

# A Study of Some Two-Syllabled Words in Thai

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As a language in the Tai family, Thai is essentially a tonal as well as a monosyllabic language. Looking through the lexicon, it is apparent that Thai has quite a few two - syllabled words. These words show a variety both in construction types and their origins.

## examples

WORD	MEANING	CONSTRUCTION	ORIGIN
1 'dɔɔk ^bia 'cut ywun	interest standpoint	compound word " "	Thai "
2 yaaw yaaw 'dek 'dek	somewhat long children	reduplicative "	Thai "
3 ^swa ^phaa ^khæŋ ^khaa	clothes leg	semantic doublet " "	Thai "
4 am ^naat nam bəə ma nut 'pat caj	power number man factor	simple word " " "	borrowed " " "
5 ma ^muaŋ 'a raj	mangoes what	simple word "	Thai "

The above table shows that construction-wise disyllabic words can be simple words, semantic doublets, reduplicatives or compound words. As for their origin, these disyllabic words can be derived from native stocks (group 1, 2, 3) or were borrowed into the language (group 4). Disyllabic words in group 5 however present a non-clear cut class as to their origin. Although some of the words can be decided as derived from compound words through certain phonological changes or were coined for use only in poetry, there are still

words that one cannot explain their disyllabicity these words are for examples, /sa `ʉk/ "hiccup" /kra daj/ "stairs". It is these words that the writer of this article will focus on.

### Previous studies

Thai scholars (Bhandhumedha, B. 1975) as well as non-native Thai ones (Haas, 1964, for example) who have done analyses on Thai grammar have pointed out that certain disyllabic words came from compound words. The first word of the compound underwent some word simplification processes which have turned the first word into non-lexical syllable synchronically. Several words have been given ; below are the ones that are usually mentioned.

`maak/fruit	`maak`muaŋ	>ma `muaŋ	mangoes	a.unstressing b.vowel shortening c.final con- sonant loss
ˆsaaw girl	ˆsaaw ˆphaʉ	>saˆphaɰ	daughter-inlaw	(a,b,c)
ˆsaaj cord	ˆsaaj dʉʉʉ	>sa dʉʉʉ	belly-button	(a,b,c)
ˆluuk class.	ˆluuk dum	>ˆluuk kadum	button	addition of /a/ b)first word leftout
ˆka dum				
ˆnok bird	ˆnok `cɔɔk	ˆnok ka`cɔɔk	sparrow	same as ˆluuk
		>ka `cɔɔk		

As can be seen from the above table, two main types of phonological process are apparent. The first type includes unstressing process, which occurs simultaneously with vowel shortening, and final consonant loss; the other type is vowel addition and leaving out of the first word. The productivity of either type seems equal. /`maak/ and /ˆnok/ are more productive than other words in the list above.

It should be observed here that the addition process is practical even at the present time, one can hear the following :

- ˆmaj ˆyak ka ˆson caj (from ˆmaj `yaak son caj  
: not care a bit to give  
attention to)  
ˆtok ka caj (from ˆtok caj startled)

Besides explanation of disyllabic words through phonological changes, there has been also an explanation that some disyllabic words were newly coined for use in poetry only, for example /kra-<sup>h</sup>kriaw/ "behaving in a way which show dissatisfaction or anger" }

It seems, despite all the explanations given, that a serious study of disyllabic words is lacking in Thai as well as in other Tai languages. Most possible, the study can reveal the history of words and perhaps shows that the direction of change to monosyllabic words does not have to be from polysyllabic words but from a sequence of monosyllabic words.

### Recent studies

The study of the Zhuang dialects has led the writer of this article to learn some Zhuang words that seem to help explain more disyllabic words in Thai. Below are some examples:

/ka daj ~ ban daj/ "stair case"

Zhuang has the word /bak/ meaning "step", "four stair steps" is /sej bak an daj/ (four-step class.- stair case). /bak daj/ may easily give /bak-ka-daj/ from which we have /kadaj/.

As for /bandaj/, it is probably derived from the contraction of /bak/ and /an/ into /ban/ giving /bandaj/. Contraction of two words into one is also found in a Korat dialect, for example in /tan ɔk/ "east" from /ta wen ɔk/.

/sa ʷk/ 'hiccup'

Zhuang has /sak/ "to block" and /ɔk/ "chest". This verb-locative noun construction /sak ɔk/ meaning "block at the chest" may be a possible source for /sa ʷk/ in Thai.

/pra ʷdiaw/ "in a wink"

Zhuang has /<sup>h</sup>bat/ "to hold breath" and /<sup>h</sup>dew/ meaning "one". Thai had the construction /<sup>h</sup>bat ʷdiaw/, which probably meant "in one breath" before. From /<sup>h</sup>bat ʷdiaw/, it is possible that we get \*/ba ʷdiaw > \*pa ʷdiaw > pra ʷdiaw/.

The proposed developments of /<sup>h</sup>kra daj/, /bandaj/, /sa ʷk/ and /pra ʷdiaw/ together with those of /ma ʷmuaŋ, sa ʷphaj, ka dum/ and so on above indicate that disyllabic words are originated from several monosyllabic constructions :

- a) compounding construction
- b) classifier construction
- c) verb-locative noun construction.

Probably there are other constructions to be revealed

A quick glance through the Zhuang, Tai Nuea and Pakial lexicons, however, shows that monosyllabic words and compounds are prominent; disyllabic words are considerably rare. Thai then can be said to be more advanced in the development to disyllabic words. The study of other Tai languages in this direction should be conducted, however, to prove this hypothesis and certainly to help clarify the non-clear cut cases of disyllabic words in Thai.

### Implications

The study of disyllabic words in Thai seems to suggest that most probably there have always been monosyllabic words in the Tai language family. The examples in Thai reveal the cycle of how monosyllabic sequences develop into disyllabic words and how disyllabic words develop back again into monosyllabic words :

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#### stage 1

mono.	comp.	phrase.	comp.	comp.	phrase.
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
stage 2					
mono.	comp.	phrase.	disyl.	disyl.	disyl.
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
stage 3					
mono.	comp.	phrase.	disyl.	mono.	mono.

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mono. = monosyllabic words

disyl. = disyllabic words

comp. = compound words

phrase. = phrase of monosyllabic words

(See examples in the next page.)

The development of monosyllabic words to disyllabic words and back to monosyllabic words again as discussed above should enable us to say that the direction of

### Examples:

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Stage 1 monosyllabic words, raj (which), `maak (fruit, class.), daj (staircase)  
 compounds or `maak`muang (mangoes), `pan raj (which one)  
 sequences of `bak `pan daj (steps)  
 monosyllabic words \*taa wan `cck (east), khon raj (which man)

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Stage 2 disyllabic words ma `muang (mangoes), `Pa raj (what), ban daj (steps)  
 ka daj (steps), ta wan `cck (east),  
 tan `cck\*\* (east)

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Stage 3 monosyllabic words aj\*\* (what), khraj (who)

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\* hypothesized word

\*\* a Korat dialect

The development of monosyllabic words to disyllabic words and back to monosyllabic words again as discussed above should enable us to say that the direction of change to monosyllabicity does not have to be from polysyllabic words, but from a sequence of monosyllabic words, whether they are compounds or certain systactic constructions.

### References

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