

A note on colloquial Phnom Penh Khmer
Naraset Pisitpanporn
Monash University

Noss (1968:95) and Huffman (1967:248) both noted that the colloquial Khmer in Phnom Penh prominently had undergone an $r > h$ shift accompanied by a low rising pitch. Noss emphasised the exceptionlessness of the shift; i.e. all standard syllable-initial /r/ had undergo both an $r > h$ shift and the emergence of a rising pitch. This was the hallmark of Phnom Penh speech before 1975.

1. Dialect spread

Huffman also noted that the Phnom Penh shift had spread through Kandal province surrounding Phnom Penh and to some provincial capitals, notably Kampong Cham. This bears witness to the growing social importance of Phnom Penh.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge killed or drove out the inhabitants of Phnom Penh, scattering the survivors across the country. A Phnom Penh accent became a potentially deadly liability rather than an asset.

Upon the eviction of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and the establishment of Phnom Penh hundreds of thousand of Khmer, including many of its former inhabitants, flocked into the city, revitalising the city as a centre of prestige. The former Phnom Penh dialects, with its $r > h$ shift and low rising pitch, also reestablished itself, though mixed with the speech of new inhabitants from other provinces. Many provincial dialects may be heard unchanged in Phnom Penh.

At the same time traces of Phnom Penh speech have begun to become popular in some of the other provinces.

A recent linguistic survey in Phnom Penh (November 1998—January 1999) shows that the $r > h$ shift is more widespread among pre-1975 residents of Phnom Penh than among the newer arrivals. But it also showed that

even among pre-1975 residents the r > h shift is no longer exceptionless; exceptions to the rule may be heard.

2. Linguistic characteristics

2.1. Falling rising pitch with out /h/ shift

The following falling rising pitch is sometimes heard on /r-/ words that did not shift to /h/, especially among younger people. For instance:

Standard		Phnom Penh	
ʔaŋ.rɛɛ	>	ʔaŋ.rɛɛ	‘pestle’
muuəy rooy	>	mrɔ̌oy	‘hundred’
baa.rəy	>	baa.rɔ̌y	‘cigarette’
baŋ.rəy	>	pə.ɽiən	‘to teach’

2.2 Monophthongisation of diphthongs

There is occasional monophthongisation of a vowel after /r-/. For instance:

Standard		Phnom Penh	
srae	>	sɛɛ	‘paddy field’
praə	>	phɔ̌ə	‘to use’
kraoy	>	khɔ̌oy, khɔ̌y	‘after, behind’

2.2 Diphthongisation of monophthongs

There are some cases of diphthongisation of a vowel after /r-/. The a > ia diphthongisation occurs only after /r/, though in neighbouring Kandal province the a > ia shift is not so restricted. (A similar a > ia shift is reported by Crowley (1998: 47) for the Kairiru language spoken near Wewak in Papua New Guinea.)

Standard		Phnom Penh	
krah	>	khǎah	‘thick’
praŋ	>	phǎiaŋ	‘hot season’
traaw	>	thǎiaaw	‘eggplant’
kraa	>	khǎuaə	‘poor’
traŋ	>	thǎuaŋ	‘straight’

3. Some Phnom Penh influences upcountry

It has also been observed that other provinces have now also adopted the $r > h$ shift plus falling-rising pitch, such as in Takeo, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, Kratie, and others, presumably under the influence of Phnom Penh. The village of Loweaa-am near Phnom Penh has adopted many Phnom Penh features.

Standard		Kratie	
pram	>	phǎaam	‘five’
kaŋ.traa	>	kaŋ.thǎa	‘contact’
craan	>	chǎan	‘to push’
sraal	>	sǎal	‘lightweight’

And in some of these areas the $r > h$ shift does not have the accompanying falling-rising pitch. For instance:

Standard		Kampong Cham	
ruŋ	>	huuŋ	‘five’
kree	>	khɛɛ	‘bed’

Standard		Kratie	
sam.raam	>	sam.haam	‘rubbish’

In some cases, vowels may be altered.

Standard		Lowea-am	
kən.teəl	>	ktəə	'mat'
ʔaŋ.rɛɛ	>	ŋhɛɛ ⁱ	'bed'
trəy	>	thɛɛy ^j	'mat'
proh	>	phǎoh	'boy'
ʔaɦ	>	ʔuəɦ	'exhaust'
daəm	>	daen	'to push'
thaəp	>	thaep	'to kiss'
tiə	>	tɛiə	'duck'
and many others.			

4. Range of variation

Some examples may help to show the range of variation found in colloquial Phnom Penh speech.

Standard baa.raŋ 'French'

Phnom Penh :

baa.raŋ, baa.raŋ, baa.laŋ, baarǎŋ, pə.raŋ, pə.riən,
pa.raŋ, pa.raŋ, pə.hǎŋ, praŋ, phǎiŋ, phɛɛ^jŋ

Standard baa.rəy 'cigarette'

Phnom Penh :

pə.ray, pə.hɛy, pa.rəy, pa.ray, pa.rǎy, pa.hɛy, prəy,
play, pay, phɛy, phǎy

Standard baŋ.riən 'to teach'

Phnom Penh :

baŋ.riən, baŋ.riən, baŋ.liən, baŋ.hǐən, baŋ.hǐian,
paŋ.riən, pəŋ.hǐən, pəŋ.riən, pəŋ.ŋǐən, pa.riən,
pə.riən, pə.liən, pə.hǐən, hǐən

Standard bam.raə 'to serve'

Phnom Penh :

bam.raə, bam.rəə, bam.rǎə, bam.laə, bam.lǎə, baŋ.rəə,
baŋ.ləə, bəŋ.rəə, paŋ.həə, pəŋ.ŋǎə, pəŋ.ŋǎə, pəŋ.həə,
pəŋ.həə, phəə