THAI MODALS

David W. Dellinger

In Noss' description of Thai, he defines two classes of constituents of interest to a discussion of modals--modals and modal verbs. Modals are defined as bound lexemes occurring between a subject and predicate (subject and predicate correlating roughly with the traditional concepts in English). Modal verbs are defined as one of four subclasses of predicatives, the other three being adjectives, transitive verbs and complective verbs. Thus, a basic distinction is established between these two classes of constituents in that modals are bound and modal verbs are free.

The notion of free and bound, here, is not the usual one. 'Free' means "can substitute for the whole predicate." This characteristic is seen frequently in responses to questions. For the question:

1) khun tɔŋ pay mây
   you must go

a typical reply would be:

2) tɔŋ
   (I) must.

A bound morpheme cannot substitute for its predicate. If, instead of tɔŋ, the word was māk 'probably' (You are probably going?), the response could not be simply *māk. It would have to be:

3) māk pay
   (I am) probably going.

One of the features of Thai grammar that creates the problem of how to distinguish verbal morpheme subclasses is that verbs have a single form; there are no participle endings or infinitive markers, for example, to indicate subordinate relationships. Consequently, the language creates strings of two, three and more verbal morphemes whose precise relationships to each other are not clear. There are no semantic grounds for distinguishing groups. Many of the morphemes that express ideas belonging to the modals in English (may, can, ought, must, etc.) are defined as verbs in Thai on the basis of their distributional characteristics. And as one might expect, the defining criteria we isolate, frequently either do not apply one hundred percent of the time, or else have more than one effect on our data--or both.

To illustrate this propensity for verb strings, the following two sentences have the non-nominal elements occurring in strings un-
derlined.

4) chán chák chôop ñaan
   I rather like work

5) lêen rûa thîew sâk phâk nûn klâp maa kô than
   We can run around for just a moment and still get back on time.
   run boat around just moment one return also on time

Not all the morpheme classes are discussed in this paper. Adjectives correspond closely to English adjectives and intransitive verbs; transitive verbs are roughly equivalent with English transitive verbs; and the completive verbs have functions both transitive and adverbial in nature in English. These three classes are not dealt with in this paper. The decision to exclude them is partially arbitrary. In particular, completive verb have some characteristics that are modal (attributive) in nature. Mundhenk's description of the completive verbs of northern Thai, as well as Noss' discussion of those of standard Thai, clearly portray this fact. But I have chosen to deal with just the limited range of the two morpheme classes--modals and modal verbs.

What I wish to do in this paper is to discuss some of the criteria Noss uses to define modal verbs and modals and show that some of it is applicable and some isn't. In the process, it will be necessary to recategorize some morphemes. In addition, I will raise some further points that suggest a need to reevaluate the verbal system of Thai in the light of generative grammar.

To begin with, Noss has two classes of modal verbs--specific (smv) and general (gmv) modal verbs. smv occur only with complements of a verbal type; they do not take nominal complements.

6) máy miî khray sàamâat dûn ̀ok dây
   not there is someone can pull out can
   There isn't anyone who can pull it out.

7) chán ca tôn rîp klâp bán
   I will must hurry return home
   I must hurry home.

8) chán máy khêay dây thamnaân
   I not ever have work
   I have never worked.

General modal verbs have both verbal and nominal type complements.

9) a) chán ca chûay triam tue háy pay rôp
    I will help prepare self cause go fight
    I'll help you get ready to go fight.
b) phôm yàakça chûay khun
   I want help you
   I want to help you.

10) a) chàen loŋ maa câak fâakfâa
    invite descend come from sky
    Please come down from the sky.

b) khâw ca chàen phûuchaay lik sâŋŋ khon
   she will invite man another two person
   She will invite two more men.

Noss also subdivides modals, here enumerating three classes.
His third is the list of the negating expressions in the language,
including the indicative negator mày 'no, not'; the imperative yàa
'don't'; and numerous items that have equivalent negative adverbials
or idioms in English, e.g. scarcely, apparently not, not really. I
have also excluded this class of negative expressions as irrelevant,
since it is widely accepted that negativity is a specific problem of
language of its own.

The remaining two modal classes I have relabeled as the K
class and the M class after the first member of each class.

K CLASS MODALS

khûn   'do something that's wrong' klêŋ   'make a pretense'
fàwn   'act in opposition; force' lôŋ   'be mistaken; get lost'
mua   'be persistent' êep   'hide; sneak'
phâŋ   'have just' phîocôy   'follow suit'

11) pay hây phôn âaykhon êep duu
   go cause free from rascal sneak look at
   Go away, peeping tom!

12) phûek nán klêŋ tân raangwan sûŋŋûŋ thàwnán
    group that pretend set reward high only
    Those people are just pretending to offer a high reward.

M CLASS MODALS

måk   'must have'

yôom   'probably'

khôŋ   'possibly'

kamlaŋ   be + -ing

kamlaŋca   'about to'

13) kan kamlaŋ tham khwaamdii yûu
    I be -ing do good continue
    I am doing good deeds.
14) duumænsæn epn rooy fæn
   it seems be print tooth
   It seems to be tooth prints.

15) kháw ssaatca hây raæwan kées ëmæn
   he maybe give reward to nephew
   Maybe he'll give a reward to you (nephews).

The characteristics that define the two classes according to Noss, are that: 1) K class modals can be imperatively negated,

16) yâa mœe châkcháa yëu
   don't persistent slow continue
   Don't persist in being slow.

17) yâa lön kháw pay thãan nâataan
   don't mistakenly enter into way window
   Don't go in the window by accident.

and, 2) they are hegated indicatively by the expression mây dáy.

18) kháw mây dáy phâaocqy pay duu nâng dûay
   he not follow suit go see movie too
   He didn't tag along to the movie.

19) kháw mây dáy këp fäñ kaansØnthanaa
   he not sneak listen conversation
   He didn't eavesdrop on the conversation.

M class modals cannot occur with yâa.

20) *yâa kamlañ khooy phûut
   don't be -ing wait speak
   *Don't be waiting to speak.

21) *yâa ssaatca nîi phuakman
   don't maybe flee them
   *Don't maybe flee from them.

And they are not directly negated, themselves, by any negative expression, i.e. no negative expressions immediately precede them. In any sentence in which the M class modals occur, the negative expressions mây and mây dáy follow the modal and are usually analyzed as negating one of the verbs following the negatives.

Additionally, the Noss' modals fall into two classes according to whether modal verbs would precede or follow them. The usual order in a predicate is M class + modal verb + K class. Noss does not specifically discuss this ordering relationship, but I feel it is as significant as the order relationships with the negatives in relation to defining a surface class of modals as opposed to verbs. It seems rather strained to group together as a single major morpheme
class, subclasses of morphemes that have such distinct ordering restrictions.

The primary criterion for distinguishing modal verbs as a group from modals as a group is that, in Noss' terms, modal verbs are free morphemes (lexemes) and modals are bound. This is the crucial difference, and the notion of free/bound is defined, as previously explained, as the ability to substitute for the whole verbal expression, in particular, in response to yes-no questions.

22) Q: thee tông rip book lun lêe
   you must hurry tell uncle eh?

   A: tông
   yes (must)

23) Q: thee kamlanca rip book lun chạy may
   you about to hurry tell uncle right?

   A: *kamlanca
   yes (about to)

Even though the syntactic position of occurrence of modals is apparently the same as that of modal verbs, i.e. between subject and predicate, they are classified separately on the basis of this substitutability criterion.

However, as Noss himself points out, there is one other interesting feature of distribution, and that is position of occurrence relative to the negative particle. Since M modals cannot be directly negated, that means they occur only preceding a negative expression (which, consequently, negates the following verbal complement rather than the modal), never following it. The other three subclasses--K modals, smv, and gmv--all take a preceding negative expression, either mây or mây dây, which are roughly equivalent in their semantic effect in at least some cases (the relevant cases).

From a structural viewpoint, the preceding data might be expected to more or less clearly define some distribution classes. Essentially on the basis of this data Noss has defined two classes of morphemes with two subclasses each. In fact, the M modals are the only group of morphemes that appear to sharply stand out. Indeed, the other three enjoy a high degree of permutability among themselves.

24) khâu lòng rãm yểm chủy phuak năn
   k gmv smv gmv
   He erroneously initiated a willingness to help that group.

25) chăn chôp kĩ>Last samàk pay duøy
   gmv k smv
   I enjoy pretending to volunteer to go too.
Having summarized Noss' criteria and interjected some further ones, I wish to introduce some contradictory claims for some of his analysis. In discussing negation, Noss has said that the modal verbs are negated by  *, and the K modals by *, with equivalent effect. This much is true, but apparently it is not true that K modals cannot be negated by * also; my informants have indicated that most of the K class (but not all) can be, with identical meaning.

Other K modals which apparently can be negated by either negative expression are * to force oneself*, * to have just*, * to pretend*, * to err*, * to sneak*, and *'together.' An interesting fact, though, is that negative use of most of these morphemes with either negator is strained and unnatural. Apparently, there are semantic restrictions that make negativization of K modals an infrequent possibility.

K modals which take only * and * 'persistently', and * 'to act contrary to expectations.' Uniquely, * 'to go with someone', according to my informant, sounded better with * than with *, which is completely contrary to the defining criterion.

Conflicting claims such as these are not easily reconciled. The most probable answer is that these are areas that just were not covered in the original study.

By way of comparison, other verb forms--transitive verbs like * 'see', adjectives like * 'lie down'--can also be negated by both expressions, but with differences in meaning. It is possible that there is a semantic difference between the two negative expressions in combination with K modals also. I haven't found a conclusive answer. The important fact here, I think, is that K modals do negate with *, thus making them even more similar to modal verbs.

Likewise, my informants disagree with the Noss claim that K modals are bound, i.e. non-substitutable for the whole predicate, saying that many of the class do indeed substitute.

Q: * you will do wrong do like that question
Are you going to do that anyway?
A: khâun
Yes!

29) Q: ěp pay duu mây snæk go look at question
Did you go sneak a look?

A: ěp
Yes (sneak)

As to the modal verbs, it is also true that some smv can precede the negative as well as succeeding it (though Noss reports only the latter). One smv, sãamâat 'can', cannot permute with negative mây; vàak 'to want', samâk 'to volunteer', and khâun 'ought' permute with no change of meaning; and khaey 'have ever', tôn 'must', yoom 'be willing', and phayâaam 'to try' do cause a change in meaning if permuted. This permutability thus causes them to appear strikingly similar to the M modals in many instances, where the negator follows them. In addition, the K modals also exhibit this ambivalent status toward negation. Three of Noss' K modals—phôn 'to have just', lôn 'to err', and kláp 'to act contrary to expectations'—do not reverse order with the negative (note that there is no correlation with which negative expression the modal can take and whether it permutes with the negative). phaakan 'together', maa 'action affects the speaker', and pay 'action affects other than the speaker' permute with no change of meaning. All the rest permute but with a shift in which notion in the predicate is negated.

30) khâw mây khuan pay = khâw khuan mây pay
he not should go
He shouldn't go.

31) a) mëc khaey mây kin annân
mother ever not eat that
Mother has, on a previous occasion, not eaten that.

b) mëc mây khaey kin annân
mother not ever eat that
Mother hasn't ever eaten that.

It is evident, then, that rather than having three distinct morpheme classes—smv, gmv and K class modals—clearly demarcated by distributional characteristics, we actually have tremendous criterial overlapping between classes and within classes. Noss doesn't discuss negation of gmv, and there is an obvious reason. It appears a verb is a case of two separate propositions, and the position of mây before or after the modal verb either negates the first proposition or the second.

32) khâw mây râam khêân nangsû
he not begin write book
He didn't begin writing the book.
33) kháw râam mày khịen nangsû
he begin not write book
He began not writing the book (he stopped writing the book.)

As mentioned above, gmv can occur with both nominal and verbal complements. Typically, when gmv have a verbal complement, the complement is preceded by one of two subordinating particles--thîi or wâa.

34) phôm wâa thîi ca háy kháw càak pay
I expect that will cause him leave go
I expected him to leave.

35) phôm sânya wâa kháw ca càak pay
I promise that he will leave go
I promised that he would leave.

Sometimes the particular particle is selected by the verb; in other instances, either particle is possible with no difference in meaning. Such sentences are readily interpretable as containing embedded sentences, i.e. the verbal complement is seen to express a predication complete in itself but still subordinate to the gmv (cf. Figure 1).

36) phôm sânya wâa kháw ca càak pay
I promised that he would leave.

Figure 1
Interestingly, though it isn't mentioned by Noss, many of the smv and K modals can also take these same subordinating particles.

37) smv

phon yâak thîi ca 'hây khâw çàak pây
I want that will cause he leave go
I wanted him to leave.

38) K class

phon phîçay thîi ca pây ðûây
I follow that will go also
I went along, also.

The presence of these subordinating particles again suggests that the verbal expression following the particles is an embedded sentence subordinate to the preceding verbal expression. Admittedly, many of the sentences were considered strange or non-Thai in style by the informants, but they were not declared ungrammatical as other were.

One final aspect of the grammar of Thai modals that bears examination is the measure of mutual exclusion that exists between members of the same class. gmv easily and commonly concatenate to form verb strings of two and more gmv, though the strings do not represent coordinate constituents.

39) khruu lêak çhûay nákriam
   teacher stop help students
   The teacher stopped helping the students.

The idea of helping the student is subordinate to 'quit'; it is that whole idea that the teacher quits. The seemingly parallel sentence below typifies a Thai sentence expressing coordinate propositions.

40) khruu ro çhûay nákriam
   teacher wait help students
   The teacher waited and helped the students.

smv likewise have been found in strings of two and three smv.

41) mêç khaay phayayaam thûât plaa
    mother ever try fry fish
    Mother has tried to fry fish.

And also K modals.

42) khâw mue klêêng têç thûâng
    they persistent pretend only argue
    They kept on pretending to argue.

This is not an absolute privilege shared by all members of these classes. There are members of each class that either are mutually
exclusive with the other members; are quite restricted as to which other members they will concatenate with; or are restricted in the ordering arrangement in which they can occur.

For example, among the smv, khæy 'have ever' can precede tôn 'must', yoom 'to force', yàak 'to want', and phayyaam 'to try', but it cannot precede khouen 'ought'. It cannot appear in reverse order with any but tôn. It is mutually exclusive with khouen 'ought'. yàak 'to want' can precede phayyaam 'to try' but not khouen 'ought', tôn 'must' or khæy 'have ever'. It can follow khouen 'ought', but none of the rest, and is mutually exclusive with sàamàat 'can'.

For the K modals, Noss comments on the cooccurrence restrictions of the class, but my work indicates that there is a much greater degree of cooccurrence permitted than he notes.

M modals do not take verbal expressions preceded by thêi or wàa, and they are mutually exclusive to perhaps an absolute degree, as indicated by Noss. These two characteristics further distinguish M modals from the other three morpheme classes discussed in this paper, further emphasizing their position as the sole group of surface modals in Thai.

The other three classes--K modals, gmv and smv--are most similar to verbs (transitive verbs and adjectives). I emphasize the fact that we are talking primarily of surface characteristics. The extent to which this categorization reflects any deeper level feature is the point to which we must ultimately direct our attention. It is probable that as we are better able to relate surface features with conceptualizations in Thai, that the surface class of modals will not correlate with a distinct class of concepts.

In Thai, as in any other language, one needn't look far to find vastly variant surface configurations conveying much the same meaning. The following paraphrases are offered as suggestions that what are surface modals, and modal verbs, are merely manifestations of deeper level categories that overlap surface classes and are manifested in several ways in performance.

43) a) khàw khæy pay thêiaw
    he ever go around
    He has gone touring (previously).

    b) khàw pay thêiaw maa lêéew
    he go around past already

44) a) khàw yàakca thamñaan
    he want work
    He wants to work.

    b) khàw tônkaan thêi ca thamñaan
    he want that will work
45) a) Kháw mue têe thamŋaam
he persistent only work
He just kept on working.

b) Kháw yûŋ yûu têe thamŋaam
he busy be -ing only work
He just kept working.

46) a) Kháw phlɔɔ phôm maa dûeŋ
he follow suit me come also
He came along with me.

b) Kháw taam phôm tît maa
he follow me closely come

NOTES

1 This paper is a revised version of one presented at the 1973 Mid-America Linguistics Conference.

REFERENCES
