

## Extension in the Usage of the Thai Classifier /tua/

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the increasingly widespread use of the classifier /tua/ among the Thai. Although there are a number of studies on Thai classifiers, I will specifically mention two works, Noss (1964), which stresses the function and use of Thai classifiers, and Hiranburana (1979), which stresses the semantic aspects of Thai classifiers. The first part of my paper synthesizes these two studies; the second part presents my own observations of the usage of Thai classifiers at the present time. The paper traces the development of the classifier /tua/ as conventionally used and how it has been colloquially extended in everyday speech. Clearly, the Thai classifier system is still alive and productive. The proper classifier is frequently used in the formal and literacy contexts, while the general classifier /tua/ occurs in other contexts.

### THAI CLASSIFIERS

As the national language of Thailand, Thai is officially spoken by almost sixty million people. It is the medium of instruction in school throughout Thailand and also the language of the mass media. Thai is classified as an S-V-O language. Vowel length and tone are phonemic. Thai vowels can be long or short. Vowel length is indicated as VV. There are five distinctive tones: mid, high, low, rising, and falling. Tones in this paper are transcribed with the diacritics superimposed over the vowel symbols, but no diacritic is used for the mid tone. Thai is an isolating language with monosyllabic words, but there are many compound words and polysyllabic loanwords from Pali, Sanskrit, Khmer, and English. Thai contains one of the most important areal features characteristic of the Southeast Asia region, i.e., the numeral classifier system.

The basic word order for a classifier in Thai is head noun + number + classifier. Noss (1964, pp. 104-109) has stated that classifiers in Thai usually co-occur with nouns when numbers and/or demonstratives are present: /buŋi hâa sɔŋ/ (cigarette-five-CL) 'five packs of cigarettes'; /buŋi sɔŋ nán/ (cigarette-CL-that) 'that pack of cigarettes'; /buŋi hâa sɔŋ nán/ (cigarette-five-CL-that) 'those five packs of cigarettes.' A classifier can also act as the head of a noun phrase when the noun is understood from the context: /sɔŋ sii lŭaŋ/ (CL-color-yellow) 'the yellow pack.' Noss grouped classifiers in Thai into four types "on the basis of their relationships with other lexeme categories" as follows:

1. Unit classifier. A classifier is a unit classifier if it has a special relationship with a concrete noun: the concrete noun, e.g., /rua/ 'boat, ship' with the classifier /lam/. This type also includes classifiers that can recur as the head of a compound concrete noun, e.g., the compound concrete noun /bajmáaj/ 'leaf' with the classifier /baj/.

2. Metric classifier. A classifier is a metric classifier if it bears no special relationship with a noun the way a unit classifier does. It is used as a unit of measurement, usually with a mass noun. Any kind of container can be used as a metric classifier, e.g., /khâaw sãam caan/ (rice-three-CL) 'three plates of rice.'

3. General classifier. A general classifier is the one that can occur in enumeration with a wide range of nouns. It has no special relationship with either concrete nouns or mass nouns of the first and second types above. Noss listed 14 members of this type, such as /ʔan/ 'piece, item,' /khûu/ 'pair,' /khâan/ 'one of a pair,' /jàan/ 'type, kind,' /chanít/ 'type, kind,' etc.

4. Imitative classifier. Imitative classifiers are mostly onomatopoeic, i.e., the imitation of sound, as in /fáa lêep sǎɔŋ wéep/ (lightning-two-CL) 'two flashes of lightning.'

According to Noss, /tua/ belongs to the unit classifier type, i.e., /tua/ is a unit classifier that has a noun reference to "non-human things with anthropomorphic characteristics (arms, legs, etc.); e.g., animals, coats, trousers, tables, chairs."

Hiranburana (1979, pp. 39–54), recognised "a definite semantic connection between a noun and its classifier" and used 28 distinctive features to classify 43 classifiers. Her three major classes with several subtypes of specific classifiers are:

1. Classifier (account): partitive, pair, plural
2. Classifier (shape): linear, quadrilateral, circular, cylindrical
3. Classifiers (function): ~~weapon, container, vehicle, machinery, inhabitation, tool~~

She then illustrated her classification of specific classifiers by tree diagrams of distinctive features. Unfortunately, she demonstrated only the shape classifier; she did not show how she would treat the classifier /tua/ in Thai.

A detailed analysis of Thai classifiers can be found in the following studies. Haas (1942), Noss (1964), Hundius and Kolver (1983), and Delancey (1986) have all stressed the arbitrary aspects of the Thai classifiers, while Lehman (1979), Hiranburana (1979), Stein (1981), and Tuaycharoen (1984) have emphasized the semantic aspects.

### THE CLASSIFIER /tua/ IN THAI

As mentioned above, Noss classified /tua/ as a unit classifier and /ʔan/ as a general classifier. Delancey (1986, pp. 446–447) showed that /tua/ is originally used with a noun that refers to animals and that /ʔan/ is a general classifier for inanimate objects in his diachronic study of the classifier systems of the Tai languages. Lanyon-Orgill's 1955 study (as cited in Goral, 1978, pp. 58–62) showed the extended usage of /tua/ as follows: "tua; body; CL for animals, creatures (other than white elephant), and by an extension of meaning with tables and chairs (having four legs), and coats, shirts, trousers, and similar garments (being similar to the skin of an animal)." Carpenter (1986, pp. 14–25) puts the classifiers /tua/ and /ʔan/ under the general classifier type. For Carpenter /ʔan/ is a general unmarked classifier which can be used with most nouns referring to inanimate things, and /tua/ is behaving more and more

like a general classifier, but it is the one that is “stylistically marked.”

### THE EXTENSION USE OF /tua/

While Noss's primary concern with Thai classifiers is based on their function and usage, Hiranburana focused on the semantic aspects. Carpenter (1987, p.45) proposed that the relationship between nouns and classifiers in Thai is semantically motivated, but is not always predictable.

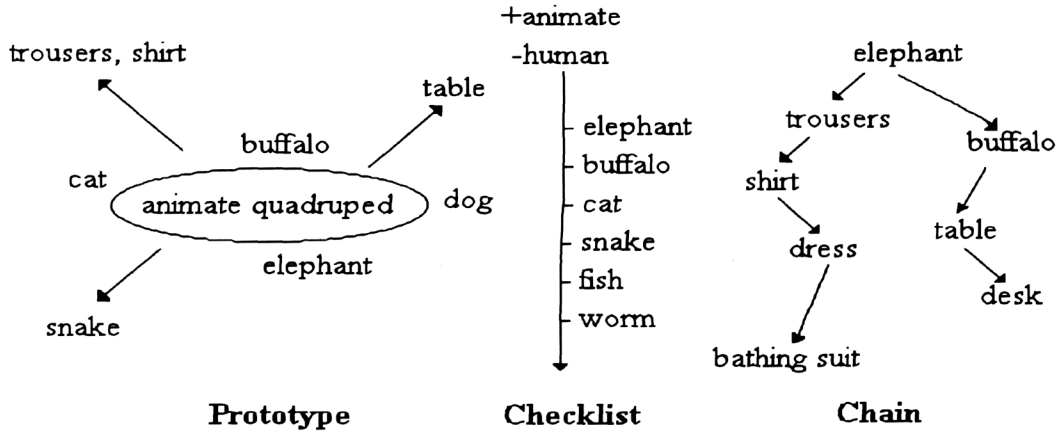


Figure 1. Carpenter's prototype, checklist, and chained category structures.

Carpenter (1987) illustrated how the use of the classifier /tua/ in Thai can be extended by using an explanation of mixed models of (a) a prototype structure, (b) a chained structure, and (c) a checklist structure, as in Figure 1. That is, the prototype model explains the class of nouns sharing some features that make it resemble the prototype more than others. The class of nouns originally and conventionally used with /tua/ are nouns that refer to animals of which the prototype should be a quadruped animal; e.g., a dog. The prototype model also predicts the class of nouns having some shared features, i.e., animals with no limbs, snakes and fish, and inanimate objects with limbs, such as tables and trousers. The checklist model presents a set of necessary and sufficient features which a noun must possess in order to be included in the same category. Nouns marked [+animate, -human] belong to the same category. The chained model explains how one noun shares some features with the other one next to it but may not resemble the rest. For example, the noun for skirt, dress without limbs, can also be used with /tua/ on the basis of a shared function with trousers.

Carpenter stated that the internal structure of the /tua/ category is a mixture of prototypes and chains as in Figure 2. Originally, /tua/ is the classifier for animals (DeLancey, 1986) of which the prototype is some quadruped. Tables and chairs are added either because of their being quadruped inanimate or because of their having limbs. Then /tua/ was extended to other items of furniture because of the shared function with tables and chairs. Trousers and skirts are also added because they have

limbs. Next, /tua/ can be used with other types of clothing because of the shared function with trousers and skirts. Mannequins and dolls are included because of their shapes. Letters /tuaŋsũuu/ and numbers /tuaŋêek/ are included because of their shapes and functions.

From the schematization above, one can see the set of Thai nouns conventionally used with the classifier /tua/ is a diverse set. Carpenter's study found that /tua/ also behaves like a general classifier and interpreted it as the "stylistically marked" classifier in colloquial speech. Her supporting evidence came from the colloquial uses of /tua/ among university students, which reflect the "youth culture" at the time as shown in Table 1.

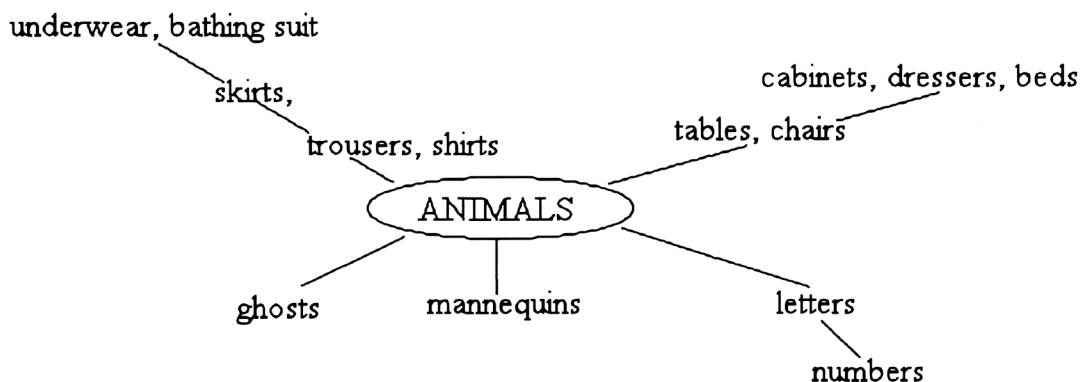


Figure 2. Carpenter's schematization of ตัว /tua/ category structure.

### PRODUCTIVITY AND REANALYSIS

It is, however, interesting to note that /tua/ is now expanding its usage. Judging from Table 1, I believe that such items as guitars, tape-recorders, and university courses can be classified as "youth culture" items, but at present /tua/ is used far more extensively. Its use is no longer limited only to the youth culture. New technologies, close contact with other cultures, and advanced communication systems have expanded the classifier /tua/ to be used more widely than ever before. The classifier /tua/ is used not only by university students but also by the general population with, for example, commercial nouns such as /hũn/ 'stock (as in the stock market when talking about a type or kind of stock),' /sĩnkháa/ 'merchandise, products,' /jaa/ 'medicine,' which *can* be classified by those classifiers that Noss listed under a general classifier: /jàaŋ/ 'type, kind' or /chanít/ 'type, kind.' The classifier now used is /tua/ as in:

khun	mii	hũn	kĩi	tua
you	have	stock	how many	CL

'How many types of stock do you have?'

mii	cèt	tua
have	seven	CL
'Seven.'		

Table 1 . *Carpenter's conventional and colloquial uses of* ตัว /tua/

Conventional	Colloquial (some speakers)
all animals, tables, chairs, dolls, ghosts, trousers, mannequins, shirts, skirts, letter, numbers	cigarettes, guitars, tape recorders, university courses, microphones, towels, underwear, bathing suits

Many new mechanical devices had their own specific classifier when they were first introduced into Thai. The word for 'camera,' /klŏŋthàajrŭup/, was listed with the classifier /klŏŋ/ in Haas (1955). The noun /khrŭaŋcàk/ 'machinery' was listed with the classifier /khrŭaŋ/ in Haas. The classifiers /klŏŋ/ and /khrŭaŋ/ were new classifiers in Thai. They were created first as partial repeaters of the compounds and finally became classifiers. The most recent novel noun that has been introduced into Thai is /khrŭaŋkhŏmphiŭtŭa/ 'computer set,' which should be classified by /khrŭaŋ/. However, the current usage for all these items is with the classifier /tua/. For example:

khun	mii	klŏŋthàajrŭup	máj
you	have	camera	QW
'Do you have any cameras?'			

mii,	săam	tua
have	three	CL
'Yes, three.'		

Haas has listed three ways of classifying most of the abstract nouns, such as /panhăa/ 'problem': repetition of the word itself and the two classifiers /jàaŋ/ and /khôv/. For /khôvpatibàt/ 'regulation,' the classifier used should be /khôv/ or /prakaan/ 'kind, sort'; for /khwaamkhít/ 'idea,' the classifier used should be a repetition of the whole noun /khwaamkhít/ or /khôv/ or /jàaŋ/. The classifier /tua/ is substituted for all these general classifiers:

rŭaŋ	nŭi	mii	panhăa	máj
matter	this	have	problem	QW
'Does this matter have any problem?'				

mii	mii	panhăa	lăaj	tua
have	have	problem	a lot of	CL
'Yes, there are a lot of problems.'				

Carpenter (1987) has described how the classifier /tua/ in Thai has been extended in the colloquial speech of university students. However, seven years after Carpenter's paper, advances in technology, business transactions, and information systems, the use of the classifier /tua/ has become more widely accepted in colloquial speech by most of the Thai people. It is no longer limited to the "youth culture." As

Barz and Diller (1985, p. 174) have noted, "clearly changing social conditions are responsible for a shift in classifier lexico-semantics, particularly where speech-level factors are introduced." The shifting usage of the classifier /tua/ is exemplified in Table 2.

Table 2 . *Productivity of the /tua/ Class*

Conventional	Colloquial (some speakers)	Current colloquial use
all animals, tables, chairs, dolls, ghosts, trousers, mannequins, shirts, skirts, letters, numbers	cigarettes, guitars, tape recorders, university courses, microphones, towels, bathing suits, underwear	stock, merchandise, medicines, cameras, machinery, radios, computers, problems, regulations, ideas

## CONCLUSION

Is this an overuse of the classifier /tua/ in Thai? Will an overuse of /tua/ impoverish the classifier system in Thai? It is my view that this is just a normal tendency in the colloquial language to use a simple and more flexible classifier system. That is to say, the entire system is still productive. Names of some new objects that can be assigned a specific conventional classifier like /khəmpʰəkdís/ 'compact disk' get /phèen/ as classifier. Those that cannot be so assigned are now used with either of the general classifiers /ʔan/ or /tua/. Some nouns that used to be classified with general classifiers like /jàaŋ/ and /chanít/ have been reanalysed and are now used with /tua/. Diller (1985, p. 65) states, "to judge from early Thai inscriptions (Khanakammakan chat phim ekkasan thang prawatsat 1978) and also from comparative evidence, the original classifier system was simpler and more flexible than the current normative one. Only a few classifiers, such as /khon/ (for people), /tua/ (for animals) and /ʔan/ (for inanimate objects), were in wide use for counting." Also, in the same article he points out that "It should come as no surprise to find that in present-day lower-class speech or in rural Thai dialects of the various regions one hears a simpler 'basic' and more flexible system –cp. the early inscriptions." From my observation, there is a strong tendency among the Thai people to go back to simplicity through the classification of animate and inanimate nouns by means of the classifier /tua/. Further and more comprehensive studies need to be conducted periodically to confirm this observation.

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