SOME OBSERVATIONS ON KHMER VERBAL USAGES

Judith M. JACOB
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

This study has arisen as a result of encountering some lexicographical problems. During the preparation of some Khmer-English dictionary material, it became clear that the information provided about the usage of verbs was not always precise. The following four groups of sentences illustrate the kinds of usage about which there was a lack of clarity:

a. ពេញ នូត ពោធ ហាម 'This cup is full'.
   តំក ពោធ ស្រែ 'The water is filling the ricefield'.

b. ក្រដុម តើ ដែលអាចចូល 'I go to market'.
   វី២១ មើល ដែលអាចចូល 'He is coming to the market'.
   វី២១ ព្រាំមើល មើល ផ្ទៃ 'He is hurrying home'.

c. ក្រដុម ហាង ខាង-សារ 'I put the clothes in the sun'.
   ខាង-សារ ហាង ធ្វើ 'The clothes are in the sun'.

d. ក្រដុម កាលួន បេតុប 'I am going into the room'.
   តំបេតុប កាលួន 'The water goes into the river'.

The points raised by these groups are as follows:

a. Is /ពោធ/ actually to be entered in a dictionary with both fill and full as its translations, since it may in fact give rise to either voice in English translation?

b. How is the dictionary-user to know that /ដែលអាចចូល/ 'to walk' and /ព្រាំមើល/ 'to hurry' may not---like other verbs of motion: /តើ/ 'to go', /មើល/ 'to come', and /ដោយ/ 'to arrive'---be followed directly by the noun expressing the destination?

c. How does one understand the grammatical association with a following noun of a verb such as /ហាង/? The sentences suggest that the noun following the verb may express a direct object (/ខាង-សារ/) in the first sentences, a kind
of locative (/thgay/) in the second.

d. What is to be done about /co:1/ 'to enter'? Must it sometimes be followed by /knoŋ/ 'in' and sometimes not? If so, when?

In order to state the use of these verbs clearly, some instruction is required about their relationship with a following noun. Is this a part of grammar or of lexicon? If, as seems likely, it should be included in grammar, what kind of reminder about grammatical usage is to be given in a dictionary?

The pursuit of an answer to these questions has led to a re-examination of some relationships between verb and noun in Khmer. For the expression of grammatical relationships, as Yu. Gorgoniyev showed,\(^1\) word-formation plays a very small part; there are some word-forms which indicate the categories to which the words are likely to belong, but the internal form takes us no further than that. The two chief means of expressing the grammatical relationships between the main, meaningful words in a sentence are word-order and the use of connectors. Both terms need amplification. By word-order is meant the order in which words occur *in combination with* features of junction, intonation, pause, and stress. Thus the process of attaching an attribute to a noun is carried out by placing the attribute after the noun and pronouncing the two or more words in close junction, with a potential slight rise in pitch and pause following the attribute; stress usually accompanies the pronunciation of the attribute. By connectors are meant both particles and "down-graded" verbs. The process of negating a verb, for example, is carried out by using a particle, /mûn/, /pûm/ or /kom/, before the verb.

Taking the first of these exponents of Khmer grammatical relationship, then, let us re-examine the function of word-

order in its application to nouns and verbs, and especially to verbs with a following noun, since the four sets (a through d) of problem contexts given above involve sequences of verbs and nouns.² It is proposed to limit the linguistic context to that of unemphatic, initiating statements consisting of one-phrase sentences. By taking several sentence-frames, it is hoped to classify different verbal usages in relation to the following noun. Some or all of these may be indicated in a lexicon.

I. Sentence-frame NV, characteristically extensible by the addition of one of the particles (/nas/ 'very', /pè:k/ 'too much').
   1. phè: h lhɔ: 'The house is beautiful'.
   2. vlə: chw: 'He is ill'.

II. Sentence-frame V, characteristically extensible by the addition of one of the particles (/nas/ 'very', /pè:k/ 'too much').
   3. træcəsk! 'It's cool!'³

III. Sentence-frame VN.
   4. dol maŋ 'It's time! (arrive-at + hour)'.
   5. rabaek tvlə(r) 'The door's open (is-opened + door)'.
   6. cheh phè: h 'The house is on fire (is-on-fire + house)'.

IV. Sentence-frame NVN(V)n.
   7. khnom 'acy siævph'y (tìy) nəsk 'I give the book to you'.
   8. lɔ:k bɔgrιen khmae(r) (tìy) nıssyr 'He teaches Cambodian to the students'.

²It is assumed that there is general agreement among readers about the categories of noun and verb. My own criteria for establishing these and other categories are given in my Introduction to Cambodian, London 1968, pp.330-332.

³This use is to be distinguished from the same pattern when it occurs as a response—for example, nəsk thə: phè: h lhɔ: tɛ: 'Do you think this house is nice?' lhɔ: 'Yes (is-nice)'.
9. ŀò:k bòghaiɲ phlo:v (mò:k) khnom 'He showed me the way'.

V. Sentence-frame NVN-VN.4
10. khnom da:s(r) tê:r phtèːh 'I walk home'.
11. khnom cèn pl:i: phnum-pèn 'I am leaving Phnom-Penh'.
12. khnom nî:lı:j ey tê:r lò:k nêh 'I spoke to that gentleman'.
13. phtèːh sōq lỳ: contĕol 'The house is built on stilts'.
14. ?aːv thvôː ?ompl: soːt(r) 'The blouse is made of silk'.

VI. Sentence-frame NVN.
15. mdaːy lùːk phkaː 'Mother sells flowers'.
16. ?oːpuk sōq phtèːh 'Father builds a house'.
17. khnom tê:r phsaː(r) 'I go to market'.
18. viːe mò:k phtèːh 'He is coming home'.
19. viːe chûː kbaːl 'He has a headache (he + is-ill + head)'.
20. viːe côk cîtːq 'He has a lame foot (he + is-lame + foot)'.

The verbal constructions defined by sentence-frames I, II and III are clear-cut. They form separate sections of grammar and are easily named, e.g. "attributive" (I), "impersonal" (III),5 and a combination of both (II). The label *attributive verb* would imply that the verb characteristically occurs also in the construction NV, used in close junction with a noun and forming only part of a sentence, as does /thom/ 'big' in the sentence /phtèːh thom nêh l?ɔ: nas/ 'This big house is very

---

4p = particle. The V which is alternative to p is a verb of motion.

5See F. Martini, "Tournures impersonnelles en cambodgien et en viêtnamien," in BSLP, 1959, p.40, where the interpretation of such sentences as those as impersonal uses is preferred to the traditional interpretation of them as examples of inverted subject.
nice'. The term *impersonal* does not necessarily exclude the possibility of a personal use as well; both would be noted in a lexicographical description.

Sentence-frame IV classifies verbs expressing the idea of doing something for someone and as such also forms a clear section of grammar. The use could be indicated somehow in a dictionary even if only by some such formula as \(\mathbf{m}(\nu)n\). The fact that the second verb is not always present will be referred to later.

In each of the verb-patterns shown in sentence-frames V and VI, however, more than one grammatical process (from a Western grammatical point of view) is represented. Thus verbs occurring in the same sentence-pattern, V, pronounced with the same intonation-pattern, produce in translation both an intransitive active verb (sentences 10 to 12) and a transitive verb in the passive voice (sentences 13 and 14). The understanding of such sentences as 13 and 14 depends in fact on meaning at the semantic level. It is precisely because the house cannot build and the blouse cannot make that the word-order can stand. The sentences must be taken as 'The house, (someone) built on stilts' and 'The blouse, (someone) made of silk'. It is not of interest to know about the agent, which is therefore not mentioned. I think that from the Cambodian grammatical angle the two types of sentences are the same and should be discussed together. Again a formula could mark the use in a dictionary: \(\#p\nu n\).

The sentences given as examples of sentence-frame VI represent, from a notional viewpoint, three kinds of statement: 15 and 16 are examples of subject + verb + object, 17 and 18 of subject + verb + destination, and 19 and 20 of subject + verb + sphere of action. There is no doubt about the importance of the word-order \#\nu\nu in connection with the expression of the relationship actor + action + object of action. If one wishes to know who hit whom, the answer is found by reference to the
word-order: A hit B. However, I think we Westerners tend to cling to this apparently firm rock, feeling deprived of many other footholds to clarity such as exponents of number, person, and tense. We consequently dismiss as exceptional the other two meanings of the word-order N VN. The meaning of destination in sentences 17 and 18 is extremely limited. Not many verbs of motion apart from /təu/, /mɔk/ and /dɔl/ occur in the N VN construction. The third class of meanings, however, those given in sentences 19 and 20, is of wide application, and the VN relationship there found is comparable with the VN relationship in the impersonal verb (sentences 4 to 6). In these cases the meaning is best arrived at by a dissecting method, making a preliminary separate translation of the first noun, if there is one, as 'As to X...', a separate translation of the verb as 'an action or state Y occurs', and a similar separate translation of the second noun as 'directed towards Z'. For example, /chə hptəɔh/ would be dissected as 'The action of catching fire occurs, directed towards the house', while /kənom chə kətəl/ would be 'As to me, the state of being ill occurs, directed towards the head'. This suggests vagueness in comparison with Indo-European syntax but in fact, in a Cambodian grammatical way, the noun which follows the verb occurs in very close junction with it. Many sequences of verb + noun which occur with frequency might well be regarded as compound words, e.g. /tətəl təən/ '(receive + gift) to take (food, drink, rest)', /θvı̊ ka(r)/ '(do + work) to work', /sok(h) cvt(t)/ '(happy + heart) to be willing to'. The first n, on the other hand, is not so closely bound to the rest, again in a Cambodian sense. In a slightly more emphatic speech style than the one we have been considering, it may be separated from the rest of the

6Except for some metaphorical uses. For example, /rùt/ 'to run' and /coh/ 'to go down' occur with the N VN construction in /rùt sì:klo:/ 'to run a cyclo-pousse' and /coh chəʊš/ 'to put one's name down'.
sentence as a complete phrase by occurring with potential rise in pitch on the last syllable and pause following it. The whole sentence is then pronounced as two phrases, e.g.

10. ṭhnom, də(r) tṳ phôtéh 'Me? I'm walking home'.
13. phôtéh, sōŋ lỳ: contuəl 'The house is built on stilts'.
19. viːə, cʰuː kbaːl 'As to him, he's got a head-ache'.

However, in a still more emphatic context, the noun which might be thought of as the object of the verb has separate phrasing and emphatic first position, e.g.

15. phkaː nîh, məːy lûːk 'These are the flowers mother sells'.

Once sentences with two phrases are admitted, the "subject" or "object" is no different grammatically (Khmerwise) from a general referent or sentence topic, as in the following sentence: daʊm nîh, cʰən phkaː: 'This tree is flowering (tree + this + come-out + flowers)'. This point elucidates the different relationships expressed by NV... in the examples given under sentence-frame V, where NV... does not always represent what we think of as subject + active verb (cf. phôtéh sōŋ... 'The house [someone] built...').

We arrive therefore at an understanding of the NVN construction (in one phrase) with subject-verb-object meaning. In spite of the apparently close connection between its members, we must have the will to regard the sequence as three separate

\[\text{For many sequences of verb + noun, however, there is no emphatic form. For example, } /\text{kHzom sok(h) cvt(t)}/ 'I am willing'; /cvt(t), kHzom sok(h)/ is nonsense.\]

\[\text{A grammatical feature which has called forth comment from more than one writer on the language. See Yu. A. Gorgoniyev, Grammatika kkhmerskogo ĭazyka, Moscow 1966, p.247; F. Huffman, An Outline of Cambodian Grammar, doctoral thesis, Cornell University 1967, p.200; and Jacob, op.cit., p.148.}\]
components and supply the precise connection between them ourselves, e.g. /mda:y lûk phka:/ 'As to mother, the action of selling takes place, directed toward flowers'. Verbs taking part in this construction might be marked by some formula such as + n.

We may now look again at the verbs cited at the beginning under a, b and c. None of them fits sentence-frames I, II or III.\(^9\)

a. /pèn/. This verb may occur in sentence-frame VI. It has the meaning 'to fill' but not in a causative sense.\(^10\)

It may be used, for example, of water filling a ricefield, /tûk pèn srae/, or of people filling by their presence a cinema, /manûs(s) pèn rò:q-kon/; but if a human agent intentionally fills a bottle, the causative verb is needed in the same construction: /kè: bampèn dô:p/. This point needs clarification in a lexicon, while the causative prefixes form part of grammar. A usage such as the first cited under a, /pèn nîh pèn haay/, is most naturally translated as 'This cup is full', but the translation full would probably be omitted in a dictionary as being misleading. The sentence is perhaps best thought of by the foreigner who aims to use the language correctly himself as 'As to this cup, the action of filling occurs, completed' or, to analyse it in the same way as sentence 3, discussed under sentence-frame V, 'This cup, (someone) filled already'. A similar contrast between the causative and noncausative uses may

---

\(^9\)Some of these verbs may occur in a sentence-frame VN, for example in a command (/tru phôo: / 'Go home!') or in a comment in a mooted context (/pèn srae/ '[It's] filling the ricefield', where speaker and hearer are watching the floodwater). These occurrences, however, do not fit our chosen linguistic context of unemphatic, initiating statements.

\(^10\)Little is now left of the Khmer opposition between causative and noncausative verbs. Contrast Bahnar as described by J. E. Banker, "Transformational Paradigms of Bahnar Clauses," in Mon-Khmer Studies I, Saigon 1964, pp.7-39.
be seen in the usages of /bak/ 'to break, snap (intr.)' and /bɔmbak/ 'to break (tr.)': /bak chỳ:/ 'The piece of wood broke', /khNom bɔmbak chỳ:/ 'I broke the piece of wood'. This dissecting approach helps with other words which may not have prefixed forms. Thus /mùt/ 'to cut' may occur as follows: /khNom mùt day/ 'I've cut my hand (as to me, action of cutting, directed towards hand)' and /kambyt nìh mìn mùt/ 'This knife doesn't cut, isn't sharp (as to this knife, no action of cutting occurs)'. In this case intentional cutting must be expressed by another verb, /kat/ 'to cut'.

b. The very common verbs of motion /mò:k/, /tùː/ and /dɔːl/, which play a varied role both alone as main verbs and as "down-graded" verbs, prove on closer examination to be rarities in occurring in sentence-frame VI, as was pointed out above. Their occurrence is so frequent that one tends not to regard them as such, but in fact other verbs expressing motion usually have to be used in the construction illustrated in sentence-frame V.\footnote{In their "down-graded" use as minor verbs /mò:k/, /tùː/ and /dɔːl/ do in fact occur as connectors in sentence-frame V, but their major use as main verbs is our concern.} This might be indicated if necessary by a formula such as /tɔː-vn/ in a dictionary.

c. /hɔːl/. The meaning of this verb is 'to expose to the atmosphere'. It occurs in sentence-frame VI, but may resemble either sentences 15 and 16 or sentences 19 and 20 in translation—that is to say, it may need in translation either a direct object or the statement of a sphere of reference. In order to feel that this versatility is grammatically understandable, application of the dissecting method is again helpful: thus /hɔːl kхаoʔ-ʔaːv/ 'the action of exposing to the atmosphere takes place, directed toward clothes', /hɔːl ʔθŋay/ 'the action of exposing to the atmosphere takes place, directed towards the sun'. The word /trəm/ 'to soak' may be cited here.
because it needs, like /haːl/, to be understood in different ways on different occasions. It may be used in the VN construction with the sense of verb + direct object, as in /tram ʔɔŋkɔː(ɾ)/ 'to soak husked rice'. But it very commonly occurs with /tūk/ as /tram tūk/ 'to soak in water' (cf. also /hæl tūk/ 'to swim', /lùŋ tūk/ 'to drown', /ʔɔndaet tūk/ 'to float'). As a final illustration of the need to dissect and then reconstruct with the appropriate connectors in mind, the verb /lèc/ will be used. It may occur as follows:

tūk lèc 'The (flood-) waters abate'.

thŋay lèc 'The sun sets'.

phṭəh lèc tūk 'The houses are partially covered by water'.

kaː(ɾ) ʔaː(ɾh)-kɔmbaŋ n̥eːk lèc cep məːk haːy 'Your secrets are coming out'.

The dictionary entry must cover the ideas of sinking, merely appearing to sink, and even of being not on the way out of sight but on the way into sight. Cover only partially might be a useful dictionary entry, while the necessity to bridge the gaps between the nouns and verbs should be explained in grammar.

We come now to the second Cambodian means of expressing grammatical relationships: the use of connectors. This has a bearing on the last problem-verb, /coːl/, which was illustrated at the beginning under d as being used with and without the particle /knoŋ/.

There are one or two particles whose use is exclusive to the written language. They in fact merely reinforce grammatical constructions based on word-order and word-grouping, which in the colloquial language are made perfectly clear without particles but by means of intonation, pause and stress. Thus /doː/ 'the one which' attaches an attribute to a noun; this is accom-
plished in the colloquial language by word-order combined with intonation and pause.\textsuperscript{12} /rì:/ or /rì: /æ/ precedes the sentence topic placed in the emphatic first position; this is carried out in the rapid colloquial language by separate phrasing of the first noun or nominal sequence in the sentence. /nèy/ attaches a noun attribute denoting possession to a noun headword; this relationship is expressed in the colloquial simply by the succession of the two nouns. One of the literary particles, /nìu/ (spelt nù:i), reinforces the link between the V and N of a VN construction, as in the following example from a newspaper, part of a statement about the President of the Cambodian Red Cross:

...ba:n nòem yôc nìu ?ómnaoy nèy krom nìl...tùu caék cù:n dol nêk cùm:m: "...took [particle] the gifts of [particle] this society....to distribute to the sick".

The use of the literary particles may be described as optional in the literary language, although in long involved sentences the two just illustrated are very useful.

Literary particles are in a class of their own. However, quite apart from such special particles, there is a tendency in a literary or formal style of speech or writing to use the everyday connectors with greater frequency than in the colloquial language and in contexts in which they are not essential for understanding. Thus, from being an aid to understanding a written text, particles have developed into an embellishing feature; this is not to say that they do not add some nuance to the meaning as well. The following examples, taken from some Cambodian folktales,\textsuperscript{13} illustrate this point:


\textsuperscript{13}Recueil des contes et légendes cambodgiens, Phnom-Penh 1963.
Instead of /tỳu phtèh cau krom/ 'go to the house of the judge', we find /tỳu kan phtèh cau krom/ 'go directly towards the house of the judge'.

Instead of /cap ?omp'ru/ 'took hold of the sugar cane', we have /cap ?ae ?omp'ru/ 'took hold towards the sugar cane', with slightly more emphasis on the sugar cane, which, in the story, comes as an interesting new item of food.

Instead of /prap niəŋ tham.../ 'tell the girl...', we have /prap tỳu niəŋ tham.../.

The very slight difference in the last two Cambodian phrases is very difficult to render in the English translation. These examples reveal that the verbs in question, /tỳu/, /cap/ and /prap/, can take part in both constructions, +p-.vn and +n,\(^{14}\) and this would ideally be noted in a lexicographical description. In Cambodian there is not only considerable freedom, as compared with most Western languages, about whether or not a connector is used; there is also a great variety of possibilities as to which of a number of connectors should be used. The verb /pràkùal/ 'to deliver', for example, may be followed by /ʔaoy/, /tỳu/ or /dol/; for example, /pràkùal ʔaoy kè:/ 'Hand [it] over to someone'.

As we descend from the elevated literary language towards the level of the everyday colloquial speech, we find that sometimes particles and "down-graded" verbs are still necessary for understanding, for example to express precise location. Thus, /khnöm dak siɛvɛh li:/ hvr/ 'I put the book on the trunk' but /khnöm dak siɛvɛh koŋ hvr/ 'I put the book in the trunk'. Then there are verbs expressing movement or mental activity which need a link with the noun which expresses the destination (as was shown in the discussion of sentence-frame ˅); for example, /pràŋap tỳu phtèh/ 'to hurry homewards', /coŋʔol tỳu tvìːə(r)/ 'to point to the door', /nùk dol khnöm/ 'think of

\(^{14}\) The possibility of this alternative is discussed by Gorgoniiev, Грャмматика..., p.252.
me'. Nevertheless, the more colloquial the style, the more readily are connectors dispensed with. There are in fact contexts from which they are regularly absent. Thus there may be no connector in an emphasised expression of place or time; for example, /kənlaan nɪh, cap trəv crəən/ 'They catch plenty of fish here'. This may be contrasted with the more prosaic and less colloquial /kə: cap trəv crəən ñvu kənlaan nɪh/, where the connector /ñvu/ 'at, in' is used in the unemphasised expression of place. Connectors are regularly absent in the colloquial speech also when sentence-frame IV is used. For the more formal /kə: ?aoy sɨəvphəu ʃoik Ɂhnəm/ 'He is giving the book to me' one hears /kə: ?aoy sɨəvphəu Ɂhnəm/ or even, if the book has already been introduced into the conversation, /kə: ?aoy Ɂhnəm/. This last has the construction ñVu but the Westerner, at least, does not like to feel that it is the same as /kə: ?aoy sɨəvphəu/ 'He gives the book' since in one case ñVu represents verb and indirect object and in the other verb and direct object. I feel that the difference is grammatical but closely connected with style. The dictionary must still indicate for /?aoy/ the use +ñ(v)n, and grammatical explanation must show that in rapid colloquial style some parts of the sequence may be absent if the meaning is clear.

Apart from constructions in which actual giving, teaching or doing something for someone is involved, many other verbs which might involve two nouns tend to be used with one noun only or to have both nouns but no connector. One hears, for example, /sraoc phka:/ 'water the flowers' or /sraoc təuk/ 'sprinkle water' or even /sraoc təuk phka:/, but /sraoc təuk lə: phka:/ 'sprinkle water on the flowers' would be too heavy and precise.

Nouns and the following connectors may be absent when an action is spoken of in which the destination is obvious.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\)Gorgoniyev, ibid., p.223, cites colloquial /?oŋk̄y kau?xy/ 'sit (on) the chair'.
When palm-juice is brought down from the tree, /dak ṣuy/ 'Put [it] (down on) the ground' is enough. When goods are being bought in the market, /dak ṭompraŋ/ 'Put [them] (in) the basket' is enough. These particular usages throw light on the phrase /dak kûk/ 'to imprison'. This phrase puts the foreigner in a quandary when he wants to say 'put this man in prison' without being colloquial and in an initiating context. Is one to make up a phrase on the lines of /kè: ṭaqʰ si⁸vph̥u mɔːk khɔmŋ/? In fact the Cambodians have another way of expressing this kind of action involving two nouns, as the following sentences show:

\[
\begin{align*}
yɔːk khao-ʔarv tʰəu həːl thɔay & \quad 'Take the clothes to put in the sun'.
yɔːk ṭeqko(r) tʰəu tram tûk & \quad 'Take the husked rice to soak in water'.
\end{align*}
\]

/nuɛm nə́ak nə́h təu dakt kûk/ 'Take this man and put (him) in prison'.

We come back, therefore, via the use of particles in colloquial speech to the conclusion which was implied in the discussion of word-order, namely that a basic economy in the use of connecting links is characteristic of Cambodian. So long as the meaning is clear through the situation itself or through word-order and intonation features, the use of connectors is a matter of style or precision. This, therefore, explains the last kind of ambiguity, which was cited under 袷 at the beginning. /coːl knɔŋ/ and /coːl/ are both correct. /coːl knɔŋ/ gives just a little more emphasis to the idea of entering, and is not characteristic of rapid colloquial speech. The styles of speech involved should be dealt with in grammar; /coːl/ would

---

1 This basic economy is not paralleled by economy of words in other grammatical contexts, even in the colloquial language. It is a feature of the language to amplify the meaning of a noun or verb by using two nouns together or a string of verbs together.
belong to the \+n class because of its occurrence in that sentence-frame. With so common a verb as /coːl/ examples of each use might be given in a dictionary.