Teaching values: interaction in a Cambodian classroom

B. Jean Longmire
University of the Pacific

Every society teaches its children its values. These values are not only conveyed directly in messages such as "We Cambodians do not do that because..." but also and perhaps predominantly they are conveyed through linguistic choices that societal members make. In order to examine what values Cambodian teachers teach their students and the way societal values influence interactions between Cambodian teachers and Cambodian students, videotapes were made of a Cambodian private language school first grade class in California. This class, conducted in Cambodian and taught by a man who was a primary school teacher in Cambodia before 1975, is part of an afterschool school run by members of a Cambodian community in California for their children. The children in this class range in age from 6 to 10 years old and, although their first language is Cambodian, they are placed in this "first grade" class because of their inability to read and write in Cambodian. The subject matter of the class includes literacy (reading and writing) and comportment (what we call "school and community" and the Cambodians call sophiavathoa). The videotapes were examined and a transcript was made of one two-hour segment. What I would like to focus on in this speech is how the Cambodian values of collectivism (the importance of the group over and above the individual) and the value of respect for hierarchy is conveyed in the Cambodian classroom through the behavior expected of the students and most importantly, through the linguistic choices that the teacher makes or demands his students make.

Collectivism. The importance of the group as opposed to the individual can first be seen in the demand for uniformity in orientation, in dress, and in response. With regard to orientation, for example, students in class sat in rows facing the front of the class. The teacher was always quite
concerned that this orientation be maintained even when he walked around the classroom. Thus, when individual students would turn to look at each other, to watch the teacher who had moved to the back of the classroom or to look out the door or window, the teacher would shout out mə laundering "look forward" or mə tablo "look at the blackboard". Although in this afterschool school, the Cambodian teachers felt they could not require uniforms, boys in the class were nevertheless required to wear a white shirt which had to be tucked into the pants and girls usually wore white blouses and skirts. Students were required to stand in unison to greet the teacher, when a visitor entered the classroom and before leaving the class. Whereas the teacher did ask questions and elicit responses individually, far more time was devoted to class recitation in unison: of letters or words written on the blackboard; of addition, subtraction and multiplication tables; of the process of addition or subtraction; and of memorized poems on good behavior. In sum, uniform group behavior was stressed.

Another indication of the importance of the group rather than the individual was in the way the Cambodian teacher addressed his students and the way he referred to himself. First, he almost never addressed or referred to a student by name (apart from calling the roll at the beginning of the class). Indeed, in his commands or questions, he preferred to leave out references to individuals altogether. In the table below, you can see ways the Cambodian teacher referred to his students in one 30-minute segment taken from the transcript. Thus, in this segment there were 224 places in questions, commands and statements made to the students where it would have been grammatically possible to include a referent to an individual student (i.e., in subject or object position). In 159 of these cases, there was no referent included.
The Way the Cambodian Teacher Referred to His Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cambodian</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No reference</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niəŋ</td>
<td>child</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>svh</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yəəŋ</td>
<td>we/our group</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>komara/əy</td>
<td>boy/girl</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual's</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>224</td>
<td>99.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of this lack of reference in questions are:

1. yuəl tee?
   understand polite particle
   
   Understand?

2. saŋap ɓaan?
   listen can
   
   Can (you) understand?

Note that the 'you' which I have included for translation purposes is not found in the Cambodian. The absence of reference can also be seen in the following teacher's request:

3. yuəl cʰlæy ʔəŋəŋ yuəl ɗ'aa mec
   understand answer then understand say how
   
   (You) understand! Answer then. What (do you) understand?

When the teacher did include a referent (see the starred terms in the table), he used the Cambodian terms niəŋ "child/ren," svh "student/s," komara/əy "boy/s-girl/s," yəəŋ "we." These were not marked as singular or plural and thus it was always unclear whether the teacher was referring to one or all of the students. The lack of reference to individual students
had interesting effects. First, because of the lack of reference to an individual in statements of praise (see 4 and 5 below), a student could feel that his or her answer brought honor to the class:

4. รว่า svh look ครูว ยุ่ง ถ้าถูก
   agree student teacher understand true

Correct. My student (or -s) understand(s) correctly

5. ห์ม ยุ่ง หมาย ค่อน svh look ครูว ถ้าถูก หย่า น่า
   ห์ม understand already child student teacher quick
   understand emphatic

ห์ม You've understood. My young student (or -s)
   learn(s) quickly.

Both responses (4 and 5) could mean that the class is correct or the class learns quickly or the individual student is correct or learns quickly. Second, criticism of behavior, being unmarked and thus not obviously directed at one student, appears deflected from one to the class as a whole. Finally, the typical command form could be and was a direct imperative, a form of command which Brown and Levinson call "clear examples of bald on record" face threatening acts (1987:95). These acts do not seem so face threatening, however, when no individual is singled out as the recipient.

Finally, it is noticeable that the teacher not only did not refer to students by name, but also did not refer to himself by his name, using instead the name of his role, ้ look ครูว "teacher."

Recognition of and Respect for Hierarchy.
The stress on hierarchy was evident in the gestures and the language register that the teacher demanded the students use with him and with their parents and also in the teacher's own response to students. In addition, it was evident in the directness of the commands. With regard to gestures and language register, the teacher required that the students use vocabulary and gestures which indicate respect. Students were taught to greet (and to say goodbye) using the honorific predicate คูมรี้ยพ "to say" as in the polite greetings below: