The acquisition of syntax/pragmatics by a Cambodian and English speaking two-year-old child

B. Jean Longmire
School of Education
University of the Pacific

Introduction. The acquisition of Khmer by children is interesting linguistically for several reasons. Phonologically, little if any language acquisition research has been done on languages which, like Khmer, stress the second syllable in two syllable words. Cambodian parents, as if to emphasize the importance to Khmer of the last part of a word, address their infants using a baby talk characterized by the deletion of this first syllable, and often the reduction of syllable initial consonant clusters. Given the phonological prominence of the second syllable and the reduction of onset consonant clusters in the speech of Cambodian parents to children, it is not surprising that Cambodian children, learning to speak, begin by producing words which are thus reduced. (See Longmire 1994 for more on Cambodian baby talk and phonological reduction.) Khmer is also interesting in that, like Japanese, pragmatic and sociolinguistic considerations pervade the language. (See Clancy, 1985, for a discussion of this regarding Japanese.) Thus, for example, Cambodian children need to acquire mastery of a vocabulary which conveys their social relationship with hearers and addressees. Learning how to refer to oneself and to others, then, presents a problem for a child. Sentence final particles signal other subtle pragmatic information such as questioning, doubt, disgust, emphasis, etc. Syntactically, the acquisition of Khmer is interesting not just for the acquisition of aspect, deixis, head first constructions, and so on, but also for the intersection of syntax and pragmatics. Indeed, the difficulty in teasing apart that which is pragmatic and that which is syntactic in languages such as Khmer may shed light on the weakness of so many studies in child language acquisition, and that is the failure to recognize that all language is learned in context and that the context is an oral one. Finally, it is interesting to study the acquisition of both Cambodian and English by a child. The differences between these two languages make it easier to see the hypotheses the child is making about each language when
the child incorrectly applies the rules of one language in speaking the other. Because the social and linguistic context in which one language is spoken may differ from that of the other, one can also see the effect of this on the differing pragmatic strategies the child uses to initiate a conversation or to make a contribution to an on-going one. In this paper I will look at the pragmatic context in which a Cambodian-English speaking child learns her languages and how this affects her understanding and acquisition of pragmatics and syntax.

Methodology. The data for this study come from a three year longitudinal study of the language development of the oldest daughter of a Cambodian and English speaking couple living in America. Cambodian was the predominant language in the environment of this child until, at the age of three, she entered an American preschool. Thus, the hypotheses this child made about both English and Cambodian were initially based on her growing understanding of the way Cambodian is structured. To conduct this study, I, along with this child's' parents, have audiotaped and videotaped the child approximately every two weeks from the time this child was born. Transcripts of these tapes have been written in Khmer and English, and the examples I will use here come from these transcripts. For this paper, I will look at the child's development of language from a mean length of utterance (MLU) around 1.5 in Cambodian and 1.0 in English, to a MLU of 2.5 in Cambodian to 2.0 in English. This is when the child was between 1;9.23 (one year, nine months, 23 days) to the age of 2;5.0.

Pragmatics versus syntax. In a paper entitled "Discourse Analysis of Japanese and Thai", Robert Jones and Eleanor Jorden asked the question, "Do 'sentences' occur in Thai speech?" (1976, p.13) Given the difficulty of identifying sentences in oral discourse in a Southeast Asian language, it is no wonder that they questioned whether the sentence was a justifiable linguistic unit of oral discourse. As they pointed out, historically the sentence is closely tied to "literary norms and the convention of writing." (p. 15) Because children learn language from oral discourse,
because so much of child language acquisition research is aimed at providing evidence for one particular linguistic theory or another, and because the prevailing linguistic theories are sentence-based and thus research in language acquisition is often focused on what a child knows about the structure of sentences, the question of what is a sentence in oral discourse is an important one. Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson (1976) claimed that "the notion of topic may be as basic as that of subject in grammatical descriptions". (p. 459) They distinguished languages according to whether the structure of sentences favored "a description in which the grammatical relation subject-predicate plays a major role" or the structure of sentences favored "a description in which the grammatical relation topic-comment plays a major role". (p. 459) Thus, they contrasted the subject-predicate construction of a sentence with the topic-comment construction of a sentence. Languages which favor topic-comment constructions were considered topic-prominent languages. Feng-Fu Tsao (1979), in his book *A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Towards Discourse Analysis*, argues that "to place topic in contrast with subject is very misleading because they essentially belong to different levels of grammatical organization". (p. 37) In Tsao's view, topic-comment structures are discourse level structures. He points out that the topic extends its semantic domain over several sentences, playing a major role in such phenomena as pronominalization and coreferential NP deletion, but topics play no role in sentence-level phenomena like reflexivization and verb serialization. (p. 261) Of course, discourse level phenomena are often found in sentences. Word final particles in Khmer often signal how previous utterances are viewed and what the speaker expects in utterances to follow (e.g., an answer). There is no doubt, however, that topic plays a major role in determining what can be deleted from a following comment and even whether the subject of the following sentence or comment can be placed in sentence final position. Of interest in this paper is the question of how the environment of a child might lead the child to an understanding of topic/comment structures and how early a child begins to produce them. Certainly, one would think,
nothing is more fundamental in language acquisition than the ability to understand or initiate a topic.

**Establishing topic.** True child-adult discourse in Khmer, where both adult and child contribute to the topic nominated, begins with joint attention to an object or person in the environment. Usually, a deictic word is involved. An example of this from my data occurs when Sopha's mother tried to get Sopha to "read" a Garfield comic strip in the Sunday newspaper with her. Sopha, age 1;9.23, gets down after a second or two and goes to the window. The conversation is as follows:

child  
nie nie pa nie
here here pa here

mother na koun? ai ke?
Where, child? What is it?

child ba
(unclear but interpreted by mother below)

mother cma: ct karn pok

cat not-see-too (I don't see)

Here the mother requests the topic from her daughter, getting a syllable of the word "cat" and, given the previous context of the Garfield cartoon, she supplies the full word "cmaa" and makes a comment regarding the cat, i.e., that she can't see one. Two month's later, the child is supplying nouns with her deictic words. It is clear also that she has equated "this" and "nih" and the meaning "here". For example, at the age of 2;0.7, she is removing silly putty from a container and talking to herself. She says:

-n- cake
thisa cake
nii-a cake
da-a cake

She seems to be trying out various words and sounds that fit in initial position. On the next day, we find her sitting in a high chair trying to get her father to give her a small Christmas tree ornament, a bear beating on a drum. She and her father interact: