

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING TEMPORAL FRAMES IN THAI CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

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Andersen (1999) states that “successful communication requires that participants be able to mentally construct a frame within which any situation is assumed to hold or any event to unfold” (p. 355). According to Hopper (1982), discourse context is an important key in interpreting temporal and aspectual meaning. Much of the literature on the Thai language says that there is no grammatical tense in Thai, but it seems that Thai has a rich aspectual system. Even without grammatical tense to locate a temporal reference, there are ways Thai speakers use to express temporal relations in their conversation, for example, temporal adverbials, temporal aspectual markers, including discourse context, and shared background knowledge.

This paper qualitatively investigates how temporal reference is established and maintained in Thai conversational discourse. The results of the study suggest that temporal adverbials are usually used to establish a temporal location in narratives, and that after a temporal reference is established, most verbs used within that temporal frame are bare verbs: rarely are temporal markers used, although aspectual markers and other auxiliary verbs are sometimes used to indirectly maintain the temporal frame. In addition, inherent semantic aspect of verbs and predicates seem to play an important role in maintaining the temporal frames as well.

Data and Methodology

The data used in this study is an audio-recorded natural conversation among a parent (father), a female teacher, and a male teacher. This conversation took place at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. The parent was invited to the university to discuss his daughter's school problems and study progress with the two academic advisors.

The conversation was then transcribed into phonetics, which represent the real pronunciation of the speakers. The transcription was divided into line boundaries according to intonation units (Chafe 1987; Iwasaki 1996). Clauses, main clauses as well as subordinate clauses, in the data were counted. There are approximately 790 clauses, or 1,460 intonation units.

Results and Discussion

As defined by Labov (1972), narrative is “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (pp. 359-

360). In the narratives found in the data, temporal adverbials are usually used to establish a time frame, at the beginning of the narrative. After the temporal frame is established, the later clauses do not normally carry temporal or aspectual markers. Data fragment (1) is an example of a past narrative in which a temporal adverbial establishes a temporal frame.

(1) PT: 46-56

After telling the student's parent (P) that all students are supposed to have their internship this semester so they have an opportunity to look for a job at the same time, the female teacher (FT) tells the parent all students, except his daughter, came to meet with their teachers on the eighth of the month for their internship assignments and courses to take in the following semester.

⇒ 1 FT: *nĩa phũa kháw maa kan*

to establish PRT friend 3 come together

the past *mũa* *wan thĩi pèet nĩa ná* *khá*

time frame when day at eight PRT PRT R.PRT

“Her friends came (here) together on the eighth.”

2 P: *[kháp]*

PRT

“Yes.”

3 FT: *[maa] cəə kàp ʔacaan liaplóy*

come meet with teacher completely

“(They) came and already met with the teacher.”

4 *law kôə mōəp tua*

1.pl HL entrust person

hây pay fùk ɲaan

CAUS go practice work

“We gave them assignments (to go) for their internship.”

5 P: *kháp*

PRT

“Yes.”

- 6 FT: *sàŋsǝn pay*
 teach go.DIR
 “(We) taught them.”
- 7 *luam thǎŋ law phûut thǎŋ ʔây*
 include altogether 1.pl speak regarding TTL
wíchaa thǎi lian thǎəm tòɔpay dǔay
 subject REL study term following too
 “And we spoke about the subjects/courses
 that they will take in the following term too,”
- 8 *sûŋ pen lǔaŋ sǎmkhan thǎŋ nǎn lǎy*
 REL COP item important altogether that EMP
 “all of which were important.”
- 9 P: *kháp*
 PRT
 “Yes.”
- 10 FT: *kháw kô mây maa hǎa lǎy*
 3 HL NEG come see EMP
 “She didn’t come to meet (us) at all.”
- 11 P: *lǎ kháp*
 Q PRT
 “Really?”

In this short narrative, the female teacher describes what happened on a specific date regarding students’ internship assignments, which the student protagonist missed, and thus her parent was invited to the school. A temporal adverbial clause is used in line 1 in order to establish the past time frame, i.e., the day when all students came for their internship assignments. What took place in that past time frame is shared and understood by the co-participants without any other use of temporal markers. The use of overt temporal markers in narratives may be redundant since one nature of narratives includes the temporal sequence of the event taking place in the temporal frame. Similar findings are shown in Andersen (1990) that temporal markers are not obligatory in Papiamentu either. Additionally, Wu (1996) found that temporal markers are also used infrequently in Mandarin Chinese narratives.

Not only are temporal markers used to establish a temporal frame in past narratives, but they have the same function in non-narratives as well. Moreover, temporal adverbials are found to provide co-participants with

more specific temporal location. In data excerpt (2), which is a non-narrative segment, only two temporal markers are used: one to establish a time frame in line 2, and the other to make a temporal location more specific and explicit in line 10.

(2) PT: 1315-1333

After the parent told the female teacher about one of his sons who also plans to go to this college later and how good his English is, the teacher asks him about his daughter, the student in trouble, concerning how she was in high school.

- 1 FT: *lěw lěw tən- lăttanaa nĩa*
and and when Rattana this.PRT
“And, and when-, Rattana,”
- ⇒ 2 *tən: rian mătthayom rian* *pen ɲay*
to establish when study high-school study COP how
the past *ʔà há*
time frame PRT R.PRT
“when she was in high school, how did she do?”
- 3 P: *man kôw yàŋɲá*
3 HL like-this
“It was like this.”
- 4 *yàŋ ʔacaan wâa nĩa*
like teacher say this
“like what you said.”
- 5 FT: *[lǝə(.) mây khôy:]*
Q NEG really
“Yeah? She was not really.”
- 6 P: *[man kô mây man kô](.)*
3 HL NEG 3 HL
“It was not, it was, uh...”
- 7 *mây khôy dii ʔa há*
NEG really good PRT R.PRT
“It was not really good.”

- 8 FT: *mây khôy dii*
NEG really good
“It was not really good.”
- 9 P: *kháp*
PRT
“Yes.”
- ⇒ 10 FT: *lêw kháw chôp ?alay mâak thísùt là*
to make and 3 like what very SUPER PRT
temporal info. *khá* *tôn nán*
specific R.PRT when that
“And what did she like best at that time?”
- 11 *wíchaa năy thĩ kháw tham dăy*
subject which REL 3 do get.ABL
dii thísùt
good SUPER
“Which subject did she do best?”
- 12 P: *phûak sîn: nà*
group art PRT
“Art.”
- 13 *[phûak wâat phâap ?alay nía]*
group draw picture what that
“Drawing pictures, something like that.”
- 14 FT: *[?oo (.) năa ca pay] thaŋ nán*
EXC should IRR go way that
“Oh, she should have taken that path.”
- 15 P: *thâ wâat phâap nĩa chán nùŋ lăy*
if draw picture PRT level one EMP
“If it’s about drawing, she did very well.”
- 16 *katun nĩa*
cartoon PRT
“Cartoons,”

- 17 *lian bệp nĩa=*
 copy model PRT
 “Copying (pictures) from models.”
- 18 FT: *=nân na si khá thammay thữg mây*
 that PRT PRT R.PRT why reach NEG
 hây pay than nấn nà
 let.CAUS go path that PRT
 “Yes, why didn’t you let her take that path?”
- 19 P: *kô phỏm- khắw khắw lủak ợeự*
 HL 1.m 3 3 choose self
 “I- She- she chose that (major) herself.”

In this excerpt, a subordinate clause which functions as a temporal adverbial clause is used to establish a past time frame in line 2. The beginning of this excerpt includes habitual states which are different from past narratives in that there is no sequential order of events, whereas there is in narratives. The past state continues to be mentioned in the stretch of talk without any use of temporal markers until line 10. The use of the temporal marker in line 10 seems to be important to the interpretation of the temporal location in the discourse, as well as to the parent’s understanding of the conversation. Without the temporal marker in line 10, *tôn nấn* ‘that time,’ there may be an ambiguity in interpreting the time frame. That is, the temporal location could be interpreted as carrying generic present-time reference, i.e., ‘what does she like best?’ and ‘what subject does she do best?’ This is because stative verbs and predicates are normally taken as carrying present-time reference by default. After the specific temporal location was provided, which resolved the possible ambiguity of temporal location, the co-participants do not use any other temporal markers.

The inherent semantic aspect of verbs and predicates is crucial to the interpretation of temporal frame as well. Telic interpretation of the verbs and predicates, especially in lines 11, 14, 18 and 19, makes past time markers unnecessary, since it already implies an end point or a final result (Comrie 1976), and thus refers to the past time frame. In particular, the use of *dây* in line 11 provides the predicate with a strong telic interpretation, probably because its lexical meaning as a verb is ‘to get, to receive,’ which is a punctual verb with an inherent end point. Consequently, it is not surprising that a number of researchers on Thai, e.g., Kanchanawan (1978), Neill (1988), Sindhavanandha (1970), refer to *dây* as a past tense marker, or a perfect marker.

Although lines 15-17 may be interpreted as having present-time reference, or generic present (‘she is, or has been, very good at drawing’),

this is not very crucial for the co-participants' interpretation of temporal frame. What is crucial is pragmatic knowledge and shared background information between the co-participants. That is, both participants know that the student, at the moment, is not studying art, which she should probably have chosen (as mentioned by the teacher in line 14). Moreover, not only does the teacher's question in line 18 make it clear that what she refers to is the past time frame through the telic interpreted aspect associated with the predicate, the parent's answer in line 19 also has past-time reference through the use of the telic verb *lûak* 'choose.'

It is found that the majority of clauses in both narratives and non-narratives in the Thai conversation used in the study are not marked with temporal devices, as shown in the above data fragments as examples. A similar phenomenon is found in Chinese conversations. Wu (1996) reports that in both narratives and non-narratives in her Mandarin Chinese conversational data, temporal markers are not frequently used even when there is a shift in temporal frame to the present or to the past.

However, the counter phenomenon is also found in the Thai conversational data. Observe the following non-narrative segment, in which explicit temporal adverbials are shown in circles, used along with other temporal markers, such as aspectual markers.

(3) PT: 182-195

When the male teacher (MT) comes into the room to meet the student's parent, he tells the parent his daughter just called.

- 1 MT: *mûakîi* *thoo maa*
just-now call come.DIR
"She just called."
- 2 FT: *khay thoo maa*
who call come.DIR
"Who called?"
- 3 MT: *lâtana*
"Rattana."
- 4 FT: *ʔə [thoo maa wâa]*
uh call come.DIR that
"Uh, she called and said..."
- 5 MT: *[bôok wâa dǎw]*
say that moment
"She said in a moment ..."

- 6 P: [ʔəə] lǎ kháp
EXC Q R.PRT
“Oh, really?”
- 7 MT: điaw cà
moment IRR
“In a moment, (she) would.”
- 8 P: điaw maa lǎ há
~~moment~~ come Q R.PRT
“She will come in a moment?”
- 9 MT: điaw ca maa
~~moment~~ IRR come
“She will come in a moment.”
- 10 FT: [ʔəə]
“Mmm.”
- 11 MT: [pay] ʔaw náŋsǎu yùu
go take book IMP
“She is getting her books.” /
“She has gone to get her books.”
- 12 FT: [()°]
- 13 P: [há điaw] ɲán điaw phǒm lɔɔ phóp
PRT moment so moment l.m wait see
“O.K. So in a moment, I will wait to see her.”
- 14 điaw điaw phǒm kô yaŋ yùu
moment moment l.m HL still LOC
“In a moment, I’ll still be here.”

In this excerpt, the co-participants frequently use temporal devices to mark temporal references. Their use of these temporal markers may be crucial for them to get their message across as well as for their listeners to correctly understand the temporal references carried in the conversation. The temporal devices used in this excerpt help make the temporal references more explicit and specific to the co-participants.

The temporal marker in line 1, *m̄ākíi* 'just now,' refers back to the recent past, which establishes the past-time reference and makes the recent past relevant to the here-and-now present. The past-time reference is maintained, which concerns the student's call, without any use of explicit temporal markers until line 5 where another temporal device is used, i.e., *ǵiaw* 'in a moment.' The fact that the temporal adverbial *ǵiaw* is used frequently after line 5 is probably because the co-participants want to make the near-future temporal reference explicit and specific to one another. Additionally, this temporal adverbial *ǵiaw* also ties the here-and-now present-time reference to the near future, which, in fact, is viewed by the co-participants as carrying the temporal meaning of 'relevant to the present-time reference.' In line 11, the use of an imperfective marker *yùu*, which carries a resultative interpretation, implicitly makes the recent past and present time at some other location relevant to the present time here at this location. Moreover, in line 14, the temporal adverbial *yaj* 'yet, still' is used together with *ǵiaw* 'in a moment,' or rather a temporal adverbial that conveying the meaning of 'relevant to the present,' both of which tie the present to the near-future time reference. Therefore, the use of all temporal devices in this episode holds the whole stretch of discourse together within one temporal frame, i.e., here and now, by making the recent past, the present and the near future relevant to one another in one episode. Although there seem to be a few shifts of temporal location in this stretch of talk, what is crucial to the co-participants' understanding is not the shifts, but rather the relationship of the recent-past and the near-future temporal references to the present-time reference. In this non-narrative context, the co-participants view the speech time as their reference point.

Conclusion

In sum, this study examines how temporal frame is established and maintained in natural Thai conversation. It is found that temporal adverbials are normally used to establish a temporal reference in both narratives and non-narratives. Explicit temporal devices, such as temporal adverbials, are rarely used in maintaining a time frame. However, aspectual markers and other auxiliary verbs are sometimes used to implicitly maintain the temporal frame. Inherent semantic aspect associated with verbs and predicates also play an important role in identifying and maintaining the temporal frame. Telic and punctual verbs and predicates are more likely to be interpreted as the past, whereas habitual states tend to be read as the present.

In addition, it is found in the longer version of my paper (Meepoe 1996) that conversational participants seem to rely on their pragmatic knowledge and shared background information in establishing or switching, maintaining, as well as identifying and interpreting temporal frames.

Generic truth is almost always interpreted as having the present-time reference, which holds across many temporal frames.

Appendix I: Glossary

ABL	ability	BC	backchannel
BNF	benefactive	CAUS	causative
CONJ	conjunction	COP	copula
<i>dây</i>	<i>dây</i>	DIR	directional marker
EMP	emphatic	EXC	exclamation
EXP	experiential	HL	highlighting device
IMP	imperfective	IRR	irrealis
LOC	locative	NEG	negative
PERF	perfect	POSS	possessive
PRT	particle	PROG	progressive
PSV	passive	Q	question
R	register	RED	reduplication
REL	relative pronoun	RESUL	resultative
SUPER	superlative	TTL	title
f	female	m	male
pl	plural	1	1st person pronoun
2	2nd person pronoun	3	3rd person pronoun
.	joins two meanings of one morpheme		

Appendix II: Transcription Conventions

- [] Brackets mark the point where a speaker's talk overlaps another speaker's.
- :
-
- =
- !
- (.)
- (.2)
- man
- ° °
- > <
- < >
- ()
- (())
- Colon indicates a *lengthened sound or syllable*.
- A hyphen marks a cut-off of sound or utterance.
- An equal sign indicates latched utterances.
- An exclamation point marks an animated sound.
- A period in parentheses marks a short pause or gap.
- A number indicates a pause in tenths of a second.
- An underline indicates an emphasis of a word or sound.
- Degree signs indicate quiet talk or soft voicing.
- The talk speeds up.
- The talk slows down.
- Parentheses indicate when a segment of talk is uncertain.
- Double parentheses indicate non-vocal action, or material that is not a part of the talk.

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