Syntactic Variations in Thai Poetry

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Introduction

This paper attempts to study different types of syntactic variations found in Thai poetry—khlooŋ, cʰən, kàap, and kloh— from the past to the present. Morphological and semantic variations are excluded from this study, even though they present major problems in understanding Thai poetry. It should be pointed out that syntactic variations seem to recur in all types of Thai poetry written by different poets.¹

Major Types of Syntactic Variations

Five major types of syntactic variations can be found in Thai poetry.

SVO becomes SOV. Subject Verb Object (SVO) is a general syntactic pattern in the present Thai language. Object Subject Verb (OSV) is also found in the Thai language when a sentence undergoes a subjectivalization transformation (Warotamasikkhadit 1983). It is interesting to find that SOV is rather common in Thai poetry. For example:

(1) fan pàak màak khíaw cỳ
  tooth mouth areca nut chew easily

  cèm ʔuǎn nuan khâaw
  bright fat creamy white

  The teeth in his mouth can easily chew betel. He is active, fat, and healthy.

  —from Nirat Suphan²

The word màak 'betel, a combination of betel leaf, lime, and areca nut' would normally appear after khíaw 'chew' in (1); however, in this line

¹ This study was originally dedicated to Sunthon Phu on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of his birth in 1986. (Note that I use the Royal Institute system of romanizing Thai names, not a phonemic one.)
màak 'betel' is moved in front of khíaw 'chew' in order to rhyme with pàak 'mouth'.

(2) nóoy kàp phûm phàan rây nay phràysân
   Noi and Phum friend be without in forest

(1) am travelling in the forest without a friend, except Noi and Phum.
   —from Nirat Muang Klaeng

The word phàan 'friend' should appear after rây 'be without' in (2), but it is moved in order to leave rây 'be without' rhyming with nay 'in'. It should be noted that the subject of this sentence is an understood I.

(3) thàŋ khon mây ?aay kô ?aay pʰii
   even person not shy then shy spirit

   Even though (you) are not shy of human beings, (you) should be shy of spirits.
   —from Khun Chang Khun Phaen

When the subject is 'you' understood as it is in (3), normal Thai word order would have khon 'person' appearing after ?aay 'be shy of'.

(4) khoʔ tuân kô tên tiin sɔɔy
   tap call attention then jump foot take short steps

   If you tap a horse to get its attention, it jumps and takes short steps.
   —from Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan

The word tiin 'foot' should appear after sɔɔy 'take short steps' in (4). The subject of this sentence appears in the previous line in the poem. However, sɔɔy 'take short steps' is left at the end of the line because in this position, it provides the obligatory rhyme with a word in the ensuing line.

Subject Verb (SV) becomes Verb Subject (VS). A subject usually precedes an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb in the Thai language, but it happens that an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb can be moved to the position before the subject. For example:

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4 King Rama II, Khun Chang Khun Phaen (Bangkok: Bannakhan, 1971).
(5) tüin taa nāa phēat môt bāt sān kaay
   be frightened eye face pale finish blood shake body

Their eyes are frightened, their faces are pale without blood, and
their bodies are shaking.

—from *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan*6

In (5), tüin taa should be taa tüin 'the eyes show fright' and sān kaay
should be kaay sān 'their bodies are shaking'. In these cases, taa 'eye'
rhymes with nāa 'face' in the same line, and kaay 'body' needs to rhyme
with a word in the following line.

(6) krāphāam nāam phráphram phrooy krachōok
    be in ripples water repeatedly spill over

   cháan krachōn chon
   be scattered everywhere water

The water ripples repeatedly. It spills over and is scattered
everywhere.

—from *Inlarat Kham Chan*7

In (6), nāam 'water' should precede krāphāam 'be in ripples' and chon
'water' should precede krachōok 'spill over'.

(7) man sēen priâw biaw nāa khāw hāa kan
    it very sour distorted face get seek each other

It is very sour and everyone's face is distorted.

—from *Nirat Muang Klaeng*8

In (7), biaw 'distorted' should appear after nāa 'face', but biaw
'distorted' is needed to rhyme internally with priâw 'sour' and nāa 'face' with
hāa 'seek'.

(8) chum nák phàktōp sōn boon sēen
    plentiful very marsh herb pile up tuberous plants inserted
Marsh herbs are plentiful. Tuberous plants are inserted (among marsh herbs).

—from Nirat Suphan

In (8), phàktòp 'a marsh herb' should appear before chum 'plentiful', but it is needed in that position in a khlooŋ in order to have a low tone in the second syllable. It is also interesting to find that an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb is moved before a subject in Thai poetry, whereas such a transformation cannot apply to a sentence in a daily conversation. Readers of Thai poetry must be able to identify an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb in order to locate its subject which, in this case, follows the verbal. Those who are not familiar with the structure of the Thai language may confuse the transformed structure of this type with a normal SVO pattern where the subject is understood or deleted. Thus, the subject may be taken as object of the preceding verb.

Noun+Modifier becomes Modifier+Noun. A modifier in the Thai language usually follows the noun it modifies, but in poetry it may precede a noun it modifies, for example:

(9) boon pàak yâak cà kée mây sin lin boon
gossipy mouth difficult will correct not end tongue gossipy

It is difficult to correct a gossipy mouth. Gossipy tongues are ceaseless.

—from Nirat Suphan

In (9), boon 'gossipy' should follow pàak 'mouth', but pàak rhymes with yâak 'difficult' for the poet's satisfaction.

(10) laaq law chêk sùk sàłâa
some group is like ripe areca nut

Some groups (are dressed) in the color of ripe areca nuts.

—from Lilit Taleng Phai

In (10), sàłâa 'areca nut' should precede sùk 'ripe'.

(11) yon thǒŋŋ pròŋŋ chôŋŋ chuan boon
look at hall airy space invite look at