THE /KA-/ AND /KRA-/ PREFIXES IN THAI

Leela Bilmes
University of California, Berkeley

1.0. INTRODUCTION

It has been noted (Varasarain 1984; Siri-aksornsat 1996) that the Thai language has many words beginning with the prefixes /ka-/ and /kra-. The same prefixes /ka- kra-/ exist in Khmer. Jenner (1982) shows that Khmer prefixes phonologically realized as /ka-/ or /kra-/ may in fact be one of three different prefixes: a velar prefix which indicates "generalized intensification"; a reduplicated initial consonant, also indicating intensification; and a velar prefix which designates nouns of five specific types (pp. xxxviii-xli). We find that the velar prefixes behave the same way in Thai as they do in Khmer, and Varasarain argues that not only are the prefixes borrowed, but that the whole process of derivation is borrowed from Khmer into Thai.

In Les Éléments khmers dans la formation de la langue siamoise, Varasarain focuses mainly on Khmer and Thai derivatives of the first two types of prefix mentioned above, the velar prefix that serves to intensify its root and the reduplicated prefix that has the same function. Although both of these prefixes will receive treatment here, I will focus mainly on the third type of velar prefix, the one that designates specific nouns.

The nouns in question cover rather specific semantic fields in the Khmer language, such as human beings, other animate beings, and substances. A few of these fields appear to be related to each other, e.g., by extension based on likeness of form and/or function. For instance, human beings and other animate beings have in common the fact that they are both alive.

In Thai as well as in Khmer there are many semantic senses of the /ka-kra-/ prefixes. In fact, it looks as though Thai has innovated other senses of /ka- kra-/ that do not exist in Khmer, the language from which the process of derivation was borrowed in the first place. Can the semantics of the Thai (and Khmer) prefixes be explained in a systematic way? The idea of a radial category of /ka- kra-/ derivatives offers us a mechanism for understanding how the semantic fields indicated by the /ka- kra-/ prefixes are related.

In this paper I will show that the third type of /ka- kra-/ prefix outlines a radial category which existed in Khmer and was borrowed into Thai. It is well known that mainland Southeast Asia is an especially complex linguistic area due
to the number of languages spoken there and the large degree of language
contact. The borrowing of a radial category from Khmer into Thai is a unique
example of language contact and the only one of its kind of which I am aware.

Before describing the radial categories of /ka- kra-/ prefixes in Thai, I will
give some reasons why I believe the direction of borrowing to be from Khmer
to Thai and not otherwise. Pursuant to this, I will explain the concept of radial
categories, briefly describe the Khmer language and its prefixational system,
and also briefly describe the Thai language.

2.0. DIRECTION OF BORROWING

In order to more fully understand the contact situation between Thai and
Khmer, it is necessary to give a short historical account of the two groups,
going back to the 6th century. The Tai people, ancestors of the modern Thai,
inhabited what is now Thailand in small numbers prior to the 11th century.
Their original home was in the south of China, and they had their capital in
Nanchao (modern Yunnan). In the 13th century, Kublai Khan's invasion of
their home forced large numbers of Tai southward. At that time, the Khmer
people, who are indigenous to the Southeast Asian mainland, were already in
the region. Evidence of Khmer presence from as early as the 11th century has
been found in archaeological ruins in modern-day Thailand, and it is estimated
that the Khmers were there from around the 6th century until the 13th century,
through the end of the Angkorian period. During this early period, Khmer rule
extended over much of present-day Thailand, and the culture flourished. In the
13th century, the Tai took the city of Sukhothai, and this conquest more or less
began the end of Khmer dominion in Thailand. Nevertheless, Thai and Khmer
documents attest to the fact that contact continued between the two peoples even
after the conquest of Sukhothai. The cultural influence of the Khmer in art and
language is abundant both before and after the period of Khmer dominion.
Architecture, sculpture, and old inscriptions tell us how strong the cultural and
linguistic influences were. In this paper, we will be concerned with an aspect
of the latter: the linguistic influence of Khmer on Thai.

It is accepted here that the borrowing of the process of prefixation went
from Khmer to Thai and not the other way around. Evidence of the Khmer
presence in what is now Thailand dates back to the 6th century (although they
may have been there as far back as the 2nd century), and includes linguistic
evidence in the form of inscriptions. This is approximately five centuries before
any evidence of Thai presence in the area. Although the Thai ultimately
defeated the Khmer and drove them out, the Khmer culture was definitely the
prestige culture. The Thai thus borrowed much from the Khmer in the areas of
art, the writing system, and language in general. In fact, the Khmer language
was so prestigious that up until the early 20th century, the elite of Thailand were learning Khmer as well as Thai (Varasarain 1984:26). So while Khmer has borrowed from Thai, especially in more recent historical periods, it is clear that in earlier times Thai borrowed much more heavily from Khmer than *vice versa*.

Another indication that this borrowing is from Khmer to Thai is revealed when considering other languages related to them, i.e. other Tai and Mon-Khmer languages. Other languages of the Mon-Khmer family exhibit the traits we are considering here. On the other hand, for the most part none of the languages of the Tai-Kadai family apart from Siamese Thai have words with the segments */ka- kra-/* following this pattern.

Finally, it would seem that educated native speakers of Thai recognize Khmer borrowings in their language. Native speakers have commented to me along the lines of “Anything with [ka-] or [-am-] in it is a Khmer word,” or “camiuuk ['nose'] is a Khmer word.” Although not all words with */ka- kra-/* prefixes are entirely borrowed from Khmer (since the whole process of derivation is borrowed), it is both interesting and significant that even (nonlinguist) native speakers recognize the “Khmerness” of these words.

As one might suspect, there are many prefixed root words in Thai which are of Khmer origin. However, prefixed words which are Tai or borrowings from Chinese, Sanskrit, or Pali also exist in modern Thai. Siri-aksornsat (1996:2) shows that of all the modern Thai */ka- kra-/* words in her data, about one third are loan words. Of this third, nearly half are Khmer. The other half of the data are what Siri-aksornsat terms “new formation words”, or prefixed words formed in Thai. This serves as evidence that Thai has borrowed the prefixational (and, incidentally, infixational) process, as opposed to just borrowing Khmer words into the language. Varasarain confirms that “[s]i leur racine est thaie, il y a de fortes chances pour que ces dérivés aient été formés par les siamois au moyen de procédés de dérivation khmère” (1984:21). Likewise, a situation may arise where Khmer has borrowed a Tai word and derived another prefixed form from it in Khmer.

3.0. RADIAL CATEGORIES

It was claimed earlier that */ka- kra-/* words in Thai cover several semantic fields and that these fields together form a radial category. According to Lakoff 1987, a radial category has a central member and peripheral members. The central or prototypical member of a category is one that is considered to be a “best example” of that category. For instance, a four-door sedan may be judged as more representative of the category *car* than a mini-van or truck and may thus be considered that category’s prototypical member. Another example can be found in the research of Heider 1971. In one of Heider’s experiments, young
children were given color chips. The researcher would turn her back and ask
the child to show her a color. The children overwhelmingly chose focal colors,
those judged as "best examples" of colors, according to the research of Berlin

The peripheral or noncentral members of a category are "motivated" by the
central member (or another category member) through some sort of
resemblance, and the peripheral members are linked to the central member via
cognitive links. Thus we might think of a radial category as a network which
radiates outward, using cognitive links to chain the peripheral members to the
central one. The nature of these links may be based on certain general
principles, among them similar domains of experience and likeness of form or
function between the central (or another) category member and the more
peripheral one(s). In general, a speaker will focus on some aspect of a
concrete, basic-level object and make a cognitive extension based on that aspect.

An example of a radial category given in Lakoff 1987 is that of the Dyirbal
classification system, originally researched by R. M. W. Dixon and published
as Dixon 1982. Classifiers are words which identify certain nouns with a
particular category. The Dyirbal language has four classifiers: bayi, balan,
balam, and bala. Briefly, the classifiers represent the following categories:

- **bayi**: (human) males; animals
- **balan**: (human) females; water; fire; fighting
- **balam**: nonflesh food
- **bala**: everything else (Lakoff, 1987:93)

In Dyirbal, women, fire, and dangerous things are designated using the same
classifier—balan. This seemingly random grouping is not as ad hoc as it may
first appear. Women are in their own category, separate from men. The sun in
Dyirbal myth is the moon's wife, and it is therefore in the same category as
women. The sun is fiery, and so, of course, is fire. Fire is dangerous, and
therefore dangerous things are also grouped in this category. Thus we see that
in Dyirbal, categories are extended from their basic or central member (woman)
via a series of cognitive extensions which, while not initially obvious, make
sense once explained.

When metonymy is involved in cognitive extensions, some salient aspect of
an object comes to stand for the entire object or for some other part of it.
Metonymical extension is a process by which peripheral members are linked to
more central members. Another type of cognitive extension that links particular
objects to a category is image metaphor. A noun may be associated with a
category or an object in a category based on likeness of form or function. We
shall see that metonymy and image metaphors are the chief cognitive processes
that account for the radial category borrowed (and extended) by Thai speakers.