Projecting a Cambodian social identity

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Erickson and Schultz, in their book *The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews*, define an individual's social identity as a set of attributes such as family background, educational achievement, ethnicity, etc. and define a performed social identity as the subset of these attributes that a participant reveals during the course of an encounter (1982:13, 16-17). The point I would like to make is that this performed social identity, when it becomes an important part of the message that a speaker wishes to convey, has a direct impact on the nature of the discourse, determining such things as what information must be foregrounded and what referred to only indirectly, and what lexical choices must be made including what reference terms will be used.

In order to examine what social identity a Cambodian would reveal in a job interview and how he or she would use the Cambodian language to reveal this identity, several Cambodian junior college and university students in the U.S. were asked to play the roles of Cambodian employer and prospective employee and create what they would consider "a good interview," one which might lead the Cambodian employer to employ the Cambodian being interviewed. These interviews, conducted in Cambodian, were videotaped and the students along with several Cambodian adults, who worked as teachers in Cambodia before the war, were asked to select the best interview. In the interview selected as "best," the interviewee was successful because he was able to structure his replies in Cambodian in such a way as to make clear his acceptance of the Cambodian values of collectivism, respect for hierarchy and willingness to accept the direction of superiors. In other words, the Cambodian being interviewed was successful because he clearly projected a Cambodian social identity, saying in effect, "hire me because my social values are the same as yours." This message, however, was not conveyed directly but rather conveyed through a careful selection of gestures and actions, a careful selection of
reference terms and other social deictic markers, and a careful structuring of his replies to questions. Let me show you how this was done.

**Social Asymmetry.** The Cambodian interviewee conveyed the message that he recognized and respected hierarchy, such as the hierarchies of employer-employee and older-younger, in several ways. First, he signaled his recognition of the social asymmetry through posture and gestures. Conforming to what Joseph Errington described as polite and gesturally muted conduct (1988:36, 37, 211), he entered the room by opening the door only the width of his body and slipping in, his western handshake was accompanied by a formal Cambodian greeting (see below), when asked to sit down he did so, sitting in an upright and still manner, pressing his back straight against the back of the chair, his feet flat on the floor, his arms pressed flat against the chair's armrest and throughout the interview, the only movement he made was a slight movement of his fingers. His voice was soft and was never raised, for example, to emphasize a point. Another signal of social asymmetry was the use by the interviewee of the honorific predicate, कुम्मिः, at the outset of the interview, in the greeting, and at the closing, in the salutation. Finally, deference was shown by the interviewee when, at one point in the interview, the interviewee, in responding to a question on what experience the interviewee had in preparation for the job indicated his dependence on the employer in the following way:

1. हाम गन्न तीत सङ्ग्रह सङ्ग्रह बांटो धार क्रिया नाम तीत और any more anything after that another

   And besides, whatever else (is required)

   क्रिया मिन नाम तीत और बांटो क्रिया क्रिया प्राप क्रिया
   I not really know until older brother help tell me

   I don't really know about unless you, older brother, help tell me.

   तो मां नाम या नाम में एक क्षेत्र में या या या में
   question place this how work this how
What's this place like? What's the work like?

via thnym ponmaan srul ponmaan naa
it heavy how much easy how much softener

How difficult is it? How easy?

kii niw lee bong taen ch neek prap knom knom min
sow dey
i.e. stay on older brother all who tell me I not really
know

I depend for all this upon you, older brother. Who can
tell me?

Collectivism. The interviewee emphasized the
Cambodian value of collectivism, that the group is more
important than the individual. He did this by indicating that he
is a fellow Cambodian belonging to the same group as the
employer, that he would be a team player who preferred to
work in a group and would not upset the group by being a
braggart or a person who thought he was better than someone
else. For example, he stresses throughout the interview that
he and the employer belong to the same group by using the
reference term kmə́e yəŋ (we you who are in my group) as
you can see in his response to the question "why have you
come?:"

2. knom ey dey dəməŋ taam puəkmaak khlaa haəy
I uh know information from friend some and

I...ah..learned from some friends and

mə́el taam kasaet khlaa dey thaa dey thaa
see in newspaper some know that know that

saw in the paper, found out that

kmə́e yəŋ mien truwkaa nek truwkaa
nekthvaəkkaa
Cambodian/we have need someone need worker
we Cambodians need someone, need someone to work

khaāŋ bɔɔkpraŋ pii phiąsaa cɔŋkles tiw phiąsaa khmaɛ
regarding translate from language English to language Cambodian

as a translator from English to Cambodian.

mliɔŋ hɔɛy kŋɔm cɔŋ thvɛɛ cia peɛkkhaʔcɔøn mneэк nɛŋ
therefore I want do as applicant one person and

Therefore, I want to apply and

couł thvɛɛkaa kŋɔŋ tiikɔŋlaŋ phaɛl khmaɛ yɛɛŋ truwɔkaa nɛŋ
enter work in place place that Cambodian/we need that

come to work in a place where we Cambodians need (a translator).

Note then that he has come, not on his own initiative, but because his Cambodian friends told him to and he saw in the Cambodian paper that the Cambodians needed a Cambodian translator and he wanted to respond to this Cambodian need. Second, the interviewer downplays (backgrounds or refers to only indirectly to) his individual accomplishments and highlights his desire to work cooperatively with others. Thus, responding to a question about whether he had any experience for the job, he said:

3. tæŋ cia pisey tæŋ pii kŋɔm mook dɔl nih
since, especially since I come reach here

From the time I arrived

kŋɔm mɛn dæl baan couł thvɛɛkaa kɔŋlaŋ nɔa phɔɔcɛŋ
I never perfective enter work place any response particle

I've never worked anywhere.