

THAI SENTENCE PARTICLES:
FORMS, MEANINGS AND FORMAL-SEMANTIC VARIATIONS

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0. SUMMARY OF ARTICLE

Sentence particles in Thai comprise a class of postposition forms that modify the sentence as a whole and signal various types of information concerning the linguistic or situational context within which a given utterance takes place. These particles are subject to various processes which cause considerable variation in the form and in the shades of meaning of the particle in question. These variations may be accounted for by postulating underlying forms that are specified in terms not only of phonemic consonantal and vocalic distinctions but also in terms of phonemic tones (five possible distinctions), vowel length (long or short) and either presence or absence of terminal glottal stop. Each underlying form also has an underlying meaning or meanings associated with it. Many of these underlying forms may then be subject to a process called primary variation, in which the ordinary phonemes of the form (especially the tones and vowel length) may change in such a way as to produce one or more phonemic variants; each new variant retains the original underlying meaning but also signals some additional shade of meaning that is concomitant with the change in form.

Particles and their primary variants (if any) are also subject to other variational processes. Certain processes result in various types of phonological simplification or reduction, for example, obligatory morphophonemic changes and various types of optional change that are a function of casual speech. And there are also various general and special intonational processes which signal varying intonational meanings. Those most affecting sentence particles include two types of voice register (normal and high), two terminal contours (falling and heightened), special particle lengthening, emphatic stress and the addition of terminal /h/.

The operation of the above processes gives rise to a very complex pattern of variations that is unique to sentence particles. It is suggested that such variations provide a means for the speaker to partially break through the limitations imposed by the phonemic system of Thai (with its tonal and vowel-length contrasts), thereby providing a wealth of options for emotive expressiveness.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF MONOGRAPH

One of the most baffling areas of the Thai language, to both the linguist and the language learner, is the sentence-particle system. And at the root of this bafflement lie two very significant problems. One is the problem of the meaning or function of many of the sentence particles (hereafter abbreviated to SPs), and the other is the unique phonological and semantic variability of many of these forms. As for the former problem, we find that Thai has at least four particles that can signal different kinds of questions, three that can signal commands, about half a dozen that signal various types of conversational or situational response, half a dozen more that signal various speaker-addressee relationships, and a good number that signal yet other types of information. The exact meaning or function of some of these particles is almost impossible to discover; for neither reference materials nor native speakers are able to shed much light on the matter.

The second problem, that of phonological and semantic variability, proves to be just as difficult, for many types of variational process can have their effect on different particle forms. Some variations comprise changes in the vowels, tones and even consonants of a given form, with these changes producing a concomitant change in the shade of meaning of the particle in question. Thus, for example, the response-desired particle *ná*¹ has the variants /ná/ (simple form), /nâ/ signalling momentary urging), /náa/ (sustained desire), /naa/ (non-involvement), /nâa/ (persuasion). Other variations of sentence particles involve more strictly intonational features (pitch, length etc.), these being added to or superimposed upon variations of the type mentioned above. Still other variations are conditioned in one way or another by phonological environment. Furthermore, different particles have different possibilities of variation; some variations reflect fairly general patterns in the system, while others are much more limited in scope.

The purpose of the present monograph is to shed light on the above problems, first by providing a summary of what I consider to be the basic meanings and functions of most of the commonly used sentence particles, and then by sorting out the different kinds of variation that occur and describing their effects on the various particle forms.

1.2 SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present study is chiefly based on the usage of a number of Thai native speakers with whom I have consulted during the past two or three years: Ms Kanlayanee Sitasuwan, Ms Malinee Dilokwanich, Mr Aphichai Boontherawara and Mr Sompong Witayasakpan, all graduate students at the University of Washington, Seattle; Ms Nantarach Pungkunpra and Ms Panpilai Katong, students at Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand; Mr Bali Puttaraksa, Mr Bampen Rawin, Ms Jiraporn Witayasakpan, Dr Pismai Wibulswasdi and Ms Somporn Chiensoubchatvera, faculty members at Chiang Mai University. A number of other native speakers have provided assistance in earlier research that has laid the foundation for this present work. Since I have named these others in earlier works (1979 and in this volume), I shall not list them again here, but their contribution has been substantial. All in all, I have received assistance from some twenty native speakers, selected from the ranks of university students or faculty (including three or four specialists in linguistics); they represent both sexes (a slight majority being women), with ages ranging between about twenty and forty years.

In gathering information from native speakers, I have relied almost entirely upon direct questions and answers about SP forms and variants and about the linguistic and situational contexts in which they occur. At the same time I have sought continually to formulate, test and reformulate generalisations about the meanings and usage of the different forms. In this whole process I have found myself very much dependent upon the ability of native-speaker informants to create examples of grammatical utterances, to make judgements about their own usage, to describe possible contexts in which utterances might occur, to discuss meanings and usage, and to react to various hypotheses I have advanced. That is to say, I have not used unsophisticated speakers as a source of raw data. Rather, I have actively sought and made use of the imagination and insights of speakers who for the most part were already linguistically sensitive and aware, and who became more and more so as a result of our ongoing collaboration.² Certainly, without the willing and perceptive help I have received from such speakers, I could not have even begun to attempt the work I have done.

Another important source of information has been usage and examples gleaned from various Thai novels and short stories. This source has provided some necessary breadth to the body of data I have gathered, and it has often set me on the trail of types of usage I had been unable to discover elsewhere. At the same time, I have taken pains to check all examples with native speakers, not only so as to test their naturalness but also to seek out explanations and additional comparable examples of usage.

Still another very important source of information has been a twenty-page set of examples prepared in connection with the language program of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Thailand. Also, I have made use of various reference works, textbooks, published articles and the like. However, I have intentionally avoided relying too heavily upon these, for I have been anxious to base my work as fully as possible on the data I have collected through the years.

To all of the above I am much indebted for what they have added to my work. And I should also like to express my appreciation to the Graduate Research Fund of the University of Washington for providing me with financial assistance for a preliminary period of work on this project, and to Chiang Mai University for providing facilities and other assistance during a significant portion of my time of research.

1.3 GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SENTENCE PARTICLES

In order to provide a clear picture of the phenomena with respect to sentence particles and their variations, it will be helpful to first describe something of the general characteristics of the class of forms in question.

1.3.1 SENTENCE POSITION AND FUNCTION

SPs constitute a class of forms which very frequently occur in sentence-final position, but they may also occur medially. In sentence-final occurrence, they may appear in sequences of up to six particles,³ but in medial occurrence the sequential possibilities are somewhat reduced. The following examples illustrate both final and medial occurrences. In the first example below (and elsewhere throughout this work) the symbols S1 and S2 represent two speakers in a conversational interchange. Unglossed forms are SPs.⁴

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- (1) S1 /mây ciŋ lõk lõ khá nĩa./
 1 2
 ‘You mean this isn't true?’
 1 2
- S2 /kô mây ciŋ nã sî./
 3 4 5
 ‘Well of course not.’
 3 4,5
- (2) /ʔaacaan nã lõ khráp khamooy naalikaa./
 1 2 3
 ‘You mean it was the **professor** who stole the watch?’
 1 2 3
- (3) /dèk khon nán sî dâay raanwan./
 1 2 3 4 5
 ‘**That** child is the one who got the prize.’
 2,3 1 4 5
- (4) /khun sâap máy khráp wãa mǝo taay léew./
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 ‘Did you know that the doctor died?’
 1 2 3 4 5,6
- (5) /hǎay pay nǎy ná, mǎawaan./
 1 2 3 4
 ‘Where'd you disappear to, yesterday?’
 3 1 2 4
- (6) /dichán yindii khã, thĩ ca maa chũay./
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 ‘I'd be delighted to come and help you.’
 1 2 3 4,5 6

Examples 2 to 6 above illustrate three types of utterances where SPs appear in sentence-medial position. In examples 2 and 3, the SPs immediately follow a noun phrase which functions as the topic of the sentence. Sentences of this type convey the sense that it is the noun phrase that is the focus of concern in the sentence. The central issue in each case is not what action took place, but what subject was involved in it – not what happened to the watch or what the child experienced, but who did the stealing or who got the prize. We can say then that in this usage the SP follows the focal element, the central predication of the sentence. Most SPs, in fact, can occur in contexts of this type.

Example 4 illustrates a second type of non-final occurrence of SPs. Here the SP follows the main verb phrase of the sentence (always involving a verb of knowing, saying etc.) and precedes the verb complement.

Examples 5 and 6 illustrate utterances in which the SP occurs following a complete sentence, but then explanatory material is added following the particle in order to fill in background material that the addressee might have missed or misunderstood.