

Khmer Noun Phrase Structure in Administrative and Academic Register: An NP-Movement Analysis Based on Royal Decrees and Scientific Articles Corpus.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the syntactic architecture of Khmer Noun Phrases (NPs) within high registers, specifically focusing on administrative texts (*rɨʂc kri:t* - Royal Decrees) and academic discourse (*at tʰa: bət βi tʰjɛ ka:* - Scientific Articles). Utilizing the X-bar Theory framework and the Determiner Phrase (DP) Hypothesis, this study addresses the typological challenges posed by Khmer's strict head-initial nature versus its distinctive surface linear word order: [Noun - Adjective - Numeral - Classifier - Demonstrative]. Through a quantitative analysis of 240 complex DPs, the study found that this surface complexity does not violate the head-initial principle; rather, it is the result of systematic NP-movement mechanisms within the DP. The core NP undergoes leftward movement across functional heads, consistently displacing the Demonstrative (*nih*) to the absolute final position in 100% of the sampled cases, serving as a critical syntactic boundary marker. Furthermore, the research elucidates the phenomenon of structural compression and extreme recursion characteristic of high-register Khmer. Empirical data reveals a significant register-specific divergence: academic prose exhibits a higher density of nominalization via *ka:* (43.6%) to maximize information density, while administrative texts rely on unprecedented right-branching adjunct chains, reaching depths of up to 23 layers to ensure legal precision. These findings provide significant typological insights into Austroasiatic syntax, demonstrating how massive recursive structures—heavily reliant on Pali-Sanskrit loanwords—are densely packed into a single DP [1] without disrupting the language's fundamental head-initial principles.

Keywords: syntactic architecture, X-bar theory, DP analysis, NP-movement, structural compression, nominalization.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Khmer is a non-inflectional Austroasiatic language characterized by a basic SVO word order and strict adherence to the head-initial principle [2, 3]. However, the Khmer NP exhibits complex typological features, particularly the fact that demonstratives are consistently "anchored" at the phrase's end [4]. In high registers, such as administrative texts and academic articles, structural compression occurs intensely, leading to the emergence of massive NPs with high information density [1]. This paper applies X-bar Theory and DP Analysis to deconstruct the internal architecture of these complex NPs and explain the syntactic mechanisms governing them.

X-bar Theory establishes a universal template for all phrases, featuring a hierarchical architecture consisting of the Head (X), the intermediate level (X'), and the maximal projection (XP) [5]. Abney [6] extended this via the DP Hypothesis, arguing that the Determiner (D) is the actual head of the noun phrase, creating a Determiner Phrase (DP) where the NP serves as D's complement. The DP approach provides additional structural positions

(such as Spec,DP and Spec,NumP) essential for explaining the [Noun-Adj-Num-CL-Dem] linear order in Khmer [4]. Moreover, in academic prose, authors often eschew subordinate clauses in favor of embedding vast amounts of information into Complement and Adjunct positions of nouns—a phenomenon known as structural compression [1].

This study employs generative syntax analysis. The data is extracted directly from two specific Khmer text sources:

Administrative Texts (រាជក្រឹត្យ — [rɨʒ kri:t]— Royal Decrees): This sub-corpus consists of 146 complex NPs extracted from official decrees (2021–2025). These texts are characterized by exhaustive legal identification, utilizing high-density Pali-Sanskrit loanwords and extensive right-branching recursion to ensure jurisdictional clarity

Academic Texts (អត្ថបទវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ [at tʰa: bət βi tʰjɛ ka:] — Scientific Articles): This sub-corpus comprises 94 complex NPs sourced from peer-reviewed Khmer journals focusing on linguistics and culture (2019). These phrases typically exhibit multi-layered nominalization and technical terminology intended to increase information density

Analytical Procedure: To ensure replicability, the data underwent a three-stage analytical process:

1. **Constituent Identification:** NPs were isolated based on the presence of functional heads, such as the nominalizer ការ [ka:] or the demonstrative នេះ [nih].
2. **Structural Mapping:** Each phrase was mapped onto a syntactic tree to measure recursion depth, identifying layers ranging from simple adjuncts to extreme 23-layer administrative chains.
3. **Quantitative Profiling:** Statistical frequency of syntactic markers (*ka:*, *nej*, and *nih*) was calculated to identify register-specific constraints and validate the mandatory nature of NP-movement in formal Khmer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Noun Phrase (NP) in Khmer strictly adheres to the head-initial principle, where the head noun always precedes its modifiers, which branch to the right. However, in high-register domains such as academic and administrative texts, the pressure to convey large amounts of precise and formal information has led to the phenomenon of "structural compression," resulting in massive phrasal structures. Through the lens of X-bar Theory and the DP Hypothesis, this complexity can be deconstructed via the following syntactic mechanisms.

Nominalization

Academic language minimizes the use of cumbersome dependent clauses, opting instead to compress verbal events into nominal entities [7]. In scientific texts (អត្ថបទវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ), this mechanism operates extensively through nominalizing prefixes, most commonly ការ [ka:] - act of/fact of) for actions and សេចក្តី [sec kdej] - notion/content) for abstract concepts. Consider data extracted from an article:

(1) Khmer: ការសិក្សាអំពីភាសានិងវប្បធម៌នៃជនជាតិមួយ [8]

IPA: [ka:.sic.sa:.ʔvm.pi:.βvp.pa.tʰv:.nej.cɔn.ciɛt.ni.moɔj]

Gloss: **NMZ (Nominalizer)** - study - about - language - and - culture - of - ethnic group - one

Translation: The study of the language and culture of a people.

Within the X-bar framework, the morpheme ការ [ka:] functions as a functional nominalizing head (n°). It selects a Verb Phrase (VP) សិក្សា [sic.sa:] (*study*) as its complement. The verb សិក្សា then selects a Prepositional Phrase (PP) អំពីភាសានិងវប្បធម៌ [ʔəm.pi:.βnp.pa.tʰv:] (*about language and culture*) as its Complement, while the PP នៃជនជាតិមួយ [nej.cən.ciət.ni. mvoɔj] (*of a people*) acts as an Adjunct attached at the n' level.

Similarly, in (2) ការប្រកាស ឯករាជ្យ [9]

IPA: [ka:.brɔ:.kah.æk.kə.riɛc]

Gloss: **NMZ** - declare - independence

Translation: The declaration of independence

The syntax consists of: Head (n°): ការ [ka:]; Complement: The transitive verb ប្រកាស [brɔ:.kah] (*declare*) and its object ឯករាជ្យ [æk.kə.riɛc] (*independence*), forming a compressed VP.

In (3) ការបង្កើតក្រសួងការពារជាតិ [9]

IPA: [ka:.bɔ:.ŋ.kɜ:t.krɔ:.sɔvŋ.ka:.piɛ.ciɛt]

Gloss: **NMZ** - establish - Ministry - Defense

Translation: The establishment of the Ministry of National Defense

There is a phenomenon of Multi-layer Compression. In this hierarchical structure, the head ការ [ka:] selects the VP [បង្កើត [bɔ:.ŋ.kɜ:t] + NP] as its complement. Within this, the object NP is itself a complex compound noun ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ [krɔ:.sɔvŋ.ka:.piɛ.ciɛt] (*Ministry of National Defense*). In the X-bar tree, this NP occupies the complement position of the verb [bɔ:.ŋ.kɜ:t] before the entire block is converted into a nominal category by the head *ka*.

Regarding (4) ការលើកឡើងអំពីតួនាទីព្រះមហាក្សត្រក្នុងការរៀបចំដឹកនាំប្រទេស [9]

IPA: [ka:.lɜk.lɔɜ:ŋ.ʔəm.pi:.tuɜ.niɜ.ti:.præʔ.ma:.ha:.kʰsa:t.kʰnoŋ.ka:.riɛp.cəm.dɜk.nɔam.

brɔ:.teʔ]

Gloss: **NMZ**- mention - about - role - Monarch - in - **NMZ** - organize - lead - country

Translation: The mentioning of the role of the Monarch in organizing and leading the country.

This is the most quintessential example of Structural Compression with advanced syntax: the entire phrase begins with the first nominalizing head ការ [ka:]. However, it contains a PP starting with ក្នុង [kʰnoŋ.] (*in*), which selects another nominalized phrase as its complement: ការរៀបចំដឹកនាំប្រទេស [ka:.riɛp.cəm.dɜk.nɔam.brɔ:.teʔ] (*the organizing and leading of the country*). The Adjunctrelationship is seen in the phrase អំពីតួនាទី...[ʔəm.pi:.tuɜ.niɜ.ti:] (*about the role...*), which attaches to the n' level to restrict the scope of the head "mentioning."

This entire complex structure forms a massive NP/nP. Nevertheless, it maintains the absolute head-initial principle of Khmer (Dryer, 1996; Haiman, 2011).

The hierarchical structure is as follows. In X-bar theory, Adjuncts attach to the intermediate level (n'), while the Complement sits adjacent to the head (n°):

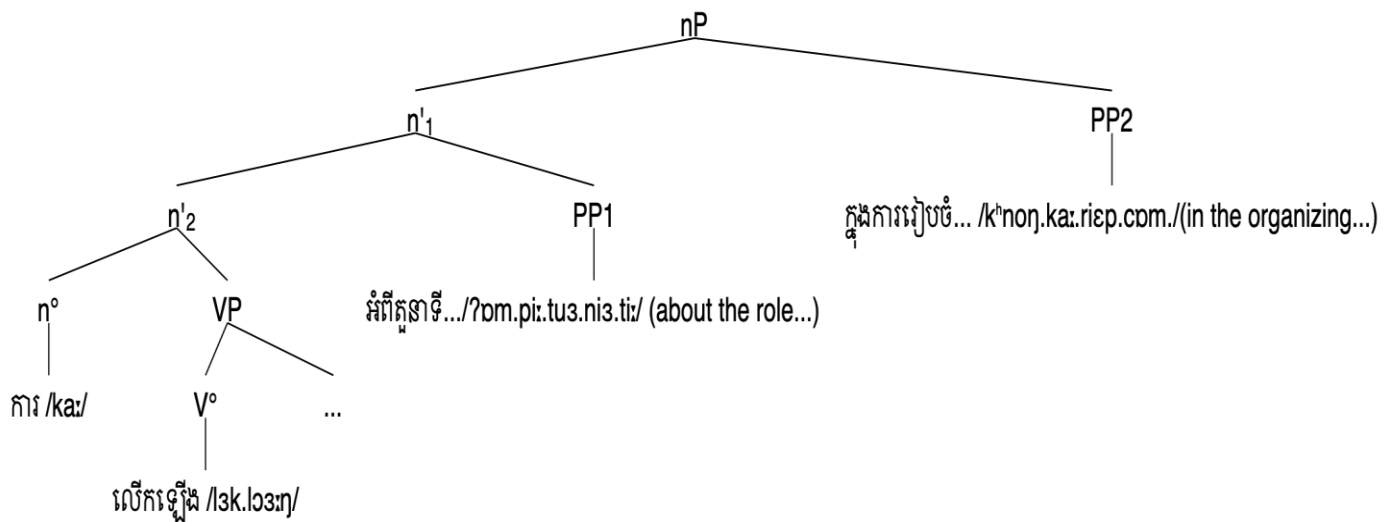


Figure 1: X-bar structure of a complex nominalized phrase in academic Khmer

According to this tree diagram, three key factors emerge: Recursion: The diagram shows PPs attached consecutively to the right of the head through n' levels. This proves that Khmer possesses a typical right-branching structure of a head-initial language. Embedding: The second PP (ក្នុង...[$kʰnɔŋ$]) contains another nominalization (ការរៀបចំ...[$ka:riɛp.com$]). This "compression" mechanism allows scientific authors to avoid writing two separate sentences, instead embedding the entire idea into a single noun phrase. Head Position: The nominalizing head ការ always precedes the VP it governs, adhering to the absolute Head-Initial principle in Khmer.

Right-Branching Recursion and Internal Structural Layers of the NP

High-register administrative texts, such as រាជក្រឹត្យ [$rɨ3c kri:t$] (Royal Decrees), feature a high density of Pali or Sanskrit-derived vocabulary (Haiman, 2011). A prominent feature of the NP here is the appearance of long chains of coordinate and subordinate compound nouns. However, despite the lexical origins, their internal syntax strictly follows the Khmer [Head + Modifier] principle.

In X-bar theory, this complexity is handled by the recursive property at the intermediate N' position ($N \rightarrow N + YP$) (Radford, 1988). Consider the data:

(5) Khmer: អត្តសញ្ញាណជាតិខ្មែរ [8]

IPA: [$ʔat.ta.sa:n.na:n.ciɛt.kʰmɛː$]

Gloss: Identity - nation - Khmer

Translation: Khmer National Identity.

In this example, we see a continuous right-branching chain: the head is អត្តសញ្ញាណ [$ʔat.ta.sa:n.na:n$] (identity), the first adjunct is ជាតិ [$ciɛt$] (nation), and the second adjunct modifying "nation" is ខ្មែរ [$kʰmɛː$] (Khmer).

(6) Khmer: លក្ខន្តិកៈទូទៅនៃយោធិននៃកងយោធពលខេមរភូមិន្ទ [9]

IPA: [$lək.kʰɔn.te.kaʔ.tuː.tʃi.nej.jo.tʰi:n.nej.kɔːŋ.jo.tʰa.pɔːl.kʰɛːm.ma.ra.pʰuːmiːn$]

Gloss: Statute - general - of - soldier - of - military - Royal - Khmer

Translation: "General Statute for Personnel of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. In this example, we see a chain linked by the preposition ទៅ [nej] (of/belonging to). The preposition ទៅ [nej] is typically used to indicate essential relationships, attributes, or components within an administrative system. Syntax: Head (n°): លក្ខន្តិកៈ [lək.kʰɔn.te.kaʔ.] (Statute); PP1: ទៅយោធិន [nej.jo.tʰi:n] (of soldiers) attached to N' to modify "Statute"; PP2: ទៅកងយោធពល... [nej.kɔ:ŋ.jo.tʰa.pɔ:l] (of the Military...) further attached to the N' of the noun "soldier." This demonstrates a pure recursive structure (N→N+PP→N+PP). This chain can extend indefinitely to the right to specify the exact position of an object within the military hierarchy.

(7) Khmer: រចនាសម្ព័ន្ធធាតុតាំងរបស់អគ្គបញ្ជាការដ្ឋាននៃកងយោធពលខេមរភូមិន្ទ [9]

IPA:[re:c.ca:.na:.sɔ:m.pɔan.cat.taŋ.ro:.bɔh.ʔaʔ.kæʔ.ba:n.ciɛ.ka:.ra:t.tʰa:n.nej.kɔ:ŋ.jo.

tʰa.pɔ:l.kʰɛ:m.ma.ra.pʰu:.mi:n],

Gloss: Structure - organize - **POSS** - General-Command - of - Military- Khmer- Royal

Translation: The organizational structure of the General Command of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.

Combined with the Possessive Phrase (PossP): The word របស់ [ro:.bɔh] acts as the head of a possessive phrase, establishing a primary relationship between "Organizational Structure" and "General Command." The preposition ទៅ [nej] (Systemic Relationship) follows to explain which unit the "General Command" belongs to (Royal Armed Forces). Alternating between ro:.bɔh and nej within the same recursive chain helps the reader distinguish between ownership/direct subordination (របស់ [ro:.bɔh]) and classification/identification (ទៅ [nej]), preventing ambiguity in long legal codices.

Additionally, high-register includes the Relative Clause ដែល [dɛ:l] (which/who) as the peak of the recursive chain:

(9) Khmer: ព្រះមហាក្សត្រដែលគ្រប់គ្រងរៀបចំសង្គម [8]

IPA: [præʔ.ma:.ha:.riɛc.dɛ:l.kro:p.krɔŋ.riɛp.cɔm.sɔ:ŋ.kɔ:m]

Gloss: Great King - who - rule - organize - society

Translation: The Great King who rules and organizes society.

The head is ព្រះមហាក្សត្រ [præʔ.ma:.ha:.riɛc] (Great King), and the Complementizer Phrase (CP) begins with the relative word ដែល [dɛ:l]. In X-bar theory, this is a CP attached to the N' level, and the internal structure of the CP contains governing verbs (គ្រប់គ្រងរៀបចំ [kro:p.krɔŋ.riɛp.cɔm]) and an object (សង្គម [sɔ:ŋ.kɔ:m]) .

NP-movement and Demonstrative Boundary Markers

Although the internal structure of the Khmer NP follows [Head + Complement/Adjunct], the positions of numerals, classifiers, and demonstratives are reversed compared to English (Simpson, 2005). Consider a phrase from data:

(10) Khmer: គំនិតទស្សនៈនេះ [8]

IPA: [kɔ:m.ni:t.toʔ.sa.na.nih]

Gloss: idea - concept - **DEM (Demonstrative)**

Translation: This conceptual viewpoint.

According to X-bar/DP Theory: Deep Structure: Under the DP Hypothesis, the demonstrative is the head of the Determiner Phrase (D°), preceding the noun: [DP [D' ៖ [nih] [NP គំនិតទស្សនៈ [kɔːm.niːt.toʔ.sa.na]]]]. To emphasize the content entity, the entire NP block (គំនិតទស្សនៈ [kɔːm.niːt.toʔ.sa.na]) undergoes leftward movement, landing in the Specifier position of the DP. The resulting surface order is [DP [NP គំនិតទស្សនៈ [kɔːm.niːt.toʔ.sa.na]]i [D' ៖ [nih]ti]]. This movement transforms the demonstrative into a "textual anchor" after the main concept has been introduced.

For (11) Khmer: គោលការណ៍ក្នុងលទ្ធិនេះ [8]

IPA: [koːl.kaː.kʰnɔːŋ.liːt.tʰi.nih]

Gloss: Principle - in - doctrine - **DEM**

Translation: This principle within the doctrine

The NP containing a complex adjunct shows that even when an NP carries a long adjunct "tail," it still moves as a single constituent. The NP here includes the head (គោលការណ៍ [koːl.kaː]) and the prepositional adjunct (ក្នុងលទ្ធិ [kʰnɔːŋ.liːt.tʰi]). This entire [NP N + PP] block moves across the D° head (៖ [nih]). In scientific prose, placing the complex concept first allows the reader to establish the subject of discussion before the word "this" functions to isolate that object within the presented theoretical system.

(12) Khmer:ព្រះរាជក្រឹត្យ នស/រកត/០១២១/០០២ នេះ [9]

IPA: [præʔ.rɨɕ.kriːt.noː.səː.roːkɔːtɔː.səːn.məʊj.piːməʊj.səːn.səːn.piː.nih]

Gloss: Royal-Decree NS/RKT/0121/002 DEM

Translation: This Royal Decree No. NS/RKT/0121/002.

Following Simpson's (2005) analysis of Southeast Asian languages, this structure is essentially a Determiner Phrase (DP) with a head-initial base order: [DP Dem[NumP Num[CLP Cl[NP N Adj]]]]. The surface order in Khmer is the result of a mandatory chain of phrasal movement (XP-movement): The entire complex [NP ព្រះរាជក្រឹត្យ នស/រកត/០១២១/០០២ [[præʔ.rɨɕ.kriːt.noː.səː.roːkɔːtɔː.səːn.məʊj.piːməʊj.səːn.səːn.piː]], carrying heavy core information, moves leftward across the Classifier (CL) and Numeral (Num) heads to reach the Specifier of NumP (or CLP). Next, the entire [NP Num CL] structure continues to move leftward, crossing the D° head containing the demonstrative ៖ [nih] (*this*). Consequently, the demonstrative ៖ is pushed to the final position.

This NP-movement explains why, in legal texts such as រាជក្រឹត្យ [rɨɕ.kriːt] (Royal Decrees), the demonstrative pronoun ៖ [nih] (*this*) or នោះ [nuh] (*that*) is always pushed to the final "stop" position. The syntactic function of this movement is to bring the NP (the focus of information) into a prominent position (presentational focus), while simultaneously turning the final demonstrative into a "boundary marker" (or boundary stopper). This helps the reader accurately identify the conclusion of a lengthy subject or object.

Comparative Analysis: Administrative and Academic NP Structures

Below is the comparative framework of Khmer Noun Phrase (NP) structures across administrative and academic registers.

Core Similarities (High Registers)

Both domains represent high registers that face the pressure of conveying large amounts of precise and formal information. As a result, both exhibit the phenomenon of "structural compression," which packs heavy nominalizations and recursive right-branching chains into a single, massive Determiner Phrase (DP) to achieve

high information density. Despite their complex surface structures, both registers strictly adhere to Khmer's head-initial principle. Furthermore, through mandatory NP-movement, both registers systematically displace the demonstrative to the absolute final position of the phrase

Comparative Framework

Criteria	Administrative Register	Academic Register
Typical Context	Administrative Texts - Royal Decrees.	Academic Texts - Scientific Articles).
Core Objective	To construct noun phrases possessing high legal identification value.	To contain complex nominalization structures and technical terminology.
Lexical Features	Features a high density of Pali or Sanskrit-derived loanwords.	Relies heavily on technical terminology and complex theoretical concepts.
Syntactic Mechanisms & Prominent Structures	Characterized by long chains of coordinate and subordinate compound nouns through right-branching recursion. These chains frequently use prepositions like ៃន [nej] (of) to indicate essential relationships, attributes, or structural components (e.g., specifying an exact position within a military hierarchy).	Extensively employs nominalization to compress verbal events into nominal entities using prefixes like ការ [ka:] (act of) or សេចក្តី [sec kdej] (abstract notions). It also uses embedding to pack vast amounts of information into a single noun phrase, avoiding the use of cumbersome dependent clauses.
Role of Final Demonstratives	Functions as a "boundary marker" (or boundary stopper). This syntactic displacement helps the reader accurately identify the conclusion of a lengthy and heavily modified subject or object.	Functions as a "textual anchor". Moving the complex concept to the front allows the reader to establish the subject of discussion before the demonstrative isolates and anchors that object within the presented theoretical system.

Table 1: Comparative Framework of NP Syntactic Features in Khmer Administrative and Academic Registers

The data presented in Table 1 highlights how Khmer's underlying syntactic architecture accommodates the divergent demands of formal registers. In administrative discourse, the NP is primarily a vehicle for precise identification. This is achieved through extensive right-branching recursion, where long chains of nominal modifiers and PPs (often headed by ៃន [nej]) specify hierarchies. Within this framework, the final demonstrative—resulting from mandatory NP-movement—serves a vital parsing function: it acts as a "boundary marker," enabling the reader to navigate the conclusion of exceptionally heavy subjects or objects.

Conversely, the academic register leverages "structural compression" to achieve high information density. By utilizing nominalizing heads (n°) like ការ [ka:], scientific authors convert entire VPs into nominal constituents, effectively embedding complex propositions into a single DP. The movement of these massive, compressed NP blocks to the Specifier position of the DP allows the theoretical entity to be introduced as a presentational focus. Here, the final demonstrative functions as a "textual anchor," isolating the preceding conceptual block within the presented discourse. This comparative evidence confirms that NP-movement in Khmer is not merely a typological curiosity but a sophisticated syntactic tool used to manage information flow across different institutional contexts.

Quantitative Analysis and Register-Specific Constraints

To substantiate the theoretical claims regarding the syntactic architecture of Khmer DPs, a quantitative analysis was conducted across both administrative and academic corpora. The empirical data confirms significant divergent patterns in the realization of NP-movement and structural complexity.

Distribution of Functional Heads and Prepositions

The frequency of specific syntactic markers serves as a primary indicator of register variation. As summarized in Table 2, the nominalizer កា [ka:] exhibits a markedly higher density in the academic register (43.6%) compared to the administrative register (20.5%). This statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) validates the hypothesis that academic discourse prioritizes structural compression, where complex verbal propositions are packaged into single nominal entities to increase information density.

Furthermore, the preposition នៃ [nej] (of) is more prevalent in academic NPs (42.6%) than in administrative ones (13.0%). This suggests that academic Khmer favors hierarchical embedding through prepositional phrases to establish conceptual relationships, whereas administrative texts tend to utilize direct coordinate or subordinate compounding.

Syntactic Marker	Administrative (n=146)	Academic (n=94)	Significance
Nominalizer កា [ka:]	30 (20.5%)	41 (43.6%)	Significant
Preposition នៃ [nej]	19 (13.0%)	40 (42.6%)	Significant
Demonstrative នេះ [nih]	100% (Final)	100% (Final)	Constant

Table 2: Distribution of Syntactic Markers in Administrative and Academic Corpora

Complexity and Depth of Right-Branching Recursion

The most striking evidence of Khmer's recursive capacity is found in the depth of the DP's right-branching adjuncts. The data reveals a "long-tail" distribution in the administrative register, which is absent in academic prose.

Recursion Depth (Layers)	Academic Register (Frequency)	Administrative Register (Frequency)
1 – 3 Layers	110 (77.5%)	45 (57.7%)
10+ Layers	3 (2.1%)	5 (6.4%)
Maximum Depth	12 Layers	23 Layers

Table 3: Depth of Recursion Layers in Administrative and Academic DPs

While academic DPs are more frequently constrained to 1-3 layers (77.5%), the administrative register produces massive structures, with some reaching an unprecedented 23 layers. This extreme recursion is a direct consequence of the legal precision constraint: administrative authors must chain exhaustive titles, institutional hierarchies, and legal qualifiers to ensure unambiguous identification. Because Khmer is strictly head-initial, the syntax permits near-infinite rightward expansion without violating core structural principles.

Universal NP-Movement and Register Function

Despite the vast differences in internal complexity and recursion depth, the demonstrative នេះ [nih] consistently occupies the absolute final position (100%) in both corpora. This empirical consistency confirms that NP-movement is a mandatory syntactic operation in high-register Khmer. The movement serves dual stylistic-functional roles:

- In Administrative Texts: It acts as a boundary marker, allowing the reader to identify the conclusion of a multi-layered subject or object before moving to the predicate.
- In Academic Texts: It serves as a textual anchor, enabling the focus (the complex concept) to be established before the demonstrative isolates it within the theoretical discourse.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of X-bar Theory and the DP Hypothesis, this paper proves that Khmer NP structures do not violate universal head-initial principles. The surface order [N-Adj-Num-CL-Dem] is the result of successive phrasal movement from complement positions to higher functional layers within the DP. In high-register contexts, the need for information-dense communication drives structural compression via recursive nominalization and deep right-branching adjuncts. Despite the massive size of the DP, syntactic anchors like demonstratives consistently perform their movement to the final position, providing clear phrasal boundaries. This generative approach effectively resolves Khmer's typological puzzles and explains its complex information organization.

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