

Creaky voice systems among the Mon-Khmer languages:

Towards Historical Explanation.

Paul Sidwell

Australian National University

Various Mon-Khmer languages make phonological use of creaky phonation, effectively multiplying the available complexity of their vowel inventories. Just what constitutes ‘creak’ is itself a difficult issue, although this writer takes a broad approach, placing it on a continuum that includes a variety of laryngeal gestures involving glottal constriction. The issue paper investigates to what extent the creaky voice systems surveyed can be explained by historical phonology and typology within the Mon-Khmer context. My findings are that they represent various independent developments, yet there are some striking similarities that hint at more general phonological processes. The emergence of creak is frequently associated with vocalic restructuring that follows the devoicing of initial consonants, reflecting a secondary shift (or ‘hardening’) of breathy voice systems. However, this is not always the case, as we can find examples of creaky voice in Mon-Khmer languages that apparently never underwent any devoicing or other evident restructuring. Such cases still pose a particularly difficult challenge for historical phonological explanation.