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COMPARISON BETWEEN THE KHMER DIALECT OF AN GIANG AND STANDARD KHMER - THE VOWEL SYSTEM

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Abstract: This study examines vowel variation in the Khmer dialect spoken in An Giang Province, Vietnam, in comparison with Standard Khmer. Adopting a comparative phonological approach, the research systematically classifies structurally equivalent lexical items and analyzes recurrent pronunciation patterns across speakers. The findings reveal that vowel variation in the An Giang Khmer dialect follows stable and systematic patterns rather than random deviation. Major phenomena include diphthong simplification, shifts in vowel quality, and vowel elision in polysyllabic words. These processes result in noticeable changes to syllable structure, frequently increasing consonant clustering and reducing syllable complexity in spoken forms. Such phonological patterns create clear divergence between local speech and the standard forms represented in written language and educational materials. The study interprets these variations as established dialectal features reflecting the phonological identity of An Giang Khmer, shaped through long-term language use within the local community. By providing a structured description of vowel variation, this research contributes empirical evidence to Khmer dialectology and offers phonological insights relevant to the teaching and learning of Khmer in contexts where regional and standard varieties coexist.

Keywords: An Giang Khmer dialect, vowel variation, language contact, Khmer language

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SO SÁNH GIỮA PHƯƠNG NGỮ KHMER AN GIANG VÀ TIẾNG KHMER CHUẨN - HỆ THỐNG NGUYÊN ÂM

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát hiện tượng biến thể nguyên âm trong phương ngữ Khmer tại tỉnh An Giang (Việt Nam) trên cơ sở so sánh với tiếng Khmer chuẩn. Áp dụng phương pháp phân tích ngữ âm so sánh, nghiên cứu tiến hành phân loại có hệ thống các mục từ tương đương về cấu trúc và phân tích các mô hình phát âm lặp lại ở nhiều người nói. Kết quả cho thấy biến thể nguyên âm trong phương ngữ Khmer An Giang mang tính ổn định và có quy luật, chứ không phải là sự sai lệch phát âm ngẫu nhiên. Các hiện tượng nổi bật bao gồm: đơn giản hóa song nguyên âm, chuyển đổi chất lượng nguyên âm và lược bỏ nguyên âm trong các từ đa âm tiết. Những quá trình này dẫn đến sự thay đổi đáng kể trong cấu trúc âm tiết, thường làm tăng các tổ hợp phụ âm và rút gọn hình thức âm tiết trong lời nói. Nghiên cứu xem các biến thể này là những đặc trưng phương ngữ đã được xác lập, phản ánh bản sắc ngữ âm của Khmer An Giang. Qua đó, nghiên cứu đóng góp dữ liệu thực nghiệm cho phương ngữ học Khmer và hỗ trợ giảng dạy tiếng Khmer trong bối cảnh song tồn giữa dạng địa phương và dạng chuẩn.

Từ khóa: phương ngữ Khmer An Giang, biến thể nguyên âm, tiếp xúc ngôn ngữ, tiếng Khmer

1. Introduction

The Khmer ethnic group is one of the largest minority communities in Vietnam, with a population of over one million people, primarily residing in the Mekong Delta region. The Khmer language continues to play a central role in maintaining cultural identity and everyday communication within Khmer communities (Thach, 2020; Huynh, 2017). In An Giang province, the Khmer population is estimated at approximately 75,878 people, mainly concentrated in the mountainous districts of Tri Ton and Tinh Bien (Phuong, 2024). Within these communities, Khmer remains the dominant language in daily interaction, especially in village settings (phum, soc), where mother-tongue use is largely preserved (Hoang & Nguyen, 2025).

The phonological system of Khmer has been the subject of extensive research across regions where Khmer-speaking populations are found, including Cambodia, northeastern and eastern Thailand, and southwestern Vietnam (Premrarat, 1995). Due to historical migration, long-term settlement, and contact with surrounding languages, Khmer has developed a range of regional dialects characterized by distinct phonological features. These dialectal differences are reflected not only in consonantal variation but also in systematic variation within the vowel system, contributing to divergence from Standard Khmer.

Khmer dialects spoken in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam are commonly classified according to regional phonological characteristics. However, previous studies have shown that such classifications are only relatively stable, as considerable phonological variation can be observed even within the same dialect region. In particular, vowel realization often varies according to local speech habits, syllable structure, and phonological environment, resulting in forms that differ markedly from the standard language.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in Khmer dialectology, research focusing specifically on vowel systems in local Khmer varieties remains limited. Many earlier studies have provided general descriptions of regional dialects without systematically examining vowel variation at the lexical level or identifying recurrent patterns of vowel alternation and vowel loss. The Khmer dialect of An Giang, commonly classified within the Rach Gia - Kien Giang dialect group, exhibits a range of complex phonological features that have yet to be fully documented. Among these features, vowel variation poses particular challenges for word recognition and accurate pronunciation, especially when local spoken forms diverge from the standard written language.

Against this background, the present study aims to compare the vowel system of the An Giang Khmer dialect with that of Standard Khmer. Using a phonological comparative approach, the study identifies recurrent patterns of vowel alternation and vowel elision in the An Giang dialect. Rather than viewing these patterns as pronunciation “errors,” the study treats them as systematic features that reflect the distinct phonological identity of the local dialect shaped through long-term language use. By providing a structured description of vowel variation, the study contributes to a clearer understanding of dialectal differences in Khmer and offers empirical data that may support vocabulary recognition and Khmer language education in contexts where dialectal and standard forms coexist.

In this study, the term Standard Khmer is used in a functional and descriptive sense, rather than implying a fully homogeneous spoken variety. It refers to the standardized form of Khmer codified in orthography, dictionaries, grammatical descriptions, and educational materials, which are largely based on the Central Khmer variety associated with Phnom Penh and surrounding regions.

It is acknowledged that phonological variation still exists within Phnom Penh Khmer, including the retention or weakening of certain consonants such as /r/. However, such variation does not contradict the role of Standard Khmer as a reference variety for comparative linguistic analysis. Accordingly, Standard Khmer in this study serves as a baseline for systematic comparison (Huffman, 1970), not as an absolute or invariant pronunciation norm.

2. A Literature Review on Khmer Dialects

2.1. Regional Variation in the Khmer Dialect System

The Khmer language exhibits substantial regional variation resulting from historical migration, settlement patterns, and prolonged contact with neighboring languages. Previous scholarship commonly classifies Khmer dialects into three major regional groups: Central Khmer, Western Khmer, and Southern Khmer. This classification is primarily grounded in phonological criteria, particularly differences in consonant systems, vowel inventories, and patterns of syllable structure.

Central Khmer is generally treated as the basis of Standard Khmer in written, educational, and descriptive linguistic contexts. However, linguistic research has demonstrated that this variety itself is not phonologically uniform. Sub-regional and urban varieties display distinct vowel realizations and prosodic features, indicating ongoing phonological change in natural speech. Studies focusing on vowel systems have shown that variation occurs even within forms conventionally regarded as standard, highlighting the dynamic nature of Khmer phonology (Minegishi, 1986; Wayland, 1998).

Western Khmer dialects, spoken by Khmer communities in northeastern Thailand,

represent another major area of dialectal differentiation. These varieties are characterized by notable differences in vowel quality, diphthong realization, and syllable reduction (Ratsri et al, 2023; Seedabut & Patpong, 2024). Scholars have consistently linked these phonological features to sustained contact with Thai, which has influenced articulatory habits and segmental patterns among Khmer speakers over generations (Smalley, 1976).

Southern Khmer dialects, commonly referred to as Khmer Krom, are spoken by Khmer communities in southern Vietnam. Within this regional group, several sub-dialects have been identified, including those spoken in Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, and the Rach Gia - Kien Giang area. These dialects exhibit systematic phonological differences that reflect both internal linguistic development and intensive contact with Vietnamese.

2.2. Phonological Features and Vowel Variation in Southern Khmer Dialects

Among the various components of Khmer phonology, vowel systems have been widely recognized as particularly sensitive to regional and social variation. Studies on Southern Khmer dialects consistently report processes such as vowel alternation, diphthong simplification, and vowel reduction, especially in spontaneous spoken language.

Research on the Soc Trang dialect has documented a tendency toward simplifying complex vowel sequences, resulting in reduced vowel contrasts in everyday communication. Similarly, studies on the Tra Vinh dialect reveal extensive variation in vowel realization depending on phonological environment, syllable structure, and speech tempo (Lam, 2016). These findings suggest that vowel variation is not marginal but constitutes a core characteristic of Southern Khmer phonology.

The Rach Gia - Kien Giang dialect group, to which the An Giang Khmer dialect belongs, has been described as exhibiting prominent phonological reduction processes. Previous descriptions note the loss of certain vowel segments and the shortening of syllable structures, often leading to divergence between spoken forms and the standard written language (Thach, 1999). Such processes affect both lexical recognition and phonological transparency, particularly in educational contexts where Standard Khmer is emphasized.

Language contact has been repeatedly identified as a key factor shaping these phonological patterns. In multilingual environments, Khmer speakers frequently engage in bilingual or multilingual communication, which influences pronunciation habits over time. Studies on Thai–Khmer contact demonstrate that borrowed lexical items are often phonologically adapted to the receiving language, with vowel quality and diphthong structure being especially susceptible to change (Sonnang, 2015; Sikarit, 2016). Comparable patterns have also been observed in Vietnamese–Khmer contact contexts, where prolonged interaction contributes to phonological accommodation in everyday speech.

2.3. Methodological Approaches in Khmer Dialect Studies

Research on Khmer dialects has traditionally relied on qualitative phonological methods, including elicitation from native speakers, phonemic transcription, and systematic comparison of structurally equivalent lexical items across dialects. This approach has proven effective in identifying stable phonological patterns and in establishing dialectal classifications, particularly in contexts where large speech corpora are not available (Premsrirat, 1995; Thach, 1999).

More broadly, linguistic research in recent years has increasingly incorporated quantitative and computational approaches to analyze structural variation in natural language data. Studies such as Van Ommen et al. (2025) illustrate how statistical and machine-learning

techniques can be employed to classify linguistic units and uncover systematic distinctions in large datasets. These approaches are particularly suitable for large-scale corpora and for research questions involving automatic classification or probabilistic modeling.

However, for studies focusing on fine-grained segmental variation - especially vowel alternation and vowel reduction in spoken dialects - comparative phonological analysis remains a widely accepted and appropriate methodology. By examining recurrent pronunciation patterns across multiple speakers and contexts, researchers can identify stable dialectal features without requiring extensive instrumental or computational resources. Numerous studies on Southeast Asian languages continue to adopt this approach when the primary objective is detailed phonological description rather than large-scale prediction or classification.

Accordingly, the present study aligns with established qualitative traditions in phonological and dialect research, in which data reliability is ensured through recurrence, cross-speaker comparison, and community validation rather than large-scale recorded corpora.

2.4. Research Gap and Focus of the Present Study

Despite growing interest in Khmer dialectology, detailed investigations of vowel systems in specific local varieties remain relatively limited. Existing studies often prioritize consonantal features or broad dialectal classification, while vowel variation is treated as a secondary or peripheral phenomenon.

In particular, the Khmer dialect spoken in An Giang province has not yet been examined through a systematic and focused comparison of its vowel system with that of Standard Khmer. The lack of detailed documentation makes it difficult to distinguish between stable dialectal features and surface-level pronunciation variation. This gap underscores the need for research that treats vowel alternation and vowel reduction as central phonological phenomena shaped by both internal linguistic processes and language contact.

Addressing this gap, the present study conducts a comparative analysis of vowel realization in the An Giang Khmer dialect and Standard Khmer. By identifying recurrent patterns of vowel variation in comparable lexical items, the study contributes empirical evidence to Khmer dialectology and provides a clearer phonological basis for understanding dialectal diversity within the Khmer language.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study involved 104 Khmer ethnic primary school students from five classes across Grades 3 to 5 in An Giang province. As Khmer language instruction officially begins in Grade 3, students at these levels were considered appropriate participants for observing the use of local phonological features in instructional and communicative contexts. The data collection was conducted during regular Khmer language lessons over a four-month period, from November 2024 to February 2025.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed, as all the participants were students directly taught by the researcher. This sampling approach enabled sustained access to participants, repeated observation over time, and systematic comparison of pronunciation patterns across multiple speakers in a natural classroom environment. While convenience sampling limits statistical generalizability, it is widely used and accepted in classroom-based linguistic and dialectological research, particularly in studies focusing on natural speech and

recurrent phonological patterns rather than population-level inference.

Primary school students constitute a suitable group for phonological observation because children's pronunciation is strongly shaped by family and community language environments. Previous research indicates that young learners demonstrate a high capacity for phonetic imitation and tend to acquire pronunciation patterns closely resembling those of adult speakers in their immediate surroundings, especially in vowel production (Nielsen, 2014; Christiner & Reiterer, 2018; Marklund et al., 2021a; Marklund et al., 2021b). Consequently, children's speech can serve as a reliable reflection of stable dialectal features transmitted across generations. In addition to student participants, the study also incorporated qualitative comparison with 17 adult Khmer speakers, including Khmer language teachers and community members in An Giang. Throughout the data collection period, the pronunciation patterns observed in students' speech were systematically compared with those used by the adult speakers in everyday communication. The consistency of vowel variation patterns across students and the 17 adult Khmer speakers indicates that the identified features are not age-specific or developmental phenomena, but rather represent stable phonological characteristics of the An Giang Khmer dialect.

3.2. Data Collection Through Classroom Interaction and Community Observation

This study adopts a naturalistic observational approach, focusing on spoken language produced during routine classroom interaction. No audio or video recording devices were used, and no instrumental phonetic tools were employed to measure acoustic properties or articulatory movement. Instead, phonological data were collected through repeated auditory observation and systematic note-taking during classroom activities over an extended instructional period.

During Khmer language lessons, the students participated in structured oral activities such as object naming, responding to visual prompts, solving riddles, vocabulary recall, and short question – answer exchanges. These activities elicited spontaneous oral production of target lexical items in a natural communicative context. Across the data collection period, the same lexical items recurred multiple times across different lessons, classes, and speakers, allowing for repeated exposure to comparable phonological environments.

Rather than relying on a single elicitation instance, the study emphasizes recurrence and consistency. Lexical items and vowel realizations were observed across numerous interactional turns and across a wide range of students. A pronunciation feature was only selected for analysis when it appeared repeatedly across different speakers and sessions, thereby reducing the likelihood of incidental or idiosyncratic variation.

In addition to classroom-based observation, adult speaker comparison was incorporated to confirm the stability of the identified vowel variants. As a long-term resident of the local Khmer-speaking community, the researcher has continuous exposure to everyday Khmer communication among adult speakers in family and community settings. Pronunciation patterns observed in students' speech were systematically compared with those commonly used by adult speakers in spontaneous daily interaction. The convergence of vowel realizations across age groups was taken as qualitative evidence that the identified variants represent established characteristics of the An Giang Khmer dialect rather than age-specific or instructional artifacts.

3.3. Transcription and Analytical Framework

Although no audio recordings were made, students' speech was documented through systematic auditory transcription conducted during and immediately after classroom

interaction. Observed pronunciations were recorded using phonemic transcription and, where necessary, phonetic symbols based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The repeated occurrence of the same lexical items across speakers and sessions allowed the researcher to verify and refine transcription accuracy over time.

The analytical framework of the study is comparative phonological analysis. Lexical items produced in the An Giang Khmer dialect were compared with their corresponding forms in Standard Khmer as represented in Khmer language teaching materials and established reference descriptions. The analysis focuses primarily on vowel variation, including vowel quality shifts, diphthong simplification, vowel reduction, and vowel elision.

A vowel variant was considered systematic and included in the analysis only when it met all of the following criteria:

- It occurred across multiple student speakers;
- It was observed repeatedly across different classroom sessions and activities;
- It corresponded with pronunciation patterns attested in adult community speech.

Although vowel variation constitutes the primary focus of the study, analysis revealed that in some lexical items phonological change involves multiple syllabic components. In such cases, variation was categorized as combined phonological variation, involving interactions between vowel change and other segmental elements such as initial or final consonants. These cases were analyzed separately to avoid oversimplifying complex phonological processes.

It should be noted that the study does not employ instrumental phonetic analysis or audio-visual recording. This methodological choice is intentional and aligned with the research objective, which emphasizes identifying stable, recurrent vowel variation patterns in natural speech rather than conducting fine-grained acoustic measurement. Reliability is ensured through repeated classroom observation, cross-speaker comparison, and validation via adult community speech, which together provide a robust qualitative foundation within the scope of this study.

4. Results

4.1. A Comparative Analysis of Dependent Vowel Components in the An Giang Khmer Dialect and Standard Khmer

This section presents the results of a comparative phonological analysis of dependent vowels in the An Giang Khmer dialect and Standard Khmer. Based on repeated classroom observation and cross-speaker comparison, two major patterns of vowel variation were identified: (i) the emergence of new vowel variants and (ii) vowel elision. These patterns occur systematically across multiple lexical items and speakers, indicating stable dialectal features rather than incidental pronunciation differences.

4.1.1. Emergence of New Vowel Variants

a. The Vowel ɛ̌ɔ̌ (/ie:/) Shifts to the Vowel /i:/.

One of the most frequently observed vowel shifts involves the dependent vowel ɛ̌ɔ̌ (/ie:/), which is consistently realized as the monophthong /i:/ in the An Giang Khmer dialect. During classroom interaction, students were asked to name objects depicted in images. For example, when shown an image corresponding to the word ស៊ីង (/sie:ŋ/) in Standard Khmer, students consistently produced the form /si:ŋ/.

Further examination of lexical items containing the vowel ɛ̌ɔ̌ (/ie:/) confirms that this

shift occurs across both O-register and Ô-register syllables, suggesting that the phenomenon is not restricted to a specific phonological environment. The diphthong /ie:/ thus undergoes systematic monophthongization in the An Giang dialect. Table 3 presents representative lexical items illustrating this pattern.

Table 1

The Lexical System in Which the Vowel ឺ [ie:] Varies Into /i:/

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer Dialect	
ឆបលៀង	cɔblie:ŋ	cɔbli:ŋ	Celebration / Feast / Banquet
សំនៀង	səmnie:ŋ	səmni:ŋ	Melody / Tune
លំអៀង	ləm?ie:ŋ	ləm?i:ŋ	Decoration / To decorate nicely
ទៀងត្រង់	tie:ŋtrɔŋ	ti:ŋtrɔŋ	Straight / Upright / Honest
កំផ្លៀង	kɔmphi:ŋ	kphli:ŋ	Slap
ចំរៀង	cəmrie:ŋ	səmri:ŋ	Song / Singing
ជំនៀងផ្ទះ	cəmnie:ŋphtiəh	cəmnie:ŋtiəh	Household tradition / Customary family practice
ជៀស	cie:h	ci:h	To avoid / To evade
ស្លៀក	slie:k	sli:k	To wear / To dress
លៀស	lie:h	li:h	Kind of small freshwater clam
ចំហៀង	cəmhi:ŋ	cəmhi:ŋ	Side / Edge / Lateral part
រងៀស	rɔ:?ie:h	a?i:h	Shy / Embarrassed / Bashful
ជនភៀសខ្លួន	cɔ:nphi:ɛhkhluə:n	cɔ:nphi:ɛhkhluə:n	Refugee / Displaced person

b. The Vowel ឺ (ae/) Shifts to /e/

The vowel ឺ (/ae/) undergoes variation in syllables with the C-V-C structure. The lexical forms exhibiting this variation share the following characteristics:

C: An O-register initial consonant

V: The vowel ឺ (/ae/)

C: The final consonant must be ក (/k/)

In such cases, the diphthong ឺ (/ae/) transforms into the monophthong /e/. This phenomenon represents a phonological similarity between the An Giang Khmer dialect and the Rach Gia - Kien Giang Khmer dialect.

Table 2

A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /ae/ Undergoes Variation Into /e/ in the An Giang Khmer Dialect

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
បែក	Baek	Bek	To break / To split
ហែក	Haek	Hek	To tear / To rip open
ស្រែក	Sraek	Srek	To scream / To shout
ស្បែក	Sbaek	Sbek	Skin / Leather
ចែក	Caek	Cek	To share / To divide
ដែក	Daek	Dek	Metal / Iron
ផ្លែក	Phlaek	Phlek	Strange / Unfamiliar / Different
ត្រែក	Chaek	Chek	To check / To examine

ប្រកែក	prɔːkaek	prɔːkek	To oppose / To object
ចំណែក	cɔmnaek	cɔmnek	Share / Portion / Part

c. The Vowel ɔɯ (/əu/) Shifts to the Vowel /əʊ/

The vowel ɔɯ is pronounced as /əu/ in Standard Khmer, particularly when combined with Ô-register consonants. In the An Giang Khmer dialect, however, this vowel is systematically realized with a more rounded and closed articulation, closely resembling the diphthong /əʊ/.

This articulatory adjustment results in a pronunciation similar to the English diphthong /əʊ/, as in show /ʃəʊ/. The shift reflects a consistent modification in vowel quality rather than sporadic individual variation. Lexical items illustrating this pattern are presented in Table 5.

Table 3

A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /əu/ Undergoes Variation Into /əʊ/

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
ទៅ	təu	təʊ	To go
ឆ្មាំ	phəu	phəʊ	Chef / Cook
ជ្រៅ	rəu	rəʊ	Depth / Deep area
ពៅ	pəu	pəʊ	A term of endearment (e.g., darling); also a nickname
ឃោរឃៅ	khoːkhəu	khoːkhəʊ	Fierce / Brutal / Cruel
ឆ្មៅ	phləu	phləʊ	Foolish / Ignorant
នៅ	nəu	nəʊ	To stay / To live / To be located

d. The Vowel ɔɯ (/ao/) Shifts to /o/

The diphthong ɔɯ (/ao/) undergoes monophthongization to /o/ in the An Giang Khmer dialect. This change occurs primarily in syllables with a C–V–C structure, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Syllable Structures in Which the Diphthong /ao/ Changes to the Monophthong /o/



The vowel ɔɯ (/ao/) shifts to the monophthong /o/. It can be observed that the diphthong undergoes simplification into a monophthong in the pronunciation of An Giang Khmer speakers. This phonological phenomenon is consistent with what is found in the Kiên Giang dialect, as discussed in the Research Overview section.

Table 4

A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /ao/ Undergoes Variation Into /o/

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
ថោក	Thaok	Thok	Cheap / Low in value
បោក	Baok	Bok	To deceive / To trick (also: to beat laundry)
ក្លោក	Kjaok	Kjok	Crane (the bird)
តោកយ៉ាក	taokja:k	tokja:k	To cry out loudly / To yell
សោកស្តាយ	soaksda:j	soksdaj	To regret / Regretful
ខោក	Khaok	Khok	Empty / Hollow
ប្រមោក	prɔ:maok	Pmok	Arrogant / Proud in a boastful way
កោកៗ	kaokkaok	Kokkok	Dry / Parched (e.g., dry land, lips)

4.1.2. Vowel Elision (Loss of Vowels)

a. Loss of the Vowel ɔ/vm/

The vowel ɔ (/vm/) undergoes elision when combined with the consonant ʔ (/k/) in polysyllabic words. In such cases, the syllable ʔkɔm/ loses its vowel component /vm/, leaving only the consonant /k/, which then merges with the initial consonant of the following syllable to form a consonant cluster.

This phenomenon stems from the habitual tendency among An Giang Khmer speakers to simplify pronunciation by reducing syllables. As a result, polysyllabic words are transformed into monosyllabic forms, reflecting a broader pattern of phonological reduction in the dialect.

Table 5

A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /vm/ is Elided

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
កំប្លែង	kɔmphaeŋ	kphaeŋ	Comedy / Joke / Funny story
កំប្លោក	kɔmphaok	Kphaok	Water Hyacinth
កំប្រុក	kɔmprɔk	Kprɔk	Squirrel
កំពុង	kɔmpuŋ	Kpuŋ	In the process of / Currently (used before verbs)
កំពូល	kɔmpu:l	kpu:l	Top / Peak / Summit / Supreme
កំពឹស	kɔmpuɪh	kpuɪh	Small shrimp
កំប៉ុង	kɔmpɔŋ	Kpɔŋ	Can / Tin (as in food can)

b. Loss of the Vowel ɔ/q/

In a classroom activity, the teacher displayed an image and asked students to name the flower shown on the screen. One student correctly identified the rose and responded with /kla:b/. Based on this response, it is evident that the vowel /q/ was not articulated; the initial consonant /k/ was pronounced directly with /l/, forming a consonant cluster.

This vowel elision resulted in the transformation of a disyllabic word into a monosyllabic one. In words with a C-V-C structure, the loss of the vowel leads to a structural shift from C-V-C to C-C, in which the initial and final consonants form a complex cluster.

Table 6*A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /əm/ is Elided*

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer Dialect	
កុសល	kəʂəl	ksəl	Merit / Good deed
កុហក	kəhək	khək	Lie / Falsehood
កុលាប	kəla:b	kla:b	Rose
តុលាការ	təla:ka:	tla:ka:	Court (of law)
ធុរេន	thu:re:n	thre:n	Durian
កូដ	Kud	kəd	Monk's hut / Monastery cell
ផុត	Phut	phət	To pass / To escape / To expire
ដុត	Dut	dət	To burn
ហុត	Hut	hət	To dry (in the sun) / To scorch

c. Loss of the Vowel ឺ (/ə:/)

The dependent vowel ឺ (/ə:/) is systematically elided in syllables whose initial consonants belong to the O-register, occurring across various syllable structures, including CV, CVC, and stacked syllables.

In these cases, the vowel /ə:/ is not phonetically realized, resulting in syllables that are produced without a vocalic nucleus. Speakers articulate the consonant or consonant cluster directly, and the surface vowel quality may approximate /ɐ:/ due to register effects and consonantal coarticulation.

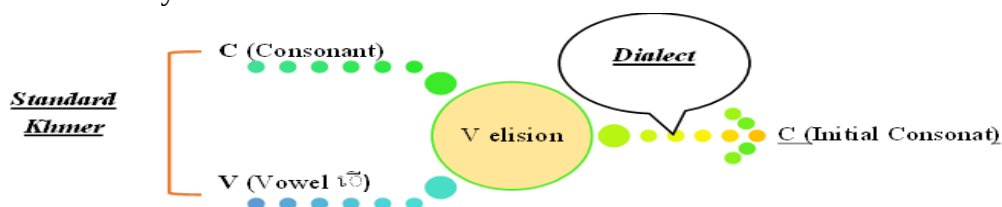
It should be emphasized that /ɐ:/ does not function as a replacement vowel for /ə:/ . Rather, it represents a surface phonetic outcome that emerges following vowel elision, rather than a process of vowel change or vowel substitution.

Syllable structure analysis further shows that when /ə:/ is elided in the second syllable of polysyllabic words, stacked syllable structures may be substantially reduced (e.g., from CVCCVC to CVCCC), resulting in increased complexity of consonant clusters.

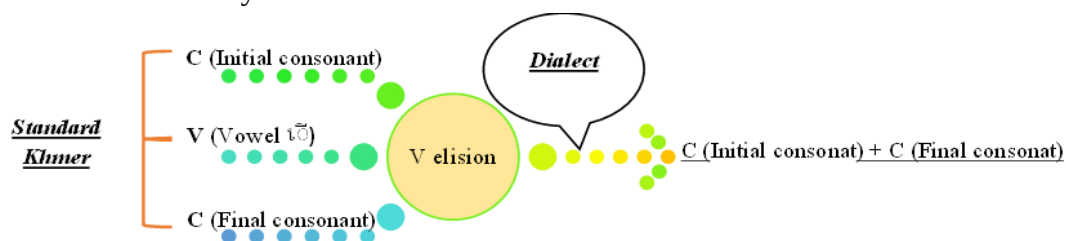
Figure 2

This Section Analyzes the Outcomes of the Elision of the Vowel /ə:/ (Spelled ឺ) in Various Syllable Structures in the An Giang Khmer Dialect

With a C-V syllable structure:



With a C-V-C syllable structure:



The diagram shows that the structure of the overlapping syllable transforms from CVCCVC to CVCCC due to the elision of the vowel ើ in the second syllable.

Table 7

A Set of Lexical Items in Which the Vowel /aə:/ is Elided

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer Dialect	
ដើរ	daə:	də:	To walk
ហើរ	haə:	hə:	To fly
ផ្ញើ	phnaə:	phnə:	To send
ស្នើ	snaə:	snə:	To propose / To suggest
ស្មើ	smaə:	smə:	Equal / Equivalent / Balanced
បើក	baə:k	bə:k	To open / To turn on / To start (e.g., engine, light)
បម្រើ	bəmraə:	pənrə:	To serve (someone)
ដំណើរ	dəmnə:	təmnə:	Journey/trip
កើន	kaə:n	kə:n	To increase / To rise
ដើង	phaə:ŋ	phə:ŋ	Empty (especially container/cup)
ផ្អើម	phaə:m	phə:m	To be pregnant
ឡើង	laə:ŋ	lə:ŋ	To go up / To rise / To ascend
ដើម	daə:m	də:m	Origin / Beginning / Tree trunk / Root
សើម	saə:m	sə:m	Wet / Moist (usually slightly wet)
សើច	saə:c	sə:c	To laugh
ហើម	haə:m	hə:m	Swollen / Inflamed
ស្តើង	sdaə:ŋ	sdə:ŋ	Thin / Slim (usually about body or object)
ថ្លើម	thlaə:m	thlə:m	Liver (organ)
ដង្ហើម	dəŋhaə:m	t'hə:m	Breath / Breathing
សន្លើម	səŋsaə:m	sə:m	Dew / moisture
ដណ្តើម	dəndaə:m	t'nə:m	To seize / To snatch / To take away by force

4.2. A Comparative Analysis of Independent Vowel Components in the An Giang Khmer Dialect and Standard Khmer

The independent vowel is used for words borrowed from Pali-Sanskrit. In the Khmer language curriculum taught in schools, independent vowels occupy only a small portion of the educational content due to the complexity of their written forms and pronunciation.

Independent vowels function as standalone syllables. This type of vowel typically does not combine with other components in a syllable.

Variations of these independent vowels do not exhibit clear phonetic markers or specific syllable structures for easy identification. As a result, variations of independent vowels are not commonly found in everyday communication. However, this study has identified several types of variations and common words in which they appear in daily spoken usage.

4.2.1. Vowel ឺ (?e)

- Shifts to the diphthong /ai/

Table 8

Some Lexical Items in Which the Vowel ឺ (/ɛ/) varies into /ai/

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
ឥសី	ʔesei	aisei	Hermit
ឥសូរ	ʔesɔː	aisɔː	Lord Īśvara

- Shifts to the monophthong /aː/

Table 9

Some Lexical Items in Which the Vowel ឺ (/ɛ/) Varies Into /aː/

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
ឥឡូវ	ʔelɔːv	aːlɔːv	Now / At the moment / Currently
ឥវាន	ʔevan	aːvan	Belongings

4.2.2. The vowels ឺ /aô/ and ឺ /ri:/ undergo a phonological shift to /aː/

Table 10

Some Lexical Items in Which the Vowel ឺ /aô/ and ឺ /ri:/ Varies Into /aː/.

Word	Phonetic Transcription		Meaning
	Standard Khmer	An Giang Khmer dialect	
ឱកាស	aôkaːh	aːkaːh	opportunity / Occasion
ឱវាទ	aôvaːt	aːvaːt	advice
ឫស្សី	riːhsei	aːsei	bamboo
ឮឬទេ	liːriːtɛː	liːaːtɛː	heard or not?

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has analyzed and systematized common patterns of vowel variation in the An Giang Khmer dialect through classroom-based observation and comparative phonological analysis. The findings indicate that vowel variation in this dialect is not random but follows recurring and structured patterns, particularly in the simplification of diphthongs and the elision of vowels in polysyllabic words. These patterns reflect both internal phonological tendencies and long-term language contact.

One of the most prominent characteristics observed is the simplification of diphthongs into monophthongs, such as the shifts from /ieː/ to /iː/, /ae/ to /e/, and /ao/ to /o/. These changes suggest a strong tendency toward articulatory economy in the An Giang Khmer dialect. While such simplification facilitates ease of pronunciation in everyday communication, it also creates a noticeable divergence from Standard Khmer, which may lead to difficulties in lexical recognition, particularly in formal educational contexts where written forms are emphasized.

Another significant phenomenon is vowel elision, especially in words containing vowels such as /ɒm/, /ɔ/, and /aə/. The loss of these vowels often results in syllable reduction and the formation of consonant clusters, transforming polysyllabic words into shorter and more compact forms. The systematic recurrence of this process across lexical items and speakers indicates that vowel elision constitutes an established phonological feature of the An Giang Khmer dialect rather than an incidental or individual pronunciation habit.

Language contact also plays a crucial role in shaping these phonological characteristics.

Living in a multilingual environment, Khmer speakers in An Giang are in sustained contact with Vietnamese and other local languages. Lexical borrowing is common, and borrowed words are consistently adapted to the local phonological system. Notably, vowel variation patterns observed in native Khmer vocabulary are also applied to borrowed items, demonstrating the internal coherence and productivity of the dialect's phonological rules.

It should be noted that although the primary data of this study were collected from primary school students, the analysis does not rely exclusively on child speech to draw conclusions about dialectal stability. The observed vowel variations were consistently attested in the speech of Khmer teachers and adult speakers within the local community, as confirmed through qualitative comparison and the researcher's long-term residence and daily communication in An Giang. This cross-generational convergence provides qualitative evidence that the phonological patterns identified in the study reflect established and stable features of the An Giang Khmer dialect, rather than temporary or age-related pronunciation traits. Data reliability was further ensured through repeated observation across multiple classes, sessions, and speakers, with only consistently recurring vowel variants included in the analysis.

In conclusion, the An Giang Khmer dialect exhibits a dynamic and adaptive vowel system shaped by internal phonological processes and prolonged language contact. Documenting such dialectal variation is essential not only for linguistic research but also for the preservation and development of Khmer language education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2020). By clarifying systematic differences between local speech and Standard Khmer, this study contributes to more effective language teaching and provides a foundation for future phonological research on Khmer dialects in Vietnam and beyond.

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