

FOREGROUNDING IN SOME SELECTED SOUTHEAST ASIAN NARRATIVES

Somsonge Burusphat

Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development
Mahidol University

1. Introduction

This paper presents the syntactic devices which are used to foreground the parts of the narrative which relate events belonging to the skeleton structure of the discourse. These events determine an 'event line' or 'storyline.'

The data consist of narratives from eight Southeast Asian languages selected from available texts which are transcribed in phonetic symbols with word by word translation and free translation. The eight Southeast Asian languages belong to the Tai-Kadai language family and Mon-Khmer language family. The former includes Thai, Lue, Bouyei, Northern Zhuang, and Kam; the latter has Northern Khmer, So, and Vietnamese. The Thai narratives are drawn from *The Structure of Thai Narrative* (Somsonge 1991); the Lue, Bouyei, Northern Zhuang, and Kam narratives from *Kam-Tai Oral Literatures* (Somsonge et al 1998); the Northern Khmer narratives from *Discourse Level Cohesion in Northern Khmer* (Somkiet 1982); the So narratives from *A Grammar of So---A Mon-Khmer Language of Northeast Thailand* (Migliazza 1998); and the Vietnamese narratives from *Cohesive Devices in Vietnamese Folktales* (Suksiri 2000).

2. The notion of foregrounding

Jones and Jones (1979:6) mention that some scholars have viewed discourse information as "an essentially bipartite structure composed of more significant information (often called backbone or foreground) and less significant information (background)."

Hopper (1979:213) refers to events as "the language of the actual storyline" and nonevents as "the language of the supportive material." The former is referred to as foreground and the latter as background.

Hopper and Thompson (1980:280) refer to grounding as “linguistic features associated with the distinction between foreground and background.” Each language makes use of particular features to mark foreground and background.

Longacre (1996) uses the term “storyline” to refer to foreground, i.e., the main line of development in a discourse which is foregrounded in varying ways in various languages. In languages with tense-aspect systems, such as English, the verb systems facilitate discourse. That is, differing tense, aspect, mood, and voice forms have different functions in discourse. In narrative discourse, for example, simple past-tense forms report successive actions and events which advance the story, whereas past-progressive forms report concomitant activities or nonstoryline. On the other hand, the languages which do not have much richness of structure in regard to tense-aspect distinction may distinguish foreground and background by a conspiracy of nonsystemic way.

Kanchana (1970:39) points out that “There are many languages in which verbal inflections are grammatical devices to reflect human time concepts; whereas many other languages use other devices to fulfill the same purpose without having to do with verbform changes or requiring any verbform marker (auxiliaries).” The languages of the Tai-Kadai language family and Mon-Khmer language family under this study have neither verbal inflections nor auxiliaries to convey time concepts. Instead, context or the juxtaposition of an adverb of time signals whether a spoken event is in the present, past, or future. As mentioned above, the foreground or storyline of English narrative is characterized by verbs in the past tense or in the completive/perfective aspect. On the other hand, the languages of Tai-Kadai family and Mon-Khmer family have no specific markers of past versus present tense. Clauses are ambiguous as to time reference. Types of verbs, such as nonstative verbs having perfective meaning, perfective auxiliaries, temporal expressions, and context will work in conjunction with each other to imply time. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to investigate how languages without a tense system, such as the languages of Tai-Kadai family and Mon-Khmer family, foreground the main line of narrative discourse.

This study has found that the major grammatical devices which are used to foreground certain parts of the

narratives include serial clause construction, the temporal auxiliaries, and aspectual auxiliaries as discussed below.

3. Serial clause construction

Sequentiality is a significant feature of foreground clauses. The events realized by foreground clauses succeed one another. Hopper (1979:214-15) refers to this succession as being in iconic order, i.e., “the same order as their succession in the real world.” The sequentiality of foreground events requires that an event occur after the completion of a prior event. He also refers to foreground events as being dynamic and active.

The languages of Tai-Kadai and Mon-Khmer family use the serial clause construction to foreground the main events which are sequentially tied. The serial clause construction consists of a series of clauses which report events that are salient and are the most dynamic element in a discourse. The series of clauses has only one overt subject present in the initial clause. The following clauses have zero anaphors as their subjects. All clauses in a series are very strongly sequential. The serial clause construction is exemplified in the Bouyei and Vietnamese languages in examples (1) and (2), respectively. In these two examples, the clauses following the initial clause have zero anaphors as subjects. All clauses in each series are foregrounded and strongly sequential.

(1) Bouyei

CL1	<i>θoŋ¹</i> two	<i>pi⁴nuan⁴</i> brother and sister	<i>te¹</i> that	<i>ɕi³</i> then	<i>pa⁴</i> PREP	
	<i>ʔdan¹</i> CLS	<i>te¹</i> that	<i>ʔbuut⁷</i> pick	<i>ma¹</i> come	<i>la³</i> down	
CL2	<i>ʔau¹</i> use	<i>wa⁶ta:u¹</i> knife	<i>tai⁵</i> from	<i>neŋ²</i> top	<i>te¹</i> it	<i>kuen²</i> carve
	<i>pan²</i> have	<i>soŋ⁶</i> hole	<i>deu¹</i> ne			
CL3	<i>ʔau¹</i> use	<i>wa⁶kuu³</i> hoe	<i>pa⁴</i> PREP	<i>ŋui⁶</i> seeds	<i>te¹</i> it	<i>wau⁶</i> dig

*ma*¹ *đo*⁶
come out

CL4 *leu*⁴ *çi*³ *ʔau*¹ *su*⁵ *kuu*² *ʔda:t*⁷ *pa*⁴
finish then take in hot place PREP

*te*¹ *ta*³ *đo*²
it dry dry out

‘CL1 The two brother and sister picked the biggest gourd.
CL2 (They) used a knife to carve a hole on it top.
CL3 (They) used a hoe to dig the seeds out.
CL4 Then (they) took the gourd to dry in a hot place.’

(2) Vietnamese

CL1 *Nàng* *nhớ* *chồng* *thương thân*
3rdPER miss husband self-pity

CL2 *bé* *con* *ra* *ngoài* *chùa*
carry child out outside temple

CL3 *trèo* *lên* *một* *mỏm* *đá* *cao* *chót* *vót*
climb up one top stone tall very tall

CL4 *nhìn về* *hướng* *chồng* *đi*
look forward direction husband go

‘CL1 She missed her husband very much.
CL2 (She) carried her child out of the temple.
CL3 (She) climbed up to the top of the mountain.
CL4 (She) looked at the direction that her husband went.’

Diller (1992) studies all the Tai varieties of Assam and has found that binary discourse structures are quite common. The binary discourse structures are parataxis with asyndeton in which clauses are coordinated without the use of overt conjunctions. These structures may be iconic in indicating repeating or continuing actions or events. The parataxis with asyndeton structure is also common in the languages under this