

The loss of word-initial consonants in Kera'a – A challenge for phonological theory
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Kera'a (or Idu Mishmi), spoken in the districts Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, shows an intriguing loss of most initial consonants in multi-syllabic words. This loss affects the progressive dialect Midu, while the consonants in question – non-aspirated stops, *h*-, nasals, glides – are retained in the more conservative dialect Mithu. For example, *aphe* 'bat' corresponds to *kaphe*, *ili* 'pig' to *bili*, *iku* 'dog' to *miku*, and *am^we* 'wild boar' to *yam^we*. While initial consonant loss has been noticed elsewhere in and outside of Trans-Himalayan (e.g., in Kiranti languages (Guillaume Jacques, personal communication), in at least 50 Australian languages (Hale 1964, Blevins 2001), in Sogeram languages of New Guinea (Don Daniels, personal communication)), it remains a challenge for the basic and common assumption in phonological theory that CV is the optimal syllable type given its wide-spread distribution in languages around the world, early acquisition in childhood, and the impression that it strikes an optimal balance between ease of articulation and signal clarity. Furthermore, consonants in word-initial position are generally considered to be 'prominent' cross-linguistically (Beckman 1998, Barnes 2002); for example, word-initial consonants undergo strengthening in a number of languages (Keating et al 2003).

A reduction of the consonant onset in word-initial position is thus unexpected for these and other theoretical and empirical reasons, and also because there is no obvious pathway of phonological change that would lead to it. For Australian languages, it has been argued that a stress shift from the first to the second syllable invited the consonant loss, but this account does not hold up for some of the Australian languages showing the change, including Ogunyjan and Oykangand–Olgol (e.g. Blevins 2001). For Kera'a, Reinöhl (2022) claims that a stress shift also does not play a role, but this claim still awaits a detailed empirical investigation. Since the change is ongoing rather than historical in Kera'a, we are able to draw on synchronic, acoustic data, comparing Midu and Mithu variants of the same words. Having explored the role of stress, we will consider alternative hypotheses for how to motivate this rare and theoretically important change. One of the alternative hypotheses that we will focus on is inter-vocalic lenition in connected speech, resulting from the prior loss of consonantal codas in Kera'a. This talk thus builds on Reinöhl (2022) studying initial consonant loss in Kera'a in greater phonological and phonetic detail, and examines the implications of the Kera'a data for one of the most wide-spread assumptions in phonological and specifically phonotactic theory.

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