

A sketch of the phonology of a Lamet dialect

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0. Introduction

0.1 Language identification

Lamet is a Mon-Khmer language of the Palaungic branch.¹ There are approximately 10,000 speakers in the mountains of northern Laos near the Chinese border, along with about 100 in Thailand. There are a few families in the United States and France. In addition, a comparison of word lists indicates there may be people speaking Lamet in China as well (Svantesson et al. 1981). The people are called Lamet in Laos and Khamet in Thailand. Those with whom I work in Seattle are originally from Laos. They pronounce the name of their language as [χəmɛ:t] or, less frequently, as [k^həmɛ:t].²

The existence of several dialects of Lamet has been noted by Ferlus, Svantesson, Lindell et al., and others. A comparison of our data collected from refugees in America with information gathered by Narumol (1980), Svantesson (1988), and others indicates significant differences among these varieties of Lamet in terms of how the Mon-Khmer register complex is manifested within the same language.³

¹My wife Jeannette and I began studying Lamet in September 1992 with the aid of a community of refugees living in Seattle, Washington. Our research is being carried on under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Many people have provided financial and technical support as we have begun this language project. We are especially grateful for generous assistance given by David Thomas, who not only introduced us to the previous research done on Lamet, but also continues to provide much wisdom and encouragement. We are of course thankful to our Lamet friends who have welcomed us with hospitality, flexibility, humor, and great patience. This report is based on work in progress; I claim full responsibility for all errors in transcription or analysis.

²Many of the Lamet we have met are married to speakers of Khmu'. The two groups are somewhat close linguistically and very close culturally. Khmu' is the language spoken in the mixed Lamet/Khmu' households. A preliminary—and quite superficial—analysis of sound differences between the two languages indicates that in cognate words where Lamet has an initial /r/, that consonant is often [k^h] in Khmu'. The Khmu' would thus pronounce /rəmɛ:t/ [χəmɛ:t] as [k^həmɛ:t], and it has been our observation that the Lamet who sometimes use this pronunciation are in many cases those who speak Khmu' at home.

³See especially Sec. 6.2, on the relationship of tone and register. Due to the preliminary status of this research, I will refer to *varieties* of Lamet, rather than using the more technical term *dialect*.

0.2 *Methods: data sources and transcription conventions*

Our primary language teacher has been Mansak, a Lamet man in his early 40s, married, with four teenage children. He and his family have lived in Seattle since May 1981, coming there from a refugee camp in Thailand. Mansak received three years of formal education in Luang Prabang under the auspices of the Catholic Church. He and his wife Plekeao are the only couple in Seattle where both spouses are Lamet. In addition to his native Lamet, he speaks (and reads) Khmu', Lao, and English.

We have also received language assistance from other members of the Seattle Lamet community. Three widows have been of particular help: Taen, age ca. 55; Plekeao's mother, Pang, a woman about 70 years old, who is addressed by the entire community as Neethaaw ('grandmother'); and Sii, age ca. 65.

There is no written form of the Lamet language in popular use. Data is presented herein in a modified IPA phonemic transcription, e.g., /k^hó:c/ 'to wash (hands, etc.)'. Phonetic descriptions, where necessary, will be indicated by square brackets, e.g., [k^hóɾc]. Vowel length is contrastive; long vowels are marked by the symbol [:] following the vowel. There is a pitch contrast between high and low tone, which are marked [ˀ] and [ˁ] respectively.⁴

0.3 *Organization of analysis*

This sketch is organized hierarchically, with successive sections treating progressively smaller units of the sound system: the word, the syllable, and then the consonant and vowel phonemes. These sections are followed by a discussion of suprasegmental features of the language: vowel length, tone, and register. The last section outlines some issues for further research; following it as an appendix is a word list illustrating tone pairs.

1. The Word

1.1 *Words with one syllable*

The strong tendency in Mon-Khmer languages, as in many of the language groups of mainland Southeast Asia, is toward monosyllabic words. This also holds for Lamet. As described in §2.1 below, the typical Lamet syllable begins with any consonant or a cluster of two consonants, and contains as its nucleus either a long or short vowel.⁵ The syllable may either be closed by one of the eligible final consonants (§3.0 below), or it may be open.⁶ Canonical monosyllables are thus #CV#, #CVC#, #CCV#, and #CCVC#, of which #CVC# appears to be the most common.⁷

⁴Tone is only marked on the ultimate syllable vowel of multi-syllable words. At this point in my research, words not marked for tone should be understood as those for which I have yet to verify the correct tone value. (Tone pair examples are listed in the appendix.)

⁵See also §2.3, which discusses syllables with nuclei consisting of syllabic consonants.

⁶As described in §2.1 below, all open main syllables contain a long vowel.

⁷In formulas presented in this paper, "C" represents any consonant, "V" any vowel,

#CV#

/cí:/	‘to remember’	/cò:/	‘life’
/lè:/	‘parakeet’	/mà:/	‘rice field’
/ró:/	‘to beg, ask’	/hú:/	‘to blow’

#CCV#

/plù:/	‘betel (leaf)’	/ʔjá:/	‘medicine’
/plà:/	‘to chop (s.t. on cutting board); meat that has been chopped’		

#CVC#

/càŋ/	‘to weigh (s.t.)’	/jò:k/	‘to stab (with knife)’
/nè:l/	‘thread’	/sá:j/	‘to know how (to do s.t.)’
/ŋà:ʔ/	‘to itch’	/mù:j/	‘axe’
/p ^h íj/	‘snake’	/tà:w/	‘to run’

#CCVC#

/klá:j/	‘to return’	/kwè:n/	‘to feel better’
/plóʔ/	‘to do, make’	/pró:t/	‘a kind of bee’
/cràŋ/	‘bristles’	/p ^h ú:m/	‘nest’
/tró:ŋ/	‘throat’	/prà:s/	‘wild boar’

1.2 Words with more than one syllable

There are also a great many words in Lamet consisting of more than a single syllable. This class of words, widely noted in Mon-Khmer languages, has the following structure: a stressed main syllable (§2.1) preceded by an unstressed and otherwise phonologically reduced presyllable (§2.2). This type of word structure is often called “sesquisyllabic,” in that these words have, in effect, one and a half syllables.

In a sesquisyllabic word, stress will always fall on the main syllable. That this is a strong characteristic in Lamet is evidenced by the adjustment of loan words to this pattern, given sufficient time.⁸ Stress may also be useful as a diagnostic tool to distinguish sesquisyllabic words from compound constructions (i.e., words), which would have stress on both “syllables.”

parentheses indicate optional elements, the symbol “#” represents a word boundary, and “-” is a syllable boundary.

⁸/k^hənó:m/ and /k^hjè:n/ are loan words from Lao which appear to be in transition to a more Lamet structure. The Lamet use /k^hənó:m/ (from the Lao for ‘candy’) for a variety of sweets and snack food items. In Lao, the final syllable has a short vowel; among Lamet speakers the vowel is long, perhaps to reinforce the strongly stressed final syllable. /k^hjè:n/ ‘to write’ has largely displaced the old Lamet /kó:c/ ‘to write’. In Lao, the word has a complex off-glided vowel nucleus; among Lamet speakers that vowel is being reanalyzed as a simple vowel /ɛ:/ with a consonant cluster /k^hj/ onset.

Following are examples of sesquisyllabic Lamet words (syllable boundaries shown here and throughout for illustrative purposes):

/mə-kà:m/	‘tamarind’	/pə-jà:w/	‘rambutan’
/sim-tóh/	‘to giggle’	/rəw-ké:w/	‘sickle’
/kən-và:/	‘orchard’	/ki-tú:t/	‘to cackle’

2. The Syllable

There are two units with significant structural differences at this level of Lamet phonology: the main syllable, and a smaller unit known as the presyllable. In this paper, the term *syllable* is reserved for reference to the main syllable; *presyllable* is used when the smaller unit is under examination.

2.1 Main Syllables

The structure of Lamet syllables may be described by the following formula:

$$C_1(C_2)V(C_3)\#$$

which defines the required elements in the syllable as an initial consonant C_1 and a vowel V . Optional elements include a second consonant C_2 (which with C_1 forms an initial cluster) and a final consonant C_3 . The smallest expansion of this formula is a syllable with the structure $CV\#$; the largest expansion is a syllable with the structure $CCVC\#$. (Note that a syllable or word boundary precedes C_1 .)

The consonants occurring as C_1 and C_3 are displayed in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively, and are discussed in §3.0. Those which may occur as C_2 (second element in a cluster) are the “liquids” from Fig. 1 (/w, l, j, r/). A syllable which is closed by C_3 may contain either a long or a short vowel, but in an open syllable the vowel is always [+long].⁹

2.2 Presyllables

In several respects Lamet presyllables are similar in form to main syllables. Recalling the formula $C_1(C_2)V(C_3)\#$ from §2.1, the presyllable has the formula

$$\#C_1(C_2)V(C_3)-$$

Its required elements are also (usually) an initial consonant C_1 , plus a vowel V as the nucleus, along with the optional consonants C_2 and C_3 .¹⁰ The presyllable, however, is a much more restricted phonological unit.¹¹ These restrictions are described below.

⁹As noted by Narumol (1980:31).

¹⁰The presyllable vowel “slot” may also be filled by a syllabic nasal or liquid (§2.3). It also appears that C_2 and C_3 do not both occur in the same presyllable; i.e., I have examples of $\#CCV-$ and $\#CVC-$, but not $\#CCVC-$. Additional research is necessary to determine whether this omission is systematic.

¹¹This kind of reduced element has been identified for many Mon-Khmer languages, as well as in other language families in Southeast Asia. It has also been called by names other than presyllable: minor syllable, half syllable, etc. Thomas 1992 provides a helpful typology of these sesquisyllabic structures based on the specific restrictions placed upon the reduced element.