

THE DIRECTION OF MONOSYLLABICITY IN RAGLAI

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1 Introduction

Raglai is a Chamic language spoken by more than 72,000 people in the highlands of South Central Vietnam. Raglai can be divided into two main dialects: the Northern Raglai (located mainly in Khanh Hoa and some parts of Ninh Thuan Province) and the Southern Raglai (located in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Province). Of the Chamic languages, such as Cham, Ede and Churu, Raglai is considered most representative of Proto-Chamic due to its relatively conservative characteristics, especially its presyllables.

Although there is still an abundance of polysyllabic words in the Raglai lexicon (about 40 percent in Southern Raglai and up to 43 percent in Northern Raglai), Raglai is now changing into a monosyllabic language like its neighboring languages in the highlands of Vietnam. The cause of this important change is ‘the areal pressure in the direction of monosyllabicity’ (Lee 1966: 76). By studying what is changing in the direction of monosyllabicity in this language, we can know more clearly the way that other Chamic languages have gone.

2 The Phonological Word in Raglai

Like other neighboring languages, such as the Mon-Khmer languages Mnong and Koho and the Chamic languages Cham, Ede, and Churu, a phonological word in Raglai can be monosyllabic, disyllabic, or trisyllabic. The polysyllabic word consists of one main-syllable with primary stress and from one to two presyllables preceding the main-syllable. In the case of trisyllabic words, the initial presyllable has a secondary stress.

The presyllable in Raglai has a simple phonological structure. It consists of only one initial consonant and one vowel.

Initial consonants of presyllables: The list of initial consonants of presyllable in Northern Raglai is shown in Table 1. In this list, voiceless stops (except [c]) occur most often. Voiced stop initials are found in fewer words.

Table 1: *Raglai presyllable initials*

Voiceless stops	p-	t-	c-	k-	ʔ-
Voiced stops	b-	d-	ɟ-	g-	
Nasal stops	m-				
Fricatives		s-	ʃ-		h-
Liquids		l-, r-			

Vowels of presyllables: One characteristic that distinguishes Raglai from other Mon-Khmer languages which only have a schwa [ə] in the presyllable is the vowel system of presyllables. Phonetically, there are 3 basic vowels [a], [u], [i], and the mid-vowel [o]. In some phonetic contexts, the schwa [ə] can be heard instead of [i], [u], or [a]. The mid-vowel [o] is found in some disyllabic words which have a mid-vowel in the main-syllable (Ex: *horəj* ‘day’, *lopeh* ‘thin’).

There is no contrastiveness in the presyllabic vowel, and in some cases, an alternation is found.

‘thinking’ sining ~ saning
‘tale’ julukal ~ jalakal

Because of the loss of phonemic contrastiveness of vowels in presyllable, the presyllable in Raglai (and also in many languages in the area) has a rather special status in the phonologic word. Phonologically, the structure of the disyllabic word is /CCVC/.

3 Changes in the Direction of Monosyllabicity in Raglai

By comparing the phonological words of Raglai with those of Proto-Chamic and Proto-Austronesian and between the two dialects of Raglai, phonetic changes in the direction of monosyllabicity in Raglai can be grouped into two stages.

Stage One: The changes are in Proto-Chamic language because these changes were shared innovations in all daughter languages. The most important change in this stage is the shift of presyllabic initial voiced stops to voiceless stops when they were followed by a voiceless stop of the main-syllable, as in Table 2. In this stage, some other shared innovations were found such as the shift of initial voiced stops to preglottalized stops (e.g., **buhuk* > *ʔbuk* ‘hair’; **bahuh* > *ʔbəu* ‘smell’).

Table 2: *Devoicing in Proto-Chamic*

Proto-Austronesian	Proto-Chamic	Raglai	Gloss
*batuk	*pituk	pituk	‘cough’
*bitis	*patih	patih	‘thigh’
*gatel	*katal	katal	‘itchy’

Stage Two: In this stage, Raglai underwent some phonetic changes like other neighboring languages. Generally speaking, Southern Raglai changes faster than Northern Raglai because the former has a close contact with Cham that has gone very far towards monosyllabicity. In particular, some peripheral areas of both dialects have many changes and their phonological words are very similar to those of Cham.

There are several main changes in the presyllable in this stage. There was a loss of phonemic contrastiveness of presyllabic vowels, although there are still three vowels phonetically. Because of the loss of phonemic contrastiveness, vowel alternation is common. Moreover, there is the assimilation with the main-syllabic vowel. Also common was the deletion of vowels especially when the initial consonant of the main-syllable is [h], [l], or [r]. By dropping the presyllabic vowel, aspirated consonants or consonant clusters

were formed, as shown in Table 3. Finally, as noted above, the initial voiced stops changed into voiceless stops when the following stop was a voiceless one, as shown in Table 4. In this stage, the change was non-conditional in Southern Raglai.

Table 3: *Telescoping*

	N. Raglai	S. Raglai
‘old’	taha	tha
‘feather’	bilu	plu
‘husked rice’	barah	rah

Table 4: *Initial devoicing*

	N. Raglai	S. Raglai
‘mushroom’	bumau	pimau
‘eight’	dalapan	talapan

4 Conclusion

Phonetic changes in Raglai, in general, are similar to those of many languages in the area. In Raglai, due to its relative isolation, the changes are just beginning. Thus, we can easily follow its changes and know how one Malayo-Polynesian language changes into a monosyllabic language and how the gradual loss of phonemic contrastiveness of presyllabic vowels has proceeded.

References

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