

Topic and Government in Thai, an Isolating Language

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Abstract

In traditional descriptions of Indo-European languages, especially the classical languages, inflection, which provides the means for enforcing the cohesiveness of phrases and clauses, such as agreement and government, had been at the center of the grammar. Although inflection has been replaced with syntactic phenomena such as fixed word order in the grammatical analyses of modern Western languages, the notions of agreement and government continue to be regarded as important parts of the grammar, because the former represents the cohesiveness of morphosyntactic units such as phrases and clauses and the latter represents the relations between a head and its dependent constituents, which hence shows the domain of government, that is, clauses.

Although it could be assumed that the devices for securing the cohesiveness of morphosyntactic units are part of the language universals, agreement is not the only device available. Most languages in East Asia, such as Japanese or Chinese, generally lack agreement; in these languages, continuity within phrases and clauses plays a significant role in cohesion. Moreover, phonological devices, such as tone sandhi in Chinese and pitch accent rules in Japanese, help enforce cohesion. These East Asian languages are also known as topic prominent languages; the topic that is located at the sentence initial position, with or without a specific topic marker, can bear various semantic roles. This suggests that the topic may be outside the domain of the verb, which generally governs the nominal constituents in a clause.

The objective of the present paper is to examine the semantic relations between topics and verbs in Thai, a language spoken in mainland Southeast Asia. Morphologically, Thai is an isolating language without nominal declension or verbal inflection. Its basic word order is Subject-Verb-Object, and Noun-Adjective, which makes the language fairly similar to French, minus the inflection.

However, Thai differs from modern European languages with regard to topic prominence and serial verb constructions. Both these features are shared by many languages in the area, such as Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese, and are hence regarded as areal features of the region.

Thai is a topic prominent language. Li and Thompson (1976) claimed that “subject” is a notion at the sentence level whereas “topic” is a notion at the discourse level; not much work has been done after this to elaborate the notion of topic at the sentence level. Following Chafe (1976: 51), who distinguished a ‘real topic’ from left-dislocated nominal constituents in Western languages (*as for* in English, for instance), we will define a topic as a constituent that functions to set a spatial, temporal, or individual framework for the main predication. Further, we will propose a criterion for topic prominence: a language that has a morphosyntactic device (or devices) dedicated to denoting a “real topic” is high in topic prominence. According to this criterion, Japanese is high in topic prominence, since it has a dedicated topic marker *wa* (‘regarding’), along with the so-called double subject sentences.

Similarly, Thai is high in topic prominence, since it also has a double subject sentence construction, with Noun₁-Noun₂-Verb (abbreviated as N₁-N₂-V) established as one of the basic sentence constructions, where N₁ is a “topic *in situ*,” which is not a constituent dislocated from other constructions. Using examples such as *chaaŋ⁴ ŋuaŋ¹ yaaw¹* (N₁: ‘elephant’; N₂: ‘trunk’; V: ‘long’; ‘The elephant has a long trunk’), we will see that N₁ is a topic *in situ* that sets a sentence framework, namely, that N₂ (denoting an aspect of N₁) serves

as a minor subject, and that V is a ‘minor’ predicate for N₂, not for N₁. Note that N₁ has no direct relation to V; V “governs” only its minor subject N₂. Since the domain of the scene-setting of the topic overwhelms the limited scope of V, we may claim that it is the topic N₁, and not V, that ‘governs’ the comment ‘N₂-V’, which is a minor subject-predicate construction.

Additionally, we will show that the verbs used in the N₁-N₂-V construction belong to a limited subset of the verbal class, comprised of one-place verbs denoting states rather than change of states. Note that stative verbs, or adjectives, are part of the verb class in Thai; verbs and nouns are distinct word classes, since the former can be directly negated with a preposed negative marker, whereas the latter cannot be similarly negated.

Another prominent characteristic of Thai is the serial verb construction, or verb serialization, which Bisang (1991: 509) defined as “the unmarked juxtaposition of two or more verbs or verb phrases (with or without subject and/or object), each of which would also be able to form a sentence on its own.” Aikhenvald and Dixon (2006) outline the cross-linguistic features of serial verb constructions. Minegishi (2011) analyzes Thai verb serializations as verbal concatenations that denote various meanings, such as “successive actions,” “action and the objective,” “action and the result,” “action and the evaluation,” etc.

Using examples of verb serialization with the Noun₁-Verb₁-Verb₂ construction (abbreviated as N₁-V₁-V₂), such as *kradaat² chiik² khaat²* (N₁: ‘paper’; V₁: ‘tear’; V₂: ‘torn’; ‘The paper is torn’), we will argue that the sentence means ‘The torn state of the paper’, where N₁ is the topic, V₁ *chiik²* (‘tear’) is the notion of voluntary action, and V₂ *khaat²* (‘being torn’) is the notion of state. However, the verbs do not denote any particular action done by any particular person. Note that the topic is an object with regard to V₁, but at the same time, it is the subject of V₂.

Another example with N₁-V₁-V₂ shows that combinations of V₁ and V₂ are not restricted to semantically paired transitive and intransitive verbs. For instance, *nan³ suu⁵ lem³-nii⁴ haa⁵ yaak³* (N₁: ‘book’; classifier-determiner, V₁: ‘seek’; V₂: ‘difficult’; ‘This book is rare’) refers to the rarity of the book, where V₁ *haa⁵* (seek) is the notion of action, and V₂ *yaak³* (difficult) is the notion of state; however, these verbs do not denote any particular action done by any particular person. Note also that the topic N₁ is an object of V₁ but has no direct relation with V₂, thus referring to the evaluation of the result of the action denoted by V₁.

On the basis of similar examples, we will argue that in Thai, the topic in N₁-N₂-V constructions is not governed by the predicative verb, and that the topic in N₁-V₁-V₂ assumes one or two semantic roles in relation to the verbs. Since the government by the verbs has limited scope in such sentences, it is the topic (N₁) that governs, in the sense that it sets the scope of comment in each construction (N₂-V and V₁-V₂, respectively).

References

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