

## **PRONOUNS AND TERMS OF ADDRESS AND THE KHMER ROUGE**

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Ranjit Guha, drawing on Bordieu, writes that one of the characteristics of insurgency has always been a challenge to “official language,” by which he means, not only the ways ruling elites can support themselves by discourse, but also the complex ways a language has of encoding, grammatically and semantically, the etiquettes of social relations as they frame and reinforce power.

Perhaps most of the revolutions of modern history have involved, at least temporarily, changes in the use of pronouns and terms of address in the direction of greater equality. The period of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is no exception, and many Cambodians, recollecting this violent period, will make very broad generalizations to the effect that during the period all other forms of address were eliminated: only *mit*, a term for “comrade” or “friend” could be used.

While my own research, which I will outline here, suggests that more subtle changes in usage were taking place, it is very much true that the Khmer Rouge did very consciously try to change what to many would seem to most basic of reflective linguistic practices. One may ask, indeed, whether the changes they promoted challenged grammar itself.

Here I will talk in a very simplified way about the system of pronouns and terms of address before going on to talk about what actually changed during the Pol Pot period and what these changes implied.

Social markings are most clearly indicated in the terminology that indicates second person and first person singular. To simplify matters, I will focus here primarily on second-person terms – although one should keep in mind that first-person terms also had hierarchical overtones.

First of all, whereas in European languages, person is indicated by pronouns and inflexion of verbs, in Khmer, as in the languages adjacent to it in Southeast Asia, it can be indicated by a pronoun, a kinship term, a title, a name, or by the

absence of any term. Thus, for instance, to say, “Are you hungry?” (Vd. tiene hambre? Tu tienes hambre?), we might find:

*aeng khlien te?* (where *aeng* is a pronoun)

*bang khlien te?* (Is older brother hungry? where *bang* is a kinship term)

*lok khlien te?* (Is señor hungry? where *lok* is a title)

*John khlien te?* (Is John hungry? where John is the name of the person addressed)

*khlien te?* (where no term is used)

Note that there is no declension of verbs in Khmer.

I will argue that the linguistic concept of markedness is relevant for talking about these different categories of terms. A usage is less “marked” when it is more common, more reflexive, the “default” case. A term is more marked when it suggests a departure from the norm or the default case.

Given the orientation of European languages we would assume that the least marked category would be pronouns. However, I would argue that in Khmer the least marked category is kinship terms. It is kinship terms which are most commonly used and in some sense are the starting point from which other kinds of usage depart. Other terms of address, whether in the use of titles, which define honorific categories, or pronouns, which mark a rude intimacy, both give a special coloring to an interaction which departs from the norm and marks the relationship as “special.”

One could say that Khmer kinship terms are not kinship terms at all since they are so often used with people who are not kin. Nevertheless, the terms maintain an overtone of metaphorical kinship. That is to say your *bang bangkaet* (an older brother in the same nuclear family) is in some sense more truly a *bang* than your *bang ci doun* (an older first cousin), who is more truly a *bang* than a member of the community who is merely of the same age category – although all would be addressed as *bang*. Kinship terms are all classificatory – extending outwards toward people in the same age groups of more immediate kin -- except for the terms for mother and father or child.

One of the most striking things about Khmer kinship terms, for the purpose of our analysis, is that they invariably indicate relative age. That is to say, someone is to us either in the category of an older or a younger sibling, an aunt, uncle, niece or nephew, a grandfather, grandmother, or grandchild – but there is no way, such as in the word “hermano”, to ignore difference of age and indicate a kind of solidarity in equality. This has far-reaching social implications.

A classic article about second-person pronouns in European languages, “The Pronouns of Solidarity and Power,” by Brown and Gilman, discussed the implications of the distinction between formal and informal second-person pronouns – that is, for example, between the usage of *Usted* and *tu* in Spanish. They explored the profound difference in the implications of these words when they are used reciprocally – that is, when two persons talking to each other both use *tu* or both use *Usted* – and when they are used non-reciprocally – when one person uses *tu* and the other person responds with *Usted*.

Now the point I would make about the use of kinship terms as terms of address in Khmer is that, technically, there is no possibility for reciprocal use. That is to say, if someone is *bang* to me – older sibling – then I am *pqoun* -- younger sibling – to him. It is logically impossible for us to both address each other as *bang*. This means that when one is using kin terms as terms of address, there is always an implicit hierarchy. At the same time one should emphasize that even when kind terms point “down,” as when someone is addressed as “younger sibling,” there is a suggestion of solidarity and intimacy – and the term is far from insulting.

Systems of titles and pronouns function more along the classical pattern of *Usted* and *tu* as described by Brown and Gilman, in that the implications of using them reciprocally or non-reciprocally are very different. Titles, it should be pointed out, are different from pronouns in that they can occur either in front of a name or in isolation, and in that they can be used in the third person. One should keep in mind that there are a whole range of titles that function grammatically in the same way, including those for royalty, for monks, for high-ranking officials, and for teachers. Among the most common titles, which I will use as my examples here,

are *lok* and *neak-srey*, which, to simplify a bit, can be taken to mean *señor* and *señora*, although they are not as universal as the Spanish terms and have implications of social status. Needless to say, all these titles “point up.”

The numbers of true pronouns in Khmer is quite small, and it seems strange to say that the only word which can be called a second-person pronoun, *aeng*, is marked by a tone of crude familiarity, which suggests “looking down.” *Aeng* co-occurs with a first-person singular pronoun, *añ*, which conveys the same tone. *Añ* is used in alternation with another word for “I,” *khñom*, which historically meant “your slave,” but now seems to have no connotation of hierarchical relationship, and is much more common than *añ* – although *añ* is much more clearly a true pronoun.

It is with *aeng* and *añ* that we most clearly see the difference between reciprocal and non-reciprocal usage. *Aeng/añ* used non-reciprocally point down, and might be used with children or with people categorized as social inferiors. While it is sometimes used within the family children or wives addressed as such would be more likely to resent the usage than if the speaker were using a kinship term. Unlike kinship terms addressed at someone younger, there is no suggestion of an emotional link; as used non-reciprocally, the terms express social distance, and the power of the the speaker to act with indifference toward the person addressed.

Used reciprocally, the terms have a very different character, an undignified kind of solidarity, perhaps equivalent to a relationship which would permit mutual use of profanity in European cultures.

Foreigners taught about proper cultural behavior in Cambodia or Thailand are often told that there is a strict taboo against touching the head of another person. What they are not often told is that there are exceptions to this rule, as there are to most rules, and that it is by seeing the exceptions that we really begin to understand the dynamic of the original prohibition. When Cambodians were asked to explain with whom ther would be reciprocal exchange of *añ* and *aeng*, they commonly told me that it was used among persons who could jokingly hit each other on the head. That is to say, there were clearly defined social situations

when someone *did* hit another person on the head, and this correlated with the social situation in which you would use *añ* and *aeng*. This might be someone you had studied with as a child, or a drinking buddy, gang members who had committed the same crime together. The point I would make here is that the reciprocal use of *añ/aeng* does represent a kind of solidarity among equals, but this kind of solidarity is by definition unrespectable. It is striking how difficult it is in Khmer, by means of pronouns, to express a simple dignified equality. The basic dignity of human relations is better expressed in the “unequal” relations of kin terms.

[Show chart] Here is a chart which I have sometimes used to represent the total system. Charts of this kind are always overly schematic in the expression of something complexly involved in the dynamic of social relationships. It leaves out many things. However, it does at least permit a rough sense of the total pattern we are looking at, as divided into three grammatical realms. First, the inner circle, that of the pronouns of *añ* and *aeng*, which in a sense represents the greatest degree of familiarity. Next, we find the doughnut, that of metaphorical kinship. Finally, outside of the doughnut, we find the higher realm of relationships to people who require titles.

As we have said, true reciprocity is impossible within the doughnut, since two people speaking to each other must logically use a term which recognizes relative age difference with the other person. However, the fact that both speakers choose to use kinship terms *does* represent a kind of solidarity, in that they have chosen *not* to use titles or pronouns; and, in fact, mutual use of kin terms does mildly suggest some kind of emotional solidarity.

Neither titles nor pronouns imply clearly what the person addressed will respond with. That is, someone addressed with a title may respond to us using a pronoun or a kinship term or another title; the same can be said of someone addressed with a pronoun. However, non-reciprocal usage marks a clear social distance. Reciprocal usage of *añ* and *aeng*, as we have said, represents a clear familiarity and a kind of solidarity, although one with less dignity than that of kinship terms.

The 1975-79 Pol Pot period in Cambodia is generally recognized as one of the most cataclysmic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one in which millions were dislocated and millions died. Khmer Rouge language policies were a relatively minor feature of a radical process of communalization that took place throughout the country, although with far-reaching implications. As far as I have been able to determine, these policies were never explicitly articulated in rules or laws; rather they had to do with revolutionary style, much like the wearing of black clothes or cutting hair short or singing revolutionary songs instead of those of the pre-revolutionary period. These practices grew out of the culture of the Khmer Rouge military movement and became highly symbolic as the general population was forced, at risk of death, to give evidence of revolutionary commitment.

As I stated at the beginning of the paper, many who survived the Pol Pot period will affirm, in very generalized terms, that all pronouns and terms of address were replaced by the word *mit*, which means “friend” or “comrade;” this is their way of recalling the ubiquity of that term and the artificiality of their effort to use it. While the widespread use of *mit* was indeed striking, my own research indicates that it was not precisely the only term used.

What did happen? First of all, in Khmer Rouge usage, there was a strong tendency for words outside the doughnut and inside the doughnut to no longer be used. In the case of titles, this was partly just a question of social categories being eliminated which corresponded to these terms. There were no longer terms for monks because there were no longer monks, and the royalty no longer existed as such. Simpler titles, like *lok* or *neak-srey* had perhaps primarily been used for government officials and their families. Government officials of the new regime were if anything more powerful than those before the revolution, having the power of life or death of those under them, but they were represented as being radically different from what came before, comrades and family to each other and, therefore, in the forced role of comrades and family to those under them.

The one word which now functioned grammatically as a title was *mit*, which like a title could be used either preceding a name or independently of it, and in

either second or third person. *Mit*, with its radical assertion of equality, came to replace all the titles that “pointed up.”

Cambodians interviewed for this research project also insisted that the Khmer Rouge did not allow word like *añ* or *aeng*. This is understandable in the case of non-reciprocal usage. It is perhaps less understandable for reciprocal usage, since it is a usage in noway associated with class pretension, and is, in fact, one of the few mechanisms in the Khmer usage of pronouns and terms of address which provide a way of indicating equality. Here the taboo seemed to have to do with the fact that these are rough, indignified terms, and the revolution, which had its puritanical streak, aimed to eliminate all impoliteness.

Despite the hierarchical implications of kin terms, there was no general prohibition on them – although some informants suggested that there might have been a tendency, when addressed a powerful younger person, to substitute the word *mit* for the word *pqoun*, indicating a younger sibling. *Mit* was sometimes combined with kinship terms, such as in the phrase *mit bang*, or “comrade older sibling.”

In general we can say that during the Pol Pot period the elements inside and outside the doughnut were suppressed, and the doughnut expanded to become a totality – with the additional alternative of using *mit* to emphasize revolutionary solidarity.

It is hard to draw overall conclusions from this. One conclusion might be that, in the long run, the culture of the Khmer Rouge was less one of general horizontal solidarity that it was of intense communal association based on metaphors of extended kinship. Many Khmer Rouge leaders, regardless of age, were known as *ta*, or “grandfather,” suggesting a sort of folksy authority. Similarly, Pol Pot, as the highest party official, was sometimes known as *bang* No. 1 (older sibling No. 1), with the No. 2 and No. 3 figures known as *bang* no. 2 and *bang* No. 3.

In a way the use of kinship terms and avoidance of titles suggests the common usage of a village, where, other than monks, most of those addressed with titles would have come from outside.

The suggestion of metaphorical kinship went much beyond this, for example, in the case of the widely reported practice of regarding the revolutionary organization as the parent of all children – to the extent that actual children were to address their actual parents with terms for uncle and aunt instead of father and mother.

When the Pol Pot period fell in 1979, it was replaced by another socialist regime, supported by the Vietnamese government. This regime was much less rigid in ideology and style, and few revolutionary practices were universally enforced. The titles *lok* and *neak srey* were still avoided in public discourse – with another word for comrade, *samamit*, encouraged instead. However, all these distinctions seemed to be breaking down by the time I first visited the country in 1989.

Certainly, by the present time, nothing that was prohibited by the Khmer Rouge is still prohibited, and one could argue that no linguistic innovation in pronouns and terms of address has endured. One could even say that the language has become *more* hierarchical, since the term *aekodom*, meaning “your excellency,” has come to have wider usage than before the word, and is now officially permitted with officials of the rank of deputy secretary of state and higher in the government. Its usage is much satirized, and opposition political parties say that it is most popular among officials with socialist backgrounds.