

TWO TYPES OF SEMANTIC CONTRAST BETWEEN THAI AND LAO

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The close genetic relationship between Thai and Lao and, indeed, among the various languages in the Tai family, is well known and equally well documented (Li 1960:951). However, since comparative studies to date have been largely restricted to phonology and lexicon, it seems appropriate to begin to consider other aspects of these languages. The results of such comparisons may prove useful in evaluating the extent to which semantic structure, for example, may be relevant in comparative analysis in the Tai family and may also enhance our understanding of the modern vernaculars.

Even a casual comparison of surface phrase structures of Lao and Thai reveals a remarkable degree of similarity. This similarity can be seen despite differences between particular lexical items which may perform the same syntactic and semantic function in the two languages. The following pairs of sentences are illustrative:

- (1) L /wánphūt ?aacaan háy nākhián ?athibaay lʔaŋ kaanpókkhóŋ/
- (2) T /wanphút ?aacaan háy nákrían ?athíbaay rʔaŋ kaanpòkkhróŋ/
*'Wednesday the professor had the student explain (about)
government.'*
- (3) L /thahǎan nǎŋ bɔ̀ɔ̀ dáy pay hóŋsinèe máa/
- (4) T /thahǎan yaŋ mây dáy pay rooŋnǎŋ maa/
'The soldier hasn't come back from the movie theater yet.'
- (5) L /náay khúu mā́k nǎaŋ máa hóŋhían thūk mʔi/
- (6) T /khun khruu chǎp dǎen maa rooŋrian thúk wan/
'The teacher likes to walk to school every day.'

- (7) L /khôy hēt kaan nám ?àay láaw/
 (8) T /phôm thamṅaan kàp phīchaay khǎw/
 'I work with her/his older brother.'

These examples are interesting also because they show a progression from complete identity of lexicon, item by item, to a total dissimilarity of lexicon, item by item (the tonal, consonantal, and vocalic correspondences between the cognate forms being regular throughout). The explanation of any one of these dissimilarities would be a useful exercise, since a variety of processes is involved. For example, sentence 3 has an apparent case of borrowing (/sinèe/ from French ciné), while /māk/ in sentence 5 may be related by semantic shift to Thai /māk cà/ 'likely to' (cf. the relic form preserved in the idiomatic /māk mâak/ 'to be very greedy'). The discussion below is devoted to an inspection of two aspects of the semantic structure of Thai and Lao.¹

Two types of contrast between Thai and Lao are exemplified in the following sentences:

- (9) L /khám ?ùṅ mēen khón (thīi māk mâkmūṅ)/
 'Khamoui is the person (who likes mangoes).'
- (10) L /pinkhám pen náay khúu/
 'Pinkham is a teacher.'
- (11) T /praanii khīi khon (thīi chṣṓp mámuṅ)/
 'Prance is the person (who likes mangoes).'
- (12) T /wīlay pen khruu/
 'Wilai is a teacher.'
- (13) L /sṣṓdam ḡūu nīi/
 (14) T /dinsṣṓ ḡūu thīi nīi/
 'The pencil is here.'
- (15) L /sṣṓdam ḡūu phīi/
 'The pencil is right here.'
- (16) T /dinsṣṓ ḡūu thīi nõn/
 'The pencil is over there.'

¹A number of useful comments by my colleague, D. Haigh Roop, on an earlier version of this paper have been incorporated here. I am indebted to him for his views and to two of my assistants in the University of Hawaii Department of Indo-Pacific Languages for their willingness to share with me their native speaker reactions to the examples cited in this paper. I would like to acknowledge with thanks the help of Vilai Prathnadi Grandstaff and Thao Kham-Oui. I must, however, be held accountable for the interpretation of the data.

The dialects represented in the data are educated standard (Central Plains) Thai and educated standard (Vientiane) Lao. The transcription is that of Gething (1972) for Thai and an adaptation of the same system for Lao. The Lao tones are marked as follows: ∅ lower mid level; ¯ upper mid level; ´ high; ˇ rising; ˘ high falling; ^ low falling.

Looking first at examples 9-12 we see two pairs of structures which are identical semantically and syntactically. Sentences 9 and 11 are equational sentences, while 10 and 12 fill the indefinite functions of the copula; all are NP V NP strings. For a more detailed discussion of the syntax of the Thai copula see Warotamasikkhadit (1969 and 1972: 14-15) and Needleman (1973:55). Turning to the semantic structure we find here a situation which contrasts with English structure. In English the syntactic structure is complex, namely NP V Art NP, and the single copula, 'to be', functions with the definite article (as in the translations for 9 and 11) or with the indefinite article (as in the translations for 10 and 12). For Thai and Lao the semantic structures are isomorphic. The diagrams below (adapted from Gething 1972) may help illustrate the point.

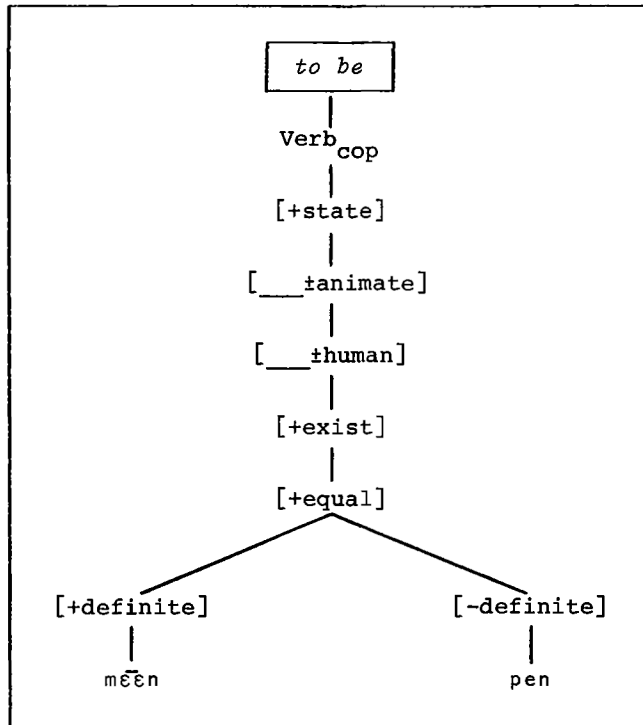


Diagram 1, Lao /mēēn/ and /pen/

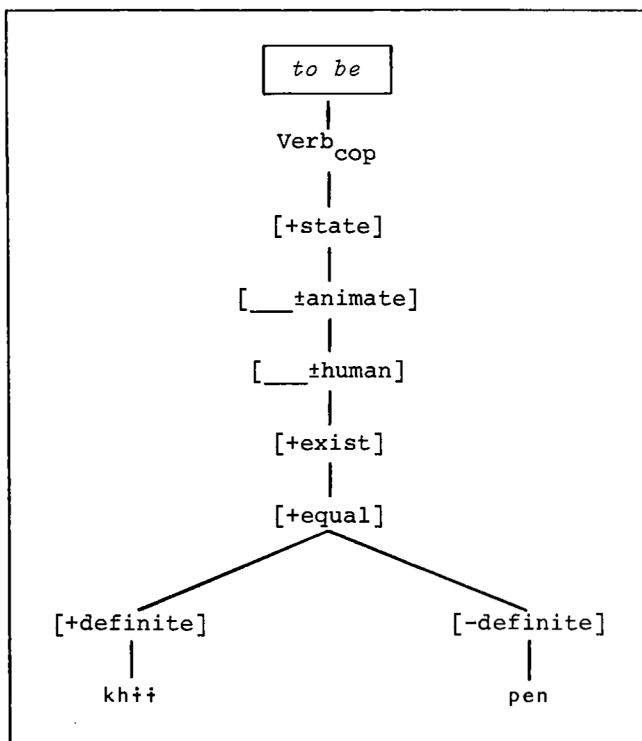


Diagram 2, Thai /khii/ and /pen/

It is important to observe that the Lao cognate of Thai /khii/ has a quite different semantic structure and serves as an example of one type of semantic contrast: simple semantic shift. Note example 17 below.¹

- (17) /khám ?ù y khii ?àay láaw/
'Khamou is like his older brother.'

The nearest equivalent Thai sentence to 17 would be:

- (18) /naay koo mʻan kàp phii chaay khǎw/ or
 /naay koo mʻan kàp pen phii chaay khǎw/

Diagram 3 represents the semantic structure of Lao /khii/ and may be compared with Diagram 2 above.

¹The existence of a homophonous form /khii/ in Lao with a semantic structure virtually identical to Thai /khii/ appears to be a very late borrowing from Thai into Lao. Lao /khii/ 'to be (equational, definite)' occurs only in platform address and is used for introductions.