

Topic and Government in Thai: focusing on 'N1-N2-V' construction



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Topics

Examining the 'N1-N2-V' construction in
Thai and argue:

1. 'N1-N2-V' is for describing constant states or properties of N1 by its predication 'N2-V'.
2. 'N1-N2-V' can be found both as a compound noun at the morphological level and as a sentence at the syntactic level.

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Characteristics of Thai similar to those of SAE

1. Basic word order: SVO, NA
2. Two-place or one-place verbs,
with exceptional three-place verbs

Above superficial resemblances with modern
Standard Average European (SAE) led
linguists to adopt the Western perspective.

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Characteristics of Thai as one of mainland Southeast Asian languages

1. An isolating language with no inflection
2. A 'verby' language with the serial verb
construction
3. Adjectives as a verbal subclass
4. A "topic prominent language"
5. A "pro-drop" language

1&2: Areal features in mainland Southeast
Asia; 3-5 also common in East Asia.

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Isolating Language: no inflection

1. No distinction between finite and non-
finite verbs.
2. Many verbs appear in a clause called
'Serial verb construction'.
3. No formal difference for distinguishing
the main verb and non-main verb.
4. How to distinguish morphology and
syntax.

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Descriptions of SAE vs. THAI: Those of Chess vs. Reversi



SAE European Languages

- Functional features of each
piece: POS and movement
- Location of the piece
(Syntax)



Thai and other Isolating Lg.

- A few POS
- Distribution & function of a
piece restricted by its
precedents

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Topic as a framework setter

The function of a topic is to set a spatial, temporal, or individual framework for the main predication. (cf. Chafe, 1976: 51)

Ex. N1 (Topic)-N2(Subject)-V(Predicate)

1. Similar to the traditional definition of subject.
2. not requiring for a topic to be explicitly realized; a topic may not exist as an overt nominal or an adverbial phrase
3. S in SVO can be a topic.

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Research Questions

1. Does 'N1-N2-V' in Thai represent 'topic prominence' as those in Japanese and Chinese are so regarded?
2. What qualifies a legitimate construction as a sentence in isolating Thai, which, for example, does not distinguish finite vs. non-finite verbs?

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'N1-N2-V' compared to 'N1-V-N2': for describing constant states of N1.

(1a) *dɛɛŋ cay (mây) dii*

Daeng heart (Neg) good [N1-N2-V]

'Daeng is (not) kind.'

(1b) *dɛɛŋ (mây) dii cay*

Daeng (Neg) good heart [N1-V-N2]

'Daeng is (not) delighted.'

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'N1-N2-V' compared to 'N1-V-N2': for describing constant states of N1

(2a) *dɛɛŋ phaj pratuu rôt*

Daeng break door car [N1-V-N2]

'Daeng broke the door of the car.'

(2b) *pratuu rôt phaj*

door car broken [N1-V]

'The door of the car is broken.'

(2c) *rôt pratuu phaj (yuu)*

car door broken (Prog) [N1-N2-V]

'The car has a broken door.'

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Basic word order 'NA' : Compounding and Relative Clause

N-A: A modifies N (N-V, V modifies N)

N1-N2: N2 modifies N1

N-Relative clause which starts with a relativizer
'thii'.

"'thii' can be omitted" (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom)

(3a) *dèk (thii) rian kèn*

child (SBR) study well [N1-(Rel)-V1-V2]

(3b) *dèk rian kèn*

child study well [N1-V1-V2]

'a child who studies well.'

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Proposal to functionally distinguish morphology and syntax in isolating languages

Morphology deals with a set of rules to form legitimate forms for the referential and predicative functions.

Syntax deals with a set of rules for making an appropriate predication.

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'N1-(Rel)-N2-V': N1 functions as the 'topic' head of the relative clause.

(4a) *aacaan (thii) nisay dii*

teacher (Rel) nature good [N1-(Rel)N2-V]

'The teacher(s) who is/are good-natured.'

(4b) *aacaan nisay dii*

teacher nature good [N1-N2-V]

'The teacher(s) is/are good-natured. / good-natured teacher(s)'

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'N1-N2-V' below allow construal as sentences only

(5) *dεεη nisay dii*

Daeng nature good

'Daeng is good-natured' / *Daeng [Proper N]

(6) *khaw nisay dii*

3rdPron nature good

'He is good-natured' / *he [Pron]

(7) *khon nii nisay dii*

Cl Det nature good

'This person is good-natured' / *this person [Cl+Det]

(8) *aacaan khon nan nisay dii*

teacher Cl Det nature good

'That teacher is good-natured' / *That teacher [N+Cl+Det]

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Finding: Specified N1s allow construal as sentences only

- (5) to (8) are syntactically the same construction.
- The key is the existence of a specific referent of N1.
- The specifiers are: (5) a proper noun, (6) a pronoun, (7) a classifier with a determiner, (8) a noun with a classifier and a determiner.
- '*nisay dii*' (being good natured), '(N1)-N2-V' with implied topic N1 can be a legitimate sentence (but not an NP)

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Specified N1s make sentences: in other constructions (1)

'N1-V-N2'

(9a) *aacaan sɔ ɔn phaasaa ajkrit*

teacher teach language English

'The teacher teaches English / English teacher(s).'

(9b) *{dεεη/ khaw/ khon nii/ aacaan khon nii/ aacaan dεεη}*

sɔ ɔn phaasaa ajkrit

{Proper N/3rdPron/Cl+Det/N+Cl+Det/Ref+ProperN} teach language English

'[Daeng/he (or she)/this person/this professor/Prof. Daeng] teach(es) English'

*{Proper N/3rdPron/Cl+Det/N+Cl+Det/title+ProperN} who teach(es) English.'

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Specified N1s make sentences: in other constructions (2)

'N1-V'

(10) *aahaan luu a*

food remain

'Foods remain. / remained foods'

'N1-N2-N3'

(11) *{khaw/ khon} chu: lu dεεη*

{3rdPron / person} name Daeng

'His name is Daeng. / a person whose name is Daeng'

Verbs with auxiliary verbs

(12) *{khaw/ khon} kamlaj aan najs lu lu yuu*

{3rdPron / person} Aux(Prog) read book Prog

'He is reading a book. / persons who are reading books'

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Specified N1s make sentences: in other constructions (3)

Serial verb constructions

(13) *{khaw/ khon} kamlaj nah rot-mee klap baan*

{3rdPron / person} Aux(Prog) sit-on bus return house

'He is going home by bus. / persons who are going home by bus'

Passive constructions

(14) *{khaw/ khon} thuuok khaa taay*

{3rdPron / person} Pass kill die

'He was murdered. / a person who was murdered'

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Summary

1. 'N1-N2-V' is used for describing properties and relatively constant states, in contrast to 'N1-V-N2', used for describing actions, events, and changes of states.
2. What is remarkable in Thai is the isomorphism found in morphological and syntactic structures.
3. The existence of 'N1-N2-V' as a compound noun at the morphological level contradicts the idea of topic as an issue of discourse level.
4. The isomorphism is also found in other constructions, such as 'N1-V', 'N1-V-N2', '(N1)-N2-N3', serial verb constructions, and passives.

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Conclusive Remarks

- If a 'head' noun N1 in a compound refers to a specific referent, then the construction is 'upgraded' to a sentence.
- Verbal modifiers such as aspect markers and /or a negator will not help 'upgrade' a phrase to a sentence.
- What individuates the referents of N1 is proper nouns, pronouns, determiners, and classifiers.
- The main role of classifiers in Thai is to individuate the referent.
- The specified referent of N1 qualifies a legitimate construction as a sentence. In this sense, it is the referent of the topic that 'governs' a sentence.

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Theoretical Implications

- 'Upgrading' vs 'downgrading' such as 'nominalization' in SAE.
- The definition of topic is too broad; it should be modified in view of the referential function.
- Where is the syntactic 'head' in 'N1-V-N2' and 'N1-N2-V' in Thai?
- Shall we distinguish morphological 'head' and syntactic 'pivot (core)'?

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