

**THE ADVERSATIVE PASSIVE IN TAI NUEA:  
EVIDENCE OF LANGUAGE CONTACT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR  
A THEORY OF LANGUAGE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

The term "adversative passive" is generally used to refer to the type of passive construction in which the subject is adversely affected; for example, /khaw4 thu:k1 ma:4 kat1/<sup>2</sup> 'He was bitten by a dog.' in Thai, and /boku wa Taroo ni nagurareta/ 'I was hit by Taroo.' in Japanese. This type of passive is commonly found in East and Southeast Asian languages. It is marked by /-are/ or /-rare/ in Japanese, /-hi/ in Korean, /bèi/ in Chinese, /bị/ in Vietnamese, /trəw/ in Cambodian, /thý:k/ in Lao, and /thu:k1/ in Thai.

The most prominent characteristic of this type of passive construction is the affected subject. Shibatani (1985:837) identified "the affectedness of the subject" as a semantic property of a passive. With reference to the adversative passive, she said that in some languages "the affectedness of the Patient subject in a passive is more pronounced than the Patient object of an active sentence.... Subject position, being the highest focus position, has the effect of the affectedness inherent in the Patient." (p. 841) In brief, what Shibatani seems to say is that when speakers of these languages want to show that the Patient is highly affected, they use a construction in which that affected Patient can be highlighted, i.e. in the subject position. Such a construction, in which the Patient subject is strongly affected or affected by an unfavorable result of an action, is an adversative passive construction.

In Standard Thai, the adversative passive is marked by /thu:k1/, which does not have a specific meaning but has been interpreted by most scholars as a passive marker meaning something like 'undergo (an unpleasant experience)'. My study on change in passive constructions in this language (Prasithrathsint 1985,

1988) reveals that the /thu:k1/ adversative passive is not the oldest type of passive found in the language. It emerged after the simple "verb" passive --the passive construction in which the verb is apparently unmarked, e.g./kam-phE:ng top1-tEng1 duaj2 dO:k1-ma:j3/ (wall-decorate-with-flower) 'The wall was decorated with flowers.'<sup>3</sup> The study also schematizes the development of the /thu:k1/ adversative passive: it developed from the intransitive verb /thu:k1/ meaning 'be hit by; suffer from' as in (b) below, which in turn developed from the transitive verb /thu:k1/ 'hit' as in (a) below.

- (a)    mi:t2            thu:k1            my:  
          knife           hit            hand  
          [+AGT]        [+trns]        [+PAT]  
          'The knife hit the hand.'
- (b)    khaw4            thu:k1            ja:-phit3  
          he            suffer from        poison  
          [+PAT]        [-trns]            [+COR]<sup>4</sup>  
          'He was poisoned.'

After (a) and (b) came Patterns (c), (d), and (e) below. In (c) /thu:k1/ occurs with an inherently intransitive verb. This type of construction is not classified as a passive by me. Pattern (d) is an adversative passive with an Agent, and (e) is one without an Agent.

- (c)    khaw4            thu:k1            paj  
          he            undergo            go  
          [+PAT]        [-trns]            [-trns]  
          'He unwillingly had to go.'
- (d)    khaw4            thu:k1            khru:            dul  
          he            undergo            teacher        scold  
          [+PAT]        [-trns]            [+AGT]        [+trns]  
          'He was scolded by the teacher.'
- (e)    khaw4            thu:k1            dul  
          he            undergo            scold  
          [+PAT]        [-trns]            [-trns, +ptnl]<sup>5</sup>  
          'He was scolded.'

(Prasithrathsint 1985:87-88)

Although commonly found in all prominent languages in East and Southeast Asia, including Standard Thai, the adversative passive does not exist in Phu Thai, a major Tai language spoken in some parts

of Northeastern Thailand. Sayankena (1985) and my study on passive constructions in Phu Thai (Prasithrathsint 1984) both report the absence of such constructions in the language, and show that wherever a passive construction should occur, a topicalized construction would be used instead. Therefore, it may be interesting to find out whether passive constructions, especially the well-known adversative passive, would be found in other Tai languages. I intentionally picked Tai Nuea, a Tai language spoken in Yunnan, the People's Republic of China, to study on this issue because it is historically grouped in the same branch as Phu Thai and Standard Thai (Li 1960, Brown 1965, cited in Sayankena 1985:1,3). However, unlike Phu Thai, Tai Nuea has its own writing system and a long tradition of literacy. The language also shows a great similarity to Standard Thai in spite of having been in contact with Chinese for a long time.

The purpose of this study is, first, to find out whether an adversative passive construction exists in Tai Nuea, and secondly, to analyze the structure of the passive if it is found. I hypothesize that such a passive exists in Tai Nuea because unlike Phu Thai, which does not have a writing system of its own and does not have any passive, Tai Nuea has a writing system and should have a passive. Indeed, studies have shown that in general writing is related to more frequent use of passive constructions. I also hypothesize that the adversative passive in Tai Nuea is like that in Standard Thai; i.e., it contains the cognate word of /thu:k1/ and that all the uses of /thu:k1/ in Patterns (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) mentioned above exist in the language.

As will be seen below, an adversative passive was found in the data, thus confirming one of my hypotheses. However, it is not marked by a cognate of /thu:k1/ as I have hypothesized, but by a borrowed word from Chinese. I will discuss this phenomenon in terms of language contact.

It is hoped that the findings of this study may have some implications for a theory of language change, especially one concerning the development of a passive in isolating languages, such as Tai and Chinese.

## Data

The data used in this study are approximately

23,000 words long. They are composed of the tape scripts of five narratives in Tai Nuea provided by my research assistant<sup>6</sup> and eight narrative texts in Tai Mau from Shan Chrestomathy by Linda Wai Ling Young (1985: 39-163).<sup>7</sup> "Tai Mau" is the name used to refer to a language spoken by Chinese Shans. The Tai Mau dialect in Young (1985) belongs to the Northern Shan group and is spoken in the frontiers of Northeastern Burma and Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China (Young 1985: 1-2). As for Tai Nuea represented by the data in this study, it is usually regarded as another dialect in the Northern Shan group. According to Young (1985:4), some claim that "Tai Nuea" is the major classification for both Tai Mau and Tai Nuea. Here I will use the name "Tai Nuea" to represent both Tai Mau and Tai Nuea and regard it as a Tai language spoken in Yunnan Province.

### **The adversative passive in Tai Nuea**

Three kinds of passive were found in the data: the simple "verb" passive, the /pen/ 'be' passive, and a type of adversative passive. Here I will deal only with the adversative passive.

Unlike what I have hypothesized, this type of passive in Tai Nuea is not found to be marked by a cognate of /thu:k1/ in Standard Thai, but by /co3/<sup>8</sup>, which seems to mean the same as /thu:k1/ in the Thai adversative passive, i.e. 'undergo (an unpleasant experience)'.

At this point, I came up with the question "Do the other words /thu:k1/, i.e. /thu:k1/ 'cheap', /thu:k1/ 'correct', and /thu:k1/ 'hit' have cognates in Tai Nuea?" I then searched for such words in the texts but did not find any. However, in the glossary provided in Young (1985: 217) are listed /thuk2/ 'to collect', /thuk2/ 'cheap; to hit' and /thuk2-caj/ (hit-heart) 'to satisfy'.<sup>9</sup> The reasons why these words were not found in the texts may be that they are content words, the occurrence of which depends on a particular context that requires them, and that they are rarely used in the language. The glossary also confirms the finding that a cognate of /thu:k1/ as a passive marker does not exist in this language.

Six instances of the Tai Nuea adversative passive were found in the data. They are as follows: