

Phonological variation and change in the Khmu dialects of Northern Thailand¹

Suwilai Premsrirat
Mahidol University

Although in Thailand Khmu is just a small ethnic minority, a remnant of a much bigger group in Laos, Khmu dialects are scattered along the Thai-Lao border in Nan and Chiengrai provinces and provide an ideal subject for the study of phonological variation and the so-called "register-tone development process." Synchronic variation can often indicate diachronic change. Cross-dialectal phonetic variation has important implications for Khmu historical phonology.

The Khmu in Chiengrai emigrated from Laos across the Mae Khong river to Thailand about 40-50 years ago; the Khmu in Nan have lived in their present and nearby locations for a long time. Some of them may have moved down from old villages further north. Some knew that their ancestors came from the Luangprabang area in Laos. There are about 10 Khmu villages in Chiengrai with a population of about 3,000 speakers, whereas in Nan there are about 20 villages with about 6,000 speakers. The synchronic structures of various Khmu dialects differ from one another phonologically, lexically, and syntactically. Speakers of one dialect do not have much contact with speakers of other dialects which they call /tmó:j/, but they do have contact with the Khmu of the same dialect which they call /kún tá:j kún hé:m/ 'sister villages'. On the other hand, they have a lot of contact with local Tai speakers living in the same area who are mainly Northern Thai and Tai Lue.

This paper analyzes phonological variation in five Khmu dialects. These dialects are spoken in the following villages:

1. Huey Yen village, Chiengkong district, and Huey Ian village, King Wiengkaen district, Chiengrai province = Dial(1)²

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² The data for this dialect is based on the author's *Thai-Khmu-English Dictionary*, 1993.

2. Nam Pan, Huey Moy villages, King Songkhwai district, Nan province = Dial(2a)³ and Ban Maj Chajdan village, King Songkhwai district, Nan province = Dial(2b). These two dialects are in fact the same dialect but while the Dial(2a) may have several word structures for one word Dial(2b) has only one consistent word structure.

3. Nam Sot and Phu Kham villages, Thung Chang district, Nan province = Dial(3)

4. Pa Phae village, Wieng Sa district, Nan province = Dial(4)

5. Huey Puk and Huey Hai villages, Muang district, Nan province = Dial(5)

The phonological structure of these Khmu dialects is discussed here in terms of word and syllable structure, and segmental and suprasegmental phonemes. The data used for discussion here was mainly obtained or rechecked from the most recent field work done in February 1994. The informants for each dialect are over 35 years of age.

1. Word and syllable structures

The Khmu syllable structure comprises one or more consonants and a vowel and may be of two types, unstressed presyllable and stressed main syllable. The main syllable canon is 'C(C)V(C).

A phonological word in Khmu may have one, two, or three syllables. A word has only one strong stress, which is always on the last syllable. The phonological word structures in Khmu are :

Monosyllabic word 'C(C)V(C):

[t'rá:k] 'buffalo', [ra:] 'to wash', [pəh] 'dust'

Disyllabic word C(C)V(C)'C(C)V(C):

[kím'póŋ] 'head', [lawə:ŋ] 'sky'

[m̩'raŋ] 'horse', [ŋ'kur] 'storm'

Trisyllabic word C(C)V,C(C)V(C)'C(C)V(C):

[trə,ləp'tá:p] 'butterfly'

[cə,lən'téŋ] 'dragonfly'

³ The data for this dialect is based mainly on Preedaporn Srisakorn's *The Sound System of Khmu at Nampan in Nan*, 1984.

In general, monosyllabic and disyllabic words are common and trisyllabic words are rare. The presyllable in most of the disyllabic words is generally believed to be a fossil of affixation, a Mon-Khmer characteristic. As shown in the variation of word structures in Khmu dialects below, the unstressed presyllable is sometimes deleted either partially or entirely.

1.1. Variation of word structures in different Khmu dialects

Word structures may vary in different Khmu dialects as shown in the following table. In Dial (2b) words are monosyllabic, whereas in the other dialects they are either monosyllabic or disyllabic.

Dial(1)	Dial(2)		Dial(3)	Dial(4)	Meaning
	(a)	(b)			
cmkin	cmkin/ mkin	kɪn	smkɪn	cmkin	'female'
hʔiər	hʔiər	ʔiər	ʔəj	ʔiəj/jjal	'chicken'
khmuʔ	khmuʔ	muʔ	khmúʔ	kamhmuʔ	'Khmu people'
ptəʔ	ptəʔ	təʔ	ktəʔ	ptəʔ	'smoke'
smʔɪr	mʔɪr	ʔɪr	bil	hʔɪr	'to smell'
tmrəʔ	mrəʔ	rəʔ	tmphlaʔ/ mphaʔ	tmbraʔ	'charcoal stove'
chʔa:ŋ	chʔa:ŋ	ʔa:ŋ	sʔa:ŋ	cʔa:ŋ	'bone'
cmpiəŋ	mpiəŋ	pɪəŋ	mpiəŋ	cmpiəŋ	'straw'
hʔeʔ	hʔeʔ	ʔeʔ	ʔéʔ	hʔeʔ	'firewood'
kmaʔ	kbaʔ	maʔ	kmáʔ	kmaʔ	'rain'
kmlə:t	mlə:t	lə:t	mpə:t	kmlə:t	'to swallow'
kmɲɛŋ	mɲɛŋ	ɲɛ:ŋ	smjaŋ/kmjaŋɲɛ:ŋ		'to listen'
knɿi:ŋ	nɿi:ŋ	ɿi:ŋ	kti:ŋ	ti:ŋ	'to fall down'
kntuər	ntuər	tuər	ntúəl/j	kntuəl	'neck'
pnɪr	pdɪr	nɪr	pnɪl/j	pnɪr	'wing'
pnsɪm	nsɪm	sɪm	psɪm	psɪm	'to plant'
rŋkəʔ	rŋkəʔ	kəʔ	ŋkəʔ	ŋkəʔ	'husked rice'
sca:ŋ	sca:ŋ	ca:ŋ	kaçâ:ŋ/ kachâ:ŋ	saca:ŋ	'elephant'
tmʔas	mʔas	ʔas	tmbeh	tmʔes	'to sneeze'
tmkəʔ	tmkəʔ	kəʔ	mphláʔ/ mpáʔ	mbraʔ	'wife'

It is obvious that Dial(1) has the fuller form of disyllabic words whereas Dial(2) has variations. Most words in Dial(2a) have disyllabic structure though in many cases the initial consonant of the presyllable is lost and the presyllable becomes

a syllabic nasal whereas Dial(2b) drops most of the presyllable, making monosyllabic words. Dial(3) and Dial(4) also show variation in the word structure though not as obvious and consistent as Dial(2).

1.2. Variation of word structure within Dialect (2a)

Looking at the word structure within a dialect, we see variation similar to that found between different dialects. The main differences are found in the loss of the presyllable (including the nasal syllable), the simplification of consonant cluster, some difference in vowels, and differences in pitch level. Dial(2a) provides a good illustration.

1.2.1 Loss of presyllable

In Dial(2a) some of the presyllables which are not stressed have variant forms which show various stages of syllabicity: full syllable, half syllable, deletion of the whole syllable, or keeping only the main syllable.

1 (2 syllables)	2 (1 1/2 syllable)	3 (1 syllable)	Meaning
prl̩ə	~ r̩l̩ə	~ l̩ə	'fire'
cmkin	~ mkin	~ kin	'woman, girl'
cr̩ŋə:j	~ r̩ŋə:j	~ ŋə:j	'to have a cold'
pr̩thuh	~ r̩thuh	~ thuh	'carelessly'
pr̩ci:	~ r̩ci:	~ ci:	'to remember'
pr̩ŋə:j	~ r̩ŋə:j	~ ŋə:j	'fan'
tmk̩ʔ	~ mk̩ʔ	~ k̩ʔ	'wife'
kamr̩ŋ	~ mr̩ŋ	~ r̩ŋ	'horse'
hmteʔ	~ mteʔ	~ teʔ	'to howl'
rmheʔ	~ rheʔ/mheʔ	~ heʔ	'sinew, vessel'
r̩ŋk̩ʔ	~ ŋk̩ʔ	~ k̩ʔ	'milled rice'

Speakers of different age groups do not pronounce the words in the same way. The speakers over 30 tend to use the fuller form of disyllabic words as in columns 1 and 2 above, whereas people younger than 30 tend to use monosyllabic words dropping the presyllable as in column 3.