

PARTS OF SPEECH IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES: AN AUTOLEXICAL VIEW

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O. Introduction

The syntax of Southeast Asian languages often seems quite difficult when observed from a perspective based on the study of European languages. This complexity is often compounded when one applies a theoretical perspective which forces lexical items into fixed syntactic categories determined by what are claimed to be universal considerations. This paper uses the notion of syntactic polysemy (Schiller 1989) or syntactic flexibility (Ratliff to appear) 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. "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 clearer. Categories which have traditionally been at least somewhat controversial, such as "relator-nouns", "classifiers", and "coverbs", are easier to deal with when syntactic, semantic, and morphological considerations are dealt with separately. These notions 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. However, this approach runs into real problems in the languages which permit 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 ɕhnam nih/
in year this
'during this year'

b. ក្នុងស្រុក
/knɔŋ srok/
in country
'in the country'

c. ចូលក្នុង
/coul knɔŋ/
enter inside
'Go inside!'

d. ដាក់សៀវភៅក្នុងប្រអប់
/dak siəwphəu knɔŋ prɑʔap/
put book inside box
'to put books in a box'

Just looking at these few examples, we can observe 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, /knɔŋ/ 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 just analyzing /knɔŋ/ as a preposition (or, in Jacob's (1968) terms, a pre-nominal particle) runs into trouble, because it is most commonly found following the lexeme <nəu> in the following structure (1.e):

e. នៅក្នុងវាំង
/nəu knɔŋ vɔət/
be-in inside temple
'in the temple'

By examining this phrase alone we cannot discover the syntactic structure. One can easily imagine the trouble that can arise if we start defining our syntactic structures in terms of the presence or absence of /knɔŋ/. Even if we expand our example into a fuller sentence (1.f), it does not clarify matters:

f. គ្រូនៅក្នុងវត្ត

/kruu nəu knoŋ vɔət/
 teacher be-in in temple
 'The teacher is in the temple'

It appears that /nəu/ is the main verb, and that /knoŋ/ heads a prepositional phrase. Still, the addition of another word renders this judgement less clear (1.g).

g. គ្រូលេងនៅក្នុងវត្ត

/kruu deek nəu knoŋ vɔət/
 teacher sleep be-in in temple
 'The teacher sleeps in the temple'

Here it is clear that /deek/ is the main verb, and /nəu/ therefore must be either a preposition or a serial verb. The serial verb analysis is dubious in view of the fact that the constituent headed by /nəu/ can be fronted (1.h), which is not typical of serial verb constructions in Khmer.

h. នៅក្នុងវត្តគ្រូលេង

/nəu knoŋ vɔət kruu deek/
 in inside temple teacher sleep
 'In the temple, the teacher sleeps'

Judith Jacob (1968) treated /nəu-knoŋ/ as a compound preposition in such cases. (Note that since written Khmer does not separate words, we can not use the written language as a diagnostic.) 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).

A particularly interesting, and typically Southeast Asian type of word is the classifier. Although classifiers are not as robust a category in Khmer as they are in languages such as Thai, there are still many cases where they are obligatory. For counting ordinary people, the word used is /nĕəʔ/, which follows the numeral as shown in (2.a):

- 2) អ្នក <ʔnək> /nĕəʔ/ 'person'
 នាក់ <nək> /nĕəʔ/ classifier for common people¹
- a. មនុស្សពីរនាក់
 /mənuh pli nĕəʔ/
 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):

- b. អ្នកមកលេងជាមួយខ្ញុំ ច្បើនៈ?
 /nĕəʔ mɔɔk leɛj cĕə-muəy kʰnom thɿai nihʔ/
 person come play with me day this
 'Are you coming to play with me today?'
- c. អ្នកណាស់នៅផ្ទះនោះ?
 /nĕəʔ naa rōəh nəu ptĕəh nuhʔ/
 person wh live be-in house that
 'Who lives in that house?'
- d. អ្នកគ្រូរស់នៅផ្ទះនោះ
 /nĕəʔ kruu rōəh nəu ptĕəh nuh./
 person teacher live be-in house that
 'The teacher lives in that house.'

One might suggest that in each case the classifier can be analyzed as a noun, and that classifiers are merely a subcategory of nouns. There is a major flaw in this treatment. In Khmer, classifiers generally do have the form of nouns, but they do not show the syntactic behaviour of nouns, in that they do not combine with adjectives and cannot be full NP's or even N. When used as a pronoun, the word does not take modifiers but must act as a complete N, as is usually the case with pronouns. Thus (2.d) cannot be interpreted as meaning 'You, teacher, live in that house' or 'Your teacher lives in that house.', though the last reading might be obtained by switching the order of /nĕəʔ/

¹ This spelling is used for the classifier only. Headley (1977) points out the similarity to Malay *anak* 'child', which better fits the <ʔnak> spelling.

² As pointed out in Schiller (1988), the pronominal system of Khmer is much messier than the literature indicates.