Lexicological Significance of Semantic Doublets in Thai

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Introduction

This paper is intended to call to the attention of scholars and students of Thai the lexicology of the language.[1] This is not one of the well-trodden paths. When the concepts and theoretical framework of American structuralism were applied to the study of Thai in works such as those by Noss (1964) and Vichin (1970), not much attention was given to the study of words, because the morphological system of the language appeared then to be rather uninteresting, Thai being an isolative language. Polymorphemic words in the language are created through various compounding processes. Though it is obvious that there are many types of compounds, most works, such as those by Rachadaphan (1983) and Jurairat (1985), focus on the formal property of compounds and issues like the number of morphemes in compounds, and the grammatical category or part of speech of each of the components in a compound, as well as the compounds themselves. Semantic issues are usually not the main concern of these studies within the structuralist framework. Even when the generative-transformational theory was adopted, the situation did not improve much for the lexicological study of Thai, perhaps because the lexicon itself was not given much attention until the arrival of the word or lexical grammar theory. A small number of compounds are studied in the work of Udom (1963), and it is proposed by implication that some are ready-made units in the lexicon, while some are transformationally derived.

Many intriguing questions remain unanswered. What is the lexicological motivation or significance for each type of compound? Why are there different types of compounds? What mechanical ingenuity is devised within the lexicology of the language itself, as reflected in the existing compounds, to keep each lexicological type of compound distinct? In an attempt to seek at least a partial answer to some of these questions, a study was done based on a sample of data consisting of 800 compounds referred to

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in this paper as semantic doublets. The purpose of the study is to find out why speakers create this type of compound, which has rather unique characteristics. The answer cannot be definite at this stage, when not much is known about the lexicology of Thai. However, it is hoped that the paper will attract budding scholars to take a more earnest look at the lexicology of Thai.

Defining Semantic Doublets

A semantic doublet is defined here as a type of compound consisting of components that share a certain degree of semantic similarity. "Sharing a certain degree of semantic similarity" means that the components may be synchronically considered synonyms, near synonyms, or words in the same semantic field. The components in this type of compound are usually mono-lexemic; however, there are a small number of semantic doublets that contain poly-lexemic components. This latter sub-type of semantic doublet is usually a product of double or multiple semantic-doublet formation processes. Another defining characteristic of a semantic doublet is that it is usually synonymous or near-synonymous with one or both or all of its components. The synonymity here means substitutability when difference in register or speech style is not taken into consideration. With this type of internal semantic structure, one can say that semantic doublets are morphologically transparent words, according to the definition given by Ullmann (1957). That is, one can derive the meaning of each semantic doublet quite easily from the meaning of its components.

The following are examples of semantic doublets with mono-lexemic components.

a. Semantic doublets with components that are synchronic synonyms.

1.	*râaŋ*	+	*kaay*	=	*râaŋkaay*
	body		body		body
2.	*kὲὲ*	+	*charaa*	=	*kὲὲcharaa*
	aged, old		aged, old		aged, old

b. Semantic doublets with components that are synchronic near-synonyms.

3.	*mîit*	+	*phráa*	=	*mîitphráa*
	knife (generic)		knife used in farming		knife (generic)
4.	*tháŋ*	+	*sîn*	=	*tháŋsîn*
	all (Adj)		all through (Prep)		all (Adv)

The following are examples of semantic doublets with poly-morphemic components.

5.	*rabìap*	+	*bèɛp*	+	*phěɛn*	=	*rabìapbèɛpphěɛn*
	regulation		model		plan		regulation
6.	*pràp*	+	*pruŋ*	+	*plìan*	+	*plɛɛŋ*	=	*pràppruŋplìanplɛɛŋ*
	adjust (seasoning)		adjust		change		change		change for the better, improve

The term semantic doublet is deliberately used in this paper to emphasize the semantic resemblance between a semantic doublet and its components, as well as the semantic resemblance between the components within a semantic doublet. The Thai word for this particular type of compound is *khamsɔ̌ɔn*, which was probably used originally by Phya Anuman Rajadhon. Other terms have been used by Thai linguists. These are *khamkhûu*, or 'word pair', and *kham mii sɔ̌ykham*, or 'word with decoration'. These terms are not adopted because they cannot reveal the significant lexical characteristics of this unique type of compound (Peansiri 1981).

Characteristics of Semantic Doublets

The study on which this paper is based began with a collection of 800 semantic doublets selected on the basis of the defining criteria outlined above. The author and two assistants, all native speakers, each went through the Royal Institute Dictionary and listed all the compounds that met the semantic doublet criteria. These three lists were compared and merged. As the team was completing the list, more semantic doublets were added, taken from each person's own competence, to clarify some of those chosen from the dictionary and to obtain the list of 800 words as planned. The analysis reveals the following formal and semantic characteristics:

Formal characteristics

The formation of a semantic doublet seems to follow the prevalent preference for the pairing rhythmic pattern; that is, the number of components in a semantic doublet is always an even number. Most doublets have two components. In cases where there are more than two, the number is usually four. Cases like this seem to be products of multiple processes, as evident in example 9 below.

7.	*yák*	+	*yáay*	=	*yákyáay*
	stealthily take a part away		move		stealthily take a part away

8. *thàay* + *thee* = *thàaythee*
transfer pour transfer a part
a part

9. *yákyáaythàaythee* = to stealthily take away a part of something

Since most of these lexical components are monosyllabic, this pairing pattern is usually overlooked. One comes to be aware of this principle only in cases like *thanŏnhŏnthaaŋ* 'road' and *khamoykhacoon* 'thief, robber'. In the former, *hŏnthaaŋ* itself is a semantic doublet consisting of *hŏn* 'direction' and *thaaŋ* 'path', while *thanŏn* is a single lexeme borrowed from Khmer and means 'road'. Since *thanŏn* is bi-syllabic, one gets a double semantic doublet with four syllables. In the case of *khamooykhacoon*, it is not a double semantic doublet, for it has only two components: *khamooy* 'thief, robber' and *coon* 'thief, robber'. The added *kha* to precede *coon* is simply to achieve rhythmic balance.

A distinct difference between semantic doublets and other compounds that are not products of reduplicating processes is the fact that components of semantic compounds are members of the same grammatical categories, as can be seen in the examples given below.

Semantic doublets are not restricted to any one grammatical category. There are those that are content words and those that are function words.

NOUN:

10. *satìʔ* + *panyaa* = *satìʔpanyaa*
awareness intelligence intellectual capability

11. *sáp* + *sĭn* = *sápsĭn*
property asset asset

VERB:

12. *khàt* + *thŭu* = *khàtthŭu*
polish scrub polish and scrub

13. *khúi* + *khìa* = *khúikhìa*
scratch scratch scratch

ADJECTIVE:

14. *mâak* + *lăay* = *mâaklăay*
many various various