SOME REMARKS ON "MÃY QUESTIONS"

Sirinee Chenvidyakarn

There are two distinctive groups of Thai yes-no questions, which are illustrated in the following dialogue:

A: ทีบ ความ ดาน นังย์ พัน ความ ความ และ Prejudice
     (you)(ever)(read)(book)(title)

   
   {
   รายงาน รัก
   มาย รายงาน รัก
   *
   *

   ทีบ ความ ดาน นังย์ พัน ความ ความ และ Prejudice
     (you)(ever)(tell)(story)(this)(give)(I)(listen to)

   “You have read Pride and Prejudice before, haven’t you?
   I remember you once related the story to me.”

B: ชาย ความ ดาน ทุก นึง นารน รัก
     (correct)(ever)(read)(time)(one)(long time)(already)

   “That’s right. I read it once a long time ago.”

   In this dialogue, A believes that B has read “Pride and Prejudice” before. This belief is revealed in the second half of his utterance คาม ดาน ไรบ ทีบ ความ ดาน นังย์ พัน ความ ความ และ Prejudice นึง ที่บ “I remember you once related the story to me.” Since A is quite certain that he knows that B has read this book, he is asking B this question not to check whether B has done so or not, but to obtain from B confirmation of his belief. In other words, A has enough information about what he is asking that he thinks he knows what the answer will be. The question markersชาย มาย,ชาย รัก พลาง, and มายชาย รัก are appropriate here, whereas รัก พลาง, มาย, and รัก are not. From this, we can say that Thai yes/no questions are classified into two groups:

   1. Questions whose question markers do not contain the wordชาย. The question markers belonging to this group areรัก,รัก พลาง, andมาย. The questions of this group will be called the ‘non-ชายQuestions.’

   2. Questions whose question markers contain the wordชาย. The question markers belonging to this group areชายมาย,ชาย รัก พลาง, andมายชาย รัก . The questions of this group will be called the ‘ชายQuestions.’

NON-ชายQUESTIONS

When asking non-ชาย questions, the speaker does not have enough information or has no information at all, so he cannot be certain about the answer. He asks the question not to confirm his belief since
he does not have any belief, but to have the hearer provide him with the information he is asking for.

The question markers used in the non-chày questions are r±±, r±± plàaw, and mày.

**mày** Questions.

**Dialogue I:**
The speaker simply wants to know whether the hearer has read Pride and Prejudice.

A: tʰəə kʰəəŋ ?àŋ nŋŋ s±± r±±əə Pride and (you) (ever) (read) (book) (title)

\[
\begin{align*}
\{ & r±± plàaw \\
& mày \\
& *r±± \\
& *mày chày r±± \\
& *chày mày \\
& *chày r±± plàaw \\
\}
\]

Prejudice khoŋə Jane Austin (belong to)

“Have you ever read Jane Austin’s Pride and Prejudice?”

B: kʰəəŋ ?àŋ hɔŋ nŋŋ naan ləaw (ever) (read) (time) (one) (long time) (already)

“I read it once a long time ago.”

In this dialogue, A does not know whether B has read the book Pride and Prejudice and wants to know whether B has done so or not, so A is asking B this question using either the mày or r±± plàaw marker. This shows that mày and r±± plàaw questions are alike in the sense that the speakers of both questions want to show the hearer that they do not know the answer and want to get an answer to remove their ignorance. The question marker r±± is inappropriate here because in asking a r±± question, the speaker wants not only to know whether what he is asking is true or not, but also to show the hearer that he thinks what he is asking is true.

**Dialogue II:**

A: chàŋ pʰəŋ kləp maa cəək Mainland (1) (just) (return) (come) (from)

pay New York, Washington D.C. ləʔMiami. (go) (and)


B: ləaw pay Chicago dəay (and) (go) (also) \{ r±± plàaw \}

“Did you also go to Chicago?”

In this dialogue, B has information about A’s going to the Mainland, and since he thinks that those who have gone to the big cities like New York, Washington D.C. and Miami may also have gone to Chicago, he draws the inference that A should have done the same thing. B asks the question with r±± plàaw marker to show A that although he has some background information about the possibility of A’s
going to Chicago, he does not want to predict the answer and wants A to be fully responsible for the answer himself.

The reason why the question marker mây is inappropriate here is because in asking mây questions, the speaker does not have any information about the thing he is asking. He is completely ignorant about the answer so he asks the question hoping that the hearer will supply the answer to remove his ignorance. In this dialogue, in which it is obvious that B bases his question on the information he has, only the question with ṭ+i plâaw, not mây is used.

The fact that in asking mây questions the speaker does not have any information about what he is asking helps to explain the limited use of mây questions when asking about something that has already happened. To clarify this point, let us consider the following sentences:

1. ṭoon thîi khâw taay theê jùu (when) (that) (he) (die) (you) (be)
   ᴱᵃᵖ khâw
   (with) (he)
   ṭ+i plâaw
   *mây
   “When he died, were you with him?”

2. pii thîi lâaw theê pay (year) (that) (already) (you) (go)
   Chicago
   ṭ+i plâaw
   *mây
   “Did you go to Chicago last year?”

3. pii thîi lâaw theê pay (year) (that) (already) (year) (go)
   Chicago bôɔy
   (often)
   ṭ+i plâaw
   mây
   “Did you go to Chicago often last year?”

All these three questions ask about things that happened in the past. mây cannot be used in either sentence 1 or sentence 2 because in asking about specific actions in the past like pay ‘go’ or jùu ‘be’ the speaker must have some information from which he can draw inferences about these actions. For example, the speaker of sentence 1 may have the following information prior to the uttering of sentence 1:

môɔnɔɔaw chân bôɔy chân wâa (sister) (my) (tell) (me) (that)
miawaannî theê pay
(yesterday) (you) (go)
ḥa khun sêm thiê bâan.
(visit) (Mr.) (Sang) (at) (house)
ṭoon thîi khâw taay theê jùu kâp khâw
r+i plâaw.

“My sister told me that you went to visit Mr. Sang at his house yesterday. When he died, were you with him?”

And for sentence 2, the following may be considered to be the information the speaker has before uttering 2:

theê chɔɔp pay Chicago chûy mây.
(you) (like) (go) (Q-marker)
pîi thîi lâaw theê pay (Chicago) ṭ+i plâaw.

“You like going to Chicago, don’t you.
Did you go there last year?”

It is unlikely that anyone can ask these two questions without having any prior assumption. So only ṭ+i plâaw, not mây is appropriate here.

As for sentence 3, it is different from sentence 2 only in that there is the word bôɔy ‘often’ in the former, but not in the latter; and this word alone triggers the use of mây. The reason behind this is that the speaker of sentence 3 may have some information about the action pay Chicago ‘going to Chicago’, but does not know anything about how often the action really took place. As he does not have any background information about how often the hearer went to Chicago last year and wants to know this, he asks the question with the question marker mây.

The question marker ṭ+i plâaw can also be used here because the speaker might have been able to make some inferences about the hearer going to Chicago often, as illustrated below:

pîi thîi lâaw theê pay Chicago bôɔy ṭ+i plâaw.

khôn bôɔy si? nà? phrɔs?
(perhaps) (often) (particle) (particle) (because)
nôɔn thê jùu thîi nàn
(younger brother) (you) (be) (at) (there)
nîi
(particle)

“Did you often go to Chicago last year? I guess you should have because your brother is there.”
From the above analysis, it is legitimate to say that ăy questions cannot be used to ask about specific actions in the past that require the speaker’s prior assumption. In other words, ăy questions are appropriate only when what is asked does not require the speaker’s assumption as shown in sentence 4:

4. ăe khe pay Chicago ăy
   (you) (ever) (go)
   “Have you ever been to Chicago?”

It is also noteworthy that the questions in which the speaker’s assumption is not a necessary condition are those that ask about the degree of things, for example:

5. ăakhn khw krōt ăe
   (last night) (he) (be mad at) (you)
   ăak ăy
   (you) (much)
   “Was he very mad at you last night?”

Another point about ăy which is worth mentioning is the fact that the question marker ăy never co-occurs with the negative word ăy in the same sentence. So the following negative question is not acceptable in Thai:

6. *ăe ăy chāp dîm ăaa
   (you) (NEG) (like) (drink) (coffee)
   ăy
   (Q - marker)

“Don’t you like drinking coffee?”

whereas the positive correspondence is:

7. ăe chāp dîm ăaa
   (you) (like) (drink) (coffee)
   ăy
   (Q - marker)

“Do you like drinking coffee?”

Linguists working on Thai syntax who have tried to explain the syntactic function of ăy are Upakitsilpasam (1956) and Warotamasikkhadit (1963). They propose that ăy is derived from r+ ăy ‘or not’. Warotamasikkhadit further explains that the phrase r+ ăy is derived from a full negative sentence. So, for him, the sentence

8. khun că ăa ăy
   (you) (will) (come) (Q - marker)
   “Will you come?”

is derived from

khun că ăa r+ ăy
(or) (NEG)

which originated in the deep structure as

khun că ăa r+ ăy ăa

We will propose an explanation of the unacceptability of sentence 6, following the analysis proposed by Upakitsilpasam and Warotamasikkhadit. The following is the tentative deep structure of sentence 6:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
S \\
\text{*}S \\
\text{thēe ăy chōp dîm ăaa} \\
\end{array}
\]

This sentence is unacceptible because it offers both negative statements whereas yes/no questions must offer the choice between positive and negative statements.

This analysis seems to work well with ăy interrogative sentences because it can provide an explanation for the non-co-occurrence of ăy and ăy in the same sentence. But if another question marker -- r+ plāaw--is taken into consideration, we will see that the same analysis does not work for r+ plāaw interrogative sentences.

Both ăy and plāaw have been referred to in Thai grammar texts together as ‘negative words.’ However, when we compare the sentences in which these words occur we see that these two words have some different grammatical functions. Notice the following sentences:
1. a. ช่าน ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ العربية
   (1) (NEG) (like) (coffee)
   “I don’t like coffee.”

1* b. ช่าน ปล่อย ช่าน เกาฟ العربية
   (NEG)

2. a. A: เธอ ฉวัน นั่งสิ่ง ช่าน
   (you) (take) (book) (my)
   ผ่าน
   (away)
   “You took my book.”

2 B: ช่าน ปล่อย
   (1) (NEG)
   “I didn’t.”

2 B: ช่าน ไม่ต้อง ฉวัน
   (1) (NEG) (take)
   ผ่าน
   (book) (your) (away)
   “I did not take your book.”

2* a. เธอ ฉวัน นั่งสิ่ง
   (1) (take) (book)
   ช่าน
   (my) (away)
   “You took my book.”

2 B: ช่าน ไม่ต้อง
   (1) (NEG)

A difference that can be seen in these examples is that ไม่ is a negative particle that occurs with the verb phrases ช่าน เกาฟ ‘like coffee’ and ฉวัน นั่งสิ่ง เธอ ผ่าน ‘took your book’, so it can be considered a negative adverb.

As for ปล่อย, it seems to have a different function. ปล่อย in II B’s response to A’s accusation is equivalent to II B, so it is proposed that ปล่อย, unlike ไม่, is a negative pro-form, which stands for the whole negative statement.

As already mentioned, ปล่อย is another negative word, and if its negativity is the conditioning factor, then, according to the above analysis, the sentence

9. เธอ ไม่ชอบ ดื่ม
   (you) (NEG) (like) (drink)
   เกาฟ
   (coffee) (Q-marker)
   “Don’t you like drinking coffee?”

should be unacceptable because both conjunctions contain the negative words—ไม่ and ปล่อย. But such is not the case since sentence 9 is an acceptable sentence in Thai. Following this, it is then illegitimate to say that the derivation of ไม่ from ร่ำะ ไม่ can be used to explain why ไม่ never co-occurs with ไม่ in the same sentence. And it is also doubtful if ไม่ is really derived from ร่ำะ ไม่ at all.

Since the syntactic explanation fails to solve the problem, we have to look for another explanation. In this case we find that the speaker’s assumption may play an important role.

It is interesting that ไม่ is the only question marker that cannot co-occur with ไม่ in the same sentence as observed by Noss (1964) and also Campbell (1964). The following sentences are illustrations of this:

10. เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ (you) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

11. เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ (you) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

12. * เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ มาย

13. เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ ช่วย (you) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

14. เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ มาย

15. เธอ ไม่ชอบ เกาฟ มาย ช่วย (you) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

ไม่ questions are also the only questions for which the speaker does not have any information about what he is asking. In the other questions, the speaker must have some background assumptions prior to the uttering of the questions. Does the fact about the speaker’s lack of background assumptions in ไม่ questions have anything to do with the non co-occurrence of ไม่ and ไม่ in the same sentence? The following analysis will show that it does:

In uttering a negative question, the speaker must have some background information whereas in the positive questions such may not be the case. For example, we can say

16. คุณ ต้อง ฉวัน เกาฟ
   (you) (will) (want) (coffee)
   ไม่
   (Q-marker)
   ค่ะ

   “Do you want coffee?”

to a guest although we do not know if he drinks coffee or not. That is to say, we can ask this positive question without having any assumptions about what we are asking. But we cannot say

17. คุณ ต้อง ฉวัน เกาฟ + Q-marker

   “You don’t want coffee, do you?”

unless we assume the addressee probably does not want coffee. ไม่ questions, in which the speaker does not have any information about what is being asked, are then inappropriate to ask about negative propositions.
The last point I would like to mention about mây concerns the situation in which both mây and rû plâaw questions can be used; the former is considered to be more polite than the latter. This is not at all surprising since in asking mây questions the speaker shows that he is completely ignorant of the answer and that he knows less than the hearer. And one way of showing someone that you know less than he is to show deference to him; mây questions are considered to be the questions that are used by the speaker to show deference to the hearer, and thus are polite questions.

rû plâaw, on the other hand, is completely different from mây in this respect. In uttering rû plâaw questions, the speaker shows that he has some information about what he is asking but he chooses not to use it to predict the answer. He wants to give the hearer the opportunity of providing an answer for him; and by doing this he thinks of himself as being equal to or superior to the hearer.

This explains why mây, not rû plâaw, questions are usually used when people with lower social status talk to people with higher social status, for example secretaries to bosses, students to teachers, children to parents, etc. Following this, it is natural that those with higher social status should feel free to use either mây or rû plâaw questions when talking to their inferiors or to those with similar status, which is exactly the case in Thai society.

REFERENCES