THAI SENTENCE PARTICLES: PUTTING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

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1. A Brief Introduction to Thai SentenceParticles.

Thai sentence particles (hereafter referred to as SPs) are postposition morphemes that modify the sentence as a whole. Most often they appear in sentence final position, either singly or in sequences of up to six in succession [see example 1]; but they may also occur in sentence medial position, where they follow the focal word or phrase of the utterance in question [example 2].

1) /mây hăn dùy ñ`).:ê k'a lâ khâp ñâ nô?. ./ 'So you
1 2 3
don't agree with this, huh?'
1 2 3

2) /γaacaan nâ 1` khà khamaoy naalikaaa./ 'You mean
1 2 3
it was the professor who stole the watch?'
1 2 3

Semantically, SPs are forms that convey information about the grammatical or situational context within which a given sentence occurs. Some signal information about speaker-addressee relationships; some signal various types of commands, invitations, requests, questions, statements, and responses; and some signal various types of verbal or situational context.

Also SPs may be said to stand as the focus of sentence intonation; and indeed, certain SP forms are characterized by a much greater intonation variability than other forms in the language.

For an inventory of SP forms, see Appendix A.

2. The Puzzle of the SP System.

Some twenty or more years ago, I received a summer salary award from the University of Washington, Seattle, to do research on Thai SPs. And as I started my investigation, I naively thought that by the end of the summer I would be well on my way to sorting the particle system out.

How wrong I was! For I soon found myself in a
bewildering maze of problems. And these problems boiled down to two basic ones that, for a long time, resisted all attempts at explanation: the problem of assigning meanings or functions to the various particles, and the problem of intonational variation. No matter what I did, I simply couldn't figure out what many of the forms meant; nor could I make sense out of the complexities of pitch and vowel-length variation. Often, as I wrestled with these problems, I would give up the whole project in despair. But then, after I had licked my wounds for a while, I would try again--only to give up in despair again. And this exasperating struggle went on for many years.

And, of course, there was little or no help to be found from grammars and dictionaries. These mostly told me what I already knew (for example, that /khróp/ is a polite particle used by male speakers); or else they gave me misleading information (e.g., that /SÍ/ conveys emphasis or command--an explanation that ignores many aspects of usage and misses the central meaning of the form entirely); or sometimes these texts would simply leave me in the dark.

Nor did it help to consult native speakers--not even linguistically sophisticated ones. Such speakers, to be sure, knew how to use the various SP forms (just as all native speakers do), but for the most part they couldn't explain why; and when they did explain, I often found it quite easy to come up with examples that prove their explanations wrong. So the puzzles of the particle system long remained a mystery to me despite all my efforts.

More recently, however, after nearly twenty years of struggle, I believe I have been able to put most of the pieces of the puzzle together. And my findings have been set forth rather fully in a monograph published in 1989 by Pacific Linguistics as the first piece in a volume entitled, Thai Sentence Particles and Other Topics. In this present paper, I draw on the information in my monograph in an attempt to describe some of the devices I have used to sort out the pieces of the puzzle.

3. Other Approaches to the Puzzle.

Before I go on to describe what I have done, it may help to say something first about how others have dealt with the two basic problems of particle meanings and of intonational variability.

Concerning the problem of particle meanings, some scholars (notably Henderson and Chuenkongchoo) have bypassed the problem of individual particle meanings altogether and simply focussed directly upon the proble
of intonational variability. Thus Henderson (1949) tells us, for example, that sentence tone C (a prosodic complex characterized by a long, falling tone) conveys 'assertion or assent' of a formal nature; and other combinations of tone and length (long or short) convey other intonational meanings. However, we are never told what a given particle or any of its variants means; so we are provided with generalizations completely unsupported by any of the particulars on which those generalizations must necessarily be based. And, as it turns out, the generalizations are often very easy to falsify. Thus, for example, we find that the long, falling tone form /sïi/, is actually used not only for 'assertion' or 'assent' but also for commands and invitations, and not only in formal contexts but also informal.

By way of contrast, other scholars (notably Bandhumedha and Peyasantiwong) have dealt with the semantic problem by assigning meanings to certain contextually-grouped occurrences of given SPs, without ever attempting to assign any basic or over-all meaning or function to a given particle. In fact Peyasantiwong suggests (1981:15) that 'one cannot identify a specific meaning independent of context' because 'each particle has more than one implication'. In other words, she has concluded that it is hopeless to try to identify the underlying meanings of many of the particles.

Indeed, one can hardly blame her for her conclusions; for the labor of sorting out basic meanings is extraordinarily difficult. But one result of her failure to do this is her failure to distinguish different particles that occur in similar contexts. Thus, for example (at various points in her presentation) she informs us of five different particles that all occur in the context of annoyance [/lâʔ/, /lâʔ/, /nâʔ/, /rêk/, and /nâ/], and five that occur in the context of surprise [/lâʔ/, /nâʔ/, /ŋay/, /nêi/, and /chiw/]. And we are never told why one form might be used rather than another in a given context of annoyance or surprise--despite the fact that the varying forms are by no means used interchangeably.

Another scholar, Noss, has made a more serious attempt to assign general meanings to each of the particles. But his treatment is very brief; and I would say [perhaps he himself would agree] that his attempts were only partially successful. Nevertheless, the task was certainly worth attempting.

Also, Noss has dealt briefly with the second part of the SP puzzle--the problem of intonational variability (though I am not sure how far he would have gone in identifying the problem as intonational). And in doing so he has followed what we may call the structural-
phonemic approach by attempting to list all the phonemic
variants of a given particle and to account for the
phonological or semantic contexts in which each is used.
Thus he speaks (1965:112) of a particle /ná/ that is
said to have the variants /nāa/ urging acceptance, /nā
more insistent, /nāa!/ emphatic, /nā/ weak question or
request for confirmation, and !/nāo/ emphatic variant
/nā/. However, he makes no attempt to set up any
underlying forms from which other variants are derived
and he makes no systematic attempt to account for the
patterns of SP variation.

Peyasantiwong (1979, 1981) follows a somewhat
similar approach, listing variant forms, and accounting
for the variations that occur. And, like Noss, she for
the most part says little about the patterns of SP vari-
ation. She does, however, describe one intonational
process in some detail: a process which she identifies
as reduction. This is a process which is said to
involve changes such as 'vowel shortening, deletion of
initial or final consonant, and tone neutralization'
(1981:226). It takes place in contexts where the part-
icle in question receives weak stress, and it is evi-
dently a function of rapidity of speech and perhaps
of casualness or personal style. Thus, for example,
/láʔ/ may be reduced to áʔ or aʔ, and /r3̍ːk/ to r̍k, áʔ
or aʔ.

By way of contrast, Henderson and Chuenkongchoo
make no attempt to describe individual variants of a
given particle. Instead, they attempt to account for
all particle forms (whether they be variants of a given
form or whether they be phonemically unvarying) in terms
of general intonational or prosodic phenomena. This
they do by setting up sentence tones or prosodic
complexes, with long-falling tone signalling one thing,
short-high tone another, etc., etc. But (as I have
suggested above), these generalizations lack informati-
on which they need to be based. Also, in Henderson's
case, many of these generalizations are easily falsi-
fied. Chuenkongchoo's, on the other hand, do come
closer to the mark; but they are often somewhat vague.

Another scholar, Rudaravanija (1965), has likewisefocussed almost exclusively on intonational phenomena,
and she has proposed underlying forms for each of the
particles, such forms being phonemically specified in
terms of consonantal and vowel quality but not in terms
of tone and vowel length. Forms then acquire values of
tone and length as a result of occurrence with one or
another of three terminal contours: falling, rising,
and sustained. Thus, for example, falling contour
signals 'statements, commands, requests, strong