

Mentoring identity: How one Khmer speaking child learned who she was

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1. Introduction.

In 1975, Clifford Geertz wrote in his article "On the nature of anthropological understanding" of his quest to discover "how people represent themselves to themselves" and thus to discover the idea they have of what a self is (48). This work of an anthropologist is rather difficult work, requiring as it does, the sifting and winnowing of all ways people represent themselves in talk and actions. This work is also, I would claim, difficult for and required of children, apprentice members of their society, who must learn how to present themselves and represent themselves, in all conversations.

Working at the confluence of three branches of the social sciences, -linguistics, psychology and anthropology, I have been influenced in this particular by notions that are, of late, coming together under the term social or cognitive constructionism. As C. Fosnot (1996) explains, this approach to cognitive development has been influenced by the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. From Piaget's work comes the concept of the dynamics of concept formation, that is, "of progressive equilibria, adaption and organization, growth and change" (14). From Vygotsky comes the concept of the dialogical nature of learning and the belief that concept formation is achieved by the child in cooperation with an adult. Finally, from Bruner's work there is the idea that the best place to study language acquisition is "at home, *in vivo*, not in the lab, *in vitro*" (Bruner 1983: 9). His work on mother/infant dialogues emphasized jointly constructed meaning. In sum, the area of psychology has legitimized the search for the construction of meaning in the dialogues between parent and child, recognizing that these initial constructs may change as the child becomes immersed in the myriad of conversations that she inevitably will be caught up in as an apprentice and later an adult member of her society.

Another influence on this study comes from Geertz's anthropological work in Bali. In his 1973 article "Person, Time and Conduct in Bali" Geertz looked at three areas which shed light on how members of that society view themselves: the many terms they used to refer to each other in conversations, the notion of role, and the concept of "shame" or what Geertz wrote would be better translated as "stage fright", the fear that one is not performing their role and that others may perceive this.

Finally, in the field of linguistics, both the recent work in discourse and in pronominal reference have been influential. Candace West, Michelle Lazar and Cheris Kramarae in their article "Gender and Discourse" claim that "gender is accomplished *in* discourse" and "that which we think of as 'womanly' or 'manly' behavior is not dictated by biology, but rather is socially constructed" (1997: 119). In 1990, in their book *Pronouns and People. The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity*, Peter Mühlhäusler and Rom Harré discuss the complexity of personal reference systems and their relationship to an understanding of self and society. They are particularly interested in how pronouns are used indexically to signal the relationship between self and others. To use them correctly, they claim, one must be able to locate oneself within a "spacio-temporal structure of things and events" and "in a structure of rights and obligations" (p. 89). Thus, to engage in conversation and to do so in a grammatically and socially acceptable way, one must acquire and possess a sense of self. To talk to others, and even to oneself, one must make paradigmatic choices among sets of pronouns and nominal terms of reference such as names expressing kinship or birth order, choices which reflect one's understanding of one's position in the moral order of things.

2. 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. To conduct this study, I, along with this child's parents, have audiotaped and videotaped the child at her home approximately every two weeks from the time this child was born. All the videotapes were made by the father without the investigator present. Transcripts of these tapes have been written in Khmer and English, and the examples I will use here come from these transcripts.

3. The Data The Child Encounters

As those of us working in Southeast Asian linguistics know, the indexicality of reference terms, that is, how terms of reference force interlocutors to rely on context to determine the referent, presents a different problem to someone learning Khmer, for example, than to someone learning a Western European language like English. In English, in order to engage in conversation one must learn to make a paradigmatic choice from a set of pronouns which label participant roles in a speech act (speaker, addressee, or neither speaker nor addressee). In Khmer, in order to engage in conversation one must learn to make a paradigmatic choice from sets of nominals which label social interrelationships between interlocutors (kinship names, birth order names, occupational role names, etc.). The fact that these terms like "I" in English, and *bōŋ* (older) in Khmer can have multiple referents presents a problem to language learners. In Khmer, a mother can refer to her child using several terms. What the child has to sort out is: Which of these terms should she use for herself when speaking to her mother? Which should she use for herself when speaking to others? And on what basis should she make this paradigmatic choice? In the Cambodian household I looked at, the primary caretaker and interlocutor for the child was the mother. As I indicated in my talk for SEALS II ("Cambodian Caretaker Speech and Teaching Routines"), this mother began talking to her daughter from the time the daughter could make eye contact with her. She talked to the daughter and for the daughter, modeling what the child ought to say. The following conversation between the mother and her two month old daughter show both the

talking-to and talking-for phenomenon as well as the variation in terms used to refer to the child:

Conversation 1.

nɔh mɪ:l pɑ: nɔh
over-there look-at father over there
Over there! Look at Papa over there!

pɑ:p pɑ: ʔaoy pɔ: ni:ɛŋ nɔh
tell father have carry **missy** there
Tell Papa to carry **you**. There!
pɑ: ʔaoy
father oh
"Oh Papa!"

pɑ: ʔaoy pɔ: ni:ɛŋ
father oh carry **missy**
"Oh Papa! Carry me!"

pɑ: pɑ: ni:ɛŋ cɔŋ ʔaoy pɔ:
Papa Papa **missy** want have carry
"Papa! Papa! I want you to carry me."

pɑ: ʔaoy
father oh
"Oh Papa!"

(The child wiggles and kicks.)
thvɥ: ʔɿ nuŋ kɔ:n
Do what this **child**
What are you doing **child**?

rɔəm ʔɿy kɔ:n ʔɿy
dance what **child** what
Are you dancing **child** or what?

(The mother returns to the previous topic.)
pɑ: ʔaoy pɑ: ʔaoy pɑ: pɔ:
father oh father oh father carry

"Oh Papa! Oh Papa! Papa carry me!"

hau pa mɔ:k kɔ:n
call father come **child**
Call your father, **child**!

(A bit later the mother says to the child:)

kɔ:n prɯ nɯŋ ceh na:h
child **littlest** this knows a lot
This **littlest child** knows a lot

kɔ:n prɯ ma:ʔ nɯŋ naa ceh na:h
Child **littlest Mom** this [diminutive] knows a lot
Mom's littlest child knows a lot.

In the conversation above, the mother uses the kinship terms "mother", "father", and "child", the birth-order term, "littlest", along with a term for a young girl. Syntactically, the word "child", for example, is used vocatively or topically and as a subject and object within a sentence. This early conversation is rather typical of conversations between mother and daughter in the first year of the young child's life.

Between the ages of one and two, the most frequent terms the mother used for her child were *koun* "child" and *ʔon* "younger". As I discussed in "Cambodian Caretaker Speech and Teaching Routines" (Longmire 1992), as soon as the child can walk, the mother increasingly engages her in pretend play involving taking care of a baby, for example. In one episode of pretend play, which I include below, the mother has strung up a hammock and has been showing her child how to rock the stuffed bear in it. She terminates the play, telling the child that it is time for lunch. By talking for the child, she demonstrates how to say good bye to the little bear, referred to as *ʔon* "younger-one" and how the child is to tell him "I'm going to eat" using the term *ʔon* "younger-one" for herself.

baan haəy ʔon ke:ŋ luək haey
have already finish **younger-one** sleep finish
Enough! **He's** sleeping now.

tru ñam ba:y tɔh tru ñam ba:y
 go eat rice go-on go eat rice
 Go eat! Let's go eat.

bai bai ʔo:n bai bai
 bye bye younger-one bye bye
 "Bye bye [bear]. Bye bye"

ʔɔ:p o:n muəy tru bai bai o:n
 kiss younger one go bye bye younger-one
 Give the baby a kiss. "Bye bye [bear]!"

o:n tru ñam ba:y
 younger-one go eat rice
 "[I'm]going to eat."

Of course, there are other examples of the use of "younger-one" in this child's environment. In children's stories that she hears, there are duck "younger-ones" and rabbit "younger-ones" and the baby sitter's littlest child is called "younger-one", as well.

The appearance of syntax and a sibling. As the child reaches the age of two, she begins to string two words together, and with this appearance of syntax, when the combination agent + action or possessed object + possessor appear, we can begin to see some of the hypotheses the child is making regarding her language, herself and her world. She has begun to use "younger-one" for herself, but this is only briefly. Two things happen to change this: first, her mother has determined that she needs to know her given and family name so that if she gets lost in the American community, she will be able to identify herself; and, second, her mother is about to give birth to the second child and determines that her daughter needs to be able to refer to herself as *bɔ:ŋ* "older-one" in relationship to her sibling.

Name games begin and at the same time the notion of possession appears. Over a period of a month, when their

daughter is two years and two months old, the parents continually ask her:

o:n	chmuəh	ʔry
younger-one	name	what

What's your name?

pa	chmuəh	ʔry
father	name	what

What's your father's name?

demanding, for the first answer, her given name and for the second answer, her father's family name plus his given name. When the child is playing with blocks and announces:

səŋ phtəəh
build house

her mother replies with:

o:n	səŋ	phtəəh	ʔaoy	na:ke:	ko:n
younger-one	build	house	for	who	child

Who are you building the house for, child?

and her daughter replies *bəh* "belong" + her given name.

At this time also, the parents begin to model the use of the word *bəŋ* "older-one" in conversations like the one between the daughter and her father below. The father moves the daughter's doll next to her, and, first, speaks to the daughter, then models what the daughter should say to the doll, and then speaks to the daughter, changing from *o:n* to *bəŋ*.

thvʔ phtəəh o:n
do house **younger-one** (=the doll)
Do a house for the **younger one** (your doll).

kʰəm ɔn bəibi mo:k cwt bəŋ
come on baby come near **older-one** (=daughter)
"Come on baby! Come near **me**."

bɔːŋ thvɿ phtɛəh ʔaoy mɿ:l
older-one do house for see
 I'm doing a house you for to see.

ʔaoy o:n ʔɔŋkuy knoŋ nih tɿu ko:n
 have **younger-one** sit in here go child
 Go on and have **the younger-one** sit in here, child.

With the birth of her brother, the daughter, two and a half years old, settled on calling herself *bɔːŋ*, "older-one", and she did so regardless of the age of the person she was talking to. Thus, for example, when she wanted to go swimming, she asked her mother:

bɔːŋ hael tɿk ba:n te:
older-one swim water can or-not
 Can I go swimming?

Clearly, she did not yet realize that she could not refer to herself as older in relationship to her mother or people older than she was.

Her parents did not correct her in her use of *bɔːŋ*. They told me, what turned out to be true, that she would learn to use it correctly when interacting with her friends, some of whom were older than her. Her parents were much more concerned that she learn her new role which included a change in behavior. They teased her when she wanted to act like a baby. One night, for example, when she wanted to suck on a nipple from her brother's baby bottle, her mother created a game instead, asking her to name the colors on the lids of the various baby bottles. When her daughter continued whining, she warned her not to ask for a nipple in front of me and engaged her daughter in a five minute effort to divert her attention by insisting that she name colors, moving the lids and insisting they were not there, teasing her about not remembering the color names, etc.! Another day, when she asked her mother to come to the bathroom and help her wipe herself, her mother insisted that she was able to do it herself and said that she should do it, otherwise, she would be *kmah Jean* "ashamed in

front of Jean". This was the first instance of the word *kmah* "shame" that I have in my data. Thus, along with the change in role name from o:n "the younger one" to bɔ:n "the older one", came her parents' insistence that her daughter perform the role of the older sibling. They helped her give her brother his bottle, had her entertain her brother, hold her brother (although not carry him) and insisted that she stop behaving like a baby, or else, they told her, she would be ashamed in front of others.

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