THERE ARE NO PREPOSITIONS IN THAI

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0. Introduction

It is not necessary that all languages have prepositions. Whitney (1889: 403) states that “The indelible words are less distinctly divided into separate parts of speech in Sanskrit than in usual elsewhere in Indo-European language—owing to the fact that the class of prepositions hardly has a real existence, but is represented by certain adverbial words which are to a greater or less extent used prepositionally.” The term “preposition” did not appear in Thai grammatical terminology until Uppakitsinlapasarn (1953: 58-70) wrote his Siamese Grammar: Morphology in 1953. He defines a preposition as a kind of word that precedes a noun, a pronoun, or a certain kind of verb in order to indicate the function of the noun, the pronoun, and the verb it precedes. ¹ A Thai preposition is somewhat different from an English preposition because the English preposition connects words. The Thai preposition is the word used in front of a noun which Thai grammarians add in front of a noun to signify the different cases in the translation of the noun declension in Pali.² Kullavanijaya’s analysis of coverts and noun auxiliaries (Kullavanijaya 1974: 72-93), Clark’s analysis of coverts and relator nouns (Clark 1975: 222-247), Clark and Prasithratthasint’s analysis of relator nouns (Clark and Prasithratthasint 1985: 53-65), and Sayankena’s analysis of relator head nouns (Sayankena 1985: 82-83) are heading in the same direction as mine. It is evident that the words which are called prepositions in the traditional Thai grammar do not constitute a single form class like English as defined by Curme (1947: 27-29) or by Fries (1952: 95-96).³

1. VERBS MISTAKENLY CALLED PREPOSITIONS

Action verbs like ‘taam ‘to follow’; ‘căak ‘to leave, to depart’, ‘tôn ‘to reach’, ‘sū ‘to reach’, ‘kratthang ‘to touch on’, con ‘to end’, tŏ ‘to connect, to build, to continue’, and etc. are all verbs in their occurrence, but their translation into English are often prepositions, for example: taam ‘along’, căak ‘from’, tôn ‘to’, sū ‘to’, kratthang ‘until’, con ‘until’, tŏ ‘to’. I consider them verbs because they can be negated when occurring as a main verb signifying prepositional semantic interpretation or when occurring as the last member of a verb string signifying the same semantic interpretation as the main verb.

1.1 taam ‘to follow’

(1) khăw taam hăa lûuk
he follow search child
He was searching for his child.

(2) khăw deen taam hăa lûuk
he walk follow search child
He was walking in search of his child.

(3) khăw deen taam lûuk
he walk follow child
He walked, following his child.

(4) khăw deen taam thănôn
he walk follow street
He walks along the street.

(5) dēk dēk nang taam raaw săphaan
child sit follow rail bridge
Children sit on the bridge rail.

No one will deny that taam ‘to follow’ in (1) is a verb because it occurs after a pronoun khăw ‘he’ which is the subject of the sentence and can be negated. taam ‘to follow’ in (2) is also a verb but it occurs as a second member of the verb string signifying functional meaning (Filbeck 1975: 112-129). taam ‘to follow’ in (3) is also a verb where khăw ‘he’ follows and lûuk ‘child’ precedes. taam ‘to follow’ in (4) is considered a preposition by traditional Thai grammarians because they do not see the semantic equivalence between taam ‘to follow’ in (3) and (4) and the translation of taam ‘to follow’ in
(4) is rather closer to ‘along’ than to ‘to follow’. Our argument is that (3) and (4) are structurally the same and the meaning of taam ‘to follow’ remains the same in both sentences. The only difference is that the nominal antact lūuk ‘child’ in (3) is an animate noun and the nominal antact thān̄n̄ ‘street’ in (4) is an inanimate noun. Thus taam ‘to follow’ in (3), (4), and (5) are all verbs, not prepositions.

1.2 cāak ‘to leave, to depart’

(6) khāw cāak bān maa
he leave home come
He left home (to come here).

(7) khāw maa cāak bān
he come leave home
He came from home.

It is evident that cāak ‘to leave, to depart’, in (6) is a verb where bān ‘home’ is the object. cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ in (7) is not semantically different from the one in (6). I see no point in calling cāak ‘to leave, to depart’, in (6) a verb and cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ in (7) a preposition. Kulvanijaya (1974: 82-83) considers cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ a coverb or a derived preposition.

(8) khāw rīpprōn deen cāak raw pay he hurry walk leave we go He hurriedly walked away from us.

(9) khāw rīpprōn deen cāak pay he hurry walk leave go He hurriedly walked away.

cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ in (9) functions as a member of a verb string rīpprōn deen cāak pay ‘hurriedly walked away’ and its meaning is the same as cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ in (8) where raw ‘we’ is not deleted as it is in (9). I find no reason to classify the two cāak ‘to leave, to depart’ differently.

1.3  th-known ‘to reach’

(10) khāw cā th-known bān khīn nī‘i
he will reach home night this
He will arrive home tonight.

(11) khāw cā pay th-known chāngmāy
he will go reach Chiangmai
khīn nī‘i
night this
He will arrive in Chiangmai tonight.

(12) khāw cā pay th-known chāngmāy
he will not go reach Chiangmai
khīn nī‘i
night this
He will not arrive in Chiangmai tonight.

th-known ‘to reach’ in (10) is definitely a verb because it follows a preverb cā ‘will’ and can be negated. In traditional Thai grammar th-known ‘to reach’ in (11) is considered a preposition even though it can also be negated as in (12). To me there is no possibility of classifying th-known ‘to reach’ in either case as a preposition.

1.4 sūu ‘to come to’

(13) raw cā māy sūu khīn lūuksāw
we will not come to ask for daughter
khāw kōm rī‘
he before question
Should we not ask for his daughter’s hand before doing something else?

(14) khāw hān nā pay thīt nī‘a
he turn face go direction north
He turned to face north.

(15) khāw hān nā sūu thīt nī‘a
he turn face come to direction north
He turned toward the North.

sūu ‘to come to’ in (13) is definitely a verb because it occurs after a preverb cā ‘will’ and can be negated. In traditional Thai grammar pay ‘to go’ in (14) is considered a secondary verb (Uppakitsinlapasan 1953: 68, Haas and Subhank 1948: 376-378, and Warotamasikkhadi 1972: 18, 34) and sūu ‘to come to’ a preposition (Uppakitsinlapasan 1953: 139). Because the two sentences reveal the same structure, both pay ‘to go’ and sūu ‘to come to’ should be the same part of speech, namely verbs.

1.5 krāthān ‘to touch on’

(16) khīn krāthān fān
wave touch on shore
Waves dash against the shore.

(17) sāamlī fhanrayāa yōm
husband wife should
krāthōkrāthān kan sāmēe
husband and wife usually clash with each other
He and she always clash against each other.

18: khāw rō khōn krāthān thīang
he wait you touch on noon
He waited for you until noon.

krāthān ‘to touch on’ in (16) is definitely a verb because it occurs after the subject khīn ‘wave’ and before the object fān ‘shore’. krāthān ‘touch on’ rarely occurs independently to signify pro-
positional meaning but rather occurs as a compound verb krathop krathang ‘to strike against, to touch on’ as in (17). krathang ‘to touch on’ in (18) is considered a member of a verb string roo kun krathang ‘wait for you until’ to signify a functional meaning ‘touching on’.

1.6 con ‘to end’
   (19) khaw con mum
       he end corner
       He is cornered.
   (20) khaw khooy kun con sawaan
       he wait you end dawn
       He waited for you until dawn.

Con ‘to end’ in (19) is definitely a verb because it occurs after the subject khaw ‘he’ and before the object mum ‘corner’ and it can be negated. It seems to me that both con ‘to end’ in (19) and (20) signify the same meaning with (19) showing a propositional meaning and (20) showing a functional meaning.

1.7 tso ‘to connect, to build, to continue’
   (21) phom tso pleen caak khruu
       l build song leave teacher
       I practiced the song with my teacher.
   (22) thanaay yin khamron tso lawyer file complaint connect
       sian court
       The lawyer filed the complaint to the court.

Tso ‘to connect, to build, to continue’ in (21) is definitely a verb because it occurs after the subject phom ‘l’ and can be negated. Tso ‘to connect, to build, to continue’ in (22) is a member of a verb string yin khamron tso ‘to file the complaint with’ shows a functional meaning.

2. STATIVE VERBS MISTAKENLY CALLED PREPOSITIONS

Some words which are called prepositions in traditional Thai grammar are stative verbs or descriptive verbs, such as klay ‘far’ and Klai ‘near’.

2.1 klay ‘far’
   (23) baaan khaw yuu klay
       home he be far
       His house is far (away).

2.2 klay ‘near’
   (24) baaan khaw yuu may klay
       home he be not far
       His house is not far (away).

(25) baaan khaw yuu klay caak baaan chan
       home he be far leave home I
       house is far from my house.

(26) baaan khaw yuu klay baaan chan
       home he be far home I
       His house is far from my house.

Klay ‘far’ in (23) and (24) is definitely a verb because it can be negated as in (24). Klay ‘far’ in (25) is a member of a verb string yuu klay caak ‘to be far away from’ and it is a verb and klay ‘far’ in (26) is structurally and semantically the same as in (25) except caak ‘to leave, to depart’ is deleted in (26).

2.3 nouns mistakenly called prepositions


3.1 khnon ‘thing’
   (29) sâa khnon kun suay
       shirt thing you pretty
       Your shirt is pretty.
I consider ส้า กี่อน กุ่น 'your shirt' in (29) a noun phrase with a string of three nouns, where กี่อน 'thing' is a noun according to the above definition. We ignore the translation of กี่อน 'thing' as 'of' in English. Prasitsrathinsit (1985: 94-95) also considers กี่อน 'thing (of)' as a noun.

3.2 ฮาน 'place'
(30) ทุก คืน ตอนกลาง 10 ห่าง ฮาน
each person want world place
สันติภาพ
peace

Everyone wants a peaceful world.

ฮาน 'place' in (30) is a noun in the noun string 10 ฮาน สันติภาพ 'world of peace'.

3.3 ที่ 'place'
(31) ข้าม ยาม จะ คุม ฮาน
he progressive will go visit
กุ่น ที่ บ้าน
you place home

He is going to visit you at home.

3.4 น้า 'inside'
(32) ภอุ่ม หก ปืน ว่าย น้า
I keep gun keep inside

น้า 'inside' in (32) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase น้า หก ปืน 'in this drawer'.

3.5 น้อย 'outside'
(33) ข้าม ยิน คู่ ยุ่น น้อย บ้าน
he stand wait be outside home

น้อย 'outside' in (33) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase น้อย บ้าน 'outside the house'.

3.6 บอน 'top'
(34) ถึงจิต หมา ยุ่น บอน
book who place be top
ต่อ น้า
table that

Whose book is placed on that table?

บอน 'top' in (34) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase บอน ต่อ น้า 'on the table'.

3.7 น้า 'face'
(35) ผ่ากัน ผ่า หมา ยุ่น น้า ร้าน
friend I wait be face store

น้า 'face' in (35) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase ยุ่น น้า ร้าน 'in front of the store'.

3.8 น้า 'back'
(36) ดีก ดีก ล่น คาน ยุ่น
child child play each other be

น้า วัด
back temple

Some children are playing behind the temple.

น้า 'back' in (36) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase น้า วัด 'back of the temple'.

3.9 ก้าว 'middle'
(37) ก้าว น้า ก้าว ทำ
he sit middle street

He sits in the middle of the street.

ก้าว 'middle' in (37) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase ก้าว ทำ 'in the middle of the street'.

3.10 ก้าว 'side'
(38) ถ้า ยิน ข้าม ก้าว ข้าก น้า
she stand close side he

ก้าว 'side' in (38) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase ก้าว ข้าก 'on his side'.

3.11 ริม 'edge, rim'
(39) ข้าม ยิน ริม สำาน
he stand edge pond

He stood on the edge of the pond.

ริม 'edge, rim' in (39) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase ริม สำาน 'on the edge of the pond'.

3.12 น้า 'north'
(40) ข้าม ทะน์ก่อน ว่าย น้า หัว
he place thing keep north head

น้า 'north' is a relator head noun in the noun phrase น้า หัว 'on the top of his head'.

3.13 ตาย 'south'
(41) มะอ๋ว คุณ ตาย ต่อ
cat sleep south table

The cat is sleeping under the table.

ตาย 'south' in (41) is a relator head noun in the noun phrase ตาย ต่อ 'under the table'.

3.14 เวลา 'time'
(42) ข้าม ม้า หมวด ช้าว
he come time morning

He came this morning.