

# Translating Khmer Second Person Pronouns: Respect, Relations, and Social Conventions in the Gospel of John

The Bible Translator  
2017, Vol. 68(3) 227–237  
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DOI: 10.1177/2051677017740419  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt)  


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## **Abstract**

This paper is a case study in the challenges of translating the Greek New Testament into Khmer, the language of Cambodia. The paper focuses on Khmer’s honorific system of second-person pronouns in order to show the difficulties of translating across language families and to highlight the amount of theological interpretation that every Khmer translation entails. Through three examples drawn from the Gospel of John, the paper explores the challenges that Jesus’ presence at the heart of Christian piety poses for a pronominal system that encodes social values such as relation and respect. The paper ends with a reflection on the possible advantages of the study of idiolect for the translation of honorific pronouns.

## **Keywords**

Khmer, Cambodian, pronouns, New Testament, Gospel of John, idiolect, translation, honorific pronouns

## **Introduction**

In their handbook for translating the Gospel of John, Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida warn translators that “one must be very sensitive to the use

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of pronominal forms, since they frequently carry rather subtle connotations” (1980, 58). Nowhere does their warning apply better than in regard to the languages of Southeast Asia, many of which feature a large number of pronouns based upon status and respect. Khmer, the primary language of Cambodia, features such a system. As both the child of a Cambodian refugee and a former English instructor at the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota, I can attest first-hand to the “subtle connotations” transmitted to my family and students when I used the wrong second-person pronoun in referring to them. And while my mishaps in pronoun usage often resulted in unintentional humor, as a student of the Greek New Testament, I was also presented with opportunities for reflection on the difficulties of translating into Khmer. It is one thing for me to refer accidentally to an elderly Cambodian woman with the wrong second-person pronoun; it is quite another thing for Jesus Christ to use the wrong pronoun!

My primary difficulty in choosing the correct Khmer pronoun lies in the fact that I am not a native Khmer speaker. Thus, the presence of a native Khmer translator will iron out some of the obvious difficulties in translating Jesus’ pronoun usage. However, a look at individual instances of his speech reveals that Jesus’ presence at the heart of Christian piety presents a unique challenge to the Khmer translator. As the following study shows, there are no neutral choices when translating the speech of Jesus.

After a brief introduction to the Khmer pronoun system, this paper highlights the problem of translating Jesus through three case studies taken from the Gospel of John. Throughout the case studies, rather than providing a prescriptive solution, I will highlight different possible translations and the commitments that these translations entail in order to cast light on what every translator must juggle. After the case studies, the paper concludes with a general reflection on the need to rethink the way in which Khmer translators choose pronouns. Though this paper is limited in scope, the hope is that it will prove useful in spurring the thinking of not only Cambodian Bible translators, but also translators working in other languages with similar systems of pronouns.

## **Khmer pronouns vis-à-vis Koine Greek**

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 indigenous tribes scattered throughout Southeast Asia, and it is distantly related to its neighbor Vietnamese (Goddard 2005, 32–33). Khmer, as an isolating language, marks word function through word position. Further, Khmer words lack inflection.

Khmer nouns and pronouns have no inflectional markers for case or number (Goddard 2005, 109). Koine Greek, on the other hand, displays a high degree of inflection, making use of numerous endings to indicate the case, gender, and number of nouns. In contrast to Khmer, Koine Greek structures itself so that each individual word carries more information independent of its placement in a sentence. However, despite the gulf in morphology, it would be incorrect to assume that Greek words always express ideas more precisely than Khmer.

When it comes to pronouns, and second-person pronouns in particular, Khmer makes up for its lack of inflection through the specificity of individual words. Like many Southeast Asian languages, Khmer has incorporated an extensive catalog of respect-based pronouns into its vocabulary (Marston 1997, 125). 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 (see Appendix). These expressions function as equivalents of the English “you,” but they also express either the title of the addressee, for example, *neck krew*, literally “teacher,” or they express familial relationships, for example, *miing*, literally “aunt” but also used to address a woman younger than the speaker’s mother. Along with the pronouns covering daily relationships, Khmer has two additional registers of pronouns for use when speaking to religious figures or royalty.

Koine Greek, on the other hand, has only two second-person pronouns, a singular pronoun, *su*, and a plural pronoun, *humeis*. Each of these also appears in the oblique cases (accusative, genitive, etc.) in order to mark its function. Through its different forms, the Koine Greek pronoun encodes number, case, and the “I–thou” relationship (i.e., the pronoun signals that the speaker is talking *to* a person and not about them). 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.

After a brief excursus on the current Khmer Bible translation, I will present three case studies that explore Jesus’ interactions with people of different social standings and the possibilities presented in each situation by the range of Khmer pronouns.

## **Excursus: current Bible translations into Khmer**

Throughout the following three case studies, I will make reference to existing Khmer Bible translations in order to illustrate the choices that

translators have made. At the present time, those interested in reading the Bible in Khmer have access to two translations. The first translation came about through the efforts of Arthur Hammond, a Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor, who completed his translation in 1954. Known officially as the Khmer Old Version (KOV), Hammond's Bible has in some ways achieved a "King James" status among Cambodian Christians. The second translation began after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1985. Arun Sok Nhep, a Cambodian who had survived the genocide and then completed seminary training in France, headed the translation team. In 1998, his team published Today's Khmer Version, later renamed the Khmer Standard Version (KSV).

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 (Sok Nhep 2000, 44–46). The KSV, as a United Bible Societies effort, relied heavily on the Common Language translation principles laid out by Eugene Nida (in, e.g., Nida and Taber 1969).

## Case studies

In order to analyze the factors influencing the interlocutors in the following three case studies, I will make use of the criteria laid out in Cho 2008 (28). Cho outlined four criteria for translators dealing with honorifics:

1. The social relationship of the interlocutors: age, social status, gender, familiarity;
2. the situation of the dialogue;
3. the cultural expectations concerning social activity;
4. the translator's assumptions about power, rank, distance, intention.

In making use of the four criteria, I will use the first three to analyze each set of interlocutors and thereafter give examples of how the translator's exegetical interpretation can influence their assumptions in the fourth criterion.

### Case study 1: John 2.4

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" (NRSV)

In John 2.4, Jesus speaks to his mother. In terms of their social relationship, Mary's position as Jesus' mother commands a respect from him that women in general did not command in the ancient Mediterranean world. In addition, the setting, a wedding, reinforces their relationship by placing their conversation within the realm of Jewish family life. The situation of the dialogue also reinforces Mary's social standing in that John portrays

her commanding the servants at the wedding (John 2.5). In many ways, Cambodian culture, with its emphasis on filial obedience, mirrors the ancient Near Eastern contrast between the low social standing of women and the respect demanded by mothers from their children.

With the above in mind, at first glance, the translation seems fairly straightforward. A translator would render *soi* “you” as either *maak*, *miad-taa*, or *mdae*, all used when a child speaks to their mother. The presence of *gunai*, the vocative form of the common word *gunē* “woman,” complicates the translation. Appeal to translation helps yields ambiguous results. A translator could follow *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* and interpret *gunē* as a normal way of referring to one’s mother (Newman and Nida 1980, 57). However, reference to the glosses from Greek literature in Liddell and Scott’s lexicon indicates that *gunē* appears in the vocative as “a term of respect or affection for a mistress or lady,” but never for a mother (1968, 363). The key to the choice of pronouns lies in the translator’s assumptions regarding the distance or intimacy between Jesus and his mother and the intention behind Jesus’ choice of the word *gunē*. (For more discussion on the relationship implied by the vocative in this verse, see Knepper 2015 and Quinn 2015.)

At the heart of the translation is the question: How does Jesus, whom John describes as the Word made flesh, address his mother? The fact that Jesus is sitting next to his mother at a family gathering could lead a translator to conclude that Jesus abides by social conventions and that *gunē* contains no disrespect and thus translate *soi* as *miadtaa* as was done in the KOV. On the other hand, influenced by the assumption that Jesus shifts emphasis from a physical to a spiritual family, a translator might render *soi* with *look-miing*, a formal way to address a woman the age of the speaker’s parents. A third possibility exists in the mediating position taken by the KSV, which chose to add a level of formality by inserting the polite title *neck* before *mdae*. The use of *neck mdae* by Jesus indicates a more distant relationship between mother and son.

To add another layer, the translator’s view of Mary plays an important part in the rendering. To highlight an extreme example, a translator with a view towards emphasizing Mary as mother of God could translate *soi* as *bpreah-ong*, the designation for royalty, to show that Jesus himself acknowledges Mary’s status as the Queen of Heaven.

## Case study 2: John 18.33-36

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”<sup>35</sup> Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am

I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"<sup>36</sup> Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (NRSV)

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 contrast to the first case study, Pilate and Jesus share no bonds before their conversation. Pilate, as a member of the occupation of Jerusalem and the procurator, holds the highest political office in the country. Even if he and Jesus were to meet on the street, an enormous social distance would exist between them. In the context of their interaction, Jesus' status as an accused criminal magnifies the gap. In addition, as a non-Roman citizen, Jesus has no recourse to a higher judicial authority; Pilate holds absolute power over Jesus' fate, as he tries to remind Jesus (John 19.10).

In John 18.33, the translator's appraisal of Pilate's intention governs the choice of honorifics. A translator who assumes that Pilate, as an upholder of political order, also upholds social order could view his question as spoken sincerely. A sincere view would use *neck* to show Pilate as polite, a translation favored by both KOV and KSV. On the other hand, a translator emphasizing the brutality of the Roman occupation and the brutality that Pilate showed in other aspects of his career (cf. Luke 13.1) could see his treatment of Jesus as mocking. A mocking translation would render the Greek *su* as '*aeng*', thereby emphasizing the social distance between the pronoun and the title "king."

Jesus' response to Pilate contains a similar range of options, all dependent upon how the translator views Jesus' relation to political authority. Since Pilate holds high social standing, a translation that sees Jesus as respecting social convention would render *su* as *look-dtɔm* "Your Excellency." A translator could also decide that Jesus' response concerning his kingdom indicates disdain for Pilate's questioning. In that case, a translator could render *su* as '*aeng*' and portray Jesus as defying Pilate by trampling on the rules of social conduct. In contrast to both options, KOV and KSV chose an awkward middle ground. In both translations, Jesus addresses Pilate as *look*, a polite address that comes off as informal considering Pilate's station as hegemon.

Of special interest to the Khmer translator is the fact 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 the 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. Although it comes at the end of the Gospel of John, the translator's decision 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.

### *Case study 3: John 15.15*

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. (NRSV)

Unlike the two previous passages, John 15.15 contains an interaction between Jesus and his social inferiors. All those addressed by Jesus are Jewish males of the peasant class and all have an intimate familiarity with each other, bred of their shared experience over the course of Jesus' ministry. In addition, the dialogue takes place in an informal setting, with the interlocutors coming together around the evening meal. The primary social distance between Jesus and the remainder of the group lies in Jesus' stature as their "rabbi." As a religious figure with disciples, Jesus commands his followers respect.

The combination of interlocutors and situation causes two problems for the Khmer translator. The first problem lies in the translator's assumption regarding the religious status of Jesus and his disciples. As with the royal vocabulary discussed in case study two, Khmer possesses a religious vocabulary used by Buddhist monks. A translator who assumes the rank of Jesus and his followers to be analogous to that of monks would therefore employ that set of pronouns. On the other hand, a translator who sees such a comparison to be unhelpful would use the common register of vocabulary. The second problem lies in Jesus' breaking of social boundaries. In this interaction, first by the washing of their feet and then with his words, Jesus clearly breaks down the societal boundary between teacher and student. The translator must then make the choice of whether to extend Jesus' actions to his

vocabulary. Following Jesus' boundary breaking, a translator could render the Greek *humas* as *bɔ-oon-proh* (little brothers) in order to show the familial intimacy between Jesus and his disciples. 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. Neither KOV nor KSV made such a move, however, both choosing to have Jesus address his disciples with the superior-to-inferior *neck* even after 15.15.

However, the translator must focus on more than just the particulars of the passage in question. The translator must also pay attention to "the sociolinguistic and pragmatic use of language" (Cho 2011, 220). The particular wording of Jesus' phrase, "I have called you friends," presents a pragmatic problem when seen in light of recent Cambodian history. In the re-education camps the Khmer Rouge sought to abolish Cambodian social hierarchy by mandating the use of the pronoun *mi t* (friend), similar to the Soviet "comrade" (Marston 1997, 160). The purpose of the use of *mi t* was to abandon the superior/inferior hierarchy inherent in Khmer grammar. Thus, a reading of John 15.15 could easily be produced which portrays Jesus as advocating Khmer Rouge policy against traditional Cambodian social structure.

While a "Khmer Rouge Jesus" translation would have a basis in the source text, it would also have disastrous sociolinguistic resonance. An analogous circumstance in which social circumstances drastically changed the resonance of pronouns occurred in the 1966 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, to both the amusement and distress of Thai Christians. As a result, the translators had to make radical changes to the pronominal system in the 1986 Thai Common Language New Testament (Hatton 1988, 180). The challenge for the translator lies in analyzing all of the linguistic, especially sociolinguistic, and pragmatic factors inherent in a particular text.

## An insight from modern linguistics

In all three of the case studies, the individual verse in the source text 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. Further, the translation of each Gospel must follow the narrative of the Gospel in question in order to translate properly (Cho 2008, 31). Though I have dealt with the Gospel of John on the level of verses for illustrative purposes, an effective Khmer translation must answer the same questions on a macro level. One 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), an idiolect is constituted in the ways that individual authors use their language. Idiolect includes word choice, but also encompasses syntactical construction, patterns of verbal usage, and tone (Campbell 2015, 136). In contrast to a translation principle that emphasizes idiolect, the translators of KOV and KSV decided many questions on the level of the entire New Testament or the entire Bible. For example, in regard to royal versus common language, the KSV translation committee decided, “royal vocabulary is used when the text involves narrations about Jesus . . . but when it comes to people addressing Jesus or Jesus talking to people, ordinary language is used” (Hong 1996, 237).

However, comparison of the four Gospels reveals that not only does the Gospel of John diverge from the Synoptic Gospels, but the three Synoptics also diverge from each other. One example of this divergence occurs in the accounts of Jesus before Pilate as presented by John and Mark. In John, when asked if he is a king, Jesus makes the bold claim that “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews” (John 18.36). On the other hand, in Mark, in response to the same question, Jesus first replies, “You say so,” and then falls silent (Mark 15.2, 5).

This is only one of many examples in which the Gospels portray Jesus’ speech in different tones, and these differences ought to be examined to determine exactly how the Gospel writers differ with regard to their views on authority, tradition, or social conventions. Because the Khmer pronoun system places such heavy stress on concepts such as respect and politeness, the different emphases of the Gospel writers may result in different pronoun usage. Devotion to the study of idiolect will allow the individual voices and concerns of the four evangelists to stand out.

## Conclusion

Advances in linguistics and the science of translation require a reappraisal of the decisions behind translations, and these decisions take on even greater importance in languages such as Khmer, with systems of respect and relationship encoded within the words. The translator working in Khmer or another language with similar pronouns must remember that a “middle-of-the-road choice” is a theological decision in and of itself. The translation of the Bible into Khmer will depend on more than just high-level knowledge of Koine Greek and translation theory. As Catherine Bocquet points out in

her book on translating Luther into French, even translating the German *du* and *Ihr* into the French *tu* and *vous* requires an intimate knowledge of French and German culture (2000, 237). How much more 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 resolve. 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" (1973, 422).

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## Appendix: A sampling of Khmer second-person pronouns

Adapted from Jacob 1990 and Gilbert 2008.

- '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
- bɔŋng*—[lit. older brother/sister] someone older than the speaker, but younger than the speaker's parents
- bɔ-oon*—[lit. younger brother/sister] someone younger than the speaker, but not young enough to be the speaker's child
- kmuay*—[lit. nephew/niece] someone who is young enough to be the speaker's child
- goon*—[lit. child] the speaker's own children
- bpaa/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
- viay*—[lit. grandmother] females approximately the age of the speaker's grandmother
- om*—[lit. uncle/aunt] someone older than the speaker's parents, but younger than the grandparents
- look-dtɔm*—[lit. your excellency] someone of very high social status, such as a government minister
- bpreah-ɔng*—either the king or God