

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis suggests three main discourse functions of repetition/ reiteration structures in Khmu oral narratives: lexical, pragmatic, and section-forming cohesion. This expands the current state of our knowledge about the discourse functions of Khmu reiteration structures (or reduplication structures, respectively) referred to by Suwilai (1987:118) as being “mainly emphatic and stylistic functions”.

First, there is lexical cohesion, which refers to word-level cohesion. Lexical cohesion includes emphasis of an atypical state or action, iconic repetition structures, style elaboration in form of elaborate expressions and reiteration structures for concept specification.

Second, there is pragmatic cohesion, which includes floor-holding (being a merely phonological repetition structure with pitch non-prominence), thematic updating and continuous summaries of local themes, which are supposed to maintain the activation status of the information which is transferred to the interlocutors.

Finally, there is section-forming cohesion. This refers to repetition structures which include discontinuous summaries of a thematic macrostructure as a contra-cohesive force, i.e. as a device to create thematic macro-units. Hence, discontinuous summaries inherit chunk delimitation of information units and thematic discontinuity of thematic macrostructures. Section-forming cohesion via repetition structures is referred to as final-focus repetition (FFR).

Pragmatic cohesion and section-forming cohesion are both sentence-level cohesive devices. Thus, they are accomplished by sentence-level repetition structures, namely right-dislocated repetition structures (RDR) in Khmu narrative discourse.

The term “right-dislocated repetition structure” is coined by me. In literature, right-dislocation was not found in connection with repetition, but only with reiteration structures for the purpose (discourse function) of concept specification as an “afterthought”, a “repair device”, or an “antitopic construction”. The conjunction of repetition and right-dislocation has been explored and our knowledge of the possible structures has been expanded.

Referring to the possible uses of this thesis, it is expected that Khmu narrators utilize right-dislocated repetition (RDR) in order to give a discontinuous summary (which is only one out of various discourse functions of RDR). This discourse function of right-dislocated repetition I call final-focus repetition (FFR). It is hypothesized that FFR as a contra-cohesive force is maintained in written discourse (literacy) in order to give summaries that go along with the change of a thematic macrostructure.

Furthermore, lexical cohesive devices like emphasis, iconic repetition structures, style elaboration structures and reiteration structures for concept specification are expected to be maintained in literacy as well.

In contrast, right-dislocated repetition and other repetition structures used for pragmatic reasons like floor-holding (which is referred to as phonological repetition), or thematic updating and continuous summaries, which are interlocutor-oriented in that they help the interlocutor to get the message, are assumed not to be maintained in written discourse, as the written mode inherits more opportunities for the reader to maintain and review previous information than the oral mode ever can.

The likelihood of preserving these repetition structures in literacy probably is the highest for word-level repetition, which is referred to as lexical cohesion. Word-level repetition inherits semantic meaning for the correct understanding of words and phrases, which is not supposed to be deleted in the written mode, whereas sentence-level repetition targets for a higher level in discourse. Hence, sentence-level cohesion is the less probable device to be maintained in written discourse. This includes section-forming cohesion and pragmatic cohesion.

If the section-forming cohesive device of discontinuous summary is kept in written texts, it would support the use of paragraphs in the written mode in order to mark thematic macrostructures. In order to explore this, I edited the 'Poor' text with one Khmu speaker, Phoon, which showed that many of the right-dislocated repetition structures are not kept in written discourse (though some are); neither the pragmatic cohesive devices like floor-holding, thematic updating, and continuous summary were kept in written discourse (as they seem to belong to the mode of speaking in oral narratives), nor the section-forming cohesive device of discontinuous summary, which is referred to as final-focus repetition. Additionally, I asked a team of four Khmu speakers⁴² to revise the 'Poor' text for good written style within the setting of a group discussion. This team did not only get rid of almost all sentence-level repetition structures, but also did a fair amount of restructuring within the text. However, this outcome will not lead to a rejection of the proposal that final-focus repetition should be used in written discourse in future editing, since the edition of written texts is generally not practiced within the Khmu society in Laos. Instead, it is expected that the decisions about good written Khmu style is still heavily influenced by Lao literature.

Further research

Further research and especially much more editorial approval from other Khmu speakers is needed in order to evaluate the current praxis or the opinions of different Khmu editors to retain final-focus repetition structures in written texts.

The evaluation of the mode of speaking between educated Khmu speakers and less educated ones is also a matter for further research. It is hypothesized that less educated Khmu speakers use more repetition in spoken discourse than educated speakers do.

Moreover, further research will show if there are other (Southeast-Asian) languages, which also have right-dislocated repetition structures with similar discourse functions. This would support the

⁴² Cf. chapter 1.6, Methodology.

claim made in this thesis, that right-dislocation can be a mere repetition structure without specifying a previously stated concept within a reiteration structure.

Additionally, further research is needed for a clear distinction between (dis-)continuous summary and thematic updating even without including grammatical categories (like a verb phrase) into the definition of a discourse function (like (dis-)continuous summary). For the sake of a simplification, I could imagine rearranging the discourse functions of sentence-level repetition structures in that thematic updating and (dis-)continuous summary would be categorized as the discourse function of 'final reinforcement', whereas floor-holding would be referred to as 'final disintegration'. Such a simplification would obviate the distinction between (dis-)continuous summary and thematic updating. Moreover, I suggest a further discourse category called 'section summary', which is different from the clause final (dis-)continuous summary, as section summaries are not located in right-dislocated position of a sentence. Instead, section summaries represent repetition (or reiteration) structures within a section of a thematic unit (cf. P.043/045, P.092/094, P.104/105, P.124/126, P.167/168, and BR.040/041/042, BR.062/065, and WP.007/008).

Furthermore, the definition of an atypical event or state regarding the discourse function of emphasis is discourse dependent and needs an ethnographic basis. In order to ensure that basis for the various specific instances, further research would be needed. For now, the basis for atypicality is my own intuition.

A further area of research may cover the plot development or information rate of repetitive discourse, in that the climax or peak of a narrative is characterized by more or less repetition structures. In the five Khmu narratives, repetition structures are not evenly distributed throughout the discourse. For example, the 'Poor' text shows less repetition structures within the section of P.055 to P.085, and the narrative 'French girl' has less repetition in the second part, starting from FG.082ff.