

Projecting a Cambodian social identity

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Erickson and Schultz, in their book The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews, define an individual's social identity as a set of attributes such as family background, educational achievement, ethnicity, etc. and define a performed social identity as the subset of these attributes that a participant reveals during the course of an encounter (1982:13, 16-17). The point I would like to make is that this performed social identity, when it becomes an important part of the message that a speaker wishes to convey, has a direct impact on the nature of the discourse, determining such things as what information must be foregrounded and what referred to only indirectly, and what lexical choices must be made including what reference terms will be used.

In order to examine what social identity a Cambodian would reveal in a job interview and how he or she would use the Cambodian language to reveal this identity, several Cambodian junior college and university students in the U.S. were asked to play the roles of Cambodian employer and prospective employee and create what they would consider "a good interview," one which might lead the Cambodian employer to employ the Cambodian being interviewed. These interviews, conducted in Cambodian, were videotaped and the students along with several Cambodian adults, who worked as teachers in Cambodia before the war, were asked to select the best interview. In the interview selected as "best," the interviewee was successful because he was able to structure his replies in Cambodian in such a way as to make clear his acceptance of the Cambodian values of collectivism, respect for hierarchy and willingness to accept the direction of superiors. In other words, the Cambodian being interviewed was successful because he clearly projected a Cambodian social identity, saying in effect, "hire me because my social values are the same as yours." This message, however, was not conveyed directly but rather conveyed through a careful selection of gestures and actions, a careful selection of

reference terms and other social deictic markers, and a careful structuring of his replies to questions. Let me show you how this was done.

Social Asymmetry. The Cambodian interviewee conveyed the message that he recognized and respected hierarchy, such as the hierarchies of employer-employee and older-younger, in several ways. First, he signaled his recognition of the social asymmetry through posture and gestures. Conforming to what Joseph Errington described as polite and gesturally muted conduct (1988:36, 37, 211), he entered the room by opening the door only the width of his body and slipping in, his western handshake was accompanied by a formal Cambodian greeting (see below), when asked to sit down he did so, sitting in an upright and still manner, pressing his back straight against the back of the chair, his feet flat on the floor, his arms pressed flat against the chair's armrest and throughout the interview, the only movement he made was a slight movement of his fingers. His voice was soft and was never raised, for example, to emphasize a point. Another signal of social asymmetry was the use by the interviewee of the honorific predicate, *cumriəp*, at the outset of the interview, in the greeting, and at the closing, in the salutation. Finally, deference was shown by the interviewee when, at one point in the interview, the interviewee, in responding to a question on what experience the interviewee had in preparation for the job indicated his dependence on the employer in the following way:

1. *haəy myaəŋ tiət sʔəy sʔəy bəntəəp pii nəŋ tiət*
 and one more anything after that another

And besides, whatever else (is required)

kɲom min dəŋ toəl tæ bəŋ cuəy prap kɲom
 I not really know until older brother help tell me

I don't really know about unless you, older brother, help tell me.

tæ kənləəŋ nih yaəŋ mec keckaa nəŋ yaəŋ mec
 question place this how work this how

What's this place like? What's the work like?

væ thjun ponmaan sruəl ponmaan naa
it heavy how much easy how much softener

How difficult is it? How easy?

kii niw læə bəŋ tæŋ ɔh næk prap kɲom kɲom min
sow dəŋ
i.e. stay on older brother all who tell me I not really
know

*I depend for all this upon you, older brother. Who can
tell me?*

Collectivism. The interviewee emphasized the Cambodian value of collectivism, that the group is more important than the individual. He did this by indicating that he is a fellow Cambodian belonging to the same group as the employer, that he would be a team player who preferred to work in a group and would not upset the group by being a braggart or a person who thought he was better than someone else. For example, he stresses throughout the interview that he and the employer belong to the same group by using the reference term *kmae yæŋ* (we/you who are in my group) as you can see in his response to the question "why have you come?":

2. kɲom əy dəŋ dɔmnəŋ taam puəkmaak khləh haəy
I uh know information from friend some and

I...ah...learned from some friends and

mæł taam kasaət khləh dəŋ thaə dəŋ thaə
see in newspaper some know that know that

saw in the paper, found out that

khmae yæŋ miən truwkəa nək truwkəa
nəkthvəəkəa
Cambodian/we have need someone need worker

we Cambodians need someone, need someone to work

khaaŋ boəkpræe pii phæsaa coŋkles tiw phæsaa
khmae

regarding translate from language English to language
Cambodian

as a translator from English to Cambodian.

mloh haey kŋom coŋ thvæe cia peəkkha?coən mneek
nəŋ

therefore I want do as applicant one person and

Therefore, I want to apply and

coul thvækaa kŋoŋ tiikonlaeŋ dæi kmae yeŋ
truwkaa nəŋ

enter work in place place that Cambodian/we need that

*come to work in a place where we Cambodians need (a
translator).*

Note then that he has come, not on his own initiative, but because his Cambodian friends told him to and he saw in the Cambodian paper that the Cambodians needed a Cambodian translator and he wanted to respond to this Cambodian need. Second, the interviewer downplays (backgrounds or refers to only indirectly to) his individual accomplishments and highlights his desire to work cooperatively with others. Thus, responding to a question about whether he had any experience for the job, he said:

3. taŋ ciə pisey taŋ pii kŋom mook dɔl nih
since, especially since I come reach here

From the time I arrived

kŋom min dæi baan coul thvækaa konlaeŋ naa
phoŋ

I never perfective enter work place any response particle

I've never worked anywhere.

Thus, he begins his discussion of himself with a negative, not, I believe, because he has no ability in this area; after all, he's role-playing and could have made up something. Furthermore, in real life, he is a competent English/Cambodian speaker and writer. I believe the negative of his response is in line with what Errington refers to as "self-abasing, other exalting conduct" (1988:40). The interviewer follows the statement that he hasn't worked anywhere with the comment that for the last few years, indeed, all of the time up until the present, he has dedicated himself to school work (see 4 below).

4. ciə pisey ponman chnaam nih pel daəl kɲom niw nih
 especially however many years this time that I stay here

Especially during these last few years that I've been here

teəŋ ɔh kii pel teəŋ ɔh teəŋ ponmaan nih kɲom dak
 all that is time all however many this I put

I have put all of my time in these last years

tiw niŋ kækkaa niw saalaa teəŋ ɔh kii kɲom tiw riəŋ
 to that work in school all that is I go study

into work at school, all, that is, I study

niw saalaa teəŋ ɔh
 at school all

at school, all the time.

Thus, this statement which begins negatively (backgrounding his experience) ends by indirectly stating that he is a dedicated student. This kind of indirection is found again and again in the interview. For example, he says that he needs the job because he doesn't have money because his scholarship doesn't provide him enough. Thus, again, he begins saying his is poor and needy but he also indirectly says that he is a scholarship student. The interviewee adds the following comment which indicates his willingness to work in a group

and suggesting that he would be willing to listen to and be corrected by others. He says:

5. mloh haəy məəl khəəŋ ʔaa kɔnlaəŋ daəl kmaɛ yəəŋ
therefore look see the place that Cambodian we

So because I saw that there was an opening that my Cambodian friends

thaa miən kɔnlaəŋ thvəəkaa prahəəl ciə
say have place work perhaps be

said that there was a place to work which is probably

srual srual compuəh kɲom phɔɔŋ
comfortable for me also

comfortable for me also.

naa muəy thvəəkaa ciə muəy kmaɛ kmaɛ kniə yəəŋ
viə

another work with Cambodian plural colleague/fellow it

Another thing, working with Cambodian colleagues

khoh trow kniə bontecbontuəc prəhəəl ciə aac ɔt
ʔoon kniə

wrong right reciprocally a little perhaps can forgive
colleague

*if a fellow does something a little bit wrong, not so right,
perhaps the fellow can be forgiven*

baan kɔɔ min dəŋ baan ciə kɲom mook
can then not know reason I come

I don't know. That's the reason I've come.

Note also the use of kniə which I have translated as "colleague" but which also has the meaning of "together" thus indicating togetherness, or groupism, emphasizing again the value of

collectivism. Notice, too, his self-abasing hint that he might make mistakes and his use of fudges like "perhaps" and "I don't know."

In summary, the overriding message that this Cambodian interviewee is trying to convey to his prospective employer is that he should be hired because his values are in line with those of his Cambodian employer. He confirms the Cambodian values of respect for hierarchy, recognition of place, and the values of collectivism and working together. This overriding message is not stated directly but is conveyed through gesture and behavior, through selection of honorific predicates and social deictic references, and through which information is foregrounded and which is backgrounded.

References

- Erickson, F., & Shultz, J. 1982. *The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Errington, Joseph. 1988. *Structure and style in Javanese: a semiotic view of linguistic etiquette*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.