

Khmer Honorifics: Re-emergence and Change after the Khmer Rouge

by

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Dedication

To my parents who instilled the importance of language learning, especially knowing one's heritage language in spite of the country in which you were born.

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Abstract

My dissertation analyzes Khmer (Cambodian) language change, particularly its honorific registers, in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge communist regime (1975-1979). I use honorifics as a lens into how Cambodians are coping with the changes they see in their social, economic, and political landscape. After war and isolation in the 1970s and 1980s, Cambodia experienced economic growth after the 1990s, driven by foreign aid development, a booming tourist industry, and international firms seizing opportunities in the now open Cambodian economy. Not everyone in the country is reaping the benefits, however, and Cambodia's cultural, religious, and educational institutions have still not fully recovered. In spite of the contradictions between rapid development and enduring poverty, political and economic corruption, and a culture of impunity, I argue that newer possibilities for social mobility are driving some Cambodians into reducing their usage of Khmer honorific registers. The trend toward register flattening not only reflects changing demographics of urbanization and the growing middle class; it also reflects people's dreams and aspirations for upward mobility in the future.

My research uncovers a mutual causative relationship between Khmer honorific registers and social status. I contend that as one changes, the other is likely to follow. As we find an emerging middle-class, we also begin to see Khmer honorific registers being reduced toward the middling honorific registers. Or we may see Cambodians using Khmer honorific registers in particular ways in order to aspire toward certain identities. I reconceptualize Peirce's "diagrammatic icons" (1955 [1902]) by adding mutual entailment to help describe what I am

observing. While diagrammatic icons tend to be static, I bring in a processual and dynamic perspective to show how two objects can in tandem with one another.

I also introduce the concept of an expanded “moral circle of honorification” to help us understand why Cambodian Khmer honorific register-use has changed. I draw on Peter Singer’s and Webb Keane’s discussion that, through modernity, people tend to have an ethical scope that extends beyond their kin and fellow villagers (Keane 2015; Singer 1981). I add a linguistic element to this conversation by showing how we can observe this expansion through shifting language-use. Traditionally, in Cambodia, the polite honorific register was usually reserved for higher ranking individuals and those who had more money and power. Today, I argue that the urban middle-class are more likely to have a larger moral circle of honorification as they begin to use the ordinary and polite honorific registers with a greater number of people. They are not, however, using the highest register forms that are concerned with royalty and Buddhist monks. By staying within the middling registers, I argue that upwardly mobile Cambodians are reimagining a more compressed social hierarchy in contemporary Cambodia.

In spite of the prevailing trend toward flattening among the urban middle-class, I also reveal underlying tensions, contestations, and debates about how Khmer honorific registers should be used as people with competing sociocultural worldviews dispute the future of their country. By uncovering disagreements about how Cambodians should speak and use honorific registers, I also uncover their competing worldviews and their struggle to (re)define their country’s national identity after war and turmoil. “Are we a country of farmers?” “Are we a Buddhist country?” “Who is owed respect?” The answers to these questions lie in how Cambodians are using Khmer honorific registers.

Introduction

Rigid Rules and Shifting Usage

During my first year of fieldwork from 2014-2015, I lived in the Tuol Tompoung area of Phnom Penh located in the southern part of the capital. A largely residential area, it was centered around Tuol Tompoung Market, also known as the Russian Market. Locals told me it received this nickname due to the large number of Russian expats that frequented the market in the 1980s after the fall of the Khmer Rouge and during the Vietnamese occupation. At that time, Cambodia's only allies were countries that were part of the Eastern Bloc, so Russians were one of only Westerners in the country until the Vietnamese withdrew in 1989. Living just 4 blocks away from the market, I often walked there at least once a week for my shopping needs. Before I became acquainted with the layout, I found myself walking in circles because it was easy to get lost within the maze of stalls, with neighboring vendors often selling the same exact products. It took a while, but I finally became familiarized with the different zones, recognizing individual sections and sellers. Before long, I learned my way around the market like a pro, being able to quickly grab the one item I needed, such as a broom or a pirated DVD, without getting turned around and having to spend more time in the hot, stuffy, crowded market than needed.

Most importantly, Toul Tompoung Market was where I and many locals came for food, from buying fresh ingredients to enjoying a quick full meal at any of the various food stalls that offered an array of choices. For less than \$3, I could have a bowl of *kuytiaw* (similar to Vietnamese pho noodles), *banh sung* (noodle salad), *babar* (savory porridge, often served with

salty toppings like salted fish), or *baay saich chruk* (rice and marinated pork, often served with chicken broth and pickled vegetables), as well as my choice of beverage such as fruit shakes, lemonade, sugarcane juice, or iced coffee with condensed milk.

I often jumped around to different food stalls, but I always returned to my favorite noodle lady. For \$1.50-2.00, she made stir fried noodles of different kinds, ranging from the typical *mi cha* (typical fried noodles) to *lori cha* (short pin-like noodles) to *mi katang* (wide, flat noodles), and adding your choice of chicken, beef, pork, or perhaps a fried egg, all done within 3 minutes if there is no one ahead of you. The first few times I plopped onto one of her plastic stools and contemplated which kind of noodle I wanted that day, eyeing the fresh ingredients that lay next to her wok as well as the menu listing her offerings, the noodle lady called me *bang*, or older sibling. Even though she may have been just a couple of years older than I was, it was not uncommon for market sellers to refer to their customers with a form of address that overshoot the customers' age range since doing so indicated the shopper's higher status and patronage even if they appeared much younger. When I became more of a regular, my noodle lady began to anticipate my order and even yelled "hello" to me when I passed through the market on days I did not intend to get any friend noodles from her stall.

There was something else that changed when I became a regular. Her person-referring term with me was no longer *bang* (older sibling); she began to call me *oun*, or younger sibling. "*Oun* came early today," she said to me once, noticing I came at a different time. While her switch in kinterms may have been a more "accurate" rendering of our age differences—perhaps amending her original reading of our age difference—I interpreted it as a change in social relations. Through this choice, my noodle lady was breaking or resetting a previous pattern of established relationship with me. As Silverstein (2003b) noted, during these moments of

“pronominal breakthrough” (Friedrich 1979 [1966]) or “metaphorical switching” (Blom and Gumperz 1972), new identities are invoked and new role relations come into play. From the noodle lady’s point of view, she and I were no longer in a distant vendor-customer relationship, where I had more authority as the paying customer. That is, she no longer used *bang* tropically to express deference toward me. She now considered our relationship more personal, intimate, and perhaps even protective. By flipping our relationship through the usage of *oun*, she became my older sister (*bang*) and I was now her younger sister, ushering different kinds of obligations and responsibilities, even if we only knew each other in passing and never learned each other’s names.

My noodle lady’s choice of kinterm illustrates not only the complexities surrounding Khmer honorifics, but also the tension and the negotiations that are involved in their usage. The complexities are often hidden behind normative rules about how to use Khmer honorifics and Khmer honorific registers, rules that often assume that identities and statuses are always given, static, and clear-cut. I include person-referring terms in my definition of Khmer honorifics and honorific registers, which include kinterms, titles, and forms of address, because they are analogous to pronouns, which are an integral part of the register system. These on-the-ground moments, like those with my noodle lady, were often contradictory to what Cambodians were telling me about their language which, according to them, had strict rules about when and with whom one can use certain honorific alternants.

Consider the following excerpt from *Lokkruu* (teacher) Sokchea, a university professor in Battambang, as he explains how Khmer honorific registers work, putting emphasis on the addressee’s age, status, and identity in relation to a speaker's own identity and that of the

speaker's parents. Words that are bolded and italicized indicate Khmer honorific variants for “eat” or “eating.”

When it comes to *hob chok*, *si* there's differentiation. If someone is higher status, older: ***ancheun pisaa baay***. Can't use the word *nyam*. [That's] comes from a later period. The respectful, traditional words are ***ancheun pisaa baay*** or ***ancheun totultien baay***... Regarding equals, it's: *mok si baay*. Rude words, bad words: *chras chram*, *bok kandal deumtrung*. If higher status, higher than one's mother, like a monk: *NIMUN CHAN*. If royalty: ***SAOY KROYA***... That is the language of *hob chok*. When speaking, it's differentiated. You cannot not differentiate. If you speak incorrectly on this subject, they'll say you're rude, don't know how to be polite. Yes, don't know how to be polite at all.

Royal register: [**CAPITALIZED & BOLD & UNDERLINED**]

Monk register: [**CAPITALIZED**]

Polite register: [**bold**]

Ordinary register: [*italicized only*]

Non-honorific register: [underlined]

Baay means rice and is often used with “eat” to indicate eating in general, regardless if rice was part of the meal or not; he also presents ***KROYA***, an equivalent of *baay* to be used if the addressee is royal. Lokkruu Sokchea also introduces three different honorific variants for the verb “to come”: ***ancheun*** (polite), *mok* (ordinary), and *NIMUN* (for monks).

In these prescriptive lessons, Cambodians like Lokkruu Sokchea often emphasize the normative rules attached to honorific-usage, taking the addressee's status into account. Further, he demonstrates that these rules are so rigid that the speaker's respectability comes under question if they do not follow these strict rules. But how do we make sense of Lokkruu Sokchea's rules about register-use, which assumes static statuses and unchanging identities, in light of my noodle lady's changing form of address with me? How do Cambodians make sense of these rules when identities and relationships are everchanging or when identities can intersect in unexpected ways, such as a younger person who is considered higher status?

The tensions, contradiction, and complexities found within Khmer honorific registers, between prescriptivist accounts like Lokkruu Sokchea's and in-the-moment realities like with my noodle lady, are one of the main reasons I became interested in studying Khmer honorific registers. As a child, I was often accused of using the wrong Khmer word for "eat" even though I noticed other Cambodians using these same words in similar contexts. Why did they claim to have these rules, but yet ignored them at times, then turn around to reprimand children like me who did the same? This experience inspired me to find out how Cambodians are socialized into such a linguistic landscape. How did they keep track of these normative rules and put them into practice in everyday life?

That question is especially relevant in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) when those normative rules about honorifics as well as any forms of social hierarchy were banned in order to foster an egalitarian society. By eliminating honorific choices, the Khmer Rouge hoped that Cambodians would begin to reimagine their own identities and social relations. As the Khmer Rouge's language policy exemplifies, language is not only a reflection of society; it also constitutes social reality, wielding things into existence. By asking Cambodians to refer to everyone as *mitt* (comrade), they had hoped that Cambodians would begin to see everyone in society as their equal. When my noodle lady referred to me as *oun* (younger sibling), instead of *bang* (older sibling), it was not just a reflection of a set social relation between us; her choice of address term established, reinforced, and solidified her worldview so that I would become her younger sibling once she uttered the kinterm.

Knowing that the bane of my existence as a child, Khmer honorific registers, were eliminated for some time, only to return after the collapse of the regime, raised more questions about the significance of Khmer honorifics in Cambodian society and how the honorific register

system may have been transformed in subsequent decades of reconstruction and reconciliation. I went to Cambodia in order to observe how Cambodians were using Khmer honorific registers to respond to their everchanging social, economic, and political landscape after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. After two decades of war and relative isolation in the 1970s and 1980s, what kind of world is being reflected and created through the Khmer honorific registers today? What kinds of identities and relationships are being projected and created through language?

After conducting two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia, I discovered that these questions remain unresolved among Cambodians themselves as they struggle to define and redefine their social and national identities. More than a generation after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, where traditional forms of cultural, religious, financial, and educational institutions came to a standstill, Cambodians today are living in a different world. After decades of isolation and destruction in the 1970s and 1980s, Cambodia quickly entered the global stage by opening its doors to foreign aid development, international business ventures, and the booming tourist industry. In 1993, the year Cambodia held its first free and fair election, King Sihanouk returned to the country after 23 years of exile, and the Cambodian Constitution was adopted, Cambodia's GDP per capita was \$254. By 2019, the country's GDP per capita had become \$1,643, growing by 546.6% in 26 years (The World Bank 2021).

Not only are Cambodians living in a different world, for a majority of them, this might be the only world they have ever known. When 65% of Cambodians are 29 years old or younger (Asian Development Bank 2014), this means a majority of the population have no experience with or few memories of the civil wars (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), and the Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989). Because tensions and contradiction are running themes throughout my dissertation, I would be remiss to not mention that, despite Cambodia's

development and increased wealth, not everyone has benefited from such growth. While statistics about poverty show that Cambodia's poverty rate decreased from 53.2% in 2004 to 20.5% in 2011, a World Bank report (2014) showed that most Cambodians who have "escaped" poverty are living just above the poverty line. These Cambodians are just as vulnerable, but often go unaccounted.

My dissertation argues that Khmer honorific registers are being flattened in light of social mobility brought about by urbanization, capitalization, and globalization, as urban middle-class Cambodians (and those who aspire to be such) envision a better future for themselves and their children. To explain Khmer register flattening, I introduce the term "moral circle of honorification" and I reconceptualize the notion of "diagrammatic icons" (Peirce 1955 [1902]). I will elaborate on these concepts in a later section, but will give brief summaries for now. First, I draw on Peter Singer's (1981) and Webb Keane's (2015) discussion that modernity has expanded people's ethical scope beyond just their kin and fellow villagers. Due to scientific discoveries, nationalism, and an emphasis on universal principles, people are more likely to have an expanded moral circle, feeling a sense of moral responsibility toward a greater number of people who may or may not be part of their immediate surroundings. I too argue that urban middle-class Cambodians have an expanded moral circle as they begin to have moral concern for more people. I demonstrate that this expansion can be observed linguistically through their register flattening, which stems from their expanded "moral circle of honorification." Second, I demonstrate that the relationship between Khmer honorific registers and other objects in society, such as social status, is very similar to Peirce's "diagrammatic icons." That is, Khmer honorific registers and social status in Cambodia reflect one another, just as a floor plan reflects a building's layout. I propose adding mutual entailment in order to fully capture what is

happening in Cambodia: that changes to one object will inevitably bring about changes in the other.

While the urban middle-class are flattening Khmer honorific registers to mirror their desires for social mobility, we continue to find tension, contestations, and disagreements about whether this is the direction all Cambodians want their language and society to go. This study highlights the tensions Cambodians are facing in the post-war decades as Cambodia enters the open market economy, integrates into the globalized world, and embraces new technology. Through an analysis of Khmer honorific registers and how they are changing, I show how Cambodians are grappling with questions about what it means to be Cambodian and what kind of country Cambodia is supposed to be as they rebuild their country's cultural, religious, and social institutions. "Is it a Buddhist country?" "Is it a place where God can speak condescendingly toward Christians?" "Is it a country with superiors and inferiors?" "Is it a country that respects their elders?" All of these questions about social and national identities are implicit and implied when Cambodians debate, argue, and disagree over how to use honorific registers in the 21st century.

Khmer Honorific Registers & Their Conventions

Traditionally, Cambodian culture is hierarchical. One must respect one's social superiors and one expects respect and deference from lower ranked individuals (younger or lower status).

Relationships in Cambodia tend to be structured vertically in terms of power, status, and patronage. A person's place in the hierarchy is determined by a number of factors, including: age, sex, familial background, birth order, occupation, political position, influence, education, personal character, and financial benevolence. (Hinton 1998, 98).

Children must respect and listen to their parents, younger siblings to older siblings, wives to husbands, students to teachers, younger people to elder, the poor to the rich, etc. All languages

have ways of expressing (dis)respect, (im)politeness, and (in)formality through speaking or writing, but in some languages, like Khmer, there are alternating expressions that distribute honor, respect, and deference (Agha 1993; Irvine 2009 [1995]). In Khmer, honorifics are expressed through a register system with lexical alternants. These lexical variants are found in verbs, nouns, and person-referring terms (pronouns, kin terms, titles, and forms of address).

The Khmer honorific register system (see Table 1) is not only iconic of social hierarchy, but it is also a linguistic projection of Cambodia's three social statuses: royalty, monks, and commoners. There is a royal register (used exclusively with royalty), a monk register (used exclusively with ordained Buddhist monks), and several levels of (in)formality and (im)politeness within the ordinary or common register. Scholars categorize the ordinary register differently. Ehrman & Sos (1972) separate the standard register into three registers: formal, ordinary, and vulgar. His Excellency Dr. Chan Somnoble, a Cambodian linguist, subsumes them all under the *samahn* (standard/common) register that commoners or laypeople use with one another (*personal communication*). The various levels of (im)politeness and (in)formality among commoners are sub-registers, according to Chan.

Register	Context	first-person	second-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	<i>toulbongkum cie knyom mjass</i>	“your highness”	<i>soay</i>
	royalty speaking to commoner	<i>troung anh, yeung (we)</i>	titles, forms of address, (see commoner below)	
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	<i>knyom preah karuna</i>	“venerable”	<i>chan</i>
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)	<i>atma</i>	<i>nyom</i>	
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	<i>knyom baht (male), neang knyom (female)</i>	<i>neak, koat (he/she)</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam, hob</i>
	Non-honorific: among equals, intimate, high to low status, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng / haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>si</i> <i>chras chram, bok kandal deumtrung</i>

Table 1: Ethnometapragmatic view of Khmer honorific registers

Khmer honorific register	Formatting
Royal register	<u>CAPITALIZED & BOLD & UNDERLINED</u>
Monk register	<u>CAPITALIZED</u>
Polite register	<u>bold</u>
Ordinary register	<i>italicized only</i>
Non-honorific register	<u>underlined</u>

Table 2: Formatting legend for Khmer honorific registers in my dissertation

The Khmer verb with the most lexical variants is “eat.” Usually, Khmer-speakers choose which “eat” word to use based on age, social status, context, and sometimes mood. However, there is differentiation on how Cambodians define the pragmatics of each variant.

Cambodians thus use different terms when inviting a king, a monk, a guest or social superior, a peasant, a close friend, or a young child to ‘come eat’ (i.e., *saoy, chhan, pisa, houp, nham, si* [respectively]) (Hinton 1998, 99).

If you compare and contrast Hinton's list of "eat" with Lokkruu Sokchea's, you will find some similarities, but also some other "eat"-words that are not listed by Hinton.

Aside from verbs, person-referring terms are rich with honorifics. Cambodians may refer to oneself in the first-person pronoun (I/me) as **TUOLBONGKUM CIE KNYOM MJASS** (with the king), *KNYOM PREAH KARUNA* (with monks), *neang knyom* (female speaker, formal/polite), *knyom baht* (male speaker, formal/polite), *knyom* (informal), *anh* (vulgar or with close intimates), **TRUONG ANH** (if one is the king), *ATMA* (if one is an ordained monk). Moreover, Khmer-speakers favor other types of person-referring terms (kinterms, titles, forms of address) over pronouns as it is considered culturally appropriate and polite to constantly place oneself in a social hierarchy. These person-referring terms are not just a form of politeness and deference to the addressee, but also to express one's identity in relation to one's interlocutors. From an English-speaker point of view, Cambodians appear to constantly refer to themselves and their addressees in the third person. English-teachers in Cambodia are often flummoxed when their students ask, "Where is teacher going?" in English, instead of "Where are you going?" because it is a direct translation of a common greeting in Khmer when meeting someone you know in passing. As Fleming & Sidnell (2020) discussed, Southeast Asian languages provide speakers with a wider range of address terms that go beyond pronouns. In fact, pronouns only account for half of the kinds of person-referring terms Southeast Asian-speakers use. Just as my noodle lady did not say, "You came early today," but said "*Oun* (younger sibling) came early today," Cambodians frequently use non-pronominal, open class nouns in places where English-speakers might use pronouns.

The frequency of non-pronominal person-referring terms illustrates the importance of knowing one's place in relation to others. Hill & Hill, through their research of honorifics in

Nahuatl (also known as Mexicano), remark that in these societies, “[i]t is important to be able to see a stranger and make judgments about him to achieve appropriate usage” (Hill and Hill 1978, 133). An elderly Javanese man told Errington, “Whenever two people meet they should ask themselves: ‘Who is this person? Who am I? What is this person to me?’ (Here he held out his hands, palms up, as if they were pans of a scale)” (Errington 1998, 11). Cambodians too grapple with these questions in their day to day lives, encountering friends, family, and strangers. Unable to hide behind general pronouns like “I/me” or “you,” Cambodians have to make judgments about the people they encounter in their day to day lives.

Khmer-speakers not only select honorifics based on judgment calls, but they may even use language to create or impose certain kinds of identities they wish to see in the world. That is exactly what happened under the Khmer Rouge communist regime (1975-1979), where Khmer Rouge leaders manipulated the Khmer language by eliminating honorific choices. Because I refer to the Khmer Rouge and their linguistic policies throughout my dissertation, let us take a look at what those policies entailed.

The Khmer Rouge’s Linguistic Policies

On April 17, 1975 the Khmer Rouge communists marched into the city of Phnom Penh. After 5 years of bitter civil war, the Khmer Rouge defeated the Khmer Republic, the political party that was backed by the United States government. Since 1970, they slowly captured most of Cambodia; the country’s capital was the last stronghold. Momentarily, there was excitement that the war was over, but the marching soon took an ominous turn. “Using loudspeakers, or simply shouting and brandishing weapons, [the Khmer Rouge] swept through the streets, ordering people out of their houses” (Schanberg 1975). On the pretense that the Americans were

going to bomb the city, the Khmer Rouge evacuated Cambodians into the countryside. “Within 36 hours, Phnom-Penh, a city of 3,000,000 was emptied” (Phou and Shipers 1980). This evacuation into the countryside was the first step in implementing a peasant revolution where there were no longer any landowners or bourgeoisie because everyone was a worker or a peasant and all Cambodians were expected to live in the countryside and “work, eat, sleep, and speak like a peasant” (Hinton 1998, 110).

When the Khmer Rouge came into power in 1975, Cambodia’s culture of hierarchy and social difference was in direct conflict with communist ideology of egalitarianism (Marston 1985; Hinton 1998, 2005).

Traditional forms of hierarchy were broken down during this process of radical change. In keeping with their goal of creating a peasant-based communist country, the Khmer Rouge claimed that DK¹ was to be an egalitarian society and enacted a number of policies to achieve this end (Hinton 1998, 109).

In order to flatten the hierarchy and promote a class-less society, all Cambodians were now peasant farmers. Everyone must wear black peasant uniforms in order to destroy individuality (Affonço 2008) and women were forced to cut their hair short as a way to symbolize gender equality between men and women (Hinton 1998, 2005). Accordingly, Khmer’s honorific register was contradictory to the Khmer Rouge’s classless society. The Khmer Rouge sought to suppress linguistic registers which denoted class, kinship, and status differences (Hinton 1998, 2005; Marston 1985).

Language has always been at the center of nationalism and the Khmer Rouge’s nation-building project was no different. When the Khmer Rouge came into power, Cambodia had several ethnic minorities such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Thais who continued to

¹Democratic Kampuchea, the new official name for Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge between 1975-1979

speaking their heritage language. Moreover, as a former French colony, many Cambodians also knew how to speak French. As in many other nation-building projects before them, this pluralism was problematic and, therefore, outlawed by the Khmer Rouge. Denise Affonço, a half-French and half-Vietnamese survivor of the Khmer Rouge, reported that the Khmer Rouge told her, “From now on, there are no more Chinese or French or Vietnamese, we're all Khmer” (Affonço 2008, 27) and “you won't speak French or Chinese any more, we'll all speak one single language, Khmer” (Affonço 2008, 29).

Even when one language is spoken, there will inevitably be different varieties of the same language based on region, socioeconomic class, and background. State leaders will select one language variety, out of many, and privilege it as the “standard.” Not only did the Khmer Rouge suppress foreign languages, but they sought to promote the sociolect of rural farmers as the standard Khmer language and, at the same time, banned any language forms associated with urban areas (Hinton 1998, 2005; Picq 1984; Marston 1985).

To flatten and level the language, they selected specific words to be part of one register. For example, all honorific variants of “eat” was banned except for the rural peasant word *hob*. Cambodians from cities usually referred to their mothers and fathers as *mak* and *pa*, but under the Khmer Rouge they now had to use the rural way of saying mother and father: *mae* and *pok* because the urban terms had bourgeoisie resonances (Thong 1985). Cambodians were no longer allowed to use elaborate pronouns and forms of address that were based on social hierarchy; everyone is now addressed as *mitt* “comrade,” the rural word for “friend.” A witness reported a Khmer Rouge soldier saying, “Don’t call me sir, call me comrade... No one is called sir after the revolution. We have been fighting to get rid of these words” (Hinton 2005, 189).

One informant named Meun also spoke incredulously of the forced equality with children under the regime. Not only were adults referring to one another as *mitt*, but adults and children were also expected to address one another as *mitt*. When referring to the children in our interview, Meun used the third-person pronoun *vea*, which may be translated it as “it” or “them” for inanimate objects, animals, small children, and social inferiors.

Even with your siblings, we were also not allowed to use other words besides “mitt” [comrade]. Sometimes, a child, a small child – even though we were older than *vea* [them], *vea* [they] also had to call us “mitt.” They [Khmer Rouge] said we were all equal. This was a communist word; they spoke the language of equality.

The third person pronoun *vea* is appropriate in traditional Cambodian society when used in the right context, but the Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate this word with humans.

This revolutionary language also abolished *vear* [*vea*], the disdainful third person singular and plural pronoun, which was used for children, subordinates and women, replacing it with *koat*, previously used in other contexts. In fact, there could hardly be a revolution worthy of the name without this development! (Picq 1984, 352)

Under the Khmer Rouge, children were glorified by the regime and Cambodians were asked to treat them as equals by referring to them with *koat*, a polite third person pronoun (Hinton 2005, 189; Picq 1984). My interview with Muen demonstrated how strange it was for many Cambodians to see young children as equals or to see children treat adults as equals. Even though she was older than these children, she was not afforded the respect she believed she deserved from them when they addressed her as *mitt*.

Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	second-person	third-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	Eliminated		
	royalty speaking to commoner			
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	Eliminated		
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)			
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	titles, forms of address, kin terms 	<i>koat</i> 	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok nyam</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>mitt (comrade), mitt + kin term, mitt + aeng</i> 	titles, forms of address, kin terms 	<i>hob</i>
	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i> 	<i>vea</i> 	<i>si chras chram, bok kandal, deumtrung</i>

Table 3: Summary of the Khmer Rouge linguistic policies on Khmer honorific registers as the Khmer Rouge eliminated elite registers and the non-honorific register.

These examples highlight the ways in which “[t]he Khmer Rouge promoted the use of such rural terms because the regime glorified the peasantry, with its more egalitarian ethos and less ‘corrupt’ way of life” (Hinton 2005, 190). The Khmer Rouge valued peasant farmers’ industrialism and held a deep hatred for anything related to the cities. Despite their claim for equality, rural peasants were held to a higher regard and referred to as the “old people” or “base people” because they were native to the countryside; those from cities were labeled “new people” (Hinton 2005; Marston 1985). As the new elites, rural peasants had a “head start” in many respects. They knew how to farm so they were used to the agricultural labor imposed by the Khmer Rouge while those from the city struggled to learn how to perform tasks that were regarded as simple by farmers.

Var had never planted rice before and was unhappy to have to do it; the locals taught her well enough, but usually mocked and insulted her while doing so. The Khmer Rouge cadres would say, “Look at your hands, they are used to holding a pen, and not to hard work” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 340).

Rural peasants also had a head start when it came to speech. They already spoke the variety of Khmer that was upheld as the standard so they did not have to drastically change their speech; those from the city were at a great disadvantage as they had to learn to speak in new ways.

Languages or dialects can be an index of one’s social identity, but these linguistic features may also index character traits. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, the use of honorifics outside of the approved lexical forms, signaled untrustworthiness and disloyalty. Not unlike fears of alternative loyalties, the use of honorifics was often seen as an appeal to the old regime, which was associated with inequality and oppression. Soth Polin, a Khmer Rouge survivor, declared “Woe to him who used a forbidden word. Denouncing himself as anti-revolutionary, he would, from that moment on, be earmarked for elimination” (Marston 1985, 27-28). One urban interviewee, Vicheny, told me that when urban Cambodians used *nyam* or *pissa* for “eat,” instead of the sanctioned *hob*, the Khmer Rouge accused them of being “capitalists” and that the language of imperialism has not been eliminated from them. While originally an index of regional origin, urban words like *nyam* and *pissa* are now seen as representing the personality or essence of a social group (Irvine and Gal 2000). It is also a form of linguistic essentialism, where “language is treated as if it were the bearer of special ontological properties in and of itself” (McIntosh 2005, 1924) because “languages are not merely treated as indices of or pointers to particular traits, but as part and parcel of them” (McIntosh 2005, 1937). By essentializing linguistic features, Khmer Rouge sought to ban words associated with urban centers and, at the same time, promote rural terms.

Honorifics represent different things to the Khmer Rouge and to urban Cambodians. Throughout my interviews with urban survivors, the Khmer Rouge regime was a time when Cambodians were not allowed to be “polite.” For urbanites, the loss of honorifics represented a loss of respect. The Khmer Rouge associated honorifics with inequality, oppression, and lack of respect for the marginalized. These differences in opinion were also seen among Nahuatl-speakers in Jane Hill’s (1998) research. Elite male Nahuatl-speakers were the ones who benefited from hierarchy and received honorifics. They lament the fact that many Nahuatl children only speak Spanish now. Consequently, Spanish-speaking youths cannot pay deference to their elders using Nahuatl honorifics, which has more subtle gradations of distance and deference. For elite male elders, Spanish is viewed as insufficient and inferior; it is an icon of “disrespect.” Nahuatl women and poor men do not share this view. Contrary to what male elites say, the past was not full of respect for women and the poor; it had “violence, poverty, and patriarchal control over life chances of women” (Hill 1998, 78). Like Nahuatl-speakers, we have competing discourses over how to define honorifics and social relations in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, but we will see these same tensions play out in present-day Cambodia as Cambodians continue to make sense of their social world through honorific registers.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in January 1979 and overthrew the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer Rouge linguistic policies were abandoned, having only lasted for 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days. According to John Marston, “Following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late 1978, there seems to have no longer been any attempt by the state to regulate the use of language. The refugees I interviewed said that they generally returned to the patterns of usage from before 1975” (Marston 1985, 51-52). After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia continued to experience upheaval and turmoil for another decade during the

Vietnamese occupation and yet again during the United Nation's peacekeeping mission in the early 1990s.

My original intention with doing research in Cambodia was to study the impact of the Khmer Rouge's policy of register leveling on honorific registers today. I wanted to put the Khmer Rouge's language policies front and center. What surprised me, however, was that any changes to Khmer honorific registers today were not a direct result of the Khmer Rouge, but were more likely due Cambodia's efforts to rebuild in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. As a result, I now see the Khmer Rouge's impact on language as indirect or secondary to changes that occurred after the collapse of the regime. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, I discovered that there is continuing debate surrounding how Cambodian society should be rebuilt: should it resemble Cambodia in the 1960s or should Cambodia look to the future? If it is toward the future, I reveal how, ironically, some of the Khmer Rouge's linguistic policies are returning, but through ideas about modernity, democracy, and social justice.

My research comes at a pivotal moment when ideas about language, identity, and nationality are in play. When I ask, "What is the state of Khmer honorific registers today?", I am ultimately asking, "What does it mean to be Cambodian today? How should Cambodians speak and behave? What is the future of Cambodia?" While Anne Hansen's research focused on Buddhism in light of 20th century print media, I am purposefully alluding to her book title *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (2007) because these questions are not new. Cambodians have always been grappling with questions about national identity, about how to speak and how to behave. As I will reiterate throughout my dissertation, the urban middle-class seem to be answering these questions one way, but there are factions of Cambodians who answer these questions in other ways. These debates are nothing new as,

historically, we have seen groups with competing world views, competing spelling systems, and competing linguistic practices battle it out against one another. My research centers these conflicts and debate, arguing that Khmer language and Cambodian culture will always be in a state of change and contestation.

Fieldwork and Research Methods

From September 2014 to December 2016 (excluding September 2015 and May 2016), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia, spending my first year in Phnom Penh and my second year in Battambang. Using participation observation, interviews, and archival research, I collected data on Khmer honorific register-usage primarily in the domains of Buddhism, Christianity, and the media. I attended Buddhist temples to watch Cambodians make offerings to Buddhist monks. I sat through several denominations of church services, such as Catholic, Mormon, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Due to the widespread use of Facebook in Cambodia during my fieldwork, I followed many of my friends and informants' activities on Facebook, supplementing face-to-face ethnographic data with linguistic data from the media. Most came from social media, but social media often overlapped with popular media, like music and television, as Cambodians inevitably used Facebook to comment and share things they saw elsewhere in the world.

My data were not limited to these main domains of religion and the media areas. Anytime I ventured out of my home to the market or to hang out with friends, these moments also were prime time for ethnographic research. My friends and informants, residents of Phnom Penh and Battambang, were primarily educated and middle-class. Some may have been born in the provinces, but have found themselves in the cities for various reasons. From a small village in

Kampong Chhnang Province, my friend Kolthida first came to Phnom Penh to go to college; her parents followed her a few years later and bought a home in the north part of the capital, even hosting me once when I was visiting from Battambang. My friend Sreymom once took me to her childhood home in Kampong Cham Province, which had no toilet or running water; she came to Phnom Penh to train as a hairdresser. I did not know the Venerable Ry, a well-regarded monk in the town of Battambang, was not from city of Battambang until he was excited to hear I had passed through Moug Ruessei, a village one hour outside of Battambang. As a result, my friends and informants were upwardly mobile so my data privileged their points of view. While I may have periodically visited my friends' hometowns to meet their families who have stayed more "rooted," I did not have enough data to know what was happening in the countryside in terms of Khmer honorific-use.

My friends and informants often led me to places I did not expect to go, taking their suggestions in stride and paying close attention to Khmer honorific-use and language-use. I frequently pulled out my cellphone to jot down notes whenever I heard or observed interesting ethnographic moments during BBQ dinner with friends, walks along the riverside, or invitations to go for a motorcycle ride to the outskirts of the city. Due to the ubiquity of cellphones in Cambodia, it did not seem out of place nor rude of me to type and stare at my phone during these moments of notetaking. I often relied on the generosity of my informants who often hearing I was interested in language, would always refer me to other people, other experts who might be able to help with my research. As tension is the running theme of my dissertation, I will admit that there was a tension between my expectations based on my research goals and what my informants wanted to offer me. When I wanted to talk about honorifics, sometimes they wanted to talk about spelling. When I wanted to talk to average Cambodians, sometimes they deferred

me to experts who they believed had more knowledge and authority—sometimes even inviting them along unannounced. I may have gone into Cambodia with particular goals in mind, such as specific research question and a planned-out methodology of getting those answers, but Cambodians surprised me by “upsetting” my research goals. For a while, I was frustrated, but always let them lead me wherever they wanted to lead me. Even though I was uninterested, I often obliged, going places I might not have wanted to go and meeting people I may not have wanted to meet, making sure to jot down notes of who I met, what they said, and what was happening. Any research methods I had in mind were often upended by Cambodians who pushed me toward their expectations for research, particularly formal sit-down interviews at large conference tables or in meeting rooms—which was often not what I wanted. “Why aren’t you interviewing them?” my friend Tuan once asked as we were sitting outside of his friends’ house in Pailin, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold near the border of Thailand. My intention that day was to build rapport, but Tuan, who had worked for NGO’s, was accustomed to researchers interviewing and writing reports. I often tried to explain that I like to get to know people first before interviewing them, but I was never sure if Tuan or other Cambodians really understood what I was trying to do.

It took me a long time to realize that I could not ignore what Cambodians wanted to show me, even if it was not what I wanted to see, because it was indicative of their insecurities about the fate of the Khmer language. Those notes that I thought were insignificant often turned out to be the most valuable ones of all. My notes about people’s “ramblings”—since that is what I thought about them at the time—helped me to uncover their anxieties, not only about the future of the Khmer language, but also about their own national identity. I was interested in the messy realities of Khmer since it seemed more “real” and “authentic” to everyday life, but Cambodians

wanted to show me the Khmer they wanted to preserve, a version of Khmer that they were proud of, even if it was a Khmer that was not found among a majority of the population.

Through the generosity, and at times insistence, of my Cambodian friends and informants I was able to shape and reshape my research questions and methodologies to suit their wants and desires. I thank them for being vocal about their desired forms of knowledge production because my research has been changed for the better. It made me rethink my understanding of Khmer and Cambodian society and this dissertation research is a testament to that.

The Future of Khmer Honorifics and Defining Cambodian National Identity

My findings show that Khmer honorific registers are being flattened in conjunction with Cambodia's changing demographics in society. Since Khmer honorific registers are fractally recursive of social statuses in Cambodian society, I argue that, as the kinds of people associated with certain registers become less relevant, the honorific registers too become less relevant. This flattening effect is not monolithic nor random. First, Khmer's honorific registers are not being flattened to one level. They are being flattened toward the middling levels that are both neutral and polite. Unlike total equality endorsed under the Khmer Rouge, where Cambodians were unable to show "respect" and "politeness" to their elders, for example, today's flattening by the urban middle-class allows Cambodian to give deference to one's superiors with the polite honorific register. Second, the processes of flattening are coming from "above" and "below" for different reasons.

More elite registers pertaining to royalty and Buddhist monks have become less relevant to many modern-day Cambodians. As a result, most urban Cambodians have not had opportunities to learn or practice honorific registers associated with those identities. Non-usage

of the elite registers, pertaining to royalty and monks, is often due to lack of fluency. When it comes to flattening from below, in the non-honorific register, some Cambodians are outright avoiding the linguistic forms associated with the register. Non-usage is not due to lack of fluency; many Cambodians know, recognize, and can probably speak the non-honorific register. Non-usage is due to changing ideas about the register’s place in contemporary Cambodia. For some, the register represents an un-modern past, either associating it with inequality and oppression on the one hand, or with uneducated farmers on the other. Cambodians who are disassociating themselves from the register are doing so in order to make a stance about their own social identities as being democratic and fair.

Register	Context	first-person	second-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	<i>toulbongkum cie knyom mjass</i>	“your highness”	<i>soay</i>
	royalty speaking to commoner	<i>troung anh, yeung (we)</i>	titles, forms of address, (see commoner below)	
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	<i>knyom preah karuna</i>	“venerable”	<i>chan</i>
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)	<i>atma</i>	<i>nyom</i>	
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	<i>knyom baht (male), neang knyom (female)</i>	<i>neak, koat (he/she)</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam, hob</i>
	Non-honorific: among equals, intimate, high to low status, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng / haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>si</i> <i>chras chram, bok kandal, deumtrung</i>

Table 4: The flattening of Khmer honorific registers. The blue arrows indicate the potential register flattening as some urban middle-class Cambodians lose fluency in the royal and Buddhist monk registers, and as they avoid the non-honorific register.

What kind of country should Cambodia be? For the urban middle-class, it is a country that shows politeness and respect, particularly through language, to a greater range of people. I call this the expansion of the “moral circle of honorification,” drawing on Webb Keane’s (2015) discussion of Peter Singer’s (1981) notion of an expanded moral circle. According to Singer and

Keane, modernity entails a change in ethical scope. In the past, people tended to have moral concern for their kin group and fellow villagers. Today, our sense of moral responsibility has expanded beyond our immediate surroundings. We are just as likely to care about people we have no direct connection with, believing everyone deserves respect, social justice, and basic human rights. I add to Keane's and Singer's claims by showing that we can observe this happening in Cambodia through language. I argue that some Cambodians have changed their speech habits in ways that indicate an expanded moral concern for others, or an expanded "moral circle of honorification." Ironically, these feelings also mirror Khmer Rouge ideologies in the 1970s about equality, elevating and uplifting Cambodians to be on equal terms after they had been oppressed by "imperialists" and "capitalists" in the cities. Today, it is the "imperialists" and "capitalists" who seem to be bringing the Khmer Rouge's dreams into fruition, even if modern-day Cambodians do not see themselves aligned with the Khmer Rouge. In the face of human rights violations, political corruption, unfair elections, impunity, no rule of law, and a prime minister who has ruled since 1985, Cambodians today are asking for more human decency, politeness, and respect for their fellow citizens—and this is reflected through the decline in usage of the non-honorific register.

Mutually reinforcing these ideas of decency and respect are the changing demographics. As the number of Cambodians leaving the farm and look for jobs in the cities grows, there is an emerging middle-class who begin to see themselves and their fellow peers as having more power and self-agency to change their current standing. Even if someone is not there yet, Cambodians today, more than ever, have more opportunities to be upwardly mobile—opportunities not afforded to them more than a generation ago. I argue that the changing demographics of class and the flattening of Khmer honorific registers are mutually connected. Their relationship is very

similar to the notion of “diagrammatic icons” (1955 [1902]). As elaborated by Gal & Irvine, “diagrammatic icons are analogies (a:b::x:y), inviting the hypothesis that whatever relationship is conjectured to exist between a and b (as posited signs) should be sought, imagined, or projected between x and y (as the signs’ semiotic objects)” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 118). I follow Gal & Irvine by linking Peirce’s semiotic work to sociological matters. As it now stands, diagrammatic icons are static, just as the map of a floor plan and the actual building layout the map reflects are fixed. I expand upon the concept of diagrammatic icon by adding mutual entailment, such that changes in one object are reflected in the other object as well. The layout of Khmer’s honorific registers is not only similar to the layout of Cambodian social hierarchy; I also claim that there is a mutual causative relation between them. As Cambodian society becomes flattened through an emerging middle-class, these Cambodians are also using Khmer honorific registers in ways that reflect changes in social status. I also argue that it can work in the other direction as Cambodians may alter their speech habits to aspire to a certain identity or social standing. Throughout my dissertation, when I draw on the expression “diagrammatic icons,” I am also including an element of mutual entailment.

Contribution to Literature

My study makes important contributions in three main areas: linguistic anthropology, Khmer language, and Cambodian Studies.

Contribution to Linguistic Anthropology

Asif Agha’s (2007, 2003) research has dominated the literature on honorifics and registers. My work on Khmer honorific registers differs from Agha’s approach to registers in

three ways. First, Agha is particularly interested in register formation, or “enregisterment,” while my research centers on register contestation. I am less concerned with how Khmer honorific registers come into being and more interested in how Cambodians differently define their honorific registers. Throughout my research, I had trouble pinning down names of registers or definitive uses for registers. As you will notice throughout my dissertation, I refuse to give monolithic definitions or usages of honorific registers. I am careful to note when a usage is “normative” or “traditional” because, in the end, I realized that register differentiation is the norm and that I could never conclusively define a register’s use. While registers may appear to be fixed in the minds of native speakers, and perhaps language scholars, variation and disagreement will always be at the heart of any honorific register system.

Second, Agha has paid closer attention to the social domain of speakers, or the kinds of people who use a register. Although I do describe the speech habits of certain kinds of speakers, such as the urban middle-class, my concept of the “moral circle of honorification” not only puts the focus on register referent and addressivity, but it also brings in an ethical element to honorific registers. Who is the target of honorific registers? What kinds of people deserve to be referred to with honorific registers? I show how the target of honorific registers have changed through the decades to include and exclude certain recipients. The non-honorific register, for example, was used to address and refer to poor farmers and children, but today that kind of language is viewed as less acceptable among some Cambodians who wish to elevate previously marginalized groups.

This leads to my third contribution: how I take a processual look at Khmer honorific registers. While Agha allows for the histories of register formation, he does not attend to how registers change over time. Building on Inoue (2004 [2002]) and Hill & Hill (1978) who have

looked at both register formation and register change, I not only show how there is register differentiation today, but also how register-use today differs from the past. For example, I show how the non-honorific register used to be primarily about power and inequality, but today it is associated with anger and lack of education.

Contribution to Khmer Language

No scholar to date has written extensively about Khmer's honorific register system. Native Khmer-speakers themselves often rely on dictionaries (Chuon 1967; Headley, Chim, and Soeum 1997) as authoritative sources about spelling and word definitions. For non-native speakers, scholarship about Khmer language are primarily about its grammar, phonology, orthography, parts of speech (Enfield 2001, 1996; Haiman 2011; Filippi and Hiep 2016; Noss 1966; Huffman, Lambert, and Im 1970). If they touch upon honorifics, they do not describe the register system completely. Authors often give a brief sketch to help situate language-learners (Ehrman and Sos 1972) or they focus more on person-referring terms rather than on the honorific register system as a whole (see "Chapter 6: Indexical words" in Haiman 2011; see "Chapter Five: Pronouns and Terms of Address" in Marston 1997; Pou 1979). In this dissertation, I am writing extensively about an aspect of Khmer language that has had very little discussion in the existing literature. Additionally, Khmer language scholars do not look at everyday interactions as I have done. Because I am analyzing language gathered through ethnographic research, I have been able to glean Khmer honorific register usage, such as slippages and false starts, that may not have been captured in other scholarship.

Contribution to Cambodian Studies

Literature about contemporary Cambodian society are often preoccupied with the history of the Khmer Rouge or how Cambodians are coping with the aftermath of the regime. Some works focus on politics and authoritarianism (Ear 2013a; Un 2019). Others focus on religion, particularly Buddhism (Davis 2016; Hansen 2007; Edwards 2004; Thompson 2006). Gender and kinship are also popular topics (Ledgerwood 2009; Brickell 2014; Derks 2008). While some are interested in Cambodia's economic development (C. Hughes and Un 2011; Nam 2017a, 2017b), others look at the consequences of development: environmental degradation, land grabs, and human rights violations (Smith 2017; Human Rights Watch 2015). Some pay special attention to the Khmer Rouge's aftereffects, studying Khmer Rouge justice to trauma to social memory (Chandler 2008; R. Hughes 2020; Zucker 2013, 2009; Kiernan 2000).

Using Khmer honorific registers as a window into society, I contribute my own perspective in each of these areas. In Chapters 1 and 5, I touch upon Cambodia's re-emergence in the globalized economy, its relationship with the media, and notions of kinship and social relations in contemporary Cambodia. I argue that ideas about relationships, status, and hierarchy has changed in light of Cambodia's re-entry into the global stage. In Chapters 2 and 3, I focus on how religiosity has been transformed in recent decades after being banned in the 1970s under the Khmer Rouge. I do so by paying close attention to which Khmer honorific registers Buddhists are using with monks and which registers Christians are using to talk about God and Jesus. I contend that Cambodians are using Khmer honorific registers in ways that reflect a compressed hierarchical relationship. Although I will not go into great detail about human rights violations and corruption in my dissertation, Chapter 4 looks at Cambodians and their changing attitudes toward the non-honorific register, which is closely associated with power and inequality. By

avoiding the non-honorific register, I argue, upwardly mobile Cambodians think they should not have to experience oppression. Instead, they want to be treated with linguistic respect. Finally, underlying all of my dissertation chapters is the lingering effects of the Khmer Rouge. Chapter 4, in particular, examines survivor memories about how the Khmer Rouge spoke to them under the regime. I show while the condescending language associated with the Khmer Rouge is being avoided, many of the Khmer Rouge's policies and ideologies about equality are now being embraced by urban middle-class Cambodians.

Themes Lurking in the Background and Foreground

Throughout my dissertation, I have several running themes that appear and reappear across multiple chapters. The most prominent theme is **history**. The long shadow of history continues to cast itself on Cambodian society. Not only is there lingering trauma of war on Cambodians who lived through the Khmer Rouge, but even those who were born after the fall of the Khmer Rouge feel the repercussions. Those include, but are not limited to, the total destruction of the education system, religious institutions, and the arts. History is not limited to the Khmer Rouge. You will find that I may refer to the French colonial period (1863-1953), the Independence period (also known as Sangkum Reatr Niyum, 1955-1970), the civil war period (1970-1975), the era of Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989), and the years of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1991-1993). Each of these historical periods has left an indelible mark onto Cambodia and the Khmer language in some way, imposing different ideas and images of Cambodian national identity.

Overlapping with the theme of history is the notion of **temporality** and **chronotopes**. Cambodians often try to make sense of their temporal surroundings: where they are in the

present, who they were in the past, and what they think they are headed for the future.

Cambodians do not just use language to talk about time, but the Khmer language itself becomes indexical of certain time periods. When Cambodians are nostalgic for a time when people spoke with dignity and respect in the 1960s, when Cambodians worry about the future of the Khmer language as more youths learn foreign languages, when Cambodians tell me that the non-honorific register reminds them of an oppressive past, these commentaries show how Cambodians come to understand their own social and national identities by linking language with time and place.

As a result of the destruction and genocide under the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians often describe their cultural heritage and cultural identity as being in **decline**. These narratives often recall a place-time when Cambodian culture, language, and art was unparalleled, either pointing to the ancient Angkor Empire or the Independence period, only to be destroyed under the Khmer Rouge regime. Even decades after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians still do not think their country has truly recovered; it is still picking up the pieces.

Cambodian commentaries about decline of Buddhism, language, and traditional culture of hierarchy are all related to **ethics** and **morality**. Narratives about ethical decline include complaints about Cambodian behavior, demeanor, and dress, but most importantly their speech. Each chapter touches upon changing views about ethical responsibility about respect and politeness in various domains. To whom do we owe respect and politeness? And from whom should we expect respect and politeness? Even among the small Christian population, there is disagreement over whether Christians should fall under God's moral circle of honorification: does God owe respect to people? As some people point to past cultural norms about ethical responsibilities, others are looking to newer and different ways of articulating civility in the

modern world. I describe this newer form of civility as the “moral circle of honorification” and show that upwardly mobile Cambodians have a more expanded ethical scope.

Since the 1990s, as Cambodia reintegrated into the globalized economy, new technology has entered the Cambodian landscape, from television to radio to the internet. The increased consumption of the **media** brings up criticisms about cultural and moral decline. Some Cambodians believe that cellphones and the internet may cause Buddhist monks to watch pornography or flirt with women. Besides monks, Cambodians are also anxious about what kind of language and image is being projected in the media because it could be easily picked up by viewers at home. If “bad” or “ungrammatical” Khmer is being used or if immoral topics are being discussed, there is worry over what the masses will copy and emulate. This fear has caused some Cambodians to police the language of media personalities to make sure that they are speaking correctly so that they can be linguistic role models for uneducated Cambodians who are watching and listening.

Criticisms about language in the media and about decline are ultimately criticisms about Cambodian **social and national identity**. Nation-building projects often rely on language to mark national and social boundaries. Who is considered part of the nation and who stands outside of it? In the aftermath of war and turmoil, questions about national identity and nation-building seem much more prominent, as is the case in Cambodia where the country attempted to rebuild their country, both physically and metaphorically. I attempt to look at the question of national identity through the lens of language. I see insecurities and contestations about language-use, which reflect insecurities and struggles in how Cambodians should define their national identity after loss and devastation. Should they recover what was lost or should they redefine themselves?

However, as historians in Cambodian studies have asserted (Edwards 2008; Hansen 2007; Chandler 2008 [1983]), questions about social and national identity are not new. When printed text entered the country in the early 20th century, early print were all Buddhist texts, primarily about how good Buddhists should behave in the contemporary world (Hansen 2007). Under the French protectorate, a diverse group of people, from colonial administrators to Buddhist reformers, contributed to various visions as to what it means to be Cambodian, often weaving in older ideas of ancient Angkorean history to construct their image of modernity (Edwards 2008). Even when the Khmer Rouge came into power, Pol Pot was preoccupied with returning to the “Original Khmer,” which was a national identity that was tied to peasant farming (ibid). When Cambodians approach the question of social and national identity today, some attempt to revert back to some of these past identities: as descendants of the Angkorean Empire who built impressive temple complexes, as Buddhists who knew how to behave, or as happy farmers working in the rice fields. Others, however, are pursuing newer identities that have never been seen in Cambodia, which is a cause for concern among some.

Organization of Chapters

My first and last chapters (Chapters 1 and 5) concern metapragmatic commentaries (Silverstein 1993), particularly language complaints (Milroy and Milroy 2012 [1985]). I bookend my dissertation with these two chapters to highlight the insecurities Cambodians have surrounding the Khmer language. The middle chapters (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) are about the most marked and less-used Khmer honorific registers: the Buddhist monk honorific register, the royal honorific register, and the non-honorific register, respectively. I argue that these three registers are in a state of decline in light of social mobility and migration into the cities. As the urban,

middle-class grows, they are losing fluency in the Buddhist monk register (Chapter 2) and the royal register (Chapter 3), but they are also avoiding the non-honorific register (Chapters 3 and 4).

In Chapter 1, “‘Khmer has no grammar rules’: metapragmatic commentary and linguistic anxiety in Cambodia,” I lay the groundwork for language contestation in Cambodia, mostly from the point of view of language complainers who criticize linguistic changes in contemporary society as “mistakes.” I show how complaints about language are also complaints about societal changes in the aftermath of reintegration, globalization, and capitalism. The complaints about societal changes are ultimately contestations about how Cambodians should redefine their own national identity.

In Chapter 2, “How not to talk to monks,” I analyze the growing lack of fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register, honorifics Cambodians ought to use when speaking about Buddhist monks. Due to changes in work hours, newer forms of entertainment, and images of misbehaving monks on social media, I show how Buddhism’s relevance is in decline in urban areas and how this leads to the decline of fluency in the monk honorific register.

Chapter 3, “Did Jesus slap or sokut for our sins? Khmer honorifics under debate & change in Christianity,” looks at both the royal honorific register and the non-honorific register in Christian settings. While most Christians happily use the royal honorific register with God, more and more Christians today want God to address them with a more polite register. I track changes in attitudes to honorific-use in Christian settings to show how a growing number of Christians now regard God’s non-honorific-use in the 1954 Bible as inappropriate, preferring newer translations where God uses more polite registers with mortals.

In Chapter 4, “From Cruel Superior to Uneducated Farmer: the non-honorific register and stereotypes of the unmodern,” I untangle the various stereotypes and valuations of the non-honorific register and ask why the urban middle-class is avoiding it. Unlike the royal register and the monk register where decline in usage is tied to lack of practice, the middle-class are outright avoiding this register, describing it as unpleasant, crude, and angry. I present three figures who are associated with the non-honorific register: the cruel superior, uneducated farmer, and Khmer Rouge cadre. I argue that both exemplify aspects of the past which urban Cambodians want to avoid: times when Cambodians were gauche farmers and times Cambodians were subjected to the cruelty of rich patrons.

Chapter 5, “Telecommunication Technologies: media personalities as linguistic role models and educators” the role of mass media in contemporary Cambodia. Owing to the media’s popularity and the poor quality of education in Cambodia, some Cambodians police the language of media personalities since they ought to be linguistic role models and Khmer teachers to the semi-literate masses. If media figures are impromptu teachers then, I analyze interactions on a popular television show which features adults and children to investigate what Cambodians are learning from the media. I argue again that there is considerable tension surround language-use as Cambodians struggle to understand their own identities and the identities of their peers in a fast-paced, changing society.

Terminological Note

Although I use “Khmer” to refer to the language, I use “Cambodian” to refer to the people residing in Cambodia. While ethnic Khmer are the majority, there are other ethnic groups

within Cambodia and there are intermarriages between groups. I use “Cambodian” to be inclusive to all ethnicities.

New Beginnings and Ends

From my fifth floor apartment balcony in the Tuol Tompoung Market area in 2014, looking northward toward the center of the capital, it was hard to miss the green construction tarps dotting the city’s landscape, pinpointing new buildings sprouting up from the ground, almost appearing overnight. When I first moved to the area, many expats considered it too far away from the city center. Many of my American friends rarely visited me; I often had to go to them since they were closer to more interesting restaurants. By the time I left the area in 2015, to move to Battambang, the Russian Market was becoming a trendy, up-and-coming area as expats began opening bars, restaurants, and even fitness facilities like a rock-climbing gym. These changes have not gone unnoticed among locals as Cambodia moved into the global marketplace, attracting foreigners into the country.

In the following chapters, you will follow me on a journey through Cambodia, across time and space, to learn about a country where people are insecure about their language, their identity, and their place in the world. Even if Cambodians lack confidence in their own native language, I hope that by the end of this dissertation, they will begin to see Khmer the way I do, as a vibrant language, with a rich history, but adaptable to changing times.

Chapter 1 “Khmer Has No Grammar Rules”: Metapragmatic Commentary and Linguistic Anxiety in Cambodia

When I was conducting fieldwork in Cambodia, I was intentionally vague about my specific research interests whenever I introduced myself to someone for the first time because I did not want to prime Cambodians into discussing my dissertation topic: Khmer honorific registers. I usually said something to the effect of: “I am a PhD student from the United States who is interested in studying the Khmer language.” I was surprised to encounter a large amount of metapragmatic commentaries (Silverstein 1993), a unique reflexive phenomenon where language is used to talk about language. More specifically, Cambodians were participating in “complaint traditions” (Milroy and Milroy 2012 [1985]) because many of the commentaries I encountered were complaints about the state of their language.

In this chapter, I begin with an ethnographic narrative that will familiarize readers with how Cambodians feel about their language. I then describe the Khmer language, particularly its script, to discuss how and why locals perceive their own language to be “messy” and “incorrect.” I argue that the tensions surrounding language-use and spelling are a result of the country’s frequent changes in regimes and shifts in ideologies, all within a short period of time. Starting with the French protectorate of Cambodia, I transport us back in time in order to relay the significance of each era’s lasting impact on the Khmer language. Once we arrive at present-day Cambodia, I turn to the education system and discuss the ways in which the poor quality of public education is pushing families with modest means to supplement public schooling with private schooling or private tutoring. After situating readers with the relevant background

information on history and language, I illustrate the range of metapragmatic commentaries I encountered, which touched upon spelling, lexicon, and language-use in general. Finally, I end the chapter by offering my thoughts on Khmer language complaints as critiques of contemporary Cambodian society.

Does Khmer have Grammar Rules?

On a warm July evening in Phnom Penh in 2015, my friends and I decided to have a nice dinner after an exhaustive day of moving. My friends helped me move my belongings and furniture out of my old apartment (on the fifth floor) to be stored temporarily in my friend's apartment (on the third floor). To thank my friends for their labor, I invited them to dinner at a nearby Indonesian restaurant, just steps away from the royal palace and the Tonle Sap River. When the sun begins to set, the riverside area is lively, teeming with people. The streets are clogged with motorbikes and cars as people are just getting off work or school. Others are exercising, power walking, kicking a shuttlecock back and forth with their friends, or joining a synchronized dance class along the river's promenade. Restaurants and food carts call out to customers walking by, enticing them with their food. The Indonesian restaurant my friends and I were sitting in, as well as many other restaurants in the vicinity, highlights Cambodia's place in the transnational, globalized world, allowing Cambodian residents and tourists to sample local, traditional Cambodian dishes alongside international cuisine.

I do not remember how this comment emerged during our meal, but my friend Kolthida remarked that the Khmer language has no grammar rules and that there were no Khmer textbooks to teach Khmer. By this point, I had already encountered similar remarks and attitudes during my research. "The Khmer language is getting worse" or "The younger generation don't

care about their language.” I often nod and smile, but silently disagreed with them because in my mind the Khmer language was merely changing, as all living languages do. That evening, however, when Kolthida said Khmer has no grammar rules, I could no longer ignore it. Maybe it was because we have become close friends and I felt comfortable speaking my mind. Maybe it was because I reached my breaking point and wanted to tell Cambodians that their language is alive, vibrant, and changing—not degenerate or dying. I finally spoke up and corrected Kolthida by saying Khmer *does* have grammar rules and, while the quality may not be the best, there are plenty of Khmer textbooks.

Franz Boas noted that people are often unaware of language rules, which he described as the “unconscious character of linguistic phenomena” (Boas 1911)—hence, why Cambodians like Kolthida thought Khmer had no grammar rules. Yet, some aspects of language actually are very salient to language-users as asserted by scholars like Silverstein (1981), Philips (1991), and Hill & Hill (1978). It was exactly why I found an abundance of instructional metapragmatic commentaries about the various honorific variants for the word “eat” during my fieldwork, which Cambodians enjoy listing for me whenever I tell them I am interested in Khmer honorific registers: *soay* (used with the king), *chan* (with monks), *borekpok*, *totultien*, *nyam*, *hob*, *si*, etc. Experiences such as these motivated me to tell Kolthida that Khmer certainly had grammar rules; Cambodians are constantly talking about them all the time.

What I failed to understand that day, however, was not that Kolthida was unconscious of her native language’s grammar rules. It was that she and many other Cambodians felt insecure that those grammar rules were not codified in any official textbooks. Despite the countless textbooks I encountered as a Khmer-language learner, native-Khmer speakers themselves did not have a centralized piece of text that they could refer back to as a standard of measure, to check

the “correctness” of their grammar. While there is one hallowed dictionary, attributed to the Venerable Chuon Nath, which Cambodians often point to whenever there are arguments about spelling, there was no grammatical counterpart to expound upon the richness of the Khmer language’s grammar.

Aim of the Chapter

During fieldwork, I was so focused on Khmer honorific registers that I did not truly appreciate such statements as worthy of investigation. On the one hand, I was not interested in such commentaries because they had nothing to do with honorifics or registers. On the other hand, I vehemently disagreed with what Cambodians were saying: their language is not dying. As someone who has colleagues working on endangered languages, I felt that Cambodians were being overdramatic. Once, when I heard Sarah Thomason share her experience working with Montana Salish, a language spoken on the Flathead Reservation in Montana where she estimated 60 elderly speakers remained when she began her study, I was especially moved when she showed a photograph of the five or so speakers she worked with, naming them one by one, pointing out how many among them had passed away since the photo was taken. To hear Cambodians complain that their language, the official language of Cambodia and spoken by 16 million people within the country and among its diaspora, is dying felt like an affront to languages in more precarious situations. I wanted to tell Cambodians that they had nothing to fear, that language variation is normal, that language change is normal. This meant their language is alive and thriving.

When I returned to the U.S. and began analyzing my fieldnotes, I was overwhelmed by the amount of metapragmatic commentaries and language complaints, like the one Kolthida

uttered to me that July evening. It became clear to me that the state of the Khmer language is a major source of concern and anxiety. It was not immediately clear to me at the time, but I later came to realize that these concerns were largely due to Cambodia's poor quality of education after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, which eliminated schooling and targeted intellectuals for execution in the late 1970s. Despite attempts to rebuild their education system in the 1980s with the few resources and personnel they had, some say public schooling still has not recovered, which is a lingering source of concern and tension in Cambodia.

As a linguistic anthropologist who tries to be objective, I have no stake in the Khmer language changing; my goal is to describe the language without judgment or prejudice, without valuing one variety or spelling over another, to acknowledge the beauty of language change and language differentiation. But for some Cambodians who are concerned about the future of their language and are vocal about language differences—differences which they deem to be problematic—there is a vested interest in the reproduction and continuation of a version of their language that they deem to be “correct” or “pure.” This vested interest in language is inevitably connected to a vested interest in a particular kind of Cambodian national identity. As diagrammatic icons (Peirce 1955 [1902]) of one another in the minds and imaginations of some Cambodians, the decline and loss of one will certainly lead to the decline and loss of the other. While American English has a robust and strong educational institution that keeps the language standardized to a degree, Cambodia does not due to its history of turmoil. Once we put this into context, we can see why some Cambodians are overly concerned about the future of their language because, to them, the future of their country, culture, and national identity depends on it.

Although language complaints are prevalent around the world, Cambodians feel their own language situation is unique due to Cambodia's historical, political, and social circumstances in the last century, most notably the Khmer Rouge regime. Other academics studying language as social action have shown that complaints about language are never just about language. By the end of this chapter, I will show that Cambodian metapragmatic commentaries about language are actually part of a larger narrative about change, disorder, and decline in Cambodian society in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. I argue that language complaints are ultimately an indirect critique of Cambodian society, from corrupt politicians to the poor quality of education to the influx of foreign organizations into Cambodia to the erosion of respect and Buddhist ideals of morality – all of which are also viewed as a consequence of the Khmer Rouge. Competing ideas about how Khmer should be spoken are ultimately competing ideas about Cambodian cultural and national identity, which has always been in contestation. What does it mean to be Cambodian or to be an “Original Khmer” (see Edwards 2008)?

Social and national identities are never given, waiting to be discovered and described. Identities are socially constructed processes, which need to be maintained and reconstructed over time. Although Cambodians have always been grappling with questions about identity throughout history, many Cambodians today feel more urgency in answering these questions. After suffering deep ruptures and upheaval, we find a nation that is attempting to reconstruct their own identity anew: what does it mean to be Cambodian today? What should Cambodian society look like and how should Cambodians speak and behave?² For some, the answers lie in the past, toward a golden era when life, language, religion, and culture were pure and authentic. For others, the answers lie in the future, toward progress and development. By analyzing these

² I am purposefully alluding to Hansen's (2007) book *How to behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*.

debates, conflicts, and inconsistencies in Khmer, I shed light on, to borrow Appadurai's words, the "multiple worlds that are constituted by historically situated imaginations of persons and groups" in Cambodia (Appadurai 1996, 33).

Before analyzing metapragmatic commentaries, I want to take a step back and give an overview of the Khmer language and recent Cambodian history in order to situate Khmer language complaints. Once readers gain a better understanding of the linguistic, political, and social landscape, they too will better understand why Cambodians are worried about the future of their language and country. After that, I will analyze a few Khmer language complaints about spelling, lexicon, and the valuing of foreign languages. Finally, I conclude that complaints about language are not just about language; they are also complaints about other social changes in the world.

The Khmer Language, Script, and Nationality

Khmer is the official language of the Kingdom of Cambodia and an important part in defining Cambodian identity because it is often said that "to be Khmer is to speak Khmer" (Smith-Hefner 1999, 1990; Needham 2003; Wright 2010). Khmer is categorized in the Austro-Asiatic language family (Heder 2007), also known as Mon-Khmer (Huffman, Lambert, and Im 1970). Before the rise of Buddhism in the region, Hinduism was the dominant religion. Although scholars cannot say for sure when Buddhism arrived in Cambodia, its growth is often associated with Angkor Wat's conversion from a Hindu temple to a Buddhist temple (Harris 2005). Through Buddhism, many Pali and Sanskrit loanwords came into the language (Ehrman and Sos 1972; Heder 2007). Today, the status of Pali and Sanskrit to Khmer is similar to that of Latin and Greek to English. Advanced vocabulary in Khmer often have Pali or Sanskrit roots so educated

Cambodians can analyze and break down a word etymologically in order to understand the word's meaning and spell it correctly. Khmer literature scholars, like Touch Kimsrieng whom you will meet later in this chapter, often complain that Cambodians today cannot spell because they do not know the Pali or Sanskrit origins of Khmer words. More on these spelling issues later. Paradoxically then, according to learned Cambodians, being Cambodian is not only about knowing Khmer; it also entails knowledge about earlier, ancient languages that have been the foundation of the Khmer language today.

Today, Khmer has about 16 million speakers. While most Khmer-speakers live within the borders of what is modern-day Cambodia, there are Khmer speech communities in the neighboring countries of Thailand and Vietnam. These communities found themselves on the “wrong” side of the border when national border lines were drawn and redrawn, separating them from the Khmer-speaking majority in Cambodia and becoming Khmer-speaking minorities in their respective countries, sometimes even being subjected to cultural assimilation. This has been the source of tension between Cambodia and its neighbors. Most notably, some Cambodians still refer to southern Vietnam as Kampuchea Krom, or Lower Cambodia, and to Ho Chi Minh City (also known as Saigon) as Prey Nokor, its name when it was a trading port under the Angkor Empire (Chandler 2008 [1983]). Beyond Southeast Asia, there are also Khmer-speakers among the Cambodian diasporic communities in Australia, France, and the United States—with Long Beach, CA and Lowell, MA being the two largest Cambodian American communities. A majority of them resettled in these countries as refugees shortly after the Khmer Rouge regime fell.

While Khmer is the official and dominant language in Cambodia, there are other ethnic groups who also speak their own heritage languages. These include, but are not limited to ethnic

Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, and indigenous³ minorities such as the Jarai or Bunong. Unlike the Chinese community, which immigrated to Cambodia, indigenous groups (sometimes referred to as “hilltribes,” “highland minorities,” or “upland minorities”) are native to present-day Cambodia, having their own language as well as cultural and religious beliefs that differ from the ethnic Khmer majority, historically living side by side with the Khmer majority (Baird 2016; Heder 2007). These various minority groups are not isolated, however. Although there is discrimination and hatred toward certain communities, with anti-Vietnamese sentiments being the most salient, there are intermarriages between groups. This is why I have chosen to use the exonym “Cambodian” to refer to the people, instead of “Khmer,” since Cambodia is made up of many different ethnic groups, not just the ethnic Khmer majority.

I would be remiss not to mention other foreigners, particularly Westerners, in Cambodia, many of whom began flowing into the country after Cambodia re-entered the open market economy in the 1990s. They are often thought of as expatriates, or expats. Unlike other immigrant ethnic groups who have historically settled in Cambodia and often assimilate into Cambodian culture after a generation or two, most Westerners are not in the country permanently. Through my observations, a majority do not learn Khmer nor do they expect their children to. Many are only in the country for a short amount of time, either to open or operate a business, train locals, work or consult with a non-governmental organization, or to teach English. This asymmetric or unequal linguistic exchange, where foreigners are not expected to speak Khmer, but Cambodians are often expected to speak English, has had an impact on the way Cambodians approach language and language learning. As I will elaborate on later in the latter half of this chapter, these circumstances have driven many Cambodians to either learn foreign

³ “Indigenous” in many Asian countries does not mean first or native inhabitants, but minority groups who have been oppressed or colonized by a majority group(s).

languages, like English, or to send their own children to private schools to learn the language. Other Cambodians, however, lament the valuing of foreign languages over Khmer.

The preceding discussion complicates prevailing ideologies about linguistic nationalism, ideologies that equate Cambodia and Cambodian national identity with the Khmer language. While the connection between language and national identity in Cambodia is strong, we cannot take it for granted because the picture becomes more complicated if we were to consider whether Khmer is the only language spoken in Cambodia. Not only are there minority groups or foreigners using languages other than Khmer within the borders of Cambodia, but Cambodians themselves are increasingly attempting to learn and speak other languages. With this in mind, we can better understand the tensions surrounding Khmer and why some Cambodians are preoccupied with the fate of their heritage language. If “to be Khmer is to speak Khmer,” then what does it mean when they are not speaking Khmer? Or, what does it mean if they are speaking the “wrong” kind of Khmer?

Before moving on, I want to briefly elaborate on Khmer spelling. Khmer script dates back to the 7th century and is Indic in origin, derived from the Brahmi script of South India (Thong 1985; Haiman 2011; Huffman, Lambert, and Im 1970). The modern Khmer alphabet has 33 consonant characters, 23 dependent vowel characters, and 12 independent vowel characters; additionally, there are subscript versions of each consonant as well as many diacritic marks (Huffman, Lambert, and Im 1970). The large inventory of consonants and vowels, in addition to the incorporation of Pali and Sanskrit loanwords into Khmer, has influenced Khmer spelling in many ways. First, due to the large amounts of consonants and vowels (both independent and dependent vowels), the same sound can be represented in several different ways. This may lead to confusion when Cambodians spell the same word differently. Second, many Pali and Sanskrit

loanwords have retained their older spelling, which does not reflect the modern-day Khmer pronunciation. For example, many Pali and Sanskrit loanwords that have silent consonants and, as a consequence, contain diacritics to help Khmer readers pronounce these loan words. As a result, Cambodians with basic literacy skills may spell words by sounding them out, forgoing the silent consonants or diacritic marks, not knowing they were there to begin with, which again leads to multiple spelling of the same word. Third, Khmer spelling has faced many challenges with the introduction of new technologies like computers and smartphones. For example, fitting the large inventory of Khmer script onto the standard keyboard presented some difficulties, causing some Cambodians to type in Romanized script because it is faster and easier than typing in Khmer. I myself have had problems hunting down a particular independent vowel or diacritic, often guessing by trial and error, pounding away at the keyboard, hoping to find that one script I am searching for.

Khmer's language variation today is perceived by locals as "messy" and "incorrect." Confusion about Khmer script and spelling conventions, of which there are multiple versions, seem to imply that Khmer grammar, and relatedly the language as a whole, is messy. This rhematization (Irvine and Gal 2000) between part (spelling) and whole (language) also explains why concerns about the decline of spelling also mirror the concerns Cambodians have about their language. As diagrammatic icons, should one fall, the other will soon follow. Yet, if we take the time to understand how Khmer spelling conventions have changed over time, we will see that the "messiness" in spelling can also be a rhematization of Cambodia's tumultuous history, reflecting the country's multiple regime changes in the last century. The different periods of recent Cambodian history and the educational policies that prevailed in them, can help us understand this perception. In the next few sections, starting with French colonialism, I will look into each

significant historical period and show how language, particularly spelling, had been affected under each regime.

Word Coinage and Standardizing Khmer Orthography: French Colonialism (early 20th century) and the Independence Period (1953-1970):

While Cambodia was under French colonial rule (1863-1953) and during Cambodia's independence period (1953-1970, also known as *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or the People's Socialist Community period), there were three movements that influenced the Khmer language and still have lingering effects on the language today: 1) the institutionalization of public schooling, 2) the standardization of Khmer spelling, and 3) the standardization of neologisms (or the coinage of new words).

Before the French decided to modernize the school system in Cambodia, according to French standards, there was no institutionalized schooling system. Boys, and not girls, could learn to read and write at local Buddhist pagodas where Buddhist monks were instructors.⁴ Spelling was not standardized so students learned to write based on their monk teacher's way of writing. At first, French colonials created workshops to train Buddhist monks, who were to return to their pagodas to teach a standardized curriculum. The French later implemented their own schooling system to teach French as a way to train Cambodians to be French-speaking civil servants (Thong 1985). Some Cambodians studied abroad in France, some of whom returned to Cambodia with newfound communist ideas (Ayres 2000a). These communists would later start a revolution that would have a lasting impact on Cambodia: the Khmer Rouge regime.

⁴ Education for boys is more valued and there are strict rules that prohibit women from touching and being too physically close to Buddhist monks.

In light of the lack of standardized spelling, there was a Royal Decree in 1915 to compile the first Khmer language dictionary. After the first commission failed to come to an agreement over diacritic marks, a second commission was formed under the supervision of the Ven. Chuon Nath, a Buddhist monk who later became the Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia (the leader of Buddhism in Cambodia) and wrote the Cambodian national anthem; he is still revered in Cambodia today. The commission published the first and second volume of the dictionary in 1939 and 1943, respectively. Both volumes were accepted as the official spelling of Khmer to be used in schools and offices (Harris 2005; Thong 1985). The fifth and last edition of the dictionary was published in 1967 before the civil war (Chuon 1967). Many Cambodians today covet this dictionary as a national treasure and many institutions claim to “follow the Chuon Nath dictionary” in terms of spelling. The dictionary was not without its critics though. One of those critics was Keng Vannsak, a Khmer linguist and philosopher. Because Chuon Nath and other committee members were well-versed in Pali and Sanskrit, they preferred the etymological spelling of Pali and Sanskrit words, which differed from the Khmer pronunciation of words, widening the gap between spelling and pronunciation (Thong 1985). Keng Vannsak, on the other hand, wanted to modernize spelling to increase literacy.

Around the same time in the 1930s, a cultural committee was formed to decide the coinage of foreign words and concepts into Khmer. Most members on the cultural committee were again well-versed in Pali and Sanskrit, so their coinage often had Indic roots. Their method was in opposition to more modern critics like Keng Vannsak, who wanted to use modern Khmer words (Harris 2005; Thong 1985). For example, both camps disagreed on how to refer to “trains.” Chuon Nath’s word of choice drew on Cambodia’s Buddhist and Indic culture: *ayaksmeyana* (pronounced more like *ayeaksmeyean*), which is derived from the Pali word

ayomoyo (metal) and *yana* (vehicle). Words like these were gibberish to most Cambodians who were not trained in Pali or Sanskrit. According to Steven Heder, these words were “Pali-Sanskrit jawbreakers, unintelligible to virtually everyone in Cambodia except for those who formulated them” (Heder 2007). Keng Vannsak, in contrast, was critical of Buddhism and advocated for the term *roteh pleung* (literally “fire wagon” in Khmer) or *rot pleung* (literally “fire vehicle” in Khmer). These terms were more comprehensible to the average Cambodian and Cambodians today refer to trains as *rot pleung* or *roteh pleung*, but formally and among educated Cambodians, *ayaksmeyana* is still known and sometimes used.

When Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953, King Sihanouk continued what the French started by increasing public primary and secondary schools for both boys and girls (S.S. Dy and Ninomiya 2003; Ledgerwood 1996). With a newly independent country in his hands, King Norodom Sihanouk wanted to promote nation-building through education and Buddhist Socialism (Ayres 2000a). Buddhist Socialism used Buddhist teachings to legitimize the king’s rule, and education was a way to modernize the new fledgling country. Because of King Sihanouk’s support of Buddhism, he approved and supported Chuon Nath’s dictionary. From our future vantage point, this solidified the dictionary’s place as *the* authoritative source on Khmer spelling because, in the minds of many Cambodians, this was how Khmer words were spelled before the country fell into turmoil.

Many people, Cambodians and non-Cambodians alike, look back on the independence or Sangkum period as Cambodia’s golden era because of the country’s advancement in science and technology as well as innovations in the arts, music, and architecture. According to them, this progress was disrupted in the subsequent periods of war and reconstruction. My friend Peter, a Cambodian refugee who resettled in New Zealand after the Khmer Rouge, has fond memories of

living in the capital as a young boy in the 1960s. He told me Cambodia would look just like Singapore if not for the communist Khmer Rouge regime. The 2014 documentary *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll*, which premiered in Cambodia during my fieldwork research, showcases Cambodia's vibrant rock and roll music industry in the 1960s and early 1970s and its eventual fall during the Khmer Rouge when many musicians perished. It was a huge hit among the expat community while I was living in Phnom Penh. One American expat expressed shock at seeing images of Cambodian women wearing short bob hairstyles and miniskirts because Cambodian women today are encouraged to have long hair, as a sign of beauty, and to cover their knees, as a sign of modesty. Her surprise may also have been partly due to the commonly given advice during Cambodian orientation sessions that advise foreigners to dress conservatively to respect Cambodian culture—uncomfortable advice in a tropical, humid country like Cambodia where foreigners would much prefer having their knees and shoulders exposed to cool off. “I had no idea,” she kept repeating over and over again after the showing; she had no idea that there was a time when Cambodia used to look like that.

In later parts of my chapter, I complicate nostalgic longings of Cambodia's golden era by showing that the progress and development that Cambodians see in old movies and photographs were limited to the cities. Many people in the countryside did not benefit from Sihanouk's policies and they were the ones who later joined the Khmer Rouge due to their discontent. Until then, we will continue toward the darker years of Cambodia: the civil war and communism.

Civil War and Communism: Khmer Republic (1970-1975) and the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979)

In 1970, the Khmer Republic⁵ overtook the monarchy and gained control of Cambodia. All foreign language schools in Cambodia closed. Most importantly, in terms of language, the Khmer Republic approved Keng Vannsak's ideology of spelling (Sasagawa 2015). Many of Keng Vannsak's followers and former students were in charge of implementing a revised orthography. They began to put it into place in the early 1970s, but it was never fully realized because the Khmer Republic did not last long. Between 1970-1975, the Khmer Republic was engaged in a civil war with the communist Khmer Rouge⁶, led by French-educated Cambodians, who gained support among rural Cambodians.

On April 17, 1975 the Khmer Rouge gained control of Cambodia and implemented a communist revolution. All foreigners were expelled from the country and Cambodia went into total isolation. Cambodians were forced into the countryside because the Khmer Rouge believed the cities were corrupted by foreign influences. By living, working, and sleeping communally in rural areas, the Khmer Rouge dreamed of a utopian society entirely comprised of worker peasants. "It was not enough to be Cambodian, born on the land: one had to speak, act, dress, and perform according to an ideal—that of the Original Khmer" (Edwards 2008, 1). Cambodians were divided into sex- and age-segregated labor camps, undertaking backbreaking agricultural projects, building dams, or harvesting rice, with long hours (as high as 18-hours per day) and

⁵ Also known as the Lon Nol government because it was led by General Lon Nol.

⁶ The group never referred to themselves as the Khmer Rouge, but because this term is ubiquitous, I have chosen to refer to them as such. The regime and country were referred to as Democratic Kampuchea (DK) during this period, but I have chosen to call it the "Khmer Rouge regime," (*Samay Khmae Krohom*) which is how most people, within and outside of Cambodian, refer to it. Cambodians also sometimes refer to it as the "Pol Pot regime" (*Samay Pol Pot*), sometimes adding the dis-honorable *ah-* in front of Pol Pot's given name (*Samay ah-Pot*).

little food. In this new world, there were no markets, no money, and no schooling. Cambodians were expected to “work, eat, sleep, and speak like a peasant” (Hinton 1998, 110).

Because I have discussed the Khmer Rouge regime and linguistic leveling of the Khmer language in further detail in the Introduction, I will limit the discussion here to how the Khmer Rouge affected the Khmer language in other ways. Most significantly, the Khmer Rouge has had a lasting impact on the Cambodian education system. The Khmer Rouge despised anyone who was not a poor, peasant farmer before the revolution. As a result, those who were educated, upper-class, and from the cities were targeted by the regime because they were viewed as the oppressors in pre-revolutionary times, so they either worked longer hours or were executed as punishment. Consequently, many educators and intellectuals died under the Khmer Rouge regime, which had ramifications in the education system in the subsequent periods.

Scholastic education under the Khmer Rouge regime was non-existent. Educational infrastructures were abandoned or re-purposed into stables, factories, or prisons (Ayres 2000a). The most well-known prison was a former high school that was renamed S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng (Ledgerwood 1997). It is estimated that over 17,000 people died there, and when the Vietnamese arrived, they only found seven survivors (K. Dy and Cambodia 2007). Today, it is a genocide museum.

Learning did not involve reading or writing, but political education, often taking place during nightly meetings where Cambodians gathered to learn revolutionary songs, hear speeches that aimed to boost morale or discussions on agricultural goals, and watch Cambodians self-criticize by confessing or apologizing for the wrongs they committed, recently or during their pre-revolutionary life. To take someone away for “education” or “re-education” (*rien sot*) was a

euphemism for hard labor or even execution (Clayton 1998). The Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot emphasized not only the eradication of education, but all other “vestiges of the past”:

There are no schools, faculties or universities in the traditional sense, although they did exist in our country prior to liberation, because we wish to do away with all vestiges of the past. There is no money, no commerce, as the state takes care of provisioning all its citizens. . . . We evacuated the cities; we resettled the inhabitants in the rural areas where the living conditions could be provided for this segment of the new Cambodia. The countryside should be the focus of attention for our revolution... (Pol Pot 1978 as cited in Clayton 1998, pg 3).

Denise Affonço, survivor of the Khmer Rouge, wrote in her memoir that the Khmer Rouge reiterated that agricultural work was to replace education, quoting what she overheard:

“Everybody will become kamakors (peasants) and kaksekors (workers). There'll be no more schools, no more books; your university will be the forest and the paddy fields; you'll earn your diplomas with your tears and the sweat of your brow” (Affonço 2008, 39-40).

These quotations show that the Khmer Rouge were more impressed with agricultural and manual labor than traditional educational attainment.

The Khmer Rouge also used a play on words to say that they did not care for diplomas សញ្ញាបត្រ or សញ្ញាប័ត្រ⁷ (*soñabat*). The word សញ្ញា *soñā* means “sign” or “symbol.” The last syllable *-bat* (-បត្រ or -ប័ត្រ) is a variant of the word ប័ណ្ណ *ban*, the Pali word for “leaf,” which was extended to mean “card” or “certificate.” The syllable *-bat* (-បត្រ or -ប័ត្រ) is a homonym for

⁷ The word “diploma” in Khmer is an example of a word with Pali origin. The last syllable in the word diploma *-bat* (-បត្រ or -ប័ត្រ) has a silent consonant ɿ /r/, which is realized as a subscript ្រ here because it is in a consonant cluster with the consonant ត /t/. Secondly, in the alternative/original spelling, there is a diacritic mark ្រ that is usually found in Pali and Sanskrit loanwords to indicate that the syllable contains a short vowel. However, it appears that nowadays most Cambodians omit this diacritic mark. This highlights a mismatch between Pali words and Khmer pronunciation, which may cause spelling issues because there are silent consonants.

another word in Khmer: *bat* បាត់, which means “missing” or “disappeared.”⁸ In re-imagining the word “diploma” as containing the word “missing” instead, the Khmer Rouge juxtaposed *-bat* (“missing”) with the word *keunh* ឃើញ (“can be seen,” “visible”). The regime declared that having a *soña-bat* សញ្ញាបាត់ (certificate that cannot be seen) is bad while having a *soña-keunh* សញ្ញាឃើញ (certificate that *can* be seen) is better. In other words, more visible efforts of hard work, such as plowing the fields, were applauded under the regime, while being an intellectual with scholarly pursuits, which do not produce visible results, was ridiculed.⁹

After 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days of genocide, trauma, starvation, and backbreaking hard labor, the regime came to an end in January 1979, when the Vietnamese came into the country and the Khmer Rouge fled to the northwest region of Cambodia.

People’s Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1991)

After the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, Cambodia came under Vietnamese control for the next decade. Vietnam installed Cambodians leaders who were pro-Vietnamese. Many of them, like Prime Minister Hun Sen, have remained in power to this day. Cambodia changed its name to the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) during this period. Some Cambodians refer to this period as the Vietnamese Liberation or the Vietnamese

⁸ An example of how the same sound *bat* can be represented in different ways in Khmer. The Pali *bat* has a silent “r” letter at the end of the word that semi-literate and nonliterate Cambodians may miss.

⁹ This play on words can also be accredited to the Khmer Rouge’s disdain for education, reading, and writing. They valued uneducated, illiterate Cambodians over intellectuals. As such, this word play also symbolizes how an uninformed Cambodian peasant might not know that the word “diploma” contains Pali etymology, misrecognizing the syllable *bat* as the word missing/disappeared. Educated Cambodians sometimes feigned illiteracy in order to survive the regime.

Occupation, depending on one's view toward Vietnam. Although some Cambodians were grateful for the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, due to their tense history, Vietnam and Cambodia have an antagonistic relationship so some Cambodians did not look fondly on the Vietnamese. Hostility also came from the international community still in the midst of the Cold War. Countries who were anti-communist and anti-socialist, like the United States, opposed socialist countries like Vietnam and in turn they did not recognize Cambodia's PRK government, refusing to provide aid to Cambodians (Ayres 2000b). Plenty of international aid did go to Cambodian refugees living in Thai refugee camps though.

Although Cambodia remained fairly isolated in the 1980s because of its control by and relationship with Vietnam, the country had help from and contact with the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc socialist countries like East Germany and Cuba (Ayres 2000a). Many of my Khmer teachers can speak Russian because they were given the opportunity to study abroad in the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Whenever I return to Cambodia, I choose to stay in the "Russian Market" area of Phnom Penh. While it is known as *Psar Toul Tomgpong* (Toul Tompong Market) in Khmer, the alternative name for the market and neighborhood derives from the prevalence of Russian tourists and expats shopping in the market in the 1980s, one of the few foreigner nationalities to visit Cambodia at that time.

With what little they had and with little help from the international community, Cambodians attempted to rebuild and reconstruct their country, and the education system was of the utmost importance. It is estimated that between 21-24% of the population perished under the regime (Kiernan 2003), and that 75% of teachers died (Ayres 2000a; Clayton 1998), which made rebuilding education in Cambodia all the more difficult. Not only was there a shortage of education personnel, but there was a lack of classrooms and books. The Vietnamese attempted to

rebuild Cambodia's education system with what little they had, using the slogan, "Those who know more, teach those who know less. Those who know less, teach those who know nothing."

Thus, teachers who had completed only up to third grade could teach students in grades 1-2, teachers who had completed junior high school could teach students in the upper grades of primary school, and those who had completed at least some high school grades could teach in the junior high schools. (Nith et al. 2010, 3)

Some Cambodians point to this period and the preceding Khmer Rouge regime as the catalyst for why the Khmer language is in disarray. The "those who know less/nothing" teachers were unqualified, the curriculum in the 1980s was inconsistent, and the various teachers taught spelling and language differently.

Further, many Cambodians suffered from depression and trauma due to their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime, and the Cambodian landscape was completely altered. Many Cambodians lost family members. More adult men than adult women died so there was gender imbalance. Women made up of 55% of the overall population, but in some areas it was as high as 2/3 of the population (Boua 1982; Ledgerwood 2009). Consequently, women had to take on labor roles typically reserved for men, such as plowing fields, which created a shift in gender norms (Ledgerwood 2009). Under these circumstances, Cambodian teachers, suffering from loss and trauma, may not have been effective educators. Additionally, Cambodian students not only had to deal with learning to read and write after four years of no education, but also had to contend with their own loss and trauma as well as other family dynamics and issues at home.

In spite of the circumstances, schools and other cultural institutions slowly returned. According to Sasagawa (2015), the PRK government had to decide which orthography to follow: Chuon Nath's or Keng Vannsak's model. In the end, the PRK government chose Keng Vannsak's orthography as the approved spelling system. Because Keng Vannsak's orthography

closely matched pronunciation, my Khmer tutor Samnang claimed that Cambodians learned to read and write easily during this period and the 1990s.

UNTAC and Beyond (1990s to today)

During the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1989. The warring factions in Cambodia signed a Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 that established temporary international rule in Cambodia and the creation of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (or UNTAC) to oversee a free and fair election for prime minister to be scheduled in 1993. This period marked the beginning of Cambodia's re-emergence into the global market and political order as well as its dependence on foreign aid and NGO assistance. From 1992-1996, external assistance grew from \$250 million to \$518 million (Ollier and Winter 2006). After two decades of isolation under the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese, this period ushered in the largest influx of foreigners into Cambodia since the Khmer Rouge expelled foreigners from the country in 1975. Over 40,000 UNTAC soldiers and UN personnel from 45 different countries descended onto Cambodia for peacebuilding efforts, bringing with them satellite dishes, Toyota Landcruisers, the English language, and the United States dollar. Cambodians had to create international standard hotels and restaurants to cater to the international clientele's tastes and needs (Ollier and Winter 2006). The UN spent \$2 billion in total on this operation (Ollier and Winter 2006). As one can imagine, the Khmer language was influenced by the arrival of outsiders into their country.

Aside from foreign nationals, the early 1990s marked the return of Cambodians from abroad (Ollier and Winter 2006). King Sihanouk returned from exile in 1993. Refugee camps along the Thai border permanently closed in 1993 and all remaining Cambodian refugees living

in Thailand were repatriated to Cambodia. Moreover, Cambodian refugees who fled before and after the Khmer Rouge regime to other countries such as the United States, France, and Australia also returned in the 1990s. Many returnees were now dual citizens and Western-educated, having new ideas about Cambodia's future. Business tycoon Kith Meng lived and went to school in Australia before returning to Cambodia; he is now one of the richest men in the country. Some returnees went into politics, which brought up the debate whether dual citizens should be allowed to run for office as their allegiances, according to Prime Minister Hun Sen, may lie elsewhere. With a second passport, they could quickly leave Cambodia, as they previously did, if there was a crisis (Poethig 2006). These dual citizen politicians include Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who also holds French citizenship, and Mu Sochua, who also has a United States passport¹⁰. In short, Cambodians living abroad, either Thailand or elsewhere, returned to Cambodia in the 1990s, influencing the Cambodian culture and Khmer language (Marston 1997).

Returning to UNTAC, the presence of foreign UN staff and soldiers, as well as international NGO workers and journalists, still has lingering effects in Cambodia today. Since English was the lingua franca among UNTAC soldiers and personnel, this period triggered the popularity of English in Cambodia (Clayton 2002). Because so few Cambodians spoke English fluently at that time, Cambodians with rudimentary English were hired as translators and earned more money. My friend Panha is a tour guide in Cambodia. When I asked him how he learned English, he said when he was a teenager in the early 1990s, he picked up English from foreign journalists and was eventually hired to be translator. Even though his English at the time was rudimentary, it was better than most Cambodians. Another lingering effect from the UNTAC era dealt with currency. Soldiers and personnel were paid in US dollars, so businesses catering to

¹⁰ These two politicians are currently in exile and are afraid to return to Cambodia due to the political situation in Cambodia.

them accepted the US dollar freely (Ayres 2003); the US dollar is still used in Cambodia today, alongside the Cambodian riel. Further, some UNTAC soldiers left behind “UNTAC babies” after the 1993 election; many returned to their home country, never meeting their children. Whenever Cambodians meet a mixed raced Cambodian who speaks fluent Khmer, they often speculate whether they are an UNTAC baby.

Since the 1993 election, in which Cambodia gained co-prime ministers (Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranariddh), Cambodia reintegrated into the global economy and the globalized world, which has had an effect on the Khmer language due to international trade and tourism. The Angkor temples were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992, and ticket sales shot up from 9,000 tickets in 1993 to 750,000 in 2003 (Ollier and Winter 2006), bringing in foreign tourists willing to spend money on food, hotel, and entertainment. Foreign investments poured into the country, driving the desire for traditional Cambodian products like silk as well as traditional music and dancing. Garment factories became the largest exporting industry in Cambodia, where 93% of the garment business is foreign owned (Ear 2013b); the majority of factory workers were women from the countryside who migrated to Phnom Penh (Derks 2008), marking the beginning of urban migration into the cities. NGOs run by foreign staff are also plentiful in Cambodia, which drives the need for English or sometimes French speaking Cambodian staff. Christian missionaries slowly trickled back into Cambodia; for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses received formal permission to return in 1993 (personal communication at JW headquarters in Phnom Penh) and the Jesus Christ Church of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) were officially recognized in 1994 (find 2010 LDS article). Although missionaries make a strong effort to learn Khmer, many Cambodian Christian youths also benefit from learning English through their connection with missionaries.

The facade of democracy only lasted for 4 years before Hun Sen staged a coup, ousting Ranariddh to become the country's sole prime minister again in 1997. Political corruption continues to be the norm in Cambodia. Cambodia came in at 156 out of 176 countries when it came to political transparency according to Transparency International (Transparency International 2016). Despite progress in development, it is the most aid dependent nation in the world (Ear 2013a). In 2011, it was estimated that 72% of the population lived on less than \$3/day (Asian Development Bank 2014), but the average Cambodian needs \$4.50/day to survive, according to the US Embassy during my orientation in 2014. While UNTAC's presence did not directly influence the Khmer language, it marked Cambodia's entry onto the global stage. The repatriation of Cambodian refugees who had lived abroad, the establishment of foreign-owned factories, and the influx of tourists and aid workers altered the Cambodian landscape.

Education Today

In most societies, schooling is the strongest institution in disseminating language standards. This is not the case in Cambodia. As noted previously, Cambodia's education system suffered tremendously during and after the Khmer Rouge. Few educators survived the regime, so when the education system was rebuilt, the government in the 1980s used anyone who was available. In terms of spelling, from the 1980s until 2009, Cambodian schools taught Keng Vannsak's orthography, but some older Cambodians continued to spell according to Chuon Nath's dictionary and fought to reinstate Chuon Nath's orthography. In 2009, supporters of Chuon Nath's spelling prevailed when "Prime Minister Hun Sen declared that schools, newspapers, magazines, and official documents had to conform to Chuon Nath's dictionary" (Sasagawa 2015, 66).

While the debate appears to have been settled, the oscillation between different spelling regimes continues to reverberate in Cambodian society today due to the poor quality of public schooling. Despite progress and development in business, trade, and tourism, Cambodia still lags behind in education. School attendance is low and dropout rates are high for several reasons. Because schools are poorly funded, and teachers are underpaid, it is not uncommon for teachers to ask for daily bribes from children, averaging to \$0.25 per student per day (Besant 2014). Poor families are more likely to keep their children out of school because families cannot afford to pay the bribes, they lack money to pay for school uniforms and other school supplies, they lack transportation to/from school in rural areas, or families need children to work to earn extra income. As a result, most Cambodians have basic literacy, which may cause them to write based on pronunciation or they may prefer to spell in ways that closely match pronunciation.

Cheating on the national grade 12 exams was rampant until the current Minister of Education, Hang Chuon Naron, implemented new anti-cheating and anti-corruption policies in 2014. The culture of corruption starts early in Cambodia as youths learn to accept that they need to pay bribes in order to get through life. Previously, it was common for students taking the national grade 12 exam to give bribes to teachers to get the answer key beforehand or to have proctors turn a blind eye to group work on exams. Before new policies were implemented, the passing rate for the national exam was 87% in 2013. After the anti-cheating reforms were implemented for the exams in 2014, only 26% passed. Only 11 students out of the 90,000 12th graders who took the exam that year earned an A grade (Ponniiah 2014). Because it was unprecedented, the Ministry of Education allowed failing students a second chance to retake the exam. More than 60,000 students re-took the exams, but only 18% passed on the second try. According to one newspaper article, “No students scored A or B grades, while one student

scored a C grade. A total of 55 students received a D grade while the vast majority – 10,815 students – passed with the lowest [passable] E grade” (Barron and Chhay 2014).

The poor quality of instruction in schools and low pay for teachers created a business for private tutoring and private education in “international schools.”¹¹ Public teachers, to supplement their income, may withhold content in public schools, only to teach the other half of the content after school for a fee (Bray 1999; Brehm 2017). After school tutoring may even take place in the same classroom with the same teacher and students. One parent reported that he spends \$25 per month for private tutoring for his daughter, which accounts for half the family’s monthly income (Leng, Retka, and Thim 2017). Students who cannot afford private tutoring claim that they are doomed to fail the exams due to the poor quality of public education. While some Cambodians welcome the strict anti-cheating stance, it does not solve the underlying, systemic issues in Cambodia’s education system, which disproportionately impacts the poor.

When it comes to international schools¹², foreign languages like English, Korean, and Chinese are also taught alongside a regular curriculum. Tuition for these schools run as low as \$100/month to as high as \$2,000/month. Even lower-middle class Cambodians who can spare \$100 a month choose to enroll their children in these international schools; if not full-time, there are often half-day schooling where Cambodian students attend Cambodian public school for one half of the day and attend international school for the other half. The quality of education at international schools is still inconsistent as some schools are not accredited. Moreover, many

¹¹ More on this later.

¹² International schools are private schools that teach foreign languages, following a particular curriculum, such as French, Singapore, American, or Canadian. Legitimate international schools in Cambodia are accredited abroad, offering International Baccalaureate or similar programs that may be transferrable to other schools abroad. Tuition can be as high as over \$25,000/year. However, many “international schools” in Cambodia are not accredited by an authority abroad. In these cases, “international schools” refer to private schools that teach foreign languages and teachers do not need any teaching credentials or qualifications except to be able to speak the foreign language of interest. It is not uncommon for unemployed expats in Cambodia without any background in teaching to find teaching jobs. These schools are more affordable, costing as little as \$100/month.

teachers are expats with no teaching credential, often being hired on the basis of their English proficiency rather than their teaching skills.¹³

Despite inconsistencies in quality of education among international schools, many Cambodians in the cities choose to send their children there. After Cambodia's reintegration into the open market, some parents believe their children will have a better future by learning foreign languages. Other Cambodians, like journalist Tong Soprach, for example, believe this insistence on learning foreign languages is detrimental to the Khmer language. In an op-ed article titled, "Khmer Children Must Speak their Mother Tongue Clearly before Bragging about their Expertise in Foreign Languages," Tong lists several Khmer language mistakes and criticizes the mixing of foreign words into Khmer. His issue is not that parents are enrolling their children in international schools, but that parents put more value in foreign languages, which impacts the Khmer language. Tong claims that some parents choose to only speak foreign languages like English or Chinese at home. As a result of not learning Khmer at home and from their parents, Cambodian children are learning Khmer incorrectly. Tong puts blame on parents who do not care about their own children's fluency in their heritage language. Parents brag when their children earn an A in English, but Tong asks why parents never brag whether their children earn an A in Khmer. For Cambodians like Tong, the future of the Khmer language is in peril because the younger generation, with support from their parents, does not care for the maintenance of the language.

To summarize, the education system in Cambodia is not robust. Teachers are inconsistent in their teaching, so students across the country are not learning a shared curriculum. Poverty and other structural issues also prevent students from enrolling in schools, which affects literacy and

¹³ There was an international school named "American Idol International School" that earned some laughs among locals, particularly those in the expat community. It appears that school has shut down.

language. Recent reports show literacy rates in Cambodia at 80%, but scholars like Stephen Heder (2007) believe this statistic is misleading because a large percentage of the population only have basic literacy, which is why some Cambodians spell incorrectly. These factors altogether contribute to variation in spoken and written language.

To add to these factors, the government's orthography standards have changed several times in the last few decades. Under King Sihanouk in the Sangkum period (1953-1970), Chuon Nath's dictionary was the approved spelling. When the Khmer Republic was in power (1970-1975), it was Keng Vannsak's model. After no schooling under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), the Vietnamese-controlled government in the 1980s followed Keng Vannsak's model. In 2009, spelling reverted to Chuon Nath again. My Khmer tutor Samnang told me that Keng Vannsak's orthography was easier because words matched their pronunciation. According to Samnang, from the 1980s up until 2009, many semi-literate Cambodians could read and write easily, but after the governmental approval of Chuon Nath's dictionary, spelling became harder.

More specifically, spelling was not only harder in terms of having to know and understand Pali or Sanskrit orthography. Samnang also meant that writing freely without fear became harder after 2009, especially for Cambodians working for governmental or public offices. They were fearful that their spelling, the spelling they may have been used to, may not align with the new standard, i.e., Chuon Nath's dictionary. "After the governmental approval of Chuon Nath's dictionary], people afraid to turn in paperwork for fear of mistakes. People waste time looking in dictionary," I scribbled in my notebook during my tutoring session with Samnang. In other words, the government's approval of the Chuon Nath dictionary felt constraining, limiting people's productivity and perhaps creativity. Although I never heard what kinds of punishment were doled out when official documents have spelling that do not

correspond with Chuon Nath's dictionary, it was enough for me to know that the shame or criticism was enough to hinder people's writing.

Samnang recalled a time when he worked at an NGO that wanted to print 500 copies of a book, but the book's title had the word *samrob samrul* "cooperation/compromise," a word that had two variations in spelling. The NGO employees were unsure which spelling was the approved Chuon Nath version: សំរួប សំរួល or សម្រួប សម្រួល. They spent one hour discussing which version to write. "Nobody dared to write the word," Samnang said. Someone called a friend who worked for a governmental ministry for advice, hoping the friend knew the answer because he wrote reports for the government. When they reached him, however, he did not know which one was the approved spelling, but he agreed to go back to his office to look at the dictionary. When I asked Samnang which spelling turned out to be the approved Chuon Nath spelling, my tutor just shook his head and said, "I don't remember. I just remember it was a waste of time."

Now that I have illustrated the general landscape and given a mini Cambodian history lesson, I will now move into specific examples of Khmer language complaints. In the next few sections, I will illustrate the range of metapragmatic commentaries that touch upon three broad categories: complaints about spelling, complaints about lexicon, and complaints about Khmer language and language-use in general.

Spelling Complaints

As I have already emphasized, some Cambodians complain that the Khmer language lacks standardized orthography. While interviewing a former courtroom translator, Mr. Phan, I was interested in learning how he translates between Khmer and English, but he went off on a

tangent to complain about the Khmer language and Khmer spelling. Mr. Phan told me that if I am interested in studying Khmer, I need to understand how Khmer, unlike English, has not been updated since the publication of the Ven. Chuon Nath's dictionary in the 1960s so there is no uniform spelling in Cambodia. As a result, governmental ministries produce documents that vary in spelling:

Even deputy ministers creating documents... they should follow [Chuon Nath's dictionary] but if they don't, then they don't... because there are no rules... They might say there are no errors [in the documents], but if you compare [the documents] with the [Chuon Nath] dictionary, there are errors. There's an additional letter *i* and the vowel *ī*. It's wrong, wrong.

What Mr. Phan was referring to at the end of his excerpt was the tendency for Cambodians to hypercorrect their own spelling in light of these Pali and Sanskrit silent script. By anticipating unconventional spelling with these difficult words, Cambodians sometimes insert unnecessary script.

A Facebook user named "I love Khmer poetry" created a Facebook photo album with images depicting common misspellings in Khmer. In one image, the author notes that some Cambodians often use the wrong vowel in the word ពិរុវ័: *piiruos*, which means pleasant-sounding or melodious. The author claims that the correct spelling has the long front vowel *ī* /i:/. It would sound like *pi:ruos*, if one were to carefully enunciate and exaggerate the word, elongating the vowel in the first syllable /i:/. In normal, everyday speech, however, Cambodians do not pronounce it in that way and the pronunciation is closer to a shorter *ī* /i/ vowel so that colloquially it is pronounced quickly, like *piruos* or *puhruos*, which matches spelling of the crossed-out word.



Figure 1: Facebook post educating Cambodians on how to spell a commonly misspelled word

While some Facebook users thank the author for enlightening them, others disagree with the author. One person believes the crossed-out word *is* the correct spelling. They invoke a past era, which presumably was from their childhood by saying, “During my days, many words were not [spelled] like this because even teachers wrote ពិរោគ:.” “I love Khmer poetry” responds by invoking an even distant past, “These words have been written that way since the inscription in stone era,” referring to the Angkor Empire which lasted from the 7th to 15th century when large religious temples were built, and Khmer writings were carved along the walls of the temples. This Facebook debate perfectly illustrates the tensions Cambodians have, not just about spelling, but also about time and national identity. Arguments about which era represented the correct spelling inevitably are also arguments about which era reflected the correct Cambodian national character. Interestingly, both users seem to say, “Your way of spelling and living is wrong. My way of spelling is the correct way because it corresponds with the past.” Which “past” they are

pointing to, however, is where they disagree, but they both seem to say that they should look to the past for the right answer, that is, the correct spelling.

In another Facebook posting, AN News shared photographs of three billboards that contain the words Serei Saophoan, the provincial capital of Banteay Meanchey Province. Each billboard used a different vowel in the first syllable of “Serei.”

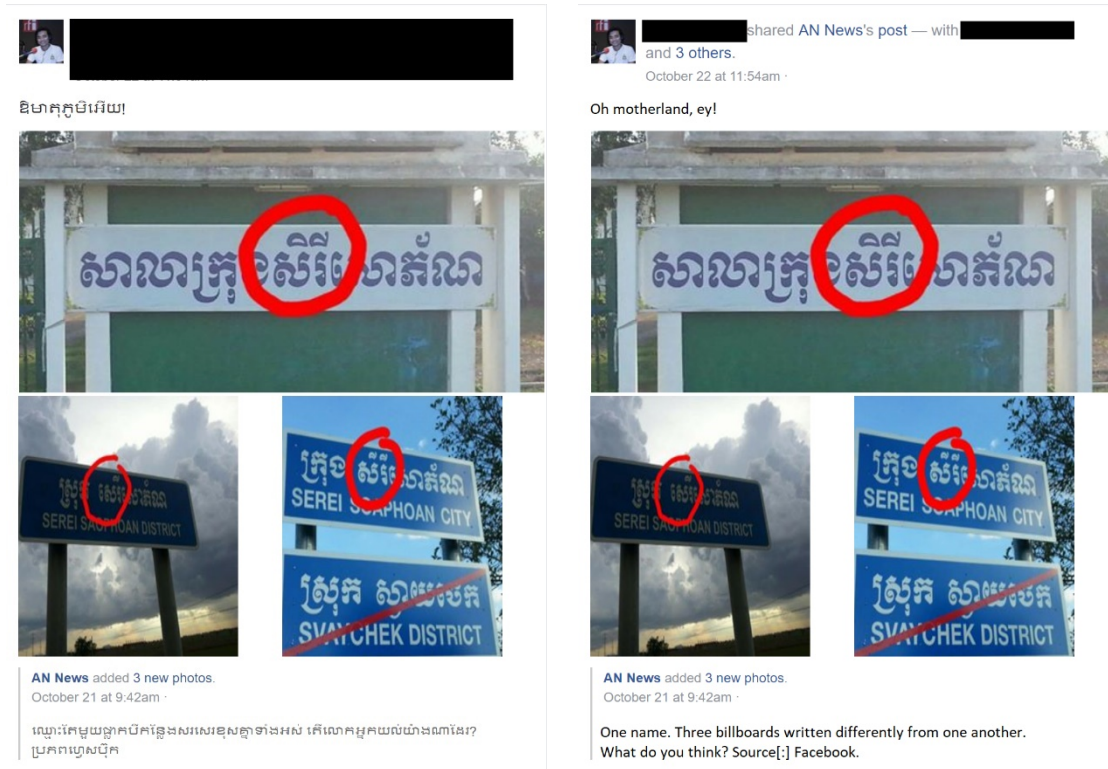


Figure 2: Facebook post about three signs that have spelled the town name Serei Saophoan in three different ways

Serei Saophoan

ស៊ីសោភ័ណ

សេសោភ័ណ

សីសោភ័ណ

Figure 3: Emphasizing the spelling differences for the town name Serei Saophoan

Many of the commenters on this particular Facebook post discussed reasons why there is variation in spelling. Some point to carelessness or laziness in society. Some blame the learning of foreign languages, which causes language-learners to forget or make mistakes in their own language. One commenter mentioned variation in pronunciation or accent, criticizing Cambodians who pronounce *kaev* (cup) as *keav*. They imply that uneducated Cambodians with regional accents may be the cause of misspellings in Khmer, perhaps spelling words based on their regional pronunciation, which differs from the “correct” spelling and “correct” pronunciation.



Figure 4: Facebook comments complaining about carelessness, deteriorating standards, and foreign language learning

Others hint at the lack of education and literacy in Cambodia, on the part of the sign maker and/or municipal officials who approved the signs.



Figure 5: Facebook comments complaining about lack of education in Cambodia

Complaints about spelling also trigger other linguistic complaints. One commenter criticized grammatical mistakes among media personalities; specifically, they object to the use of a third-person pronoun (គេ/វា, or “he/she”) when speaking directly to an addressee. A few others correct

the original poster by telling them that the correct word for “billboard” is *slak* (ស្លាក), not *plak* (ផ្លាក), which stems from the French *plaque*.

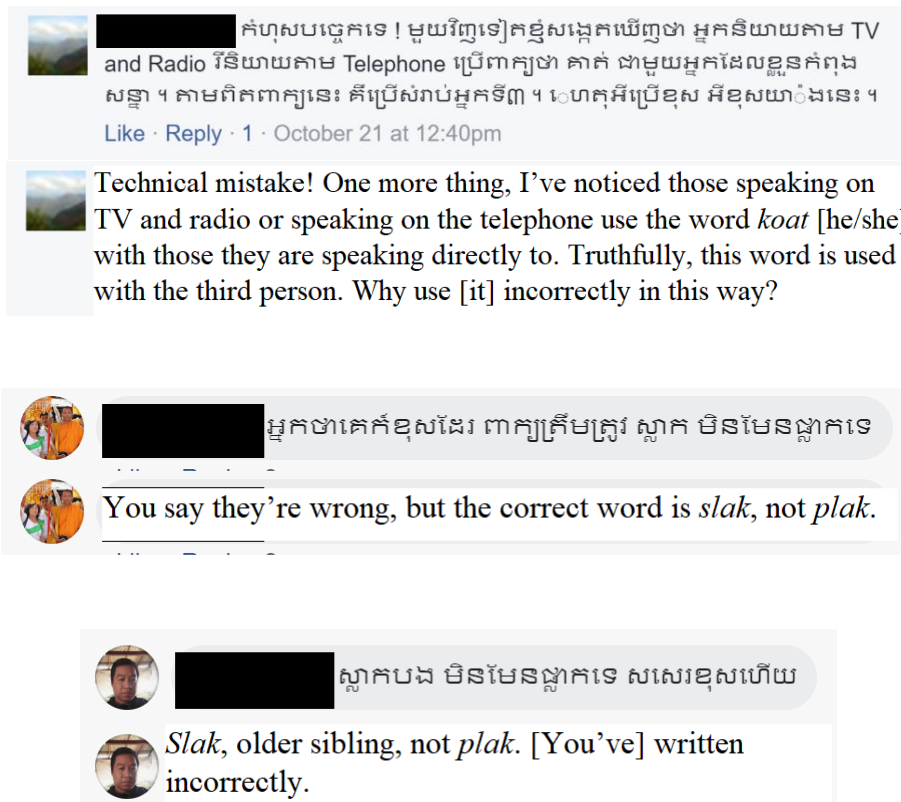


Figure 6: Facebook comments complaining about other topics besides the misspelling of Serei Saophoan

Through spelling complaints, these Cambodians are also expressing their discontent with other aspects of society: lack of attention and laziness among everyday citizens, political officials, and media personalities; the state of Cambodian education; and the popularity of foreign languages.

Lexical Complaints

Some Cambodians point to semantic changes they observe, which they deem to be mistakes. For example, the verb “to wear” clothing differs for pants and shirts. For shirts, the verb is *peak* ពាក់. For pants, it is *sleak* ពាក់ជ្រោង. Today, some Cambodians use *peak* for both shirts and pants, which is wrong according to my friend Rithy because *peak* is for clothing that goes over your head. Whenever Rithy hears someone say “*peak*” *kaov*, instead of the correct “*sleak*” *kaov*, he said it makes him laugh because he imagines someone wearing pants over their head. For Rithy, this semantic change or semantic extension, where *peak* is extending its usage to all forms of clothing and not just clothing that goes over your head, is not possible. The word *peak* cannot be used for shirts because the definition of the word does not allow for it. He told me that he thinks this incorrect usage originated in Phnom Penh. As a native of Battambang, a city and province that prides itself with speaking the best dialect of Khmer, Rithy often disparages the capital of Phnom Penh and this instance was no different. He said Phnom Penh was a diverse city with a mix of people, from rich to poor, with the poor originating from the countryside. It is those poor people, flooding into the capital to find jobs, who are sully the Khmer language by using *peak* with pants. Like many other Cambodians taking part in language complaints, Rithy inevitably brings in societal complaints, particularly about poor rural Cambodians, but also about their migration into urban centers.

Another time, my friend Vichet said he was disgusted by a misuse of the word “endangered” by a television host. The host used the word “endangered” (ពិភពគ្រោះថ្នាក់) to describe the declining state of a traditional dance. For Vichet, however, “endangered” should only be used with animals; the host should have used the term “disappearing” instead. I suggested to Vichet that languages change all the time and maybe the word meaning might extend its usage beyond

animals. When I asked him to elaborate on why this was a huge transgression, “[h]e said it’s OK if the person was just talking among friends, but [the host] was on TV and was being watched by many people so [Vichet] believed it wasn’t a good example to give to other Cambodians.” In Chapter 5, I will elaborate more on the role media personalities play in Cambodia and why their language is scrutinized by the Cambodian public. For now, it is enough to say that some Cambodians like Vichet believe media personalities should be linguistic role models for Cambodian citizens, especially when the semi-literate masses are not likely to pick up a book to read, but rather turn on the television for entertainment.

Another area of lexical complaints involves foreign loanwords. In an op-ed, Tong Soprach was unhappy to see that Cambodian youths were using English words like “yes” and “OK” (S. Tong 2012a). A Facebook community group named “តាមដានសំណេរភាសាខ្មែរ-Correct Khmer Spelling” posts language related news and images, as well as language mistakes they find on the internet. In the following example, “Correct Khmer Spelling” nitpicks a Facebook post by a pineapple seller. They not only complained about misspellings, but also urged Cambodians to use Khmer words rather than French borrowings. The pineapple seller tells potential customers



Figure 7: Facebook post complaining about language mistakes made in a pineapple seller’s advertisement

to call them by phone if they want to order, using the word កមង់ *kamang*, from the French “commander,” to invite people to order. Correct Khmer Spelling goes out of their way to chastise the French borrowing *kamang* and instead, urged Cambodians to use the traditional Khmer word បញ្ជាទិញ *banhceatinh* or “order.”

Cambodian complaints about the use of foreign words are supporters of linguistic purism, believing foreign words should not enter the Khmer language as language mixing is wrong. These beliefs are predicated on strong nationalistic convictions that value one’s heritage language. Linguistic purists also worry that Khmer words may be devalued. They may even fear that the Khmer language will slowly be overtaken by foreign languages. Thus, simple language complaints about foreign words are not just objects about word usage only. They point to larger fears and tensions about changes they see in contemporary Cambodian society, emerging from country’s financial growth, the influx of foreigners, and the poor quality of education. What I find most curious, however, is that many Cambodians critique more recent borrowings from English and French, yet usually ignore Pali and Sanskrit loanwords into the Khmer language, which entered into Khmer during the Angkor period (Jacob 1993 [1986]), what many believe to be the height of Cambodian (and Khmer) civilization. These language complainers seem to imply that speaking English and French is a good representation of how the ideal Cambodian citizen should speak. Older borrowings from the ancient past, however, have already been incorporated into national Cambodian identity, an identity many Cambodians are proud of inheriting.

Complaints that Cambodians Value Foreign Languages and Devalue Khmer

In Cambodia, especially in the cities, international schools can be found on every block. They are so popular that some Cambodians complain that Cambodian youths attending international schools and learning foreign languages may even forget how to speak Khmer. The following field notes are comments I observed from two different women within a month apart.

When I told her my research on language, she said she's very concerned with the Khmer language because the young people don't speak Khmer well... She said young Cambodians don't want to learn Khmer, and are more interested in English, Chinese, or Korean. She's very concerned about the language (field notes February 2015)

R--- actually made a comment about how the Khmer language is getting worse, how Cambodians don't even know how to speak their own language because they are learning foreign languages. (field notes March 2015)

Both women interestingly have lived a majority of their childhood and young adult lives in the United States. They immigrated to the US as young children, but have since returned to Cambodia to live and work. They are, what some scholars call, the 1.5 generation, having one foot in their parents' heritage culture and the other foot on the American side. Young enough to learn English quickly, the 1.5 generation are not only interpreters and mediators for their parents, but are also trailblazers who pave the way, to make life easier, for their American-born younger siblings and cousins in the 2.0 generations. Conversely, they may have been too old to have assimilated completely into American culture. Linguistically, some have marked accents in both English and their heritage language. Culturally, the 1.5 generation often feel liminal, never quite fitting in: too American for among their heritage group, but too "foreign" for Americans. This is probably what prompted these two women to return to Cambodia, hoping they could fit in somewhere or to return to their roots. Their metapragmatic commentaries about Khmer are fueled by their experiences growing up in the US. They have returned to Cambodia, only to

observe a changing language and a different attitude about language. While I am unable to speculate, at least one of them has returned to the United States. Perhaps Cambodia was not what she imagined it to be linguistically and culturally. And perhaps she still could not fit in there either.

Not unlike my discussion about foreign loanwords, Cambodians sometimes complain about foreign influences on the Khmer language. As mentioned previously, some criticize the mixing of English words into the Khmer language. Others complain that Cambodians are incorporating English grammar into Khmer, which is inappropriate according to Cambodian culture. In an op-ed article, Tong Soprach, chastises Cambodians who say *sourdey neak teang as knea* (Hello, everybody). While saying “Hello, everybody” is appropriate for English-speakers, it is not in Khmer:

... when they [bilingual Khmer and English speakers] are at a seminar or meeting with Cambodian and international guests, they greet participants by saying *sourdey neak teang as knea* (Hello, everybody). This greeting is contrary to respectful Cambodian culture of knowing who is higher ranked. (S. Tong 2012b)

A typical Cambodian greeting in a large crowd consists of acknowledging different social statuses that might be present in the room. It is not uncommon to open lectures, meetings, and seminars by saying, “Hello, your royal highnesses, your excellencies, sirs, madams, misses, uncles, aunts, older siblings, younger sibling, and friends who are present here” (*Jumreapsuor trong, lok ayadom, lok chumteav, lok sang, lok, loksrey, om, pu, ming, bang, puon, ning mittpeak dael mean vattamean nov tinis*). I once asked my friend Serey if it was necessary to include royalty, if it was obvious there were no royalty in the room. He said Cambodians sometimes like to err on the side of caution just in case there was anyone with royal blood who may have joined a conference talk unnoticed. My friend Vichika admitted that she uses English to flout traditional norms of hierarchy; as a university staff member, she prefers to open meetings in English by

saying “Good morning,” not only to save time, but also to avoid offending any high-ranking people in the room by inadvertently leaving out their titles in Khmer. These complaints highlight tensions surrounding the popularity of foreign languages like English. While younger Cambodians embrace English, more conservative Cambodians disapprove of its influence on the Khmer language: introducing and mixing English words, changing Khmer grammar, and producing informality and equality when traditional Cambodian norms demand formality and hierarchy.

As I have already alluded to through this chapter, Khmer language complaints are responses to changes Cambodians see in their social, political, and economic landscape. Hidden behind these complaints about language are not just fears about the future of the Khmer language; we also find fears about the future of Cambodian culture and national identity. For many Cambodians, language and culture or language and the nation are diagrammatic icons. The decline and loss of one also means the decline and loss of the other. I will end this chapter by taking a look at what parts of Cambodian society are being critiqued through these language complaints, but also how some Cambodians are attempting to turn the tide to save their language, and consequently, their country.

Language Complaints as Critique of Contemporary Society, but a Sign of Hope

Cambodians do not just complain about language errors, they also attempt to understand the causes and sometimes propose solutions. Touch Kimsrieng, the president of the Khmer Literary and Cultural Association, is an intellectual who is committed to helping Cambodians speak, read, and write Khmer correctly. He has been a consultant on Voice of America Cambodia and Radio FM 102, answering language related questions from viewers. When asked

why the Khmer language is in decline on Voice of America, Touch said it is because Cambodians do not know nor value the history and source of the Khmer language, i.e. its Pali and Sanskrit origins. He also admitted that the large inventory of Khmer script adds to the difficulty of spelling, which provide Cambodians many variations to represent the same sound. Further, he also cites “individualism” as another source of the problem, pointing to the debates between Chuon Nath and Keng Vannsak, which stalled Khmer language progress. While Touch appears to be sympathetic to the difficulties of the Khmer language, he is also adamant that Cambodians must persevere through the difficulties by memorizing correct usage and spelling (Voice of America Cambodia 2019). I have proposed simplifying Khmer script (eliminating repeated consonants and vowels, changing spelling to reflect pronunciation) to a few Cambodian friends, pointing to similar changes in mainland China and Laos, but many were opposed to this. They said Khmer writing is their heritage and it should not be changed.

Another prevailing complaint is that Cambodians do not value or respect their own heritage language. According to Touch Kimsrieng again, Cambodians do not take the time to “write correctly, pronounce correctly, use correctly, create [new words] correctly, borrow [foreign words] correctly” (Voice of America Cambodia 2019). Further, complaints about carelessness and laziness in Khmer is often compared with the care and thought Cambodians give to foreign languages. As I noted earlier, journalist Tong Soprach, believes Khmer language carelessness stems from parents who encourage their children to learn foreign languages, devaluing fluency in their own heritage language. Tong says Cambodians put more care in writing English, consulting dictionaries if they are unsure of a word’s spelling; when it comes to Khmer, however, Cambodians do not bother to check (S. Tong 2013b, 2012b).

I once attended a translation workshop on the invitation of my friend Chamreun. He worked for a translation company that hires native Cambodians and English-speaking foreigners to translate Khmer Rouge related documents, between Khmer and English. Because the workshop involved non-Cambodians, it was run entirely in English. Workshop facilitators provided a list of 12 tips on how translators can improve their translation skills. Point number 7 was a piece of advice directed at native-Khmer speakers, asking them to try to work on the “[i]mprovement of your native language, Khmer” by reading more literature, particularly texts pertaining to the Khmer Rouge period. The Cambodian facilitator reading these tips aloud began to make a comment about why this advice was on their handout, “The Cambodian generation... the younger generation here [in Cambodia], I don’t think their language is not great, it’s not so—” and before he could search for the right words, a voice from the audience chimed in by saying, “They don’t care about it.” “It” being the Khmer language. I found it striking that they targeted that piece of advice to the Khmer-speakers only and not toward the English-speakers. The majority of the Cambodian translators in the room were young, in their 20s, hired because they were bilingual in both Khmer and English, but yet were told to improve their own language. A generous interpretation of the workshop’s original advice would be that they were entirely concerned with getting the Cambodian translators situated and familiarized with the Khmer spoken under the Khmer Rouge, which used many new political words unknown to many Cambodians before the regime began. Nonetheless, the facilitator’s subsequent comment, as well as the one attendee who chimed in, was focused on Cambodian youths and their carelessness or apathy toward their heritage language in general. Hence, Cambodians need to improve their native language.

Why are Cambodians concerned about carelessness in language? Referring to English complaints, Deborah Cameron argues that the ideology of language standardization is so strong that “even the most trivial spelling mistakes are to be deplored because they show that the writer is ‘careless’ and ‘sloppy’ - they are, in other words, outward signs of a deeper flaw in character” (2012 [1995], 68). In Cambodia, similar judgments are also being made. Being careless and not paying attention to language-use or spelling are not just deep individual character flaws, but about deep national character flaws—another instance of rhematization. These character flaws are not just political. They are also moral. Through a nexus and unity between language, nationality, and morality, and as diagrammatic icons, a stain on one indicates a stain on the others.

These language complaints, and the related metapragmatic commentaries, are an indirect critique of Cambodian society in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime because “complaints about language change are usually symbolic expressions of anxiety about larger social changes” (Cameron 2012 [1995], 238). When Cambodians complain about the use of English words or spelling mistakes on road signs, they are also pointing to other issues in Cambodia, from a historic accident that put certain leaders into power, to the way the education system was rebuilt in the 1980s, to the foreigners who entered Cambodia during the transitional period. These language complaints are ultimately asking: Why are corrupt or uneducated politicians in office? Why is public education so bad? Why are parents putting their children in private schools to learn English?

Further, Cambodian complaints about society are indirect complaints about the country: what kind of country is Cambodia supposed to be and who is the ideal citizen? While these commentaries are about the present-state of Cambodia and the Khmer language, there are hints

of nostalgia for the pre-Khmer Rouge period. The past serves as a role model for how Cambodia should be. Simultaneously, Cambodians are worried about the future. What does that future look like? For some Cambodians like my friend Pheakna, who told me she was very concerned about the future of Khmer because youths are learning English, Chinese, and Korean, the future is full of doom and gloom as Khmer slowly deteriorates, overshadowed by other, more powerful languages. And if the Khmer language were to die, then what becomes of the Cambodian people? Since language and national identity are diagrammatic icons, the decline of Khmer is worrying sign that their country and national identity will soon follow.

Chan Soy wrote a famous poem that is often quoted by Cambodians who talk about the importance of the Khmer language. I ran into this quote several times during fieldwork, not just in person, but also in written text whenever Cambodians wrote about the plight of their language.

ភាសារលត់ ជាតិរលាយ
ភាសាពណ្តាយ ជាតិឡើងថ្កាន
អក្សររលត់ ជាតិរលំ
អក្សរឡើងថ្កុំ ជាតិពណ្តាយ។
(ចាន់ សយ)¹⁴

When language is extinguished, the nation dissolves
When language shines, the nation prospers
When writing is extinguished, the nation falls
When writing is glorified, the nation shines.
(Chan Soy) [*My own translation*]

The term *rolut* in the first line can also be translated as “die,” “to go out,” or “to disappear.” Since it also carries the connotation of a dying fire, which I thought was metaphorically apt, I decided to translate it as “extinguished.” It is this first line of the poem is often the line

¹⁴ I have been unable to verify when this poem was written.

Cambodians quote, “When language dies/is extinguished, the nation dissolves.” You cannot have one without the other. When one becomes corrupted, the other follows. Because language and nationalism are intimately intertwined (Haugen 1966), as diagrammatic icons, some Cambodians are preparing for the worst.

Others, however, are fighting to prevent that from happening. With the creation of spaces, communities, and educational programming that correct and educate Cambodians on language-related issues, these Cambodians show signs of hope as they attempt to control the chaos. From the Facebook page “Correct Khmer Spelling” to Touch Kimsrieng’s guest appearances on radio programming, these venues provide an alternate possibility. Alongside their complaints, we find a potential future that is much different from today: if only Cambodians learned Pali and Sanskrit etymology, if only Cambodians put more care and effort in studying Khmer instead of foreign languages, if only politicians were more educated, then Khmer would not be in decline and Cambodia would be a thriving country. The fire that is the Khmer language may be close to dying, but it is not extinguished just yet. By complaining about language, by bringing attention to these issues, Cambodians are attempting to save their language and, ultimately, their nation.

Chapter 2 How *Not* to Talk to Monks

During my fieldwork in the town of Battambang, I became well acquainted with the Venerable Ry who, despite only being in his mid-30s at the time, was a highly revered and well-connected Buddhist monk. “*ATMA* can help,” he told me after learning about my research at our first meeting, using the first-person pronoun *ATMA* (អ្នក) ordained monks use to refer to themselves when conversing with non-monks like me. He was extremely generous with his time and put me in touch with people in the Battambang area, from a university professor with expertise on the Khmer language to a staff member at the Catholic church after he found out I was interested in how Christians speak in church.

During fieldwork, I often try to meet with my informants at least once or twice informally, without an audio recorder, to build rapport. After first establishing a relationship with the Ven. Ry, I began recording our conversations. My purpose in speaking to monks like the Ven. Ry was to explore the status of the Buddhist monk honorific register in contemporary Cambodia, or lexical variants pertaining to monks. This includes the vocabulary every Cambodian regardless of identity is supposed to use when speaking *to* monks and when speaking *about* monks, as well as the vocabulary ordained monks is supposed to use with for non-monks, such as royalty and laypeople.

First, if any Cambodian wanted to say, “The Ven. Ry lives at Wat Boveal” in Khmer, traditionally, they ought to use the Buddhist monk honorific verb *KUONG NOV* (to live, to stay, to reside at) instead of the ordinary *nov*, even if the Ven. Ry is nowhere near the speaker. In that

sentence, the status and social identity of the subject, an ordained monk, should trigger the Buddhist monk honorific register, whether the speaker is the king, another monk, or a regular layperson like me. The speaker's social identity does not affect the verb in this case. Second, ordained monks have special vocabulary when speaking to all non-monks, including laypeople and royalty. For example, when the Ven. Ry said, "I can help" to me, a non-monk, the first-person pronoun he used was *ATMA* ("ATMA can help."). If he were addressing the king, who is a non-monk, he would use the same first-person pronoun. If the Ven. Ry were to express the same sentiment toward another monk, however, he ought to use the first-person pronoun *KNYOM PREAH KARUNA* (or any of its abbreviations) instead of *ATMA*. I would also use *KNYOM PREAH KARUNA* (or any of its abbreviations) when I am referring to myself in conversation with a monk. All of these intricate rules that I have just laid out, however, may be moot now. I had heard that Cambodians today, especially youths, were becoming less fluent in this register and could no longer talk to monks in (what many consider to be) the appropriate register. By spending time with the Ven. Ry, my intention was to explore this phenomenon further.

I had spoken to the Ven. Ry and other monks at length about the Khmer language, and have recordings of these conversations. I have recordings of Buddhist monks and laypeople chanting at pagodas (often in Pali, and not in Khmer). I have recordings of laypeople participating in Buddhist rituals and holidays at temples, but since monks do not typically mingle with the crowd and instead are seated separately away from laypeople, my recordings and observations primarily consist of what the temple-goers were doing. What I lacked were "real" conversations between monks and laypeople in Khmer.

One day, I worked up the courage to ask if I could observe and possibly record the Ven. Ry interacting with Cambodians. Aside from people passing by and one instance where he sat in

on a meeting he had arranged for me to talk to a university professor, I did not get to observe the Ven. Ry interacting with laypeople for an extended period of time. During these fleeting moments though, I often noted that his interlocutors used *KONA* or *KANA* (ក្នុងណា)—the most frequently used word in the Buddhist monk honorific register and, therefore, a word Cambodians are most likely to remember when speaking with monks. It is not only the word “yes” when speaking to monks, but it is also an abbreviation for the first-person pronoun *KNYOM PREAH KARUNA* (ខ្ញុំព្រះករុណា),¹⁵ the first-person one ought to use when conversing with monks.

As we sat outside in the courtyard of the pagoda on a Sunday morning, I decided to broach the topic: would he let me record him talking to local laypeople? Disappointingly, the Ven. Ry declined my request. Instead, he encouraged me to go to YouTube to find people interviewing monks in the monk register. According to him, there were a few notable male journalists who had been previously ordained as monks so they knew how to interview monks who came onto their program. I remember feeling disappointed at the time, but I did not press the Ven. Ry any further. I watched as he pulled out his cellphone, opened YouTube, and played a few clips of journalists interviewing monks, adding commentary like, “He used to be ordained.” I nodded politely and repeatedly said, “*KANA. KANA*,” as I wrote down the names of the videos he listed.

Ven. Ry’s deflection reflected his apprehension with everyday Cambodians and their fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register. Although the Ven. Ry is fluent in the monk register, having been a monk for twenty years by that point, he knew that the average Cambodian was not. If he had any anxieties, it was not about his own language-use, but the language-use of

¹⁵ Another abbreviation is *KNYOM KANA* (ខ្ញុំករុណា). This is the abbreviation I prefer to use with monks.

other Cambodians. From his experience, most Cambodians were not fluent in the monk register so he was worried that I would not be able to obtain the “ideal” interaction between a monk and a layperson. Moreover, the Ven. Ry’s suggestion that I go to YouTube to find particular journalists who were skillful with the monk register emphasized the Cambodian desire to guide me toward other people or sources with more expertise and knowledge. Like many other Cambodians I have met, the Ven. Ry wanted to give me the “right” kind of language. He might not have been able to imagine why a researcher like me would be interested in recording everyday people speaking, especially if there was a possibility of them speaking Khmer “incorrectly,” as is often the case with the monk register. He also went a step further by helping me vet YouTube videos, filtering the search results for me so that I would only listen to journalists who were fluent in the monk register.

This chapter begins to support my argument of register flattening by examining one of the Khmer honorific registers in detail: the Buddhist monk honorific register. From conversations with monks and laypeople, from Buddhists to non-Buddhists, we find tension surrounding how Cambodians are supposed to treat monks, culturally and linguistically. As a Buddhist country, monks traditionally have been highly revered, which is why they stand apart from the rest of society. First and foremost, they receive a special register, lexical words that are limited to monks. Buddhists must also adhere to other norms of respect involving body language and comportment. When monks are standing, laypeople should sit. If monks are sitting, people should sit and crouch down lower than monks. Laypeople should hand objects to monks using both hands. When giving food and beverages to monks, laypeople should take off their shoes, though not all Cambodians today adhere to this. I argue that these interactional norms are no longer being followed as Cambodians are re-imagining identities and social statuses. Not only

are Cambodians upwardly mobile, and see themselves as more elevated than before, but monks have also been demoted in Cambodian society, not only in terms of importance, but also because disillusioned Buddhists keep seeing images of immoral monks in the media. Not only is social status flattening in society through the burgeoning middle-class, but at the same time, we also see shrinking relevance among the Buddhist monk class. Since social status and language are diagrammatic icons (Peirce 1955 [1902]), the decline of Buddhism and Buddhist monks is connected to the decline of the Buddhist monk honorific register.

As I have done in other chapters, I try to answer the questions that are lurking in the background: “What kind of country is Cambodia?” and “What do Cambodians want to be?” In this chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions with respect to Cambodia’s religious identity. “Cambodia is a Buddhist country.” “Cambodians are Buddhist.” “Cambodians respect Buddhist monks.” Or, is this no longer the case? Can Cambodian Buddhists reconcile between being Buddhist and not being able to use the Buddhist monk honorific register? The answer is not quite transparent as Cambodians grapple with these same questions about their own religious identity through their use, or non-use, of the Buddhist monk honorific register.

Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	first-person	second-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	<i>toulbongkum cie knyom mjass</i>	“your highness”	<i>soay</i>
	royalty speaking to commoner	<i>troung anh, yeung (we)</i>	titles, forms of address, (see commoner below)	
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	<i>knyom preah karuna</i>	“venerable”	<i>chan</i>
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)	<i>atma</i>	<i>nyom</i>	
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	<i>knyom baht (male), neang knyom (female)</i>	<i>neak, koat (he/she)</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam</i>
	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>hob, si, chras chram, bok kandal, deumtrung</i>

Table 5: The flattening of Khmer honorific registers. The red boxed in area indicates the Buddhist monk honorific register.

First, I give a brief background into the Buddhist monk honorific register. Then, I bring in linguistic data that involve monks to see how these situations play out in everyday interactions. Not only are Cambodians talking about the register being in decline, but I also show linguistic evidence of that decline as Cambodians stumble and make linguistic mistakes in front of monks. Next, I will present a brief overview of the Buddhist monk honorific register as well as the recent history of Buddhism in Cambodia—with special attention to the Khmer Rouge and the period immediately after the fall of the regime—so that I may situate the readers on why Cambodians have trouble talking to monks these days. I show how changes in the post-war decades have contributed to Cambodia’s changing relationship with Buddhism. These include modern-day work hours, public schooling, advances in technology, newer forms of entertainment, and the visibility of misbehaving monks as having an effect on Buddhist temple attendance and Cambodian attitudes toward monks—all of which inevitably impact the Buddhist monk honorific register and its potential decline. I show that not only are Buddhist laypeople less

religiously-inclined, as evidenced by the declining use of the Buddhist monk honorific register, but I also show that monks themselves may abandon the Buddhist monk honorific register when they are participating in un-monk-like behaviors.

In, the last half of my chapter I examine how Cambodians have borrowed the monk register in creative ways, using it in the presence of non-monks. In these situations, Cambodians have some command of the register but are joking around with non-monks. In my final example, I analyze the use of the monk register in Catholicism where it was traditionally used with Catholic priests. Like the rest of Cambodian Buddhist society where changes to ideas about identity and status have impacted Buddhists' social relations with monks, Catholics are also experiencing a shift in how they interact and speak with priests. At the end of this chapter, I argue that Khmer honorific register flattening and the decline of the monk register might not necessarily lead to the decline of Buddhism. It might, however, yield a kind of Buddhism that is more open to interpretation on what it means to be a good Buddhist.

The Buddhist Monk Honorific Register

The Buddhist monk honorific register contains honorific variants that ought to be used when speaking to ordained monks (monks as addressee) and about ordained monks (monks as referent or the topic of conversation). Additionally, the register also contains honorific variants to be used by boys and men who have been ordained as monks. The table below lists the most common honorifics found in this register. Although there are many more honorific registers, I juxtapose the Buddhist monk honorific register with the ordinary register for comparison:

	Buddhist Monk Honorific Register		Ordinary Register
	Anyone speaking to ordained monks ¹⁶	Monks speaking to all non-monks ¹⁷	Primarily used between equals or intimates ¹⁸
Yes	<i>gana</i>	<i>bo</i>	<i>baht</i> (m) <i>chas</i> (f)
First-person pronoun	<i>kynom preah karuna</i> (abbreviated as <i>kynom gana</i> or <i>gana</i>)	<i>atma</i>	<i>knyom</i>
Second-person pronoun	<i>preachtaekun</i> (venerable god) <i>taekun</i> (venerable) <i>lok</i> +age-appropriate kinterm (i.e., <i>lok</i> uncle, <i>lok</i> nephew)	<i>nyom</i>	Various
to eat	<i>chan</i>	<i>chan</i>	Various
to sleep	<i>sung</i>	<i>sung</i>	<i>dek</i>
to go	<i>nimun tov</i>	<i>nimun tov</i>	<i>tov</i>
to come	<i>nimum mok</i>	<i>nimum mok</i>	<i>mok</i>
to sit	<i>kuong</i>	<i>kuong</i>	<i>kuy</i>
to speak	<i>mean potdika</i>	<i>mean potdika</i>	<i>niyay / ta</i>
to go to the bathroom	<i>dohtoksat</i>	<i>dohtoksat</i>	Various
to give	<i>braken</i>	<i>braken</i>	<i>aoy</i>
food	<i>chunghan</i>	<i>chunghan</i>	<i>mahob</i>

Table 6: Examples of the most commonly used words in the Buddhist monk honorific register along with the equivalent ordinary register

The above table is an ethnometapragmatic stereotype of how Cambodians view the Buddhist monk honorific register. It is a stereotype because, as I will show in this chapter, not all Cambodians share this view. Some Cambodians do not have command of the Buddhist monk honorific register and may use ordinary honorific terms with monks instead. This is not uncommon since register competence is often unevenly distributed in society (Irvine 2009 [1995]; Errington 1998; Agha 2007). Other times, monks and non-monks alike may purposefully flout normative honorific rules for creative effects: using the monk register with non-monks to

¹⁶ This includes monks speaking to other monks as well as royalty speaking to monks.

¹⁷ This includes royalty.

¹⁸ This refers to commoners and it does not refer to monks talking to other monks.

joke around, purposefully avoiding the monk register in the presence of monks to show disapproval of Buddhism, and monks may even use the ordinary register when participating in un-Buddhist-like behaviors (e.g., when flirting with women).

Fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register is not a simple dichotomy of fluent or not fluent (Agha 2003, 1999). Fluency in any of the Khmer honorific registers is often best described as a scale since some Khmer-speakers know more honorific words than others. Additionally, when we are discussing register fluency in Khmer, we need to distinguish between “knowing” what words fall in the monk register and actual performance of the register. The former constitutes being able to name or rattle off honorific variants that are within the register, often out of context, such as for a test. For many Cambodians, they may be able to do this comfortably. The latter notion about performance involves the ability to properly style-shift to a different register in the right moment. When Cambodians are literally face-to-face with a monk, there may be performance issues such as stuttering and self-corrections, or dysfluencies. It is this latter issue where many Cambodians feel uncomfortable with the register, often finding themselves slipping back into the ordinary register. Although it may appear that Cambodians are performing dysfluency as a humbling mechanism, this is not the case. Parents, grandparents, and other monks may chastise, criticize, and shame Cambodians who misspeak. Although the monks I interviewed claim that they would not criticize Cambodians for speaking incorrectly, I believe that deep down, they do feel disappointment.

It is important to note that the Buddhist monk honorific register, along with all of the other honorific registers described in my dissertation, are better described as linguistic etiquette among Khmer-speakers, rather than a grammar system. Therefore, it is not something that is formally taught in public schools in great detail. Before public schooling was institutionalized in

the 20th century, one of the only ways Cambodian boys learned to read and write was at the pagoda when they were ordained as monks. This system of schooling helped to maintain fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register in Cambodian society since boys who had previously been ordained had experience with the register. The Ven. Ry brought up this history during one of our conversations when he said children not only lack interactions with monks, but that teachers are just as inexperienced. In the following excerpt, he shares a common slippage among Khmer-speakers when they encounter a monk. They often have trouble style-shifting between the registers. The first-person pronoun, one of the most commonly used words, is often the culprit, as speakers often find themselves dysfluent or stuttering between the ordinary first-person pronoun (*knyom*) with the monk register (*GANĀ*).

When Cambodia set up schools outside of the pagodas, some children don't seem to understand [the Buddhist monk honorific register] anymore... [Children] never get to communicate with monks. Even some teachers, teachers who have received an education, some are not used to communicating with monks either and are shy. They don't trust themselves when they speak. Sometimes using *knyom*. Sometimes using *GANĀ*."

I asked my friend Rithy if he was taught the monk register in school. He said he remembers spending one day, probably a couple of hours, when he was in Grade 3 in the early 1990s, but it was not something they were tested on. "You don't really have conversations with monks at that age," I remember him saying, echoing the Ven. Ry remarks that children do not communicate with monks anymore so there is a lack of opportunities to practice. Both the Ven. Ry and Rithy are also implying that parents were not bringing their children to the pagodas for religious ceremonies.

When it comes to Khmer honorific language socialization, many Cambodians believe it begins in the home. When speaking to the Ven. Ry and *Lokkruu* ("teacher," male) Sokchea, a university professor, they emphasized that it was the parents' and grandparents' responsibility to

teach children how to speak properly. At an early age, children learn their positionality in relation to other family members so that they know how to address their kin. “How old are you? What year were you born?” Lokkruu Sokchea said, voicing the adults surrounding the child to get them to think about their age in relation to the future interlocutors. When children use the wrong honorifics, it reflects badly on the parents. “The mom doesn’t know how to instruct/discipline (*bradow*, ប្រើប្រាស់)¹⁹ [the child],” Lokkruu Sokchea said, animating what disapproving Cambodians might say if they overheard a child using the wrong honorific term.

Buddhist temples²⁰ are also important sites where children may learn the Buddhist monk honorific register. Boys and men who ordain as monks, either temporarily or permanently, will learn the register after ordination from older monks or abbots—if they have not learned the register already. Ideally, according to the Venerable Ry, parents should take their children to the temple regularly, particularly during important holidays, so that children may practice using the monk register and have frequent interactions with monks. “They [the children] might become accustomed [to using the monk register],” he stated.

In the next section, I analyze linguistic data involving monks to show how the language socialization story above, as told to me by the Venerable Ry and Lokkruu Sokchea, represents an idealized version of *how* Cambodians should be learning their language: from their parents at home or from monks at the pagoda. The data below show some evidence that fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register is declining or that Cambodians are choosing not to speak to

¹⁹ According to Headley's Khmer-English Dictionary, the word means “to discipline, teach manners to, lecture, admonish, educate, advise; to exhort, urge,” which is why I think it is important to point out both the teaching as well as the disciplining aspect of the word.

²⁰ Sometimes referred to as “monastery” or “pagoda” in English (Crosby 2014). I may use these terms interchangeably, along with the Khmer word *wat* or *vat*.

monks with the monk register. If so, these processes of language socialization are not happening, at least not in recent years. Let us take a closer look at the examples.

Navigating the Buddhist Monk Honorific Register

Most Cambodians believe that one ought to use the Buddhist monk honorific register when speaking *with* monks or *about* monks. We have two interrelated issues. On one level, fluency in the register is a spectrum. Most lay Cambodians know a few monk honorific terms. The most well-known is *GANA* (for “yes” or as an abbreviation for the first-person pronoun). Some Cambodians know more Buddhist honorific terms than others. There is a stereotype that rural Cambodians know the monk register more than urbanites because they have more opportunities to visit the temple while city people are too busy²¹. On another level, we have a different issue. This one entails the ability to style-shift into the Buddhist monk register when it actually matters. Out of context, and without pressure, many Cambodians can probably list the honorific variants they should use with monks. However, when it comes to using it in interaction, and switching to that register in the presence of monks, Cambodians may forget or falter: having false starts and self-repairs, leading them to appear dysfluent.

Some aspects of language are automatic or habitual. For example, on occasion, I have accidentally said, “Thanks, you too!” after being told, “Enjoy your meal” or “Enjoy your movie.” In Khmer, peppering one’s speech with *chas* or *baht* (the female and male way of saying “yes,” respectively) is one way to show politeness so it is one of those habitual quirks Cambodians have. As a result, they are also one of the trickiest words for Cambodians to style-shift from

²¹ This alludes to a common ideological position that rural residents are windows into the past and that they are more likely to retain “traditional” cultural norms and linguistic practices that have been lost by urbanites. This belief is turned on its head in Chapter 4 as I examine one linguistic practice that urbanites have happily shifted away from, one that is still retained in the countryside: the non-honorific register.

because they are so habitual, which is why speakers may appear dysfluent in the presence of monks when they forget to say *GANA* instead. At a CVS Pharmacy in Long Beach, CA, which has the largest Cambodian American community in the United States, I overheard a man say “*Baht. GANA.*” In that instance, I knew he was talking to a monk because Khmer-speakers would have understood that the speaker was making a self-correction. His first instinct was to use the ordinary *baht* to respond “yes,” but then added *GANA* to repair. Hearing *GANA* was the only proof I needed to know he was conversing with a monk, but I followed the sound of their voices and peeked around the corner to find a Cambodian man and woman interacting with a monk in his saffron-colored robe in front of a Coinstar machine. Socheanda Mony, a journalist for TemplenewsTV, a YouTube channel that shares news stories about Cambodian Buddhism, had a similar slip up while interviewing the Ven. Luon Sovath remotely. During the interview, I caught her end a question with *chas*, but she quickly recovered by adding *GANA*. “What does the venerable one think or have opinions about supporting the January 7 monks like this, *chas— GANA?*”²² These two instances remind us that besides having competency in the Buddhist monk honorific register, Khmer-speakers still need to contend with these slippages that occur when they forget to make these transitions between registers.

Cambodians may be more versed in style-shifting between sub-registers within the ordinary register, such as from neutral or ordinary to polite, but style-shifting to the Buddhist monk register might take more of a linguistic jump. Although Buddhist temples can be found on every block, and although monks are prevalent and an everyday occurrence in Cambodian life, not all Cambodians can style-shift properly into this register in practice. This paralyzes many Cambodians and gives them anxiety when they find themselves being in the presence of monks.

²² 17:17 to 17:25 <https://youtu.be/X-wH2inEnuM>

The following are a list of strategies Cambodians may use when they lack fluency in the register. We find that lack of fluency affects how Cambodians interact with monks, some run away to avoid them while others apologize beforehand.

Avoiding Monks

Cambodians may outright avoid interactions with monks if they do not feel that they have command of the Buddhist monk register. After attending a Buddhist temple with friends to be blessed for the upcoming Cambodian New Year, my friend Sreymom, who was in her early 30s, jokingly revealed on the car ride home that she cannot speak to monks. I was surprised by Sreymom's admission because she came from a small village in Kampong Cham province before moving to the capital as a young adult to become a hairdresser, defying the stereotype that people in the countryside are more fluent in the Buddhist monk register than their city counterpart because they tend to go to temples more often as other forms of entertainment in rural areas are lacking. It was surprising to hear her giggle in the car as she revealed to me that she avoids running into monks at all costs because of her lack of fluency: "I see a monk, I walk the other way," she said laughingly. Because she is unfamiliar with the Buddhist monk honorific register and because she does not want to make any linguistic mistakes in front of a monk, Sreymom purposefully avoids being in their presence in order to avoid having to speak to them directly.²³

Sreymom and some Cambodians who go out of their way to avoid monks believe that it is necessary to use the monk register, but because they are not fluent in the register, they would

²³ There is no obligation to donate to monks if Cambodians were to encounter monks in public. First, monks are not allowed to handle money directly. They rely on volunteers inside temples to count donations. Second, monks are not supposed to be materialistic. Thus, a good monk would not care if laypeople were donating or not.

rather not find themselves in those situations. They may feel some sense of guilt or embarrassment due to their lack of fluency, feeling regret for not being able to properly speak to monks. This differs from feelings of shame found among communities where speakers, particularly youths, cannot speak their heritage language very well, which may cause their elders to correct and shame youths publicly (Reynolds 2009; Meek 2007). While I have heard of instances of correction among Cambodians and by monks, I think the anxiety and insecurities are closer to feelings of guilt. For people like Sreymom, they want to avoid any linguistic wrongdoing in the presence of monks so they walk away. The Ven. Ry seems to be able to read the minds of other Sreymoms out there. Though he was referring to city people in particular, he said they probably worry that if they speak incorrectly with a monk, they may have acted demeritously²⁴ (ឃុំ, *baap*). “That’s why people in the cities are shy [around monks].”

The Ven. Bunchea, a monk who was in residence in Brooklyn, NY, told me that he would rather Cambodians speak to him and make mistakes than have them run away.

When we’re afraid of one another, and are scared to talk to each other, scared of being wrong... we continue to be scared... In Khmer we say, “If you’re scared, get closer.” If you’re scared, get closer. That’s how we learn. There’s another saying, “If you want knowledge, kill a priest. If you want the fruit, burn the tree stump.” When we ask a lot of questions, we will understand. If we don’t ask, we won’t learn. So then we won’t know.

The Ven. Ry had similar thoughts:

If we wait until everyone speaks perfectly, maybe there will never be an opportunity to speak to each other. Sometimes, it just makes people even more scared. That’s why when communicating, if there’s some right [words], some wrong [words], it’s normal.

In his experience though, the Ven. Ry says when he lets Cambodians make mistakes in front of him without correcting them or pointing it out, they eventually will speak correctly. It is usually

²⁴ The opposite of earning merit.

when they are scared that they will speak incorrectly. Many monks want Cambodians to practice speaking to them. As the monks I interviewed suggest, when Cambodians avoid things that give them fear, it only prolongs their ignorance. Monks want Cambodians to get over their fear in order to learn the register. Many Cambodians might say that it is easier said than done. I certainly felt embarrassed when I slipped up during my conversation with the Ven. Bunchea who, unlike the Ven. Ry, was quick to correct me on the spot whenever I forgot to say *GANA*, but I think it impressed him that I was willing to try despite my mistakes.

It seems that some Cambodians, like Sreymom, want to respect monks in linguistically appropriate ways, but are unable to do so. Thus, they would rather hide and run away from them than use the “wrong” register and perhaps offend monks. If the Ven. Bunchea is right, then Cambodians may never be able to respect monks linguistically if they do not work through their fear. In the following section, we find another set of Cambodians who still continue to speak to monks, though some apologize beforehand out of embarrassment while others are unremorseful.

Using the Ordinary Register with Monks, Sometimes Apologizing Beforehand:

Cambodians may choose to converse with monks using the ordinary honorific register. In some cases, they may preface their conversations with monks by offering an apology, letting monks know that they do not have command of the Buddhist monk register. Through this apology, Cambodians acknowledge that they should be using the monk register, but may make mistakes. Others may use the apology as a way to continue speaking in the ordinary register. Instead of running away, these Khmer-speakers hope that the monks will be forgiving of this flaw.

In a now-deleted Youtube video posted by a Cambodian Youtube news channel named BCP TV, a journalist named San Buntheoun is interviewing a monk at a pagoda. The monk is accused of having an affair with a woman. The monk maintains his innocence by saying that he was just having a conversation with his female friend in his room about donating funds to build a monk dormitory. Buntheoun begins his questioning of the monk, but then makes an aside by apologizing that he does not know how the monk language very well. A couple of notes to help: *GANA* is the first-person pronoun with monks and Buntheoun shifts his footing and attention during this short interaction between the monk and the audience behind the camera:²⁵

San Buntheoun²⁶: This means, uh. In the beginning— *GANA* will ask so everyone will finally understand once and for all. Sorry, [*turns to face the camera to address audience*] friends out there as well²⁷, [*turns back to the monk*] so everyone will finally understand the situation. Uh, for what reasons has— [*puts his palms together toward the monk*] *GANA* apologizes. *GANA* is not skillful.

Most Cambodians listening in will know what Buntheoun means when he apologizes for not being skillful: he is not skillful in the monk register. This excerpt reminds us that there are different scales of fluency as most Cambodians know the more common monk register terms, but outside of those few terms, they may not feel comfortable conversing with monks for very long. Like most Cambodians, Buntheoun knows (or remembers) to use *gana*, an abbreviation of the first-person pronoun (*knyom preah karuna*) laypeople should use when speaking to an ordained Buddhist monk. However, Buntheoun either does not know other Buddhist monk honorific terms or he does not trust himself to remember to use them in the interaction, so he prefaces his interrogation of the monk with an apology that he is not skillful or experienced.

²⁵ <https://youtu.be/SqrHI55eGwU> (Start at 0:38 to 0:54) [Video now deleted]

²⁶ In September 2019, San Buntheoun decided to ordain as a monk for 1 week. His fluency in the register may have increased.

²⁷ I believe at first Buntheoun was addressing the crowd gathered around him during the interview when he said “so everyone will understand,” but also wanted to acknowledge and address his audience watching remotely as well.

The Ven. Ry reported hearing similar apologies from Cambodians. Across our many meetings, he emphasized the many ways Cambodians might apologize to him. Some remember to use *GANA*, the abbreviation for the first-person pronoun *KNYOM PREAH KARUNA*, while others continue to use the ordinary first-person pronoun *knyom*. Below are two examples he has voiced for me:

“Holy one, *GANA* asks for forgiveness if *GANA* uses the wrong monk words. Please be forgiving.”

“*Knyom* apologizes. *Knyom* doesn’t know how to speak the monk language.”

In the second example, I am unsure if the speaker, by way of the Ven. Ry’s re-enactment, purposely avoided the monk register first-person pronoun or if they left it out on purpose to show how bad their monk register truly is. As I will expand on later, the Ven. Ry said he does not blame Cambodians or make them feel guilty in any way when they make these makes.

Other Cambodians may be unapologetic in their use of the ordinary register with monks. Samnang, a university student in his 20s getting his master’s degree in linguistics, knows that the first-person pronoun when speaking to monks is *GANA*, but sometimes he forgets and uses the ordinary first-person pronoun, *knyom*. He seemed unphased by this mistake during our discussion. Cambodians like Samnang might be the reason why the Ven. Soklin commented that the younger generation do give care and attention (បើកចិត្តទុកដាក់, *ot sov yokchet tukdak*) when it comes to the monk register. He says youths use the ordinary register with monks because it is easy.

Avoiding the Buddhist Monk Register to Distance Oneself from Buddhism

I present one example of a Cambodian woman who does not think knowing the monk register is important in her life. Chhorvy is a Protestant Christian woman in her 40s. She purposefully avoids the Buddhist monk register to express her Christian identity and to disassociate herself from Buddhism. “I don’t like to use the monk language,” she said. When she encounters monks, she knows she should say *GANA* (“yes”), but she will say *chas* on purpose. I recreate her animation of these interactions with a monk while going to work. *NYOM* is how an ordained monk says “you” to refer to non-monks. *ATMA* is the first-person pronoun monks use to refer to themselves in conversation with non-monks.

Chhorvy: For example, sometimes when I ride and share a taxi with a monk, monks will ask, “Where is *NYOM* going?” I’ll say, “Going to work.” If he says, “*ATMA* will get off here first.” I don’t want to reply with “*GANA*.” I answer “*chas*” because I don’t want to use monk words. (laughs)

Me: Don’t want to use because you’re Christian?

Chhorvy: *Chas. Chas. Chas.* I know the monk words, but I don’t like using the monk words. (laughs) I want to use words for ordinary people [with monks]. Answer, “*chas*.” Ordinary.

Me: Are monks angry when...

Chhorvy: Not angry. Because usually monks know that we don’t know how to speak. They wouldn’t assume that we know [the language], but [choose to] not use it. But usually they think we just don’t know how to speak.

Chhorvy avoids the monk register in order to avoid venerating monks. As a Christian woman who believes in God, she does venerate God and Jesus using the royal honorific register because they can never be on the same level as humans (see Chapter 3). Monks, on the other hand, are not worthy of worship so she wants to treat them like ordinary people, which means using ordinary language with them. Chhorvy also hides behind the fact that most Cambodians are not

fluent in the monk register. Using their dysfluency as a shield or excuse, she is able to mask her true intention, which is to reject or resist Buddhist beliefs. She does not feel bad because they would just assume she is another typical Cambodian Buddhist who does not know how to speak to monks, rather than a Christian woman who is purposefully flouting the Buddhist monk honorific register.

Buddhism in Cambodia: rupture and attempted revival

After religion was banned under the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians were eager to reinstate Buddhism in the postwar decades. Yet, Cambodians today are not likely to learn the monk register at home, they are less likely to go to the pagoda, and men today are less likely to ordain as monks, even if temporarily. Consequently, Cambodians in general are less likely to have interactions with monks and less likely to practice using the monk register. But why? Why are Cambodians no longer going to the pagodas? Why are parents no longer teaching their children how to speak to monks? The answer lies in ideological changes about what it means to be a Cambodian in the 21st century, particularly one who is upwardly mobile and does not have time to maintain a religious commitment to Buddhism.

It is often said that “to be Khmer is to be Buddhist” since Cambodian national identity is strongly associated with Buddhism (Smith-Hefner 1994, 26). But what does it mean to be Buddhist? Or, traditionally, what did it mean to be Buddhists? Cambodian Theravada Buddhists believe in the doctrine of rebirth and building merit in one’s lifetime so that one may be reborn into a more fortunate realm in the next life. While one cannot change their current standing, they can build merit in this lifetime and hope for a better rebirth. Merit can be achieved by following Buddhist precepts, listening to the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings), and doing good deeds for

others—most importantly, good deeds in the service of Buddhist temples and Buddhist monks. Such merit-making activities to monks and temples include donating money and food or offering one’s labor or services to cook or fix things around the temple. Parents may also earn merit by sending their sons to join the monkhood. In the 21st century, merit-making practices are in decline due to capitalistic demands that prevent Cambodians from attending the temples as often as they used to in the past.

Traditionally, ordained Buddhist monks²⁸ play an important role as the “living embodiments and spiritual generators of Buddhism” (Ebihara 1966). Because they stand apart from regular society, Theravada Buddhist monks have many precepts, or rules, to follow. These include wearing austere robes, not eating after 12 noon, and abstaining from romantic relationships and sexual relations. In the following section, this traditional image of the moral Buddhist monk has been shattered with the advent of the internet and pictures of bad monks circulate through society. In the past, bad monks were handled privately and Cambodians were none the wiser, but today, social media makes their bad deeds public.

The typical day of a monk consists of waking up before sunrise to read and practice their scriptures. After eating breakfast, they continue to read and practice their scriptures, or they may walk around their neighborhood to collect alms. Around 10 or 11 AM, laypeople arrive at the temple to cook and serve food to monks as a way to build merit. Monks meditate and chant for laypeople who have come. Right before noon, monks enjoy their last meal of the day.

Historically, families often sent their sons to be ordained as monks²⁹ as a way to earn merit for

²⁸ Only men can be ordained. There are nuns (*donchii*), but they are not formally ordained like men, though there have been movements to grant them ordination status. Buddhist nuns tend to be elderly women who have chosen to give up their worldly possessions and vanity (e.g., shaving their heads). Buddhist nuns are not spoken to with the monk register. My impression is that Cambodians would speak to them with the same deference as any elderly woman in Cambodia: the ordinary, but polite register.

²⁹ As I will explain, monk ordination is not always permanent. Boys and men may be ordained as little as one week or as long as a few years, with the average length being 2 years.

the parents, helping the boy's parents receive a more fortunate rebirth. For poor families, joining the monkhood also offered other added benefits for their sons: free education, meals, and a safe place to live. Before schooling was institutionalized in Cambodia in the 20th century, Buddhist temples were the primary source of schooling for boys (and not girls) in Cambodia. In the 1960s, for example, May Ebihara noted that 2/3 of men in the village she observed had been ordained as a monk during their lifetime (Ebihara 1966).

Today, fewer boys are joining the monkhood. With public schooling, poor boys no longer need to join the monkhood to learn to read and write. In a *Southeast Asia Globe* article (Black 2017), two young men were asked if they ever considered becoming monks. "I have no time to be a monk," one said. "I have to study so that I can get a good job. I'm not really thinking about religion." Another said, "[W]hen you become a monk you lose all your freedom and are treated differently by society." Here, individual desires for freedom, educational attainment, and career aspirations are examples of ideological changes that have led to the undesirability of becoming a monk.

Newer opportunities for education and careers have only been possible after Cambodian entered the open market economy in the 1990s in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. Buddhism suffered deep ruptures under the regime as monks were forced to unordain and some were even targeted for execution. Buddhist temples were destroyed or converted into warehouses, clinics, prisons, or interrogation centers (Ledgerwood 2011; Ayres 2000a). Buddhist images were defiled and religious texts were burned or destroyed (Ledgerwood 2011). Even after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed and the Vietnamese invaded the country in 1979, the country only permitted partial reformation of Buddhism, such as only allowing men over the age of 55 to ordain as monks. It was not until the 1990s when Buddhism was allowed to properly flourish. After

Vietnam released control of Cambodia in 1989 and after Cambodia adopted its constitution in 1993, which gives Cambodians the freedom of religion, Cambodia made efforts to re-establish Buddhism by removing taxes on temples and age restrictions for monk ordination.

Although there were efforts to restore and revitalize Buddhism since the 1990s, it coincided with Cambodia's economic growth. Cambodia's GDP has grown exponentially as foreign businesses have come in to take advantage of the labor pool and as foreigners begin seeing Cambodia as a tourist destination. These economic and social changes have hindered Buddhism in many ways. Economic incentives are pulling Cambodians away from temple attendance. Rural Cambodians, particularly young adults, flock to urban centers—sometimes even going abroad to Thailand or Korea—to find work. And urban centers are notorious for being less religious because Cambodians working city jobs often require long hours in order to make ends meet. This leaves little free time for Cambodians to go to the temples, especially when a Buddhist holiday falls on weekday and Cambodians cannot afford to take time off. Current economic circumstances have compelled Cambodians to prioritize accruing money over accruing merit.³⁰ The Ven. Soklin, a young monk in his early 20s in Battambang, claimed that parents today have no time to teach their children the monk language because they are busy working, in the fields (farm work) or in the cities. They only have time to take their children to and from school, prioritizing their own jobs as well as their children's secular education over religion.

Outside of financial incentives, going to the pagoda is not an appealing activity for many Cambodians today, particularly Cambodian youths and young adults. Buddhist temples used to be the center of entertainment and festivals pre-KR regime—and also where Cambodians often

³⁰ I thank Stuart Kirsch for pointing this out to me.

found future spouses (Ebihara 1968, 398-399)—but today new forms of media and entertainment exist. During a Kathin ceremony with my family at a Buddhist temple in Siem Reap province, my younger relatives ranging from pre-teens to late teens could never sit on the floor for too long. “Cramped legs,” I remember them saying with a painful look on their face as they got up and walked outside for a break while the monks continued to chant. The Venerable Sombo, the monk at Wat Ounalam, said it is harder for youths to be ordained as monks these days because they want to have fun and be happy (សំប្បឿន, *sabbay*, “fun” and “happy”), particularly with new technologies and other modern advancements, which is why boys and men do not ordain for too long. He said, “Monks [today] want to have fun so they unordain,” or go back to being laypersons who can eat past noon, go to the mall, and not be constrained by strict precepts.

Before fieldwork, as a non-practicing Buddhist myself with no interest in religion whatsoever, my impression was that Cambodians were very devout Buddhists. My first inkling that Buddhists in Cambodia were not much different from me was with my Khmer teacher *Neakkruu* (“teacher,” female) Vo. One day during a classroom break, Neakkruu Vo asked me about my religion. I hesitantly said, “Buddhist,” and added, “but not very strict,” fearing she might quiz me on my knowledge of Buddhism in Khmer. She nodded. “Me too,” she said. “I only take fruit to the temple when it is an important Buddhist holiday.” I remember feeling relieved that I was not the only “fair-weather” Buddhist in Cambodia.

Scholarship on language shift often focuses on changes in entire codes (or whole languages), where one language is being replaced by another. In our current world of transnational global flows (Appadurai 1996), the shift from one language to another is often rooted in financial incentives: which language offers more rewards? From languages like Nahuatl (Hill and Hill 1986), Mayan (Reynolds 2009), Kaska (Meek 2010), and Gapun (Kulick

1992), it is easy to see how language contact with dominant languages in the global market tend to pull speakers toward the more advantageous codes. With Khmer, we have a situation where Khmer-speakers may be learning other foreign languages to be competitive (see Chapter 1), but they are not abandoning their local language entirely. There is a language shift, not at the code level, but at the register level, a shift away from registers that appear to be less relevant or important. Another difference is that Cambodians are not outright rejecting the Buddhist monk honorific register in favor of another; they just do not have time to nurture their competency in this register.

Prior literature and research on language shift usually see the “target” language (the one people are orienting toward) as advantageous while the native or indigenous language is disadvantageous, highlighting the push toward one language and the pull away from the other. Garrett introduced the term “code-specific genre” to understand where, when, and how languages are being used, or “the genre the code was instantiated in the course of everyday action” (Garrett 2005, 351), in order to better understand language shift in multilingual settings. When speakers differentiate languages by genre (“Language A is the language we use at work” vs. “Language B is the language we use in religion.”), it makes it more evident as to why some languages are abandoned in some instances and why they might be retained in limited contexts. Registers by default are already genre-specific, which is why it is not surprising when certain practices that are less popular, such as religious activities, or domains that are limited or inaccessible, such as professional expertise that involves more training, motivate language shift. When we view the Buddhist monk honorific register in terms of its register-specific genre, a genre that is all about Buddhism and monks, we can get a clearer picture as to why many Cambodians lack competency.

Like many other language shifts around the world, this register shift within the Khmer language is also driven by market and capitalistic realities. Knowing how to use the Buddhist monk honorific register does not directly interfere with capitalistic goals, but what is preventing Cambodians from attaining financial advancement is the institution of Buddhism and abiding by its precepts and tenets. Current working hours, schooling, and other forms of entertainment occupy most of the modern-day Cambodian's time, limiting the time for religious activities. Reynolds (2009) described her young Mayan informants' choices as extremely limited, which is why many choose to leave home and speak Spanish, desiring better opportunities. At times, it seems Cambodians are also limited in their choices, having to choose between honoring their religion or work and school obligations, especially if their livelihood depends on working and they need to make ends meet. As the Ven. Soklin said earlier, parents are too busy working and only have time to take their children to and from school. But other times, we see that perhaps Cambodians might have too many choices these days, having to choose between religion and other forms of activities (like going to school). As I had discussed earlier, when it comes to men and monk ordination, they are increasingly not joining the monkhood, even just temporarily, due to other opportunities that are available today, which were not available in previous decades. The Ven. Khy Sovanratana told the *Southeast Asia Globe*, "There are more jobs outside the monastery. Young boys can have a family and enjoy life, which they see as more attractive than being quiet, circumspect and restrained" (Black 2017). Regardless of whether the choices are viewed as limited or not, it is fair to say that most Cambodians today have not chosen "Buddhism" when given the option, passing over it as they pursue other interests as more important for their time. As the genre of Buddhism becomes less attractive for many Cambodians today, the register associated with this genre is also being sidelined.

I do want to emphasize that many Cambodians still consider their religious identity to be Buddhist, even if they are not adhering to all of the precepts or participating in every single holy day. My Khmer language tutor Samnang, in his early 50s, said “holy days” (ថ្ងៃសីល, *tngai sul*) happen once a week, based on the Buddhist calendar, and these are sacred days when devout Buddhists need to adhere to additional precepts, such as not slaughtering animals. Samnang was disappointed that there was no more “morality” (សីលធម៌, *sulator*) today because nobody seems to be observing holy days anymore. Now Cambodians can “kill [animals] anytime.” Contrary to what Samnang thinks, many Cambodians seem to be happy being Cafeteria Buddhists, picking and choosing which parts of Buddhism to follow, or being Pchum Ben Buddhists, going to Buddhist temples for major holidays like Pchum Ben. This not only includes people like my teacher Neakkruu Vo, who only brings fruit to the pagoda during important holidays, but also these two youths in their 20s interviewed in the *Southeast Asia Globe*:

Savath and Ly are prime examples of such Buddhists. Neither visit the pagoda outside holy days – unless down on their luck – and neither follow the five precepts³¹ of Buddhism, which are regarded by many monks, such as Chuon, as the religion’s only non-negotiable ‘rules’. However, neither Savath nor Ly believe these facts make them any less Buddhist, with Savath claiming “it’s not necessary to follow all the five precepts, as long as you don’t harm others” and Ly defending his beliefs by stating that he still “respects the Buddha” (Black 2017).

It seems many Cambodians are content with following some parts of Buddhism and respecting Buddhism in their own way. If this is the case, then not being able to use the Buddhist monk honorific register in interactions with monks does not preclude Cambodians from being considered Buddhists. And they may still want to respect and revere monks, not by using the monk register, but using the polite ordinary register or through body language. However, there may be some pushback from more conservative or traditional Buddhists who believe fluency in

³¹ The five things Buddhists must abstain from: killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication.

the register is necessary to being good Buddhists. We will take a look at some interactional data to examine this in closer detail.

This change in how Cambodians practice Buddhism is part of a larger trend of Buddhism modernism or modern Buddhism (McMahan 2012) where Buddhism has engaged with Western ideals like equality, individuality, and freedom. Scholars of Buddhist studies assert that the Buddhism we see today is undergoing a process of modernization. As Buddhists respond to current events and new ideologies, so too has Buddhism been reshaped and reinterpreted to fit people's newer needs. Lopez defines modern Buddhism as a religion that "stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual above the community" (2002, ix). To be "modern" is to also feel a sense of control or self-agency. Modernity is when people begin to assert their sense of self-agency, believing that they are solely responsible for their own destiny, and not the responsibility of any gods, spirits, or religion (Keane 2015). For Cambodians whose lives have drastically changed in the post-war years of intense development, they no longer believe their social standing or that their fate is set in stone, unlike the Buddhist belief that one's current situation is a reflection of their past life's deeds. By virtue of working hard to climb the social ladder, Cambodians are resisting and rejecting the belief that their current standing cannot change. This attitude was also reflected in Christensen's (2019) investigation into why Cambodians are increasingly holding Brahmanistic beliefs—beliefs in spirits,³² ghosts, and praying for luck, which are not part of Buddhist doctrines—he found that Cambodians were saying, "We will never get rich if we follow Buddhism."

In the 21st century, merit-making practices are in decline. Boys are less likely to join the monkhood. Young Cambodians working at a modern café might not bother or even know that

³² Refer to Erick White (2017) for more information about spirit possession in Theravada Buddhism.

they ought to take off their shoes when handing food and drinks to monks. There is one more important piece of this puzzle in understanding Buddhism's decline before we move onto the linguistic data: the internet, particularly social media.

Bad Monks on the Internet

In the wake of Cambodia's liberalized economy, new technology like television, computers, and the internet have penetrated the Cambodian market. It is now easy for stories to spread and go viral as Cambodians post and share news and information. In this section, I will present stories about misbehaving monks to demonstrate that viral stories about bad monks are another factor that contributes to the decline of Buddhism and, relatedly, the Buddhist monk honorific language. When Buddhists see that monks are not that different from the rest of society, perhaps there is no need to give them a special register.

In 2018, a monk named Srel Vanna was defrocked for sexual relations with a 19-year-old young woman named Lida. He claimed it was consensual, she claimed it was rape. To prove that Vanna was not so innocent, Lida posted a video of Vanna eating and licking corn on the cob in a sexually suggestive manner and shared images of him gambling and playing the lottery, both of which go against Buddhist precepts since monks cannot handle money. Vanna was disrobed publicly, and the images of his disrobing ceremony spread quickly over Facebook. One journalist, Pheng Vannak, interviewed Vanna on Facebook Live after he was disrobed, surrounded by a large crowd of village supporters from his hometown. At the end of his interview, Pheng said he cannot judge who is telling the truth, Vanna or Lida, but he wanted to read a Facebook post Lida wrote a few months prior: "You are the only one I want to marry. Let everyone know that you have already won me. I won't love anyone else aside from you, Vanna,

the master of my life.”³³ The large crowd roared and clapped when they heard the last part. The journalist continued to say he cannot judge who is telling the truth, but said the Facebook post was very telling and it made Lida’s claim of rape less credible.

In the Information Age, Vanna’s immorality, the speed at which his story spread, and the public outcry that followed were not an isolated incident. Misbehaving monks are more visible today. Exasperating the matter is the fact that troubled boys may be sent to join the monkhood to be reformed as a form of bootcamp, but they may continue to commit offenses as monks since they did not want to be there to begin with. Such bad behavior becomes more visible today as bad monks post photos of themselves committing offenses and as laypeople share images of monks misbehaving. In an article for the *Southeast Asia Globe*, the Ven. Khy Sovanratana proposed more robust background checks for would-be monks in order to prevent ‘troublemakers.’ According to him, “Drug addicts are not easily changed. It’s not like you can possess such a man and become a morally behaved person immediately” (Black 2017).

Whereas technology offers channels to report and catch bad monks, Cambodians also blame technology as the source of immorality for monks. Cellphones, the internet, and Facebook are spaces where monks may interact with people inappropriately. Since monks and women are not able to be physically near one another nor are they allowed to be alone together, social media chats are virtual spaces where monks and women may flout these rules. While there is no official injunction against these technologies, some conservative Cambodians believe that monks should not be using such technology because of the temptations to stray away from Buddhist teachings.

³³ Even though Vanna was a monk at this time, Lida used the ordinary register in this romantic post. The first- and second-pronouns were the kinterms *bang* (older sibling) and *oun* (younger sibling). In Cambodian heterosexual relationships, men are viewed as “older siblings” (big brother) while women are “younger siblings” (little sister). Cambodians refer to themselves and their partners accordingly. Thus, Lida literally said “Older sibling is the only one younger sibling wants to marry” (I glossed it as “You are the only one I want to marry.”)

While interviewing my friend Leakhena a few days before she was about to be baptized as a Christian, I asked why she made the choice to convert. Leakhena pointed out immoral monks as one of the reasons she wanted to leave Buddhism. She said she was a devout Buddhist who always went to the temple on holy days to make offerings, but monks today are not like monks in the past. One particular incident rattled her. A Buddhist monk befriended her on Facebook. He sent her a message and told her that he loved her and that he had many girlfriends. She was upset and wanted to know why this monk was being inappropriate with her. In Cambodia, she said, you are supposed to respect monks, “but how can I respect them if they do not follow the rules?” Indeed, how can Cambodians respect monks linguistically if they are not acting like monks?

Bad monks have existed throughout history. It is only in recent times, with the advent of the cellphone cameras and social media, that they have been made visible and subject to public scrutiny. With greater accountability, I claim that Cambodians are beginning to realize that monks may not be as ethical as they are thought to be and that they are no different from regular laypeople after all. They too struggle with immorality and temptations. This might be one reason why the Cambodians may purposefully choose to shun monks, as people like Leakhena convert to Christianity and as parents avoid taking their children to temples with bad monks.

Buddhism and Buddhist monks are beginning to lose their veneer of morality. On the one hand, monks may not be seen as that much different from the laity. If so, they may be undeserving of a separate register. On the other hand, Cambodian men, especially, no longer need to join the monkhood to gain status or stand apart from society (Davis 2016); they can get a secular education, get a job, and have a family. These twin mechanisms, the lowering status of monks and the new economic potentials for the laity that elevate their status, work together to

diminish Buddhism's dominance in Cambodian society. As statuses change, language will follow.

What do monks think?

All of the monks I spoke to said they do not mind if Cambodians make mistakes because they are important opportunities to learn and practice. As the Ven. Bunchea told me, if you're weak in something, be brave enough to go forward, to make mistakes, to be corrected, and learn. It is fine to be wrong and there is no shame in being corrected. The Ven. Ry was mindful that if youths who are afraid go in one direction and Buddhism goes in another direction, there will never be any engagement between the two, which is why he is careful not to call out or bring attention to Cambodians making mistakes. "It's normal (តើធំម្តង, *tomada*)," the Ven. Ry often said, which I interpreted as "no big deal."

The Ven. Ry knows that fixing Cambodians' speech might be more difficult so, for him, what is more important is that they show respect and deference to him in other ways, such as through behavior and bodily comportment. Buddhism has many etiquette and rules regarding how laypeople should behave around monks. For example, women are not allowed to touch monks or be physically close to them, so they can show respect by having proper boundaries. When handing objects to monks, laypeople must hold the object with both hands as they hand it over to the monk. Even among regular Cambodians, this is also considered a more respectful way of giving things to people and Cambodians often receive things with both hands as a gesture of appreciation as well. Another important behavioral etiquette involves one's height in relation to monks. As the Ven. Ry said, "Whatever you do [in the presence of monks], don't do things that make yourself too tall/big." If monks are standing, Cambodians should be sitting on the

ground. If monks are sitting on the ground, Cambodians should crouch down so that their head is never higher than the monk's head. As long as Cambodians show respect and deference in these ways, according to the Ven. Ry, the issue of language and register-use is less important.

After making a point to say that he is not offended by Cambodians who lack fluency in the Buddhist monk register, the Ven. Ry often adds a caveat, saying that he believes there are exceptions. Media personalities, such as TV hosts, radio hosts, and journalists ought to know how to use the Buddhist monk register and the royal register because they are more likely to meet and interview monks on their program. While ordinary Cambodians may get a pass, he believes media personalities should be fluent in the elite registers that pertain to monk and royalty. The preoccupation with the language of media personalities may be related to lack of education and illiteracy in Cambodia and the popularity of television and radio programs as entertainment. Viewing media personalities as (linguistic) role models, some Cambodians believe media personalities ought to speak Khmer properly to set a good example to viewers who are listening and watching (see Chapter 5). On two separate occasions, the Ven. Ry elaborates on why public figures need to know how to speak to monks.

But generally, we don't care [if Cambodians cannot use the monk register], but there is a small group where they say we're educated, we need to be flexible. For example, if we are an MC [masters of ceremonies] or hosts, if there are monks, if there are people of different ranks, like excellencies, whenever the we use words that are not appropriate, they will say we have not reached the level of MC or moderators.

[W]e need—one word is protocol, protocol to be appropriate, to be a role model. Like hosts on the radio and the like. Truthfully, [they] need to know everything. Cannot speak normally at all. Because the language [they] use to ask questions, the general population, they are watching. Citizens will watch so we need to have speech that is appropriate. (Underlined words were in English.)

The Ven. Ry mentioned that, unlike Thailand where television and radio hosts have to be qualified and know how to speak about royalty and monks, Cambodia does not have the same

standards. As a population that is semi-literate, they primarily listen to the news rather than read. That is why people like the Ven. Ry thinks it is so important for programming hosts to be able to speak “correctly” so that they can be good linguistic role models for the masses. While the Ven. Ry lets everyday Cambodians have a pass, he expects media hosts to speak “correctly” with royalty and with monks.

Using the Buddhist Monk Register with non-monks

In this section, I present situations in which Khmer-speakers are using the Buddhist monk honorific register with the “wrong” people, non-ratified people who are non-monks. This may seem contradictory to claims I have made in the previous sections that Cambodians were less fluent in the monk register, but I maintain that the conditions in the following section below are very different. For the most part, Cambodians are not having long, involved conversations in the monk register; they are usually using a few phrases. And most importantly, they do not have the pressure of performance. As the Ven. Ry said earlier, Cambodians are shy and nervous around monks, which gives them performance anxiety. The situations below, for the most part, involve non-monks so Cambodians have no fear of making any mistakes. There is one section that involves former monks so that is one slight exception.

Sarcasm and Joking

Cambodians may use the Buddhist monk honorific register and the royal honorific register with their friends as a way to joke. There is a common phrase in Khmer, “*CHAN tech*, *SAOY tech.*” This means “eat a little, eat a little,” in the Buddhist monk register followed by the royal register. *CHAN* is the verb “eat” in the Buddhist register while *SAOY* is the royal verb for

“eat.” Khmer-speakers use it for fun, playing off the fact that they are referring to one another as monks or royalty when they are, in fact, neither. I interpret this as friends using fancier words than necessary to poke fun at one another. It is akin to English-speakers saying they are going to get some “libations,” instead of just “drinks.” The word “eat” is one of the few words Cambodians tend to know in the monk register and the royal register so, for most Cambodians, producing this joke is not difficult.

There is another version of this joke, or a kind of playfulness, that my Khmer tutor says he has heard among tuk tuk or motodup drivers (rickshaw and motorcycle taxis), who tend to be male. This version also involves different words for “eat,” but it goes in the opposite direction. Instead of using an elite term, the tension is around whether a lower, down-to-earth term is better. When someone asks, “Want to go *nyam*?” they are using neutral or ordinary city word for “eat.” Someone else might reply, “Not *nyam*. *Si*!” or “*Nyam*, what? *Si*!” to indicate that they did not like the use of *nyam*. Rather, they would have preferred to be spoken to with *si*, a non-honorific term that is used among equals, from a high ranking person to a low ranking person, and the animal word for “eat.” In other words, they wanted a “lower” term. As friends who see themselves as equals or as workers who share an intersection where they wait for customers, the response could be interpreted in a couple ways. First, it could be seen as a class issue. Usually, tuk tuk and motodup drivers working in the cities are originally from rural areas where they tend to use the word *si* for eat more often. Hearing a friend use *nyam* might indicate that the friend is becoming an urbanite, or at least speaking like one, and going away from their rural roots. Another related interpretation is that the addressee is making a larger comment about their identity or relationship with one another. “We’re close friends. Just use the casual word for ‘eat’ with me.”

In both situations of playfulness, Cambodians are playing around with the register levels and playing around with the language rules. It reminds us that Cambodians do not have to use the registers with the correct ratified people. That is, the monk register is not solely limited to monks only.

To convey Buddhist principles

I observed a street food vendor dealing with an impatient customer who complained about how long her food was taking. The street food vendor was making fried noodles and had several orders in his queue. A woman approached him to say she had been waiting a long time for her food. He said, “*Lok* is working on it” (I am working on it), referring to himself as *lok*. *Lok* by itself can mean sir, lord, mister, or monk, but after she walked away and no longer within earshot, he began speaking to himself using the Buddhist monk register’s first-person pronoun *ATMA*: “*ATMA* cannot make it in time.” While discussing this with Cambodian professor Kheang Un, he found it odd too, but he guessed that maybe the vendor was trying to tell the woman to practice patience, which is a Buddhist virtue. However, his last line was uttered after she walked away so perhaps the vendor himself was also reminding himself to not be angry with customers.

Habit

Earlier, I discussed how Cambodians may forget to use the monk honorific terms due to habit. Here, I show how Cambodians may also forget to stop using the monk honorific register when a monk is no longer a monk. When monks leave the monkhood, it may take their relatives and friends a while to adjust. One friend who had been ordained said his father accidentally

called him *LOK kon* (*lok* child) and responded to him with *GANA* for awhile afterwards out of habit.

When Vanna, the monk who ate corn on the cob suggestively earlier in this chapter, was being interviewed immediately after he was disrobed, he was wearing regular clothing, but he continued to use *ATMA* during his interview. Since he had been a monk for at least a decade, he probably had trouble adjusting to the ordinary register. Though, if you remember, he had no trouble switching to the ordinary register when he was flirting with Lida. The journalist conducting the interview sometimes referred to Vanna as *LOK paoun* (*LOK* younger sibling, as if he were still a monk) and sometimes as just *paoun* (younger sibling). He does, at one point, refer to Vanna just as *LOK* and was about to say something, but then self-corrects by saying *paoun*. Even though this might be the journalist's first time meeting Vanna, his appearance of having a shaved head may have thrown him off, which was why he continued using the monk register with him at times.

In this final section, I will discuss another area where the Buddhist monk honorific register is being used with non-monks. In Catholicism, the monk register was borrowed and used with Catholic priests. I show how the flattening of social hierarchy in Cambodia and the flattening of the Buddhist monk honorific register is not limited to the domain of Buddhism. We also find similar social and linguistic flattening occurring in Catholicism. Just as usage and fluency in the monk register is in decline among Buddhists, younger Catholics are no longer using the monk register with priests, much to the disappointment of older Catholics.

The Buddhist Monk Honorific Register with Catholic Priests

It is easy to associate the decline of the Buddhist monk honorific register with the decline in Buddhist religiosity in Cambodian society. However, this picture is incomplete. Khmer register flattening and the flattening of social hierarchy are phenomena that are occurring in all aspects of Cambodian society, from religious domains to secular life. I will end my chapter with one final discussion to show that the Buddhist monk honorific register is not only in decline in Buddhist settings, it is also in decline in another religious domain: Catholicism. When Catholicism entered Cambodia in the 1600s, Catholics borrowed the Buddhist monk honorific register and used it with Catholic priests in the same way one would use it with Buddhist monks. Most notably, honorific variants included *CHAN* (eat), *SUNG* (rest/sleep), and *GANA* (yes). The only notable difference is that Catholics refer to priests as *LOK opok* (Lord Father) and the preferred first-person pronoun Catholics use with priests is *kon* (child).

Just as the Buddhist monk honorific register seems to be in decline in Cambodian society, elderly Catholics bemoan the fact that this register is no longer used in church. Elders lament the fact that when they were younger, Catholics respected priests linguistically and behaviorally. Similar to behavioral rules with monks, older Catholics remember a time when they were not allowed to sit or stand higher than priests, nor were they allowed to touch priests. During a meeting at the Battambang Catholic church, one Catholic man said it was ironic that everyone (including me) was sitting at a table with their Indonesian Catholic priest, on the same level, because in the past, if the priest was sitting on a chair, we would be sitting on the ground.

One elderly Catholic nun in her 70s complained about young Catholics today committing several offenses encapsulated in the following utterance:

Nuon: After the war, our tradition was destroyed.

[*Loud voice*] “Francis! Francis! Francis³⁴, *tov nah?*” I’m not happy when *LOK opok*—
go where? (ordinary) Father

when anyone speaks with *lok opok* in that way. When *lok opok* answers [them], I’m not happy. [*Soft voice*] “*Lok opok, ancheunh tov nah?*” ... And further than that, today,
Father, go where? (polite)

[*Nuon touches my arm gently and says in English, in a sing-song voice*] “Heeeelloooo!”

[*Nuon quickly returns to her serious voice*] I’m not happy at all.

(Underlined is in English)

I must ignore the fact that Nuon herself failed to use the Buddhist monk register in her soft voice correction (normatively, when speaking to Buddhist monks, it should be *NIMUN TOV NAH?*). Even as a seasoned Catholic nun, she is also prone to slippages herself. Ignoring her failed attempt to style-shift for now, Nuon highlights several things wrong with younger Catholics these days. First, they refer to the priest by his first name instead of calling him *lok opok* (Father). Second, they touch Father Francis, which was taboo previously in the Cambodian Catholic Church. Third, they use the informal, ordinary language with Father Francis. These include using English (“Hello”), using the informal register for “go where?”, and they also speak loudly and brashly when one should speak softly and gently with priests, elders, and those who are higher ranking. Because language, like honorifics, are not isolated, Nuon’s short utterance here presents a textual configuration that aligns to animate the kind of Catholic she detests through language, tone of voice, and behavior.

³⁴ The priest’s first name.

The flattening of social hierarchy, or perhaps the removal of strict hierarchy and strict formality, is not only noted through changes in language, like the decline of the Buddhist monk honorific register, but it is also depicted through the fact that young Catholics today have no qualms touching and hugging priests. One elderly Catholic woman in Phnom Penh, Phon, told me that when she was growing up, girls were not allowed to touch priests. Phon did try to complain and protest to a bishop, or someone higher up, about asking international priests to stop hugging people, but she was told, as she puts it, “priests are like us. We [Catholics] are like priests.” Today, Phon has no problem hitting priests (perhaps playfully) or even dragging them if she wants them to go somewhere. This change in how Catholics see, treat, and speak to priests stems from a change in social identity and social relationship, which seems to emanate from both priests and Catholics. Foreigner priests come to Cambodia with different ideas about conduct and demeanor. Catholic youths are growing up in a post-war, developing country where hierarchy is flattening. For the younger generation, Catholic priests do not stand apart from them. Priests no longer occupy a privileged status or space, much like the way Cambodian Buddhists feel about Buddhist monks today. Why should they use a different register with them? Using the ordinary, but polite register seems to be good enough for younger Catholics today.

Father Francis, who was listening to the discussion about the monk register, is an Indonesian priest who had only been in Cambodia for a couple of years. When the elderly Catholics asked *lok opok* (Father) what he thought, he expressed that he was uncomfortable with the special Khmer honorific register older Cambodians use with priests because he feels that it causes him to be too distant from his congregation. He said he understands why royalty, God, and Jesus needed special words (the royal honorific register), but he did not think priests like himself needed a different register from ordinary people. “Regarding those words [in the monk

register] with priests, it's too high and when used with priests, it makes it seem [we're] too far away from people." He would not mind the ordinary, polite honorific register, which younger Catholics use today with priests. In the excerpt below, Father Francis goes through several honorific registers. He begins by saying the royal register in the Bible when referring to God and King Herod is acceptable. He does not want people to use the monk register with him because it is too high for him, using *CHAN* ("eat") as an example. However, he does not want people to use the ordinary, neutral register with him because it is too low (*keng* "rest", *nyam* "eat"). He would prefer Catholics use the ordinary, polite register instead (*pisaa* "eat").

When Jesus **MIEN PREAH BONTUL** ("speak," royal) or King Herod **MIEN PREAH BONTUL**, this is what I mean. The language in the Bible is clear. It means by Khmer norms, they use higher words for royalty and for God. But for the living, they continue to respect priests with words that come from the heart, from feelings, but the language is not high like with royalty or Jesus... If they tell me, "Father go *keng*" ("rest," ordinary) language or if use *nyam* ("eat," ordinary). Can't use *nyam*, use *pisaa* ("eat," polite). "Father *pisaa*." Can't use ordinary *nyam*, but this word [*pisaa*] is higher than *nyam*, but it's not like *CHAN* or it's not too high.

After hearing Father Francis express his reservations and uncomfortableness with hierarchy and honorifics, Rey says to Father Francis, "*Kon* (child) wants to explain" ("I want to explain") before beginning an explanation on how Buddhist terms came into Catholicism. Another nun, in her late 60s, Sonya, says that Father Francis is a representative of God so priests are not like ordinary people. Priests have the ability to perform certain rituals, like baptism, and if he were just an ordinary person, he would be married with a wife. This is why they want to use the monk register with him. He *is* different from regular people in their eyes.

I was introduced to this group of elderly Catholics by Thida, a Catholic woman in her late 20s who works for the Catholic church in Battambang. She originally deferred to the elderly Catholics when I said I wanted to learn about the Catholic church, but later we finally had a chance to have a more casual conversation about her job at the Catholic church, how she got

involved with the church, and why she converted. She also shared the Catholic church’s mission and values. The Catholic Church in Battambang province often reaches out to Buddhist temples and other religions to arrange activities and events. In fact, I met Thida through the Ven. Ry who had worked with her and the Catholic church in the past to ordain a tree as a form of solidarity and friendship between the two religious institutions. The Ven. Ry was the one who encouraged me to talk to the Catholic church, said he had a contact there, and gave me Thida’s phone number.

We spoke about the activities the Catholic Church arranged with the various religious groups in the region. Because the Apostolic Prefect of Battambang Province is from Spain and his native language is Spanish, I asked what language everyone spoke when the various religious groups came together. Khmer, Thida said. When I asked her if she knew the Buddhist monk honorific register when conversing with the Venerable Ry, she said: (*kynom* is the ordinary first-person pronoun)

Thida: Uuuuy, I know very little! (*we both laugh*) I’m Khmer, but when I speak— when I speak on the phone with the Venerable— the Venerable Ry, I always mess up. Here [the Catholic Church], we use the ordinary language so when I pick up the phone, ‘Hello, *jumreapsuor*³⁵, *knyom*—Oh! Sor³⁶—[*slowed, measured pace*] *GANA*. *GANA*³⁷.’
Hello (ordinary) I (ordinary) I (monk)

I forget every— don’t really know it. It’s difficult. *Chas* [yes]
(Underlined is in English.)

Unlike Chhorvy, the Protestant woman who intentionally avoids the monk register when sharing taxis with monks, Thida does believe it is important to know the monk language when speaking to Buddhist monks, despite being Catholic now. In the above excerpt, Thida recalls what it is like

³⁵ Respectful Khmer greeting, but with monks, one should say *somtwaybongkum*

³⁶ It sounded like Thida was about to say “sorry” in English

³⁷ *GANA* could mean “yes” or an abbreviation of the first-person pronoun “I/me/my/mine.” I am unsure which word she meant it to mean in this context. If I had to guess, however, I think she was self-correcting her use of *knyom* (I).

speaking to the Venerable Ry on the phone: the false starts, the self-repairs, and the overall dysfluency. First, Thida uses a respectful Khmer greeting *jumreapsuor*, but normatively, Cambodians should greet monks with *SOM TWAY BONGKUM* instead. Second, Thida refers to herself as *knyom*, the ordinary first-person pronoun, at first before quickly correcting herself by saying *GANA*. Third, to make up for her linguistic slip ups, she lowers the volume of her voice and slows down her speed, both of which are ways Cambodians show respect to higher ranking individuals, much like Nuon's excerpt above.

Although Thida was a recent Catholic convert, converting just one year prior, and although she was raised Buddhist, she never fully learned the monk register. She had been in contact with the Catholic church ever since she was a teenager when the church visited her village through outreach programs, most importantly donating a wheelchair to her brother who had polio. She formed a relationship with the Apostolic Prefect, the priest who heads Battambang province, and he asked her to work for the church. She noted that she had worked for the Catholic Church for 10 years and many employees of the church were Buddhists; there was no pressure to convert. She finally decided to convert when she was about to marry her husband who is Catholic. Even now as a Catholic, Thida still felt the need to honor monks like the Ven. Ry by using the Buddhist monk register, but is embarrassed that as a Cambodian, she does not have command, often mixing up words and making mistakes on the phone with him.

Thida's reenactment of her phone call with the Ven. Ry reminded me of how my meeting with the elderly Catholics ended. That day I watched them as they discussed the loss of the monk register in Catholicism. Rey accepts that it is dying out. Hierarchy in Catholicism has flattened recently, not just in language, but also in behavior as Rey points to how we were all sitting together at the same table with Father Francis, as equals on an equal level. Before, when a priest

sits on a chair, he said, Cambodians would sit lower than him on the grass³⁸. Rey made a prediction that by the year 2050, the Catholic church in Cambodia will be like America and the English language, without any hierarchy at all. Nuon, alluding to a Khmer love song, turned to me and uttered, “Wait until *oun* is dead first” (Wait until I’m dead first). *Oun* means younger sibling or the woman in heterosexual relationship while *bang* (older sibling) refers to the man. The song Nuon was referring to, titled “Wait until *Bang* is Dead First,” is about a man who tells his lover that if she wants to leave him, she should wait until he has passed away (“Wait until I am dead first”). Nuon borrows the song title to refer to herself and changes the kinterm to reflect her gender. Here, near the end of our meeting, Nuon is realizing the tide has turned, but wants Catholic society to wait until she is gone before completely losing the monk honorific register with priests.

The Future of Buddhism

This flattening of hierarchy in society and language seems to be replicated in all spheres of life—a recurrent theme of my dissertation. While this chapter is primarily about Buddhism, it is just one of many domains being impacted by Cambodia’s rapid economic development after the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s and after Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s. The decline of the Buddhist monk register in Catholicism is evidence that it is not just about changes within Buddhism, but a change in how people, in all domains, are beginning to re-imagine social relations in Cambodian society. Linguistic privileges that were previously afforded to certain

³⁸ A similar custom that seems to also come from Buddhism, where Buddhists always make sure to sit lower than monks.

statuses like kings and elites and, in this case, monks and priests, are no longer viable in the current Cambodian landscape.

Although many others have written about Buddhism and religion in Cambodia during the post-war, post-Khmer Rouge period, none have taken a serious look at religion through the lens of language. My data suggests that Buddhism, and language related to Buddhism, as well as extreme social hierarchy are increasingly incompatible with modern-day aspirations and pursuits. I return to the questions from the beginning of my chapter that are lurking in the background: “What kind of country is Cambodia?” and “What do Cambodians want to be?” More and more Cambodians might not immediately answer “Buddhist.” They may say they want a good job. They want to be successful. They want to live well. Echoing the title of Paul Christensen’s article title, Cambodians are more likely to say, “We will never get rich if we follow Buddhism” (Christensen 2019). The potential loss of the Buddhist monk honorific language is a consequence.

However, I see glimpses of a society that still wants to hold onto more important Buddhist holidays, like Pchum Ben, which commemorates the dead. I see Cambodian Buddhists who still want to revere monks and Cambodian Catholics who want to honor priests, but perhaps not through a special register. The perceived decline of Buddhism might be iconic of the perceived decline of the Khmer language (Chapter 1). If Buddhism is a diagrammatic icon of the Khmer language, then Buddhism is nowhere near dying. It, like Khmer, is changing. If Khmer can change to suit the needs of its ever changing speakers, then Buddhism too can change to suit the needs of modern-day Cambodians who might not be able to adhere to every precept, who are too busy to visit the temple as often, and who cannot speak to monks.

Chapter 3 Did Jesus *Slap* or *Sokut* for Our Sins? Khmer Honorifics under Debate & Change in Christianity

Death, [I'm] not afraid. Not afraid. Because Jesus *slap* ("die," ordinary)—that Jesus was willing to **SO-SOKUT** ("die," royal) also. So why should I be afraid? Jesus **SOKUT** and Jesus lived again. I- when I *slap* I will live with Jesus again. – Touch Bin in *Death, Where is Your Sting?*³⁹

The excerpt above comes from a testimony video produced by Moving Works, a non-profit Christian filmmaking ministry (Moving Works 2016). Viewers watch Touch Bin, an elderly Cambodian woman, bear her testimony in Khmer. Tailored to an English-speaking audience, the English translation is not relegated to the bottom of the video as an afterthought, but is well-placed and prominently displayed in large font throughout the video, sometimes even taking center-stage over Touch's own face. At the climax of the video, not only are non-Cambodian viewers unaware of Touch's shift from the ordinary register to the royal honorific register, but Moving Works' English translation erases her linguistic stumble and subsequent self-repair concerning two Khmer honorific variants for the verb "die": *slap* (used with commoners) and **SOKUT** (used with royalty). I reproduce her utterance here, using my own translation of her supposed mishap, to introduce a set of issues I want to address in this chapter: the role of Khmer honorifics in Cambodian Christianity. While Buddhism is Cambodia's official religion and a symbol of tradition (see Chapter 2), I will discuss Christianity in this chapter because of its rise in popularity, because it exemplifies one of the many post-war foreign

³⁹ Touch's stumble begins at 1:09: <https://youtu.be/gIKS5grZqgU>

influences into Cambodia, and because linguistic changes in Christian settings are also consistent with the linguistic changes that are happening throughout Cambodia.

In this chapter, I watch Cambodian Christians grapple with honorific register-use in church. Which honorific register should Christians use to talk *to* God and *about* God? Which honorific register should God use to speak to people on earth? The answers to these questions vary as Christians envision their relationship with God in different ways, using different honorific registers to realize that kind of relationship they want. I show that Christians want non-reciprocal honorific usage with God because they all agree that he is higher status. What they do not agree on is how that non-reciprocal honorific usage should be expressed. Is it a master-slave non-reciprocal relationship? Or a king-modern citizen non-reciprocal relationship? Although there is still tension, I show that there is a general shift toward a flattened relationship with God, which impacts the kinds of honorific registers Cambodians not only use with God, but what registers they expect God to use with them. This shift toward flattening is not unique within the domain of Christianity. It is a prevailing trend across Cambodia, which impacts people's use and interpretation of Khmer honorific registers.

After giving a brief history of Christianity and Bible translation in Cambodia, I show that there is general consensus in how Christians should talk about God. While there are exceptions, for the large part, Christians prefer using the royal honorific register with God, equating him with the status of a king and paying the highest linguistic deference possible to him. Nevertheless, I discuss the challenges to this ideal as the average Cambodians is not fluent in the royal register. I show how Christians make considerable efforts to learn the register and how they socialize new converts into using the register properly.

Next, I discuss the largest area of contestation among Cambodian churches: how should God speak to people? The answer to this question also aligns with which Bible translation Christians prefer, but it also reflects a growing trend toward status flattening and register flattening. Some older, more conservative Christians, who adhere to an older translation of the Bible do not mind when God uses the non-honorific register⁴⁰, a register that is sometimes intimate, but sometimes impolite. Today, a growing number of Cambodians, both Christians and non-Christians alike, feel uncomfortable with the non-honorific register in society (the topic of Chapter 4), which they equate with anger and condescension. Instead, more and more Christians today adhere to newer Bible translations which have retranslated God's honorific-use, toward the ordinary register and the polite register. In doing so, God elevates Christians both socially and linguistically. This change in attitude about how God should speak and treat people reflects similar changes across the rest of Cambodian society as extreme hierarchy, akin to a master-slave or landlord-peasant relationship, and condescension toward others is less acceptable today. Like the rest of Cambodian society, these Christians also have an expanded moral circle of honorification and they want God to expand his circle of honorification to include them too.

This chapter continues to support my prevailing argument that the Khmer honorific register system is being flattened. While I argue that the royal honorific register is in decline for most Cambodians, this chapter will show that the small 0.4% of the population (Pew Research Center 2015) who are Christians is keeping the register alive. It supports my argument that Cambodians have no issue with elite honorific registers that give deference upwards. The problem is that most Cambodians are not quite fluent enough to use those registers because they

⁴⁰ There is no formal name in Khmer for this register so I have variously referred to it as a dis-honorific register and the non-honorific register. See Chapter 4 for more information.

have not had opportunities to use and practice them. This chapter will be about one community who is trying to keep the royal honorific register alive.

Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	first-person	second-person	“eat”
Royal People talking to God and Jesus	commoner speaking to royalty	<i>toulbongkum cie knyom mjass</i>	“your highness”	<i>soay</i>
	royalty speaking to commoner	<i>troung anh, yeung (we)</i>	titles, forms of address, (see commoner below)	
Monk	Anyone speaking to monk	<i>knyom preah karuna</i>	“venerable”	<i>chan</i>
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)	<i>atma</i>	<i>nyom</i>	
Ordinary / Common God talking to people in KTV/KSV	polite/formal	<i>knyom baht (male), neang knyom (female)</i>	<i>neak, koat (he/she)</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam, hob</i>
God talking to people KOV	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng / haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>si</i> <i>chras chram, bok kandal deumtrung</i>

Table 7: Khmer honorific registers in Christian settings. The purple boxed in area is how most Cambodian Christians speak to God. The blue boxed in area is how God speaks to people in the KOV Bible published in 1954. The dotted black boxed in area is how God speaks to people in more recent Bible translations (KTV and KSV). Notice the parallelisms between the flattening of Khmer honorific registers in Cambodian society and the flattening of Khmer honorific registers in Christian churches.

If you refer to Table 6, a large number of Christians believe they should use the royal register, the purple boxed in area, with God. Where we find contention, however, is how God should speak to people. The older Bible (or Khmer Old Version, KOV) translated God’s speech using the non-honorific register (the blue boxed in area). In doing so, they were translating His language in a way that demonstrates His power and authority over people. Here God is the big person (*neak thom*) while humans were the little person (*neak thuoch*). In the 1950s, when the first Khmer Bible was published, this kind of dynamic was a non-issue and Cambodian Christians accepted his non-honorifics. As early as the 1970s, Christians began asking for a more modern-sounding Bible. After several decades of war that delayed the project, it finally came to

fruition in 1998 and 2005, when the New Testament and the Old Testament were published, respectively. God's words were modified in ways that reflected honorific alternants found in the ordinary register (the dotted black boxed in area). Hence, more recent Bible translators had God using more "polite" terms with humans.

History of Christianity and Bible Translation in Cambodia

To understand the debates over honorific register use and Bible translations, I will show how Bible translation practices have been impacted during Cambodia's volatile history.

Christianity has not had a very long history in Cambodia, which was why the first complete translation of the Bible into the Khmer language was not published until the 20th century. While the Catholic Church had been in Cambodia since the 16th century, the Catholic community was mostly comprised of ethnic-Portuguese, French, and Vietnamese. It is estimated that before WWI there were 36,000 Catholics in Cambodia, but only 3,000 of which were Cambodian (Ponchaud 2012).

When Protestant missionaries were given permission to enter the country in 1923, they embarked on translating the Bible into Khmer. Reverend Arthur L. Hammond, an American missionary, is credited with the first Khmer translation of the Bible (Cline and Bray 1975; Sok Nheb 2000; Hong 1996). Hammond's Khmer Bible translation, which was based on the American Standard Version Bible, took thirty years to complete because of the interruption of WWII. This Bible, published in 1954, is also known as Khmer Old Version (KOV) after newer translations of the Khmer Bible have been introduced.

Due to their intertextual connections to some "original" text, scriptural translations, according to Schieffelin (2007, 2014), present cultural and linguistic challenges and are often

sites of contestation. Thus, it was no surprise that Hammond’s translation was not without its critics. As the number of Protestants rose to about 5,000 people by the year 1974 (Cline and Bray 1975), some Protestants and Catholics began to critique Hammond’s translation as “too difficult to understand, especially for non-Christians” (Hong 1996). While the concerns ranged from syntactic⁴¹ to semantic⁴² issues, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus primarily on the place of Khmer honorific registers within Christian settings.

Hammond inserted hierarchy into the Khmer Bible. Through transduction and transformation (Silverstein 2003b), Hammond translated the Bible in a way that he believed Cambodian readers would find acceptable, using the Khmer royal register in situations concerning God. In doing so, he believed Cambodians would want to relate to God as a king, the highest level of respect. Christian missionaries working with other Asian and Pacific Islander languages with honorific registers have also done the same. Harkness (2015) and Philips (2007), for example, observed similar pragmatic translations in Korean and Tongan Bibles, respectively, where the highest honorific register is reserved for God.

⁴¹ Some Christians believed that Hammond translated too literally from English to Khmer, using the American Standard Version Bible as the source. This introduced awkward syntax into Khmer, such as the passive voice. For example, Hammond’s literal translation of “Your sins are forgiven” in Mark 2:5 was regarded as strange to Khmer-speakers (Sok Nheb 2000), presenting an issue between minimal intertextual gap vs. a maximal intertextual gap (Handman 2010; Briggs and Bauman 1992). Hammond’s translation left a minimal intertextual gap between his source language (American English) and the target language (Khmer), but some Christians found his close translation difficult to understand. I have heard that some Cambodian Christians, however, might believe the awkward syntax is a necessary part of being Christian, having its own religious dialect. They almost seem to say, “We speak this way in church, but it is a part of our identity.”

⁴² For example, “prophet” was translated as *howra* (អូរា) in the KOV. Some Christians disliked the term *howra* because they believe its original meaning, “fortune teller,” does not fit the Christian concept of “prophet,” a person who can communicate with and speak for God. Additionally, some of Hammond’s translation choices came from existing Buddhist terms, which may be misinterpreted by Cambodians who are more familiar with the Buddhist definitions, giving the terms unintended meanings (Sok Nheb 2000). “Heaven” was translated as *stansuor* (ស្ថានសួគ៌), a Buddhist term for a place where all divinities live. Unlike the Christian concept of “heaven,” *stansuor* is still part of the sinful world (ibid). When one American missionary asked Cambodians if they wanted to go to *stansuor*, she was surprised when Cambodians told her that they did not want to go based on their Buddhist understanding of the term. To her, heaven was a beautiful place, but for Buddhists, *stansuor* was not.

The use of the royal register, however, presents some problems—which I will expand in more detail in the next section. First, not all Khmer-speakers are fluent in the royal honorific register. As many scholars of honorific languages have noted, competency in honorific registers is unevenly distributed in society (Irvine 2009 [1995]; Errington 1998; Agha 2007). In Cambodia, only educated elites and, more recently, devout Christians know the royal register. It is rare for the average Cambodian to be in the presence of the king, so it is not necessary to know the royal register. Thus, most Christian converts do not have command of the royal register, so they must make an effort to learn and practice this register.

Another point of contention stems from Hammond’s animation of God’s speech. Some Christians believed Hammond may have gone too far in his adherence to hierarchy, rendering some of God’s language too condescending and impolite. For example, the first-person pronoun used by God in the KOV was the Khmer pronoun *anh*. Some Cambodians categorize *anh* as rude, which may cause Cambodians to have a negative reaction upon hearing or reading God’s use of such a term. Nonetheless, some Cambodians say it is appropriate in contexts where a *neak thom* (big person) is speaking to a *neak thuoch* (small person), such as a parent to child or a boss to an employee, defending this translation choice because everyone is lower status than God. While Hammond was translating the Bible in the 1920s-1950s, the use of this pronoun may have been acceptable, but by the 1970s, it was beginning to be viewed as inappropriate, prompting its erasure in newer Bible translations. We will see later that there is a generational shift in how people view these terms, with some even equating the non-honorific usage as symbolizing the past.

The United Bible Societies (UBS), a worldwide association of Bible societies with local affiliate members in several countries, launched a new translation project in the early 1970s to

create a more modern translation of the Khmer Bible. The translation team's "main concern... was to provide Khmer people not with a 'religious dialect,' but rather with a Bible which speaks the language they learn at school, the language they use in the workplace" (Sok Nheb 2000). Around the same time the new translation project began, Cambodia fell into civil war between the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge. Most of the fighting began in the countryside so many rural Cambodians fled to the capital of Phnom Penh seeking refuge. With school closures and a lack of medical personnel, Protestant missionaries provided shelter, food, schooling, and medical assistance to those in need, which also gave them the opportunity to evangelize (Cline and Bray 1975).

In 1975, after the UBS translation team completed their first draft of the new translation of the New Testament, but before they could complete the translation of the Old Testament, the Khmer Rouge defeated the Khmer Republic. After gaining control of the country, the Khmer Rouge expelled foreigners and for the next four years, they isolated Cambodia from the outside world. Religion was banned. Buddhist monks were forced to disrobe (or, defrock) and many Christians and Muslims, fearful of execution, hid their religious identity. All but one person on the new Bible translation team perished and most of their manuscripts were lost. The only member of the translation team to survive, a French priest named Francois Ponchaud, fled the country with the first few chapters of Matthew (Sok Nheb 2000; Hong 1996; Ponchaud 2012). Father Ponchaud returned to France and continued the Bible translation project in the 1980s with the help of Reverend Arun Sok Nheb, a Cambodian pastor serving Cambodian refugees who had resettled in France (Hong 1996; Sok Nheb 2000).

Despite the death of Christians during the Khmer Rouge regime, there was an increase in Christian conversion after the regime's collapse. In 1979, after the Vietnamese invasion, there

was persistent fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese throughout the 1980s. Many international relief organizations came to the refugee camps to administer aid, some of which were Christian organizations. Christian organizations not only proselytized in the camps, but some were also involved in the refugee resettlement process. Organizations, such as the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and local churches sponsored refugees to resettle in countries like the United States and France where churches continued to provide social services to Cambodian refugees even after resettlement (Smith-Hefner 1994). Because of their contact with Christian organizations, Cambodians in the refugee camps and those who resettled in other countries sometimes converted. Some of the refugee converts return to Cambodia periodically on missionizing trips to proselytize.

In the 1980s, in the midst of Cambodian displacement around the world, the USB translation team in France worked tirelessly to translate the Bible. This translation team differed with Hammond's translation methods in many ways. In contrast to Hammond's reliance on American English in the American Standard Version Bible, this translation team also relied on the original language of the Old Testament and New Testament: Hebrew and Greek, respectively. Most importantly, this Bible translation team changed many of the so-called vulgar non-honorific terms to what they deemed to be a more polite register. Instances of *anh* (I) were changed to *yung* (literally "we," a trope where the king is viewed as more than one person), *knyom* ("I," informal), or *preah mjass* (a person-referring term where God refers to Himself as "Exalted Master").

In 1993, a combination of events occurred. Not only did the translation team publish the new translation of the New Testament (the translation of the Old Testament was still pending), but Cambodia was also re-opening itself to the world after the Vietnamese relinquished control

and after all the warring factions signed the Paris Peace Accord. Cambodia's new constitution recognized religious freedom and the Cambodian government began allowing Christian missionaries to return to Cambodia. Thai refugee camps closed permanently and Cambodians, some of whom converted to Christianity, finally returned home.

Christianity grew in popularity as Cambodian Christians returned from abroad and as Christian missionaries poured into the country in the 1990s. After experiencing such traumatic and tragic events, Cambodians often turn to religion, not only for comfort, but also for answers as to why the Khmer Rouge brutality occurred (Smith-Hefner 1990). In Buddhism, an individual's fate is predetermined in part by their past lives so Buddhist Cambodians believe they must have committed grave misdeeds in their past lives which caused them to suffer in their present lives (ibid). Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, offered an alternative viewpoint where one's sins can be forgiven during one's lifetime (Smith-Hefner 1994). Even former Khmer Rouge leaders like Duch, one of the top Khmer Rouge leaders, converted to Christianity to perhaps absolve his sins. Using their personal experiences and survival stories under the Khmer Rouge, many Christian Cambodians were able to re-interpret their suffering as a trial and that God had a hand in saving them, creating the perfect testimony. Besides the attractive doctrinal beliefs, Christian organizations also offered access to important resources and programs. Although conversion was not a prerequisite to accessing such resources, Cambodians who used them were open to being ministered and were more likely to convert, which caused some critics to label this "rice bowl conversion."

In 1997, the translation of the Old Testament was completed and the newly translated Bible, with both Old and New Testament combined, was published in 1998. This translation is called Today's Khmer Version (TKV). When the TKV Bible was published, there was uproar

that divided the denominations. While Catholics today have accepted the TKV as their official Bible (Craddock 2016), some Protestants had reservations. In one article, one American Protestant missionary reportedly said the TKV was a dumbed down version of the word of God and Protestant pastors have told their congregation to avoid this Bible, telling Cambodians that they must challenge themselves to struggle through Hammond's translation in the same way English-speakers struggle through the King James Bible (Bailey 1997). Some Protestants were happy with the TKV's modern translation, but were unhappy with the name changes which reflected the Greek or Hebrew pronunciations instead of the American pronunciation. To appease those latter Protestants, the UBS revised the TKV by returning to the American pronunciations. In 2005, the Khmer Standard Version (KSV) was published and some Protestants were more accepting of this translation. Other Protestants continue to cling to the KOV Bible.

Bible Translations	Notes
Khmer Old Version (KOV) 1954 - Used by Protestants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English was the source language - More literal translation method - Users who favor TKV and KSV believe the KOV uses impolite honorific register - Preferred by older generation: easier to read
Today’s Khmer Version (TKV) 1998 - Used by Catholics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hebrew and Greek were the source language - Dynamic equivalency translation method
Khmer Standard Version (KSV) 2005 - Used by Protestants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Users who favor KOV say TKV and KSV are dumbed down versions - Preferred by younger generation: easier to read

Table 8: Summary of the three main Khmer Bibles with their similarities and differences

Khmer’s Royal Honorific Register in Christianity: *sokut*, not *slap*

Studying honorifics within religious contexts is also important because it reminds us that honorific-usage is not always about relationships between living humans; they can also reflect our social relations with beings who have not been born yet, who no longer exist, who may never have existed (Agha 2007). How do we talk about our future unborn children? How do we talk to our long-deceased ancestors? How might we talk to angels, the devil, and God? Language need not be limited to the present here and now, but it is about our relationships with all spirits, beings, and even inanimate objects. In the opening excerpt of the chapter, I use Touch’s slip up between *slap* (“die,” ordinary) and **SOKUT** (“die,” royal) to illustrate why the royal honorific register is so fraught in Cambodian Christian settings. In discussing the history of Khmer Bible translation, I emphasized how the first Protestant Bible translators took great care in translating the importance of hierarchy into Christianity. In this section, I show how regular Cambodian Christians feel about the use of the royal register.

I often asked Christians why God and Jesus were referred to with a different register. One American Christian informant in Battambang who has interpreted church services between Khmer and English told me that God (or Jesus) is the “king of kings” so she completely understood why Cambodians would want to give him the highest form of praise through language. While talking to Theory, a Christian woman in her early 30s, about why Christians use the royal honorific register in church, she said “Jesus is like a king.” When I asked if the royal register was difficult to learn, she said it was hard at first, but once you start reading the Bible and hear the words on a daily basis, you will begin to learn and understand. During our conversation, Theory even caught one of my “errors.” I referred to Jesus with the ordinary third-person *koat* (he/she) instead of the royal third-person pronoun **TRUONG**. She was quick to say, “Just now, Cheryl used *koat* [with Jesus]. It should be **TRUONG**.”

Chhorvy, a Christian woman in her 40s, was adamant that God and Jesus will never be on the same level as humans so she can never use words from the ordinary register with them. She knows she is already close to God, but she chooses to use a different register with Him to show her devotion.

In Khmer, when we believe in God, we don’t want to—we know we’re close to God, but we don’t want to put ourselves on the same level as God. We want to glorify God, and we want God’s fame and God’s honor [to be] higher than us. That’s why we use the royal honorific register.

Chhorvy said it is already part of Cambodian culture to notice hierarchical differences between people so Cambodian Christians do not find it strange to use a different register. In fact, they may even expect it since they habitually pay deference to anyone who is older, higher status, or superior.

Language Socialization into the Royal Honorific Register

The average Cambodian does not know the royal honorific register very well. While speaking to non-Christian friends and informants about it, they often admit that they only know a few words, like the first-person pronoun commoners must use with royalty (**TUOL BONGKUM CIE KNYOM MASS**, or its abbreviations), but not much. One of my friend's mother, Ms. Ung, told me,

We know some, but when speaking, there's some wrong [words], some right [words]. We know some because we often watch videos⁴³ so know some. Know a little. **TUOL PREAH BONGKUM** and what not. **KNYOM PREAH KARUNA**⁴⁴, we know. (Laughs) When we have to speak this [register], afraid we'll speak incorrectly. Can't speak well.

Although Miss Ung is not Christian, I share this admission to illustrate the linguistic landscape in Cambodia so that readers will get a sense of the challenges Christian missionaries and Christian churches face when they minister and proselytize to Cambodians. What do Christians do when a majority of the population do not know the register very well? Do they try to socialize Christians into speaking it or will they change the Bible to make it easier for the average person to understand? I found that both were happening, but that the former, that socializing Cambodians into the register, was more common.

⁴³ I am unsure if Ms. Ung is talking about news broadcasts on television about the royal family or if she is referring to fictional television shows or movies. Regarding the latter, one friend in her early 20s, Sarong, told me that Cambodians are more likely to hear the royal honorific register while watching Chinese or Korean dramas set in ancient times. I presume the plots involve royalty and kingdoms. So, when these TV shows or movies are dubbed into Khmer, the characters use the royal register when referring to royalty.

⁴⁴ This appears to be the Buddhist monk first-person pronoun. I am unsure if she was trying to make a point that Cambodians are also likely to know the Buddhist monk register equivalent for the first-person pronoun.

	Royal honorific register	Ordinary register
Body parts		
Hand	<i>preah huos</i>	<i>dai</i>
Feet	<i>preah batie</i>	<i>cheung</i>
Blood	<i>preah lohut</i>	<i>chiem</i>
Face	<i>preah pheak</i>	<i>muk</i>
Verbs		
To be located at / stay / reside	<i>kuong</i>	<i>nov</i>
To come	<i>yeang mok</i>	<i>mok</i>
To go	<i>yeang tov</i>	<i>tov</i>
To say / speak	<i>preah mien bontul</i>	<i>niyay, ta</i>
Pronouns		
First-person	<i>tuolbongkum, kon</i> (child)	<i>knyom</i>
Second-person	Title	<i>neak</i> , Title, Kinterm
Third-person	<i>truong</i> , Title	<i>koat</i>

Table 9: Examples of the most commonly used royal honorific terms Christians use in church along with their ordinary register counterpart

The common narrative among Cambodians, both Christian and non-Christian, is that the royal honorific register became non-existent in Cambodia after the king was exiled. King Sihanouk’s exile began in 1970 when the Khmer Republic held a coup. He continued to be in exile during the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). When Cambodia fell under Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s, he was still in exile. It was not until 1993 when King Sihanouk finally return to Cambodia. Hence, Cambodians told me, they had no need to learn the royal honorific register for a couple of decades. When I asked my friend Rithy, who was probably 8 or 9 years old when the king returned, whether he learned the royal honorific register, he said Cambodia was still a “communist” country (due to the Vietnamese socialist occupation) when he was in the first grade so it was not something he learned in school. His Excellency Dr. Chan Somnoble, a linguist, also said something similar when we met and talked about my dissertation research about the Khmer honorific registers. He even wrote some notes on a piece of paper, jotting down “រាជនិយមទី២ 1993” (Royalism #2 1993), when he talked about, not just the return of the king, but also the

return of the royal honorific register into the Khmer language. That #2 refers to King Sihanouk's second reign; his first reign was from 1953-1970, after Cambodia's independence from France up until he was ousted by the Khmer Republic.

I must emphasize that the royal honorific register is not limited to the Cambodian royal family, but is applicable to royalty in other parts of the world. So the absence of King Sihanouk alone does not mean the register could not have been maintained among Cambodians who wanted to discuss foreign, fictional, or historical monarchies. Indeed, as the topic of this chapter emphasizes, the royal register can be used outside of instances pertaining to Cambodian royalty. Even so, it appears that the register was not directly relevant to most Cambodians when their own monarchy, their own king, was in exile. This hindered efforts to learn, hear, and practice the register.

This narrative and this history, of an absent king and a register that was already non-existent due to his absence, still influences Khmer language socialization today in Cambodia for a couple of reasons. First, the king's return also coincided with the adoption of the 1993 Cambodian constitution, which stated that all Cambodians had freedom of religion. Before, Christian organizations were not allowed to enter Cambodia, but now they can. So the king's absence in Cambodia also overlapped with the absence of Christian organizations. Secondly, the absence of the king during the 1970s and 1980s was another reason why Cambodians were not very fluent in the register; it did not "exist" during that time. Mr. Y, a director of a Christian ministry in Phnom Penh, said that there seem to be more educated people today so he thinks the royal register will become more widespread, but made a point to talk about the past:

Before we didn't really speak the king's language very much because the previous generation, in the 1980s, 9⁴⁵—we didn't have a king. So we erased the king's language. When the king returned, like on the radio, on television, they broadcast royal words, people begin to learn it more and more.

I will return to Mr. Y later in my chapter because his ministry is one of the few in Cambodia that is actively cutting back on royal terms.

Returning to the register, many Cambodian Christians will admit that the royal register might be difficult at first, especially for uneducated Cambodians in the provinces, but once Cambodians are exposed to it, they will begin to be fluent in the register. When I asked whether Chhorvy already knew the royal honorific register before becoming Christian, she told me that she did not know the royal honorific register very well when she first converted to Christianity around 19-years-old. “[I] didn't really know it because I was still young,” she said “But when we begin to believe in Jesus Christ, and we begin to learn to read God's words (**PREAH BONTUL**), we know [it].” Chhorvy used a royal honorific register to describe God's words or God's speech: **PREAH BONTUL**. It is similar to the royal honorific verb “to speak/say”: **PREAH MIEN BONTUL**.

Theary, the Christian who corrected my pronoun-use for Jesus, said that when she works with new converts, she often waits to correct them later. Indeed, she did the same with me. She waited until I had finished talking before pointing it out. One elderly Catholic woman, Ms. Tran, who works as a translator for the Cambodian Bible Society told me that she often corrects people in the following way:

⁴⁵ I think Mr. Y was about to also say “90s,” but he stopped himself because the king did return in 1993.

We say, “That’s wrong. Jesus **SOKUT** (die).” We tell them that. “Jesus **SOAY** (eat).” “Jesus **MIEN BONTUL** (speak)”... So pastors and teachers explain it in this way. They become interested and help to strengthen everyone in church so that they understand. When they understand, they will begin to say, “Jesus **MIEN BONTUL** (speak).”

She estimates that after 3 months most new Christian converts will learn to read and understand the Bible, and relatedly the royal honorific register. Using myself as an example, I remember feeling completely lost during Cambodian church services the first few times I attended, but once I began studying the equivalencies between the royal honorific register and the ordinary register, and learning important Christian vocabulary such as “redemption” and “prophet,” it did not take me very long to begin having an easier time in church.

Another staff member at the United Bible Society of Cambodia, Bora, said that when he first worked as an interpreter for teachers, interpreting from English to Khmer, he often made mistakes, using the ordinary word instead of the royal word. Underlined words were uttered in English.

Sometimes I forgot to use the royal words. I mixed up and used the regular words when I talk about see or eat or look. We were using the ordinary words like *muhl* (“look,” ordinary). We didn’t use the word **TOT** (“look,” royal) because we were new. Later after we studied the Bible, read the Bible often, then we know that we need to use the royal register according to the Bible when we translate. We begin to notice later that I now know how to use the royal register really well.⁴⁶

Reducing or Eliminating the Royal Honorific Register

There are two additional Bibles that are not as widespread in Cambodia, but are worth mentioning. First is the Khmer Christian Bible (KCB), which was translated by Words of Life Ministries and published in 2012. At the time of my research in 2016, only the New Testament had been translated and they were still working on the Old Testament. Mr. Y, one of the

⁴⁶ I am unsure why Bora switches between first-person singular and plural. He may have been talking about himself sometimes, but also referring to new Christian converts in general other times.

Directors at Words of Life Ministries, which created its own Bible translation, said that they retranslated the Bible with Cambodians in the provinces in mind, those who were not educated and who do not know the royal honorific vocabulary very well—bringing up the urban-rural divide. This was why they put a lot of effort into creating a new Bible, “reducing difficult words” (*kat bontoay peak bibak bibak*) to make it more comprehensible to those in the provinces. Unlike uneducated Cambodians who were criticized for misspellings as a result of Khmer’s challenging orthography (see Chapter 1), we find small attempts to help uneducated, Christian converts comprehend the Bible. While educated Cambodian elites are unwilling to change Khmer spelling to cater to the semi-literate, a small number of Christian ministries are willing to make lexical changes, changes from the royal honorific variants toward more common lexical terms.

When I asked Mr. Y for any examples of instances where they did or did not use royal vocabulary, he gave one interesting example. He said in their Bible (KCB), when Jesus “eats,” they use the word *borepok*, which is in the polite sub-register of the ordinary honorific register, whereas other Bibles would translate the word “eat” as SOAY, the royal honorific word. When translators use SOAY, they are putting Jesus on the same level as royalty. When the KCB uses *borepok*, Jesus is given an ordinary, but also a very polite term for “eat,” which might be due to his humanness as well. I transcribe Mr. Y’s words below. The regular italicized word is the ordinary register. The bolded word is the polite register. The word that is capitalized, bolded, and underlined is the royal honorific register.

ពេលព្រះយេស៊ូ ញ៉ាំ (laughs) យើងប្រើពាក្យថា បរិភោគ
When Jesus *nyam* (laughs), we use ***borepok***.

ហើយគម្ពីរផ្សេងទៀតដាក់ថា សោយ
While other Bibles use **SOAY**.

Notice how Mr. Y uses three different alternants for the word “eat” in his sentence. In explaining how their Bible translates situations in which Jesus “eats,” he uses the word *nyam*. Basically, it could be glossed as, “When Jesus is eating...” If I had to guess why he laughed a bit after saying this, it might have been because he noticed that he just used a very ordinary word for “eat” with Jesus to begin his explanation. As someone living in Phnom Penh, he probably uses *nyam* on a day to day basis because city people tend to use *nyam*. His use of *nyam* here is interesting because it comes right before he explains that their Bible actually endorses a more polite word (***borepok***) for Jesus, which is one register above *nyam*. However, this “polite” word is not on the same level as the word other Bibles use, which is **SOAY**, a royal word that the average Cambodian rarely encounters.

Other examples of royal words that were edited out were body part words, replaced with the *samanh* or ordinary words. Interestingly, Mr. Y said the KCB kept the royal word for “hands” in their Bible because a majority of Cambodians recognize the royal word **PREAH HUOS**. After I asked him about other common “body” terms, like “feet” and “blood,” he also stated that the KCB kept the royal word for “feet” and “blood.” Mr. Y concedes that they could not eliminate all of the royal words because if they did, people might think they were “not giving value” (*ot aoy tumlai*) to God or to the Bible. This seems to echo many Christians told me when I

asked them why they used a separate register for God. Nonetheless, Mr. Y said his ministry still made sure to have more “ordinary words” (*peak samanh*, or words one would commonly find in the ordinary honorific register) in the KCB.

Another one of Words of Life Ministries’ directors wrote this in the comment section of his blog when someone asked him why they were working on another Khmer translation of the Bible.

According to a nationwide survey 74% of all literate Christians do not have access to a Bible. That is the main reason behind the Khmer Christian Bible: ACCESSIBILITY to the Scriptures. We also assembled a team of Christian Khmer (living in Cambodia) scholars including consultants for grammar and spelling from the top linguistic scholars in the nation to make an ACCURATE, LITERAL and CLEAR translation of the scriptures. The multi-denominational Evangelical team of translators worked 8 years on the NT alone. The OT is being prepared right now. I don’t want to criticize the other 4 Bible Versions available in Cambodia, but we feel the Khmer Christian Bible is very accurate to the original languages because we did not translate it from English, but from Greek and Hebrew. – Steve Hyde <http://www.asiaforjesus.org/2012/06/28/khmer-christian-bible-hot-off-the-press/>

Here, Steve Hyde may have been criticizing the KOV since Hammond had used an American English Bible as his source language. Hyde brings up the authenticity of the KCB’s translation since they went to the Bible’s original language: the Old Testament in Hebrew (and perhaps also Aramaic) and the New Testament in Greek.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses was another Christian church in Cambodia that made changes to how they refer to God and Jesus. Two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Battambang, a husband and wife, told me that in 2008 their church made a doctrinal decision to stop using the royal honorific register in their Khmer language publication in 2008. When I got a chance to travel to Phnom Penh to meet an American Witness on the Khmer translation team, Jason Blackwell, I learned that their decision was based on the original text of the Bible (Blackwell 2016). Hebrew and Greek do not have honorifics so Khmer should use ordinary terms when speaking to or about

Jehovah. Secondly, due to illiteracy and lack of education, many of the Cambodians they are trying to reach are not well-versed in the royal register. The Witnesses that I met in Battambang said that they did not want to emulate the way Latin was originally used in the European Catholic churches; they want Cambodians to understand the word of God in their own vernacular. Cambodians should not feel they need to learn a new language, or in this case, a new elite register that most of the population is not fluent in. The 2008 decision was more of a publication policy (Blackwell 2016) and both Witnesses in Battambang confirmed that Cambodian Witnesses are free to speak to God in any way they choose. After the change was implemented, some older Cambodian Witnesses continued to use **TUOL BONGKUM**(I) in Kingdom Halls because they were uncomfortable with using *yeung knyom* (exclusive “we,” or the royal “we”).

Words of Life Ministries and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are in the minority when it comes to eliminating or reducing the use of the royal honorific register in church and in the Bible. It would be interesting to see how these differences pan out in Cambodia in the next couple of decades, but at this point, it appears that the KSV, TKV, and KOV Bibles, as well as the commitment to using the royal honorific register is still going strong.

When God uses the Non-honorific Register

Most Cambodian Christians have no problem using the royal honorific register when speaking about God. Many do so willingly because they want to honor him and “give him value” (*aoy tumlai*), even if the register has a slight learning curve. In recent decades, however, Cambodians are no longer comfortable with social inequality, or social hierarchy that is downward facing. More than a generation ago, this kind of dynamic between a rich, powerful

patron and a poor, powerless client, between a slave master and an enslaved person, was the norm. The big person (*neak thom*) can treat the little person (*neak thuoch*) disrespectfully and speak to them disrespectfully using the non-honorific register. In light of the social changes in Cambodian society during the post-war decades, such as its re-emergence into the globalized world and participation in the open market, Cambodians are beginning to see the world and themselves differently. This ideological change is happening across all of Cambodia and Christianity is not immune to it.

The KOV (Khmer Old Version) Bible, first translated in 1954, often translated God's words with the non-honorific register. This meant that God was the *neak thom* (big person), talking down toward people on earth who were *neak thuoch* (little persons). The most frequent non-honorific terms are pronouns: *anh* (the non-honorific first-person pronoun) and *aeng* (the non-honorific second-person pronoun). Since the 1950s, however, Christians began seeking newer translations of the Bible. One of the most significant changes was with God's language-use toward people.

One Protestant church in Battambang province still adheres to the KOV. There were a few instances where speakers animated God's voice or Jesus's voice using the non-honorific register. In one lesson, a church member was telling the story of Saul's conversion story in Acts 9:3-9. The speaker, a man in his 40s or 50s, did not read directly from the Bible, but gave a summary of events. In the story, Saul encounters Jesus, but does not know who he is so he asks, "Who are you?" According to the speaker, Jesus said the following:

អញជាយេស៊ូ ដែលឯងបានបៀតបៀនអញ។

"*Anh* is Jesus, whom *aeng* has persecuted *anh*."

"I am Jesus, whom you have persecuted me."

In summarizing the Bible passage to churchgoers, the speaker animated Jesus using the non-honorific register: *anh* (I/me) and *aeng* (you). Interestingly, in the KOV, however, it appears that Jesus never uttered *anh* or *aeng*. In Acts 9:5, the KOV translators had Jesus speaking in the ordinary register with Saul:

ខ្ញុំនេះជាព្រះយេស៊ូវ ដែលអ្នកបៀតបៀន
“*Knyom* is Lord Jesus, whom *neak* has persecuted.”
“I am Jesus, whom who you have persecuted.”

Even the KSV, the newer Bible translation, is similar:

ខ្ញុំជាយេស៊ូវដែលអ្នកកំពុងតែបៀតបៀន
“*Knyom* is Jesus, whom *neak* is persecuting.”
“I am Jesus, whom who you are persecuting.”

In both Bibles, Jesus uses the ordinary pronouns *knyom* (instead of *anh*) and *neak* (instead of *aeng*). The speaker, however, intuitively sees Jesus as having the prerogative to speak in the non-honorific register, giving him this particular voice when giving his lesson. Even though the KOV is notorious for having God, the Father, speak in non-honorifics, it appears that Jesus does not use non-honorifics in the KOV. But since this particular church in Battambang is a proponent of the KOV Bible, it made sense that churchgoers there were more likely to accept that Jesus would use *anh* and *aeng* in the retelling of the story of Saul’s conversion.

The same speaker ends his lesson by quoting Jesus again. He cites a common phrase about Jesus (and perhaps God), saying he is not of this world:

ព្រះអង្គមានព្រះបន្ទូលថា អញមិនមែនជាបស់លោកីយទេ។
“Lord ***MIEN BONTUL TA***, ‘*Anh* is not of this world.’”
“The Lord said, ‘I am not of this world.’”

The speaker gives Jesus the royal honorific verb “to say” to elevate Jesus. In contrast, when the speaker is voicing Jesus, he gives Jesus the right to use the non-honorific pronoun *anh*. Because

there are many passages in the Bible about God and Jesus being “not of this world,” I cannot be sure which passage he is referring to. However, just browsing one Bible passage in particular, John 8:23 in both the KOV and KSV Bibles, it is clear that Jesus uses *knyom*, the ordinary first-person pronoun, when he says, “I am not of this world.”

I inquired with Pastor Chhay, the pastor of that church in Battambang, a couple of weeks later about the use of *anh* in church that day since I wrote the above quotations in my notebook. I told Pastor Chhay that I overheard the lesson where the speaker said, “*Anh* is Jesus” or “I am Jesus.” Pastor Chhay seemed to dismiss my memory because he said that although God (Jehovah) uses *anh* in the Old Testament, Jesus, in the New Testament, never uses *anh*; Jesus uses *yeung* (“we”). *Yeung* is sometimes used as a royal “we” where one powerful person, like a king or queen, is speaking as if they were more than one person. In explaining this difference between God’s and Jesus’s pronoun-usage, Pastor Chhay stated:

... in the Old Testament, God never speaks with us using *knyom*. “*Anh* is Jehovah, the God who created heaven and earth.” Later, in the New Testament, Lord Jesus speaks with soft words. “*Yeung* (we) are the Lord.” The Lord [Jesus] never uses *anh*.

Even though Pastor Chhay was adamant that Jesus would never say *anh* in the Bible, I was certain that the church speaker reported Jesus saying *anh* in his lesson. After my interview with Pastor Chhay, I went back home to relisten to my audio recording of the church service to verify if I heard correctly. Sure enough, the speaker did say it loud and clear in my recording. This discrepancy is important because it shows that, even though the KOV Bible clearly has Jesus using more “polite” terms, the church member at the church has internalized that Jesus has more power and authority over people because the KOV also has God using non-honorifics. This power and authority for both God and Jesus translated into Jesus using the non-honorific register when the church member was retelling the story of Saul’s conversion.

I pressed Pastor Chhay on the topic of God’s non-honorific language-use. Why is it OK for God to use anh? Pastor Chhay said that we, mere humans, do not have the right to use anh with other people, but God has the right to use anh with us because we are God’s followers.

When we walk with God, we walk behind Him. Following in His footsteps. So we see that when we walk behind God, we can’t walk in front of him. Wherever God YEANG TOV (“go,” royal), we go there too.

Notice that Pastor Chhay uses the royal register of “to go” (YEANG TOV) when he says, “Wherever God goes, we go there too.” Based on Pastor Chhay’s explanation, he clearly sees God as being superior to humans, as someone who is the leader. God is the *neak thom* (big person) and we are the *neak thuch* (little person). Therefore, God can “talk down” toward us if He wants to. We are beneath him and are at his whim.

In contrast to Pastor Chhay and his church members, many other churches in Cambodia are moving away from the KOV and are also moving away from the attitude that God can use the non-honorific register with people. In the next section, I discuss attitudes from Christians who prefer newer Bible translations, like the KSV, which have altered God’s language. I demonstrate that, like the rest of Cambodian society, Cambodian Christians are also no longer comfortable with being “talked down to,” either by God or by other people.

Why is God so Angry?

When I asked Theary, a Christian woman in her 30s, what she thought of the KOV, she said that every time she reads the KOV, she asks herself, “Why does God always use anh?” According to Theary, anh is only used when parents are angry at their children, so reading a Bible where God says anh and aeng reminds her of times when her parents are angry at her. Indeed, the non-honorific register is sometimes described as the language one loses their temper

in and it is a trope among urban Cambodians that parents switch to the non-honorific register when they are mad at their children. Theory cannot reconcile why God would choose to use that kind of language, which is why she prefers the KSV (Khmer Standard Version) Bible, which has erased all of God's *anh* and *aeng*.

Thida is a Catholic woman in her late 20s who had just converted to Catholicism within the past two years, but she had been working for the Catholic church in Battambang for at least 15 years. When I asked her if there were any differences between the way Catholic and Protestants spoke in church, Thida shared something she witnessed at a Protestant church in the capital of Phnom Penh while she was in college. She said her friends invited her to this church to learn how to play guitar and piano. When she arrived, she was shocked when she saw the word *anh* on the wall. I presume the word *anh* was a quote from a Bible passage in the KOV. Below, Thida tells me what she saw that day and how she felt. *Piruos* is a Khmer word that means melodious, a beautiful sound. It is also used to describe beautiful speech, such as when someone speaks politely or correctly.

I saw a word. They had a slogan written on the wall. They used the language “*anh*.” It said “*anh*.” So I thought, “Uy! Why do they speak in such a not *piruos* way?” Because among us—I hadn’t really participated with Catholics very often, but I started hanging out with them around 2003, 2004. So I have never seen [Catholics] speak in an un-*piruos* way before. [They] say “*knyom*,” “*yeung*” like that. But over there [at that Protestant church], they wrote “*anh*.” I don’t know how their Bible translated it in this way. I don’t understand.

Although she was not officially Catholic at the time, Thida had been in contact with the Catholic church ever since she was a young girl after they visited her village to donate a wheelchair to her brother who had polio. So, her experience with the Catholic church, even before her conversion, was that the Catholic God would never use *anh*; God and Jesus would use *knyom* (I, ordinary) or

yeung (we). If you recall in the section where I elaborated on the history of Bible translation, the Catholic church uses the TKV Bible, which is very similar to the KSV Bible.

Disagreements about *anh*-usage illustrate that speakers do not always agree or use honorific registers in the same way (Silverstein 2003a; Agha 2007). This variation in usage in how Cambodians view the non-honorific register reflects different regimenting frameworks (Philips 2007; Agha 2007). While Pastor Chhay and his congregants freely received *anh* and *aeng* from God, believing God is their leader and Christians are merely his followers, other Christians might not. Theary and Thida reflect what many young, modern Catholics believe to be the kind of interaction they would want to receive from God and Jesus, an interaction where they are not being “talked down to.” They wanted a God who would speak to them in a civil and decent manner, a God who would treat them with respect, and not in a manner that patronizes them or demeans them, which is what the non-honorific register in the KOV does, according to them. Let us take a look at why efforts were made to cater to Christians like Theary and Thida.

Ms. Tran is a translator working at the Bible Society in Cambodia, the organization that was responsible from the translation of the TKV and KSV. She also echoed Theary and Thida when she said that the words *anh* and *aeng* in the KOV are “unpleasant sounding” (អាក្រក់ស្តាប់, *akrok stap*), not *piruos*, and words that make her ears sore. Ms. Tran pointed to the TKV and KSV Bible translations as having “appropriate” (សមរម្យ, *somrum*) language. “It [the recent translation] is respectful, polite, appropriate, but we don’t use the highest level to make everyone equal, just enough to make it appropriate. Don’t want to hear things that make your ears sore (លឺស្លឹកត្រចៀក, *chii sleuk tracheak*).” When Ms. Tran said that they used respectful language, but not the highest level, I interpret this to mean that God and Jesus are using registers with people that

are more respectful, register levels right above the non-honorific register. God and Jesus are not, however, using more elite registers with Christians since it would be inappropriate to put people on the same level as God and Jesus. According to Ms. Tran, having them use just one level above the non-honorific register is enough. They do not need to overdo it or to overshoot their politeness since Christians will never be equal to God. She just wants to hear them speak in a more appropriate manner. When I asked Ms. Tran how Bible Society in Cambodia re-translated God's language, she said: "Anh (I) was often changed to *yeung* (we). God *niyay*⁴⁷ ("speak," ordinary) *yeung*, not anh."

Bora is a Christian in his early 30s and also a staff member at the Bible Society in Cambodia. He said that the Bible Society of Cambodia wants to make sure everyone has a Bible. Some people might prefer the KOV while some people prefer the KSV. However, according to Bora, the new translation of the Bible is the one that he believes is the one that is the most accurate. When talking about why they changed God's words in newer translations, he said,

We use '*yeung*'... the word 'anh' is a word that they used in the past, in ancient times (សម័យបុរាណ, *samay boran*) a long time ago. That word indicates power (អំណាច, *amnaich*), but today the word 'anh' is an obscene (អស៊ី, *asuruos*) word, a word that is not polite (ក្លិនសម, *kuosom*), a word that we don't use very often.

When I pushed Bora on why the word anh was appropriate in the past, but is now inappropriate, he said he was not sure. The only thing that came to mind, for him, was that the word anh means the speaker has "power."

Mr. Y echoed similar sentiments to Bora, also bringing up the concept of time. Again, he is one of the directors of Words of Life Ministries which published yet another translation of the

⁴⁷ I noticed Ms. Tran using the ordinary "speak" (*niyay*) when referring to God speaking instead of **MIEN PREAH BONTUL**.

Khmer Bible, the Khmer Christian Bible (KCB). I asked Mr. Y about the differences between his Bible and other Bibles, he said:

The first Bible of 1923⁴⁸ used a lot of ordinary words, but many of the words in that Bible, when compared to today, have changed meanings or are no longer being used, or people stopped using them in speech. Like when God ***MIEN BONTFUL*** (“speak,” royal), they used ‘*anh*.’ Maybe during that time period the word was common so when people heard it, they didn’t think it was a problem. But in this day and age, the word ‘*anh*’ is not *piruos* (melodious) at all. Whenever we say, whenever anyone says, ‘*anh*,’ it means the person is not educated, someone who not gone to school, someone who is not civilized. Therefore, in the later Bible, they stopped using the word ‘*anh*.’ When God *niyay* (“speak,” ordinary), [He] uses the word ‘*yeung*,’ like the way a king would *niyay*⁴⁹.

Mr. Y brings up another stereotype about people who use the non-honorific register: that they are uneducated, uncivilized people. I expand on this stereotype in Chapter 4. For now, however, it is enough to know that some Christians believe that stereotypes of a powerful superior and of an uneducated farmer are not stereotypes that they want to be associated with the Christian God. Additionally, like Bora, Mr. Y also brings up the concept of time and temporality. The word *anh* may have been appropriate in the past, but today that kind of language is no longer appropriate. Based on their responses, I was under the impression that they were speaking about the early 20th-century when the first Khmer Bible translators were translating the Bible. However, they could also have been referring to an even deeper past, the past that was located within the Bible itself.

This interpretation came when I met Sister Na and Sister Shepherd, a pair of missionaries, one Cambodian and one American, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons. I treated them to fruit shake at a local restaurant in Battambang

⁴⁸ Although the KOV was published in 1954, I would not be surprised if either the New Testament or the Old Testament was completed earlier. 1923 may have been when one half of the Bible had been completed.

⁴⁹ I do not mean to nitpick Mr. Y. I just noticed that he did not use the royal honorific register at certain moments. It shows that all Cambodians have the tendency to have linguistic slippages.

as a thank you for being interviewed one afternoon. When I asked them which Bible translation they used, the sisters were unsure since they tend to read the Book of Mormon more often. After explaining how the KOV has God using *anh* and *aeng*, they both nodded and said, “Oh yeah, we use that version.” When I asked what they thought of God’s non-honorific register, Sister Shepherd responded with, “Actually, in the Book of Mormon, we don’t use those words. For Jesus Christ, ***TRUONG*** (“he/she,” royal) *ni*⁵⁰— ***TRUONG BONTUL*** (“he speaks”, royal) the word *yeung* (“we”). And doesn’t use *anh*. And ***TRUONG*** uses *neak* (“you,” ordinary). But we still respect the Christian Bible [KOV] that we use.” Ignoring the conflation between how God speaks in the KOV versus how Jesus speaks in the Book of Mormon, which is another separate issue, it appears that since the Book of Mormon is their primary text, the KOV Bible and God’s non-honorific register-usage in that Bible seem to be less relevant for Mormons. Sister Na also added her own thoughts, which is reminiscent to what Bora and Mr. Y said about time periods:

Regarding that [the non-honorific register], it came from ancient times (*boran*) and we haven’t changed, haven’t changed things that came from the past. But this book [Book of Mormon] was created during our time. Regarding ***TRUONG*** (he/Lord), ***TRUONG*** treats us [by saying], “*Yeung* (“we”) is the Lord.”

Sister Na introduces another angle about temporality that made me rethink what Bora and Mr. Y said earlier. Her response indicates that the power dynamics translated in the Bible were from “Biblical time,” a time period that was even further back than I had originally imagined. According to Sister Na, we find non-honorific words in the Bible because inequality was prevalent thousands of years ago when Biblical events were taking place. Mormons primarily rely on the Book of Mormon, which Sister Na described as being from “our time” (ជំនាន់យើង,

⁵⁰ It appeared that Sister Shepherd was about to say *niyay*, the ordinary word for “speak,” but she caught herself and quickly self-corrected by repeating the royal third person *truong* to refer to Jesus and adding *bontul*, the royal word for “speak” or “word.”

chumnuon yeung). Published in English in 1830, Sister Na seems to imply that the 19th century language and power dynamics in the Book of Mormon are equivalent with modern day ideals. Even though the 1800s was two centuries ago, it is recent enough in her mind because it was written in a way that reflects the kinds of social relations Sister Na wants to see in Cambodia today. It was more important for her to hear the Lord Jesus say *yeung* in the Book of Mormon, even if God says *anh* in the KOV.

Returning to Bora and Mr. Y, their responses could also be interpreted in this way as well when they said *anh* came from the past. Either way, whether their “past” is pointing to Biblical times or the more recent past of when the Khmer Bible was first translated, it might not make much of a difference. Even if *anh* may have been more historically accurate in the Biblical past, perhaps how God would have spoken more than 2000 years ago to people like Moses, Bora and Mr. Y have sought out newer Bible translations that have updated God’s language, reflecting modern-day sensibilities. Mormons, like Sister Na and Sister Shepherd, have kept the KOV, but have excused its non-honorific register-use as a reflection of its time, a curious anachronism of the past.

As I have argued throughout my dissertation, changes in Cambodia in the post-war period have given Cambodians a lot of social mobility. Through newer work opportunities domestically and abroad, through access to better education in private schools, and through new technology, Cambodian society has an emerging urban middle-class. Cambodians who climb the social ladder are no longer tied to power dynamics of the past, where a landlord oversees a peasant, where a *neak thom* (big person) belittles a *neak thuoch* (little person). Modern-day Cambodians are no longer beholden to any *neak thoms* who want to wield power over them. While most Cambodians in the past were powerless, today they are their own masters of their fate and future.

Although Bora did not elaborate on this in detail when he talked about *anh*'s association with “power,” I believe this is lurking in the background when Cambodians like him, Christian or not, express that they feel uncomfortable with words like *anh*, *aeng*, and any other word located in the non-honorific register. Not unlike the Bosavi people who also had a shift in thinking, which prompted a newer Bible translation (Schieffelin 2007), this shift in Khmer honorifics prompted newer translations of the Bible that the younger generation could interpret and identify with.

In Chapter 4, I will expand on the non-honorific register as it has been used in other, non-Christian settings. Even non-Christian Cambodians are starting to feel uncomfortable with the non-honorific register. Not only does it remind them of uneducated farmers from the countryside, but it also reminds them of times when poor Cambodians were subjected to the cruelty of superiors. These two images reflect an unmodern past that is not compatible with modern-day Cambodia, where Cambodians ought to have access to better education and where Cambodians are no longer beholden to any rich landlords when they can move the city and open their own business. As a chronotope (Bakhtin 1981 [1975]) of the unmodern, the language associated with these figures, the non-honorific register, is also incompatible with the modern age.

These processes of change that are occurring both inside and outside Christianity ultimately impact how Cambodians view their own identity as well as their relationship with other people and beings. Once upon a time, Cambodians had a fraught relationship with angry bosses, today they can be their own boss. When some Christians read the KOV and see that God is using the non-honorific register, it reminds them of these power dynamics. Most Christians today cannot reconcile with God using that kind of language, reminding them of the “cruel superior.” They do not want that kind of relationship, that form of power dynamic, with God.

Recall my friend Theory's response that God language-use reminds her of times when her parents are mad at her. She asks herself, "Why is God angry?" whenever she reads the KOV. I also shared that many Christians like Theory described God's non-honorific use in the older translation as "ancient" (*boran*), or being used in ancient times. Maybe it was OK back "then," whenever "then" was, but it is no longer the case "today." Newer translations of the Bible were created for people like Theory, removing God's non-honorific-use. God in newer Bible translations now speaks to His people in a more respectful manner, reflecting a kinder relationship between Christians and their God.

KOV vs. KSV

In the following sections, I will analyze and compare Bible passages to show how God's language-use differed between Bibles. Since the KTV, the Bible used by Catholics, is very similar to the KSV except for name translation differences, for the ease of comparison, I will present Bible passages from the KOV and the KSV.

Isaiah 45:4-7

Although most of my family remained Buddhist, some parts of my family have converted to Christianity. One of my aunts is an extremely devout Christian. In her 50s, she converted to Christianity a few years after arriving in the United States. She often posts Bible passages on her Facebook page. One day while scrolling through Facebook, this passage struck me because of the many times God uses *anh* (I/me) and *aeng* (you), non-honorific pronouns that are less appropriate in modern-day Cambodia. In this passage, God is speaking to Jacob. He tells Jacob

that even if Jacob doesn't recognize Him, He has chosen Jacob to His servant. I have boxed in honorific lexical variants.

អញបានហៅឯងតាមឈ្មោះឯងនេះ ដោយយល់ដល់ពួកយ៉ាកុបជាអ្នកបម្រើអញ និងអ៊ីស្រាអែល ជាអ្នកដែលអញ
បានជ្រើសរើស អញបានកំណត់នាមត្រកូលដល់ឯងហើយ ទោះបីឯងមិនបានស្គាល់អញក៏ដោយ ៥ អញនេះជា
យេហូវ៉ា គ្មានព្រះណាដទៃទៀត ក្រៅពីអញ ឥតមានព្រះណាទៀតសោះ អញនឹងក្រវាត់ឲ្យឯង ទោះបីឯងមិន
ស្គាល់អញក៏ដោយ ៦ ដើម្បីឲ្យមនុស្សទាំងឡាយ ចាប់តាំងពីទិសខាងថ្ងៃរហូតដល់ទិសខាងថ្ងៃលិចបានដឹងថា
ក្រៅពីអញគ្មានព្រះណាផ្សេងទៀតឡើយ គឺអញនេះជាព្រះយេហូវ៉ា ឥតមានព្រះណាទៀតសោះ ៧ គឺអញដែល
បង្កើតពន្លឺ ហើយក៏ធ្វើឲ្យមានងងឹតផង.

Anh have called *aeng* by *aeng's* name, for Jacob is *anh's* servant and for Israel, whom *anh* have chosen. *Anh* have set *aeng's* name already. Even if *aeng* does not know *anh*, 5 *anh* am Jehovah, and there is no one else. Besides *anh*, there is no other god. *Anh* will bind with *aeng*, even if *aeng* does not know *anh*. 6 For all people, from sunrise to sunset, will know that besides *anh*, is no other god. *Anh* am Jehovah. There is no other god. 7 *Anh* created light and can make darkness.

Compare the same passage in the KSV Bible below. Many of God's *anh*-usage have been replaced with *yeung* (we), as God takes on the royal "we" to refer to Himself. "You" is no longer *aeng*, but is now *neak*, a general term for "you."

យើងហៅអ្នកចំឈ្មោះ ព្រមទាំងប្រគល់តំណែងដ៏ខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់អោយអ្នក ទោះបីអ្នកមិនស្គាល់យើងក៏ដោយ ព្រោះ
យើងអាណិតកូនចៅរបស់យ៉ាកុប ជាអ្នកបម្រើរបស់យើង គឺជនជាតិអ៊ីស្រាអែលដែលយើងបានជ្រើសរើស។
៥ យើងនេះហើយជាព្រះអម្ចាស់គ្មានព្រះអម្ចាស់ណាផ្សេងទៀតឡើយក្រៅពីយើង គ្មានព្រះជាម្ចាស់ណាទេទោះបី
អ្នកមិនស្គាល់យើងក្តីក៏យើងបានប្រគល់អោយអ្នកមានប្តីអំណាច៦ ដើម្បីអោយមនុស្សក្នុងពិភពលោកទាំងមូល
តាំងពីទិសខាងកើតដល់ទិសខាងលិចទទួលស្គាល់ថា ក្រៅពីយើងព្រះឯទៀតៗសុទ្ធតែឥតបានការ។យើងនេះ
ហើយជាព្រះអម្ចាស់គ្មានព្រះអម្ចាស់ណាផ្សេងទៀតឡើយ។៧ យើងបង្កើតពន្លឺ និងភាពងងឹត

Yeung call *neak* by name, and give a high position to *neak* even if *neak* does not recognize *yeung*, because *yeung* has compassion for Jacob's children and grandchildren, as *neak* is *yeung's* servant and the Israelites that *yeung* has chosen. *Yeung* is the Exalted Master, there is no other Exalted Master besides *yeung*. There is no other Exalted Master, even if *neak* doesn't recognize *yeung*, *yeung* gives *neak* power in order to get all people on earth, from the East to the West, to recognize that outside of *yeung*, any other god is useless. *Yeung* is the Exalted Master, there is no other Exalted Master. *Yeung* created light and darkness.

Although there are other translation differences between these passages, I am only focusing on the change from the non-honorific register to more ordinary register. It is quite noticeable that all instances of the non-honorific *anh* and *aeng* were erased in the KSV. God's language has been changed to *yeung* ("we," ordinary) and *neak* ("you", general). Here, from the modern-day point of view, God is speaking in more ordinary language toward people and is not "talking down" to people. While *anh* indicates power with an element of inequality, the switch to the *yeung* ("we") similarly represents God's power, but instead of inequality, we see his greatness and his magnitude. The KSV Bible treats God as if He were more than one person, showing His power in terms of size and number rather than unquestioned authority.

Luke 12:20

After interviewing a group of elderly Catholics in Battambang at the Catholic church, they encouraged me to return for mass on Sundays to observe their service. Five days later, I returned to observe a Cambodian Catholic mass for the first time. The lesson that day in mass seemed to be around the uselessness of toiling or building up wealth. The priest, originally from Indonesia, read a passage from Luke 12:13-20, also known as the "The Parable of the Rich Fool" in English. In this Biblical story, we learn that there was a rich man who yielded an abundant harvest. Not knowing what to do with the excess goods, he decided to build a larger barn to store his surplus grain so that he can have an easy life. In line 20, God tells the rich man that he is, in fact, a fool. In the New International Version of the Bible, this line is translated into English as, "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" The moral of the story? Do not be

preoccupied with material wealth or worldly desires since they are all “meaningless” (ឥតណ័យ, *ut ney*) to God.

I recreate Luke 12:20 below because it contains God’s voice. This passage, which comes from the TKV Bible, was read aloud by the Catholic priest in church that day. As a reminder, the TKV Bible is the Bible Cambodian Catholics use, but this passage is exactly identical to how it is in the KSV; both are the newer Bible translations that have rendered God’s language to be gentler. Notice that God uses *yeung* (“we”) to refer to himself and *neak* (“you,” general) to refer to the rich man. God is also given the royal verb for speaking, ***MIEN PREAH BONTFUL***.

ប៉ុន្តែ ព្រះជាម្ចាស់មានព្រះបន្ទូលទៅកាន់សេដ្ឋីនោះថា: “នែ មនុស្សឆោតល្ងង់អើយ! យប់នេះ យើងនឹងផ្តាច់ជីវិតអ្នកហើយ ដូច្នេះ ទ្រព្យសម្បត្តិដែលអ្នកបានប្រមូលទុកសម្រាប់ខ្លួនអ្នក នឹងបានទៅជារបស់នរណាវិញ?”។

But God ***MIEN PREAH BONTFUL*** (“speak”) to that rich man, “Ey, foolish human, ey! Tonight, *yeung* will take *neak*’s life. So the property *neak* has been storing for *neak*-self, then whose will it be?”

This passage caught my attention in church that day because God was speaking. I decided to compare the same passage with the KOV Bible to see how they differed from one another. Even though God had a scolding tone toward the rich man, the TKV/KSV Bible still had God using *yeung* and *neak*, terms from the ordinary register. While He may have been angry, he was still linguistically restrained toward the “foolish” man.

I have recreated the same passage, Luke 12:20 from the KOV, below. Here, God refers to the rich man as *aeng* (three times). He refers to himself as *anh* once. God is also given the royal verb for speaking, ***MIEN PREAH BONTFUL***.

ប៉ុន្តែព្រះទ្រង់មានព្រះបន្ទូលទៅអ្នកនោះថា ឱមនុស្សល្ងង់អើយ នៅវេលាយប់នេះ ឯងអញនឹងដកយកព្រលឹងឯងទៅវិញ ដូច្នេះ តើទ្រព្យសម្បត្តិទាំងប៉ុន្មានដែលឯងបានប្រមូលទុកនេះ នឹងទៅជារបស់អ្នកណាវិញ

But Lord ***MIEN PREAH BONTFUL*** (“speak”) to that person, “Oh foolish human, ey. Tonight, for *aeng*, *anh* will take *aeng*’s soul. So all the property that *aeng* has collected, whose will it be?”

Even though the priest that day during mass was only concerned with the TKV/KSV Bible passage, I put the KOV passage side-by-side to show how the newer translation read in church that day differed from the KOV, first published in 1954. The TKV (1998) and KSV (2005) have erased God’s non-honorific pronouns of *anh* and *aeng*. As Christians have expressed to me, this kind of language is no longer appropriate today in Cambodia. After 40-50 years later, *anh* (“I/me,” non-honorific) has been replaced by *yeung* (“we”) and *aeng* (“you,” non-honorific) has been replaced by *neak* (“you,” general).

God and Christians: A Flattened Hierarchy

Language and Khmer honorific registers in Christian settings are fraught. Many agree that Christians should devote themselves to learning the royal honorific register because of their desire to show honor and respect to God and Jesus through language. Further, many also agree that their linguistic relationship with God is non-reciprocal. Where we find contestation is whether God’s power and authority gives him the right to use the non-honorific register with Christians. More and more people today no longer think God should be using that kind of language with people. This ideological change is not limited to Christianity. Indeed, these changes in how Cambodians view relationships, statuses, and identities, which have emerged in light of Cambodia’s rapid post-war development, are also occurring in the rest of Cambodian society. Modern ideals about inequality have caused Cambodians to view the non-honorific register as incompatible in contemporary Cambodia, a chronotope of an unmodern past. If being modern means one must expand one’s moral circle of honorification, then shouldn’t God do so

too? In the next chapter, I continue this conversation by looking at the non-honorific register's status in non-Christian settings.

Chapter 4 From Cruel Superiors to Uneducated Farmers: the Non-Honorific Register and Stereotypes of the Unmodern

The Tribunal Judge

On February 8, 2012, the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) was barely 9 minutes into its morning courtroom session when Michiel Pestman, the Dutch attorney for former Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea, began to raise a matter that he had repeatedly tried to raise in the past month: he wanted the court to condemn Prime Minister Hun Sen for remarks he made in Vietnam where he referred to his client as “deceitful” and a “killer.” His client, Nuon Chea, was second-in-command during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), behind Pol Pot. More than 30 years after the fall of the regime where one-fourth of the population perished, Nuon Chea was finally charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity. Pestman and the rest of the defense team wanted Nuon Chea to receive a fair trial, which is why Hun Sen’s comments troubled them. According to Pestman, political leaders like Hun Sen must refrain from making such comments in public as it prejudices his client who should be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

The Trial Chamber—five judges, comprised of three Cambodian and two international judges—have repeatedly brushed off Pestman’s request, telling him to drop the subject. That day was Pestman’s fourth attempt since January 10, 2012 to get the Trial Chamber to comment on the matter. Before Pestman could finish his sentence, “Reluctantly, we have to revisit Hun Sen’s remarks made at a press conference, now some time ago, in Vietnam,” his microphone is

suddenly cut off by the presiding judge Nil Nonn⁵¹ (also referred to as “President” or “Mr. President), interrupting Pestman’s floor time. Judge Nil said the following in Khmer, but Pestman heard this English interpretation on his headset:

We have already advised Counsel already [sic]⁵² that you cannot take advantage of the allotted time to put questions to your client to ask questions which are not relevant or other issues. The chamber has already addressed this before. And that when the Chamber has ruled on it and you are not satisfied with such ruling, you can file an appeal against such decision before the eyes of the law, and you are not allowed to make any further statements to the subject matter that has already been ruled. You are now asked to pose questions to your client concerning the historical background of the Democratic Kampuchea’s⁵³ context. And if you do not really have any questions to pose the witness – to the – your client, then the Chamber can conclude that you have no questions.⁵⁴

Although the English translation already suggests Judge Nil’s exasperation, those who heard his remarks in Khmer were well aware that he was expressing an extra layer of anger through his choice of second-person pronoun. The English translation lacked the pragmatic force Judge Nil conveyed through his use of *neak aeng* (អ្នកឯង), a sometimes intimate, but sometimes vulgar “you.” In fact, the second-person pronoun is elided altogether in the very first instance of the first sentence. When Judge Nil says, “We seem to have already told *neak aeng*...” (my own translation) in Khmer, the Khmer-to-English interpreter referred to Pestman with the third person “Counsel” instead of “you”: “We have already advised Counsel...” Perhaps the interpreter himself was taken-aback by the pronoun-choice and did not know to convey the term. Perhaps he decided to create some distance from the pronoun. Since Cambodians often speak in the third person as a way to show politeness and formality, perhaps he transferred that part of Khmer

⁵¹ Cambodian surnames come first. I may refer to some Cambodians, like Judge Nil, by their surname. Some Cambodians such as Prime Minister Hun Sen and former Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea are almost always referred to by their full names; I usually follow suit.

⁵² Khmer-to-English interpreters are not native English-speakers and are interpreting in real-time so there may be some odd sentence structures.

⁵³ Also known as the Khmer Rouge Regime, how the Khmer Rouge referred to their own nation-state.

⁵⁴ Transcript of Trial Proceedings Public, Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 4-5 (2012)

grammar into English as a way to show decorum in spite of Judge Nil's language. I am not sure. What I do know is that Pestman, a native Dutch-speaker listening to the English interpretation, was simply unaware of Judge Nil's additional layer of disdain and scorn. It was only much later that his Cambodian staff informed him that the judge had used a pronoun that some would argue to be inappropriate in a courtroom setting. I will return to this example later and discuss the commentary surrounding Judge Nil's use of *neak aeng* in the courtroom, particularly the way Pestman seized the moment to garner some sympathy for himself and his client.

In this chapter, I disentangle the social indexicalities, social range, and social domains of the most controversial "honorific" register in the Khmer language, the one *neak aeng* is located in, to investigate why more and more Cambodians, primarily the urban middle-class, are avoiding it. This register does not have an official name in Khmer, but Cambodians have variously referred to it as an animal language, farmer language, the language of power, the language of anger, and the language one uses with close intimates. I tentatively refer to it as the "non-honorific" register, but concede that there is no perfect labeling due to its wide indexical range.

Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	first-person	second-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	<i>toulbongkum cie knyom mjass</i>	“your highness”	<i>soay</i>
	royalty speaking to commoner	<i>troung anh, yeung (we)</i>	titles, forms of address, (see commoner below)	
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	<i>knyom preah karuna</i>	“venerable”	<i>chan</i>
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)	<i>atma</i>	<i>nyom</i>	
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	<i>knyom baht (male), neang knyom (female)</i>	<i>neak, koat (he/she)</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam</i>
	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>hob, si chras chram, bok kandal deumtrung</i>

Table 10: Khmer honorific registers. The red boxed in area indicates the non-honorific register.

As I have discussed in prior chapters, the Khmer honorific register system is not only iconic of social hierarchy, but it is also a fractal recursion of Cambodia’s three social statuses: royalty, monks, and commoners. As a result, social status and Khmer honorific registers are diagrammatic icons of one another (Peirce 1955 [1902]). That is, as one expands or shrinks, so does the other. Due to newer opportunities for social mobility and migration, Cambodian demographics are changing as the number of Cambodians who stay in the countryside to farm decreases and as the number of Cambodians moving into the cities to find jobs increases. We find an emerging urban middle-class whose lifestyle and language are also changing. In Chapter 2s and 3, I describe Khmer honorific register flattening from “above” from the Buddhist monk honorific register and the royal honorific register. I show how dysfluency in these registers is often tied to lack of practice.


Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	first-person	second-person	third-person	“eat”
Ordinary / Common	polite/formal			<i>koat</i>	<i>pisaa</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>knyom</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>nyam</i>
	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>anh</i>	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>vea</i>	<i>hob, si</i>
					<i>si</i>

Table 11: The ordinary/common register. The lowest sub-register, which I refer to as the “non-honorific register,” is the topic of this chapter, but it is also juxtaposed with the other sub-registers above it. I have eliminated any variants that are not discussed to ease readability. I will argue in this chapter that usage of the non-honorific sub-register is declining among the urban middle-class in Cambodia.

Register	Formatting
Polite/Formal	<i>bold</i>
Ordinary/Neutral	<i>italicized</i>
Non-honorific	<u><i>underlined</i></u>

Table 12: Formatting legend for transcripts where Khmer honorific registers are used. Chapter 4 makes references to these three sub-registers.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to a concurrent process coming from “below,” emanating from the commoner register. The non-honorific sub-level or sub-register, where the linguistic term *neak aeng* is located, is also diminishing, but for different reasons. Unlike the more “elite” registers, where lack of fluency among the average Cambodia is often tied to lack of practice, the average Cambodian recognizes the non-honorific register and knows how to use it. The issue is not whether Cambodians have competency in the register. The issue is that an increasing number of Cambodians are avoiding it, sometimes even claiming not to use it, at least in formal settings. Why are Cambodians, particularly the urban middle-class, averse to the non-honorific register?

First, I will give a brief summary of the non-honorific register and the most commonly used lexical terms. Here, readers will become familiarized with the “dictionary” definition of the non-honorific register. Cambodians often point to this first-order indexicality when arguing over the inappropriateness of the non-honorific register. We will find two seemingly opposing definitions on what the non-honorific register indexes: power and familiarity. What these seemingly opposing definitions have in common are the kinds of people who are ratified to use “bald on record” talk (P. Brown and Levinson 1987): those in power and those speaking to close intimates. Next, I present cross-linguistic data on similar linguistic forms and registers in other languages that also share a similar range of indexicalities to the non-honorific register.

Next, I will present two seemingly opposite social personae who are commonly associated with the non-honorific register: cruel superiors and uneducated farmers. These sections move beyond the referential or dictionary model of honorifics, which assumes words only have one meaning. They also show the non-honorific register in interaction because we can better understand these linguistic forms in interaction. The data contained in these sections demonstrate that speakers not only rely on a word’s definition in order to make honorific-choices; speakers also take into consideration the kinds of people who stereotypically use these forms, or the second-order of indexicality. What kind of person uses the animal *sɿ* (eat) with another human, for example, and what does it imply when someone uses it? Whether more upwardly mobile Khmer-speakers today use the non-honorific register or not depends on whether they want to identify with the social actors associated with non-honorific expressions.

Next, I introduce a third figure who is a combination of both the cruel superior and the uneducated farmer: the Khmer Rouge cadre. Although the Khmer Rouge flattened Khmer honorific registers by linguistically engineering their own sanctioned register (refer to Table 3 in

the Introduction or Table 14 in this Chapter), many Khmer Rouge survivors voice their Khmer Rouge captors with the non-honorific register instead—which goes against Khmer Rouge policies that advocate agrarian egalitarianism. I investigate this supposed inconsistency between Khmer Rouge policy and practice. Further, I elaborate on the irony between modern-day register flattening and the flattening that occurred under communism. At the end of this discussion, I show how these three characterological figures (Agha 2007, 177) emerged in light of social, political, and economic changes in Cambodia and how they—the cruel superior, the uneducated farmer, and the Khmer Rouge cadre—stand in contrast to the ideal modern Cambodian citizen, driving the urban middle-class Cambodians away from the non-honorific register lest they be mistakenly recognized as one of them.

This chapter continues the theme of tension and the search for national identity. I argue that the urban middle-class are re-imagining their Khmer honorific register system to reflect their aspirations for the ideal Cambodian society, the ideal Cambodian nation, and the ideal Cambodian citizen. In conjunction with the expansion of the urban middle class, we find similar expansion in the use of the middling honorific registers toward more people. The potential for upward mobility, to change one's social class and identity in one's lifetime, is a new phenomenon. Cambodians who have taken the risk to move to the city, to start their own business, not only see newer possibilities within themselves, creating an increased sense of self-agency and self-worth ("I matter. I am valuable"), but they also know that their fellow citizens also have the same sense of self-agency and self-worth, even if their peers have not taken that leap just yet. "My fellow compatriots also matter and are equally valuable." This expanded circle of moral or ethical concern (Peter Singer as cited in Keane 2015) is part and parcel with being an

ethical modern-day person, where Cambodians feel a sense of ethical responsibility beyond their own family or village.

I show that this ethical responsibility can also be expressed through language. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the Khmer non-honorific register as Cambodians debate over its place in the 21st century. The avoidance of the non-honorific register and the propensity to use the other honorific registers in recent years indicate an expansion of *who* Cambodians believe have “linguistic-worth.” Following Singer and Keane, I call this the “expanded moral circle of honorification,” where the number of people and the kinds of people who deserve linguistic decency has expanded beyond one’s elders, one’s superiors, or persons of boon. Previously, Cambodians had to know their place, so to speak, know where they belong on the rung of social hierarchy, and know how to accept the ire of their superiors—not being included in their superiors’ moral circle of honorification. Nowadays, that way of thinking, that kind of condescension expressed in the non-reciprocal use of the non-honorific register, is unmodern. Today, Cambodians are more likely to say, “I deserve better than the non-honorific register. And my fellow Cambodians also deserve better than the non-honorific register.” This expanded moral circle of honorification entails an element of (linguistic) sympathy (Lempert 2012) toward others. Even if someone is “inferior,” Cambodians with an expanded moral circle of honorification believe there is no reason to treat or speak to them with the non-honorific register. Instead, they encourage reciprocal use of the ordinary or polite register.

At the same time, the middle class expects to be included in their peers’ moral circle of honorification. This expectation runs counter to that of certain elites who benefit from power and inequality, upholding ideals about non-honorific register-usage. It also conflicts with the linguistic practices of rural Cambodian farmers who use the non-honorific register reciprocally

as part of their sociolect. Since the urban middle-class is likely to use the ordinary or polite register, expecting reciprocal usage, when they receive the non-honorific register from farmers or superiors, it creates a tension resembling non-reciprocal non-honorific usage. Even if farmers extend the non-honorific register reciprocally, the middle-class want to give more polite registers; this inadvertently creates inequality as the middle-class see themselves giving respect and deference to farmers, but farmers are not doing the same in return.

Ultimately, arguments about how to define the non-honorific register are arguments about what it means to be an ethical Cambodian citizen in the 21st century.

What’s in a Name? Cross-linguistic Comparisons

I have asked Cambodians if this sub-register, which I have tentatively named the non-honorific register, has an official name and nobody has ever offered one. During a meeting with linguistics professor His Excellency Dr. Chan Somnoble, when I asked him about Khmer’s honorific registers, he quickly drew a chart for me and noted the three main registers: royal, Buddhist monk, and commoner (which he refers to as *reastr-sap* or “people’s language”), making note of the honorific alternants for the word “eat” at each register level. Although he noted several examples for “eat” at the commoner level, including the non-honorific *si*, he was not particularly concerned with dividing the register up any further, instead subsuming them all under one.

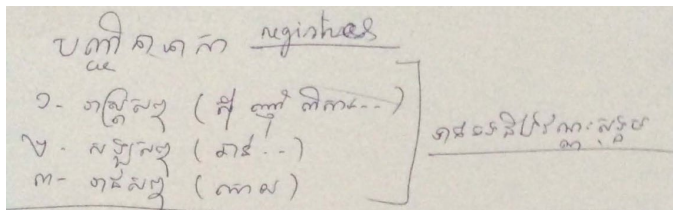


Figure 8: Khmer Registers according to Dr. Chan Somnoble

Registers

1. People language (*si, nyam, pisaa*)
2. Buddhist language (*chan*)
3. Royal language (*saoy*)

Concerning societal levels

In a 1972 Khmer language textbook for the United States Foreign Service Institute, the authors referred to the register that is the topic of this dissertation chapter as the “vulgar” social level, “used to or about animals, children, people for whom one need not show much respect or for whom one feels contempt” (Ehrman and Sos 1972). Although John Haiman (2011) was only describing the Khmer pronominal prefix *a-* (or as I prefer, *ah-*) as a “dishonorific,” *ah-* falls under the same register as *neak aeng* so I have sometimes referred to it as the (dis)honorific register. What these two labels, “vulgar” and “(dis)honorific,” ignore, however, are the other possible valorizations of the register: to index closeness, intimacy, and solidarity among equals and intimates. While these indexicalities are just as important, the labels “vulgar” and “(dis)honorific” do indicate a prevailing trend in how many Cambodians today feel about the register.

	Non-honorific register	Other (polite) alternatives for commoners
Verbs		
eat	<i>si</i>	<i>nyam, pisaa, borepok, totultien</i>
sleep	<i>dek</i>	<i>keng, samran</i>
Pronouns		
I / me	<i>anh</i>	<i>knyom, neang knyom</i> (female-speaker), <i>knyom baht</i> (male-speaker), kin terms, titles, forms of address
you	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i>	kin terms, titles, forms of address
he / she / it	<i>vea</i>	<i>koat</i> , kin terms, titles, forms of address
Affirmative / Polite marker		
yes	<i>uh</i>	<i>chas</i> (female-speaker), <i>baht</i> (male-speaker)
Titles, Address terms		
Personal names, titles, etc.	<i>ah+[NOUN]</i>	kin terms, titles, forms of address

Table 13: A list of the most only used words in the non-honorific register and their alternants in the ordinary and polite registers

Thai and Lao are two languages that are closely related to Khmer and have registers that resemble Khmer's non-honorific register. While Simpson (1997) describes the Thai pronouns that most closely correspond to the non-honorific register as "impolite," Enfield (2007) and Zuckerman (Forthcoming) use the word "bare" to describe Lao pronouns. Indeed, the word "bare" paints a different picture for these lexical items: that they are not inherently "impolite," but that they are unadorned, without any extra embellishments such as politeness, respect, or formality—much like the "plain" English pronoun "thou," which has virtually become extinct in modern-day English except among Quakers through the pronoun "thee" (Bauman 1983).

A similar phenomenon comes from Brown & Levinson (1987) through their discussion of the term "bald on record" to describe communicative strategies that are upfront, direct, and clear. Instead of saying, "When you get the chance, could you perhaps do this for me?," bald on record remarks are concise and outspoken: "Do this." Like the non-honorific register, speakers who are vastly superior than their addressees and speakers who do not fear redress from their addressees, such as friends, are ratified to use bald on record utterances. Applying this same reading toward the non-honorific register helps us understand how seemingly opposite kinds of definitions, power and intimacy, can be found in the same linguistic forms.

While I use the term "non-honorific" in this chapter, I am not opposed to the terms "bare," "plain," or "bald," because these labels are neutral without taking any one valuation over another. It is this nakedness, of being informal, ordinary, without any frills, that causes some Cambodians to read these terms as morally unacceptable, especially in "public" contexts if we were to go with the "naked" metaphor. It might be OK to be naked at home, but not when one is out, especially with strangers. As I will elaborate later, many terms within the non-honorific register used to be ordinary and neutral, but over time have taken on more negative connotations,

going through processes of semantic derogation. Much like gendered terms for women that used to be commonplace, like “wench” (girl) and “hussy” (housewife), we find that as Cambodian society changes, lexical terms located in today’s non-honorific register experienced a shift in meaning toward the pejorative. As newer honorific forms emerged, the non-honorific register terms were pushed aside by certain parts of society while some communities have retained the non-honorific register’s original “bare” usages.

With competing valorizations of old usages and new, we can never know what the non-honorific forms mean out of context. As with other languages with honorifics, particularly Indo-European languages with T-V⁵⁵ second-person pronouns, we need to observe their usages in an interactional setting in order to gain a better understanding of what is going on (R. Brown and Gilman 1960; Silverstein 2003a). Bengali, for example, has a second-pronoun *tui* that “is an endearing form of address inside the family and between friends, but it is an inferior form of address outside the family in most of the cases” (Das 1968, 20). We also find ambiguity in the Vietnamese kinship term *anh*⁵⁶ (“elder brother”), where it can express “the speaker’s relative lack of respect for another person or emphasize the feelings of closeness between them” (Keane 2015, 232 citing Luong 1988). Hearing these honorific terms alone and without context is insufficient because without the second pair part they remain indeterminate.

In Khmer, one way we might be able to deduce the non-honorific register’s meaning is to see if the interlocutor reciprocates with the non-honorific register or if they respond with a different (non-reciprocal) form. When used non-reciprocally, where one speaker uses the non-honorific register while the other responds with a different register, it often indicates power on the part of the speaker who uses the non-honorific register since one of its definitional usages

⁵⁵ T stands for the informal second-person pronoun while V stands for the formal second-person pronoun.

⁵⁶ Not to be confused with the second-person pronoun *anh* in Khmer, which I will also discuss.

allows a *neak thom* (big person) the privilege of using the non-honorific register with a *neak thuoch* (little person). When the non-honorific register is used reciprocally, it often indicates intimacy and solidarity among the interactants since the other approved definition of the register involves usages among equals and close intimates. But reciprocal use of the non-honorific register can also indicate anger and infighting, bringing in second-order indexicality of impoliteness to hurl insults at one another. Khmer-speakers then also have to contend with parsing out whether reciprocal usage of the non-honorific register is “play” or a real “fight” (Bateson 2000 [1955]).

Thus, even within conversations, we can still find uncertainties about indexicality, especially when identities and statuses are under question. Therein lies the rub, so to speak, or the tension surrounding the non-honorific register in contemporary Cambodia, where demographics are changing and different language ideologies about region, class, and hierarchy are coming into contact. For a comparative case, consider what happened when Irvine encountered a French-speaking Senegalese taxi driver who addressed her in the French T-form while she replied with V. “What does the taxi driver’s [T] usage mean?” Irvine asks, running through a gauntlet of possibilities (Gal and Irvine 2019, 188). Some of Irvine’s speculation include whether the taxi driver’s native language of Wolof was an influence, whether he was being condescending, or whether he was extending egalitarian feelings. Though Irvine and her taxi driver have additional layers of social identities to contend with, from nationalities to native languages, we similarly find tensions within Cambodia today as people’s statuses change and become socially mobile.

Despite the trend or desire toward upward mobility, not everyone benefits from Cambodia’s economic development. This tension between on-the-ground social realities and

people's desires and aspirations also add to the tensions surrounding the non-honorific register. As some Cambodians aspire toward the urban, middle-class, and using honorific registers in ways to reflect their dreams, we still find a large part of the population that remains financially vulnerable, living hand to mouth. If language reflects reality, then perhaps that is why the non-honorific register, which is an emblem of inequality, still exists, especially as the poor are being exploited for their labor. But if language can also shape and reshape reality, then perhaps removing the lowest register from usage can motivate Cambodian society to move toward a different kind of reality, one that would not abuse or mistreat the poor economically, politically, and linguistically.

Illusion of Equality

Although hierarchy and social class differences still exist in the modern world, certain ways of expressing hierarchy are no longer acceptable. Modern day ideals about democracy and justice, the notion that all people should be treated equally, have made condescending language less acceptable. In languages with honorifics, from Khmer to Indo-European languages, condescending language is represented in conversations that involve non-reciprocal honorific usage (R. Brown and Gilman 1960; Keane 2015). Just as Brown & Gilman (1960), have witnessed Indo-European languages moving away from T-V usage and toward T-T usage, we find similar trends in Cambodia today as more of the population begins to move away from the non-reciprocal usage of the non-honorific register because of its association with power dynamics that should no longer exist in the contemporary world. The difference in Cambodia is that middle-class Khmer-speakers seem to advocate V-V interactions, mimicking the English language's elimination of the T-form (thou) in favor of the V-form (you) in the 17th-century

England (Bauman 1983). Yet, in spite of the middle-class's expectations, we continue to find tension between the desire for (linguistic) equality among the middle-class and whether it matches the hierarchical realities of Cambodia's current society. Can both exist at the same time? And will social reality follow language if Cambodians try to manipulate it linguistically?

We find the illusion of equality when a boss and an employee use reciprocal T, despite the fact that one has more power and perhaps a much higher salary than the other. Paulson's 1970s research on pronoun-usage in Sweden among the upper class, middle class, and working class shows us that the illusion does not fool everyone. *Du-reformen* (*du* reform) was a campaign by the Social Democratic to stress "egalitarian relations among all members of society" (Paulston 1976, 360). The party encouraged widespread *du*-usage, the Swedish T-form, for everyone while discouraging *ni*, the Swedish V-form. By the 1970s, the upper class were quite comfortable adopting the solidarity *du*, using it with everyone, even the working class. While the working class had no trouble using *du* with other working class peers, Paulston noted that they often had a sense of distrust when someone of a higher class extended *du* to them. When someone of a higher class speaks to them with *du*, the working class are unsure if the elite is extending the *du* of solidarity (expecting reciprocal *du*) or the *du* of condescension (where a superior says *du*, while an inferior says *ni*). Much like Irvine's interaction with the Senegalese taxi driver, we can never be sure what is intended, especially if it is a stranger in a fleeting moment. In spite of the campaign for egalitarian relations, the Swedish working class in the 1970s understood that there were clear class differences between people, and had difficulty feeling a sense of solidarity with the upper class. In these instances, where the working class member does not return with *du*, but instead uses *ni*, this results in a condescending *du*, even though this was the very opposite of what the upper class member had intended. The upper-class

can try to pretend there are egalitarian feelings linguistically, but the realities of social inequality in Sweden prevented the working class from following suit. Although in a much different context, I also see competing expectations and social realities driving Khmer honorific registers, particularly the non-honorific register, in different directions, which is why we continue to find disagreement and tension in language-use.

This illusion of equality was also apparent under the Khmer Rouge. As I will return to later, there was a huge disconnect between Khmer Rouge's linguistic policy and how it was actually put into practice. There was an illusion of equality under the Khmer Rouge, but the Khmer Rouge treated certain Cambodians differently, particularly anyone who was not a poor peasant farmer. They labeled Cambodians into two main groups: New People or April 17 people (Cambodians who lived in the cities and were evicted into the countryside after the Khmer Rouge came into power in April 17, 1975) and Old People or Base People (individuals who were already farmers in rural areas). The Khmer Rouge targeted New People for execution or assigned them with harder labor because the New People were believed to be part of the oppressor class before the revolution, the haves who exploited the have-nots. Even though they preached equality in many ways, particularly through language, the Khmer Rouge flipped hierarchy on its head by putting farmers, the formerly oppressed class, in charge and in positions of power. Because of the Khmer Rouge realities of torture and genocide, most survivors would agree that the Khmer Rouge regime was anything but a model of equality. Cambodians were forced to speak in egalitarian ways, but the regime and their Khmer Rouge captors more often than not contradicted the very ideology they themselves put forward.

We again find a similar illusion of equality in contemporary Cambodia. After Cambodia entered the open market economy in the 1990s, the country has been one of the fastest

developing countries in the world. Despite this rapid development, millions of Cambodians are still being left behind. I may emphasize the growing middle-class, but there are still plenty of Cambodians who are living right at or just below the poverty line. With capitalism, we find more disparity. However, we see the illusion of equality today through capitalistic potential, through a promise of reward if one were to take a risk. As I will elaborate in Chapter 5, about new technology and media, even if Cambodians have not experienced personal financial growth, images in the media as well as contact with other Cambodians who have left home to work in the cities, are fueling their desires to one day participate. They might not be there yet, but there is the possibility that they too can move to Phnom Penh and be a fruit shake seller or a motorbike taxi driver. After seeing a neighbor renovate toward a bigger house using remittances from children living and working in Korea or Thailand, some Cambodians themselves feel the urge to do the same for themselves and their families. This illusion might also fuel the flattening of Khmer honorific registers, even if social class mobility is not quite there yet.

Nonetheless, this aspirational outlook among the urban middle-class conflicts with other perspectives in Cambodia. Much like the case with socialist Vietnam where there are two conflicting kinship models (Luong 1984), different ways of interpreting language and using language are not just about adhering to different language rules. They often point to competing sociological and ideological worldviews about what kind of society Cambodia should be. While the middle-class tries to drive Khmer honorific registers toward the middling registers, we find competing and conflicting worldviews that drive Khmer honorific registers in other directions.

In the next few sections, let us take a look at the kinds of people who are stereotypically associated with the non-honorific register. I argue that, for the middle-class, these social

personae are the very opposite of what it means to be Cambodian and what kind of country Cambodia should be.

Cruel Superiors: Appropriate in this Modern Day and Age?

Colonialism, feudalism, patron-client relationships, peasant-landlord relationships, and *khsae* (string, i.e., dependence) have been the hallmark of Cambodian social relations for thousands of years (Chandler 2008 [1983]; Un 2005). This relationship has operated at varying scales: between Cambodia and other nation-states who provide business and donations to the country, between international aid organizations and everyday Cambodians, and even between neighbors, such as moneylenders and money borrowers. While such relationships are sometimes symbiotic, being beneficial for both sides, as wealthy patrons or benefactors protect and feed clients and as clients support their patrons, these relationships are often coercive and there is no denying the patron often has the upper hand socially, financially, and linguistically. The bigger person (*neak thom*) has the prerogative to use the non-honorific register toward the little person. Here, the condescending aspect of the register is stressed, often accompanied by anger, though not always. In the following sections, I give examples of “cruel superiors”: someone with more power and authority, oftentimes also angry, who is using the non-honorific register non-reciprocally toward someone with less power and authority. Their speech, attitude, and demeanor stand in contrast with modern-day urban middle-class ideals about the expanded moral circle of honorification and about how people should be treated.

What is Appropriate Language in Court? Returning to Judge Nil

Let us return to the ECCC, or Khmer Rouge tribunal courtroom, and to Judge Nil's use of *neak aeng* toward Pestman. Right before Judge Nil loses his cool with Pestman, he referred to Pestman in the third person as *lok* (លោក), or "sir," when Pestman said he had "two short procedural matters [he] would like to discuss." Judge Nil, perhaps based on past incidents with Pestman, tells him that he may proceed, but emphasized that "The Chamber does not allow *lok* (sir) to make other [irrelevant] statements during this time." However, after Pestman refuses to drop the subject, Judge Nil switches person-referring terms, from a form of address (*lok*, "sir") to a more direct, but impolite second person pronoun (*neak aeng*, "you"). This switch illustrates the creative aspect of honorifics and register-usage, how speakers use language to navigate social relationships, as well as to express their mood or emotions. Citing Paul Friedrich as well as Blom & Gumperz, Silverstein uses the terms "pronominal breakthrough" and "metaphorical switching," respectively, to refer to:

"... situations in which the normatively presupposable contextual conditions for Speaker to use either T or V⁵⁷ are present, but then the in-a-sense "wrong" form (V or T respectively) occurs. Of course the form is never "wrong"; it just breaks or resets a pattern of established pair-part usage (at the 1st-order of analysis), with all that that entails, as it invokes (makes relevant to the course of interaction) new identities or sociocultural aspects of participants and context" (Silverstein 2003a, 210)

Style shifts mark a change in social relationship that may or may not be temporary.

I reproduce what Pestman heard over his headset in English, followed by my own translation of what Judge Nil said in Khmer to re-familiarize Cambodians with the event:

"We have already advised Counsel already that you cannot take advantage of the allotted time to put questions to your client to ask questions which are not relevant or other issues. The chamber has already addressed this before. And that when the Chamber has ruled on it and you are not satisfied with such ruling, you can file an appeal against such

⁵⁷ Referring to Indo-European languages that have two second person pronouns "you," T refers to the informal/intimate "you" while V refers the formal/polite "you."

decision before the eyes of the law, and you are not allowed to make any further statements to the subject matter that has already been ruled.

You are now asked to pose questions to your client concerning the historical background of the Democratic Kampuchea's⁵⁸ context. And if you do not really have any questions to pose the witness – to the – your client, then the Chamber can conclude that you have no questions.”

A reproduction of Judge Nil's remarks using my own translation:

We seem to have already told *neak aeng* already, that *neak aeng* cannot take advantage of the allotted time we offer *neak aeng* to question *neak aeng's* client related to relevant historical context, not other issues. That other issue, the Chamber has already replied to already. What the Chamber has already decided, if *neak aeng* is not satisfied with the Chamber's decision, *neak aeng* might file a grievance through the law's procedural court. We absolutely cannot let *neak aeng* do things according to *neak aeng's* recollections anymore.

Right now, we allow *neak aeng* to ask questions related to the historical background concerning *neak aeng's* client from this moment on. If [you] don't ask, [we] will conclude that *neak aeng* gives up the questioning of the witness pertaining to relevant historical facts of Communist Kampuchea.

I do not want to disparage the courtroom interpreters in any way. In fact, I admire their ability to interpret in real-time and I sympathize with them when English-speaking personnel in the courtroom use idioms or slang that they may not be familiar with. I reproduce Judge Nil's remarks with my own translation to highlight the number of times he uses the pronoun *neak aeng* and to give readers an impression of the differences in tone that may or may not be conveyed to Pestman and to other English-listeners who can only rely on the English translation.

Second-order indexicality would suggest that the use of *neak aeng* indexes someone who does not know how to hold their temper and take the high road. Another second-order interpretation indexes Judge Nil's power and authority as the presiding judge in the courtroom, and he has the prerogative to use *neak aeng* if he wants to; it is a non-issue. Neary is a staff member for the defense team and the person who alerted me to this interaction. She agrees that Judge Nil is in a position of power, but does not think he can wield his power. According to her,

⁵⁸ Also known as the Khmer Rouge Regime, how the Khmer Rouge referred to their own nation-state.

what he did was “insulting” and “inappropriate in Khmer in terms of culture.” She goes on to say in English, “When [you] say *neak aeng*, you are like a king, show power, use a pointing finger.⁵⁹ It’s inappropriate. Almost like ‘I’m a king, I can use this with you.’” She does not think the president of the courtroom can do that toward someone, even if he is the president. For Neary, Judge Nil failed to extend his moral circle of honorification toward Pestman. Regardless of context, even if he is in a position of power, even if he is angry, all personnel in the courtroom should be spoken to with respect.

This moment also shows us how Judge Nil feels about Pestman in that instance, not just that Judge Nil is angry at Pestman, but that he feels that Pestman is now someone who is no longer worthy of more respectful register levels after harassing the court. Instead, Pestman is now worthy of the non-honorific register after disobeying his order to move on from the topic of Hun Sen. After addressing him as *lok* (“sir”) in prior turns of talk, Judge Nil downgrades his choice of address to the non-honorific second-person pronoun (*neak aeng*, “you”) as a response and reprimand to Pestman’s behavior.

With the various second-order indexicalities swirling around, Neary and the rest of the Cambodian staff on the defense team quickly informed Pestman of Judge Nil’s use of *neak aeng*. In explaining the significance of *neak aeng*, they grabbed onto the first-order indexicality that Judge Nil’s choice of words disrespected Pestman and his client, Nuon Chea. At the same time, they also point toward second-order indexicalities by accusing Judge Nil of being impolite and perhaps intimidating. In these interpretations, the defense team believes that the moral circle of honorification was not extended toward them. In doing so, he violated courtroom norms of

⁵⁹ Pointing one’s figure in anger toward someone is an insult in Cambodian culture, indicating one’s power, but also belittling the person being pointed at.

decorum and respect, which should include everyone in the courtroom and occur at all times in which the court is in session.

Pestman took the opportunity to bring up the matter at the next court session on February 13. He wanted to note on record that the judge's language might be misinterpreted as showing bias against his client, Nuon Chea:

I'm not familiar with the Khmer language, as you know, and it was not interpreted, but I was later told by several people that the expression is highly unusual in Court, certainly, to address one of the other parties. I now even understand that the language is inappropriate, if not simply rude, and it could even be interpreted as intimidating, not just to me, but more importantly, also to my client.

Mr. President, I might have raised – I may have raised issues you're not happy with, but I've never addressed the Court inappropriately, and I would like the Court to address us appropriately as well.

The use of the work – the word 'neak aeng' to address me or my client only helps to further undermine the integrity of this Court, and, equally important, it could give the appearance of bias. A neutral observer of these proceedings could be led to believe that you, Mr. President, are unable or unwilling to judge my client, Nuon Chea, with the necessary emotional distance and objectivity.

It is what I wanted to note for your record today. Thank you.⁶⁰

Pestman and his defense team seized this moment to garner sympathy. If not from Judge Nil, perhaps from the wider Cambodian and international communities watching the trial. By making the case that the use of *neak aeng*, was not only inappropriate, but intimidating, Pestman elicits sympathy by saying that it was uncalled for. He says, "I've never addressed the Court inappropriately," because the Court is part of Pestman's moral circle of honorification. He also adds, "and I would like the Court to address us appropriately as well," because Pestman believes he and his client deserve to be part of Judge Nil's moral circle of honorification. After Pestman's speech, Judge Nil only responds with, "Thank you for the observation made by counsel for Nuon Chea" and turns to the prosecution.

⁶⁰ Transcript of Trial Proceedings Public, Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 4-5 (2012)

In the *Phnom Penh Post*, Sok Sam Oeun, a Cambodian legal expert said that although the term is impolite, it is not “unfamiliar in the Kingdom’s courtroom” (Di Certo 2012). He goes on to say, “I think the judge should set a good example for the Cambodian courts... Local court judges commonly use this word – and much worse!” A former tribunal prosecutor, who asked to go unnamed in the article, similar stated, “Of course, it is an impolite word, but there are no laws or judicial advice against using it in court” (ibid). Both experts bring in tension between their desire for the judge to “set a good example” in the courtroom and the reality that judges do, in fact, commonly use “impolite” language (such as the non-honorific register). The anonymous former tribunal prosecutor implies that rules and policies need to be in place in order to suppress such language in court, or else they will go unchecked.

What would happen if there were laws that police the language of those in power? In the next section, I present another cruel superior: Prime Minister Hun Sen. His language-use has in fact been the topic of an op-ed article that asks the Cambodian government to create a law, a code of conduct, for national leaders and politicians to speak appropriately in public. As one journalist demanded, Cambodia needs a code of conduct in order to prohibit the use of the non-honorific register in public speeches. Even though this code of conduct does not yet exist, I show that the request for a such a code attempts to widen political leaders’ circle of honorification since their current circle of honorification is not as expansive as most Cambodians would like. By forcing politicians and leaders to discontinue their on-honorific register usage, supporters of these codes of conduct want the Cambodian government to treat their citizens with linguistic decency and respect, which are the hallmarks of a modern, democratic nation.

Code of Conduct for Public Officials?

In a January 14, 2013 op-ed article published in the Cambodian newspaper *The Phnom Penh Post*, a social affairs columnist named Tong Soprach demands the creation of a code of conduct to control how national leaders and politicians in Cambodia speak in public. According to him, politicians have a propensity to, “use impolite (*asuoruos*) words... and shockingly violent (*hungsa*) words... that are not in the rank of political leaders at all” (S. Tong 2013a). But what are these impolite or violent words, according to Tong?

In his article, he includes name-calling, which often contain the sometimes impolite, sometimes intimate prenominal prefix *ah-*, such as *ah-Vietnamese puppet*, *ah-ignorant scholar*, and *ah-Dr. Bald*⁶¹ (where the target of this last insult probably lacks hair). Tong explicitly lists the second-person pronoun *haeng* (“you,” similar to *aeng*) and the first-person pronoun *anh* (“I/me”) as inappropriate and problematic for political leaders to use in public settings. In other words, Tong wants politicians to stop using the non-honorific register.

To illustrate what Tong means, I present one instance in 2011 where Prime Minister Hun Sen used the non-honorific register in front of an audience. That day Hun Sen had a grudge against journalists from Radio Free Asia because they have a history of writing stories about him and his wife in a bad light. After asking the audience if anyone from Radio Free Asia was present, Hun Sen unloaded his anger onto them, telling them to go ahead and continue to criticize him. “I let *haeng* (you) criticize [me]. The more [you] criticize *anh* (me), the better. *Anh* win because *haeng* criticize me.” Despite the other indexicalities for the non-honorific register, such as intimacy, critics like Tong point to the impolite valorization that causes the register to be inappropriate in public speeches. To serve as good role models, critics believe a code of conduct

⁶¹ Juxtaposing a title (Doctor/PhD) and a fake name “Bald” to mock a balding person.

for politicians must be created to regulate their language-use in public. Perhaps judges and other court personnel, like Judge Nil, might also be included in this. Tong writes:

According to the Constitution, each citizen has the right to public expression. But the expressed words should follow a code of conduct for all human beings. It doesn't mean that being a leader gives one the power to speak rudely, insultingly, or violently at all. Therefore, all leaders, all politicians must have a code of conduct for speaking properly as decent, dignified heads of state, leaders, and be good role models that provide a good message to the Cambodian people, especially children and youths who are easily impressionable, [and they should] raise social morality that is currently declining. (S. Tong 2013a)

Echoing discussions that criticize Judge Nil's use of *neak aeng* in the courtroom, we find a growing number of Cambodians who believe that being in power does not give someone the right to "speak rudely, insultingly, or violently at all." Instead, they should be good role models for Cambodian citizens.

Tong also points to the cruel leadership of the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot as the beginning of "bad" language-use, contrasting it with Cambodia in the 1960s, right before the Khmer Rouge came into power. Tong is nostalgic for that golden era before the Khmer Rouge, when the country "had good culture and civilization, including the use of proper words, and [people] respected (*karop*) each other, respected (*karop*) elders." That era is long gone as Cambodians today are more likely to "receive *haeng* (you), *anh* (I), nasty words that compare humans with animals, where those people receive, from others, a value that tells them that they are humans located on the bottom rung of society" (S. Tong 2013a). Tong not only brings up the animalistic reading of the non-honorific register, but also the concern that there are people out there who are being treated inhumanely, people who are not included in the moral circle of honorification when they receive the non-honorific register. I will return to the Khmer Rouge's language policy later in this chapter, but for now, I want to emphasize that there is a tension between how "respect" is defined: as deference to hierarchy (as Tong described respecting elders

in the 1960s) or as democratic civility (the ideology encouraged by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s and the urban middle-class today). There is another tension: who is afforded respect? While Tong points to elders, he also implies that the non-honorific register is inappropriate, even coming from those in power. While Cambodians in power who regularly use the non-honorific register believe respect is about having their authority go unquestioned, Tong and many other Cambodians think that respect is about being treated like a human being, rather than being compared to animals or being located on the bottom rung.

After hearing Hun Sen's 2011 non-honorific rant toward Radio Free Asia, an intellectual named Mr. Kuch Chanly claims that political leaders representing nations "must have dignity, in terms of behavior and speech as well, but Hun Sen uses nasty words" and later adds that, even under heavy criticism, political leaders must "respond back in a dignified manner" (Mao 2011). Several things are implied in his remarks. First, Hun Sen's use of the non-honorific register represents his lack of control and refinement. Second, these characteristics are unbecoming of a political leader in the 21st century.

There is one instance in which Hun Sen defends his language-use. On June 29, 2016, he referred to a political opponent as *ah-kuk* (*ah-prisoner*), which may also be a warning that Hun Sen could have him arrested on a whim. A representative from the opposition party, Mr. Eng Chhay Eang, disapproved of the use of *ah-kuk*. He says, "I do not want to hear such unpleasant (*asuoruos*) words spoken by our senior politicians... Such unpleasant (*asuoruos*) words can come from uneducated people, but those who lead the country should not use such words. Even if they are angry, they should use appropriately dignified words" (Kher 2016). A couple of days later at the National Fish Day celebration on July 1, 2016, Hun Sen defends himself from accusations that he was using an impolite word. The word *ah-kuk*, he argues, is not an insult or a

swear word, but a *samanh* (ordinary, simple, common) word, an ordinary citizen's word. "*Ah-kuk* (*ah*-prisoner) is *samanh* language for farmers and it has no other meaning other than *ah-kuk*" (Dara 2016). I would argue that Hun Sen was being facetious here in his clarification of *ah-kuk*, especially when we consider the context, that Hun Sen hurled it at a political opponent and that he has had a history of imprisoning people who oppose him. Through his explanation, however, we also discover another figure associated with the non-honorific register: the farmer.

Many Cambodians also link the non-honorific register to farmers or rural Cambodians through enregisterment. While Hun Sen dismisses his critics by alternatively drawing on positive evaluations and assessments of farmers, as common or ordinary people, many Cambodians today do not draw on the same images. Just as Mr. Eng said, "Such unpleasant words can come from uneducated people," in an earlier paragraph, some Cambodians also associated the term "uneducated people," which includes farmers, peasants, and other rural residents. Just as more and more Cambodians consider the cruel superior's use of the non-reciprocal use of the non-honorific register to be inappropriate in modern-day society, we also find arguments that reciprocal use of the non-honorific register is just as inappropriate.

Before moving on, I do want to note that Hun Sen as an individual looms through each of the three figures I discuss in this chapter: the cruel superior, the uneducated farmer, and the Khmer Rouge cadre. Born into a farming family in Kampong Cham province, Hun Sen joined the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s before defecting to Vietnam, claiming he had disagreements with the Khmer Rouge. He helped the Vietnamese rebel army defeat the Khmer Rouge and, when the Vietnamese occupied Cambodia, they placed Hun Sen in power in 1985 and that is where he has remained up until the present day. Cambodians who disagree with Hun Sen's politics and

conduct often paint him as an uneducated person who found himself in a position of authority. They rarely see Hun Sen as an exemplary Cambodian citizen.

Uneducated Farmers: the Rural and Urban Divide

All around the world, we find a stark divide between rural and urban residents in how they live, behave, and speak. Recognition of these differences often lead people to create stereotypes, and language is often the focus of those stereotypes. Among the Tibetans Agha interviewed, he found that some speakers thought that *too*, the non-honorific word for “food” in Tibetan, is “disrespectful... and is really only used for food for animals and servants. Some informants add—somewhat disparagingly, it seems—that speakers of ‘upper region’ dialects... use it more widely and may even use it referring to food for people” (Agha 1993). The Tibetan case also reflects demographic and regional differences in usage: what is considered taboo by one group could be perfectly acceptable by another. This variation in language-use is also observed in Cambodia, where we find a divide in how urban Cambodians and rural Cambodians approach language, particularly the non-honorific register.

When Cambodians speculate why Cambodians might use the non-honorific register, they often point to the speaker’s background. This mirrors what Susan Philips encountered during her research on how Tongans make sense of the uses or non-uses of honorifics among individual speakers (Philips 2011). Tongans often make guesses about a person’s background because which high school they attended, their religious affiliation, and whether they had any overseas experience could indicate whether they have control of Tongan honorifics or not. When I spoke to Ms. Tran, a Catholic teacher who has worked on Bible translation, about why newer Bibles stopped translating God’s language through the non-honorific register (Chapter 3), she drew on

second-order indexicality to name the kinds of people who are likely to use the non-honorific register:

There's the royal language. There's the monk language, aristocratic language. And there's [language of] the lower class too, like farmers. They speak just like what you just said, *anh*, *aeng*, and the like.

According to Ms. Tran, the “lower class..., like farmers” use *anh* and *aeng*. Even if farmers are using these terms reciprocally, as opposed to God who uses it non-reciprocally with Christians, by referring to these terms as “lower class,” Ms. Tran implies that reciprocal use of non-honorifics is inappropriate.

When Hun Sen defended his use of the word *ah-kuk* (ah-prisoner), he also defended it by saying he was only uttering the simple term in reaction to being antagonized by his political opponents. That is, he was using it reciprocally.

Two people were silently walking. Suddenly, Grandpa Ngorn shouted “*Ah*-Chhin, *haeng* (I) was so afraid, *haeng* (I) almost died.” And then the other person quickly responded by saying, “What's wrong *ah-kuk*?”... But let me ask whether the one who incited and made the other so afraid that they almost died was wrong, or the person who cursed that was wrong? The one who incited [first] by saying they were so afraid that they almost died was wrong.

Ignoring Hun Sen's contradiction on whether *ah-kuk* is a swear word or not, this passage implies that reciprocal use of the non-honorific register is not always viewed as intimate and close. If someone were to extend non-honorifics, in this case it is the grandfather who shouted that he was afraid by using *haeng*⁶² as a first-person pronoun, it was perfectly acceptable for someone to respond back with a non-honorific, such as *ah-kuk*. This hypothetical story highlights a tension in how Hun Sen interprets non-honorific usage and how the urban middle-class view it. Hun Sen feigns innocence because his political opponent started it and Hun Sen was merely using *ah-kuk*

⁶² Although *haeng* is normally a non-honorific second-person pronoun “you,” similar to *aeng*, sometimes it is used as a non-honorific first-person pronoun. I believe this is one of those cases where it is being used in the first-person.

in response. However, the urban middle-class might argue that two wrongs do not make a right. Even reciprocal usage of the non-honorific register is wrong.

When it comes to farmers' use of the non-honorific register, there are two interpretations. One is that they are speaking informally and intimately with everyone because it is their sociolect. This might be due to the fact that using the non-honorific register with other villagers is a normal part of their everyday life and linguistic upbringing. In one Khmer language blog, a Cambodian man sketches out a conversation between him and his son. His son asks his father why their family uses *pok* (dad, rural), *mae* (mom, rural), *anh* (I) and *haeng* (you) with one another while other families use kinterms like: *ba* (dad, urban), *mak* (mom, urban), *kon* (child), which is different than our family." The son juxtaposes his family's non-honorific pronoun usage with other families who are likely to replace pronouns with kinterms. For example, a mother who wants to say "I love you" might actually say, "Mother loves child." The son notices that this is not the case with his family where the non-honorific pronouns are being used directly. The father answers with,

Our family has been using those words since the time of our ancestors and it has become habit... We villagers use words differently than city people, intellectuals, and the rich. We use words like *si* (eat), *chus* (defecate), *puk* (drink), *dek* (sleep), *anh* (I), *haeng* (you), etc. They use words like *nyam* (eat), *botcheung* (bend legs, i.e., use the bathroom), *ba* (dad), *mak* (mom), *knyom* (I), *kon-aeng* (child-you, i.e., endearing address with children). (Sambatt 2011)

The father's explanation solidifies an interpretation that these words were simply just language differentiation between rural and urban residents.

Another related interpretation is that their moral circle of intimacy or informality, when it comes to the non-honorific register, is greater, casting a wider net toward more people. They do not see these terms as vulgar. And they expect reciprocal non-honorific register-usage as a way

to extend feelings of solidarity. Although the range of people included in the urbanite's moral circle of honorification and the farmer's moral circle of informality overlap, it is how that moral circle is expressed linguistically that differs: with urbanites encouraging the ordinary or polite register while farmers tend to use the non-honorific register.

The next few sections will be about this figure who is juxtaposed to the urbanite. I pay attention to the differences between rural and urban usages of the non-honorific register. While the preceding discussion was about pronouns and forms of address, the following sections look at other forms in the non-honorific register, focusing primarily on the word "eat."

Si and Hob vs. Nyam

There are two words for "eat" in Khmer that are associated with farmers from the countryside: *si* and *hob*. While there are several other words for "eat," these two words often stand in stark contrast with the word *nyam*, the unmarked word for "eat" among city Cambodians. More polite terms for "eat," such as *pisaa*, *totultien*, or *borepok*, are marked for politeness. Incidentally, these forms for "eat" were also a focal point for the Khmer Rouge's language policy, which I will describe in brief detail later.

For now, I want to concentrate on the linguistic urban-rural divide in how Cambodians say "eat." *Hob* was appropriated by the Khmer Rouge to be the only word for "eat" when they came into power in the late 1970s since it was commonly used by peasant farmers. It too was an unmarked word for "eat," but only among rural Cambodians. Many urbanites found it difficult to adopt the word *hob* under the Khmer Rouge. Some knew it existed, but it was not a word that was part of their vocabulary. Others, like my friend Sengly's mother, claimed to have never

heard of it before. Living 7 kilometers outside of the town of Battambang, she was 20 years old when the Khmer Rouge came into power.

Ms. Ung (Sengly's mother): Under the Sangkum⁶³ period, we were used to using *nyam*. They [the Khmer Rouge] didn't let us use it—*nyam*, *pisaa*. They wanted us to say *hob*.

Sengly: Even for kids too, *hob*?

Ms. Ung: Uh! *Hob* for everyone, from old to young!

Sengly: [Even mothers, *hob*?

Ms. Ung: [“Hey comrade, *hob* this. Other comrade, *hob* that!”

Sengly: For mothers and fathers, *hob* too?

Sengly's mother: *Hob* too. Before, we would say, “Mom, *pisaa baay*.” Eh? And “*nyam baay*.” Children would say, “*Knyom* [I] already *nyam*.” Not [back] then. “[I] already *hob*.” “*Hob baay*,” they let you say. *Anh* [I] never heard the word *hob* until the Khmer Rouge period. *Hob. Hob*. Who has heard of the word *hob* before?

Sengly and his mother's conversation showed how strange it was for Cambodians, particularly those from more urban areas, to use one word for “eat” with everyone. For city people, using *nyam* or *pisaa* was more appropriate, especially in situations where a lower status individual was speaking to a higher status individual, like a child to mother. Interestingly, Sengly's mother referred to herself using the first-person pronoun *anh* in one instance. It was my first time meeting her so I was unsure whether she was speaking informally or crudely with me because I was younger than her (I brought up the question about language under the Khmer Rouge while Sengly asked his own follow-up questions upon hearing her answer). I also wondered whether she was extending familiarity to me since I was friends with her son, or if she was speaking intimately with her own son since he was also part of the conversation.

⁶³ Sangkum Reatr Niyum was the period after Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953 and before Cambodia fell into civil war in the 1970.

Many would put *si* under the non-honorific register because it is also the animal word for “eat.” I once tried to translate a children’s book about dinosaurs to a couple of Cambodian children. When I got to the page about dinosaur diet, saying some dinosaurs *nyam* meat while some dinosaurs *nyam* vegetables, the kids started giggling. It sounded silly to them because dinosaurs *si*, not *nyam*. People in the city often take issue with the word *si* when used with humans. Unlike *hob*, which city people might find strange, perhaps a peculiar regionalism, *si* is more often than not, more of a transgressive word among urbanites. They might say *si* is OK with friends and family, and small children, but would never ever use it in any other context. In spite of this, I often found urban adults trying to avoid using *si* as a way to set a good example for their children. I observed this conversation between a Cambodian grandmother and her granddaughter in Phnom Penh:

Grandmother: *Nyam baay*⁶⁴ yet?

Granddaughter: Already *si*.

Grandmother: Eh! “Already *nyam*!”

Here, the grandmother corrects her granddaughter’s usage of *si* by replacing it with *nyam* instead.

Farmers Retaining Older Language Uses

In sketching the history of the word *si*, as well as other terms within the non-honorific register, I have found that many of these words did not have negative connotations, but over

⁶⁴ Literally “eat rice,” but Cambodians often use “rice” to mean any food in general.

time, have become pejorative. Through semantic derogation, we not only understand why there is a stark divide between how rural and urban Cambodians view the non-honorific register, but also perhaps why urban Cambodians see rural farmers as being stuck in the past.

Curiously, some Cambodians have reported that when *nyam* is used in the countryside, it is often used non-reciprocally by adults with children only. Ehrman & Sos explains it in one footnote:

ស៊ី /sii/ and ហ្សូប /houp/ are used in areas outside of Phnom Penh, in such areas ញ៉ាំ /ñam/ is used only in the family with children. However, in Phnom Penh, the usual word is ញ៉ាំ /ñam/. (Ehrman and Sos 1972, 99)

This also came up during an interview with a monk and university professor. The Venerable Ry described *nyam*'s original meaning as “sweet,” which I interpreted to mean babyish or childish. He and Lokkruu Sokchea cited the Chuon Nath dictionary, which states that *nyam* was used with children, spoken by adults toward children. Both were uncertain as to why this childish word for “eat” somehow got extended to all people to the point that city people now think it is a general term for “eat” among affluent and urban people. As two men who currently live in the town of Battambang, but were originally from small villages more than an hour away, their insights were especially meaningful to me. By their account, when rural children go to Phnom Penh to work and then return home to their villages, they might out of habit say “*Mae, nyam baay*” or “Mom, eat rice.” According to the Ven. Ry, “In the countryside, ‘*Mae, nyam baay*’ is very awkward, awkward and disrespectful.”

Another Cambodian man who moved from the countryside to Phnom Penh also shared his experiences between the words *si* and *nyam* (Tim 2010). He explains that after moving to the capital, Phnom Penh residents often got angry with him for using the word *si*, claiming it to be immoral. They tried to convince him to start using the word *nyam* instead. He also went into the

Chuon Nath dictionary to figure out what was wrong with the word *si* because it was the word he used for “eat” growing up. He triumphantly declared on his blog that, according to the dictionary, *si* is a simple word for “eat,” used among equals. *Nyam*, on the other hand, was a “slang” word for “eat” with young children. Seizing upon this older definition, he accuses city people of speaking to other adults like children when they say *nyam*. And the word *si* not immoral or obscene. He asserts that his upbringing with the word *si* was nothing he should be ashamed about.

We see that semantic derogation with *si* occurs when other words with similar definitions like *nyam* enter the linguistic stage. This story can be repeated with other linguistic terms currently located in the non-honorific register, such as between the non-honorific *anh* (I) and ordinary *knyom* (I). The first-person pronoun *anh* used to be the only first-person pronoun while *knyom* was a historical word that meant “slave” (Pou 1979). By the time the Code of Conduct for Boys was written, the word *anh* was already falling out of use since the Code encouraged boys not to use the word *anh* because it is a “hurtful” and “inappropriate” word, and using it will make it look like you lack education (Jenner and Pou 1976). Though the age of the Code is unknown, it is estimated to be “modern” or new by Cambodian history standards (ibid), which is often understood to be in the 19th to early 20th centuries.

Jacob (1993 [1986]) believes contact with the French language, and particularly the V-form (*vous*), encouraged educated Phnom Penh residents of all ages and social levels to use *vous* reciprocally, appreciating its equality. This no doubt had an impact in how they used Khmer, which also had “explicit exposition of differences of social status” (Jacob 1993 [1986], 157). Citing the fictional novel *Mealea Dong Chett* (“Garland of the Heart”) set in pre-WWII, Jacob points to a tension between how a local governor actually wants to speak to his subordinates,

using *anh*, and how prevailing trends have made *anh*-usage impolite. He knows he must use the pronoun *knyom*, but cannot bring himself to do it. “[T]hough he knows he should not now use the familiar /²ap/. The result is that his underlings all become used to understanding what he says even with the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ omitted” (ibid). These examples suggest that the non-honorific register’s widespread usages in history often makes it an index of the past, a past that had extreme hierarchy, but also a past where a majority of the population were rural peasant farmers. I will elaborate on the significance of the temporality of the non-honorific register at the end of my chapter.

The Ignorant Farmer Avoiding Si

A Khmer teacher once told me a joke about a man from the countryside who was about to go to Phnom Penh for the first time. His children told him, “Dad, remember, don’t use the word *si* in Phnom Penh. People there use the word *nyam*.” When he arrived in Phnom Penh, he tried to hail a cyclo⁶⁵, a pedal-taxi that resembles a tall tricycle where passengers are seated in front while the driver pedals. But he called out, “*Nyam-clo!*” The first syllable of the word cyclo is pronounced like *si*. The farmer took his children’s instruction quite literally by avoiding the word *si*, even in a word that has nothing to do with the word “eat.”

I found a similar version of this joke online (Pech 2012), but it differed from my teacher’s telling of it in a few ways. First, it was a son leaving for Phnom Penh, not a father. Second, it was his mother who gave him the advice. Third, his mother’s advice included both *si* and *hob* as examples of words people in Phnom Penh do not use. “Child, do you know? People

⁶⁵ Cyclos used to be a popular form of transportation in Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge. Today, tourists probably make up the bulk of clients for cyclo drivers as Cambodians prefer faster modes of transportation.

in Phnom Penh, they don't normally use the word *si* or *hob* like us farmers. They use the word *nyam* instead of those words. You understand, child? Don't forget your mother's advice." Since my teacher's story was less descriptive, reading the more fleshed out story brought about more interesting details: the son's fear and awe seeing how big the capital was, his confusion as to why a cyclo driver ignored him when he tried to hail him by yelling *nyam-clo*, his inner thoughts about whether city people were rude after being ignored, and another mishap where he refers to Silup Market as *Nyam-lup* Market. Both versions of this story prey upon several stereotypes in Cambodia. One is that farmers in the countryside use the word *si* while city people use the word *nyam*. It also implies that the word *si* should not be used in the city since it is considered bad-mannered. Finally, it paints country people as simple, uneducated, and naïve, taking advice too literally, thinking that all instances of *si* were off limits.⁶⁶

Jokes often make differences and divisions even more apparent. In her analysis of jokes that involve Native Americans, Meek (2013) demonstrates that Native American identity, often expressed through their speech, is juxtaposed to a "White" standard, which suggests ambiguity in how they belong in the United States: as U.S. citizens or as perpetual foreigners. Like the Native American persona, which portrays them as "dysfluent, un-modern, and simple" (Meek 2013, 352), the ignorant farmer is similarly portrayed and also juxtaposed with an urban standard in Cambodian society, often urban residents in Phnom Penh. Through these jokes, we discover that Cambodians do not feel sympathy toward the receiver of the non-honorific when they hear a farmer using it as they often do when they hear a cruel superior using it. Instead, the jokes are funny because Cambodians often feel pity toward the ignorant, illiterate farmer who uses the non-honorific register, too simple to understand when to *si* and when not to. "He just doesn't

⁶⁶ One Cambodian friend at my Battambang gym told me that he sometimes jokingly referred to his friends Sitha and Sinuon as *Nyam-tha* and *Nyam-nuon*.

know any better,” is how Cambodians might respond along with some laughter. To have the Cambodian farmer be the butt of these jokes implies that they might not belong in Cambodia, not just as citizens, but also as people living in the contemporary.

The next sections not only portray the final characterological figure of the Khmer Rouge cadre, but also try to make sense of the ironies and inconsistencies that have emerged in light of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Re-animating the Khmer Rouge

The figure of the “cruel superior” and “uneducated farmer” is combined in a final character: the Khmer Rouge soldier, someone who is also associated with the non-honorific register. Khmer Rouge survivors often re-animate the Khmer Rouge using non-honorifics, despite the Khmer Rouge encouraging more neutral, rural language like *hob* for “eat” in order to create an egalitarian agrarian society full of farmers. While some reenactments portray the Khmer Rouge in their true communist form, spouting political rhetoric such as wanting to get rid of “imperialism” (ចក្រពត្តិ, *chakrapuot*) or talking about life after the “revolution” (បដិវត្ត, *padiwat*), many victims of the Khmer Rouge remember a different portrayal of the Khmer Rouge: that of a cruel superior. It is not hard to imagine that there may have been a disconnect between policy and practice. While the Khmer Rouge eliminated hierarchy for others, they often asserted hierarchy for themselves; and their use of the non-honorific register is evidence of this. Nor is it hard to imagine a Khmer Rouge soldier speaking with the non-honorific register while interrogating, beating, and executing Cambodians. It is, after all, the language of power and authority and the Khmer Rouge wielded extreme power and authority, holding people’s lives in their hands.

Re-enactments and stories that voice the Khmer Rouge tell us a lot about how survivors remember their experiences and how they want the world to remember the Khmer Rouge: as cruel, brutal, and vicious – not just in their behavior, in having little regard for life, but also through their violent language. When the Khmer Rouge’s voice is in contrast with the speaker’s own personal voice, the main difference is often portrayed through the non-honorific register on the part of the Khmer Rouge. Using Goffman’s (1981) distinction between animator, author, and principal, we see that re-enactors also become the “animators” of the Khmer Rouge by playing an active role in bringing their voices to life, but they are not using their own words. Instead, the “author” and the “principal” of those words belong to the Khmer Rouge, who are decidedly different from the person who is animating them. The social and collective memories, along with reenactments, have solidified the non-honorific register as the language of the Khmer Rouge. The non-honorific register has become enregistered to the point that many young Cambodians who were born after the Khmer Rouge regime also imagine the Khmer Rouge period in this way due to the portrayals in movies, plays, and survivor stories.

In the following sections, I show evidence from various genres that illustrate my point. First, I briefly reintroduce the Khmer Rouge language policy and talk about the contradictions and ironies between the flattening that occurred in the 1970s to the flattening that is occurring today among the urban middle-class. The latter half contains individual recollections of Khmer Rouge speech, ranging from interviews I conducted with rural Cambodians, testimony from the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and public performances re-enacting life under the regime.

The Khmer Rouge Language Policy & Parallels Today

When the Khmer Rouge came into power in 1975, they made considerable efforts to establish an egalitarian agrarian society. They evicted all Cambodians into the countryside to live communally because all Cambodians were expected “work, eat, sleep, and speak like a peasant” (Hinton 1998, 110). The elite honorific registers for royals and monks were eliminated because there was no royal family nor any religious institutions under the regime. When it came to the ordinary honorific register, the Khmer Rouge had to be selective about which honorific register level would represent their new national language. Instead of choosing an already existing register, they linguistically engineered a new register, choosing words that sometimes came from the ordinary register and sometimes from the polite register. Most notably, the Khmer Rouge refashioned the Khmer language by using the sociolect of rural Cambodians as the model by which their new communist language would follow.

For urban Cambodians, the most notable linguistic difference under the regime was the word *hob*, the only sanctioned word for “eat” under the regime. For them, *hob* was a country bumpkin word for “eat” and they found it strange to use one word, the same word, with everyone, regardless of age and status. Recall Ms. Ung and Sengly’s conversation about *hob* earlier in this chapter. Another Phnom Penh resident, Vicheny, who was 17 years old when the Khmer Rouge took over, described the Khmer Rouge language as no longer polite because Cambodians were no longer allowed to use their preferred words for “eat”:

Speech was no longer polite. And *nyam* and the like, it became *hob*. Everything else, *totultien* [was eliminated]. We were used to using *totultien*, *nyam*, and the like. But no, had to use *hob* for everyone. Nobody used those [other] words [for “eat”]. Anyone who used those words, they [the Khmer Rouge] said the language of imperialism has not been eliminated [from you], the language of imperialism.

However, for both rural and urban Cambodians alike, the form of address *mitt* (“comrade”) was another stark difference. Most Cambodians were accustomed to referring to people in both second- and third-person by titles (“teacher”), forms of address (“sir”), or kin terms (“aunt”). Now, everyone was *mitt*. Sometimes *mitt* was accompanied by *aeng* (“you”) to be *mitt-aeng*, which can be a sign of intimacy, but also a sign of anger, which we will learn from survivor stories. Other times, Cambodians reported that the Khmer Rouge allowed *mitt* to be used with a kin term, like *bang* “older sister or brother,” to become *mitt-bang* (“comrade older sibling”). Finally, another notable linguistic change for urban Cambodians was how they refer to their mothers and fathers. Under the Khmer Rouge, they were not allowed to use the city words *mak* or *ba*. *Instead*, they had to call their parents by the rural terms for mom and dad, *mae* and *pok*.

Register	Context, Status, Role Relation	second-person	third-person	“eat”
Royal	commoner speaking to royalty	Eliminated		
	royalty speaking to commoner			
Monk	non-monk (commoner or royalty) speaking to monk	Eliminated		
	monk speaking to non-monk (commoner or royalty)			
* Ordinary / Common	polite/formal	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>koat</i>	<i>pisaa, totultien, borepok nyam</i>
	ordinary/neutral	<i>mitt (comrade), mitt + kin term, mitt + aeng</i>	titles, forms of address, kin terms	<i>hob</i>
	non-honorific: high ranking to low ranking, among equals, informal, intimate, vulgar, animals	<i>aeng, haeng, neak aeng</i>	<i>vea</i>	<i>si chras chram, bok kandal, deumtrung</i>

Table 14: Summary of the Khmer Rouge linguistic policies on Khmer honorific registers as the Khmer Rouge eliminated elite registers and the non-honorific register. Notice the parallelisms between the flattening of Khmer honorific registers in Cambodian society and the flattening of Khmer honorific registers under the Khmer Rouge.

Another notable linguistic policy under the Khmer Rouge emerged from their disdain for the non-honorific register. They wanted to elevate social groups who have long been oppressed by Cambodian society: women, the poor, farmers, peasants, and children. These social identities are often associated with being on the lower rungs of society, or the little persons (*neak thuch*) in an unequal relationship. Not only do they do bear the brunt of labor while the big persons (*neak thom*) enjoy the fruits of their hard work, a classic communist critique about capitalism, but they are also the ones who are most likely to receive condescension and anger, i.e, non-honorifics. The Khmer Rouge wished to eliminate non-honorifics as a way to give value to all people, regardless of their age, gender, or previous social class before the revolution.

One way they did this was to eliminate the *ah-* prefix that sometimes conveys intimacy, but other times conveys disdain, arrogance, and anger, as we have seen with Prime Minister Hun Sen. It is often used in front of someone’s name, like *ah-Cheryl*, but can also be used for nouns:

ah-French person or *ah*-this thing, as examples. Even though *ah*- could signal solidarity, it was its patronizing element that led the Khmer Rouge to banish its usage. While interviewing Thay about his experience with language under the Khmer Rouge, he mentioned that he and his friends commonly used *ah*- with one another. Thay was 13-years-old at the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime and was from the countryside in Takeo Province. It came up when I asked him, “What happens when you use the wrong word [under the Khmer Rouge regime]?”

For kids, when they [Khmer Rouge] held meetings, they told us to say *mitt*. Whenever [we did] wrong outside [in public], like when we say *ah*- for example, they would have a meeting later. They had meetings all the time, meetings in the morning, meetings in the evening. We often messed up, saying *mitt* sometimes, saying *ah*- other times. They didn’t enforce [the rules] yet because we were entering and leaving different troops [work brigades] and we hadn’t been accustomed to good⁶⁷ language yet. We were used to saying *ah*-, *ah*-friend, and the like. When they took us out [to work], they wanted us to say *mitt*, so [we] say *mitt*. If [we] forget, then [we] forget. They didn’t enforce [strictly], but they had meetings morning and night, repeating the language, wanting us to speak that way, stopping us from calling each other *ah*-friend, wanting us to call each other *mitt*. ‘Ey, *mitt*, come and work’ like that... During morning meetings, [they] told us to stop calling each other *ah*-this, *ah*-that. Use *mitt* with one another. ‘Come, *mitt*-yeung [comrade-we, let’s] go to work.’ ‘*Mitt*-aeng, do this.’ ‘*Mitt*-aeng, do that.’ During the afternoon, evening meetings, [they] tell us again, repeatedly. Wanting us to learn the language of address. We were forgetful, sometimes forget some. It wasn’t important.

The Khmer Rouge divided people up into work brigades based on age and gender. Thay described working with friends or workmates of equal status and age as using *ah*- with one another, which reflects the intimate or solidarity meaning of *ah*-. In fact, this is one instance in which the Khmer Rouge figure is not portrayed as a cruel superior, but as the communist cadre. Thay did not report brutality or punishment when it came to linguistic mistakes. As a kid from the countryside, the Khmer Rouge were probably more forgiving of Thay and other rural Cambodians when they made linguistic mistakes during the regime. The Khmer Rouge did not hold any grudges against his kind; it was the rich city people who were the source of inequality

⁶⁷ I am unsure if he was referring to “good” language by Khmer Rouge standards or by traditional Cambodian culture standards. However, if I had to guess, I am leaning toward the traditional cultural standards.

before the revolution. We often hear a different story from urban Cambodians. Recall Vicheny's report that the Khmer Rouge often accused them of not getting rid of "imperialism" when they used the city word *nyam* ("eat"), threatening them with "re-education," a euphemism to take people away to be executed, if they did not learn.

Mr. Y, a former Khmer Rouge leader now living in Pailin Province, said *hob* was chosen because Pol Pot wanted to choose a simple word that a majority of Cambodians could understand. Remember, this was a time when 80% of Cambodians were farmers in the countryside so *hob* was their sociolect. Secondly, it was already an unmarked word for "eat" among rural residents, a word that could be used with anyone and everyone. *Si* and *chras*, which fall under the non-honorific register, were not chosen because they were inappropriate with individuals superior to you. Mr. Y said he too asked Pol Pot why they used the word *hob*. In the following, Mr. Y animates Pol Pot's voice, recalling his answer to him:

Mitt-aeng [comrade-you], if *mitt-aeng* asks me to go *hob baay*, I would accept [the language] because *mitt-aeng* is lower than me...But if *mitt-aeng* asks me to *pisaa bay*, I can also accept as well because I am higher than *mitt-aeng*. If *mitt-aeng* asks me to *si baay*, "Mok *si baay*, Pol Pot!", cannot [accept]. It's wrong.

Notice the contradiction between equality and hierarchy. Despite calls for equality, Pol Pot himself tells Mr. Y that Mr. Y is lower than him hierarchically, which is why Mr. Y was not allowed to use the non-honorific *si* with Pol Pot. The usage of *nyam* went unspecified, but it may have been implicit that *nyam* could never be used due to its urban resonances.

Another salient change was the elimination of the third-person non-honorific *vea* for people. *Vea* is a pronoun that can be used for inanimate objects ("it"), but it is also a third-person pronoun "he/she" that can be used among equals and intimates or from a superior toward an inferior. In its place, the Khmer Rouge wanted all individuals to be referred to as *koat*, the formal third-person pronoun for "he/him" or "she/her."

This revolutionary language also abolished *vear*, the disdainful third person singular and plural pronoun, which was used for children, subordinates and women, replacing it with *koat*, previously used in other contexts. (Picq 1984:352)

The elimination of hierarchy was, on the one hand, viewed by many urban Cambodians as the elimination of “politeness” since they could not speak “politely” with their elders anymore using polite registers from the common register. On the other hand, the elimination of hierarchy in terms of the banishment of any form of condescension, such as the non-honorific register, was also unpopular by Cambodians from the cities. Not only did they want to give politeness to those above, but they also wanted to exert their superiority over those below them as well. While speaking with Meun, who was born and raised in Phnom Penh and has been living in the United States since the 1990s, she echoed how many urban Cambodians felt when they were introduced to the term *mitt* (“comrade”). The eradication of hierarchy by the Khmer Rouge meant those below her did not need to give her respect. Indirectly, Meun implies that it was an assault on her prerogative to “talk down” to children. Notice her use of *vea* when referring to a hypothetical small child.

Sometimes, a child, a small child – even though we were older than *vea* [them], *vea* [they] also had to call us *mitt*. They [Khmer Rouge] said we were all equal. This was a communist word; they spoke the language of equality.

The irony is that there are many similarities between the Khmer Rouge regime and current trends in Cambodian society. First, the Khmer Rouge and the urban middle-class desired a world that was more equal, but they had vastly different ideas about what that kind of equality looks like. The Khmer Rouge advocated an agrarian form of equality, where everyone was equally a farmer. They similarly refashioned the Khmer language to fit that worldview. A relative who lived under the Khmer Rouge once told me, “The Khmer Rouge wanted everyone to be equal. We were equal, alright: equally poor.” The urban middle-class do not want complete

equality; they just want a scaled-down version of hierarchy, one that is not as extreme as past forms of feudalism. They still want ways to honor elders, show formality, and to be polite, which is why they still use the more polite register. Equality here meant everyone was respected.

The trend toward secularization is another similarity. The Khmer Rouge were more direct with their efforts to secularize the country by banning religion. Buddhist pagodas were desecrated or turned them into prisons, animal pens, or storage spaces. Monks were forced to disrobe (or defrock). Religious minorities like Christians and Muslims also suffered. The urban middle-class are slowly reaching secularization on their own through societal changes such as busy work hours, newer forms of entertainment, and images of bad monks, changing Cambodians' relationship with Buddhism. This not only causes them to be less religious, but to also lose fluency in the Buddhist monk honorific register (Chapter 2). It is even more ironic, that capitalism, relationships with foreign countries, and foreign languages—the very things the Khmer Rouge despised as the root of all evils—are the very features that have encouraged secularism and a modern sensibility.

Both the Khmer Rouge and the urban middle-class today loathe the non-honorific register. While urban middle-class people still want ways to express formality and politeness upwards, they too find downward facing language, language that disparages people, to be demeaning. This disdain for the non-honorific register was also shared by the Khmer Rouge as they banned words from the register. For example, they discouraged people from using the third-person *vea* and encouraged the polite third-person pronoun *koat*. Today, the urban middle-class is also more likely to share these views. Thida, a staff member from the Catholic church, described her two-year-old niece or nephew⁶⁸ as *koat*. *The Voice Kids Cambodia*, a popular

⁶⁸ In Khmer, the term *khmy* is a gender-neutral term for niece and nephew. I was uncertain of the gender as she was telling the story.

reality show and singing competition, had music coaches, in their 30s and 40s, who often referred to the child and pre-teen contestants as *koat*. This contrasts with Meun’s narrative during our interview about the Khmer Rouge, where she referred to young children as *vea*: “... even though we were older than *vea*, *vea* also had to call us *mitt*.”

Of course, in spite of the Khmer Rouge policy to treat everyone equally, it was not accomplished in practice since they were focused on eliminating anyone who had been part of the oppressor class during pre-revolutionary times, anyone who was from the city, upper-class, educated, and what-not. Cambodians could never learn to embrace the language without remembering the pain and suffering they or their elders lived through. The Venerable Ry summed it up by saying:

When we look at the Pol Pot regime, they made people use egalitarian words, but in practice, apparently it wasn’t like this at all. It was oppressive. It harmed people. It was hateful.

Despite the irony that the language of the growing urban middle-class seems to correspond with the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians do not see it that way because the middle-class, unlike the Khmer Rouge, still allows Cambodians to honor and give respect upwards toward elders and superiors—something that was not permitted under the Khmer Rouge. The urban middle-class’s re-imagined system of Khmer honorific registers still retains honorific alternants in the ordinary register and the polite register, allowing room to show politeness, if they choose. This pivotal linguistic and cultural difference is what sets contemporary register flattening apart from the Khmer Rouge communist register flattening—that is, if we were to ignore the genocidal tendencies of the other regime.

Personal Interviews

When survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime talk about their experiences, they often reanimate the Khmer Rouge, giving them voice. Sometimes they were used to illustrate new words like *mitt*. Recall Thay voicing the Khmer Rouge as saying, “*Mitt-aeng*, do this. *Mitt-aeng*, do that.” These commands were likely uttered when the Khmer Rouge were assigning jobs or tasks to Cambodians under the regime. For the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves, the address term *mitt-aeng* may have been an intimate form of address. It is a combination of *mitt* (“comrade”) and the non-honorific *aeng* (“you”). Mr. Y recalled Pol Pot referring to him as *mitt-aeng*.

For other Cambodians, however, the term *mitt-aeng* conjures up painful, terrifying memories of getting in trouble. My friend Neth took me to his hometown in Takeo Province to meet some villagers who had lived under the Khmer Rouge. Neth knew of my interest in the Khmer Rouge language so he helped me guide the conversation in that direction when we met Mr. N and Mr. O, two men who were youths under the Khmer Rouge. The four of us laughed during the following exchange.

Neth: When [the Khmer Rouge] were unhappy, what did they say?

Mr. N: *Mitt-aeng*

Mr. O: *Mitt-aeng*

(*Everyone laughs*)

Mr. N: ‘*Mitt-aeng*,’ when hear [that word], [become] nervous. ‘*Mitt-aeng*! Do it well, *mitt-aeng*.’

Mr. O: When hear that, [you] better be careful.

It seemed strange looking back, but at the time of the interview, perhaps the informants, Neth, and I had enough distance from that time period for them to joke about how terrifying it was to

hear that you might have been in trouble. What made it funny perhaps was its parallel with power dynamics between parents and children. Cambodian parents use the non-honorific register when they are angry with their children and are scolding them. To hear Mr. N's and Mr. O's fear of *mitt-aeng* then also mirrored the fear children have when they know they are in trouble. Not unlike the American trope that parents call their children by their full names, certain linguistic forms allude to certain genres, such as "you're in trouble," which is why children and Khmer Rouge victims alike are preparing themselves for an impending reprimand.

Correspondingly, the Venerable Ry and Lokkruu Sokchea also mention certain Khmer Rouge words that make Cambodians shudder today. In the following exchange, notice that Lokkruu Sokchea puts ah- in front of the word *hob*, to show his disdain for the word. Also, see how he refers to himself with the non-honorific anh, the first-person pronoun. Although I am much younger than Lokkruu Sokchea, which gives him the prerogative to use the non-honorific anh with me, I believe the use of anh here was more about his hatred of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Lokkruu Sokchea: Ah-hob [the word *hob*], anh (I am) miserable.

Venerable Ry: When we hear the word *samak-mitt* (comrade), [we] get scared.

Lokkruu Sokchea: Scared of it. When [we] hear the word *chlob* (spy), hear *samak-mitt*, or *kamapibal* (cadre), or any of those words, [it] reminds [me] it's from that era that made anh miserable.

Moving away from personal interviews, let us now turn to one witness's testimony at the ECCC, or Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

Reported Speech at the ECCC

Meas Sokha was called as a witness for the ECCC on January 21, 2015. He was a teenager under the Khmer Rouge and in 1976 was sent to Kraing Ta Chan prison with a number of his family members. He was questioned repeatedly about the prison's conditions, the executions, as well as the interrogations he witnessed. Although Meas had not been interrogated by the Khmer Rouge, he claims to have overheard the questioning while picking vegetables a few meters away from the interrogation room. Throughout his testimony, Meas reported what the Khmer Rouge were saying through direct quotations, animating their voices.

When questioned by both the prosecution and the defense about what questions he overheard the Khmer Rouge asking, Meas answered with direct quotes, animating the voices of the Khmer Rouge who often accused prisoners of working for the enemy before the Khmer Rouge came into power, ranging from the CIA, FBI, KGB, or the previous Lon Nol⁶⁹ government, even though these accusations were illogical and outrageous. In the following excerpts from different parts of Meas's testimony, the Khmer Rouge are voiced using the non-honorific second-person pronoun *aeng* (you) while they are interrogating prisoners and threatening Meas. In contrast, Meas uses the unmarked, informal first-person pronoun *knyom* (I) throughout his testimony when referring to himself, but he uses it to animate the voices of the prisoners.

1. They would ask, 'What did *aeng* do?' The prisoners would say, '*Knyom* didn't do anything.' '*Aeng* is stubborn. *Aeng* was ranked 5 stars or *aeng* was an American CIA or Vietnamese CIA.' They would ask that. 'If *aeng* doesn't answer, *anh* will hit [you].'
2. *Knyom* can't remember all of them [the questions] because [I] heard from a distance, but *knyom* remembers them asking, 'What did *aeng* do during the Lon Nol regime? What was *aeng's* rank?' That's what was asked. *Knyom* only remembers that much.

⁶⁹ Also known as the Khmer Republic (1970-1975), the regime immediately preceding the Khmer Rouge, whose leaders and followers were enemies and were subject to torture and execution.

3. They warned *knyom*, ‘If *aeng* sees anything, knows anything, hears anything, get out. If *aeng* mentions that this is a place where people are interrogated, tortured, beaten, hit on the head until [they] bleed⁷⁰, be careful, *aeng* will have trouble.’ They just warned *knyom* like that.

Not only does Meas offer a stark contrast between his voice as Khmer Rouge animator and his own personal voice, but Meas also does so when reporting the speech of unidentified prisoners. In the first excerpt (1), notice the juxtaposition of two first-person pronouns: *knyom* and *anh*. The prisoner answers back with *knyom*, but the Khmer Rouge threatens to hit them with *anh*.

What is important to the staged creation of the Khmer Rouge cadre, through the non-honorific register in present-day Cambodia, is not whether the Khmer Rouge actually used those terms in the 1970s, but that Meas voices them as doing so 40 years later. The Khmer Rouge are using condescending language while the victims are not.

Re-enactments in public performances

The current ruling party in Cambodia, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has been in power since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 and the long-serving Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in power since 1985. As a means to garner local support and gain legitimacy, the ruling government in the 1980s and 1990s encouraged Cambodians to voice their anger at the Khmer Rouge. By promoting a shared sense of anger toward the previous regime, the CPP hoped Cambodians would be grateful toward the ruling party.

Tivea Chong Kamheung (ទិវាចងកំហឹង) is often translated as Day of Hate/Hatred or Day of Anger in English. A more literal translation of the Khmer term would be Day of Holding onto

⁷⁰ In other words, executed.

Anger, which might be better glossed as Day of Maintaining Rage. Every May 20 for most of the 1980s and 1990s, the government held blessing ceremonies and performances to commemorate the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. Cambodians were encouraged to share memories about their experiences under the regime, testimonies that not only express sadness, but also anger and rage. Effigies of top Khmer Rouge leaders were often burned.

In 2011, the government renamed the holiday to “Day of Remembrance.” One of the most interesting events is a re-enactment of the Khmer Rouge regime with actors portraying Khmer Rouge cadres and Khmer Rouge victims. Actors portraying Cambodian victims under the regime use props, but mostly make use of miming, to show that they are working in the fields and tending to animals. In these re-enactments, they are often subjected to verbal abuse, beatings, and death. Actors portraying Khmer Rouge soldiers are always dressed in black, sometimes with a *krama* (checkered scarf), which is emblematic of peasant farmers who use *kramas* daily: as a towel to wipe one’s sweat, as a sling or purse to carry things around, or as a hat to keep them cool from the sun. The Khmer Rouge, in these plays, are cruel and laugh menacingly, kicking, hitting, shooting, and stabbing their victims. In one scene, a Khmer Rouge snatches a baby away from the mother. In another, Cambodians are lined up, tied to a rope and dragged. Loudspeakers blare lamenting music, sound effects (like gunshots), the voice of a narrator, as well as the voices associated with the actors acting on the ground.

In re-enactments, actors playing Khmer Rouge cadres often invoke the non-honorific register when arguing with Cambodians. The most common second-person pronoun was *aeng* or *mitt-aeng*. In these instances, there is no doubt that the pronoun is used to convey anger and

superiority. In one clip, a worker stops working and decides to rest. Two Khmer Rouge soldiers appear and ask him, “What are you doing?!”⁷¹

Aeng *twuh s?ey*
You do what

Gloss: What are you doing?!

Here, the Khmer Rouge soldier uses the non-honorific *aeng* toward the worker. The Khmer Rouge soldier may have been expressing his power and authority over the worker as well as his anger and contempt toward what appears to be a lazy person who has stopped working.

Outside of Day of Hate performances, we also have re-enactments being performed by former Khmer Rouge cadres who worked at S-21 prison. Originally a high school named Tuol Sleng, it was converted into a torture prison under the Khmer Rouge and is a museum today. In the documentary *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Panh 2002), former Khmer Rouge prison guards and prisoners reunite at S-21, not only revisiting life at the prison under the regime, but former guards even re-enacted their daily routines throughout the grounds of the prison. In many of these re-enactments, former Khmer Rouge guards use the non-honorific register, either to describe the prisoners or in re-enacting their interactions with them. In one scene, a former guard explains how he would fetch a prisoner who has been called for interrogation. He mimes how he would enter the room and handcuff the prisoner, referring to the prisoner with the non-honorific third-person *vea*.

‘Number 13, get up!’ [I] let *vea* (he/she) get up. Take a scarf to blindfold. After blindfolding with the scarf, [I] handcuff *vea*’s hand from behind. (Panh 2002)

⁷¹ Aeng, what are doing? 4:35 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MRAiGUNxGw>

His use of *vea* in this re-enactment shows how he was embodying the role of the prison guard more than 20 years after the prison was closed down.

In another scene, another former prison guard re-enacts and narrates how he would inspect the prisoners' locks while on guard duty in a room that used to house rows upon rows of prisoners who were shackled together. In that same empty room, he paces back and forth, from row to row, rattling invisible locks, asking the prisoners to lift their hands, and checks their pockets.

'Sit! Don't move!' I begin to walk around—'*Ah-aeng!* Who let *aeng* take off [your] shirt? *Aeng* doing it without the guard's permission? *Aeng* dares to take off [your] shirt. *Aeng* dares to take off [your] shirt. *Ah-aeng* is taking off [your] shirt to hang [yourself]? Give [me] the shirt!' I grab the shirt and take it outside. (Panh 2002)

In another re-enactment, the same prison guard paces back and forth in front of a prison cell's barred window, often sticking his arm through the bars to point at invisible prisoners who are misbehaving⁷² or fetching things for prisoners who may have requested food or a can to relieve themselves.

Ey (what)? *Si* (eat) porridge? *Anh* will bring it.

(Reaches arm through bars of the window to point) '*Ah*-that person! Be careful of stealing other people's porridge. Don't move! Don't move! Be careful! [If] *anh* (I) come in, [you'll] be in trouble.'

'What?' (Peers through the window and waits a few seconds) 'Need to pee? *Uh* (yes), *anh* will bring it [the can].' ... (Enters the cell, places the can on the floor, and points at the prisoner) 'If it spills, be careful! [You'll] get the club.'

How former prison guards spoke during these re-enactments differed from how they spoke outside of them. Instead of *anh* (I), they used *knyom*. Instead of referring to the prisoners as *vea*

⁷² Recall that Neary, in her disappointment with Judge Nil's use of *neak aeng*, equates the use of *neak aeng* with someone pointing their finger at someone, which is a condescending gesture.

(he/she, them), they used *neak tos* (prisoners) or *ke* (they) in the third-person. In group reflections by former prison guards where they spoke candidly about how they got caught up in the Khmer Rouge, we learn that many of them were young when they were conscripted to join the Khmer Rouge. Those who willingly joined did so because they were misled into thinking that they were helping to reinstate King Sihanouk. When the regime took a dark turn, they were unable to escape. It was kill or be killed.

Khmer Rouge Texts

Another tension inherent in the Khmer Rouge was their disdain for literacy and education, but also their meticulous recordkeeping practices in places like S-21 and for some media propaganda. This presented some difficulties for me as I was unable to find official written documents outlining the Khmer Rouge language policies. However, I was able to browse through *Revolutionary Flag*, a Khmer Rouge magazine and one of the few printed materials under the regime, but authors often presented the voice of the Khmer Rouge cadre who had successfully defeated the imperialists so the use of honorific registers were rare.

Scenes like the following in the *S21* documentary revealed other aspects of record keeping that could help us understand how the non-honorific register was used under instances of torture. A former Khmer Rouge S-21 prisoner reads aloud from a book that dictated their policies about torture. References toward prisoners were rife with the non-honorific third-person *vea*: “[We] must make *vea* suffer in order to get *vea* to quickly answer... [You] must beat *vea* to frighten [them], but [they] must not die” (Panh 2002). The use of *vea* appears to conflict with linguistic Khmer Rouge policies I heard that said *vea* was to be eliminated and replaced with *koat*. One explanation, as we have seen in other examples, when the Khmer Rouge are asserting

their power and authority, particularly toward people who may have committed an offense, they permitted themselves to use the non-honorific register. Although the Khmer Rouge encouraged equality, equality and respect were not given to people who have disobeyed them or were considered “enemies.” Hence, *vea*-usage in moments of torture do not violate their own linguistic policies.

After S-21 was converted to a museum, visitors will encounter a billboard that advertises the 10 rules prisoners at S-21 must follow. The billboard has three columns, representing these 10 rules in three languages: Khmer, French, and English. In Khmer, we find widespread use of the non-honorific register. In rule #1, it says “Whatever is asked, [you] must answer. Don’t divert away from *anh* (my) question.” For rule #7, “Don’t do anything. Sit still while waiting for *anh*’s order. If no order, don’t do anything. *Anh* order [you] to do something, do it right away. Protesting is not allowed.” The defense team at the Khmer Rouge tribunal have cast doubt on whether these rules were actually posted at S-21 during the time of the regime or whether they were (re)produced by survivors with the help of the Vietnamese government. Regardless if these rules were “official” or not, it is telling how signs, texts, and re-enactments of the Khmer Rouge have enregistered the non-honorific register to be a Khmer Rouge language.

Denial of Co-evalness & Non-contemporaneity with the Present

In this chapter, I have presented figures that represent the opposite of modernity: the cruel superior, the farmer, and the Khmer Rouge. If you recall in Chapter 3, I addressed disagreements in Christianity about the appropriateness of the non-honorific register in the Bible, particularly whether God would use that kind of language. At the time of the first Bible translation, in the early 20th century, Bible translators had no issue with God’s non-honorific

usage since he is the highest being, “the king of kings” as Christians might say. Since then however, some could not reconcile with God using that kind of language, reminding them of the “cruel superior.” Recall my friend Theary’s response that God language-use reminds her of times when her parents are mad at her. This makes her question, “Is God angry at *knyom*?” Many Christians like Thida described God’s non-honorific use in the older translation as ancient (*boran*), or being used in ancient times. Maybe it was OK back then, but it is no longer the case today. Newer translations of the Bible were created for people like Thida, removing God’s non-honorific-use to fit modern-day ideals about how they reimagine their social relations with God, one that is not only closer or intimate, but also modern.

Many non-Christian Cambodians today also equate the non-honorific register, and the characterological figures associated with it, as non-contemporaneous with the present. Not only are angry feudal landlords outdated since Cambodians today are no longer beholden to wealthy patrons, but Cambodians nowadays are also not tied to farm work and can move to the cities to find jobs. When the Unite the Right 2 protestors (a group that was a mixture of alt-right, Neo Nazis, and white nationalists), gathered in Washington, D.C. in 2018, counter-protestors also organized themselves in opposition. The counter-protestors viewed the Unite the Right 2 protestors and their ideologies as being out of place in the 21st century, people and ideas that belonged in the past: the American Civil War (confederates) and WWII (Nazis) (Starrett and Dalsheim 2019). Similarly, we find that in Cambodia, the non-honorific register and the people associated with the register (cruel superiors, farmers, and the Khmer Rouge) are viewed as non-contemporaneous with the present. That kind of language and those kinds of people should not exist today, in a modern world that believes in education, democracy, justice, and equality for all humankind. We have moved past that, haven’t we?

Context	Expectation
Elites with lower ranking individuals	Non-reciprocal non-honorific register usage (superior uses non-honorific, inferior responds with higher level register, similar to T-V)
Farmers with others	Reciprocal non-honorific usage (similar to T-T)
Urban middle-class with others	Reciprocal ordinary or polite register usage (similar to V-V)

Table 15: Social classes and their linguistic expectations

As demographics, identities, and statuses shift in Cambodia, so do language ideologies about the non-honorific register. The trend away from non-honorific register among the middle-class is connected to the register’s association with resonances of the unmodern: feudalism and provincialism. Yet, this is only a trend. We still find non-honorific register-usage in contemporary Cambodia. This presents tension, conflict, and debate among Cambodians with competing sociocultural worldviews, not only about how to use the non-honorific register, but also about Cambodian national identity. Is it a country where Cambodians judges are allowed to use *neak aeng* in the courtroom? Or is it one where judges would refrain from that language?

Chapter 5 Telecommunication Technologies: Media Personalities as Linguistic Role Models and Educators

While having BBQ with my friend Vichet and a few other friends in Phnom Penh, the topic of television hosts came up in conversation. Vichet said television hosts in Cambodia speak “disgustingly,” something he said in English as was the habit among our friend group being a diverse mix of different nationalities living, working, and researching in Cambodia. Because the word “disgustingly” was very strong, I asked him to elaborate on what he meant. He gave a recent example he observed on television. He said the television host used the Khmer word “endangered” when describing a dance. That is, the host said a particular cultural dance was “endangered” in Cambodia. Vichet was adamant that “endangered” was the wrong word to use in that situation since it should only be used with animals. The host, according to Vichet, should have used the term “disappearing” instead because that was the right word to use when describing the potential loss of a dance. I am not entirely certain what Khmer words he was referring to, but I if I were to venture a guess, the words in question might be ពិភពគុណ (“endangered”) and ការបាត់បង់ (“disappear” or “loss”).

Vichet’s strong reaction to something I thought was a trivial matter struck me. I did not think it was a huge semantic leap to use the word “endangered” with a dance. I suggested to Vichet that languages change all the time and maybe the word meaning might extend its usage beyond animals. When I asked him to elaborate on why this was a huge transgression, “[h]e said it’s OK if the person was just talking among friends, but [the host] was on TV and was being

watched by many people so [Vichet] believed it wasn't a good example to give to other Cambodians" (fieldnotes).

Vichet was not alone in his complaint about the use of language in the media. Mr. Chheat, a writer and poet from Phnom Penh, also made similar remarks when a friend introduced me to him as someone who is interested in Khmer. He said there were a lot of changes in the Khmer language because people were copying television hosts who are using Khmer incorrectly. Following my discussion about politicians' language-use in Chapter 4, Mr. Chheat also blamed *neak thom* (big people) like politicians who use incorrect Khmer in public, but "nobody dares to *tawa* (protest)," he says. My friend, Rithy from Battambang, told me that the education system in Cambodia is not strong so people are not well educated. In contrast, the media is "huge" because "people communicate on Facebook, learn from Facebook, from the news," but language in media is "crazy. Sounds like nobody checks the script, grammar is bad, and accent is bad. Sounds like they use a lot of slang... not precise Khmer" (fieldnotes). By juxtaposing these two institutions, schooling and the media, Rithy implies that media seems to have replaced the education system, but what the media is teaching is bad language.

I noted in Chapter 1 that while I was conducting fieldwork in Cambodia I often encountered a large amount of metapragmatic commentaries (Silverstein 1993). These metapragmatic commentaries were often in the form of complaints (Milroy and Milroy 2012 [1985]) as Cambodians frequently complained about the state of the Khmer language. I hinted in Chapter 1 that some of these language complaints were related to the media in some way. In Chapter 2, I shared commentary by a Buddhist monk who said he was less upset when average Cambodians cannot speak to him with the Buddhist monk honorific register, but he absolutely believed media figures, such as journalists and program hosts, must be fluent in the monk

register as well as the royal honorific register. Not only are they likely to interact with people from different ranks and statuses on their programs, but they are also being watched by the public so they ought to be good linguistic role models for society. In Chapter 4, I analyzed debates surrounding the language of politicians, especially their propensity to use the non-honorific register in public speeches, which some Cambodians find unbecoming of political leaders who should also be good role models for society.

In this chapter, I will use the media as a site for analysis. In a society that has rapidly embraced telecommunication technologies like smartphones and the internet, the media's significance in Cambodian society cannot be ignored. While television is still popular, within the last decade, smartphones have become so ubiquitous in Cambodia that the average Cambodian is more likely to own a cellphone than a toilet. Not only is buying a smartphone easier and cheaper than installing plumbing into one's household, but Cambodians find owning a smartphone more beneficial and crucial, offering news, entertainment, and another form of sociality to stay connected with family who have migrated away from home for work. In 2015, into the first year of my fieldwork, only a third of Cambodians had access to the internet and Facebook—which are both synonymous to one another in Cambodia since most people who use the internet only use Facebook. One year later in 2016, almost half of Cambodians (48%) had access to the internet or Facebook and 80% of them accessed them through their smartphone (Phong, Srou, and Sola 2016). That same year “Internet/Facebook became the most important channel through which Cambodians access information (30%) – surpassing TV (29%) and almost doubling radio (15%)” (ibid).

The media, particularly social media, have been an equalizing and democratizing force in many respects, which as we will later learn, has consequences for the Khmer language. First, the

media ensure that everyone has equal access to resources and information. In a country where Cambodians are largely semi-literate and where there is a strong oral culture, television broadcasts and video commentaries on the internet make it so that anyone and everyone can consume and absorb the information. While television, newspapers, and radio are often subject to censorship, Cambodians can obtain unobstructed news and resources through the internet. If knowledge is power, then Cambodians today have the potential to gain more power and agency. Relatedly, Cambodians not only gain more access to information, but they themselves can produce and share information. Through social media, anyone's voice and message can be heard. All they need is a cellphone to record themselves and then upload it onto the internet, without the need for a fancy studio or expensive equipment. Finally, the internet also introduces anonymity as strangers interact with one another, not knowing who is on the other side of the screen besides. When their interlocutor's age, gender, and social class is unknown, it creates a kind of common ground between people.

Not everyone agrees that the media's equalizing influence is a force for good. Its equalizing effects, of giving and sharing information, also indicate that "bad" information, such as "bad" language, can circulate. This is why people like Rithy are worried about what Cambodians are learning from the media if they are not learning in traditional spaces like schools. If anyone's voice and language can be heard, there is the potential for the "bad" language of uneducated Cambodians to be shared. Through my dissertation, I have elaborated on the iconic link between language and social status as well as language and national identity. In this chapter, we will investigate how fraught these connections really are on the public stage.

I begin by unpacking why public figures in the media are being policed in Cambodian society. I argue that, due to their prominence in a largely semi-literate and semi-educated society,

some Cambodians believe that they should be good role models for society. This is especially important in light of the poor quality of public education. This has not gone unnoticed in the government who has created and enforced a Code of Conduct for Artists (broadly defined as actors, musicians, and anyone in the media) since it is important for the government to make sure the media promotes an ideal image of national identity. Media personalities, and even average Cambodians who have unwittingly become famous after gaining a large following online, have become impromptu teachers of Khmer language and Cambodia culture, whether they like it or not. As a result, there is an undue amount of scrutiny being placed on them, particularly their language-use.

In the last half of this chapter, I will analyze interactions on the reality show *The Voice Kids Cambodia*, a singing competition for children that became popular by the end of my fieldwork. If the media has become a medium for education and if media figures are impromptu teachers, what are viewers of television shows like *The Voice Kids Cambodia* learning? I highlight conversations between adults and children, as well as conversations about children by adults, to show a tension between traditional structures of hierarchy between adults and children in Cambodia and the trend toward status flattening. I argue that tensions on stage, as interactants navigate identity and status, as well as tensions off stage among social media commentators, are arguments over how to model proper social relations in Cambodia. When these social relations are highly visible to millions of people, the media becomes an important site for defining national identity, but how Cambodians want to define that national identity is still up for debate.

Policing of Media Personalities: Language and Beyond

Living in a country that has experienced war and turmoil, Cambodians are insecure about their own national identity, especially after the upheavals experienced in the various cultural, religious, and educational institutions. A large part of their national identity is tied to the Khmer language, which is why, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, there is a lot of anxiety about the status of Khmer. Should Khmer fall, national identity will surely follow. Due to their visibility as well as their potential in circulating discourses, celebrities in the public eye are often the target of intense scrutiny. Any hint of error or decline of language-use in the media, is akin to a black mark on Cambodian identity.

Unlike the English language in the United States, where there is a more robust education system and a fairly consistent idea of what counts as Standard American English—even if there slight variations—language standards in Khmer are not as strong. Without a strong education system, a shared curriculum, or strict standards on spelling, there is a fear among some Cambodians that the “uneducated” masses will pick up and emulate “wrong” language use. The fact of Americans watching vapid reality shows with non-standard English is not viewed as a threat to the English language. The same would not be true in Cambodia, where some would think it would endanger their language, which is why Cambodians often critique the language of media personalities. Due to their prominence, they should represent an idealized version of Cambodian identity (i.e., be a role model) and, at the same time, educate the public on how to follow their example (i.e., be an instructor). When public figures do not uphold these norms of being a role model and instructor, it is a violation of that figure of the idealized citizen. For these reasons, the government and various ministries have gone out of their way to create codes of

conduct for various professions, such as midwives, teachers, and artists in order to preserve and protect national identity and culture.

But what exactly is Cambodian culture? In the following sections, we will see this come into play as I discuss the struggle to not only define Cambodian culture and Cambodian identity, but also the competing struggles to suppress what some think are definitely not supposed to be part of Cambodian culture and identity. The next sections take a look at the different ways media personalities are criticized: for their dress, content, and language-use.

Dressing too Sexily

Just as the speech of public figures are being scrutinized, so too are their dress and behavior. Women especially who have found themselves in the public eye have been punished if they were deemed to have “downgraded” Cambodian culture. One famous model and actor with a large following, Denny Kwan, was banned from the entertainment industry for one year after she refused to stop posting scantily clad photos of herself on Facebook, even after the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts tried to “educate” her in a May 2016 meeting on how to protect Cambodian culture by dressing properly (Sou, Kong, and Amaro 2017). She had violated the Ethical Code of Conduct for Artists, which states that all artists “must adhere to the principles of ethics, virtue, truthfulness, writing, word usage, gestures, action of behavior, character, dress, preserving dignity in order to contribute to the enhancement of social ethics and national prestige.”⁷³

More recently in 2020, Ven Rachna, a 39-year-old woman in Phnom Penh who runs an online shop on Facebook, was arrested on pornography charges (Hul 2020). Her crime was

⁷³ ក្រមសីលធម៌នៃអ្នកសិល្បៈ (Ethical Code of Conduct for Artists), 2016, Part 2, Article 4, Point 3

posting racy photos of herself modeling clothing from her shop, like lacey nightgowns, or wearing lingerie while posing next to other products for sale, such as shoes and lotion. Because Ven was the breadwinner in her family, her family experienced financial strain during her absence.

Kwan and Ven's popularity and their visibility on public forums like Facebook were viewed as a threat to national identity because their actions went against the traditional idealized image of what a Cambodian woman should be: modest and reserved. To have pictures of women doing un-Cambodian-like things circulating "out there" was troubling. To uphold and preserve that identity, women like Kwan and Ven who violate that image of the ideal Cambodian women must be quelled.

Discussing "Immoral" Topics

In an 2013 op-ed article, Tong Soprach criticized songwriters for writing songs about drinking, which he fears will influence youths to get drunk (S. Tong 2013c). Buddhists are supposed to refrain from consuming intoxicants, like alcohol. Even though the average Cambodian flouts this Buddhist precept, Cambodians want to maintain the illusion by not promoting or advertising alcohol consumption. When there are songs that mention drinking in anyway, it can cause a major uproar.

Tong's criticism in 2013 has not stopped artists from producing songs about alcohol. One recent song in 2020 by Sophea Tep entitled, "Why Don't You Want to Drink Beer?" was largely criticized by listeners for promoting alcohol-use. In one posting of the song on Facebook, one user commented, "Go ahead and drink. Don't need to think about the nation [anymore]. They've

already taken most of the land.”⁷⁴ The last sentence could be glossed as, “They’ve already ruined our country.” The commenter is drawing on the metaphor that the country of Cambodia is already deteriorating in light of discussions about drinking. The comment conveys a sense of hopelessness for the country: they have already lost the culture war to musicians like Sophea Tep, a war about what kind of country Cambodia should be. According to one opinion article, the author states that Sophea Tep’s song violates the Ethical Code of Conduct for Artists because it does not have any educational meaning for the listeners. The article points to Part 3, Article 5, Point 3 under the section entitled, “The Obligations of the Creator,” which states that the creator must “embed good ideas and perspectives that are beneficial to the promotion of education, morality, virtue, conscience, patriotism, culture, and social development” (Rath 2020). Both the Facebook commenter as well as the writer of the PNN article do not think a song about drinking beer uplifts or strengthens Cambodian culture. In fact, it does the opposite and can devalue their national identity. Even if most Cambodians drink alcohol, to sing about it openly, in a country whose national religion is Buddhism, could damage that image and identity.

Criticism about Language-Use

Let us return to return to my friend Vichet who criticized a television host for using the word “endangered” to describe the potential loss of a dance. When I tried to suggest to Vichet that perhaps the Khmer language was changing and that Cambodians were probably using the Khmer language in new ways, Vichet said “[h]e said it’s OK if the person was just talking among friends, but [the host] was on TV and was being watched by many people so [Vichet] believed it wasn’t a good example to give to other Cambodians” (fieldnotes).

⁷⁴ <https://fb.watch/4WXsbXixz/> “ដាប់និងផឹកទៅបាច់គិតរឿងប្រទេសជាតិអីទេគេយកដីពិតអស់ហើយ”

It might seem contradictory of Vichet to say, “it’s OK if the person was just talking among friends” because if he truly was OK with people using “endangered” to describe a dance among friends, then he should be OK with them hearing it on TV and then using it among friends. But this is not the case. Vichet seems to imply that he would be upset if people watching a television program were to pick up and emulate wrong language-use they just heard on television. We can interpret Vichet’s fear more specifically about the source of the offending speech and the potential for it to circulate into wider discourses. When the average Cambodian is using the wrong word among friends, it would not be heard by too many people so the fear of erroneous language circulating is low. Spitulnik (Spitulnik 1998, 1996) has shown the importance of mass media in Zambia, specifically radio, in circulating words, phrases, and discourse style among a community. This same potential is present in Cambodia, but there is a fear that the circulating discourse is the wrong version of Khmer.

The tension here is between what identities are visible to the public, and “on stage,” and what identities are hidden from view. The identity being projected on stage must be immaculate, representative of traditional Cambodian culture. All other Cambodian identities who contradict that image must be obscured, not only so that nobody can see them, but also so that they do not continue to spread across society. I borrow Goffman’s distinction between “front stage” and “back stage” behavior (Goffman 1990). Although Goffman uses these terms to refer to individual personhood, the actions one individual might engage in when there is an audience and when there is none, I reframe this distinction in terms of what kinds of identities, speech, and behavior are good enough to be performed in front of an audience. Cambodians using the word “endangered” in the wrong context would not bother Vichet if they were back stage. It is the

mere fact that there is an audience present that creates anxiety, and that is why people like Vichet are preoccupied with what is being spoken on the front stage, i.e., the media.

In Chapter 4, I analyzed language complaints about political leaders who use the non-honorific register in public. After hearing Prime Minister Hun Sen use a phrase from the non-honorific register, Mr. Eng Chhay Eang, a representative from the opposition party, said “Such unpleasant (*asuoruos*) words can come from uneducated people, but those who lead the country should not use such words” (Kher 2016). Mr. Eng said that uneducated farmers can use these unpleasant, vulgar words because they are relegated to the back stage, are not under the public eye, and are not positioned as teachers of the Khmer language. The prime minister is not only the face of the country and perpetually at the front stage, he is also known for his long, drawn-out speeches that are mandatory viewing for civil servants; the longest one lasted 5 hours, where he took no breaks or questions (Associated Press 2012).

In one final example, I will re-summarize a Facebook comment I introduced in Chapter 1. If you recall, there was a Facebook post about three road signs that spelled the same town name in three different ways. That post generated a slew of commentary. Some Cambodians speculated on the reasons why the sign went through so many eyes, but the mistake was never caught. Some blamed the education system. Some blame the popularity of learning foreign languages like English. The complaints about spelling also triggered other linguistic complaints. One commenter began her comment by commenting that the road sign fiasco was due to a technical error or technological error, but then went on to complain about another language ill that is widespread in Cambodian society: grammatical mistakes by people in the media.

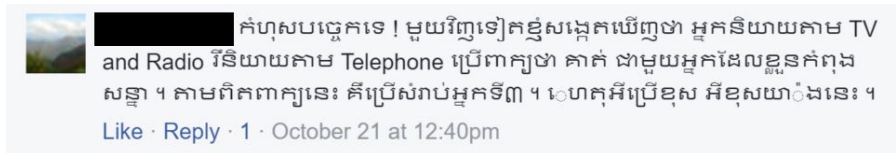


Figure 9: Commenter on Facebook complaining about people using a third-person pronoun in the second-person.

Technical mistake! One more thing, I’ve noticed those speaking on TV and the radio and speaking on the phone use the word *koat* [he/she] with those they are speaking directly to. Truthfully, this word is used in the third-person. Why use [it] incorrectly in this way?

Although this comment had nothing to do with the road sign, the commenter felt the need to bring up another linguistic mistake that they believe to be prevalent in Cambodian society, something that they associate with being used on TV and radio, i.e., media personalities.

While *koat* is a polite third-person pronoun (he/she), I have heard Cambodians using it in the second-person, just as the commenter reported. Cambodians have even used it in the second-person with me, usually when meeting me for the first time. “Where is *koat* (she) from?” a middle-aged security guard asked me out of curiosity when I was signing in at the front desk of an American organization in Phnom Penh. I remember thinking momentarily who he could be talking about before quickly realizing that he was asking me directly. “Where are you from?” is what it meant. In these moments, I interpret *koat* as a polite, but also distancing term, especially when Cambodians are unsure about your status and social relations.

What these instances of *koat* in the second-person, both in the media and in everyday conversations, show is that Khmer-speakers are using Khmer honorific registers in different and newer ways to navigate tricky social relations. As we will see in the next part of my chapter, relying on forms of address (like “sir” or “teacher”) forces Cambodians to make calculations about status while relying on kinterms (like “big sister” or “aunt”) forces Cambodians to estimate a stranger’s age in relation to one’s own. I surmise that *koat*-usage simplifies the awkwardness of

balancing and understanding several kinds of intersecting identities. The security guard may have been older than me, but he may have also wanted to pay deference to me knowing I was a foreigner working in Cambodia.

In today's developing world where Cambodians are constantly in contact with different social identities as well as nationalities, it is a convenient way to talk directly to someone without having to add extra data about status, age, and perhaps even gender to the mix. The use of *koat* in the second-person becomes a flattening and equalizing force in the Khmer language. I would not be surprised to hear that television and radio hosts may be using *koat* in similar ways since they encounter a range of people on their programming. For radio hosts, these include call-ins where their interlocutors are unseen and their identities are largely unknown. Some Cambodians have embraced this new convenient usage. Others find it faulty. And as the Facebook commenter implies, usage by those in the media is especially troubling. They do not want "wrong" *koat*-usage in the media to circulate and be taken up by the masses, who themselves will be influenced by it and repeat it.

To continue the conversation about the flattening of social relations, I turn our attention to one of Cambodia's most popular reality shows during my fieldwork: *The Voice Kids Cambodia*. This singing competition comprised entirely of child contestants. They perform in front of judges, who are famous Cambodian musicians themselves, to vie for a chance to be on one of the judges' teams and be coached by them. My data come from the first stage of the competition: the blind auditions. At this stage, the judges' chairs are faced away from the contestants so they must judge the singer based solely on their voice. If a judge wants that contestant to be on their team, they press a button and their chair will turn around. If more than

one judge chooses the same contestant, the child contestants must choose which one they would like to be their coach.

As we watch children and adults interact on this very public stage, we find some tension as well as negotiation with person-referring terms, particularly kin terms, as interactants select what form of address they believe is most suitable for the interaction. While many of the examples seem very micro and small-scale, I contend that, taken altogether, they indicate that social hierarchy and status in Cambodia is flattening. Keep in mind that this does not mean total equality. Cambodians still want some “wiggle room” to show respect, politeness, deference, as well as intimacy, but how these feelings are expressed is under debate. Adults and children are never portrayed as “friends” on an equal level, but there is conflict between whether their relationship is akin to aunt/uncle and niece/nephew versus a sibling relationship.

In the first section, I demonstrate the flattening of hierarchy between adults and children by looking at how coaches refer to their contestants in the third person. We find prevalent use of the third-person pronoun *koat*, which replaces the third-person pronoun *vea* (often translated as “it”). I argue that the coach’s choice of pronoun *koat* elevates children, bringing them closer in hierarchy to adults—something that was not common more than a generation ago before the Khmer Rouge.

***Koat* with Kids**

On the popular television singing competition, *The Voice Kids Cambodia*, the coaches give recaps of the contestants on their team. When referring to the contestants in the third-person and why they chose them, the judges frequently used the contestants’ names and the pronoun *koat* (the formal third-person “he/him” or “she/her,” and plural “they/them”). Occasionally,

coaches have used kinterms such as *paoun* (“younger sibling”), forms of address like *neang* (“miss,” “young woman”), and nouns like *kmeng srey* (“young girl”), but I have never heard them use *vea* (“it”).

Coach Sovath, in his 40s, has variously said things like, “I will instruct *koat* to be better.” Coach Kanha, in her 30s, has also similar said things like, “I pushed the button to choose *koat* to be on my team” and “*koat*’s voice is melodious.” Coach Nisa, also in her 30s, has referred to constants with *koat* in similar ways: “*Koat*’s voice is not ordinary. I like *koat*’s voice.” Here, the judges are elevating the children by avoiding the non-honorific register *vea* that Cambodians have historically used with young children. In its place, they seem to prefer the third-person pronoun *koat* instead, which may indicate some distancing and formality since Cambodians also have the option to use kinterms to also indicate intimacy.

Recall that the Khmer Rouge regime’s linguistic policies banned the non-honorific third-person pronoun *vea*, “the disdainful third person singular and plural pronoun, which was used for children, subordinates and women” (Affonço 2008). In *vea*’s place, the Khmer Rouge sanctioned the formal third-person pronoun *koat*. While *koat*-usage with other adults may have been more effortless, many Cambodians struggled with this linguistic and cultural change among children because the inequality between adults and children is one of the most enduring and significant inequality in Cambodian society. *Koat* was particularly symbolic when used with children because it elevated them to the same level as adults. When discussing her experience with the Khmer Rouge linguistic policies, one of my informants, Meun, a Cambodian woman who has lived in the United States since the 1990s, continued to refer to children as *vea* when she relayed her linguistic experiences under the Khmer Rouge. She told me how shocking it was for her to

not only refer to children as *mitt* (“comrade”), but to have them call her *mitt* as well: “... even though we were older than *vea*, *vea* also had to call us *mitt*.”

Although urban middle-class Cambodians today do not see themselves continuing the Khmer Rouge linguistic policy, I believe they share similar views to the Khmer Rouge. Both want to elevate children and, at the same time, do not want to subordinate them linguistically. Even though some may argue that it is appropriate for adults to use *vea* with children, due to being older and having higher status, there is a trend against this linguistic treatment of children. Usages of *vea* still occur today, though it is usually among the elderly. In the Northwest part of Cambodia, I heard an elderly man mutter that his granddaughter could not find a particular merchandise by saying “*Vea* can’t find it,” or “She can’t find it.” That grandfather is probably part of an older generation who still uses *vea* with his children and grandchildren, regardless if they are young children.

Besides *koat*, I have observed Coach Kanha and Coach Nisa, the two women coaches, using other person-referring terms with their female contestants, though not as often. I have heard Kanha refer to her female contestants as *neang* (“miss,” “young woman”) a few times: “... *neang* came to Team Kanha” and “I was really excited when *neang* chose me to be *neang*’s instructor.” Nisa similarly seems to have used kinterms with female contestants, referring to one as *paoun* (“younger sibling”): “*Paoun* Lalin, when I heard *koat*’s voice...” Like Kanha, Nisa has also referred to contestants as *neang*: “*Neang*’s first time [singing] made me worried, but I will believe I made the right choice.”

Both Kanha and Nisa have referred to a few of the female contestants as *khmeng srey* (“young girl”), though in these instances, it appears to be translated as “This young girl...” followed by her age. For example, after describing her newest team member, Kanha ended by

saying, “*Khmeng srey* 13 years old is good,” which could be translated as “This 13-year-old girl is good.” Similarly, Nisa once introduced her latest team member by saying, “*Khmeng srey* is only 7 years old,” or “This young girl is only 7 years old.” It is not surprising that the coaches sometimes refer to the young girls with other person-referring terms. In Khmer, there are a lot more ways to refer to women, just like in other languages where forms of address vary based on whether a woman is of marriageable age and married or not.

Although I have not been able to analyze all available episodes of *The Voice Kids Cambodia*, I predict that Sovath, the sole male judge, rarely used these terms with the female contestants because of cross-gender differences/norms. He may have felt uncomfortable using these terms while the other coaches, as women, may have felt more at liberty to refer to the young girls in a myriad of ways. I will emphasize that these other person-referring terms were not as frequent as *koat*, however. Indeed, as you may have noticed, sometimes they work in conjunction with *koat*, such as when Nisa said, “*Paoun* (“young sibling”) Lalin, when I heard *koat’s* voice...”

This section was about how the coaches referred to the young contestants in the third-person. The following section will analyze interactions between coaches and contestants on stage as they meet for the first time. You will find that, although coaches rarely used kin terms in the third-person, when interacting with the contestants face-to-face, they often use kin terms as a form of address. When children and adults meet, there is a tension in how they should define their relationship: are they siblings or are they aunt/uncle and niece/nephew? I argue that the answer is still unresolved as Cambodians are still trying to figure out their own identity and their relationship with others.

Aunt/Uncle-Niece/Nephew vs. Older Sibling-Younger Sibling Complementary pairs

Kinterms come in complementary pairs. If someone is your *om* (senior aunt or uncle⁷⁵), *pu* (junior⁷⁶ uncle) or *ming* (junior aunt), then you are their *khmuy*⁷⁷ (niece or nephew). If you are my *bang*⁷⁸ (older sibling), then I am your *paoun* (younger sibling). In this section, I will analyze face-to-face interactions on the television singing competition *The Voice Kids Cambodia* between Coach Sovath, in his 40s, and contestant Julina, a 13-year-old girl. When they first meet, they have opposing views on their relationship: are they uncle and niece or older brother and younger sister?

In the beginning, Sovath uses an uncle-niece complementary pair, referring to himself in the first-person as *pu* (uncle) while Julina uses an older sibling-younger sibling complementary pair, referring to Sovath in the second-person as *bang* (older sibling). Although the conversation flows, there is a linguistic tension or mismatch, what I will refer to as a non-complementary kinterm address. Since Julina auditioned with an English song, “How Far I’ll Go” from Disney’s animated film *Moana*, the first question Sovath asked her when she had finished singing was how long she had been learning English.

Julina: I have been learning for probably 3, 4 years, *bang* (older sibling).

Sovath: But sing well.

Julina: Yes⁷⁹.

⁷⁵ Khmer differentiates between aunts and uncles who are older or younger than one’s parents. Also many kinterms are gender-neutral. *Om* is a gender-neutral term to refer to one’s parents’ older siblings (and their spouses). It is also used as form of address with non-kin who appear to be older than one’s parents, but not old enough to be your grandparent.

⁷⁶ The younger sibling (and their spouses) of one’s parents, or a non-kin who appears to be older than you, but not too much younger than your parents.

⁷⁷ It is a gender-neutral term for both nieces and nephews.

⁷⁸ Also a gender-neutral term

⁷⁹ Cambodians tend to pepper their speech with *chas* or *baht*. They can be translated as “yes,” for women and men, respectively, but they are also polite marker.

Sovath: Yes. *Pu* (uncle) likes hearing that sound.

Julina: Yes.

Sovath: Yes.

Julina: Thank you, *bang*.

Although I argue that social hierarchy and honorifics are being flattened in Cambodia, I do not mean flattened to one level where everyone is considered your “friend” or “comrade.” This trend toward flattening is not monolithic. Cambodians still want some wiggle room to show respect and deference—something that was not afforded to them under the Khmer Rouge regime. Youths like Julina continue to adhere to Cambodian ideals about politeness, but with a more muted hierarchy. Because Cambodians are always mindful of age and status, it is considered polite to address one’s interlocutor in some way. Instead of a bare “thank you,” Cambodians often reflect on who they are thanking and addressing. That is why Julina does not just say “thank you” to Sovath; she says, “Thank you, *bang*.” Julina politely ends her sentences with a kinterm she believes to be the correct form of address for Sovath. He is an older brother to her. Sovath, on the other hand, refers to himself as *pu* (uncle), which does not align with Julina’s kinterm.

As we continue to observe their exchange, Sovath refers to Julina as *paoun* (younger sibling), which conflicts with or is non-complementary to his earlier identity as a *pu* (uncle).

Sovath: And when [you were] singing, there’s like a feeling of like (.) excitement, following the song’s instrumental music. *Paoun* (younger sibling) knows how to use the music to follow [your] own singing very well.

Julina: Thank you, *bang*.

In contrast to referring to himself as an uncle, it appears Sovath aligns himself with Julina's view by addressing her as *paoun* (younger sibling), which is complementary to her *bang* (older sibling). In other words, we find tension within Sovath himself through his mismatch of kinterms. Although he refers to himself as "uncle" in the first person, he refers to Julina as "younger sibling" in the second person, creating a non-complimentary dyad of uncle-little sister.

Sovath is consistent in always referring to himself as *pu* (uncle), but after referring to Julina as *paoun*, he switches and refers to her as *khmuy* (niece) in the next exchange, which is the complementary form of address to *pu*.

Sovath: *Pu* enjoys [it]. If [you] come to *pu*'s team, *pu* will instruct and teach [you] how to be even better. *Pu* will add to areas where *khmuy* is lacking.

Julina: Yes.

Sovath: And will make *khmuy* become better in this artistic venue.

Julina: Yes.

Sovath: Thank you, *khmuy*, thank you.

Julina: Thank you, *pu*.

But by the end of the exchange, Julina herself aligns with Sovath and finally switches to referring to him as *pu*. Although the conversation ends with Julina conceding to and agreeing with a wider hierarchy between them, that of an uncle and a niece, I argue that we should pay attention to Julina's first instinct, to think of Sovath as an older brother, narrowing the hierarchy. Perhaps Julina is part of a younger generation that defaults to *bang* or uses *bang* more widely than it had been used in the past.

Sovath is consistent with referring to himself as *pu* (uncle) with contestants, but he is prone to switching between *khmuy* (niece/nephew) and *paoun* (younger sibling) when speaking to contestants, sometimes even within the same utterance, as in the below excerpt with a contestant named Visal, who is 14. Here, Sovath is vying for a contestant that the other coaches also want. Just like with Julina, Sovath always refers to himself with *pu*, but sometimes switches between *paoun* (younger sibling) and *khmuy* (niece/nephew). Unlike the example with Julina, where Sovath and Julina were interacting back and forth, perhaps influencing one another's choice of kinterms, Sovath is not exchanging words with the 14-year-old at this moment. Within this speech utterance, he himself shifts between calling him *paoun* (younger sibling) and *khmuy* (niece/nephew):

Pu only needs to fulfill what *paoun* is lacking. So *pu* will sit here quietly to let *khmuy* happily decide what *khmuy* would like going into the future. If *khmuy* makes the wrong choice at this time, it might cause our road to the future, the artistic road that we desire, go in a different direction.

The other two coaches, Nisa and Kanha, are a few years younger than Sovath. In contrast to Sovath who always sees himself as the contestants' uncle, as two women in their 30s, they primarily refer to themselves as *bang* (older sibling) and to the contestants as *paoun* (younger sibling). Perhaps they still see themselves as young enough to be the contestants' older siblings. Or, they may have a different worldview about their relationship with the contestants.

Sovath, however, usually refers to the other coaches in the third person as *ming* (aunt) when in conversation with the contestants, using the children as the origo (Agha 2007). One time, a contestant named Soklieb failed to get any of the coaches to turn around and pick him. Sovath asked him how he felt when “*pu* didn't push [the button], *ming* didn't push [the button],” referring to himself and the other coaches as aunts and uncle. The contestant said it was not a

problem, but then began to cry on stage. The female judges walked onto the stage to console him and cheer him on. Sovath's previous utterance may have influenced Kanha because she refers to Soklieb as nephew when she pointed to the audience and said, "Soklieb, see how *bang bang, om, pu, ming* applauded *khmuy* (nephew) energetically?" Although Nisa is a few years older than Kanha, she chose to address him with *oun*, a variation of *paoun* (younger sibling). She follows Kanha's remarks by telling him, "Just now, *oun* said [you] weren't nervous. Don't cry. Wipe [your] eyes. Although *oun* lost this time, *oun* is still young. In the next few years, *oun* will have the opportunity to return to this stage and be successful."

Usually before Sovath interjects, we find that the other female judges were more consistent in referring to the contestants as *paoun/oun* (younger sibling) and to themselves as *bang* (older sibling). It is only after Sovath references the coaches as *ming* (aunt) that they sometimes switch to align themselves to Sovath's perspective. Returning to Visal, the 14-year-old contestant from earlier, he was extremely popular as all three judges vied to be his coach. Nisa and Kanha made their plea using *bang-paoun/oun* social relations. Nisa stood up and said, "Visal, *oun*'s voice, *bang* wants to praise [it] as genuine... And the voice *bang* wants is a voice like *oun*'s." Nisa ended her plea in a singsong voice, elongating the word *oun*, almost like a romantic longing, while placing both her hands on her heart. Kanha similarly refers to herself as *bang* when she compliments Visal's voice, "*Bang* wants to praise [you]" and "Visal's voice on *bang*'s team will be the most talented of all." In the end, Visal chose to be on Sovath's team.

After embracing Visal, Sovath tells him to *chumreapsuor*, or greet respectfully, his *ming*s (aunt). His suggestion is reminiscent to how parents would tell children to greet their elders appropriately. "Greet uncle" or "Greet grandmother," parents might tell their children. It is one of the ways children are socialized into knowing how to address people. Kanha and Nisa begin to

switch away from *bang*, perhaps following Sovath's lead since he referred to them as *ming*.

Notice how Nisa begins with *bang-oun*, but switches to a non-complimentary dyad of *ming-oun* (aunt-younger sibling) after Sovath interrupts and refers to her as *ming*.

Sovath: [Go] *chumreapsuor ming*.

Sovath guides Visal toward Nisa.

Visal: (Hands pressed together) *Chumreapsuor, ming*.

Nisa: Thank you. *Oun's* voice is really good, melodious. Every *bang* here wanted [you]—

Sovath: *Ming* wanted [you], but [your] destiny is disconnected with *ming's*.

Nisa: Then our destiny is disconnected, but *ming* will still love *oun*. [Our] destiny isn't disconnected to mean *ming* will stop loving [you]. Not at all. *Ming* still loves [you]. *Ming* loves [you]. Thank you! Have Success!

Sovath: [Go] *chumreapsuor, ming*. One more. *Ancheun* ("come," polite).

Sovath guides Visal toward Kanha.

Visal: (Hands pressed together) *Chumreapsuor, ming*.

Kanha: Thank you, *khmuy*, for coming to perform on our program. And thank you very much for not choosing *ming*. Not really. *Ming* is sad.

This exchange is interesting in many respects. Sovath's interaction with Visal mimics a particular kind of genre in Cambodia, that of a parent-child or adult-child socialization technique where adults not only teach children to greet their elders, but also how to politely and respectfully greet them. Additionally, Sovath's choice of kinterm influenced the other coaches' subsequent form of address with Visal. They originally saw their relationship with Visal as *bang-paoun/oun*, but once Sovath referred to them as *ming*, they switched over to *ming* as well—though Nisa had a non-complimentary *ming-oun* dyad. One final note: Sovath uses a polite

honorific register term for “come” or “invite” with Visa, *ancheun* (អញ្ជើញ), which contrasts with the ordinary term *mok* (មក). This could be interpreted in two ways. Sovath may have been treating Visal like an honored guest who, out of all the judges competing for him, chose Sovath above all. Hence, Sovath may have been using an appropriate register level to reflect his gratitude. Alternatively, it could also be interpreted as another instance of language socialization, where Sovath is using a polite honorific term to teach Visal how to speak politely. Even though Sovath is directing his speech toward Visal, he may have been using his own speech as a role model for how Visal should speak to his elders in a respectful manner. This also aligns with his insistence that Visal properly greet the other judges he had just rejected to be his coach. Sovath’s language socialization event was not just for Visal, but also expands across the airwaves as he educates other Cambodians at home, telling them that this is the proper way to greet one’s elders.

I want to emphasize that these interactions between the coaches and the contestants on *The Voice Kids Cambodia* flow without any disruption. Nobody ever commented on the choice of person-referring terms during these face-to-face conversations. However, I did find one instance where an audience member commented on the fact that the coaches were using the “wrong” kinterms with children. Under one of *The Voice Kids Cambodia*’s Facebook posts, a commenter wrote, “The coach[es] should call boys and girls *khmuy khmuy* (nieces and nephew) don’t call *paoun paoun*. Because coach[es] are old enough to be their *ming*, to be their *pu*, to be their *om*.” (Underlined was written in English.) In other words, the coaches are old enough to be their junior and senior aunts and uncles. But one may ask: why did they go out of their way to inform these famous-musicians-turned-singing-competition-coaches to let them know that they are too old to refer to the kids as *paoun*? One answer lies in their visibility, as I discussed earlier, and the fear that this “wrong” social relations between adults and children will spread across the

country. I also want to argue that this tension or contradiction in how to address one another is indicative of Cambodia's identity crisis in the aftermath of war and in light of its fast-paced technological and financial development, an identity crisis at an individual level, but also on a national level.

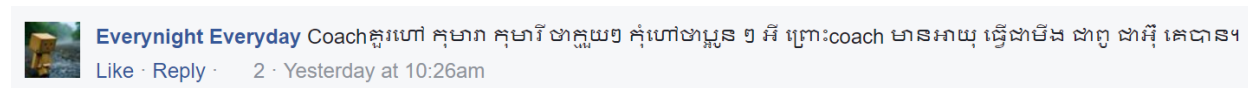


Figure 10: Facebook comment by an audience member critiquing the coaches' use of *khmuy* (niece/nephew) with child contestants

The tension or contradiction stems from whether Cambodians think they should be abiding by strict age-grade kinterm differences or whether they can be more general. The term *bang paoun* together can mean “siblings/brothers and sisters,” but it can also mean “everybody” or “you all” when you are referring to a large crowd of people of various ages. In Cambodia, it is also common for teachers and other adults to refer to young school-age children in the second-person as *paoun paoun*. Literally, they are referring to them as “little brothers and little sisters,” but colloquially, this is their way of saying “you” or “you all” since their addressee are younger than them. Even if the adults are much older, this person-referring term is used as a general form of address for all children. I heard this form of address when I attended the Khmer Rouge tribunal and a group of high schoolers were bussed in to watch the court proceedings. A staff member at the tribunal came out to greet them and to introduce the history of the court, the defendants, as well as the star witness that day *lok srey* (madam) Elizabeth Becker. He addressed the students as *paoun paoun* or *oun oun* (a variation of *paoun*) the entire time, taking the kinterm as a general form of address, despite being at least 30 years older than them.

Some Cambodians, like my friend Socheata, reflect on whether *paoun paoun* and the complementary *bang* are the “wrong” kinterms to use with children or students, especially if the

speaker is much older than the kids they are addressing. I noticed this tension when I agreed to volunteer with Socheata when she told me that she had planned to travel to my area in Battambang to do some programming events through EducationUSA to help Cambodian students learn about study abroad opportunities in the United States. We went to three schools in total, one high school and two universities. Socheata, who was in her early 30s, first introduced herself to the students at the high school using *bang* (older sibling) and referred to the students as *paoun paoun*. She actually paused and joked out loud whether *bang* was the wrong kinterm to use because she was old enough to be their *ming* (junior aunt), but said that she will continue using *bang*. After accompanying Socheata back to her hotel room, since she made the trip to Battambang from the capital of Phnom Penh, we reflected on that moment again. In my fieldnotes for that day, I wrote:

[Socheata] made a joke during her talk that she's much older than the HS [high school] students, but she will call herself "*bang*." Because of the wide range of ages (HS and college), she's not sure how to refer to herself... For college students, *bang* fits. But with HS students, *ming* might be appropriate according to her.

Socheata felt more comfortable using *bang* with the college students, since their age difference was not too great so it was easy to see herself as their older sister, but with high school students, she was unsure if *bang* was appropriate or not. Though she described it as a joke afterwards, it was a real, genuine concern. Here, Socheata's reflections seem to lean toward the commenter on *The Voice Kids Cambodia's* Facebook page who criticized the coaches' use of *paoun* with the contestants. While Socheata stuck with *bang*, that Facebook commenter probably would have told Socheata that *ming* would have been the appropriate age-grade kinterm to use with the high school-age students.

These competing models about kinterm-usage reveal a tension over what is the idealized relationship between Cambodians and how that relationship should be projected in the media as a model by which everyone citizen must follow. Just as Tongans try to project a brother-sister relationship onto the courtroom and at a national level (Philips 2000), some Cambodians are trying to force a particular kinship model or worldview onto the media. While some people have no issue with the female coaches' use of *bang-paoun/oun* (older sibling-younger sibling), there are murmurings among some Cambodians who disagree with this model, advocating for a more appropriate age-grade difference between adults in their 30s and 40s with children between the ages of 7-14 or so.

Youths, Language, and Modernity

Implied in many of these language complaints and critiques about media personalities is not that the masses will pick up bad language, but that impressionable children are the most vulnerable. Not only are they living in the Information Age, but they are also living during a time when migration and mobility is the norm. The emergence of new media alongside travel due to these global flows provide Cambodians with a new imaginary (Appadurai 1996) as they begin to see other ways of being, not only through images in the media, but also through their family, friends, and neighbors who have done it themselves. It fuels their imagination for other possibilities of being. This new imaginary, and this new construction of an imagined community (Anderson 1983) through the media, motivate some Cambodians, particularly youths, to see their own social identities in a new light. And that has consequences for how they use honorifics and honorific registers.

In light of generational differences, we find competing worldviews on what means to be Cambodian as the older generation and the younger generation push and pull social status and language in different directions. In Chapter 1, I shared two cases in which English, both grammar and culture, seem to have an influence on Cambodian culture and language. In Tong Soprach's op-ed, he criticizes Cambodian youths who have incorporated English "grammar" into Khmer by saying "Hello, everybody," or *sourdey neak teang as knea*, which is "contrary to respectful Cambodian culture of knowing who is higher ranked" (S. Tong 2012b). A typical greeting at the beginning of every workshop, conference, or meeting tends to name everyone who might be present in the room: "Hello, your royal highnesses, your excellencies, sirs, madams, misses, uncles, aunts, older siblings, younger sibling, and friends who are present here." I also noted that my friend Socheata, who I reintroduced again in this very chapter, dislikes opening her meetings in Khmer because she feels obligated to greet everyone with an appropriate title and form of address. Worried that she might offend high ranking, powerful people by not naming them in her opening greeting, she begins her meetings in English with "Good morning," not only to save time, but to sidestep the Cambodian cultural norm. In Chapter 1, I showed how Cambodians often point to English, and perhaps American or Western culture, as the source of the problem. In this chapter, I want to argue that English is not solely to blame for these language shifts. These changes are one of the many consequences of the Khmer language's trend toward flattening.

One elderly Cambodian woman, Ms. Tran, in her explanation of hierarchy and Khmer honorific registers, explained that in Cambodian society, when you meet someone, you need to consider whether they are older or younger than your mother since Khmer has "aunt" and "uncle" kinterms that differentiate between an aunt/uncle who is younger than your mother (*pu* "junior uncle," *ming* "junior aunt") versus older (*om*, "senior aunt/uncle). If it is someone bigger

than you, older than you, or has more power than you, Ms. Tran said, they will be angry if you get the forms of address wrong. Yet, after giving me this warning, Ms. Tran admitted that her own grandchildren are not quite abiding by this rule.

I have grandchildren, they call me *yay* (grandma), and I don't want that because I don't love [the kinterm]. Want them to call say *lok-yay* (honorable grandma), *lok-ta* (honorable grandpa).

Ms. Tran differentiates between *yay* and *lok-yay*. Both mean “grandmother/grandma,” but one adds an honorific *lok* to give additional respect and deference, especially to indicate it is a form of address. *Yay* by itself would just be the noun “grandmother.” She wants them to call her *lok yay*, but her grandchildren call her *yay*. This difference indicates a conflict between these two different generations about social relations in Cambodia. Even though Ms. Tran grew up during a time when you addressed grandparents with an additional honorific prefix, her grandchildren are growing up in a world where there is no need to defer to your elders in the same way by adding *lok*.

This flattening is reminiscent of what happened during the Khmer Rouge regime. On the one hand, they elevated children by encouraging the third-person pronoun *koat* while banning uses of *vea*. On the other hand, they also altered kinterms under the regime. While there are reports that kinterms were banned, where one must refer to everyone as *mitt* (comrade), in some areas kinterms were allowed, sometimes even used in combination with *mitt*, such as *mitt-bang* (comrade-older sibling). However, Ms. Tran's experience with her own grandchildren in recent times reminded me of what one Khmer Rouge survivor told me about her experiences under the Khmer Rouge. Vanna, who was a Phnom Penh resident and 17 years old when the Khmer Rouge took over, said they were not allowed to be “polite” under the Khmer Rouge because the Khmer Rouge did not allow these honorific prefixes. Vanna presents other honorific prefixes that often

accompany kinterms that are similar to *lok-*, such as *neak-* and *mak-* to talk about how kinterms changed under the regime:

Like my mother's *ming* (aunt). I call *koat* (her) "*neak-ming*" (honorable aunt). *Neak-ming*, *lok-pu* (honorable uncle). *Veā* ["it," the Khmer Rouge] told us to say *pu*, must say *pu*, say *ming*. There was no *lok-pu*. There was no *neak-ming*. There was no *mak-yay*. There was no *lok-yay*. Even if older [than you], it was *yay*... Speech was not polite.

Notice how Vanna refers to the Khmer Rouge as *veā* to show her disdain. In the above excerpt, like Ms. Tran, Vanna sees a huge difference between referring to someone as *ming* versus *neak-ming*. The latter conveys more respect, politeness, and deference. Being unable to add these honorific prefixes, Vanna described the regime as lacking politeness. Perhaps as an outsider, the addition or omission of these small prefixes did not seem that significant to me, which might align with how Cambodian youths of today feel, but for older Cambodians like Ms. Tran and Vanna, the omission of these one syllable prefixes make all the difference.

Will children and youths continue to drive Khmer honorifics and hierarchy toward flattening? Or will older Cambodians be able to reign in these speech habits? When I visited Pastor Chhay's church in Battambang, he also invited me to stay after church to have lunch since he and his family live on the church's grounds. To thank him and his family for their hospitality, I brought a fruit basket as a gift. Pastor Chhay's wife happily accepted the basket and went about cutting the various fruits to put on a plate to serve. She nudged her grandson, about three years old, to say *awkun* (thank you) to me for bringing fruit. He looked at me and said, "*Awkun*," But his grandmother was not satisfied, "*Akun* and what else?" He looked at me again and said, "*Awkun, yi* (aunt)." Here, she was urging her grandson to heed Cambodian cultural practices that place great emphasis on hierarchy and forms of address. Saying "hello" and "thank you" alone would not suffice; one needed to address that person or persons individually. Yet, many Cambodians today, as Tong lamented in his op-ed prefer to say "hello" or "hello, everybody,"

cutting out individual statuses and ranks. While Tong and others might describe these Cambodian youths as “lazy” for not going through the rigamarole of “diagrammatic chain of role designators, proper names, and titles” (Lempert 2013), I wonder if Cambodian youths just do not feel the need to acknowledge these differences.

At the end of my lunch with Pastor Chhay’s family, the family overheard the grandson call his aunt by her first name “Chhunly.” According to the family, it was inappropriate for a nephew to refer to his aunt by her name, or at least by her name only. I watched as the entire family chastised him for calling her “Chhunly” instead of “Yi Ly,” or (aunt Ly), where “Ly” is an abbreviation of her first name. A family friend who joined the lunch said, “He doesn’t know how to *pu ming* (aunt, uncle),” using the kinterms “aunt, uncle” as a verb to mean “knowing how to address people properly.” His grandmother explains, “He calls her Chhunly because no one gets angry at him. When he sees people are angry, he’ll change and say Yi Ly.” At the time, while watching the family discuss a 3 year old’s speech habit that afternoon, I saw it as a stubborn child not wanting to obey his family. Now, however, I wonder if he might actually be forward-thinking, part of a new generation of Cambodians who think it is allowable to call your aunt by her first name.

How should Cambodians speak and behave? I am purposefully alluding to Anne Hansen’s (2007) book title *How to Behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*. While Hansen’s title reflected the concerns of Buddhist monks in the early 20th century when print technology entered Cambodia, I contend that Cambodians are grappling with similar questions today: how should Cambodians speak and behave in the 21st century in response to globalization, capitalism, and social media? As this chapter elucidates, the answer to that question is varied and complex, with some Cambodians actively consuming new forms of

media with “bad” language while staunch conservatives view these media as a form of corruption onto Cambodian culture and society.

Conclusion: Who is the Proper Cambodian?

How should Cambodians refer to themselves and how should they address social others? In the aftermath of war, in the midst of large-scale development, and with the rise of newer forms of media, some Cambodians are reimagining their own identities and reinterpreting social relations in ways that are vastly different than a generation ago, which often leads to criticism and debate among those who are unhappy with these changes. In the context of mass media, this is most apparent through its potentially democratizing resonances, which has been empowering for some Cambodians, but also viewed as potentially dangerous for others.

As this chapter has shown, mass media has illuminated the underlying tensions and contradictions that are simmering in Cambodia in the aftermath of political upheaval and attempts at development and reconstruction. One of the tensions is about the status of the media in Cambodian society: is it a force of good or evil? On the one hand, the media offers Cambodians the freedom to read and share commentaries. On the other hand, the media also presents potential sources for destroying traditional culture.

The last point leads us to the other tension that is being played out in the media: what is the future of Cambodian national identity? There seems to be a new trend, a burgeoning worldview that sees Cambodian society as more egalitarian than in the past. This is not the only worldview, but a newer one that runs counter to more traditional views about social hierarchy and language-use. This newer worldview is made possible through globalization and the circulation of images and people through the media, particularly the internet, giving people new

possibilities, a new kind of imaginary for the future (Appadurai 1996). As more Cambodians move from the countryside into the cities for wage labor, as Cambodians come into contact with foreigners and learn foreign languages, as Cambodians read the news and watch videos on Facebook, some are beginning to have aspirations for a better future for themselves and their children. Although capitalism, globalization, and urbanization usually bring inequality and a larger gap between the rich and the poor, they also provide the possibility for social mobility. The country's recent developments in telecommunication, broadcasting, and entertainment reinforces this new imaginary. Even Cambodians who remain "fixed" in their hometowns can still see and experience other worlds through the media and with social media, they can stay connected with friends and neighbors who ventured out on their own.

Who is the ideal Cambodian citizen and what kind of country should Cambodia be? My research shows that the answer is still unresolved as Cambodians compete, argue, and renegotiate their own identity and that of their country. While the answer remains to be seen, I demonstrated that newer forms of national identity are emerging in light of the country's recent development, not just economic development, but also its advancement in telecommunication, broadcasting, and entertainment. This new identity is unlike the ideal Cambodian of the past: one who was content with being a farmer rooted in the countryside. For Cambodians with aspirations for social mobility, this presents newer possibilities that were not available more than a generation ago. Anyone can try to move to the city and become a taxi driver or a factory worker. Anyone can learn English and get a good paying job. Anyone can come from humble beginnings to become an online commentator. And anyone can compete in a singing competition like *The Voice Cambodia*.

Conclusion

As I indicated in my Introduction, this dissertation contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations in three major domains: linguistic anthropology, Khmer language, and Cambodian studies.

Contribution to Linguistic Anthropology

Asif Agha (2003, 2007, 1999, 1994, 2002, 2004, 2009), who has written extensively on honorifics and register-use, is primarily interested in enregisterment, or how registers and linguistic repertoire are formed and come to be recognized by a language community. Although other scholars have written usefully on registers, Agha's work on enregisterment has dominated recent scholarly thought on the subject. I bring a different perspective by showing how existing registers in Khmer are dynamic, how they are in a state of contestation as Cambodians continually disagree over a register's usage and status. By centering disagreements surrounding registers, my dissertation opens up newer lines of questioning for scholars investigating languages with honorifics registers. How might future ethnographic research concerning registers benefit from prioritizing register instability and register debate? Some may associate the Khmer language's instability with its volatile history and frail education system. Although Khmer might be an extreme example of a language where there is no firm institutional control over language standards, language variation is present in all communities of speakers. If we were to study registers, not only to understand how they came into being, but how they are differently

defined and used by language-users, we may decenter hegemonic ideals about language standardization by showing that language differentiation is the norm, not the exception.

When we turn our attention to register contestation, we must inevitably compare and contrast registers. The best way to define a register is to say what it is *not* because when one register is chosen in a speech utterance, there are other registers that were not chosen. Like Irvine's (2001) work in on noble speech and griot speech in Wolof and Irvine & Gunner's (2018) study of *hlonipho* and *bonga* in Zulu, I demonstrate that it is important to look at relations between registers. As emphasized throughout my chapters, when Cambodians argue over honorific register-use, they often point to which registers are appropriate and which ones are inappropriate in a particular social setting. My work encourages other language researchers to analyze registers in relation to other speech repertoire because we cannot fully examine a register without understanding how it compares and contrasts with other registers. Linguistic differentiation has been of interest to other linguistic anthropologists like Irvine & Gal (2000) since it not only explains how we differentiate and mark social boundaries, but also how language change is motivated as social groups differentiate themselves from others. I extend this thinking toward register differentiation and encourage more research that analyzes relations between registers.

Further, while Agha is concerned with the social domain of registers, or the social categories of people who recognize a register and know how to use it, I not only look at who uses which particular honorific registers in Khmer, but I further examine who is the target of those registers. Following Webb Keane's (2015) discussion of the expanded moral circle as a sign of modernity, which he borrows from Peter Singer, I introduce the concept of the "moral circle of honorification" to show how an expansion of moral concern can be expressed through language.

Within Khmer honorific registers, we find evidence that a greater number of Cambodians are avoiding the non-honorific register and they are more likely to use the ordinary and polite honorific register levels with a wider number of people. The modern ideals that emphasize moral responsibility toward others, toward people who are not just in one's immediate surroundings, seem to have an impact on the speech patterns of urban middle-class Cambodians as they begin using Khmer honorific registers in newer ways. I discovered that these Cambodians are more likely to use the ordinary and polite honorific registers when addressing or referring to other people, people who might not have received the benefit of these registers historically.

My findings raise questions about whether we might find an expanded moral circle of honorification in other languages and societies. Will we find similar observations in other languages with honorific registers where language-users are preoccupied with issues of modernity? And what about languages without obligatory honorifics? How might language-users speaking English, for example, express their moral concern for others linguistically? What linguistic strategies, if any, can be observed? Further research on addressivity and reference in a variety of other languages could provide insights into how language is used to express ethical care in light of modern democratic ideals.

My research also expands on the work conducted by linguistic anthropologists like Jane & Kenneth Hill (1978) and Miyako Inoue (2004 [2002]) who have studied and tracked the historical life of registers. Through an investigation of Nahuatl honorifics and Japanese women's language, respectively, these researchers sought to understand the social and pragmatic meaning of particular registers in their informants' changing world. These languages, along with Khmer, went through similar kinds of language contact and modernizing efforts. My work diverges from theirs because Cambodia's current language contact and modernizing campaigns are not directly

institutionalized by the state. While the Spanish colonials and the Japanese government played a large role in ushering in change, through the teaching of Spanish or the emergence of a Japanese women's language in print media, in Cambodia we find that changes were often an indirect result of the country's re-integration into the global market. In Cambodia, globalizing and modernizing efforts seem to largely emanate from the local population, and not from the state. It is the demographic of people moving into the cities to find work who have a desire to learn English, who have a hunger for foreign mass media, and who aspire to live in a larger house. Although the current Cambodian government is authoritarian and has censorship powers in many domains, efforts to standardize or reform the Khmer language by the government or the education system have not been successful—as I have shown throughout this dissertation. My findings in Cambodia, in an environment without a strong institutional stronghold on language maintenance, might help us understand the consequences of top-down versus bottom-up honorific register change. How might language change motivated by the state differ from language change motivated by the locals themselves?

The status of Khmer's honorific registers today might also give us a glimpse into how neighboring languages with honorific registers might fare in the future as notions of status, difference, and inequality conflict with democratic ideals about equality and development. Jack Sidnell and Merav Shohet (2013) hint at this issue by exploring the different strategies employed by Vietnamese-speakers who want to express equality and sameness when their address system involves age-grade kinterms that oblige speakers to choose which interlocutor is higher ranking and which is lower ranking. In the 1980s, by the time Joseph Errington was studying and documenting the Javanese language (see Errington 1998, 1986, 1985, 1988), the Indonesian language had already dominated the local population. As Errington told me in an e-mail

correspondence, “The Javanese honorific system wasn’t so much put to an end as left to die.”⁸⁰

The Indonesian government chose Indonesian as the national language due to its lack of deferential forms. They were hostile toward the idea of Javanese elites (*priyayi*) and the accompanying speech styles related to them. Will we see Javanese honorifics also flatten toward the middle speech style (*madya*)? Indeed, as Errington has demonstrated through his research, the majority of Javanese-speakers never had a need for the higher speech styles anyway. If this were to continue, will we eventually see a Javanese that discards its high (*krama*) and low (*ngoko*) forms? My work then also opens up larger questions about the place of honorific registers in the modern world. Can we have a traditional language system that emphasizes hierarchy when modern influences seem to be motivating societies around the world toward parity, equality, and justice?

This leads me to another potential insight from my study: ways to preserve and reproduce languages in light of large-scale social change. Even though some Cambodians have expressed fears that Khmer may be replaced by English, my findings show that Khmer is still alive and thriving. It is being maintained because it is changing and being reproduced in newer ways that reflect the shifting Cambodian landscape. Can speech communities whose languages are in more precarious conditions, languages that are competing with more socially and economically dominant languages, learn from Khmer’s internal language changes in order to preserve their own indigenous languages? I believe they can. Khmer has shown us that a language can still survive—even if some parts of that language are in decline. Would endangered languages be able to go through similar internal changes by disposing of less relevant parts in order to preserve the language as a whole? This is a difficult question. Not all Cambodians agree with the changes

⁸⁰ Joseph Errington, e-mail correspondence with author, December 10, 2012.

they see today and not all indigenous language activists are willing to discard traditional aspects of their heritage culture. However, it is important to consider the possibilities.

Contribution to Khmer Language

My work is a first step toward documenting Khmer's honorific register system. While there are Khmer literature scholars who have paid closer attention to dictionaries and while there are Khmer language researchers who have written extensively on orthography, phonology, and syntax, none of them have taken seriously the place of Khmer language in society and in interaction. I am writing about an aspect of Khmer language that is, at the very core, social and political. I go beyond pronouns and address forms by bringing attention to Khmer honorific registers as a whole, showcasing the range of lexical forms found within each register. When Cambodians comment on honorific choices, they are not just commenting on individual lexical choices; they are also commenting on the register-choice, pointing to other lexicon in the same register or pointing to lexicon in another register for comparison.

Through Khmer metapragmatic commentaries about Khmer honorific register-use, I highlight differing attitudes toward Khmer registers. In doing so, I emphasize that these registers are in a constant state of change and contestation as Cambodians interpret and reinterpret the role honorific registers play in their daily lives. While I sometimes discuss Khmer honorific registers and their normative rules, or how Cambodians have traditionally used and imagined their honorific register system, I am mindful of the ways in which Cambodians have disregarded the rules and how they have creatively and tropically used honorific registers. Not unlike my call to center instability and disagreement in the literature on registers, I would also like to bring variation and contestation to the fore in Khmer language studies. Some Khmer-speakers believe

Khmer language variation is an indication of decline, corruption, or degradation, but I would like to celebrate language variation as evidence of Khmer's vibrancy.

These discoveries were only made possible through my use of interactional data. Previous Khmer language scholars often relied on elicitation sessions or interviews to gather data, which often focuses on the norms of honorific register-use. By analyzing naturally occurring Khmer, both written and spoken, I was able to observe tropic and competing uses of Khmer honorific registers as well as real-time slippages and self-repairs. Linguistic data of these kinds reveal the very nuances and complexities hidden behind the rigid rules Khmer-speakers often espoused. I hope that my work will inspire more linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists to study Khmer language-use in interaction.

Contribution to Cambodian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies

As a small country that has experienced extreme war and turmoil in the last few decades, scholarly research about Cambodia focuses either on the history of the Khmer Rouge or on how contemporary Cambodian society is rebuilding itself in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. The most prevalent domains are politics and political corruption, economic development, human rights issues and violations, gender and kinship, Buddhism and religion, and psychological trauma and social memory. Through an investigation of language and Khmer honorific registers, my research touches upon all these subjects. As Cambodia entered the open market economy, the ability to rise in status and climb the social ladder, along with public venues to broadcast and share their grievances, have given many upwardly mobile Cambodians the courage to challenge and protest long-standing views about political oppression and social inequality. As a result, Cambodians are less likely to accept the non-honorific register, a register that is associated with

power, condescension, and the Khmer Rouge. At the same time, political, economic, and religious elites appear to have diminishing power, lowering their status in the eyes of average Cambodians. Cambodians' growing lack of fluency in the royal honorific register and the Buddhist monk honorific register is evidence of the elites' decline. While some Cambodians still want to maintain extreme hierarchy, advocating widespread use of all of Khmer's honorific registers and intricate forms of address, others are striving for a more equitable society that expands their moral circle to give all Cambodians linguistic decency and respect. By studying honorific registers, I am able to discuss religion, social mobility, migration, educational potential, and economic possibilities—topics that have interested Cambodian scholars since the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime.

My findings, however, have only begun to scratch the surface within these various domains. Should Cambodian studies scholars pay closer attention to Khmer honorific register-usage within their area of expertise, or should they be interested in collaborating with me by sharing their linguistic data, we may discover interesting insights into how Cambodians are more specifically responding to changes in the fields of politics, religion, kinship, economic development, and social memory. By embarking on a deeper analysis of honorific registers within each topical area, I believe we will get a clearer picture of how Cambodians are able to recover and rebuild after experiencing intense trauma, ruptures, and reconstruction.

Unlike Thailand and Vietnam, countries which have gone through economic development several decades earlier, Cambodia's entrance onto the global stage is much more recent. As Cambodians undergo newfound urbanization and capitalism today, we may ask if Thailand and Vietnam offer a glimpse as to what awaits. Thongchai Winichakul (2000) traces the development of the term *siwilai* ("civilized") in the late 19th and early 20th century Thailand

as Thai elites and intellectuals desired to become *siwilai*. Sophorntavy Vorng (2011) also examines the Thai terms *inter* and *hi-so*, which come from the English words “international” and “high society,” respectively, to talk about class and the urban-rural divide in Bangkok, Thailand. In Vietnam, Erick Harms (2016) looks into the country’s urban development and economic reforms, which began in the 1980s, and how they have panned out in recent years. In Ho Chi Minh City, urban spaces are not only viewed as civilized, but urban lifestyles and behaviors are also viewed as civilized. Rural areas, then, are not only uncivilized, but the behaviors of rural people are associated with incivility. When comparing these case studies in Thailand and Vietnam to contemporary Cambodia, I also found parallels among urban middle-class Cambodians who seek their own ideas about civility through their choice of honorific register-use. At the same time, they want to avoid notions of incivility, which are often associated with the speech and behavior of rural farmers.⁸¹ I have discussed the stereotypes urbanites have about rural farmers: will Cambodia’s economic development and globalized economy lead to a deeper social and linguistic divide between urban and rural residents? Will Cambodia, particularly its capital of Phnom Penh, mimic its neighbors in Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City by adopting similar ideas about urban civility, *siwilai*, *inter*, and *hi-so*? Or will Cambodia’s development and urban modernity differ from its Southeast Asian counterparts? Only time will tell.

Future Work: Expanding on Other Registers and Demographics

The bulk of my dissertation chapters have focused on honorific registers that are considered marked in Cambodian society: the Buddhist monk honorific register, the royal honorific register, and the non-honorific register. These registers differ from the unmarked and

⁸¹ I thank Jack Sidnell for pointing these similarities out to me.

more frequently used ordinary register and polite register. Certainly, these registers are the ones that are most prominent in the average Cambodian's everyday life and the very registers that might remain if Khmer honorific registers continue to flatten in light of the decline of the other registers. In the chapters on religion, however, I show settings in which the ordinary and polite register may actually be highly marked since they have traditionally been inappropriate in situations involving Buddhist monks and God. More work may be done in this area by looking at individuals who *only* use the ordinary and polite honorific registers because they either refuse to use the other registers or because they do not have command of the other registers. What happens when a Cambodian Buddhist always uses the polite register with Buddhist monks instead of the Buddhist monk honorific register? How might Cambodian Christians respond to a congregant who chooses to talk about God using the ordinary register instead of the royal honorific register? Although I have limited data about apathetic Buddhist monks and exasperated Catholic nuns who do not think they can turn the linguistic tide, more work could be done in the field of religion to learn more.

Because I spent the majority of my time in the cities and among the urban middle-class, questions about Khmer honorific register flattening in the countryside remain unanswered. If the urban middle-class are flattening Khmer honorific registers, what is happening to registers in the provinces? Although the data I collected came largely from upwardly mobile urbanites, some of my informants held hybrid, intersectional, and mixed social identities, originally hailing from the countryside and having moved to the cities for school or work. This raises several questions about the linguistic practices of non-urban Cambodians of several demographics: Cambodians who have not left the countryside, rural Cambodians who temporarily travel to the cities for work, and previously-rural Cambodians who have permanently moved to the cities and only visit

their home villages for important events and holidays. How might migration, both into the cities and back to the countryside, impact Khmer honorific registers in the countryside? Would a researcher conducting long-term ethnographic research in a rural village find similar Khmer honorific register flattening? And would our answers vary in terms of groups who are largely stationary, those who are largely mobile, and people who have contact with mobile kin and neighbors though they are stationary themselves? We may even extend these same questions to Cambodians who have migrated abroad for educational and employment purposes: how might internationally inclined Cambodians use of Khmer honorific registers?

Had I completed my dissertation before 2020, the preceding questions would have been the main questions that I believed to be unresolved and in need of more research. While completing my dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging stories from Cambodia have led me to ask even more questions about how Cambodians will once again cope with large-scale ruptures in society. Will my findings about Khmer honorific register flattening still hold? Or will I need to revise and rethink my findings in light of the ongoing global health crisis?

Future Work: Will COVID-19 Disrupt Khmer Honorific Register Flattening?

Up until the end of my fieldwork by December 2016, Cambodia's economy was continuing to grow exponentially, particularly with the help of Chinese investment in areas that depended on local labor, such as construction and hospitality. Urban migration, the widespread availability of microfinance loans, and the ease of setting up a business in an informal economy⁸²

⁸² For example, many Cambodians operate without a formal business license. Any Cambodian can become a private taxi driver by using their own vehicle to solicit passengers who are trying to go in the same direction. Or, a Cambodian can become a fruit shake vendor by buying a mobile cart, some fruit, and a blender and setting up shop on a sidewalk or wherever there is space.

have fueled many Cambodians' dreams of a better future for themselves and their children as they began buying land, building homes, and putting their children in international schools in the cities. The trend toward urbanization was so strong that the Center for Khmer Studies even received funding to create the Cambodia Urban Database to aid researchers with finding documents, reports, and other resources concerning Cambodia's rapid urbanization.⁸³

With the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, opportunities for upward mobility slowed and halted—even before Cambodians experienced any health crisis within the country. With the closure of factories, construction sites, and the tourism sector—many of which are foreign-owned or foreigner dependent—Cambodia's place in the globalized economy had never been more apparent. While Cambodians had escaped the global health crisis in 2020, the country's economy came to a complete standstill because of the toll the coronavirus was taking on other parts of the world. These repercussions not only underscored Cambodia's dependence on the global economy, but they also exposed Cambodia's vulnerability, as many people live paycheck to paycheck. Work stoppages in light of the pandemic have created two interrelated phenomena that might have an impact on social relations and Khmer honorific registers: the reversal of urbanization as Cambodians move back to their home villages and large-scale debt to moneylenders or microlending programs as Cambodians are unable to make loan payments.

From Urbanization to Ruralization: Will Cambodians Talk like Farmers Again?

I have argued that urbanization and social mobility are driving Cambodians toward using the middling honorific registers, especially as they see the potential to rise in the social ladder and as they see their peers do the same. As a result of business closures in the cities, many

⁸³ See <https://urbandatabase.khmerstudies.org/>.

Cambodians have opted to return to their home villages in the provinces, often to help their families farm. Prime Minister Hun Sen himself remarked that Cambodia's economy will remain strong during the pandemic because "we must not forget that we are an agricultural country" (Nhim 2020). After decades of intense urbanization, what happens when Cambodians leave the cities? Will Cambodia's national identity be tied to agriculture and farmers in the countryside? How might COVID-19's "ruralization" affect Khmer honorific registers as Cambodians go back home? That is, how might Cambodians moving back to their home villages speak with the rural family and friends? Will they continue to use Khmer honorific registers the way they had been using them in the cities? If so, will the influx of "cosmopolitan" peers into the countryside impact how Cambodians in rural areas speak? Or will Cambodians who are returning to the provinces revert to older linguistic practices as they try to adapt and assimilate back to rural life?

While time will tell if this ruralization is only temporary or if it will be long-term, the move back home to the provinces by one of my informants, which I witnessed through social media, offers one potential case study to consider. Davy, a woman in her late 30s, whom I met in Phnom Penh, shared photos of herself and her family fishing for sea creatures in a muddy lake. In the Facebook post captioned "Life in the village" (written in English), Davy is chest-deep in mud searching for water creatures to eat, including snails, shrimp, and small fish. I was struck by her use of *hob*, the rural word for "eat," as she responded to a Facebook friend in Phnom Penh who admired the freshness and authenticity of her meal—even joking that she does not need to go to a spa or use lotion now after having a mud bath. Deflecting his admiration, Davy reveals to him that she is not successful at all because she can barely find enough food to eat (*hob*) and has no money to buy lotion. While this indicates that Davy has reverted to a rural sociolect, more work needs to be done to know whether Davy's register-use is the norm or an exception. We also

must not ignore the hardship this post reveals. What can honorific-use among rural returnees tell us about how they are coping with financial difficulties in the countryside?

Will Financial Debt Re-establish Inequality and Patron-Client Relationships?

The pandemic has also revealed another worrying trend in Cambodia: excessive borrowing of microfinance loans (Bylander 2015; Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights and Sahkmakum Teang Tnaut 2019; K. Tong et al. 2019). Cambodia has the highest amount of microfinance debt in the world, averaging \$3,804 in loans in 2019 (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights 2020). The ease with which Cambodians may borrow money has its advantages and disadvantages. These loans have helped many Cambodians pay for upfront costs of opening a new business. Normally, if their business is successful, they are able to make monthly payments on their loans. Unfortunately, sometimes Cambodians are unable to make a profit and become indebted to their moneylenders. When the pandemic lockdowns closed businesses and prevented Cambodians from working, a large percentage of Cambodians defaulted on their loans. My informant Davy, for example, has shared photos of her bank loan statements on Facebook, which amounted to a total of \$160 per month. In one post, she anthropomorphizes the bank by using the polite third-person pronoun *koat* (he/she), writing “The bank follows you home. *Koat* is not afraid of the coronavirus.” For Davy, the bank has become an entity that she must pay some deference to, using a more polite pronoun instead of the non-honorific third-person pronoun, often used with inanimate objects, *vea* (it).

Davy’s post shows that indebtedness is reminiscent of patron-client relationships that have been the hallmark of Cambodian social relations. In my dissertation, I argued that social

mobility is driving the urban middle-class toward an expanded moral circle of honorification as they see themselves and their peers rise in social status, no longer being dependent on wealthy landlords to eke out a living. This trend, however, may be upended by the pandemic as more and more Cambodians like Davy find themselves in debt to private moneylenders and microlending programs, creating an unequal lender-debtor relationship where debtors have the upper hand. To what extent will debt affect social hierarchy and social relationships in Cambodia? Will Cambodians once again be subjected to oppression and the wrath of moneylenders who are doggedly pursuing loan payments? Will wealthy landlords use the non-honorific register to demand payments and to belittle Cambodians in debt? That is, will poor Cambodians find themselves outside of their landlords' moral circle of honorification? Or, will Cambodians who have previously experienced upward mobility be able to withstand the (linguistic) oppression and fight for social justice?

To answer these questions, we may need to wait awhile until the dust settles, but I offer one anecdote that may help us speculate how Cambodians are coping with loss of income and food insecurity. In April 2021, the Cambodian government imposed severe lockdown restrictions on several neighborhoods in Phnom Penh, closing markets as well as preventing residents in certain hotspot areas, or "red zones," from leaving their homes. Many Phnom Penh residents were on the verge of starvation, unable to go grocery shopping. As their food supplies ran out, some Cambodians stuck in these designated red zones began demanding justice on the internet. Through social media apps like Facebook and Telegram, Cambodians were able to broadcast their dire situation to the rest of the country. Cambodians outside the red zones rallied to help their fellow peers by bringing groceries:

Tin's family hadn't received anything from the state. So he turned to the internet to see if someone there was listening. "I decided to post asking for help on Facebook on April 18

and people started to spread it... I got a small amount of money and some canned foods from people” (Haffner 2021)

This incident shows that some Cambodians may continue to have an expanded moral circle, helping strangers in need. More work needs to be done, however, to see how Cambodians are coping with financial loss and food insecurity during the pandemic. If dire conditions were to continue, would Cambodians shrink their moral circle of concern toward themselves and their immediate families, living in a dog-eat-dog world? The answer to these questions will inevitably reflect the future of Khmer honorific registers.

What Could Have Been & What’s in Store for the Future

My friend Peter, a Cambodian refugee who resettled in New Zealand after the Khmer Rouge, has fond memories of living in the capital as a young boy in the 1960s. According to Peter, Phnom Penh was so developed that when Singapore’s prime minister Lee Kuan Yew visited the capital in the 1960s, he told King Sihanouk that he hoped Singapore would look like Phnom Penh someday.⁸⁴ On one of this many trips back to Cambodia, where he checks in on his local business ventures, Peter took me on a drive around the Chroy Changvar peninsula, a newly gentrified and renovated part of Phnom Penh. It lies on the other side of the Tonle Sap River and is home to a fishing community where families live entirely on their boats docked along the riverbank. Peter wanted to check out Sokha Hotel, a newly built five-star hotel on the tip of the peninsula. In 2015 it stood in stark contrast to the poor fishing community just steps away from the hotel, though by now, I would not be surprised if the community has now been evicted since

⁸⁴ The exact quote, uttered by Lee Kuan Yew during his visit in April 1967, may have been “I hope, one day, my city will look like this” (Turnbull 2004).

that land is now considered prime real estate.⁸⁵ While looking up at the Sokha Hotel, and across the river to Central Phnom Penh, Peter said he truly believed Cambodia would look just like Singapore, if not for the occurrence of the communist Khmer Rouge regime. But looking at the towering skyscrapers in the distance that day in 2015, I did not think that reality was far ahead.

Had the coronavirus pandemic not transpired, I would have predicted that Cambodia, or at least the capital of Phnom Penh, was headed in that direction. With the arrival of COVID-19 and its financial repercussions, I am no longer sure what the future holds. When the dust settles, we may ask: What does it mean to be Cambodian in the aftermath of the pandemic? Will Cambodians be farmers again, going back to the agricultural roots? Will Cambodians forever be in debt? Or, will Cambodians return to the cities once again to try to make things work?

Although the full effect of COVID-19 and Cambodia's shutdown remains to be seen, I do know that an investigation into how Cambodians are using Khmer honorific registers will help us find the answers.

⁸⁵ As of June 2021, the community has received an eviction notice. See <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/phnom-penh-floating-fishing-community-faces-eviction>.

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