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. pêñ nih pêñ haøy ‘This cup is full’.
   tûk pêñ srae ‘The water is filling the ricefield’.

b. khпон tûy phsar(r) ‘I go to market’.
   viə môk phsar(r) ‘He is coming to the market’.
   viə praŋap môk phtëah ‘He is hurrying home’.

c. khпон hail khao-ʔav ‘I put the clothes in the sun’.
   khao-ʔav hail thŋay ‘The clothes are in the sun’.

d. khпон cool knoŋ bòngup ‘I am going into the room’.
   tûk cool pòək ‘The water goes into the river’.

The points raised by these groups are as follows:

a. Is /pêñ/ actually to be entered in a dictionary with both fill and full as its interpretations, 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 /praŋap/ ‘to hurry’ may not—like other verbs of motion: /tûy/ ‘to go’, /môk/ ‘to come’, and /daɿ/ ‘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 /hail/? The sentences suggest that the noun following the verb may express a direct object (/khao-ʔav/) in the first sentences, a kind of locative (/thŋay/) in the second.

d. What is to be done about /cool/ ‘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
Some observations on Khmer verbal usages

expression of grammatical relationships, as Yu. Gorgoniyev showed,\textsuperscript{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, /mùn/, /pùm/ 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.\textsuperscript{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 nవ, characteristically extensible by the addition of one of the particles (/nas/ ‘very’, /pèk/ ‘too much’).

1. phtēah lɔɔ ‘The house is beautiful’.
2. viə chur ‘He is ill’:

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

3. tracèak! ‘It’s cool!’\textsuperscript{3}

III. Sentence-frame vn.

4. dol maon ‘It’s time! (arrive-at + hour)’
5. rabaak tviə(r) ‘The door’s open (is-opened + door)’.
6. cheh phtēah ‘The house is on fire (is-on-fire + house)’.

IV. Sentence-frame nvn(v)n.

7. khnom ʔaoy siypḥyə (tɨu) nəak ‘I give the book to you’.\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1}Yu. A. Gorgoniyev, The Khmer Language, Moscow 1956, p.50.

\textsuperscript{2}It 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.

\textsuperscript{3}This use is to be distinguished from the same pattern when it occurs as a response—for example, nəak thə phtēah nih tɔɔ: tɛː’Do you think this house is nice? tɔɔ: ‘Yes (is-nice)’.  

141
8. lôk bôrîan khmae(r) (tûu) nissvt ‘He teaches Cambodian to the students’.
9. lôk bôrhaŋ phlor(v) (môk) khnom ‘He showed me the way’.

V. Sentence-frame nvp-vn.4

10. khnom daa(r) tûu phtêaŋ ‘I walk home’,
11. khnom cêŋ pî phnûm-pêŋ ‘I am leaving Phnom-Penh’.
12. khnom niųvây tûu lôk nû ‘I spoke to that gentleman’.
13. phtêaŋ soŋ lû contûal ‘The house is built on stilts’.
14. ‘aŋ thvû ʔompîr soott(r) ‘The blouse is made of silk’.

VI. Sentence-form vvn.

15. mdây lûk phkâ ‘Mother sells flowers’.
16. ‘ɔpûk soŋ phtêaŋ ‘Father builds a house’.
17. khnom tûu phsaar(r) ‘I go to market’.
18. viə môk phtêaŋ ‘He is coming home’.
19. viə chúî kbaal ‘He has a headache (he + is-ill + head)’.
20. viə côk cîŋ ‘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 /phtêaŋ thom nîh lõx 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 +u(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 em cambodgien et en viêt-namien,” in BSLF, 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 nvn 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 nvn. The meaning of destination in sentences 17 and 18 is extremely limited. Not many verbs of motion apart from /tū/, /mōk/ and /dol/ occur in the nvn 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, /cheh phtēah/ would be dissected as ‘The action of catching fire occurs, directed towards the house’, while /knom chūrk bāzl/ 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. /tūːr/ tīn/ ‘(receive + gift) to take (food, drink, rest)’, /tvāː kəz(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 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. knom, dā(r) tū phtēah ‘Me? I’m walking home’.
11. phtēah, sōŋ līː contül ‘The house is built on stilts’.
12. via, chūrk bāzl ‘As to him, he’s got a headache’.

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

Except for some metaphorical uses. For example, /rūt/ ‘to run’ and /coh/ ‘to go down’ occur with the vn construction in /rūt sīkloː/ ‘to run a cyclo-pousse’ and /coh chmūah/ ‘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, mdary lūak ‘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: daːm nih, ce pʰkʰaː ‘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. pʰteʔ hɔŋ... ‘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 components and supply the precise connection between them ourselves, e.g. /mdary lūak 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.  

a. /pɛŋ/. This verb may occur in sentence-frame VI. It has the meaning ‘to fill’ but not in a causative sense. It may be used, for example, of water filling a ricefield, /tūk pɛŋ srae/, or of people filling by their presence a cinema, /manu(s) pɛŋ rōn-kon/; but if a human agent intentionally fills a bottle, the causative verb is needed in the same construction: /kɛt bɔmpɛn doːp/. 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 hɔːj/, 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) ctf(i) / I am willing’; /ctf(i), kɔnŋom sok(h)/ is nonsense.


9Some of these verbs may occur in a sentence-frame vn, for example in a command /tɛu pʰteʔ/ ‘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.
Some observations on Khmer verbal usages

in the usages of bak/ ‘to break’, snap (intro.) and /bombak/ ‘to break (tr.)’: /bak chêː/ ‘The piece of wood broke’, /khnom bombak chêː/ ‘I broke the piece of wood’. This dissecting approach helps with other words which may not have prefixed forms. Thus /mût/ ‘to cut’ may occur as follows: /khnom mût day/ ‘I’ve cut my hand (as to me, action of cutting, directed towards hand)’ and /kambvt nih mûn mût/ ‘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 /môːk/, /tûː/ and /dôːl/, 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. This might be indicated if necessary by a formula such as + $p$ ~ vn in a dictionary.

c. /hâːl/. 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 /hâːl khao-ʔarv/ ‘the action of exposing to the atmosphere takes place, directed toward clothes’, /hâːl thnaj/ ‘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 /hâːl/, 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 ʔơːkɔː(r)/ ‘to soak husked rice’. But it very commonly occurs with /tûk/ as /tram tûk/ ‘to soak in water’ (cf. also /hâːl tûk/ ‘to swim’, /lûːŋ tûk/ ‘to drown’, /ˈpɔːŋdæt tûk/ ‘to float’). As a final illustration of the need to dissect and then reconstruct with the appropriate connectors in mind, the verb /lêːc/ will be used. It may occur as follows:

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\begin{align*}
tûk lêːc & \text{‘The (flood-) waters abate’}.
\thnaj lêːc & \text{‘The sun sets’}.
\phtêːh lêːk tûk & \text{‘The houses are partially covered by water’}.
\kaː(r) ʔaː(rth)-kômbaŋ nêːk lêːc cêːŋ môːk hâːy & \text{‘Your secrets are coming out’}.
\end{align*}
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The dictionary entry must cover the images 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 /môːk/, /tûː/ and /dôːl/ 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, /coli/, 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 /dɔt/ ‘the one which’ attaches an attribute to a noun; this is accomplished in the colloquial language by word-order combined with intonation and pause. /riŋ/ or /riŋ?ae/ 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, /nỳu/ (spelt nûv), 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:

...bám nɔm yɔk nỳu ?ɔmnaoy nèy krom nih....tù caek cùn dɔl nèék cùmŋtœ: ‘...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, illustrate this point:

Instead of /tỳu phþéah cau k rèm/ ‘go to the house of the judge’, we find /tỳu kàn phþéah cau k rèm/ ‘go directly-towards the house of the judge’.

Instead of /cap ?ɔmpỳu/ ‘took hold of the sugar cane’, we have /cap ?æ ?ɔmpỳu/ ‘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 nìøŋ thaz…/ ‘tell the girl…’, we have /prap tỳu nìøŋ thaz…/.

Some observations on Khmer verbal usages

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, /täu/, /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 /präkuol/ ‘to deliver’, for example, may be followed by /ʔaoy/, /täu/ or /dol/; for example, /präkuol ʔaoy kē/ ‘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, /khnop dak sāvphyu lœ: hyp/ ‘I put the book on the trunk’ but /khnop dak sāvphyu n̄noj hyp/ ‘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, /prap tū phéth/ ‘to hurry homewards’, /conʔol tū vīa(r)/ ‘to point to the door’ /nûk döl khnop/ ‘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, /kɔlnœŋ nih, cap trv crœn/ ‘They catch plenty of fish here’. This may be contrasted with the more prosaic and less colloquial /kèt cap trv crœn nûk kɔlnœŋ nih/, where the connector /nû/ ‘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 /kèt ʔaoy sāvphyu mɔk khnop/ ‘He is giving the book to me’ one hears /kèt ʔaoy sāvphyu khnop/ or even, if the book has already been introduced into the conversation, /kèt ʔaoy khnop/. This last has the construction nvn but the Westerner, at least, does not like to feel that it is the same as /kèt ʔaoy sāvphyu/ ‘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 phkaː/ ‘water the flowers’ or /sraoc tūk/ ‘sprinkle water’ or even /sraoc tūk phkaː/, but /sraoc tūk lûː phkaː/ ‘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 Gorgoniiev, Грамматика..., p. 252.
spoken of in which the destination is obvious. 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 kɔmpran/ ‘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 /kê: ʔaoy siəvphûu mɔ̃ kʰnom/? In fact the Cambodians have another way of expressing this kind of action involving two nouns, as the following sentences show:

<yòk khao-ʔav tûu hazl thëny ‘Take the clothes to put in the sun’.
yòk ʔəŋkɔ̃(r) tûu träm tùk ‘Take the husked rice to soak in water’.
nôm nêək nih tûu dak 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 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. /koəl knøŋ/ and /koəl/ are both correct. /koəl knøŋ/ 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; /koəl/ would belong to the $+n$ class because of its occurrence in that sentence-frame. With so common a verb as /koəl/ examples of each use might be given in a dictionary.

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15 Gorgoniyev, ibid., p. 223, cites colloquial /ʔəŋkûy kauʔry/ ‘sit (on) the chair’.
16 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.