

The Functional Equivalence of Adjectives as Verbs in Khmer Syntax

Hok Chheangkhy*, Swasti Mishra

Department of Humanistic Studies, Indian Institute of Technology (BHU), Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. *Corresponding Author's Email: hokchheangkhy.rs.hss21@itbhu.ac.in

Abstract

This study examines the functional equivalence of adjectives and verbs in Khmer syntax, contending that several lexical items typically classified as adjectives act as verbs within a flexible category system. Unlike many languages that require a copular verb to link subjects with descriptive properties, Khmer, an analytic or isolating language without morphological inflection, raises questions about the classification of its parts of speech. This research explores whether the adjectives traditionally categorized as adjectives in Khmer belong to a separate part of speech or within the verbal class. Drawing on qualitative syntactic analysis, the findings demonstrated that adjectives not only modify nouns but also function as verbs in the sentence. Adjectives act as predicates without the need for linking verbs; they form negative and imperative sentences and co-occur with aspectual markers. This functional equivalence leads to overlap with the verb class within the broader Southeast Asian typological pattern, in which the adjective is not fully distinguished from verbs. Therefore, adjectives in Khmer are best classified as a subclass of verbs rather than a different grammatical category. This paper contributes to Khmer linguistics by clarifying the syntactic behavior of descriptive predicates and broader typological discussions of universal categories of adjective classes and supports the functional equivalence of adjectives and verbs in Khmer syntax.

Keywords: Adjectives, Analytic Language, Khmer Syntax, Predicates, Stative Verbs, Typology.

Introduction

Khmer is the official and national language of Cambodia (1). This language is classified as the Mon-Khmer branch in the Austroasiatic language family (2). Khmer does not exhibit any inflectional morphology and its grammatical relation is typically encoded analytically. So, the classification of parts of speech causes a theoretical issue in Khmer linguistic typology because the words in Khmer do not change their forms to signal the number, gender, or case (1). Nevertheless, many words in Mainland Southeast Asian languages (MSEA) act as verbs in predicate position, but they are adjectives in attributive position. In the same way, words that have parts of speech as nouns in some contexts exhibit verbal features in serial verb constructions too (3).

Max shows that to understand how to analyze the sentences, we need to have a basic knowledge of word categories (4). But the division of parts of speech between adjectives and verbs is flexible in many typological languages, as adjectives have similar grammatical features to verbs, to nouns, or to both and neither (5). Adjectives in some

languages are easily recognized by just looking at their forms, for example, English suffixes are added to the roots, then the words become adjectives, such as comfort + -able >comfortable; play + -ful> playful. However, many adjectives do not have the specific forms (6). Traditional classifications generally treat a noun as the name of the person, place, or thing, adjectives as the noun modifiers and verbs as a word denoting an action (7). But the evidence from English words indicates that one word may be like another in one respect and a different word in another. The words "upper case" and "lower case" belong to the class of adjectives; but lower is a comparative adjective, whereas upper is not in that phrase (8). Regarding this matter, van Lier explained that lexical flexibility is the possibility that we use one or more lexemes in a particular language in more than one function without any morphosyntactic adaptation and without semantic shift (9). Previous research has described the categorial openness of Khmer (10). Yet the comprehensive assessments of adjectival predication in Khmer remain vague.

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Some linguistic descriptions frequently state that Khmer language does not need a linking verb (11). Another problem is that some researchers may apply Indo-European grammatical principles to Khmer because it is a highly analytic language (3). The present study raises two questions regarding the functional equivalence of adjectives as verbs in Khmer syntax. The study is processed by the two following questions:

- a) In what syntactic criteria do adjectives in Khmer serve as predicates?
- b) How do these criteria differ from attributive functions?

The current research centers on two linguistic frameworks: linguistic typological theories about word-class flexibility and functional-analytic perspectives on predicate structure in MSEA. Typological linguists have illustrated that many languages do not limit strict distinctions between lexical categories (5, 12, 13). A single lexical item may serve as both adjective and verbal roles, so it depends on its syntactic position to distinguish the parts of speech (3).

Some scholars have explained the distinctions of lexical categories may serve different roles, depending on the syntactic position (5, 12, 13). Regarding the functional analyses of predicates in the languages of MSEA, Bisang, Vittrant and Watkins demonstrate that predication is a domain where verbs, adjective and stative predicates link without overt linking verbs (14, 15). Khmer has the same word order to other languages such as: Thai, Lao and Mon (3). Hence, these languages are closely related to the typological framework in Khmer.

Adjectives generally denote the properties that people or things have and they modify nouns (16). In inflectional languages, adjective categories are easily recognized through overt markers such as gender, number, or case (17). While in highly analytic languages, adjectives are typically characterized by their syntactic contributions and the way they modify nouns instead of by morphological features (3). Lexical flexibility is the ability of a word to function as many roles in grammar (9). These conceptual frameworks provide the basis of the current analysis of adjectives as verbs in Khmer.

Dixon examined adjectival classes across languages. He observed that some languages have 'adjective', which is a kind of semantic category, it

is not morphosyntactic (5). While Croft stated that syntactic distribution is more important than morphology in determining the category of words (12). Meanwhile, Haspelmath argued for flexible categorial assignment, which is based on functional behavior (13). Enfield and Bisang described those adjectives in MSEA are profoundly incorporated into verbal predicate structures (10, 14). In Thai and Lao languages, adjectives expressing emotion and psychological state often function as predicates (18-20). Whereas the Vietnamese language has the same patterns of stative predicates without applying linking verbs (21). Viveka mentioned that the use of adjectives falls into two groups: one is as a noun modifier and the other is as predication (22).

Concerning the previous studies about the adjectives in Khmer syntax, numerous articles simply focused on each word class, particularly on the function of noun phrases, the function of adjectives and so on. In Jacob's work, there was no adjective class in Khmer language (23). Whereas Ehrman regarded the adjective as a stative verb. She mentioned that adjectives are verbs in Khmer language. She added that adjectives function in the same syntactic position as action verbs (24).

According to Huffman: "any predicates that come before the intensifying adjective /nah/ (very) is an adjectival verb (25).

Previous studies may have focused primarily on the semantic aspects of adjectives in Khmer language, but they ignore the syntactic dimension of adjectives. Remarkably, very few studies applied corpus-based data, even though Sketch Engine now has a lot of digital data on Khmer. Andrew confirmed that a common method to collect syntactic data is to study the variety of structures used by people when they speak or write. He added that modern linguists adopting this approach often rely on data from a corpus database (26).

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive design was used in this research and the data were derived from an empirical corpus stored in Sketch Engine. For Khmer, Sketch Engine provides a brilliant dataset and from here, adjectives frequently occur and function equally as verbs. The objective is to understand how and why adjectives in Khmer serve as verbs; thus, the analysis concentrated on naturally occurring usage patterns rather than solicited judgments or generated examples. To

study the syntax of any language, linguists have to examine the structure of that language (4). So, the qualitative approach enables the theory in the study in several ways, such as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes, constructs and hypotheses (27). This qualitative research provides the comprehension of syntactic environments, semantic domains, discourse contexts and functional concepts behind adjectival predication. The data for this research were collected by purposively picking up adjectives functioning as verbs, while other adjectives act normally, but from the Khmer corpus provided in Sketch Engine, a platform that is commonly used for linguistic research focusing on the first type. The Sketch Engine Khmer corpus comprises: digitalized newspapers, online articles, public communication texts and contemporary written materials that represent the current usage.

These extracted data provided a comprehensive and balanced representation of modern adjectives in Khmer language. The research employed a corpus as the primary data source to eliminate the limitations of intuition-based generalizations and to ensure all analyses reflect how language is really used instead of how it should be used (4). Since the study deals with the functional equivalence of adjectives as verbs, the data sampling was carried out by using:

- a) Three adjective keywords frequently used as examples in this paper, including the following:
 - i. /sʔa:t/ (beautiful, nice, clean)
 - ii. /tʰom/ (big)
 - iii. /cah/ (old)
- b) Depending on their frequency and corpus availability, concordance lines are retrieved for each lexical word of each adjective.
- c) Keyword in context (KWIC) of each word helps us observe the patterns of syntax and function of adjectives in Khmer.

Each adjective was analyzed in depth for both attributive and predicative roles. Each concordance line was assigned to one of these functional categories:

- a) An attributive adjective modifies a noun by occurring after the noun without functioning as a predicate.
- b) An adjective that acts as a verb and serves as the main predicate of the phrase, optionally taking aspect markers, making negative and

imperative sentences and comparing with stative verbs in distribution.

The study employed two syntactic features to define adjectives functioning as verbs equally.

This research paper followed the ethical standards of the research to make sure that all data findings are accurate and reliable sources from the Sketch Engine corpus.

Results

According to corpus data drawn from Sketch Engine, the qualitative analysis of naturally occurring phrases and sentences shows the distinct and consistent patterns of Khmer adjectives in the syntactic functions. The evidence presented in the result demonstrated that the existence of some adjectives in the syntactic criteria occurs in predicate positions, but not all adjectives; they all must align with syntactic analysis and syntactic test. That is, the evidence presented here represents systematic patterns of adjective combinations with various aspects. The patterns of different combinations involved the criteria of Khmer syntax.

As this research explores the criteria of functional equivalence of Khmer adjectives that serve as verbs in predicate position, two research questions about the function of adjectives as verbs in Khmer syntax and the difference between adjectives as modifiers and adjectives as verbs are introduced to fill research gaps in the present paper. The incorporation of syntactic analysis and syntactic test points out the need for a comprehensive, data-driven examination to expose the functional behavior of adjectives in Khmer syntax.

Syntactic Analysis

Adjectives in Khmer language exhibit verb-like behavior inside the relevant syntactic contexts. They function as predicates in a clause without the presence of a linking verb when they express verbal semantics as stative verbs do. Max defines a linking verb as a kind of verb that links the subject to the word that comes after the verb. The word that stands after the verb is either a noun phrase or an adjective phrase. He additionally adds that if it is a noun phrase, the noun phrase refers to the same person or thing that the subject refers to; if it is an adjective phrase, the adjective phrase describes the subject. So, the linking verb shows that both the subject and the noun phrase or adjective phrase following the verb are talking

about the same thing (7). Thomas states that linking verb is a small group of verbs like be, seem, appear, become, look and so on. He adds that these verbs have the common features related back to what stands before the verbs, describing their states (28). Bisang indicates that there are two kinds of linking verbs in Khmer language, one is /*cea*:/ (to be) and another is /*ku*:/ (to be) as

identification (14). The following examples are illustrated to prove that adjectives as verbs in the sentences, as illustrated in Table 1. The examples in Table 1 show that adjectives in Khmer are used as predicates without the presence of linking verbs. In these structures, adjectives express the state or quality of the subjects, forming as a complete clause.

Table 1: Illustrative Examples of Predicative Adjectives in Khmer Sentences

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|-----|
| <i>nieŋ</i> she | <i>sʔa:t</i> beautiful | | | | [1] |
| 'She is beautiful.' | | | | | |
| <i>knɔm</i> I | <i>Cah</i> Old | <i>haəj</i> already | | | [2] |
| 'I was old.' | | | | | |
| <i>aəŋ</i> you | <i>tʰom</i> big | <i>haəj</i> already | | | [3] |
| 'You grew up.' | | | | | |
| <i>bantecteat</i> little more | <i>knɔm</i> I | <i>cah</i> old | <i>haəj</i> already | | [4] |
| 'Sooner I will get old.' | | | | | |

The adjectives /*sʔa:t*/ (beautiful, nice, clean), /*cah*/ (old) and /*tʰom*/ (big) used in the above examples function as stative verbs in the sentences from Equations [1-4]. Linking verbs /*cea*:/ and /*ku*:/ are not required between the subject and adjectives as predicates in such sentences. Tallerman explains

that in some languages linking verbs is not used to link the subject to the predicate adjective (29). She also gave the following example to prove this point, as depicted in Table 2. Example in Table 2 reveals that adjectives in Malay can serve as predicate without linking verbs as Khmer does.

Table 2: Adjectival Predicate in Malay

| | | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|---------|-----|
| <i>Ali</i> Ali | <i>mara</i> angry | (Malay) | [5] |
| 'Ali is angry.' | | | |

So, as what Tallerman confirms in Equation [5], is also applicable in Khmer, we assume that adjectives in Equations [1-4] serve as verbs in Khmer syntax because those adjectives carry the whole predicative meaning, denoting the sense or quality of being beautiful, being old and expressing the change of the physical state.

Adjectives Using with Aspectual Markers

This syntactic analysis shows that adjectives in Khmer are compatible with the aspectual markers. Khmer is an analytic language; it does not have

many productive morphological processes to create large families of words, but aspectual and modal particles can be added to the adjective Equation [5]. Adjectives are also able to take these aspectual markers and particles as other stative verbs do. The following sentences are shown in Table 3. The examples in Table 3 demonstrate that adjectives in Khmer can occur with aspectual markers in the same ways as verbs. This structure indicates that adjectives act as stative verbs and share grammatical properties with verbs in Khmer syntax.

Table 3: Adjectives with Aspectual Marker Constructions in Khmer

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----|
| <i>Kʰnaəj</i> pillow | <i>kuətəe</i> have to | <i>sʔa:t</i> clean | | | | | | | [6] |
| 'A pillow has to be clean.' | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>sbaək</i> skin | <i>ko:n</i> child | <i>rɔbah</i> POSS | <i>nea?</i> you | <i>nəŋ</i> will | <i>sʔa:t</i> beautiful | <i>haəj</i> and | <i>men</i> not | <i>rɔmah</i> itchy | [7] |
| 'Your child's skin will be beautiful and won't be itchy.' | | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|---------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|--|------|
| <i>knɔm</i> | <i>thom</i> | <i>haəj</i> | | | | | | | | |
| I | big | already | | | | | | | | [8] |
| 'I already grew up.' | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>spean</i> | <i>daɛl</i> | <i>kɔmpɔŋ</i> | <i>cah</i> | <i>trudro:m</i> | | | | | | |
| bridge | that | PROG | old | dilapidated | | | | | | [9] |
| 'The bridge that is becoming old and dilapidate.' | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>knɔm</i> | <i>nəŋ</i> | <i>sʔa:t</i> | <i>cearieŋrɔho:t</i> | | | | | | | |
| I | will | beautiful | forever | | | | | | | [10] |
| 'I will be beautiful forever.' | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>sbaek</i> | <i>men</i> | <i>ŋeaj</i> | <i>nəŋ</i> | <i>cah</i> | <i>cri:wcruəŋ</i> | <i>tɔw</i> | <i>ta:m</i> | <i>ʔa:ju</i> | | |
| skin | not | easy | will | old | wrinkle | go | by | age | | [11] |
| 'The skin will not easily be come old and wrinkled according to the age.' | | | | | | | | | | |

The sentences above are evident to support the findings in which the sentences use the aspectual and modal with the adjectives. Adjectives have been documented as they will be able to co-occur with aspectual markers (e.g., /*nəŋ*/ 'will' and /*kɔmpɔŋ*/ 'progress'), which are usually used with verbs in Khmer. The adjectives /*sʔa:t*/ (beautiful, nice) /*thom*/ (big) and /*cah*/ (old) in Equations [6-11] are combined with the aspectual markers and particles. They behave as the other verbs do, being aspectually completed, progressive and future. They stand after those aspectual markers, so they are the property of verbalization. This reveals that Khmer adjectives carry lexical tense-aspect modality features, which is similar to a verb.

Adjectives Participating in Serial Verb Construction

Adjectives in Khmer can also appear in serial verb constructions as the verbs do, so they function as verbs in the predicates. Serial verb construction, also called serial verbs, is a single clause structure consisting of multiple independent verbs that are not linked by any linking word and do not have a predicate-argument relationship among the verbs (3, 30). The sentences below show that the adjectives combine with the verbs in the serial verb construction in Khmer syntax, so the adjectives function as predicates as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Adjective with Serial Verb Construction in Khmer

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|------|
| <i>nieŋ</i> | <i>ʔa:c</i> | <i>sʔa:t</i> | <i>ba:n</i> | <i>pram</i> | <i>c^hnam</i> | <i>dap</i> | <i>c^hnam</i> | | | |
| she | can | beautiful | succeed | five | year | ten | year | | | [12] |
| 'She can still stay beautiful for five years, ten years.' | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>sopheap</i> | <i>nea:ri:</i> | <i>krɔp</i> | <i>ru:p</i> | <i>taɛŋtae</i> | <i>caŋ</i> | <i>sʔa:t</i> | <i>neŋ</i> | <i>mean</i> | <i>pheaptea:ʔteap</i> | |
| gentle | woman | all | form | always | want | beautiful | and | have | attractiveness | [13] |
| 'Every woman always wants to be beautiful and attractive.' | | | | | | | | | | |

The adjective /*sʔa:t*/ in Equations [12, 13] co-occurs with the verbs /*ʔa:c*/ and /*caŋ*/ in the serial verb construction. In these structures, those adjectives contribute descriptive or resultative meanings while functioning as parts of the predicate sequence, so they function as verbs in the predicate.

Adjectives Taking Direct Arguments

The last test of adjectives in Khmer syntax is that adjectives take direct arguments in the same way

that verbs function. Furthermore, adjectives in Khmer syntax can also make a negative sentence by adding negative lexical words /*men*/ or /*ʔat*/ (not) that is often associated with adjectives, as stated in Table 5. The examples in Table 5 below demonstrate that the negation markers in Khmer can be attached directly to the adjectives to form the negative sentences, so they serve as the predicate.

Table 5: Adjectival Predicate with Negation in Khmer

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|--|------|
| <i>nieŋ</i> | <i>men</i> | <i>sʔa:t</i> | | | | | | | | |
| she | not | beautiful | | | | | | | | [14] |
| 'She is not beautiful.' | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>sbaek</i> | <i>rɔbah</i> | <i>nea?</i> | <i>nəŋ</i> | <i>men</i> | <i>ta:m</i> | <i>ʔa:ju</i> | <i>nuh</i> | <i>te:</i> | | |
| skin | POSS | you | will | not | by | age | that | PRT | | [15] |
| 'Your skin won't be old according to your age.' | | | | | | | | | | |

remaining word in a phrase rather than the head (29). First, the head plays an important role in telling us about the crucial semantic information and it determines the meaning of the whole phrase. The head, therefore, determines the word class of the entire phrase as well. So, the phrases in Equations [20, 21] /*pteah cah*/ (old house) tell us about /*pteah*/ (house), which is old. Since /*pteah cah*/ in Equation [20] is headed by a noun, it is called Noun Phrase (NP). Second, the example in Equations [20, 21], the word /*pteah*/ is the head which shares the same ‘distribution’ as the entire phrase.

In Equation [21], where the whole phrase occurs, we can substitute just the head. For instance, we say either *s/he sleeps in the old house*, or just *s/he sleeps in the house*. The head then can’t be omitted, so the third property of head is that it is the obligatory item in the phrase. When the adjective modifies a noun like /*pteah*/ (house), it plays the role as an adjective. Now look at another example, as shown in Table 7. The adjective in Table 7 serves as the predicate while occurring with the aspect marker in Khmer. This structure shows that adjectives can combine with aspectual markers in the ways as verbs.

Table 7: Adjectival Predication with Aspect

| | | | |
|----------------|------------|-------------|------|
| <i>kǎət</i> | <i>cah</i> | <i>haaj</i> | |
| S/he | old | already | [22] |
| ‘S/he is old.’ | | | |

The question raises what the difference between Equations [20] and [22]?

There must be a clear syntactic test to differentiate the sentences Equations [20, 22] in Khmer language. Miller, in his work ‘A critical introduction to syntax’ uses the term “Split Noun Phrase” (Split NP) to explain the cases where the parts of the noun phrase, which logically belong to a single noun phrase, are not placed next to each other in a sentence. Instead, these parts are separated, or split, across different positions in the clause. He additionally states that a split NP appears when:

- a) a noun and its modifiers such as determiner, adjective, quantifier, relative clause, etc.
- b) which forms one NP at the level of meaning
- c) are distributed across the clause, rather than forming one contiguous constituent (31).

To make sure that the word /*cah*/ (old) is an adjective and act as modifiers to their nouns, there is a syntactic test for splitting NP.

We turn to look at Equations [22, 23] again, we see that the combination of head noun and its modifier are split by using the proclitic particle /*dv:*/ between them in Khmer syntax. It is assumed that the relevant constituent remains a part of a single NP, even though they are separated, as seen in Table 8 below. The examples in Table 8 reveal that the clauses containing adjectives can be split by the proclitic particle when the adjectives function attributively. In these constructions, the particle separates the modifier from the noun within the noun phrase.

Table 8: Splitting Noun Phrase in Attributive Adjectives

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|------|
| <i>pteah</i> | <i>dv:</i> | <i>cah</i> | | | | |
| house | | old | | | | [23] |
| ‘Old house’ | | | | | | |
| <i>kǎət</i> | <i>de:k</i> | <i>knoŋ</i> | <i>pteah</i> | <i>dv:</i> | <i>cah</i> | |
| S/he | sleep | in | house | | old | [24] |
| ‘S/he sleeps in the old house.’ | | | | | | |

It is noted that the splitting noun phrase above occurs in both formal spoken and written language (1). When the noun phrase can be split between modifier by the proclitic particle /*dv:*/, then it is still the same constituent structure in Khmer syntax.

Whereas in Equation [22], the word /*cah*/ (old) is not a constituent construction of the word /*kǎət*/

(she or he) because we cannot split NP by /*dv:*/ like those in Equations [23, 24], as indicated in Table 9. The example in Table 9 demonstrates that splitting an adjective from the aspectual marker results in an ungrammatical sentence in Khmer structure (Equation [25]). The adjective and the aspectual marker must remain together when functioning as a predicate.

Table 9: Ungrammatical Splitting of Noun Phrase with Adjectives

| | | | | |
|----------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------|
| <i>kǎət</i> | <i>/dɔː/</i> | <i>cah</i> | <i>haaj*</i> | |
| S/he | | old | already | [25] |
| 'S/he is old.' | | | | |

Overall, the results of this study reveal that adjectives and verbs in Khmer are functionally equivalent across many syntactic environments, especially in predicative use. Khmer is not compelled to have an auxiliary 'to be' and adjectives can act as full verbs expressing states or qualities. Functional equivalence is a contextual one, determined by syntactic position, compatibility with aspect markers and semantic interpretation.

This finding illustrates the typological status of Khmer as being an isolating language, where syntactic roles are more relevant for word classes rather than morphological roles. It is also in line with patterns found cross-linguistically in several Southeast Asian languages (including Thai and Vietnamese), where adjectives are reported to be comparably flexible.

In summary, Khmer adjectives can also act as verbs when they co-occur with verbal aspect markers, make negative statements and join the serial verb construction or convey stative or resultative meanings. The lack of visible differentiation between adjectives and verbs in such examples serves to emphasize the lexical flexibility of Khmer in terms of syntactical issues. These results support the view that categories in Khmer are not concretely categorical, but functionally defined and by extension have implications for our understanding of the structure of Khmer syntax as well as its status within linguistic typology.

Discussion

The results presented in this research provide relevant examples of the syntactic operations of lexical categories in Khmer language and contribute to the discussion of Southeast Asian languages. The study reveals that Khmer demonstrates category fluidity. It allows some adjectives to function as verbs in a sentence without a copular verb. This study examined the functional equivalence of adjectives as verbs in Khmer syntax. This complies with the typological observation regarding languages in the Mainland Southeast Asian linguistic area, that boundaries between the categories of nouns, verbs and

adjectives tend to be less rigid than in other language families.

The corpus data from Sketch Engine shows that many adjectives in Khmer, when predicated, function in the same way as stative verbs.

The research findings revealed that category flexibility allows adjectives in Khmer function equally as verbs in Khmer syntax. Some adjectives in Khmer serve as adjectives to modify nouns and they also function as verbs by taking aspectual markers such as temporal particles, making negation, joining serial verb constructions and taking direct arguments as other stative verbs do. If the adjective includes an aspectual function word or is in a negated clause, that adjective goes beyond the description of a simple modifier. Although earlier studies denied the absence of an adjective class or regarded the adjective class as stative verbs (25, 26), our findings suggest that some adjectives play a role as verbs in Khmer syntax, but not all adjectives. This research explored a comprehensive function of adjectives based on corpus data from Sketch Engine. Therefore, the findings advocate for more adjectives to be rooted in the Khmer lexical system and to be flexible enough to allow for class changing in certain syntactic contexts.

However, long-term research may be needed to analyze the semantic distribution of adjectives, particularly those that cannot function as verbs in Khmer. The semantic features of adjectives, be they of an inherent, temporary, or relational disposition, could determine their predicative potential. Future studies may examine semantically feasible ways of using adjectives as predicates in Khmer. Current observations suggest that some adjectives act as verbs without the help of a copula verb. The findings offer conclusive evidence that some adjectives function as verbs because they take aspectual markers, participate in serial verb construction, make negative sentences and take direct arguments. This study concludes that the good way to understand the functional equivalence of adjectives and verbs in Khmer is to consider it a case of category flexibility, rather than a case of category identity.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that the functional equivalence of adjectives as verbs in Khmer is not a universal property that can occur with all kinds of adjectives. The adjectives exhibit verbal properties, including acting as predicates, interacting with aspectual and modal markers, making negative sentences, joining in serial verb constructions and taking adverbial modification typical of verb phrases. However, some adjectives do not function as verbs in Khmer syntax. Their main role still serves as attributive. This distinction suggests that Khmer speakers think of some semantic features, particularly emotional or experience states, as they always express the physical states functioning as predicates.

The research findings enhance the understanding of lexical category flexibility in Khmer and challenge the relevance of Indo-European parts of speech categories to analytic languages. They also reveal how the significant corpus-based qualitative research finds the patterns that intuition cannot investigate. The future research should focus on the corpus, examine language change, dialectal variations and examine the use of adjectival predicate structures by children in Khmer language.

Abbreviations

EAA: Eastern Austroasiatic, KWICK: Keyword in context, MSEA: Mainland Southeast Asian languages, NP: Noun Phrase.

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Author Contributions

Hok Chheangkhy: data collection, writing- first draft, methodology, data analysis, Swasti Mishra: literature review, supervision on the writing process.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no competing interests pertinent to the context of this article to declare.

Data Availability

All the data used in the paper is taken from Sketch Engine corpus. The authors will share the data used for the study after a request is made to them via email.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The author declares that Grammarly and QuillBot are used to enhance language and edit texts, with a focus on grammar checks and sentence structure.

Ethics Approval

No ethical clearance certificate is applicable for the present study.

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