The acquisition of syntax/pragmatics by a Cambodian and English speaking two-year-old child

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Introduction. The acquisition of Khmer by children is interesting linguistically for several reasons. Phonologically, little if any language acquisition research has been done on languages which, like Khmer, stress the second syllable in two syllable words. Cambodian parents, as if to emphasize the importance to Khmer of the last part of a word, address their infants using a baby talk characterized by the deletion of this first syllable, and often the reduction of syllable initial consonant clusters. Given the phonological prominence of the second syllable and the reduction of onset consonant clusters in the speech of Cambodian parents to children, it is not surprising that Cambodian children, learning to speak, begin by producing words which are thus reduced. (See Longmire 1994 for more on Cambodian baby talk and phonological reduction.) Khmer is also interesting in that, like Japanese, pragmatic and sociolinguistic considerations pervade the language. (See Clancy, 1985, for a discussion of this regarding Japanese.) Thus, for example, Cambodian children need to acquire mastery of a vocabulary which conveys their social relationship with hearers and addressees. Learning how to refer to oneself and to others, then, presents a problem for a child. Sentence final particles signal other subtle pragmatic information such as questioning, doubt, disgust, emphasis, etc. Syntactically, the acquisition of Khmer is interesting not just for the acquisition of aspect, deixis, head first constructions, and so on, but also for the intersection of syntax and pragmatics. Indeed, the difficulty in teasing apart that which is pragmatic and that which is syntactic in languages such as Khmer may shed light on the weakness of so many studies in child language acquisition, and that is the failure to recognize that all language is learned in context and that the context is an oral one. Finally, it is interesting to study the acquisition of both Cambodian and English by a child. The differences between these two languages make it easier to see the hypotheses the child is making about each language when

the child incorrectly applies the rules of one language in speaking the other. Because the social and linguistic context in which one language is spoken may differ from that of the other, one can also see the effect of this on the differing pragmatic strategies the child uses to initiate a conversation or to make a contribution to an on-going one. In this paper I will look at the pragmatic context in which a Cambodian-English speaking child learns her languages and how this affects her understanding and acquisition of pragmatics and syntax.

Methodology. The data for this study come from a three year longitudinal study of the language development of the oldest daughter of a Cambodian and English speaking couple living in America. Cambodian was the predominant language in the environment of this child until, at the age of three, she entered an American preschool. Thus, the hypotheses this child made about both English and Cambodian were initially based on her growing understanding of the way Cambodian is structured. To conduct this study, I, along with this child's' parents, have audiotaped and videotaped the child approximately every two weeks from the time this child was born. Transcripts of these tapes have been written in Khmer and English, and the examples I will use here come from these transcripts. For this paper, I will look at the child's development of language from a mean length of utterance (MLU) around 1.5 in Cambodian and 1.0 in English, to a MLU of 2.5 in Cambodian to 2.0 in English. This is when the child was between 1;9.23 (one year, nine months, 23 days) to the age of 2;5.0.

Pragmatics versus syntax. In a paper entitled "Discourse Analysis of Japanese and Thai", Robert Jones and Eleanor Jorden asked the question, "Do 'sentences' occur in Thai speech?" (1976, p.13) Given the difficulty of identifying sentences in oral discourse in a Southeast Asian language, it is no wonder that they questioned whether the sentence was a justifiable linguistic unit of oral discourse. As they pointed out, historically the sentence is closely tied to "literary norms and the convention of writing." (p. 15) Because children learn language from oral discourse,

because so much of child language acquisition research is aimed at providing evidence for one particular linguistic theory or another, and because the prevailing linguistic theories are sentence-based and thus research in language acquisition is often focused on what a child knows about the structure of sentences, the question of what is a sentence in oral discourse is an important one. Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson (1976) claimed that "the notion of topic may be as basic as that of subject in grammatical descriptions". (p. 459) They distinguished languages according to whether the structure of sentences favored "a description in which the grammatical relation *subject-predicate* plays a major role" or the structure of sentences favored "a description in which the grammatical relation *topic-comment* plays a major role". (p. 459) Thus, they contrasted the subject-predicate construction of a sentence with the topic-comment construction of a sentence. Languages which favor topic-comment constructions were considered topic-prominent languages. Feng-Fu Tsao (1979), in his book *A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Towards Discourse Analysis,* argues that "to place topic in contrast with subject is very misleading because they essentially belong to different levels of grammatical organization". (p. 37) In Tsao's view, topic-comment structures are discourse level structures. He points out that the topic extends its semantic domain over several sentences, playing a major role in such phenomena as pronominalization and coreferential NP deletion, but topics play no role in sentence-level phenomena like reflexivization and verb serialization. (p. 261) Of course, discourse level phenomena are often found in sentences. Word final particles in Khmer often signal how previous utterances are viewed and what the speaker expects in utterances to follow (e.g., an answer). There is no doubt, however, that topic plays a major role in determining what can be deleted from a following comment and even whether the subject of the following sentence or comment can be placed in sentence final position. Of interest in this paper is the question of how the environment of a child might lead the child to an understanding of topic/comment structures and how early a child begins to produce them. Certainly, one would think,

nothing is more fundamental in language acquisition than the ability to understand or initiate a topic.

Establishing topic. True child-adult discourse in Khmer, where both adult and child contribute to the topic nominated, begins with joint attention to an object or person in the environment. Usually, a deictic word is involved. An example of of this from my data occurs when Sopha's mother tried to get Sopha to "read" a Garfield comic strip in the Sunday newspaper with her. Sopha, age 1;9.23, gets down after a second or two and goes to the window. The conversation is as follows:

child	niə niə pa niə
	here here pa here
mother	na koun? əi ke?
	Where, child? What is it?
child	ba
	(unclear but interpreted by mother below)
mother	cma: ɔt kəɲ pʰɔɽ
	cat not-see-too (I don't see)

Here the mother requests the topic from her daughter, getting a syllable of the word "cat" and, given the previous context of the Garfield cartoon, she supplies the full word "cmaa" and makes a comment regarding the cat, i.e., that she can't see one. Two month's later, the child is supplying nouns with her deictic words. It is clear also that she has equated "this" and "nih" and the meaning "here". For example, at the age of 2;0.7, she is removing silly putty from a container and talking to herself. She says:

-n- cake
thisa cake
nii-a cake
da-a cake

She seems to be trying out various words and sounds that fit in initial position. On the next day, we find her sitting in a high chair trying to get her father to give her a small Christmas tree ornament, a bear beating on a drum. She and her father interact:

Child	bear nih (three times) (=bear here/this)
	papa (=father)
	bear nih (two times)
Father	mui na: koun (=one which, child)
	na:
	mui na:
Child	Babbles
Father	nih? (=here/this)
	nəɣ (He hands the ornament to his daughter)
(a minute later)	
Father	əi ke nih a: nih? (=what this? this?)
	əi ke koun? (=what this, child)
Child	bear
Father	bear leŋ əi?
Child	biŋ kə kau (sound in tune like" jingle bell" but it is unclear)
Father	hn?
	leŋ klaun? (The father is guessing that she said something like: he plays like a clown.)
Child	klaun? (repeats what her father said)
Father	Bear vai sko (=bear plays drum)

In this interaction, we can not only see how the father requested further information in order to clarify the topic (and retrieve the object), but how he then engaged his child in an exchange: first getting her to name the topic (what's this, child? bear) and then encouraging her to provide a comment (plays drum). This little routine, identifying a topic and then demanding comments about that topic, occurs again and again. One can see it not only in events where the child labels an object she picks up, and then the parents demand a comment, but also in story-book reading where the parent or the child identifies a picture and the parents demand comments about the picture. An example of this occurred when Sopha was 2;3.15. Both her mother and father helped her to identify the topic. When she did this, they elicited comments:

M əi ke?	(What's that?)
C kʰi mau	(Mickey Mouse)

M tvə ʔəi ?	(Do what?)
M tvə ʔəi nih?	(Do what here?)
M Mickey Mouse tvə ʔəi?	(Mickey Mouse do what?)
F Mickey Mouse tvə ʔəi koun?	(Mickey Mouse do what, child?)
C təː haəl tik	(Do swim.)
F haəl tik	(Swim.)
C Fish haəl tik	(Fish swim.)
F haəl tik niw aenaː?	(Swim be where?)
C haəl kau	(Swim outside.)
F haəl niw krau	(Swim be outside.)
F haəl tvə mec tiw	(Swim do how?)
C haəl əpcəŋ	(Swim like this.)

Notice here how, after the topic (Mickey Mouse) was initially identified, the parents omitted the subject of the comment-sentence, but then they felt compelled to put the topic back into the topic-comment construction when the child didn't seem to understand the question. They then omitted the subject when the child responded correctly. When the child announced the next topic (fish) and made a comment about it, the parents demanded further comment, in every instance without a subject in the comment-sentences. Thus, the parents model topic-chaining and subject deletion in discourse.

Sopha's growing ability to establish a topic and make a comment about it can also be seen in her nomination of the topic "fish" in the previous example. More typically, however, she continued to fill the topic slot with the deictic word *nih* "here/this". Sopha's English ability was also growing, although her mean length of utterance in English was smaller than in Cambodian, and her hypotheses about how English is structured were greatly influenced by Cambodian. Whereas with even a small 1.5 MLU Sopha could initiate a conversation in Cambodian with *nih*, usually causing her parents to ask her for clarification of the topic, e.g., ʔvrʔəʔ? What's that?", or to make a comment about the topic. In English, however, this conversation-initiating ploy failed. For example, when she ran around the house one day, stopping here and there to say "This!", noone reacted, and she soon stopped this as a way to elicit comments. In English, she equated *nih* with "this" and she would construct topic-identifying utterances in the form: dis ABC; dis train;

dis tape; disa cake and even mixed language utterances in the form: disə bɔŋ duck "this brother duck" (example from age 2;3.27). She always paused slightly between this/dis/disə. In Cambodian, she made subjectless comments if the topic was already established. For example, at the age of 2;8.2, in a conversation with me which took place while we were examining the book *Peter Pan*, the following interaction took place:

> Me: Who's that?
> Captain Hook.
> That's Captain Hook!
> Sopha: ɔt miɛn dai (not have hand)

When I responded by translating the Cambodian to "doesn't have a hand", she corrected her response to:

> itsə nat miɛn dai (itsa not have hand)

A few pages later when we came upon another picture of Captain Hook, she announced:

> nih ɔt miɛn dai
> this/here not have hand

When we then saw a picture of Peter Pan and Captain Hook with swords standing on a plank above the water, she said:

> nih tiw vai
> this/here go fight

and when we had turned to the book *Snow White*, and we came upon the picture of the prince kissing Snow White, she announced:

> nih cʰup cʰɯ haəy
> this/here stop ill finish
> This not ill anymore

The comment part of this construction also developed in English, beginning initially with noun phrases in constructions like "Thisa alligator.", and developing into constructions like:

> ðɪsə lion roar
> ðɪsə baby cry
> ɪtsə fall down

The last utterance was made after she demonstrated "falling down". The idea that the construction would, perhaps, be clearer or more complete with a topic marker can be seen in her trying out an utterance she must have heard at the baby-sitter's house. The utterance was:

> wadəjúsei or wat-n-júsei

What do you say?
where the -n- in wat-n-jûsei seemed a syllable which, perhaps even to her, was unclear. She was playing with a doll house one day (age 2;6.2) when the following interaction occurred:

Sopha:	waɗəjûsei
	wat-n-jûsei
	wat-n-jûsei
	maʔ waɗjûsei
Mother:	mec koun? (What, child?)
Sopha:	waɗəjûsei
Mother:	əi ke? (What's that?)
Sopha:	wat'əjûsei
Mother:	tʰaː mec?
Sopha:	watjûsei
Mother:	What what?
Sopha:	dɨs waɗʒûsei
Mother:	What do you think?
Sopha:	dɨs waɗʒûsei!

Subjects in Comments. Throughout this period of language acquisition, from 1;10 to 2;10, Sopha often placed subjects in sentence final position. Indeed, her parents often remarked that Sopha talked "backwards". An example of this is in the conversation below. Sopha (age 2;0.8) is playing with the bear ornament when she says:

Sopha:	ʔɔ ʔɔː	(oh oh)
	baʔ haəy	(break already)
Mother	nɛəʔnaː tʰəː baʔ	(Who break it?)
Sopha:	tʰəː beibi	(Do baby (I))
Mother	beibi tʰəː baʔ	(Baby(you) do break)

Here Sopha places the subject "baby" meaning herself after the verb "do". Her mother corrects her utterance, placing the subject in first position. It does happen in Cambodian that subjects which are not identical to the topic of the discourse can be placed in sentence final position, but it is unlikely that Sopha has this level of understanding of discourse. Two things may be confusing her: first, the tendency to repeat the topic (or is the second occurance a subject?) in sentences like

"What do tigers say?" which, in Cambodian, is "kla tʰaː
mec kla" (tiger say how tiger). This kind of question, what
do animals do or what do animals say, is found in a familiar
child-adult routine. Second, a vocative may begin or end a
phrase, as in sopʰa mo nih sopʰa (Sopha, come here,
Sopha). This may be the reason Sopha (2;0.8) has the
following conversation with her mother:

> Mother: cam maʔ joːʔ aoy (let mother take give)
> Sopha: (fusses)
> Mother taa ai ke (question: what that (you want))
> Sopha fuʃi (fish)
> daʔ mami (put mommy)
> daʔ mami (put mommy)

This last utterance "put mommy" was clearly a request for
her mother to put fish on her plate, but there was no pause or
tone change between "daʔ" and "mam". In other words, it
had the intonation of a sentence final subject instead of a
vocative. In both cases, the topic was different from the
noun phrase put in sentence final position. In the first, the
topic was the bear, and baby was placed at the end. In the
second, the topic was fish and mommy was placed at the
end. Finally, we have the inversion which occurred in
English when she was 3;1.18. I bring it up because,
although it occurred later than our other data here, it seems
related to what she is doing with subjects which are not the
same as the topic. In this case, Sopha and I were drawing a
birthday cake and she announced

Sopha: I want uhm candle.
Me: What color?
Sopha: uhm color this one
Me: OK. How many?
Sopha: Three
and uh blow it
Me: You want...blow?
Sopha: pla: (flame)
Me: Oh, OK, fire, you want the flames.
Sopha: Yeah, and blow you
Blow you candle

Why did the inversion occur here? Is it because the topic is candle and she feels "you" must then be down-graded? This is still unclear.

Other head + modifier constructions. If one can say that topic-comment structures are similar to other structures with a head followed by a modifier, then it should be made clear here that Sopha was also producing some other structures of this type. Given the consummate interest of a two-year-old, especially a two-year-old with a baby brother, in things that belong to her, it is not strange to see possessive constructions appearing rather early. In Cambodian, Sopha produced:

> **Possessive**
> pʰteəh beibi (2;2.17)
> house baby (my)
>
> pʰteəh sopʰa (2;2.17)
> house Sopha
> (my house)
>
> dɔp pa bɔŋ təə (2;4.15)
> glass father older/my isn't it
> (my daddy's glass, isn't it) or
> (your glass)
>
> pah mama bear (2;10.0)
> belonging mama bear
> (mama bear's)
>
> kɔṛ for bear (2;10.0)
> bicycle belonging bear
> (bear's bicycle)

As you can see, she began to equate the Cambodian word *pɔʰ* as in *nɔʰɔʰ* (belong) with "for". Thus, when she was identifying things belonging to baby bear in the Goldilocks story, she looked at a picture of baby bear hanging above baby bear's bed and said: this for baby bear.

At the same time as she was producing these possessive constructions, she also called a fish-shaped magnet used to stick things to the refrigerator door a "sticker fish", a picture of a female clown a "clown mommy" and slippers under the bed of one of the bears in the story of

Goldilocks "shoe funny". Thus, in both English and Khmer, she was using head + modifier constructions.

In conclusion, I believe we can see in all of this how a child comes to use topic-comment structures, beginning first with a simple deictic marker for the topic, gradually adding to this a comment in the form of a noun phrase, and finally using a verb phrase in comment position. I believe we can also see in this how parents, through scaffolding, aid their children in understanding the need for a clear topic and a series of comments. For those of us who teach Asian languages, often adopting methodology which is used in the teaching of European languages, we might want to consider a methodology which is less sentence centered. Tsao (1979) suggested paragraph-centered teaching. Perhaps, that is a little too literary. Instead, we may want to include in our methodology the kind of identifying topics and calling for comments which these Cambodian parents have engaged their child in.

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