ON IMPERSONAL VERBS IN THAI

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the occurrence of impersonal verbs in Thai within the Lexicase dependency framework. The paper limits its scope to a discussion of the impersonal verbs which do not require a verbal dependent. These verbs are referred to in the Lexicase grammar as non-extension impersonal verbs. The paper proposes the postposing test to identify impersonal verbs and to distinguish a subject from a preverbal locational noun.

The paper is divided into 5 sections. While the first section presents an introduction, the second part provides an overview of impersonal verbs within the Lexicase analysis. The tests to be used in identifying impersonal verbs are discussed in the third section. An analysis of non-extension impersonal verbs in Thai is illustrated in the fourth section. The last section presents the conclusion.

2. Impersonal Verbs

Within the Lexicase dependency framework, verbs may be subcategorized with the feature [±mprs] (personal), as shown in SR-1, according to whether they take a referential subject or a non-referential subject. A personal verb ([±mprs]) grammatically requires a referential subject, as illustrated in RR-1. An impersonal verb [+mprs] requires a non-referential subject, as shown in RR-2. RR-3 captures the fact that the majority of verbs in Thai are referential.

SR-1  [+V]  ->  [±mprs]
RR-1  [-mprs]  ->  |?[]Nom || [+ref] ||
RR-2  [+mprs]  ->  |?[]Nom || [-ref] ||
RR-3  [+V]  ->  [-mprs]
Impersonal verbs may be divided into two categories: true-impersonal and pseudo-impersonal verbs (Pagotto 1985). True-impersonal verbs are verbs which do not have an overt grammatical subject or those cooccurring with a phrasal constituent in a preverbal position, referred to as a 'subject surrogate', in the case of English (Pagotto 1985:1) as shown in (1a). Pseudo-impersonal verbs, on the other hand, are verbs which require the presence of an expletive subject 'it', as in (1b).

(1) a. That he was elected upset Mary
   +mprs
   +trns
   -xtns

   b. It upset Mary that he was elected.
   +mprs
   +trns
   +xtns

Even though the Thai language has both types of impersonal verbs, this paper will only discuss the occurrence of impersonal verbs which do not require a verbal dependent, referred to as non-extension verbs. All non-extension impersonal verbs in Thai are true-impersonal verbs. True-impersonal verbs in Thai are verbs which do not allow an overt grammatical subject, for example, ฆ่า "to happen".

3. Tests to identify Impersonal Verbs

In this section, I propose the postposing test and the postposing topicalization to identify the syntactic function of a noun phrase in a preverbal position. The postposing test distinguishes a referential subject of a personal verb from a preposing non-subject argument of an impersonal verb. The postposing topicalization is used as a supportive test to identify the preverbal noun phrase as a subject.
The Thai language has three case forms, namely the Nominative (Nom), the Accusative (Acc) and the Locative case form which is marked by the feature [+lctn]. Any arguments of a verb may be postposed via postposing topicalization. This postposing topicalization is performed by two mechanisms: 1) a final particle and/or a pause marking the end of a sentence preceding the constituent; and 2) a topic marker nā? at the end of a topicalized phrase. ¹ The following example illustrates that in Thai a Nominative actant (a subject) and an Accusative actant (an object) may be postposed via postposing topicalization.

(2) a.  kōy  kin  khanōm thīi  chán sī  maa  rī?yaŋ
    Kōy  eat  sweet  which  I  buy  hither  or  not
    Nom  +trans  Acc

    'Has Kōy eaten the sweets that I bought?'

b.  kin  khanōm thīi  chán sī  maa  rī?yaŋ  [PAUSE]
    eat  sweet  which  I  buy  hither  or  not

    kōy  nā?
    Kōy  TOP

    'Has she eaten the sweets that I bought, Kōy? (Lit.)

c.  kōy  kin  rī?yaŋ  [PAUSE]  khanōm thīi  chán sī
    Kōy  eat  or  not  sweet  which  I  buy

    maa  nā?
    hither  TOP

    'Has Kōy eaten them, the sweets that I bought?' (Lit.)

Both subject, kōy in (1b) and the object khanōm thīi chán sī maa in (1c) can be postposed to the end of the sentence by having a pause marking the end of a clause and the topic marker nā? at the end of the topicalized phrase.

Moreover, a Locative actant marked by the localistic feature [+lctn] can be postposed via postposing topicalization. In (3), the Locative actant is in a preverbal position while in (4) it is in a postverbal position.

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¹ The topic marker nā? is optional when the topicalized noun phrase is modified by the determiners nīi 'this' or nān 'that'
(3) a. dɔʔmal kɔot faymây rɔo
the Mall exist fire Ques
+lctn
'Did ‘The Mall’ burn?'

b. kɔot faymây rɔo [PAUSE] dɔʔmal nàʔ
exist fire Ques The Mall TOP
'Did it burn, ‘The Mall’? ' (Lit.)

(4) a. thɔɔ câʔ pay pàchâa rɔo
you will go cemetery Ques
+lctn
'Are you going to the cemetery?'

b. thɔɔ câʔ pay rɔo [PAUSE] pàchâa nàʔ
you will go Ques cemetery TOP
'Are you going there, the cemetery?' (Lit.)

It should be noted that the noun phrase in a preverbal position can be a Nominative actant or a Locative actant. The locative actant in this position is normally a lexically locational noun. A noun is identified as a locational noun if it may occur as immediate dependent of a locational verb such as pay, maa, and yùìù. (Indrambarya 1994:53). For example, the locational verb pay 'to go' expects a noun with the feature [+lctn] as its dependent to be interpreted as a Locus and Locative actant. In (5a) the verb pay may have the noun phrase dɔʔmal as its immediate dependent since dɔʔmal is a locational noun marked by the localistic feature [+lctn]. The verb pay then assigns the Locative case form and the Locus case relation to dɔʔmal, shown by the implied feature [3[+lctn]] and [3[+LOC]] on the lexical matrix of the regent verb pay. On the other hand, the noun tɔnmây tɔn nàŋ ‘that tree’ in (5b) is not a locational noun and hence the regent verb’s requirement for a locative complement is not satisfied.

(5) a. deŋŋ pay dɔʔmal
Dang go The Mall
1Index 2Index 3Index
Nom +lctn +lctn
PAT -trns LOC
actr 3[+LOC] 3[+lctn]
'Dang went to The Mall.'
b. *dǝŋŋ pay tòn mái tòn nán
Dang go tree CL that
1Indz 2Indz 3Indz
Nom +lctn -lctn
PAT -tren
actr ?[+lctn]

'Dang went to that tree.'

The Nominative actant and a Locative actant which occur in a preverbal position, in (2a) and (3a), exhibit different characteristics. Only a Locative actant may be postposed to the position before the final particle without a pause and a topic marker. Comparing the Nominative actant kǝy in (2a) with the Locative actant dǝŋŋ mal in (3a). Example (6) illustrates that the Nominative actant kǝy in (2a) cannot be postposed to the position before the final particle. On the other hand, example (7) illustrates that the locative actant dǝŋŋ mal in (3a) may be postposed to the position before the final particle.

(6) *kin khanōm thī chán sī maa kǝy rīŋyaŋ
eat sweet which I buy hither Koy or not

'Has she eaten the sweets that I bought, Koy?' (Lit.)

(7) kǝŋt faymāy dǝŋŋ mal rǝo
exist fire the Mall Ques

Did it burn, the mall? (Lit.)

I then claim that the postposing test is able to identify the syntactic category of a preverbal noun phrase. The test is performed by postposing the preverbal noun phrase in question to the end of a sentence, before the final particle, if there is one. Note that there is no pause in between at all. If the sentence remains acceptable, the noun phrase is not a subject. Instead, it is a Locative noun phrase of an impersonal verb. On the other hand, if the sentence is unacceptable, the preverbal noun phrase is identified as the subject of the sentence. The postposing topicalization mentioned earlier may be used as a supportive evidence identifying a preverbal noun phrase as a subject if it can only be postposed with a pause and a topic marker.
Now consider the following sets of sentences in (8) and (9) in which the locational noun phrase *tây tô? nîi* 'space under this table' is in a preverbal position. Since there is no final particle at the end of sentence (5a), one may test the syntactic function of *tây tô? nîi* by simply postposing it to the end of the sentence without having a pause.

(8)  

a.  

*tây tô? nîi yaŋ wâañ*

under table this still empty
+lctn +lctn
Nom -mprs
PAT -trns
actr -xtns

'The space under this table is still available.'

b.  

*yaŋ wâañ tây tô? nîi*

still empty under table this

'The space under this table is available.'

c.  

yaŋ wâañ PAUSE tây tô? nîi nà?

still empty under table this TOP

'The space under this table is available.'

As shown in (8b), the sentence becomes ungrammatical when the noun phrase *tây tô? nîi* is postposed to the end of the sentence without a pause and a topic marker. Example (5c) confirms that that the noun phrase *tây tô? nîi* can only postposed via postposing topicalization, that is, with the topic marker *nà?* and a pause. Hence, *tây tô? nîi* in (5a) is identified as a subject, rather than a preposed Locative actant. Now compare the distribution of the noun phrase *tây tô? nîi* in (8) with (9).

(9)  

a.  

*tây tô? nîi mîi klöŋ sånä bay*

under table this exist box two CL
+lctn +lctn +mprs +trns -xtns

'The space under this table has two boxes.'

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According to Savetamalya (1989), relator nouns such as *tây* 'space under' and *bon* 'surface' are analyzed as nouns since they may have the determiner as their dependent, for example, *tây nîi* 'space under this'.
Unlike (8a), because the locational noun phrase tāy tó? nii in (9a) may be postposed without a pause and a topic marker, as illustrated in (9b), the noun phrase tāy tó? nii in (9a) is not a subject. It is a preverbal locative noun phrase of a locational impersonal verb. This noun phrase is assigned the Locative case marker by the regent impersonal verb mii 'exist'.

Thus a locational noun in a preverbal position may function either as a subject of a personal verb or as a preverbal locative noun phrase of an impersonal verb. I have illustrated in this section that the postposing test and the postposing topicalization are helpful in identifying the function of the preverbal noun phrase and in distinguishing a personal verb from an impersonal one.

4. Non-extension Impersonal Verbs in Thai

Non-extension impersonal verbs in Thai are locational, true-impersonal ([-psdo]) and are all transitive verbs, as shown in RR-4. Thus they are non-extension impersonal locational transitive verbs.

RR-4

| +mprs | -> | -psdo |
| -xtns | | +trns | +lctn |

Non-extension impersonal locational transitive verbs do not allow the presence of a non-referential subject man 'it' in their case frames, as shown in the unacceptable (10b). Hence, these verbs are true-impersonal.

(10) a.  kāōt₃ phēndinwaāy thī₄ yūipūn
        happen earthquake at Japan

        'There is an earthquake in Japan.'

b.  *man kāōt₃ phēndinwaāy thī₄ yūipūn
        it happen earthquake at Japan

        'There is an earthquake in Japan.'

In general, impersonal locational transitive verbs do not allow any overt grammatical subject, especially in a formal speech such as a news report, as shown below.
**Formal**

(11) *man cà? kôvt phayû? khanàät vây nay thaleesaay
it will exist storm size big in desert
+lctn
+mprs
+trns
-xtns

hèŋ nìì
CL this

'There will be a big storm in this desert.'

However, verbs of this class may allow the presence of non-referential subject man 'it' in colloquial speech style, as in the following sentence. I do not classify it as another verb class because the variety depends on speech formality and there found to be no grammatically significant environments.

**Colloquial**

(12) man mìì phií nay bàan nìì düay ròo
it exist ghost in house this also Ques
+lctn +Adv
+mprs
+trns
-xtns

'Is there also a ghost in this house?'

Within the lexicase dependency analysis, each word consists of three basic components, namely sound, distribution, and meaning. According to Starosta (1988:98), a form is considered to belong to two distinct lexical entries when it occurs in two distinct grammatically significant environments. In other words, if a form X can occur in syntactic patterns A and B, but some other form Y can occur only in pattern A but not B, or only in pattern B but not A, the form X is considered to belong to two separate lexical items distinguished by their distinct syntactic distributions. Consider (13) and (14):

(13) a. kôvt 3 námthúam thiì 4 phàaktày
happen flood at South

'There is a flood in the South.'
b. kɔɔt₄ námthùam khĩn₄ thũ₄ phãaktãy
happen flood up at South
'There is a flood in the South.'

(14) a. mii₃ námthùam thũ₄ phãaktãy
exist flood at South
'There is a flood in the South.'

b. *mii námthùam khĩn thũ₄ phãaktãy³
exist flood up at South
'There is a flood in the South.'

As shown, the form kɔɔt in (13) can occur in two environments, but mii₃ may occur only without the adverb khĩn, as shown in (14a). This gives us evidence that kɔɔt in the two sentences should be considered to be two distinct lexical items belonging to two separate subclasses.

With evidence from the grammatically significant environments criteria, verbs of this class may be divided with the feature [+ncpt] (inception) into two classes according to their cooccurrence with the path adverb khĩn 'up'.

SR-1  [+lctn]  |  [-]  |  [+ncpt]
      [+mprs]  |                  |
      [+trns]  |

³ However, it is found that when an object of mii indicates a gathering together for a specific purpose such as a negotiation and a conference, not a natural phenon, mii may coocur with the adverb khĩn 'up', as shown below. This could be an instance of a selectional restriction of the noun phrase following mii. For example

*mii kaansumnana kiawkãp phasa thai khĩn thũ₄ roongreem nii exist seminar about language Thai up at hotel this
'There is a seminar on Thai language at this hotel.'
4.1. Non-extension True-impersonal Locational Non-inception Transitive Verbs

Non-extension true-impersonal locational non-inception transitive verbs expect a locational complement and do not allow the presence of the path adverb *khin₄ 'up'. They include *mii₃ 'to exist' and *kəə₃ 'to occur'. These verbs do not allow the presence of any grammatical subject.

'There are ghosts in this house?' (Lit.)
The noun phrases *nay bāan nii* 'inside this house' headed by the locational noun *nay* 'inside' in (15a) may be preposed, as shown in (15b).

(15) b. nay bāan nii mii3 phīi rō
    in house this exist ghost Ques
    +N +lctn +lctn +mprs
    +lctn
    LOC +trns

'In this house, there are ghosts.'

The ability of the noun phrase *nay bāan nii* 'in this house' to occur both at the beginning of the sentence, as in (15b), and at the end of the sentence without a pause and a topic marker, as in (15a), illustrates that this noun phrase is a locative noun phrase of the impersonal verb *mii3* 'to exist', rather than a subject of a personal verb. When a locational noun occurs sentence-initially, the same postposing test may serve as a reliable test in distinguishing a subject from a preposed locative noun phrase. Consider (16):

(16) a. bāan nii mii1 phīi
    house this have ghost

'This house has ghosts.'

b. *mii1 phīi bāan nii
    have ghost house this

The example (16b) suggests that *bāan nii* in (16a) is subject of the non-extension personal transitive verb *mii1* 'to have'. This is because the noun phrase *bāan nii* in (16a) cannot be postposed without a pause, as shown in the ungrammatical (16b). Instead, it can only be postposed via postposing topicalization, that is with a pause and a topic marker, as in (16c).

(16) c. mii1 phīi nā? [PAUSE] bāan nii nā
    exist ghost prt house this TOP

'Has ghosts, this house.' (Lit.)
4.2. Non-extension True-impersonal Locational Inception Transitive Verbs

Non-extension true-impersonal locational inception transitive verbs are transitive verbs which do not allow an overt grammatical subject but which require the presence of the path adverb with the feature [+path,+vrtc,+sln] namely, khιn4. This class is limited in number and includes kɔɔt4 'to happen' and prakoτ2 'to appear'.

(17)

kɔɔt4
happen

nambthuam
flood

khιn4
up

thιi4
at

phιaktay
South

1
index
2
index
3
index
4
index
5
index

+lctn

+mprs

+ncpt

+trns

-xtns

0[+Nom]

-frm

0([+Nom])

0[+AGT]

0[+actr]

2([+Acc])

2[+PAT]

3[+path]

+sln

+vrtc

4[+lctn]

4[+LOC]

'There is a flood in the South.'

The locative complement noun phrase of the verb kɔɔt3 may be omitted contextually. The question pull test (Hasagawa 1988:71) may help to identify this missing constituent as a complement. When the given information seems incomplete, an addressee will use questions such as 'what?'/"who?"/"where?" to retrieve required information until the complete sentence is recovered, as shown below.

(18) A: kɔɔt phayú? yay
occur storm big

'There is a big storm.'
B: thii₄ nāy
    at where
    'Where?'

A: thū₄ Khaway
    at Kauí
    'At Kauí.'

Sookgasem (1992a:291-293, 1992b:2), working within the HPSG framework, argues that Thai has two types of subjects: preverbal subjects and postverbal subjects. The forms mii 'to exist' and kañ 'to occur' are instances of a limited set of verbs occurring in the verb-subject construction in Thai. In other words, the noun phrase following mii (i.e. phi̲i ghost' in (15)) is not an object but rather a subject of the verb mii. Her argument is based on the three criteria: passivization, imperativization, and VP topicalization.

According to Sookgasem (1992:291), only transitive verbs in Thai may be passivized with the thīuuk₅ construction. Since a noun phrase following mii cannot be passivized, she concludes that the noun phrase after mii must be a subject, rather than an object of the verb. However, 1) it does not follow that if only transitive verbs can be passivized, then all transitive verbs can be passivized; and 2) not all transitive verbs in Thai may trigger the thīuuk₅ passive construction. Only activity non-factitive transitive verbs which are perceived as affecting a Patient, such as tii₁ 'to hit' and dūʔ₁ 'to reproach', may occur as an embedded verb of thīuuk₅ and doon₄, as shown in (19). While activity factitive transitive verbs such as wāat₄ 'to draw' may be passivized only with the dooy₁ construction as illustrated in (20), non-activity transitive verbs such as dāyyin₁ 'to hear' and mān₁ 'to resemble' cannot be passivized at all, as seen in (21) (Indrambaryya 1994:168-178, 270, 275-276). Thus, her passive criterion is not generally valid.

(19) a. mēe dūʔ nit
    mother reproach Nit
    '(Nit’s) mother reproached Nit.'

b. nit thīuuk₅/doon₄ mēe dūʔ
    Nit undergo mother reproach
    'Nit was reproached by her mother.'
(20) a. thomayantii khîn niyaay rîaj nîi
   Thomaryantii write novel CL this
   'Thomayantii wrote this novel.'

b. ??niyaay rîaj nîi thîuk5jdoon4 thomayantii khîn
   novel CL this undergo Thomaryantii write
   'This novel was written by Thomayantii.'

c. niyaay rîaj nîi khîn dooy thomayantii
   novel CL this write by Thomaryantii
   'This novel was written by Thomayantii.'

(21) a. chán mîan phôc
   I resemble father
   'I resemble my father.'

b. *phôc thîuk5jdoon4 chán mîan
   father undergo I resemble
   '(My) father is resembled by me.'

c. *phôc mîan dooy chán
   father resemble by I
   '(My) father is resembled by me.'

Another test Sookgasem employed is imperativization, according to which only a subject may be imperativized (Sookgasem 1992:288-289), as shown in (22b).

(22) (Sookgasem's 17a and 17b)

a. mîi phayû? nay thaleesaay nîi thâwnán
   exist storm in desert this only
   'There exist storms only in this desert.'
b. phayú? PAUSE mii nay thaleesaay níi
storm exist in desert this

thâwnán ná
only IMP

'Storms, exist only in this desert.'

Since one can command the word phayú?'storm' in (22b), Sookgasem concludes that the noun phrase phayú?' in (22a) must be the subject of the sentence, yielding the verb-subject construction. Such an analysis is statable in a powerful transformational framework, but from the constrained monostratal lexical point of view, the imperative sentence in (22b) is not related to (22a) but to (23) below.

(23) phayú? bêep níi mii2 nay thaleesaay
storm kind this exist in desert
Nom +lctn +lctn
PAT -mprs LOC
actr -trns

níi thâwnan
this only

'This kind of storm occurs only in this desert.'

Thus, in sentence (22) there are two lexical items mii 'to exist'. The form mii in (22a) is an impersonal locational transitive verb mii3, while the form mii in (22b) and (23) is a personal locational intransitive verb mii2 'to exist', requiring an overt referential subject phayú?'storm'. Two pieces of supporting evidence are the result of the postposing test and the postposing topicalization. The sentence (22b) becomes unacceptable when phayú? bêep níi is postposed to the end of the sentence without a pause or a final particle and a topic marker, as in (24a). The sentence is acceptable only in the postposing topicalization test, which makes use of both a pause and a topic marker, as in (24b).

(24) a. *mii2 nay thaleesaay níi thâwnan
exist in desert this only

phayú? bêep níi
storm kind this

'This kind of storm occurs only in this desert.'
b. mii2 nay thaleesaay nii thàwnan lèʔ?  
exist in desert this only prt

[PAUSE] phayúʔ bèep nii nàʔ?  
storm kind this TOP

'Exists only in this desert, this kind of storm.'

VP topicalization or Subject postposing is another kind of support adduced for Sookgasem's claim. Since the NP following mii may be postposed, as in (25), she concludes that it is the subject of mii in (22a).

(25) mii nay thaleesaay nii thàwnan  
exist in desert this only

phayúʔ rëen bèep nii  
storm strong kind this

'Exists only in this desert, this kind of strong storm.' (Sookgasem 1992:294)

However, Sookgasem fails not only to note that (25) is acceptable only with a pause before the postposed noun phrase phayúʔ rëen bèep nii 'this kind of strong storm', as shown in (26),

(26) mii nay thaleesaay nii thàwnan  
exist in desert this only [PAUSE]

phayúʔ rëen bèep nii  
storm strong kind this

'Exists only in this desert, this kind of strong storm.'

but also to notice that (25), which I have rewritten as (26), is ambiguous. Since both a subject and an object may be topicalized via postposing, I argue that (26) is an ambiguous structure. The postposed noun phrase could either be a subject of the personal locational intransitive verb mii2, as shown in (23) or an object of the impersonal locational transitive verb mii3, as in (22a). Thus Sookgasem's VP topicalization is only a type of postposing topicalization in which a subject or an object is postposed. Hence, I contend that there is no verb-subject construction in Thai. There is, however, verbs which do not have a referential subject in their case frame referred to as impersonal verbs. These verbs may also have homophonous personal verb forms. For example, the non-extension locational non-inception
transitive verb \textit{mi}i$_3$ 'to exist' has the personal transitive verb \textit{mi}i$_1$ 'to have' and the personal locational intransitive verb \textit{mi}i$_2$ 'to exist' as homophones.

5. Conclusion

I have illustrated in this paper that there exists a construction in Thai called impersonal verbs construction, rather than verb-subject construction. I have proposed the postposing test and postposing topicalization to identify and differentiate a subject of a sentence from a preverbal locative noun phrase. Non-extension impersonal verbs in Thai do not allow an overt grammatical subject and hence they are true-impersonal. Moreover, non-extension impersonal verbs in Thai are also found to occur only with Locus actant and transitive verbs and thus are all classified as non-extension impersonal locational transitive verbs. These verbs are subdivided into non-inception and inception subclasses depending on whether they may cooccur with the path adverb \textit{khin} 'up'.

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