

Speech act verbs in Tai languages: Theoretical background and research methods

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with speech act verbs (SpAV). By this we mean a rather loosely defined class of verbs (see part 2) which denote the meaning aspect of utterances (vs. e.g. roaring), and include not only performatives, e.g. 'to promise', but also verbs invoking actions through utterances causing actions by others, e.g. 'to incite' (Kurzon 1998) or by oneself, e.g. 'to state'.

This paper proposes preliminary concrete steps for the research of SpAV and related aspects in Thai (and surrounding languages). To this purposes, we take a three-pronged approach. After reasoning for our approach and providing necessary scientific background in part 2, we discuss data from three areas in part 3 which include an elementary dictionary research (3.1), native speaker cooperation in two questionnaires (3.2) and discussion of two selected problem areas (3.3). Part 4 concludes with some ramifications for theory building and part 5 opens up future research tasks.

2. Approach

2.1 Definition of speech act verbs

To demonstrate our approach, this part provides the definitions for this paper, the research methods, and a brief review of the research history and other related linguistic aspects.

SpAVs are a very diversified set, but definitions should not include all and everything (cf. Wierzbicka 1987, 1.8, p. 18). This situation calls for definitions, which have to be flexible at their edges to be able to cope for varying conditions, circumstances, changes and differences. Such flexibility would show one strength of the theory.

Throughout the research history of SpAVs, there have been a good number of attempts at defining them. In simple terms, all speech act verbs denote actions which are (usually) done verbally, i.e. social actions by self or other, in which uttering is made use of to do or achieve something. To comprise the most important trends in definitions, we take the revised version of Reinelt (1996): Speech act verbs, in a wider sense, denote “actions usually performed by speaking (to tell, to describe) or, in a narrower sense, verbs which constitute actions by their virtue of being uttered under the appropriate conditions (such as: to name a street X avenue)” (Reinelt 1996:924), (cf. Austin 1962, Searle 1969).

2. Research methods

In this paper, we can only try to pave the way for more extensive research. The following approaches seem reasonable:

1. Dictionary research.

Checking for entries which denote speech actions in the sense defined in 2.1 above, the result of such a search through Tongsopit (n.d.) are presented in part 3.1. below. However, the limits of dictionary research have to be taken very cautiously. Bilingual dictionary research shows us how the authors of the dictionary have come to terms with the problem that very often there are no easily fitting equivalents. Since it is not usual to leave out items just because no ready equivalent is available in the other language, other strategies are common, to at least give the user an idea of how to say what he intends to.

These may be conventionalized circumscriptions or others made up only in the dictionary. To check on this source, we will consider German FRAGEN and Thai expressions for to SCOLD. Furthermore, bilingual dictionaries as one way to cope with variations in expressions between languages, are especially in the case of SpAV, also a way to cope with the differences of codification of societal differences and their wording. SpAVs can be a special FL learning problem, especially if the L2 has considerably more or less SpAVs, and if (the frequency and area of) their uses differ widely.

2. Using native speakers.

Two approaches are possible here:

1. Questionnaire to be filled out by native speakers. The linguistic results of a rigidly structured questionnaire in list 1 and 2 are presented in part 3.2.1 below. These short lists contain different SpAV categories, mainly to enable research in SpAV differences, i.e. between them and in sentences. This list mainly employs methods from infra-language research, e.g. minimal pairs, and a number of sentences.

A word of caution is necessary in this place too. It is difficult to elicit equivalents, if the whole concept of a certain class of words is not present or not very elaborated. To research this, much more elaborate methods are necessary, c.f. 3.2.2 below.

2. Observational data collection: Recording the spoken language. Although this approach is ultimately necessary for assessing the present state and use of SpAVs, it is also the most laborious and costly one. For logistic reasons, this has to be left for a large project in the future. To make any sense at all, such a project would have to cover a wide area of situations where speech act verbs can occur.

3. Interlinguistic comparison of selected areas can lead to the discovery of corresponding problem areas and structural solutions. An example discussion for the Thai equivalents for the German erotetic verb FRAGEN and v.v. for the Thai varieties of to SCOLD is given below in 3.3.

4. Philological research of the traditional and modern literature can reveal trends and corroborate research results.

5. The role of social institutions.

Societal institutions may play a certain role, as for example confession, a purely oral institution, seems to have done in Europe. A look at Benveniste (1978) might be enlightening. Similar trends account for the vast number of SpAVs from Greek and Latin, although this might be an Indo-European strain, which could perhaps also have reached Thailand through buddhism (e.g. *plaka:t*).

2. 3 Background and research history

The development of speaking about speech, i.e. metalanguage, is a precondition for the development of SpAVs; animals have no speech act verbs. Additionally, for the development of a larger number of SpAVs, there must be some societal value to speak about a language or someone's use of language, for example in relationship to reality.

Already Buehler (1934) treated the action aspects of our verbal actions, Wittgenstein (1953) their limitlessness. But it was left to Austin (1962) to refocus our attention on an important part of the vocabulary of European languages, conspicuously in his philosophical approach. His early classification was refined by Searle (1969), whose analysis of promise also led us to recognizing the restrictivity of sentential analysis. With the pragmatic turn in Germany, the philosophical aspects of the SpAV discussion were settled in the societal context (Maas/Wunderlich 1972, Wunderlich 1976). The discussions of the performative analysis (I hereby) and of what constitutes an indirect speech act, resolved by Burckhardt (1986), lead to a change in focus, only to be regained by Vanderweken's (1990-91) tries at a formal logic.

Kubo's (1996) list of English-Japanese correspondences seemed to prove Heeschen (1980) right, who had declared the large amount of SpAVs a specific development of European languages. Reinelt (1996) found the extensive use of the SAY character for SpAV in Chinese, and the considerable number of SpAV this language has had and still has. That paper and the preliminary results presented in part 3 of this paper are vivid proof that Heeschen was not right at least in these cases.

Wierzbicka (1987) compiled a dictionary for English SpAVs. Marui/Nishijima's (1991) comparative English-German-Japanese re-ordered list provided a first extensive overview of SpAV across different cultures, but much more cross-linguistic research is necessary. One way to cope with the variegated circumstances is to propose classifications. Various criteria for the classes have been given, but most do not hold too well and undecided cases are legend.

As for the many classification which have been proposed so far after the initial classification proposal by Austin (1961), see Wierzbicka (1987) for an overview. She distinguishes 37 categories with altogether 270 members, including some multiple-classifications, a recent cross-linguistic attempt deserves special mention. Marui/Nishijima (1991) use the following classification for cross-linguistic comparisons (adapted from Austin 1962):

(1) Marui/Nishijima (1991)

Verdictives (e.g. to acquit),
 Exercitives (to order),
 Commissives (to promise),
 Behabitatives, e.g. for thanks (to thank) attitudes (to resent) etc., and
 Expositives (to agree)