

# Khmu play languages<sup>1</sup>

Frank PROSCHAN  
Indiana University

The verbal arts of the Khmu (/Kmhmu?/, Kmhmu, Kmhmu', Kammu) people of northern Laos and neighboring Thailand, China, and Vietnam hold great interest not only to students of linguistic poetics and oral literature, but also to linguists who are concerned more with phonology, morphology, and syntax.<sup>2</sup> Khmu verbal arts typically involve playful manipulation of language forms and structural features that are present in normal everyday speech. As is generally true of poetic language, in these artistic genres elements of language are broken down and reassembled into new forms in new contexts. As Sherzer points out with particular reference to play languages, such special forms of speech are created "by making use of the rule structure or rule format of ordinary language but at the same time filling in this structure or format with possibilities not exploited in ordinary language" (Sherzer 1982:189). Those verbal art genres that involve the highest degree of modification stand out prominently as divergent from normal language, but it is useful to view such markedly extraordinary forms in the context of more ordinary speech genres that employ similar techniques but to a lesser degree, with each form having its place along a continuum from everyday speaking to highly modified speech forms. It is also useful and informative to consider these language phenomena in an areal context: many of these techniques have counterparts in related or neighboring languages in the area. In other cases the Khmu practices are unique, or at least they are carried out to a far greater extent than is described elsewhere.

Khmu play languages, speech surrogates, reduplication, and extended rhymed verse are alike in employing a characteristic technique that we may refer to as "parallelism." In each case, the artistic utterance achieves its fullest semantic force only by reference to another similar or parallel utterance; the referent may either be present in close contiguity or it may be absent. "Parallelism" can be

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<sup>2</sup> Khmu words are represented here using a modified IPA orthography, corresponding closely to a romanization in use by Khmu living in the United States and France. In this orthography /h/ following a stop or affricate marks aspiration and /h/ preceding a liquid marks devoicing. Length of vowels is indicated by doubling; an initial glottal stop should be understood to precede words represented here as beginning with a vowel. Personal names are represented as they are transliterated by the persons concerned. Although the author, along with most of the Khmu in the United States, prefers the spelling "Kmhmu", we adopt here the spelling used for library cataloguing by the U.S. Library of Congress.

defined succinctly for our immediate purpose as “the ordered interplay of repetition and variation, likeness and difference”: a sound, word, or string of sounds or words repeats or refers to a similar but usually nonidentical sound, word, or string. Let us briefly consider some examples of this general phenomenon, to get a better idea of what these various forms share in common, before giving more detailed consideration to Khmu play languages and disguised speech.

## 1. Reduplication and poetic parallelism

In *reduplication*, we encounter what we can consider micro-parallelism: a word or part of a word is repeated exactly or with modifications in its morphology and phonology. Thus in English we have such words as “roly poly”, “wishy washy”, “fiddle faddle”, and “hurdy gurdy”. In his authoritative account of Khmu morphology, Svantesson identifies five kinds of reduplication (1983:84); the symbols and definitions are his but the examples are my own:

R(Ø), reduplication without any change	
<i>caac caac</i>	‘sound of liquid dripping to ground’
R(O), onset-changing reduplication	
<i>tlot tot</i>	‘name of a bird species’
R(P), peak-changing reduplication	
<i>kvləəv kvlav</i>	‘manner of shivering’
R(C), coda-changing reduplication	
<i>hvɔɔy hvɔt</i>	‘flute sound flutters’
R(R), rhyme-changing reduplication	
<i>sn̩glɔŋ sn̩boon̩</i>	‘smooth-skinned and light-skinned’

In each case, certain phonological sequences are repeated without change, while others are altered or introduced. The first case involves simple repetition, while the others clearly involve partial repetition with variation.

The degree to which reduplication is a productive morphological process in Khmu has yet to be determined. Clearly, it is within the expressive lexicon (where reduplication is most frequent) that we find the greatest variability among Khmu dialects. With a few interesting exceptions, the basic lexicon of Khmu is common to all dialects, while the expressive vocabulary is far more diverse. But because the morphological structure of the language and the techniques of reduplication are well-known to speakers, newly encountered reduplicative words can be understood even if they are not present in a particular dialect. Whether we locate productivity at the emitting or receiving end of an interactional utterance—whether we assign it to the speaker or the listener—we can nevertheless say that the comprehensibility of reduplicated words depends on a native speaker’s/hearer’s profound if inchoate understanding of the morphology of the language itself.

The methods of reduplication employed in Khmu have very close counterparts in other Austroasiatic languages, including Pacoh (Watson 1966), Ngeq (Smith 1973), Bahnar (Banker 1964), and Khmer (Gorgoniev 1976).<sup>3</sup> Khmer reduplication, as described by Jacob (1979), may involve repetition of a monosyllabic or multisyllabic word (cf. Svantesson’s R[Ø]); rhyming, i.e. “reduplication of vowel nucleus and final consonant” (cf. Svantesson’s R[O]); chiming, i.e. “reduplication of initial and final consonant” (cf. Svantesson’s R[P]); alliteration “with reduplication of initial consonants” (cf. Svantesson’s R[C]), or a minor presyllable whose consonant “echoes” the initial consonant of the main syllable (Jacob 1979:112-115).

Reduplication is also typical of Vietnamese, as described by Nguyen Van Huyen (1934), among many others.<sup>4</sup> He examines reduplication under the somewhat broader category of “word-groups” which themselves combine to form “aesthetic unities.” He considers a class of binomes formed by the complete or incomplete repetition of phonological features. Complete repetition involves two identical terms; in the case of incomplete repetition the two terms may share their vowel and tone, or their initial consonant. Nguyen Van Huyen presents reduplication in Vietnamese as a somewhat special case of the far more pervasive process of parallelism. His study is especially valuable in relating micro to macro: reduplication and word groups are drawn together in his analysis with parallelism in poetic verse, to which we now turn.

*Poetic parallelism in Khmu verse genres*, the second object of our attention, involves an “apportionment of invariants and variables,” in Jakobson’s formulation (1987[1966]:173). Within a stable frame that recurs from one poetic line to the next, varied words are inserted. In Jakobson’s definition, canonical parallelism exists when “certain similarities between successive verbal sequences are compulsory or enjoy a high preference,” especially when these sequences occur “in metrically or strophically corresponding position” (1987[1966]:146, 145). An example comes from my recordings of Khmu verse sung in the U.S., here performed by Ta’ Souan Khansouvong, a singer from the Pak Beng region of Laos who is now living in California:

rmhuuk, uun oʔ mec siaŋ bɔɔ, yaan  
 rmhiaŋ, uun oʔ mec trooŋ bɔɔ, yaan  
 siaŋ bɔɔ, yaan, cii pat hlaaŋ hrooŋ  
 trooŋ bɔɔ, yaan, cii hur hlaaŋ hor  
 siaŋ kɔɔn, yaan, klɛʔ klɛʔ muan kir  
 siaŋ kɔɔn, yaan, kler kler muan cɾeɛŋ

<sup>3</sup> Other useful treatment of reduplication in Southeast Asian languages include Gonda’s studies of Indonesian languages (1940, 1949-50), and an anthology of works in Russian (Alieva et al. 1980) discussing the languages of insular and mainland Southeast Asia.

<sup>4</sup> There are literally dozens of studies of reduplication in Vietnamese, as noted in Huffman (1986) and Thomas (1989-90 [1992]). Nguyen Van Huyen’s study is among the first, and particularly relevant because it relates word-level reduplication to higher-level forms.

bellow, let me hear your sound, dear  
 yell, let me hear your throat, dear  
 your sound, dear, is like my Jew's harp  
 your throat, dear, is like my flute  
 your sound, dear, goes *klɔ? klɔ?*, beautiful as my rattle  
 your sound, dear, goes *kler kler*, beautiful as my cymbals

(KV-FP-058, recorded 11 August 1984  
 in Richmond, California)

As is evident, each couplet involves a substantial degree of repetition, with variation introduced into the stable frame. In the case of this example, each couplet makes literal sense, and the parallel words fall in the same place within the stable frame. Without going into exhaustive detail on similar traditions in other Southeast Asian languages (see Proschan 1989), let me point out that poetic parallelism of this sort is an areal phenomenon transcending differences of language families, modes of social and economic organization, literacy vs. nonliteracy, and autochthonous vs. introduced religion. It is analyzed most pointedly for the ritual language traditions of Indonesia by Fox (1971, 1977) and his colleagues (in Fox 1988), but it also characterizes the ritual language of various ethnicities in Vietnam, including the Mnong Gar (Condominas 1977), Maa' (Boulbet 1975), Lac (Le Gay and K'Mloi Da Got 1971), and Muong (Cuisinier 1951). More typical in mainland Southeast Asia is the use of parallelism in courtship songs, as found among the Mon (Guillon 1971), Maa (Boulbet 1972), Mien (Saepharn 1988), and Tho (now known as the Tay-Nung; see Nguyen Van Huyen 1941). Nguyen Van Huyen's masterful explication of parallelism in the antiphonal love songs of the Vietnamese (1934) and Catlin's ongoing investigations of the courtship songs of the Hmong (see, for example, Catlin 1982) are among the most sophisticated considerations of the parallelistic poetics of mainland verse forms.

A more complicated form of parallelism typical of Khmu verse (and perhaps unique to the Khmu) is what they call *hrlɔ? prgap* 'reverse words' (treated more fully in Proschan 1989, 1990b, 1992). In reverse word parallelism, paired lines or paired couplets are related inversely to one another: a word in line A, for example, serves to reverse a rhyming word in line B or line C; the two words fill cross-wise slots within the parallel frame. In the verse below, sung by Khmu singer Thongsy from the Muong Sai region of Laos, *vaay* 'later, after' reverses *chaay* 'to be able'; *bok* 'to cut' reverses *dok* 'to manage, to be able'; *pntrim* 'to flatten' reverses *nim* 'year'; *pntrii* 'to clear' reverses *pii* 'year'; *tuh* 'regrown swidden' reverses *prduh* 'to follow, adhere to.'

bok o? vaay, pii bok o? vaay  
 bok pntrim ləŋ tuh, bok pntrii ləŋ tuh  
 chaay o? dok, pəə chaay o? dok  
 dok prduh ləŋ pii, dok prduh ləŋ nim

I will cut later, I won't cut later  
 I cut flat the fallow field, I cut clear the fallow field  
 If I'm able or if I'm not able  
 I will follow the year, I will follow the year

(KL-FP-008, recorded 26 April 1990  
 in Ban Houei Uad, Laos)

In this example, the first partner is as meaningful as the second partner, but often the first partner will be meaningless, nonsensical, or related only metaphorically to the main content. In those cases where the first partner's meaning is obscure, listeners are challenged to guess what will follow: the initial lines are enigmatic and unclear, and listeners take great pleasure in anticipating the solution to the enigma. The first partner is thus a disguised counterpart of the semantically primary—if chronologically secondary—partner. In some cases, indeed, the second partner is never present and only the obscure image of the first partner is provided; here the intended meaning is suggested without ever being made explicit (see Proschan 1990b).

The performance contexts in which reverse parallel verses are sung offer some clues as to the attraction this playful disguise holds for its performers and listeners. For instance, reverse parallelism is ubiquitous in the verses exchanged by young lovers, who might be shy to come right out and say certain things but are more willing to utter a semantically obscure enigma. They are also used in various songs sung around the rice wine jar, when singers seek to amuse their increasingly intoxicated listeners, who take delight in trying to guess the singer's meaning. And finally, they are employed in ritual verse of many sorts, and it is well established that ritual language often involves secrecy, disguise, and semantic obscurity.

Before turning to our presentation of Khmu play languages and disguised speech, it is important to mention two other forms of poetic parallelism that sit between the microparallelism of reduplication and the macroparallelism of extended verse forms. These are *hrlɔʔ tat* or *hrlɔʔ tək* 'riddles' and the genre known in English as 'sayings.' Khmu have no precise word reserved specifically for these sayings, as Lindell points out (1988:88), referring to them as *hrlɔʔ prɔgɔp* 'reverse words' or *kham tɔkɔp tɔgaay* 'back and forth words.'

In structure, riddles are brief phrases unified by assonance, alliteration, and sometimes by internal rhyme; they frequently have an intonational and syntactic break or caesura dividing the phrase into two. The phonological structure resembles that we have seen in reverse word parallelism. For instance:

gaan cet praan, cndraŋ mooy hlem  
 seven-ridged house, one pillar

pleʔ kjɔk  
 wild banana

klam tɔpɔh rɔh tɔkɔŋ  
 carry the trough along the ridge

mat briʔ  
 sun

Notably, there are no instances of anagrammatic or other phonological relations between the riddle and its answer, a typical feature of many other traditions of riddling (cf. Jakobson 1987[1970]:255ff).

Lindell provides a collection and explication of a number of what she calls “rhyme-pivot sayings”, discussing their poetic structure, performance context, and semantic content (1988). Many of these sayings are used during the marriage negotiations between two families: “at different stages in the discussions the members of the wife-taking group are bound to use certain set phrases to state their point in oblique terms, which will certainly be perfectly well understood by the opposite party” (Lindell 1988:90). Other sayings that Lindell discusses are those that are used to inculcate values of hospitality, proper behavior, kindness, temperance of thought and tongue, caution, and honesty. The meanings of these sayings are not abstract, timeless and permanent but are instead situational, bound up with a specific context of use.

Lindell does not suggest why a form that is opaque on its surface but transparent in its meaning would be important in the particular context of wedding negotiations; we can venture some speculations. The obliqueness is presumably important because it helps to ensure the continuity of the negotiation; ambiguity and obliqueness permit disagreements or contrary positions to be stated without threatening to disrupt or terminate the negotiations. The nature of the marriage negotiations is such that the ultimate conclusion is given—the couple will probably wed, or else the negotiations would not have begun. Yet the negotiations may involve points of potential conflict where the interests of the two parties collide; the oblique rhyme-pivot sayings help to ensure that if such conflicts arise, they need not do irreparable harm.

In their linguistic structure, as we have noted, these succinct sayings or proverbs employ parallelism of various sorts. Most are very short, as for instance this example drawn from a publication of Damrong Tayanin:

•  
vaar smruat, klam hla?  
kma? smruat, klam ton

Hot early, carry rice-basket  
Rain early, carry bamboo container

[Tayanin 1984:9]

The saying explains that when it is hot early in the morning, one can expect rain by mid-day. A form of chiasmus is employed in which the last word of the first line is rhymed with the first word of the second, again combined with parallelism joining the two lines together. The resemblance to both the structure of riddles and the extended parallelism of sung verse is obvious. A similar structure is employed in an extended proverbial expression, used by young people seeking knowledge from their elders:

oo i? məh kəɔn hmme, ple? kɔɔm,  
siim praa mec, sec praa nəəŋ.  
bəŋ bəɔ məh mat bri? jəŋ, mat moŋ kaal.  
kək ɔɔy klvis, klis ɔɔy smgar.



ប៉ា ម៉ា ថាវ, ម៉ា កេ,
   
 ម៉ា ថាវ, ម៉ា គុន.
   
 ជ័រ ស្នាត, ជាត គម្ពុ?,
   
 គម្ពុ? កុរ, ស្បុរ រាម.

Oh, we are the new child, the young fruit,  
 The still unhearing bird, the still unknowing bird.  
 We lean on you, the high sun, the new moon.  
 If we bend, straighten us; if we make a mistake, correct us.  
 You are the elder, the old one,  
 The village headman, the priest.  
 The pistol bullet, the Khmu tradition,  
 The village people, the treasure basket.

[collected in Boston, November 1986]

Here again, lines are linked together by lexical parallelism (lines 5 and 6) or syntactic parallelism (lines 1 and 2, 5 and 6, 7 and 8). Within a line, two clauses separated by a caesura may also be linked together by lexical parallelism (line 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Within each and every line, the paired clauses are linked together by syntactic parallelism. Finally, we again have instances of the use of phonological chiasmus with rhymed words on either side of a caesura (line 2, 4, 7, 8) or linking two successive lines (lines 2 and 3, 7 and 8).

The playful manipulation of language and speech that we have seen as characteristic of Khmu verse is also typical of other verbal art forms such as play languages and speech surrogates used in some of the same contexts—around a jar of rice wine at village celebrations, or as a traditional part of courtship. As with the *hrlɔʔ prɔp* ‘reverse words’, these other forms also involve an important element of disguise and enigma. Before turning to a discussion of play languages, I will briefly discuss the tradition of instrumental speech surrogates. Both play languages and speech surrogates share certain characteristics: they are used for playful mirthmaking, their comprehensibility is substantially impaired or reduced as compared to normal speech, and the two genres are employed in similar circumstances. Like reduplication and poetic parallelism, both play languages and speech surrogates play off tensions between similarity and difference and between contiguity and separation.

Play languages and speech surrogates are what we can call second-order sign systems: based on natural speech and using many of its processes, they do not refer immediately to things in the world, but instead refer to them only through the mediation of a base utterance (whether copresent or absent). They are signs of signs, requiring that we decipher them into an intermediate base utterance in order *to understand them properly*. Reduplication involves one sound or string of sounds that refers backward or forward to a closely contiguous sound or string; poetic parallelism in its simpler forms involves one word that refers directly to a corresponding word in a contiguous line or verse. But we have briefly seen more complex forms of poetic parallelism that involve more indirect reference. In the cross-wise reverse parallelism the referent is displaced, and may even be absent

(see Proschan 1990b). With the play languages and speech surrogates to which we now turn, the base utterance is generally absent; the disguised, semantically obscure utterance refers outside itself and outside its immediate performance context to another semantically transparent utterance. We will consider instrumental speech surrogates briefly before examining play languages more thoroughly.

## 2. Jew's harp love dialogues

The sung love dialogues we have mentioned above have their counterpart in instrumental music traditions associated with courtship. Throughout East and Southeast Asia and Oceania, a Jew's harp or other musical instrument may be used to send speech-like messages between two courting lovers. Typically, a young man will come to the home of his intended wife, playing on a Jew's harp, flute, mouth organ, or other instrument; encoded within the music are verbal messages directed to his lover. In some cases, she may respond with her own music, again uttering verbal messages without speaking them. A typical description is provided by Roth for the Iban of Borneo, but could apply almost as well to the Khmu:

When a girl is visited for the first time by a stranger, he is rarely received, but if he comes several nights running, she then believes him to be in earnest, especially if he declares he means no harm, but is in search of a wife. She will then sit up with him, and after chewing *sirih* and betel nut, they discourse, often through the medium of a jew's harp, one handing it to the other, asking questions and returning answers, and conversing upon all manner of topics until the day begins to break, and it is time for him to grope his way back. [Roth 1892:129]

Not every instance will correspond exactly with this model case, but the largest number are remarkably similar. Thus, for some ethnic groups a leaf, flute, or mouth organ is used instead of a Jew's harp. The most ancient report of such musical speech surrogates in the region comes from the middle of the 9th century C.E., describing the kingdom of Nanchao in what is now Yunnan, where "the young lads and bachelors, in the evenings and nights, roam about the lanes and alleys, blowing on mouth-organs of bottle gourd. Some blow on leaves of trees. Sounds and rhymes all convey words of affection, and serve to address and call each other" (Luce 1961:78).

The geographic span of this tradition extends from the aboriginal peoples of Formosa throughout mainland Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Philippines, and through the Pacific as far east as aboriginal Hawaii (see Proschan 1989:381-407). Although there are numerous references to the tradition in the ethnographic and historical literature, few provide much useful detail. Among the most pertinent exceptions is Conklin's accounts of the Hanunóo of the Philippines. The Hanunóo use Jew's harp and flute in their love dialogues, and also employ a "form of voice disguise achieved by inhaling while talking. This method of concealing one's identity is much used at night among unmarried folk, especially before gaining entry into a girl's house, or when within hearing distance of her elders" (Conklin and Maceda 1955:2). Elsewhere, Conklin situates this speech form (*paha:gut*) within a range of "methods for modifying the normal patterns of speech for purposes of ... conceal-



ment” (1959:631), several associated expressly with courtship. Young suitors arriving at a girl’s house will “conceal their identity by wearing a blanket over the head and by speaking in an unusual manner [i.e., *paha:gut*]” (1959:634); once inside they exchange metaphorical lyrics or play flute, Jew’s harp, or violin. In another form of special speech associated with these courtship dialogues, “the highest value is placed on the most indirect method of statement” (Conklin 1959: 634).

Like Conklin, Catlin considers instrumental speech surrogates of the Hmong along with other forms of speech disguise. The Hmong use Jew’s harps, leaves, flutes, and mouth organs as speech surrogates in courtship (Catlin 1982). The Hmong language has seven tones, but their music (both vocal and instrumental) uses only four or sometimes five pitches. Thus, even when words are sung, they will necessarily have their tones distorted to some degree; this is done, however, in a systematic manner, as outlined by Catlin (1982). The same system of tone-pitch association that is used for vocal music is used for the instrumental surrogates. Importantly, Catlin situates these instrumental forms together with singing, in a gamut of artistic manipulations of speech. Singing is at one level of remove from speech, imposing certain distortions onto the tone structure, as noted above. The instrumental speech surrogates may be at a second level of remove, representing with instruments a melodic contour derived from singing; this may be through iconicity (where the instrument uses pitches corresponding to those that would be sung) or through indexicality or symbolism (where knowledge of the first-level utterance is necessary before the second-level one can be understood) (Catlin 1982: 192-93). A similar second level of remove may be achieved by combining singing with what Catlin calls “encryption” in the form of the Hmong play language *lus rov* (Catlin 1982:184; Derrick-Mescua, Berman, and Carlson 1982).

Common to many of these practices is a function of concealment or disguise, either of the identity of the singer or player or the content of his or her message. Following Proschan (1981), Catlin contends that these forms of distorted speech serve as framing devices, setting them apart from regular communication:

the Hmong distorting techniques each superimpose a unique grid upon the sounds and actions to be interpreted, marking them all by stating ‘This is a performance,’ as well as more specifically labeling an event as courtship or ritual behavior. In this way, the lover is protected from possible embarrassment, because if rejection should result, it was his song which wooed rather than himself. Indeed, Hmong people consistently state that ‘shyness’ is the reason for playing an instrument rather than speaking directly to the beloved. [Catlin 1982:193]

The importance of Catlin’s presentation is increased by the fact that she examines both social and musico-linguistic aspects, and that she considers together a number of similar and related traditions, rather than treating speech surrogates, for example, as an isolated phenomenon.

## The Khmu *hroon*

For the Khmu, the *hroon* Jew's harp is but one of a number of related courtship traditions. Thus, to play on the Jew's harp is *pat hroon trkle?*, to sing in courtship is *təəm trkle?*, the special style of self-deprecating language used in courtship is *hrlə? trkle?*. A number of play languages are also used in courtship (see below). Traditionally, a Khmu youth would come in the evening to visit his girlfriend's house, sometimes playing on the *snkuul* mouth organ as he approaches the house, or circling around the house with the *snkuul* until he is invited in. The girl can recognize the distinctive style of her lover's *snkuul* music. Once inside, they would sit near one another, yet still under the watchful eyes of her parents, and he would play on the *hroon* Jew's harp. Ta' Cheu Rathasack, who demonstrated the *hroon* for me, explained that because it is a quiet instrument, the girl will often snuggle closer to the boy. Using the *hroon*, he will profess his love, compliment his sweetheart, praise her character and beauty, and propose marriage. In one example performed by Ta' Cheu, he tells her "If you don't want to marry me, you have to return my love" (KV-FP-A123). The girl may reciprocate musically by playing on the *tət*, a two-holed transverse flute. As far as I have been able to determine, she does not enunciate words with the *tət*, but each song has a clear meaning. In response to her father's Jew's harp, Ta' Cheu's daughter Keo Rathasack simulated the response that a young girl might make to her boyfriend, playing a *cət rmjim* courting song whose meaning was that "she wants the boy to fall in love with her and stay in love with her" (KV-FP-A123).

The *hroon* that the Khmu use is either a small metal, single-tongued instrument (identical with that used by the Hmong and other groups; cf. Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978:65-67) or a longer bamboo instrument, also single-tongued (similar to those used by Mon-Khmer and Austronesian peoples in Cambodia and Vietnam; cf. Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978: 69-71).<sup>5</sup> Cheu Rathasack taught himself how to play when he was a teenager, so that he could get a wife. At the same time, he had himself tattooed in order to be attractive and to impress his girlfriends. His first *hroon*, made from a French silver coin, could be heard fifty feet away. It was so successful in helping him find a wife that he gave it to a friend, who was equally successful and likewise passed it on to another friend.

Young courtiers are not the only ones to play the *hroon*. Ta' Cheu Rathasack told me that the *hrəy* or spirits also play the *hroon*, or sometimes a tree leaf. When a man dies who had been a good *hroon* player, his *hrəy* might come back and scare people by playing in the burial ground. Cheu Rathasack has heard this happen, and though the music sounded good, it scared him and left him sick. He also explained that in the forest during the spring, one can hear the *hroon* being played by a lizard. The *hroon* had originally been played by the *tkan* bamboo rat. The red-necked gecko called *daən trəol* heard the *tkan* playing and said "Let me borrow your *hroon* to see if I can play it or not." When the bamboo rat gave it to him, the gecko went off with it, never to return. The bamboo rat cried and cried about the loss of his *hroon*, and that is why his eyes are so small, from crying so

<sup>5</sup> Khmu in Chiang Rai province in Thailand report that they formerly used a Jew's harp with three tongues, although no one today remembers how to make or play such an instrument.

much. The gecko is called *daanj pat hroonj* because you can always hear him playing on the *hroonj* (KV-FP-A123).

### **Likeness and difference, iconicity and distortion**

An utterance using an instrumental speech surrogate may potentially refer to its undistorted or unmodified base utterance in one of several ways. According to Umiker, “There appear to be two basic types of primary oral substitutive systems, systems of *encoding* and systems of *abridgment*’ (1974:498-499). The encoding system most often employs what Umiker calls “lexical logograms” in which the “sign ... represents a lexical unit” or word (1974:499). A second type of encoding system, not discussed by Umiker, uses certain “signature tunes” or *leit-motivs* to indicate or identify either the musician or the intended recipient. In these cases the referent of the musical signs is not a word or lexical unit but in fact a person. In both cases the relation of sign to referent is one of symbolism or codified contiguity—there is a direct one-to-one relation between a given sign and the word or person to which it refers, but this relation must be learned through convention—but in their situated social functioning, the signs are predominantly indexical, operating like proper names to indicate the *person* to whom they refer rather unambiguously.<sup>6</sup>

A third type of system is the abridging system, in which, in Stern’s words, “Each transmitted sign exhibits significant resemblance to a corresponding sound of the base message [natural language]. An abridging system, while preserving some phonic resemblances to the base utterance, represents only part of its phonemic qualities ...” (Stern 1957:487). This iconic mode is the primary one at work in the Khmu Jew’s harp utterances and connects them to the other forms of parallelism we have encountered above. The sounds are imitative of those of normal speech, while at the same time diverging from them in various ways. Speech, as a complicated and multipartite phenomenon, is susceptible to diverse types and degrees of imitation. The acoustic properties of the Jew’s harp and the performative techniques of its players allow for a high degree of sonic iconicity between speech and speech surrogate, since a skilled player can quite well articulate vowels (using the resonating chamber of the mouth) and can simulate certain consonants and tones through conventional means.

Any particular tradition may partake of several sign modes simultaneously. Thus, an iconic system in which there is a high degree of acoustic similarity between the surrogate utterance and its corresponding utterance in natural language may also depend for its fullest understanding on the social and cultural context and on the immediate performance context. Or, as in the case of the Hmong tradition considered by Catlin (1982), a particular sung musical pitch is associated partly by convention with a particular speech tone, and is thus symbolic; the instrumental pitch is iconic of the sung pitch and is secondarily symbolic of the speech tone.

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<sup>6</sup> The terminological distinction between the iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes of representation derives from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1935-66), amplified and extended by Jakobson (1987).

Assuming that in Khmu and other Southeast Asian speech surrogates it is the iconic mode that predominates, we can see certain similarities between speech disguised by a musical instrument, reduplication, and poetic parallelism. Like reduplication and parallelism, speech surrogates repeat—often incompletely or imperfectly—phonological material from a normal or base utterance. A seeming difference is that the Jew’s harp utterance is spatiotemporally removed from the base utterance, where in the case of reduplication the two partners are contiguous, and in the case of parallelism the two partners are usually in close proximity. But indeed, as I have shown elsewhere (Proschan 1990b), in poetic parallelism we often find a seeming ‘orphan line’ whose referent is not present but instead is only implied.

Moreover, as in the riddle-like forms of *hrlɔʔ prɔap* ‘reverse word’ parallelism, it seems that many utterances using speech surrogates can only be understood to the degree that they resemble familiar phrases already known to the listeners. This situational meaning implies, then, that someone using a Jew’s harp to pronounce formulaic courtship verses and phrases will be more clearly understood than if, for instance, he tries to read stock market quotations or political proclamations. Just as the *hrlɔʔ prɔap* can be understood because it repeats, with variation, a co-present or absent phrase, so can the Jew’s harp or other instrumental speech surrogates be most fully understood when they repeat phrases well-known to the intended listeners and predictable to lesser or greater extent because they are uttered in a familiar context.

### 3. Khmu play languages

We have noted that instrumental speech surrogates can usefully be considered together with play languages, since both are utilized in very similar contexts, as Conklin has shown for the Hanunóo (1959) and Catlin for the Hmong (1982). Both also involve a strong element of disguise—sometimes of the identity of the speaker but more often it is the message itself that is made obscure. The nocturnal visits of a suitor are one of the two primary occasions for Khmu play languages: the other is around the rice wine jar at a village celebration. The latter context—noisy, boisterous, and public—is not well suited to the use of the quiet Jew’s harp, but play languages are particularly associated with the wine jar, and the rice wine only increases the fun for both listener and speaker.

#### Three Khmu play languages

Let us consider an example of *kham prʔʌʌn* ‘*prʔʌʌn* speech’ from one such party, held in Richmond, California on May 11, 1985, celebrating the visit of Khmu scholar Damrong Tayanin. The speaker is Ta’ Ngeun Boon from the *tmɔɔy yuan* dialect group. We will present this example with three versions of each line: first as it was actually spoken, then in its undisguised or basic version, and then in English translation. Pauses are less easily identified here than in song, because there are frequently short pauses surrounding a manipulated word, and longer pauses separating phrases; lines have been broken here according to the longer pauses.



be called *kham prʔʌʌn* or *kham prʔee prʔʌc prʔʌʌn* (in place of /pr/, some dialects will use /tr/; the Southern dialects will use *hrlɔʔ* instead of *kham* for 'speech'). It is created by analysing the word into constituents, then embedding the constituents within a frame repeated from word to word. Some speakers use exactly the same frame throughout, while others (as in the present example) use several alternative vowels for the first part of the frame. The frame most often employed by Ta' Ngeun uses a long open /aa/ as the rime of the first word of a set; in some cases he uses /ɔɔ/, /əə/, or /ʌʌ/. We can represent the canonical shape of a Khmu word as follows, with parentheses enclosing optional phonemes and a single point representing syllable juncture:

# (C<sub>1</sub>) (C<sub>2</sub>) (C<sub>3</sub>) C<sub>4</sub> V<sub>1</sub> (V<sub>2</sub>) (C<sub>5</sub>) #

(Note that if C<sub>4</sub> is a glottal stop, it is not represented in the orthography.) In this play language as performed by Ta' Ngeun, the following rule is employed (with some variations that we will consider below):

#(C<sub>1</sub>)(C<sub>2</sub>).(C<sub>3</sub>)C<sub>4</sub>V<sub>1</sub>(V<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>5</sub>)# → #(C<sub>1</sub>)(C<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>3</sub>)C<sub>4</sub>**aa**# #C<sub>4</sub>V<sub>1</sub>(V<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>5</sub>)# #C<sub>4</sub>**ʌʌn**#

Thus, to take only a few examples,

oʔ	→	aa oʔ ʌʌn (i.e., ʔaa ʔoʔ ʔʌʌn)
chaay	→	chaa chaay chʌʌn
prʔoom	→	prʔaa oom ʌʌn
bɔɔ	→	baa bɔɔ bʌʌn
kmɲeŋ	→	kmɲəə ɲeŋ ɲʌʌn
hməh	→	hmɔɔ hməh hmʌʌn

Where some speakers employ the above rule rigorously, others use it more flexibly, especially in their choice of the long vowel to be used in the first word. In stating the rule, we have used the vowel /aa/ as the rime of the first word, but another vowel is often substituted by Ta' Ngeun. Thus he uses:

ɔɔ lav ʌʌn  
 kəə kɔɔn kʌʌn  
 həə heem hʌʌn  
 yɔɔ yat yʌʌn  
 məə maʔ mʌʌn  
 ɔɔ laaŋ ʌʌn

We can see a tendency to avoid exact vowel harmony between the first and middle words, but there is no discoverable rule governing what other vowel might be substituted for /aa/. For many other speakers, /ɔɔ/ is used throughout, and it is thus to be expected that it would be used in place of /aa/ when a substitute was needed. However, the tendency to avoid vowel harmony is not carried out throughout, so we have



praa praa ɸɾAAɳ		
baa baa bAAɳ	as well as	ɓɔɔ baa bAAɳ
yaa yat yAAɳ	as well as	yɔɔ yat yAAɳ
laa laʔ ləəy lAAɳ		

Individual speakers will vary in the extent to which they subject every word in a string to modification; oftentimes, words may be presented intact, without being embedded in the frame. This is especially the case for ‘minor words’ (cf. Sherzer 1982:190) such as prepositions and conjunctions. The locative preposition *daʔ* or *daa* ‘at’ is indeed often combined with a noun such as *gii* ‘here’ in a contraction *dgii*. In this case, *daʔ gii* may be treated as *dgii* would be:

daʔ gaa gii ɢAAɳ	or	dgaa gii ɢAAɳ
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or as two separate words:

daa daʔ dAAɳ gaa gii ɢAAɳ

The other area in which there is substantial variability among speakers and even within a single utterance is in the treatment of multi-syllabic words, especially including loan words. For instance, Sweden (which would be pronounced by Khmu—using IPA orthography—as *svii-den*) is treated by Ta’ Ngeun as

ɓɔɔ sii sAAɳ vɔɔ vii vAAɳ dɔɔ den dAAɳ

but it could equally well be treated as

svɔɔ vii vAAɳ dɔɔ den dAAɳ

Ta’ Ngeun admits to not knowing how to treat the name Richmond, a word that also presented a problem to the man who preceded him in performing the *kham ɸɾAAɳ*, Ta’ Lue Saengsourith. Ta’ Lue offers two choices in succession:

ric mɔɔ mɔɳ mAɳɳ rɔɔ riɳ rAAɳ cmɔɔ mɔɳ mAɳɳ

In the first case, Richmond is considered as two separate words broken as follows:

ric mɔɳ

In the second case it is considered as two words broken as follows:

riɳ cmɔɳ

Ta’ Lue also provides an alternative for another multi-syllabic word that Ta Ngeun uses. For the word *ɸɾoom* ‘to speak together,’ Ta’ Ngeun treats it exactly according to the stated rule:

ɸɾaa oom AAɳ

Ta' Lue treats the same word somewhat differently:

prʔɔɔ prʔoom prʔʌʌn

This is perhaps because the play language itself is often called *prʔee prʔʌc prʔʌʌn* (or some variant thereof), thus suggesting to Ta' Lue the form that he used.

In the Southern Khmu form known as *hrlɔʔ trʔian*, things work the same except that in place of /ʌʌn/ in the third word we find /ian/. Thus, to use examples from Ferlus (1974:172):

krvəs	—>	krvɔɔ vəs vian
kmuul	—>	kmɔɔ muul mian
tæɛŋ	—>	tɔɔ tæɛŋ tian

And in the form known as *hrlɔʔ trʔəc*, the rime of the third word is /əc/ (examples again from Ferlus 1974:173):

taay	—>	tɔɔ taay təc
rɔɔt	—>	rɔɔ rɔɔt rəc
srməʔ	—>	srmɔɔ məʔ məc

We have noted that the play languages in general are called *kham prʔee prʔʌc prʔʌʌn* or *hrlɔʔ trʔee trʔəc trʔian*, and we have seen that the *prʔʌc - trʔəc* and *prʔʌʌn - trʔian* forms work according to what is essentially the same rule. The *kham prʔee* and *hrlɔʔ trʔee*, on the other hand, require a new rule. Let us consider several examples (the first two from my fieldwork, and the latter two from Ferlus 1974:174):

laa bee ləh yee ləh hɪee  
 baa yɔh hməh  
 where are you going ?

loʔ ee ləh yee laʔ dee leʔ hree  
 oʔ yɔh daʔ hreʔ  
 I am going to the field

laa bee liʔ dnee luʔ gee loʔ ee  
 baa dniʔ guʔ oʔ  
 do you love me?

lɛs krvee loʔ ee lii dgee lut kee  
 krvəs oʔ dgii kut  
 my foot is cut

The rule can be stated as follows:

#(C<sub>1</sub>)(C<sub>2</sub>).(C<sub>3</sub>)C<sub>4</sub>V<sub>1</sub>(V<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>5</sub>)# —> #1V<sub>1</sub>(V<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>5</sub>)# #(C<sub>1</sub>)(C<sub>2</sub>)(C<sub>3</sub>)C<sub>4</sub>ee#

That is, /l/ is followed by the rime of the word, then the complete initial of the word is followed by /ee/. The first rule preserves the sequence of phonemes in the canonical word shape, with a repetition of C<sub>4</sub>. The second rule, however, involves an inversion in which rime and complex initial are broken apart, then switched. Here again, minor words can be left intact.

The last form of play language for which we have data involves a similar inversion, although here we are concerned with syllables rather than phonemes. This form is not given a name other than *kham prʔʌʌn* or *kham prʔee prʔʌc prʔʌʌn*. Let us first see several examples:

daa iʔ tɲəh  
daa əh tɲniʔ  
don't do like that

baa cəə yəʔ poʔ məh  
baa cəə yəh poʔ məʔ  
who will you go with?

baa yəh daʔ mat  
baa yat daʔ məh  
where are you at?

baa sreʔ məʔ doŋ  
baa sroŋ məʔ deʔ  
who are you following?

mee cəə vəh yam hmec  
mee cəə vəc yam hməh  
when are you leaving?

oʔ cəə vaŋ siibec  
oʔ cəə vec siibaŋ  
I will return home tomorrow

A somewhat more elaborate rule must be stated to describe this form:

1. Consider only the last three syllables of the phrase; preserve any preceding syllables intact.
2. Combine the initial of the first syllable and the rime of the third syllable.
3. Preserve the middle syllable intact.
4. Combine the initial of the third syllable and the rime of the first syllable.

The effect of these inversions is to produce something that looks very much like the *hrlɔʔ prɔp* 'reverse word' parallelism we considered above, especially in their incarnation as 'monomial parallels' or 'orphan lines'; the main difference here is that the play language does not produce real words, while the reverse words are generally meaningful (in isolation if not in context). Here as in the previous types of

play language, the resulting words are morphologically well-formed, even if they have no preexisting meaning.<sup>7</sup>

What all of these play languages have in common—and what they share with the instrumental speech surrogates—is that the meaning of the utterance is far from transparent. Yet the meaning is at the same time discoverable through application of ingenuity (in the case of the play languages) and attentiveness (in the case of both the Jew's harp speech and the play languages). In both cases, one can learn relatively easily to produce the distorted or disguised utterance, and deciphering or comprehending is not difficult once accustomed to the particular system being used. At the same time, comprehension is not automatic: those who choose *not* to understand (as, for instance, parents overhearing young lovers) can accept the utterance as incomprehensible.

The disguised utterances serve another function, especially in the case of the instrumental speech surrogates, of distancing the speaker from the utterance. Catlin reports that the Hmong explain their use of speech surrogates as a factor of their “shyness”, allowing them to say things without investing themselves too heavily in the semantic content of the utterance (1982:193). The ambiguity that is inevitable in the case of the speech surrogates provides room for retreat if the message is not welcomed by the intended recipient.

Yet it would be a mistake to overlook the factor of sheer pleasure and amusement. Both the play languages and the speech surrogates sound funny. The play languages are at once morphologically well-formed and semantically nonsensical (on their surface), evoking the babbling of infants through the chiming repetition of the initial consonants. Both play languages and speech surrogates sound enough like normal speech to be recognizable as being meaningful communication, but they are different enough to be unmistakably abnormal. In the case of courtship, these playful forms of speech offer the speaker a chance to demonstrate intelligence and virtuosity—an opportunity to show off without boasting. In the case of their use around the celebratory jar of rice wine, the play languages offer speakers a chance to display their skills publicly, to engage in friendly competition, and to match their wits against their friends and neighbors. In this context, a point comes when failure itself means success: as more and more wine is consumed, a speaker's stumbling attempts to demonstrate skill may instead prompt merriment and mirth on the part of auditors. He may have failed to bring forth a well-formed utterance, but he may achieve a greater success by bringing forth laughter (even if it is at his own expense).

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<sup>7</sup> In describing a similar process used in the Hmong *lus rov* play language, Derrick-Mescua, Berman and Carlson refer to it as metathesis (1982). I think it is better described as double metathesis—it is not simply one sound that is displaced to another position, but a second sound that replaces it and whose place it in turn takes. In English, we have the similar process that creates spoonerisms: “one swell foop” for “one fell swoop” and “bass ackwards” for “ass backwards.”

## Play languages in areal perspective

As compared to instrumental speech surrogates that are frequently noted in traveler's accounts and other documents, play languages and disguised speech are rarely mentioned in the ethnographic or linguistic literature for Southeast Asia. One exception is Conklin's discussion of Hanunóo play languages, included in his broader account of various forms of Hanunóo speech disguise. In the case of Hmong, we are fortunate to have several useful linguistic analyses (Catlin 1982: 184; Derrick-Mescua, Berman, and Carlson 1982; Ai Ch'ing 1972[1957]; Chu T'ing 1972[1957]). Notably, in Hmong the cross-wise substitution that is employed in the third Khmu play language presented above is often combined with interposed syllables as in the first two Khmu languages. Without reviewing all of the interesting conclusions of these authors, let it suffice to say that both the sociocultural contexts and the linguistic forms are remarkably similar to those we have seen for Khmu. The special languages are most often used by young courting lovers, who are motivated to disguise their speech for the same reasons we have earlier discussed for the instrumental speech surrogates used on the same occasions.

I would like here to conclude by presenting two little-known forms very similar in form to the last of the three Khmu traditions we have considered above, and to the riddles and sayings we briefly examined earlier. Interestingly, neither of these forms is reported to have any association with courtship, except insofar as they both constitute a kind of ribald teasing typical of the interplay between the genders in many Southeast Asian cultures. The first is a Cambodian play language called *phiəsaə traləp* 'backward speech'<sup>8</sup> and the second is the Vietnamese *nói lái* 'inverted speech.' As contrasted to Khmu play languages that are used to utter phrases of varying, but usually innocuous, content, these two forms are alike in that their subject matter is usually ribald or obscene (although most often not without humor). This sexually-charged content may account for the relative neglect these genres have suffered at the hands of scholars.<sup>9</sup>

The Cambodian form of parallelistic rhyming slang is used in jest to make obscene or lewd comments about someone, often within that person's hearing.<sup>10</sup> The structural similarities between this form and those we have seen already for Khmu are unmistakable. It is precisely similar to the last of the three Khmu play languages, so much so that we may use exactly the same set of rules to produce them.

The Vietnamese form *nói lái* is one of those included in Chéon's survey of "Annamite argots" (1905). It is unclear from his account who are the speakers that use this argot: the other cases that he presents are often restricted to a specific trade

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<sup>8</sup> This is like the form that Thomas and Thomas describe for Surin Khmer, under the name *kanlian*, although they emphasize the less ribald occasions for its use (1982).

<sup>9</sup> The cultural tensions in Khmer culture between modesty and obscenity, prudery and ribaldry are discussed in Proschan (1990a).

<sup>10</sup> The examples provided by the author have been omitted. They may be requested from the editorial board or from the author. [Editors].

of merchants or laborers, or are particular to artist-prostitutes. By his account, “this is a language formed mechanically and artificially, resulting from the exchange of final sounds between two words that follow one another immediately in the discourse” (1905:48); he later notes that “it is not even necessary that the words follow one another without intermediary. The inversion may be produced between two words separated by another” (1905:49). In his discussion, Chéon can find only one example “that does not *immediately* offer a gross or obscene meaning. [The others] are absolutely untranslatable into French.” (1905:49).

The facility with which virtually any speaker can produce such inversions is due to the long-established practice, borrowed from Chinese lexicography, of decomposing a monosyllabic word into two elements: initial and final. Pronunciation of a word “is indicated by two characters, of which the first provides the initial articulation and the second the final sound” (1905:49). Indeed, because this decomposition is so familiar and the *nói lái* inversion is easily accomplished, “one carefully avoids combining certain words that lend themselves naturally to an inversion susceptible of giving to those denatured terms a new meaning that shocks the most basic proprieties” (1905:49).

#### 4. Conclusion

The particular attraction that play languages, reduplication, poetic parallelism, and speech surrogates hold to linguists and others interested in language rests in the basic fact that all of them can shed light on how speakers themselves understand their language to work. Native speakers are admittedly often unable to articulate in a self-conscious manner such understandings—in fact, rare are the speakers of any language who can speak tellingly about the inherent structures and rules of their own language. But marvelously, many people can demonstrate through play languages or other genres a profound if unarticulate knowledge of the structures they employ unconsciously in their daily speech. Artistic language in general, and special languages of the kind we have discussed here in particular, make latent and manifest not just the ‘psychological reality of the phoneme’ (to use Sapir’s term) but also the psychological reality of various other phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic processes and attributes of a given language.<sup>11</sup> They amply deserve our attention.

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Thomas and Thomas show that play languages can “serve as a structural test for the boundary between the initial consonant cluster and the vowel cluster” in Khmer, or can show “what phonological features can be violated without destroying the rhyme” (1982:95); they conclude that “beside being fun, [play languages] can be of scientific value too” (1982:95).



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Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47408  
U.S.A.