

Autolexical solutions to the problem of “parts of speech” in Southeast Asian languages

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0. Introduction

The syntax of Southeast Asian languages can appear quite difficult when observed from an ethnocentric perspective, and this complexity is often compounded when one applies a theoretical perspective which forces lexical items into fixed syntactic categories determined by putative universal considerations. This paper uses the notion of syntactic polysemy or syntactic flexibility (Ratliff 1991) to discuss the nature of word classes in Khmer and a few other Southeast Asian languages. Specifically, I will concentrate on several words which appear in a wide variety of syntactic contexts, not merely nouns and verbs, but also modals, adverbs, prepositions, and classifiers.

1. Clarifying what we mean by “parts of speech”

By using the Autolexical technique of separating syntactic considerations from semantic considerations (Sadock 1991), and having a distinct inventory of word classes (or categories) at each level, the often confusing problem of determining “parts-of-speech” is made much easier. Let’s start with categories which have traditionally been at least somewhat controversial: “relator-nouns”, “classifiers”, and “coverbs”. These terms have a tendency to be defined in purely language-specific terms, usually by positional factors since morphology is not much help in mainland Southeast Asian languages. For pedagogical purposes it is often useful to determine lexical categories simply on the basis of co-occurrence restrictions. As we shall see, however, this approach leads to analytical problems in the languages which allow widespread deletion, as is the case with most of the isolating languages of Southeast Asia.

Consider the Khmer word presented in (1).

- 1) ក្នុង <knɔŋ> /knɔŋ/ 'inside'

Headley (1977) glosses it as a predicative with the meanings in, inside, within, during and gives the following examples (inter alia):

- a. ក្នុងឆ្នាំនេះ
/knɔŋ chnam nih/
in year this
'during this year'
- b. ក្នុងស្រុក
/knɔŋ srok/
'in the country'
- c. ចូលក្នុង
/coul knɔŋ/
'Go inside!'
- d. ដាក់សៀវភៅក្នុងប្រអប់
/dak siəwphəu knɔŋ prɔʔɔp/
'to put books in a box'

Even these few examples serve to show the diversity of the uses of /knɔŋ/. The semantic range is not very broad, with all senses having to do with a notion of being located inside of something, but the syntax is less clear. For the most part, it seems to be a preposition but in (1.c) either a nominal or adverbial analysis seems more appropriate. One might want to claim that (1.c) is parallel to the English translation, where one can claim that 'inside' is a preposition with a deleted object. Yet analyzing *knɔŋ* as a preposition (or, as Jacob 1968 does, a pre-nominal particle) requires justification, because it is most commonly found

following the lexeme *nəu* in the following structure (1.e):

- e. នៅក្នុងវាំង
 /nəu knoŋ vɔ̌at/
 be-in in temple
 'in the temple'

By examining this phrase alone we cannot discover the syntactic structure. And imagine the trouble we will get into if we start defining our syntactic structures in terms of the presence or absence of *knoŋ*! A fuller sentence (1.f) does not clarify matters:

- f. គ្រូនៅក្នុងវាំង
 /kruu nəu knoŋ vɔ̌at/
 teacher be-in in temple
 'The teacher is in the temple'

Although it appears that *nəu* is the main verb, and that *knoŋ* heads a prepositional phrase, the addition of another word muddies the waters (1.g):

- g. គ្រូដេកនៅក្នុងវាំង
 /kruu deek nəu knoŋ vɔ̌at/
 teacher sleep be-in in temple
 'The teacher sleeps in the temple'

And as further support we can front the constituent headed by /*nəu*/ (1.h):

h. នៅក្នុងវត្តគ្រូដេក

/nəu knoŋ vōat kruu deec/

in inside temple teacher sleep

'In the temple, the teacher sleeps'

For this reason, (Jacob 1968) treated *nəu-knoŋ* as a compound preposition in such cases. (Note, by the way, that written Khmer does not separate words.) I present these facts as an introduction to the problem at hand, namely the identification of syntactic categories or parts of speech. I will not go into any further analysis here, but note that *nəu* was the subject of Schiller 1984, and that the analysis of *knoŋ* as a preposition is justified in Schiller 1991c.

Let us now turn to a case involving a classifier. Although classifiers are not as robust a category in Khmer as they are in, say, Thai, there are still many cases where they are obligatory. For counting ordinary people, the word used is *něaʔ*, which follows the numeral as shown in (2):

2) ម្នាក់ <ʔnăk> /něaʔ/ 'person'

នាក់ <năk> /něaʔ/ classifier for common people¹

a. មនុស្សពីរនាក់

/manuh pii něaʔ/

person 2 CL

'two persons'

But the word is also used as a pronoun (usually second person²) as shown in (2.b) and is also the head noun in compounds (2.c,d):