

# Pragmatics of Negation in Thai

Dhirawit Lagsanaging, Ph.D.  
Department of Foreign Languages  
Faculty of Science  
Prince of Songkla University  
Hat Yai, Songkhla 90112

In this paper, I propose to discuss the pragmatic aspects of negation in Thai, i.e., the use of negative imperative in a polite context and the non-negative use of negation in Thai. My account of this paper will be principally based on the Theory of Indirect Speech Acts (Searle 1975, Sadock 1975, and Green 1974) and the Conversational Postulates (Grice 1975, R. Lakoff 1977, and Gordon and G. Lakoff 1975).

## 1. Negative Politeness

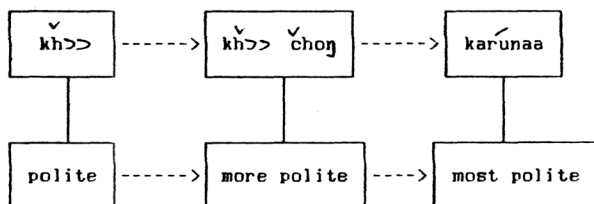
For the sake of clarity, I will divide the discussion on negative politeness into two parts: the use of politeness markers in Thai and the factors affecting politeness.

### 1.1 The Use of Politeness Markers

There are at least three important politeness markers in Thai which are used with the negative imperative. They are the following:<sup>1</sup>

- |    |                                                         |               |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. | $\overset{\vee}{kh\text{๓๓}}$                           | 'please'      |
| 2. | $\overset{\vee}{kh\text{๓๓}}\overset{\vee}{ch\text{๓}}$ | 'kindly'      |
| 3. | <u>karūnaa</u>                                          | 'kind enough' |

The degree of politeness of the three markers can be indicated by the diagram given below:



## 1.2 Factors Affecting Politeness

A negative directive (cf. Searle 1975) is basically a linguistic attempt by someone 'A' to prevent someone else 'B' from doing what 'A' does not want to be done even if it is in the interest of 'B'. For this to be achieved, 'A' has to rely on either the power factor or the solidarity factor.<sup>2</sup>

The power factor is the strength of mutual recognition by 'A' and 'B' that 'A' is superior to 'B'. The solidarity factor indicates a mutual bond of intimacy between 'A' and 'B', which is usually based on equality. These two factors are said to represent vertical and horizontal social distances respectively.

For example, the sentence kh>> jaa tham siaa daa 'Please don't make a noise,' said by a teacher in the classroom to a pupil is not likely to lead to any conflict, the power factor is so dominant that the pupil will readily do what the teacher wants him to do. If the same sentence is said by a wife to a husband, or the other way round, in a society where they have an equal status, it may lead to an argument if the hearer think that he or she is not making any noise. When the speaker is more powerful than the hearer, it is possible for him to use any one of the three politeness markers (i.e., kh>>, kh>> chong, and karúnaa) with the imperative. But he usually chooses the most polite karúnaa in case he

wants the hearer not to do something that may benefit him. If the hearer is less powerful than the speaker, when he speaks, he must use only the most polite karūnaa. Where the power factor is strong, we take into account what R. Lakoff (1977: 88) calls 'Rule of Formality' to prevent the speaker from imposing on the hearer. In Thai, this rule is observed by placing the definitive titles (cf. Haas 1964: 94), such as khun 'Mr., Mrs. or Miss' before the first name of the listener and then following it by an imperative with politeness marker, as in (5):

- (5) khun      puu,      kh<sup>h</sup> >>      jaa      pai      duu naŋ      ləi  
       defi-      poo      polite      neg      go      see movie      at all  
       nitive  
       'Miss Poo, please don't go to the movie.'

The third factor that enters the need for politeness is the Degree of Conflict at risk. (Leech, 1980 : 108) A scale of severity can be roughly indicated by making a distinction between physical conflict, disobedience, will-flouting, and will-incompatibility:

1) Physical Conflict (Strongest):

A tries to make B do X, but B does not do X, he does Y instead. For example, A tells B, jaa ao pakkaa, 20 dins<sup>h</sup>  
ma hăi chan 'Don't bring a pen, but bring a pencil for me.' But B brings a pen instead of a pencil.

2) Disobedience:

A orders B to do X, B does not do X. For example, A orders B not to go to bed by saying chan sàŋ waa māj hăi n >> n 'I order you not to go to bed.' Still B goes to bed.

## 3) Will-Flouting

A communicates that A wants B to do X, but B does not do X.

For example, A tells B, chan māj tónkaan hāi thāsúe sua phaen, 'I don't want you to buy costly shirts.' But B does buy a costly shirt.

## 4) Will-Incompatibility (Weakest):

A communicates that A wants B not to do X, but B tells him that he wants to do X.

For example, A communicates to B, hāi tha pai duu nan 'I want you 'not to go to a movie.' But B tells him that he wants to go to the movie. It is just the opposite of what A wants B to do. In the Thai society the stress is on minimising the conflict while the act of communication is going on. As a result, the more the risk of conflict, the stronger the desire to use the more polite form.

2. Non-negative Use of Negation in Thai

In every day speech, we very often use one sentence to convey the meaning of another. For example, in English, the negative question, "why don't you have a seat?" can, under certain circumstances, entail the meaning of the positive request, "Please have a seat". In what follows, I will focus on the non-negative use of negation in Thai where the neg māj loses its original negative meaning and conveys something positive instead. The discussion will, however, be divided into two main sections: rhetorical negative and negative question.

2.1 Rhetorical Negative

Most of the things which have traditionally been called 'rhetorical negative' come under the heading of indirect speech acts. Following are the sub-types of rhetorical negatives:

2.1.1 Rhetorical Negative Implying Assertion

The assertion in Thai can be indicated through the rhetorical negative. Consider, for examples, (8) and (9):

- (8) khon      yaaň      chaň      maǰ      khoei      kohoǩ  
 person    like       me       neg       ever    tell a lie  
 'A person like me never tells a lie.'  
 (= I always speak the truth)

- (9) khon      yaaň      khun      maǰ      khoei      phuuť  
 person    like       you      neg       ever    speak  
  
 khwaam̌chiň  
 truth  
 'A person like you never speak the truth.'  
 (= you always tell a lie)

In (8) and (9) the sentences with the neg maj do not express a negative meaning but assert a positive idea (i.e., "I always speak the truth" and "You always tells a lie"), though it is invariably the case that the positive idea is the opposite of the positive counterpart of the given sentence.

2.1.2 Rhetorical Negative Implying Modesty

There are contexts in which a speaker uses a negative sentence not because he wants to contradict its positive counterpart, but because he wants to minimise the assertion made by the positive proposition. This may be done out of modesty, as is obvious from the examples in (11) and (12)

- (11) A:    thə      kəň      phaasaǎ      angriť      chəň  
          you      good      language      English      very

'You are very good in English.'

B: phom<sup>ˊ</sup>      maj<sup>ˆ</sup>      keŋ<sup>ˋ</sup>      thaorai<sup>ˊ</sup>      rɔɔk<sup>ˋ</sup>  
 I      neg      good      much      at all  
 khrap (male)  
 ptc. of respect

'I am not that good, [ madam ]  
 [ sir ]

(12) A: tha<sup>ˋ</sup>      khayan<sup>ˋ</sup>      chan<sup>ˋ</sup>  
 you      diligent      very  
 'You are very diligent.'

B: nuu<sup>ˋ</sup>      maj<sup>ˆ</sup>      khayan<sup>ˋ</sup>      thaorai<sup>ˊ</sup>      rɔɔk<sup>ˋ</sup>  
 I      neg      diligent      much      at all  
 kha (female)  
 ptc. of respect

'I am not that diligent [ madam ] ,  
 [ sir ]

In each of these cases, A pays compliments to B, which B does not deny but he considers it impolite (in Thai contexts) to accept it without a protest. The answers of B in (11) and (12) convey modesty. We may likewise note that remarks like "Yes, I am" or "Yes, you're right" as answers to the questions of A will be regarded as inappropriate in the Thai society.

### 2.1.3 Rhetorical Negative Used to Avoid Unpleasant Remarks

There are cases where we use a sentence in an indirect manner in order to avoid undesirable feelings. For examples, we may take a look at (15) and (16):

(15) khao<sup>ˋ</sup>      maj<sup>ˆ</sup>      chai<sup>ˋ</sup>      khon      dii      lai<sup>ˋ</sup>  
 he      neg      correct      person      good      at all

'He is not a good person at all.'

(= He is a very bad person)

- (16)      ʌ                      ʌ                      ʌ                      ʌ                      ʌ  
 12ʔn              maj              cháɪ              khon              suai              ləi  
 she              neg              correct              person              beautiful              at all  
 'She is not beautiful at all'  
 (= She is very ugly)

(15) and (16) are used as euphemistic expressions to avoid direct unpleasant remarks which will create undesirable feelings among the speaker and the listener.

All these uses of negative are apparent counter-examples of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975 : 45-46) of Quantity which says:

"Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required."<sup>3</sup>

However, it is not so, for if this maxim is violated, it is balanced by bringing in other maxims, i.e., the Maxim of Relation (i.e., Say what is appropriate in a context) and the Maxim of Manner (i.e., Be perspicuous).

## 2.2 Negative Question

There is a type of indirect speech acts which is sometimes called 'whimperative' (Green 1975: 127). It refers to a wh-question which has an imperative sense. Such a question does not require a reply in terms of 'yes' or 'no'; it is used to make a request or a suggestion. What is required, then, is the action. Although, this type of speech acts is grammatically a question, pragmatically it is a request, an invitation, or a suggestion.

### 2.2.1 Request

Consider (17):

- (17)      thammai      thə      maj      niap      baan  
              why                you      neg      quiet      a little  
              'Why don't you be quiet?'  
              (= please be quiet)

(17) is pragmatically a positive request by using a negative question. The listener is not expected to say why he is not quiet but to be quiet.

The negative question can be an "invitation" in certain situation. Consider (18) which is spoken by a salesgirl in a department store in Bangkok:

- (18)      khun      maj      duu      sinkháa      ní      noi      rú  
              you      neg      see      goods      this      little      Q.

khā (female)

ptc. of respect

'Why don't you have a look at these goods?

(= I invite you to have a look at these goods)

The reason for using the negative question as an invitation is that it is considered to be more polite and less coercive than just a direct imperative. It is acknowledged that "The chief motivation...for using these indirect forms is politeness." (Searle 1975 : 74)

## 2.2.2 Suggestion

Quite often, in our daily speech, we make a suggestion in an indirect way. This is to give options to the hearer and to ask for his opinion on what the speaker says. The reason for using this will be the same, i.e., politeness. As an example, consider (20):



(20)	tham	yaaň	nǐ	maǰ	diikwaǎ	rǔ
	do	like	this	neg	better	Q.

'Don't you think it is better to do it this way.'

(= Let's do it this way)

The speaker uses (20) to suggest what should be done and also gives option to the hearer so that he can decide whether he should follow the speaker or have his own way.

To sum up, the Thai language provides the speaker with three politeness markers to be used with negative imperative. These markers are khə̌ 'please', khə̌ choň 'kindly', and karūnaǎ 'kind enough to'. However, the negative politeness can be affected by three important factors: the Power Factor, the Solidarity Factor and the Degree of Conflict at Risk. We have shown how these factors govern the Rule of Formality, the Rule of Hesitancy, and the Rule of Equality. In the latter section of this paper, I have discussed the non-negative uses of negation in Thai which consist of the rhetorical use of negatives and the use of negative questions for imperative. These uses have been examined from the point of view of the Cooperative Principles as expounded in Grice (1975) in order to adequately account for the pragmatic sides of negation in Thai.

## NOTES

1. Other variations of these polite markers are p̀ròt, dáí p̀ròt, and kh̃ᵛᵛ dáí p̀ròt, respectively.
2. Cf. Brown and Gilman (1960)
3. Grice sets up this conversational maxim by facetiously employing Kant's table of categories. The maxim is also similar to Occam Razor's precept; "Do not multiply entities beyond necessity".

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