

LANGUAGE PLANNING AND LANGUAGE POLICY OF CAMBODIA

Thel Thong

1. INTRODUCTION

The people of Cambodia called themselves Khmer and referred to their language as /phiisaakhmae/¹ or simply Khmer. Khmer is one of the most important members of the Mon-Khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic family of languages. The number of speakers as of the 1970s was over 7,000,000 in Cambodia, in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam, in the Thai provinces bordering Cambodia and in lower Laos.

Khmer is a language with a literary tradition dating at least from the early 7th century. It was attested in the early Khmer inscriptions at Ak Yom in 609 AD, Angkor Borey in 611 AD and Prasat Toch in 620 AD. But the most important one was the inscription of Kdei Ang Chumnik with 12 lines in archaic Khmer dated 629 AD. The historical periods of Khmer may be divided into three main parts: Old Khmer, Middle Khmer and Modern Khmer. In this paper, the most recent part of the development of Modern Khmer is dealt with. It covers the period from the French occupation of Cambodia to the present.

Indian influence is apparent in the vocabulary of Khmer. Native Khmer words are either monosyllabic or disyllabic. Words referring to literature, administration, royalty, religion and specific subjects in the field of education are mostly borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit. From the 7th century AD to the heyday of Angkor, Khmer and Sanskrit existed side by side. They were the languages of stone inscriptions. From the 13th century, Pali took the place of Sanskrit following the spread of Theravada Buddhism.

For two centuries from the time of ransacking of the capital city of Angkor in the 14th century AD, and the capital city of Longvek in the late 16th century AD by the Thai, Khmer was in the darkest period of its history. For a long period, the Thais had political supremacy over Cambodia. Cambodian princes and Buddhist monks were educated in Thailand. Thai influence on Cambodian language, literature, culture and administration was inevitable. It was a kind of re-borrowing from Thai which included much that the Thai had previously borrowed from Cambodia at the time of Angkor. During this period Khmer suffered a serious setback as the result of the loss of territorial integrity. The western and north-western provinces became part of Thailand. Khmer in Thailand became a separate dialect: the dialect of Surin and of Chantabun. The delta of the Mekong river became part of Vietnam where another dialect was spoken, Khmer Krom. From the arrival of French in Cambodia to the 1950s, three main languages were used in Cambodia: Khmer, the native language; Pali, the language of Buddhism - which was also the lingua franca of South-east Asia; and French. Language planning in Cambodia thus involves at least these three languages; but in this paper, emphasis is given to Khmer.

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1.1 General linguistic background of Modern Khmer

The Khmer alphabet had been borrowed from one of the languages which was used in the south of India in the 6th century. Three types are currently used. The italic type and the straight type are used for handwriting and printing. The round script type (which is a careful and artistic writing) is used in transcribing religious texts of the Pali language. It is also commonly used as capital letters for title of books, general notices and commercial advertisement boards. The main punctuation is the full stop ្ក; the symbol *Essum* is used at the end of a chapter or of a book. The words used in a phrase or a short sentence are usually written with no spaces between them. In Khmer, capital letters are not used to start sentences or to write proper names; but bold scripts can be used for emphasis.

The Khmer writing system is syllabo-phonemic.² The presence of two inherent vowels /aa/ and /oo/ is one of the characteristic features of the Khmer alphabet which influences the choice of consonants and vowels in consonant clusters and syllables of the forms CCV, CCVCV and CVCV. There are a number of rules to determine the dominant group of consonants which can retain its inherent vowel and those that cannot. Khmer words are predominantly of one or two syllables. Syllables are of the form V, VC, CV, CVC, CCV and CCVC. Khmer is like English in that it has syllable stress and intonation patterns associated with sentences. Some characteristic features of Khmer syllables are as follows:

- a consonant cluster is composed of only two consonants, occasionally with a connecting schwa;
- only some consonants may occur in syllable-final position;
- consonant clusters do not occur at the end of a syllable;
- a glottal stop can assume the function of an initial consonant, a second element of a cluster, or a final consonant;
- final consonants are not released.

The tendency of Khmer toward mono- and disyllabic words with a definite internal syllable structure leads to shortening of polysyllabic loanwords, known as a Khmerisation process. The process consists of:

- contracting of consonants into consonant groups;
- dropping of intermediate vowels;
- dropping of syllables or part of a syllable.

Although Khmer was considerably enriched by words borrowed from foreign languages, it has lost none of its own characteristics. It has preserved its basic word stock and its grammatical features. Khmer has derivational prefixes and infixes which can alter the meaning of the word or change its part of speech. Affixation is also used to coin new words from roots or stems borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit. Apart from derived words formed by affixation, the morphological aspects of Khmer words do not enable us to determine their parts of speech.

The sentence structure is basically SVO. Khmer does not express grammatical relationship by means of suffixes as in English. It has recourse to auxiliary words. The plural of a noun is expressed by adding words which mean many or few or simply by repeating the same word twice. Khmer questions are formed by adding the question particles /taaə/ in front of an affirmative sentence, and /teé/ at the end of it and pronouncing the sentence with rising intonation. In casual speech, only the particle /teé/ is used and it is similar in meaning to the English tag-question. The substance questions of the types *who*, *whom*, *where*,

what and *when* are formed by placing the particle /teé/ in front of the affirmative sentence and placing the question word in the sentence where the corresponding noun or phrase would go.

2. MONASTERY SCHOOL AND LANGUAGE PLANNING³

Education has been a major concern in Cambodia for centuries. Monastery schools run by Buddhist monks were in operation in mediaeval times. The French took over Cambodia in 1863, and a Western school system was slowly introduced. The monastery school operated in most villages until Cambodia got its independence from France in 1953. Instruction in these schools was open to boys only. Subjects taught were reading, writing, basic arithmetic, woodwork, masonry, blacksmithing and basketry. The last year in the monastery school included principles of Buddhism, the code of ethics for boys, religious literature and poetry. Pali was taught only to novice Buddhist monks in the elementary schools for Pali.

The monastery schools throughout the country were the institutions which promoted the Cambodian language and Buddhism. Though Khmer was used as a medium of instruction, there were neither formal curriculum nor proper teaching methods. They varied from one school to another, even within the same province. Spelling and writing style depended mainly on the ability of the Buddhist monk teachers who ran the schools. Each school has its own method, teaching practices and choice of texts. One common factor was the school timetable; classes were held in the afternoon. The principal textbooks were poetry, novels with religious themes and codes of ethics. All the texts were written on palm leaves or on scrolls.

In 1911, a royal decree ordered that Khmer was to be taught throughout the kingdom. The first attempt to modernise the teaching of Khmer and to set up a uniform curriculum in the monastery schools was undertaken in 1908 by Mr Boudoin in Kampong Cham. Unfortunately, it was abandoned a few years later. In 1921, a second attempt was carried out in Kampot by Mr Ménétrier with the full support of the French governor and the Buddhist diocese. They agreed on the following points:

- confer the traditional education to Buddhist monks;
- open a teaching method workshop centre for Buddhist monk teachers;
- Khmer was to be the medium language of instruction;
- basic curriculum was based on Cambodian morals, reading, writing and basic arithmetic.

At the end of the workshop, the Buddhist monk teachers returned to their monasteries and ran their renovated monastery schools on their own. From 1924 to 1930, 58 monastery schools were opened with a school population of more than 3,000 children. A similar system was put into practice in other provinces after the example of the province of Kampot. It was well accepted by the local people and the Buddhist monks. It was a great success in upholding Khmer and updating the traditional education in Cambodia. And once again Khmer had regained its pride among the local people.

The renovated monastery schools operated side by side with the public schools up to 1953. From 1954, the monastery schools became public elementary schools or primary schools. And those in a large agglomeration of villages could expand to accommodate high schools.

3. MODERN KHMER IN RELIGIOUS CIRCLES AND SCHOOLS

The primary schools and the high schools of Pali and the Buddhist University have been the second most important agency in promoting Khmer in religious circles. Khmer has at all times been the medium language of instruction in these institutions. In the 1930s, the Buddhist Institute organised a religious tour headed by outstanding Buddhist monks who visited important monasteries in South Vietnam and preached Buddhist doctrine in Khmer. This tour also used mobile library vans. They visited monasteries and villages in the remote areas in Cambodia. Buddhist monks and villagers were able to buy or borrow Cambodian books. It was a great success and an efficient means of promoting Khmer and Buddhism.

In the 1930s, a group of educated Buddhist monks and well-known Buddhist lay people promoted the translation of basic Buddhist texts such as daily prayers into Khmer, and started to use Khmer in chanting instead of Pali. This move to Khmerise Buddhist texts sparked a serious quarrel between the conservative religious leaders and the innovative group. Buddhist monks and Buddhist lay people were split in two opposing camps, the conservative school and the renovative one. The religious confrontation dragged along for two decades. Finally, in 1950, the renovating group won the battle. This was a big step in revising Buddhist teaching for the common people who did not understand Pali. The renovative group completed the translation of the Tripitaka, the book of Buddhist doctrine and teaching, in 1969 which was followed by a nationwide inauguration of the holy text in the same year.

Pali was the second most important language after Khmer before the arrival of French in Cambodia. The schools of Pali were organised by Buddhist monks with the support of religious leaders and Buddhist lay people. Pali schools were opened in most important monasteries, for Buddhist monks who wanted to gain deep insight into Buddhism. Pali was the lingua franca of Buddhism in South-east Asia. The growth of the Pali schools was mainly the work of the Buddhist monks. They organised their own curriculum which was partly for religion and partly for modern education. The language of instruction was Khmer from primary to tertiary level. The head of the monastery and his two deputies were recruited from student monks of the Pali schools. This made the religious school education more attractive. The religious education opened a High School of Pali in Phnom Penh in 1914. In 1925, a committee for the examination of books published by the school of Pali was formed. In the 1960s, the highest religious institution, the Buddhist University, was opened in Phnom Penh. The religious institutions and the Buddhist monks were the spearhead of Khmerisation from the very early 20th century in the history of Cambodian education. Khmer progressed gradually behind the religious shield of Buddhism. During this period, a certain degree of standardisation of Khmer went on in the monastery.

4. FRENCH LANGUAGE IN CAMBODIA

The French implemented a French language policy in Cambodia. They introduced modern education and gradually established primary schools in most of the important provinces. French was the language of instruction. Most Cambodians were not enthusiastic about this new system of education. They stuck to the monastery school of their own village.

The French authorities were desperately in need of Cambodians who could speak French to assist them in running the country. The first public primary school was opened in Phnom Penh in 1873. A school for training Cambodian interpreters was opened in Phnom Penh in 1885. Upon the completion of six years in