

# **Imperfective Markers in Thai: An Analysis of *kamlan* and *yùu* in Natural Spoken Discourse**

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## **I. Introduction**

While tense is the relation of a given situation (an event, a state or a process) to a defined reference point, usually the time of speech, aspect refers to “the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976:3), i.e., the internal nature of an event viewed by the speaker. For example, these two sentences, *John ran* and *John was running*, are both in the past tense; what distinguishes them is aspect.

Interpreted aspectual meaning comes from two main sources, grammatical aspect which comes from grammatical morphemes, and inherent lexical aspect of the verb. In this study, two Thai grammatical aspectual markers, *kamlan* and *yùu* were examined.

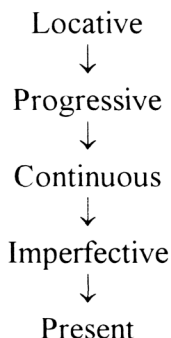
## **II. Grammatical Aspect**

Two main aspectual categories that are clearly distinguished are perfective and imperfective. Perfective views a situation as a whole, “without regard to internal temporal constituency” (Comrie 1976: 12). On the other hand, imperfective “views an event from within, without explicit beginning or end” (Andersen 1990b: 7). Imperfective has general aspectual meaning that includes habitual, i.e., a typical event or state, as well as progressive. While progressive has more specific aspectual meaning, with a limited and temporary duration, imperfective involves more extended temporal duration, and can be used for both stative and dynamic events.

### III. Diachronic Development of Imperfectivity

The most typical source of progressive markers is locative expressions meaning “to be located in or at an activity.” Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca (1994) predict that the progressive occurs early in the process of development, and then evolves into the more general meanings. Figure 1 shows the path of development of imperfective aspect, which may eventually develop into present.

Figure 1  
Diachronic Development of Locative into Imperfective Markers  
(Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca 1994)



The lexical meaning of locative is gradually lost due to the shift from locative meaning to temporal meaning. As the locative meaning weakens while the temporal meaning becomes more stabilized, the meaning of the progressive aspect eventually arises. At this stage of development, the progressive is restricted to dynamic verbs and predicates. Later on, its grammatical meaning becomes more general, and the characteristic of a time period is extended. It develops from progressive to continuous, which is no longer limited to dynamic verbs but can be used with stative verbs and predicates, according to Comrie (1976). Then, the aspectual marker develops into imperfective, and possibly present. Since the development of aspectual markers is a gradual process, it is

possible to find them in various stages of development, marking more than one aspect in any language at any particular time.

#### IV. Research Rationale

Unfortunately, most studies, if not all, in the area of Thai tense, mood and aspect have been conducted on the sentential level and used invented sentences as examples, instead of the discourse-pragmatic level and using natural spoken data. Much of the literature does not try to distinguish the aspectual meanings of *kamlan* and *yùu*.

It is true that in some contexts, these two aspectual markers convey the same meaning, i.e., progressive aspect. However, an aspectual marker that has been claimed to have a particular meaning can actually convey other related aspects, depending on the discourse context. The original meaning and grammatical development of an aspectual marker may have an influence on the distribution of its functions and meanings. *Kamlan* is primarily used as a noun meaning ‘power, strength, energy,’ for example, *kamlan cay* in (1):

(1) PT: 648

P: *phǒm ləy mòt kamlan cay ləy thí ca maa*  
 1.m EMP all.gone power heart EMP that IRR come  
 “So I have lost my will to come (here to ask for help).”

On the other hand, the primary lexical meaning of *yùu* is a verb meaning ‘to live, to reside, to stay, to be in/at,’ as in (2):

(2) PT: 967-968

FT: *?acaaŋ ?anoŋ kô bòk yùu hǒo*  
 teacher Anong HL tell live dorm  
 “Ajarn Anong said she lived in the dorm.”

*tề mây lúu (hh) yù(hh) toη năy(hh) (.)*

but NEG know be at where

“But she didn’t know where exactly the dorm is.”

In terms of the positions of *kamlaη* and *yùu* when they function as an aspectual marker, they are placed differently in a verb phrase. *Kamlaη* is placed before the main verb, for example in sentence (3):

(3) EQ3: 1252

T: *kô kalaη<sup>1</sup> khít wâa*

HL PROG think that

“I’m thinking that...”

*Yùu*, on the other hand, is placed after the verb phrase, i.e., after the main verb, or the verb and the object, for example, sentence (4):

(4) EQ4: 452

T: *khon thî bēp duulēē law yùu*

person REL like take.care 1 IMP

“a person who, like, takes care of us.”

*Yùu* is not necessarily placed at the end of the sentence. It is usually followed by a time expression, for example:

(5) EQ3: 819

T: *kin lúsùk kin thuunâa seenwít yù sǎam wan*

eat think eat tuna sandwich IMP three day

*mǎη*

probably

“I think I was probably eating tuna sandwiches for three days.”