

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON KHMER VERBAL USAGES

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. pèŋ nih pèn haəy 'This cup *is full*'.
tùk pèn srae 'The water *is filling* the ricefield'.
- b. khnom týu phsa:(r) 'I *go to* market'.
viə mò:k phsa:(r) 'He *is coming to* the market'.
viə prənap mò:k phtëəh 'He *is hurrying home*'.
- c. khnom ha:l khao-ʔarv 'I *put* the clothes *in the sun*'.
khao-ʔv ha:l thəy 'The clothes *are in the sun*'.
- d. khnom co:l knoŋ bəntúp 'I *am going into* the room'.
tùk co:l prək 'The water *goes into* the river'.

The points raised by these groups are as follows:

- a. Is /pèn/ 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 /daə(r)/ 'to walk' and /prənap/ 'to hurry' may not—like other verbs of motion: /týu/ 'to go', /mò:k/ 'to come', and /dəl/ '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 /ha:l/? The sentences suggest that the noun following the verb may express a direct object (/khao-ʔarv/) in the first sentences, a kind of locative (/thəy/) in the second.
- d. What is to be done about /co:l/ '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, /mũn/, /pũm/ 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. phtëəh l’ɔ: ‘The house is beautiful’.
2. vixə chu: ‘He is ill’.

II. Sentence-frame *v*, characteristically extensible by the addition of one of the particles (/nas/ ‘very’, /pè:k/ ‘too much’).

3. trəcək! ‘It’s cool!’³

III. Sentence-frame *vn*.

4. dəl maŋ ‘It’s time! (*arrive-at* + *hour*)’
5. rəbaək tvixə(r) ‘The door’s open (*is-opened* + *door*)’.
6. cheh phtëəh ‘The house is on fire (*is-on-fire* + *house*)’.

IV. Sentence-frame *nv(n)v*.

7. khnom ‘aoy siəvphɿu (tɿu) nək ‘I give the book to you’.

¹Yu. A. Gorgoniyev, *The Khmer Language*, Moscow 1956, p.50.

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, nək tha: phtëəh nih l’ɔ: tɿ: ‘Do you think this house is nice? l’ɔ: ‘Yes (*is-nice*)’.

8. lōk bōṅriən khmae(r) (t̃y) nissyt 'He teaches Cambodian to the students'.

9. lōk bōṅhaṅ phlorv (mō:k) khjom 'He showed me the way'.

V. Sentence-frame nvp-vn.⁴

10. khjom daə(r) t̃y phtēəh 'I walk home',

11. khjom cəp p̃i: phnūm-p̃əp 'I am leaving Phnom-Penh'.

12. khjom niỹ:əy t̃y lōk nūh 'I spoke to that gentleman'.

13. phtēəh s̃əṅ l̃y: cōntūəl 'The house is built on stilts'.

14. ʔarv thṽy: ʔomp̃i: soɪt(r) 'The blouse is made of silk'.

VI. Sentence-form nvñ.

15. mdzy lūək phka: 'Mother sells flowers'.

16. ʔor̃p̃uk s̃əṅ phtēəh 'Father builds a house'.

17. khjom t̃y phsa: (r) 'I go to market'.

18. ṽi:ə mō:k phtēəh 'He is coming home'.

19. ṽi:ə chū: kbazl 'He has a headache (*he + is-ill + head*)'.

20. ṽi:ə cok c̃yṅ '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 /phtēəh thom nih l'ɔ: nas/ 'This big house is very 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 + *n(v)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)

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

⁵See F. Martini, "Tournures impersonnelles en cambodgien et en vietnamien," in *BSLP*, 1959, p.40, where the interpretation of such sentences as these as impersonal uses is preferred to the traditional interpretation of them as examples of inverted subject.

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 make the use in a dictionary: + *p* ~ *vn*.

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 *nv**n* 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 clarify such as exponents of number, person and tense. We consequently dismiss as exceptional the other two meanings of the word-order *nv**n*. The meaning of destination in sentences 17 and 18 is extremely limited. Not many verbs of motion apart from /t̚y/ , /mò:k/ and /dɔl/ occur in the *nv**n* construction.⁶ 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, /cheh pht̚əh/ would be dissected as 'The action of catching fire occurs, directed towards the house', while /khnɔm ch̚u:k kba:l/ 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. /tət̚u:əl t̚i:ən/ ('receive + gift) to take (food, drink, rest)', /thv̚: k̚a:(r)/ (do + work) to work', /sok(h) c̚y:t(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 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. k̚nɔm, da:(r) t̚y pht̚əh 'Me? I'm walking home'.
13. pht̚əh, sɔŋ l̚y: c̚ɔnt̚uəl 'The house is built on stilts'.
19. v̚i:ə, ch̚u:k kba:l 'As to him, he's got a headache'.

However, in a still more emphatic context, the noun which might be

⁶ Except for some metaphorical uses. For example, /r̚uət/ 'to run' and /coh/ 'to go down' occur with the *nv**n* construction in /r̚uət s̚i:klo:/ 'to run a *cyclo-pousse*' and /coh ch̚m̚uəh/ 'to put one's name down'.

thought of as the object of the verb has separate phrasing and emphatic first position, e.g.

15. *phkaː nih, mdaːy lùək* 'These are the flowers mother sells'.⁷

Once sentences with two phrases are admitted, the "subject" or "object" is no different grammatically (Khmerwise) from a general referent or sentence topic,⁸ as in the following sentence: *daəm nih, ceŋ 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. phtêəh sɔŋ...* 'The house [someone] built...').

We arrive therefore at an understanding of the *nv*n 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 components and supply the precise connection between them ourselves, e.g. */mdaːy lùək phkaː/* '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. /pɛŋ/. 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, */tùk pɛŋ srae/*, or of people filling by their presence a cinema, */mənù(s) pɛŋ ròŋ-kon/*; but if a human agent intentionally fills a bottle, the causative verb is needed in the same construction: */kêː bɔmpɛŋ dɔːp/*. This point needs clarification in a lexicon, while the causative prefixes form part of grammar. A usage such as the first cited under *a*, */pɛŋ nih pɛŋ haəy/*, 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 be seen

⁷For many sequences of verb + noun, however, there is no emphatic form. For example, */khnɔm sok(h) cyt(t)/* 'I am willing'; */cyt(t), khnɔm sok(h)/* is nonsense.

⁸A grammatical feature which has called forth comment from more than one writer on the language. See Yu. A. Gorgoniyev, *Граматика кхмерского языка*, Moscow, 1966, p.247; F. Huffman, *An Outline of Cambodian Grammar*, doctoral thesis, Cornell University 1967, p.200; and Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁹Some of these verbs may occur in a sentence-frame *vn*, for example in a command */tʰy phtêəh/* 'Go home' or in a comments in a mooted context */pɛŋ 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.

¹⁰Little 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.

in the usages of *bak* ‘to break’, *snap* (*intro.*) and */bɔmbak/* ‘to break (*tr.*)’: */bak chɨ:/* ‘The piece of wood broke’, */khnɔm bɔmbak chɨ:/* ‘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: */khnɔm mùt day/* ‘I’ve cut my hand (as to me, action of cutting, directed towards hand)’ and */kambɔt nih munn 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 */mɔ̀k/*, */tɨu/* and */dɔl/*, 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.¹¹ This might be indicated if necessary by a formula such as *+p ~ vn* in a dictionary.

c. */ha:l/*. 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 */ha:l khao-ʔarv/* ‘the action of exposing to the atmosphere takes place, directed toward clothes’, */ha:l thɨay/* ‘the action of exposing to the atmosphere takes place, directed towards the sun’. The word */tram/* ‘to soak’ may be cited here because it needs, like */ha:l/*, 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 ʔɔ̀kɔ̀(r)/* ‘to soak husked rice’. But it very commonly occurs with */tùk/* as */tram tùk/* ‘to soak in water’ (cf. also */hael tùk/* ‘to swim’, */lùəŋ tùk/* ‘to drown’, */ʔɔ̀ndaet tùk/* ‘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:

tùk lèc ‘The (flood-) waters abate’.

thɨay lèc ‘The sun sets’.

phtɛəh lèk tùk ‘The houses are partially covered by water’.

ka:(r) ʔa:(rth)-kɔmbaŋ nɛək lèc cɛp mɔ̀k haəy ‘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.

¹¹In their “down-graded” use as minor verbs */mɔ̀k/*, */tɨu/* and */dɔl/* do in fact occur as connectors in sentence-frame V but their major use as main verbs is our concern.

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, /co:l/, 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 /dɔː/ 'the one which' attaches an attribute to a noun; this is accomplished in the colloquial language by word-order combined with intonation and pause.¹² /rɪː/ or /rɪː ʔae/ 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. /nɛ̃y/ 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, /n̩v̩/ (spelt n̩rv̩), 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 nɔ̃m yɔːk n̩v̩ ʔəmnaoy nɛ̃y krom ni:h....t̩v̩ caek c̩u:n dɔl nɛ̃ək c̩umɲuː '....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,¹³ illustrate this point:

Instead of /t̩v̩ phtɛ̃əh cau krɔm/ 'go to the house of the judge', we find /t̩v̩ kan phtɛ̃əh cau krɔm/ 'go directly-towards the house of the judge'.

Instead of /cap ʔɔmp̩v̩/ 'took hold of the sugar cane', we have /cap ʔae ʔɔmp̩v̩/ '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 n̩ɛ̃ɲ thax.../ 'tell the girl...', we have /prap t̩v̩ n̩ɛ̃ɲ thax.../.

¹²See F. Martini, "La distinction du prédicat de qualité et de l'épithète en cambodgien et en siamois," in *BSLP*, 1957-8, pp. 295-305.

¹³*Recueil des contes et légendes cambodgiens*, Phnom-Penh 1963.

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, /tʰu/, /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 /prəkùəl/ 'to deliver', for example, may be followed by /ʔaoy/, /tʰu/ or /dəl/; for example, /prəkùəl 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 "downgraded" verbs are still necessary for understanding, for example to express precise location. Thus, /khɲom dak siəvphʰu lɔː hɤp/ 'I put the book on the trunk' but /khɲom dak siəvphʰu knoŋ hɤp/ '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 V); for example, /prənap tʰu phtəh/ 'to hurry homewards', /cəŋʔol tʰu tvɨə(r)/ 'to point to the door' /nʉk dəl khɲom/ 'think of 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, /kɔnlaeŋ nih, cap trɤy craən/ 'They catch plenty of fish *here*'. This may be contrasted with the more prosaic and less colloquial /kè: cap trɤy craən nʉu kɔnlaeŋ nih/, where the connector /nʉu/ '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 /kè: ʔaoy siəvphʰu mɔk khɲom/ 'He is giving the book to me' one hears /kè: ʔaoy siəvphʰu khɲom/ or even, if the book has already been introduced into the conversation, /kè: ʔaoy khɲom/. This last has the construction *nv**n* but the Westerner, at least, does not like to feel that it is the same as /kè: ʔaoy siəvphʰu/ 'He gives the book' since in one case *vn* 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 /ʔaoy/ the use +*n*(*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 tʉk/ 'sprinkle water' or even /sraoc tʉk phka:/, but /sraoc tʉk lɔː phka:/ 'sprinkle water on the flowers' would be too heavy and precise.

Nouns and the following connectors may be absent when an action is

¹⁴The possibility of this alternative is discussed by Gorgoniyev, *Грамматика...* p. 252.

spoken of in which the destination is obvious.¹⁵ When palm-juice is brought down from the tree, /dak dvy/ 'Put [it] (down on) the ground' is enough. When goods are being bought in the market, /dak kəmpraŋ/ 'Put [them] (in) the basket' is enough. These particular usages throw light on the phrase /dak kùk/ '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 /kê: 'aoy siənpħyū mō:k khəom/? In fact the Cambodians have another way of expressing this kind of action involving two nouns, as the following sentences show:

yō:k khao-ʔav t̃yū ha:l th̃ay 'Take the clothes to put in the sun'.
 yō:k ʔəŋkə:(r) t̃yū tram t̃yūk 'Take the husked rice to soak in water'.
 nəəm nəək nih t̃yū dak kùk '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.¹⁶ So long as the meaning is clear through the situation itself or through word-order and intonational features, the use of connectors is a matter of style or precision. This, therefore, explains the last kind of ambiguity, which was cited under *d* at the beginning. /co:l knoŋ/ and /co:l/ are both correct. /co:l knoŋ/ 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; /co:l/ would belong to the +n class because of its occurrence in that sentence-frame. With so common a verb as /co:l/ examples of each use might be given in a dictionary.

¹⁵Gorgoniyev, *ibid.*, p. 223, cites colloquial /ʔəŋkūy kauʔvy/ 'sit (on) the chair'.

¹⁶This 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.