

The Phonology of Samre

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I. Introduction

Samre is a Mon-Khmer language of the Pearic subgroup spoken in Cambodia along the border of Thailand. This paper describes Samre as spoken in Tambon Nonsi, Borai District, Trat Province of Thailand.

Other languages such as Pear, Chong, Angrak and Sa'och are in the Pearic subgroup with Samre (Thomas and Headley 1970), a subgroup also supported by Diffloth (1974) and Huffman (1976). There are approximately 5,000 Pearic speakers in Cambodia (Diffloth 1974). According to Matisoff (1991:219), many languages in this branch are in danger of extinction, a danger reflected in low estimates of the number of speakers: Pear, 1000; Samre, 200; Sa'och, 500; Samray, 2000; and Suoy, 200. This group represents only 0.05 percent of the total (6,789,000) Austroasiatic speakers in Cambodia during the period before the civil war.

Thongkum (1984) accidentally ran across people who spoke Samre while on a survey for a minority language map project in Thailand. She noted at the time that there were about seven or eight Samre families at Ban Mamuang, Bo Rai District, Trat Province. Due to time limitations, the the phonology of the language was based on the 367 words which were collected in two days from two informants so the amount of data is very limited. However, this article does provide us with a rough sketch of the Samre language in Thailand. The most interesting feature of this description of the Samre is my finding that the language is becoming tonal.

My first visit to Ban Mamuang (now in Tambon Nonsi, Bo Rai District) was in August, 1998. When I asked the local officials about the Samre people, they didn't recognize them as such because they mistakenly considered the Samre to be the same as another group of people called the 'Chong (of Trat),'¹ who speak a different language from

Thai but similar to Khmer. I asked them to take me to visit the people and talked with the people. I also took the Samre word lists of Thongkum (1984), and the word lists of Chong in Chantaburi (Huffman 1985) for a rough check. I found that the people are intermingled with the Thai population and have become bilingual. In addition, they often hide their true identity because they are afraid of discrimination by others, or because the Samre are generally very shy.

The children learn Thai at school and refuse to learn the language of their parents because they want to be like the other Thai groups, namely the local Thai (which may be a Central Thai language) and the Northern Thai who have come to live in the villages more recently. Some of the Samre parents say that they were advised by the former Thai teachers not to speak the language with the children; otherwise they could not learn to speak and read Thai well. The Thai language is considered preferable because it has a writing system and it is a dominant language. Thus, most of the Samre use more Thai than their own language. This contributes to the minority group's assimilation to the Thai way of living and speaking and to the decrease in their fluency in their mother tongue.

I had been informed that there are about twenty or thirty people who still use both the Samre language and Thai language within their group. I have made visits to most of them and found that the degree of Samre language ability differs depending on factors such as age, the frequency of use, and their attitude toward preservation the language. Some of them told me that they abandoned the language nearly fifteen to twenty years ago. I don't think that there are more than ten people who can still speak the language fluently, that is, who are able to remember most Samre vocabulary, to pronounce the words with confidence, to communicate with others on all topics, and to tell the stories or explain events fluently. The rest are not fluent, that is, unlike the more fluent group, they forget some words or the percentage of Thai loan words is greater or they are semi-speakers who cannot use the vocabulary

and grammatical structures well enough to communicate. The limited number of the speakers and the restricted domains of usage of the language indicate that the language will be lost very soon.

It is clear that we need much more reliable descriptive and comparative data on specific dialects before we can clarify the language versus dialect problem for the Pearic languages. Realizing that the Samre speakers left in Thailand are disappearing — only part of the elder generation 60 years old or older can speak fluently — I have decided to do my Ph.D. dissertation on the Samre grammar in order to provide useful data for further synchronic and diachronic studies on the Pearic languages. In order to share the data with other scholars at the Southeast Asia Linguistic Society conference, a preliminary phonological analysis of the Samre has been written based on a corpus of about 2,800 words, which were recorded on tape and transcribed. Some problems remain unsolved. This paper is presented as an initial step toward solving one of the problems: is tonogenesis occurring or not?

II. Phonological Analysis

1. Word and Syllable Structure

Samre has a typical Mon-Khmer syllable and word structure, which can be summarized as:

$$(C_1 V_1 (C_2)). ' C_3 (C_4) V_2 (C_5)^{T(one)}$$

The above syllable structure suggests the existence of minor and major syllables as two syllable types in Samre.

The minor syllables are always unstressed and the pitch level is neutral. Most of them are the first syllable of a disyllabic word, consisting of C_1 which is almost always a stop, but /m/, /l/ or /s/ have been found too. It should be noted here that there are many cases of fluctuation among the phonemes which occur in this position. For example, /s/ or /kh/ or /th/ as in /sanii^C/ or /khanii^C/ or /thanii^C/ 'sun, day'; /l/ or /k/ as in /lahaan^C/ or /kahaan^C/ 'stiff'; /c/ or /ch/ as in /camoh^B/ or /chamoh^B/ 'name'; /s/ or /k/ or /t/

as in /sapaŋ^C/ or /kapaŋ^C/ or /tapaŋ^C/ ‘swamp’. V₁ is a short, somewhat colourless vowel, usually [a] but often tending toward [ə]. C₂ is most often a nasal either /m/, /n/ or /ŋ/ and sometimes /p/ or /w/ have been found too (as in /sapaŋ^B/ ‘to have a cold’ and /cawsuut^C/ ‘bear’).

The major syllable (either a word or a syllable) is always stressed. It begins with C₃ in which any consonant phoneme can occur. C₄ are often liquids /l/ or /ɭ/ while C₃ (a stop, a nasal, or sometimes /s/) occurs in this position too. V₂ may be long or short or may be a diphthong. C₅ are the set of final consonants, which are optional.

Some words provide evidence that there is a Samre tendency toward becoming monosyllabic. Many of the minor syllables of disyllabic words may be reduced to syllabic nasals, such as /maluəŋ^B/ or /mluəŋ^B/ ‘man’; /kancuɯɯ^B/ or /ncuɯɯ^B/ ‘needle’; /təŋkɿaan^A/ or /ŋkɿaan^A/ ‘fire-place’, which increases the number of initial clusters. Moreover, it may also be deleted in some words, such as /samaaŋ^C/ or /maaŋ^C/ ‘caper’; /kuŋwiək^C/ or /wiək^C/ ‘millipede’.

2. Consonants

Samre has 21 single consonant phonemes as shown in the following chart. All of them can occur as initial consonants; only those preceded by a hyphen can also occur finally.

-p	-t	-c	-k	-ʔ
ph	th	ch	kh	
b	d			
-m	-n	-ɲ	-ŋ	
	s			-h
	l			
	-ɭ			
-w		-j		

Notes on the consonants:

/p/ is realized as [p] - A voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop occurring initially and or finally, e.g. /paan^A/ [paan³²] ‘flower’; /chap^A/ [c^hap³⁴] ‘to catch’.