

The Perceptual Foundation of the Thai Classifier System

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Introduction

This paper is a development from a larger study (Placzek 1984) of noun classifiers in Standard Thai or ST.¹ I adopt the view that all categories in natural language are founded upon prototypes, a conclusion also reached by Lyons (1981: 73). The general theoretical background is supplied by Rosch's work on prototypicality (for example, Rosch 1978) and Hunn's work on inductive versus deductive processes of categorization (especially Hunn 1976; 1982). The basic data for the paper is taken from various dictionaries and from several interviews with native speakers from Bangkok. Much of the data appears in Placzek (1978; 1984) and is appropriately referenced where necessary.

Overview

Classifiers apply to nouns by two main criteria: either perceptual or generic (that is, "kind of thing"). This distinction is discussed at some length below. Perceptual criteria are primarily visual; in particular, they are based upon shape in the vast majority of cases. Generic criteria, in contrast, are a mixed grouping of factors, some perceptual, some functional or material, which depend upon a notion of "kind" or "essence." Ultimately, generic criteria are seen to be anything other than that which provides a (shape-based) single unit referent named by the noun. In this paper, examples are first given of purely generic, purely perceptual, and ambivalent classifiers. Next, a survey of a selection of classifiers is made. The selection is of the most common classifiers 1) that apply to concrete objects, 2) that apply to wide ranges of objects, or have extended ranges of application, and 3) that are of the ambivalent type. Within these limits of selection, it is apparent that in almost all cases the generic value may be derived from the

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perceptual, but not necessarily vice versa. In a historical view, these conclusions should be valuable in the long-term project of reconstructing the Proto-Tai classifier system.

Generic and Perceptual Criteria of Classification

There is a certain amount of difficulty with the notion “generic” as I am using it here. Although the term causes confusion for those with backgrounds in biology or folk taxonomy, I shall continue to use it rather than earlier choices such as “essence.” In present usage, the term does not refer to a specific taxonomic level of organization, although the implications for such taxonomic relations are unavoidable in some cases. Basically, generic criteria of classifier applicability refers here to criteria that may subsume a number of perceptual, functional, material, stereotypic, and other characteristics into a unified concept² of the “natural kind”³ or essence of the referent named by the noun (that is, the thing classified). Thus, a simple definition of generic criteria is any criteria other than perceptual, where “perceptual” is based primarily on shape. Here, some examples will be useful.

Generic Classifiers. A purely generic classifier in the Standard Thai (ST) system is *khon* ‘person’. This classifier applies to people in all cases except especially revered people, for whom special honorific classifiers take precedence. This classifier apparently applies simply because it is people being referred to, and not because there are any combinations of shape or other perceptual features present. Thus, human-shaped figures are not counted with *khon*, and to count people by shape (literally as “bodies”) is to degrade them. The criterion here is “being a person,” and, as indicated above, it is no simple matter to define exactly what a person is in Thai or any other society. Being a person or not being a person is a complex bundle of characteristics involving primarily the ability to interact socially. Whatever “being a person” amounts to in Thai or other societies, it is more than the perception of a human shape. This is a good example of generic criteria of classification.

If we look at the semantic values of *khon* in its classifier function, we find the generic criterion of “being a person” applies—never “shape.” As a noun in compounds, *khon* also means ‘person’, never ‘shape’. As an independent noun (a category defined more precisely below), it similarly can have only generic value as ‘person’.

² Hunn (1976) has described psychological processes that result in just such a gestalt-like fusion of a variety of characteristics that tend to co-occur in nature. Other research notes that the resulting gestalt may not actually occur in nature, but it is rather a blending of a range of characteristics that tend to co-occur. See the more thorough discussion in Placzek (1984).

³ “Natural kind” would be a better label than “generic,” except for the anomaly of applying it to man-made artifacts that also have their own “essence” or “generic” character.

The very fact that generically based classifiers can occur with independent noun function has certain diachronic implications, namely that they appear to be later additions to the system, borrowed into the classifier lexicon from the main lexicon.

Perceptual Classifiers. In contrast to purely generic classifiers, we have examples of purely perceptual classifiers such as *sên* for 'lines', or *phên* for 'planks or plates'.

The classifier *sên* applies generally to a wide range of nouns that are all long and flexible, such as blood vessels, nerves, noodles, necklaces, drawn lines, strings, and so on. It also applies to routes, paths, and conduits that appear long. No single generic value appears to motivate the application of *sên* to a noun, except the dominant impression of being saliently one-dimensional (S1D), plus the secondary criterion of being flexible.⁴

The word *sên* cannot stand alone as a one-place predicate, as can *khon* 'person'. If we devise as contextless as possible a situation to test this, we might try a telephone call context or a quiz show context, both of which ask informants to respond in a natural way in a minimal-context real-life situation. For example:

(On the phone:)

<i>thîi</i>	<i>nôn</i>	<i>mii</i>	<i>khon</i>	<i>yùu</i>	<i>máy</i>	(answerable)
(over)	there	exists	person	(stay)	Q	

Are there any people over there?

<i>thîi</i>	<i>nôn</i>	<i>mii</i>	<i>sên</i>	<i>yùu</i>	<i>máy</i>	(unanswerable)
(over)	there	exists	S2D	(stay)	Q	

(In a quiz show:)

<i>nay</i>	<i>hōōŋ</i>	<i>nán</i>	<i>mii</i>	<i>khon</i>	<i>yùu</i>	<i>máy</i>	(answerable)
In	room	there	exist	person	(stay)	Q	

Are there any people in that room?

⁴ S1D means "saliently one-dimensional," roughly "long thing." S2D means "saliently two-dimensional," roughly "flat thing," and S3D means "saliently three-dimensional," roughly "round thing," but including, for instance in ST, dice and other cubes. A fourth possibility is S0D meaning "zero-dimensional," roughly "very small thing." The first three terms are fairly common in the literature on noun classification; the latter has been used by Scott Delancey.

<i>nay</i>	<i>hōŋ</i>	<i>nán</i>	<i>mii</i>	<i>phèn</i>	<i>yùu</i>	<i>máy</i>	(unanswerable)
In	room	there	exist	S2D	(stay)	Q	

In these examples, the unanswerable question is unanswerable because the classifier used (*sên* for long flexible things, *phèn* for flat rigid things) is a two-place predicate requiring another noun that refers to material or to some generic concept: *sên aray* 'What string?/A string of what?' Perceptual classifiers tend to be two-place predicates; generic classifiers tend to be the more independent, "stand alone," one-place predicates.

Ambiguous Classifiers. Finally, there are classifiers that are ambiguous as to whether their criteria of application are generic or perceptual, or that are alternately generic in some cases, perceptual in others. Take the classifier *tua*, for example. This classifier is usually explained as "classifier for animals," and indeed it does apply to all animals *regardless of shape*, including birds, insects, snakes, and microbes. The only exception, that has clear historical and cultural motivations, is the use of *châak* (literally 'rope' in contemporary ST) for domesticated elephants, a usage now considered obsolete by most speakers. The use of *châak* seems to have been motivated by the special symbolic and social status of elephants in pre-modern Siamese society. Note, as well, the relative historical transitoriness and geographical limitations of this use of *châak*. Pre-modern Siamese is the only language of the Tai family to have used *châak* in this way, to my knowledge, whereas *tua* as classifier for animals is widespread throughout the Tai family and throughout Southeast Asia. This use of *châak* is generically motivated, whereas the use of *tua* in ST, I argue below, is perceptually motivated.

The clear picture so far of *tua* as a generic classifier is clouded by its use for pieces of furniture, as well as for script figures, all of which appear to be classified by *tua* not because they are animals, but because they have "body shapes."

Here, "body" in the semantic structure of ST appears to be basically a head, torso, and tail, as with fish or snakes. Being limbed, or more particularly four-legged, appears to be a secondary perceptual quality, like flexibility for *sên*. In the case of furniture, there appears to be a further extension from body shape to four-legged furniture with a raised flat surface, thence to any furniture with a raised flat surface, regardless of manner of support (that is, regardless of number of legs, or of presence or absence of legs). In the case of clothing, there is still a clear preference for body shape, since clothing with limbs, or anything that takes the shape of the body, is clearly classified by *tua*, whereas items of clothing that have their own rigid shape (such as hats and shoes) do not take *tua*. Some items are ambivalent, such as a sarong, which more clearly takes *tua* when it is worn, as opposed to when it is folded up flat.