VARIABILITY IN CAMBODIAN COPULAR CONSTRUCTIONS: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

1.1 CAMBODIAN 'TO BE'

Cambodian, like most of the world's languages, does not have a single element which corresponds to all of the senses of English 'to be': rather, as many as seven different forms are used in existential, locative, and copulative constructions. In general, each Cambodian construction corresponds to a distinct part of the range of functions and meanings of 'to be', although some constructions appear to overlap partially with others. The basic inventory of Cambodian forms of 'to be' can be summarised as follows:

1) existential: *mian*

2) locative: *(kɨɨ) nəw*

3) copulative

  a) with predicate adjectives: zero, *kɨɨ*

  b) in equative constructions with predicate NPs:

    kɨɨ – sometimes exclusively, sometimes in variation with the less preferred options *ciə*, *kɨɨ ciə* (formal style) and zero (informal style)

  c) in non-equative constructions with predicate NPs: *ciə* and *kɨɨ* usually judged equally acceptable, but *ciə* sometimes preferred; *kɨɨ ciə* (formal style) and zero (informal style) always possible but less preferred options

1.2 PREVIOUS ANALYSES

I am not aware of any detailed treatment of this issue in the literature on Cambodian. Some discussion can be found in basic grammars such as Ehrman (1972), Jacob (1968), and Noss and Proum (1966). However, the descriptions offered in these grammars are incomplete, and they differ on some important points, especially where copulative constructions are concerned.

For example, in Ehrman, no semantic distinction is made between the copulas *ciə*, *kɨɨ*, *kɨɨ ciə* and the zero copula. The copula *ciə* is defined as a copula which indicates that "the subject is a member of the class of objects named by the predicate"; it is the copula used in sentences such as 'This is a pencil' (1972:75). Concerning *kɨɨ*, Ehrman says that it "may be used with

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[1]   I have been assisted in my fieldwork on Cambodian by Mr Van So Chau, a native speaker of Cambodian.

the same meaning as *ciə*, except that where it is followed by more than one proper name, it is obligatory"; an example which requires *kɨɨ* is 'This is Sok, Suon, and Sos' (p.75). No examples are given for *kɨɨ ciə*, but Ehrman claims that it is "used like *ciə*" (p.76). Finally, the use of the zero copula is said to occur "in some cases...especially in predicates containing time words"; for example, in 'Today is Saturday' (p.76).

Jacob (1968:140–141) suggests that *ciə* and *kɨɨ* are semantically distinct. She claims that "*ciə* 'to be'...may be used when two nouns are linked by it", and she gives examples such as 'I am a teacher' and 'That girl is Mr. X's daughter' (p.140). Concerning *kɨɨ*, she notes that it is used "like *ciə* in linking two nouns but has the lexical meaning 'to be in essence, to be by nature'", as in the example 'What's this? It's coral' (p.141). Finally, she points out that two noun phrases may be linked by zero where *ciə* or *kɨɨ* would be expected; these are regarded as "ad hoc verbalisations of nominal constructs" as in the example 'She's a widow' (p.141).

Noss and Proum (1966:118–119) offer the most detailed account of which I am aware. They draw clear semantic distinctions between *ciə*, *kɨɨ*, and the zero copula. The word *ciə* is defined as 'to be a member of the class of', as in 'I'm a student' (p.119). In contrast, *kɨɨ* is defined as 'to be equivalent to', as in 'The biggest book of all is the one on the bottom' (p.118). Finally, the zero copula is interpreted as 'to be characterised by', as in 'My book is white' (p.118). In addition, Noss and Proum discuss the use of *nəw* as the locative 'to be (somewhere)', as in 'The blue book is on the bottom' (p.118), and the use of *mian* as the existential 'to be (in existence)', as in 'There are two books' (p.118).

Of the three descriptions, the one offered by Noss and Proum seems to be the best; in addition to being the most detailed, it is the one which, in general, most closely matches the material which I have elicited in fieldwork sessions with Mr Van So Chau. However, the match between Noss and Proum's description and the system exhibited by Mr Chau is not always exact. In addition, the overlap of functions of some variants, which is mentioned in Ehrman and Jacob but not in Noss and Proum, is abundant in my elicited material.

2. THE FORMS OF 'TO BE'

In the following sections, the various Cambodian forms and uses of 'to be' as given by Mr Chau are discussed individually.

2.1 EXISTENTIAL 'TO BE': *mian*

The verb *mian* is used for existence (EXT): 'there is/are', 'to be in existence'. No other copula is possible.

(1)   *Mian   siəwphəw   bɛy.*
         EXT   book   three
         There are three books.

The same verb is used for possession ('to have'); the possessor NP precedes the verb:

(2)   *Kɲom   mian   siəwphəw   bɛy.*
         I   EXT   book   three
         I have three books.

2.2 LOCATIVE 'TO BE': *(kɨɨ) nəw*

The Cambodian verb *nəw* means 'to be located' and is used to link a subject to a predicate indicating temporary or permanent location in space or time. In all contexts, *nəw* can be optionally preceded by the equative *kɨɨ*; there is no change in meaning, but the expanded form is characterised by Mr Chau as "unusual" and likely to occur in formal rather than informal styles. Locatives (LOC) are not formed with *mian, ciə, kɨɨ ciə*, or zero.

Examples (3)–(6) illustrate the use of *(kɨɨ) nəw* to indicate, respectively, temporary location of non-events in space, permanent location of non-events in space, spatial location of events and temporal location of events:

(3)   *Tidaa (kɨɨ)   nəw   pnum.piñ.*
        Tidaa COP   LOC   Phnom.Penh
        Tidaa is in Phnom Penh.

(4)   *Pnum.piñ   (kɨɨ)   nəw   kmɛr.*
        Phnom.Penh COP   LOC   Cambodia
        Phnom Penh is in Cambodia.

(5)   *Tii   pracuŋ (kɨɨ) nəw / kɨɨ / ʔciə sabaa.*
        place meeting COP LOC COP COP school
        The meeting is at school.

(6)   *Peil pracuŋ (kɨɨ) nəw / kɨɨ / ʔciə maon prampii.*
        time meeting COP LOC COP COP hour   seven
        The meeting is at seven o'clock.

In examples (5) and (6), the copulas *kɨɨ* and, more marginally, *ciə* can be used in place of *nəw* to link a subject NP with a predicate NP. In Cambodian, these constructions must be regarded as copulative rather than locative, although this distinction is lost in the English translations. The use of copulas in such constructions is treated in detail below, in the discussion of Cambodian copulative constructions.

2.3 COPULATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH STATIVE PREDICATES: zero, *kɨɨ*

Statives in Cambodian, unlike adjectives in English, are full verbs and so do not require any other accompanying verb, such as a copula (COP). It may be noted that *nəw, mian, ciə*, and *kɨɨ ciə* are never possible in stative constructions. The behaviour of *kɨɨ* is unique; while it is nearly always less preferred than zero, it is "less bad" than the other variants in combination with a stative verb:

(7)   *Tidaa (?kɨɨ) lʔaa.*
        Tidaa COP   good
        Tidaa is good.

Choice of copula does not seem to depend on whether the predicate indicates permanent or temporary qualities:

(8)   *Tidaa (?kɨɨ) lʔaa   krup   peil.ve.liə.*
        Tidaa COP   good   all   time
        Tidaa is good all the time.

(9)   *Tidaa (ʔkɨɨ) kampuŋ   lʔaa.*
         Tidaa COP   PROGRESSIVE good
         Tidaa is good right now.

Zero is generally preferred in sentences with an expletive subject:

(10)   *Viə (ʔkɨɨ) lʔaa   dael tidaa səmlap trəy.*
         it   COP   good   that Tidaa kill   fish
         It's good that Tidaa killed the fish.

There is one exception to the preference for zero with stative verb predicates. In complex sentences in which the lack of an overt copula would result in ambiguity, *kɨɨ* is preferable to zero:

(11)   *Dael   tidaa   səmlap   trəy   kɨɨ   lʔaa.*
                                          ?0
         that   Tidaa   kill   fish   COP   good
         That Tidaa killed the fish is good.

The problem with zero in this sentence is that it can allow *lʔaa* to be interpreted as a modifier of fish, giving the reading 'that Tidaa killed the good fish'. If the order of the clause constituents is changed to avoid the possibility of this reading, as in example (10), then the zero copula is preferred.

2.4 IDENTIFICATION AND ATTRIBUTION: COPULATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH NP PREDICATES: *kɨɨ, ciə, kɨɨ ciə*, zero

This is an area where there is a high degree of overlap between variants; the lack of consensus in the literature regarding the meaning and use of the different forms can probably be attributed to the fact that they are interchangeable in many contexts. The most important distinction to be made in this area is between *kɨɨ* and *ciə*; *kɨɨ ciə* and the zero copula are stylistic variants which, in general, can replace *kɨɨ* or *ciə* regardless of semantic context. Constructions with *kɨɨ ciə* are characterised by Mr Chau as "needlessly wordy" and appropriate in more formal registers, while the zero copula is characterised as "incorrect, but sometimes heard in rapid speech". The form *kɨɨ ciə* and the zero copula were given as possible but of marginal status for all copulative sentences, except in the case of purely equative constructions (see below), in which *kɨɨ* is the only possibility. The focus of the following discussion will be limited to the distribution of the stylistically unmarked options *kɨɨ* and *ciə*.

In general, *kɨɨ* is an equative copula, whose function is to identify one NP with another; the basic meaning of *A kɨɨ B* is something like '(the thing named by) A is equal to (the thing named by) B'. In contrast, *ciə* is a copula with attributive function; it links a subject NP with a predication. The basic meaning of *A ciə B* is something like '(the thing named by) A can be characterised as B' or 'B is a characteristic of (the thing named by) A'.

This seems to correspond to the distinction that Lyons (1977:185) makes between equative and predicative copulative sentences. According to Lyons, a sentence like (12) can have two readings:

(12)   *Giscard d'Estaing is the president of France.*