

Negation in Thai Serial Verb Constructions: A Pragmatic Study

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INTRODUCTION

Negation has been analyzed in terms of truth-values in propositional semantics for a long time. Logicians postulated that “if a proposition is true, then the negated proposition is false.” However, Givón (1984, pp. 321–351) pointed out that negation in our natural language needs to be examined from the epistemic and cognitive viewpoints rather than the logical one, because negation is used in discourse in the context when the speaker assumes that the hearer tends to believe in the corresponding affirmative, and the negative speech act is then a denial or contradiction of that assumed belief (Givón, 1984, p. 324). Negation, therefore, is essentially placed within the domain of pragmatics, which accounts for linguistic phenomena from the user’s point of view and emphasizes the motivation of our usage of language in context.

Although a considerable number of studies have been made on serial verb constructions¹ (henceforth, SVCs) in Thai, for example, Sereechoensatit (1984), Thepkanjana (1986), and Chuwicha (1993), there is no study that is exclusively dedicated to negation in Thai SVCs. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the pragmatic constraints we encounter in negating verbs in SVCs in Thai by providing motivation for the behavior of SVCs with respect to negation. Pragmatic and cognitive concepts, such as purpose, relevance, expectation, volition, saliency, and so on, postulated by Givón (1984), form the theoretical framework of this study. The data used in this study were collected from a Thai corpus² of newspaper and magazine articles. The collected SVCs are classified into three groups, and the behavior of each pattern of SVC is then investigated. The SVC classification is based on Chuwicha (1993), who postulates 12 patterns³ of basic SVCs⁴ in Thai. Chuwicha’s SVC patterns are in turn based on the semantic properties of the kinds of verbs that appear in the first and second positions of the SVC. SVC patterns postulated by Chuwicha, which are adopted in this study, are summarized below.

¹The definition of a serial verb construction according to Chuwicha (1993) is primarily based on the surface forms of sentences. That means, if two verbs with or without direct objects occur in a row, they represent serial verb constructions.

²The data used in this study are drawn from the Thai language corpus that belongs to the Linguistics and Knowledge Science Laboratory (LINKS), National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, Thailand.

³Patterns 7, 11 and 12, which include the equative verb **pen** ‘be characterized as,’ are excluded from this study because there exists an unresolved problem concerning the idiomaticity of the verb **pen** in certain expressions.

⁴The basic SVC is SVC which is composed of only two verb phrases (Chuwicha, 1993, p. 39).

TYPES OF BASIC SVC'S CLASSIFIED BY CHUWICHA (1993)

In this section, we will have a look at Chuwicha's classification of basic SVCs in Thai. Each pattern of SVC is composed of two verb phrases (henceforth, VPs). Chuwicha (1993, pp. 51–59) classified the SVCs into 12 patterns as shown below. Each pattern is distinguished by the semantic properties of the two verbs that co-occur in the string. The semantic property of the verb is expressed below after the colon.

Pattern 1: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: non-primary action verb

Example: wĭŋ lɔp
 run avoid
 'run and avoid something or somebody at the same time'

In the first pattern of SVC, the first verb expresses a "primary action," i.e., action in which we can perceive clearly which body part is used, whereas the second verb expresses a "non-primary action," i.e., action in which we cannot perceive clearly which body part is used in carrying out the action named by the verb. Both primary and non-primary actions expressed by this pattern occur at the same place and time and are carried out by the same person. It can be concluded that this pattern expresses a single but semantically complex event which is viewed along two "dimensions." In the example above, in the first dimension the event expresses a motion which is carried out by means of two legs at a rather high speed, and in the second dimension the same event is an action of avoiding somebody or something.

Pattern 2: VP1: body posture verb + VP2: action verb

Example: nāŋ duu nǎŋsǔu
 sit look book
 'sit looking at a book'

In the second pattern, the first verb expresses a body posture, whereas the second verb expresses an action carried out by an animate being while holding the body in the posture indicated by the first verb. Like the first pattern of SVC, the event expressed by the verb in each position occurs at the same place and time.

Pattern 3: VP1: non-directional motion verb + VP2: directional motion verb

Example: wĭŋ khāw bān
 run enter house
 'run and enter a house at the same time'

This pattern expresses an event of motion that provides information of two kinds. The first kind indicated by the first verb is the means or manner of carrying out the motion. The other kind of information indicated by the second verb is the direction of the motion. In this pattern, the motion verbs in both positions semantically constitute a single path but provide different perspectives for viewing the path.

Pattern 4: VP1: action verb using a sense organ + VP2: perception verb

Example: mɔɔŋ hɛ̃n
look see
'look at something and see it'

This pattern of SVC expresses a complex event consisting of an action carried out by means of a sense organ and also a perception which is a consequence of the first action. It can be said that the events denoted by both kinds of verbs occur at the same place and time.

Pattern 5: VP1: verb expressing feeling or attitude towards an action + VP2: action, state, process verb

Example: klua hòklóm
fear fall
'be afraid to fall down'

This pattern of SVCs expresses a feeling or an attitude towards an occurrence of an event. The first verb of this pattern is semantically incomplete. It needs a complement to complete its sense. Therefore, it is called a complement-taking verb.

Pattern 6: VP1: verb expressing manner in doing an action + VP2: action verb

Example: rêŋ kɛ̀p khôm̩muun
hurry gather data
'gather data in a hurry'

This pattern expresses the carrying out of an action in a certain manner. The manner in this case is encoded as a verb occurring in the first position of the SVC. The second verb indicates an action carried out by the subject of the sentence. The verbs indicating manner are not semantically complete in themselves. Since they need verbal complements to complete their sense, they are also called complement-taking verbs.

Pattern 8: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: action verb

Example: pîŋ plaa kin
grill fish eat
'grill fish to eat'

This pattern of SVC expresses a sequence of two actions. The two transitive verbs of this pattern share the same direct object. The times of occurrence of the two actions named by the two verbs are so close to each other that we usually perceive them as one single but structurally complex event. In addition, since the two transitive verbs in this pattern are volitional verbs that denote two actions occurring consecutively, this pattern is often perceived as denoting an objective in carrying out a certain action.

Pattern 9: VP1: deictic directional verb + VP2: action verb

Example: pay thamŋaan
go work'
'go to work'

This pattern of SVCs expresses the subject's motion from a certain place to carry out a particular action. The first verb in this pattern of SVC consists of two deictic directional verbs, namely, **pay** 'go' and **maa** 'come.'

Pattern 10: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: inchoative verb

Example: paa kêew tøk
 throw glass break
 'throw a glass and the glass breaks'

This pattern expresses two events occurring consecutively. The first transitive verb indicates an action that causes another event to occur. As there is no delay between the two events, this pattern is often perceived as denoting a single complex event.

PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF NEGATION IN SVC'S

All patterns of SVCs mentioned above behave differently with regard to negation (henceforth, NEG), as shown below. It is claimed here that the behavior of SVCs with respect to negation can be explained in terms of pragmatic principles postulated by Givón (1984). All of the patterns of SVCs mentioned above may be classified into three groups as far as negation is concerned, as below.

Group 1

Group 1 is composed of patterns 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9. SVCs of group 1 do not allow NEG to intervene between the two VPs; they allow NEG to occur before the first VP, and both the first and the second VPs are then within the scope of negation, as shown in the formula below.

(a) * VP1 NEG VP2,⁵

(b) NEG VP1 VP2

The SVCs in this group may be subclassified into two groups on the basis of the type of event which they indicate. The first subgroup consists of patterns 1, 2, 3, and 6. The two action verbs in each pattern of SVC in this subgroup express events that are carried out by the same subject, and occur simultaneously at the same place.

Examples:

Pattern 1 (1A) *wĩŋ mây lõp
 run NEG avoid

(1B) mây wĩŋ lõp
 NEG run avoid
 'do not run to avoid'

Pattern 2 (2A) *nân mây duu nãŋsũũ
 sit' NEG look book

⁵ "*" before an example means that the expression is odd or hardly acceptable in unmarked contexts.