

ADVANTAGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF COMPUTER-ASSISTED EXAMINATIONS OF STANDARD THAI

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1. INTRODUCTION

My interest in Thai stems from my experiences as a foreign language teacher in Thailand and as a student of the Thai language. The root of the problems and difficulties in learning Thai as well as in teaching a foreign language to Thai students is, in my opinion, the lack of an adequate, up to date and binding grammar of Standard Thai. To look at Standard Thai from the perspective of *Thai as a Foreign Language* is a necessity for both learners of Thai as a Foreign language as well as for Thai teachers of foreign languages at Thai universities and language institutes. Foreign language teaching is contrastive language teaching and the student as well as the teacher, Thai and foreigner alike, need to be able to refer back to a reliable description of the Thai language. In this paper I will try to give an example of the role computer technology may play in developing such a description.

Anyone who deals with Standard Thai under the premises of Foreign Language Teaching will meet with three obstacles: first, there is no comprehensive up-to-date description of modern Standard Thai. The existing reference books in Thai and in English have been written over 35 years ago (Haas 1964, Noss 1964) and disagree on essential subjects such as word classes and word function. Manfred Kummer's *Grundlagen einer kommunikativen Grammatik für das Thailändische* (Foundations of a Communicative Grammar of Thai) is, as far as I know, the only attempt to develop a comprehensive grammar of spoken Standard Thai based on linguistic research in the fields of pragmatics and socio-linguistic. Unfortunately, this attempt has not been developed beyond a preliminary state. It is by now 16 years old - not to mention the fact that it is written in German which makes it unattainable for most of the students and linguists and excludes itself from international discussion. Already in 1900, the German scholar Oscar Frankfurter was aware of the necessity to reach an international audience and wrote his *Elements of Siamese Grammar* in English.

The second of the three obstacles is that the many courses teaching Thai to foreigners do not take into account the developments in the grammatical presentation of modern languages and of the findings of the research in the field of Foreign Language Teaching. These language courses are not based on a reliable concept of contrasting source and target language but almost exclusively follow the audio-lingual system. They mainly teach phonetics and later on add some general statements for example about the strict *Subject-Object-Predicate*-word order or the use of classifiers. Usually, these statements are based more on intuition than on empirical data (which is not to say that intuition necessarily leads to incorrect statements).

Finally, the multitude of linguistic studies on singular phenomena of the Thai language is of a rather exclusively academic nature and neither addresses the need of the learner of *Thai as a Foreign Language* to understand certain phenomena of Standard Thai nor the need of the Thai teacher of foreign languages to contrast phenomena of the foreign language with those of his and the learner's native language Thai.

One of the advantages of a computer-assisted examination of Thai texts is that it allows to look at linguistic phenomena on a large scale, may verify or falsify hypotheses or intuitions and thus may lead to *new* insights, ideas and hypotheses. Computer technology helps making available large amounts of texts, either spoken or written and presents the tools to quickly browse through them. Unfortunately, the computer regards a language as a systematically structured object of examination and doesn't account for irregularities and fluctuations in the field of semantics. The subtle semantic tints that are saturated with culturally specific meanings and attitudes probably only fully grasped by a native speaker elude the computer's software as well as the analytical Western eye and the scope of Western academic terminology. This is especially the case with a language as context-dependable and semantically ambiguous as Thai.

2. SUBJECT MATTER AND PREPARATORY WORK

My specific interest is the representation of tense and aspect in contemporary Standard Thai. The chronological narrative order is the natural time axis of a language with such a strong tradition of literature, historiography and religious teaching by word of mouth as Thai (Chetana 1998). Temporal relations are usually self evident and thus do not necessarily need explicit marking. What has happened first will be narrated first. It is sufficient to situate events by time adverbials such as *วันนี้* or *ปีหน้า*, usually in topical position.

Chronological narrative order and time adverbials, however, say nothing about the completion, the beginning or the state of progression of an activity and their subsequent relation to other activities. Sometimes, these aspects are a semantically inherent characteristic of the main verb¹. Often, they need to be marked explicitly. I have looked at such *markers of aspectual relation* and, in order to get a broader picture, at conjunctions that mark interclausal chronology.

For the purpose of this paper, I have looked at the presentation of preverbal *ได้* in standard reference and teaching material and compared it with its actual use in two different kinds of texts. I have generated two concordances, one from the soap opera *รักเราไปหมด* published between September 22 and November 10, 1999 in the *Thai Rath*-newspaper's online version, and the second one from a compilation of articles of three issues of the online version of the magazine *ศิลปวัฒนธรรม* from September, October and November 1999. I have selected the soap-opera from *Thai Rath* as an example for a text whose language is close to every-day spoken language. It consists mainly of dialogues that are supposed to be realistic and comprehensible to the average reader. I am aware of the fact that especially the language of soap operas varies greatly according to the social status of the characters involved. I think, however that this more a matter of the lexicon than of the function and syntactic

¹ In German linguistics, the term "Aktionsart" – *manner of action* (Bussmann 1990:59pp) is used to refer to the different states of progression an activity verb may imply, as for instance in "*verbrennen* – to burn to the point of complete destruction" as opposed to "*brennen* – to burn" or in "*einschlafen* – to pass from the state of being awake into the state of sleep" as opposed to "*schlafen* – to sleep".

There seems to be no disagreement that one of the semantic properties of preverbal ʔ is the marking of past time or completion of an activity. Mary Haas (1964) labels preverbal modifying ʔ as adverb-auxiliary and gives its meaning as "get to, got to, did (indicating past time)" (p. 178). The immediately following subentry is ʔ which is explained as "did, did do" (ibid.). McFarland (1995) gives as the fourth and last meaning of ʔ "an auxiliary verb and sign of the past tense" and as example "ʔ ʔ " (p. 338). Noss (1964) does not mention the affirmative preverbal ʔ but only the negative ʔ , belonging to the so called /maj/ class of modals. He explains that it is "Commonest in past situations but also occurs in present and future situations regarded as not capable of change." (p. 139) The absence of an explanation for the affirmative ʔ indicates to me that its alleged time related function is a relatively recent occurrence and that, at least at Noss' times, it still carried the meaning of the

that requires a verbal extension. preverbal ʔ could be characterized as the beginning of a verb concatenation or a verb space left for any kind of extension between preverbal ʔ and the main verb. Thus, semantic properties resembling very much those of the English *to get*. There is no extension of the main verb. In the position in front of the main verb, it takes on confirmation, readiness or ability and can be preceded by an object or another verb. In the position behind the main verb it is used to express agreement, direct object. As a secondary verb it can be positioned either before or behind a main verb. As a main verb it means *to receive* or *to obtain* and can be followed by a form plus associated meaning, but a form plus meaning plus distribution." (Starosta 1993:8). As a frequently used word whose semantic properties change with its syntactic position, giving evidence to Starosta's statement that "[...] a word is not a form, nor a form plus associated meaning, but a form plus meaning plus distribution." (Starosta 1993:8).

TEACHING MATERIAL

3. PREVERBAL ʔ IN STANDARD REFERENCE AND

position of words. As for the text compilation from the ʔ -magazine, it serves as an example for the written language of the educated middle class. One of the problems in drawing evidence from these concordances is that they list every appearance of a chain of symbols regardless of its co-text. Thus, a ʔ - concordance will list all the ʔ as well, and in the ʔ concordance we find every primary verb, every compound verb such as ʔ , as well as every postmodifying modal. Thus, it is necessary to build sub-concordances. In the case of ʔ , I have also generated a concordance of the negation ʔ since the tense-related function of ʔ seems to appear more frequently in the negation than in the affirmative.

primary verb *to get, to receive*. Oscar Frankfurter (1900) explains “The past is indicated by the words ได้, and แลว. The former precedes the modified word and has the meaning of the imperfect; [...]” (p.84) Frankfurter’s confinement within the patterns of a Latin proto-grammar becomes obvious when he further writes “In combination we have ได้ and แลว when a pluperfect meaning is to be given [...]” (p.85) Campbell (1968) gives a rather confusing explanation of the issue. After saying that “the past tense may be indicated by putting the word DY in front of the verb.” He continues: “This form of the past tense is not very often used except with a few words such as ‘to receive’, ‘to hear’ etc. which almost invariably take DY in front of them in the past tense.” (p.73), leading to the wrong assumption that ได้รับ and ได้ยิน are the past tense versions of the verbs รับ and ยิน. Bisang (1992) considers, contrary to Noss, the preverbal affirmative ได้ but not the negating preverbal ไม่ได้. He categorizes ได้ as a Tense-/Aspect-/Modality-marker and comes to the conclusion that as a TAM-marker it has retained its meaning of *to obtain* but has in many contexts developed from here the function of a marker of past time. He maintains, however, that this function is secondary to the meaning “to get to.” (p.349)² กำชัย ทองหล่อ (1977) in his standard *หลักภาษาไทย* simply states that preverbal ได้ marks past tense as does เคย. (p.245)³ กำชัย apparently tries to force Latin based grammatical patterns on to Thai. He explains for instance that the sentence เราจะได้ทำงาน is an expression of the ‘future perfect’ เป็นอดีตกาลในอนาคต (p.248).

Like Noss, Anthony (1968) gives prominence to the negative preverbal ไม่ได้. He introduces ได้ preceding the main verb in the second part of *Foundations of Thai* and explains “When day precedes the main verb, it no longer means ‘can’ but signals past time. It most frequently appears in the negative--may day--but the use of day alone as a signal for past time has become increasingly frequent.” (p.341) Equally, the A.U.A. Thai Language course introduces preverbal ได้ in its negating version: “mây dâi ... This denies the occurrence of an action and hence almost always refers to the past (I didn’t ...).” (Brown 1991:137) In Book 3 of the language course, the aspectual character of preverbal ได้ is mentioned expressively. “Preceding a verb, this [ได้] shows the accomplishment or completion of the verb.” (Brown 1969:218) Among the non-English language Thai courses, Gilles Delouche gives in his *Méthode de Thai* an explanation similar to that of Campbell. He explains that ได้ is used with verbs of activity which in itself carry the meaning of reception. As examples he gives two sentences, one with ได้รับ and one with ได้ยิน. (p.96). As with Campbell, this statement gives room to the misleading assumption that ได้ will not be used in front of

² “Als TAM-Zeichen schließlich behält *dāj* seine Bedeutung von “erlangen” bei, entwickelt aber daraus in vielen Kontexten die Funktion als Vergangenheitszeichen. Diese Funktion ist aber – wie Scovel (1970:88f.) bemerkt – eher sekundär zur Bedeutung ‘to get to’.”

³ “ชนิดบอกกาล [...] ๑. บอกอดีตกาล ได้แก้คำ - ได้, เคย”