Coordinate Compounds and Khmer Phrase Structure
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In Khmer as in other isolating languages of SE Asia, lexical elaboration via both compounding and serialization is productive. Our focus in the following discussion will be on symmetrical coordination and the place of symmetrical compounds in Khmer grammar.

There is a strong tendency to use coordinate near-synonym compounds rather than single words in Khmer, as in other SE Asian languages. These compounds may be verb-verb, as in:

cnaj pisaa “tasty tasty”
doh khat “clean polish”
cruet criep “absorb absorb”
psaa pcoep “connect connect”
trəm “align” + trəw “correct”
prjɛn “instruct” (<riən “learn”) + prədaw “advise, edify”
khoh “wrong” + plaek “novel” = “different”
khookhəw “violent” + troskbat “treasonous”(1) = “violent”
kcəl “lazy” + crə ooh “sluggish” (< ‘ooh “drag”) = “slothful”
lənən “ignorant” + klaw “ineducable” = “dumb”
plum “light” + tlaa “bright, clear” = “bright and clear”
crənh rəəh “choose”+ “choose”
ciəh “detour around” + wiən “move aside” = “avoid”
səm “appropriate” + srəop “adapt” = “appropriate”
saak “test, try” + lbən “survey, test” (<*laən)(2) = “try, test”
wəiəc “dishonest, crooked” + wee “deviant” = “dishonest”
loən luə “resound, sound”
soh “all over” + saaj “spread out, diffuse” (>psaaj “propagate”) = “far and wide”
wət rəənəm “wither wilt”
krəm “dry, desiccated”+ krm “clot, bruised” = “sad”
kəp ‘cover” + dəndəp “cover to keep warm” = “cover (e.g. as clouds cover sky)”
puen “hide” + samnam “silence” (transitive verb <ηηηm “silent”) = “hide”
liet “extend” + santhəŋ “stretch” = “extend”
pruəŋ baarəm “anxious, worried”
kləŋ “strong” + klaa “courage” (> klahaan “brave”) = “proud and strong”
khooč “damage” + khaat “lose the use of” = “damage”
phaal “produce, utility” + prajooc “profit, use” = “profitability”
təŋ caŋ’iət “tight constrained”
bak “break (e.g. handle off something)” + baek “break (body of something)” = “break”
’ən “decline, be sickly, worsen” + thəaj “back up, reverse, diminish” = “decline, fade”
bieŋ biəŋ jiəjii “bother, annoy”
plah “change” + pdoon “change”
ṣət səiem “silent mute”.
prah “get away” + caak “leave” = “escape”
crah srəlah “clean, clear”
sok dom rəmniə “happiness”

They may (less frequently) be Noun- Noun:

bəmnaŋ pratnəa “goal” + “intention”
sok kseem ksaan “peace” + “peace”
baep jaaj “kind” + “sort”
krət kraam “law” + “law”
ləətəa wəl “vine” + “vine”
’əmnaa ’əkun “thanks” + “thanks”
kmaŋ sətrəw “enemy” + “enemy”.

Some V-V compounds remain verbs (and some even function as conjunctions or prepositions). But often the compound V-V becomes nominalized ipso facto(3):

tok phəə “worry afraid” > “suffering”
tok saok “worry, weep” > “suffering”
paŋŋəa wiəŋ wiəŋ “intelligent wise” > “intelligence”
saareəəh samkhan “important important” > “importance”
“connect” + “connect” > “connection”
“hide” + “hide” > “(the game of) hide and seek”

Though the number of such compounds seems to be indeterminate, not all combinations are equally frequent, or even possible. For example, the words mhoop (<hoop “eat”) “any food that goes with rice”, ‘ahaa, “food”, sbiṣṇ “provisions, rations, stock, supplies”, cάmnēj “food” (<cēj “eat”) all mean “food” and can be combined but only in the lexicalized formulas

mhoop ‘ahaa
mhoop cάmnēj
sbiṣṇ ‘ahaa
cάmnēj ‘ahaa

Similarly, priṇp, thiṇp, and prādooc all mean “compare” and can be combined only into the compounds

priṇp thiṇp
priṇp prādooc

Not all coordinate compounds are binomial. Sometimes three or more synonyms occur together:

prāhaṇ “disrespectful” + kaoj “crooked” + kaac “coarse, nasty, savage” = “excessive”

Sometimes, the coordination of two words will itself function as an element in a superordinate compound, so that in principle, the rule N --> NN is recursive:
cumnw “illness” + [ chw “ill” + tkat “???”(4)] = “illness”

The last example (which is not unique)(5) consists of a conjunction of a word with some distinct version of itself, and is therefore a particularly useful demonstration of the semantic redundancy of symmetrical compounds. Motivations for this kind of compounding are the subject of this paper.
Some reasons for the proliferation of these compounds are fairly obvious. The two conjoined synonyms may not in fact always be entirely synonymous, and so their combination is thus slightly richer or different in meaning from either one on its own. Examples are:

cηοj “fragrant” + cηαη “delicious”
trαbak “snap at” + kham “bite”
bak “break (e.g. handle off)” + baek “break (e.g. into two or more pieces)”

A frequent correlate of compounding is that while single words have a concrete meaning, their combination or reduplication can have a figurative or metaphorical one:

muk “face”, but muk + mοeη “mouth” = “face, reputation”
kппο “high”, but kппο “???” + kппο = “exalted”.

In some cases, the combination may be quite idiomatic:

noηηм “lead, guide” + ‘aοj “give” = “cause”
cααη “tie, bind” + cam “wait for, guard” = “remember”.

There remain, however, many cases where coordination seems to provide little semantic information. Among the reasons for this compounding, we recognize two which are commonly cited: elegance and intensification. In addition, we would like to suggest two kinds of “trade-off”: syntactically, compounding may provide a compensation for the absence of cues to syntactic category or constituency, and lexically, it may compensate for the absence of phonological bulk.

A) Elegance

The coordinate compound structure occurs in ordinary speech, but is associated with the flowery diction of a higher register or verbal art, thus occurring particularly often in proverbs:
[koəh rumləʊŋ] pnom ‘aɔj rɔliəj sruel ciəŋ kaa [plah
[dig up loosen] mountain so fall easy exceed that [change
pduo][ca’rət ni’saj] rəbəh mnuh
change][ attitude talent] of person
“It is easier to move a mountain than to change one’s habits”

kaa ‘atooh ‘aɔj kwə ciə kaa [sɑŋ sək] dæl kəə
that not fault give : be that repay revenge which must happy
[treek ‘aa] ciə tii bəm phot
happy be the uttermost
“Pardon is the most glorious revenge.”

Notice the particular exuberance of such compounds in a
formulaic New Year’s greeting:

soom ‘aɔj baan seeckdəj sok [cɑmroŋ cɑmrəəŋ]
please give get matter peace ??? plenty
[prəkaɑp daoj] sokphiəp
with through peace
bəriboo [prəh caak] [cumʃuŋ [chuŋ tkat]]
enough escape escape illness ill ???
[crah srəlah] ‘ampii
clear clean from
[tok saok] [muəmaw](6) [ kdw krahaaŋ](7)
sad weep Frustrated Hot Burn
haəj soom [baan tɔtəəl ]
and please get receive
nəw phiəp [ʃəp rumʒʊəp] sawməŋ soom ‘aɔj [prəkaɑp nəŋ]
with aspect calm pacify distress please give with with
phiəp [sokdom rəmiə] səntəphiəp ni’rən tən təw!
aspect happiness happiness peace forever continue go

“I wish you peace and plenty, health and deliverance from
sicknenss, freedom from suffering, frustration, and irritation, and
may you receive surcease from distress; I wish you this with
happiness and peace forever.”

Elegant style (səmnuəŋ wəhəa) or spice (krəŋ kəw) is in fact
one explicit motivation for compounding, and we specifically invoke this as the sole or principal motivation in examples like:

təŋ caŋ’iət “tight”
swət rəŋoom “wilt”
ciəh wiəŋ “avoid”

as well as in every single coordinate compound in the New Year’s greeting above. Closely related to the notion of elegance in this structure is the aesthetic notion of formal symmetry. The formal symmetry of the elements in a compound may be more important than their semantics. As evidence for this, we note that in addition to meaningful synonym compounds, Khmer has a huge number of symmetrical reduplications or twin forms of the razzle-dazzle type (more accurately, of the alliterating spic ‘n’ span type, cf. Ourn & Haiman ms. and the references there, particularly Ratliff 1992 for comparable structures in Hmong, and Vonvipsanond 1992 for Thai). Here one or both of the elements in the compound may be entirely meaningless ‘servant words’ (bo’ri’wαδ sap), glossed “????” as in

kpoŋ “????” + kpoŋ “tall, high” = “exalted”
lbəŋ “famous” + lbəŋ “????” = “famous”
kruŋk “spice” + krəw “????” = “spicy”
təŋ “block” + təŋ “????” = “block someone’s view”
prəŋ “turn” + prəŋ “????” = “turn, change”
ptuŋ “????” + ptoŋ “against” = “bear witness against”
təŋ “accurate” + təŋ “???kick” = “accurate”
prum “????” + prum “lovable” = “lovable”
khət “???approach” + khəm “strive” = “strive”
cəmroŋ “????” + cəmraən “lots” = “plenty”.

It is hard to say these servant words are meaningless: but it is also hard to say what they mean. It is notable also that although there are hundreds of these compounds in Khmer, there is no productive method of generating the meaningless element of each pair: they are words and verbal artistry consists exclusively in remembering them, not in making up new ones.
B) Intensification (twəə ‘aŋ klaŋ “make it strong”)

Where the synonymy of the coordinated words is nearly perfect, the use of two is sometimes more emphatic than using only one. Some examples of purely iconic strengthening via (quasi) repetition include:

psaa “join” + pcoəh “join” = “weld, join”
wiəc “dishonest” + wee “deviant” = “really dishonest”
saak “try” + lbəan “try” = “really try”.

In fact, it is sometimes unclear if the structure is a symmetrical compound or a head-modifier construction whose second word functions as an intensifier (wisəh kun niəm) of the first as in “pitch black”:

puən “hide” + səməəm “silence” = “really hide”
nəwə “motionless” + tkəl “still” = “very still”
kdəw “hot” + krəhaaj “burn” = “burning hot”
srəh “fresh” + bəmprəəə “fresh” = “really fresh”

But sometimes, compounding seems to serve neither of these commonly acknowledged functions. It is as if the language, like the melody of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” loved to say everything twice, and this is the phenomenon we are trying to account for by suggesting that compounding may also have some compensatory functions.

C) Substitute for Phrase Marking?

Syntactically, compounding creates structures [XX] instead of [X]. We suggest, tentatively, that this bracketing provides some sorely needed structure in an otherwise strikingly unstructured string of words. Crucially, we make reference to two other perhaps functionally related facts. The first is that there are few cues to phrase structure constituency or even to category labelling in general, and those function words that exist (node building words like the relative pronoun dael) are highly optional. The
second is that simple repetition of a word (saying it literally twice) is surprisingly not an available option to signal intensification: repetition unambiguously and obligatorily marks plurality or repetition.

There are two overarching principles of hierarchical Khmer PS:

a) modifiers follow heads (e.g. N + A in NP)
b) operators precede operands (e.g. P + NP, VO)

but the situation is confused by a number of factors.

Within NP, the second constituent (whether N or A) should modify the first, but de facto A+N word order exists in cases like koon “offspring” + Noun, where koon has come to mean and act like the adjective “small”. Phrases like koon cruuk not only mean “child (of the) pig (type)” but also “small pig”.

Within NP, numerals must precede classifiers. Since the latter are themselves Nouns, there is de facto modifier + head order in phrases like pii mjaj “two days”, which coexists with expressions like cruuk pii “two pigs”. Minimal contrast pairs like maoŋ pii “two o’clock” and pii maoŋ “two hours” abound. Under other circumstances which we are unable to characterize as yet, Numeral may precede simple non-classifying Noun:

new muej kanlaej
in  One place
“in place, without moving”

Knom con tew tae muej kanlaej ponnooh
I  Want go only one place  That-many
“There’s only one place I want to go.”

Cf. Jeen new pteeh tae muej
We  live  house only one
“we live in the same house”
Node building words are optional. The syntax of one of these, the genitive marker robōh "(thing) of" has been described in the literature: the particle acts as a compensatory diacritic (Haiman 1985:60-7) to signal constituency that is not directly signalled by the order and adjacency of the words. That is, it is optional when the possessor is adjacent to the possessee and is obligatory otherwise (Huffman 1970:73):

koon (robōh) kluyen
child of Self
"my/her own child"
?koon tooc ___ kluyen
"her small child"
*koon tooc pii ___ kluyen
child small two Self
"her two small children"
*caŋkoom da mut ___ klaa
fang Very sharp tiger
"the extremely sharp fangs of the tiger"
*tpoel saŋ khaŋ ___ koon
cheek both side Child
"both of the child’s cheeks".

Although the behavior of other node-building words may be similar, we have not been able to demonstrate the same kind of pattern with all of them.

1. The modifier-maker jaŋ

The noun jaŋ "kind, sort" is not only a synonym of baep, with which it appears in synonym compounds. It also has at least an incipient purely syntactic function which baep does not have, in that it marks the following word or phrase as attributive rather than predicative. In principle, cruuk l’aa means "the pig (is) good" and can function either as a sentence or as a noun phrase "the good pig". Conversely, cruuk jaŋ l’aa can only be a NP "the good pig". Again in principle, jaŋ may cooccur only with stative verbs. Sometimes in this function it seems to signal
intensity and is synonymous with the intensive particle da “very”:

canoom da/jaan mut  
fang very/kind sharp  
“extremely sharp fangs”  
tierock da/jaan prum pruj  
infant very/kind lovely  
“extremely lovely infant”

It would seem jaan would be extremely useful in distinguishing attribution from predication as well as for making a distinction between adjectives and active verbs. But generally, the distribution of jaan as we have observed it in texts does not correspond to such “syntactic” or “derivational” functions:

koon [‘oŋ ɡɔmnaæc saæc] jaan kak’ak  
child exhaust laughter laugh kind uproarious  
“the child laughs and laughs, uproariously”

Wiel tumniep trew [lɔc lɔŋ] jaan domnam  
field lowlands undergo flood kind damage  
“fields sustain severe damage from floods”

préeh ti’nakɔo bayceen soo saen jaan [klaŋ klaa]  
lord sun emit rays kind strong clear  
“the sun shines forth bright and strong”

‘Aoj chëh prøj jaan [sɔnthoo sɔnthɔw] laeŋ thаем tiet  
to light forest kind ablaze  
“to set the forest ablaze”

préeh ‘atet bayceen rosmej jaan klaŋ  
lord sun emit rays Kind strong  
“the sun shines bright”

coracao prapret téw jaan lumbaak  
traffic act go kind difficult  
“traffic moves with difficulty”
kee baan [khooc khaat] [phaal praajooc] jaaŋ craən
they get damage lose profit usefulness kind lots
"they undergo severe damage to their profits"

miəŋ krooh tnak jaaŋ tɕon
exist accident kind heavy
"there are serious accidents"

kŋom baan dəŋ nuŋ jol nəw [mnooh saŋceetnaa ]
I can know and understand acc. Deep emotion
nəj kaa [tɕək tɕoŋ] nuh jaaŋ cbah nah
of nom. connect connect that kind clear very
"I can hear very clearly the deep emotion of that bond."

Leeŋ lbaŋŋ kuuk wah ciəmuəj koon jaaŋ riikriəj taam tuursap
play Game peekaboo with child kind joyful follow phone
"joyfully play peekaboo with her child over the phone"

mdaaj banluu thaa "kuuk" Jaaŋ wəəŋ
mother pronounce say kuuk kind long
"The mother says "kuuk" in a long drawn-out fashion."

2. The relative pronoun dael “ever”

The relative pronoun dael marks the following phrase as a
(subordinate) relative clause rather than a predication on the same
level as the preceding NP. In principle, it can be used to make
distinctions like the following:

cruuk nəəp
pig die
"The pig died."
cruuk dael nəəp
pig which die
"the pig that died"

Again, this does not seem to correspond with its distribution in
texts. Nor does it seem to function as a compensatory diacritic.
Note that in most of the following structures the RC occurs adjacent to its head:

mnuh dael miën[camnh dën] tok dooc cie miën ponlwum
person that have knowledge know? like be exist illumination
"a person that has knowledge is like one enlightened"

siwphew dael cie wonna’ kam rabah neek nipcoon
book that be masterwork of person writer
"a book that is the masterpiece of a writer"

nipcoon dael miën kee cmooh [lbøj lbøj]
writer that have they name famous famous
"writers that are famous"

propheet siwphew dael miën klëmsaa l’aa
kind book that have essence good

skoel ruup mnuh dael leek jook moox ni’jiej
know form person that raise bring come speak
"come to know the person in question"

neek dael miën [muk nièti] trëw cam tii
person that have task duty must guard place
"the people who have the task of guarding the place"

In the sentences below, the dael cannot be omitted. Note that the RC is sometimes but not always separated from its (bolded) head by intervening material:

toptol nüj capkoom mut rabah klaa [dael trabak kham koon]
contend with fang sharp of tiger that snap Bite child
"contend against the sharp fangs of the tiger that snap and bite her offspring"

prëen prämaj [dael baan dot cool prej roock cap sat]
hunter hunt That get set afire forest seek catch animal
"the hunter that sets a forest fire while trying to trap animals"
kaεt ‘ampεε tocca’ret kumnwt [khookhew troskbat ]
aris bad character thought violent aggressive
daεl ‘aac noem mɔɔk nɛw krooh tnak
that can lead come at accident
psein psein daoj mun dɛŋ kluɛn
different through not know self
“a bad nature and violent thoughts arise that can lead to mishaps of various sorts through the lack of self-knowledge”.

Lbaɛŋ nih ciɛ lbaɛŋ cəmbaŋ mʊɛj dael jɛŋ kʊɛ caaŋcam
game this be game principal one that we should remember
“This is a principal game that is worth remembering.”

Koon keŋ prɔh sɛŋ tɔɔc cralaŋ sraŋ nɔnɛm
child new male female small cute fresh smile
daɛl mdaaj pɪuɛt tɛk
that mother wash water
“The small cute infant boy or girl that the mother washes”

In each of the following examples, the brackets indicate the RC. Note that the relative pronoun is not present in the original, but can be supplied:

kmiɛn nɔɔnaa mneek [ ___ ‘aac cuɛj saŋkrooh] 
not exist anyone person can help save life
“there is nobody who can help save their lives”

mienia tuuk muɛj muɛj [ ___ caev cool mɔɔk taam ptɛɛh ]
exist boat one paddle enter come follow house
“an occasional boat paddles right up to and can enter the houses”

mnuh [ ___ cɛh dɛŋ ‘aac cuɛj miɛto’ phuum]
person know know can help motherland village
“a person who knows how to help their native country”

ponlum [ ___ nɯt nɛw coɛp mʊŋ kluɛn]
illumination stay live adhere with self
“the illumination that stays by one’s side”
mnuh kwak [___dæ wɯlɯɬ stɪp rɔlk pləw nuh laeɟ]
person blind walk in error grope seek road that at all
"a blind person that walks in error and gropes blindly for the path"

phiǝsaa muǝj [___ pǝsǝn pii phiǝsaa kmae]
language one different from language Khmer
"a language other than Khmer"

We do not know the stylistic or syntactic principles that govern the distribution of this word. Other function words include ciǝ “be” and nǝw “direct object” whose elementary distribution is even more puzzling to us. What they share with the other words we have described above is that they are disconcertingly optional so that they provide limited guidance in parsing.

The Parts of Speech are not clearly defined. Like other Sinospheric languages, Khmer lacks a category distinction between Verbs and Adjectives; prepositions and adverbs are identical with either nouns or transitive verbs; most conjunctions are verbs; the complementizer for STKP verbs is the verb thaa “say”. So, the only solid part of speech distinction seems to be the distinction between nouns and verbs. But this distinction is also a relatively fragile one.

Roots which seem to be predominantly Verbs can surface as nouns (e.g. coǝn ‘step on’ can be “a step”, in phrases like cap pǝdǝm tan pii ___ tiǝp tǝw mun “begin from the lowest step “); less often (?) Roots which are nouns can surface as verbs (e.g. cmooh “name” as in cmooh kǝnom “my name” can be “be named” in phrases like kǝnom cmooh “I am called, my name is ...”). There is derivational morphology: the prefixes kaa- and kdǝj “matter” can be added to any verbal root to create a derived noun. Almost as productive and with the same function, is the infix -Vm(n)-. Even derivational morphology can be ignored or seems to fail to give unambiguous signals about the characterization of the word. In particular, it seems that the derivational function of the nominalizing infix is not fixed. For example: in wiǝl
t(umn)įp “low fields”, the qualifying word is either the adjective/verb tiįp “low” or a derived noun “lowness”; in klaa k(ąmn)aac “fierce tiger”, the qualifying word may be either the adjective/verb kaac “fierce” or its derived nominal. Conversely, derivational morphology may be optional. When they occur, the nominalizing affixes kaa- seekdıį- and phiįp- invariably create derived nouns. But they do not seem to be required for verbs to behave as nouns. For example, in phrases like daąmbįj twǝǝ pɔɔrnįę “in order to make describe”, the final verb acts as a nominal object “description” of the transitive verb twǝǝ “make”. The nominalizing prefix kaa- “ness” is available (as in kaa-pɔɔrnįę twǝ twɔl cɔɔ laa lǝałkhǝɛɛɛǝ’ samkhan “the description must stand on the important characteristics”). It is equally available (and is sometimes used) in V-V compounds which are supposedly already derived nominalizations.

Our Hypothesis: in addition to signaling intensification and providing some aesthetic spice, doubling may serve a possible cognitive function, compensating for that of “node-building” function words. It creates brackets and groups words into larger constituents. In slowing down the rate of speech it may provide the listener with more time to make sense of the stream of speech. If [XY] can be either an endocentric or an exocentric construction, the expansions [XXY] or [XYY] or [XXYY] serve to provide a breather for the listener. (As a mental exercise, try humming or whistling “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” without the note pairs.)

Notably, however, the coordinate compounds investigated here are not simple repetitions of the same word, but pairs of synonyms. The language is also rich in symmetrical reduplicative compounds like spic ‘n’ span which may serve the same function. Why no simple repetition?

Total repetition is frequent in Khmer: in fact there is an orthographic shorthand device for indicating it. But it can’t be used either for intensification or for elegance.
D) Simple repetition is not available.

Simple repetition of a given word is not available as a device since it has a different semantic function. Khmer does not allow structures like

a mad mad mad mad world
the green green grass of home

to signal intensification, or to be used without any meaning whatever. Instead, repetition of the same morpheme is possible but instead of bearing the iconic function of intensification repetition always carries other equally iconic functions: a plural, repetitive, continuative, or distributive meaning:

mien srālaj dooc dooc knie
exist love Like like each other
All love (their children) the same.”

Cf. Mdaaj dooc knie nuj ‘owpuk peej cêt
Mother like each other with father full heart
“The mother together with the father is proud and happy.”

Mien ceek ‘ampəw nuj daem chəe pseej pseej
exist banana sugar cane with trunk tree different different
“There are banana trees, sugar cane, and various other trees”

Cf. Phiesaa muəj pseej pii phiəsaa kmae
Language one different from language Khmer
“a language other than Khmer”.

Other examples of the distributive sense of repetition include:

prələm sraaj sraaj
dawn Get light
it gets lighter bit by bit
wie kəm kəm
crawl creep
crawl inch by inch

kham bantaa damnə muej muej
strive continue journey one one
struggle onward one (sc.step) at a time

səh pukee pukee
student good
good students

daəm cheə kəpoh kəpoh
trunk wood tall
tall trees

cmooh ləj “a famous name”
cmooh ləj ləj “famous names”

Our Second Hypothesis: compounding may be used in Khmer, as it may be used in Mandarin and other languages of the region, as a relatively unsystematic means of building up phonological bulk. It may thus be functionally related to infixation (cf. Haiman 1998) in Mon-Khmer, and to the variety of devices in Mundaric languages (Zide & Anderson, this volume) which have in common only the result that they “add one mora” to a (typically monosyllabic) root.

Some Comparative Remarks:

Clearly Khmer is similar to Vietnamese, Thai, Mandarin, Lahu, Hmong, and other SE Asian languages in both its syntactic underspecification and in the exuberance of its lexical elaboration (Riddle 1990, 1992, Stahlke & Riddle 1992). The isolating nature of SE Asian languages may be responsible for creating paratactic target structures in general (Riddle 1990) and these do in fact occur in non-contiguous isolating languages spoken in Africa. But the most common explanation for semantically redundant
symmetrical compounding is aesthetic (Haas 1964, Matisoff 1973, Johns & Strecker 1987, Riddle 1992). While greater length is almost universally an icon of politeness and refinement, the particular penchant for making things longer by saying them twice seems to be common to SE Asian languages and Khmer is typical of these languages in this respect.

As in Mandarin, symmetrical compounding may create figurative as opposed to concrete meanings (Li 1990, Liu 1992, apud Duanmu 1999). As in Mandarin and other languages, compounding may serve a derivational function, making nouns out of verbs (ibid.).

Duanmu is skeptical of these as motivations for symmetrical compounding. He also rejects the well-known Karlgren hypothesis that compounding in Mandarin was motivated by the drive to reduce intolerable homonymy as that language lost tonal and consonantal distinctions that were better preserved in other Chinese languages (creating compounds by the funny-haha vs. Funny-queer mechanism). He proposes instead that compounding in Mandarin is obligatory where stress and rhythmic requirements call for disyllables, and is blocked where those requirements call for monosyllables. Unlike Mandarin, Khmer does not seem to require compounds or disyllabic forms for rhythmic reasons. It is never absolutely ungrammatical to have repetition, nor to avoid it, as Duanmu convincingly shows it sometimes is in Mandarin. Therefore, Duanmu’s explanation for the distribution and prevalence of disyllables and compounds in Mandarin cannot apply to Khmer.

Finally: Unlike Hmong, at least (Riddle 1990), Khmer cannot reduplicate for intensification. While one can say in Hmong (and in English)

koj txawj txawj ua paj ntaub
you know know do embroidery
“You really know how to do embroidery”
this metalinguistic use of simple repetition is spoken for or otherwise allocated in Khmer, and that fact may contribute to an even greater exuberance of symmetrical and reduplicative compounds in that language than elsewhere in SE Asia.

To say this is not to deny that the primary function of synonym compounds may be aesthetic — or to deny that, once established, the pattern may have simply taken on a life of its own.

Endnotes

1. Itself a compound of trusa “opposite side” + kbät “ally oneself”.

2. Source of pralavana “test, trial, examine”

3. This is particularly noticeable when opposites are conjoined: khoh “wrong” + trəw “correct” = “morality”, and so forth.

4. Tkat is presently meaningless, an example of a non-symmetrical “servant word”, cf. Noeurng & Haiman, ms.

5. Other examples include baoh cumhiən chiən “take step + step”, and ‘əh səmaæc səæc “exhaust laughter+ laugh”, where the verb is coordinated with its own cognate accusative construction. Related is the compounding of doublets: peel “time (<Skt)” + weelıə “time (<Pali)”.

6. Neither part of this word is now meaningful, but the formal symmetry of the syllables strongly suggests compounding as in English words like higgledy piggledy, cf. Ourn & Haiman ms.

7. It is unclear whether the second element is a coordinate member of this compound or an intensifier.
References

Haiman, J. 1985. Natural syntax. CUP.
Riddle, E. & H. Stahlke, 1992. Linguistic typology and Sinospheric languages. Papers from the 1st Annual Meeting of the SEA Linguistics Society