# Does Thai Permit Detransitivity?

Anthony Diller

Australian National University

Analyses of Thai grammar of Dr. Vichin Panupong have been important guides for Thai linguistic research for several decades. Our present knowledge of Thai syntax in particular owes much to insights in such works as *Inter-sentence Relations in Modern Conversational Thai* (Panupong, 1970) and the Thai-language counterpart *Khrong sang phasa thai: rabop wayakon* (Panupong, 1979). Theses and other studies by Dr. Vichin's colleagues and students have further developed and refined the basic approach of these pioneering works. All in the field owe Dr. Vichin a debt of gratitude for her stimulating publications and ideas.

In this paper we start from an important "detransitivity" question raised by Dr. Vichin at the Twelfth International Congress of Linguists in Vienna (Panupong, 1978). A definitive answer to the question will not be attempted here. Instead, an approach for coming to terms with the problem raised by Dr. Vichin will be suggested—a framework indebted to Role and Reference Grammar (Foley & Van Valin, 1984, Chap. 2), especially to how ACTOR and UNDERGOER function in this theory.

## POLYFUNCTIONAL WORDS

Panupong (1978) calls attention to pairs of Thai sentences such as those renumbered here as (1a–1b) that seem to show a transitive–intransitive alternation. Compare also an additional topicalized sentence (1c).

(1a)　lûuk-rɯa　kamlaŋ　kaːŋ　bay-rɯa.
　　　crew　　　*PROG*　　hoist　sail　　*Hoist the sail*
　　　'The crew are raising the sail.'

(1b)　bay-rɯa kaːŋ　lɛ́ːw.　　*Hoist on own petard*
　　　sail　　hoist　already
　　　'The sail has been raised.'

(1c)　bay-rɯa kháw　kaːŋ　　lɛ́ːw.
　　　sail　　3P　　hoist　　already
　　　'The sail they have already raised.'

### Transitivity Alternations

*In the analytic framework of Panupong (1970), (1a) would seem a straightforward* case of SUBJECT TRANSITIVE VERB OBJECT, which could be represented as in

(2a). As for (1b), although the basic practical meaning seems clear, there could perhaps be two syntactic possibilities, depending on context.

(2a)    S – Vt – O
(2b)    S – Vi
(2c)    O – (∅$_S$) – Vt
(2d)    O – S – Vt

For most Thai speakers, the intransitive/passive meaning translated in (2b) is probably favored as the decontextualized interpretation for (1b). "Decontextualized" here is similar to what Panupong (1970) has referred to as "initiating." However, in the right context ("non-initiating"), a topicalized-object agent-suppressed transitive interpretation, symbolized in (2c) by (∅$_S$), seems possible for (2b) too, at least for many Thai speakers (Diller, 1993, p. 411). Suppose that a boat's captain asked whether the crew had taken care of both the sail and anchor. The answer might be, in effect, "The sail (they) have raised, but not the anchor." Pattern (2c) would then bear a direct relationship to (2d), showing relations in the agent-explicit sentence (1c).

Some important theoretical questions raised by Panupong's concern with sentences like those above include:
- Given sentences like (1b), what is the nature of principles distinguishing interpretations (2b) and (2c)?
- Assuming that a standard derivational relationship is involved between sentences like (1a) and (1b), which criteria are necessary and sufficient to decide the direction of derivation? Must we rely on (perhaps conflicting) naive intuition?
- Are these interpretations in fact *discrete*, as the representations above would seem to suggest, or is it possible that interpretations (2b) and (2c) could really be ends of a *gradient* continuum, with intermediate levels of semi-transitivity to be accepted?

## Intuition or Logic?

Similarly, while (3) is classified among intransitive sentences by Panupong (1979, p.80) on the pattern of (2b), one could easily imagine a (2c) interpretation along the lines above.

(3)    bâːn        phə̂ŋ        kwàːt.
       *house*      *just-now*   *sweep*
       'The house has just been swept.'

In other non-initiating situations of course, sentences such as (1b) or (3) could receive (2b)-like intransitive interpretations. Sometimes there might be phonological clues available to speakers or overt topic-marking particles. However, it seems that these are of secondary significance for the problem at hand. Speakers at least sometimes do rely on context alone to determine whether superficially identical sentences receive (2b) intransitive or (2c) transitive agent-suppressed interpretation. Thus, at least in some cases, it seems we can claim that construal of transitivity in Thai is contextually (pragmatically) sensitive.

Depending on theoretical orientation, this question could be approached in different ways. In terms of generative-transformational theories of syntax, (2c) would probably be seen as implying "movement" or some notational analogue—in effect, topicalization, along with agent deletion or, in more recent generative work, a zero element **pro** (Chomsky, 1986, p.80). It is less clear how current generative theory should treat (2b). This too could perhaps be handled through a derivational chain involving movement (or a similar analogue) or alternatively, in a more lexical theory, through a rule of lexical derivation. Generative discussions would take this as an important issue to debate but leading current generative theories seem alike in rejecting the option of a gradient transitivity relationship.

In considering sentences like (1a-1b) along with a range of other alternations, Panupong (1978, p. 221) deserves credit for raising these basic questions for Thai, but from a different perspective. Should we, she asks, "take one word with more than one function as a polyfunctional word ...[which] accords better with our intuition" or proceed "logically" by restricting the notion of an individual word to one specific function as determined through syntactic frame analysis. It is interesting that a decade after Panupong pinpointed this problem for Thai, Jackendoff (1990, p.156) noted that the same basic problem remains for English so-called unaccusative alternations with verbs like **open** (see below).

As Panupong observes, the "logical" course proliferates semantically similar homonyms or creates what she calls homophonic-graphic words. On the other hand, in the "intuitive" analysis, **ka:ŋ** in (1a) and (1b) would be considered "the same word" or basic underlying lexical form but used in different lexico-syntactic situations. This is what Jackendoff (1990) refers to as a *correspondence-rule strategy,* perhaps effected through linking rules.

In the logical analysis then there would need to be two *separate words* in (1a) and (1b), presumably with some sort of (systematically derived?) semantic links. This leads to an interesting consequence in terms of the use of structural sentence test-frame criteria to establish word class. If we accept the line of argument above admitting topicalized (2c) as a possible interpretation of (1b), then the logical analysis would lead to two different lexical items—each superficially looking like **ka:ŋ** and each occurring *superficially*, at least, in the same syntactic frame. Operationally, this means that a syntactic test frame in its *superficial* form alone is no longer entirely adequate to establish word class: in this case, we need to know the specific structural description, i.e., details of interpretation as in (2b-2c), as well. In Panupong's approach, this could perhaps be accomplished through invoking the "initiating/non-initiating" distinction, since the former decontextual interpretation would seem to favor the more passive-like reading.

## Actors and Undergoers

As long ago as 1922 what can be called "Thai traditional grammar" began to come to grips with the general problem raised above. This was through application of the semantic case or *karaka* (**ka:rók**) analysis of Panini and the Indic grammarian tradition. What we might now refer to as semantic case roles, thematic relations or theta roles were central to *karaka* theory. Revealingly, Phaya Upakitsilapasan (1922, section

64.2, p. 130) considered sentences of form (1c) to have a noun-phrase (henceforth NP) pattern of form:

(4)    **kammaka:rók   +   kantùka:rók + VERB**
          UNDERGOER          ACTOR

The Indic karaka terms above can be conveniently be glossed with the terms ACTOR and UNDERGOER following Role and Reference Grammar (RRG; Foley & Van Valin, 1984; Van Valin ,1993). These English terms should be taken as arbitrary labels for "macroroles" which subsume more specific semantic relations relevant to the semantics of individual verbs. In this framework, a term like *agent* is used in a more restricted sense to refer to a rational entity willfully controlling and effecting an action; similarly, *patient* to a directly affected entity, etc. Thus in "I hear a **sound**," I and **sound** are taken to be ACTOR and UNDERGOER respectively, but in this instance further specified as *experiencer*  and *theme* respectively, not as *agent*  and *patient*. On the other hand, in "I picked the **flower**" the ACTOR nominal I is further specified as *agent*, and **flower** would be UNDERGOER specified as *patient*. In actual practice, even *agent*  and *patient*  should perhaps be taken as intermediate-level categories, since the specific nature of agency in verbs, say, like 'to hit' and 'to praise,' is arguably somewhat different and this difference may affect certain syntactic facts.

Thus ACTOR and UNDERGOER as used in RRG are macroroles, each consisting of sets of more specific thematic relations (similar to theta-roles), several of which may occur in both macrorole sets. Also, in this theory, although ACTOR and UNDERGOER are taken to be discrete in terms of how they are associated with lexical verbs and how they affect surface syntax, there is no further requirement that in a particular sentence a given nominal bears one and only one of the more specific type of thematic relations. There is perhaps indeed no discrete universal set of these items. Nominals such as "sail" in (1b) and "house" as in (3) are taken to be UNDERGOER macrorole, but could be further expanded, depending on viewpoint, as a combination of theme and patient. (In this sense, the so-called "theta criterion," specifying a system of unique roles, as proposed in recent generative work, holds only at the RRG macrorole level.)

For Thai at least, Figure 1 gives a schematic idea of how two hierarchies might be constituted to account for issues discussed here. This triangular arrangement is an elaboration of the essentially one-dimensional scheme commonly found in case grammar hierarchies and elsewhere in RRG work (Van Valin, 1993, p. 44). In the version of the scheme presented here, for example, an *agent* is stronger in the A-hierarchy than an *experiencer*, while an affected *patient*  is stronger in the U-hierarchy than a *goal* or unaffected *theme*. *Theme* and perhaps some similar theta-roles might occur weakly in both hierarchies: i.e., *theme* behaves as weak-A in some constructions and as weak-U in others. As we see below, this line of presentation is useful in clarifying certain principles of Thai syntax.
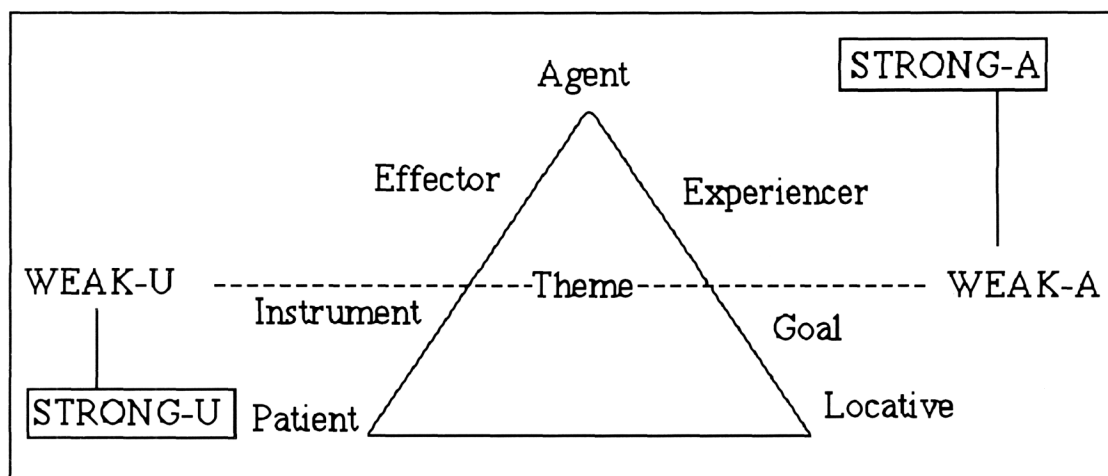
Figure 1. UNDERGOER (U) and ACTOR (A) macroroles.

## "Subject" as a Derivative Relation

Returning to the Thai examples, in what today might strike us as an act of "radical functionalism," we find that Phaya Upakitsilapasan went on to associate the term SUBJECT (**pratha:n**) in sentences like (1c) not with the immediately preverbal ACTOR NP but with the UNDERGOER NP preceding it. In the sentence renumbered here as (5), he considers the NP **wát ní:** 'this monastery' to be the SUBJECT (i.e., **pratha:n**). It seems in this case, as occasionally elsewhere in his writing, he was using the term **pratha:n** in a pragmatic sense more in line with TOPIC in contemporary syntactic studies. (TOPIC in this sense is sometimes translated as **khwa:m-làk** in Thai.) In these cases **pratha:n** does not really seem to denote SUBJECT in the sense of an English-like strictly grammatical relation, e.g., as determined by subject-verb morphological agreement or by English constraints on cross-clausal zero-anaphora. See also discussion by Fischer (1977), Gsell (1979), and Vongvipanond (1982b, p.30).

(5)    wát       ní:    sè:tthí:    sâ:ŋ.
       *monastery  this   rich-person  build*
       'This monastery was built by a rich person.'

In fact, rather than assuming a priori that Thai has a well-motivated *grammatical* relation SUBJECT matching the English concept, we would benefit by joining Foley and Van Valin (1984, p. 32) in questioning this category as an elemental linguistic universal. Rather, the pragmatic notion of TOPIC and the semantic notions of ACTOR and UNDERGOER appear to be the truly elemental building blocks for Thai. Thus one common SUBJECT in Thai transitive sentences is a coming together of the more basic ACTOR and TOPIC represented here as A/T. In intransitive sentences, U/T is also a

common possibility. If this argument is accepted, SUBJECT in Thai becomes merely a convenient way to refer to a collection of more basic units and principles. The case for SUBJECT as a non-basic unit of analysis is seen compellingly for "verbs of lacking" discussed below. For an earlier related approach, see Gsell (1979).

Furthermore, Phaya Upakitsilapasan's approach implies that the verb lexically assigns semantic case or **ka:rók** relation to its nominals, whereas overt sentence-initial position assigns **pratha:n**-status, or what we might now interpret as TOPIC status. This is shown schematically for sentences (1a-c) in (6-a-c).

(6a) lûːk-rɯa        kamlaŋ        kaːŋ        bay-rɯa.
ACTOR/TOPIC          PROG          VERB        UNDERGOER
= A/T    ≤                         Vт          U       θ

(6b) bay-rɯa                        kaːŋ        lɛ́ːw.
UNDERGOER/TOPIC                      VERB        ADVERB
= U/T    ≤                          Vı

(6c) bay-rɯa        kháw          kaːŋ        lɛ́ːw.
UNDERGOER/TOPIC     ACTOR         VERB        ADVERB
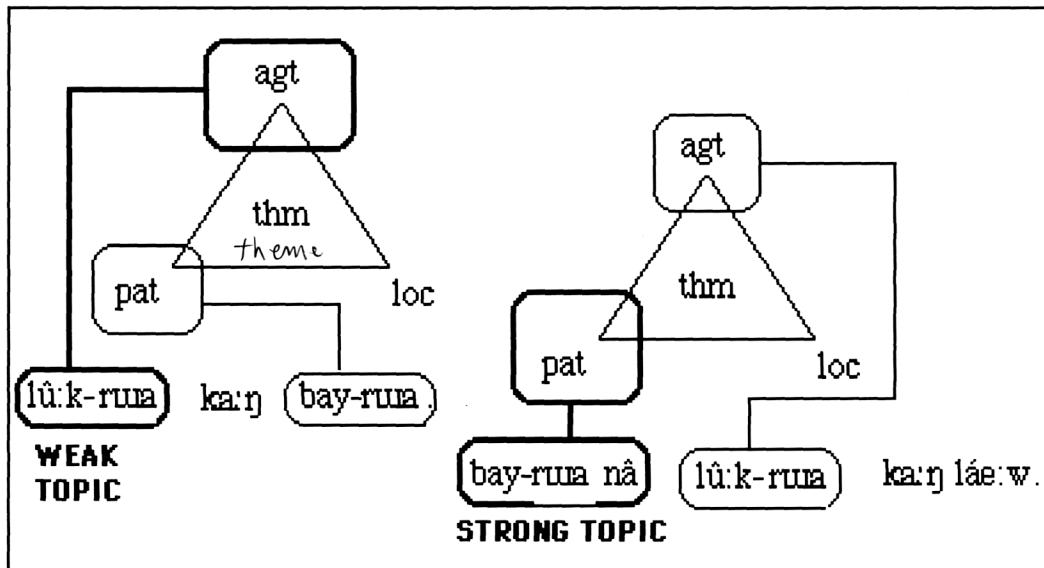= U/T    ○ -∅ₛ      A             ∨ +



Figure 2. Alternate arrangements of transitive sentences.

Rewritten in the manner of (6a-c), the patterns (2a-d) would thus be restated as to the right in (7a-d).

(7a)    S - Vt - O        >        A/T - Vt - U        (U taken more as *patient*)
(7b)    S - Vi           >        U/T - Vi            (U taken more as *theme*)

(7c)    O - (Ø$_S$) - Vt      >        U/T - Vt          (U taken more as *patient*)
(7d)    O - S - Vt           >        U/T - A - Vt      (U taken more as *patient*)

It is further likely in Thai that the TOPIC function (abbreviated as .../T in (7)) is actually associated with another hierarchy—a pragmatic one. Evidence of this is presented by Vongviphanond (1982a,b and elsewhere), who has probed the three-way relationship between pragmatics (TOPIC status), semantics (what we are calling here ACTOR-UNDERGOER status) and grammatical relations (SUBJECT status). Vongviphanond's work (1982a, p. 40; 1982b, pp. 46–47) shows that the notion TOPIC as used here will need to be further refined, since some Thai sentences have multiple topics, perhaps in a multiple-embedded relationship. Also, from a Lexicase perspective, Savetamalya (1992) has discussed these issues as well, coming to somewhat different conclusions—easily accommodated in the present framework. Finally, Panupong (1970, p.29) calls attention to a further TOPIC-like type occurring *in Thai* sentences similar to English so-called right-dislocations: "(He's) naughty—this boy." (Note that some, including Sookgasem (1992), prefer to take this construction as "VP topicalization"; to apply "topicalization" to this particular construction perhaps diffuses the utility of the term.) In any event, a system of pragmatic relations similar to (5) might well be developed to deal with issues such as these, including strong-to-weak degrees of topical emphasis.

Figure 2 suggests how an analysis of this sort might be developed for sentences similar to (1a) and (1c). For a standard, initiating, sentence, S-Vt-O in Panupong's sense, equivalent to A/T-Vt-U as above, the leading NP is normally only weakly topical unless specially marked with a deictic, particle, etc. On the other hand, with the non-initiating or highly contextualized order U/T-A-Vt as in (1c) the leading NP seems to gain a stronger topic value by virtue of position alone.

## Lexical Derivation or Topicalization?

Solutions intertwining Phaya Upakitsilapasan's analysis and the issues in Panupong's "intuitive" and "logical" options are found in a number of works in the case-grammar and lexicase frameworks (Starosta, 1971). Thus Kullavanijaya (1974) treats items such as **pɔ̀ːt** 'open'/'be open' and **sák** 'wash (clothes)'/'to be washed' as transitive-intransitive lexical pairs subject to regular synchronic derivational processes.

In a similar way, Clark and Prasithrathsint (1985, pp. 47-48) treat the data renumbered here as (8a-d).

(8a)    *A/T*   *V/t*   *U*
        chăn    sák     phâː    kɔ̌ːŋ    nán     lɛ́ːw.
        *I*     *wash*  *cloth* *heap*  *that*  *already*
        'I have washed those clothes already.'

(8b)    *U/T*                          *A*     *V/t*
        phâː    kɔ̌ːŋ    nán     nâ     chăn    sák     lɛ́ːw.
        *cloth* *heap*  *that*  *PCL*  *I*     *wash*  *already*
        'Those clothes I have washed already.'

(8c)    phâː    kɔːŋ    nán    sák    lɛ́ːw.
        *cloth    heap    that    wash    already.*
        'Those clothes have already been washed.'

(8d)    phâː    kɔːŋ    nán    man    sák    lɛ́ːw.
        *cloth    heap    that    it    wash    already*
        'Those clothes, they already have been washed.'

Reinterpreting these sentences in the shorthand of (7) would give:
(8a): A/T-Vt-U, the transitive norm;
(8b): U/T-A-Vt, topicalization facilitated by particle **nâ**;
(8c): U/T-Vi derived intransitive, with topical U treated as *theme;*
(8d):  U/T-U-Vi derived intransitive, a topicalized version in this case with shadow or resumptive pronoun **man** coreferential with preceding intransitive subject.

Clark and Prasithrathsint argue that the intransitive interpretation of (8c) is the result of lexical derivation. Note that (8c) is quite analogous to examples (1b) and (3) of Panupong.

(8d) is a particularly convincing indication of essentially *passive* semantics since there is here no possibility of restoring a "missing" agent in the immediately preverbal position. The fact that in addition to the U/T-U-Vi reading of this sentence some speakers may accept, given the proper context, a reading U/T-A-Vt (as though **man** might refer disrespectfully to a child, etc.) should not be seen as substantially affecting the argument for lexical derivation of the preceding reading. It simply means, as in the case above, that surface form alone is inadequate for the type of analysis we are pursuing.

(9)    phâː    kɔːŋ    nán    nâ    sàk    lɛ́ːw.
       *cloth    heap    that    PCL    wash    already*
       (9a) 'Those clothes, they already have been washed.'
       (9b) 'Those clothes, (I, etc.) have already washed them.'

Although not specifically considered by Clark and Prasithrathsint, a topic-marked sentence similar to (8c) also occurs colloquially and is shown in (9). The significant point is that the particle **nâ** (or in some analyses, also **ná**) should be seen as optionally helping to topicalize the phrase-initial noun phrase to which it is attached.

It may be that that for interpreting a token such as (9) out of context (perhaps an unnatural task, in any case) the presence of the particle **nâ** slightly facilitates (9b) or at least alerts a listener to the topicalized-object possibility. However **nâ** in itself should not be seen as resolving ambiguity definitively in the way that **man** does in (8d), given the resumptive reading coreferential with the preceding subject noun phrase. The two interpretations of this U/T construction type are shown in Figure 3.
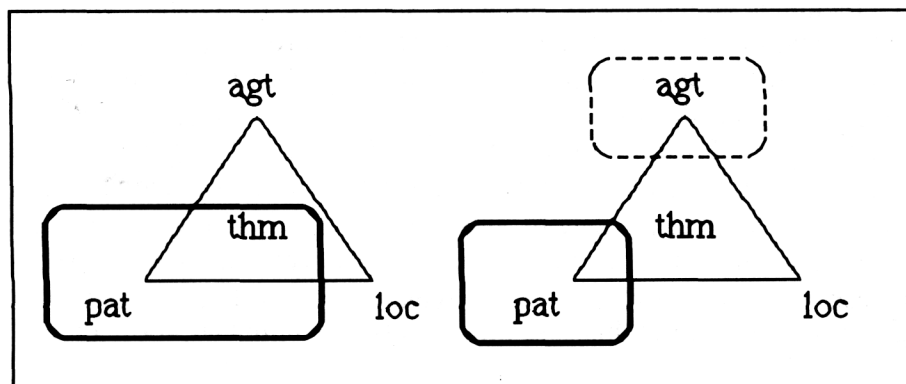
Figure 3. Interpretations of U/T in Examples (8c) and (9). Left: topical theme/patient, intransitive-stative predicate. Right: topical patient, transitive-active predicate, agent suppressed.

Bandhumedha (1988, p. 237) takes up some similar sentences including those renumbered here as (10)-(11).

(10)    tôn-kulà:p    ní:    rót    lǽ:w.
        *rosebush    this    water    already*
        'This rosebush has been watered already.'

(11)    wát    ní:    sâ:ŋ    mɯ̂a    phɔ:-sɔ̌: 2478.
        *monastery    this    build    back-in    B.E. 2478.*
        'This monastery was built in 1935.'

Are these to be considered additional examples of Panupong's **ka:ŋ** type as illustrated in (1b)? In Bandhumedha's classification of these items, which is reminiscent of Phraya Upakitsilapasan's, the leading noun phrases are considered "direct objects which have come to be in subject position." In the terms above: U which have come to be initial U/T.

To what extent should these constructions be considered "passives"? For (10), the parallel with the verbs in **ka:ŋ** 'hoist, spread out' and **sák** 'wash' as discussed above seems close. The verb **rót** 'to water (plants)' appears to occur in the same patterns, and with the same interpretive possibilities, as the preceding change-of-state verbs. Even **sâ:ŋ** 'to build' as shown in (11), a somewhat different semantic type of verb, follows the general pattern. However, for creation verbs like **sâ:ŋ** in the pattern shown in (11), the initiating or decontextualized interpretation of passive, similar in nuance to the English passive participle, seems especially strong. It thus would be shortsighted to claim that a passive reading for (11) depends entirely on discourse context or is only a non-initiating interpretation. The specific semantic (not pragmatic) nature of the verb is involved in the issue as well.

It is common to cite Thai adversative expressions in **thù:k** and **do:n** 'to undergo, suffer' as the nearest approach in Thai to a Western-language passive, but Prasithrathsint (1988) has shown that nine different Thai constructions deserve to be called

"passive." Included among these are what she refers to as the "verb" passive—essentially the type I have reviewed above in (1b), (3), (10), (11) etc. This type is well documented in earlier sources, whereas the **thù:k** adversative construction and most other passive-like forms Prasithrathsint shows to be more recent developments. A further observation of Prasithrathsint (1988, p. 370) is significant for the argument developed here: when verbs of creativity such as **sâ:ŋ** 'build' are intended in a passive sense, her data indicate that the pattern illustrated in (11) is almost always used rather than a construction in **thù:k** or another type of passive. So again, specific verbal semantics can affect selection of pragmatically-sensitive construction type. (Sociolinguistics is relevant in this case too; see also Khanittanan, forthcoming.)

## Could Thai Transitivity be a Gradient Function?

Let us review the argument so far. The facts considered above show that for the potentially transitive verbs considered in the examples, at least four construction patterns are available, as outlined in (2a-d). (2a-b) can stand as favored decontextual or initiating readings, transitive/active, and intransitive/passive respectively, at least arguably in a relationship of lexical derivation. On the other hand, (2c)—which as we have seen can be superficially identical with (2b) in some constructions, is essentially a non-initiating topicalized, transitive but agent-suppressed reading. Most Thai speakers would agree that (2c) interpretation requires a proper context and is in that sense to be taken as non-initiating.

Furthermore, to resolve this interpretive issue, semantic verb type and general construction type seem to interact with contextual variables in a complicated but principled way. In some, but not all, cases the interpretive principles suggest gradient functions rather than simple bifurcations. Thus, while looking at an ancient monastery, if one says the sentence (11), a *gradient interpretive range* involving transitivity seems possible—a range in turn depending on a parallel set of utterance contexts and discourse presuppositions. Compare Upakitsilpasan's similar sentence cited above (5).

Semantically, (5) and (11) use a creation verb, **sâ:ŋ** 'to build,' as predicated of the monastery and followed in the case of (11) by an asserted time expression. For (11), lacking other contextual information to the contrary, a Thai listener is likely to feel rather strongly that the (2b) intransitive-passive interpretation should outrank the (2c) topicalized, agent-suppressed transitive one. While (2b) would be favored to a great degree, this feeling is not quite categorical if extra background information were to become gradually or partially available. The (2c) interpretation would grow stronger, say, if a particular patron's activities in endowing several monasteries were in the discourse background (as, for example, in a type of biographical passage found in traditional Thai historical materials). The more a listener feels that the speaker has a specific agent in mind, the more (2c) becomes favored over (2b) as the intended interpretation.

Similarly, for Panupong's sentence (1b), it is not impossible to imagine a *set* of interpretive contexts ranging from those appropriate for "the sail has been raised" through intermediate cases and on to "the sail, someone has raised it." English, of course, must divide this set of situations discretely for purposes of linguistic coding—but is there reason to suppose that Thai must do the same thing?

Arguably, it seems possible on the contrary to claim that Thai listeners'—if not speakers'—decisions about (2b) versus (2c) interpretation in (11), etc., would depend on *the relative amount of contextual information available. This would suggest a gradient principle*—albeit one which in may cases would default, as it were, to the *more uncontroversial binary choice.* But the *principle would remain:* the more that background assumptions and prior discourse allow us to come to think that (11) is about a specific human agent/benefactor's actions, or the more we think that (1b) is about a specific crew member who raised the sail, then the more we will opt for (2c) interpretation over (2b). In this way, we might even find cases where speaker's/writer's interpretation could differ, gradiently or even in polar terms, from listener's/reader's. It would be difficult to say which interpretation was "correct."

Thepkanjana (1992) has approached the question of gradient transitivity from a *lexical perspective and has made important progress in clarifying basic lexical issues. Her work suggests a transitivity ranking of verb sets by semantic features. The* approach here is to go on, in the general vein of Hopper and Thompson (1980), to make the more pragmatic claim that even a single lexical item, in certain discourse constructions, may be subject to gradient transitivity interpretation. A full account of this speculation is beyond our scope here and would need in any case to reconsider sentences like (8d), where presence of an overt pronoun seems, *in this particular case, to be forcing a pair of polar interpretations* rather than permitting a range of gradient ones. Also, building on the basic argument of Thepkanjana, perhaps we can see creation verbs like **sâːŋ** 'to build' in (11) as facilitating passive-like (2b) interpretation to a degree relatively *greater* than for altered-state verbs like **kaːŋ** 'to hoist,' **kwàːt** 'to sweep,' or **sák** 'to wash,' at least as used in (1b), (3), and (8c). If so, then basic verbal semantics, specific syntactic construction and degree of contextual background available to interpreters all become relevant to deciding the (2b)-(2c) issue.

### Other Topic-Sensitive Polysemy

Although the (2c)-(7c) U/T-(A)-Vt reading may require context, at least the basic semantic relations in the (2b)-(7b) U/T-Vi and (2c)-(7c) U/T-(A)-Vt are similar: the NP refers to an item (viz, the sail) that has undergone a change of state caused by the action *named by the main verb (viz, being hoisted and spread out). The relevant difference* may be seen as how salient the agent may be.

Not all cases of preposed NP in Thai are of the same type as in the preceding **kaːŋ** 'to hoist,' **kwàːt** 'to sweep,' or **sák** 'to wash,' at least as used in (1b), (3), and (8c) 'hoist, spread out' or **kwàːt** 'sweep' examples. Note that for those verbs typically a human agent must perform an action on a non-human thing that brings about a change of state. For other transitive verbs such as **nát** 'to set up an appointment with,' **sɔ̌ːn** 'to teach,' etc., both of the verb's main arguments are typically human. (12) and (13) show that for verbs of this sort a somewhat different sort of ambiguity can arise.

(12)  câw-khɔ̌ːŋ    ùː    ná  mây  dây  nát  kháw  wáy  rɔ̀ːk.
      *owner*         *garage PCL not   able  fix-time 3P  in-advance PCL*
      (12a) 'The garage owner did not set up a meeting with him.'
      (12b) 'The garage owner — I didn't set up a meeting with him.'

Presumably for (12) the favored decontextualized reading would be (12a), but this sentence occurred in a best-selling Thai novel (Kopchitti, 1987, p.115) in a context where the meaning could only be (12b). That is, the interpretation in context is U/T, marked with ná, with zero A construed as speaker and with resumptive object pronoun coreferential with topicalized U. Note that this resumptive pronoun is different in position and function from the one in (8d), although both admit multiple context-sensitive interpretations.

(13)    ɔ̌ː,        phûː-chaːy    kɔ̂    sɔ̌ːn...
    *oh*       *man*              *LINK*   *teach*
    (13a) 'Oh, men teach too.'
    (13b) 'Oh, they teach men too.'

Similarly, for (13) out of context, (13a) would be the favored decontextualized interpretation for most Thai speakers, with the leading NP interpreted as A/T and object not stated, as though we were discussing the staff of a school and, in the conversation immediately preceding, someone had claimed that only women were teachers there.

However, (13) actually occurred in a recorded interview with a dancer who had just been asked whether her dance school taught only women students. In this case, the (13b) interpretation, U/T with suppressed agent (A), is unquestionably what was intended by the speaker and accords with what native Thai speakers understand when hearing the tape.

Further, in an experiment (Bart Evers, p.c.), an incomplete transcript was presented in *written form* to 50 Thai speakers for them to fill in zero anaphors with overt nominals if they wished. With respect to (13) none left the written text as it had been uttered orally. In another experiment, the single sentence (13) was extracted from the taped interview and presented to native speakers of Thai, who in this condition overwhelmingly interpreted it as (13a) through lack of context. These experiments taken together show that for this token at least that (i) there were no audio cues associated with the two interpretations and that (ii) the intended interpretation, while automatic in the original contextualized oral mode, is not regarded as optimal in written Thai (Diller, 1993). Although these examples must be formally distinguished from the transitivity alternations examined previously, the interplay of semantic, discourse-pragmatic, and sociolinguistic variables is similar.

## Construction Type and Transitivity

(12) and (13) then differ from (1b), (3), (6), (7), etc., in that a "voice alternation" explanation could be invoked to account for dual interpretations only in the latter cases. On one reading, at least, verbs like **kaːŋ** 'hoist, spread out' and **kwàːt** 'sweep' in the examples cited could be seen as undergoing lexical derivation to account for interpretive differences. On the other hand, in order to account for dual interpretations for verbs like **nát** 'to set up an appointment with (someone)' and **sɔ̌ːn** 'to teach (someone or something)' in the constructions shown in (12) and (13), there

does *not* appear to be a plausible lexical derivation explanation of this sort available. Rather, the main verbs remain transitive in both of the alternate interpretations.

(14a)  dèk      hôŋ      níː      sɔ̌ːn      ŋây.
       *child*    *room*   *this*    *teach*   *easy*
       'The children in this room are easy to teach.'
       OR: 'The children in this room can be taught easily.'

(14b)  wíchaː    wâːkayasǎmphan    sɔ̌ːn      yâːk
       *subject*   *syntax*           *teach*   *difficult*
       'Syntax is difficult to teach.'

To clarify the preceding issue, we should avoid the temptation to rely either on discourse pragmatics alone or on verbal argument semantics alone—that is, on animacy conditions and **kaːrók** relations, such as whether both A and U arguments of a transitive verb are typically both human or not. Note that both arguments are human in **nát** 'to set up an appointment with (someone)' and in one possibility for **sɔ̌ːn** 'teach.'

These verbs contrast with **kwàːt** 'sweep,' etc., where the argument pattern is human acting on non-human entity. However, as (14a) shows, *in certain construction types*, verbs of the former human-only type seem to behave in the (1b) mode. The **sɔ̌ːn** 'teach' examples are particularly telling because (14a–b) together suggest that predicate construction type is the operative determinant here rather than specific properties of argument animacy.

For (14a–b) then a lexical derivation explanation becomes at least plausible. This returns us again to the basic polyfunctional-word issue raised by Panupong (1978), but now with the distinct possibility that a derived passive sense for a transitive verb is not entirely a matter of the verb's basic semantic type (**kaːrók** structure) or idiosyncratic lexical properties. Rather, the possibility of a derived sense may depend partly on discourse pragmatics and partly on syntactic construction type as well.

## POLYFUNCTIONALITY ACROSS LANGUAGES

Do the factors discussed above for Thai apply more widely? In this section we suggest briefly that some features are Thai-specific while others are found in English and/or reflect more widespread trends or universal principles.

### Topic-Manner Constructions

(15a)  The clothes washed well. (E.g., with the biodegradable detergent.)
(15b)  (*?) The clothes washed already.
(15c)  *The clothes washed well by Mary.
(15d)  (*?) The students in this room teach easily.

Dixon (1982) observes that an English verb like **wash** can undergo a detransitive derivation in topic-manner constructions as in (15a). Outside of the explicit construction type, the derivation is far less acceptable, as (15b) shows, although it might perhaps be encountered in some special non-standard context. (15c) shows that the topic-manner detransitive construction is, in English at least, completely distinct from the passive. Dixon shows that for this construction type the agent is obligatorily suppressed.

Many English-controlled process or change-of-state verbs like **wash**, **peel**, **slice**, *drive*, etc. take the topic-manner detransitive construction, with agent suppressed, quite freely. Not all transitive verbs occur naturally in this construction type. Unlike (14a), which seems quite normal in Thai, the English counterpart (15d), if possible at all, would be highly marked.

It appears then on the basis of the Thai and English examples considered that certain broad principles of construction-sensitive detransitivization are likely to be widespread if not universal, but still subject to individual lexical peculiarities in specific languages.

### 'Break'-Type (Decausative) Constructions

Transitivity alternations less construction-specific than the topic-manner case affect English **break**, **open**, **burn**, **boil** and many other verbs sometimes referred to as, or further subdivided into, unaccusatives, middle verbs or decausatives (Klaiman, 1991, 1992; Kemmer, 1992). Corresponding to a single English lexical item, Thai often features multiple items with differing typical argument patterns: **phǎw**, **mây** 'burn'; **tôm**, **dùat** 'boil.' Also, the Thai forms may differ slightly as to more substantive semantic nuances as well as showing characteristic differences in thematic roles.

When English typically translates with one verb what other languages code with several, speakers of such languages, including Thai, may not feel that their verbs are quite so similar as English translations suggest. It is instructive then to compare several English, French, and Indonesian 'break' verbs more closely. (French examples from Brousseau and Ritter, 1991, and J-M. Ruinard, p.c.; Indonesian, from Ira Armstrong, p.c.). General issues raised for 'break' verbs here would apply more widely.

(16a)  Eng.: The window **broke**.
(16b)  Fr.: La fenêtre a **cassé**.
(16c)  Indo.: Jendela (itu) **rusak**.
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(16d)  Eng.: Mary **broke** the window.
(16e)  Fr.: Marie a **cassé** la fenêtre.
(16f)  Indo.: Mari **merusakkan** jendela.

Sentences in (16a–f) indicate that items meaning 'break' in English and French show a simple alternation between transitive and intransitive readings, superficially reminiscent of Thai patterns (2a) and (2b), while Indonesian needs a complex affixation (**me-**...-**an**) to derive the transitive from the intransitive. Note that the forms in (16a–c), while intransitive, are not strictly speaking passive. True passives differing in form from these can in fact be formed from the active sentences in (16d–f) by normal morphological rules of the three languages: "The window was broken by Mary," etc.

(17)   *mali:   **tæ̀:k**   kracòk.
       *Mali*    *break*    *windowpane*

(18)   mali:   **hàk**   kradù:k   kày.
       Mali    break     bone      chicken.
       'Mali broke the chicken bone.'

(19a)  Fr.: Marie a **brisé** la fenêtre.
(19b)  Fr.: La fenêtre **s'est brisée**.
(19c)  Fr.: *La fenêtre a **brisé**.

Common Thai verbs 'to break' include **tæ̀:k** 'to break up into pieces' and **hàk** 'to break off, snap in two.' It is interesting that **tæ̀:k** is essentially intransitive, confined (save for special idioms) to uses similar to (16a); thus (17) is not generally acceptable. For transitive meanings as in (16d), use must be made of common periphrastic serialized causative expressions in **tham, hây** or **tham hây** (2c). Thus **tæ̀:k** behaves in a way vaguely parallel to Indonesian **rusak**, although the latter derives a transitive-causative through overt causative morphology instead of serialized periphrasis.

On the other hand, **hàk** freely admits alternation of the English (16a–d) or French (16b–e) sort. It thus admits the full range (2a–c) interpretations discussed above. In many ways this is parallel to the English and French examples. However **hàk** has a particular semantics, connoting a shear-like 'snapping' cleavage with the broken item brittle, such as a bone, pencil or stick.

Similarly, French shows multiple verbs including **briser** and **casser** 'to break,' with a slight semantic difference. On the one hand, the substantive French semantic difference is reminiscent of the **tæ̀:k/hàk** nuances, with **briser** including at least the possibility of shattering and **casser** suggesting a more abrupt severing, cracking, or cleavage. The Thai and French transitivity specifications, on the other hand, can be quite different. (19b–c) illustrates that for the essentially transitive verb **briser**, a derived decausative construction involves the reflexive element **se** ( or **s'**), as though the window 'broke itself.' In loose terms then, **briser** represents similar substantive semantics but just the reverse transitivity pattern of **tæ̀:k**, in that with **briser** extra marking is required for a derived decausative, but in the case of **tæ̀:k** for a derived transitive/causative. (**Casser** too may take this reflexive construction with some additional semantic nuances. Otherwise it accords more closely with the transitivity alternation potential of **hàk** .)

(20)   lom     tham    hây       kracòk       tæ̀:k.
       *wind*   *make*   *give/let*   *windowpane*   *break*
       'The wind broke the glass pane.'

(21)   kracòk        phæ̀n          nán    tæ̀:k       do:y   lom.
       *windowpane*   *CLASSIFIER*   *that*   *broke(en)*   *by*   *wind*
       'That pane of glass broke in (/*?by) the wind.'

A further complexity for the analysis of Thai that must be left aside here concerns the relationship between (17), (20) and (21)—the latter (Pichit Roinil, p.c.) perhaps subject to some acceptability differences. For speakers who do accept (21), the A *effector* argument can appear in a prepositional phrase in **do:y**, which elsewhere marks agent or manner. (An A *agent* argument in this construction seems less acceptable.) (21) might be seen as a discourse strategy enabling an essentially intransitive verb such as **tɛ̀:k** to occur with two semantic arguments: topical U/T and non-topical A (here 'wind'). This is a pragmatic configuration somewhat different from (20), the more common two-argument periphrastic causative. Note that most English speakers reject a parallel agentive or effector **by**-phrase with verbs like **break** when used in decausative constructions (as distinct from in true passives), although speakers may admit other prepositions marking effector more vaguely such as **in** (e.g., in the English translation for (21)).

## Existential and "Lacking" Constructions

Existential verbs and verbs of lacking, appearing, presenting oneself, etc., show some syntactic similarities across the world's languages. A number of otherwise so-called SVO languages, including Thai, prefer to arrange non-topic (new-information) existential arguments postverbally. The Thai **mi:** construction has often been analysed along these lines; similar verbs such as **pra:kòt** 'appear,' **kə̀:t** 'happen' show similar tendencies. See Vongvipanond (1982b) and Sookgasem (1992).

(22a)   mi:         panhǎ:      mày-mày     thûa-pay.
        *there-be    problem     new-new     everywhere*
        'There are new problems present everywhere.'

(22b)   panhǎ:   ní:    mi:         thûa-pay.
        *problem   this   there-be    everywhere*
        'This problem is present everywhere.'

Note that, as a first approximation at least, in (22a) where the UNDERGOER/*theme* NP 'problem(s)' is indefinite new information, the preferred position is postverbal, but when it is definite information, e.g., previously cited in discourse, it more commonly appears in preverbal TOPIC position. Compare constraints on English expletive constructions in "there..." However, even though this ordering principle is a strong tendency in many languages, in Thai it is not an absolute rule. In any event, a complete treatment of these pragmatic matters is complex and beyond my present scope.

Verbs like **mòt** 'to be all gone,' **khà:t** 'to be lacking,' and the like show some cross-language similarities to existentials. However the Thai verbs are interesting in that they allow what seems to be a complete reversal of their NP arguments with respect to the verb, as in (23a-b). One consequence of this is to render the traditional notion of grammatical SUBJECT especially unrevealing and ad hoc for these verbs. In the terms developed above, both arguments appear to be in the UNDERGOER macrorole. The

more specific roles in (23a-b) are perhaps to be labeled *theme* and *locative*. That is, **sugar** (*theme*) is lacking at the **market** (*locative*), but better U labels might be found.

(23a) ná:mta:n    khà:t    talà:t.
     *sugar*       *lack*     *market.*
     'Sugar is lacking at the market.' (= The sugar shortage is more topical.)

(23b) talà:t    khà:t    ná:mta:n.
     *market*    *lack*     *sugar*
     'The market is lacking sugar.' (= The market deficiency is more topical.)

Reviewing the existential cases above, we find that the verbs of lacking are broadly similar in terms of pragmatic sensitivity. Speakers tend to agree that logically or semantically (23a–b) are equivalent but different in contextual emphasis. Although difficult to pinpoint, speakers may report a differential pragmatic effect in terms that we will interpret as topicality, with the leading preverbal NP more topical than the postverbal one. Bandhumedha (1970, p. 27), in discussing the verb **mòt** 'to be out of, to be all gone,' notes combined semantic-pragmatic constraints governing NP argument ordering. She reports that concrete, definite items tend to precede **mòt**; abstract, indefinite ones, to follow the verb. In some cases, such as (24a–b) a single *theme* argument may vary as to position, but with sensitivity to pragmatic-semantic features. Translations for this pair are intended to reflect Bandhumedha's claims.

(24a) ŋən    mòt.
     *be-all-gone*    *money*
     'All the money is money spent.'

(24b) mòt    ŋən.
     *money*      *be-all-gone*
     '(I've) not got any more money.'

(24b) could also occur with an initial *experiencer* or *locative*. In general, if a Thai verb of lacking occurs with both *theme* and *locative* UNDERGOER arguments, as in (23a–b), and one of these arguments is more strongly topical than the other, e.g., it is marked with a deictic, particle, and/or is referred to in immediately prior discourse, then Thai appears to rely more on pragmatic principles in determining word order, rather than semantic ones. Thus in Figure 4 the configuration in (1) represents (23a) in a situation where *theme* **sugar** is being discussed, whereas (2) represents (23b) where the *locative* **market** (perhaps tending toward *patient*) is relatively more topical. Also, both **khà:t** and **mòt** can occur with a human "affected experiencer" argument instead of locative. In fact it is this sort of argument that is taken as suppressed as indicated in the translation of (24b). It is significant for the argument here that an *experiencer* argument of this sort, being stronger in the A hierarchy than the U macrorole *locative*, does not accept the argument reversal of (23a-b) with the ease that *locative* does.

It would be tempting to generalize as follows: in Thai sentences with two low-A arguments, especially where arguments both bear UNDERGOER macroroles, then

*pragmatics, rather than semantics, becomes the main determinant in word order.* In this sense, then, neither (23a) nor (23b) should be considered a more basic order with the other derived. Both are equal with pragmatics the arbiter. But in other cases, such as with an overt strong-A argument, semantics provides the clear default or initiating pattern. If discourse dynamics renders a different syntactic construction more suitable, pragmatics can then override these semantic ordering principles—sometimes with special marking to make this override order felicitous.
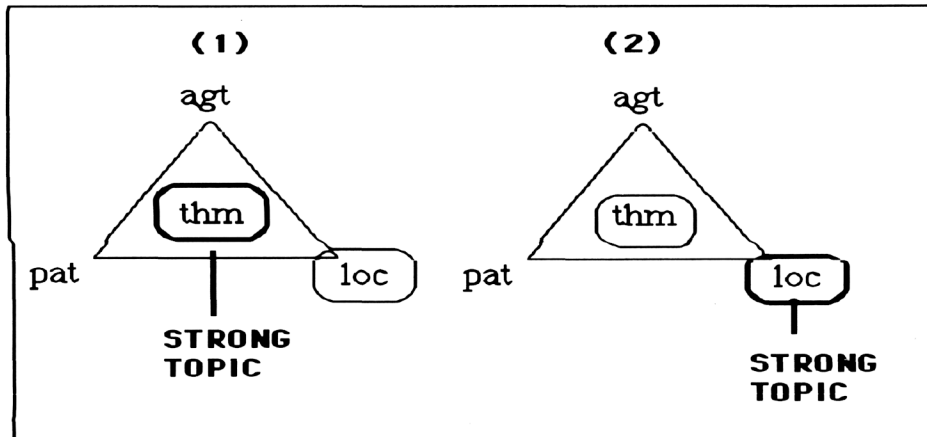


Figure 4. Pragmatic contrast in double UNDERGOER constructions.

The above generalization may be on the right track but as stated it is too strong. While double UNDERGOER "affected *locative*" verbs such as **pûan** 'to be soiled with' appear to follow the reversal principle, the common "neutral *locative*" verb **yù:** 'to be located' does not admit the same sort of complete argument reversal that **khà:t** and other verbs of lacking allow. If a *locative* with **yù:** is highly topical, it may indeed be preposed but the *theme* (the person or thing located somewhere) does then not normally become postverbal. (Postverbal right-dislocation—the "afterthought construction"— should be considered different from what applies in (23a–b)).

(25)    kày        tua-phû:  mòt.
         *chicken    male      be-all-(gone)*
         (i) 'The roosters are all gone.' (E.g.: —have all been sold. Only hens are left.)
         (ii) '(They're) all roosters!' (= There are no hens at all.)

A final peculiar feature of the verb type considered in this section is a strong propensity toward more basic types of semantic polysemy. The verb form **khà:t** in a strictly intransitive construction elsewhere means 'to be torn.' For the existential verbs, **mi:** has an alternate transitive meaning of 'to have' and **kə̀:t** 'to be born.' Even **mòt** is actually polysemous, varying between 'all' and 'all gone,' as shown in the interpretations of (25) (Wilaiwan Khanittanan, p.c.). Why this particular set of pragmatically sensitive verbs is prone also to more fundamental semantic polysemy is a question for future study.

## CONCLUSION

Transitivity alternations in Thai have been considered in the light of a system of *basic distinctions proposed by Foley and Van Valin (1984; i.e., RRG)*. These include macroroles ACTOR and UNDERGOER, similar to **kaːrók** relations of traditional Thai grammar, along with TOPIC status (of varying strengths) for NPs in discourse. In some cases this may be compared with the traditional Thai (/Indic) term **prathaːn**.

- ROLE factors (including predicate semantics and theta-role representation)
    - ACTOR (A) and UNDERGOER (U) patterns for lexical verb
    - whether a predicate is more about a state or an action
- REFERENCE factors (relating to discourse pragmatics)
    - whether a NP is to be a strong or weak TOPIC
    – whether a missing argument is to be construed (zero anaphora).

RRG analysis breaks the traditional notion of grammatical "subject" down into more basic semantic-pragmatic components and further denies that "subject," as traditionally defined, is necessarily a universal grammatical category homogeneous across languages. Thai data tend to support this denial.

For Thai, how role and reference properties combine—whether to be taken traditionally as SUBJECT or not— depends on several factors. Thai sentences of the (1b) **kaːŋ** type, noted as problematic by Panupong (1978), have a single UNDERGOER argument in overt syntax. Whether or not alternate interpretations are more plausibly accounted for by transitive-intransitive verb alternation or by some analogue of movement (topicalization) and ACTOR suppression must take into account at least the following issues, which are interrelated:

(i) the inherent semantic type of the main verb, such as **kaːng** 'to hoist (a sail, etc.),' **sák** 'to wash,' **sâːŋ** 'to build,' or **khàːt** 'to lack'—each differentially affecting, for example, how U arguments are typically conceptualized and discussed;

(ii) variation in sets of nearly synonymous verbs, such as **tæ̀ːk**, **hàk** 'to break,' with similar basic semantics, but which vary significantly in terms of possible A-U argument patterns;

(iii) construction-specific semantic/pragmatic restrictions, such as in existential expressions or in topic-manner sentences;

(iv) background contextual knowledge, either derived from discourse context or from cultural "common sense," leading language users to construe missing nominals, to be sensitive to relative topicality, and/or to favor one type of transitivity interpretation over another;

(v) subjective evaluation and synthesis, e.g., language users' collective feelings that for a given sentence in context, in the light of (i)–(iv), the message should be focused on an action as affecting something (U = more a *patient*) or else is more appropriately focused on a currently relevant state (U = more a *theme*) that has resulted from a prior action, but the action itself is no longer considered especially salient for present purposes. For Thai, a radical possibility is that in some cases transitivity status might be gradient rather than binary.

A general principle for Thai seems to be that the more the referent NP of a strong A is salient, the more likely A is to occur either as overt TOPIC or to be suppressed as

zero anaphor easily construed. On the other hand, for double UNDERGOER sentences of type (23a-b), the absence of a strong A argument with verbs like **khàːt** 'to lack' seems to hand over, as it were, to discourse-pragmatic factors the decisive power in determining argument word order in surface syntax. In these cases especially the traditional notion of SUBJECT becomes opaque.

Although the approach suggested here is still tentative, it is hoped that ideas derived from Role and Reference Grammar may be of utility in clarifying issues in Thai syntax in the future. Perhaps in this way RRG may lead to an analysis both "intuitive" and "logical," answering the challenge posed by Panupong (1978).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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