ARE THERE PREPOSITIONS IN THAI?

KITIMA INDRAMBARYA

University of Hawai‘i

Abstract

Within the lexicase dependency grammar framework, this paper investigates the class of Thai words which traditional grammarians have called ‘prepositions’ and which lexicase studies of Thai have analyzed as non-extension prepositions to see what syntactic categories they belong to. I argue that there are in fact prepositions in Thai but that they are limited in number.

The paper discusses possible criteria for distinguishing prepositions from nouns and other syntactic categories as well as in order to identify non-extension prepositions in Thai.

1. Introduction

Various Thai linguists have looked into what the traditional grammarians refer to as prepositions and have reanalyzed them into various categories, for example, verbs (Warotamasikkhadit 1990); coverbs, for prepositions which derive from verbs (Kullavanijaya 1974, Clark 1975); relator nouns, for nouns which carry the localistic features for their dependent nouns (Kullavanijaya 1974, Clark and Prasithrathsint 1985, Savetmalaya 1989); and conjunctions (Warotamasikkhadit 1990). In his paper ‘There are no prepositions in Thai’, Warotamasikkhadit (1990) claims that there are no prepositions in Thai. Instead, words which are called prepositions are actually verbs, nouns, or conjunctions.

Working within the lexicase dependency framework (which maintains that there are eight word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives, determiners, adverbs, prepositions (or postpositions), conjunctions, and sentence particles), I will argue that there are, in fact, prepositions in Thai, but that they are limited in number. In this paper, I have selected words which the traditional grammarians refer to as prepositions and have proposed criteria to identify their syntactic categories.

In lexicase, prepositional phrases are regarded as exocentric constructions containing more than one obligatory head. Two kinds of prepositions are non-extension prepositions, which require a noun phrase co-head, and extension prepositions, which require a clausal co-head. Extension prepositions are referred to as ‘subordinate conjunctions’ by traditional and
transformational grammarians and as ‘complementizers’ by the Government and Binding Theory syntacticians. Lexicase makes a distinction between extension prepositions such as wâa ‘that’ and thâa ‘if’, and (coordinate) conjunctions in that only the latter coordinate two constituents of the same syntactic category. Thus, conjunctions have two dependents while extension prepositions normally have a single co-head dependent. Conjunctions in Thai include têe ‘but’, leʔ ‘and’, and kâp1 ‘and’. This paper focuses on the prepositions which occur with a noun phrase dependent. Thus, the term ‘prepositions’ refers to non-extension prepositions.

2. Criteria for identifying non-extension prepositions in Thai

Before discussing the criteria for identifying the syntactic categories of words traditionally referred to as prepositions, I have chosen one of the least controversial words to represent for each syntactic class the characteristics of that class.

Preposition: kâp2 ‘with’

The preposition, kâp2 ‘with’, has been selected to represent the characteristics of prepositions, since, synchronically, it does not have corresponding verbs in the language.

(1)  dêŋŋ khuy kâp2 lék
     Dang talk with Lek

     ‘Dang talked with Lek’.

Relator noun: bon ‘on, top; surface’

(2)  dêŋŋ waang náŋsii bon
     Dang lay book on

     tôʔ niʔi
     table this

     ‘Dang put a book on this table’.
Verb: cεék₁ ‘to distribute’

(3) dểǝng sī₂ khanom cεék₁
dêkdek
Dang buy sweets distribute
children
‘Dang bought sweets to distribute to the children’.

Adverb: wáy ‘lying’

(4) kháw thing nángsií wáy
he abandon book lying
bâan nán
house that
‘He left a book at that house’.

2.1. Criteria distinguishing prepositions from verbs and adverbs

2.1.1. Topicalization of the following noun phrase - ‘stranding’

A preposition and a relator noun cannot be stranded, while a verb and an adverb can.

Preposition

(5) *lék nả? dểǝng khuy kâp₂
Lek TOP Dang talk with
‘Lek is the person with whom Dang talked’. (Lit. ‘Lek, Dang talked with’.)

Relator noun

(6) *tôʔ nīi dểǝng waang
table this Dang lay
nángsií bon
book on
‘This table is the place where Dang put a book on’. (Lit. This table, dang put a book on’.)
Verb

(7) dèkdèk ná? deèng sii₂ children TOP Dang buy
khànóm cèèk₁ sweets distribute

'These children are the ones to whom Dang bought sweets to distribute'. (Lit. 'The children, Dang bought sweets to distribute to'.)

Adverb

(8) bān nán ná? kháw thing house that TOP he abandon
nánɡsii way book lying

'That house is where he left a book'. (Lit. 'That house, he left a book at'.)

2.1.2. Topicalization of the word in question together with the following noun

While both a prepositional phrase and a relator noun, together with their dependents may be topicalized, as shown in (9) and (10), neither a verb, plus its dependent, nor an adverb together with a following noun, may be topicalized, as in shown in (11) and (12), since they do not form a constituent.

Preposition

(9) kàp₂ lék deèng khuy teē with Lek Dang talk but
kàp₂ nidaa deèng máy khuy with Nida Dang not talk

'With Lek, Dang talked, but with Nida, Dang did not'.
Relator noun

(10) bon to? nii deëng
on table this Dang
waang nãngsii
lay book

'On this table, Dang put a book'.

Verb

(11) *cëek₁ dëkdëk deëng
distribute children Dang
sii₂ khanom
buy sweets

'To distribute to the children, Dang bought sweets'.

Adverb

(12) *wány båän nán khâw
lying house that he
thing nãngsii
abandon book

'At that house, he left a book'.

2.1.3. Choice of negation word

A predicate preposition and a predicate noun phrase occur in construction only with the negation word mâychây while a verb and an adverb may occur in construction with either mây or mâydây.

As a test, we try to negate the word in question in the position in a clause with no contrast involved. If neither mây nor mâychây are applicable, as found for most words, we try to negate them in a contrastive clause. (Here I show only the applicable negation with a contrastive clause.)

Preposition

(13) deëng khuy kÀp₂ lék
Dang talk with Lek
*mây/mâychây kÀp₂ ooy
NEG with Oi

'Dang talked with Lek, not with Oi'.
Relator noun

(14) deëng waang nángsìi bon
Dang lay book on

tó? níi *mây/mâychây
table this NEG
bon sofàa nán
on sofa that

‘Dang put a book on this table, not on that sofa’.

Verb

(15) deëng sì₂ khanom ceëk₁
Dang buy sweets distribute
dékdék mây/mâydân/*mâychây
children NEG

cëëk₁ laan
distribute niece

‘Dang bought sweets to distribute to the children, not to her nieces’.

Adverb

(16) khâw thing nángsìi wây
he abandon book lying
bân níi mây/mâydân/*mâychây
house this NEG
wây bân nán
lying house that

‘He left a book at this house, not at that house’.

2.2. Criterion for distinguishing prepositions from verbs:
The root predicate with the negation word mây

If a form never occurs as a root predicate in the language, such a form is not a verb. If, on the other hand, one finds that a form may occur as a root predicate, three possibilities are: a) the form is a verb (e.g. klây ‘to be near’); b) the form is a non-verb predicate (e.g. samràp ‘for’); or c) the form in question has a
homophous verb (e.g. càak₁ ‘to distribute’, hãy₁ ‘to give’). There are multiple possibilities because a predicate can be a verb, a noun or a preposition (Starosta 1988:235).

In this situation, the choice of negation word must be reapplied to see if the form in the root predicate position is a verb. If it can occur with the negation word mày, the form in that position is a verb. If it can occur with the negation word mâychày, it is either a predicate noun or a predicate preposition (i.e. samràp ‘for’).

In order to identify whether the verb in the root predicate position is the same lexical item as the word in question, the meaning preservation must be taken into consideration. If the verb in the root predicate preserves the meaning of the word in its original position, the form belongs to a single lexical entry (e.g. klay ‘to be far’). If it does not, the word in question has a homophonous verb (e.g. verb càak₁ ‘to depart’: preposition càak₂ ‘from’: noun càak₃ ‘from’: verb hãy₁ ‘to give’: adverb hãy₆ ‘for’).

Examples (17), (18), and (20) show that kàp₂ ‘with’, bon ‘surface’, and wày ‘lying’ never occur as root predicates and therefore are not verbs. Céek₁ ‘to distribute’ may occur as a root predicate, as in (19a), and occurs with mày ‘not’, as in (19b), which reveals that it is a verb.

Preposition

(17) *dëeng káp₂ lék
     Dang with Lek

‘Dang with Lek’.

Relator noun

(18) *nángsii bon to?
     table on table

‘The book is on the table’.

Verb

(19) a. dëeng cëek₁ nángsii
     Dang distribute book
dëkdék
     children

‘Dang distributed books to the children’.
b. deêng mây/mâydây cêek
   Dang NEG distribute
   nängsii dêkdêk
   book children

   'Dang does not distribute books to the children'.

Adverb

(20) *khâw wây nängsìi bân nân
    he lying book house that

   'He left a book at that house'.

2.3. Criterion for distinguishing prepositions from nouns: Determiner modification

   Only a noun can be modified by the determiners nü 'this', or nân 'that'.

Preposition

(21) *deêng khuy kàp2 nân
    Dang talk with that

   'Dang talked with that'.

Relator noun

(22) deêng waâng nängsìi bon nân
    Dang lay book on that

   'Dang put a book on that'.

Verb

(23) *deêng sî2 khanom cêek
    Dang buy sweets distribute
    nân
    that

   'Dang bought sweets to distribute to that'.
Adverb

(24) *kháw thing nángsii wáy nán
he abandon book lying that

'He left a book at that'.

Savetamalaya (1989:149-150) notes that a few relator nouns may not occur with the determiner nán 'that', including nia 'above', klaang 'middle', and lang 'back'. In this case, if a noun phrase headed by the word in question can occur as a subject of a sentence, then the form is considered to be a noun.

To summarize, topicalization of the following noun (stranding), topicalization of the word in question together with the following noun, and the choice of negation word show that prepositions and nouns act similarly, while verbs behave similarly to adverbs. The negation word mâychây occurs with a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase. Mây and mâydây, on the other hand, occur with a verb or an adverb. A root predicate distinguishes a verb from an adverb. Determiner modification distinguishes a noun from a preposition. The summary of test results is shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Strand</th>
<th>TOP with following noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>NEG</th>
<th>Det. mod.</th>
<th>Root predicate w/mây</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>mâychây</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>mâychây</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>mây,</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mâydây</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>mây,</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mâydây</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Summary of test results
3. Applications

In this section, I discuss the results of applying the five tests summarized above to the words in question, using the following seven steps:

(a) a sentence containing the word in question
(b) the application of topicalization of the following noun-stranding (See 2.1.1)
(c) the application of topicalization of the word together with a following noun (See 2.1.2)
(d) the application of choice of negation in a non-contrastive clause or in a contrastive clause, if the former is not applicable (See 2.1.3)
(e) the application of determiner modification (See 2.3)
(f) the application of the root predicate test (See 2.2)
(g) the application of choice of negation word to the root predicate (See 2.2)

3.1. Prepositions


càak₂ ‘from’

The form càak has various homophones. Càak₁ ‘to leave, to depart’ is a verb; càak₂ ‘from’ is a preposition; càak₃ ‘from’ is a noun. Examples (25b) to (25d) show that càak which occurs as dependent of a regent verb could be either a preposition or a noun.

(25) a. dêeng dön càak bânân khâw
    Dang walk leave house he
    ‘Dang walked from his house’.

    b. *bânân khâw dêeng dön càak
        house he Dang walk leave
        ‘His house, Dang walked from’.

    c. càak bânân khâw dêeng dön
        leave house he Dang walk
        ‘From his house, Dang walked’.
d.  dēŋg  dōn  cāak  bāan  khāw  
Dang  walk  leave  house  he
*mây/mâychây  cāak  roongrian
NEG  leave  school
‘Dang walked from his house, not from school’.

Example (25e) reveals that cāak in (25a) cannot be a noun
and hence must be a preposition.

e.  *dēŋg  dōn  cāak  nán
Dang  walk  leave  that
‘Dang walked from that’.

Example (25f) shows that there is a corresponding verb
cāak₁ in the language.

f.  dēŋg  cāak₁  bāan  khāw
Dang  leave  house  he
‘Dang left his house’.

I do not consider the form cāak in (25a) to belong to the
same lexical item as the one in (25f) because of the different
distribution of cāak when occurring as a root predicate, as
illustrated in (25g). That is, cāak in (25f) may occur in
construction with the negation word mây but not mâychây in
contrast to (25d), which is cāak₂.

g.  dēŋg  mây/*mâychây  cāak₁
Dang  NEG  leave
bāan  khāw  nēe
house  he  sure
‘Dang will certainly not leave his house’.

However, in expressions referring to time, such as (25h),
cāak can be modified by the determiner nán ‘that’, revealing
that it is a noun. I consider this form in (25h) to be cāak₃.
h. càak₃ nán khâw mây phûut
from that he NEG speak
kàp₂ chân laɔy
with I at all

‘From then he no longer speaks to me’.

Further, càak₂ in (25a) does not share the same meaning with càak₁ in (25g) and càak₃ in (25h). While the verb càak₁ carries the meaning of ‘to leave, to depart’, the preposition càak₂ and the noun càak₃ carry the meaning ‘from’. The justification for this claim derives from the fact that càak₂ and càak₃ do not necessarily involve motion, as shown in (25i), while càak₁ always involves a movement from one place to another.

(25) i. miangthay hàang càak
Thailand far from
ameerikaa mâak
America much

‘Thailand is very far from America’.

3.2. Relator nouns

Relator nouns in Thai include nâa ‘front’, lang ‘back’, càak₃ ‘from’, khee ‘only’, mîa ‘when’, etc.

tângtee ‘since’

The distribution of tângtee in (26b) to (26d) shows that it could be either a preposition or a noun. Example (26e) reveals that tângtee is a noun. Example (26f) shows that there is no corresponding verb in the language and thus the form cannot be a verb.

(26) a. khâw mây phûut kàp₂ chân
he NEG speak with I
tângtee mîawaan
since yesterday

‘He has not talked to me since yesterday’.
b. *mîawaan khåw mây phûut
   yesterday he NEG speak

kâp₂ chán tângtée
with I since

‘Yesterday, he has not talked to me since’.

c. tângtée mîawaan khåw
   since yesterday he

mây phûut kâp₂ chán
NEG speak with I

‘Since yesterday, he has not talked to me’.

d. khåw mây phûut kâp₂ chán
   he NEG speak with I

*mây/mâychây tângtée mîawaan
NEG since yesterday

‘He has not talked to me not since yesterday’.

e. khåw mây phûut kâp₂ chán
   he NEG speak with I

 tângtée nân
since that

‘He has not talked to me since then’.

f. *khåw tângtée mîawaan
   he since mîawaan

‘He was since yesterday’.

3.3. Verbs

Verbs include klây ‘to be near’ and klay ‘to be far’, thing ‘to arrive’, etc.

**Klay ‘to be far’**

(27) a. bân khåw yùu klay roongrian
   house he stay far school

‘His house is far (from) school’.
b. roongrian nà? bāan kháw
    school TOP house he
    yùu klay
    stay far

    'School, his house is far (from) school'.

c. *klāy roongrian bāan kháw yùu
    near school house he stay

    'Far (from) school, his house is'.

d. bāan kháw yùu mây/mâychây/
    house he stay NEG
    *mâychây klay roongrian
    NEG far school

    'His house is not far (from) school'.

e. *bāan kháw yùu klay nán
    house he stay far that

    'His house is far (from) that'.

f. bāan kháw klay roongrian
    house he far school

    'His house is far (from) school'.

g. bāan kháw mây/mâychây
    house he NEG
    klay roongrian
    far school

    'His house is far (from) school'.

3.4. Adverbs
Adverbs include hätš ‘to, for’.

hätš ‘for, to’

Examples (28b) to (28d) show that hätš in (28a) behaves like a verb or an adverb. Example (28e) confirms that the form is not a noun.
Example (28f) shows that there is a form of *hây which occurs as a main verb in the language and carries the meaning of ‘to give’, but not ‘for’. Thus, I consider *hây in (28a) to be a separate lexical items from hây in (28f). Since there is no verb hây in the language carrying the meaning ‘for, to’, I consider (28a) to be an adverb.

f. lék  hây  suda
   Lek  give  Suda
   * 'Lek for Suda'.
   'Lek gave Suda (something)'.

(28) a. lék khian côte maay  hây  suda
   Lek write letter for Suda
   'Lek wrote a letter for Suda'.

b. suda  nà?  lék khian côte maay
   Suda  TOP  Lek write letter
   hây
   for
   'Suda, Lek wrote a letter for'.

c. *hây  suda  lék khian côte maay
   for  Suda  Lek write letter
   'For Suda, Lek wrote a letter'.

d. lék khian côte maay  hây  suda
   Lek write letter for Suda
   mây dây/*mây chây  hây  suwanna
   NEG  for  Suwanna
   'Lek wrote a letter for Suda, not for Suwanna'.

e. *lék khian côte maay  hây  nân
   Lek write letter for that
   'Lek wrote a letter for that'.
g. lék máy/mâyôy/*mâychây hay
Lek NEG give
sudaa
Suda
‘Lek did not give Suda (anything)’.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a few criteria to identify and distinguish prepositions in the Thai language from other syntactic categories. The criteria employed are: topicalization of the following noun (stranding); topicalization of the word in question together with the following noun; the choice of negation; determiner modification; and the root predicate with the negation word máy. By applying these criteria to words which are traditionally called ‘prepositions’, I have shown that there are, indeed, prepositions in Thai. Furthermore, some words which are traditionally referred to as prepositions could, in fact, be identified as prepositions, nouns, verbs or even adverbs.

References


