

## Final /a/ Mutation in some Western Austronesian Languages

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Peculiar features in the historical phonology of some western Austronesian languages are the various mutations which affect the vowel /a/ when it occurs in final position. These mutations, which affected many dialects of Malay, Javanese, and Balinese, have changed final /a/ into various other vowels, such as [ɛ], [ɔ], or [ə]. Some examples of the different reflexes of the word for ‘five’ are listed below.

Malay		Javanese		Balinese	
Dialect	Form	Dialect	Form	Dialect	Form
Kedah	lima	Tengger	lima	Pedawa	lima
Johor	limə	Banten	limə	Denpasar	limə
Patani	limə	Solo	limə	Ubud	limə

The reasons behind these common yet perplexing changes have, to the best of my knowledge, never been properly explained. This paper is an attempt to provide an inventory of possible reflexes of \*a#, and to give an explanation for the phenomena. It will be proposed that the cause of these changes, which appear to lack phonetic motivation, was in fact sociolinguistic in nature. It originated as a reduction of final /a/ in the speech of the Indianized elite of central Java, in imitation of a similar process in Indic languages. From there, the process spread to languages which were in close contact with Javanese, and which were also heavily influenced by Indian culture. A final reduced vowel, however, did not sit in well with the phonotactic and prosodic constraints of the affected languages. Consequently, various dialects restrengthened the final reduced vowel into a ‘full’ vowel. Since this happened independently in many dialects (though due to the same types of structural pressures), the reduced vowel was strengthened into many different vowels.