

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING TEMPORAL FRAMES IN THAI CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

Amy Meepoe

University of California, Los Angeles

Andersen (1999) states that “successful communication requires that participants be able to mentally construct a frame within which any situation is assumed to hold or any event to unfold” (p. 355). According to Hopper (1982), discourse context is an important key in interpreting temporal and aspectual meaning. Much of the literature on the Thai language says that there is no grammatical tense in Thai, but it seems that Thai has a rich aspectual system. Even without grammatical tense to locate a temporal reference, there are ways Thai speakers use to express temporal relations in their conversation, for example, temporal adverbials, temporal aspectual markers, including discourse context, and shared background knowledge.

This paper qualitatively investigates how temporal reference is established and maintained in Thai conversational discourse. The results of the study suggest that temporal adverbials are usually used to establish a temporal location in narratives, and that after a temporal reference is established, most verbs used within that temporal frame are bare verbs: rarely are temporal markers used, although aspectual markers and other auxiliary verbs are sometimes used to indirectly maintain the temporal frame. In addition, inherent semantic aspect of verbs and predicates seem to play an important role in maintaining the temporal frames as well.

Data and Methodology

The data used in this study is an audio-recorded natural conversation among a parent (father), a female teacher, and a male teacher. This conversation took place at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. The parent was invited to the university to discuss his daughter's school problems and study progress with the two academic advisors.

The conversation was then transcribed into phonetics, which represent the real pronunciation of the speakers. The transcription was divided into line boundaries according to intonation units (Chafe 1987; Iwasaki 1996). Clauses, main clauses as well as subordinate clauses, in the data were counted. There are approximately 790 clauses, or 1,460 intonation units.

Results and Discussion

As defined by Labov (1972), narrative is “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (pp. 359-

360). In the narratives found in the data, temporal adverbials are usually used to establish a time frame, at the beginning of the narrative. After the temporal frame is established, the later clauses do not normally carry temporal or aspectual markers. Data fragment (1) is an example of a past narrative in which a temporal adverbial establishes a temporal frame.

(1) PT: 46-56

After telling the student's parent (P) that all students are supposed to have their internship this semester so they have an opportunity to look for a job at the same time, the female teacher (FT) tells the parent all students, except his daughter, came to meet with their teachers on the eighth of the month for their internship assignments and courses to take in the following semester.

⇒ 1 FT: *nĩa phũa kháw maa kan*
to establish PRT friend 3 come together
the past *mũa* *wan thĩi pèet nĩa nĩa* *khá*
time frame when day at eight PRT PRT R.PRT
 “Her friends came (here) together on the eighth.”

2 P: *[kháp]*
 PRT
 “Yes.”

3 FT: *[maa] cəə kàp ʔacaan liaplóy*
 come meet with teacher completely
 “(They) came and already met with the teacher.”

4 *law kôə mōəp tua*
 1.pl HL entrust person
hây pay fùk ɲaan
 CAUS go practice work
 “We gave them assignments (to go) for their internship.”

5 P: *kháp*
 PRT
 “Yes.”

- 6 FT: *sàŋsǝn pay*
 teach go.DIR
 “(We) taught them.”
- 7 *luam thǎŋ law phûut thǎŋ ?ây*
 include altogether 1.pl speak regarding TTL
wíchaa thǐi lian thǎəm tòɔpay dǔay
 subject REL study term following too
 “And we spoke about the subjects/courses
 that they will take in the following term too,”
- 8 *sûŋ pen lǔaŋ sǎmkhan thǎŋ nǎn lǎy*
 REL COP item important altogether that EMP
 “all of which were important.”
- 9 P: *kháp*
 PRT
 “Yes.”
- 10 FT: *kháw kô mây maa hǎa lǎy*
 3 HL NEG come see EMP
 “She didn’t come to meet (us) at all.”
- 11 P: *lǎ kháp*
 Q PRT
 “Really?”

In this short narrative, the female teacher describes what happened on a specific date regarding students’ internship assignments, which the student protagonist missed, and thus her parent was invited to the school. A temporal adverbial clause is used in line 1 in order to establish the past time frame, i.e., the day when all students came for their internship assignments. What took place in that past time frame is shared and understood by the co-participants without any other use of temporal markers. The use of overt temporal markers in narratives may be redundant since one nature of narratives includes the temporal sequence of the event taking place in the temporal frame. Similar findings are shown in Andersen (1990) that temporal markers are not obligatory in Papiamentu either. Additionally, Wu (1996) found that temporal markers are also used infrequently in Mandarin Chinese narratives.

Not only are temporal markers used to establish a temporal frame in past narratives, but they have the same function in non-narratives as well. Moreover, temporal adverbials are found to provide co-participants with

more specific temporal location. In data excerpt (2), which is a non-narrative segment, only two temporal markers are used: one to establish a time frame in line 2, and the other to make a temporal location more specific and explicit in line 10.

(2) PT: 1315-1333

After the parent told the female teacher about one of his sons who also plans to go to this college later and how good his English is, the teacher asks him about his daughter, the student in trouble, concerning how she was in high school.

- 1 FT: *lěw lěw tən- lăttanaa nĩa*
and and when Rattana this.PRT
“And, and when-, Rattana,”
- ⇒ 2 *tən: rian mătthayom rian* *pen ɲay*
to establish when study high-school study COP how
the past *ʔà há*
time frame PRT R.PRT
“when she was in high school, how did she do?”
- 3 P: *man kôɔ yàŋɲá*
3 HL like-this
“It was like this.”
- 4 *yàŋ ʔacaan wâa nĩa*
like teacher say this
“like what you said.”
- 5 FT: *[lǝə(.) mây khôy:]*
Q NEG really
“Yeah? She was not really.”
- 6 P: *[man kô mây man kô](.)*
3 HL NEG 3 HL
“It was not, it was, uh...”
- 7 *mây khôy dii ʔa há*
NEG really good PRT R.PRT
“It was not really good.”