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Introduction

The Khmer Language

Khmer is part of the Mon–Khmer language family, a very old family—probably the oldest—spoken in Mainland Southeast Asia. The Mon–Khmer family includes languages scattered geographically from southern China through Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, down into Malaysia and across to India.

You’ll quickly find that Khmer is very different from the languages you’re used to speaking in the US and in Europe. Verbs are not inflected for tense or person (e.g. the word meaning “to go” in Khmer has the same form whether we’re talking about the past, present or future (i.e. there’s no “went”), and whether or not we’re talking about you going, her going, they going, etc.). Most words in Khmer do not indicate plural or singular. Many Khmer words are much shorter than many English words, though the more you venture into the realm of “high,” educated vocabulary in Khmer, the longer the words are.

When you see, in the transcripts to video conversations in this book, a Khmer phrase and its English “gloss” (rough translation) side-by-side, you’ll notice that Khmer often gets across a concept in three or four—or less—words, while the corresponding English gloss may be a sentence or more long. This fact—that Khmer grammar and word placement tends to “do more with less” than English—leads many people, including Khmer native speakers, to make statements like, “Khmer grammar is simple,” or even “Khmer has no grammar.” Nothing could be farther than the truth. Khmer grammar is every bit as complex as that of English (or Spanish, or French), but it just goes about expressing things in a completely different way. While you’ll find that it’s quite easy to express the most basic needs and concepts in Khmer, you’ll also soon see that to convey nuance and subtlety of meaning in Khmer, something we tend to do in English with vocabulary choice and intonation, is extremely tricky for English speakers. Khmer is capable of expressing all the nuance and subtlety that English (and all languages) is, but to do it you need to learn to carefully rearrange words, add short particles at the end of phrases, etc.

One of the most daunting tasks you’ll encounter in learning Khmer is learning to recognize (and produce) all of the various vowels and diphthongs. Depending on the dialect spoken, Khmer has some 31–33 separate vowel sounds and vowel combinations, way more than the 18 that exist in American English, the 21 in British English, or the 20+ vowel sounds in languages like Thai and Vietnamese.

There’s a very visible difference between English and Khmer as well; by this I’m referring to how the language is written. Khmer has its own unique script, based on a South Indian script which was itself based on Devanagari, the alphabet used by the Indians to write Sanskrit, Hindi and other languages. The Khmer writing system is syllabic, just like Hindi, and also Arabic and Hebrew (not to mention Thai and Lao, which were derived in part from the Khmer alphabet). In a syllabic writ-

ing system, the most important unit from words are built is (surprise!) the syllable. Each syllable is represented by a consonant symbol, to which is usually attached a vowel symbol. In Khmer, these vowel symbols can occur before or after the consonant (or both), above it, or below it. In addition, consonant clusters in Khmer are indicated by special versions of each consonant placed under, following or wrapped around the leading consonant. If this all sounds highly complicated, well, it is. But it's important that you not be scared by the Khmer writing system. It's closer to being phonetic than English is (though not to the extent that Spanish or Indonesian is phonetic). And while there are many rules for spelling words in Khmer, there aren't that many exceptions to those rules (the reverse of course being true for English!). In this textbook (and in class at SEASSI), we'll be using *only* the Khmer alphabet in class, no phonetic transcription system. Most students devise their own phonetic system based on English letters, but I strongly advise against this. By using your own phonetic system you'll only be using a crutch that impedes your full learning of the Khmer alphabet, plus you'll probably be reinforcing your own mistakes in hearing and speaking Khmer. The Khmer alphabet is the best system on this planet for representing the sounds of the Khmer language, so why not use it from day one?

Last but not least, another striking difference between Khmer and Western languages is the way that social status and hierarchy are expressed vividly in the language, mostly in the case of word choice. There's no "neutral" pronoun meaning "you" in Khmer, rather one chooses from over 20 options(!) based on one's social status, age and (less often) gender relative to the person you're speaking to and the level of formality/intimacy of your relationship. In fact, many students of Khmer find that the way social hierarchy is boldly displayed in Khmer conversation very distasteful to them and hard to accept. This is because in the West, though of course we do have a class system and social hierarchy (which we express more in things like body language and tone of voice than in word choice), we like to pretend that we don't. We have an *ideal* of social equality. Traditional Khmer society has nothing like this, and social hierarchy is often boldly proclaimed by those of high status, and humbly adhered to by those of low status. You'll need to come to terms with this if you want to carry out successful communication in Khmer. It's not your job to change the ways that Khmers look at the world of social relationships, and you couldn't do it if you tried (look how unsuccessful the Khmer Rouge were at that!). We'll say more on this topic later in this book.

What You'll Learn (and Won't Learn) in a Beginning Khmer Course

After two months of intensive study of the material in this book, *combined with frequent practice with native speakers* (for all practical purposes this refers to studying a summer at SEASSI), or two full semesters in a University level class doing the same, you will be able to communicate in Khmer at "survival" level. In ACTFL terms (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), you will most likely be at a "High Novice" of language proficiency.

You'll be able to partially satisfy the requirements of basic communication exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances; that is, memorized phrases

(this goes for both listening and speaking). Occasionally you'll be able to expand these memorized phrases through simple recombinations of their elements...but for the most part you'll rely on phrases you've learned in this book. You'll be able to ask questions or make statements involving the material you've learned. You'll be able to show some signs of spontaneity although this will fall short of real "autonomy of expression."

Your Khmer vocabulary will center on areas such as basic objects, places, and the most common kinship terms. Your Khmer pronunciation—though significantly better than it was starting out!—will most likely be strongly influenced by your command of the sound system of English. Errors (both phonetic and grammatical) will be frequent and, in spite of repetition, you will often have difficulty being understood by even those with experience listening to non-natives speak Khmer. This will be most true when you deviate from your "learned utterances" and attempt to improvise.

You will possess a basic vocabulary and command of structures relative to the topics focused on in the chapters of this textbook: introductions/pleasantries; items and activities in the classroom; family and making reference to various life-states and rites of passage; food (eating and cooking); basic directions and location in space; work (including important related verbs) in a general sense; states of health and illness; very limited concepts relating to Khmer Buddhism, including rote memorization of one Buddhist chant; the physical environment and the weather; basic living tasks such as renting a hotel room; describing the purchase, selection and wearing of clothing.

You'll be able to understand many simple questions related to the above topics, but you'll often have great difficulty creating an answer, especially if the larger context of the question is not crystal clear, if extralinguistic cues are not present, or if you're in doubt about what types or ranges of response are expected of you. In general, you'll be able to best communicate (and understand) when you yourself is in control of the communication; i.e. when you're the initiator of an exchange and when it's you who determines the subject matter. You'll do less well when the conversation (and its topic) is primarily controlled by the native speakers with whom you're interacting. You will not be a good eavesdropper.

In terms of literacy, after sufficient study of and practice with the material in this book (again, two months in SEASSI or two semesters in a University full academic year program), you will be able to identify common words, usually in a specific social context. You will have familiarity with all of the Khmer consonants and vowels when written in a non-specialized, non-stylized fashion (which excludes much Khmer handwriting as well as ្រៀន or "rounded script", which is used on signs, etc).

You will be able to decode simple narratives and instructions in a previously-known context using vocabulary which coincides with your spoken Khmer vocabulary. Where the right vocabulary has been learned, you'll be able to read a variety of documents for instructional and directional purposes. This includes

reading standardized messages, phrases, or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps, and signs. You'll also be able to decode—albeit haltingly and requiring rereading and frequent stops for prediction, evaluation of context, and guessing the meaning of unknown vocabulary—simple narratives such as personal letters and informational articles on topics dealing with Khmer life. You'll be able to work your way through Khmer folktales where you know 70–80% of the vocabulary in the story already.

You'll be able to read some texts dealing with basic personal and social issues such as work and occupations, descriptions of the physical environment, and health and illness. You'll do best with material written for social purposes and aimed at the widest possible Khmer audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions dealing with public life. You'll also be able to decode, with some difficulty, many newspaper headlines and advertisements, though you'll have a lot of trouble with the text of newspaper articles. You'll especially have a problem where a text contains multiple embedded dependent clauses, which are not covered in this textbook.

You'll be able to write from memory or when prompted in oral dictation a large number of familiar words and phrases and important sightwords, as well as the entire alphabet. You'll be able to write complex sentences, which will be grammatical about 50% of the time. You'll be able to write a number of fixed expressions and much of your memorized spoken material, though often with some spelling mistakes. You'll be able to supply information on simple forms and documents, especially when those documents reflect specific topical areas focused on in this textbook. You'll be able to write Khmer numbers and some names, and make lists of things. In all, you should be able to write from memory or when prompted approximately 30–40% of the material in this textbook, though with spelling errors.

You'll be able to write short messages (such as phone messages), postcards, and letters to friends. The majority of your writing will focus on personal experiences, daily routines, and everyday events. You will be able to write creatively and expressively as well, though native speakers not experienced with reading creative or humorous writing may have a great deal of difficulty understanding such writing.

The Structure of This Textbook

Each chapter begins with the presentation of vocabulary lists dealing with the topical focus of the chapter. All of this vocabulary can be heard pronounced on the Audio Tracks on your Course DVD. There will often be footnotes explaining the nuances of this vocabulary and mentioning how it fits into Khmer culture.

Following the Audio Track vocabulary, you'll be guided to the Multimedia Lessons for that chapter, which can be accessed on a web browser using the files on your Course DVD. Multimedia Lessons consist of a video, taped on the street or in a home in Cambodia, explanatory material in the textbook and/or on that Lesson's

browser page, and often (but not always) a vocabulary list and/or transcript. This list and transcript is sometimes found on the Lesson's browser page in a pop-up window; sometimes found in your textbook.

Next, you'll find the Culture and Grammar Notes for the chapter. These will explain in some detail the usage and function of vocabulary and phrases which were introduced in the Audio Tracks.

Next, you'll come to the Literacy Lessons for the chapter. In the first four chapters this material will mainly consist of detailed explanations of various aspects of the alphabet. From Chapter Five onward, you'll be given actual Khmer stories to read, as well as other material, including personal letters, a wedding invitation, etc.

In Chapters One through Four, following the Alphabet Basics for that chapter you'll find a list of sightwords which you'll need to memorize how to write and read. You can hear these words pronounced on your Course DVD Audio Tracks as well.

Finally, each chapter ends with some suggestions for further study and applications of the material covered in that chapter.

What and How Much to Study

You're presented with a huge amount of material to learn in this textbook, and absorbing it all can be overwhelming. One thing's for sure: it's not just going to be poured into your head, no matter how good the teacher is you're working with. You're going to have to do a lot of work to internalize and be able to practically use all of this language knowledge. It's doable, and can be made less daunting if you carefully organize your study time. Do keep in mind that the promises earlier about "what you will learn" in a course using this textbook assume that you will be putting in lots of structured study time: roughly two hours outside class for every hour spent in class.

You'll need to divide your study time between the various aspects of the language you need to work on (memorization of the alphabet and vocabulary words, practicing speaking, practicing listening with the many audio and video materials available to you on your Course DVD, practicing writing, working on out-of-class projects with your fellow students, etc.), and very importantly, you need to schedule generous *breaks* in between sessions of studying.

Here's a more detailed breakdown on how this might look. The section below is meant to help you answer the question, "what exactly do I **do** with all this language study time?" Again, a lot of that is up to you, but I do have a number of suggestions based on experience:

1. **Memorization.** This is probably the least glamorous and most tedious aspect of language study. But it's really important, and unavoidable. There are lots of terms for things that you're just going to have to memorize. Your teachers try to help

you do this in class by various activities, repetition, use of new terms in context, by bringing in pictures, “real life” objects to associate with the new terms, etc. In the end, however, you’re the one responsible for knowing all the vocabulary.

So how do you go about this? What works for every individual is going to be different, but a lot of language learners find flashcards useful. You can write multiple words on one index card (in the corners), or just one word. You can write the Khmer term on one side and the English on the other. Or maybe draw a picture (it only needs to make sense to you) on the side opposite the Khmer word, and write no English word. How you use flash cards can differ from study session to study session, too. Sometimes, you’ll want to show yourself the English term or picture and then come up with the Khmer word; other times, the reverse. You also might want to consider working with other students, drilling each other using the cards.

I’ve never exactly used flashcards myself, mind you. When I was learning Khmer, I always had pieces of 8 1/2 by 11 paper in my back pockets containing lists of words (or phrases) which I was currently working on memorizing. Sometimes there would be English definitions on the paper, sometimes only Khmer. Whenever I had a free moment: at a bus stop, walking outdoors, sitting in a café, I’d pull out the list and cram another word into my head, then test myself later. I’d also go for walks in the woods and talk to myself, reciting both parts of various types of conversations and lists of vocabulary terms. Or I’d try to describe whatever I saw around me, or what I was doing at the time. However you do it, it’s tedious, but it has to be done.

It’s hard to say how many hours you’re going to need to spend on memorization per chapter, but suffice it to say that the above activities or similar ones should take up at least 50% of your personal study time.

2. Drills. This is one of the old dreaded practices of post WW II language classrooms in the US, due to the postwar popularity of something called the “Audiolingual Method” of language learning. Depending on who your language teacher was, you might have spent an entire hour-long foreign language class at some point in the past six decades doing nothing but drills! We’ll only use these a little in class, because class time is best used for communicative activities. However, drills do have some value for some learners, and you’re encouraged to devise and use them on your own. At the end of some units in the textbook, you’ll find some suggestions on useful drills to try. This is another activity that can be quite nice to do with a partner.

3. Free Writing. You’ll be doing this in something called a “dialog journal” each week at SEASSI, but there’s no reason you can’t do it on your own as well. As soon as you know how to write even one word or letter in Khmer, you can practice writing it again and again, sometimes pronouncing it, sometimes not. Trying to make sentences with words you’ve learned in class is especially useful, and more fun than just writing the same word over and over again. Write a letter to an imaginary friend, a real friend, a teacher, or try to write a simple story about

your life.

4. ***Focused Listening Practice.*** This is extremely important. The fact that listening is important is evidenced by the large amount of learning materials you're provided with here with which to practice focused listening: your Audio Tracks, videos we watch in class at SEASSI, and the videos at studykhmer.com. At SEASSI, you'll be given specific listening activities using these materials; that is, you'll be told to listen for specific words, phrases, information. If you're studying on your own, you can devise your own focused listening exercises.

You should always watch each video in the Multimedia Lessons more than once. Listen a first time without consulting any text materials; just try to "soak it in." Then listen again, following the transcript if there is one. Write down words you know in the video. Write down an approximation of words you can hear which you don't know. Go back and listen again, to see if you can figure out the meaning of the unknown words in the context of words you do know. Consult the vocabulary list or a dictionary, then listen to the video again. The variations are endless. You should spend at least an hour, if not two, doing this with each video.

5. ***Learning and Practicing Dialogs.*** Pick one of the dialogs from a video in a Multimedia Lesson and memorize one part of it, then the other part, and practice reciting each part in turn. Get together with a partner and trade off parts. Try to improvise your own dialog using structures you've learned from the video dialog.

6. ***Plain Old Speaking Practice.*** Granted, your non-native speaking classmates are not the best "models" for Khmer grammar and pronunciation. But that doesn't mean you can't get together and practice speaking Khmer with them outside of class! You will benefit from such an activity, just not the same way as you would if you were practicing with a native speaker. Students in past SEASSIs have had a great deal of success and satisfaction doing this. You and a classmate can either work on memorizing specific required spoken material from whatever unit you're working on in class, or just have free conversation. For "free" conversation, however, it might be good to set some rules (impose some sort of basic structure) for yourselves. For instance, agree that you have to get through an entire meal (or pitcher of beer?) together using only Khmer. If you're studying on your own, supplemented by meetings with a native speaking tutor, all of the above can of course apply as well.

At SEASSI, with Heritage students, of course, you have a built-in community of native speakers to practice with; take advantage of it. Try to avoid that urge to always speak English with each other, even outside of class: make a pact among yourselves (and with the upper level non-native speakers) to only communicate in Khmer. Or get a picture book of Cambodia from the library and go through it together, describing everything you can in the book using Khmer. Or even go to a Cambodian neighborhood together with other students and just randomly talk to people (older people in particular). Or set aside an hour to just practice speaking with one of your teachers, either during office hours or at a pre-arranged evening

meeting (note: if the teacher you're doing this with is of the opposite gender, it's best to do this with a **group** of students). It's simple, but true: the best way to learn a language is to use it.

The above are just some suggestions. You'll need to find what works specifically for you. Everyone learns languages a little differently, so part of your overall language learning task is to get to know yourself well enough to identify your specific learning style and then plan your time and activities accordingly.

It's also important that (assuming you're using this textbook as part of a class) you prepare each day for class in advance, by reading your textbook, memorizing material, doing listening practice. Most of our time in class at SEASSI will be spent in interactive, hands-on activities that attempt to recreate real-life situations in which you'll use Khmer. The better you're prepared in advance, the more you'll get out of these activities, and the more your fellow students will get out of them, too.

Preparation is equally important if you're studying on your own and using this textbook in conjunction with meetings with a native speaking tutor. If this is the case, you're the one who is going to have to impose structure on your meetings with the native speaker (see page 276 for more). One way you can impose this structure is by using the structure of this textbook to guide your work with the native speaking tutor.

Understanding the Icons in this Textbook

The following icons appear throughout this textbook; here's a guide to what they mean:



This icon indicates that the Khmer material nearby is included on an **Audio Track**, the number of which will be given to you.



This icon indicates that there is a **Multimedia Lesson** associated with the accompanying material.



This icon indicates that the Khmer term or terms next to it do not need to be incorporated into your spoken vocabulary; you only need to be able to recognize the terms when you hear them spoken by native speakers.