Reduction of Historical Disyllables in Central Kampong Chhnang Cham

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Western Cham is an Austronesian language spoken across Cambodia and southern Vietnam (Eberhard et al., 2026). Tendency towards monosyllables is an areal characteristic of mainland Southeast Asia (Enfield, 2018), and previous literature on Western Cham has documented the weakening of the initial syllable in disyllabic words, resulting in it being dropped or retaining only the onset and forming a word-initial consonant cluster (Friberg & Hor, 1977; Ueki, 2011).

This presentation explores phonetic reduction among historical disyllables in a dialect of central Kampong Chhnang province (CKC), drawing on data from four speakers (all women). In focus are the following three strategies that have not been reported for other Western Cham varieties. For comparison, Proto-Chamic reconstructions by Thurgood (1999) are provided with asterisks:

a. Deletion of the initial syllable with devoicing of the following sonorant. This occurs when the first onset is a stop and the second is a sonorant. Examples include:

1.	a)	[l̥a̤ːw]	*dihlɔw	‘before’
	b)	[m̥ɜ̤ɨ̤]	*tama	‘be cut (by a knife)’
	c)	[ɲ̊iːʔ]	*kuñit	‘turmeric’

b. Deletion of the initial syllable with gemination of the following obstruent. This occurs when both onsets are obstruents. For the coronal fricative /s/, the contrast is reinforced by lenition of the singleton form to a dental approximant [ð̤]. The evidence, though limited, also indicates a length contrast among CKC’s implosives. Examples include:

2.	a)	[pːɛ̤a̤w]	*kabaw	‘water buffalo’
	b)	[kːe̤ː]	*pagi	‘tomorrow’
	c)	[sːaw]	*tasɔw	‘breast’

c. Reduction of an initial syllable with a sonorant into a nasal. This occurs when the first onset is *r, *l or a nasal. For *r and *l, the resulting nasal is homorganic to the following consonant, while for word-initial *m, it either remains [m] or reduces further to a homorganic nasal. In items where the following consonant is already nasal, this reduction produces a geminate. Examples include:

3.	a)	[mpṳʔ]	*mabuʔ	‘drunk’
	b)	[ŋkaj]	*lakɛy	‘man’
	c)	[nːa̤m]	*ranam	‘love (v.)’

Notably, these reduced forms are in synchronic variation with more conservative forms, and there are significant differences among speakers in terms of how often they are produced. Comments from one informant suggest that these differences coincide with diglossia between a ‘spoken’ and ‘written’ form of CKC.

References

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