THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGISTERS IN STANDARD KHMER

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As far as I know, the concept of register as a linguistic feature was first applied to the vowel system of modern Mon by Harry L. Shorto, Professor of Mon-Khmer Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Shorto recognises a head register consisting of a vowel subset "characterised by clear voice quality" and a chest register consisting of a parallel vowel subset "characterised by breathy voice quality in association with a general laxness of the speech organs and a somewhat centralised articulation of vowels". The quasi-tonal distinction between the two subsets is "inherent in all Mon words" and "similar to that of Cambodian."¹

The first to apply the term to modern standard Khmer was Miss Eugénie J.A. Henderson, also of the School of Oriental and African Studies.² In her now classic description of Khmer phonology,³ Henderson speaks of a First Register, corresponding to Shorto's head register, and a Second Register, corresponding to Shorto's chest register. Apart from the descriptive refinements she introduces, these are coextensive with the "a-series" and "e-series" vowels recognised by François Martini⁴ as well as his predecessors and followers.⁵ However, Henderson, a product of the British school of acoustic phonetics established by Daniel Jones and an exponent of the Firthian school of linguistics, defines her First Register as marked primarily by "a 'normal' or 'head' voice quality", and secondarily by "relatively high pitch". In contrast, her Second Register is marked primarily by "a deep rather breathy or 'sepulchral' voice, pronounced with lowering of the larynx, and frequently accompanied by a certain dilation of the nostrils", and secondarily by lower pitch.⁶ While in Mon "the exponents of register are distributed throughout the articulatory complex but exclude pitch features,"⁷ in Khmer "the

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register of a syllable is closely bound up with the vowel nucleus of that syllable, the two being mutually interdependent..." but includes pitch. For Henderson, then, the primary factor in register is contrastive (oral versus pharyngeal) resonance while contrastive (normal versus lower) pitch is a secondary factor. She allows that "in relation to the VN of the second register, those of the first are in general more open in quality," but this single reference to the common lowering of her First Register is patently not part of her definition of register. She insists in fact that "the different vowel 'colour' inherent in the registers... ensures that no vowel nucleus of the first register can ever have exactly the same quality as a vowel nucleus of the second register, no matter how alike their general description may be apart from the question of register."10

The very excellence of Henderson's interpretation of the registers, reflecting her broad knowledge of Southeast Asian linguistics, posed a curious problem for others in the field. On the one hand, the question arose of reconciling her conclusions with those of Martini, who had had nothing whatever to say of resonance and pitch contrasts.11 On the other hand, when it came to applying Henderson's findings to the development of improved pedagogical methods, it was found that their concern with phonetic phenomena called for modifications. A valuable study of the first question was made by Heinz-Jürgen Pinnow, who advisedly concluded that Henderson's phonological description and Martini's Saussurian phonemic description both have undeniable merits.12 The second and equally serious matter has been ably resolved by Mrs Judith M. Jacob, Lecturer in Cambodian at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Dispensing with Henderson's contrastive pitch, Jacob accepts contrastive resonance and introduces the feature of contrastive tenseness, which is only implicit in Henderson's description but which Shorto attributes to Mon. Jacob stipulates that syllable nuclei of the First Register are "pronounced with a clear, 'head' voice and a certain degree of tension" while those of the Second are pronounced "with a breathy, 'chest' voice and a comparatively relaxed utterance."13

More importantly, however, Jacob specifies that this "distinction of voice quality in the utterance of the vowels and diphthongs of the two registers" is potential – that is to say, facultative. "This difference of voice quality," she says, "will... not be heard in the speech of all speakers. It may be heard occasionally [sic] in the speech of some speakers and is then most easily noted in syllables uttered in isolation." She rules out, moreover, any registral contrast in the three potential pairs of long high falling diphthongs which she transcribes /e/ /ə/, /ə/ /ə/, /ə/ /ə/, noting that the Cambodians themselves are "sometimes
confused about these diphthongs in some words, not knowing to which register they belong and therefore not knowing which spelling to use.\textsuperscript{14} Jacob's modification of Henderson's original terms bears out Pinnow's conclusion as noted above and makes it easier not only to adjust Martini's observation of functional facts to Henderson's observation of phonetic facts but also to translate Henderson's findings into other phonemic analyses. Thus the American linguist Franklin E. Huffman, a former student of Mrs Jacob, has developed a phonemic interpretation of standard Khmer which improves upon Martini's earlier system and makes no mention whatever of contrastive resonance, pitch, or tension.\textsuperscript{15} Rejecting the term "register", he returns to the older conception of "series", which however he restricts to his exposition of the writing system. Such restriction is justified in the sense that the register of any given nucleus is a lexical fact which cannot be accounted for from the data of pure description but can be accounted for in terms of the quasi-historical environments reflected in the writing system. Elsewhere I have commented on some of the strong and weak points of Huffman's analysis.\textsuperscript{16}

In this place I wish only to suggest that on pedagogical as well as analytical grounds it may be preferable (a) to return to a position more midway between Shorto, Henderson and Jacob on the one hand and Martini on the other and (b) to pay closer attention to the development of the modern vowel system.

While the actual term used is probably unimportant, my own view is that the label "register" should be retained in phonemic interpretations of standard Khmer but should be redefined (despite the confusion thereby created with Firthian usage) in terms of function. After all, Henderson's and Jacob's phonetic observations have by no means been invalidated or otherwise shelved by conversion into American phonemic terms and, as Jacob points out, contrast may be effected by means of systematic alternations of resonance and tension, if not also of Henderson's pitch. The potentiality of more than minimal functional distinctions is hence a feature of the language with which the instructor and student of Khmer must reckon. It is this potentiality that accounts for the presence in standard Khmer of what Fries and Pike called "coexistent phonemic systems".\textsuperscript{17} On the one hand we have a \textit{Hochsprache} or Received Pronunciation manifesting 31 contrasting nuclei and reflecting an ideal of delivery appropriate for situations in which speech is formal and largely premeditated, if not actually read or recited. On the other hand we have a parallel style of utterance, "normal" or neutral without being substandard, which manifests only 24 contrasting nuclei. Specifically, on the high, higher-mid and low levels of openness both systems have
6, 3 and 7 nuclei respectively. Above the mean-mid level, however, the Received Pronunciation has 6 nuclei (/ʃy, ʃi, ʃe, ʃu, ʃe, ʃo/) not found in the normal style, while below the mean-mid level it has 1 nucleus (/æ/) which the normal style lacks. One of the functions of a sound instructional method should be to explain the rationale of these coexisting systems.

For this and other reasons I maintain that the concept of register, by whatever name it is known, should not be confined to expositions of the writing system. The latter, after all, reflects a stage of the language before the development of the two vowel subsets in question, and whether it is fortunate for the Khmer (and us) that their writing is conservative enough to signal the interrelationships of these subsets is a moot point having little to do with linguistic analysis. The circumstance that it does show registral relationships should not be ignored, but it seems much more useful to my way of thinking to show how the registers are manifested on the phonemic level.

In the first place, the register of most of the 31 syllable nuclei is recognisable on the basis of (a) the nuclear shape itself, (b) the nature of the syllable initial, whether simple or clustered, or (c) a combination of these indices. For example, the 9 nuclei which I write /i/, əə, ə, uu, u, uə, əə, əə, əə/ fall exclusively within the High Register (Henderson's Second), while the 8 nuclei which I write /aa, a, aə, o, aə, aə, a/ fall, again exclusively, within the Low Register. This means that ambivalence is limited to the 3 pairs of "broken" nuclei mentioned above by Jacob plus the 4 pairs of simple phonemes which I write /e̞e : əə, ɣy : ɣy, əə : əə, əo : əo/. Among the consonants initial /m, n, r, w, j, r/ presuppose High Register nuclei, while initial /b, d, q, s, h/ presuppose Low Register nuclei; ambivalence is thus confined to the four stops plus /n, l/. Hence while Henderson and Jacob mark all nuclei of the High Register with the grave accent, I prefer to add diacritics only in the 14 ambivalent cases just cited - with the deplorable innovation of reserving the grave for the Low (First) Register while using the acute for the High. Even a certain percentage of these diacritics is redundant, thanks to the consonant environments specified.

In the second place, the two registers are interdependent in the sense that the phonemic inventory is incomplete without both while members of each registral pair show morphophonemic alternation in the presence of certain affixes: /ruh ʁuʃ/ 'to exist, be (alive)' > /ɾbəh/ 'object, thing'; /ɾdəm/ 'to surround' > /ɾsɾəəm/ 'to envelop, encase'; /wʃəj/ 'to beat, whip' > /cwaʃ/ 'to wind, wrap, plait'; /prəʃ/ 'to change' > /bmɾəʃ/ 'change'; /ɾʊp/ 'to count' > /ɾprəp/ 'to