

Features and types of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances in spoken Khmer

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This study examines lexical, paralinguistic, kinesic, and situational features of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances by Cambodians in the Khmer language in terms of Khmer-language terminology for classifying these utterances. While, as with spoken English, there is considerable overlap between the categories used to classify such utterances, this study seeks to identify key features which place utterances in particular categories.

Examples of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic utterances were collected from over 100 Cambodian videocassettes produced in Cambodia since 1990.¹ While most of the videos were low-budget theatrical movies, videocassettes of on-stage comedy performances were also included. Five Cambodian-American informants aided in validating the interpretations made of the content and intent of the utterances as well as in corroborating that particular features were relevant in how an utterance should be classified.² Khmer-language categories for classifying utterances were obtained not only from English-Khmer dictionaries but also the Institut Bouddhique's *Vacananukram Khmer* (1968).³

Informants frequently related utterances more to perceived intent than lexical, paralinguistic, or kinesic features in the performance of an utterance. Although there was agreement among informants on the classification of many of the utterances, some utterances were not consistently classified. This seems to reflect not only the difficulty in classifying utterances with subtle cues but also some disagreement among the informants in terms of the semantic boundaries of some of the categories. In the following discussion regularities across utterances are described and examples of utterances in a number of specific Khmer-language categories are presented.

Common Features

Ladd (1980) has suggested that some features tone of voice may be relatively universal across languages. Tone of voice, as a paralinguistic feature, and kinesics for the utterances examined in this study were generally found to resemble those

in English. Intonational and lexical features were, as Ladd (1980) would also predict, specific to Khmer.

Utterances aimed at hurting another individual often included one or more of the following features: sentence intonation associated with anger, facial expression associated with anger, confrontive eye contact, and lexical choices showing disrespect.

Based on the examples observed it seems that anger is evidenced in Khmer speech by a general rise in pitch and volume. Angry statements thus seem to be spoken in a higher tone of voice and a louder manner than non-angry statements. In some angry statements pitch rises across the sentence with the highest pitch occurring on the last syllable which may be given particularly strong stress. Depending on whether the utterance is a statement or question, the voice falls or rises on the last syllable.

Hurtful utterances were also usually spoken with eye contact with the person to whom the remark was addressed. Sometimes this occurred only as a glance while at other times a stare was maintained.

Speakers of hurtful utterances also tended to display facial expressions associated with anger. These included frowns and the tightening of the muscles around the eyes in the manner of the scowl.

Hurtful utterances also tended to display certain lexical features that indicated disrespect. The most common feature was the choice of familiar pronouns, ដង្ហែ (ʔaɛŋ) for you and

អ៊ើញ (ʔaŋ) for I, and the use of the address particle អី (ʔaː).

អី precedes a name, pronoun, or other word of address in speaking to another or may be used as a term of address by itself (Jacob 1968; Huffman 1970). Placing this particle before a word decreases the amount of respect that would otherwise be associated with the term of address. For example, អី សំណាញ់

(familiar address particle followed by friend) takes a term of address which is not particularly respectful and converts it to a term of contempt unless the interaction is between intimates. Although these pronouns and vocative particles also occurred in non-hurtful statements in which close friends talked, these words clearly marked disrespect and hurtful intent when interactants were not well-acquainted. Less commonly, hurtful

statements also displayed the choice of disrespectful terms when choices were possible, for example, the use of the most disrespectful term for eat (ឆ្អី) rather than more respectful forms.

Utterances that were intended as non-hurtful teasing contrasted with the above features. Such utterances were often marked by smiles, non-derisive laughter, and softer and more relaxed vocal qualities. They were often accompanied by terms of address followed by the addition of a syllable produced by lengthening the last consonant of the term of address to become the first letter of an unstressed syllable with the remainder of the syllable consisting of (əh). Ehrman (1972) described such added unstressed syllables as deriving from particles. Huffman (1970) described this particular modification of the final particle as resulting from ឆ្អី⁺, a particle soliciting agreement or a yes

answer from the hearer. Huffman (1970) noted that some speakers generalize this particle to use at the end of nearly any sentence. The application of this particle to terms of address seems to have produced another address particle.

Sarcastic utterances often displayed some of the same features as hurtful utterances in general, but such features were often less marked. Some types of sarcastic utterances relied primarily on subtle lexical features.

Types of Utterances

Informants tended to classify utterances more on the basis of intent and situation rather than other features. The most common term used for an insult was ឆ្អី (ce:r) but informants often added that the best examples were those in which cursing occurred (something rarely seen in Cambodian movies). ឆ្អី statements are well-described by the general features described above for hurtful statements.

ឆ្អីក៏ (cəmɔ:k) conforms rather closely with the English verb to mock. A hurtful intent accompanies these statements. In the samples from Cambodian videos ឆ្អីក៏ was often accompanied by a haughty facial expression. Some statements were accompanied by unusual intonation or derisive

laughter. The use of ឯង and អី were also common. A good example of this type of statement is the following:

Source: ហ៊ានស្កត់នាឯណា? (Angkor Wat Video)

ធ្វើ ប្រក ដូច គេ ទើប ចុះ មក ពី ហ៊ានស្កត់
Acts behavior like he just descend come from heaven.

This statement, which was spoken by a young woman who was fed up with her boyfriend, ends with an unusual intonation of the word for heaven with a slow fall on the last syllable that starts from an unusually high pitch.

ចំអាន់ (com?an) contrasts with ចំអក់ in not having a hurtful intent. It aligns closely with the English verb to tease. Speakers using these statements often smiled or laughed during the utterance. Such statements were always spoken between people (characters) who knew each other well. Although ឯង and អី occur in such statements, the use of the particle ហ្ន៎ as an address particle seems to further distinguish such statements from those intended to be hurtful. A terse example of this type of statement is:

Source: អាយ័ស្មៀនមាញ់ចាប៉ីប្រាជ្ញឃ្លួន (CMI Video)

អញ្ចឹង បានតែធាត់
then reason why fat

This statement from an ayae performance is spoken by a woman who has just endured teasing about how skinny she is. After her male ayae partner declares he is a doctor and can help her gain weight, she expresses surprise that he is a doctor then teases him with the above statement that means "Oh, that's why you are fat!" Informants explained that not being thin was seen as a sign of being healthy and that doctors are expected to be

healthier than other people, because they know how to stay well. Her intonation and accompanying smile as well as the fact that she is turning the tables on his previous teasing, identify this statement as merely teasing. Nonetheless, her male partner does not greatly appreciate the comment.

A common type of hurtful statement in Cambodian videos is the មើលងាយ (mɔːlɿŋiːəy). This term comes from the two words "see easily". Jacob (1974:152) notes that this phrase means "do you see?". These statements have the same features as ជេរ statements but are limited to situations in which someone puts someone in their place. In Cambodian films this occurs when someone of a higher social class criticizes someone of lower social standing for engaging in behavior which is not acceptable for someone of their social status. The following example illustrates the above features:

Source: អ្នកដាំកែវភ្លើងកប៉ង (K. K. Productions)

ហ្នឹង:	នាង	ឯង	មិន	សុំ	ពន្លត់	ភ្លើង	ទាន
status	miss	you	not	ask for	blow out	flame	candle
នេះ	ទេ						
these	at all						

This statement, taken from a movie, reminds a young woman from the country that she should not be helping a temporarily blind, middle class man, whom she is caring for as a nurse, with successfully blowing out the candles on his cake. The angry intonation pattern and use of ឯង to a non-intimate are important features.

Some types of teasing statements were neutral enough that informants suggested that they were best called បង្អាប (bɔŋʔap), embarrassment. Such statements were delivered in a rather dead-pan manner. Consider the following statement:

Source: ចុះខ្ញុំសន្សំ! (Preah Vihear Video)

ញ៉ាំ	ដូច	ជ្រូក	អញ្ចឹង	បាន	ទំនិញ	ឡើង
eat	like	pig	then	result	merchandise	climb
ថ្លៃ		រាល់	ថ្ងៃ			
expensive		everyday				

The statement means something like "It's because you eat like a pig that the prices have been going up so much at the market. (e.g. you eat so much that there is a scarcity of food thus driving up prices)". This statement is spoken by a man to a household visitor whom he perceives as an inconvenience. It is spoken as a matter of fact without features associated with other forms of teasing or mocking.

Another type of insulting statement is the ចំអាស់ (cəmʔaːh). Dictionary definitions (Vacananukram Khmer 1968; Jacob 1974) give two entries for this word. The first means to wash a corpse, while the second is to speak very coarsely or obscenely to a woman. In non-theatrical usage, these statements are normally insults that involve sexual references. Such statements occur almost exclusively in Cambodian videos in ayae and live comedy performances where they are intended to be crude but funny. Curiously, in these performances women often insult men with sexual reference as well. A good example of this statement as it occurs in ayae is:

Source: ក្រមស្រស់កម្លោះចោម (S. M. Productions)

ចិត្ត	មិន	បាន	ដូច	ឆ្កែ	ខែ	ក្រដឹក
heart	not	have	like	dog	month	in-heat

This statement which means "You aren't capable of love and act like a female dog in heat" is spoken by a character who has just found his wife flirting with another man. The statement is spoken with intonation associated with hurtful statements. Such statements often rely on double entendres with sexual meanings.

A number of additional categories were important in how informants interpreted insulting, teasing, and sarcastic

statements. For some of these categories, insulting, teasing, or sarcastic statements may occur as variations of the type of statement. These categories are ផ្លែផ្កា , លេបខាយ , ការមិនជឿ, and ញ៉ែ.

ផ្លែផ្កា (phlae-phka:) literally means "fruit-flower". The term is used to identify statements relying on subtle word play. These statements at one level appear to be about something else other than their actual intent. Two examples are helpful in illustrating this concept.

Source: ចុះខ្ញុំឱសអ្វី! (Preah Vihear Video)

ទ្រូលន់ ដល់ ហើយ អា ស្ទាវ ជើង ជ្រូក
fatty arrive already address particle soup foot pig

ជាមួយ ត្រឡាច ហ្នឹង
with wintermelon right there

In this first example taken from a Cambodian movie, a young woman who has just been embarrassed about her behavior responds with what appears to be a comment about the soup. The statement appears to say "The meat is really fatty in this pigsfeet with wintermelon soup". But the key here is the use of the address particle អា which is not likely to be used to get the attention of the soup. Informants understood this statement as directed to the man who embarrassed her at the table telling him that he is not a nice person. Pig is a common word in Khmer insults. This interpretation is also brought about by the use of the word meaning "right there" and by the fact that at the end of the statement the young woman points not at the soup but at the

young man across the table. In this way ផ្លែផ្លា is a means for expressing subtle insults.

ផ្លែផ្លា can also be used as a means of flirting or criticizing another. In the following example a lower-status male comments on the fact that his middle-class friend is having an affair. He does this with a parody on a Cambodian primary school tune used to learn arithmetic operations.

Source:	អណ្ណាតដុះផ្លែផ្លា		(Angkor Wat Video)	
បើ ចង់	ស្រណុក	ឲ្យ	យក	មួយ
បើ ចង់	ព្រួយ	ឲ្យ	យក	ពី
បើ ចង់	ខ្វល់ ស៊ី	ឲ្យ	យក	បី
បើ ចង់	ដេក ដី	ឲ្យ	យក	បួន
បើ ចង់	ងាប់ ខ្លួន	ឲ្យ	យក	ប្រាំ

Each line of this song is of the form "If you want to" _____ "take " some particular number from one to five. The first line means "If you want to have life easy take one". The second means "If you want to worry, take two". The third means "if you want to be hungry, take three". The fourth line means "If you want to sleep on the ground, take four. The final line means "If you want to die, take five". This rhyme is intended as a statement that the younger man knows about his friend's affair and does not approve.

For ផ្លែផ្លា examples, kinesic and paralinguistic features were less obvious and consistent. Lexical and semantic features appear to be the primary means of conveying statement intent.

លេបខាយ (lɛ:pɰha:y) as a term has two meanings.

Jacob (1974:174) defines the term as to flirt while Huffman and Proum (1977:114) define this term as "to extemporize appealingly and provocatively." Informants were also split on

this. However, it seems that the first definition is simply a narrower demarcation of the concept since men who engage in flirting often use such statements. An example of an utterance in the more general meaning of the term is:

Source: នេះគឺរឿងខ្ញុំ (Angkor Wat Video)

គេ	ថា	ប្រុស	ញញឹម	ស្រី	ញញឹម
they	say	man	smile	women	smile
ដូច	ស្ករ	ផ្អែម	ស្រមោច	អញ្ចឹង	
like	sugar	sweet	ant	like that	

This statement is uttered by an older woman who teases/scolds two young people. លេបខាយ statements have the potential to be insulting, teasing, or sarcastic.

ការមិនជឿ (ka:r`mun cwə) simply means disbelief.

Informants had no consistent term for classifying statements delivered with this intonation but indicated that such remarks indicated disbelief. Such statements are a form of sarcasm. In these statements the speaker contradicts what is said through special intonation. The following example displays this.

Source: ប្រមុំក្រមកំម្លែង៩៣ (Preah Vihear Video)

Wife: មក ពី ណា?

come from where?

Husband: ធ្វើការ

working

Wife: ធ្វើការ រហូត!

work throughout

This last statement normally is a statement that someone has been working all day. While most of the utterance is spoken

with normal statement intonation, the last syllable is spoken with a high rapidly falling and highly stressed intonation on the last syllable of the final word which has the effect of contradicting the overall statement. This intonation has the effect of changing the statement into "I don't believe you've been working all day". More examples will be needed to better understand sarcastic remarks of this type.

The last category to be discussed is ញ័្លៃ (nae). The

Vacananukram Khmer (1968:321) defines this as a way of speaking in a thin and hoarse voice. Informants explained that this represented a tone of voice and behavior that men adopt when they flirt with a woman. It is often characterized by hesitancies and almost cough-like sounds in speech as well as nonverbal behavior associated with flirtation or shyness.

Most utterances of this type in Cambodian movies are also examples of មិនអី. However, these statements are understood to express interest in the woman being teased. The woman's role in such encounters seems to be to respond with anger or even insults. Consider the following example:

Source: នាងធីតា (CMI Video)

Guy:	ភ្លៀង	ខ្លាំង	យ៉ាង	នេះ
	rain	hard	how	this
	អ្នកនាង	ខ្លាច	ទទឹក	ភ្លៀង ទេ,
	miss (polite)	afraid	get wet	rain ? particle
	អ្នកនាង	ប្តី		
	miss	particle		
Girl:	ខ្លាច	ឆ្កួត	អី?	
	afraid	crazy	what	
Guy:	ព្រោះ	ថា	នៅ	លើ
	because	say	located on	body

អ្នកនាង

miss (polite)

សុទ្ធតែ

only

របស់

things

ក្លែងក្លាយ ទាំងអស់

fake

all

The young man says, "Aren't you afraid to get wet?" The woman answers, "Why should I be afraid, you lunatic?" The young man responds, "Because everything about you is fake (and will wash off in the rain). Although there are features here of ចំអិន, there are other vocal and behavioral features that distinguish such instances as a special case.

Implications

This study is only an initial exploration of insulting, teasing, and sarcastic remarks in the Khmer language. While some paralinguistic and kinesic features associated with the utterance types examined in this study appear to be universal, some lexical and intonational features of types of utterances were identified which are specific to Khmer. Results suggest that additional work on the Khmer language on the use of unusual intonational features as markers of contradiction and lexical choices as markers of insulting and teasing remarks may be fruitful.

The results also underscore the pragmatic, contextual nature of utterances. Categories used by respondents remind us that the interpretation of language depends on the pragmatic considerations of context. Use of categories obtained from informants has the potential to aid foreign students of the Khmer language in better understanding the intent and relevant features of messages.

However, there are some limitations in generalizing these results to day-to-day interaction. Several informants periodically reminded me that we were watching theatrical presentations and that people did not talk this way in real life.

Certainly, some types of statements such as the ចំអិន were only observed in a stage comedy form. On the other hand, theatrical performances may offer fruitful examples of utterance types even though these utterances may be somewhat

exaggerated in comparison to everyday speech. Entertainment videos do seem to have potential as a source of utterances to be analyzed in the study of the pragmatics of Cambodian speech.

Notes

1. For the examples used to illustrate types of utterances, the name of the video from which the statement was taken and American video company distributing the video are given.
2. The author wishes to thank Polly Miech, Sophy Lim, Heang Taing, and particularly, Morokoth Ouk and Suos Sarin for their assistance in interpreting and transcribing the utterances.
3. Romanization of Khmer terms follows the system used by Jacob (1974) with the exception that the accent mark used to distinguish registers was omitted.

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