Synchronic metathesis and apocope in three Austronesian languages of the Timor area

HEIN STEINHAUER
Leiden University

1. Introduction

Systematic word "mutilation" as a means to express certain types of syntactic cohesion is typologically uncommon. Three Austronesian languages in the wider Timor area show both metathesis and apocope, fulfilling comparable syntactic functions, viz. Helong, Dawanese and Letinese.

For each of these three languages I shall present below 1) some general information, 2) a survey of phonemes, spelling and canonical wordshape, and 3) a discussion of rules and function of these processes of apocope and metathesis. This will be done mainly in relation to noun phrases. It should be emphasized though, that the phenomenon is all permeating in verb phrases as well (transitive verbs, for instance are subject to metathesis and/or apocope if they are followed by an object noun phrase), but a discussion of verb phrases would require more or less lengthy excursions into concord inflection, voice, aspect and verbal marking of various kinds, which do not immediately present new openings for understanding and comparison of the phenomena to be discussed below.[1]

2. Helong

2.1 *General*

Helong is a minority language in the Kupang district of West Timor, where it is spoken by some 9,000 people. Today the language is confined to four villages on the southwestern tip of Timor, and the majority of villages on the

off-coast Semau Island. Helong is in contact with Rotinese, Dawanese, Kupang Malay and Standard Indonesian: the other inhabitants of Semau Island are mainly Rotinese, whereas in the mainland villages Helong speakers mix with speakers of Dawanese and also Rotinese.

Many speakers of Helong regularly visit the provincial capital, Kupang, where a local variety of Malay is the mother tongue of the majority of the urban population; Kupang Malay is also widely used in inter-ethnic communication of a less official nature throughout the area. Standard Indonesian, finally, is used at school, in church, and in official contacts with people from outside the Helong speaking community. The use of Helong is consequently confined to daily domestic and rural routine and traditional ceremonies.

I collected the data below in August 1995 from two informants: Markus Laiskodat (1949) and Nelly Dahoklori (1976) both from Boneana, the only pure Helong village on the Timor mainland, some 25 km southwest of the town of Kupang. The Boneana dialect is claimed to differ less from the Semau Island dialects than the other mainland varieties of Helong. The generational difference between my two informants has no bearing to the apocope and metathesis phenomena to be discussed in 2.5.[2]

2.2 Phonemes

Helong has a simple five vowel system ([central, low] **a**, [+front, mid] **e**, [+front, high] **i**, [-front. mid] **o**, [-front, high] **u**), in which the mid vowels are phonetically open, and the low vowel can be realized rather front.

Labial consonants are the stops **p** and **b**, the nasal **m**, and the fricative **f**; the latter occurs only in loanwords. Alveolar consonants are the stops **t** and **d**, the nasal **n**, the fricative **s**, the lateral **l**, and the trill **r**; the latter was originally a loan phoneme, occurring in borrowings from Malay and Dawanese (Amarasi dialects), but in the speech of the younger generation it replaces intervocalic **d**. The palatal stops **c**, **j**, and the glide **y** are all loan phonemes from Malay. The velar consonants are the stop **k**, the nasal **ng**, and the gilde **w**; the latter only occurs in loanwords from Malay. The glottal consonants, finally are the stop **q** and the fricative **h**.[3]

---

[2] These differences are in fact considerable: they can be observed in intonation, presense vs. absence of certain consonant clusters, preservation of [d] vs. merging with [r] in certain positions, lower vs. higher number of Malay/Indonesian loanwords, and in pronominal suffixation patterns (for possessor with a subclass of nouns, and for subject with a subclass of intransitive verbs).

[3] Phonemically, **h-** followed by a nasal or lateral may constitute a word-initial consonant cluster in the insular dialects. Phonetically, these clusters are realized as a voiceless nasal/lateral *with a voiced transition to the next vowel. In the "mainland" dialect of Boneana these clusters* have become plain voiced nasals and **sl-/l-**.

Stress is marginally phonemic and will not be indicated below. The vast majority of words in isolation is stressed on the penultimate syllable.

2.3 *Wordshape*

Many grammatical words in Helong are monosyllabic, but lexical stems, may be monosyllabic as well, e.g. **bo-**[4] 'head', **ke** 'bird', **ngot** 'dog'. However, such stems constitute a minority. The majority is clearly bisyllabic. Compared to Dawanese and Letinese, the canonical shape for such bisyllabic (non-clitical) words in Helong is simple:

(1)   C(C)V(C)V(C)

Word-initial glottal stop is phonemic (cf. **luis-ia**[5] 'the cat here' and **luis qia** 'this cat here'). Consequently, there are no non-clitic words beginning with a vowel.

The final consonant of suffixless words may be **ng**, or any glottal or alveolar consonant except **d**. In (intransitive) verbal inflection for subject concord, and in nominal inflection for inalienable possessor words may end in the suffix sequences **-m-s** '2p-PL' and **-n-s** 'non2p.PL-PL'[6] A word may end in any of the five vowels.

In some longer words I found intervocalic sequences of (two) consonants, but these are probably the result of compounding.

Word-initial consonant clusters are confined to the speech of the older generation and to the following sequences: **b-** or **k-** and a following **-l-**, and to **s-** and a following **-l-**, **-m-** or **-n-**. Those with **-l-** are simplified to **b-**, **l-** and **l-** respectively in the speech of the younger generation (for those containing a nasal I lack comparable data).

---

[4] The hyphen indicates that this is the stem of an inalienable noun. A suffix (referring to the person of the whole of which the referent of the stem is a part) should follow.

[5] Although **-ia** is written here as a suffix it is in fact a phrasal clitic. A discussion of its morphophonology is given below.

[6] These inflectional patterns, their exact meaning and distribution have to be subject of further research. There appear to be lexical differences. Besides, there are obviously dialect differences, as well as differences between the older and younger generations.

2.4 *Noun phrase*

The (somewhat simplified) structure of the Helong noun phrase is:

(2)   ± Possessor + Noun ± Attribute ± Cardinal Numeral ± Determiner

This formula is open to extensions, for instance, with adverbials, coordination and relative clauses, but my data are insufficient, and for the limited purpose of this paper a discussion of them would be less instructive.

The Possessor which may precede the head noun (N) may be a personal pronoun or another noun indicating the possessor (in a broad sense) of the referent of N. In the case of a noun, the kind of possession indicated is one of generic type; compare the following constructions:

(3)   **kaut lehen-ia**[7] 'the papaya (**kaut**) leaf (**lehen**) here'
      kaut-a lehen-ia 'the leaf here of the papaya over there'

I analyse this latter construction as a sequence of two noun phrases.

The Attribute in (2) may be an adjective, an ordinal numeral, or a noun; the latter denotes the origin of the referent of the head noun, the material it is made of, or another entity with which it is associated; it may also be a sequence of such attributes, e.g. a noun and/or an adjective and/or an ordinal numeral. Examples:

(4)   **seman** 'sarong' + **manget** 'narrow' --> **seman manget** 'narrow sarong'
      seman + **lima-q** '5-th' --> **seman limaq** 'fifth sarong'
      seman + **helong** 'Helong' --> **seman helong** 'Helongese sarong'
      quma 'house' + **batu** 'stone' --> **qum batu** 'house made of stone'
      qasu 'bovine animal' + **sapi** 'cow-' --> **qaus sapi** 'cow'
      qasu + **sapi** + **batu** + **limaq**
          --> **qaus saip baut limaq** 'fifth cow made of stone'

The Determiner in (2) may be a demonstrative or an article. Helong appears to have a Macedonian determiner system, i.e. it has a three-way deictic opposition, both for the demonstratives and for the articles. In chart 1 the singular forms are given. The plural requires an additional **-s**.

---

[7] A hyphen indicates a word-internal morpheme boundary, or the boundary between a word and an enclitic.