

## **Initial consonant loss and its consequences Evidence from Cape York Peninsula (Australia)**

J-C Verstraete (University of Leuven)

This paper examines the historical loss of root-initial consonants and syllables, and its consequences for stress systems and the structure of roots. Systematic initial loss is relatively rare from a worldwide perspective (Blevins 2007), but it is found in several areas in Australia (Hale 1976a, Alpher 1976, Blevins 2001), including Cape York Peninsula in the northeast. This paper uses data from six Paman (Pama-Nyungan) languages of this region to show that initial loss is not just a typological curiosity, but has wide-ranging consequences beyond the segmental level.

The languages studied here belong to the Middle Paman and the Lamalamic subgroups of Paman (Verstraete 2012, 2018). Middle Paman languages show a combination of retention, lenition and loss of initial consonants, as shown in (1) for Umpithamu, while Lamalamic languages show systematic loss of initial consonants, as shown in (2a) for Umbuygamu, and/or initial syllables, as shown in (2b) for Lamalama (Proto-Paman reconstructions: 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*

The process of initial loss found in these languages is interesting not just as a typological rarity, but also because it has consequences at various levels. First, loss of initial consonants can lead to a reorganization of the system of word stress. I use the case of Umpithamu (Middle Paman) to show that partial loss of initial consonants in this language initiates a cascade of changes resulting in stress shift, from the left-aligned moraic trochees found in many Pama-Nyungan languages, to the right-aligned system found in Umpithamu. This is interesting from a diachronic perspective, because stress shift has often been argued to cause initial loss (e.g. Hale 1964), whereas here it can be shown to be a consequence. Secondly, initial loss can also lead to generalized root expansion, in order to restore a bisyllabic minimum for roots. In Middle Paman and Lamalamic, the net result of systematic initial loss would be a large percentage of monosyllabic roots in the lexicon (or their metrical equivalents in bisyllabic roots with extrametrical initial vowels). I use historical-comparative-evidence to show that in both subgroups, various historical processes of root expansion can be identified that keep the percentage of monosyllables low, ranging from metrically driven leftward and rightward expansion, to large-scale lexicalization of compound structures. In this sense, initial loss can be shown to be the starting point for a range of processes that lead to a fairly radical change in the typological profile of the languages where it occurs.

- Alpher, B. 1976. Some linguistic innovations in Cape York and their sociocultural correlates. In Sutton, ed. *Languages of Cape York*. Canberra: AIAS. 84-101.
- Blevins, J. 2001. Where have all the onsets gone? Initial consonant loss in Australian Aboriginal languages. In Simpson et al, eds. *Forty years on: Ken Hale and Australian languages*. Canberra: PL. 481-492.
- Blevins, J. 2007. Endangered sound patterns: Three perspectives on theory and description. *Language Documentation and Conservation* 1: 1-16.
- Hale, K. 1964. Classification of Northern Paman languages, Cape York Peninsula. A research report. *Oceanic Linguistics* 3: 248-265.
- Hale, K. 1976a. Phonological developments in particular Northern Paman languages. In Sutton, ed. *Languages of Cape York*. Canberra: AIAS. 7-40.
- Hale, K. 1976b. Wik reflections of Middle Paman phonology. In Sutton, ed. *Languages of Cape York*. Canberra: AIAS. 50-60.
- Verstraete, JC. 2012. Contact-induced restructuring of pronominal morphosyntax in Umpithamu (Cape York Peninsula, Australia). *Diachronica* 29: 326-358.
- Verstraete, JC. 2018. The genetic status of Lamalamic: Phonological and morphological evidence. *Oceanic Linguistics* 57: 1-30.