Pragmatics of Negation in Thai

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In this paper, I propose to discuss the pragmatic aspects of negation in Thai, i.e., the use of negative imperative in a polite context and the non-negative use of negation in Thai. My account of this paper will be principally based on the Theory of Indirect Speech Acts (Searle 1975, Sadock 1975, and Green 1974) and the Conversational Postulates (Grice 1975, R. Lakoff 1977, and Gordon and G. Lakoff 1975).

1. Negative Politeness

For the sake of clarity, I will divide the discussion on negative politeness into two parts: the use of politeness markers in Thai and the factors affecting politeness.

1.1 The Use of Politeness Markers

There are at least three important politeness markers in Thai which are used with the negative imperative. They are the following:

1. ข่ำ 'please'
2. ข่ำ ช่อง 'kindly'
3. ข่ำน 'kind enough'

The degree of politeness of the three markers can be indicated by the diagram given below:
1.2 Factors Affecting Politeness

A negative directive (cf. Searle 1975) is basically a linguistic attempt by someone 'A' to prevent someone else 'B' from doing what 'A' does not want to be done even if it is in the interest of 'B'. For this to be achieved, 'A' has to rely on either the power factor or the solidarity factor.

The power factor is the strength of mutual recognition by 'A' and 'B' that 'A' is superior to 'B'. The solidarity factor indicates a mutual bond of intimacy between 'A' and 'B', which is usually based on equality. These two factors are said to represent vertical and horizontal social distances respectively.

For example, the sentence ṭhāa tham ṭaṅ ḍaṅ 'Please don't make a noise,' said by a teacher in the classroom to a pupil is not likely to lead to any conflict, the power factor is so dominant that the pupil will readily do what the teacher wants him to do. If the same sentence is said by a wife to a husband, or the other way round, in a society where they have an equal status, it may lead to an argument if the hearer think that he or she is not making any noise. When the speaker is more powerful than the hearer, it is possible for him to use any one of the three politeness markers (i.e., ṭhāa, ṭhāa ṭaṅ, and ṭaṅ) with the imperative. But he usually chooses the most polite ṭaṅ in case he
wants the hearer not to do something that may benefit him. If the hearer is less powerful than the speaker, when he speaks, he must use only the most polite karūnāa. Where the power factor is strong, we take into account what R. Lakoff (1977: 88) calls 'Rule of Formality' to prevent the speaker from imposing on the hearer. In Thai, this rule is observed by placing the definitive titles (cf. Haas 1964: 94), such as khun 'Mr., Mrs. or Miss' before the first name of the listener and then following it by an imperative with politeness marker, as in (5):

(5) khun puu, kh>> jaa pai duu nang loi
defi- poo polite neg go see movie at all
native
'Miss Poo, please don't go to the movie.'

The third factor that enters the need for politeness is the Degree of Conflict at risk. (Leech, 1980 : 108) A scale of severity can be roughly indicated by making a distinction between physical conflict, disobedience, will-flouting, and will-incompatibility:

1) Physical Conflict (Strongest):
   A tries to make B do X, but B does not do X, he does Y instead. For example, A tells B, jaa ao pakkaa, zo din>>
ma hain chan 'Don't bring a pen, but bring a pencil for me.' But B brings a pen instead of a pencil.

2) Disobedience:
   A orders B to do X, B does not do X. For example, A orders B not to go to bed by saying chan san wha mai hain n>>n 'I order you not to go to bed.' Still B goes to bed.
3) Will-Flouting

A communicates that A wants B to do X, but B does not do X.

For example, A tells B, chan maj tonkaan hai thosue sua phaeq, 'I don't want you to buy costly shirts.' But B does buy a costly shirt.

4) Will-Incompatibility (Weakest):

A communicates that A wants B not to do X, but B tells him that he wants to do X.

For example, A communicates to B, chan maj tonkaan hai tha pai duu naŋ 'I want you not to go to a movie.' But B tells him that he wants to go to the movie. It is just the opposite of what A wants B to do. In the Thai society the stress is on minimizing the conflict while the act of communication is going on. As a result, the more the risk of conflict, the stronger the desire to use the more polite form.

2. Non-negative Use of Negation in Thai

In every day speech, we very often use one sentence to convey the meaning of another. For example, in English, the negative question, "why don't you have a seat?" can, under certain circumstances, entail the meaning of the positive request, "Please have a seat". In what follows, I will focus on the non-negative use of negation in Thai where the neg maj loses its original negative meaning and conveys something positive instead. The discussion will, however, be divided into two main sections: rhetorical negative and negative question.

2.1 Rhetorical Negative

Most of the things which have traditionally been called 'rhetorical negative' come under the heading of indirect speech acts. Following are the sub-types of rhetorical negatives: