

Verb Subclassification in Thai based on Syntactic Phenomena

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Abstract

The paper proposes to classify Thai verbs by examining their occurrences in several syntactic structures, such as topic-comment, negative, causative, and passive constructions.

I first examine the transitivity hypothesis proposed by Hopper and Thompson (1980) and Tsunoda (1985) and show that it is inadequate for classifying Thai verbs. This is because many two-place verbs in Thai can occur with or without an object conditioned by the information structure; this poses practical difficulties with regard to the identification of transitive or intransitive verbs. It is well known that in Thai, a nominal constituent immediately following a verb can assume not only semantic roles such as Patient, but also those of Goal, Instrument, or Location, depending on the meaning of the verb itself. I therefore claim that the constituent should be regarded as a Complement, according to the traditional, but semantically the most neutral, nomenclature.

Then, I propose a system of verb classification that includes both transitive and intransitive verbs on the basis of their occurrence, such as in negative, imperative (see Prasithrathsint 2000), causative, and passive constructions. I claim that the most important dichotomy for Thai verbs is the distinction between “voluntariness” and “spontaneity,” which is typically reflected in the contrast between “duu” (to watch) and “hěn” (to see). The former is related to the notion of the subject’s intention, agentivity, and (partial) control, and the latter, to that of the experiencer’s spontaneity and lack of control. I claim that these two features are equally important because the latter entails not only verbs standing for “passive” perception, but also intransitive verbs denoting state, change of state, existence, and various natural phenomena or processes that are beyond human control.

On the basis of the assumption that the most basic sentence structure in Thai is the serial verb construction, I will attempt to analyze causative and passive constructions as part of serial verb constructions where the semantic dichotomy proposed above plays a significant role. These two constructions are antiparallel to each other: the former has the voluntary verb “hây” (to give), while the latter has the spontaneous verb “thùuk” (to

get hit) as the initial verb. The rest of the constructions constitute a semantic unit, rather than a syntactically embedded clause. I thus claim that in Thai sentence structures it is causative vs. passive structure, rather than active vs. passive one that contrasts each other, and that both structures are entailed in the serial verb constructions.

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