TWO TYPES OF SEMANTIC CONTRAST
BETWEEN THAI AND LAO

THOMAS W. GETHING

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 /wánphút ðaacañ háy nákhían ?athìbaay lëaŋ kaanpókkhóoŋ/
(2) T /wanphút ðaacañ háy nákrián ?athìbaay rëaŋ kaanpókkhîoong/
   'Wednesday the professor had the student explain (about) government.'

(3) L /thahãan náŋ bǒc dāy pay hóongñee màa/
(4) T /thahãan yâŋ mày dāy pay roongnàŋ maa/
   'The soldier hasn't come back from the movie theater yet.'

(5) L /náay khúu mëk ñàññ màa hóongñan thûk mài/
(6) T /khun khruu chôop deàŋ maa roongriàñ thûk wan/
   'The teacher likes to walk to school every day.'
(7) L /khọy hẹt kaan nám ?àay lâaw/
(8) T /phôm tham¿aa n káp phîchaay khaw/
   '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 (/sînê/ from French ciné), while /mâk/ in sentence 5 may be related by semantic shift to Thai /mák cà/ 'likely to' (cf. the relic form preserved in the idiomatic /mák 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 /khâm ?ûy męk khôn (thîi mák màkmuàñ)/
   'Khamouë is the person (who likes mangoes).'</n
(10) L /pinkhâm pen nàay khûu/
    'Pinkham is a teacher.'</n
(11) T /praanii khî khôn (thîi chôop màmuàñ)/
    'Prance is the person (who likes mangoes).'</n
(12) T /wîlay pen khruu/
    'Wilai is a teacher.'

(13) L /sôtad mûu nîi/
(14) T /dûtso yûu thîi nîi/
    'The pencil is here.'

(15) L /sôtad mûu phîi/
    'The pencil is right here.'
(16) T /dûtso yûu thîi nöon/
    'The pencil is over there.'

1 A 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 Prathnade 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: ŋ lower mid level; ̄ upper mid level; ʼ high; ˊ rising; ˇ 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 /mēn/ and /pen/](image-url)
Diagram 2, Thai /khī/ and /pen/

It is important to observe that the Lao cognate of Thai /khī/ 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) /khām ʔuy khīʔ ʔlāay láaw/
    'Khamou is like his older brother.'

The nearest equivalent Thai sentence to 17 would be:

(18) /naay koo mǐn kāp phīchaay khāw/ or
    /naay koo mǐn kāp pen phīchaay khāw/

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

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