

A CLASSIFICATION OF THAI CLASSIFIERS

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One area which has hardly been touched and which has always baffled a non-Thai speaker is the use of classifiers. At first impression there seems to be one classifier for each noun. My counting, which I believe is fairly extensive, reveals 75 in all, not counting those classifiers used as units in measurement of weight, distance and time, nor those referred to by U. Warotamasikkkhadit (1963) as 'reduplicative classifiers', which is the use of the noun itself as its own classifier such as /my¹ sɔɔ⁵ my¹/ 'two hands',¹ nor classifiers for the non-concrete nouns such as /wæp²/ 'a flash', /kæp⁴/ 'a rap'.

The fullest account of the use of Thai classifiers can be found in Noss 1964. It is a word which occurs with a noun when a number and/or a demonstrative is also present - /bur¹i sɔɔ⁵ muh¹/ 'two cigarettes' or /bur¹i muh¹ ni⁴/ 'this cigarette'. However, in the context where the noun is understood, the noun may be omitted, leaving its classifier to act as the head of a classifier phrase - /sɔɔ¹ si⁵ lya⁵/ 'the yellow pack'. Noss recognises that there are well over 200 classifiers in Thai. He groups them into four types:

1. A unit classifier which has a specific relationship with one or more concrete nouns.
2. A metric classifier which occurs in enumeration. It has no special relationship with the noun in the way that unit classifiers do but it is used for measurement of a mass noun into fixed unit or conventional contents of a container such as in /khaa³ saam⁵ tcaa¹/ 'three platefuls of rice'. Noss also divides the metric classifiers into five subclasses namely (1) distance and size, (2) weight, (3) container, (4) value, and (5) time.

3. A general classifier which occurs in enumerations after an extremely wide range of nouns with no special relationships with those nouns. Some of them can occur even after abstract nouns. The class is small and probably closed. Noss notes that 14 classifiers belong to this type.

4. An imitative classifier which is the same type of classifiers referred to by Udom Waritamasikkkhadit (1963) as 'reduplicative classifiers' which has been mentioned previously.

In his classification, Noss is primarily concerned with the function and usage of the classifiers. There is little attempt to relate classifiers semantically with the nouns they represent. In Noss' opinion (1964), "a far better lexicographical technique, used by Mary Haas and others, is to give the unit classifier in parentheses after each concrete noun listed" and that "The semantic connection between classifier and noun may be buried so deep in history that it makes no sense descriptively".

Obviously, Noss' despair over Thai classifiers can only leave the Thai-learner at a loss, with his memory the only tool available to tackle this area of Thai language. It is my contention, however, that there is a definite semantic connection between a noun and its classifier, and that on being confronted with an unknown object and given its function, most Thais will more or less agree as to what classifier they would use if one is required.

It seems that one may group Thai 'specific classifiers' into three major classes with their subclasses. These, with specifications by various lexical features will give selectional rules which will match with the feature specifications of a noun and permit the noun to select its appropriate classifier. The three major classes are as follows:

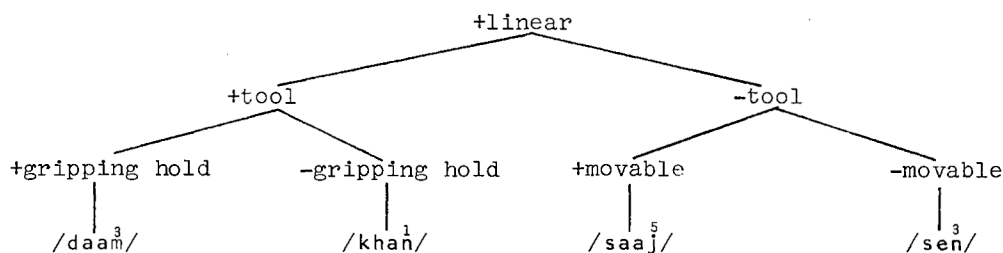
1. Classifiers_(amount)
 - 1.1. Classifiers_(partitive)
 - 1.2. Classifiers_(pair)
 - 1.3. Classifiers_(plural)
2. Classifiers_(shape)
 - 2.1. Linear
 - 2.2. Quadrilateral
 - 2.3. Circular
 - 2.4. Cylindrical

3. Classifiers_(function)

- 3.1. Weapon
- 3.2. Container
- 3.3. Vehicle
- 3.4. Machinery
- 3.5. Inhabitation
- 3.6. Tool

In this paper, I will use only one area to illustrate my contention namely the use of Classifiers_(shape) in which there is a definite connection between the classifier and the shape of the noun it is to go with.

2.1. Linear Classifiers



Nouns used with each classifier:²

- /lem³/: /miit³/ (and its noun compounds), /tcoḥḥ⁵/, /siaḥ⁵/, /khem⁵/,
 /kankraḥ¹/, /thian¹/, /paḥ¹/ ('oar'), /paḥ¹/ ('spatula'),
 /khwaan⁵/, /khraad³/, /taliḥ⁵/
- /daam³/: /pkat⁴/, /paakkaḥ¹/, /diḥ²/
- /khan¹/: /thanuḥ⁵/, /naamaḥ¹/, /rom³/, /beḥ²/, /tchoḥḥ⁴/, /scoḥḥ³/, /thappiḥ¹/,
 /scoḥḥ¹/
- /saa⁵/: /thanon⁵/, /thaan¹/, /mænaam⁴/, /lamthaan¹/, /khlcoḥḥ¹/
- /sen³/: /saa⁵ phaḥ¹/, /bamiḥ²/, /wun⁴ sen³/, /maj⁵/, /faaḥ³/, /khem⁵ khaḥ²/,
 /tchyak³ phuuk² rcoḥḥ¹ thaaw⁴/, /phom⁵/, /luat³/, /daaḥ³/, /tchyak³/,
 /lek²/ ('steel wire'), /saa⁵ thoorasap²/ ('telephone wire'),
 /saa⁵ faḥ¹/ ('electrical wire')

Before discussion of the classifiers and their corresponding nouns, one should mention something about the features used here. The feature [+linear] is used here to imply that length is the striking feature in

the object which in some cases, such as /thanon⁵/ 'road', can have width as well.

/lem³/ is the general classifier used for a linear tool which has to be used with a gripping hold such as /miit²/ 'knife', /khem⁵/ 'needle'. /thian¹/ 'candle' is perhaps the only one exception since when one holds a candle, it need not be a grip. Three of the nouns used with /lem³/, namely /phat⁴/ 'fan', /paakkaa¹/ 'pen' and /diw³/ 'a kind of Chinese weapon' can be used alternatively with another classifier /daam³/.

When the tool is used without the gripping hold, /khan¹/ is used. When one holds those nouns, the hold itself is more like a support (e.g. /rom³/ 'umbrella') or a counterweight effort (e.g. /thanud¹/ 'bow') rather than a grip. It is quite certain that this classifier is derived from the same root as two other words: /khaan¹/ 'to support' and /khaan⁴/ 'to go against'.

/saa⁵j/ and /sen³/ are non-tool linear classifiers. The basic difference between them is marked by the features [+stationary] and [-stationary]. It may be argued that /saa⁵j/ is also used for /thor¹a sap²/ 'telephone' and /fa¹i faa⁴/ 'electricity', but this usage in fact refers to the telephone and electricity connections and not to the wire which will be used with /sen³/ if a classifier is required.

2.2. Quadrilateral Classifiers