

# UNITIZER AND NOMINALIZER: THE /N/ AFFIX IN JAHAI

*Niclas Burenhult*

## 1. Introduction

Jahai, a language belonging to the Northern Aslian subgroup of the Aslian branch of Mon-Khmer, is spoken by some 1,000 individuals in the states of Perak and Kelantan, Peninsular Malaysia, and adjacent parts of southern Thailand. A significant feature of Jahai morphology is the presence of affixed morphemes involving the phoneme /n/, which have two main purposes: to nominalize verbs and to unitize nouns. The present paper discusses the morphophonemic, morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of the /n/ affix in Jahai, and attempts are made to identify the conceptual relationship between the processes of nominalization and unitization. Fieldwork is in progress, and further data are likely to modify, refine and supplement the current results. The present discussion does therefore not aim at completeness and is to be considered as preliminary.

### 1.1. The /n/ affix in Aslian: previous accounts

Affixation of /n/ is a widespread morphological process in Mon-Khmer, and its function is usually that of nominalization of verbs. For examples of this process in various branches of Mon-Khmer, see e.g. Manley 1972:42-43 for Sre (Bahnaric), Radhakrishnan 1981:60-63 for Nancowry (Nicobarese) and Svantesson 1983:94-99 for Kammu (Kammuic).

The /n/ affix is also well-represented in the Aslian branch of Mon-Khmer, spoken in the interior of the Malay Peninsula, and has been reported in all of its three subbranches. As in the rest of Mon-Khmer, its function is usually that of nominalization of verbs, where the derived form has sometimes been equated with the gerund of some European languages (Matisoff, to appear, 24-25, 28; Benjamin 1976:176; Diffloth 1976b:98). This derivative has been described for Temiar (Benjamin 1976:174-177), Semai (Diffloth 1972:91), Jah Hut (Diffloth 1976b:98, 108-109) and Semelai (Kruspe 1999:123-129) and is reported in several other languages, including Batek, Chewong and Besis (Diffloth 1975:16; Matisoff, to appear, 28). Schebesta (1931:646-647) also provided examples of similar nominalization in the supposedly extinct Central Aslian dialect Ple-Temer.

In some Aslian languages the /n/ affix is also added to noun roots to derive count nouns from mass nouns, a process described for Jah Hut (Diffloth 1976b:99-100), Semai (Diffloth 1976a:236) and Semelai (Kruspe 1999) and also indicated early on for Jahai (Schebesta 1928:811-812). A range of other, more specialised and restricted functions of the /n/ affix have been reported in individual Aslian languages (Benjamin in press, 29-30).

### 1.2. The present study

The present account of affixation of /n/ forms part of a larger descriptive study of the To' variety of Jahai, as spoken by the 90 or so inhabitants of Kampung Sungai Banun, in the resettlement area of Air Banun, Temengor *mukim*, Hulu Perak district, in the state of Perak, Peninsular Malaysia. The analysis is based on elicitation as well as recordings of

spontaneous speech. For a detailed account of the phonological and phonotactic characteristics touched on briefly below, see Burenhult 2000.

## 2. Morphophonemic characteristics

Jahai words may be monosyllabic, sesquisyllabic, disyllabic or, occasionally, trisyllabic. Monosyllabic words always display the canonic structure CVC, e.g. [c<sup>h</sup>ep<sup>h</sup>] /c<sup>h</sup>ep/ 'to catch'. Sesquisyllabic words are phonetically disyllabic, but the vowel of the initial syllable is strictly epenthetic and predictable and is omitted in phonemic transcriptions: C.CVC, e.g. [kənɛic<sup>h</sup>] /k.nɛc/ 'comb'.<sup>1</sup> Truly disyllabic words have either an open initial syllable with a non-predictable vowel, usually /a/, or a closed initial syllable, the vowel of which may be either predictable or non-predictable: CV.CVC, e.g. [kawip<sup>h</sup>] /ka.wip/ 'sun bear'; CC.CVC, e.g. [təmkal] /tm.kal/ 'male'; or CVC.CVC, e.g. [kalto<sup>h</sup>ŋ] /kal.toŋ/ 'knee'.

These patterns of syllabic structure are significant to the affixation of /n/ in nouns and verbs since they alone determine the three existing allomorphic variants of the affixation process, each of which is associated with monosyllabic, sesquisyllabic and disyllabic words respectively.

### 2.1. Allomorphic variation

**2.1.1. Monosyllabic words.** In monosyllabic words (CVC) affixation involves the prefixing of /n-/ and the copying and infixing of the word-final consonant before the root.<sup>2</sup> An epenthetic vowel (usually [ə]) is inserted between the affixed /n/ and the copied consonant to create a closed initial syllable with /n/ as onset.

$C_iVC_f \rightarrow nC_f.C_iVC_f$

Hence there are forms like [nəp<sup>h</sup>ʔap<sup>h</sup>] /np.ʔap/ from /ʔap/ 'tiger', [nəmji<sup>h</sup>b<sup>h</sup>m] /nm.jim/ from /jim/ 'to cry', and [nəltɛl] /nl.tel/ from /tel/ 'track'. If the final consonant of the root is a palatal, the inserted epenthetic vowel is realized as [i]: [nic<sup>h</sup>sec<sup>h</sup>] /nc.sec/ from /sec/ 'meat', [nijbaj] /nj.baj/ from /baj/ 'to dig'. If the final consonant is a glottal stop /ʔ/ or fricative /h/, the epenthetic vowel is realized as [a]: [naʔjiʔ] /nʔ.jiʔ/ from /jiʔ/ 'to burn', [nahbɔh] /nh.bɔh/ from /bɔh/ 'fruit'.

**2.1.2. Sesquisyllabic words.** Affixation of /n/ in sesquisyllabic words (C.CVC) involves the infixing of /-n-/ after the initial consonant and the copying and infixing of the word-final consonant before the onset of the final syllable. Epenthetic vowels are inserted to break up the initial cluster and create a closed penultimate syllable with /n/ as onset.

$C_i.C_mVC_f \rightarrow C_i.nC_f.C_mVC_f$

Examples include [kənək<sup>h</sup>dɛk<sup>h</sup>] /k.nk.dek/ from /k.dek/ 'squirrel', and [j<sup>h</sup>ənəŋlɛ<sup>h</sup>ŋ] /j.nŋ.leŋ/ from /j.leŋ/ 'to put inside'. As in affixation in monosyllabic words, the inserted epenthetic vowel is realized as [i] if the copied final is a palatal – e.g. [tənijwi<sup>h</sup>j<sup>h</sup>] /t.nj.wij/ from /t.wij/ 'headache', and [ʔənijnaj] /ʔ.nj.naj/ from /ʔ.naj/ 'to bathe' – and as [a] if the final is glottal – e.g. [j<sup>h</sup>ənaʔhūʔ] /j.nʔ.hūʔ/ from /j.hūʔ/ 'tree' and [c<sup>h</sup>ənahto<sup>h</sup>] /c.nh.toh/ from /c.toh/ 'to spit'.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'sesquisyllable' was coined by Matisoff (1973:86; to appear, 8) and literally means 'one-and-a-half syllable'. Most writers on Aslian (including Diffloth 1976a; Matisoff, to appear; and Kruspe 1999) prefer to exclude the epenthetic vowel from phonemic transcriptions, and this is also the orthography employed here. For reasons of clarity and legibility, Benjamin (1976:152-53) argues in favor of including it.

<sup>2</sup> This type of partial reduplication, referred to as *coda copy* by Kruspe (1999) and *incopyfixation* by Matisoff (to appear, 25-30), is a common morphological phenomenon in Aslian languages.

2.1.3. *Disyllabic words.* In disyllabic words (CV.CVC, CC.CVC or CVC.CVC), /-n-/ is infixed after the word-initial consonant. Again, epenthetic vowels are inserted to break up the initial consonant clusters and create a penultimate syllable with /n/ as onset.

CV(C).CVC → C.nV(C).CVC  
CC.CVC → C.nC.CVC

Examples: [sənagup] /s.na.gup/ from /sagup/ ‘cloud’, [kənərlep] /k.nr.lep/ from /kr.lep/ ‘to forget’, [mənuŋker] /b.nuŋ.ker/ from /buŋ.ker/ ‘to wake up’.

3. Morphosyntactic characteristics

Although the morphophonemic characteristics of the /n/ affix are identical in nouns and verbs, the two derivational processes obviously differ markedly from a syntactic point of view. Affixation in verbs result in nominalization, making the verb behave syntactically like a noun and become the head of a noun phrase; affixation in nouns occurs in noun phrases involving numerals or the quantifier ‘many’ and does not lead to a change in word class.

3.1. Nominalization

Affixation of /n/ in verbs typically produces verbal nouns which denote the state of being or act of doing whatever is denoted by the verb (see also section 4.1). The affix will here be labelled *nominalizer* (N). These nominalized verbs behave syntactically like ordinary nouns and become heads of noun phrases. Consequently, they may take possessors, as in the following examples:

npcip tmkal  
go.N man ‘the man’s going’  
pnikir mōh  
think.N 2S ‘your thinking’

It may also take adjectival modifiers and predicatives:

knajoh btʔet  
swim.N good ‘good swimming’  
pnŋseŋ ʔoʔ btʔet  
speak.N 3 good ‘his speaking is good’

Furthermore, nominalized verbs can be included in constructions involving numerals and quantifiers:

nej cnhtoh  
one spit.N ‘one spitting’  
kōm hnuluh  
many shoot.N ‘many shootings’

3.2. Unitization

Affixation of /n/ in nouns takes place typically (but optionally) when the noun is preceded by a numeral or the quantifier /kōm/ ‘many’. This is exactly the situation described by Schebesta (1928:811) for Jahai. The affix will here be labeled *unitizer* (UNIT) and the resulting form will be called *unitized noun*. The process may be illustrated by the following examples:

tmkal ʔo-puŋe? duwa? nrber  
 man 3S-have two younger.sibling.UNIT  
 'the man has two younger siblings'  
 ʃhũ? tani? ʔo-ʔek kəm nhbɔh  
 tree that 3S-give many fruit.UNIT  
 'that tree produces many fruits'  
 nej hrkit je-ŋɔk ba-grik  
 one night.UNIT 1S-stay in-Gerik  
 'I spent one night in Gerik'

Since the unitizer is optional, the corresponding sentences with non-unitized forms are considered equally correct:

tmkal ʔo-puŋe? duwa? ber  
 man 3S-have two younger.sibling  
 'the man has two younger siblings'  
 ʃhũ? tani? ʔo-ʔek kəm bɔh  
 tree this 3S-give many fruit  
 'this tree produces many fruits'  
 nej hrkit je-ŋɔk ba-grik  
 one night 1S-stay in-Gerik  
 'I spent one night in Gerik'

*3.2.1. Unitization in classifier constructions.* Enumeration often involves the optional use of either of two classifiers: /ken/ for human nouns, and /kəmoʔ/ or /kəbiʔ/ for non-human ones (see also section 4.2.2). In such cases, the unitizer may be left out altogether or, as is usually the case, it may be added to the classifier, but never to the noun. The word order among the three elements is invariably noun-numeral-classifier.

ber je? duwa? nnken  
 younger.sibling 1S two CLF.UNIT  
 'my two younger siblings'  
 je-bdəl tabəŋ limeʔ kbiʔ  
 1S-shoot leaf monkey five CLF  
 'I shot five leaf monkeys'  
 je-bdəl ʔameŋ duwa? knʔbiʔ  
 1S-shoot siamang two CLF.UNIT  
 'I shot two siamangs'  
 je-bʔbɔʔ tomen duwa? knʔmoʔ  
 1S-carry on back snakehead two CLF.UNIT  
 'I carried two snakeheads on my back'

Classifier constructions are sometimes used without the head noun, usually for anaphoric purposes, as in the following example:

dɛ-je? nej knʔmoʔ  
 for-me one CLF.UNIT  
 'one for me'

#### 4. Semantic and discourse-related characteristics