Features and types of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances in spoken Khmer

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This study examines lexical, paralinguistic, kinesic, and situational features of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances by Cambodians in the Khmer language in terms of Khmer-language terminology for classifying these utterances. While, as with spoken English, there is considerable overlap between the categories used to classify such utterances, this study seeks to identify key features which place utterances in particular categories.

Examples of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances were collected from over 100 Cambodian videocassettes produced in Cambodia since 1990. While most of the videos were low-budget theatrical movies, videocassettes of on-stage comedy performances were also included. Five Cambodian-American informants aided in validating the interpretations made of the content and intent of the utterances as well as in corroborating that particular features were relevant in how an utterance should be classified. Khmer-language categories for classifying utterances were obtained not only from English-Khmer dictionaries but also the Institut Bouddhique's Vacananukram Khmer (1968).

Informants frequently related utterances more to perceived intent than lexical, paralinguistic, or kinesic features in the performance of an utterance. Although there was agreement among informants on the classification of many of the utterances, some utterances were not consistently classified. This seems to reflect not only the difficulty in classifying utterances with subtle cues but also some disagreement among the informants in terms of the semantic boundaries of some of the categories. In the following discussion regularities across utterances are described and examples of utterances in a number of specific Khmer-language categories are presented.

Common Features
Ladd (1980) has suggested that some features tone of voice may be relatively universal across languages. Tone of voice, as a paralinguistic feature, and kinesics for the utterances examined in this study were generally found to resemble those
in English. Intonational and lexical features were, as Ladd (1980) would also predict, specific to Khmer.

Utterances aimed at hurting another individual often included one of more of the following features: sentence intonation associated with anger, facial expression associated with anger, confrontive eye contact, and lexical choices showing disrespect.

Based on the examples observed it seems that anger is evidenced in Khmer speech by a general rise in pitch and volume. Angry statements thus seem to be spoken in a higher tone of voice and a louder manner than non-angry statements. In some angry statements pitch rises across the sentence with the highest pitch occurring on the last syllable which may be given particularly strong stress. Depending on whether the utterance is a statement or question, the voice falls or rises on the last syllable.

Hurtful utterances were also usually spoken with eye contact with the person to whom the remark was addressed. Sometimes this occurred only as a glance while at other times a stare was maintained.

Speakers of hurtful utterances also tended to display facial expressions associated with anger. These included frowns and the tightening of the muscles around the eyes in the manner of the scowl.

Hurtful utterances also tended to display certain lexical features that indicated disrespect. The most common feature was the choice of familiar pronouns, ພະ (ʔaŋ) for you and ພາກາ (ʔaŋ) for I, and the use of the address particle ພາ (ʔaː). ພາ precedes a name, pronoun, or other word of address in speaking to another or may be used as a term of address by itself (Jacob 1968; Huffman 1970). Placing this particle before a word decreases the amount of respect that would otherwise be associated with the term of address. For example, ພາ ພາກາ (familiar address particle followed by friend) takes a term of address which is not particularly respectful and converts it to a term of contempt unless the interaction is between intimates. Although these pronouns and vocative particles also occurred in non-hurtful statements in which close friends talked, these words clearly marked disrespect and hurtful intent when interactants were not well-acquainted. Less commonly, hurtful
statements also displayed the choice of disrespectful terms when choices were possible, for example, the use of the most disrespectful term for eat (ឯា) rather than more respectful forms.

Utterances that were intended as non-hurtful teasing contrasted with the above features. Such utterances were often marked by smiles, non-derisive laughter, and softer and more relaxed vocal qualities. They were often accompanied by terms of address followed by the addition of a syllable produced by lengthening the last consonant of the term of address to become the first letter of an unstressed syllable with the remainder of the syllable consisting of (əh). Ehrman (1972) described such added unstressed syllables as deriving from particles. Huffman (1970) described this particular modification of the final particle as resulting from ឬ, a particle soliciting agreement or a yes answer from the hearer. Huffman (1970) noted that some speakers generalize this particle to use at the end of nearly any sentence. The application of this particle to terms of address seems to have produced another address particle.

Sarcastic utterances often displayed some of the same features as hurtful utterances in general, but such features were often less marked. Some types of sarcastic utterances relied primarily on subtle lexical features.

**Types of Utterances**

Informants tended to classify utterances more on the basis of intent and situation rather than other features. The most common term used for an insult was ឯឯ (ce:r) but informants often added that the best examples were those in which cursing occurred (something rarely seen in Cambodian movies). ឯឯ statements are well-described by the general features described above for hurtful statements.

ឯឯ (com?ːk) conforms rather closely with the English verb to mock. A hurtful intent accompanies these statements. In the samples from Cambodian videos ឯឯ was often accompanied by a haughty facial expression. Some statements were accompanied by unusual intonation or derisive
laughter. The use of ងឺ and ហ្វាន្ត were also common. A good example of this type of statement is the following:

Source: ប្មុនសូត្រូសារណា? (Angkor Wat Video)

កុំឈឺ ប្រកុង ខ្ញុំ នឹង ដឹង ឬ ល្អ ប្រកុង ឬ ប្រសិទ្ធភាព
Acts behavior like he just descend come from heaven.

This statement, which was spoken by a young woman who was fed up with her boyfriend, ends with an unusual intonation of the word for heaven with a slow fall on the last syllable that starts from an unusually high pitch.

ឈឺ (com?an) contrasts with ឈឺ in not having a hurtful intent. It aligns closely with the English verb to tease. Speakers using these statements often smiled or laughed during the utterance. Such statements were always spoken between people (characters) who knew each other well. Although ងឺ and ហ្វាន្ត occur in such statements, the use of the particle ូអូ as an address particle seems to further distinguish such statements from those intended to be hurtful. A terse example of this type of statement is:

Source: អាចឈឺអាចឈឺប្រកុងដឹងប្រសិទ្ធភាព (CMI Video)

អាចឈឺ ប្រកុង នឹង ដឹង ឬ ល្អ ប្រសិទ្ធភាព
then reason why fat

This statement from an ayae performance is spoken by a woman who has just endured teasing about how skinny she is. After her male ayae partner declares he is a doctor and can help her gain weight, she expresses surprise that he is a doctor then teases him with the above statement that means "Oh, that's why you are fat!" Informants explained that not being thin was seen as a sign of being healthy and that doctors are expected to be