

Final particles meet boundary tones: the case of Bangkok Thai

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One common characteristic of languages in Southeast Asia is the use of final particles to convey discourse meaning generally attributed to intonation in other languages. The functional resemblance between final particles and intonation, coupled with the observation that many tone languages have elaborate systems of final particles, has led various researchers, e.g. Yip (2002), to believe that final particles are used in languages with lexical tones instead of intonation to express sentence-level meaning. Using final particles in Bangkok Thai as a case study, I claim that intonation and final particles in tone languages, in fact, work together in the expression of discourse function. In particular, I adopt the view that Thai has intonational tones which are identifiable as separate phonological units from final particles (Pittayaporn 2006), and then argue that the type of meaning expressed by these intonational morphemes is that signaled by intonation in non-tonal languages like English.

Under the compositional view of intonational meaning (Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg 1990, Steedman 2007), intonation tunes can be characterized as strings of tonal morphemes: pitch accents, phrasal tones, and boundary tones. These tones signal particular relationships between the propositional content of the utterance and the participants in the current discourse. For Thai, Pittayaporn (2007) identifies two boundary tones, i.e. tones that occur at edges of intonational constituents. These boundary tones H% and L% may co-occur with final particles at the end of intonational phrases. According to this analysis, boundary tones and final particles co-exist as two distinct classes of morphemes in Thai.

More crucially, the two boundary tones can be shown to convey meaning prototypically associated to intonation. In combination with final particles, they together signal a wide range of discourse functions. Following the “meaning minimalists” approach to final particles (e.g. Cooke 1989, Li 2006, etc.), I hold that each final particle has a core meaning, and the different interpretations are in fact contextually derived. I argue that the boundary tones and the final particle express two distinct types of meaning. While Thai final particles convey illocutionary forces, Thai boundary tones mark whether the speaker or the hearer is in control of the propositional content similar to their English counterparts (Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg 1990, Steedman 2007). Analyzing Thai particle /na/ and /si/ in different contexts, I show that the different interpretations attributed to them are derived from their core semantics in combination with the boundary tones.

For instance, the particle /na/ can be analyzed as signaling establishment. It indicates that the propositional content is claimed to be established. The boundary tone H%, in contrast, indicates that it is the hearer who establishes the claim. The combination of /na/ ‘ESTABLISH’ and H% ‘HEARER’S CONTROL’, as illustrated by (1), thus has an effect of urging the hearer to response to the claim. In contrast, /na/ ‘ESTABLISH’ in combination with L% ‘SPEAKER’S CONTROL’, as exemplified by (2), means that it is the speaker who establishes the propositional content as true. The implicature is that further argument is not called for.

- (1) nó:j nâŋ nîŋ-nîŋ na +H%
Noi sit still ESTABLISH HEARER
‘It is you who establish that Noi is sitting still.’
= Please response to my claim that Noi is sitting still.
- (2) nó:j nâŋ nîŋ-nîŋ na +L%
Noi sit still ESTABLISH SPEAKER
‘It is me who establish that Noi is sitting still.’
= I am telling you that Noi is sitting still.

The co-existence of boundary tones and final particles, together with the fact that the two categories of morphemes express different discourse information indicate that final particles in Southeast Asian languages do not replace intonation but collaborate with it to achieve the range of interpretations observed.

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