Imperfective Markers in Thai: 
An Analysis of *kamlan* and *yùu* in Natural Spoken Discourse

Amy Meepoe
University of California, Los Angeles

I. Introduction

While tense is the relation of a given situation (an event, a state or a process) to a defined reference point, usually the time of speech, aspect refers to “the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976:3), i.e., the internal nature of an event viewed by the speaker. For example, these two sentences, *John ran* and *John was running*, are both in the past tense; what distinguishes them is aspect.

Interpreted aspeclual meaning comes from two main sources, grammatical aspect which comes from grammatical morphemes, and inherent lexical aspect of the verb. In this study, two Thai grammatical aspectual markers, *kamlan* and *yùu* were examined.

II. Grammatical Aspect

Two main aspeclual categories that are clearly distinguished are perfective and imperfective. Perfective views a situation as a whole, “without regard to internal temporal constituency” (Comrie 1976: 12). On the other hand, imperfective “views an event from within, without explicit beginning or end” (Andersen 1990b: 7). Imperfective has general aspeclual meaning that includes habitual, i.e., a typical event or state, as well as progressive. While progressive has more specific aspeclual meaning, with a limited and temporary duration, imperfective involves more extended temporal duration, and can be used for both stative and dynamic events.
III. Diachronic Development of Imperfectivity

The most typical source of progressive markers is locative expressions meaning "to be located in or at an activity." Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca (1994) predict that the progressive occurs early in the process of development, and then evolves into the more general meanings. Figure 1 shows the path of development of imperfective aspect, which may eventually develop into present.

Figure 1
Diachronic Development of Locative into Imperfective Markers
(Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca 1994)

Locative
\downarrow
Progressive
\downarrow
Continuous
\downarrow
Imperfective
\downarrow
Present

The lexical meaning of locative is gradually lost due to the shift from locative meaning to temporal meaning. As the locative meaning weakens while the temporal meaning becomes more stabilized, the meaning of the progressive aspect eventually arises. At this stage of development, the progressive is restricted to dynamic verbs and predicates. Later on, its grammatical meaning becomes more general, and the characteristic of a time period is extended. It develops from progressive to continuous, which is no longer limited to dynamic verbs but can be used with stative verbs and predicates, according to Comrie (1976). Then, the aspectual marker develops into imperfective, and possibly present. Since the development of aspectual markers is a gradual process, it is
possible to find them in various stages of development, marking more than one aspect in any language at any particular time.

IV. Research Rationale

Unfortunately, most studies, if not all, in the area of Thai tense, mood and aspect have been conducted on the sentential level and used invented sentences as examples, instead of the discourse-pragmatic level and using natural spoken data. Much of the literature does not try to distinguish the aspectual meanings of kamlan and yùu.

It is true that in some contexts, these two aspectual markers convey the same meaning, i.e., progressive aspect. However, an aspectual marker that has been claimed to have a particular meaning can actually convey other related aspects, depending on the discourse context. The original meaning and grammatical development of an aspectual marker may have an influence on the distribution of its functions and meanings. Kamlan is primarily used as a noun meaning ‘power, strength, energy,’ for example, kamlan cay in (1):

(1) PT: 648

P: phôm ləy môt kamlan cay ləy thî ca maa
1.m EMP all.gone power heart EMP that IRR come
“So I have lost my will to come (here to ask for help).”

On the other hand, the primary lexical meaning of yùu is a verb meaning ‘to live, to reside, to stay, to be in/at,’ as in (2):

(2) PT: 967-968

FT: ?acaan ?anon kô bôk yùu hôt
teacher Anong HL tell live dorm
“Ajarn Anong said she lived in the dorm.”
"But she didn’t know where exactly the dorm is."

In terms of the positions of kamañ and yùu when they function as an aspectual marker, they are placed differently in a verb phrase. Kamañ is placed before the main verb, for example in sentence (3):

(3) EQ3: 1252

T: kô kalañ¹ khít wâa
   HL PROG think that
   "I’m thinking that..."

Yùu, on the other hand, is placed after the verb phrase, i.e., after the main verb, or the verb and the object, for example, sentence (4):

(4) EQ4: 452

T: khon thî bèp duulee law yùu
   person REL like take.care 1 IMP
   "a person who, like, takes care of us."

Yùu is not necessarily placed at the end of the sentence. It is usually followed by a time expression, for example:

(5) EQ3: 819

T: kín lúsàk kin thuunâa seenwít yù sãam wan
   eat think eat tuna sandwich IMP three day
   máñ
   probably
   "I think I was probably eating tuna sandwiches for three days."
In addition, both *kamlan* and *yùu* can occur in the same clause, for example:

(6) EQ5: 381

M: *tcoo nán nà yùu thîi nây*
   when that PRT be place where
   “At that time, where were you?”

*kalam* *ncoo yùu*
KAMLANG sleep YUU
“You were sleeping”

According to Bybee et al. (1994), when there are two constructions that signal the same or similar meaning, one of them is recently developed and takes over some functions of the older construction, whereas the older one has extended its meaning. Therefore, the two constructions do not have exactly the same meaning, although they both may express the same aspectual meaning in certain contexts. Based on the diachronic development of imperfective aspectual markers shown in Figure 1, we would expect that *yùu*, which is primarily a locative verb, has developed along this imperfective pathway, whereas *kamlan* does not follow this pathway.

V. The Study
5.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and distinguish the functions and meanings of the two aspectual markers in Thai, *kamlan* and *yùu*, on a discourse-pragmatic level, following Bybee et al.’s (1994:127) developmental pathway of imperfective aspect. Using a functional approach, the study determines the functions and meanings of the two aspectual markers used by native Thai speakers.

This paper attempts to answer two research questions:
(1). Can Bybee et al.'s (1994) theoretical framework for the development of temporal aspectual markers provide a basis for distinguishing the functions and meanings of the two aspectual markers, kamlaŋ and yùu?

(2). What is the "basic meaning" of each aspectual marker in the study, separate from how the marker is interpreted in specific contexts (Andersen 1990b)?

5.2 Methodology

The data used in the study is five recorded Thai conversations between native speakers. The conversations were transcribed into phonetics. Each data set was separated into units. The basic unit that was used to separate line boundaries in the data is the intonation unit. The tokens of kamlaŋ and yùu found in the data were counted and categorized according to their semantic function and basic meaning in the discourse: Lexical meaning, i.e., Noun (n.) for kamlaŋ or Locative marker (loc.) for yùu, Progressive marker, and Imperfective marker.

The main part of my analysis is the qualitative analysis on the discourse-pragmatic level. This reevaluates and explains the basic functions and aspectual meanings of kamlaŋ and yùu, their semantic influence on the inherent lexical aspect of the verb/predicate, as well as how their aspectual meanings are influenced by the discourse context.

VI. Analysis and Results
6.1 Quantitative Analysis

From five data sets, there are 5,384 intonation units. Table 1 shows the frequency of kamlaŋ and yùu found in the data, and Table 2 shows the frequency of different functions of yùu.
Table 1: Frequency of *kamlan* and *yùu*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th><em>kamlan</em></th>
<th></th>
<th><em>yùu</em></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lexical Meaning</td>
<td>(n.) 4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
<td>(loc.) 241</td>
<td>75.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect marker</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.63%</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>24.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Progressive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>• 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Imperfective</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>• 62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>320</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequency of different functions of *yùu* tokens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect marker</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Progressive function</td>
<td>19.48% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Imperfective function</td>
<td>80.52% (62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 demonstrates that *kamlan* is used much less frequently than *yùu* for all functions. While only 7 tokens of *kamlan* were used as an aspecual marker, there were 77 tokens of *yùu*. *Kamlan* is used only as a progressive marker; it does not convey an imperfective function in the data. On the other hand, *yùu* is used more frequently and conveys both progressive and imperfective aspects.

Table 2 shows that 77 *yùu* tokens are used as aspecual markers. While only 19.48% (15) of *yùu* tokens used as an aspecual marker convey progressive meaning, most of the *yùu* tokens, i.e., 80.52% (62), are used to convey imperfective.

6.2 Progressive Function of *kamlan*

Data fragment (7) shows when *kamlan* is used as a progressive marker.
(7) Parking situations (EQ3: 1252-1257)

In this context, T is talking about parking situations in Los Angeles. She has an experience with her uncle when people, especially those who come as a group, take the parking spot that she is about to take. She is always afraid of those people because they are bigger than her. T is giving a hypothetical situation that if she had to face that kind of situation by herself, what she would do. If she let other people take her parking spot all the time, she would be bullied forever.

→ 1 T: kŏ ᱇lanaŋ ᱇hît wāa
   HL PROG think that
   “I’m thinking that...”

2 nī thâ pay khon diaw
   PRT if go person alone
   “if I had gone there alone,”

3 thamŋay dîi wā (.5)
   how good PRT
   “what would I have done?”

4 thâ yoom ᱇hâw
   if surrender 3
   “If I surrendered to them,”

5 kŏ tông (.2) s- (.)
   HL have.to
   “I would have to...”

6 thûuk ᱇hâw laŋkēe tâdôt pay ?à
   PSV 3 bully forever go.DIR PRT
   “I would be bullied forever.”

Khît ‘to think’ is prototypically a stative verb, meaning ‘to hold an opinion or idea.’ It can also be a dynamic verb implying the process of thinking about an idea. In this context, T is thinking
about a particular hypothetical situation (line 1), and conveys her thinking as a progressive activity by using kamlaŋ, showing her control or agency over the situation. Therefore, khit is an activity, rather than a state. If yùu were used instead of kamlaŋ in this context, the aspect conveyed would be imperfective, meaning ‘to have an opinion.’ Therefore kamlaŋ makes stative verbs such as ‘think’ more dynamic, and implies an energy input from the agent. The difference in the aspectual meanings of yùu versus kamlaŋ comes from their primary lexical meanings, since the primary lexical meaning of kamlaŋ ‘power, strength, energy’ denotes dynamicity and agency.

6.3 Imperfective Function of yùu

Yùu is used both as a progressive and imperfective. Data fragment (8) gives an example of when yùu is used as an imperfective marker.

(8) Caretaker (EQ4: 444-455)

A is talking about what he did when the Northridge earthquake happened. While it was shaking, he hid himself under the table in his dorm room. When it stopped, he as well as other students on his floor in the dorm came out of their rooms and stayed in the hall way in order to wait for the ‘caretaker’ on the floor to tell them what to do.

1 A: yùu nay hōl wee
   be in hall way
   “(We) were in the hall way.”

2 T: lew (...) ñâw kh- khâw hây yùu ʔân
   CONJ EXC 3 CAUS stay therefore
   “And...Oh! they told (you) to stay (there) so...”
3 lèw lèw man pòet[phay]
   CONJ CONJ it safe
   “And it was safe?”

4 A: [mây] chây kháp
   NEG right PRT
   “No! (I didn’t mean that.)”

5 kô ?òk ma-
   HL out come
   “We came out”

6 ?òk maa phúa ca duu wâ
   out come.DIR for IRR see that
   “came out to see”

7 tôn tham yâñgay
   must do how
   “what we were supposed to do.”

8 phô wâa .hhh thûk chán nî
   because that every floor PRT
   ca mii bèpwâa
   IRR have like
   “Because on every floor, there’s, like,”

9 → khon thî bèp duulee law yûu
   person REL like take.care 1 IMP
   “a person who, like, takes care of us.”

10 T: ?òc [(ca dây)]
    BC IRR DâY³
    “I see. So you could...”
11 A: \[ léw \] ca dáy· duu wâ
     CONJ IRR DAY see that
     "Then we could wait and see"

12 khâw bôk wâa háy law tham (yanhïay)
     3 tell that CAUS 1 do how
     what he would tell us to do."

Unlike the locative marker yûu in lines 1 and 2, yûu in line 9 in this data fragment conveys an imperfective meaning of the verb ‘take care.’ The speaker is saying that there is a person on every floor who takes care of other students. This event of taking care of the students, which is marked by yûu, does not have an implication of a beginning or an end. The action of taking care does not stop when the earthquake stops, for instance. Instead, it is a responsibility of the ‘caretaker,’ a student who is hired as a resident assistant, to take care of others and make sure everyone and everything on his floor is all right whenever problems arise. Thus, the imperfective yûu in this case carries a general temporal aspectual meaning of the verb ‘take care.’

6.4 Imperfective with Habitual Implication

Data fragment (9) shows a habitual implication conveyed by yûu.

(9) Tuna sandwiches (EQ3: 816-820)

P has asked T about her food situation after the earthquake. T did not have a lot of food left in her house at that time. She ate whatever she had and ate tuna sandwiches for a few days.

1 T: ?ko tooo nân lûsûk
    EXC when that think
    "Oh, at that time, I think ..."
2 ca mii (.2) seeñwit ñalay kõ  kin pay
IRR have sandwich what HL eat go.DIR
“I had some sandwiches, and I would eat any kinds.”

3 P: mmn= BC
“Mmm.”

→ 4 T: =kin lúsük kin thuunâa seeñwit yù
eat think eat tuna sandwich IMP
sãam wan máŋ  huh huh
three day probably
“I think I was probably eating tuna sandwiches
for three days.”

5 P: =?ohöoy huh huh
BC
“Oh!”

In line 4, yùu is used to convey an aspectual meaning of an
extended duration, i.e., about three days. From the context,
yùu also carries a habitual implicature of the actions eating tuna
sandwiches. According to Brinton (1988), habitual refers to
repeated actions on multiple occasions. That is, the speaker
repeatedly ate tuna sandwiches on multiple occasions during
that time period. As normal human beings, we know that a
person cannot continuously eat for that length of time without
stopping. The habitual meaning, therefore, comes from both
the discourse context with the use of yùu and our pragmatic
knowledge.

VII. Conclusion

In summary, the developmental pathway of imperfective
markers proposed by Bybee et al. (1994) provides a basis for
distinguishing the functions and meanings of the two Thai aspectual markers, kaṃlaṇ and yūu. Yūu, which is primarily used as a locative verb, has had a longer development than kaṃlaṇ. It has developed from a locative marker to a temporal marker, and can be used to convey not only progressive meaning like kaṃlaṇ, but imperfective meaning as well. On the other hand, kaṃlaṇ, which does not follow this imperfective developmental pathway, tends to be used as only a progressive marker, and thus is more restricted in its use.

The nature of how each aspectual marker is used illustrates the basic aspectual meaning of each marker, separate from how it is interpreted in specific contexts (Andersen 1990b). The basic meaning of yūu is abstract “locative” for both time and space. While it can convey locative meaning, it can also carry both progressive aspect and imperfective aspects, the aspectual meaning of extended temporal duration that can include a habitual implicature. The use of kaṃlaṇ, on the other hand, is more restricted to limited and specific temporal duration. Therefore, kaṃlaṇ is used to convey only progressive aspect, requiring an energy input from the agent.

This study has provided some implications. I hope that the description of the functions and meanings of kaṃlaṇ and yūu drawn from the analysis of the study will be beneficial not only to the research in the area of tense, mood and aspect, but also to second or foreign language learners as well as heritage language learners of Thai. Furthermore, research on functions of aspectual markers used by adult native speakers, such as this study, can be a good basis for future research on the acquisition of aspectual markers by first and second language learners of Thai.

**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BC</th>
<th>backchannel</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONJ</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIR</td>
<td>directional marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAUS</td>
<td>causative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAY</td>
<td>.dy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>emphatic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Endnotes

1. Kalanŋ is a variation of kamlanŋ. The transcription is according to the actual pronunciation of the speaker.
2. The data used in the study was collected by Shoichi Iwasaki, and was transcribed and translated by myself.
3. dây, as a preverb auxiliary, is called a past tense marker in some studies, e.g., Kanchanawan (1978). As a lexical verb, dây means ‘to have an opportunity to...’ to get to..., which carries an implicature of past tense (Sindhvanandha, 1970). Neill (1988) states that dây carries a perfect aspect, rather than a past time reference (p. 108).

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