LINGUISTICS IN CAMBODIA AND ON CAMBODIAN

This article is concerned with linguistic work done since the early 1940's either in Cambodia or on Cambodian. The former comprises almost exclusively work done by Cambodians on their own language. Outside work on Cambodian includes publications from various parts of the world, chiefly from Europe and Russia, and shows wider scope and greater diversity of approach. In the introductory sections, 1 and 2, these two groups of publications are treated separately. In the following six sections, however, works published both in Cambodia and elsewhere are discussed together under subject headings. Short bibliographic references are given sometimes in footnotes as the books or articles arise in the course of discussion. A full bibliography will be found at the end of the article.

1. THE WORK OF CAMBODIAN LINGUISTS

The most distinguished philological and literary work of Cambodia in this century has been associated in some way with the Buddhist Institute of Phnom Penh and the adjacent Pali School, which is now part of the Royal University of Cambodia. Publications have been under the auspices of either the Bibliothèque Royale or the Buddhist Institute, whose journal, Kambujasuriyā, has been the vehicle of publication for many new poetic compositions since its inception in 1927. The energies of highly educated Cambodians whose interests lie in the literary and linguistic heritage of Cambodia have been turned to the task of making Cambodian literature and religious works written in Pali available to the public, rather than of producing strictly linguistic work. Thus publications include many religious texts in Pali or translated from Pali, which have sometimes been annotated or accompanied by a commentary. Texts of literary works of Cambodian origin have been published direct from collections of manuscripts and have also in some cases been edited with notes. Such work was not thought to come within the scope of this article. The seventeenth century inscriptions of Cambodia have been published with linguistic notes; these will be discussed below in the section on Old Khmer. Purely linguistic work, not related to specific texts, has been produced by individual authors, unconnected with the Buddhist Institute, as well as by the Buddhist Institute. Several bilingual dictionaries have appeared in the period with which we are concerned, designed to meet the growing needs of foreigners learning Cambodian or of Cambodians learning foreign languages.

Manuals on the Khmer orthography or grammar, written entirely in
Cambodian, are chiefly intended for use in schools. A grammar of Sanskrit is an isolated example of a Cambodian work not concerned with the Cambodian language. Publications of this kind will be cited and discussed in the appropriate section below.

2. THE WORK OF LINGUISTS OF OTHER COUNTRIES

Outsiders were faced with certain problems which did not concern the Cambodian linguist. Thus, from the point of view of phonetics, imploded /b/ and /d/ were not always heard accurately and consequently provoked discussion; the complex vowel system was described by many people but without unanimity and the two vowel-series or voice-registers, which are not easily distinguishable in colloquial speech, have been ignored by some. The first linguists to describe Khmer, having settled the difficult question of what they heard, had the further problem of how to record the sounds in a transcription with the limited number of vowel symbols available to them in print. In Indo-China the diacritics used for Vietnamese were familiar to printing houses and began to be adopted for Cambodian. In the last two decades, as the IPA symbols became more widely used and available in print, the difficulties of Khmer linguists have been in wrestling with the variety of symbols which others choose to use. At least one misunderstanding of another’s interpretation has appeared in print owing to a misconception of the use of a diacritic! From the phonological angle, the complex vowel system is such as to defy efforts at neat simplification. The voice-registers may be viewed very differently by different linguists and may be treated as phonemic or merely phonetic since only three vowel-nuclei, the diphthongs /ia/, /ua/, and /ua/) occur on both registers and this alternative occurrence seems to be only theoretical. The Cambodian pronunciation and spelling of common words such as /cūn/ ‘to occur’, /cūp/ ‘to meet’ may be on either register. On the other hand the articulatory distinctions between first register /e:/ and the closer second register /è:/ are so small that register may be called in as a corroborating feature and treated as potentially operative in the cases of the three diphthongs.

The Indian-derived script has caused difficulty in more than one way. It had too few vowel signs for Cambodian but had symbols for cerebral consonants and voiced plosives which are not required for Cambodian. The general principle employed in the use of the script for Cambodian is that the unwanted voiced plosive symbols are used to convey to the vowel symbols ‘second series’ or ‘second register’ pronunciation. Thus the symbols k + a give /kə:/ while the symbols g + a give /kəː/. Consonants

1 See below p. 48 re Pinnow’s interpretation of Henderson.
2 The same phonetic ~ phonemic transcription is used throughout for all citations of Modern Khmer material (i.e even where the work of others is quoted) in order to avoid for the reader the confusion of interpreting first one system and then another. The transcription used is that of Henderson: ‘The main features of Cambodian pronunciation’.
other than plosives acquire by means of diacritics the possibility of being ‘first register consonants’ or ‘second register consonants’. Difficulties have arisen from the script in connection with historical studies. Additional vowel symbols were introduced from the fifteenth century onwards. This suggests that the vowel system was less complicated at the time of the old inscriptions (seventh to thirteenth centuries) and that probably the sonant symbols represented sonant consonants at that time. Along with this theory, which sounds reasonable in itself, the fallacy has sometimes arisen that, apart from the ‘new’ vowel symbols, Modern Khmer spelling is direct evidence for Old Khmer forms. This is not the case. The word /ko:n/ ‘child’, for example, was spelt kon in the seventh to eighth centuries, kvan in the ninth to twelfth centuries and is now spelt kûn. 3 Another way in which the orthography has proved to be a problem has been that inventors of transcriptions have hesitated between a transcription which represented the orthography and one which represented the pronunciation. Some have tried to combine both as did Louis Finot 4 in the transcription adopted officially by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient.

Two more auditory characteristics of the language, which, however, are characteristic of languages in general, have proved difficult to linguists concerned with Khmer. First, there is a great difference between colloquial pronunciation and the formal pronunciation of an educated person. 5 Second, there are minor dialectal differences. One is not here referring to major differences such as the pronunciation of final written r (as a uvular /r/) in the Battambang area (while elsewhere it is not pronounced at all). The difficulties arise from the slighter differences such as variations of pronunciation with or without aspiration in initial sequences. Should the word for sugar-palm in ‘received’ Cambodian speech be pronounced /tnaot/ or /tnhoat/, and should the orthography mark the aspiration or not? Possibly phonetic variations of this kind were once dialectal and have now overstepped their geographical boundaries. François Martini and Eugenie Henderson were both describing ‘received’ Cambodian from work with native speakers. In spite in this their work shows a lack of unanimity in the phonetic description of, for example, the short diphthongs on the second register.

Grammatically, Khmer raises the problem for the Western linguist of: a) finding formal criteria, chiefly syntactical, for setting up word categories and sentence patterns while b) refraining from reading into the language the categories and sentence patterns he would like to find there and which he feels should be there from the prejudices arising from knowledge of his own native tongue.

3 The transliterations are made, as for Old Khmer in section 7, according to the system and by Coësès, Inscriptions du Cambodge.

4 Finot, ‘Notre transcription du cambodgien’.

5 Thus, Martini, in ‘De la réduction des mots sanskrits passés em cambodgien’, critiques the Dictionnaire cambodgien for the unnatural pronunciation indicated for Indian loanwords and corrects some of them. Henderson, in ‘The main features of Cambodian pronunciation, pp. 168 and 172, gives both colloquial and formal pronunciation for certain types of word-form.
The first non-Cambodian linguists to publish work on the language in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily explorers, missionaries, or colonialists, and secondarily linguists. Short vocabularies and brief grammatical descriptions came first, to be followed by a number of manuals, some substantial dictionaries, Cambodian-French and French-Cambodian, and a grammar written in French. Most of the latter were the product of a life-time of work in the country and a profound knowledge of the language. The relationship of Khmer to other South East Asian languages was discussed in many works of comparison. Later linguistic work included the discussion of loanwords introduced into Cambodian from Sanskrit, Pali, and Portuguese.

The period with which we are concerned here is marked by the greater detail and more technical approach with which studies of grammar or comparison have been tackled and by the appearance of the first strictly phonological studies of the language. Cambodian has now become a subject of study for the professional linguist.

3. WORKS ON THE ORTHOGRAPHY

Various authors have been concerned with the orthography, without making a phonological statement. In a work edited by Charles Fossey, Au Chhieng describes the emergence from the Sanskrit script, which the Khmers adapted for their language, of the various styles of writing used in Cambodian in modern times. The presentation of the Cambodian characters is clear and pleasant. An historical survey of the introduction of Indian writing systems into South East Asia by Damais goes into greater detail about the actual Indian script borrowed, but the orthography examples given for each language are in this case slighter and less well produced. A teaching manual written entirely in Cambodian serves as a complete work of reference for the student of Khmer with regard to the calligraphic form of the various scripts now in use. It is interesting that this work gives precise instructions as to how the student should sit and hold his pen but does not tell him where to start in drawing each character. This probably seems obvious to the Cambodian teachers and students for whom the work was written, though it is not always clear to the foreigner. A 62-page booklet by Derek Tonkin describes the modern orthography for the English-speaking student and was produced with particular reference to the needs of people with little time to study phonetic transcriptions. Tonkin uses a transcription based on English spelling to represent the sounds for each Cambodian symbol. He states the full orthographic rules, as given in Cambodian grammars, with numerals and punctuation marks, and adds a list of abbreviations current in Cambodian books and newspapers,

6 Fossey, Notices sur les caractères étrangers anciens et modernes rédigées par un groupe de savants et réunies par Charles Fossey.
7 Damais, Les écritures d’origine indienne...
8 Méthode pratique de l’écriture khmère.
9 Tonkin, Modern Cambodian writing.