

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KHMER-MON LANGUAGES

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Southeast Asia has long been known as a region encompassing many languages belonging to a number of linguistic groups. Many of the languages of mainland Southeast Asia were first recognized as constituting part of an Austroasiatic stock by the German anthropologist Pater Wilhelm Schmidt in 1906. As the chief members of this stock Schmidt admitted the Mon-Khmer languages of Southeast Asia and the Munda languages of India. Earlier investigators such as James R. Logan, J.F.S. Forbes, and C.O. Blagden had postulated a Mon-Annam (or Mon-Khmer-Annam) group. The membership of Annamese (= Vietnamese) in this group was more or less officially sanctioned by J. Przyluski in 1924. Later, however, Henri Maspero proved the difference between Vietnamese and Mon-Khmer in his "Etudes sur la phonétique historique de la langue annamite: les initiales."¹ Later scholars have followed Maspero in relegating Vietnamese to the Thai family.

May it be forgiven us Khmer, preoccupied as we are with the founding of a new nation, that we have gone contrary to established linguistic usage and elected to speak of the "Khmer-Mon" languages. On the one hand, we inevitably deem Khmer the most important member of this group, though we have no wish to underrate Mon. On the other hand, we aspire to resuscitate the venerable term *khom*, by which the

hai referred to the Khmer and the Mon together:

ho- 'Khmer' + -m 'Mon' > *khom* 'Khmer-Mon'.

In the words of Phya Anuman Rajadhon, the Khom were probably a race of people akin to the Môn and the Khmer (or Cambodians) of the present day. The old Môn alphabet and also the old Khmer alphabet were called Khom by the Thai."²

But precisely who were (or are) the Khmer-Mon (or Mon-Khmer) peoples? Historical records indicate that they were the earliest inhabitants of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. According to the most recent documents published in the United States,³ a total of seventy-six peoples of this group are distributed from western India to the China Sea across Burma, Thailand, Laos, the Khmer Republic, and Vietnam. These peoples speak Khmer-Mon languages, which are not only different from every other language in the world but which are especially different from the languages of the Thai peoples, the Burmese, and the Vietnamese--not to mention the Chinese who settled in Southeast Asia along with the first occupants. Of all the Khmer-Mon peoples, only the Khmer, the Mon and the Cham were able to develop high cultures which preserved their own cultures and own writing systems down to modern times. On the one hand, it was only these groups which occupied fertile river basins (the Khmer and the Mon) or coastal plains (the Cham); on the other, it was only these groups that were in communication with foreigners. The other Khmer-Mon groups were highlanders and forest-dwellers cut off from the first three and maintaining virtually no relations with one another; these have made no progress, especially in the fields of linguistics and orthography.

Whatever their progress, modern linguistic science has shown that there are no tones in any of the languages of these Khmer-Mon groups. These languages differ, consequently, from those of such neighboring peoples as the Thai and Lao, the Burmese, and the Vietnamese. Khmer in particular remained immune to the influence of the Thai tonal system--and this despite the fact that the western and northern provinces of Cambodia were under Thai hegemony from 1795 to 1907 and again from 1941 to 1946! In the same way, the speech of Khmer who have lived for centuries in neighboring territories--over four million in Thailand and three million in South Vietnam--has remained the same as that of their compatriots in the Khmer Republic. In case of necessity, the Khmer have borrowed words from their neighbors, but none of these loans have tones.

As has been observed already, the languages of every one of the latecomers into Southeast Asia such as the Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese have always had tones. What are tones? In tonal languages, pronunciation of words ranges from high to low and the meaning of the individual word varies accordingly. In order to mark tonal variations, diacritics are put over or under the vowel of a given syllable or word. For example, Chinese as actually spoken in Peking has four tones: (1) a mid tone, marked by a horizontal line (*e.g.*, sān 'three', duō 'many'); (2) a rising tone, marked by the acute (*e.g.*, nán 'difficult', huídá 'to answer'); (3) a falling-rising tone, marked by the klicka (*e.g.*, xiě 'to write', zhǔn 'exact'); and (4) a falling tone, marked by the grave (*e.g.*, sì 'monastery', cuò 'fault'). Vietnamese actually has six tones: the ngang or level, the

ắc or high-rising, the hỏi or low-rising, the huyền or low-falling, the nặng or low-constricted, and the ngã or high-rising-broken. It is evident that Thai, Lao and Burmese also have tones.

According to André-G. Haudricourt, the tones of Vietnamese have their origin in Chinese. He observes that Tonkin had been under Chinese domination for so long that the final consonants of Vietnamese changed into tones.⁴ J. Przyluski came near to sharing this view, for in 1924 he wrote, "As long as one does not know the circumstances in which a given language loses or keeps its tonal system, one must be prudent and not speak of the disappearance or the survival of such a system in determining the genealogy of languages."⁵ We for our part do not yet share Haudricourt's opinion, inasmuch as the speech of Khmer who have lived for centuries under foreign domination still manifests no tones. This is most clearly seen in the case of loanwords. Thus Vietnamese bánh 'cake' (high-rising) is read banh (level) in Khmer, while Vietnamese thầy 'master, teacher' (low-falling) is read thây in Khmer. Like Khmer, Mon and Cham have borrowed heavily from Thai and Vietnamese respectively; all such loans as they have made from these tonal languages are toneless. At the same time, when Thai and Vietnamese borrow from Khmer-Mon languages these loans are assigned tones. We conclude from this that loanwords conform to the phonological system of the borrowing language.

Apart from the matter of tones, members of the Khmer-Mon group are distinguished from alien neighbor languages in employing certain characteristic processes of derivation. All of these processes come under the head of affixation--more exactly,

prefixation and infixation. Inasmuch as prefixation is manifested in many languages of the world, I shall confine myself here to a brief description of infixation which is a surer criterion of linguistic affiliation.

An infix is a consonantal element which is introduced into the interior of a root form to create a derivative form having a derivative meaning. A given root together with its derivatives by prefixation and infixation constitute a derivational set or family. For example, infix -n- inserted into the root kit 'to think' yields the derivative kɔmnit 'thought'; kit and kɔmnit are members of the same derivational set.

In Khmer only the nasals plus the consonants -b-, -l- and -v- function as infixes. Thus: -ŋ- inserted into khva:r 'to hook' forms kɔŋva:r; -ɲ- inserted into khciək 'to expel' forms kɔɲciək 'expellant'; -n- inserted into kda:r 'to pierce' forms kɔnda:r 'gimlet, auger'; -n- inserted into cu:əj 'to help' forms cɔmnu:əj 'aid'; -b- inserted into rɔ:ŋ 'to parry' forms rɔbɔ:ŋ 'fence'; -m- inserted into cam 'to watch' forms chmam 'watcher'; -l- inserted into crih 'to look about the same' forms cɔlɪh 'almost'; while -h- inserted into kha:k 'to spit' forms kɔmha:k (kh- + -h- + -a:k) 'spittle'.

The most typical of the infixes in Mon are -m-, -n- and -w-.⁶ For example,

-m-	klon	'to work'	>	kamlon	'work'
	klòt	'to steal'	>	kamlòt	'thief'
	kećät	'to kill'	>	kemćät	'killing'
	ćoin	'to sew'	>	ćemòin	'tailor; sewing line'

	ćoit	'to plow'	>	ćemoit	'agriculturist'
-n-	ćū	'to rest'	>	ćenū	'resting-place'
	kòp	'sufficient'	>	kenòp	'desire, longing'
-v-	pòk	'to open'	>	pawòk	'opening'
	pòn	'to shoot'	>	pawòn	'shooting'
	pāu	'to coil'	>	pawāu	'coil'

In Cham also, -n- functions as an infix.⁷ Thus, tɔ:k 'to dwell' > tɔnɔ:k 'dwelling'; pu:əc 'to speak' > pɔnu:əc 'speech'; ti:əv 'to row' > tni:əv 'oar'; i:əŋ 'to be born' > cni:əŋ 'birth'.

I have illustrated infixation only in the three main languages of the Khmer-Mon group, but I must emphasize that essentially the same processes of derivation are used in the less evolved sister-languages.

It is interesting to note, moreover, that a closely related language family, the Malayo-Polynesian, makes use of the same methods of derivation. This family employs interfixes, that is to say syllables (in contradistinction to single consonants) which are introduced into the interior of a root to create a derivative form having a derivative meaning. Thus in Malay and Indonesian⁸ we have perintah 'to command' > pemerintah 'one who commands'; pandu 'to drive' > pemandu 'driver'; paksa 'to oblige' > pemaksa 'obligation'; pakai 'to use' > pemakai 'user'; pilih 'to choose' > pemilih 'choice'; pindjam 'to borrow' > pemindjam 'borrower'; and pajak 'tax' > pemajak 'taxpayer'. In these examples the syllables -me- and -em- inserted into the root yield derivatives indicating acts and agents. In the same way, in Malagasy⁹ we encounter such sets as mandeha

'to go' > mampandeha 'to cause to go'; miditra 'to enter' > mampiditra 'to cause to enter'; mankatia 'to love' > mifankatia 'to love each other'; mamango 'to strike' > mifamango 'to strike each other'; fitaka 'to cheat' > finitaka 'being cheated'; tapaka 'piece' > tinapaka 'being cut to pieces'; hehy 'laugh' > homehy 'to laugh'; and sisika 'scale' > somisika 'to scale'. In these examples the syllables -amp-, -if-, -in- and -om- are inserted into the root to form derivatives indicating causation, reciprocity, the passive, and the active voice. In Cham, finally, we find such cases as patau 'to compare' > pamoeyau 'comparison' and boeng 'to eat' > bamoenoeng 'food', where -moe- serves as an interfix.

The reader will no doubt be surprised that I have grouped Cham together with Malay, Indonesian, and Malagasy. In reality, Cham belongs at once to the Khmer-Mon group of languages and to the Malayo-Polynesian family. The first scholars grouped the Cham, ethnically and linguistically, with the Malayo-Polynesian family; later scholars, using the results of further research, had the daring to conclude that the Cham constitute a mixed group intermediate between the Khmer-Mon and the Malayo-Polynesian. Pater Schmidt wrote in 1906, "The structure of Cham is Khmer-Mon, but it has borrowed words from Malayo-Polynesian languages, especially words of number and personal pronouns."¹⁰ And Coedès said in the same vein, "Le cham...possède un mécanisme de dérivation beaucoup plus rudimentaire que l'indonésien, et sa structure est devenue si semblable à celle des langues Môn-Khmer que certains auteurs l'ont classé dans cette famille."¹¹

⁷ Etienne Aymonier, "Grammaire de la langue chame," in *Excursions et Reconnaissances* (Saigon), 1889.

⁸ T. Iscandar, *Kamus dewan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1970).

⁹ Aristide Marre, *Grammaire malgache* (Imprimerie Vosgienne, 1894).

¹⁰ W. Schmidt, "Les peuples môn-khmer, trait d'union entre les peuples de l'Asie centrale et de l'Austronésie," in *BEFEO*, VII (1907): 213-63, VIII (1908): 1-35.

¹¹ G. Cœdès, *Les peuples de la péninsule indo-chinoise: Histoire - Civilisations* (Paris: Dunod, 1962), 36.

