A Comparative Study of chak and râm in Thai

Tasanalai Burapacheep
Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities
Kasetsart University, Bangkok
10900, Thailand

Abstract

The present study is an expansion of the paper, 'The Study of the Perfective chak in Thai,' (Burapacheep 1995). The present work deals with the function and meaning of the perfective chak in comparison with the verb râm. 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 chak on the one hand, and râm 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 chak and the verb râm in Thai. Chak is generally used colloquially and is not normally found in formal usage, whereas râm 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 râm is generally given as 'to begin, to start', whereas chak, 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 chak on the one hand, and râm 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 treatment

The present study examines the behaviour of chak and râm 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 markers. 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 chak and räm when they occur singly with the proposed categories of verbs, starting from their occurrence with state verbs.

2.1 The co-occurrence of chak 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) khau  chak  khao
 he (perf.) be healthy
 He is beginning to be healthy.

(2) khau  chak  kae
 he (perf.) be old
 He is starting to get old.

(3) khau  chak  hiu
 he (perf.) be hungry
 He is starting to feel hungry.

(4) khau  chak  nauai
 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 \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) with verbs indicating states

Generally speaking, \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) can freely occur with verbs denoting both permanent and temporary states and indicate the beginning of a situation. The verb \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) can replace chak in all the examples above denoting similar meaning. Consider (5) - (8) below:

(5) khâu \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) khọ̀n \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{n} \)
he (begin) be healthy
He is beginning to be healthy

(6) khâu \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) kẹ̀
he (begin) be old
He is beginning to get old.

(7) khâu \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) hius
he (begin) be hungry
He is starting to feel hungry.

(8) khâu \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) nọ́i
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 \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) 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) khâu \( \hat{\mathbf{r}}^\text{m} \) pen thà hàn \( \hat{\mathbf{g}}^\text{u} \)
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) * khâu chàk pen thà hàn \( \hat{\mathbf{g}}^\text{u} \)
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) kʰau chʰak pen thə həːn thiː diː ləː u
    he (perf.) be soldier (rel.pro.) good (perf)
    He is becoming a good soldier now.

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

(12) kʰau rʰ:m pen thə həːn thiː diː ləː u
    he begin be soldier (rel.pro.) good (perf)
    He is beginning to be a good soldier now.

2.3 The co-occurrence of chʰak and rʰ:m with verbs indicating dynamic situations

2.3.1 Chʰak and rʰ:m with verbs indicating processes

With verbs indicating processes, the differences in the behaviour of chʰak and rʰ:m can be seen more clearly. As with verbs denoting states, rʰ:m can freely occur with process verbs to indicate the beginning of a situation. The use of chʰak with process verbs, on the other hand, is restricted. Normally, the co-occurrence of chʰak 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) kʰau rʰ:m dəː n
    he begin walk
    He is beginning to walk.

(14) kʰau rʰ:m ləːŋ caː n
    he begin wash dish
    He is starting to do the washing up.

(15) *kʰau chʰak dəː n
    he (perf.) walk

(16) *kʰau chʰak ləːŋ caː n
    he (perf.) wash dish

Sentences such as (15) and (16) can be made acceptable with the addition of phrases such as reu kʰən ‘faster’ and diː kʰən ‘better’ which indicate a change. Consider (17) and (18) below, to which reu kʰən and diː kʰən are added, respectively:
(17) khâu chák dźên reu kʰuⁿ
    he  (perf.) walk faster
He is starting to walk faster.

(18) khâu chák laːŋ caːn diː kʰuⁿ
    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, r̂ː:m can also occur in contexts where a change is involved. The verb r̂ː:m can replace chák in (17) and (18) resulting in (19) and (20) below:

(19) khâu r̂ː:m dźên reu kʰuⁿ
    he begin walk faster
He is starting to walk faster.

(20) khâu r̂ː:m laːŋ caːn diː kʰuⁿ
    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) khâu chák âːn nàŋ sû phim
    he  (perf.) read newspaper
He is starting to read newspapers more often.

(22) khâu chák duː thoː raː thât
    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 r̂ː:m 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) khâu r̂ː:m âːn nàŋ sû phim
    he begin read newspaper
He is beginning to read a newspaper.
(24) khâu râm du: tho: rathá
he begin watch television
He is starting to watch television.

2.4 Chá́ and râm with verbs indicating events

Chá́ and râm do not typically co-occur with verbs denoting events as an event occurs at a single moment and does not have a duration. Both chá́ and râm which refer to the beginning of a situation imply that the situation has a duration. Normally the use of chá́ and râm with verbs indicating events is not acceptable when the situation is interpreted as a single event. Consider, for instance,

(25) * khâu râm hòk lóm
he begin fall down

(26) * nǎ́j râm còp
film begin end

(27) * khâu chá́ hòk lóm
he (perf.) fall down

(28) * nǎ́j chá́ còp
film (perf.) end

It should be pointed out that chá́ and rám 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) khâu chá́ ai
he (perf.) cough
He is beginning to cough.

(30) khâu râm 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 rám is acceptable whereas, chá́ is not.
(31)  kʰəu  r̩ː:m  khɔ̀ pratu:
      he   begin    knock    door
    He is beginning to knock at the door.

(32) kʰəu  chák  khɔ̀ pratu:
      he   (perf.)  knock    door

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

(33) kʰəu  chák  khɔ̀ pra tu:  daŋ  kʰən
      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 r̩ː:m with regards their co-occurrence with the proposed categories of verbs. Chák and r̩ː: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 r̩ː: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 r̩ː: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 emerged 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 r̩ː: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.

References


