Khmer general interrogative sentence

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The Khmer general interrogative sentence is expressed with an interrogative particle /rī/, /tee/, or by a combination of these two words /rī tee/ at the end of the sentence with a word order of declarative sentence. Therefore, the following three kinds are possible.

[1] baaŋ tw saalaa rī
(...... you go school .....)

[2] baaŋ tw saalaa tee
(...... you go school .....)

[3] baaŋ tw saalaa rī tee
(...... you go school .....)

This paper analyzes how these interrogative particles /rī/ /tee/ /rī tee/ are used syntactically and semantically.

1. Precedence research

Huffman(1970, p.46/p.77) writes as follows:

“The full form of the final question particle tee? is rī-tee?, which occurs only in written Cambodian or formal speech...”

“tee is used in questions where a yes or no answer is anticipated...”

“The question particle rī is used instead of tee in any question involving one of a number of alternatives...”

Thomas(1976, p.99) writes as follows:

“So, to summarize, rī is used when one wants to question only one phrase in a clause, but tee is used when one wants to question a whole sentence or the main verb in a sentence (remembering that sentence and clause are endocentric constructions with a verb at the center). And the answer to rī or tee may be a yes or no or an alternative, though rī tends to expect a yes”. “The combination rī tee is used to question sentences, like tee, but specifically expects a yes or no answer”.

“Descriptive clauses with ci or kī ci can take only rī questions, never tee. (The use of kyy clauses is becoming less common.)”

2. Analysis of the three interrogative particles

2.1. /rī tee/

/rī tee/ is used in the interrogative sentence which asks affirmation or negation of the main verb phrase. The speaker does not predict an answer.

[4] ŋam kaafee rī tee?
(drink coffee)

This is a simple yes/no be as question about the main verb phrase /ŋam kaafee/ (drink coffee), meaning “Do you drink coffee or not?” According to the informant, the speaker does not predict an answer and thinks that there is a possibility that the hearer may not drink coffee.

2.2. /tee/

/tee/ is used to confirm the speaker’s confidence of the main verb phrase. It does not ask affirmation or negation like /rī tee/.

[5] m’aák niąŋ niw ptĕh rī tee phaarirī?
(mother you be home Phary)
(YKR:p.14)

This is also a simple yes/no question about the main verb phrase /niw ptĕh/ (be at home), meaning “Is your mother at home or not, Phary?” In this scene, the visitor does not predict an answer.

2.2. /tee/

/tee/ is used to confirm the speaker’s confidence of the main verb phrase. It does not ask affirmation or negation like /rī tee/.

[6] skaál baaŋ saan tee?
(know Mr. Saan)
(CTC:p.96)

In this scene, a wife who visits the lover of her husband Mr. Saan speaks to the woman who seems to be his lover. The...
wife is confident that the woman is her husband’s lover. This sentence [6] confirms the speaker (wife)’s confidence of the main verb phrase /skaal baan= saan/, meaning “You know Mr. Saan, don’t you?” The sentence [11] mentioned later gives and compares the example using /ri+i+/ which the lover is asking in the same scene.

In this scene, a foster father decides to make Sophaat, who has been interrupting his studies temporarily, go to school again. The foster father is confident that Sophaat is pleased to be able to return to school. It confirms the speakers confidence with the main verb phrase /su=kh cit/, meaning “I want you to go to school again from tomorrow. You are pleased, aren’t you?”.

Affirmation or negation “drink or not” was asked in sentence [4]. In this sentence [10] however, using /ri+/ other various alternatives about /nham kaafee/ (drink coffee) are presented. For other alternatives, there may be “drink tea” or “make coffee” etc... If /nham kaaffe/ is considered as a noun phrase “to drink coffee” and this sentence [10] is considered as a kind of noun sentence meaning “What you are going to do is to drink coffee?” it may be easy to understand and may be possible to cover the usage of /ri+/ generally.

This sentence [11] is asked in the same scene as sentence [6]. In contrast to sentence [6], in this case, since the speaker knows the listener, other alternatives about /talap skaal baan/ (know Mr. Saan) cannot exist. It can be analyzed that “blame” is expressed by using /ri+/ intentionally about what the speaker knows in fact, “Do you know him or not or what kind of acquaintance?”

In the collected data using /ri+, many examples are in the scene which cannot consider other alternatives. However, they are found to express “blame”, “irony” or “surprise” as in sentence [11].

3. Conclusion

The overall results of this research shows that the three interrogative particles have different roles respectively as follows.

- /ri+ te/ asks affirmation or negation about the main verb phrase.
- /te/ confirms the speaker’s confidence in the main verb phrase. Sometimes a /te/ sentence expresses “invitation”.
- /ri+/ is used to ask other alternatives about the noun phrase as in a noun sentence. When there are no possible alternatives, /ri+/ sentences express “blame”, “irony” or “surprise.”
NOTES

The romanization follows Sakamoto (1988). The sources of each examples are abbreviated at the end of the example. Examples with identified sources are the examples from the informant directly. I appreciate the cooperation of Mr. Ungsa Marom and Ms. Kep Sokuntheath as informants. The sources of the examples and their abbreviations are as follows.

SPT: Rim, Kin 1952 Sophaat.
CTC: Duong, Can 1996 A narrow path.
YKR: Pal, Vannarirak 2000 Night has passed.

REFERENCES

