

# **Linguistic Contributions to the Study of the Northern Khmer Language of Thailand in the last two decades\***

**SUWILAI Preamsirat**  
ILCRD, Mahidol University

Northern Khmer (NK) is a Khmer variety spoken in Thailand. The purpose of this paper is to survey the linguistic work that has been done on Northern Khmer in the last two decades with the hope of encouraging linguistic research in Cambodia as well as in other Khmer speaking areas.

Outside Cambodia, Khmer is spoken by a large population in Thailand and Vietnam. In Thailand it is spoken in the lower part of northeast Thailand and the adjoining area in the eastern area bordering Cambodia. The speakers number more than one million. The Khmer in Thailand have been cut off from the Khmer of Cambodia for a long time and the mountains form a natural barrier to frequent interaction between the majority of the Khmer of Thailand and the Khmer of Cambodia.

In the last two decades the linguistic contributions to the knowledge of Northern Khmer are substantial and cover the following areas:

1. Names and "language" status
2. Distribution and numbers of speakers
3. Language structure
4. Phonetic studies of some major features
5. Dictionaries and thesauruses
6. Socio-cultural studies
7. Word play and expressives
8. Epic recitatives
9. Pedagogical materials
10. Development of a Thai-based orthography for Northern Khmer, and its practical application. (publications of folk-tales, proverbs, songs, terms used in herbal medicine and primary health care, etc.)

This paper concludes with a bibliography of linguistic works on Northern Khmer. Some of the major developments and recent research works are discussed in detail in this paper.

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## 1. Names and “language” status

The term “Northern Khmer” was introduced by William Smalley (1964, 1976) in contrast to the Central or Southern Khmer of Cambodia and Vietnam. It corresponds to the Northern Khmer (NK) native word *khmɛ:r lɔ:* ‘upper Khmer (เขมรสูง)’ which is used to refer to the Khmer people and language in Thailand. This is an autonym used to show the difference between the Khmer in Thailand and the Khmer in Cambodia who are called *khmɛ:r krɔ:m* ‘lower Khmer (เขมรต่ำ).’ The NK live in the highlands whereas the Cambodian Khmer live in the low lands and their pronunciation is different. (Prakorb 1987, Suwilai and Sophana 1990). Moreover, the various dialects of Khmer in Thailand or NK are generally called by the name of the district or province they are located in, such as Surin Khmer (เขมรสурินทาร์, เขมรพื้นบ้านสุรินทาร์.), Buriram Khmer (เขมรบุรีรัมย์), and Sankha Khmer (เขมรสังขะ) etc.

As a result of the Orthography Conference in 1989, Surin Khmer pronunciation has been generally accepted as standard NK. At the 1990 Orthography Conference in Surin province, the NK people agreed to officially call themselves and their language *khmɛ:n thɪn thai* ‘Thailand Khmer (เขมรถิ่นไทย)’ (Suwilai and Sophana 1990). They normally consider themselves as Thais who speak Khmer. Apart from these, designations David Thomas (1990) discussed the “language” status of NK. He showed convincingly that NK can be considered to be “a distinct language” from a sociolinguistic viewpoint.

## 2. Distribution and numbers of speakers

The survey of NK was first conducted by William Smalley in 1964 in his *Ethnolinguistic Survey of Northern Khmer and Kuy Speaking People in Northeast Thailand*. It was then published in 1988 and again in 1994. The most recent survey of NK is a part of the ethnolinguistic map project of Thailand directed by Suwilai and others and started in 1992 (completed is expected in 1998). The data were collected at the village level. About 60 languages have been recorded. According to this research project, NK speakers are found in at least 12 provinces in eastern and northeastern Thailand. The speakers number around 1.4 million. The core area of NK speakers includes the provinces of Surin and Buriram and a part of Srisaket. The NK communities then extend to the east to some districts in Ubon, to the north to some districts of Mahasarakham, Roi-et etc., and to the west to some districts of Sakaew. They are also found in Chanthaburi, Trat down to the east coast, and in Chachoengsaw in central Thailand near Bangkok.

## 3. Language structure

The phonological system of some dialects of NK has been investigated and described in detail as follows: Surin Khmer phonological system (Smalley 1976, Dhanan and Chartchai 1987). Buriram Khmer (Prakhonchai District) phonology (Krissana 1986), and Chachoengsaw Khmer (Ratchasan District) phonology (Amphon 1995). In general, these phonological systems are rather similar, although there are some phonetic differences. A comparative study of Surin Khmer and a variety of Phnom Penh Khmer phonological systems was conducted by Prakorb

(1987). There are more detailed phonetic differences between these two varieties of Khmer. Some aspects of syntactic structure and discourse structure were investigated and described; e.g., morphology and clauses in Surin Khmer (Pornpen 1989), Buriram Khmer relational grammar (Phunsap 1984), discourse level cohesion in Surin Khmer (Somkiet 1982), the deliberate causative in Surin Khmer (Dorothy Thomas 1984), and the instrumental/locative and goal affix -N- in Surin Khmer (Dorothy Thomas 1990).

#### 4. Phonetic studies of some major features

The NK vowel system is rather complex. In terms of universal vowel systems, NK is atypical in both the number of basic vowels and their positions. An acoustic study of NK vowels was conducted by David Thomas and Wanna Tianmee (1990) using Kay Sonograph model 7029A. Then the phonetic variation of some dynamic final consonants of NK such as the final trill and final palatals were investigated in 37 districts where NK speakers are living by using about 55 key words. This was reported in Suwilai (1995), and Suwilai and Orawan (1996). It reveals that Surin city (Muang district) and surrounding areas, which constitute the heart of the NK core area, still retain the final trill /-r/ which has been lost in standard Cambodian Khmer. Final  $\text{្រ}$  /-r/ in written Khmer is not pronounced in Cambodian speech. NK has developed the palatalization of a velar nasal and a velar stop. Final velar nasal /-ŋ/ has been changed to palatal nasal /-ɲ/, and final velar stop /-k/ has been changed to palatal stop /-c/ after front vowels. This innovation is obviously caused by the influence of the preceding front vowel on the final consonant. Final glottal stop /-ʔ/ has developed in place of the final palatal and velar stops in some words. This type of palatal assimilation conforms to the principle of "least effort" in pronunciation. The same kind of innovations may also be developing in certain areas of Cambodian Khmer and Vietnamese Khmer pronunciation, but a systematic study of this phenomenon has still not been done.

#### 5. Dictionaries and thesauruses

There are two detailed dictionaries on Surin Khmer-Thai-English compiled by Dhanan and Chartchai in 1978 and Stephen Teel in 1988. In 1994 Thongluang, a school teacher in Surin, compiled a Thai-Northern Khmer-Cambodian-English dictionary. He writes NK in the Thai-based orthography and Cambodian in Khmer script. La-ao Congyu (1993) from Sirinthorn secondary school in Surin province also compiled a thesaurus of Surin city daily-life vocabularies in Thai-Surin Khmer-English. She also transcribed Surin city Khmer in the Thai-based orthography. A Northern Khmer thesaurus is also being undertaken by Dorothy and David Thomas.

#### 6. Socio-cultural studies

In Smalley's *Linguistic Diversity and National Unity* (1994), NK is described as having the status of marginal regional language in Thailand's hierarchy of languages. It is a *lingua franca* in some areas of the lower part of the northeastern Thailand, whereas standard Thai, which is the official language, is at the top in the

hierarchy . Lao, which is a regional language, is under this, but is above NK. Since Kuy, Yeu, Lao, and Thai Korat speakers live in the same region of northeastern Thailand as the NK speakers, most of the Northern Khmer speakers have developed a certain kind of multilingualism. They can at least speak central Thai besides the mother tongue. Many of them also speak Kuy and Lao or Thai Korat (Suwilai 1984, Smalley 1994).

Various studies on the NK lexicon have been carried out. The study of the lexicon in regard to the various concepts and activities of the rice production process or rice cycle in NK contributes quite a lot to the understanding of the NK people's life and society (Naraset 1986, 1995). The study of village names in the Muang district of Surin province (Suwilai and Sukhumavadee 1984) reveals that the Khmer names refer to the history, geographical features and natural resources of the village. The difference in some of the official names which are standard Thai and the local names which are Khmer causes some confusion (Suwilai and Sukhumavadee 1984). Suwilai (1984) pointed out that the appropriate use of address terms and greetings in the NK is quite essential in the NK community. The suggestion has been made to outside people who wish to stay there to learn to use the appropriate address terms and greetings. Benon (1988) compared the use of some lexical items between NK and Cambodian Khmer, such as the use of some pronouns.

## 7. Word play and expressives in NK

The NK people enjoy using word play and expressives (using sound symbolism to indicate meaning) very much. Thomas and Thomas (1982) described the characteristics and types of word play in Surin Khmer. Kotchakorn (1991) studied and described meanings and types of expressives in Surin Khmer.

## 8. Epic recitatives

A kind of Khmer vocal music or epic recitative *ទេវីយនបេតិក្យ carianj brəj*, which is practiced in the Khmer area of Thailand, was studied by Christian Bauer (1989). Over 50 hours of music and interviews and some 1,000 pages of manuscript (transcription and singers notes) were collected for investigation. It shows clearly that the Khmer *ទេវីយនបេតិក្យ carianj brəj* is not an adaptation of other kinds of music in northeastern Thailand but traditional Khmer music.

## 9. Pedagogical materials

Pedagogical materials lessons on NK have been produced, for example, *Surin Khmer Conversation Lessons* (Kheuan, Suwilai and Thomas 1984).

## 10. Development of a Thai-based orthography for NK and its practical application

Various attempts have been made at writing NK by the native speakers of NK themselves who want to express themselves through writing their own mother tongue, in order to communicate with each other in writing, to facilitate remembering, or to record oral traditions. It has also been done by outsiders who want to communicate effectively with this group of people. They normally based their system of writing on the system of the language they already know. That is standard Thai. They do not know much about Khmer script, and the writing system of standard Thai, which is the official language, is a part of their lives. However, every so often they don't know how to overcome the complications of the task, and their system cannot be widely used because it is inconsistent and leaves out some critical part of the language.

A reasonable NK orthography using Thai letters was worked out by William Smalley and John Ellison, and it was used, with some adaptations for more than 15 years. However, there are still many problems but with a variety of solutions. In 1987, 1988 and 1989 the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University, organized orthography meetings on NK with the cooperation of Surin non-formal education, Sirinthorn school and Thailand Summer Institute of Linguistics. The purpose was to work out a NK writing system, to establish consensus among the NK speakers, local officials and linguists, and also to stir up interest in writing NK. It should have a minimum of conflict with the Thai writing system yet still be efficient for NK. The NK orthography is very useful for the speakers, because even though many of the villagers are fluent in spoken Thai, the majority of them are only semi-literate. So such an orthography would give them a boost in reading ability in general, as well as aiding in rural community development and health programs. It would also aid in recording and preserving their culture (Suwilai and Sophana 1990, Dorothy Thomas 1989 and 1990, Smalley 1976, 1994).

Various applications have been made by using this Thai-based NK orthography. They include diglot booklets, such as folktales, proverbs, ceremony and health care publications (Suwilai and others 1996). La-ao's thesaurus of Surin city daily life vocabularies (1993) and Thongluang's dictionary (1994) also use this orthography in writing NK words.

### Final remarks

Even though linguistic work has contributed substantially to the knowledge of NK of Thailand, more work is still needed. For example, more detailed syntactic and semantic studies and the comparative study of various aspects of the Khmer language as spoken in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam should be done. The synchronic study of standard Khmer as well as the dialects spoken in different regions should also contribute significantly to our knowledge of the Khmer language. A survey for the ethnolinguistic map of Cambodia will give a clear picture of the languages and ethnic groups there. Rural community development programs such as literacy programs, health programs as well as oral tradition and culture preservation programs might therefore be appropriately considered.

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Institute of Language and Culture  
for Rural Development  
Mahidol University at Salaya  
Nakornpathom 73170