Does Thai Permit Detransitivity?

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Analyses of Thai grammar of Dr. Vichin Panupong have been important guides for Thai linguistic research for several decades. Our present knowledge of Thai syntax in particular owes much to insights in such works as Inter-sentence Relations in Modern Conversational Thai (Panupong, 1970) and the Thai-language counterpart Khrong sang phasa thai: rabop wayakon (Panupong, 1979). Theses and other studies by Dr. Vichin’s colleagues and students have further developed and refined the basic approach of these pioneering works. All in the field owe Dr. Vichin a debt of gratitude for her stimulating publications and ideas.

In this paper we start from an important “detransitivity” question raised by Dr. Vichin at the Twelfth International Congress of Linguists in Vienna (Panupong, 1978). A definitive answer to the question will not be attempted here. Instead, an approach for coming to terms with the problem raised by Dr. Vichin will be suggested—a framework indebted to Role and Reference Grammar (Foley & Van Valin, 1984, Chap. 2), especially to how ACTOR and UNDERGOER function in this theory.

POLYFUNCTIONAL WORDS

Panupong (1978) calls attention to pairs of Thai sentences such as those renumbered here as (1a–1b) that seem to show a transitive–intransitive alternation. Compare also an additional topicalized sentence (1c).

(1a) lûuk-rúa kamlaŋ kaŋ bay-rúa.
crew PROG hoist sail Hoist he said
‘The crew are raising the sail.’

(1b) bay-rúa kaŋ lâːw.
sail hoist already Hoist on own petard
‘The sail has been raised.’

(1c) bay-rúa khâw kaŋ lâːw.
sail 3P hoist already
‘The sail they have already raised.’

Transitivity Alternations

In the analytic framework of Panupong (1970), (1a) would seem a straightforward case of SUBJECT TRANSITIVE VERB OBJECT, which could be represented as in
(2a). As for (1b), although the basic practical meaning seems clear, there could perhaps be two syntactic possibilities, depending on context.

(2a) $S - Vt - O$
(2b) $S - Vi$
(2c) $O - (\emptyset_S) - Vt$
(2d) $O - S - Vt$

For most Thai speakers, the intransitive/passive meaning translated in (2b) is probably favored as the decontextualized interpretation for (1b). “Decontextualized” here is similar to what Panupong (1970) has referred to as “initiating.” However, in the right context (“non-initiating”), a topicalized-object agent-suppressed transitive interpretation, symbolized in (2c) by $(\emptyset_S)$, seems possible for (2b) too, at least for many Thai speakers (Diller, 1993, p. 411). Suppose that a boat’s captain asked whether the crew had taken care of both the sail and anchor. The answer might be, in effect, “The sail (they) have raised, but not the anchor.” Pattern (2c) would then bear a direct relationship to (2d), showing relations in the agent-explicit sentence (1c).

Some important theoretical questions raised by Panupong’s concern with sentences like those above include:

- Given sentences like (1b), what is the nature of principles distinguishing interpretations (2b) and (2c)?
- Assuming that a standard derivational relationship is involved between sentences like (1a) and (1b), which criteria are necessary and sufficient to decide the direction of derivation? Must we rely on (perhaps conflicting) naive intuition?
- Are these interpretations in fact discrete, as the representations above would seem to suggest, or is it possible that interpretations (2b) and (2c) could really be ends of a gradient continuum, with intermediate levels of semi-transitivity to be accepted?

**Intuition or Logic?**

Similarly, while (3) is classified among intransitive sentences by Panupong (1979, p.80) on the pattern of (2b), one could easily imagine a (2c) interpretation along the lines above.

(3)  bān       phān       kwāːt.
   house  just-now    sweep
   ‘The house has just been swept.’

In other non-initiating situations of course, sentences such as (1b) or (3) could receive (2b)-like intransitive interpretations. Sometimes there might be phonological clues available to speakers or overt topic-marking particles. However, it seems that these are of secondary significance for the problem at hand. Speakers at least sometimes do rely on context alone to determine whether superficially identical sentences receive (2b) intransitive or (2c) transitive agent-suppressed interpretation. Thus, at least in some cases, it seems we can claim that construal of transitivity in Thai is contextually (pragmatically) sensitive.
Depending on theoretical orientation, this question could be approached in different ways. In terms of generative-transformational theories of syntax, (2c) would probably be seen as implying “movement” or some notational analogue—in effect, topicalization, along with agent deletion or, in more recent generative work, a zero element pro (Chomsky, 1986, p.80). It is less clear how current generative theory should treat (2b). This too could perhaps be handled through a derivational chain involving movement (or a similar analogue) or alternatively, in a more lexical theory, through a rule of lexical derivation. Generative discussions would take this as an important issue to debate but leading current generative theories seem alike in rejecting the option of a gradient transitivity relationship.

In considering sentences like (1a-1b) along with a range of other alternations, Panupong (1978, p. 221) deserves credit for raising these basic questions for Thai, but from a different perspective. Should we, she asks, “take one word with more than one function as a polyfunctional word ...[which] accords better with our intuition” or proceed “logically” by restricting the notion of an individual word to one specific function as determined through syntactic frame analysis. It is interesting that a decade after Panupong pinpointed this problem for Thai, Jackendoff (1990, p.156) noted that the same basic problem remains for English so-called unaccusative alternations with verbs like open (see below).

As Panupong observes, the “logical” course proliferates semantically similar homonyms or creates what she calls homophonic-graphic words. On the other hand, in the “intuitive” analysis, kān in (1a) and (1b) would be considered “the same word” or basic underlying lexical form but used in different lexico-syntactic situations. This is what Jackendoff (1990) refers to as a correspondence-rule strategy, perhaps effected through linking rules.

In the logical analysis then there would need to be two separate words in (1a) and (1b), presumably with some sort of (systematically derived?) semantic links. This leads to an interesting consequence in terms of the use of structural sentence test-frame criteria to establish word class. If we accept the line of argument above admitting topicalized (2c) as a possible interpretation of (1b), then the logical analysis would lead to two different lexical items—each superficially looking like kān and each occurring superficially, at least, in the same syntactic frame. Operationally, this means that a syntactic test frame in its superficial form alone is no longer entirely adequate to establish word class: in this case, we need to know the specific structural description, i.e., details of interpretation as in (2b-2c), as well. In Panupong’s approach, this could perhaps be accomplished through invoking the “initiating/non-initiating” distinction, since the former decontextual interpretation would seem to favor the more passive-like reading.

**Actors and Undergoers**

As long ago as 1922 what can be called “Thai traditional grammar” began to come to grips with the general problem raised above. This was through application of the semantic case or karaka (kārāk) analysis of Panini and the Indic grammarian tradition. What we might now refer to as semantic case roles, thematic relations or theta roles were central to karaka theory. Revealingly, Phaya Upakitsilapasan (1922, section
64.2, p. 130) considered sentences of form (1c) to have a noun-phrase (henceforth NP) pattern of form:

\[(4) \text{kammaka:rók} + \text{kantûka:rók} + \text{VERB} \]
\[\text{UNDERGOER} \quad \text{ACTOR} \]

The Indic karaka terms above can be conveniently be glossed with the terms ACTOR and UNDERGOER following Role and Reference Grammar (RRG; Foley & Van Valin, 1984; Van Valin, 1993). These English terms should be taken as arbitrary labels for “macroroles” which subsume more specific semantic relations relevant to the semantics of individual verbs. In this framework, a term like agent is used in a more restricted sense to refer to a rational entity willfully controlling and effecting an action; similarly, patient to a directly affected entity, etc. Thus in “I hear a sound,” I and sound are taken to be ACTOR and UNDERGOER respectively, but in this instance further specified as experiencer and theme respectively, not as agent and patient. On the other hand, in “I picked the flower” the ACTOR nominal I is further specified as agent, and flower would be UNDERGOER specified as patient. In actual practice, even agent and patient should perhaps be taken as intermediate-level categories, since the specific nature of agency in verbs, say, like ‘to hit’ and ‘to praise,’ is arguably somewhat different and this difference may affect certain syntactic facts.

Thus ACTOR and UNDERGOER as used in RRG are macroroles, each consisting of sets of more specific thematic relations (similar to theta-roles), several of which may occur in both macrorole sets. Also, in this theory, although ACTOR and UNDERGOER are taken to be discrete in terms of how they are associated with lexical verbs and how they affect surface syntax, there is no further requirement that in a particular sentence a given nominal bears one and only one of the more specific type of thematic relations. There is perhaps indeed no discrete universal set of these items. Nominals such as “sail” in (1b) and “house” as in (3) are taken to be UNDERGOER macrorole, but could be further expanded, depending on viewpoint, as a combination of theme and patient. (In this sense, the so-called “theta criterion,” specifying a system of unique roles, as proposed in recent generative work, holds only at the RRG macrorole level.)

For Thai at least, Figure 1 gives a schematic idea of how two hierarchies might be constituted to account for issues discussed here. This triangular arrangement is an elaboration of the essentially one-dimensional scheme commonly found in case grammar hierarchies and elsewhere in RRG work (Van Valin, 1993, p. 44). In the version of the scheme presented here, for example, an agent is stronger in the A-hierarchy than an experiencer, while an affected patient is stronger in the U-hierarchy than a goal or unaffected theme. Theme and perhaps some similar theta-roles might occur weakly in both hierarchies: i.e., theme behaves as weak-A in some constructions and as weak-U in others. As we see below, this line of presentation is useful in clarifying certain principles of Thai syntax.