

ON KHMER POLAR INTERROGATIVES

David Thomas

Huffman (1970:77-79) points out the difference between the two polar (yes/no) interrogatives in Khmer rɨi and tee. He describes the difference as being that rɨi is used in questions where there are a number of alternatives, while tee is used when there is only a two-way yes/no alternative.

Examples (from Huffman):

Look qəncəəñ tɨw psaa rɨi? 'Are you going to the market
(or somewhere else)?

Look qəncəəñ tɨw psaa tee? 'Are you going to the market
(or not)?

The responses to the first (rɨi) question might be:

Baat, tɨw psaa.

'Yes, going to the market.'

Baat tee, kñom tɨw salaa.

'No, I'm going to the school.'

while the responses to the second (tee) question might be:

Baat, tɨw.

'Yes, going.'

Baat tee, kñom min tɨw tee.

'No I'm not going.'

On further examination of the use of these interrogatives, however, a different statement of their use appears possible. While both rɨi and tee correspond to the English polar interrogatives Are you...?, Do you...?, Huffman has observantly noticed that rɨi implies other alternatives, whether or not those alternatives are overtly stated in either the question or the answer. I would propose that by shifting one's focus from the clause elements to the sentence as a whole the same could be said about tee on the sentence level as was said about rɨi on the clause and phrase levels, namely, that tee is not necessarily polar either but implies alternatives. To the question Look qəncəəñ tɨw psaa tee? we might get as replies, in addition

to the polar replies cited above:

Baat tee, kñom n̄iw pt̄eah. 'No, I'm staying home.'
 Baat tee, kñom baok aaw. 'No, I'm going to wash my clothes.'
 Baat tee, kñom daə leeng. 'No, I'll just take a walk.'

These replies would show that there is a range of possible alternatives. With rii the alternatives substitute noun phrases, locations, etc., in the original sentence. With tee the alternatives substitute whole sentences for the questioned sentence. And the difference is also reflected in the situational contexts: in the first example the rii question would be asked of a man walking down the road, toward the market, while the tee question would be asked of a man sitting at home not obviously going anywhere. Also, a rii question tends to expect a yes answer, while a tee question tends to have less preconceived expectation about the answer.

Further examples:

rii
 Look m̄ək pii-msəl-məñ ri i? 'Did you come yesterday?'
 Baat, pii-msəl-məñ. Yes, yesterday.
 Baat tee, pii-msəl-mngay. No, the day before yesterday.

Nih tlay hoksəp ri əl ri i? 'Does this cost sixty riels?'
 Baat, hoksəp. Yes, sixty.
 Baat tee, haasəp. No, fifty.

Look ci ə baarang ri i? 'Are you French?'
 Baat, baarang. Yes, French.
 Baat tee, aamerikang. No, American.

Salaa ri ən n̄iw khang-muk ri i? 'Is the school ahead?'
 Baat, khang-muk. Yes, ahead.
 Baat tee, khang-sdam-day. No, on the right.

tee
 Pt̄əh nih lqâə tee? 'Is this house good?'
 Baat, pt̄əh nih lqâə. Yes, this house is good.
 Baat tee, pt̄əh nih m̄in lqâə tee. No, this house isn't good.

Baat tee, pt̄əh nih krâkwâq. No, this house is dirty

Baat tee, pt̄əh nuh lqâə c̄əng. No, that house is better.

Look câng baan kafei tee? 'Do you want coffee?'
 Baat, câng. Yes, I do.
 Baat tee, kñom soum baay klah. No, please give me some rice.
 Baat tee, kñom m̄in n̄am kafei tee. No, I don't drink coffee.

Look ceh phiəsaə cən tee?	'Do you know Chinese?'
Baat, ceh.	Yes, I do.
Baat tee, pruəh kñom mìn dael riən phiəsaə cən phâang.	No, because I have never yet studied any Chinese.
Baat tee, pii mun kñom ceh, pontae əyləw-nih plíc âh haəy.	No, I used to speak it, but have now forgotten it.

So, to summarize, rii 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 rii or tee may be a yes or no or an alternative, though rii tends to expect a yes.

To add a few further refinements. The combination rii tee is used to question sentences, like tee, but specifically expects a yes or no answer.

Ptəh nuh lqââ rii tee?	'Is that house good?'
Baat, lqââ.	Yes, good.
Baat tee, mìn lqââ tee.	No, not good.

Look câng baan kafei rii tee?	'Do you want coffee?'
Baat, câng.	Yes, I do.
Baat tee, mìn câng tee.	No, I don't.

Descriptive clauses with ciə or kii ciə can take only rii questions, never tee. (The use of kii clauses is becoming less common.)

Look ciə baarang rii?	'Are you French?'
Look kii ciə aamerikang rii?	'Are you American?'

In complex sentences the situation is a little more complicated. In a causal sentence, if the main clause follows the subordinate clause, either rii or tee can be used, with rii questioning a part of the main clause, and tee questioning the whole main clause or sentence, following the usual rules. The yes expectation with rii, however, seems stronger than the part/whole distinction at the sentence rank. In formal writing yes or no answers are preferred for both rii and tee rather than alternative answers; if an alternative must be stated, it must follow a yes or no.

Daoy look chii ngay nih, tae look bângriən sqaek rii?	
<i>Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?</i>	
(expecting a yes answer)	
Baat, kñom bângriən.	Yes, I will teach.
Baat tee, ngay can təəp kñom bângriən.	No, on Monday I'll teach.

Daoy look chii ngay nih, tae look bângriən sqaek tee?

Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?

Baat, ât bângriən. Yes, I won't teach.

Baat tee, kñom twə kaa No, I'll work at home.

nîw ptəh.

In a causal sentence, if the main clause precedes the subordinate clause, the main clause is understood as being asserted and only the subordinate clause can be questioned, using only rîi.

Look min bângriən sqaek, pipruəh ngay nih look chii rîi?

You won't teach tomorrow because you are sick today?

Baat, trîw haøy. Yes, that's right.

Baat, pipruəh ngay nih Yes, because I'm sick today.

kñom chii.

Baat tee, pipruəh kñom No, because I'm busy.

rawuəl.

In a conditional sentence apparently tee is the normal interrogative, with rîi being used only if the main clause ends with non-interrogative tee or dae.

Baə look tîw Pnum Pîñ, taə look srəy trîw tîw ciəmuəy look tee?

If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?

Baə look tîw Pnum Pîñ, taə look srəy min tîw ciəmuəy look tee rîi ?

If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife not go with you?

Baə look tîw Phnum Pîñ, taə look srəy tîw ciəmuəy look dae rîi ?

If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?

So the general principle can perhaps be restated to say that when the center of a clause or sentence is considered asserted and only a phrase or subordinate clause is questioned, then rîi is used. But when a sentence as a whole is questioned, or its central clause or verb, then tee is used.

NOTES:

1. I am indebted to Ouk Sau and Thong Thel for help and suggestions on this paper. The romanization used in this paper follows that of Huffman, except that ng is used for /ŋ/, and â for /a/.

REFERENCES:

Huffman, Franklin E. 1970. Modern Spoken Cambodian. New Haven: Yale.