

CLAUSE-FINAL MODALS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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1. Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the properties of modals such as dai in Thai. Dai is unusual in that it occurs in some position *following* the verb, whereas other modals in the language precede the VP as is elsewhere common in V-O languages:

- 1) *khaw* *khian* ***dai***
 he write can
 ‘He can write.’
- 2) *khaw* ***doong/aat-ca*** *pay*
 he must/may go
 ‘He must/may go.’

Further investigation reveals that this curious positional property of *dai* is also attested in a highly similar way in many other languages of the region. In SVO Cambodian, Vietnamese and Cantonese modal verbs occur as expected before the lexical predicate with a single interesting exception - a modal with the same meaning as *dai* is found to follow the main verb (Hmong is also reported to pattern in this way):

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|----|----------------|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| 3) | <i>goa'at</i> | <i>roo-ut</i> | <i>baan</i> | Cambodian |
| | he | run | can | |
| | 'He can run.' | | | |
| 4) | <i>anh-ta</i> | <i>den</i> | <i>duoc</i> | Vietnamese |
| | he | come | can | |
| | He can come. | | | |
| 5) | <i>kui</i> | <i>lai</i> | <i>dak</i> | Cantonese |
| | he | come | can | |
| | 'He can come.' | | | |

The repeated occurrence of such a marked paradigm in so many neighbouring languages might strongly seem to indicate borrowing and transfer. The suspicion that the modals in these languages are indeed related is further strengthened by the observation that they *all* have parallel homophones, lexical verbs with the meaning 'get/have':

- 6) *phom dai botbaat thii dii* (Thai)
 I got role Rel good
 ‘I got a good role.’
- 7) *k’nyom jong baan bee-a moo-ay dorp* (Cam.)
 I want get beer one bottle
 ‘I want to get/have a bottle of beer.’
- 8) *toi duoc tho cua gia-dinh toi* (Viet)
 I got letter family me
 ‘I got a letter from my family.’
- 9) *ngoh dak saam-man je* (Cant.)
 I have 3-dollaronly
 ‘I only have \$3 left.’

If the modal series is indeed connected via borrowing, one clearly needs to ask both what the original source might have been and how the differences in phonetic form among the languages may be given explanation. We would like to suggest that the relevant hypothetical source was actually Middle Chinese and that there is a highly plausible route of transfer out of Middle Chinese and through the languages in the group.

Although forms like Cantonese (5) do not occur in Modern Mandarin, they are commonly found up until the 13th century in Middle Chinese (*see* Sun 1996):

- 10) *yi ren ji de* Middle Chinese
 one person play can
 ‘One person can play (it).’

In (10) one observes the occurrence of a post-verbal potential modal de, essentially just as in the patterns noted earlier. Now, given the assumption that the Tai people originated from S.E. China and subsequently migrated southwestwards between the 11th and 13th centuries, it is clear that they were in the Chinese-speaking area precisely at the time when this post-verbal de was common, and migrated away just before its decline, a highly suggestive fact. We therefore propose that de was borrowed into Thai as dai. There are also reasons to believe that the pronunciation of de in Middle Chinese was actually more like /dei/ (*see* Sun 1996), so the posited phonetic change to /dai/ is hardly major.

Concerning the modal in Cambodian ‘baan’, this may be taken to have actually been borrowed from Thai, which developed a second modal with the same positional property as dai pronounced /pen/ (as indeed suggested in Huffman 1973). As for Vietnamese duoc, the occurrence of a

syllable-final voiceless stop is obviously similar to that in Cantonese dak, and arguably can be said to reflect either borrowing from Chinese at a period in the Middle Ages when the use of syllable-final stops was known to be more widespread, or borrowing from one of the southern Chinese dialects such as Cantonese which retained such voiceless stops longer. The centuries of contact and exchange between Cambodia and Thailand and Vietnam and China also clearly provide a straightforward route for the hypothetical transfer.

So, there would indeed seem to be quite reasonable motivation for assuming that a process of borrowing and onward transfer has here resulted in the creation of a regional typological feature of some significant importance - the occurrence of a *post*-verbal modal in a set of otherwise fully regular head-initial V-O languages. We now attempt to probe the syntactic properties of this modal, concentrating primarily on Thai where we believe the vital clues to understanding the paradigm in general are located.

2. Thai

Above we have noted that the position of the potential modal in the languages considered is rather exceptional, essentially for the reason that cross-linguistic evidence consistently shows modals occurring to the left of the lexical predicate in head-initial languages. Recently it has been suggested that this evidence is in fact so pervasive that a 'universal template' may be argued for, with modal and aspectual verbs all occurring in a pre-determined hierarchical ordering dominating the VP-predicate (Cinque 1996). The occurrence of a group of modals in some position to the right of the verb as found in Thai, Viet etc is consequently not only unexpected and but also a strong theoretical challenge to this universalist hypothesis. Below we subject these modal structures in Thai to some careful scrutiny to see what kind of structure may be assigned to them and how this may bear on the universalist issue.

One may quickly discount the possibility that the modals here are some kind of verbal suffix similar to the *-e-* potentiality marker in Japanese (as in: *hanas - e - ru* - speak - Pot - Tense 'can speak'); the fact that objects, adverbs and other elements intervene between the main verb and dai indicates that the latter is a fully independent modal element:

- 11) *raw* *jee* *kan* *prung-nii* *dai*
 we meet together tomorrow can
 'We can meet tomorrow.'

A variety of evidence indicates however that there is more to the post-verbal position of the modal than initially meets the eye and it is not simply VP-final but somehow 'higher' in the clause. First of all, consider

the patterning of *yes-no questions*; these are answered in the positive by repetition of the leftmost or 'highest' verbal element in any string, as in (12):

- 12) *phom doong pai mai* A: *doong* B: **pai*
 I must go Q must go
 'Must I go?' 'Yes.'

In *dai*-sentences it is found that an answer-form consists in the repetition of *dai* rather than the linearly first lexical verb, indicating that it is *dai* which is the hierarchically higher verbal element rather than the lexical verb, despite the surface ordering:

- 13) *khaw phuut phasaa thai dai mai* A: *dai* B: **phuut*
 he speak language thai can Q can speak
 'Can he speak Thai?' 'Yes.'

The position of *sentential negation* in *dai*-sentences offers a further indication of the structure of the clause; sentential negation occurs immediately before *dai*, and following the lexical verb and its object/adverbs:

- 14) *khaw phuut phasaa thai mai dai*
 he speak language thai NEG can
 'He cannot speak Thai.'

If one makes a standard assumption that sentential negation occurs external to and higher than the VP, then it is not possible to suggest that there is a VP constituent in (14) containing both the lexical verb and *dai*, as this would then simultaneously also contain the sentential negation. Consequently *dai* would again *not* seem to be inside the VP.

The patterning of constituent negation adds a further informative clue. In (15) the negation *only* has scope over the underlined string and critically *not* over *dai*:

- 15) *khun mai pai kap khaw dai*
 you NEG go with him can
 'You can (choose) not to go with him.'

In order to account for this, one must assume that negation in (15) does not 'c-command' *dai*, and hence that the underlined string in (15) is a constituent which excludes *dai*.

In view of the above, one might instead entertain the possibility that all of the material which precedes *dai* is actually predicated of *dai* as its