VARIABILITY IN CAMBODIAN COPULAR CONSTRUCTIONS: 
A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

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: (kii) naw
3) copulative
   a) with predicate adjectives: zero, kii
   b) in equative constructions with predicate NPs:
      kii – sometimes exclusively, sometimes in variation with the less preferred options cio, 
      kii cio (formal style) and zero (informal style)
   c) in non-equative constructions with predicate NPs: cio and kii usually judged equally 
      acceptable, but cio sometimes preferred; kii cio (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 cio, kii, kii 
cio and the zero copula. The copula cio 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 kii, 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.

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the same meaning as *cia*, except that where it is followed by more than one proper name, it is obligatory”; an example which requires *kii* is ‘This is Sok, Suon, and So’ (p.75). No examples are given for *kii cia*, but Ehman claims that it is “used like *cia*” (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 *cia* and *kii* are semantically distinct. She claims that “*cia* ‘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 *kii*, she notes that it is used “like *cia* 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 *cia* or *kii* 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 *cia*, *kii*, and the zero copula. The word *cia* is defined as ‘to be a member of the class of’, as in ‘I’m a student’ (p.119). In contrast, *kii* 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 *naw* 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 Ehman 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 siawphaw bey.*
     EXT book three
     There are three books.

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

(2)  *Knom mian siawphaw bey.*
     I EXT book three
     I have three books.
2.2 LOCATIVE ‘TO BE’: (kii) 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 kii; 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, cia, kii cia, or zero.

Examples (3)–(6) illustrate the use of (kii) 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 (kii) nəw pnum.piŋ.
Tidaa COP LOC Phnom.Penh
Tidaa is in Phnom Penh.

(4) Pnum.piŋ (kii) nəw kmər.
Phnom.Penh COP LOC Cambodia
Phnom Penh is in Cambodia.

(5) Tii pracq (kii) nəw / kii / ?cia sabaa.
place meeting COP LOC COP COP school
The meeting is at school.

(6) Peil pracq (kii) nəw / kii / ?cia maon prampii.
time meeting COP LOC COP COP hour seven
The meeting is at seven o’clock.

In examples (5) and (6), the copulas kii and, more marginally, cia 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, kii

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, cia, and kii cia are never possible in stative constructions. The behaviour of kii 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 (?kii) 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 (?kii) lʔaa krup peil.ve.liə.
Tidaa COP good all time
Tidaa is good all the time.
(9) Tidaa (ʔkii) kampuŋ lʔaa.
Tidaa COP PROGRESSIVE good
Tidaa is good right now.

Zero is generally preferred in sentences with an expletive subject:

(10) Viə (ʔkii) 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, ʔkii is preferable to zero:

(11) Dael tidaa səmlap trəy ʔkii lʔaa.
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: ʔkii, ciə, ʔkii 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 ʔkii and ciə; ʔkii ciə and the zero copula are stylistic variants which, in general, can replace ʔkii or ciə regardless of semantic context. Constructions with ʔkii 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 ʔkii 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 ʔkii is the only possibility. The focus of the following discussion will be limited to the distribution of the stylistically unmarked options ʔkii and ciə.

In general, ʔkii is an equative copula, whose function is to identify one NP with another; the basic meaning of A ʔkii 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.