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# Translating the Bible into Khmer: Challenges and Opportunities

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Translating the Bible into Khmer:  
Challenges and Opportunities

A Paper

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## **I. An Introduction to Cambodia and the Cambodian People**

This paper has its genesis in my own experience as both a second generation Cambodian and a Lutheran. My mother fled Cambodia in 1981 and converted to Christianity after her arrival in the United States. As a young child, my mother and her brothers tried to teach me the intricacies of Cambodian expression, but mostly succeeded in befuddling me. As I have grown older and gained a grasp of both the Cambodian language and the Greek New Testament, I have also gained an even greater sense of appreciation for the linguistic gymnastics that my mother has to do every time that she sits and listens to the Bible read in church.

My time teaching English as a Second Language through the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota has brought further light to the gymnastics of Cambodian bible translation. I teach elderly Cambodians, who have scant exposure to the English language, and so I have found it necessary to parse out every concept that we cover. Parsing the differences between the Cambodian and the English language in an academic and pedagogical manner has furthered my interest in the task of Bible translation and has led directly to the research presented here.

Through this paper on translating the Bible into the language of Cambodia, I hope to shine light on a Christian community that often finds itself in the shadow of its cousins the Vietnamese and the Hmong. By highlighting the challenges of translating into Cambodian, I hope to inspire a renewed interest in Bible translation for Cambodians both in Cambodia and around the world. To my knowledge, this is the first paper written about Cambodian translation by a member of the second generation of the Cambodian diaspora.

In working with the Cambodian community, I have found that the general public lacks even a cursory knowledge of Cambodia. Thus, I begin my paper with the basics of Cambodia's geography, demography, and language. Moving on to translation, I offer a short history of the Bible in Cambodia, then, discuss the non-linguistic obstacles that Bible translators face in the modern Cambodian context. From there, I move on to describe the Cambodian language vis-à-vis Koine Greek, and its challenges in relation to the Bible, followed by a case study in translating second person pronouns. I end the paper with a reflection on the need for translators to incorporate the advances of modern linguistics and a look towards the future of Cambodian Bible translation.

### **Where is Cambodia?**

As a young child growing up outside of Los Angeles, California, my peers displayed an amusing array of responses when I told them that I was Cambodian. A small number knew that Cambodia was in Southeast Asia, but the majority responded with either embarrassment at their ignorance or a mad stab at trying to place it in the world. On one such occasion, one of my peers, confusing Cambodia with Cameroon, exclaimed, "I didn't know your mom was from Africa!" I relate this personal anecdote to illustrate the fact that despite the genocide of the 1970s and tourist interest in the temple of Angkor Wat, Cambodia remains a country with limited global recognition.

Cambodia is located in Southeast Asia, in between the spheres of influence of India and China. To the north and east, Cambodia borders Laos and Vietnam. Together, the three countries comprised the former colony of French Indochina. To the north and west, Cambodia borders Thailand, the only country in Southeast Asia to have avoided colonization.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Steinberg, *Cambodia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1957), 20.

Roughly the size of Missouri, Cambodia's geography consists mainly of a low-lying central plain surrounded by mountains. The Mekong River dominates the central plain, providing the conditions for Cambodia's rice production, as well as Cambodia's main fishery.<sup>2</sup> Along the borders with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, the climate shifts towards mountainous jungle, known to the French as the *maquis*.<sup>3</sup>

### Who Lives in Cambodia?

Almost sixteen million people live in Cambodia. Of those sixteen million, ninety percent are ethnic Cambodians.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic Cambodians refer to themselves as Khmer.<sup>5</sup> Cambodia also contains Vietnamese and Chinese communities, who comprise five and one percent of the population, respectively.<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese communities live in the regions of Cambodia bordering the Mekong River Delta, an area of territorial dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia. The Chinese migrated into Cambodia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as part of the southern Chinese diaspora that sent laborers and merchants into Indochina, Indonesia, and the United States.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese, several smaller ethnic groups call Cambodia home. These include the Cham, as well as seventeen to twenty one tribes referred to collectively as the *Montagnards*. The *Montagnards* live in the highlands between Cambodia and Vietnam and are descendants of Neolithic Mon-Khmer people. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ashok K. Dutt, "Cambodia" in *Southeast Asia: A Ten Nation Region*, ed. Ashok K. Dutt (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 213.

<sup>3</sup> The expression is similar to when Australian's speak of "the bush."

<sup>4</sup> "Cambodia," The Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book, accessed April 25, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Pronounced *kh-my*. The "r", while present in the Khmer script, is silent.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese community in Cambodia presents an opportunity to clarify some of the usage regarding the use of the word "Cambodian." Many of the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia have lived there for several generations; when they immigrate to other countries, they often refer to themselves as "Cambodians." My own family falls into this category. However, they are not Khmer. To put it in another way, all Khmer are Cambodians, but not all Cambodians are Khmer. Thus, throughout this paper, I will use Cambodia to refer to the political state and Cambodian to refer to the people who live in Cambodia and the people of the Cambodian diaspora, regardless of ethnicity. When ethnic Cambodians are meant and, to refer to the language, I will hereafter use the term Khmer.

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Willmott, *The Political Structure of the Chinese Community in Cambodia* (New York: Humanities Press, Incorporated, 1970), 7.

predominantly Muslim Cham are the remnants of a kingdom located in the southeast part of Cambodia.<sup>8</sup>

The Muslim Cham and the animist *Montagnards* aside, the overwhelming majority of Cambodians (over ninety seven percent) embrace Buddhism. Christianity has made few inroads in Cambodia, with between 50,000 and 250,000 adherents.<sup>9</sup> About 20,000 Cambodian Christians belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the remainder belong to the Khmer Evangelical Church, a result of work by the Christian and Missionary Alliance.<sup>10</sup>

### **What Language Do They Speak?**

Each ethnic group in Cambodia possesses its own language, but they share Khmer as a national language. Khmer, as its name indicates, is the native language of the Khmer community. When people refer to the “Cambodian” language, they mean Khmer.

Worldwide, approximately sixteen million people speak Khmer, with the vast majority living in Cambodia. Khmer belongs to the Austro-Asiatic branch of languages, and more specifically to the Mon-Khmer family. Khmer’s closest linguistic-familial connections lie with the languages of the *Montagnards* scattered throughout Southeast Asia, and it is distantly related to its neighbor Vietnamese.<sup>11</sup> Along with Vietnamese, Thai, and Lao, Khmer forms a *sprachbund*, i.e. a group of languages which shares common features on account of geographical proximity. Thus, although Thai and Khmer do not share a language family, they share sixty percent of their vocabulary.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Steinberg, *Cambodia*, 48-49, 51-56.

<sup>9</sup> “Buddhists,” Pew Research Center, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Cambodia,” The Christian and Missionary Alliance, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.cmalliance.org/field/cambodia>.

<sup>11</sup> Cliff Goddard, *The Languages of East and Southeast Asia: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Having introduced the Cambodian country, people, and language, the remainder of the paper will focus on the obstacles and opportunities associated with translating the New Testament into Khmer. The first section will cover the history of Khmer Bible translation. The second section will discuss the non-linguistic obstacles faced by Khmer Bible translators. The third section will hone in on linguistic difficulties presented by Khmer vis-à-vis Koine Greek. The last section will use Khmer's catalog of second person pronouns as a case study of these difficulties in action.

## **II. Some Challenges of Translating into Khmer**

### **A Short History of Bible Translation into Khmer<sup>13</sup>**

Although missionaries had visited Cambodia as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the history of translating the Bible into Khmer began with the French colonial government in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike in Vietnam, the “crown jewel” of the French Indochinese colonies, the Roman Catholic Church paid scant attention to Cambodia, and so Bible translation took place on an ad hoc basis. A French priest, Marie-Joseph Guesdon translated the first Bible passages into Khmer; Guesdon's translations came from the lectionary texts and consisted of selections from the gospels, epistles, and the Psalms. The first book of the Bible translated in its entirety was the Gospel of Luke in 1899, the result of collaboration between a French government official and a royal interpreter. The translation of the entire Bible did not begin until the arrival of evangelical missionaries in the twentieth century. In 1923, Arthur Hammond, a Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor, began translating the Bible into Khmer, using the American Standard Version as base text. Thirty years later, in 1954, Hammond completed his translation. In 1973, the United Bible Society began an effort to provide a translation done by native Khmer speakers. The team

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<sup>13</sup> This section is adapted from Joseph Hong, “Translating and Revising *Today's Khmer New Testament*” in *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1996), 234-237.

completed a draft of the New Testament by 1975, but in that same year, the Khmer Rouge rose to power. Under the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian translators died and, aside from the first four chapters of Matthew, the remainder of the draft disappeared.

In 1985, five years after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese, the United Bible Societies renewed their translation effort. Arun Sok Nhep, a Cambodian who had survived the genocide and then completed seminary training in France, headed the translation team. By 1993, the team had completed the New Testament. Five years later, they published the whole Bible as *Today's Khmer Version*.

At the present time, Cambodian Christians use both Hammond's translation and *Today's Khmer Version*. Hammond's, officially known as the *Khmer Old Version [KOV]*, continues to enjoy popularity for its connection to the original evangelical mission effort and its use among Cambodians Christians in Thai refugee camps. In some ways, the *KOV* has achieved a "King James" status among Cambodian Christians. *Today's Khmer Version*, later renamed the *Khmer Standard Version [KSV]*, has faced opposition from some of Cambodia's leading evangelical pastors, but has grown in popularity among newer converts.<sup>14</sup>

The two Bibles exhibit divergent translation principles. In translating the *KOV*, Arthur Hammond relied on a literal rendering of the American Standard Version into Khmer. Hammond's concern for reproducing the form of the biblical text led him to introduce foreign grammatical concepts into his translation, most notably the passive voice.<sup>15</sup> The *KSV*, as a United Bible Societies effort, relied heavily on the Common Language translation principles laid out by Eugene Nida. Especially in regards to the New Testament, the translators relied on Nida's dynamic equivalence translation model in order to make the Bible "speak the language

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<sup>14</sup> For simplicity, I will refer to the two translations as the *KOV* and the *KSV*.

<sup>15</sup> Arun Sok Nhep, "Translating the Bible into Khmer," in *Honeycomb* 1 (2000), 44-46.



[Cambodians] learn at school, the language they use in the workplace.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike the *KOV*, the *KSV* prioritizes proper Khmer grammar over the form of the biblical text.

### **Challenges Faced by Khmer Translators**

Before diving into Khmer grammar and the practice of translating into Khmer, it is necessary to highlight the two most prominent non-grammatical challenges of translating the New Testament into Khmer. The first is the abject poverty that continues to plague Cambodia as a country. The second is the sheer dominance of the Buddhist idiom in Cambodian life and thought.

Poverty remains the greatest challenge to Khmer translators. Cambodia has not recovered from the horror begun by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Though the Khmer Rouge genocide and the Vietnamese occupation have past, the effects Cambodia continues to rank as one of the poorest countries in East Asia.<sup>17</sup> The death of one in three Cambodians, the proliferation of land mines in agricultural areas, the lack of access to clean water and medicine, the lack of access to education, and a brutally corrupt government continue to cripple the Cambodian people.<sup>18</sup> Within the matrix of Cambodian difficulties, Khmer Bible translators find themselves lacking in many ways. Their lack of access to quality education in their native language and lack of capital for self-sustaining ministry are just two of the many problems that grow out of the environment of Cambodia’s poverty.

Another challenge, no less profound, rises out of the Cambodian people’s long relationship to Buddhism. Cambodian’s first encountered Buddhism in the 9th century, and since

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 46.

<sup>17</sup> “Cambodia,” The World Bank, Accessed April 25, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/cambodia>.

<sup>18</sup> Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, trans. Mark W. Mcleod (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 299-300.

Buddhism has grown to hold a virtual monopoly on Cambodian religious life.<sup>19</sup> First of all, Buddhism's monopoly presents challenges to the translator through the close linkage of Khmer ethnic identity with Buddhist practice. For many, "To be Cambodian is to be Buddhist," and so devotion to another set of sacred writings can lead to charges of forsaking Cambodian identity.<sup>20</sup> On a deeper level, through over a millennium of interaction, the Buddhist idiom has molded Cambodian religious thought. This religious molding presents an area where the line between cultural and linguistic challenges blurs. Buddhism has shaped the connotations of individual words such as "heaven," "God," etc. As Arun Sok Nhep, one of the *KSV* translators describes, "For instance, in the past, the term *stan suor* has often been used for 'heaven(s).' But in the Khmer [Buddhist] cosmological worldview, *stan suor* is a place where all divinities live, and it is still related to the present sinful world. By saying "God dwells in *stan suor*" we make him, in the eyes of ordinary Khmer, imperfect and less than Buddha."<sup>21</sup> Khmer translators cannot uncritically adopt Khmer religious words for Christian theological terms. The influence of Buddhism extends to the ways that Cambodians think about religion in general. In the 1970s, a French translator expressed the difficulty of choosing words to describe Jesus:

If we adopt the vocabulary of an ordinary man, we respect the humility of Christ and his incognito... But we come up against the fact that Buddha, being of royal blood, is always designated by royal terms. Not to use them for Christ, we are told, would discredit him in the eyes of the people.<sup>22</sup>

Khmer translators face challenges that are entrenched within the reality of Cambodian life and identity. In the following sections, the difficulties of the Khmer language magnify these challenges.

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<sup>19</sup> Steinberg, *Cambodia*, 290.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Douglas, "The Cross and the Lotus: Changing Religious Practices Among Cambodian Immigrants in Seattle" in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian & Pacific America*, ed. Jane Iwamura & Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159.

<sup>21</sup> Arun Sok Nhep, "Translating the Bible into Khmer," 45.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Clavaud, "Problems Encountered in Translating the New Testament in to Modern Cambodian" *The Bible Translator*, Vol 24, no. 4 (1973), 421.

## Khmer Grammar Vis-à-vis Koine Greek

In addition to the physical and cultural challenges encountered by Khmer Bible translators, the internal logic of the Khmer language differs considerably from that of the Koine Greek in the New Testament. Koine Greek belongs to the Indo-European language family along with Latin and Sanskrit, as well as modern languages such as English, French, and Russian.<sup>23</sup> As detailed above, Khmer belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family, which includes Vietnamese and the languages of the so-called hill tribes of Burma, Malaya, and Cambodia.<sup>24</sup>

Khmer, as an isolating language, marks word function through word position. Further, Khmer words lack inflection. Khmer nouns have no inflectional markers for case or number, and Khmer verbs have no markers for tense or aspect.<sup>25</sup> Koine Greek, on the other hand, displays a high degree of inflection, making use of numerous augments and endings. Nouns display case, gender, and number; verbs display tense,<sup>26</sup> voice, mood, person, and number.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Khmer, Koine Greek structures itself so that each individual word carries more information independent of its placement in a sentence.

The gulf in morphology between Khmer and Koine Greek points to differences in the way that they express ideas. To use verbs as an example, Koine Greek, with all of its inflections, displays three voices, three moods, and six tenses. In contrast, Khmer verbs have only an active voice and no tenses. Khmer verbs express their relationship to time through context, though in ambiguous circumstances, adverbs can play a part.<sup>28</sup> The Khmer translator faces the challenge of expressing the information encoded in the Greek verb without overloading the translation in a

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<sup>23</sup> Carl Darling Buck, *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 1.

<sup>22</sup> See page 9 and 10 for more details.

<sup>25</sup> Goddard, *The Languages of East and Southeast Asia*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> There is considerable debate among scholars as to whether Greek verbs actually encode tense. For the sake of simplicity, I will treat them as though they do, since the ramifications for translating Khmer into Greek are similar.

<sup>27</sup> Buck, *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*, 237-240.

<sup>28</sup> Judith M. Jacob, *Introduction to Cambodian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69.

way unnatural to Khmer. The Khmer translators may have to satisfy themselves with a translation that is more ambiguous in regards to time and aspect than the Greek. However, Greek does not always express ideas more precisely than Khmer. The next section discusses the challenges entailed when Khmer expresses an idea with more precision than the original text.

### **Case Studies: The Second Person Pronoun in Khmer**

Koine Greek verbs present a challenge for the translator because they encode more information than Khmer verbs. The short case study that follows presents the opposite challenge in the form of the Khmer second person pronouns. Like many East Asian languages, Khmer has incorporated an extensive catalog of respect based pronouns into its vocabulary.<sup>29</sup> Depending on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, Khmer employs over a dozen pronouns that identify differences in age, gender, and social status.<sup>30</sup> These expressions function as equivalents of the English “you,” but they also express either the title of the addressee, e.g. *neck krew*, literally “teacher” or they express familial relationships, e.g. *miing*, literally, “aunt,” but also used to address a woman younger than the speaker’s mother.<sup>31</sup> Koine Greek, on the other hand, has only two second person pronouns, a singular pronoun, σὺ and a plural pronoun, ὑμεῖς. Each of these two also appears in the oblique cases (accusative, genitive, etc.) in order to mark its function. Through its different forms, the Koine Greek pronoun encodes the “I/thou” relationship, number, and case. The Khmer pronoun encodes the “I/thou” relationship, social standing, familial relation, respect, and intimacy. The challenge for the Khmer Bible translator lies in the areas where the Khmer pronoun encodes a higher level of specificity than the Greek, especially in terms of values such as respect and intimacy. The amount of meaning carried by

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<sup>29</sup> John Marston, *Cambodia 1991-94: hierarchy, neutrality and etiquettes of discourse*, (Phd. dissertation, University of Washington, 1997), 125.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix A for the full lists of pronouns.

<sup>31</sup> Khmer is written in a Sanskrit alphabet. No standardized system for transliterating Khmer exists, so I will use the system of Richard Gilbert, *Cambodian for Beginners* (Berkeley, Paiboon Publishing, 2008), 2-4.

Khmer pronouns validates Newman and Nida’s advice that “one must be very sensitive to the use of pronominal forms, since they frequently carry rather subtle connotations.”<sup>32</sup> The following three case studies explore Jesus’ interactions with people of different social standings and the possibilities presented in each situation by the Khmer pronoun catalog.

### Case Study #1: John 2:4

Καὶ λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι;  
[And Jesus said to her, “What is it to me and to you, woman?”]<sup>33</sup>

In John 2:4, Jesus speaks to his mother. At first glance, the translation seems fairly straight forward. A translator would render σοί as either *maak*, *miadtaa*, or *mdae*, used when a child speaks to their mother. The presence of γύναι, the vocative form of the common word γυνή [woman], complicates the translation. As in the *KSV*, a translator could follow *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* and interpret γυνή as a normal way of referring to one’s mother.<sup>34</sup> However, the glosses in Liddell and Scott’s *Lexicon* show that γυνή appears in the vocative as “a term of respect or affection for a mistress or lady,” but never for a mother.<sup>35</sup> The preceding verse makes clear that Jesus is talking to his mother, so the translator might opt for the more nuanced reading of the *New Interpreter’s Bible* that

The use of that form of address to speak to one’s own mother is unusual however. It creates a distance between Jesus and his mother by playing down their familial relation.<sup>36</sup>

Taking the *New Interpreter’s Bible* reading, they might render σοί with *look-miing*, a formal way to address a woman the age of the speaker’s parents.

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<sup>32</sup> Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 58.

<sup>33</sup> All Biblical citations come from *The Greek New Testament: Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010) and all translation are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>34</sup> Newman and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> “γυνή” *A Greek-English Lexicon Compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 363.

<sup>36</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume IX Luke John*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 536.

At the heart of the translation is the question: How does Jesus, the Word made flesh, address his mother? East Asian theological reflection, such as Peter Phan’s work on Jesus as the Eldest Son, could result in a translation that acknowledges and reinforces the deference that a son shows his mother. On the other hand, influenced by Matthew 12:48,<sup>37</sup> the translator could make the decision that Jesus breaks down hierarchical ways of dividing people. To add one more layer, the translator’s view of Mary plays an important part in their rendering. On the extreme end, a Roman Catholic translator with a view towards emphasizing Mary as co-mediatrix could translate σοί as *bpreah-ɔng*, the designation for royalty, to show that Jesus himself acknowledges Mary’s status as the Queen of Heaven.

In both the *KOV* and the *KSV*, the translators took γύναι as a form of mother-son address. The *KOV* used *miadtaa*, while the *KSV* chose to add a high level of formality by inserting the polite title *neck* before *mdae* [mother]. While the *KSV* doesn’t go so far as to “play down their familial relation,” the use of *neck mdae* by Jesus indicates a distant relationship between mother and son, a la Georg von Trapp and his children in the *Sound of Music*.

### Case Study #2: John 18:33-34, 36a

Εἰσηλθεν οὖν πάλιν εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον ὁ Πειλᾶτος καὶ ἐφώνησεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς Ἀπὸ σεαυτοῦ σὺ τοῦτο λέγεις ἢ ἄλλοι εἶπον σοὶ περὶ ἐμοῦ;... ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς Ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμὴ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

[Then, Pilate entered the praetorium and addressed Jesus, saying to him, “Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, “Do you say this by yourself or have others said this about me to you? ...Jesus answered “My kingdom is not of this world.”]

John 18:33-34 contains an example of a social superior speaking to Jesus and Jesus’ reply. Shortly after, John 18.36a raises the question of Jesus’ appraisal of himself. In John 18.33, the tone of Pilate’s response governs the translation. If the translator sees Pilate’s treatment of Jesus as mocking, they could translate σύ as *aeng*, thereby emphasizing the social distance

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<sup>37</sup> “But, he [Jesus] answered, saying to the one who was speaking, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?”

between the pronoun and the title “king.” A sincere view of the question could use *look* to show Pilate as polite, if somewhat skeptical. Jesus’ response to Pilate contains a similar range of options.

Since Pilate holds high social standing, a translation that sees Jesus as respecting social convention would render  $\Sigma\grave{o}$  as *look* or, if Jesus intends to show extra deference to Pilate, *look-dtɔm* [Your Excellency]. A translator could also decide that Jesus’ response (“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting”) indicates disdain for Pilate’s questioning. In that case, a translator could render  $\Sigma\grave{o}$  as ‘*aeng* and portray Jesus as trampling on the rules of social conduct.

Of special interest to the Khmer translator is that Jesus acknowledges having a kingdom. A translator could take Jesus’ statement and logically conclude that Jesus considers himself a king. In that case, the translator could use the set of pronouns reserved for royalty. On the other hand, in acknowledging his kingdom, Jesus sets it apart from the worldly kingdoms of Herod and Caesar. Jesus differentiating his kingdom from the kingdoms of “this world,” could lead to a translation that features Jesus overturning the established customs for how a king speaks and relates to others.

Similar to John 2:4, the translator’s choice of pronoun depends on their appraisal of Jesus’ relation to the social propriety of his day. In the case of Pilate, instead of parsing Jesus’ view of the family, the translator must appraise Jesus’ relation to the Roman government. A translator with a Lutheran, two-kingdoms theology would choose differently than a translator with a liberation theology. Although it comes at the end of the Gospel of John, the translator’s decisions regarding Jesus’ interaction with Pilate has implications for the rest of the Gospel. The need to take into account the entire Gospel when translating John 18:33-36 and vice versa

deserves further attention and will be discussed in greater detail in the section on idiolect to follow.<sup>38</sup>

In keeping with John 2:4, the translators of the *KOV* and the *KSV* chose polite language for both Pilate and Jesus. In both translations, Pilate addresses Jesus as *neck*, the polite way of addressing someone of lower social status. In both translations, Jesus addresses Pilate as *look*, the polite way of addressing someone with religious or political status.

### Case Study #3: John 15:15

οὐκέτι λέγω ὑμᾶς δούλους ὅτι ὁ δοῦλος οὐκ οἶδεν τί ποιεῖ αὐτοῦ ὁ κύριος, ὑμᾶς δὲ εἵρηκα φίλους

[I no longer call you servants since the servant does not know what his master does, but I call you friends].

Unlike the two previous passages, John 15:15 contains an interaction between Jesus and his social inferiors. In this interaction, Jesus clearly breaks down the societal boundary between teacher and student. Following Jesus' boundary breaking, a translator could render ὑμᾶς as *look*, the familiar word for friend between equals. Logically then, Jesus' addresses to his disciples would use traditional teacher/student pronouns before John 15:15 and friend/friend pronouns for the remainder of the Gospel.

The last forty years of Cambodian history throw a monkey wrench into the simplicity. One of the programs of the Khmer Rouge in the re-education camps was to abolish Cambodian social hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> The Khmer Rouge sought to abolish the hierarchy through abandoning superior/inferior address and mandating the use of the word *mi't* (friend), similar to the Soviet "comrade."<sup>40</sup> Thus, a reading of John 15:15 could easily be produced which portrays Jesus as advocating Khmer Rouge policy against traditional Cambodian social structure.

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<sup>38</sup> See pages 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> Marston, *Cambodia*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



While a “Khmer Rouge Jesus” translation would have linguistic precedent, it would also have disastrous consequences for the reception of the Gospel in Cambodia. An analogous circumstance occurred in the translation of the *Popular Thai New Testament*. Thai has a similar pronoun system to Khmer, and the translators chose a pronoun for Jesus, that while grammatically correct, came to carry strong associations with homosexuality. Ever since, that particular translation has been known in Thailand as the “Super Gay Jesus” Bible, to both the humor and distress of Thai Christians.<sup>41</sup> The challenge for the translator lies in arbitrating between linguistic, theological, and pragmatic factors.

The *KOV*, translated before the Khmer Rouge, uses the word *soomlan*, while the *KSV* uses the aforementioned *mi't* and *soomlan* to form the compound *mi't soomlan* [best friends]. In both translations, Jesus continues to address the disciples with the word for inferiors, *neck*, instead of the word for equals, *look*, even after naming his disciples as friends.

In all three of the case studies, the individual verse does not contain within it all of the markers to address the problems of the translator. The translator must appeal to theological, cultural, and historical resources in order to produce an informed translation. The structures of the Khmer language stretch Eugene Nida’s maxim that “The translator must attempt to reproduce the meaning of a passage as understood by the writer” to the breaking point, because while the deep structure of the languages may be the same, the surface structure diverges.<sup>42</sup>

### **An Insight from Modern Linguistics**

Though I have dealt with the Greek New Testament on the level of verses for illustrative purposes, an effective Khmer translation must answer the same questions on a macro level. One

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<sup>41</sup> Howard A. Hatton, “*Maha-Katoey* and the Popular Thai New Testament” in *Issues in Bible Translation* ed. Philip C. Stine (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 180.

<sup>42</sup> Eugene Nida, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: The United Bible Societies, 1969), 8.

of the ways that modern linguistics engages larger scale questions is through the study of idiolect.

Analogous to dialect (i.e. the way that different groups of speakers use the same language), idiolect examines the ways that individual authors use their language. Idiolect includes word choice, but also encompasses questions of syntactical construction, patterns of verbal usage, and tone.<sup>43</sup> One of the weaknesses of both the *KOV* and the *KSV* is that the translators decided many questions on the level of the entire Bible instead of on a book by book or author by author basis. For instance, in regards to royal vs. common language, the *KSV* translation committee decided, “royal vocabulary is used when the text involves narrations about Jesus...when it comes to people addressing Jesus or Jesus talking to people, ordinary language is used.”<sup>44</sup> Because the Khmer pronoun system places such heavy stress on concepts such as respect and politeness, it is highly probable, if not certain, that individual Gospel writers will express the same dialogue in different manners. The way that John expresses Jesus’ adherence to the traditional Khmer pronoun system ought to differ from Matthew’s expression of the same ideas, depending on the Gospel writer’s views on authority, tradition, or social conventions. Advances in the study of idiolect allow the individual voice and concerns of the authors to stand out, instead of disappearing behind *a priori* decisions of how to translate a given term.

Modern linguistics has, of course, more to offer than idiolect, but hopefully idiolect serve as an introduction to the insights that a linguistically informed practice of translation can offer.

### **Conclusion**

Behind the question of which tools to use in a new translation lies the larger question: Why make a new Khmer translation? After all, there are already two translations of the Bible

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<sup>43</sup> Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 136.

<sup>44</sup> Hong, *Translating and Revising Today’s Khmer New Testament*, 237.

into Khmer, one of which was done by native Khmer speakers within the last 30 years. In closing, I would like to offer two answers to that question, one philosophical, one pragmatic.

Philosophically, the first answer is that translation must continually rethink itself. People change, languages change, and advances in the study of translation continue. Each new translation project uncovers new insights and offers an opportunity to hear and speak the Gospel in a new way. As the Christian community in Cambodia grows and changes, it will require new Bibles that meet its needs for worship, study, and evangelization.

Pragmatically, there is now the opportunity to engage in a scholarly Khmer bible translation. While both Hammond and the translators of the KSV used the best tools available to them, their over-riding concern was making the Bible speak Khmer as quickly as possible. Now that Hammond and the KSV have established a resource for church and missionary use, there is time to tackle the more complex questions that the biblical text presents. The goal is not a “better” translation, but a different one. To wit, there is not yet a Bible with scholarly notes and introductions in Khmer. As the Christian community in Cambodia and in the diaspora matures, there will be an increased need for resources geared towards those who wish to dive deeper into the biblical texts.

As a final note on the necessity of a new translation, we are still waiting for the first generation of biblical scholars who are native speakers of Khmer. Up to this point, problems of education, poverty, and the small size of the Christian population in Cambodia have prevented Cambodian Christians from training their own scholars. As shown above, the translation of the Bible into Khmer will depend on more than just high level knowledge of the Bible and translation theory. As Catherine Bocquet points out in her book on translating Luther into

French, even translating the German *Du* and *Ihr*<sup>45</sup> into the French *tu* and *vous* requires an intimate knowledge of French and German culture.<sup>46</sup> How much more so, will the translation of Khmer require highly trained translators with an intimate knowledge of Cambodian culture!

The task of preparing a new Khmer translation of the Bible presents future translators with a legion of problems to wrestle. But, to quote Jean Clavaud, a Christian missionary who remained in Cambodia despite Pol Pot's genocide, "The very existence of these problems makes the translation of the Bible into Cambodian, or into any other language for that matter, an enthralling task."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> At Luther's time, *Ihr*, not *Sie*, expressed the plural and formal second person pronoun

<sup>46</sup> Catherine Bocquet, "Deuxième Partie: Quelques Problèmes Ponctuels" in *L'Art de la Traduction Selon Martin Luther: Ou Lorsque le Traducteur se Fait Missionnaire* (Arras Cedex: Artois Presses Université, 2000), 237-239.

<sup>47</sup> Clavaud, *Problems Encountered in Translating the New Testament into Cambodian*, 422.

## Appendix A – Khmer “second Person Pronouns”

Adapted from Judith Jacob, *Introduction to Cambodian* and Richard Gilbert, *Cambodian for Beginners*

*'aeng* –someone inferior socially, somewhat vulgar

*nek* –someone younger or of a lower social status

*look/look-srey* – [lit. Sir/Madam] someone with status such as a religious leader or boss

*bɔɔng* – [lit. older brother/sister] someone older than speaker, but younger than speaker's parents

*bɔ-oon* – [lit. younger brother/sister] someone younger than speaker, but not young enough to be the speaker's child

*kmuaɣ* – [lit. nephew/niece] someone who is young enough to be the speaker's child

*goon* – [lit. child] the speaker's own children

*bpaɑ/aabpuk* – [lit. father] the speaker's father

*maak/mae/miadtaa* – [lit. mother] the speaker's mother

*bpuu* – [lit. uncle] a male who is approximately the age of the speaker's father

*miing* – [lit. aunt] a female who is approximately the age of the speaker's mother

*dtaa* – [lit. grandfather] a male who is approximately the age of the speaker's grandfather

*yiay* – [lit. grandmother] females approximately the age of the speaker's grandmother

*om* – [lit. uncle/aunt] someone than the speaker's parents, but younger than their grandparents

*look-dtɔm* – [lit. your excellency] someone of very high social status, such as a government minister

*bpreah-ɔng* –either the king or God

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