

CREATIVE FORCES IN KHMER

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1 An important characteristic of Khmer (leakkhana' piseh)

The forces of erosion run rampant in spoken Khmer with unexampled viciousness. In casual registers (or perhaps routinely in the speech of younger speakers) the unstressed initial syllable CVN- or CrV- is typically reduced to Cə, C, or zero (cf. Huffman 1970, *passim*).

Speaker N.	Speaker P.	
<i>kawndaal</i>	<i>kədaa</i>	“middle”
<i>krawdaah</i>	<i>kədaa</i>	“paper”
<i>bawnthaem</i>	<i>(p)thaem</i>	“add”
<i>bawntaaw</i>	<i>taaw</i>	“continue(transitive)”
<i>bawbaaw</i>	<i>baaw</i>	“rice gruel, porridge”

For speaker P., All consonant clusters are simplified in at least the following ways:

- a) [h] is lost after affricates
- b) stops are elided before stops and nasals
- c) affricates are simplified to fricatives before obstruents
- d) [r] is elided after stops

Speaker N.	Speaker P.	
<i>chiem</i>	<i>ciəm</i>	“blood”
<i>pteah</i>	<i>tea</i>	“house”
<i>knjom</i>	<i>njom</i>	“I”
<i>kmuej</i>	<i>muej</i>	“nephew”
<i>ckae</i>	<i>skae</i>	“dog”
<i>cngawl</i>	<i>sngawl</i>	“wonder”
<i>cmooh</i>	<i>smue</i>	“name”
<i>kawntraj</i>	<i>kətaj</i>	“scissors”
<i>trawlawp</i>	<i>tawlawp</i>	“return”

(Change (c) is perhaps a Vietnamese-influenced dialect: all the other changes are general.)

In all dialects, final [r] survives only in the orthography; final written [s] in all but the most formal speaking styles is lenited to [h]; final [h] is often entirely elided; and final stops /p/, /t/, /k/, all unreleased, are approaching near acoustic identity with each other and with the glottal stop.

Written	Spoken	
<i>kmaer</i>	<i>kmae</i>	“Khmer”
<i>psaar</i>	<i>psaa</i>	“market”
<i>cas</i>	<i>cah</i>	“old”
<i>nih</i>	<i>ni</i>	“this”
<i>kawmsawt</i>	<i>kawmsaw’</i>	“wretched”
<i>peek</i>	<i>pee’</i>	“too (much)”
<i>kooraup</i>	<i>koorau’</i>	“salute”

In a small number of common words, final consonants are optionally elided in the conservative pronunciation of speaker N. and are no longer part of the word at all for speaker P.

Speaker N.	Speaker P,	
<i>jaau(k)</i>	<i>jaau</i>	“get, take”
<i>meeu(l)</i>	<i>meeu</i>	“look”
<i>maau(k)</i>	<i>maau</i>	“come”

Channeled as it is, the Principle of Least Effort in Khmer is not only alive, but well on the way towards reducing the canonical structure of the sesquisyllabic word from CVN+C(r)VC to an open monosyllable CV(‘).

As Bloomfield (1933:370 et passim) among others clearly recognized, an enormous number of sound changes that have been attested are compatible with the Principle of Least Effort. Indeed, the method of reconstruction using the principle of *lectio difficilior* as our best bet for the ancestral form (the PLE in reverse, as it were) silently encourages the assumption that most changes are of this type, which is one reason why our reconstructions of PIE look so unpronounceable. Part of the reason why the PLE of Zipf and phoneticians like Passy is nevertheless not more generally recognized as a linguistically significant tendency is that no language has yet been reduced to anything like silence. But the true reason for the fact that languages continue to be vocal, we suggest, is not that the PLE is invalid, nor that sound change is inhibited or reversed in all but the most extreme cases (Bloomfield, 395-6; Bolinger 1975: 438) but that there exist creative forces which are forever building up phonetic structure at the same time that sound change is wearing it down. Although these forces are less systematic than those of sound change and analogy, they must be active, or Khmer speakers at least would soon find themselves saying very little. And we believe that in Khmer, some of these forces are very much in the open.

2 Another characteristic feature of Khmer: infixation

One of these changes, John argued in an earlier report, is analogy itself. The productive nominalizing infix -Vm(n)- ~ -VN-, attested in nouns like *c-awm-rieng* “song” (< *crieng* “sing”). *c-awm-hang* “(monk’s) food” (< *chang* “(monk) eat”) may be the result of a kind of backformation. Given alternating pronunciations [C(VN)CVC] for the same etymon, the elided syllable coda of the unstressed syllable may have been reinterpreted as a meaningful morpheme, and then inserted into words where it had no etymological pedigree (Haiman

1998). This process may have played a considerable part in preserving the sesquisyllabic word in Khmer, as opposed to its loss in related Mon-Khmer languages like Vietnamese.

Another closely related change, however, may be that of purely DECORATIVE infixation. While in the majority of cases, the infix -Vm(n)- ~ -VN- can indeed be analyzed as a derivational morpheme of some kind, there exist a number of other cases where this infix seems to have little cognitive meaning, or perhaps none whatsoever. In another paper, we have called these cases of “syntactic backsliding” inasmuch as what looks to be a “deverbal noun” is in fact syntactically acting exactly like the verb from which it is presumably “derived” (Haiman & Ourn 2003). But it may be that cases of this sort are not as perverse as the label “backsliding” may suggest, if the infixation has no cognitive function to begin with. Noeurng’s intuitions about the meanings of the infixes in examples such as these are practically ineffable. They may mean SOMETHING but whatever that something is, it cannot be characterized either syntactically (as a nominalizing morpheme, for example) or semantically:

kmaoc bejsaac *k-awmn-aac*
ghost spirit vicious-ness
“vicious ghosts and evil spirits”

neak c-um-ngww
person sick-ness
“sick person; a patient”

koo nji *s-awm-kaaum*
cow female skinny-ness
“skinny female cow”

ktaaum *l-um-haau* *muej*
hut empti-ness one
“a hut without walls”

knong ptej *s-awm-ŋam* *nej* *rietrej*
in surface silence of night
“in the silent surface of the night”

We hesitate to say that infixation in these cases is purely decorative, partly because unsystematic differences of meaning are often associated with infixation, and partly because Noeurng does not feel it to be *sawmnuən vauhaa* “elegant style”, which *bawnthaem Ibaoj* “adds flavor”, an institutionalized and hence recognizable Khmer stylistic category on which speakers agree.

3 A third characteristic feature of Khmer: Symmetrical Compounds

But we will now present other cases which can be explicitly labelled in this way. In particular, these are cases of decorative REPETITION. We have suggested (Ourn & Haiman 2000, Haiman & Ourn 2002) that Khmer is a language which “likes to say

everything (at least) twice”. In those earlier articles, we focussed on two kinds of such at least partially decorative repetition:

- a) genuine compound forms (*samah*): these are synonym pairs like “cease and desist”: e.g. *lwen rauhah* “quick fast”;
- b) fake compound forms: these are typically alliterated twin forms like “spic ‘n’ span” which consist of at most one meaningful root and a meaningless “servant word” (*bo’ri’waa sap*) :e.g. *rauneeñ raunoon* “dangle”, whose first member is meaningless.

Both real and fake compounds exhibit both type and token frequency. A typical page of literary Khmer will have four or five genuine compound forms. Fake compounds do not seem to occur so often in texts, but are well-represented in the total lexicon. In a card index file that John has been keeping since we began working together, 24 out of the 202 entries beginning with [rau..], 8 out of 168 entries beginning with [caw..], and 12 out of 191 entries beginning with [tr..] are servant word compounds. Nor are combinations of both real and fake compounds excluded: triplets like *lwen rauhah rauhuen* “quick fast schmast” are not too unusual.

While the explicit motivation for some of these {A+B} compounds may have been partly that of elegance, there is always the (sometimes remote?) possibility that the pairing actually meant something. For example, perhaps in genuine compounds, A and B are not totally synonymous: in that case, their conjunction C may therefore mean something new. Or, in the case of the alliterative twin forms, perhaps neither A nor B by themselves mean anything (any more?), and meaning then arises only from their conjunction. Either way, the conjunction is motivated by factors other than the purely aesthetic.

4 Compounds which “add flavor”

We would like to present a third series of A+B forms where there is no trace of any semantic difference between A and B, which are judged to be purely synonymous, and in which the repetition quite explicitly has none of the iconic functions (marking plurality or iterativity or emphasis) that repetition typically has not only in Khmer but in languages generally. The general formula for these pairs (which seem not to have a specific label in the Khmer grammatical tradition) is this: a verb is paired with a light-verb version of its cognate accusative construction: **have a dream+dream**, and so forth. (Curiously, although genuine cognate accusative constructions do exist, we have not yet encountered cases like **dream a dream+dream**.) Among the most frequent examples of this construction are conjuncts like:

<i>baoh c-um-hien chien</i>	“take a step step”
<i>baek k-umn-wt kwt</i>	“open thought think”
<i>miən c-awmn- eh ceh</i>	“have knowledge know”
<i>ciə awmn-aoj aoj</i>	“be a gift give”
<i>cie c-umn-uum cuun</i>	“be offering offer”
<i>awh s-awmn- aəuc saeuc</i>	“exhaust laughter laugh”