ON KHMER POLAR INTERROGATIVES

David Thomas

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

Examples (from Huffman):

Look qəncaa tīw psaa rāi? 'Are you going to the market (or somewhere else)?

Look qəncaa tīw psaa tee? 'Are you going to the market (or not)?

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

Baat, tīw psaa. 'Yes, going to the market.'
Baat tee, kñom tīw salaa. 'No, I'm going to the school.'

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

Baat, tīw. 'Yes, going.'
Baat tee, kñom mān tīw tee. 'No I'm not going.'

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

Baat tee, kǒm ǹw ptéah. 'No, I'm staying home.'
Baat tee, kǒm baok aaw. 'No, I'm going to wash my clothes.'
Baat tee, kǒm daa leeng. 'No, I'll just take a walk.'

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

Further examples:

ri
Look mək pii-məl-mən ri? 'Did you come yesterday?'
Baat, pii-məl-mən. Yes, yesterday.
Baat tee, pii-məl-mngay. No, the day before yesterday.

Nih tlay hoksəp riə ri? 'Does this cost sixty riels?'
Baat, hoksəp. Yes, sixty.
Baat tee, haaəp. No, fifty.

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

Salaa riən ǹw khaaŋ-muk ri? 'Is the school ahead?'
Baat, khaaŋ-muk. Yes, ahead.
Baat tee, khaaŋ-sdəm-day. No, on the right.

tee
Ptéah nih lqəa tee? 'Is this house good?'
Baat, ptéah nih lqəa. Yes, this house is good.
Baat tee, ptéah nih mìn lqəa tee. No, this house isn't good.

Baat tee, ptéah nih krakwəq. No, this house is dirty
Baat tee, ptéah nuh lqəa ciəŋ. No, that house is better.

Look câŋ baan kafei tee? 'Do you want coffee?'
Baat, câŋ. Yes, I do.
Baat tee, kǒm soum baay kləə. No, please give me some rice.
Baat tee, kǒm mìn fəm kafei tee. No, I don't drink coffee.
Look ceh phu'saa can tee?  'Do you know Chinese?'
Baat, ceh.
Baat tee, pruh kñom
min dael ri’on phu’saa
con phàaang.
Baat tee, pii mun kñom
ceh, pontae əylaw-nih
plíc əh hasy.

So, to summarize, rii is used when one wants to question only one phrase in a clause, but tee is used when one wants to question a whole sentence or the main verb in a sentence (remembering that sentence and clause are endocentric constructions with a verb at the center). And the answer to rii or tee may be a yes or no or an alternative, though rii tends to expect a yes.

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

Ptëh nhuq lqåâ rii tee?  'Is that house good?'
Baat, lqåâ.
Baat tee, min lqåâ tee.  No, not good.

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

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

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

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

Daoy look chii tngay nih, tae look bängrîn sqaek rii?
_Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?_
(expecting a yes answer)
Baat, kñom bängrîn.  Yes, I will teach.
Baat tee, tngay can taaep  No, on Monday I'll teach.
kñom bängrîn.
Daoy look châi tngay nih, tae look bângriâm sqâek têe?
Because you are sick today, will you teach tomorrow?
Baat, ât bângriâm. Yes, I won't teach.
Baat têe, kñom taw kaa No, I'll work at home.

nîw ptêh.

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

Look mân bângriâm sqâek, pipruôh tngay nih look châi râî?
You won't teach tomorrow because you are sick today?
Baat, trîw hây. Yes, that's right.
Baat, pipruôh tngay nih Yes, because I'm sick today.
kñom châî.
Baat têe, pipruôh kñom No, because I'm busy.
rawuel.

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

Bâe look tîw Pnum Piñ, tae look srey trîw tîw ciâmuy look têe?
If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?

Bâe look tîw Pnum Piñ, tae look srey mân tîw ciâmuy look têe râî?
If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife not go with you?

Bâe look tîw Phnum Piñ, tae look srey tîw ciâmuy look dae râî?
If you go to Phnom Penh, will your wife go with you?

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

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

REFERENCES: