

# CAMBODIAN NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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Let me begin this paper in a truly Cambodian way, with what will be the endpoint in this discussion of Cambodian narration. I begin with a story which is remarkable in that it was told to me in English by a ten-year old Cambodian American boy who is now in the fourth grade in an American public elementary school and has been in an American school since kindergarten. Yet this story, which he narrated in response to my asking him to tell me about his dog Blacky, is a story which I shall claim is Cambodian in structure, nonetheless. I have put the story in example number one, and at this point I will say only that this is a story about the dog Blacky, and I am the person who is saying 'hmmmm', 'uhhuh' and so on. My comments are in italics.

## Example 1. Boy's English Narrative.

Then the next day we took him for a walk *hmmmm*  
I think about I mean a few weeks later *uhhuh* we  
took him for a walk *hmm* my dad and my bro-  
we took him for a walk we my bro by big brother,  
Viseth, *uhhuh* uhm he he took Blacky for a walk  
and he was around and then I broke up with my  
brother see my biggest brother goes somewhere  
and I follow him *uhhuh* cuz he takes Lucky *uhhuh*  
and my big brother he just break go somewhere  
else then then something weird came then when  
we went close to the uhm playground *uhhuh* in  
the village *uhhuh* my big brother Viseth *uhhuh*  
say take uhm Lucky home Dad says so because  
uh cuz Blacky bit somebody so my Dad says just  
in case that somebody - Lucky bite somebody  
*uhm* so uhm he went there *uhhuh* and then this  
one kid came His mother His feet got bitten right  
here (*shows an area on the leg*) Really? Lucky bit  
him? *uhhuh* My brother said he was holding him  
Lucky's uhm my brother told that guy to run  
*uhhuh* so then Blacky runs *uhhuh* and then my  
brother got after that he let go cuz of that it's hard  
it's rough *yeah* and the one with the chain that

one hurt his hand so he let go after that slip it  
*uhhuh* it slips off his hand so so it bit him.

One of the reasons that the above story is so difficult for English-speaking listeners to comprehend is the difficulty they have in putting the events in chronological order. Indeed, when I presented the above story to a class of American teachers and asked them to tell me what happened in the story, they could not. Naturally, all narratives of personal experience involve the recounting of events that occurred in a temporal sequence, but whether the narrative itself must be structured to conform to that sequence is another matter. For English speakers, as work by Labov and Waletzky (1967), Labov (1972) and Labov and Fanshel (1977) has shown, the structural backbone of the narrative of personal experience is formed by narrative clauses, independent clauses whose verb is marked with the simple past tense, which are presented in the order in which the events they describe occurred. Thus, temporal iconicity is a requirement of English oral narratives of personal experience. The reason why the English-speaking teachers could not recount the story that the young boy told was that they could not restructure the events chronologically, and because they could not do that, they felt that the story had no structure. I will argue that the story is structured. It merely is not structured in an English way.

### **Topic-Comment Structure in Parent-Child Narratives.**

If narrative clauses are not ordered chronologically, how then is order achieved in a Cambodian story. How can the listeners follow the story? What guidelines do they have? One guideline is the topic-comment structure. Indeed, I believe that anyone who has seen a Cambodian child learn how to tell a story would agree that at the core of the Cambodian narrative is the topic, and in general, in a story, the topics are the protagonists. Story-telling ability begins for the Cambodian child with the ability to identify and announce a topic. As soon as a child is able to do this, Cambodian parents help the child to further construct the story by asking the child about the appearance and the activities of the protagonist, thereby helping the child to construct the comments which necessarily follow the topics in a Cambodian story. As an example of this, see Example 2. Here we find a conversation between a mother (M), a father (F) and their two-year old daughter (C). They are looking at a page of a children's story book on which the character, Mickey Mouse, appears to be swimming. This causes the child to remember the fish that she saw when she went camping with her parents.

## Example 2: Parent-child story building

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| M: ʔəy ke                     | M: What's that?                          |
| C: kʰi maos                   | C: (Mic)key Mouse.                       |
| M: tʰvə: əy                   | M: Do what? (What's he doing?)           |
| M: tʰvə: əy nih               | M: Do what here? (What's he doing here?) |
| M: Mickey Mouse tʰvə: əy      | M: Mickey Mouse's doing what?            |
| F: Mickey Mouse tʰvə: əy koun | F: Mickey Mouse 's doing what, child?    |
| C: tʰə: həəl tɨk              | C: Do swim                               |
| F: həəl tɨk                   | F: Swim (He's swimming.)                 |
| C: Fish həəl tɨk              | C: Fish swim                             |
| F: həəl tɨk niw ʔaenə:        | F: Swim where?                           |
| C: həəl kaou                  | C: Swim out-there                        |
| F: həəl niw kraou             | F: Swim be outside                       |
| həəl tʰvə: mec tɨw            | Swim do how (How do they swim?)          |
| C: həəl ɔpɔɔŋ                 | C: Swim like-this                        |

The mother begins the interaction by asking the child what the picture is of (eliciting the topic). When the child responds with 'Mickey Mouse', the mother and the father then ask what Mickey Mouse is doing (eliciting a comment). The child responds with the comment 'He's swimming' which, because it was not formed correctly, is corrected or clarified by the father. The child then nominates the topic and adds a comment (fish swim) which causes the father to demand further clarification and comment (where did they swim/where was it swimming). This conversation is an example of the way in which parents elicit topics from children. When a topic is announced by the child, the parents elicit comments. When a topic with a comment is announced, they elicit, for example, a place where the event occurred or some further comment about the topic. Later, when a child is able to announce topics and make comments about them with some regularity, the parents work to help the child (1) shift focus from topic to topic in a story and (2) move from event to event along a story line.

**Moving along the Story Line.** Example 3 below is an example of how a Cambodian mother, who is narrating the children's book *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer 1969), shifts from topic to topic and moves from event to event. Four things

are of interest in this short segment. First, we can see the relationship between the use of nouns, pronouns and topic shifts or scene shifts. Second, the use of the verb *həəy* 'finish' in relationship to topic shifts is exemplified. Third, we can see the use of the perfective marker 'go' to indicate movement from event to event along the story line, and, finally, this segment illustrates how stories are narrated by using anticipatory statements followed by flashbacks. (I have formatted the story in the table to highlight the topic, comments, and the words signalling topic shifts and event shifts.) See Example 3 on the next page.

**The Choice of Nominal, Pronominal or Zero Subjects.** The Mayer story that the woman is narrating is complex because there are several characters involved: a boy, a dog, and a frog. Throughout the story the boy and the dog are engaged in different activities which are portrayed as occurring simultaneously. Thus, the narrator must constantly switch from character to character.

In the section of the story narrated here, the boy has just gone to the window to call his frog, and, simultaneously, the dog has just stuck his head in a bottle. The dotted line at the beginning of the table represents several comments, not included here, which the mother has made about the dog's activities. These comments culminate with the comment I have included:

*cəəp kbə:l viə knoŋ nɪŋ dɔ:p nɪŋ tɪw*  
stick head its inside in bottle that go  
The dog had stuck his head in the bottle

The mother then shifts her focus to the boy and narrates the next event.

*kɔ:m nɪŋ khɔ:m bæ:k bɔŋtʰwɛ:c nɪŋ*  
child that try open window that  
The child manages to open the window

*sraek hau kɔŋkaep nɪŋ tʰæŋ*  
cry-out call frog that one  
call out to the frog

She then shifts her focus back to the dog and says:

## Example 3. Narrating a children's book

chkae nvŋ	----- cɔep kbael vie knoŋ nŋj dɔp nvŋ	tv heey	dog that	----- stick head its in in bottle that	go finish
korn nvŋ	khom baek boŋʉʉc nvŋ	heey	child that	try open window that	finish
chkae nvŋ ko	sraek hau koŋkaep nvŋ ʒeŋ mɔ:k mvi	dee	dog that	so get out from window that come look get out	also
srap vie	mien coep ʒeŋ ne-- dɔp nvŋ nŋv coep kbael vie nŋv nvŋ ʒeŋ ʒa'nd pi: hr boŋʉʉc nŋj ʒhɛk 'kɔk' mɔ:k kream baek kaev baek kaev nŋj	ruec tv heey tv heey	suddenly it	have stuck together uh- bottle that still stuck head its in that one slip from above window that fall 'klunk' come down break glass break glass that	finish go finish to finish
korn nvŋ	muk soy kreporv ne-- sɔary aoy a: chkae nvŋ		child that	face give frown uh- regret give that dog that	

**chkae nʷŋ kə ceŋ pi: bəŋʔu:æc nʷŋ**  
 dog that then exits from window that  
 The dog exits (falls) from the window.

As you can see, the strategy that this woman is using to refer to the dog and the child is to select a noun with a demonstrative (*chkae nʷŋ* 'dog that' and *ko:ŋ nʷŋ* 'child that'), a pronoun (*koət* for the boy and *viə* for the dog or frog), or nothing (allowing the listeners to figure out the referent for themselves) depending on the situation; thus: (1) when introducing a topic, she uses a noun and a demonstrative and (2) after the topic has been introduced, she adds one or more comments which usually have no grammatical subjects. However, if there is a shift in scene or event, especially if this shift is depicted on another page in the story book, she will use a pronoun.

Consider, for instance, Example 3 where the woman narrating the story announces the topic, the child, and then makes two comments: (1) manages to open the window; and (2) calls out to the frog. Notice that she does not concatenate these comments with a marker, e.g., a conjunction or a verb, nor does she use a grammatical subject, nominal or pronominal, with either of these comments. (Both of these events were portrayed in one scene or picture on one page.) Also from Example 3, consider the place where the woman narrating the story looks at the picture with the dog standing on the window ledge and makes several comments about the dog:

1. falls from window
2. comes to look
3. falls
4. is stuck in the bottle
5. is with its head stuck in the bottle

She provides no grammatical subject for any of these comments. The narrator then turns to the next picture, in which the dog appears to be falling from the window with its head in the bottle, and she uses the subject pronoun *viə* for the dog in topic position, thereby indicating a continuance of the topic but a change of scene:

**srap viə rəʔvəl pi: lʷ: bəŋʔu:æc niŋ**  
 suddenly it slip from above window that  
 suddenly it slips from the window above

In sum, nouns with a demonstrative are used initially to mark topics. Pronouns signal that there has been a change in scene or event but not a change in the topic. Within a scene, comments following a topic will not have overt grammatical subjects if the subject of the comments is identical to the topic.

**Topic-Comment Structure in Child's English Narrative.** At this point let me reintroduce the dog story. In Example 4 below, I have maintained the structure of the narrative, but, to clarify the topics a little more, I have removed all of my back channel signals, i.e., the 'uhhuh' noises encouraging the speaker to go on. I have placed the main topic, 'my big brother, Viseth' and all the comments about him along the right side. I have put the scene setting comments in the middle of the page along with mention of the boy who was bitten and references to the dog Blacky, and I have put on the right side all comments about the oldest brother, not Viseth, who the speaker refers to as 'my biggest brother' and the second dog, Lucky, and the speaker himself, who he refers to as 'I'. I will explain why some of the narrative is in bold face later.

Example 4: Young boy's story.

Then the next day we took him <b>for a walk</b>	
I think about I mean a few weeks later	
we took him for a walk and then	
my dad and my bro- we took him for a walk	
we	
<u>my bro- my big brother, Viseth,</u>	
he he took Blacky for a walk	
he was around	
	I broke up with my
	brother, see
	my biggest brother goes
	somewhere and I follow him
	cuz he takes Lucky
my big brother	
he just break go somewhere else	
	then then something
	weird came then when
	we went close to the
	uhm
	playground in the village
my big brother Viseth	
say	

take Lucky home

*Dad says so*

*because uh*

*cuz Blacky bit somebody*

*so my Dad says just in case that somebody -*

*Lucky bite somebody*

so he went there and then

this one kid came with his

mother

his feet got bitten right here

*(shows an area on the leg)*

my brother said

he was holding him, Blacky, uhm

my brother told that guy to run so

then Blacky run

my brother got

he let go

*cuz of that's hard, it's rough*

*then the one with the chain*

*that one hurt his hand*

*so he let go after that*

slip it it slips off his hand

so it bit him

As you can see, the story is essentially structured along topic/comment lines, e.g., 'my brother, he'. The narrator does not follow the adult's rule of inserting pronouns only at scene changes where the topic remains the same. He seems to have learned the English rule, that sentences require subjects, rather well, although he feels free to refer to a previous topic with a pronoun even if there is an intervening aside. Thus, the referent of 'he' in 'he went there' is unclear as well as the referent of 'it' and 'him' in 'so so it bit him'. What makes the boy's narrative quite difficult to follow is the lack of markers indicating shifts from one topic to another and from one event to another. How do Cambodian adults do this? Returning to Example 3, you can see how this is done.

**Shifting from one Topic to Another and from one Event to Another.** Whenever the narrator switches from one topic to another, she terminates the one topic with *haey* 'finish' and begins the next topic. This is not the only function of the word *haey*, i.e., indicating the completion of one topic and a shift to another. The word may also indicate the completion of



one event and the beginning of another. In Example 3, for example, the narrator links the event 'Fall "klunk" come down' with the event 'break glass' using *haəy* (The dog falls down with a klunk *haəy* 'finish' breaks the glass bottle.) The word *ruəc* 'finish' also functions in this way.

In addition to the completive and linking function of *haəy*, the narrator also uses the word *tɨw* 'go' as a means of placing one event in the background and allowing the next event to move to the foreground. This word, therefore, is what moves the story along the story line from event to event. In Example 3, we can see that the narrator uses *tɨw* to transform the 'stick its head in the bottle' to the equivalent of 'has stuck its head in the bottle...'. She also uses *tɨw* to transform the sentence 'Still stick its head in that (bottle)' to something like 'With its head still stuck in the bottle...' and the sentence 'break that glass' into 'After the glass (bottle) broke, the boy...'. Thus, the word *tɨw* 'go' serves a perfective function, indicating that the previous event has finished and is now serving as the background to another event.

When I have asked the young narrator of our dog story to tell me a story in Cambodian, he typically shifts from event to event using the Cambodian words *ban tɨw* 'get go' after every event (both verbs functioning as perfectives). Perhaps it is the difference between the Cambodian markers and English markers, i.e., the perfective *tɨw* 'go' and *ban* 'get', placed at the end of a clause, and the English perfective attached to the main verb, that is the reason why the young boy is not clear about how to mark these things in English and the reason why he does not clearly mark his narrative. How would the young boy's dog story change if perfective markers were inserted in their proper place? I believe it would look something like what you see in Example 5. (I have also included in this version some of the English words and expressions that he was having difficulty with.

#### Example 5. Boy's story with perfectives included

One day my brother Viseth took the dog for a walk. I wasn't with him. I had followed my oldest brother who was walking the other dog, Lucky. Viseth had gone somewhere else. Then, a strange thing happened: Viseth came up to us when we were near the playground and told us to go home because Blacky had bitten someone and our father had said to bring Lucky home in case he bit

someone, too. You see, this kid had come to our house with his mother. Blacky had bitten him in the back of the leg. What happened was this: My brother was holding Blacky and he told the other guy to run. My brother couldn't hold Blacky because the leash was hard, and it slipped in his hand, so the dog ran after the guy and bit him.

In sum, one problem with the boy's story is the lack of perfective markers. I began this paper, however, with the claim that the boy's story has a Cambodian structure, and this is true, I believe, in spite of his short-comings with perfective markers. As you can see, the above version of the boy's story clearly lacks chronological iconicity.

### **The Anticipatory Structure of Cambodian Narratives.**

If the boy's story has no chronological structure, how then is it structured? I believe this can be made clear by considering two other characteristics of Cambodian stories. The first is that Cambodian story-tellers like to signal where they are going, the punch line, the end point, before they explain to their listeners how they got there. You can see this a little bit in the Cambodian woman's narration of the children's story in Example 3. Note that even this small substory within a larger narration of the entire book announces the outcome of an action first and then explains how that outcome came about. Thus, the narrator says:

chkae nɿŋ kə cɛɲ piː bəŋʔuːɛc nɿŋ  
 dog that so exit from window that  
 So the dog falls from the window.

The narrator then provides the first version of the action, the most abstract version:

mɔːk mɿl dæc  
 come look also  
 comes and looks out

cɛɲ  
 exits  
 falls

This version merely states that the dog came to look and then 'fell out'. Actually, the Cambodian word *cɛɲ* is more abstract than the word 'fall.' It is closer in meaning to the

English words 'exit' or 'depart', although English speakers would not use these words here. Following this first brief overview of what happened, the narrator gives a second and more detailed version. In this version she uses the Cambodian words *rəʔyl pɨ:* 'slips from' instead of the more general *cəp* 'exit', for example. She also includes some description of the dog.

*mien cəp tɛəŋ ne-- dɔ:p nɔŋ*  
 have stick together -uh- bottle that  
 (He's) stuck in the bottle

*nɨw cəp kbə:l viə nɨw nɔŋ ʔəŋ ruəc tɨw*  
 still stick head its in that one finish go  
 With his head still stuck in the bottle

*sɔ:p viə rəʔyl pɨ: lɔ: bəŋʔuəc nɨŋ*  
 suddenly it slip from above window that  
 he suddenly slips from the window.

Perhaps a clearer example of the anticipatory nature of Cambodian oral narratives is found in the narrative in Example 6. This narrative comes from an interview conducted as part of an oral history project of the library at the California State University-Sacramento. Here the narrator is telling the interviewer about a woman he knew at the art school he attended, a woman whose name was similar to his. (The complete story is printed on the following page.) The narrator begins his story by introducing the topic: a woman named Socheat Tha:

*mien niəŋ sɔ:y mnək nuh*  
 have girl female one person that  
 There was a girl

*chhmueh niəŋ soʔciəta*  
 name girl Socheat Tha  
 her name was Socheat Tha

He then makes a statement which contains the denouement of the story:

*chhmueh soʔciəta nɔŋ*  
 name Socheat Tha and  
 (her) name was Socheat Tha and

**tɿw riən komnu: nɿw tɿ: nuh dæ**  
 go study drawing at place that also  
 (she) went to study drawing there, too.

Following this anticipatory statement, he provides his first of two versions of the story of why this woman happened to be studying at that art school. The first version is a brief synopsis or overview of the events. He says:

**niəŋ nuh buəs ciə dom ci: mdom tɿw haəy**  
 girl that become nun once go finish  
 The girl had become a nun and

**sɿk tɿw**  
 quit go  
 had quit

**tɿw riən nɿŋ tɿw**  
 go study then go  
 (and) had then gone to school

(Note that this section of the narrative provides a good example of the use of **tɿw** 'go' as a perfective marker and the use of the completive **haəy** 'finish' to move one along the story line.) After this first version of the story, the narrator gives the more detailed version. He adds, for example, that when she was studying before, her boy friend broke her heart. He also adds the name of the monastery and place where she lived before coming to the art school, the monastery in Phnom Sompeu. He finishes the story in a way which is also typical of Cambodian oral narration, with a statement which mirrors the statement he began the story with. He began the story with:

**chhmueh soʔciəta nɿŋ tɿw riən komnu: nɿw tɿ: nuh dæ**  
 name Socheat Tha and go study drawing at place that also  
 Her name was Socheat Tha and she went to study  
 drawing there, too.

and, thus, he ends the story with:

**ko tɿw riən komnu: ʔɔpɿŋ tɿw nɿŋ niəŋ chhmueh**  
**soʔciəta**  
 so go study drawing like that go and girl name  
 Socheat Tha

So she had gone to study drawing and her name  
was Socheat Tha

In sum, Cambodian narratives typically begin at the end and proceed through various versions of a story, each one more detailed than the preceding one.

**The use of effect and cause.** The final piece of the puzzle, the clue as to what structure the Cambodian boy is using in his dog story, is the importance to Cambodians of providing an answer to the question 'Why?'. In another story from the oral history project of the library at California State University-Sacramento, a Cambodian told of being sent out to get water for the evening meal. He said that in retrieving water from the well, he stepped on something which he thought was a log. It turned out to be a dead body. At this point, he stops the narrative and says:

knom min d ɲ haet daoy sa: ʔəy  
I not know reason for what  
I don't know why

bən ciə ke ɲəp niw knoŋ nɲ dae pontae...  
why is he die in there also but...  
why he died there either, but...

I wonder what an English speaker would have said at that point. My guess is that he or she would have said, 'I don't know when he died, but....'

The need to express the reason why may also have motivated our narrator of the story about the woman in the art school to explain why she was there, i.e., she was in that school, because when she was studying at another school, her boy friend broke her heart, an event which caused her to leave that school, become a nun, etc.

If one looks at the chronological order of the events in our dog story, one finds the following:

1. Viseth and his brothers take Blacky and Lucky for a walk. Viseth was using the chain leash.
2. Viseth leaves his brothers.
3. Viseth walks Blacky.
4. Viseth meets a friend.
5. Viseth tells his friend to run.
6. Blacky runs after Viseth's friend.

7. Blacky pulls on the chain.
8. The chain hurts Viseth's hand.
9. The chain slips off Viseth's hand.
10. Blacky bites the leg of Viseth's friend.
11. Viseth's friend's mother and his friend go to Viseth's house, so Viseth's father finds out what happened.
12. Viseth's father tells him to find his other brothers and tell them to bring the other dog, Lucky, home.
13. Viseth tells his brothers to bring Lucky home.

The order of these events in the boy's story, however, is the following:

1-3-2-3-13-12-10-12-11-10-5-6-9-8-9-10

This order is not determined by chronology, but, I believe, by an effect plus cause chain, and how Cambodian begins with the effect! The narrator begins by noting an effect, that something 'weird' happened one day when he was out walking with his brother and his dog, Lucky. The weird event (event 13) was that his middle brother came to tell them to take Lucky home. The narrator then proceeds to explain why this occurred. He begins with the most direct cause (event 12: the father said so) followed by an explanation of why the father said so (event 10: Blacky bit someone). The narrator, having explained the consequences of the dog's biting someone, then feels it necessary to explain why the dog bit someone. He again begins with a consequence of the event (event 11: the boy with the dog bite and his mother go to the narrator's house.) This event is linked with the previous events in that it is what causes the father to decide that the brothers should bring the other dog home. The narrator, having anticipated the consequences, then goes back to explain why the dog bit the boy. He explains that event 10, the dog bite, was caused by event 5 (his brother telling his friend to run) and event 6 (Blacky's running after his friend) and event 9 (the leash slipping out of his brother's hand). Here the narrator stops to clarify why the leash slipped from his brother's hand (the chain was hard and rough and so, event 8, it hurt his hand and, thus, event 9 occurred (the leash slipped from his hand). As a result of all of this, the narrator concludes, it (the dog) bit him (the boy). This, then, is a Cambodian tale told in English. As a Cambodian tale, it is organized using structures such as topic plus comment, anticipations and flashbacks, general statements and specific ones, and effects plus causes.

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