CAMBODIAN NARRATIVES
OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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Let me begin this paper in a truly Cambodian way, with what will be the endpoint in this discussion of Cambodian narration. I begin with a story which is remarkable in that it was told to me in English by a ten-year old Cambodian American boy who is now in the fourth grade in an American public elementary school and has been in an American school since kindergarten. Yet this story, which he narrated in response to my asking him to tell me about his dog Blacky, is a story which I shall claim is Cambodian in structure, nonetheless. I have put the story in example number one, and at this point I will say only that this is a story about the dog Blacky, and I am the person who is saying 'hmmmm', 'uhhuh' and so on. My comments are in italics.

Example 1. Boy's English Narrative.

Then the next day we took him for a walk hmmm I think about I mean a few weeks later uhhuh we took him for a walk hmm my dad and my bro-we took him for a walk we my bro by big brother, Viseth, uhhuh uhm he he took Blacky for a walk and he was around and then I broke up with my brother see my biggest brother goes somewhere and I follow him uhhuh cuz he takes Lucky uhhuh and my big brother he just break go somewhere else then then something weird came then when we went close to the uhm playground uhhuh in the village uhhuh my big brother Viseth uhhuh say take uhm Lucky home Dad says so because uh cuz Blacky bit somebody so my Dad says just in case that somebody - Lucky bite somebody uhm so uhm he went there uhhuh and then this one kid came His mother His feet got bitten right here (shows an area on the leg) Really? Lucky bit him? uhhuh My brother said he was holding him Lucky's uhm my brother told that guy to run uhhuh so then Blacky runs uhhuh and then my brother got after that he let go cuz of that it's hard it's rough yeah and the one with the chain that
one hurt his hand so he let go after that slip it

uhuh it slips off his hand so so it bit him.

One of the reasons that the above story is so difficult for English-speaking listeners to comprehend is the difficulty they have in putting the events in chronological order. Indeed, when I presented the above story to a class of American teachers and asked them to tell me what happened in the story, they could not. Naturally, all narratives of personal experience involve the recounting of events that occurred in a temporal sequence, but whether the narrative itself must be structured to conform to that sequence is another matter. For English speakers, as work by Labov and Waletzky (1967), Labov (1972) and Labov and Fanshel (1977) has shown, the structural backbone of the narrative of personal experience is formed by narrative clauses, independent clauses whose verb is marked with the simple past tense, which are presented in the order in which the events they describe occurred. Thus, temporal iconicity is a requirement of English oral narratives of personal experience. The reason why the English-speaking teachers could not recount the story that the young boy told was that they could not restructure the events chronologically, and because they could not do that, they felt that the story had no structure. I will argue that the story is structured. It merely is not structured in an English way.

**Topic-Comment Structure in Parent-Child Narratives.**

If narrative clauses are not ordered chronologically, how then is order achieved in a Cambodian story. How can the listeners follow the story? What guidelines do they have? One guideline is the topic-comment structure. Indeed, I believe that anyone who has seen a Cambodian child learn how to tell a story would agree that at the core of the Cambodian narrative is the topic, and in general, in a story, the topics are the protagonists. Story-telling ability begins for the Cambodian child with the ability to identify and announce a topic. As soon as a child is able to do this, Cambodian parents help the child to further construct the story by asking the child about the appearance and the activities of the protagonist, thereby helping the child to construct the comments which necessarily follow the topics in a Cambodian story. As an example of this, see Example 2. Here we find a conversation between a mother (M), a father (F) and their two-year old daughter (C). They are looking at a page of a children's story book on which the character, Mickey Mouse, appears to be swimming. This causes the child to remember the fish that she saw when she went camping with her parents.
Example 2: Parent-child story building

M: ʔay ke
C: kʰi maos
M: tʰær ʔey

M: tʰær ʔey nih
M: Mickey Mouse tʰær ʔey

F: Mickey Mouse tʰær ʔey
C: tʰær hael tik
F: hael tik
C: Fish hael tik
F: hael tik niw ʔaenəɾ
C: hael kaou
F: hael niw kraou
hael tʰær mec tiw
C: hael ocnəɾ

M: What's that?
C: (Mic)key Mouse.
M: Do what? (What's he doing?)
M: Do what here? (What's he doing here?)
M: Mickey Mouse's doing what?
F: Mickey Mouse 's doing what, child?
C: Do swim
F: Swim (He's swimming.)
C: Fish swim
F: Swim where?
C: Swim out-there
F: Swim be outside
Swim do how (How do they swim?)
C: Swim like-this

The mother begins the interaction by asking the child what the picture is of (eliciting the topic). When the child responds with 'Mickey Mouse', the mother and the father then ask what Mickey Mouse is doing (eliciting a comment). The child responds with the comment 'He's swimming' which, because it was not formed correctly, is corrected or clarified by the father. The child then nominates the topic and adds a comment (fish swim) which causes the father to demand further clarification and comment (where did they swim/where was it swimming). This conversation is an example of the way in which parents elicit topics from children. When a topic is announced by the child, the parents elicit comments. When a topic with a comment is announced, they elicit, for example, a place where the event occurred or some further comment about the topic. Later, when a child is able to announce topics and make comments about them with some regularity, the parents work to help the child (1) shift focus from topic to topic in a story and (2) move from event to event along a story line.

Moving along the Story Line. Example 3 below is an example of how a Cambodian mother, who is narrating the children's book *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer 1969), shifts from topic to topic and moves from event to event. Four things
are of interest in this short segment. First, we can see the relationship between the use of nouns, pronouns and topic shifts or scene shifts. Second, the use of the verb haey 'finish' in relationship to topic shifts is exemplified. Third, we can see the use of the perfective marker 'go' to indicate movement from event to event along the story line, and, finally, this segment illustrates how stories are narrated by using anticipatory statements followed by flashbacks. (I have formatted the story in the table to highlight the topic, comments, and the words signalling topic shifts and event shifts.) See Example 3 on the next page.

The Choice of Nominal, Pronominal or Zero Subjects. The Mayer story that the woman is narrating is complex because there are several characters involved: a boy, a dog, and a frog. Throughout the story the boy and the dog are engaged in different activities which are portrayed as occurring simultaneously. Thus, the narrator must constantly switch from character to character.

In the section of the story narrated here, the boy has just gone to the window to call his frog, and, simultaneously, the dog has just stuck his head in a bottle. The dotted line at the beginning of the table represents several comments, not included here, which the mother has made about the dog's activities. These comments culminate with the comment I have included:

ccep kbael via knou nin dcp nuy tu
stick head its inside in bottle that go
The dog had stuck his head in the bottle

The mother then shifts her focus to the boy and narrates the next event.

kom nuy khom baeek bochic nuy
child that try open window that
The child manages to open the window

sraek hau konkaep nuy laen
cry-out call frog that one
call out to the frog

She then shifts her focus back to the dog and says: