
Indigenous Highlanders and “Oralcy” in the Ban Leung Market

— A Micro-Discourse Analysis of Market Power in a Cambodian Province —

Walter P. Dawson *

I. Introduction

This study represents a continuation of the research which I began in March of 2005 on bilingual literacy education in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia. I approached the previous study with the implicit purpose of assessing the need for Oral Khmer in the bilingual literacy curriculum of the nonformal education project managed by International Cooperation Cambodia with a focus on the six Tampuan villages in the project. I chose these villages because the Tampuan ethnic group lives in closest proximity to the provincial capital of Ban Leung and therefore has the most need for the Khmer language as a result of the frequent interaction they have with Khmers in comparison to the Krung, Brao, and Kavet ethnic groups, which while represented in the project, have relatively less contact. Nevertheless, as Khmer in-migration continues as outlined by (source here) the problems resulting from that demographic change such as land security and income generation may have an increasingly greater effect on all ethnolinguistic minorities in Ratanakiri Province in the very near future.

My previous study consisted of observations of literacy classes in the six villages combined with focus group interviews with students and teachers. Several of the findings from that study motivated me in my formulation of the research design for this research project. In every village surveyed the student

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referred to their need to speak Khmer in the provincial market in Ban Leung. A further finding which illuminated the power relations between Khmers and the ethnolinguistic minorities was the fact that in four of the six villages respondents stated that they wanted to learn to speak Khmer to avoid being cheated in the market (Dawson, 2006). In my previous study I was restricted to second-hand accounts of students' experiences in the market and prompted reflection on their needs for communication in the market. Therefore, in this study my intention was to observe and record the language produced, communication difficulties experienced, and resulting social action inherent in the market activities of Tampuan and Krung ethnolinguistic minorities as the two groups most represented in the market. As always sincere thanks must go to the staff of International Cooperation Cambodia and the COE Research Office at International Christian University for providing the funding and support for my field research without which this study would not have been possible. My hope is that this research will help in the effort to understand the power relationships between different ethnic groups in Cambodia and inform the planning and implementation of efforts for bilingual education such as the Highland Children's Education Project administered by CARE Cambodia and supported by UNICEF.

1. General Background of Education for Indigenous Highlanders in Ratanakiri Province

Ratanakiri Province is in the northeastern corner of the nation of Cambodia bordering Laos to the north and Vietnam to the east. As stated earlier it is unusual in its ethnic diversity in comparison to other provinces in Cambodia. In some ways the location of Ratanakiri worked in its favor through the years of war and internal turmoil. In an International Cooperation Cambodia (ICC) proposal report written in 2003 the staff writes that, "historically, geographic isolation and poor infrastructure have permitted minority people to maintain their dependence on the land without fear for the future. Yet this is no longer the case" (ICC, 2003, p. 4). The authors explain that now they are threatened by indiscriminate logging, mining, hunting, and plantation farming. This isolation has, of course,

had negative effects as well in that education has not reached the people.

Economic and budgetary factors have hampered the spread of education in Ratanakiri which is one of the poorest provinces in Cambodia. Bray (1999) shows in his study of private education costs that Ratanakiri has by far the lowest average private contribution for education at an average of 300 riels in comparison to the overall sample of nationwide schools for which the average contribution is 2,500 riels (p. 49). Nevertheless, this is easily explained as Bray states, “Ratanakiri...had much lower levels of household and community financing than other parts of the country investigated in this study. In part, this reflected the lack of traditions of community financing associated with pagodas. It also reflected general poverty” (Bray, 1999, p. 73).

As my study focuses on linguistic issues with reference to educational needs of indigenous highlanders, I should provide some statistics to show the current state of education in Cambodia as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1 Ethnic Affiliation and Literacy Rates

Ethnic Affiliation	Rates (%)					
	Male			Female		
	Illiterate	Semi-literate	Literate	Illiterate	Semi-literate	Literate
Khmer	23.2	28.0	48.8	44.1	26.0	29.0
Highland Minorities	76.3	18.4	5.3	85.7	14.3	0.0
Others	53.8	23.1	23.1	65.0	19.4	15.0

Note: From Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport study (Nyirady, 2002: 6).

The drastic gap in literacy between the dominant Khmer ethnic group which makes up 90% of the Cambodian population and the indigenous highlanders who comprise about 4% of the population is striking. Particularly striking is the 0.0% literacy rate for female indigenous highlanders.

2. Focus of this study: The Provincial Market in Ban Leung as Social Interaction Site

The UNTAC Population Census of 1992 listed the population of Ratanakiri at 66,764, whereas the General Population Census of Cambodia in 1998 gives the population as 94,243 indicating a 41% increase in population in just six years. This is compared to an overall 29% increase in the population of the country of Cambodia during the same time period. The district of Ban Leung, where the central provincial market of Ratanakiri is located, increased by 82% during this time (McAndrew, 2000, p. 7). From these statistics we can see clearly that Ratanakiri has experienced a large influx of Khmer settlers who come in search of economic opportunity in this province most distant from Phnom Penh. This influx is reflected by the growth of the Ban Leung Market.

Two studies have been conducted on the Ban Leung which reveal important facts about ownership and participation in the market. The overall growth of the market was reflected by the fact that the number of stores rose from 302 stores to 535 stores between 1996 and 2000. In the first study carried out in 1996, fully 91% of the market stalls were owned by Khmers or Khmer Chinese. Laotians owned 6% of the stalls followed by Vietnamese owners at 3% and less than 1% owned by Cham. The data from the 2001 study (McAndrew, 2000) revealed little change with only one market stall owner, who was Krung, coming from the indigenous highlander population. It can safely be said that the Ban Leung market is dominated by Khmer merchants who made up 86% of the owners in 2000. Of note, there was an increase of couples who owned stalls who were of “mixed origin” and that population of owners stood at 3.6% while there were more Vietnamese owners who immigrated to the province from neighboring Vietnam.

According to a Tampuan staff member in ICC, the ethnolinguistic minorities have a reserved space in the Ban Leung market where they can conduct their activities. Unlike the merchants who have stalls reserved with at least a roof structure over it, the space reserved for the ethnolinguistic minorities is not marked in any noticeable way. In March of 2005 the space was located to the east of the main entrance between two rows of stalls, whereas in March of 2006 it

had moved to an area just off the road which leads up to the market entrance to the west. I was unable to discern how or why the space reserved was transferred from one side of the market to the other, but during the nine days that I conducted observations in the market, the site remained the same.

This study focused on the production of the Khmer language in the provincial market by ethnolinguistic minorities. In analyzing this production, I hope to learn more of the power relations between Khmers and minorities and the ways in which those relations are reflected and/or created by the use of language for economic purposes in the buying and selling of goods in the Ban Leung provincial market.

II. Research Methods

All documents related to nonformal literacy education projects conducted by ICC over the past decade were analyzed as well as all research studies which have been conducted in the area on the socioeconomic situation of the indigenous highlanders of Ratanakiri Province. Furthermore, I sought out relevant literature from multinational organizations, particularly UNESCO, on literacy education for linguistic minorities. While I was in Ratanakiri I had the good fortune to be able to speak with a number of SIL linguists who have been instrumental in the creation of literacy projects as well as the NGO staff members, most of whom come from the indigenous groups, who have supported the creation and development of education programs and curricula.

During the nine days I conducted my field research in the Ban Leung market I was assisted by two Tampuan research assistants who observed informants. The research assistants were instructed to acquire the assent of Tampuans in the market for the first five days and then Krungs for the subsequent four days, after which the research assistants shadowed the subjects while they were both selling and buying in the market. During this time the research assistants used tape recorders to record the market conversations which subjects had while buying and selling. The sampling goal was to shadow two subjects each day for a total of 18 subjects over the nine days and this goal

was achieved.

The research assistants were provided with a list of questions to serve as an interview protocol for individual interviews with the subjects. They were instructed to make every effort to interview subjects without interfering with the economic activities of the subjects as that was their purpose in traveling the long distances to the market and those activities had very real repercussions for the livelihood of themselves and their families. The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed, and translated into English.

A Tampuan translator who was quadrilingual in Tampuan, Krung, Khmer, and English transcribed and translated the full 230 conversations recorded during the nine days of data collection. As he was not physically present at the time of recording he was assisted by the two research assistants with contextual information on the actors and situations crucial to understanding the conversations as language produced in situ. Subsequently, I analyzed these conversations using the techniques of conversation analysis as a subfield of discourse analysis in the field of linguistics. In contrast to traditional studies of conversation analysis I did not focus on such features as turn-taking or patterns in conversation exchange although I will discuss those features briefly in the findings. After numerous readings of the conversations I became interested in the occurrence of communication breakdowns in negotiations which could potentially lead to the classification of this study as an examination of cross-cultural pragmatic failure if cultural difference is the factor which explains the communication breakdowns.

My efforts to analyze the conversation data from fieldwork necessitated that I contact linguists and curriculum development experts familiar with the languages and cultures of the different ethnic groups in Ratanakiri Province. In doing so my contacts with SIL linguists working in collaboration with the ICC non-formal education projects proved invaluable. Andrew Carson and Sally Keller, SIL linguistic experts on the Tampuan and Krung languages, and Bech Yech, a Tampuan curriculum development consultant working for ICC, listened to and provided feedback on selected recordings of conversations from the data

collected.

III. Findings

In view of these conversations as business negotiations having direct import for the subjects' livelihood, it might have been interesting to determine whether subjects were able to negotiate in Khmer for buying and selling to their own benefit or whether they were hampered in those efforts by their Khmer speaking and comprehension abilities. However, this would have necessitated that I or my research assistant interview the subjects about each and every business transaction which would have been infeasible considering the nature of uninterrupted commerce in the provincial market. Therefore, my analysis focused on instances of communication breakdown which resulted in no business transaction being conducted.

After thoroughly examining the conversation texts, it appeared that there was a frequent pattern which resulted in communication breakdown resulting in no business transaction. In those instances the Khmer buyer or seller used an exclamation? In the Khmer language followed by a complaint, usually regarding a price perceived to be too high. The use of such an exclamation occurred in fully 33 of the total of 230 conversations, 115 in which Khmers were buying from Tampuan or Krung sellers. These exclamations were often yelled. Below I have presented several of these conversation samples.

Conversation Sample 1.

Scene 3 <KrM with KF>

(K) How much is this eggplant?

(Kr) One block is a hundred.

(K) Yoo... (buyer yelled) three for one hundred?

(Kr) No, three for two hundred please.

(K) It is not so good. One hundred for three bundles, won't you sell it? I'll get them all.

(Kr) No

Conversation Sample 2.

Scene 9 <TM with KF>

(K) How much water convolvulus?

(T) One bundle is five hundred.

(K) Yii... too much expensive! One is three hundred okay?

(T) No

I have presented Conversation Samples 1 and 2 above as they were examples of communication breakdowns which were frequently found. When the Khmer buyers yelled and complained about the price, the Krung and Tampuan sellers often replied with a flat refusal. The sellers replied with a curt “No” and the conversations ended with that turn. In addition to this pattern, a similar pattern involved the Khmer buyer insulting the minority seller after the business transaction aspect of the conversation had ended. Some examples of public insults or ridicule perpetrated by the Khmer buyers can be seen in the following conversations.

Conversation Sample 3.

Scene 8 <TF with KF>

(K) How do you sell water convolvulus?

(T) One bundle is two hundred?

(K) Eleven bundles are one thousand okay?

(T) No

(K) (another Khmer lady yell) Woo... there lot of water convolvulus other places, why should we buy from her?

Conversation Sample 4.

Scene 7 <TF with KF>

(K) How much the water convolvulus?

(T) One bundle is two hundred.

(K) Oo... (buyer yell) it is too much expensive. Two bundles are one hundred okay?

(T) No

(K) Ess... (scream) what is expensive! Twelve bundles are one thousand okay?

(T) No, one bundle one hundred.

(K) Please keep eat yourself.

Some insults also targeted indigenous highlanders' inability to speak Khmer or carry out calculations necessary for business transactions.

Conversation Sample 5.

Scene 7 <TF with KF>

(K) How much the banana?

(T) One set is one thousand.

(K) Two sets are one thousand and five hundred okay?

(T) Two sets two thousand (she speak Tampuan)

(K) What is she say? She doesn't speak Khmer? Oh.. it's too difficult to understand.

(K) One set is six hundred okay? How is the lowest price? Too much expensive there is no one will buy it.

(T) Two sets one thousand and five hundred.

(K) Who can eat this banana, one thousand and five hundred (buyer said).

In Conversation Sample 5 there is an instance of code-switching where the Tampuan female responds in the Tampuan language and the Khmer female ridicules her before refusing to buy anything from her.

Conversation Sample 6.

Scene 5 <TF with KF>

(K) How much do you sell curry nuts?

(T) One can five hundred.

(K) Two cans are eight hundred okay?

(T) Emm...

(K) Would you okay?

(T) No

(K) Give me for twenty cans. Here your money.

(T) You give me only ten thousand, add ten thousand more.

(K) Ah.. one can five hundred and twenty cans you would me give twenty

thousand? Oh my gods. (buyer yell)

(someone sit next to her explained her to understand)

(K) Here the money. Oh.... One can five hundred and twenty cans ask me

twenty thousand? (she still look down at her)

In Conversation Sample 6 the buyer yells because the Tampuan seller gives her the wrong amount of change. She continues to stare down at the seller after the transaction is complete.

Conversation Sample 7.

Scene 5 <TF with KF>

(K) How much the lemongrass?

(T) A bundle for a hundred.

(K) Here money. Exchange me hundred please.

(T) What?

(K) Yii... (buyer yell) I take only nine bundles. Exchange me a hundred please.

In Conversation Sample 7 the Tampuan seller does not understand what the buyer says and asks, "What?" which infuriates the buyer who yells the "Yii" exclamation at her. In Conversations 3 through 7 it is clear that the Khmers

insult the minority sellers and while this was the trend in the majority of the cases of communication breakdown, there were some instances where the minority sellers countered the complaints or insults and displayed anger themselves.

Conversation Sample 8.

Scene 1 <KrM with KF>
(K) How much this banana?
(Kr) Ah...
(K) This banana how much would sell it?
(Kr) The good one is one thousand and five hundred. And that this is five hundred for
Each set.
(K) Woo... the banana like this still sell much expensive! <scream a buyer> One set is five
hundred okay?
(Kr) Yii... how good the Khmer banana? Do they shake in gold water?
<seller yell in angry>
(K) No, because your banana is not fresh. And we can't use to do a sacrifice.
(Kr) But we can eat it.
(K) Yes it is, but sometime we need to use for sacrifice.

In this conversation the Khmer buyer complains about the quality of the banana which she wants to offer for a sacrifice. The Krung seller does not passively respond to the complaint but argues that the banana is suitable for consumption. The conversation below represents a case where code-switching is used by the seller to express annoyance in her native language, after which the transaction proceeds until the buyer purchases the papaya.

Conversation Sample 9.

Scene 3 <TF with KF>
(K) How much do you sell this papaya>
(T) One is five hundred.
(K) Ess... what a expensive! (she scream).
(T) Yii... expensive what? (she scream back at the buyer in Tampuan)
(K) Three hundred okay? I will get two sets. Okay for three hundred?
(T) No
(K) Two sets are seven hundred okay?
(T) No, eight hundred please.
(K) 700 please?
(T) Are you not buy it?
(K) Buy what? you are not low the price.
(T) Okay please, two sets are seven hundred.
(K) Here your money. Is it right?
(T) Yes

In most cases where the Khmers yelled at the indigenous highlanders there was a communication breakdown and the transaction was terminated immediately. However, in a limited number of cases, the Khmer buyer made an effort to repair the communication after making a complaint. Two examples of the pattern are found in Conversation Samples 10 and 11.

Conversation Sample 10.

Scene 4 <KrF with KF>
(K) How much the jackfruit?
(Kr) One is three thousand.
(K) woo... (yell the buyer) too much expensive! Two thousand okay?
(Kr) Two thousand and five hundred.
(K) No, if two thousand I'll get it.
(Kr) Emm...
(K) Do you?
(Kr) Yes please.

Conversation Sample 11.

Scene 3 <TF with KF>

(K) How much banana one set?

(T) One set is one thousand.

(K) Oo... too much expensive. One set for five hundred okay?

(T) Emm...

(K) Okay per set for five hundred?

(T) No, eight hundred please.

(K) Two sets are one thousand and five hundred? Okay grandma?

(T) Yes please.

The use of these yelled exclamations presented a problem for data analysis crucial to the interpretation of the data. The crux of the problem was in ascertaining whether the linguistic behavior is accepted in the three different culture of participants which might indicate that communication breakdowns resulted from cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Different aspects of utterances such as intonation or volume could render very different communication effects. It was crucial to ascertain whether the Khmer buyers and sellers were acting in an acceptable way for Khmer commercial culture or were exhibiting discriminative behavior towards the ethnolinguistic minorities indicative of the power-status relationships in Cambodian society between the different ethnic groups.

IV. Conclusions

My interest in the conversations was focused on the occurrence of numerous instances where Khmer buyers and sellers yelled exclamations consisting of the following: “cho”, “yoo”, “woo”, “yii”, “iss”, and “ess”. It seemed that the use of these yelled exclamations led to a breakdown in communication. Although complaining about prices is a common feature of Cambodian commercial culture, the aspect of yelling such exclamations at high volume was not an acceptable practice. Linguists familiar with Khmer culture informed me

that such yelling would be offensive to any Khmer participant in a business transaction as well as a person of Tampuan or Krung ethnicity. Therefore, one can conclude that the Khmer participants were exhibiting discriminative and insulting behavior towards the indigenous highlanders with whom they were conducting transactions. Thus, the communication breakdowns were not an example of cross-cultural pragmatic failure which was one potential explanation.

My linguist and curriculum designer informants made it clear to me that the behavior of the Khmer buyers in instances where they yelled complaints was not acceptable. This behavior indicated that they were looking down at the indigenous highlanders which was literally evidenced by the exchange in Conversation Sample 6. One of the potential dangers of conducting linguistic research is in concluding that a “failure” in communication can be attributed to the non-native speaker’s inadequacy in the target language. It is in such cases that a thorough knowledge of the culture and context of communicative interaction in situ is vital to understanding the dynamics of the human relations revealed therein. In summary, indigenous highlanders who make the arduous task of traveling to the provincial market in Ban Leung face a two-fold obstacle to participation in economic life. First, they are discriminated against because of their limited ability to speak the Khmer language. Secondly, they are treated as inferiors by Khmers who have migrated to Ratanakiri in pursuit of economic opportunity. Although the indigenous highlanders comprise the majority of the population in Ratanakiri Province, the long-term neglect of educational provision for the Tampuan, Krung, and other indigenous peoples ensures that they will be denied the economic and social power to take advantage of the opportunities which arise as the province develops and is exploited by foreign commercial interests.

Notes

- (1) Key to the conversation transcriptions: K=Khmer, T=Tampuan, Kr=Krung, M=Male, F=Female.

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〈 Summary 〉

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This study represents a continuation of research conducted in March of 2005 on nonformal bilingual literacy education in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia. The purpose of the previous study was to assess the need for Oral Khmer in the bilingual literacy curriculum of the nonformal education project managed by the NGO International Cooperation Cambodia with a focus on the six Tampuan villages in the project. The Tampuan ethnic group was chosen because they live in closest proximity to the provincial capital of Ban Leung and therefore have the most need for the Khmer language. Thus Tampuan communities are currently experiencing the effects of Khmer in-migration which may have greater relevance for other highlander groups in the near future. For the present study, during which data collection was carried out in February and March of 2006, subjects were chosen from both the Tampuan and Krung ethnic groups as those groups were represented with most frequency in the Ban Leung marketplace participating in economic activities with Khmers. In short, the purpose of this study was to observe and record the language produced, communication difficulties experienced, and resulting social action inherent in the market activities of Tampuan and Krung ethnolinguistic minorities in their interaction with Khmers in the Ban Leung provincial market. To that end, analysis of literature related to literacy education and the economic livelihood of the Tampuan and Krung people in Ratanakiri was followed by interviews with policy experts and linguists familiar with the education situation, cultures, and languages of the indigenous highlanders. The primary component of the research was the collection of market conversations between Tampuan and

Krung minority peoples and Khmers buying and selling in the Ban Leung provincial market. After thorough conversation analysis of these texts a pattern involving the use of yelled exclamations and communication breakdown was detected. The exclamations were often followed by insults and public ridicule of ethnolinguistic minorities targeting their limited Khmer-speaking ability or numeracy proficiency. The challenge for data interpretation came in deciding whether these communication breakdowns exemplified cases of cross-cultural pragmatic failure or cases of discrimination against linguistic minorities resulting from power-status relations in Cambodia society. Based on analyses of Khmer and highlander culture and communication, it was determined that the yelling of complaints was not an acceptable practice in either Khmer or highlander commercial culture and indicated that the communication breakdowns resulted from verbal discrimination perpetrated by Khmers against the highlander minorities. It should be noted that there were cases where highlanders exhibited agency in arguing with Khmers or complaining about Khmer attitudes within some sampled conversations; however, these cases were limited. The results of this data will be used to inform efforts by UNICEF, CARE, and other organizations to develop curricula and train education officials and teachers to expand the provision of bilingual education throughout Cambodia.