| /cɔmnam/      | /cnam/         | ‘a marker’             |
| /kɔŋhet/      | /kəhet/        | ‘a line’               |
| /kɔmna:t/     | /knɑ:t/        | ‘birth’                |
| /kɔmnɔt/      | /knɔt/         | ‘thought’              |

### 2. Optional loss of second element /-r-/ and vowel

| Central Khmer | Northern Khmer |                       |
|---------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| /prɔhi:am/    | /pəhi:am/      | ‘at dawn’             |
| /prɔteah/     | /pətiah/       | ‘to meet’             |
| /prɔhua?/     | /pəhɔ?/        | ‘pickled salted–fish’ |
| /trɔla:c/     | /tla:c/        | ‘a gourd’             |
| /trɔcea?/     | /tcia?/        | ‘cold’                |

  

| Central Khmer | Northern Khmer |                   |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| /crɔnaŋ/      | /cnaŋ/         | ‘a cut off piece’ |
| /crɔmɔh/      | /cmɔh/         | ‘nose’            |
| /crɔnam/      | /cnam/         | ‘to make a mark’  |
| /krɔmom/      | /kmom/         | ‘young woman’     |
| /krɔhɔ:m/     | /kəhɔ:m/       | ‘red’             |

<sup>4</sup> In order to get profit.

## 3. Loss of medial /-V-C-/

|           |         |           |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
| /bɔndɔ:h/ | /pɔɔ:h/ | 'to grow' |
| /dɔmbaw/  | /tmaw/  | 'a wound' |
| /kɔmbet/  | /kmet/  | 'a knife' |
| /kɔnda:l/ | /kna:l/ | 'middle'  |
| /kɔndɔl/  | /knɔr/  | 'rat'     |

## 4. Summary

In Central Khmer the aspiration in [C<sup>h</sup>C] sequences is automatic, thus non-contrastive. But in Northern Khmer the aspiration in [C<sup>h</sup>C] sequences contrasts with its absence [CC], so the [h] in that position is a full phoneme.

The contrast C<sup>h</sup>C/CC in Northern Khmer has developed from the loss of initial or medial consonants resulting in [CC] sequences.

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