

**Cambodian Caretaker Speech and Teaching Routines**  
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**Introduction** Language teaching methodology such as the Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell is primarily based on research on the linguistic and social environment of middle class American children learning English. Many teachers of Southeast Asian children in America wonder whether the linguistic environment and the socialization process of Southeast Asian children matches that of these Americans, and, if not, what implications this has for language teaching methodology. Early studies of the talk directed at children in middle class American homes indicated that this talk (often called "baby talk", "motherese", and most recently, "caretaker speech") had several features, some of which researchers felt might facilitate language learning. These features included: reductions and simplifications in the phonological structure of a word; repetitions, expansions, and use of short utterances; limiting topics to the here-and-now; and use of a high proportion of questions and commands. (See Ferguson 1964, Snow and Ferguson 1977). Ferguson (1964) showed that this particular language register was found in cultures throughout the world, and later he indicated that this simplified register is also used when native speakers of one language speak to second language learners (Snow and Ferguson 1977). Subsequently, however, the universal nature of this simplified speech register was called into question in studies such as those by Heath (1983), Ochs (1988), and Schieffelin (1990).

**Methodology** This paper reports on the findings of a longitudinal study of the linguistic and socializing environment of two Cambodian children who, although born in America, have been raised in a Cambodian language environment. The Cambodian children chosen for the study are the first-born children, one boy and one girl, of two middle-class Cambodian couples. The parents of the girl received a university education in Cambodia, and the parents of the boy are finishing their college education in the United States. All of the parents are working, are literate in English and Cambodian, and have made a conscious decision to create a primarily Cambodian language environment for their children. Thus, for example, when they are at work, they have managed to have their children taken care of by Cambodian caretakers, in the one case a baby-sitter and in the other case a grandparent. To do this study, the Cambodian

parents have agreed to become co-researchers. Approximately every two weeks, they have videotaped their children in everyday routines and interactions with themselves (the parents) and others, in the case of the girl since the day she was brought home from the hospital and in the case of the boy since around his second birthday. The parents have helped in the Cambodian transcription of the interactions. The videotapes have been shared with other Cambodian parents and have, thus, helped instigate further discussions on parenting, on differences in child-rearing among Cambodians, and differences in interactions between parents and their children.

**Results** The results of the study of the socializing and linguistic environment of these two children and the discussions carried on with other Cambodian parents indicate that (1) there is a Cambodian baby talk or caretaker register which Cambodian caretakers use with prelinguistic children. It has many of the characteristics that I have mentioned above. I will say more about this later. (2) Whereas Cambodian caretaker speech seems to be very much alike across Cambodian households, the routines which Cambodian parents engage their children in differ from household to household. I shall say more about this below also. (3) Whereas Cambodian children are often engaged in dyadic conversations with their caretakers, most Cambodian children become part of households which contain many family members. It is not unusual to find children living with parents, uncles, aunts, or grandparents. It is often the case that a young couple will move into a house or an apartment with the mother's parents. Thus, the first child of that young couple will be surrounded by the parents and grandparents along with uncles and aunts, many of whom are still in elementary school. Cambodian children are never left alone. Typically, they sleep with their parents. They are accompanied from the moment they get up in the morning to the moment they go to bed at night. Even if they go to bed early, they are not alone. Someone will stay with them until they fall asleep. When Cambodian children are held or when they are being fed solid food, they are positioned so as to face the group. Furthermore, Cambodian babies are not left crying. When they cry, they are immediately picked up and attended to. If they are fussing, their attention is distracted. If they cannot be immediately soothed, someone will pick them up and carry them out of the room, distracting them or tending to their needs. As they get older, fussing is laughed at or ignored by the parents. Older children in the vicinity are expected to remove and attend to a fussing child. Thus,

Cambodian children are socialized to be members of a group and to be dependent on that group for their needs.

**Routines** By routines, I mean those interactions which caretakers repeatedly engage their child in, routines such as mealtime routines and bedtime routines. The nature of these interactions, the number and type of routines, and the length and participants involved appear to differ from household to household. For example, whereas in every household, parents engage in a mealtime routine with their toddler, the nature of the routine,—whether the toddler eats with the family sitting at the table, whether the toddler is made to sit upon a mat in a particular position and expected to stay there, or whether the child is allowed to wander about while eating—differs from household to household. What particularly interested me in the households of the two Cambodian children I have been observing is the teaching routines which the parents in these two households engage their children in. These routines appear to be directly related to the role expectations that these Cambodian parents have for their children. Thus, for example, in the routines I have chosen for this paper, the routines I call "Putting things away" and "Nurturing," the Cambodian mother is teaching her daughter the role of child-caretaker and mother's helper in the house. This is the role that the eldest daughter usually assumes in a Cambodian household, helping her mother both to take care of the younger children and take care of the house. These routines were begun as soon as the child began to respond to her mother's commands, shortly after her first birthday. The mother and father of the boy have not been engaging their son in these routines. When they saw the tapes of the girl's mother teaching her child in the nurturing and putting things away routines, they commented on the fact that these routines would be for a daughter. The parents of the boy are both involved in education, the father studying to be a teacher of mathematics and the mother working as an aide in the school system. Their expectations for their son are for him to be a good student. It is not surprising then that the teaching routines that these parents engage their son in are educational routines such as putting the letters of the alphabet in order and correctly saying each letter. (The interactions occur in Cambodian, but the letters may be from the English alphabet or from the Cambodian alphabet.) For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen three routines to serve as examples of Cambodian parent-child interaction. All of these routines were taken from the videotapes filmed by the father of the girl, however, the

language on the tape, the caretaker register, is very similar in both the household of the girl and the boy. Table 1 indicates the routines I have chosen and the age of the child at the time these routines were taped.

**Table 1. Routines**

Nurturing	1;1year
Bedtime	1;1year
Putting things away	1;3years

**Characteristics of Cambodian Baby Talk** From the very beginning Cambodian parents talk to their children, responding to their child's movements, noises and facial expressions as if they were legitimate turns-at-talk. Mothers may respond to their child's gurgles, smiles and expressive jargon with *nuṃhəəy* "That's right!" *ʔə:mec* "What did you say?" and *ʔə:mɔ̃ɔ̃tət* "Say that again." Examples of this occur in the nurturing routine in Table 2 below. This interaction takes place just before the child is put to bed. While her mother is heating her baby bottle, the child has wandered into the living room and sits down next to her teddy bear. She lays the bear on the carpet and covers it with a small blanket. At this point the mother responds to the child's actions and to her expressive jargon (which I have not included in the table but which occurs throughout).

**Table 2. Nurturing routine**

See the following page.

The child's expressive jargon at this stage is quite tuneful. It sounds like language but not necessarily like Cambodian. Regardless of the fact that the child's babbling is clearly not interpretable, the mother responds to this jargon with "That's right." (Line 20, Table 2) and "uh huh" (as in lines 18, 19, and 26 in Table 2).

The nurturing routine also exemplifies another characteristic of Cambodian baby talk: parents prefer to refer to their children by a word indicating their role relationships rather than by name. Thus, Cambodians refer to their children as "child" [*ko:n*], "younger-one" [*o:n*], and the "last one" [*pɔ̃u*]. These are sometimes modified as, for example, with a diminutive such as [*æŋ*]. In the nurturing routine, the mother teaches her child to call the baby by the term "younger-one" [*o:n*] which the child will, in turn, use to refer to her younger siblings when they are born. The preference for terms which label role relationships also holds for adults referring to other