ARE THERE PREPOSITIONS IN THAI?

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Abstract

Within the lexicase dependency grammar framework, this paper investigates the class of Thai words which traditional grammarians have called ‘prepositions’ and which lexicase studies of Thai have analyzed as non-extension prepositions to see what syntactic categories they belong to. I argue that there are in fact prepositions in Thai but that they are limited in number.

The paper discusses possible criteria for distinguishing prepositions from nouns and other syntactic categories as well as in order to identify non-extension prepositions in Thai.

1. Introduction

Various Thai linguists have looked into what the traditional grammarians refer to as prepositions and have reanalyzed them into various categories, for example, verbs (Warotamasikkhadit 1990); coverbs, for prepositions which derive from verbs (Kullavanijaya 1974, Clark 1975); relator nouns, for nouns which carry the localistic features for their dependent nouns (Kullavanijaya 1974, Clark and Prasithrathsint 1985, Savetamalaya 1989); and conjunctions (Warotamasikkhadit 1990). In his paper ‘There are no prepositions in Thai’, Warotamasikkhadit (1990) claims that there are no prepositions in Thai. Instead, words which are called prepositions are actually verbs, nouns, or conjunctions.

Working within the lexicase dependency framework (which maintains that there are eight word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives, determiners, adverbs, prepositions (or postpositions), conjunctions, and sentence particles), I will argue that there are, in fact, prepositions in Thai, but that they are limited in number. In this paper, I have selected words which the traditional grammarians refer to as prepositions and have proposed criteria to identify their syntactic categories.

In lexicase, prepositional phrases are regarded as exocentric constructions containing more than one obligatory head. Two kinds of prepositions are non-extension prepositions, which require a noun phrase co-head, and extension prepositions, which require a clausal co-head. Extension prepositions are referred to as ‘subordinate conjunctions’ by traditional and
transformational grammarians and as 'complementizers' by the Government and Binding Theory syntacticians. Lexicase makes a distinction between extension prepositions such as wâa 'that' and thâa 'if', and (coordinate) conjunctions in that only the latter coordinate two constituents of the same syntactic category. Thus, conjunctions have two dependents while extension prepositions normally have a single co-head dependent. Conjunctions in Thai include tèe 'but', le?-‘and’, and kâp₁ ‘and’. This paper focuses on the prepositions which occur with a noun phrase dependent. Thus, the term 'prepositions' refers to non-extension prepositions.

2. Criteria for identifying non-extension prepositions in Thai

Before discussing the criteria for identifying the syntactic categories of words traditionally referred to as prepositions, I have chosen one of the least controversial words to represent for each syntactic class the characteristics of that class.

**Preposition: kâp₂ ‘with’**

The preposition, kâp₂ ‘with’, has been selected to represent the characteristics of prepositions, since, synchronically, it does not have corresponding verbs in the language.

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(1)  dêang  khuy  kâp₂  lék  
     Dang    talk  with  Lek

     'Dang talked with Lek'.
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**Relator noun: bon ‘on, top; surface’**

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(2)  dêang  waang  nángsií  bon  
     Dang    lay    book   on
     tò?    nií  
     table  this

     'Dang put a book on this table'.
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Verb: ceek₁ ‘to distribute’

(3) dèng sii₂ khanom ceek₁
dèkdèk
Dang buy sweets distribute
children

‘Dang bought sweets to distribute to the children’.

Adverb: wáy ‘lying’

(4) kháw thing nángsií wáy
he abandon book lying
bân nán
house that

‘He left a book at that house’.

2.1. Criteria distinguishing prepositions from verbs and adverbs

2.1.1. Topicalization of the following noun phrase – ‘stranding’

A preposition and a relator noun cannot be stranded, while a verb and an adverb can.

Preposition

(5) *lék nà? dèng khuy kàp₂
Lek TOP Dang talk with

‘Lek is the person with whom Dang talked’. (Lit. ‘Lek, Dang talked with’.)

Relator noun

(6) *tóʔ níi dèng waang
nángsií bon
table this Dang lay
book on

‘This table is the place where Dang put a book on’. (Lit. This table, dang put a book on’.)
Verb

(7) dèkdèk náʔ deɛŋ sī₂
    children TOP Dang buy
khanom cēek₁
sweets distribute

'These children are the ones to whom Dang bought sweets to distribute'. (Lit. 'The children, Dang bought sweets to distribute to'.)

Adverb

(8) bāan nán náʔ kháw thing
    house that TOP he abandon
náŋsii wāy
book lying

'That house is where he left a book'. (Lit. 'That house, he left a book at'.)

2.1.2. Topicalization of the word in question together with the following noun
While both a prepositional phrase and a relator noun, together with their dependents may be topicalized, as shown in (9) and (10), neither a verb, plus its dependent, nor an adverb together with a following noun, may be topicalized, as in shown in (11) and (12), since they do not form a constituent.

Preposition

(9) kāp₂ lék deɛŋ khuy tēe
    with Lek Dang talk but
kāp₂ nīdaa deɛŋ māy khuy
    with Nida Dang not talk

'With Lek, Dang talked, but with Nida, Dang did not'.