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

B. Jean Longmire
School of Education
University of the Pacific

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 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: **nie nie pa nie**
  - here here pa here
- mother: **na koun? ai ke?**
  - Where, child? What is it?
- child: **ba**
  - (unclear but interpreted by mother below)
- mother: **cma: ɔt kəŋ pʰɔŋ**
  - 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  
mai na: koun (=one which, child)
na:
mai na:

Child  
Babbles

Father  
nih? (=here/this)

xor (He hands the ornament to his daughter)

(a minute later)

Father  
ai ke nih at nih? (=what this? this?)
ai ke koun? (=what this, child)

Child  
bear

Father  
bear len ai?

Child  
bin ke kau (sound in tune like "jingle bell"
but it is unclear)

Father  
len klaun? (The father is guessing that she
said something like: he plays like a clown.)

Child  
klau? (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 ai ke? (What’s that?)
CKh mau (Mickey Mouse)
M tva ʔai? (Do what?)
M tva ʔai nih? (Do what here?)
M Mickey Mouse tva ʔai? (Mickey Mouse do what?)
F Mickey Mouse tva ʔai koun? (Mickey Mouse do what, child?)
C tɔː hael tik (Do swim.)
F hael tik (Swim.)
C Fish hael tik (Fish swim.)
F hael tik niw senaː? (Swim be where?)
C hael kau (Swim outside.)
F hael niw krau (Swim be outside.)
F hael tɔː meː tɔː (Swim do how?)
C hael eːpɛəɭ (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., ʔaː lɛʔe? 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: disa បុរស duck "this brother duck" (example from age 2;3.27). She always paused slightly between this/dis/dis.

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: ប្រុសមួយ (not have hand)

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

ប្រុសមួយ  (itsa not have hand)

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

១២ ប្រុសមួយ

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:

១២ កាប់

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:

១២ ប្រុសបែង ប្រុសបែង ប្រុសបែង

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:

ប្រុស lion roar

ប្រុស baby cry

២២ 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 babysitter's house. The utterance was: បានតុសេី or បាន់-តុសេី
What do you say?

where the -n- in wat-n-jōsei 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:

Sophia: \textit{wa\textcircled{a}jōsei}
\textit{wat-n-jōsei}
\textit{wat-n-jōsei}
\textit{ma? wadjōsei}

Mother: \textit{mec koun ?} (What, child?)

Sophia: \textit{wa\textcircled{a}jōsei}

Mother: \textit{a\textcircled{i} ke?} (What's that?)

Sophia: \textit{wat'ajōsei}

Mother: \textit{t\textcircled{a}r mec?}

Sophia: \textit{watjōsei}

Mother: What what?

Sophia: \textit{dus wadjōsei}

Mother: What do you think?

Sophia: \textit{dus wadjōsei}!

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

Sophia: \textit{ho ho:} (oh oh)
\textit{bal haey} (break already)

Mother \textit{ne'mar t\textcircled{a}r ba?} (Who break it?)

Sophia: \textit{t\textcircled{a}r beibi} (Do baby (I))

Mother \textit{beibi t\textcircled{a}r baï} (Baby(you) do break)

Here Sophia 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 Sophia has this level of understanding of discourse. Two things may be confusing her: first, the tendency to repeat the topic (or is the second occurrence a subject?) in sentences like
"What do tigers say?" which, in Cambodian, is "kla the wreckage klaa" (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 ma? jor? aoy (let mother take give)
Sopha: (fusses)
Mother tae ai ke (question: what that (you want))
Sopha fi ji (fish)
dai mami (put mommy)
dai 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 "da" and "mami". 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**

pḥeaŋ beibi (2;2.17)  
house baby (my)

pḥeaŋ sopha (2;2.17)  
house Sopha  
(my house)

dɔŋ pa bɔŋ taa (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)

kɔŋ for bear (2;10.0)  
bicycle belonging bear  
(bear's bicycle)

As you can see, she began to equate the Cambodian word pɔ́ŋ ɔ́ŋ in នឹងតូរ (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.

