A GRAMMAR OF VERB SERIALIZATION
IN THAI

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In Thailand

Thai is one of many languages in Southeast Asia that has Verb Serialization, i.e. a string of verbs occurring in sequence or serially within a clause. This phenomenon of these languages has sometimes been noted in passing but rarely, to my knowledge, has it been singled out and investigated as to its specific linguistic properties and how these properties are to be accounted for in a grammar. In this paper I will present a description which will account for the properties, both syntactic and semantic, of Verb Serialization in Thai and how they are to be described in relation to other aspects of the linguistic structure of this language. Since Verb Serialization exists in several languages of the same area of the world it is hoped that the following discussion will also provide insight into the structure of these other languages.

1. The Data

A sentence in Thai may consist of a single verb, which may be transitive or intransitive, or adjective.

1) súk ʔaan nangs科幻
   N   V   N
   Sook read book
   Sook read the book.

2) bun yu
   N   V
   Boon is-located
   Boon is here.

3) phensีи súay
   N   adj
   Pensee pretty
   Pensee is pretty.

Verb Serialization in Thai, as in many other languages of Southeast Asia, is the occurrence of two or more verbs in sequence one after the other.

4) dèk sffи khanом
   N   V   N
   child buy candy
   The child bought candy.
5) 德州 pay สิ่ง หน่วย หอม
  N  V  V  N
child  go  buy  candy
The child went to buy candy.

6) 德州 วิ่ง หน่วย หอม
  N  V  V  V  N
child  run  go  buy  candy
The child ran to buy candy.

7) 德州 วิ่ง กล้า ผ่าน หน่วย หอม
  N  V  V  V  V  N
child  run  return  go  buy  candy
The child returned running to buy candy.

Verb Serialization need not be confined to sequences of verbs alone, however. Oftentimes there is a mixture of transitive and intransitive verbs, along with objects and locational nouns, occurring in a series.3

8) สุก ลง น้ำ ศักย์ บ้าน
   Sook  take  wood  come  house
   Sook brought the wood home.

9) สุก ลง น้ำ ศักย์ บ้าน ต่อ?
   Sook  take  wood  come  build  table
   Sook brought wood to build a table.

10) ปราสาท ช่วย คุณ น้ำ ศักย์ บ้าน
    Prasit  help  Sook  carry  wood  come  house
    Prasit helped Sook carry the wood home.

11) ปราสาท กล้า ช่วย คุณ ศักย์ บ้าน ต่อ?
    Prasit  return  come  help  Sook  build  table
    Prasit returned to help Sook build the table.

Although adjectives are marked as verbs in Thai (cf. 3), their occurrence in Verb Serialization is rarer and appears to be limited to those adjectives which can function as modifiers to other verbs.

12) 德州 ทาม ดี
    child  do  good
    The child is behaving well.

13) ปู่ ยุค สามย่า ดี
    father  locate  well  good
    Father is well and happy.

14) บ้าน ยุค สูง
    house  locate  high
    The house is built high up off the ground.
The goal of this paper is to present a grammar of Verb Serialization in Thai which will be descriptive of all that is relevant about series of verbs in this language. To accomplish this goal, I shall argue that, in spite of their popularity in current grammatical descriptions, transformational rules make quite misleading and sometimes ambiguous predictions in describing the properties, whether syntactic or semantic, of Verb Serialization in Thai. Instead, I shall argue that all the relevant facts of Verb Serialization are adequately described by a grammar employing 1) Phrase Structure rules to account for the syntactic properties of Verb Serialization, and 2) interpretative rules to account for the semantic properties of Verb Serialization.

2. A Phrase Structure Description

Verb Serialization, i.e. the fragment of Thai illustrated above and which I have chosen to term Verb Serialization, properly begins in relation to the following PS rules.

16) i. S → NP + PDP
    ii. PDP → (Aux) VP* (S)
    iii. VP → V (NP)
    iv. NP → N (S)

The symbols and interpretations of these rules are well known in linguistic circles so I will not take the space to spell out their details. Of crucial importance to the discussion, however, is the claim that the above rules make about Verb Serialization, namely that a series of verbs in Thai is derived from VP*. While the asterisk in VP* will eventually have to be replaced by a more precise symbol, it is still useful at this stage of our discussion, for it means that in a PS derivation one or more Verb Phrases may be enumerated thus specifying a node of the structure in Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image_url)
The category VP* makes two specific claims about Verb Serialization.

--First, VP* states that Verb Serialization, in addition to S, has a recursive property of its own in the linguistic structure of Thai. Understood in this sense recursion means repetition, i.e. the grammar may enumerate one or any number of Verb Phrases independently of the symbol S or of underlying sentences. Thus Verb Serialization is not 'reducible to a certain combination of single sentences' (Kuroda 1965) out of which, by means of transformational rules which would raise deeply embedded VP nodes to be surface structure constituents of an initial verb, a grammar would finally enumerate a string of verbs. Rather, as based on the grammar proposed above, any \( V_{1+n} \) of a series is enumerated from a VP directly specified by a rule of the base component of the grammar.

--Second, VP* makes the claim that Verb Serialization is sub-propositional, and not propositional, in character. VP* in a grammar of Thai states that Verb Serialization is fundamentally different from the propositional character which is inherent in the symbol S. Each \( V_{1+n} \), in other words, does not constitute a separate proposition (which would then have to be described via an underlying S and transformational rules); rather, a \( V_{1+n} \) forms a constituent part of a proposition, i.e. S, in a grammar of Thai. What this sub-propositional character of Verb Serialization is, of course, will be brought out in the discussion of this paper.

2.1 The Argument From Syntax

In the rules 16i-iv above there are two occurrences of embedded S: the first is in 16ii which is the rule generating Verb Complementation in Thai, and the second is in 16iv which is the rule for Relativization for Thai. At first blush it would appear reasonable to derive each \( V_{1+n} \) from either of these two construction, \([S]_{pdp}\) or \([S]_{np}\), thus arguing in effect that a \( V_{1+n} \) is a particular surface structure manifestation of an underlying verb complement or relative clause. But to derive sequences of verbs from an underlying S, whether it is \([S]_{pdp}\) or \([S]_{np}\), by means of transformational rules runs into a major obstacle. Since it makes no difference whether the underlying S is a verb complement or relative clause, for either source give rise to the same problem, consider only the examples below which would purport to derive the second verb of a verb series from an underlying \([S]_{np}\) or relative clause.

17) prichaa cháy mít táat nfa
Prichaa use knife cut meat
Prichaa used a knife to cut the meat.

18) prichaa cháy mít thíi yuu nay bāan
Prichaa use knife which locate in house
Prichaa used the knife which was in the house.