

FORMS AND MEANINGS OF THE THAI PARTICLE *si*

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0. SUMMARY OF ARTICLE

The Thai form *si* is a discourse particle having various pronunciations and used in a wide variety of ways. The variant pronunciations include /si/, /sii/, /sî/, /sîi/, /sí/, and (for some speakers) /síi/; and the varying usages include action-inducement utterances (commands, suggestions, invitations, requests), responses to questions and to question-raising statements, inferential comments, and statements noting new information. All these forms and usages have one meaning in common – that of signalling a logical, necessary, or expectable response. And then the variations in form signal further distinctions as follows: /si/ or /sii/ for non-involvement, /sî/ for definiteness, /sîi/ for persuasion, /sí/ for personal need or wish, and /síi/ for personal wish plus persuasion. Under certain circumstances these variants may be neutralised to /si/; and the forms /sîi/ and /síi/ may be raised to signal intensification of meaning. The above phenomena are exemplified in this paper through the presentation of a wide range of data; and the data are then accounted for by means of relevant explanations and generalisations.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *si* AND THE CLASS OF DISCOURSE PARTICLES

The form *si*, with its various pronunciations and meanings, comprises one of a class of forms in Thai sometimes designated as sentence-final particles but perhaps more appropriately identified as discourse particles. These particles usually but not always occur at the ends of sentences, and they generally signal various types of commands, questions, responses, statements, etc. They also constitute links of various kinds with the linguistic and non-linguistic context of the discourse or linguistic interchange within which they occur.

1.2 SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Some of these particles prove extraordinarily resistant to definition, analysis, or explanation. For one thing, some occur with a variety of pronunciations the precise significance of which is extremely difficult to determine. And certain particles are used in such a variety of ways that one is hard put to it

to discover what function they could possibly have. Then again the line between what is acceptable or grammatical and what is not sometimes seems so tortuous and arbitrary that one wonders how a native speaker ever learns to use the forms correctly or to understand the usage of other speakers.

This paper constitutes an attempt to make sense out of the bewildering ins and outs of the forms and meanings of just one of these particles – the form *si*. I have selected this particular form for consideration because it has been, for me, the most bewildering and complex of the lot. Also, I am hopeful that light shed in this area may lead to a more insightful exploration of a wider range of phenomena relating to the whole class of discourse particles.

In preparing this paper, I have, of course, had access to a body of published material (see bibliography); but most of the information contained herein has been obtained from several years of intermittent bedeviling of a number of very patient and helpful native speakers. The following have all assisted me by spending considerable amounts of time sharing their knowledge and understanding with me: Dr Prapin Manomaivibool, Ms Nisa Udomphol (now Ms Sakdechayont), Ms Peansiri Eknuyom, Mr Chare Vathanaprida, Ms Subhaphorn Vathanaprida, Ms Pimpun Suwanamalik (now Ms Fitzpatrick), Ms Niphapharn Chutrakul, Dr Navavan Bandhamedha, and Ms Arada Kiranand. I have also leaned very heavily upon an unpublished paper prepared for me by Ms Udomphol, entitled ‘Semantic Functions of the Thai Particle /Si/’. A number of examples cited below have been taken from her work.

In general, the data and explanations which follow are presented in terms of the usage of my most recent informant, Ms Kiranand. Other speakers will certainly differ from Ms Kiranand in their use of *si*, and some of these differences have been recorded in my notes; but many other differences assuredly have not, for some of my data were gathered at a time when my perceptions and understanding were more limited than now. Also, unfortunately, I no longer have access to my original sources of information, so I cannot check my data in the light of more recent insights. In any case, my presentation is structured around Ms Kiranand’s speech patterns. Significant variations from those patterns will be pointed out where relevant.

1.3 FORMS AND MEANINGS OF *si* AND THE TREATMENT OF THEM HERE PROPOSED

Now to an examination of the particle *si*. And in order to lay a foundation for our discussion, I must explain that *si* occurs with the following forms: /si/, /sî/, /sí/, /sii/, /sîi/, and for some speakers, /sîi/.¹ All of these forms seem to possess some element of meaning which they hold in common; yet each can, for the most part, be differentiated from the others by some distinct and consistent meaning that it possesses. I shall attempt in this paper to identify the basic meaning common to all forms, and to isolate the meanings that distinguish each variant from the others. As I do this, it will soon become evident that the bulk of the paper is concerned with semantic problems; and my approach in dealing with these is first to present data, then to formulate hypotheses, and then in certain cases to show how these hypotheses apply. The paper then concludes with a summary of my conclusions and a couple of suggestions concerning possible future research.

2. THE BASIC MEANING OF *si* AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE VARIANT /sî/

Let us first take up the the matter of the basic meaning that is characteristic (as I suggest) of *si* in all its varied forms and occurrences. And, in order to bring the wealth of data down to manageable proportions, let me present a number of examples of just one of the variant forms, namely /sî/. I

choose this particular form because it happens to occur in a rather wide range of situations; and, once such occurrences are explained, we will find we have a convenient basis for going on to account for the other variants.

2.1 EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF OCCURRENCE OF /sî/

The following examples are arranged according to varied categories of occurrence or usage: commands, suggestions, invitations, requests, responses to questions and to question-raising statements, inferential statements, and utterances noting new information. These categories should not, however, be taken too seriously, for they merely provide a convenient means for setting forth the data. When a given example fits into one category or another is not a matter of crucial importance. The point is that /sî/ occurs in each of the varied contexts, and we must find some account of its meaning that is consonant with this wide variety of occurrences.

Square brackets, below, mark information as to possible situations in which the utterance in question might occur.

2.1.1 ACTION-INDUCEMENT UTTERANCES

These comprise various kinds of utterances in which the speaker is prompting the addressee to some particular action. They include commands (see examples 1 and 2 below), suggestions (3-7), invitations (8, 9), and requests (10-12).

- (1) /pàət pratuu sî/
 1 2
 ‘Open the door.’
 1 2
 [It's time for the store to open, and it is the addressee's responsibility to perform this duty. Or: a third party's hands are full, and he can't open the door himself, but the addressee is there handy to help him. Or: the addressee appears to be uncomfortable sitting in a stuffy, closed room.]
- (2) /yàa khàp rew !sî/
 1 2 3
 ‘Don't drive so fast.’
 1 2 3
 [The speaker thinks the addressee is driving too fast.]
 (The exclamation symbol here, and in example 18 below, indicates an emphatic raising of the pitch of /sî/.)
- (3) /faŋ sî, phró? dii/
 1 2
 ‘Listen! (That's) beautiful.’
 1 2
 [The speaker hears some beautiful music and calls it to the attention of the addressee.]

- (4) /khǎn hây dii sî, léew ca dâay raarwan/
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 ‘Write nicely now, and (you)’ll get a reward.’
 1 2,3 4 5 6 7
 [A mother wants her child to write to his grandfather, and she offers him a reward if he writes a nice, neat letter.]
- (5) /sáu sâa tua nán sî, sǎay dii/
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 ‘(Why don’t you) buy that shirt? It’s nice and pretty.’
 1 3,4 2 6 5
- (6) /khâw hây kô ?aw sî/
 1 2 3 4
 ‘He’s giving (it to you), so take (it).’
 1 2 3 4
 [The speaker is encouraging the addressee to accept the offer being extended to him.]
- (7) /kô yàa nâη sî/
 1 2 3
 ‘Well then don’t sit (there).’
 1 2 3
 [The addressee has just indicated verbally that he is reluctant to seat himself. Perhaps he is afraid the chair won’t take his weight, or he has noticed something spilled on it.]
- (8) khâw maa sî/
 1 2
 ‘(Do) come in.’
 2 1
 [The speaker is welcoming someone at the door.]
- (9) /kin khâaw kòon sî, léew khôy pay/
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 ‘Eat first, then (you can) go.’ (gradually)
 1,2 3 4 6 5
 [The addressee is about to leave; but it is almost time to eat, so the speaker urges him to stay for the meal.]
- (10) /yìp dǐnsǎo hây nòy sî/
 1 2 3 4
 ‘Hand me the pencil, (would you?)’ (grasp pencil for (me) a little)
 1 2 3 4
 [The pencil is within easy reach of the addressee, and the speaker cannot conveniently reach it for himself.]