

PAIRED ADJECTIVES IN CAMBODIAN*

by

Richard B. Noss

Adjectives of opposite meaning in Cambodian, as in English and many other languages, often share a single abstract noun which is used to measure, without prejudice, the quality involved. In such languages, adjectives like "large" and "small" are clearly paired, as can be shown by a number of simple linguistic tests ("A is larger than B" always means "B is smaller than A" etc.). While their meanings are relative, they are obviously at different ends of the same scale. When one measures impartially, however, one measures the "size" of an object rather than its "largeness" or "smallness."

Pairs of adjectives like "large" and "small" are here called *paired-opposite adjectives*, and nouns like "size" are called *neutral-abstract nouns*. Following are some typical uses in English:

<i>light (ness)</i>	<i>heavy (ness)</i>	<i>weight</i>
<i>short (ness)</i>	<i>long (- - -)</i>	<i>length</i>

These two things are equally light, short.

These two things are equally heavy, long.

These two things are of equal weight, length.

I was surprised at its lightness, heaviness, weight.

I was surprised at its shortness, -----length-----

(Note ambiguity of "length")

Use of paired-opposite adjectives and neutral-abstract nouns in Cambodian:

thmey "new (of things)" cah "old" cōmnaḥ "age"

rəbəḥ pii nih thmey cōmnaḥ khnia.

These two things are equally new.

rəbəḥ pii nih cah cōmnaḥ khnia.

These two things are equally old.

rəbəḥ pii nih cōmnaḥ khnia.

These two things are of equal age.

* In this article, the term "Cambodian" means Modern Standard Khmer as spoken and written in the Kingdom of Cambodia itself. This is the text of a talk delivered at the Siam Society on 4 September, 1969.

In many languages which have words of these categories, if a neutral-abstract noun is derived from either of a pair of opposite adjectives, it is invariably derived from the positive or "larger" member of the pair. This is true in both English and Cambodian, where, for example, things can be "hot" or "cold", but one objectively measures "heat," not "cold." Such a common cultural trait is so strong, in fact, that it may even penetrate scientific thinking: the intensity of light, for example, could as easily be measured from top to bottom (i.e. in degrees of darkness), but is in practice measured from bottom to top (in degrees of light).

Following are some English examples of neutral-abstract nouns based on the "larger" of two paired-opposite adjectives:

<i>"Small"</i>	<i>"Large"</i>	<i>Abstract</i>	<i>"Small"</i>	<i>"Large"</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>height</i>	<i>soft</i>	<i>hard</i>	<i>hardness</i>
<i>shallow</i>	<i>deep</i>	<i>depth</i>	<i>dull</i>	<i>sharp</i>	<i>sharpness</i>
<i>narrow</i>	<i>broad</i>	<i>breadth</i>	<i>cold</i>	<i>hot</i>	<i>heat</i>
<i>narrow</i>	<i>wide</i>	<i>width</i>	<i>cool</i>	<i>warm</i>	<i>warmth</i>
<i>short</i>	<i>long</i>	<i>length</i>	<i>dark</i>	<i>light</i>	<i>light</i>
<i>thin</i>	<i>thick</i>	<i>thickness</i>	<i>weak</i>	<i>strong</i>	<i>strength</i>

Sometimes a new "large" adjective is even formed from an originally unrelated abstract noun:

<i>poor</i>	<i>rich</i>	<i>wealth</i>	— <i>wealthy</i>
<i>ill</i>	<i>well</i>	<i>health</i>	— <i>healthy</i>
<i>soft</i>	<i>loud</i>	<i>noise</i>	— <i>noisy</i>
<i>lazy</i>	<i>hard-working</i>	<i>industry</i>	— <i>industrious</i>

Cambodian is perhaps unique in having a more or less regular infix for deriving a neutral-abstract noun from the "larger" of paired adjectives. (The infixing process itself is well known, having been described by Maspéro, Gorgoniev, Jacob, and others, and need not concern us here.) Examples:

<i>"Small"</i>	<i>"Large"</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
<i>tou small</i>	<i>thum large</i>	<i>tumhum size</i>
<i>cit near</i>	<i>chṇaay far</i>	<i>cəmṇaay distance</i>
<i>tiəp short</i>	<i>khpuəh high, tall</i>	<i>kəmpuəh height</i>
<i>sraal light</i>	<i>thṇuən heavy</i>	<i>tumṇuən weight</i>

thaok <i>cheap</i>	thlay <i>expensive</i>	dəmlay <i>price</i>
sdaəŋ <i>thin</i>	krah <i>thick</i>	kəmrəh <i>thickness</i>
yfiit <i>slow</i>	liən <i>fast</i>	ləbiən <i>speed</i>
təceəʔ <i>cold</i>	kdaw <i>hot</i>	kəmdaw <i>heat</i>
ŋəŋit <i>dark</i>	phlii <i>light, bright</i>	puanlii <i>light</i>
ksaoy <i>weak</i>	khləŋ <i>strong</i>	kəmləŋ <i>strength</i>
reəʔ <i>shallow</i>	crəw <i>deep</i>	cumrəw <i>depth</i>
ləŋuəŋ <i>stupid</i>	cəh <i>clever</i>	cəmməh <i>knowledge</i>

Two important things should be noted about these sets of paired-opposite adjectives and related neutral-abstract nouns in Cambodian, both showing that the sets are truly *linguistic*, and not merely semantic. First, the opposition of the adjectives can be demonstrated: if A is [thaok cəŋ] B, then B is [thlay cəŋ] A. (cəŋ = "more than"). Second, derivatives made by infix from the left-hand column ("small" adjectives) either do not exist, or are of unrelated meaning and function. Thus sets like the above, which are abundant in Cambodian, can rightly be called grammatical, although the infix itself is no longer productive.

In addition to the regularly-derived neutral-abstract nouns, Cambodian has two other devices which are relevant here. Nearly all adjectives can freely form an abstract noun by prefixing the morph /sac-kdey/, which works almost exactly like Thai /khwaam-/ or English /-ness/:

lʔəə "good" (dii) sac-kdey lʔəə "goodness" (khwaam-dii)

Such abstract nouns are *not* neutral, however, and are sometimes in contrast with existing infixed nouns, as we shall see later.

Secondly, Cambodian has a set of modifying words which commonly substitute for the expected neutral-abstract noun in expressions of equality only. This set of words has the same relationship to adjectives that classifiers have to nouns: a given adjective determines the selection of the specific member of the the set. Only the last member listed below, /pəhael/, can be used with any adjective indiscriminately.

Even the plus/minus type of model, however, does not really serve in the areas of morality and emotion, for it is possible for an individual or a situation to be both "bad" and "good" at the same time. This is, in fact, the essence of tragedy. The same is true of pairs like "sad/happy." For still other adjectives, there may be no obvious paired-opposite. For example, what is the opposite of "angry" in English?

It is tempting to use the linguistic evidence of paired-opposite adjectives and their related neutral-abstract nouns as a tool to gain insight into the cultural values of the society using the language. The use of paired-opposite adjectives for semantic mapping of other words has long been a technique of psycholinguistics, in fact. Thus, for English speakers, a "brave" person has a lot of "courage" and a "cowardly" person has very little; there is even a newer formation "courageous" which means "brave." In other words, "cowardice" and "bravery" are both on the "courage" scale, which resembles the "lightness/heaviness" scale illustrated above. But what about "meekness" and "boldness," "sadness" and "happiness"? The native speaker identifies them as opposites, but what is the name of the scale?

In Cambodian, the situation is a little different, because the neutral-abstract noun derived by infix gives us a tool. For example, consider this set:

(sac-kdey) aakrɔʔ "bad(ness)" (sac-kdey) lʔɔɔ "good(ness)" lumʔɔɔ
 "goodness" Does this mean that "goodness" can be a neutral quality as far as Cambodians are concerned? If so, this concept must predate Buddhism! Another set:

cia "well, in good health" chii "ill" cumɲii "illness"

There is no infix form */cumɲia/, which would be the abstract noun from /cia/. To be sure, there are other words for "health," but they come from Sanskrit sources. Since the infix is always applied to the "large" member of a pair of adjectives, this suggests that "ill" rather than "well" is the positive adjective!

Finally, here is the most puzzling set of all :

piñ	“full”	tətee	“empty”	
rəvuəl	“busy, occupied”		tumnee	“free, vacant”
		tee	“not”	

This incomplete set suggests that /tee/ originally meant both “empty” and “unproductive” (the opposite of “busy”), besides its modern negative meaning. Thai speakers will immediately think of the word /plàaw/, which has all of these meanings even today. If so, the /tee/ meaning /plàaw/, “empty” became reinforced with a prefix /tə-/ , and the derived abstract /tumnee/ became specialized as an adjective meaning “free, unoccupied.” But more importantly, since there are no neutral-abstract derivatives of either /piñ/ or /rəvuəl/, we would then have a case of “empty, unproductive” being a *positive* characteristic, and “full, busy” a *negative* one !

Though this line of reasoning may prove unproductive in the Western sense, I believe that further investigation of the relationship between paired-opposite adjectives and neutral-abstract nouns in Cambodian may yield some positive results. At the very least, it should keep one *busy*.