NOTES

Some observations on Khmer discourse markers

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During March–May 1993, I completed my fieldwork collecting data on subordination in Cambodian Khmer at Aranyaprathet, Prachinburi Province, Thailand.

Working on the data, I have found that some discourse markers appear to be crucial for the understanding of how Khmer discourse is organized. Here I will discuss only two phenomena dealing with discourse pragmatics.

I. ka: and taə

As shown in Figure 1, ka: and taə occur in the same structural positions; they occur optionally before verb phrases and occasionally before subject noun phrases. (Figure 1, examples [1] to [3])

Sometimes these two words precede the subject of sentences, as in examples (4), (5), and (6).

ka: and taə are used to join important information to a preceding discourse. Although these two markers share the same syntactic position, it is noticeable that ka: precedes affirmative sentences while taə introduces interrogative sentences.

Nevertheless, one question word, /məc/ or /mdəc/ ‘why’ cannot co–occur in juxtaposition with taə. It always co–occurs with ka:. This awaits further investigation. (Figure 1, examples [7] and [8])

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There were a few problems of data collecting since Khmer speakers near the border tended to mix Khmer with Thai, especially when they talked to a speaker of Thai people. Language samples given here are drawn from textbooks, short stories and recorded plays.

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II. niŋ

Khmer has two optional demonstratives: *niŋ* used with an object near the speaker and *nuh* with an object far from the speaker. Demonstratives in Khmer follow head nouns and indicate a noun phrase boundary. (*Figure 2, examples [9] and [10]*)

There is another word which can occur in roughly the same position as these two demonstratives. The word *niŋ* seems to share the same features as demonstratives. In the *Khmer Dictionary* (Buddhist Institute, 1967–1968), *niŋ* is glossed as *nuh*, one of Khmer demonstratives. Headley’s *Cambodian–English Dictionary* (1977) translates *niŋ* as “1. this, that” and “2. here, there, right here, right now”. (*Figure 2, examples [10] to [12]*)

Semantically *niŋ* only expresses definiteness; it has an article–like function in Khmer. This ‘article’ is also optional as are demonstratives.

According to my informant, *niŋ* can occur with *nuh* although in his opinion it apperas to be superfluous. *niŋ* - *niŋ* is not acceptable by some speakers, but perhaps it should not be considered ungrammatical. (*Figure 2, example [13]*)

*niŋ* in Khmer may be borrowed from *niŋ* in Thai. It is written as / niŋ / which marks it clearly as a Thai loanword. Nevertheless, *niŋ* in Thai expresses indefiniteness while *niŋ* in Khmer expresses definiteness.

The shift from indefiniteness to definiteness could be because Khmer already has the word *muŋ* ‘one’ for indefinite expressions. But then, as we saw above, it also has two demonstratives. Perhaps *niŋ* represents a more neutral relationship more appropriate for anaphoric discourse definiteness.

*Abbreviations:*

BE     verb of existence/presence  
CAUS   causative  
COMP   complementizer  
*D.M.*  discourse marker  
DEM    demonstrative  
excl.   exclamation  
*ints.* intensifier  
*IRRL* irrealis  
NEG    negative particle  
*part.* final particle  
PRN    [personal] pronoun  
REC    reciprocal  
REL    relative marker  
wh–    relative question marker
REFERENCES


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(1) peːn nuː pʰəh kɐː lʊn sɑːn-sɑːn cʊl kʊn kɔmpɔt prɪ y mun nuh bat tiw
tiːm ə tʃiːŋ kɪːm pɔt prɪ y mun nuh bat tiw
time that snake kɐː crawl slowly-Redup enter in bush forests before DEM disappear, go

'At that time the snake then crawled slowly into the bush and disappeared.' [SOURCE: saen cambar]

(2) A: ?ou! ɓam ... ɓam-ɕiːt thːaː mɔː dæe
excl. title, Wichet COMP how as well

'Oh! What did he say?'

B: keː thːaː keː nɪk kʊn nɑːh! tæ keː kmaː k救助 keː tʊː kɔh
PRN say PRN think PRN Part but PRN ashamed because PRN do wrong

piː mɪt-ʃʰəʔ tʃʰɛŋlary
from friend all

kʊn kɐː ɓam pɔnŋûəl keː kom ʔaʊy keː kɪt dʊc-nɑh ... 
PRN kɐː past explain PRN don't CAUS PRN think like that ...

'He said [that] he thought of me but was ashamed because he did [something] different from all of us [his close friends]. So I explained to him not to think like that.' [SOURCE: tɨsɔy snɛʔar]

Figure. 1 kəː and təː in modern Khmer discourse
I understood already. I knew already what Nakree talked to me but ... but I could not betray Chinda. Chinda was very kind and good to me. She helped [me pay] complete school fees and book expenses. How then could I betray her since she is so good to me?' [SOURCE: kampūəŋcam cam sne]
(4) haøy soum ma? kom plic thà sat-k?ae k?ae wia niw-tæe k?ae
and then ask mom don't forget COMP crow PRN still crow

though ma? kham yɔ̌c tik-miāh mɔ̌k liə̄p rɛcana: le: sambol kmaw krap-kwa?
although mom try hard melt, gold come paint decorate on skin black dirty

ræbæn wia yan-næ:
of PRN how

kf: wia min ¿æc tiw cia hæn kaæt dæ
kf: PRN NEG able go BE swan happen as well

'And then, Mom, please don’t forget that a crow is always a crow. No matter how hard you try to paint gold on its dirty black skin, it cannot become a swan either.' [tiasoy snehæt]

(5) tharî: kŋom soum toh tiw coh! tæ kŋom ha? ¿douc-cia min yûal niy nih sah
Tharee PRN excuse (me) go Part but PRN as if NEG understand remain DEM part.

tharî: metta: præ kŋom ¿aoy cam-cam phæŋ bæn te!
Tharee mercy tell PRN direct-Redup too able part.

tuʔ-hæy-cia yan-næ: kf: tharî: niw-tæe cia mît pʰæq ræbxh kŋom cia nic nah!
although anyhow kf: Tharee still BE close friend of PRN BE always part.

'Excuse me, Tharee, but it seems that I don’t understand this implication at all. Could you please tell me frankly? Anyhow, you are always my close friend.' [tiasoy snehæt]

Figure. 1 kf: and tæ in modern Khmer discourse
(6) ʔo!  cində: ʔəyləw pukæ riɔprðœp piə? niyiəy nah excl. Chinda now good at narrate word speak int.

ɓæk ɓamŋ ponmaŋ khae saŋ ceh crən tæ-ɔməŋ separate PRN how much month at all know much really

təo təo -self BE teacher wh- PRN teach PRN part.

‘Oh! Chinda now you are very good at selecting words [to speak]. It’s only a few months that we have not seen each other. [You] know a lot. Who then is your teacher?’ [SOURCE: kampwəŋcəam cam sνə!]

(7)  [After Chum has taken a poster from his pocket, Som said]

yiː!  chum ṁəc kəi? ʔæŋ hiəŋ haek ɓamrəm ɗo৮-c-nəŋ excl. Chum why kəi? PRN dare tear warning poster like this

‘Oh! Chum how dare you tear the poster?’ [SOURCE: ʔəyləthɔə]

Figure. 1 kəi and təo in modern Khmer discourse
‘Oh! I am still embarrassed [to see] Tharee. Speaking of which—why ... don’t [I] see Tharee sitting [and] eating with them?’ [SOURCE: *tøøay sne:hat*]
(9) សំណាល ការលេង នឹង គឺ អាដុល ក្រុង និង កាល មាន ហ្គីសារវត្ថុ: តែឃុំ ភាពណាម
  Samnang place DEM CAUS REC think see arrive memory together how many
  ងារ ក្រុង ទឹកកក មិន មាន ញៅមុខ មាន ណាម កូន យើង ហាវ
  REL REC used to BE together PRN since origin come DEM already

  'Samnang, this place made me think of all the memories I used to share with you since the first time we met.' [SOURCE: tiéay snehat]

(10) មន្ទាត់ មិន មាន ពីរ ដែល
  area DEM BE house 10

  'There are ten houses in that area.'

(11) ប្រុស-ពីសែត កាលីក: ពីរ នឹង ប្រុស គឺ កុំ ណាម យើង ហាវ!
  Phisit field corn niŋ you do body part.

  'Pisit, do you look after [lit. do] the cornfield by yourself?' [SOURCE: kampúeəcam cam snei]

Figure. 2: niŋ in modern Khmer discourse
(12) *A:* ʔoun kom pruey t̥ay naː muəy bəmnuəŋ yəŋ kəŋ niŋ bən samrəc
you don’t worry day wh- one wish we certainly IRRL get succeed

‘Don’t worry, some day our wish will certainly succeed.’

*B:* hiː excl. taː D.M. time d̥aːl haw that t̥ay naː niŋ
excl. REL call COMP day wh- niŋ

‘Oh! whatever day would that be called?’ [SOURCE: t̥əsəy sneːhaː]

(13) kəpəl niŋ nuh mɔːk piː naː
ship niŋ DEM come from wh–

‘Where did that ship come from?’

Figure. 2: *niŋ* in modern Khmer discourse