THAI SENTENCE FOCUS

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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 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." This analysis suggests that the element in focus is given a semantic feature [+focus] in the deep structure. 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:

\[
(1) \quad X \quad NP \quad Y \quad \Rightarrow \quad X \quad NP \quad [\ [+\text{PRO}] \ Y \\
\quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{[+focus]} \quad \quad [\text{[+III]}] \\
\quad \quad \quad \quad \quad Y \quad \text{must not be } [[\text{+PRO}], \text{[+III]}], \quad \text{or kʰɔŋ.}
\]

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:

\[
(2) \quad [\text{[+PRO]}} \quad \Rightarrow \quad \text{man 'it'}
\]

\[
\quad \quad \text{[+III]} \quad \text{[-human]}
\]
Consider, for example, the following sentences:

(9) phó chớp sìa tua nán
    father like shirt classifier that
    Father likes that shirt.
If the nouns in (9) and (10) are focused, rule (1) will apply to (9) and (10) yielding (11) and (12) respectively.

(11) a. phó thân chóop sâa tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.

b. phó kææ8 chóop sâa tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.

c. phó khâw9 chóop sâa tua nán man
father he like shirt classifier that it
Father, he likes that shirt.

(12) pâak khɔɔŋ phûuyîŋh khon nán theè baâŋl0
mouth of woman classifier that she thin
That woman's lips are thin.

When the focus element is pre-sententially transposed, it becomes the topic11 of the sentence. (11) and (12) will become (13) and (14) respectively.

(13) a. sâa tua nán phó thân chóop man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

b. sâa tua nán phó kææ chóop man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

c. sâa tua nán phó khâw chóop man
shirt classifier that father he like it
That shirt, father, he likes it.

(14) *khɔɔŋ phûuyîŋh khon nán pâak theè baâŋ
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  [[+PRO] Y  # (P)  NP  X  [[+PRO] Y  
    [+focus]  [[+III]]  [+focus]  [[+III]]
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 thán 'he, she' in (13), man 'it' also in (13), and thẹ '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) $X$ $NP$ $Y$ $NP$ $Z$ $X$ $NP$ $Y$ $NP$ $Z$

$[+focus]$ $[+focus]$ $\Rightarrow$ $[+focus]$

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

Rule (16) will block phọc '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) $X$ $NP$ $Y$ $Q$ $Z$ $X$ $NP$ $Q$ $Y$ $Z$

$[+focus]$ $\Rightarrow$ $[+focus]$

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

(18) sịa tua nán phọc thán chọọp man rīi
shirt classifier that father he like it question
That shirt. Does father like it?

(19) khoŋ phюсьn ɤŋ khoŋ nán pàak thẹ thọ baŋ rīi
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) sịa tua nán rīi phọc thán chọọp man
shirt classifier that question father he like it
That shirt? Does father like it?