Transitivity Continuum in Thai

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1. Introduction

Verbs in any language are traditionally classified into transitive verbs (henceforth TVs) and intransitive verbs (henceforth IVs). The word "transitive" is derived from a Latin verb "transeo", which means "go over or across".[1] The definition of the Latin verb implies a movement from one place to another. A remnant of this meaning is still present in the word "transitive" used as a grammatical term. The definition of the TV offered by classical and contemporary linguists is given in two ways : syntactic and semantic. The TV is syntactically defined as a verb which requires a direct object (henceforth DO) while the IV has no such DO present. (Jespersen 1969, Chomsky 1965) Chomsky's DO is present at the level of "deep structure" whereas Jespersen's appears at "surface structure". Semantically, the TV is defined as a verb which expresses an activity which is "carried over" or "transferred" from one participant to another, or a verb that expresses the effects of an action which pass over from the agent to the patient.(Lyons 1968) The IV, in contrast, denotes an action which is not transferred between two participants or which does not have an effect on another participant. The semantic definition presupposes that the TV has two arguments denoting two participants whereas the IV has but one. However, the verbs "to leave", "to hear", "to reach" and "to suffer" as in He left Bangkok., I heard a noise., He reached Bangkok. and He suffered a stroke., are considered TVs by the syntactic definition but, by the semantic criteria, are not incorporated within the TV class. We can see that some syntactically defined TVs are in conflict with the semantic definition of TVs as illustrated in the examples above.

The TVs and IVs in Thai are defined along the same line. Panupong (1962), Warotamasikkhadit (1963), and Kullavanijaya (1974) propose the syntactic definition for the TV whereas Phraya Uppakitsilpasarn (1918), a traditional Thai grammarian, postulates the

semantic definition, that is, a TV is a verb that is not complete in meaning without an object. Some linguists recognize that DOs of the TVs in Thai are optional. Kullavanijaya states that DOs can be omitted on two conditions, that is, (1) in certain contexts subject to recoverability (where the omitted DO is easily understood) and (2) when the DOs are either indefinite or cognate.[2] Noss (1964) even claims that DOs in Thai can be freely omitted.

To determine whether a given verb in Thai is a TV or an IV is not as simple as one might think. The semantic criteria for identifying both types of verbs is characteristically vague and elusive. It is not always easy to prove whether or not a verb is complete in meaning, or whether or not a verb expresses an activity which is carried over or transferred to another participant. Therefore, the semantic criteria cannot be completely relied upon. As for the syntactic criteria, it identifies as a TV a verb that can be followed by a noun. However, omitting linguistic elements in sentences is prevalent in Thai. Therefore the DOs can always be omitted in appropriate contexts. The question is how we know whether a particular verb which appears without a DO in a sentence is **actually** followed by a DO or not. In other words, how do we know if the DO is merely omitted but in fact understood, or if there is no DO present at any level of understanding? One of the tests is to try and put a noun after the verb. If the verb allows an occurrence of the following noun, it can be considered a TV. Another test is to put the interrogatives ?àray "what" or khray "who" after the verb. If a meaningful question arises or if it is possible to think of an answer to that question, it means that the verb does have a DO otherwise the DO could not be questioned. For example, the verbs such as wítòk "worry", kít "think", nâN "sit", dâyyin "hear", kròot "be angry", nOOn[4] "sleep" are identified as TVs since they can be followed by nouns or interrogative words. In contrast, such verbs rÓONhây "cry", yɯɯn "stand", lúk "rise", are considered IVs since they can be followed by neither nouns nor interrogative words. That a verb allows the presence of a DO may lead one to believe that the verb is in itself semantically incomplete and so needs a DO to complete its meaning. The problem is that our intuition sometimes makes us feel that some verbs which occur with DOs such as prà?màa "be nervous", sŏNsǎy "wonder", d33n[5] "walk", thûam "flood", pìak "be wet", com "sink" are **not** semantically incomplete when occurring without a DO. Some people think that these verbs are already semantically complete without DOs. We can see that

there are two kinds of transitivity emerging from the discussion above, namely, syntactic transitivity and semantic transitivity. It is apparent that the two kinds of transitivity do not necessarily coincide in Thai.

From my preliminary observation, there are some cases in which Thai speakers are of the same opinion and some other cases in which they are not as to the type a given verb belongs to. For example, Thai speakers consider the verbs tii "hit", lây "expell", tàt "cut", láaN "wash", TVs, and the verbs rîip "hurry", rɔ́ɔNhây "cry", yím "smile",rûaN "fall", IVs. However, there are some disagreements as to the verbs krɔ̀ot "be angry", kèN "be skilful", phOOcay "be sastisfied", thûam "flood", chaná? "win", etc. In this paper, I will investigate what semantic underpinnings may lie behind such intuitive judgements. To be precise, I will analyze the semantic properties of the groups of verbs that are uniformly and not uniformly agreed upon as TVs and IVs.

The data analyzed in this paper is drawn from the appendices in three theses, namely, Intransitives in Thai (Phancharoen 1967), Transitive Verbs in the Thai Language (Kanchanawan 1969), Thai Intransitive Verbs: A Study and Classification in Case Grammar (Wongsiri 1982). These appendices contain lists of three groups of verbs, that is, TVs, IVs, and "tran-intransitive" verbs (henceforth TIVs). TVs are syntactically defined in these theses as verbs that inherently require DOs. However, the DOs can be omitted in appropriate contexts. IVs are defined as verbs that do not allow the presence of any DO. TIVs are defined as verbs that have DOs which are optional even out of context; therefore, they may occur with DOs but this is not a mandatory requirement.[6] The DOs of TIVs are regarded as extra arguments of the verbs.

2. Semantic properties of the three groups of verbs

As mentioned above, the verbs appearing in the appendices in the three theses can be classified into TVs, IVs and TIVs. Each group of verbs are semantically accounted for as below.

2.1 Transitive verbs

The verbs that are listed under the TV list in the appendix in Transitive Verbs in the Thai Language are **volitional**[7], **action verbs**, i.e., verbs which denote activities performed with volition on the part of the actor. The TVs in this appendix may be classified into two subclasses according to the semantic roles of the DOs. These subclasses are TVs

whose DOs are in the target role, and the TVs whose DO
are in the non-target role.

2.1.1 TVs with target DOs

The target refers to an entity which either
"receives" a volitional action or is created by
volitional action carried out by an agent. The targe
is the entity which an action is directed at. The verb
of this type can be subclassified according to whethe
the entities denoted by the DOs exist before th
actions signified by the verbs or not.

2.1.1.1 TVs with non-preexisting DOs

The TVs of this type are creation verbs such
as sâaN "build", tæ̀æN "compose", and kÒO "build". Th
entities referred to by the DOs of these verbs do no
exist before the performance of the actions. However
these entities represent the targets that the agent
have in mind while performing the actions.

2.1.1.2 TVs with preexisting DOs

The verbs of this type express actions whic
are directed at entities that do exist before th
performance of the actions. These entities "receive th
action" in some way. This type of TVs is classifie
into three groups according to the degree of effec
incurred upon the DO.

2.1.1.2.1 TVs of the first degree effect

The verbs of this type may be used as answer
to the question "What does someone do to an entity?"
The verbs indicate that the entities denoted by the DO
are physically affected by the agents. The action
expressed by these verbs are carried out by means of
physical and direct contact. Consequently, such action
result in some kind of obvious and perceptible chang
in the affected entities, for example, change o
location, change of state, change of size or change o
shape. Some of the verbs in this type are daay "cu
(grass)", rin "pour (water)", tòy "punch", yók "lift"
tii "hit", sùup "pump",etc.

2.1.1.2.2 TVs of the second degree effect

The verbs of this type can also be answers
the question "What does someone do to an entity?". Th
actions expressed by these verbs are vague in such
way that they may not be concretely specified. :
addition, these actions may consist of several mo
specific "subactions". The entities indicated by t
DOs are not necessarily physically affected. Howeve
the actions are likely to produce some pragmatical
inferred effects on the target entities. Some of the
verbs are kòtkhÌi "oppress", khúkkhaam "endanger", ko
"deceive", ?ùppathǎm "support", tômtǔn "fool"
raNkhwaan "annoy", etc.

2.1.1.2.3 TVs of the third degree effect