

Semantic Characteristics of Constructions in Thai with Two Participants

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0. Introduction

Developing Japanese-Thai and Thai-Japanese online dictionaries in progress, available via our following web site.

<http://cblle.tufs.ac.jp/dic/th/jath/index.html>

This presentation demonstrates part of the results of our analysis of Thai verbs which is going on along with the development of dictionaries.

Topics of my presentation

1. Examining syntactic environments of Thai verbs with two participants, or nominal constituents.
2. Examining semantic roles of two participants.

Characteristics of Thai similar to those of SAE

Thai language is characterized as follows:

1. An isolating language without verbal inflection or nominal declension.
2. Basic word order: SVO, and NA.
3. Verbs are mostly two-place or one-place verbs, with exceptional three-place verbs.

The above superficial resemblances with modern Standard Average European languages (abbreviated as SAE) have lead linguists to adopt approaches similar to those for SAE.

Western (SAE) approaches to SVO languages

The Western, or Standard Average European perspective adopts 'human-centered' approaches to languages, which stemmed out of syntactic analyses of modern European languages such as English or French, characterized with the following two features.

1. Presuming nominative-accusative case marking in SVO constructions.
2. Regarding two-place constructions as transitive constructions, by assuming semantic roles Agent to the Subject, and Patient to the Object in SVO constructions.

Characteristics of Thai as one of mainland Southeast Asian languages

Thai has however more characteristics that are common in languages in mainland Southeast Asia, such as follows.

1. Topic Prominence.
2. Pro-Drop; presence or absence of (pro)nominal participant is conditioned by contexts.
3. Adjectives as a verbal subclass; see Prasithratsint (2000).

Research Questions

1. Whether Thai, along with other languages in Southeast Asia, can be best described from the Western perspective?
2. In particular, how should we analyze the topic-prominence with the pro-drop feature in the above languages?

Note that the above features, for which not much work has been done, also characterize major languages in East Asia, such as Chinese or Japanese. For further elaborating studies, do we need to have an ‘Eastern’ perspective for languages in Southeastern and Eastern Asia?

Previous Works: Minegishi (SEALS XX), (2011)

In my previous papers Minegishi (SEALS XX forthcoming), and (2011), I claimed as follows.

1. Due to the Pro-drop feature, distinguishing transitive from intransitive verbs is practically difficult, since absence or presence of objects depends on the contexts.
2. Contrast between Voluntary (V_vol) and Spontaneous verbs (V_sp) is relevant to basic sentence constructions.
3. Semantic features [+vol] [+sp] are consistent regardless of absence or presence of Os.
4. Directions of ‘**Affectedness**’ are important in analyzing antiparallel causatives and passive constructions.

The above ideas are however still based on the human-centered perspective; “human volutariness is important”. We will therefore start our analysis again from the scratch, i.e., by examining all the possible patterns in which Thai verbs appear.

1. Methods for examination

1. Examining sentences obtained by elicitation, which include the most basic (almost 300) verbs in ILCAA Linguistic Questionnaire (1979).¹
2. Finding encoding patterns which are typical and particular in Thai.
3. Analyzing semantic roles of nouns in the following syntactic environments:
 1. N₁-V-N₂ (Subject-Verb-Complement)
 2. N₁-N₂-V (Topic-Subject-Verb)

Basic assumptions for examining semantic roles of participants

‘Labeling’ nominal participants is not sufficient for analyzing syntactic constructions, since (1) most of the labels for semantic roles reflect traditional ‘human-centered case names’ for inflecting languages, and (2) passive roles of things (or inanimate objects) are not properly labeled within such frameworks, i.e., Theme. In particular, we should decompose these labels

¹ Thanks are due to Mr. Narin Thap-hong and Ms. Waranya Ota who have been helped me make the Thai sentence database.

into semantic properties, such as [Voluntary, Spontaneous, Kinetic, Control, etc.], in case a participant may bear two roles; for example, see no.3 below. In what follows, ‘ $x \rightarrow y$ ’ means that x affects y , ‘ $x \leftarrow y$ ’ means that x is affected by y , respectively.

1. Humans have ‘minds and physical bodies’; actively participating in ‘transitive’ activities: [+Voluntary, +Kinetic, +Control, Patient Affected (S→C)], such as *tii1* (hit).
2. Humans have ‘minds’; passively involved in feelings, perceptions: [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Subject Affected (S←C)], such as *hen5* (see), *day3in1* (hear).
3. Humans have ‘minds’; actively attempting to obtain perceptions: [+Voluntary, +Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Subject try to get Affected (S→/←C)], such as *duul* (watch), *faG1* (listen).
4. Humans and things as physical existences, as things are; passively involved in movements: [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Semantic roles: S (Theme?)]
5. Humans and things may be passively related to one another: [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Semantic roles: S (Theme?)]

2. Results

We have found that Thai has two major sentence types with two participants; i.e., “Noun₁ Verb Noun₂” and “Noun₁ Noun₂ Verb”. We regard the former a typical ‘Subject Verb Complement (SVC)’, the latter, a “Topic Subject Verb (TSV)’ construction. First we will examine verbs in Subject Verb Complement constructions. In such constructions, 148 verbs take only human subjects, 53 verbs take only thing (inhuman or inanimate) ones, the rest 94 verbs take either human or thing subjects according to their semantic properties. Second, we will see verbs in Topic Subject Verb constructions. Note that the numbers of verbs are not always accurate and following results are tentative since examination of each sentence example is not completed.

Findings 1a: 148 Verbs with Human Subjects [+H] only

Note that the notion ‘typical’ is justified by frequency; the more verbs are found in a construction, the more typical the construction pattern is.

1. Among 148, 87 Verbs with high transitivity.
2. [+Voluntary, +Kinetic, +Control, Patient Affected (S→C)].
3. Semantic roles: S (Agent)_C (Patient)

Ex. *tii1* (hit), *chok4* (punch), *sadeen1* (show), *phuut3* (say), etc.

Findings 1b: 148 Verbs with Human Subjects [+H] only

There are also verbs whose Complement’s role is not Patient.

1. Among 148, 26 Verbs with low transitivity
2. Among the 26, 7 Verbs for motion/location
[+Voluntary, +Kinetic, +Control, Patient not Affected], such as: *khaw3* (enter),

waay3naam4 (swim), *nii5* (run away), *kradoot2* (jump), *aasay5* (dwell), *khii2* (ride), *naŋ3* (sit).

3. Semantic roles: S (Agent)_C (Locus)
 1. Rest of the 26 are Verbs for perception, feeling (12), or *mental activities* (2), estimation of states.
 2. [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Subject affected by Patient], such as: *tuuun2* (awake), *puat2* (ache), *nuay2* (tired), *hiw5* (hungry /thirsty), *kroot2* (angry), *klua1* (afraid), etc.
 3. Semantic roles: S (Recipient/Experiencer)_C (Locus of Stimulus)
 1. Feelings or perception verbs (9) for actively attempting to obtaining perception
 2. [+Voluntary, +Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Subject try to get Affected (S→/←C)], such as *duu1* (watch), *faŋ1* (listen)
 3. Semantic roles: S (Agent/Experiencer)_C (Patient/Locus of Stimulus)

Findings 2: 53 Verbs with Thing (non-human) Subjects [+T] only

1. Among 53, 39 adjectival Verbs with one participant only (intransitive verbs).
2. The rest 14 verbs include feeling, (change of) states, identifying verbs [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control, Patient Affected (S→C(P))], such as: *khom5 paak2* (bitter to mouth), *klay* (far to eyes), *may3* (burn stg).
3. Semantic roles: S(Theme)_C(Locus), or S (Cause)_C (Patient)

Findings 3: 94 Verbs with Human or Thing (non-human) Subjects [+H/+T]

1. Among 94, 19 Verbs with one participant only (intransitive verbs) [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control], for denoting (change of) states, such as *khaaw5* (white), etc..
2. Among the rest 75, 40 verbs for describing actions or physical process affecting Patients: [+/-Voluntary, -/+Spontaneous], S(Agent /Cause)_C(Patient), such as *hak2* (break), *cap2* (touch).
3. Among the rest 75, 27 verbs for movements, locations, with Patient not affected [+/-Voluntary, +/-Kinetic, +/-Control]: S(Agent /Theme)_C(Locus), such as *yuuun1* (stand up), *luk4* (rise), *bin1* (fly).

Findings 4: 96 Verbs in N₁-N₂-V Constructions

1. 96 Verbs in N₁-N₂ Constructions
2. Among them, 58 verbs are one-place verbs.
3. Among the 96, 72 adjectival Verbs for describing states [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control], such as *khaw4 nitsay5 dii* (He is good-natured.)
4. The rest includes feeling verbs [+Spontaneous, -Kinetic, -Control], and motion verbs [+/-Voluntary, +Kinetic] denoting the state, or results of actions: *tOOn1 nii4*, *rot4 pratuul phaG1 yuu2*.

(For now, the car has (a) broken door(s)/ The door(s) of the car is/are broken.)

3. Conclusive Remarks

1. Both 'N₁-V-N₂' and 'N₁-N₂-V' are popular constructions.
2. Typical pattern 'N₁-V-N₂' contains transitive verbs with S(A)→ C(P)
3. Verbs for feelings and perception has 'N₁-V-N₂' with S(A/E) ← C(L, S)
4. 'N₁-N₂-V' describes states with not only 'adjectival', but also 'action' verbs.

Related to 2 and 3, it should be noted that no verb has a construction: Subject [+T] Complement [+H]. That is, sentences such as “The news surprised me” **are not possible** in Thai. If a human is one of the participants, the human is always in the position of Subject. This is important to construe Thai sentences containing the topic followed by serial verbs not always accompanied by explicit complements. IF a human is selected as the topic, it remains as the topic that is referred to by all the following verbs, such as in the following ‘verby’ construction.

Ex. *dɛɛŋ1 day3yin1 siaŋ5-rɔɔŋ4 kɔɔ3 tok2-cay tuun2 khun3 maal lɛɛw4 kɔɔ3*

Gl. Daeng hear voice-crying *LINKER* surprised wake up come *PERFECT LINKER*

wiŋ3 rɔɔŋ4-takoon1 ɔɔk2 caak2 baan3 payl.

run shout out from house go)

(Daeng was surprised to hear someone crying, woke up, and ran out of the house shouting.)

No.4 is an important pattern since it is typical one in Thai, containing so-called adjectival verbs that do not take its complements. Also it is a typical pattern containing so-called double subject, which consists of the topic, a minor subject, and a verb, which is found not only in languages in mainland Southeast Asia, but also in those in East Asia, such as Chinese and Japanese.

This is why the Eastern perspective is needed to properly describe languages with topic prominence and ellipsis which is enabled by the overwhelming cohesive power of the topic.

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