

Khmer vowels in transition

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Khmer has a very complicated vowel system. There are 31 vowels in Khmer according to Huffman (Huffman, 1977). These include both simple and complex vowels. The simple vowels consist of a single vocalic quality, long or short, and the complex vowels consist of a sequence of vocalic qualities.

Although pronunciation of standard Khmer is related fairly closely to the orthography in the Khmer script, which has been gradually evolving since the earliest known inscription in the Khmer language of 611 A.D. (Huffman, 1977), one observes that, in actual less formal speech communication, the vowel system in Khmer varies from person to person and from region to region, showing varying relations to the Khmer orthography.

A Khmer word which is pronounced at the present need not, of course, be pronounced the same as in the past, and the sounds which may be inferred from the script in the past may not coincide with the pronunciation made by native Khmer speakers at the present time.

In actual speech communication in modern Khmer, a Khmer word with a simple vowel in standard Khmer may pronounced in different ways. Generally, the simple vowels may move downward from higher to lower vowels: *ee* > *εε*, *uu* > *oo*, *oo* > *ɔɔ*, or may move upward from lower to higher vowels: *ee* > *ii*, *oo* > *uu*, *ɔɔ* > *oo*. This vertical movement between adjacent levels of the simple vowels does not change the meaning of the word. (Naraset, 1996).

Significantly, Khmer complex vowels are also in transition. There are, at least, two complex vowels which may vary, that is /*iiə*/ corresponding to ឺ in Khmer script and /*uuə*/ corresponding to ឺ in Khmer script. These two complex vowels, /*iiə*/ and /*uuə*/, fluctuate greatly in the pronunciation of native Khmer speakers in daily conversation. They are often simplified as /*ii*/ and /*uu*/ respectively.*

*I am grateful to Professor Christopher Court of the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University for informing me, among many other things, that history appears to be repeating itself here: earlier complex vowels more or less like /*iiə*/ and /*uuə*/ in Old Khmer were similarly simplified. However, he is not sure whether it is a case of the old rule *continuing* to be productive down to modern Khmer in *some* varieties, and now spreading to other varieties, or whether the phenomenon in contemporary Khmer is a purely chance recapitulation of an already completed or arrested development in earlier Khmer.

iiə > ii

ទៀត	tiət	>	tiit	‘again’
ប្រដេជ្រង	praciəw	>	praciw	‘bat’
ត្រៃឡាត	trəyɲiət	>	trəyɲiit	‘dried fish’
ត្រៃច្រក	traciə?	>	tracii?	‘ear’
សៀវភៅ	siiəwphəw	>	siiwphəw	‘a book’
etc.				

uuə > uu

ជួប	cuuəp	>	cuup	‘to meet’
រួច	ruuəc	>	ruuc	‘to be finished’
ចក្ខុក	ckuuət	>	ckuut	‘to be mad’
កង្កួត	kʔuuət	>	kʔuut	‘to vomit’
មួយ	muuəy	>	muuy	‘one’
etc.				

Not all words with these complex vowels have undergone the above sound change. Rather the change is moving word-by-word through the vocabulary with some words more stabilized with the complex vowel and others more stabilized with the simple vowel. It seems that speech-style, age, sex, socio-economic of speaker, etc. play a part in this process, and that it represents a typical social-variation situation calling for a Labovian analysis.

In summary, ឡៃ which is officially pronounced /iiə/ is often simplified to /ii/ and រួច which pronounced /uuə/, is often simplified to /uu/. These two complex vowels are in a transitional period but will probably end up monothongized in all varieties of Khmer.

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