

The Emergence and Development of Abstract Nominalization in Standard Thai¹

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INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, some kinds of linguistic variation may be more sensitive to social values than others. In Thai society, it seems that grammatical variation does not receive as much interpretation as a social marker as phonological variation. In fact, whereas Thais tend to label a variant of a speech sound in Thai as *prestigious* or *stigmatized*, they rarely regard a variant of a morphological or syntactic entity in the language as more prestigious than another. However, it is grammatical variation that tends to cause a greater stir among Thai grammarians and language teachers than phonological variation, because it is concerned with the right or wrong, grammatical or ungrammatical, and appropriate or inappropriate use of language.

Passive constructions in Thai can be cited as an example of a syntactic entity that causes a stir in Thai society. Although active and passive constructions can be regarded as two variants of a kind of syntactic phenomenon, the former are more favorable than the latter. Passives are rarely used in Thai speech. Many textbooks on Thai grammar either ignore them completely or suggest that the neutral passive construction, in which the verb is neutral, be avoided. The most commonly heard reason that they give is that the typical passive in Thai has to be adversative; i.e., it must imply that the subject of the verb undergoes an unfortunate experience. In other words, only such verbs as *kill*, *punish*, *scold*, *hit*, etc. can be passivized. Otherwise, the passive will be non-Thai and should be avoided in order to “preserve Thai identity in the Thai language.”

It is interesting to note that the neutral passive emerged in Thai about a century ago but is still unacceptable among Thai teachers and language authorities. My study on change in passive constructions in Thai during the Bangkok period (Prasithrathsint, 1985, 1988) reveals that among several types of passive in Thai, the neutral passive² is the last to emerge and is found to occur much more frequently in translations from

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²The neutral passive in Thai is marked syntactically by /thùuk/, the same as the Thai adversative passive. However, the former is semantically neutral; i.e., it does not imply any unfavorable experience on the part of the patient subject; for example:

๓๓ thùuk bə̀n òk pen sǐi sǎn
 money passive marker divide out be four part
 ‘The money was divided into four parts.’

English than in non-translations. Could we infer from this fact that this syntactic form is not very much accepted because it has not been in the language long enough or because it is regarded as a borrowed form, which is still “foreign”—not yet integrated into the language?

The reason why this syntactic entity is considered to be a borrowing from English even though its form is not calqued from the passive in English (not marked by the verb *to be* plus a past participle) is probably that it functions the same as the English passive. It is a good equivalent of the English passive, and thus makes the English and Thai ways of talking compatible to a considerable extent. In other words, it makes translations from English into Thai easy, straightforward, and accurate in terms of informational structuring. Therefore, it usually gives an impression of being “foreign” even though it is used by Thais in their original speech or writing.

Another phenomenon that attracts the attention of language critics is *abstract nominalization*. Too much use of it is commented on as causing the Thai language to be unnecessarily elaborate and thus inappropriate. Correcting their students' compositions, Thai language teachers usually suggest that they say /tôn-ráp/ ‘welcome’ instead of /thawăay kaan-tôn-ráp/ ‘give (to a king or queen) a welcome’ or /prasŏj/ ‘intend’ instead of /mii khwaam-prasŏj/ ‘have intention.’ Some think that such examples of nominalization are calques from English and do not sound Thai.³

I myself have a different view. The nominalized variants of the above examples seem to be elaborate, but they are appropriate for a formal style, which is the style we often hear the forms used in.

However, that nominalization has become a target of criticism in Thai society interests me very much. This induces me to speculate that the forms may have emerged lately in the language or that their occurrence might have increased so radically that it has disturbed the traditional pattern of language use in Thai. In other words, it makes me ask this question. Is nominalization in Thai not completely accepted as typical Thai because it is too new or because it is used more frequently today than in the past? In order to answer this question I have to study the problem diachronically, starting from the time of the oldest stone inscription, which is the first record of Standard Thai, to the present decade—a time span of approximately 700 years.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to find out when each of the patterns of abstract nominalization emerged in Thai and how frequently it is used in different periods or whether its occurrence has increased over time. In my analysis, I hypothesize that abstract nominalization in Thai emerged as a consequence of the modernization of Thai society by King Rama V (1868-1910) and that its occurrences have increased through the time span of 700 years. It is hoped that the findings of this study will create more understanding of nominalization in Thai both in terms of its usage and of its development and also provide more insight into the relationship between language and society.

³In English, one would say “welcome” and “intend” more frequently than “give a welcome” and “have intention.” However, that Thais usually think that these examples of nominalization are calques from English is a consequence of their over-generalization; i.e., they assume that complexities in Thai grammar are not originally Thai and that they are imported from some other language. English seems to be the language most suspected because of its obvious influence on languages around the world, including Thai.

Scope of the Study

The language that this study concentrates on is Standard Thai. It is the variety of Thai used in the court and by leading personalities of Thailand. It functions as Thailand's national language, official language, language of the mass media, and language of education. It is the most prestigious variety, which is taught to non-Thais as a second or foreign language and used as the lingua franca among people from different regions of Thailand. Some scholars call it "Central Thai" or just "Thai." It also overlaps with "Bangkok Thai," which is the variety of Thai used by Bangkokians. That Standard Thai happens to be used most in Bangkok, the center of all national activities, makes it easy to assume that it is another name of Bangkok Thai. In fact, both should be regarded as the two sides of the same coin; one suggests prestige and representativeness, whereas the other, a geographical location, which contrasts with other regional dialects.

The data used in this study were selected from documents written in Standard Thai only. For the sake of simplicity, the word "Thai" will be used more often to refer to the same variety.

In this study the term "nominalization" is used to cover both *lexical nominalization* (e.g., *happiness* from *happy*) and *grammatical nominalization* (e.g., *That he refused to join the group* from *He refused to join the group*). Following Crystal (1991, pp. 233–234), I will use the term "nominalization" to mean "the process of forming a noun from some other word class (e.g., *redness*) or the derivation of a noun phrase from an underlying clause (e.g., *His answering of the letter* from *He answered the letter*)."

Most types of nominalization are abstract, although some are not, such as *meeting(s)*, *seasoning(s)*, *employer(s)*, *employee(s)*, *difference(s)*. This study will limit itself to abstract nominalization and will deal only with three prominent patterns of it. They are 1) the /khwaam/ nominalization; 2) the /kaan/ nominalization; and 3) the /thîi/ nominalization.

Description of the Linguistic Entity under Study

The process of /khwaam/ nominalization brings about a /khwaam/ nominal, which is derived from the combination of the /khwaam/ morpheme and a verb or verb phrase, e.g., /khwaam-dii/ 'goodness,' /khwaam-săamâat/ 'ability' (/dii/ 'good' and /săamâat/ 'able' are verbs in Thai). The /khwaam/ morpheme itself derives, through a grammaticalization process, from the word /khwaam/ meaning 'sense or substance of a matter; (legal) case or lawsuit.' According to Haas (1964, p.82), the nominalizer /khwaam/ is usually rendered in English by such suffixes as *-ness*, *-ity*, *-th*, *-ment*, *-ance* (*-ence*), *-(t)ion*, *-(t)ude*, *-ure*, *-y*, *-ery*, *-ship*, and *-dom*.

The /kaan/ nominalization is the process of rendering a nominal by combining the morpheme /kaan/ with a verb or verb phrase, e.g., /kaan-phûut/ 'speaking,' /kaan-kin/ 'eating,' /kaan-siksăa/ 'studying; education.' Haas (1964, p. 290) likens the nominalizer /kaan/ to such English suffixes as *-ing*, *-ion*, *-ment*, *-ance* (*-ence*), *-ery*, and *-y*.

Since /khwaam/ and /kaan/ overlap to some extent, Thais follow a general rule that the latter is limited to action verbs that usually correspond to the gerund in English, whereas the former is reserved for any verb that refers to a very intangible idea or concept. However, some verbs can be derived into both /khwaam/ and /kaan/ nominals but have different meanings, e.g., /khwaam-hěn/ 'opinion' and /kaan-hěn/ 'seeing' (/hěn / 'to see').

The other pattern of nominalization that this study focuses on is /thîi/ nominalization. The word /thîi/ generally means 'place; space.' Through the process of grammaticalization it has yielded the /thîi/ nominalizer, which is combined with a clause to form a factive nominal or complement clause or sentential complement, as can be seen in the underlined part of this sentence: /thîi khăw sòp phaan pen rîang pralâat/ 'That he passed the exam is a surprise.'

These three patterns of abstract nominalization are productive, but the factive nominal pattern does not seem to occur as frequently as the other two.

Previous Studies

There are no previous studies focusing *specifically* on nominalizations in Thai. This phenomenon is normally mentioned in certain grammar textbooks and dictionaries, which usually list the /khwaam/ and /kaan/ nominalizers with their speculated meanings, e.g., Haas (1964, pp. 29, 82), Noss (1964, p. 60), Royal Institute Dictionary (1982, pp. 89, 173).

As for the /thîi/ nominalization, it is even more rarely dealt with than the other two. What is more, it is labelled with different names or classified into different categories by different syntacticians. Phraya Upakit Silapasarn (1948) called it /naamaanúprayòok/ 'nominal subordinate clause,' e.g., /...thîi thəə tham chên nîi/ '...that you did like this.' Bandhumedha (1982, p. 189) calls the /thîi/ nominal /prayòok khayăay/ 'modifying clause.' She also regards /thîi/ as a word to be added after the /kaan/ nominal in certain contexts; for instance, from the sentence /raw hăa sîi sîn-kháa làw nîi dâay nâyay/ 'We can find and buy these goods easily,' Bandhumedha derives the following sentence with the /kaan/ nominal followed by /thîi/: /man pen kaan nâyay thîi raw cà hăa sîi sîn-kháa làw nîi/ 'It is easy that we find and buy these goods.' Savetamalya (1989, pp. 139–141) states that there are four words /thîi/ in Thai, and the one that corresponds to what I call the /thîi/ nominalizer here is considered by her to be a complementizer which functions as the regent of a complement clause. According to her, "noun complement clauses in Thai are headed by the complementizer noun /thîi/ which is obligatorily followed by its immediately following verbal sister. They can be either the head of a free noun phrase (e.g., *thîi fôn tók nàk* tham hây náam thûam/ 'That it rained very hard caused a flood.') or an