

The diachrony of initial consonant loss in Cape York Peninsula (Australia)

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This paper revisits the diachrony of initial consonant loss, a type of sound change that is found in several areas in Australia (Hale 1976a, Alpher 1976, Blevins 2001), but is rare from a world-wide perspective (Blevins 2007). So far, the literature has mainly analysed initial loss as the outcome of a gradual process of initial weakening, caused by a shift of stress away from the initial syllable (Alpher 1976, Blevins & Marmion 1994). In this paper, I use data from a set of eight Paman (Pama-Nyungan) languages of Cape York Peninsula (Australia), which illustrate not just loss of initial consonants, but also initial consonant lenition and the loss of entire initial syllables. Using these data, I argue that (i) the classic model of gradual initial weakening needs to be supplemented with more abrupt mechanisms, specifically analogy-driven loss based on synchronic alternations, and contact-induced loss, and (ii) the causal link with stress shift needs to be refined, and in some languages loss of initial consonants in part of the lexicon may itself cause changes in the stress system.

Cape York Peninsula, in Australia's northeast, has several 'hotspots' of initial loss (Alpher 1976, Sutton 1976), e.g. in the north and on the central east coast. This paper focuses on the eastern hotspot in the Princess Charlotte Bay area, specifically eight languages from three different subgroups of Paman, viz. Middle Paman (Umpithamu, Yintyingka, Umpila), Lamalamic (Lamalama, Umbuygamu, Rimanggudinhma) and Thaypanic (Kuku Thaypan, Aghu Tharrnggala). The Middle Paman languages show a combination of retention, lenition and loss of initial consonants, as shown in (1) for Umpithamu, while the Lamalamic and Thaypanic languages show systematic loss of initial consonants, as shown in (2a) for Umbuygamu, and/or of entire initial syllables, as shown in (2b) for Lamalama (Proto-Paman reconstructions from Hale 1976b).

- (1) a. *kuwa* 'west' ~ **kuwa* b. *ya'u* 'foot' ~ **caru* c. *aangkal* 'shoulder' ~ **paangkal*
(2) a. *agarr* 'flesh' ~ **pangkarr* b. *karr* 'flesh' ~ **pangkarr*

When confronted with these data, the classic model of gradual initial weakening only works for Umpithamu, which shows phonologically systematic patterning of initial consonant loss, lenition and retention. The other languages deviate in two ways, suggesting two further pathways to initial loss. In Umpila and Yintyingka, lenition, loss and retention of initial consonants do not show any phonological systematicity: their patterning can only be explained in terms of contact-induced change, specifically borrowing from neighbouring languages that do have gradual initial weakening. In Lamalamic and Thaypanic, loss of initial consonants is complete, but initial vowels are retained or lost. Against expectations in the literature (e.g. Blevins & Garrett 1998, Sommer 1976), initial vowels in these languages do not show any signs of weakening, but are in fact in a strong position, with a large number of contrasts. Instead, initial loss in these languages can be related to specific phrasal structures that induce construction-specific loss of the initial vowel of the first lexeme, which creates a regular synchronic alternation between forms with and without an initial vowel, and can serve as an analogical model driving the systematic loss of initial vowels.

The classic model of stress shift towards the second syllable is equally problematic when confronted with these data. Lamalamic languages show the predicted pattern of stress on the first consonant-initial syllable in the root, but crucially Middle Paman languages do not. In Umpithamu, for instance, stress placement can be generalized in terms of a right-aligned system of moraic trochees, which crucially allows initial stress for some types of vowel-initial roots. This suggests that the classic model of linear stress shift causing initial loss does not seem to work. Instead, initial consonant loss in part of the lexicon, as observed in Umpithamu, may itself be a crucial factor leading to a shift in stress alignment from left to right edge (compare Lahiri 2015 on reanalysis driving changes in stress alignment in the history of English). This still leaves the root causes of initial loss to be addressed, but at least it shows that stress shifts in these languages are not always simple linear shifts, and that they are not necessarily the cause of patterns of initial loss but can also be an effect.

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