Alphabet Basics, Continued: Vowel Governance

The main principal of vowel governance—what determines which consonant in a word gets to control how the vowel(s) in the word will sound—is the concept of "strong consonants" and "weak consonants". Note that this is not a typology used in traditional Khmer literacy instruction, it was invented by the linguist Frank Huffman in the 1970s. I like this system because it's simple and elegant, and it accounts for everything. But it doesn't mean there aren't other ways of explaining how vowel governance works in Khmer, there certainly are. What counts is that you're able to accurately predict the sound of (most) written words in Khmer, even if you previously haven't been exposed to that word. This accuracy breaks down a bit when we get to words of Sanskrit and Pali origin, with all their special pronunciations and silent consonants. But this system will still get you a long way.

The Strong Consonants

ក ខ គ ឃ

ច ឆ ជ ឈ

ដ ឋ ឌ ឍ

ត ថ ទ ធ

ប ផ ព ភ

ស ហ អ

Right off the bat, you should notice something about who's strong in the conso-
nant world: that's right, all of the *stop consonants* in Khmer are strong. But we

have a few non-stop members in the "strong club" as well: the "sibilant" ស and

the "spirant" ហ . Well, the membership of ហ in this elite group is somewhat

open to debate, but I think we can let him stay for the most part.

Next we want to be asking, "who's weak, then"? And the answer of course, is

everyone else:

Weak Consonants

ង ញ ន ម យ រ ល វ

So here's our first basic rule: any consonant when placed next to a vowel symbol

gets to determine the series (and thus the sound) of that vowel...*unless* the con-

sonant in question is weak, and a strong consonant pops up someone in the

word. Then the strong consonant—if it's of a different series than the weak con-

sonant—will impose its series on the vowel. Note that this strong/weak thing ap-

plies not only to words where a weak consonant *begins* the word, and a strong

consonant pops up later...it also applies to cases where a *strong* consonant be-

gins the word. Also note that ហ and ឡ don't appear in either list. These

consonants each have a second series counterpart already (ន and ស , respec-

tively), so there's never any confusion over which consonant in these two pairs

we use to get the vowel sound of which series. Ask the coordinator in class at

SEASSI if you're confused by this.

In the latter situation (here comes our second rule), the weak consonant never gets to have a say about anything, and the series of every vowel in the word will be the series of the strong consonant *unless a strong consonant of the other series comes along.* In that case, the vowel(s) for the rest of the word switch to the value dictated by the "new" strong consonant.

Finally, rule number three: If there are multiple strong consonants of different series in the word (or even in the same consonant cluster), the consonant *closest* to the vowel in question gets to determine its series (sound).

Got it? Didn't think so, it's all sounding pretty abstract, right? So what we need are some concrete examples. First, on Audio Track 103, you'll hear examples of words in which a strong consonant begins the word, and subsequent weak consonants don't get to change a thing. The series of every vowel in the word follows the series of the initial strong consonant:

ត្រី	ស្វា	ប្រយ័ត្ន	បារី	កន្លែង	កំណើត
fish	monkey	careful	cigarette	place	birth

Now let's look at and listen to some examples of words in which a weak consonant gets to start off controlling the vowel sounds of a word (this includes being the first or "top" element in a consonant cluster in a monosyllabic word), but gets the show stolen from it when one of those strong consonant bad boys shows up. Listen on Audio Track 104:

ល្ហុង	ល្អ	ម្ហូប	របស់	វាចា	ម្ចាស់
papaya	good	food	thing	speech (formal)	owner; master