

# VARIABILITY IN CAMBODIAN COPULAR CONSTRUCTIONS: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 CAMBODIAN 'TO BE'

Cambodian, like most of the world's languages, does not have a single element which corresponds to all of the senses of English 'to be': rather, as many as seven different forms are used in existential, locative, and copulative constructions. In general, each Cambodian construction corresponds to a distinct part of the range of functions and meanings of 'to be', although some constructions appear to overlap partially with others. The basic inventory of Cambodian forms of 'to be' can be summarised as follows:

1) existential: *mian*

2) locative: (*kii*) *nəw*

3) copulative

a) with predicate adjectives: zero, *kii*

b) in equative constructions with predicate NPs:

*kii* – sometimes exclusively, sometimes in variation with the less preferred options *ciə*, *kii ciə* (formal style) and zero (informal style)

c) in non-equative constructions with predicate NPs: *ciə* and *kii* usually judged equally acceptable, but *ciə* sometimes preferred; *kii ciə* (formal style) and zero (informal style) always possible but less preferred options

### 1.2 PREVIOUS ANALYSES

I am not aware of any detailed treatment of this issue in the literature on Cambodian. Some discussion can be found in basic grammars such as Ehrman (1972), Jacob (1968), and Noss and Proum (1966). However, the descriptions offered in these grammars are incomplete, and they differ on some important points, especially where copulative constructions are concerned.

For example, in Ehrman, no semantic distinction is made between the copulas *ciə*, *kii*, *kii ciə* and the zero copula. The copula *ciə* is defined as a copula which indicates that "the subject is a member of the class of objects named by the predicate"; it is the copula used in sentences such as 'This is a pencil' (1972:75). Concerning *kii*, Ehrman says that it "may be used with

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<sup>1</sup> I have been assisted in my fieldwork on Cambodian by Mr Van So Chau, a native speaker of Cambodian.

the same meaning as *ciə*, except that where it is followed by more than one proper name, it is obligatory”; an example which requires *kii* is ‘This is Sok, Suon, and Sos’ (p.75). No examples are given for *kii ciə*, but Ehrman claims that it is “used like *ciə*” (p.76). Finally, the use of the zero copula is said to occur “in some cases...especially in predicates containing time words”; for example, in ‘Today is Saturday’ (p.76).

Jacob (1968:140–141) suggests that *ciə* and *kii* are semantically distinct. She claims that “*ciə* ‘to be’...may be used when two nouns are linked by it”, and she gives examples such as ‘I am a teacher’ and ‘That girl is Mr. X’s daughter’ (p.140). Concerning *kii*, she notes that it is used “like *ciə* in linking two nouns but has the lexical meaning ‘to be in essence, to be by nature’”, as in the example ‘What’s this? It’s coral’ (p.141). Finally, she points out that two noun phrases may be linked by zero where *ciə* or *kii* would be expected; these are regarded as “ad hoc verbalisations of nominal constructs” as in the example ‘She’s a widow’ (p.141).

Noss and Proum (1966:118–119) offer the most detailed account of which I am aware. They draw clear semantic distinctions between *ciə*, *kii*, and the zero copula. The word *ciə* is defined as ‘to be a member of the class of’, as in ‘I’m a student’ (p.119). In contrast, *kii* is defined as ‘to be equivalent to’, as in ‘The biggest book of all is the one on the bottom’ (p.118). Finally, the zero copula is interpreted as ‘to be characterised by’, as in ‘My book is white’ (p.118). In addition, Noss and Proum discuss the use of *nəw* as the locative ‘to be (somewhere)’, as in ‘The blue book is on the bottom’ (p.118), and the use of *mian* as the existential ‘to be (in existence)’, as in ‘There are two books’ (p.118).

Of the three descriptions, the one offered by Noss and Proum seems to be the best; in addition to being the most detailed, it is the one which, in general, most closely matches the material which I have elicited in fieldwork sessions with Mr Van So Chau. However, the match between Noss and Proum’s description and the system exhibited by Mr Chau is not always exact. In addition, the overlap of functions of some variants, which is mentioned in Ehrman and Jacob but not in Noss and Proum, is abundant in my elicited material.

## 2. THE FORMS OF ‘TO BE’

In the following sections, the various Cambodian forms and uses of ‘to be’ as given by Mr Chau are discussed individually.

### 2.1 EXISTENTIAL ‘TO BE’: *mian*

The verb *mian* is used for existence (EXT): ‘there is/are’, ‘to be in existence’. No other copula is possible.

- (1) *Mian siəwphəw bəy.*  
EXT book three  
There are three books.

The same verb is used for possession (‘to have’); the possessor NP precedes the verb:

- (2) *Kñom mian siəwphəw bəy.*  
I EXT book three  
I have three books.

2.2 LOCATIVE 'TO BE': (*kii*) *nəw*

The Cambodian verb *nəw* means 'to be located' and is used to link a subject to a predicate indicating temporary or permanent location in space or time. In all contexts, *nəw* can be optionally preceded by the equative *kii*; there is no change in meaning, but the expanded form is characterised by Mr Chau as "unusual" and likely to occur in formal rather than informal styles. Locatives (LOC) are not formed with *mian*, *ciə*, *kii ciə*, or zero.

Examples (3)–(6) illustrate the use of (*kii*) *nəw* to indicate, respectively, temporary location of non-events in space, permanent location of non-events in space, spatial location of events and temporal location of events:

- (3) *Tidaa (kii) nəw pnum.piñ.*  
Tidaa COP LOC Phnom.Penh  
Tidaa is in Phnom Penh.
- (4) *Pnum.piñ (kii) nəw kmɛ.*  
Phnom.Penh COP LOC Cambodia  
Phnom Penh is in Cambodia.
- (5) *Tii pracuŋ (kii) nəw / kii / ?ciə sabaa.*  
place meeting COP LOC COP COP school  
The meeting is at school.
- (6) *Peil pracuŋ (kii) nəw / kii / ?ciə maon prampii.*  
time meeting COP LOC COP COP hour seven  
The meeting is at seven o'clock.

In examples (5) and (6), the copulas *kii* and, more marginally, *ciə* can be used in place of *nəw* to link a subject NP with a predicate NP. In Cambodian, these constructions must be regarded as copulative rather than locative, although this distinction is lost in the English translations. The use of copulas in such constructions is treated in detail below, in the discussion of Cambodian copulative constructions.

2.3 COPULATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH STATIVE PREDICATES: zero, *kii*

Statives in Cambodian, unlike adjectives in English, are full verbs and so do not require any other accompanying verb, such as a copula (COP). It may be noted that *nəw*, *mian*, *ciə*, and *kii ciə* are never possible in stative constructions. The behaviour of *kii* is unique; while it is nearly always less preferred than zero, it is "less bad" than the other variants in combination with a stative verb:

- (7) *Tidaa (?kii) lʔaa.*  
Tidaa COP good  
Tidaa is good.
- (8) *Tidaa (?kii) lʔaa krup peil.ve.liə.*  
Tidaa COP good all time  
Tidaa is good all the time.



In the equative reading, both NPs function as referential expressions; each refers to an individual, and the copula simply indicates that there is identity between the two referents. In the predicative reading, the predicate NP does not have a referential function; it does not refer directly to some individual, but rather tells something about the subject of the sentence. In the predicative reading, 'is the president of France' describes the referent of the subject NP in the same way that predicates such as 'likes to play tennis', 'was born in France' or 'is six feet tall' give information about the referent of the subject NP.

The distinction between predicative and equative copulas is one that is of little importance in English, since the same copula is used for both functions. However, the distinction can be shown even in English; when (12) has a predicative reading, the article can be optionally omitted. When it has an equative reading, the article cannot be omitted.

In Italian, the distinction between these two types of copula sentences has clearer syntactic consequences. Compare the following (from Moro 1991:21):

- (13) *Una foto del muro fu la causa della rivolta.*  
A picture of the wall was the cause of the revolution.

The predicate NP of this sentence can be replaced by the clitic *lo*, which precedes the copula:

- (14) *Una foto del muro lo fu.*  
A picture of the wall was it.

However, if the order of the NPs in the original sentence is reversed, then clitic replacement of the predicate NP is not possible:

- (15) *La causa della rivolta fu una foto del muro.*  
The cause of the revolution was a picture of the wall.
- (16) \**La causa della rivolta lo fu.*  
The cause of the revolution was it.

To explain the difference between (13) and (15), Moro (p.22) appeals to the notion of referentiality versus non-referentiality of NPs. A referential NP "points to" a referent, while a non-referential NP describes another NP. In Italian, a predicate NP can be replaced by the clitic *lo* only if the predicate NP is non-referential. In (13), clitic replacement is possible because 'the cause' is non-referential; 'a picture' can be assigned the property of being 'the cause'. A property is a predication and can be replaced by a clitic. In (15), clitic replacement is not possible because 'a picture' is referential; 'the cause' cannot be assigned the property of being 'a picture'.

The distinction which Moro makes between copulative constructions with a non-referential predicate NP and copulative constructions with a referential predicate NP corresponds to the distinction made by Lyons between predicative and equative copulative constructions. Perhaps instead of the terms non-referentiality/referentiality and predicative/equative, the terms 'attribution' and 'non-attributive identification' might be used to distinguish these two types of copulative constructions.

The distribution of *kɨi* and *ciə* in Cambodian can be analysed in terms of the distinction between these two types of copulative constructions. In equative constructions, in which the predicate NP is referential, or identificational rather than attributive, *kɨi* is preferred, sometimes exclusively, sometimes with *ciə* as a less preferred option. In predicative



- (24) *Kñom kii viə.*  
           \**ciə*  
 I      COP it  
 I am it.

When the subject NP is formally identical to the predicate NP, as in (25), the sense of the construction is one of identification rather than predication, and *kii* is the only possible copula:

- (25) *Kñom kii kñom.*  
           \**ciə*  
 I      COP I  
 I am I.

Exclusive use of *kii* is often found where the head of the subject NP is formally identical to the head of the predicate NP, although the subject NP and the predicate NP may have different modifiers:

- (26) *Siəwphəw thom.ciən.kεε kii siəwphəw pǝa khiew.*  
                                   \**ciə*  
 book      biggest      COP book      colour blue  
 The biggest book is the blue book.
- (27) *Siəwphəw pǝa khiew kii siəwphəw thom.ciən.kεε*  
                                   \**ciə*  
 book      colour blue      COP book      biggest  
 The blue book is the biggest book.

The same holds for constructions with *?aa* 'one' as the head of the predicate NP:

- (28) *Siəwphəw thom.ciən.kεε kii ?aa pǝa khiew.*  
                                   \**ciə*  
 book      biggest      COP one colour blue  
 The biggest book is the blue one.
- (29) *Siəwphəw pǝa khiew kii ?aa thom.ciən.kεε*  
                                   \**ciə*  
 book      colour blue      COP one biggest  
 The blue book is the biggest one.

To summarise, constructions in which *kii* is the only possible copula seem to be limited to constructions which have a purely equative or identificational sense, and which retain the sense of equation or identification (and exclusive use of *kii*) when the order of constituents is reversed.

#### 2.4.2 PREFERENCE FOR *kii*

In the majority of copulative sentences with a predicate NP in my elicited material, what we have is either relative preference for *kii*, with *ciə* as a less preferred option, or else *kii* and *ciə* are judged equally acceptable. The relative degree of preference for *kii* can be changed by changing the order of constituents. For the variants which correspond to the Italian sentence in (13) (in which clitic replacement is possible in Italian), with an attributive (or 'non-referential') predicate NP, *kii* and *ciə* are judged equally acceptable. For the variants

which correspond to (15) (in which clitic replacement is not possible in Italian), with a non-attributive, identificational (or 'referential') predicate NP, *ciə* is possible but *kii* is preferred.

Why should free variation be the norm in attributive copulative sentences? In some sense, when you attribute a property to an NP, you are at the same time identifying it; thus, in general, whenever *ciə* is acceptable, so is *kii*. But the reverse is not true; you can identify something without attributing a property to it. In such sentences, there is a clear preference for *kii*.

Here are several minimal pairs of this type:

- (30) *Rup.taət muɣ kii mul.hɛc naisankriəm.*  
*ciə*  
 picture one COP reason war  
 A picture was the reason for the war.
- (31) *Mul.hɛc naisankriəm kii rup.taət.*  
*?ciə*  
 reason war COP picture  
 The reason for the war was a picture.
- (32) *Tidaa kii nea?.kruu knuɲ phum nih.*  
*ciə*  
 Tidaa COP teacher in village this.  
 Tidaa is the/a teacher in the village.
- (33) *nea?.kruu knuɲ phum nih kii tidaa*  
*?ciə*  
 teacher in village this COP Tidaa  
 The/a teacher in the village is Tidaa.
- (34) *Baay kii məhɔp kmɛ cɲaṅ.*  
*ciə*  
 rice COP food Cambodian delicious  
 Rice is a delicious Cambodian food.
- (35) *Məhɔp kmr cɲaṅ kii baay.*  
*?ciə*  
 food Cambodian delicious COP rice  
 A delicious Cambodian food is rice.
- (36) *Tii.kroɲ dael yən kii kii tii.kroɲ thom.ciən.kɛ.*  
*ciə*  
 city that we see COP city biggest  
 The city we saw is the biggest city.
- (37) *Tii.kroɲ thom.ciən.kɛ kii tii.kroɲ dael yən kii.*  
*?ciə*  
 city biggest COP city that we see  
 The biggest city is the city we saw.

The copulative variants of examples (5) and (6), given above in the section on *nəw* and repeated here as (38) and (39), follow the same pattern. When the predicate NP is one of identification rather than attribution, as in these examples, then *kii* is preferred over *ciə*.



However, when the order of constituents is reversed, the predicate NP is attributive, and *kii* and *ciə* are equally acceptable:

- (38) *Tii pracuŋ (kii) nəw/ kii/ ?ciə sabaa.*  
 place meeting COP LOC COP COP school  
 The meeting is at school.
- (39) *Peil pracuŋ (kii) nəw/ kii/ ?ciə maon prampii.*  
 time meeting COP LOC COP COP hour seven  
 The meeting is at seven o'clock.
- (40) *Sabaa kii tii pracuŋ.*  
*ciə*  
 school COP place meeting  
 School is the place of the meeting.
- (41) *Maon prampii kii peil pracuŋ.*  
*ciə*  
 hour seven COP time meeting  
 Seven o'clock is the time of the meeting.

Examples (42) and (43) suggest that pronouns are more 'referential' than proper names in Cambodian:

- (42) *Niən kii tidaa.*  
*ciə*  
 she COP Tidaa  
 She is Tidaa.
- (43) *Tidaa kii niən.*  
*?ciə*  
 Tidaa COP she  
 Tidaa is she.

Examples (44) and (45), which follow the same pattern, suggest that a first name is more 'referential' than a title in Cambodian:

- (44) *Tidaa kii nea?.srəy kuit.*  
*ciə*  
 Tidaa COP Mrs Kuit  
 Tidaa is Mrs Kuit.
- (45) *Nea?.srəy kuit kii tidaa.*  
*?ciə*  
 Mrs Kuit COP Tidaa  
 Mrs Kuit is Tidaa.

#### 2.4.3 DEMONSTRATIVES

Demonstratives appear to be inherently 'referential' in Cambodian; this seems logical, since demonstratives have the inherent function of 'pointing to' a referent. In non-interrogative constructions, when either the subject NP or the predicate NP contains a demonstrative, *kii* is preferred over *ciə*:

- (46) *Nih kii mdaay robah kmeyn.srəy.*  
       ?ciə  
 this COP mother of girl  
 This is the mother of the girl.
- (47) *Mdaay robah kmeyn.srəy kii nih.*  
   ?ciə  
 mother of girl COP this  
 The mother of the girl is this one.
- (48) *Srəy nih kii tidaa.*  
   ?ciə  
 woman this COP Tidaa  
 This woman is Tidaa.
- (49) *Tidaa kii srəy nih.*  
   ?ciə  
 Tidaa COP woman this  
 Tidaa is this woman.

#### 2.4.4 WH-QUESTIONS

Similarly, interrogative constructions with the WH-element *nah* 'which' inherently ask for identification rather than description; *kii* is always preferred over *ciə* in such constructions:

- (50) *Muy nah kii trəy?*  
   ?ciə  
 one which COP fish  
 Which is a fish?
- (51) *trəy muy nah kii trəy l?aa?*  
   ?ciə  
 fish one which COP fish good  
 Which fish is a good fish?

The behaviour of the WH-elements *wəy* 'what' and *nea?naa* 'who' is exceptional. In constructions with *wəy*, *kii* and *ciə* are judged equally acceptable, whether the sense of the construction is one of asking for identification, as in (52), or one of asking for a definition or description, as in (54) (example (53) can have either reading):

- (52) *Nih kii wəy?*  
       ciə  
 this COP what  
 What is this?
- (53) *Viə kii wəy?*  
       ciə  
 it COP what  
 What is it?

- (54) *Baay kii wəy?*  
           *ciə*  
 rice COP what  
 What is rice?

In constructions with *nea?naa* 'which person, who', *ciə* is always preferred over *kii*:

- (55) *Nih ciə nea?.naa?*  
           ?*kii*  
 this COP who  
 Who is this?
- (56) *Niən ciə nea?.naa?*  
           ?*kii*  
 she COP who  
 Who is she?
- (57) *Tidaa ciə nea?.naa?*  
           ?*kii*  
 Tidaa COP who  
 Who is Tidaa?

#### 2.4.5 PREFERENCE FOR *ciə*

Other than the 'who' sentences, I was able to elicit only a few sentences for which Mr Chau expressed a preference for *ciə*, with *kii* as a secondary option. My data contain no sentences in which *ciə* is chosen exclusively; wherever *ciə* is possible, *kii* is available, at least as a secondary option.

Sometimes, there is a correspondence between preference for *ciə* and the use of the indefinite article with the predicate NP in the English translation. The English translations for (58) and (59) differ only in that (58) has an indefinite article where (59) has a definite article; (58) has preference for *ciə*, and (59) has preference for *kii*:

- (58) *Viə ciə siəwphəw l?aa.*  
           ?*kii*  
 it COP book good  
 It is a good book.
- (59) *Viə kii siəwphəw l?aa.*  
           ?*ciə*  
 it COP book good  
 It is the good book.

However, this correspondence does not always obtain; compare example (32) above, repeated here as (60), in which *kii* and *ciə* are judged equally acceptable, whether the English translation has a definite article or an indefinite article as part of the predicate NP:

- (60) *Tidaa kii nea?.kruu knuŋ phum nih.*  
           *ciə*  
 Tidaa COP teacher in village this.  
 Tidaa is the/a teacher in the village.

The opposition of identification and attribution seems to play a more important role in the distinction between preference for *ciə* and preference for *kii* than the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness of predicate NPs. Sentence (58), with preference for *ciə*, is a likely response to a question which asks for a description, such as ‘What kind of book is it?’. Sentence (59), with preference for *kii*, is a likely response to a question which asks for identification, such as ‘Which book is it?’.

Similarly, *ciə* is preferred in (61) below, a response to the question ‘Can you tell me something about Tidaa?’, while *kii* is preferred in (62), a response to the question ‘Who is Tidaa?’:

(61) *Tidaa ciə nea?.kruu.*  
       ?*kii*  
       Tidaa COP teacher  
       Tidaa is a teacher.

(62) *Tidaa kii nea?.kruu.*  
       ?*ciə*  
       Tidaa COP teacher  
       Tidaa is a teacher.

I was surprised by the judgments given for two minimal pairs which seem structurally equivalent to examples (30) to (37). For those sentences, the variants with an identificational NP have preference for *kii*, and the variants with an attributive predicate NP have *kii* and *ciə* judged equally acceptable. In the following examples, the variants with an identificational predicate NP also have preference for *kii*, but the variants with an attributive predicate NP have preference for *ciə*:

(63) *Rud.tiəni kmer kii pnum.piñ.*  
       ?*ciə*  
       capital Cambodia COP Phnom.Penh  
       The capital of Cambodia is Phnom Penh.

(64) *Pnum.piñ ciə rud.tiəni kmer.*  
       ?*kii*  
       Phnom.Penh COP capital Cambodia  
       Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia.

(65) *Pratiniətapəday kii George.Bush.*  
       ?*ciə*  
       president COP George.Bush  
       The president is George Bush.

(66) *George.Bush ciə pratiniətapəday.*  
       ?*kii*  
       George.Bush COP president  
       George Bush is the president.

Mr Chau explained that he prefers *ciə* in (64) and (66) because “everyone knows that these are so, so there’s no need to identify them”. In other words, the sense of (64) and (66) is felt to be strongly descriptive or attributive, and not likely to be a question of identification. It seems then that, at least in some cases, there may be an element of subjective judgment involved in the use of *kii* and *ciə*, which is related to how the speaker perceives the relative

plausibility of identificational and attributive readings. The fact that *kii* and *ciə* are judged equally acceptable in structurally similar examples such as (30) to (37) may be due to the fact that for these sentences, identificational and attributive readings are interpreted as equally reasonable.

In conclusion, it appears that despite the high degree of overlap in the distribution of *kii* and *ciə*, the two copulas have essentially distinct functions; *kii* functions primarily as an equative copula, linking a subject NP with a referential, or non-attributive, identificational predicate NP, while *ciə* functions primarily as a predicative copula, linking a subject NP with a non-referential, or attributive, predicate NP. At least some of the overlap of the two copulas in my data appears to result from the fact that many sentences permit both equative and predicative readings, especially when elicited in isolation, in the absence of any particular context. In a future study of Cambodian copulative constructions, the hypotheses which I have presented here might be confirmed or refined through examination of the use of the copulas as they occur in particular contexts in Cambodian discourse or written texts.

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