

A CLASSIFICATION OF THAI CLASSIFIERS

SamAng HIRANBURANA

One area which has hardly been touched and which has always baffled a non-Thai speaker is the use of classifiers. At first impression there seems to be one classifier for each noun. My counting, which I believe is fairly extensive, reveals 75 in all, not counting those classifiers used as units in measurement of weight, distance and time, nor those referred to by U. Warotamasikkhadit (1963) as 'reduplicative classifiers', which is the use of the noun itself as its own classifier such as /my¹ sɔɔ⁵ my¹/ 'two hands',¹ nor classifiers for the non-concrete nouns such as /wæp²/ 'a flash', /kæp⁴/ 'a rap'.

The fullest account of the use of Thai classifiers can be found in Noss 1964. It is a word which occurs with a noun when a number and/or a demonstrative is also present - /buri¹ sɔɔ⁵ muh¹/ 'two cigarettes' or /buri² muh¹ ni⁴/ 'this cigarette'. However, in the context where the noun is understood, the noun may be omitted, leaving its classifier to act as the head of a classifier phrase - /sɔɔ¹ si⁵ lya⁵/ 'the yellow pack'. Noss recognises that there are well over 200 classifiers in Thai. He groups them into four types:

1. A unit classifier which has a specific relationship with one or more concrete nouns.
2. A metric classifier which occurs in enumeration. It has no special relationship with the noun in the way that unit classifiers do but it is used for measurement of a mass noun into fixed unit or conventional contents of a container such as in /khaa³ saam⁵ tcaa¹/ 'three platefuls of rice'. Noss also divides the metric classifiers into five subclasses namely (1) distance and size, (2) weight, (3) container, (4) value, and (5) time.

3. A general classifier which occurs in enumerations after an extremely wide range of nouns with no special relationships with those nouns. Some of them can occur even after abstract nouns. The class is small and probably closed. Noss notes that 14 classifiers belong to this type.

4. An imitative classifier which is the same type of classifiers referred to by Udom Waritamasikkkhadit (1963) as 'reduplicative classifiers' which has been mentioned previously.

In his classification, Noss is primarily concerned with the function and usage of the classifiers. There is little attempt to relate classifiers semantically with the nouns they represent. In Noss' opinion (1964), "a far better lexicographical technique, used by Mary Haas and others, is to give the unit classifier in parentheses after each concrete noun listed" and that "The semantic connection between classifier and noun may be buried so deep in history that it makes no sense descriptively".

Obviously, Noss' despair over Thai classifiers can only leave the Thai-learner at a loss, with his memory the only tool available to tackle this area of Thai language. It is my contention, however, that there is a definite semantic connection between a noun and its classifier, and that on being confronted with an unknown object and given its function, most Thais will more or less agree as to what classifier they would use if one is required.

It seems that one may group Thai 'specific classifiers' into three major classes with their subclasses. These, with specifications by various lexical features will give selectional rules which will match with the feature specifications of a noun and permit the noun to select its appropriate classifier. The three major classes are as follows:

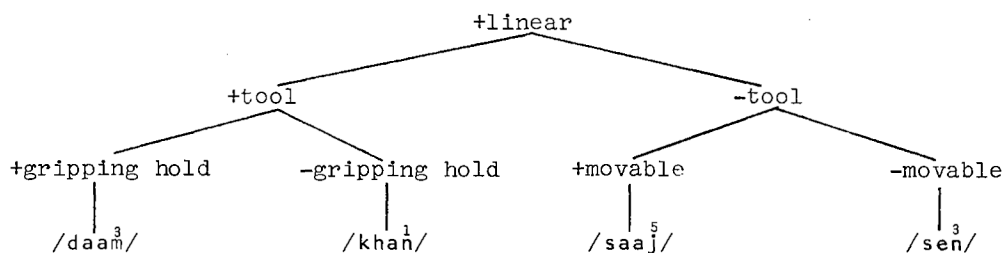
1. Classifiers_(amount)
 - 1.1. Classifiers_(partitive)
 - 1.2. Classifiers_(pair)
 - 1.3. Classifiers_(plural)
2. Classifiers_(shape)
 - 2.1. Linear
 - 2.2. Quadrilateral
 - 2.3. Circular
 - 2.4. Cylindrical

3. Classifiers_(function)

- 3.1. Weapon
- 3.2. Container
- 3.3. Vehicle
- 3.4. Machinery
- 3.5. Inhabitation
- 3.6. Tool

In this paper, I will use only one area to illustrate my contention namely the use of Classifiers_(shape) in which there is a definite connection between the classifier and the shape of the noun it is to go with.

2.1. Linear Classifiers



Nouns used with each classifier:²

- /lem³/: /miit³/ (and its noun compounds), /tcoob²/, /siam⁵/, /khem⁵/,
 /kankraj¹/, /thian¹/, /pa¹/ ('oar'), /pa¹/ ('spatula'),
 /khwaan⁵/, /khraad³/, /tali⁵/
- /daam³/: /pkat⁴/, /paakka¹/, /di²/
- /khan¹/: /thanu⁵/, /naama¹/, /rom³/, /be²/, /tchoon⁴/, /sco³/, /thappi¹/,
 /sco¹/
- /saa⁵/: /thanon⁵/, /thaa¹/, /mænaam⁴/, /lamthaan¹/, /khlo¹/
- /sen³/: /saa⁵ pha¹/, /bami²/, /wun⁴ sen³/, /maj⁵/, /faa³/, /khem⁵ khat²/,
 /tchya¹ phuuk² ro¹ thaaw⁴/, /phom⁵/, /luat³/, /daa³/, /tchyak³/,
 /lek²/ ('steel wire'), /saa⁵ thoorasap²/ ('telephone wire'),
 /saa⁵ faj¹/ ('electrical wire')

Before discussion of the classifiers and their corresponding nouns, one should mention something about the features used here. The feature [+linear] is used here to imply that length is the striking feature in

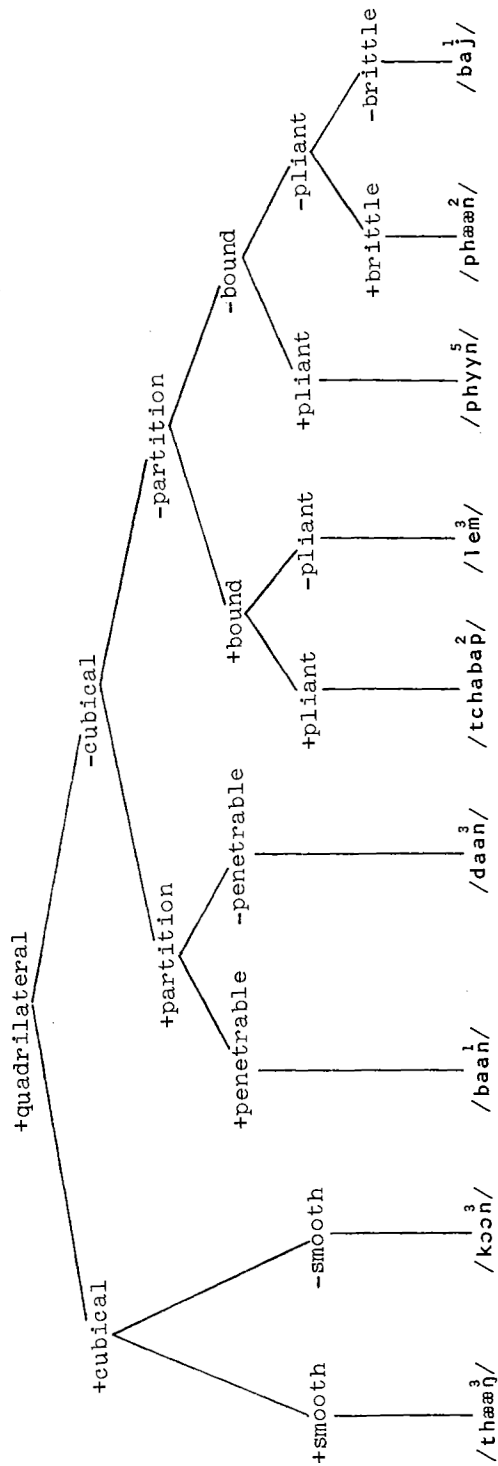
the object which in some cases, such as /thanon⁵/ 'road', can have width as well.

/lem³/ is the general classifier used for a linear tool which has to be used with a gripping hold such as /miit²/ 'knife', /khem⁵/ 'needle'. /thian¹/ 'candle' is perhaps the only one exception since when one holds a candle, it need not be a grip. Three of the nouns used with /lem³/, namely /phat⁴/ 'fan', /paakkaa¹/ 'pen' and /diw³/ 'a kind of Chinese weapon' can be used alternatively with another classifier /daam³/.

When the tool is used without the gripping hold, /khan¹/ is used. When one holds those nouns, the hold itself is more like a support (e.g. /rom³/ 'umbrella') or a counterweight effort (e.g. /thanud¹/ 'bow') rather than a grip. It is quite certain that this classifier is derived from the same root as two other words: /khaan¹/ 'to support' and /khaan⁴/ 'to go against'.

/saa⁵j/ and /sen³/ are non-tool linear classifiers. The basic difference between them is marked by the features [+stationary] and [-stationary]. It may be argued that /saa⁵j/ is also used for /thor¹a sap²/ 'telephone' and /fa¹i faa⁴/ 'electricity', but this usage in fact refers to the telephone and electricity connections and not to the wire which will be used with /sen³/ if a classifier is required.

2.2. Quadrilateral Classifiers



Nouns used with each classifier:

- /thææŋ³/₁: /leŋ²/, /thoŋ¹/, /jaan¹ loŋ⁴/
- /kooŋ³/₁: /hin⁵/, /din¹/, /khi³/, /meek³/, /khanom⁵ paŋ¹/, /ʔit²/,
/naam⁴ khææŋ⁵/, /sabu²/, /naam⁴ taan¹/, /din¹ niaw⁵/
- /baan¹/₁: /pratu¹/, /naa³ taan²/, /katcoŋ² ŋaaw¹/
- /daan³/₁: /kamphææŋ¹/, /rua⁴/, /faa⁵/, /daan³/
- /tchabaŋ²/₁: /tcoŋ² maaŋ⁵/, /naŋsy⁵ phim¹/, /warā¹ saan⁵/, /ʔeekā² saan⁵/
- /lem³/₂: /samut²/, /naŋsy⁵/, /samut² bantyk⁴/, /nitayā² saan⁵/
- /phyyn⁵/₁: /syā²/, /phrom¹/, /maan³/, /naŋ⁵ sat²/, /phaa³/ (and its
compound nouns, e.g. /phaa³ ʔom³/, /phaa³ tchet⁴ tua¹/ etc.)
- /phææn²/₂: /kra-daan¹/, /saŋ-ka-si⁵/, /kra-byaŋ³/, /kha-nom⁵ paŋ¹/,
/jaaŋ¹/, /naŋ⁵/, /kra-daaŋ²/, /ma-muaŋ³ kuan¹/
- /baj¹/₁: /ruup³/, /thon-na⁴ baŋ²/, /phaŋ³/, /bat²/, /tua⁵/

The features [+quadrilateral], [+cubical], [+bound], [+pliant] need some qualification here. [+quadrilateral] only implies that the object has breadth and length while [+cubical] does not mean that it is actually cubical, only that it has thickness added to its length and breadth. [+bound] here implies that the object has leaves which are supposed to be (bound) together; hence /naŋ-sy⁵ phim¹/ 'newspaper' is [+bound] although it is actually not bound. [+pliant] means 'can be folded' as well as 'supposed to be folded' hence /ruup³/ 'a photograph' is [-pliant] because it is not supposed to be folded.

Since the diagrams used in this paper are self-explanatory, there will be notes only for items which require explanation or modification.

As /thææŋ³/₁ and /kooŋ³/ are distinctive by reason of the feature [smooth], one may argue that this is not the case with /nam-khææŋ⁵/ 'ice' and /sa-bu²/ 'soap' which can be smooth but have the feature [-smooth]. But /naam⁴ khææŋ⁵/ is quite uneven when compared with the nouns which use /thææŋ³/ like /jaaŋ¹ loŋ⁴/ 'rubber (eraser)', and /thoŋ¹/ 'ingot'. /sa-bu²/ is a loanword and it would be quite legitimate to leave it out in the analysis. However, it is probably better to treat them as exceptions.

/kra-tcoŋ² ŋaaw¹/ 'mirror' also has the feature [+penetrable]. This is because I have taken the feature [+penetrable] to mean 'any kind of penetration beyond the partition' which, in the case of a mirror, one achieves through vision.

It should be noted here that /lēm³/₂ is a different classifier from the homophonous linear classifier /lēm³/₁ in the previous section.

/kra-daat²/ 'paper' is another exception as it has the feature [+brittle]. This is a loanword from Portuguese. A colleague of mine has given an interesting explanation that it is quite possible that the early form of paper could be thick and crispy and this would have fitted the feature. However, this is merely conjecture. /jaaŋ¹/ 'rubber mat', /naŋ⁵/ 'dried skin' and /ma-mua³ kuaŋ¹/ 'dried mango paste' are no exception if one extends the feature [+pliant] to include objects which are not supposed to be folded.

2.3. Round Classifiers

Nouns used for each classifier:

| | |
|--|---|
| /lɔɔt ² /: | /lɔɔt ² faj ¹ /, /lɔɔt ² kɛw ³ / |
| /luuk ³ /, /phon ⁵ /: | /luuk ³ bɔɔn ¹ /, /luuk ³ then-ni ⁴ /, /luuk ³ piŋ-pɔɔŋ ¹ /, /luuk ³ kɔɔf ⁴ / |
| /huā ⁵ / ₁ : | /huā ⁵ hɔɔm ⁵ /, /kra-thiam ¹ /, /huā ⁵ tchaj ¹ thaaw ⁴ /, /pha ² kaat ² /, /khæ-rɔɔt ² / |
| /huā ⁵ / ₂ : | /kra-lam ² plii ¹ /, /pha ² kaat ² hɔɔm ⁵ /, /huā ⁵ plii ¹ / |
| /phon ⁵ / or /baj ¹ / ₂ : | /tæŋ ¹ moɔ ¹ /, /som ³ /, /ma-naaw ¹ /, /som ³ ʔoɔ ¹ /, /ma-mua ³ /, /malakɔɔ ¹ /, /klua ³ /, /tæŋ ¹ kwa ¹ /, /fak ⁴ / |
| /paak ² /: | /hæ ⁵ /, /ʔua ¹ / |
| /woŋ ¹ /: | /woŋ ¹ klom ¹ /, /wæŋ ⁵ /, /kam-laj ¹ /, /pha ³ /, /maak ² ruk ⁴ / |
| /phua ¹ /: | /maa-laj ¹ /, /na ⁵ sa-tik ⁴ / |
| /rian ⁵ /: | /ŋya ¹ /, /traa ¹ / |
| /dua ¹ /: | /ta-wa ¹ /, /dya ¹ /, /daaw ¹ /, /win-jaan ¹ /, /rɔj ¹ pyan ³ / |
| /dɔɔk ² /: | /dɔɔk ² maj ⁴ /, /thɔɔŋ ¹ jip ² /, /kun-tcæ ¹ / |

The feature [+spherical] is not to be taken literally. Here, it means any round object with a third dimension. [+opening] is used for any object with a circumferential top and another part attached to it.

/luuk³/ is used for a hollow spherical object. However, its spherical feature is very strong and its use is also extended to objects which are not hollow such as all round fruit and vegetables. Hence it is used alternatively with /baj¹/ . This connection with fruit and vegetables results in the use of these two classifiers for any fruit and vegetable which in fact of cylindrical shape like /fak⁴/ 'marrow', and /tæŋ¹ kwa¹/ 'cucumber'. /baj¹/₂ here is homophonous with /baj¹/₁ which is used for non-brittle flat quadrilateral objects.

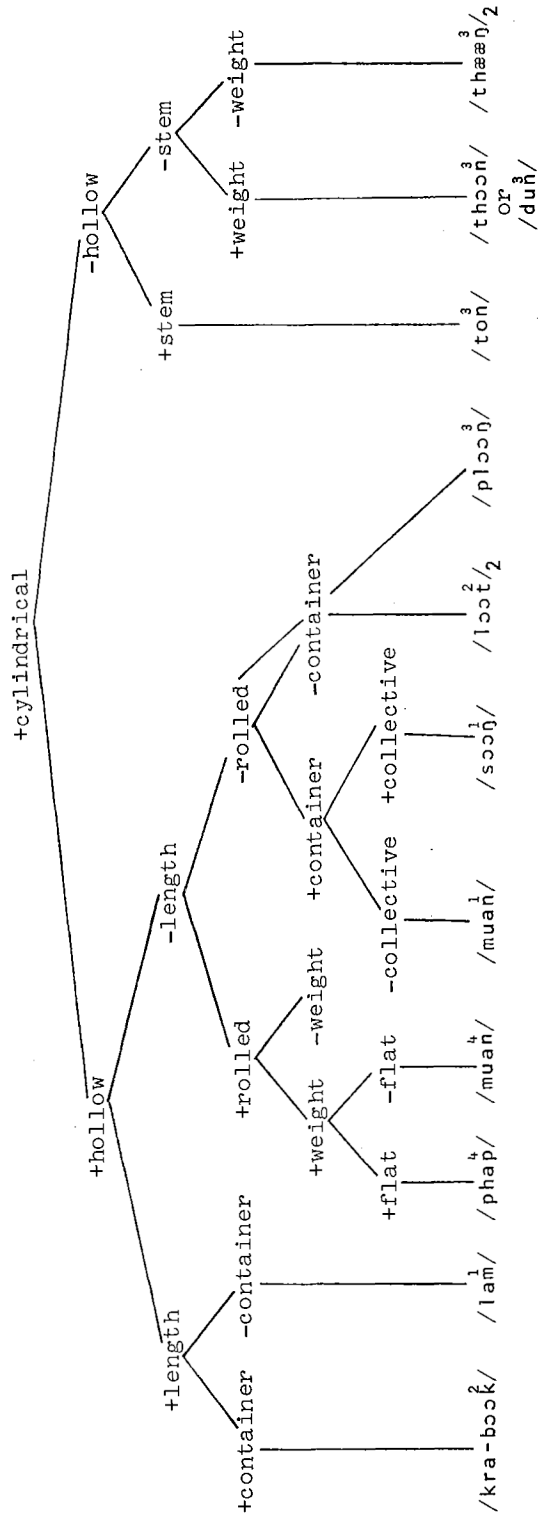
/huā⁵/₁ which is used for a round root is likewise used for any root which may not be spherical in shape, like a carrot or a turnip.

The distinctive feature for /dua¹/ and /dɔɔk²/ is [radiate]. It seems strange that /dua¹/ should be used with /win¹ jaan¹/ 'soul' which is an abstract noun. But the Thai believe that the soul is a luminous ball which leaves a body on one's death, as often mentioned in Thai literature. Another strange noun to use with /dua¹/ is /rɔj¹ pyan³/ 'stain'

but a stain to be used with this classifier has to be of the kind which starts with a spot and then radiates in all directions.

The use of /wo¹h/ is also extended to people sitting for a game of cards or chess; it is also used for an orchestra or a drama group, all of which are abstract. However there seems to be a concrete connection if one takes it to refer to the gathering itself.

2.4. Cylindrical Classifiers



Nouns used with each classifier:

- /kra-bɔɔk²/: /pyɲ¹/, /fa¹j tcaa⁵j/, /khaa³w laam⁵/
- /la¹m/: /ma⁴j pha²j/
- /pha⁴p/: /phaa³/
- /mua⁴n/: /kra-daa²t/, /sa⁵m lii¹/, /kra-daa¹t tcham-ra⁴/
- /mua¹n/: /bu-rii²/, /thɔɔ¹n mua⁴n/
- /lɔɔt²/₂: /lɔɔt² kaa-fæ¹/, /lɔɔt³ jaa¹/, /lɔɔt² (phom⁵)/, /lɔɔt² nii-ʔɔɔn¹/, /ro¹ mua⁴n phom⁵/
- /plɔɔ³n/: /jaa³/
- /ton³/: /su¹n/, /sa⁵w/, /ton³ maa⁴j/
- /thɔɔ³n/: /maa⁴j/, /kra-bɔɔ¹n/, /le²k/, /plaa¹/, /tchyak³/
- /du³n/: /fyɲ¹/, /le²k/, /maa⁴j/
- /sɔɔ¹n/: /bu-rii²/, /sɔɔ¹n tɔt² maa⁵j/
- /thæ³n/₂: /tchɔɔ⁴k/, /din-sɔɔ⁵/, /paak-kaa¹/, /phu¹u-kan¹/, /jaa¹n lɔp⁴/, /ʔaj-tim¹/

/kra-bɔɔk²/ is used for /pyɲ¹/ 'gun' and /fa¹j tcaa⁵j/ 'torch' as the emphasis is on the tubular nature of the two objects. One may raise the question that /bu-rii²/ 'cigarette' is not hollow but it is so featured because of the need to differentiate nouns used with /mua⁴n/ - that is rolled heavy objects - from the light ones. These two classifiers should be treated together as they derive from the verb /mua⁴n/ 'to roll'. It can also be argued that a cigarette is never tightly packed. /sɔɔ¹n tɔt² maa⁵j/ 'envelope' has the feature [+hollow] as it is hollow when opened.

/thɔɔ³n/ and /du³n/ are used alternatively but in applying one of these classifiers to the same object, one is more conscious of the weight when /du³n/ is used.

In this paper, I have used 28 features to differentiate 43 classifiers which are used with 173 nouns. The number of the nouns is in fact greater as some of them are generic (like 'flowers', 'trees', 'fruit'). A great number of compounds can also be formed with many nouns cited.

It may not seem economical but one should take into account that when other classifiers are analysed, the same features can be applied again. Nonetheless, it should be seen clearly from this illustration that there is a definite semantic connection between the noun and the classifier. In completing this paper, I have accidentally come across the third scale of correspondence which is the connection between the vowel of the classifiers and their shapes for all round classifiers except three (/pha⁴p/, /paak²/, /thææ³ŋ/) have rounded vowels while the other two groups have unrounded vowels. It may not be far from the truth to say that although language is arbitrary, there is evidence of its imitative nature which is found more in some languages than in others.

N O T E S

1. In this paper, J.G. Harris' device for marking tones is used, i.e. the superscript numbers; ¹ for the mid tone, ² for the low tone, ³ for the falling tone, ⁴ for the high tone and ⁵ for the rising tone. /y/ will also be used for [w] and /tc/, /tch/ for /tɕ/, /tɕh/ respectively.

2. My apologies for not giving an English translation for the non-Thai reader as it tends to distract one's attention in reading. A list of English equivalents is given, in the same order as the words occur in the article, in the appendix.

APPENDIX

2.1. Nouns used with linear classifiers

- /lem¹/₁: *knife, hoe, spade, needle, scissors, candle, oar, axe, prongs, spatula.*
- /daam³/: *fan, pen, a kind of Chinese weapon.*
- /khañ¹/: *bow, bow, umbrella, fishing rod, spoon, fork, ladle, banjo.*
- /saa⁵j/: *road, way, river, stream, canal.*
- /señ³/: *fan belt, egg noodle, transparent noodle, silk thread, cotton thread, belt, shoe laces, hair, wire, thread, string, steel wire, telephone wire, electrical wire.*

2.2. Nouns used with quadrilateral classifiers

- /thæñ³/₁: *iron, ingot, rubber eraser.*
- /kooñ³/: *stone, clay, shit, cloud, a loaf of bread, brick, ice cube, soap, sugar cube, plasticine.*
- /baañ¹/: *door, window, mirror.*
- /daañ³/: *wall, fence, room wall, side (e.g. of a triangle).*
- /tcha-ba²p/: *letter, newspaper, journal, document.*
- /lem³/₂: *exercise book, book, diary, magazine.*
- /phyñ⁵/: *mat, carpet, curtain, hide, cloth (and its compound nouns, e.g. nappy, towel, etc.)*
- /phæñ²/₂: *plank, corrugated iron, tile, a slice of bread, rubber mat (in the car), dried skin, paper, dried mango paste.*
- /ba¹j/_₁: *photograph, banknote, card (for playing), (invitation) card, ticket.*

2.3. Nouns used with round classifiers

| | |
|--|---|
| /lɔɔt ² /: | <i>electric bulb, glass bulb (used for experiment).</i> |
| /luuk ³ /, /phon ⁵ /: | <i>ball, tennis ball, pingpong ball, golf ball.</i> |
| /hua ⁵ / ₁ : | <i>onion, garlic, turnip, long lettuce, carrot.</i> |
| /hua ⁵ / ₂ : | <i>cabbage, lettuce, banana flower.</i> |
| /phon ⁵ /, /baj ¹ / ₂ : | <i>melon, orange, lemon, pomelo, mango, papaya, banana, cucumber, marrow.</i> |
| /paak ² /: | <i>fishing net, fishing net.</i> |
| /woŋ ¹ /: | <i>circle, ring, bracelet, card game, chess game.</i> |
| /phuāŋ ¹ /: | <i>garland, a bunch of rubber bands.</i> |
| /rian ⁵ /: | <i>coin, medal.</i> |
| /duaŋ ¹ /: | <i>sun, moon, star, soul, stain.</i> |
| /dɔɔk ² /: | <i>flowers, a kind of Thai sweet, key.</i> |

2.4. Nouns used with cylindrical classifiers

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| /kra-bɔɔk ² /: | <i>pistol, torch, Thai dessert contained in bamboo tube.</i> |
| /lam ¹ /: | <i>bamboo stem.</i> |
| /pha ^h /: | <i>cloth (rolled).</i> |
| /muan ^h /: | <i>(rolled) paper, a roll of cotton wool, toilet roll.</i> |
| /muan ¹ /: | <i>cigarette, rolled pancake.</i> |
| /lɔɔt ² / ₂ : | <i>drinking straw, syringe, a roll of hair, fluorescent tube, hair roll.</i> |
| /ploɔɔ ³ /: | <i>reed.</i> |
| /ton ³ /: | <i>log, pole, trees.</i> |
| /thɔɔn ³ /: | <i>wood, a weapon made of wood, iron bar, a big piece of fish, rope.</i> |
| /duŋ ³ /: | <i>log (for fire), iron bar, wood.</i> |
| /sɔɔŋ ¹ /: | <i>a pack of cigarettes, envelope.</i> |
| /thæŋ ³ / ₂ : | <i>chalk, pencil, pen, painting brush, rubber eraser, ice lolly.</i> |

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOSS, Richard B.

1964 *Thai Reference Grammar*. Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service
Institute.

WAROTAMASIKKHADIT, Udom

1963 *Thai Syntax: An Outline*. Doctoral dissertation, University
of Texas, Austin.