ON KHMER POLAR INTERROGATIVES

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Huffman (1970:77-79) points out the difference between the two polar (yes/no) interrogatives in Khmer rii and tee. He describes the difference as being that rii is used in questions where there are a number of alternatives, while tee is used when there is only a two-way yes/no alternative.

Examples (from Huffman):

Look qañcœñ tìw psaa rii? 'Are you going to the market (or somewhere else)?

Look qañcœñ tìw psaa tee? 'Are you going to the market (or not)?

The responses to the first (rii) question might be:

Baat, tìw psaa. 'Yes, going to the market.'
Baat tee, kñom tìw salaa. 'No, I'm going to the school.'

while the responses to the second (tee) question might be:

Baat, tìw. 'Yes, going.'
Baat tee, kñom mìn tìw tee. 'No I'm not going.'

On further examination of the use of these interrogatives, however, a different statement of their use appears possible. While both rii and tee correspond to the English polar interrogatives Are you....?, Do you....?, Huffman has observantly noticed that rii implies other alternatives, whether or not those alternatives are overtly stated in either the question or the answer. I would propose that by shifting one's focus from the clause elements to the sentence as a whole the same could be said about tee on the sentence level as was said about rii on the clause and phrase levels, namely, that tee is not necessarily polar either but implies alternatives. To the question Look qañcœñ tìw psaa tee? we might get as replies, in addition
to the polar replies cited above:

Baat tee, krouch new pteah. 'No, I'm staying home.'
Baat tee, krouch baok aaw. 'No, I'm going to wash my clothes.'
Baat tee, krouch dae leeng. 'No, I'll just take a walk.'

These replies would show that there is a range of possible alternatives. With rie the alternatives substitute noun phrases, locations, etc., in the original sentence. With tee the alternatives substitute whole sentences for the questioned sentence. And the difference is also reflected in the situational contexts: in the first example the rie question would be asked of a man walking down the road, toward the market, while the tee question would be asked of a man sitting at home not obviously going anywhere. Also, a rie question tends to expect a yes answer, while a tee question tends to have less preconceived expectation about the answer.

Further examples:

\[ rie \]
Look mok piu-msol-maen rie? 'Did you come yesterday?'
Baat, piu-msol-maen. Yes, yesterday.
Baat tee, piu-msol-mngay. No, the day before yesterday.

Nih tlay hoksap rial rie? 'Does this cost sixty riels?'
Baat, hoksap. Yes, sixty.
Baat tee, haasap. No, fifty.

Look ci baarang rie? 'Are you French?'
Baat, baarang. Yes, French.
Baat tee, aamerikang. No, American.

Salaa rion new khaang-muk rie? 'Is the school ahead?'
Baat, khaang-muk. Yes, ahead.
Baat tee, khaang-sdam-day. No, on the right.

\[ tee \]
Ptéah nih lqâa tee?
Baat, ptéah nih lqâa.
Baat tee, ptéah nih min lqâa tee.

Baat tee, ptéah nih krâkwâq.
Baat tee, ptéah nuh lqâa ciang.

Look cang baan kafei tee? 'Do you want coffee?'
Baat, cang.
Baat tee, krouch soum baay klah.
Baat tee, krouch min fiam kafei tee.

'Is this house good?'
Baat, ptéah nih lqâa.
Baat tee, ptéah nih min lqâa tee.

Baat tee, ptéah nih krâkwâq.
Baat tee, ptéah nuh lqâa ciang.

'Yes, this house is dirty'
No, this house is dirty
No, that house is better.

'Yes, I do.'
No, please give me some rice.
No, I don't drink coffee.
Look ceh phûsaa côn tee? "Do you know Chinese?"
Baat, ceh.
Baat tee, prûh kôm
mûn dael riûn phûsaa
con phàâng.
Baat tee, pîi mun kôm
ceh, pontae ayâtû-nîh
plîc âh hây.

So, to summarize, rî is used when one wants to question only one phrase in a clause, but tee is used when one wants to question a whole sentence or the main verb in a sentence (remembering that sentence and clause are endocentric constructions with a verb at the center). And the answer to rî or tee may be a yes or no or an alternative, though rî tends to expect a yes.

To add a few further refinements. The combination rî tee is used to question sentences, like tee, but specifically expects a yes or no answer.

Ptêh nûn lqûâ rî tee? 'Is that house good?'
Baat, lqûâ.
Baat tee, mûn lqûâ tee.

Look càng baan kafei rî tee? 'Do you want coffee?'
Baat, càng.
Baat tee, mûn càng tee.

Descriptive clauses with cî or kî cî can take only rî questions, never tee. (The use of kî clauses is becoming less common.)

Look cî baarang rî? 'Are you French?'
Look kî cî aamerikang rî? 'Are you American?'

In complex sentences the situation is a little more complicated. In a causal sentence, if the main clause follows the subordinate clause, either rî or tee can be used, with rî questioning a part of the main clause, and tee questioning the whole main clause or sentence, following the usual rules. The yes expectation with rî, however, seems stronger than the part/whole distinction at the sentence rank. In formal writing yes or no answers are preferred for both rî and tee rather than alternative answers; if an alternative must be stated, it must follow a yes or no.

Daoy look chiî tngay nhî, tae look bàngriûn sqaeq rî?
Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?
(expecting a yes answer)
Baat, kôm bàngriûn. Yes, I will teach.
Baat tee, tngay côn têap No, on Monday I'll teach.
kôm bàngriûn.
Daoy look chăi tngay nih, tae look bângriăn sqaeq tee?
   Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?
Baat, ât bângriăn. Yes, I won't teach.
Baat tee, kñom twaa kaa No, I'll work at home.
       niw pteah.

In a causal sentence, if the main clause precedes the subordinate clause, the main clause is understood as being asserted and only the subordinate clause can be questioned, using only rii.

Look mën bângriăn sqaeq, pipruv tngay nih look chăi rii?
   You won't teach tomorrow because you are sick today?
Baat, triw haay. Yes, that's right.
Baat, pipruv tngay nih Yes, because I'm sick today.
       kñom chăi.
Baat tee, pipruv kñom No, because I'm busy.
       rawuəl.

In a conditional sentence apparently tee is the normal interrogative, with rii being used only if the main clause ends with non-interrogative tee or dae.

Baa look tiw Pnom Phni, taa look srey triw tiw ciamuy look tee?
   If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?
Baa look tiw Pnom Phni, taa look srey mën tiw ciamuy look tee rii?
   If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife not go with you?
Baa look tiw Pnom Phni, taa look srey tiw ciamuy look dae rii?
   If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?

So the general principle can perhaps be restated to say that when the center of a clause or sentence is considered asserted and only a phrase or subordinate clause is questioned, then rii is used. But when a sentence as a whole is questioned, or its central clause or verb, then tee is used.

NOTES:
1. I am indebted to Ouk Sau and Thong Thel for help and suggestions on this paper. The romanization used in this paper follows that of Huffman, except that ng is used for /ŋ/, and â for /a/.

REFERENCES: