

Not Yes, Not No: The Zen of Khmer Discourse Particles

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NOT YES, NOT NO: THE ZEN OF KHMER DISCOURSE PARTICLES

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0. Introduction

This paper will examine the Khmer discourse particles *tee* and *baat*, focusing primarily on the former, which is more problematic. I'll present a multi-modular analysis of their illocutionary, discourse, syntactic and semantic properties. The goal is two-fold. As can be seen from the data (on the handout), *tee* has a wide range of uses. The word *tee* has been previously discussed in descriptive grammars and in one analytical paper (Eilfort & Schiller 1990).

Typically (e.g., Huffman 1970, Jacob 1974, Headley 1977) these particles are presented in dictionaries and pedagogical work by simply listing a variety of examples (3). One goal of this paper is to unify the disjoint listings into a coherent explanation which covers the wide range of applications of the particle. I will also compare the use of *tee* to certain English tags, such as "...or not" and the areal A-not-A construction.

1. Description

The need for clarification on the description of *tee* is clear when one compares standard dictionary entries and grammars with the data presented below. To vastly oversimplify, the literature gives the impression that *tee* means 'no' and *baat* (and the equivalent for female speakers, *caa*) means 'yes'.

1.1 First hypothesis: 'yes/no'

Although *tee* does resemble the English response 'yes', it is clear from (1) that neither *tee* nor *baat* bears the entire positive or negative value by itself.

- 1) The Khmer particles *baat* and *tee*
Replies to
- | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| | <i>look</i> | <i>baan</i> | <i>teñ</i> | <i>mhoup?</i> | |
| | sir | get | buy | food | |
| | 'Have you bought the food?' | | | | |
| a. | <i>baat,</i> | <i>teñ</i> | | | |
| | RESP | buy | | | |
| | 'Yes' | | | | |
| b. | <i>baat,</i> | <i>muun</i> | <i>toən</i> | <i>teñ</i> | <i>tee</i> |
| | RESP | not | yet | buy | prt. |
| | 'No, I haven't bought it yet.' | | | | |
| c. | <i>baat,</i> | <i>nuŋ</i> | <i>teñ</i> | | |
| | RESP | will | buy | | |
| | 'No, but I will buy it.' | | | | |
| d. | <i>baat,</i> | <i>tee</i> | | | |
| | RESP | prt. | | | |
| | 'No.' | | | | |

1.2 Second hypothesis:

Looking at additional data (2-5), we find that the situation seems quite complicated. In (2), the word functions to indicate that the question is supposed to be answered 'Yes' or 'No'. It is functionally equivalent to the English 'or not?' tag, and to gloss (2) as 'Do you have a wife or not?' is possible. There is also a clear parallel in the A-not A question form found in many languages of the area, where the equivalent of the 'or' particle is almost never found. Khmer may eventually drop it as well, since it is a language where lexemes which are not required for grammatical or communicative import are often eliminated, especially if they are readily available from the context of an utterance.

- 2) In yes/no questions
- | | | | | |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| <i>look</i> | <i>mien</i> | <i>prapuən</i> | (<i>ruw</i>) | <i>tee?</i> |
| sir | have | wife | (or) | prt. |
- Have you a wife?

Judith Jacob's dictionary includes the listing presented in (3), where *lʔ:* translates to 'good' and *ru:* to 'or', the latter also seen in example (2).

- 3) Dictionary entry in Jacob 1974:
- (i) (not) ...at all; indeed;
- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>mʊn lʔ:</i> ____ | it is not good |
| <i>lʔ:</i> ____ | it is indeed not good |
- (ii) (in question) or not?
- | | |
|---------------------|-------------|
| <i>lʔ:</i> ____? | Is it good? |
| <i>lʔ: ru:</i> ____ | Is it good? |

From this, we might conclude that *tee* adds a negative polarity to the sentence, even if the sentence already contains a negation element (cf. 1b and the first dictionary entry in 3i). That seems to work well, though the effect in (3i) is to strengthen the emphasis of the negation, as Jacob's gloss indicates. That is a discourse effect we will return to below in the discussion of the discourse-function component. So we have a variety of uses of negation, some coordination, some discourse, but none which are traditional verb phrase or sentential negators, except in cases where the explicit negator *mʊn* (or its synonyms) is also present, as in 3i above and 4-5 below). So we can't classify *tee* grammatically as belonging to the same class of negators as *mʊn*.

- 4) In negative statements
- | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| <i>khñom</i> | <i>mɔək</i> | <i>mʊn</i> | <i>baan</i> | <i>tee</i> |
| I | come | not | able | prt. |
- I couldn't make it.
- 5)
- | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| <i>khñom</i> | <i>mʊn</i> | <i>nʊw</i> | <i>rih</i> | <i>kɨ</i> | <i>yaaj</i> | <i>naa</i> | <i>tee!</i> |
| I | not | will | choose | think | manner | prt. | prt. |
- 'There is no way for me to decide!'
- [Literally: I will not choose in any manner!]

Before we try to make a nice neat rule that encapsulates our observations about the obligatory co-occurrence restrictions on *tee* and *mʊn*, it is important to consider additional data. In (6) the negation is incorporated in a negative polarity

item (cf. *mien* 'have'). Note that in this case there is no independent negation particle.

- 6) *kmien hien təu naa mɔɔk naa tee.*
 not-have dare go prt. come prt. prt.
 'He never goes anywhere.'

In (7), we see that the notion of "negative" must be enlarged to include sentences which involve the notion 'only'.

- 7) In constructions with 'only'
khñom ceh tæ rien tee.
 I know-how only study prt.
 All I know is how to study.

1.3 A third suggestion: just describe it

We must be careful, however, not to over-extend the analysis. We could just say that *tee* is a generalized negation marker that applies to everything but straightforward VP-negation, as well as to indicate questions, and is found at the end of and utterance. That's not a particularly convincing description, however.

Yet this is exactly the kind of problem we run into when attempting to describe Southeast Asian languages, with their lack of inflectional morphology and abundance of so-called particles. Now let's try to strip down and clarify the definition. We will have to adjust utterance-final to sentence-final or verb phrase final, a definition which depends on the framework of analysis being used.

In (8), we must include the initial *tee* as part of the utterance, though it can be syntactic sentential unit unto itself, or some adjunct of a sentential unit.

- 8) In negative replies
tee, khñom mʉm thvəə kruu baŋriən tee
 prt. I not do teacher teach prt.
 'No, I'm not a teacher.'

I won't delve into theory-internal matters here, except to say that in my view *tee* is an element which combines with a sentential unit to form another sentential unit, and is found in sentence final position as a result of natural default relations from syntax to discourse function, which I'll return to later.

We see in (9), that content questions never take *tee*,

- 9) *thjai nih pʉ? hnəŋ mɔɔk maon ponmaan (*tee)?*
 day this group that come hour how-much
 'What time are those people coming today?'

nor do requests for action (10).

- 10) *soum niŋey prap khñom ʔəmpii srok*
 please speak tell me about country

khmae mədaŋ tiet məəl
 Khmer one-time more look
 'Please tell me again about Cambodia.'

So we must reduce the notion of a question marker to a marker of yes-no questions, and if we might be able to attribute this quality to the ‘no’ portion of the yes-no question. What about the question-marking aspects, then? Well get back to them. Let’s postpone the formulation of a lexical entry just a bit more, because there are still some purely descriptive problems. Semantically, we have been suggesting that negation—the denial of a proposition—is involved.

Example (11) demonstrates that *tee* is not always appropriate even when the statement involves the denial of a previous assertion. It must be at the start of the utterance, not the end, when followed by an assertion of a proposition the speaker does not want to negate.

- 11) a. *tee*, *khñom thvəə kruu peet* (**tee*)
 prt. I do teacher medicine
 ‘No, I’m a doctor.’
- b. *khñom thvəə kruu peet tee*
 I do teacher medicine prt
 ‘Am I a doctor?’ (marked, but acceptable given appropriate context)
- c. *khñom muən thvəə kruu peet tee*
 I not do t eacher medicine prt.
 ‘I’m not a doctor.’

So we are going to have to account for the differences in scope resulting from the position of the particle.

We have not yet exhausted the paradigmatic properties of the item. It turns out that the position usually occupied by *tee* at the end of the sentence is restricted, and can only be occupied by one lexeme. (12) shows that there is another particle which is used in a similar manner, but this particle *soh* is restricted to utterances which are quite strong in their emphasis.

- 12) *khñom muən dael təu soh!*
 I not ever go at all
 ‘I’ve never been there!’

Negative imperatives (13) also fail to trigger the use of *tee*.

- 13) *kom pruəy* (**tee*)!
 don’t worry

Finally, (14) shows that the presence of a clitic *tae* not only does not automatically force the use of *tee*, but can even reject it. The *tee* of negation is in complementary distribution with *laəy* and *səh*, which are intensifiers of negation. On the other hand, yes/no question *tee* is in complementary distribution with markers of imperativity and information questions.

- 14) *khñom muən baan dəj thaa koət kəmpung-tae*
 I not get know say prn. Prog. Aspect
sasee səmbot (**tee*).
 write letter
 ‘I didn’t know he was in the middle of writing a letter.’

2. An Autolexical analysis

Having assembled a set of elusively related facts about the word, let's take a look at the problem from a variety of perspectives. The autolexical approach demands that each lexical item in a language be listed with information concerning its phonology, morphology, syntax, logico-semantics, discourse-function, illocutionary properties and real-world meaning. We try to determine the behavior of the item in each of these dimensions.

For *tee*, some of this work was done in Eilfort & Schiller (1990), and for the purposes of this paper I'll use the syntactic and logico-semantic analysis of that paper, and concentrate on the illocutionary and discourse properties. As the 1990 paper pointed out, *tee* has the illocutionary function of passing information, except in the case of yes/no questions. We claimed that in yes/no questions the result of adding *tee* to the utterance is not an assertion. This was represented in an autolexical entry (15).

15) <i>tee</i>	(in yes/no questions)	
	syntax:	S/S
	logico-semantics:	nil
	morphology:	X,
	illocutionary:	+IP _____[-assertion]
	Interface:	default

Most of that analysis, is, I believe, correct. The phonological representation is uncontroversial, even if the transcription systems for Khmer vary widely. Syntactically, we chose to analyze it as an item which combines with a sentential unit and returns a sentential unit. In specifying the logico-semantics as nil, we claimed that where a proposition was actually negated, it was another negative particle in the utterance that provided that information, and that *tee* plays no direct role in the propositional logic of the utterance. Morphologically, the particle is inert and does not combine with any other items in the morphosyntax.

All that is fine, but then we come to the listing pertaining to the illocutionary module. There I believed we made an error.

Without concerning ourselves with theory-internal details such as whether [assertion] is an appropriate feature for the Illocutionary dimension, I think it is more appropriate to discuss this aspect of yes/no questions in terms of the Discourse-Function dimension reflected in the listing (16).

16) <i>tee</i>	(in yes/no questions)	
	syntax:	S>>S
	logico-semantics:	nil
	morphology:	inert
	illocutionary:	[+IP -SR]
	discourse function:	[+Focus]
	Interface:	default

I have jettisoned the \pm assertion feature, which now seems terribly ad hoc anyway, in favor of an analysis involving an existing feature, speaker responsibility, and have added a listing the discourse-function dimension. In a yes/no question, the proposition is added to the discourse context and the addressee

is prompted to comment on it (thus the obvious parallel with English ‘or not’ tags, cf. ex. 2). That the item is in focus is not only evidenced by its position, but *tee* also usually bears phonetic stress.

The position of *tee* is determined by the cross-modular interface. The interface is governed by the Generalized Interface Principle (Sadock and Schiller 1993) which demands that the structure of each dimension correspond to the structure of other dimensions as closely as possible. This is why elements of a syntactic category $S \gg S$ are, as a universal tendency, found outside the main clause or inserted as parenthetical, if their content is primarily discourse-functional or illocutionary in nature. In other approaches, one might describe these functions as “metalinguistic” or “extragrammatical” but the autolexical view is that these dimensions are as much a part of the grammar of a language as the syntax and semantics, and that lexical entries include this grammatical information, using a system of categories and combinatorics which are of the same nature as those of syntax, morphology and so on.

The autolexical approach combines the listing in (16) with a set of default relationships that apply across dimensions, which may be language specific or universal tendencies. In the present case, the relationship of the categories specified at the illocutionary and discourse-function levels is usually to category that combine with higher syntactic levels such as sentences rather than more atomic levels such as nouns, verbs, etc. This is reminiscent of the long-standing observation that interjections and parenthetical tend to be found at constituent boundaries. As for the other uses of *tee*, the lexical entry in (17) is appropriate:

17) *tee*

syntax:	$S \gg S$
logico-semantics:	nil
morphology:	inert
illocutionary:	+IP+SR
discourse function:	[+Focus]
Interface:	default

The difference in the two listings is confined to a single feature on the illocutionary level. In the case of the yes-no question, the speaker is not taking responsibility for the propositions contained in the utterance, but merely offering them as possibilities, or, perhaps via a Gricean mechanism, a request. In the remaining examples, the speaker does take responsibility for the statement.

This is intuitively appealing to an autolexicalist, because in our framework we expect polysemy to produce items which differ either on a single level, or, if on multiple levels, then there should be a predictable “default” relationship between those levels. For example, if we find a word used as both a verb and an adjective, we expect that the adjective involves the assignment of a property to an entity, and that the verb is a two-place predicate, the sort of thing one often finds in early stages of language acquisition by children.

3. Conclusion

I hope that this presentation of the behavior of the discourse particle *tee* will serve as a contribution not only to the understanding of Khmer, but also to the analysis of Southeast Asian discourse particles in general, and that the method employed, involving autonomous representations of discourse, illocution, logico-

semantics, syntax and their lexical entries can be used to enrich our understanding of these elusive phenomena.

I do realize that in this brief presentation I have only hinted at details and specifics of the Autolexical framework, but suggest that it can be of great practical value when brought to bear on the tricky question of lexicography. Whether or not one adopts the specific dimensions of the Autolexical approach and their internal representations, the process of viewing the different relationships words have from different grammatical perspectives can help clarify the description of these items, and make life easier for future researches who can test the descriptions and refine them as needed.

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