When is an affix not a morpheme? Minor syllables in Kayah Li

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The Kayah Li* phonological word is the structure of those lexical items which are neither analyzeable compounds; truly polysyllabic morphemes like ḫōsɔpʰō 'airplane', nǐnē 'real'; nor suspect polysyllabic morphemes like dɔnē 'recount legends' (where the first syllable may or may not recur in dɔdē 'hold out, offer in the hand' and dɔmē 'show'). This structure may be abbreviated as:

1) \[ \text{C V C C V v} \]

Upper-case elements are required, and lower-case are optional; lower-case elements stand for subsets of the possible realizations of their upper-case counterparts. CCV is main syllable; post-main syllable v is a suffix. T= /á/ high, /ā/ mid, /a/ (unmarked) low-level, /à/ low-falling. This paper will consider the pre-main syllable element symbolized cv above, which I will call presyllable (another possibility would have been the term 'minor syllable' used in much Mon-Khmer linguistic literature). We will ignore suffixes, which are quite rare. Presyllables are common, and fall into two types:

a. \(?i-\) may have only high or low-level tones (not mid or low-falling). The underlying tone of the presyllable undergoes dissimilation
before main syllables having high, low-level or low-falling tones (i.e., any but mid). Examples with dissimilation are: ʔíɓe 'speak', ʔíŧ̣á 'a plow'; with underlying tone not dissimilated: ʔínə 'to fart', ʔiɿu 'the Kayah New Year festival'.

b. Cə- has low-level tone exclusively. C = p t k. The presyllable's vowel copies that of the following main syllable at slower tempos and tends towards true [ə] at faster tempos.

Thus presyllables are phonologically dependent on their associated main syllables, not only in being unable to occur alone, but also in having their phonological realization partially determined by features of the main syllable: tonal features in the first type, vocalic features in the second.

At least one presyllable is an independent morpheme: tə- 'one', like the other numerals, combines with any Classifier. E.g. tərlə 'one (seed, eye, button etc.)', təɓə 'one (neck, ladder, rope etc.)', təphə 'one (person).

The next best cases of morphemically autonomous presyllables are kə- and pə- when prefixed to certain verbs with directional meaning. The following examples illustrate using the verb təɿɛ 'ascend' and its prefixed derivatives as directional complements to preceding head verbs pɦjá 'take' and jə 'extend.
base verb: ʔa phjá the 's/he picks it up'
Sbj moves: ʔa phjá kəthe 's/he takes it and goes up'
orientational: ʔa jò pəthe 's/he raises it/holds it raised'

The following paradigm may be constructed, including all items that fit the syntactic/semantic categories even when they do not include the 'right' prefixes.

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<tr>
<th>gloss</th>
<th>base verb</th>
<th>Sbj moves</th>
<th>Orientational</th>
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<tr>
<td>go up</td>
<td>the</td>
<td>kəthe</td>
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<tr>
<td>go down</td>
<td>1e</td>
<td>kəle</td>
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<td>fall</td>
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<td>go out</td>
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<td>go in</td>
<td>nō</td>
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<td>go nearby</td>
<td>thō</td>
<td>kəthō</td>
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<tr>
<td>go across</td>
<td>rē</td>
<td>kərē</td>
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<tr>
<td>arrive</td>
<td>tō</td>
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<tr>
<td>go curving</td>
<td>taka</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>move from home</td>
<td>hē</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>pəhē 'ahead'</td>
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<tr>
<td>[no verb]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>kəkhjā 'backwards'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>move towards home</td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>go</td>
<td>cəwá</td>
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Main syllable khjā in kəkhjā 'backwards' corresponds to no verb, but occurs in the Localizer khjā~békhjā 'in back of, behind' (most Localizers are noun-related), and the Verb Particle khjāse 'back again, in response'.
As for the type ?i-, the following word pairs suggest a true derivational function, the pattern being N+?i+V with a general meaning 'N for the purpose of V':

ché 'sew'; sé ?íché 'sewing machine' (sé 'large machine')
klē 'chop keeping contact'; jò ?iklē ~ jò klē 'chopping block' (jò 'at the base of')
phō 'chop, pound'; kū chw ?iphō 'foot-operated tilt hammer for pounding rice' (kū chw 'mortar')
śē 'split with a wedge'; təthá ?isē 'a wedge'
đē 'dip up (water)'; thā ?idē kū 'water hole (thā 'water', kū 'hole')

A second group has only ?i- + verb, forming names of tools; as if words originally belonging to the preceding group had omitted the initial noun.

mū 'to hammer, strike'; ?imū 'a stick (for beating')
tha 'to plow'; ?itha 'a plow'
ci 'cut with scissors'; ?ići 'scissors'
po 'thresh'; ?ípo 'a hammer'
dū 'sweep'; ?idū 'broom'

And possibly ?íkwa 'stick, switch', if related to kékwa 'be in half', təkwa 'one half' (via '(half>') piece of branch, stick').

Note that not all tool names are formed in this way (e.g. 1wá 'saw', bů 'to saw', tənè 'hoe', təcē 'sickle'). There is also one noun/verb pair
with no prefix on either: kwā 'axe; to chop down'.

?í- may also be prefixed to phē 'father', mò 'mother', and phō 'grandfather', restricting the meaning to one's blood kin, where the unprefixed forms may apply either to blood kin or to an unrelated older person being addressed as elder kin out of respect: ?íphē 'my father', ?ímò 'my mother', ?íphō 'my grandfather'.

It seems reasonable to use the term 'prefix' for kə- rə- ?i- ?í- above. Are all Kayah Li presyllables prefixes? There are difficulties. An affix may be characterized as an element that is both phonologically dependent and morphemically autonomous; i.e., having specifiable semantic and syntactic features. But Kayah Li tends not to combine those two characteristics in a single item. The presyllables listed above are not typical: most presyllables have less or no morphemic autonomy. Conversely, securely autonomous morphemes, even bound forms, tend to be full syllables--not phonologically dependent. Put another way, Kayah Li words that contain affixes are either too much like single morphemes or too much like compounds.

Each phonologically-defined type of presyllable, besides the fairly autonomous morphemes already listed, also includes numerous instances of lower autonomy. The more autonomous items above satisfied two criteria:
a) affiliation with a group of prefixed forms having a common semantic element (instruments, motion verbs, kin terms).

b) existence of unprefixed counterparts (or, occasionally, counterparts with a different prefix) having reasonably relatable semantics.

I will now list items whose autonomy is UNCLEAR, satisfying a) but not b), and OBSCURE, satisfying neither a) nor b).

?í- UNCLEAR


?í- OBSCURE


'earth, the world' above; khu is the Classifier for spools of thread).

tə- UNCLEAR (tə- is the most common presyllable)

Directional: təva 'encircling', təka 'curved, hooked, in a curving path', təlwā 'past', təphā 'out of the way', təja 'past going in opposite directions'.

Of these, təva 'encircling' is a verb; the rest are members of a class of directional verb particles which also includes unprefixed items (və 'circumventing', rəwā 'along, following') and one with optional prefix kə- (bé-kəbē 'across').

təka 'curved' occurs optionally unprefixed in sī təka-sī kə 'dishonest' ('heart'+'bent'), and may be related to kə 'move towards home' if the latter originally meant 'return, turn around'.

Undesirable personal qualities: təmwi 'crazy', təklū 'stunted', təro 'timid', təkē 'dwarfed', təklē 'lazy', təkhrō 'stupid', təkhwa 'speechless'.

Animals: təchē 'elephant', təcī 'binturong', təchɔ̀ 'slow loris', təklī 'tortoise', təthē 'centipede', tənī 'bee', təkhwā 'lizard', təmē 'tusk (of pig)'.

tə- OBSCURE

The following is just a sample (listed verbs first, then nouns): təpē 'kick stg', təkli 'gnaw', təlū 'roll stg up', tənē 'steep', təcə 'cool', təcā 'tight', təkhā 'yawn', təplō təpjā 'hurry', təphē 'cotton', təkō 'box', təpwī 'longan'(a fruit), təc̬
'anything', təmò 'sun'. There are close to two dozen more.

Isolated pair: tənə 'think about' (with Noun argument), nə 'think that' (with clausal argument)

kə- OBSCURE

kəjē 'person', kəlō 'hill', kədō 'lid' (dō 'a wall, to enclose'), kənə 'almost', kəʔə 'noisy, deafening', kəlwa 'slanted', kəsē 'itch', kəjō 'move, shake', kədō 'dirty (water)', kərē pē 'umbrella', kətha 'magic' (ultimately from Indic gatha ).

pə- OBSCURE

pəhō 'onion', pəkū 'Sgaw Karen', pəkhrō (possibly a particular Karen group, possibly just a couplet of the foregoing), pəcə 'to gossip', cō pəriə 'sharp-pointed', pətī and pəteə both 'small', pəlwī 'cool (air)', pənē 'buffalo'.

If we imagine a scale of morphemic autonomy, it is clear that the majority of occurrences of presyllables as defined thus far fall towards the zero end of the scale. The following item, of different phonological shape belongs at the opposite end of the scale, being if anything too autonomous to be prefix.

ʔə is the unmarked third person pronoun (singular/plural not distinguished; there are two other third person pronouns that are more restricted in occurrence). What I take to be the same item (or a closely related, homophonous item) occurs in various prefix-like constructions, listed below. In these it has only some of the phonological characteristics of a prefix: it is
unstressed, at or near low-level pitch, and its vowel quality approaches [ə]. On the other hand at slower speech tempos it retains the vowel quality [a] and does not exhibit vowel harmony with the following syllable. It has two functions with Bound Nouns (i.e. those requiring a co-
constituent).

1) A certain type of classifier (Bound by definition, requiring a numeral co-constituent) may function as head of compound nouns; for instance plo 'classifier for small round things' appears in ké plo 'eggplant seed', bése plo 'eye' (bése 'face'), mi plo 'light bulb' (mi 'fire'). The modifier position in such compound nouns may also be occupied by ?a-; thus with plo we have ?aplo 'a seed, its seed'. The following examples first gloss the morpheme as classifier, then give several examples of its occurrence in compound nouns, then its occurrence with ?a-:

po clf for enclosures; kúphe po 'fireplace, hearth' (kúphe 'ashes and dirt'); pù po 'cattle pen', thé po 'pigpen', chá po 'chicken coop'; ?apó 'finial of New Year's pillar; its cage'
be clf for winged, winglike or flakelike things; ruū be 'silver coin'; ?abe 'a round flat thing' (of coin or bī so 'dried fermented bean' only)
tù clf for sheaves; bó tù 'sheaf of rice' (bó 'growing rice'); ?atù 'a sheaf'
plē clf for ears of grain; bó plē 'ear of rice'; ?aplē 'id.'
phē clf for branches; so phē 'branch', khru phē 'small firewood'; ?aphē 'branch'
It would not be quite accurate to describe this ʔa- as derivational. It does not derive (ordinary) nouns from classifiers, since these classifiers, when appearing in compounds like mi ʔap1c 'light bulb', already overlap with nouns with no assistance from a prefix. In ʔap1c 'seed', ʔa- is effectively a stand-in for any ordinary noun, functioning only to make the whole construction a Free element. Like any Bound morpheme, these classifier-related nouns require a co-constituent, and ʔa- is merely the most colorless such co-constituent. Its function is to allow the Noun to occur as a Free form without adding any other semantic specificity.

2) ʔa- functions similarly with some other Bound nouns. phē 'male' (distinct from the Free noun 'father') occurs in compounds such as hē phē 'Chinese man', phē twà 'handsome man', pù phē 'bull, chā phē 'cock'; with ʔa- we have ʔaphē 'the male one' (of some previously mentioned animals). mò 'female; mother' shows the same pattern: chā mò 'hen' (chā 'chicken'), ʔamò bē 'the yellow one (hen, previously mentioned)'. Many names of plant parts fall under this heading, occurring either with a species name, the general word for 'plant', or with ʔa-. E.g. with se 'fruit': kése 'eggplant', sóse 'fruit', ʔase 'a fruit, its fruit'. Other examples include ʔat₃ 'tuber', ʔamò 'trunk', ʔaché 'thorn', ʔale 'leaf', ʔarwǐ 'root', ʔalò 'core, heart', and possibly ʔak1wǐ 'seed (for planting)'.

Is this prefix ?a- truly distinct from the pronoun ?a? On the one hand, ?a- is unlike any (other) pronoun in its noun-forming function as just described. On the other hand these ?a-compounds retain an anaphoric flavor in the many cases where ?a+N occurs in a context that contains a possible antecedent for ?a (this anaphoric flavor is reflected by the gloss 'its fruit' given above for ?ase). Cf. the following case of təʔā 'ginger' followed several clauses later by ?atə 'its rhizome, the rhizome':

3) phjá pòsè təʔā / təʔā ?o t(h)ō me hū tē /
   take again ginger ginger exist finish do like what
   cwa chō pòsè təʔā / təʔā ma təmjō ma
   go plant again ginger ginger be.so one-kind be.so
   hé ?itē [5 clauses] ?ā nə chō pòsè phjá pòsè
   call what this PTC plant again take again
   ?atə
   *-tuber

'[they] also took ginger/they had ginger, and then what?/[they] went and planted the ginger/ginger is a kind of, what do you call it?' [5 clauses on the Thai word for 'ginger' elided] 'this, they also planted [it] and took its rhizome/the rhizome'. (396.3)

Here it would not be unreasonable to see ?a- in ?atə 'tuber, rhizome' as referring back to təʔā 'ginger', hence the possible gloss 'its rhizome'. But the following example, otherwise very similar, does not allow such an analysis:
chāmò bē ?ə nə be /chāmò 1c
chicken-female yellow exist two CLF chicken-female black
?ə sō be /?əmə̊ bē jo cwa'ə̊ təbe
exist three CLF *-female yellow fly go PTC one-CLF
There are two yellow hens and three black hens; one of the yellow ones has flown away.
Here ?əmə̊ bē does NOT mean 'its yellow mother',
or even 'its yellow female'. I am not prepared to
give a conclusive analysis of this matter, but the
following seems relevant.

If examples like ?ətə̊ 'the rhizome' and
?əmə̊ bē 'the yellow one' do in fact display a sort
of anaphoricity, it is better seen as anaphoric or
quasi-anaphoric function of the ENTIRE WORD
quasi-anaphoric function of common nouns is
found in English examples like That spruce tree
is in bad shape; the trunk is riddled with
carpenter ants. This quasi-anaphora is possible
with any common noun, and is not a feature of a
special grammatical category pronoun.

Thus ?ə- is morphemically highly
autonomous and phonologically dependent, but
its phonological dependence is partial, certainly
less than that of Cə- and ?i-.

To sum up, there is a discrepancy between
the phonological category presyllable and the
morphosyntactic category affix. With the
vagueness of boundary between the presyllables
that are morphemically autonomous and those
that are not, the temptation is to call all of them
prefixes. After all, perhaps additional lexical
data will reveal further common-meaning
groupings; and even if a given presyllable is
fully obscure in the modern language, perhaps it once was an autonomous morpheme.

The latter hypothesis can sometimes be confirmed by etymology. The prefix in ʔí’thu ‘post’ is hi ‘house’, judging by the cognate hi thu in the closely-related Western Kayah Li. The prefix in ʔí’khu ‘earth, world’ is probably he ‘earth, dirt’, supported by the Western equivalent he khu ‘earth, world’ (the second syllable is a Localizer noun meaning ‘on the upper surface of’).

On the other hand etymology can also complicate the picture. The prefix in ʔí’be ‘speak’ is probably hé ‘call, say’ (be ‘impinge, affect’, a very common result expression); cf. Western Kayah hé be ‘speak’. Perhaps the following also have the same source: ʔíro ‘sing’, ʔíví ‘whistle’, ʔí’u ‘to crow’, ʔíché ‘tell’, ʔíla ‘call animal by clucking sounds’. If these etymologies are valid, the fact that these verbs of oral action can be grouped with other ʔi- words under ‘body movements’ is at best a very recent innovation, and at worst a figment of my analysis.

*Kayah Li, also known as Kayah, Red Karen, and Karenni, is a language of the Karen branch of Tibeto-Burman, spoken in Kayah State of Burma and adjacent parts of Thailand. Data in this paper, representing the Eastern dialect area of Kayah Li, were recorded in 1983-84 and 1987-88 in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. My research was supported by two grants from the U.S. Department of Education: a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant and a Fulbright-Hays Advanced Research award.