SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RESTRICTED INTENSIFIERS
IN NORTHERN THAI

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INTRODUCTION

It may be appropriate to begin this paper on a grammatical feature
of Northern Thai by citing an example from English to provide the un-
conversant reader with an approximate idea of the structure, meaning,
and usage of intensifiers in Thai dialects. The English words "itsy-
bitsy" and "teensy-weensy" are good examples of the type of intensifica-
tion that will be discussed because: (1) these words are fairly unique
lexical items; (2) they are usually found only in informal colloquial
English; (3) they have an unusual syllable structure of rhyming syl-
lables; (4) they expand or intensify the meaning of a more common
English word (in this case, *little*). Even though there are very few
words like these in English, we shall notice later on that there are
several similarities between "itsy-bitsy words" in English and restricted
intensifiers in Northern Thai.[1]

Restricted intensifiers are words from one to four syllables in length
which are used to modify the class of verbs which Noss (1964:122) refers
to as "general adjectives". They are almost always restricted in usage
to one adjective, hence the term *restricted* intensifier as opposed to
unrestricted intensifier, like Standard Thai /mâak/ *'very'*, which can be
used to modify any adjective. As Purnell (1965:17) has observed, re-
stricted intensifiers are endocentric constructions; that is, the

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privilege of occurrence of the adjective head and intensifier used to-
gether is identical with the privilege of occurrence of the adjective
head used alone. In usage, they tend to be highly colloquial and in-
formal and are frequently used in exaggerated speech. Restricted
intensifiers are probably found in all Thai dialects, although a cursory
comparison of Standard and Northern Thai indicates that there is con-
siderable difference between dialects as to which adjectives possess
restrictive intensifiers and which do not. Thus, for the two Standard
Thai intensifiers listed as examples below, Northern Thai contains no
restricted intensifiers but must resort to unrestricted intensifiers for
modification.

Restricted Intensifiers in Standard Thai

(Note that each intensifier is restricted to only one adjective.)

   /lék kràcítrít/ *'extremely little'*, *'minute'*

   /jàaj bə̂ələ̂ə/ *'extremely big'*, *'enormous'*

   */lék bə̂ələ̂ə/ **'enormously little'*

   */jàaj kràcítrít/ **'minutely big'*

Unrestricted Intensifiers in Standard Thai

(Note that /mâak/ *'very'* can be used with any adjective.)

   /lék mâak/ *'very little'*

   /jàaj mâak/ *'very big'*

There are many similarities between the structure and meaning of
intensifiers among the Thai dialects; however, this study will be con-
fined solely to the Chiengmai dialect of Northern Thai [ค๋ามฟลๆ]. The
data are presented in Table I and consist of a list of restricted
intensifiers for twenty-six general adjectives drawn from two different
sources: Purnell and Hope 1962 and three Chiengmai-born informants of
different ages, sex, and educational background.[1]

Purnell (1965:10) classifies restricted intensifiers into four groups
according to syllable length. Although all four groups are represented
in the corpus presented in Table I, one-syllable intensifiers (e.g.
1. /wɛt/) and two-syllable intensifiers (e.g. #8 /mɔ́tkɔ́t/) are more
numerous than four-syllable intensifiers (e.g. #6 /pàlɛ̆mtɛ̂mtɛ́ɛ/), and
three-syllable intensifiers (#17 /khàlɣ́ʔtɣ́ʔ/ was the only example found)

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[1]The transcription is based on that of Purnell and Hope 1962 which itself is derived
from the familiar Haas notation. The only symbol in the table which differs from the
Standard Thai transcription is the tone mark /˘/, which refers to high short-falling
tone. Syllables which end with a final stop and are not marked with a tone symbol
are pronounced with a low short-rising tone in Northern Thai.

Table I

SOME RESTRICTED INTENSIFIERS IN NORTHERN THAI

General Adjectives	*Restricted Intensifier*	
	Purnell and Hope	Informants (—— signifies a form identical to Purnell and Hope)
1 /sɛɛw/ *'pointed'*	/wɛt/	——, /wɛɛw/
2 /sŷy/ *'straight'*	/sét/	——
3 /hǎaj/ *'to disappear'*	/sɛp/	——, /hǎaj sɛp hǎaj sɔ̌ɔj/
4 /mon/ *'round'*	/khwɛ́t/	——, /kwɛt/
5 /khĭaw/ *'green'*	/líw/	/pɣ́y/, /pɣ̌y/, /pítpĭi/
6 /lɛ̌ɛw/ *'smashed'*	/lɛ́t/	——, /lɛ̌ɛw fɛ́ʔ lɛ̌ɛw fên/. /pàlɛ̆mtɛ̆mtɛ́ɛ/
7 /wɛ̂ɛt/ *'crowded'*	/tàlũm/	——
8 /tàm/ *'short, low'*	/mɔ́tkɔ́t/	/ʔɔ́ttɔ́t/, /ʔĩaʔtĩaʔ/
9 /cɛ̃ɛŋ/ *'light, bright'*	/sɛ̃ɛlɛ̃ɛ/	/phɛ̃ɛlɛ̃ɛ/, /sàlɛ̀ʔsàlɛ̃ɛ/
10 /sǔuŋ/ *'tall'*	/kõŋdõŋ/	——
11 /mũm/ *'blunt'*	/muʔhuʔ/	/muʔkuʔ/
12 /mŷyt/ *'dark'*	/typtỹy/	/tɣ́ptỹy/, /tɣ́ʔtỹy/
13 /ŋaam/ *'beautiful'*	/phĩlĩi/	——, /phĩilĩi/
14 /dɛɛŋ/ *'red'*	/pỹŋlỹŋ/	——, /pàlỹŋ/
15 /lỹaŋ/ *'yellow'*	/ʔỹaʔtỹaʔ/	/ʔỹaʔcỹaʔ/, /ʔɛ̀ɛmsɛ̀ɛm/
16 /lɣ́k/ *'deep'*	/ciwwiw/	——, /cĩwwĩw/
17 /dam/ *'black'*	/pɣ́tpỹy/	——, /khàlɣ́ʔtɣ́ʔ/
18 /phɔ̌ɔm/ *'thin'*	/kõŋdɔ̃ŋ/	——
19 /suk/ *'ripe'*	/tĭaʔtĭaʔ/	none found
20 /hâak/ *'to vomit'*	/lɔ́ʔlɔ́ʔ/	——, /lɔ́ʔlɔ́ʔ/
21 /sãn/ *'short'*	/pukluk/	——, /ʔuttut/, /ʔɔttɔt/, /mítkít/
22 /lỹam/ *'shiny'*	/lỹammɛʔlỹammɛp/	——, /mɛ́pmɛ́p/, /mípmíp/, /mípmípmɛ́pmɛ́p/
23 /khǎaw/ *'white'*	not listed	/cwɔ́ʔ/, /swɔ́ʔcwɔ́ʔ/
24 /mĕn/ *'smelly'*	not listed	/tɣ́ŋ/, /tỹŋ/
25 /tũj/ *'fat'*	not listed	/ʔɔ́ttɔ́t/, /ʔúttút/, /ʔỹŋpỹŋ/
26 /ʔɔ̌ɔn/ *'weak'*	not listed	/mĩaʔmĩaʔ/, /ʔàlúptúptàap/ /ʔàlùppùppàap/, /pàlɛ̆mtɛ̆mtɛ́ɛ/

are extremely rare. Purnell further subclassifies the two-syllable
intensifiers, the largest group, into subgroups depending on whether
they are continuous, where the two syllables are repeated in sequence,
or discontinuous, where the two syllables are separated by the adjective.
There are many instances of continuous two-syllable intensifiers (e.g.
#9 /sɛ̆ɛlɛ̆ɛ/) but much fewer of the discontinuous type (e.g. #22
/lỹam mɛʔ lỹam mɛp/). No regularity seems to emerge which would govern
the relationship between the adjective and the number of syllables its
corresponding intensifier contains. Example #6 refutes any claim that
the number of syllables in the intensifier is predictable from either
the structure or meaning of the adjective, because the adjective /lɛ̆ɛw/
'smashed' is modified by a one-syllable intensifier /lɛ́t/, a distontin-
ous two-syllable intensifier /lɛ̆ɛw fɛ́ʔ lɛ̆ɛw fɛ̂n/, and a four-syllable
intensifier /pàlɛ̆mtɛ̂mtɛ́ɛ/.

For a linguist who is interested in discovering patterns of rule-
governed behaviour in human language, it is frustrating to work with a
corpus such as this, in which often no neat regularities nor useful
generalisations arise. One might even be tempted to paraphrase Sapir
by stating in exasperation that "all languages leak". Despite the fact
that intensifiers vary greatly in their structure and usage and are an
unusually creative and dynamic part of the language, regularities can be
noted and recorded. These regularities are listed as informal observa-
tions in this paper because the corpus is not large enough to justify a
more formal presentation in terms of rules. Furthermore, such a pres-
entation would necessarily be based on a detailed phonology of Northern
Thai. Until a more ambitious study such as the latter is undertaken,
any formal analysis of restricted intensifiers in terms of rules and
phonological features would be *ad hoc* and unsatisfactory.

PHONOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

The first question that naturally arises concerns a possible relation-
ship between the phonological configuration of the adjective and that of
the intensifier which modifies it. We have already seen that it is im-
possible to predict the number of syllables in the intensifier from the
structure or meaning of the adjective; however, is it possible to work
backwards and discover any regularity in the phonological pattern of
the adjectives from the phonological pattern of the intensifiers? At
least one such regularity is apparent. One-syllable intensifiers (see
#1-6, and #23,24) are found with adjectives which contain long vowels
and end with either a sonorant or zero. Adjectives /mon/ *'round'* (#4)
and /men/ *'smelly'* ($24) are exceptions because they both contain short