

FIRST AND LAST IN THAI, OR THE ORDER OF OPPOSITIONS

†Mary R. Haas

In 1943 the well-known Chinese writer, Lin Yutang, published a book entitled *Between tears and laughter*. To me this title was vaguely disquieting-- indeed, it seemed quite awkward. Then I realized that the opposition of 'tears' and 'laughter' is normally rendered 'between laughter and tears' in English. In other words, the order is the reverse of that used in Lin's title. Perhaps in Chinese the order is the reverse of English-- this I do not know.* In Thai, however, binomials (Malkiel 1968) within this semantic range are regularly the reverse of those in English, and this paper is concerned with binomials containing opposites.

Thai is a language in which the head always precedes the attribute in modifying constructions (e.g. man-good = good man) whereas English is a language in which the opposite order usually pertains. Both languages also make considerable use of various kinds of what are often described as coordinate constructions, and in many of these where the languages appear to have equivalent expressions the word order is the same in both languages. On the other hand, in the case of coordinate constructions involving oppositions, it frequently happens that Thai uses the reverse of the English order, something that has even been observed in expressions which may be calques from English, such as 'black and white (photograph)', rendered in Thai as 'white (and) black (photograph)'.

In studying examples of the order of coordinates which are opposites, I have included coordinate phrases as well as compounds. In the following examples (Haas 1964) Thai word order is the reverse of the English:

1. thúsùg 'sorrow-happiness', Eng. 'joy and sorrow'
2. príawwāan 'sour-sweet', Eng. 'sweet and sour'
3. nenthooṅ 'silver-gold', Eng. 'gold and silver'
4. binpaj' binmaa' 'fly-go fly-come' or 'fly on, fly back'
Eng. 'fly back and forth'

* It is *leǐ xiào zhī jiān* 'between tears and laughter', which is also better rhythmically in *pǔtōnghuà* (Mandarin). (Ed.)

5. thîi mâjdii'kômii' thîidii'kômii' 'some bad, some good',
Eng. 'some are good, some are bad'
6. dĭawklâj' dĭawklaj' 'now near, now far', Cf. Eng. 'far
and near'

Theoretically speaking, it would seem that coordinate items could be listed in any order in both English and Thai, but most, if not all, languages have a preferred order which in any given expression will remain fixed. Nevertheless, the question regarding the examples above is: why does Thai have the reverse of English (or English the reverse of Thai)? It appears that while English prefers the order 'favourable:unfavourable' (good and bad, light and dark, etc.), Thai prefers 'unfavourable:favourable.' Lin Yutang's use of 'tears and laughter' rather than 'laughter and tears' thus fits the Thai pattern nicely, but goes against the normal English one.

There are, however, other examples of coordinate oppositions in which somewhat more flexibility exists. Even in examples which are very close semantically, one may have one order and another its reverse, both in Thai and in English.

7. khûu bàawsăaw' 'pair groom-bride', Eng. 'bride and groom'
8. sāmii' phanrajaa' (elegant term) 'husband-wife', Eng.
'husband and wife'
9. thāŋjĭŋ' lēchaaj' 'both women and men', Eng. 'men and women'
10. phômēē' 'father and mother, parents', Eng. 'mother and
father' (but also 'dad and mom')*

So examples involving male and female oppositions in both languages show a little more flexibility between expressions, even though a given expression tends, as already noted, to remain fixed. An example showing such variation within one expression is the following variant for (8):

- 8a. phanrájaa' sāmii' 'wife-husband', Eng. 'husband and wife'

This latter has the advantage of showing inner rhyme (-jāa sām-), a device favoured by some speakers. The examples given here are chosen to show some variation, though it turns out that Thai and English expressions involving male and female opposition tend to place the male term first. But one does find a few expressions placing the female term first, as in English (7) and (10) and Thai (8a) and (9).

* Most commonly 'mum and dad' in England. (Ed.)

In undertaking this study I was hoping to find some explanation for those cases where Thai and English have reverse order in coordinates, but beyond the observation already made that English prefers 'favourable:unfavourable' and Thai prefers the reverse, it would appear that the treatment of oppositions is not subject to generalization. Instead, each expression tends to have its own explanation in both languages. One disruptive influence that occurs in Thai is the desire of many speakers to use inner rhyme, as in (8a), and this may entail the rearrangement of the items in order to bring about the adjacency of the rhyming segments, a device which also accounts for a few cases where two orders are possible in Thai; thus (8) vs. (8a).

Further studies of Thai binomials might, indeed, profit from an areal approach, i.e. a comparative study of the problem in other languages of the area (see Haas 1978).

REFERENCES

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Haas, Mary R. | 1964. <i>Thai-English student's dictionary</i> .
Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press. |
| | 1978. Areal linguistic characteristics
of East Asia. In <i>Chinese language use</i>
(ed.) Beverly Hong (Contemp. China papers
13). Canberra: Contemp. China Centre,
Austral. Nat. Univ., 1-8. |
| Lin Yutang | 1945. <i>Between tears and laughter</i> .
Garden City, New York: Blue Ribbon Books. |
| Malkiel, Yakov | 1968. Studies in irreversible binomials.
In <i>Essays on linguistic themes</i> . Oxford:
Blackwell, 311-55. |

