THAI SENTENCE FOCUS[1]

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1. Introduction

No one will deny that in his daily conversation, certain elements of the sentences he utters are in focus[2] while some others are not. Sentence focus brings the element in question to the center of attention, provides a contrast with other elements, and emphasizes the element in question to be remembered in later discourse. The element in focus must be either a noun phrase or a verb in a matrix sentence. Longacre 1976 believes that "focus is a relatively superficial phenomenon or, in terms of constructional derivation, a relatively late rule in progressing from the semantic depth towards the surface."[3] This analysis suggests that the element in focus is given a semantic feature [+focus] in the deep structure.[4] This paper aims to show how sentence focus in the Thai language works.

2. Focus on noun

Any noun in the deep structure, including a noun in a prepositional phrase in a matrix sentence, can be focused but a noun phrase in an embedded sentence cannot. When the [+focus] feature appears in any noun phrase, the third person pronoun attachment transformation is applied as follows:

(1) $$X \quad \underset{[+\text{focus}]}{NP} \quad Y \Longrightarrow X \quad \underset{[+\text{focus}]}{NP} \quad \begin{bmatrix}[+\text{PRO}]\\[+\text{III}]\end{bmatrix} Y$$

Y must not be [[+PRO], [+III]], or khɔ̌ŋ.[5]

Rule (1) will introduce a pronominal segment attached to the noun phrase by incorporating the feature [+PRO], [+III], to the rightmost position of a noun phrase, and copying significant features from the preceding noun to signify pronominal status. The pronominal added will be realized as follows:

(2) $$\begin{bmatrix}[+\text{PRO}]\\[+\text{III}]\\[-\text{human}]\end{bmatrix} \Longrightarrow \text{man} \quad \text{'it'}$$

(3) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+monarch], [+prince] ⇒ phrá?oŋ thân 'he, she'

(4) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+monk], [+prince 2], [+high ranking official] ⇒ thân 'he, she'

(5) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+older person] ⇒ kææ 'he, she'

(6) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+feminine], [+polite] ⇒ thəə 'she'

(7) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+polite] ⇒ khǎw 'he, she'

(8) [+PRO], [+III], [+human], [+foreigner], [-polite] ⇒ man 'he, she'

Consider, for example, the following sentences:

(9) phôɔ chôɔp sa̤a tua nán
father like shirt classifier that
Father likes that shirt.

(10) pàak khɔ̌ɔŋ phûuyǐŋ khon nán baaŋ
mouth of woman classifier that thin
That woman's lips are thin.[6]

If the nouns in (9) and (10) are focused, rule (1) will apply to (9) and (10) yielding (11) and (12) respectively.

(11) a. phɔ̂ɔ thân chɔ̂ɔp sɨ̂a tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.[7]

b. phɔ̂ɔ kææ[8] chɔ̂ɔp sɨ̂a tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.

c. phɔ̂ɔ khǎw[9] chɔ̂ɔp sɨ̂a tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.

(12) pàak khɔ̌ɔŋ phûuyǐŋ khon nán thəə baaŋ[10]
mouth of woman classifier that she thin
That woman's lips are thin.

When the focus element is pre-sententially transposed, it becomes the topic[11] of the sentence. (11) and (12) will become (13) and (14) respectively.

(13) a. sɨ̂a tua nán phɔ̂ɔ thân chɔ̂ɔp man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

b. sɨ̂a tua nán phɔ̂ɔ kææ chɔ̂ɔp man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

c. sɨ̂a tua nán phɔ̂ɔ khǎw chɔ̂ɔp man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

(14) *khɔ̌ɔŋ phûuyǐŋ khon nán pàak thəə baaŋ
of woman classifier that mouth she thin
That woman, her lips are thin.

On the evidence cited above, one can propose the following transformational rule, the focus-preposing transformation.

(15) # X (P) NP $\begin{bmatrix}[+\text{focus}]\end{bmatrix}$ $\begin{bmatrix}[+\text{PRO}] \\ [+\text{III}]\end{bmatrix}$ Y $\Longrightarrow$ # (P) NP $\begin{bmatrix}[+\text{focus}]\end{bmatrix}$ X $\begin{bmatrix}[+\text{PRO}] \\ [+\text{III}]\end{bmatrix}$ Y

A noun phrase or a prepositional phrase containing a noun in focus is transposed to a pre-sentential position but the pronominal segment introduced by the third person pronoun attachment transformation is not.

Note that thân 'he, she' in (13), man 'it' also in (13), and thəə 'she' in (14) are not preposed with the noun phrase.

When rule (15) is applied, any other element in focus to the right of the preposed noun phrase is defocused. This can be represented by the following rule.

(16) X NP Y NP Z ⟹ X NP Y NP Z
[+focus] [+focus] [+focus]

This rule prevents other focus elements from being transposed to a pre-sentential position.

Rule (16) will block phôɔ 'father' in (13) and pàak 'mouth' in (14) from being preposed to a pre-sentential position because they no longer contain the [+focus] feature.

If the matrix sentence with the noun phrase in focus is a question, the question element is transformed to the right of the preposed noun phrase in rule (15) and this can be represented as follows:

(17) X NP Y Q Z ⟹ X NP Q Y Z
[+focus] [+focus]

Suppose that (13a) and (14) contain a question element as the following:

(18) sa̍a tua nán phôɔ thân chôɔp man rɯ̌ɯ
shirt classifier that father he like it question
That shirt. Does father like it?

(19) khɔ̌ɔŋ phûuyı̌ŋ ko̍n nán pàak thəə baaŋ rɯ̌ɯ
of woman classifier that mouth she thin question
That woman. Are her lips thin?

When rule (17) is applied, (18) and (19) will become (20) and (21) respectively.

(20) sa̍a tua nán rɯ̌ɯ phôɔ thân chôɔp man
shirt classifier that question father he like it
That shirt? Does father like it?