A Verb-Subject Construction in Thai:

An Analysis of the Existential Verb "mii"

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0. Introduction [1]

In this paper I provide an analysis of the postverbal subject in Thai. Thai is described as a SVO language by Hawkins (1983) and by Thai grammarians Surintramont (1979), Sripen (1972), Warotamasikkhadit (1972), Kullavanija (1968) and in Thai traditional grammar books. However, these analyses seem to be problematic due to the peculiar characteristics of such verbs as mii 'exist', kEEt 'occur', duumIan 'seem', praakot 'appear' as well as some verb-like adjectives, which do not require any element or unit at all in the position right before them in a declarative sentence. These particular verbs have been analysed as taking a nonovert subject or a deleted subject. This phenomenon raises the following questions: Do these verbs and some verb-like adjectives require subjects? If so, where are they located? If not, what types of verbs are they? Are some Thai sentences subjectless when spoken or written in isolation?

To argue that there is a verb-subject construction in Thai, I show in sentences spoken in isolation occurrences of the existential verb mii. In this analysis, I first present the forms of subjects and objects of intransitive and transitive verbs, including an element or a unit in the postposition of the verb under investigation. I argue that the mii-construction is a sentence, not a verb phrase. Then I argue that the element following the verb mii 'exist' is a subject, not an object, of this verb. Based on this investigation I propose that there are two subject types in Thai: preverbal (subject-verb construction) and postverbal (verb-subject construction).

I divide the paper into four sections. Section 1: The Notion "Subject"; Section 2: Background of the Thai Language: the points relevant to this particular analysis; Section 3: The Analysis; and Section 4: Conclusion.

1.0. The Notion "Subject"

To define the term "subject" for my analysis, I folllow Keenan's (1976) properties of a basic subject of a basis sentence.

Keenan lists thirty properties which subjects characteristically possess and three types of characteristic subjects. The properties may be pragmatic, semantic or syntactic. He presents four major categories of basic subject properties: (1) autonomy, which includes independent existence, indispensability and autonomous reference; (2) case-marking; (3) semantic role; and (4) immediate dominance. He divides the characteristics of subject into three types: coding properties, behavior properties, and semantic properties. He postulates that certain subject properties are more difficult for derived subjects to acquire than others and further hypothesizes a Promotion Hierarchy, claiming that coding properties are the most easily transferred, while the semantic ones are the most difficult to acquire.

Despite the availability of a number of properties, not all can be taken as valid tests for determining the grammatical relation of a postposition of the verb **mii**. One reason is that Thai is a non-inflectional language; there are no case markers for subjects and objects; nor is there any agreement between a verb and a subject, or between a verb and an object. Secondly, both subject and object in Thai share several properties. For instance, both can be deleted or omitted, topicalized, questioned, relativized, as well as being a possible controller of stipulated coreference. The only properties left to be employed as valid tests to find the exact status of the postposition of the existential verb **mii** are imperativization, passivization and VP topicalization.

I focus in this paper the type of subject which Keenan describes as a basic subject, not a derived one.

2.0. Background of the Language

In Thai, the verb form does not agree with its subject or object in person, number and gender; nor does it change according to the tense and time of an event or an action. (1a) and (1b) show that the verb **thamnaan** 'work' is invariant regardless of the particular personal pronoun and the temporal expression. Although the verb is uninflected, it is accompanied by adverbs which indicate the time.

(1)
a. s[khaw   thamnaan   thukwan/   mIawaannii
       he/she   work   everyday   yesterday
       they (m/f)
    "He/she/they (m/f) work(s) everyday"   or
    "He/she/they (m/f) worked yesterday"
b. s[can/ raw/ khun thamnaan   thukwan/   mIawannii
        I   we   you work   everyday   yesterday
    "I/we/you work everyday"   or
    "I/we/you will work yesterday "

     The evidence above thus shows that properties of
subjecthood or inflection marking the subject are not
reflected in the verbal morphology.
     (2) shows that there is no agreement between a verb
and an object in Thai.

(2) s[can   rak   mxx/   phOOmxx/   khaw]
      I   love   mother   parents   he/she/they (m/f)
    "I love mother /parents/ her/ him/ them(m/f)"

     Subjects and objects in almost all sentences spoken
in isolation in Thai are indicated by position. That is,
a subject occurs before a verb, while an object
immediately after verb and a prepositional object after
a preposition.

3.0. The Analysis
     To argue that there is a VS construction in Thai, I
divide this section into three: 3.1. illustrates forms of
a subject, an object and an element in the postposition
of the verb mii. In 3.2. I argue for the sentencehood of
the mii construction. Based on the argument in 3.2., I
further argue in 3.3. that an element in the postposition
of the verb mii is a subject, not a direct object, of
this verb.

3.1. The Forms of Subject and Object in Thai
     This section shows that NP, S and S' all function as
both subjects and objects in intransitive-verb (INTV) and
transitive-verb (TV) sentences. It also presents their
occurrences as the postposition of the mii construction.
In this analysis I focus on TV, INTV and the mii
construction.
3.1.1. NP
     Sentences (3a-b) show that NP **phaayu rxn** 'strong
storm' functions as a subject of INTV **kEEtkhIn** 'occur'
and TV **thamlaai** 'destroy', respectively.

(3)
```
a. s[ np[ phaayu    rxn]    kEEtkhIn    bOybOy]
        storm    strong   occur       often
   "A strong storm often occurs"
b. s[ np[ phaayu    rxn]    thamlaai   muubaan]
        storm    strong  destroy    village
   "A strong storm destroyed a village"
```

Sentence (3c) shows that the verb **mii** takes NP **phaayu rxn** in the object position only.

```
c. [mii  np[ phaayu    rxn]]
   exist      storm    strong
   "There is a strong storm"
 *[ np[ phaayu rxn]   mii]]
 *[ np[ phaayu]  mii  rxn]
```

Comparing (3c) with (3d), we see that both the existential verb **mii** and TV **kliat** 'hate' have NP **phaayu rxn** in the object position. This NP is the object of the TV **kliat** sentence (3d).

```
d. s[ np[ can]   kliat    np[ phaayu   rxn]]
        I       hate         storm    strong
   "I hate a strong storm"
```

3.1.2. Complementized Sentence (S')

Complementizers usually used in Thai are **kaanthii** and **thii**. Some verbs take both, while others allow one of them. This is due to certain characteristics of certain verbs. Sentences (4a-b) show occurrences of S' as a subject of INTV **kEEtkhIn** 'occur' and TV **thamhai** 'cause/make', respectively.

(4)
```
a.s[s'[kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]] kEEtkhIn   bOybOy]
       comp          storm  blow strong occur    often
   "That storms blow strongly often occurs"
```

```
b.s[s'[ kaanthii s[phaayu   phat     rxn]] thamhai
        comp          storm  blow    strong cause
     s[ can   klua]]
         I    scare
   "That the storm blows strongly makes me scared (or
   scares me)"
```

(4c) and (4d) show ocurrences of S' in the object position of the TV **hen** 'see' sentence and the **mii** construction, respectively.