Foreign Language Compounds in Thai:
Evidence for Morphological and Structural Influence

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1. Introduction

Among the things that impress students of the Thai language are the richness and flexibility of the language, an important source of which are the numerous loan words in Thai from other languages - Sanskrit, Pali, Khmer, Chinese, Malay, Portuguese, English, etc. Thai has borrowed a large number of words from the older Indo-Aryan (Indic) languages Sanskrit and Pali and continues to use these two classical languages (especially Sanskrit) as sources for much of its learned and technical vocabulary. In more recent times, English has served as a source for vocabulary, especially for words referring to material items and concepts associated with Western culture.

This paper looks at nominal compounds in Thai of the type adjunct noun + head noun (e.g. "classroom," "schoolteacher") that have been formed from Indic and English elements and investigates to what extent this pattern of compound formation has influenced Thai nominal compound formation, originally of the type head + adjunct.

Noss (1964) classifies among "exceptions to this [i.e. head + adjunct] pattern" in Thai those compounds where "the first constituent is not the head, and hence the compound is irregular." (Noss 1964: 64). He cites a number of examples of this type of "irregular" compound including:

mahāa widthajalaj
great college
'university'

êeg äg-kharâad-cathûud
first high-ranking diplomat
'ambassador'

Interestingly, Noss cites the following example as containing the "same morpheme /êeg/ in normal compound lexeme: /naan/ 'woman' /naan-êeg/ 'heroine'" (Noss 1964: 65).

In this paper it will be argued that both types of noun compounds (adjunct + head and head + adjunct) are "regular" in Thai in as much as both types are more or less productive. The native Thai formation (head + adjunct) is the unmarked type and is used to form compound
nouns from native Thai elements, but frequently also from originally non-native elements. The other type of formation (adjunct + head) is used to form compound nouns from mainly non-native (Indic and English) elements, but is used in certain circumstances with native elements or in mixed native + non-native formations. It appears that the choice of which type of formation to use is based, to some extent at least, on stylistic and semantic/functional considerations.

The discussion of nominal compounds in this paper is restricted mainly to binary collocations of nouns. Thai compounds of the type noun + verb phrase (e.g. rān khāay vaa 'drugstore,' literally 'store sell drug'), noun + adjective (e.g. cāj dīi 'to be) kind,' literally 'heart good') or adjective + noun (e.g. dīi cāj 'to be) glad,' literally 'good heart') are not dealt with here in detail.

The data for this paper was gleaned from books, newspapers, journals, commercial signs, telephone directories, and radio broadcasts. All of the Thai examples have been checked with native speakers of Thai.¹ The transcription used here for Thai is based on that found in Noss (1964) and Haas (1982). The transcription for Sanskrit is the standard system as found in Gonda (1966).

2. Nominal Compound in Indic (Sanskrit and Pali) and English

The older Indo-Aryan languages, Sanskrit and Pali, are well known for their extensive use of often long nominal compounds. For the purposes of this paper, two related types of Indic compounds are of interest: dependent (tatpurusa) compounds and descriptive (karmadharāya) compounds. Both types are grouped together as determinative compounds. This type of compound noun is characterized by an inflected head noun preceded by an uninflated noun or adjective stem (i.e. not marked for number and case). Whitney (1889: 489) describes determinative compounds in Sanskrit:

A noun or adjective is often combined into a compound with a preceding determining or qualifying word - a noun, or adjective, or adverb....

This is the class of compounds which is of most general and frequent occurrence in all branches of Indo-European languages.

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The following are some examples of Sanskrit determinative nominal compounds: (Whitney 1889: 489-490, 495)

*adjunct + head*

adjunct: deva senā god army 'army of gods'

adjunct: jīva loka life world 'world of the living'

adjunct: brahma gāvī priest cow 'the priest's cow'

adjunct: eka vīra one hero 'sole hero'

adjunct: rāja rṣi king sage 'king-sage'

English compound nouns are generally of this type also: an inflected head noun preceded by a uninflected (i.e. unmarked singular) qualifying adjunct noun:

*adjunct + head*

tooth brush (toothbrush)

Other similar examples of English compound nouns include:

notebook, telephone directory, toolmaker, city hall, scholar-poet, classroom, schoolteacher, department head, football, bookshelf, etc.

3. Nominal Compounds Used in Thai

3.1 Nominal Compounds of the Type Head + Adjunct

Noss (1964: 63) describes compounds in Thai as characteristically endocentric: the first constituent is the head and
all other constituents are modifiers; ... In nearly all cases, moreover, the form-class of the compound lexeme is the same as that of the head constituent when it occurs as an indepedent lexeme.

The examples below show the the type head + adjunct. The term "adjunct" is used here in Noss's sense of "modifier." This order of elements is the canonical Thai type: a head followed by modifiers, which include adjective phrases, demonstratives, complexes of numeral + classifier (but not cardinal numerals used without classifiers), relative clauses, and noun adjuncts. A number of compounds of non-native elements are also of the type head + adjunct. (An asterisk * appers before items in this sub-section which have the order adjunct + head.)

head    adjunct
1)   khrýaŋ  karii
     equipment curry
     'curry ingredients'  (Noss 1964: 61)

2)  khii  taa
     excrement eye
     'eye secretion'  (Noss 1964: 661)

3)   hón  náam
     room water
     'bathroom'

4)   dèg  wád
     child temple
     'temple boy'

5)   máleŋ  wan
     insect day
     'house fly'

6)  ráan  aahāan
     shop food
     'restaurant'

7)  sàmúd  thoorásáb
     book telephone
     'telephone directory'