A Comparative Study of chǎk and rɤ̂:m in Thai

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Abstract

The present study is an expansion of the paper, 'The Study of the Perfective chǎk in Thai,' (Burapacheep 1995). The present work deals with the function and meaning of the perfective chǎk in comparison with the verb rɤ̂:m. The former is commonly used in colloquial Thai but not normally found in formal usage, whereas the latter can be used in both. In carrying out the analysis we shall examine the cooccurrence of chǎk on the one hand, and rɤ̂:m on the other, with the different categories of verbs proposed in the present study. It will be suggested that the two forms which seem to be semantically similar and can often be used interchangeably have some significant differences in their meaning and usage.

1. Introduction

This paper presents a comparative study of the perfective chǎk and the verb rɤ̂:m in Thai. Chǎk is generally used colloquially and is not normally found in formal usage , whereas rɤ̂:m is commonly used both in colloquial and formal Thai. Apart from the difference in the level of formality, the two forms can be used interchangeably in several contexts, expressing similar meaning. The meaning of the verb rɤ̂:m is generally given as 'to begin, to start' ;whereas chǎk , a perfective aspect marker indicates the beginning of a situation with an implication that the situation referred to is different from the previous one (Burapacheep: 1995).

The analysis deals with the combination of chǎk. on the one hand, and rɤ̂:m, on the other , when each of them occurs preceding the verbs of the proposed categories. The study is expected to lead to a better understanding of the behaviour of the two forms.

2. Present treatmant

The present study examines the behaviour of chǎk and rɤ̂:m on the basis of their co-occurrence with the proposed categories of verbs which are classified according to the kind of situation they normally indicate in a simple sentence without temporal adverbials or aspect maskers. The framework adopted here is based on Vendler (1967), Comrie (1976) and Lyons (1977).

For the purpose of the present study, Thai verbs will be broadly divided into two main categories:

1. Verbs indicating states which are further divided into
   1.1 verbs indicating permanent states
   1.2 verbs denoting temporary states

2. Verbs indicating dynamic situations, which are further subclassified into

   2.1 verbs indicating processes
   2.2 verbs denoting events

We shall proceed by examining the use of chák and rɔ̂:m when they occur singly with the proposed categories of verbs , starting from their occurrence with state verbs.

2.1 The co-occurrence of chák with verbs indicating states

The perfective chak frequently occurs with verbs indicating both permanent and temporary states. Examples illustrating the use of chak with permanent state verbs are given in (1) and (2) and with temporary state verbs in (3) and (4) below :

(1) khǎu chák khrɛ̌ŋ rɛːŋ
 he (perf.) be healthy
 He is beginning to be healthy.
(2) khǎu chák kɛ̀ː
 he (perf.) be old
 He is starting to get old.
(3) khǎu chák hiu
 he (perf.) be hungry
 He is starting to feel hungry.
(4) khǎu chák nùai
 he (perf.) be tired
 He is beginning to feel tired

Sentences (1) - (4) refer to the inception of situations with an implication that they are different from previous ones. For instance, in sentence (1) it would normally be taken that the person in question was previously not in good health.

2.2 The co-occurrence of rɤ̂ːm with verbs indicating states

Generally speaking, rɤ̂ːm can freely occur with verbs denoting both permanent and temporary states and indicate the beginning of a situation. The verb rɤ̂ːm can replace chák in all the examples above denoting similar meaning. Consider (5) - (8) below:

(5) khǎu rɤ̂ːm khnɤ̌ŋ rɛ̌ːŋ
he (begin) be healthy
He is beginning to be healthy

(6) khǎu rɤ̂ːm kɛ̀ː
he (begin) be old
He is beginning to get old.

(7) khǎu rɤ̂ːm hǐu
he (begin) be hungry
He is starting to feel hungry.

(8) khǎu rɤ̂ːm nuàːi
he begin be tired
He is starting to feel tired.

Sentences (5) - (8) refer to the beginning of situations and it's understood that they are different from the preceding ones. The meanings of these sentences are similar to those of (1) - (4) except that the latter sound more informal. Apart from the difference in the level of formality, chak and rɤ̂ːm seem to be semantically similar and they can often be used interchangeably when occurring with state verbs. However, there are cases where the two differ. Consider , for instance, the sentences below:

(9) khǎu rɤ̂ːm pen tha hǎːn lɛ́ːu
he begin be soldier (perf.)
He has become a soldier now.

The sentence may be uttered in a context such as when the person was known to have been drafted and now he has begun his days in military service.

(10) * khǎu chák pen tha hǎːn lɛ́ːu
he (perf.) be soldier (perf.)

Sentence (10) is normally ungrammatical but it may be accepted if the sentence is taken as referring to a change in the behaviour of the person in question i.e. that he is now behaving in a soldierlike manner.

Notice that if we add some words to (10) so that it is understood as expressing a change, the sentence will be perfectly acceptable as in (11) below:

(11) khǎu chák pen tha hǎ:n thǐ: di: lɛ́:u
    he (perf.) be soldier (rel.pro.) good (perf)
    He is becoming a good soldier now.

The use of chák which implies a change from the previous situation fits in this context. The verb rɤ̂:m can replace chák as in (12) below , expressing a similar meaning:

(12) khǎu rɤ̂:m pen tha hǎ:n thǐ: di: lɛ́:u
    he begin be soldier (rel.pro.) good (perf.)
    He is beginning to be a good soldier now.

2.3 The co-occurrence of chak and r :m with verbs indicating dynamic situations
    2.3.1 Chák and rɤ̂:m with verbs indicating processes

With verbs indicating processes, the differences in the behaviour of chák and rɤ̂:m can be seen more clearly. As with verbs denoting states, rɤ̂:m can freely occur with process verbs to indicate the beginning of a situation. The use of chák with process verbs, on the other hand, is restricted. Normally, the co-occurrence of chák with process verbs is unacceptable if the situation is interpreted as a single incident. To illustrate the point (13)- (16) are given below; (13) and (14) are grammatical , whereas (15) and (16) are not :

(13) khǎu rɤ̂:m dɤ̀:n
    he begin walk
    He is beginning to walk.
(14) khǎu rɤ̂:m lá:ŋ ca:n
    he begin wash dish
    He is starting to do the washing up.
(15) * khau chák dɤ̀:n
    he (perf.) walk
(16) * khau chák lá:ŋ ca:n
    he (perf.) wash dish

Sentences such as (15) and (16) can be made acceptable with the addition of phrases such as reu khûɯn ' faster' and di: khûɯn 'better' which indicate a change. Consider (17) and (18) below, to which reu khûɯn and di: khûɯn are added , respectively:

(17) khău chák dɤ̆ːɲ reu khɯ̂n
he (perf.) walk faster
He is starting to walk faster.
(18) khău chák láːŋ caːn di: khɯ̂n
he (perf.) wash dish better
He is beginning to do the washing up better.

The acceptability of chák in these contexts corresponds with our treatment of chák as a marker indicating the inception of a situation, implying a change from the previous one.

As can be expected , rɤ̂ːm can also occur in contexts where a change is involved. The verb rɤ̂ːm can replace chák in (17) and (18) resulting in (19) and (20) below:

(19) khău rɤ̂ːm dɤ̆ːn reu khɯ̂n
he begin walk faster
He is starting to walk faster.
(20) khău rɤ̂ːm láːŋ caːn di: khɯ̂n
he begin wash dish better
He is beginning to do the washing up better.

One interesting point about the co-occurrence of chák with verbs denoting processes is that chák may be used with verbs of this group when the situation referred to can appropriately be taken as indicating a repeated activity rather than a single one. (21) and (22) are given to illustrate the point:

(21) khău chák àːn naŋ sɯ̆phim
he (perf.) read newspaper
He is starting to read newspapers more often.
(22) khău chák du: tho: ra thát
he (perf.) watch television
He is beginning to watch T.V. more often.

The situations in (21) and (22) can be interpreted as newly formed habits recently developed by the person in question.

With the use of rɤ̂ːm instead of chák as in (23) and (24) below, the most likely interpretation will be that each sentence refers to the beginning of a single activity not a repeated one. In other words , the situations are not taken as new habits:

(23) khău rɤ̂ːm àːn naŋ sɯ̆ːphim
he begin read newspaper
He is beginning to read a newspaper.

(24) khǎu rɤ̂:m du: tho: rathát
he begin watch television
He is starting to watch television.

2.4 Chák and rɤ̂:m with verbs indicating events

Chák and rɤ̂:m do not typically co-occur with verbs denoting events as an event occurs at a single moment and does not have a duration. Both chák and rɤ̂:m which refer to the beginning of a situation imply that the situation has a duration. Normally the use of chák and rɤ̂:m with verbs indicating events is not acceptable when the situation is interpreted as a single event. Consider, for instance, (25) - (28) below :

(25) * khǎu rɤ̂:m hòk lóm
        he begin fall down
(26) * nǎŋ rɤ̂:m còp
        film begin end
(27) * khǎu chák hòk lóm
        he (perf.) fall down
(28) * nǎŋ chák còp
        film (perf.) end

It should be pointed out that chak and r :m can co-occur with event verbs when the situation in question can appropriately be interpreted as a series of events rather than a single one. However, there are differences in the behaviour of the two, consider , for instance , (29) and (30) below :

(29) khǎu chák ai
        he (perf.) cough
        He is beginning to cough.
(30) khǎu rɤ̂:m ai
        he begin cough
        He is beginning to cough.

It is suggested that there is a subtle difference in meaning between (29) and (30). Although both of them refer to the inception of a situation, (29) is usually taken as having an added implication that the person in question has been coughing for some time. For instance, the sentence may be uttered in a context in which the person is suspected to have developed a sore throat, while (30) may be said to be neutral as to this implication.

In (31) and (32) below, the use of rɤ̂:m is acceplatele whereas, chák is not ;

(31) kȟau rî:m khɔ́ pratu:
he begin knock door
He is beginning to knock at the door.
(32)* kȟau chák khɔ́ pratu:
he (perf.) knock door

(32) will be acceptable with the addition of phrases such as daŋ khɯ̂n 'louder' and na:n khɯ̂n 'longer' which will indicate a change. In (33) below, dan khɯ̂n 'louder' is added :

(33) kȟau chák khɔ́ pra tu: daŋ khɯ̂n
he (perf.) kn ck door louder
He is beginning to knock louder at the door.

So far we have seen similarities and differences in the behaviour of the perfective chák and the verb rɤ̂:m with regards their co-occurrence with the proposed categories of verbs. Chák and rɤ̂:m may be considered to be semantically similar and can be used interchangeably when occurring with most state verbs. Their differences clearly emerge when they combine with verbs indicating processes and events. It is suggested that the verb rɤ̂:m covers a wider range of usage. It indicates the beginning of a situation without necessarily implying a change from the previous one. Chák, on the other hand, does not only refer to the inception of a situation but also implies that the situation referred to is different from the preceding one.

3. Conclusion

The study of the use of the perfective chák and the verb rɤ̂:m against the background of an account of Thai verbs has led to a better understanding of the meaning and usage of the two forms. Their similarities and differences have clearly ermerged when they co-occur with different types of verbs. The study corresponds with our treatment of chák as a perfective marker indicating the beginning of a situation with an implication that the situation is different from the previous one. The verb rɤ̂:m also indicates the beginning of a situation but is neutral with regard to an implication of a change from the preceding one.

Notes

1. In Comrie (1976 : 3 - 20) aspect is defined as 'different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.' It is also stated that perfectivity involves a lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal constituency of a situation and that with the use of the perfective forms the situation is presented as a single whole. Comrie further points out that the perfective form of some verbs, in particular of some stative verbs, can be used to indicate the beginning of a situation. (ingressive meaning).

2. The term situation , employed by Lyons and Comrie as a general cover term for states , processes and events, is adopted here in the same role.

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