A Gestural Interpretation of Variation and Variability in Minor Syllables

Becky Butler, Cornell University
bbt24@cornell.edu

Jan 3 – 6, 2013

Sesquisyllables

Sesquisyllabic words comprise two types of syllables:
- a heavy major syllable, which is right-aligned and is the locus of phonological contrast
- a light, reduced minor syllable

Variation across languages in the types of segments appearing in minor syllables
- [θ] 'beaz' Bunong
- [ɾ] 'joi' Jahai (Burenhult 2001)
- [p] 'pah' to slap each other' Pacoh (Watson 1964)
- [m] 'lam' one' Sieng (Haupers 1969)

Unaccounted-for variability within individual languages regarding the phonetic realization of minor syllables
- [mteh] ~ [mteh] 'pepper' Khmer
- [pʃʃap] ~ [pʃʃap] 'attach' Khmer

Conclusions

1. The minor syllable is not a coherent phonological entity.
2. Variation in minor syllables across languages is due to the fact that some minor syllable nuclei have associated gestures, while others do not.
3. Variability in the presence of the minor syllable “vowel” in languages like Khmer is due to variability in gestural alignment, but the minor syllable vowel of Bunong is always realized because it has an associated gesture.