

CLASS NOUNS AND CLASSIFIERS IN THAI

CHRISTOPHER I. BECKWITH

Indiana University

Various kinds of implicit semantic categorization, or set classification, exist in natural languages. Thai provides especially good data for one kind that differs in several respects from both classifier and folk taxonomy categorization. *Class nouns*, compounds consisting of *class term* heads and attributives which are frequently other nouns, are found in many languages, including English, but have not hitherto been examined from a formal point of view. In Thai, class nouns are treated as a distinct category because, perhaps, while many class terms are exclusively bound forms, many are also classifiers and may, in addition, be independent nouns. This paper examines class noun categorization and its relationship to both classifier categorization and folk taxonomy.

There are at least three major kinds of noun categorization in Thai: class noun categories, noun classifier categories, and folk taxonomies.

Folk taxonomies, which are comparable to Roschian semantic categories, may be defined as 'hierarchical non-agreement semantic categories', that is, sets of nouns organized according to semantic level. For example the noun *residence* can be the superordinate head of a taxonomy with the next level down, the basic level, consisting of the nouns *house*, *trailer*, *igloo*, and so on. Each of these nouns can be the basic level head of a subordinate level, for example under *house*, the subordinate level nouns *bungalow*, *Cape Cod*, *ranch*, *split-level*, and so on. The 'type and token'¹ hierarchies set up in such taxonomies are not based on agreement, and the nouns need not have any formal organizing feature in common. The semantic structure of such taxonomies has been investigated in great detail (Rosch 1977, Lakoff 1987).²

Noun classifier classes may be characterized as 'salient characteristic agreement categories'. A classifier category, or class, is a set of nouns that is implied by the classifier chosen to agree with the included nouns on the basis of salient physical

characteristics or kinesthetic image schemas (on which see below). These classes are minimally structured taxonomically, insofar as the classifier and the set of nouns which it heads form a single two-level class or hierarchical set. All nouns in a classifier set appear to belong to the same Roschian semantic level. Classifier classification in Thai has been investigated in some depth (Hundius and Kölver 1983, Conklin 1981, Hiranburana 1979), although much more needs to be done. A good discourse study, such as has been done for Mandarin (Erbaugh 1986) and Japanese (Clancy 1980), is especially needed.

Class nouns in Thai formally consist of a class term head followed by an attribute, usually a noun, i.e., [[N_{class}] + N]. The attribute may also be a class term, or it may be a verb or a member of another category. The question of how class term categorization fits into the semantic system of Thai (or, so far as this writer has been able to determine, any other language) has not been addressed, and the issue of the semantic relationship of class noun categories and classifier categories has remained uninvestigated in any detail. Class nouns have been described briefly by Haas (1964), and more recently by DeLancey (1986), who discusses the semantic structure of class noun classes. The latter concludes, 'the two categories, class term and classifier, can be described in very similar ways semantically, and lexically the two categories overlap to a considerable degree... They are clearly distinct only as syntactic categories' (DeLancey 1986:442).

First of all, one may attempt to set up a partial taxonomy for the extremely productive class term *khryân*, which has a wide semantic field focused on the idea 'gizmo', 'equipment'. The same lexical item is also a classifier, but it seems not to be a free noun. For the purposes of the present study, it is sufficient to give a random set of examples elicited orally. However, it should be noted that these constitute only a tiny fraction of the total number of class nouns built on this class term.

<u>Class Noun</u>	<u>Attrib gloss</u>	<u>CLN gloss</u>	<u>NCL</u>	<u>N C L</u> <u>category²</u>
<i>khryānbin</i>	to fly	airplane	<i>lam</i>	long hollow thing ⁴
<i>khryāndontrii</i>	music	instrument	<i>chín</i>	portable thing
<i>khryānyon</i>	vehicle	motor	<i>khryān</i>	gizmo
<i>khryānmyy</i>	hand	implement	<i>chín</i>	
<i>khryānphimdiid</i>	to typewrite	typewriter	<i>khryān</i>	
<i>khryānpradàb</i>	to decorate	ornament	<i>chín</i>	

Table 1. Head: Class Term *khryān* ‘gizmo, equipment’⁵

The category implied by the class term *khryān* includes at least three terms that belong semantically to a Roschian (taxonomic) superordinate level, namely the words for ‘musical instrument’, ‘tool, implement’, and ‘ornament’, as shown in Table 2.

<u>Superordinate Level Class Noun</u>	<u>CLN gloss</u>	<u>NCL</u>
<i>khryāndontrii</i> ⁶	instrument	<i>chín</i>
<i>khryānmyy</i>	implement	<i>chín</i>
<i>khryānpradàb</i>	ornament	<i>chín</i>

Table 2. Suprasuperordinate Level Head: CLT *khryān*

Each of these class nouns is the head of a basic level class consisting of nouns unrelated by form to *khryān*. Taking the first of these class nouns, *khryāndontrii* ‘musical instrument’, as an example,⁷ consider the list of some typical instruments of Thailand, all basic level nouns (*สอ* ‘Thai fiddle’ being an instrument morphologically distinct in Thai music from the violin, or ‘fiddle’ of English), in Table 3.

<u>BLN</u>	<u>BLN gloss</u>	<u>NCL</u>	<u>NCL gloss</u> ⁸
<i>khlùj</i>	flute	<i>law</i>	reed; NCL: reeds, flutes
<i>pieno</i>	piano	<i>lǎŋ</i>	NCL: house-like structures
<i>sɔɔ</i>	Thai fiddle	<i>khan</i>	handle; NCL: long, handled objects
<i>klɔɔŋ</i>	drum	<i>lûug</i>	child, offspring, fruit; NCL: fruits, 3-D objects in general
		<i>baj</i>	leaf; NCL: things made of leaves, baskets, rounded container-shaped objects, fruits, etc.

Table 3. Superordinate Level Head: CLN *khry̆aŋdontrii*

Each of these basic level nouns can, in turn, be the head of a subordinate level category. Consider Table 4, where the basic level noun *sɔɔ* ‘Thai fiddle’ is the head of its own subordinate level noun category. As may be seen from the diagram in Figure 1, such a category as a whole could be described as a taxonomy, descending from the class term head *khry̆aŋ* at a top-most level to a set of class nouns at a superordinate level, to a basic-level name-category consisting of *sɔɔ* ‘Thai fiddle’ and oth-er nouns unrelated by form to *khry̆aŋ*, and on down to the sub-ordinate level class nouns built on the basic level class term *sɔɔ*.

<u>Subordinate Level CLN</u>	<u>CLT gloss</u>	<u>CLN gloss</u>	<u>NCL</u>
<i>sɔɔ dŭaŋ</i>	bamboo trap	treble fiddle	<i>khan</i>
<i>sɔɔ ?ŭu</i>	loud	alto fiddle	<i>khan</i>

Table 4. Basic Level Head: BLN and CLT *sɔɔ*

All of the subordinate level examples in Table 4 take the same classifier, *khan*, that the basic level head noun *sɔɔ* does. This confirms the conclusion reached by Rosch (1977) concerning perception and classification of subordinate level objects and their corresponding subordinate level nouns,