

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RESTRICTED INTENSIFIERS IN NORTHERN THAI

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INTRODUCTION

It may be appropriate to begin this paper on a grammatical feature of Northern Thai by citing an example from English to provide the un-conversant reader with an approximate idea of the structure, meaning, and usage of intensifiers in Thai dialects. The English words "itsy-bitsy" and "teensy-weensy" are good examples of the type of intensification that will be discussed because: (1) these words are fairly unique lexical items; (2) they are usually found only in informal colloquial English; (3) they have an unusual syllable structure of rhyming syllables; (4) they expand or intensify the meaning of a more common English word (in this case, '*little*'). Even though there are very few words like these in English, we shall notice later on that there are several similarities between "itsy-bitsy words" in English and restricted intensifiers in Northern Thai.¹

Restricted intensifiers are words from one to four syllables in length which are used to modify the class of verbs which Noss (1964:122) refers to as "general adjectives". They are almost always restricted in usage to one adjective, hence the term *restricted* intensifier as opposed to *unrestricted* intensifier, like Standard Thai /mâak/ '*very*', which can be used to modify any adjective. As Purnell (1965:17) has observed, restricted intensifiers are endocentric constructions; that is, the

¹The author wishes to express his gratitude to his Northern Thai informants and to Dr Herbert C. Purnell Jr who was generous in lending his materials and advice. The author takes full responsibility, however, for the comments and speculations expressed herein.

privilege of occurrence of the adjective head and intensifier used together is identical with the privilege of occurrence of the adjective head used alone. In usage, they tend to be highly colloquial and informal and are frequently used in exaggerated speech. Restricted intensifiers are probably found in all Thai dialects, although a cursory comparison of Standard and Northern Thai indicates that there is considerable difference between dialects as to which adjectives possess restrictive intensifiers and which do not. Thus, for the two Standard Thai intensifiers listed as examples below, Northern Thai contains no restricted intensifiers but must resort to unrestricted intensifiers for modification.

Restricted Intensifiers in Standard Thai

(Note that each intensifier is restricted to only one adjective.)

/lék kràcítrít/ 'extremely little', 'minute'

/jàaj bâəlâə/ 'extremely big', 'enormous'

*/lék bâəlâə/ *'enormously little'

*/jàaj kràcítrít/ *'minutely big'

Unrestricted Intensifiers in Standard Thai

(Note that /mâak/ 'very' can be used with any adjective.)

/lék mâak/ 'very little'

/jàaj mâak/ 'very big'

There are many similarities between the structure and meaning of intensifiers among the Thai dialects; however, this study will be confined solely to the Chiangmai dialect of Northern Thai [ต๋ำเมือง]. The data are presented in Table I and consist of a list of restricted intensifiers for twenty-six general adjectives drawn from two different sources: Purnell and Hope 1962 and three Chiangmai-born informants of different ages, sex, and educational background.¹

Purnell (1965:10) classifies restricted intensifiers into four groups according to syllable length. Although all four groups are represented in the corpus presented in Table I, one-syllable intensifiers (e.g. 1. /wət/) and two-syllable intensifiers (e.g. #8 /mókst/) are more numerous than four-syllable intensifiers (e.g. #6 /pàlěmtěmtěc/), and three-syllable intensifiers (#17 /khàly?tý?/ was the only example found)

¹The transcription is based on that of Purnell and Hope 1962 which itself is derived from the familiar Haas notation. The only symbol in the table which differs from the Standard Thai transcription is the tone mark /[~]/, which refers to high short-falling tone. Syllables which end with a final stop and are not marked with a tone symbol are pronounced with a low short-rising tone in Northern Thai.

Table I

SOME RESTRICTED INTENSIFIERS IN NORTHERN THAI

General Adjectives	Restricted Intensifier	
	Purnell and Hope	Informants (— signifies a form identical to Purnell and Hope)
1 /sɛɛw/ 'pointed'	/wɛt/	—, /wɛɛw/
2 /sɿy/ 'straight'	/sɛt/	—
3 /hǎaj/ 'to disappear'	/sɛp/	—, /hǎaj sɛp hǎaj sɔɔj/
4 /mon/ 'round'	/khwɛt/	—, /kwɛt/
5 /khǎaw/ 'green'	/lǐw/	/pýy/, /pýy/, /pítpǐi/
6 /lɛɛw/ 'smashed'	/lét/	—, /lɛɛw fɛʔ lɛɛw fɛn/. /pǎlɛmtɛmtɛɛ/
7 /wɛɛt/ 'crowded'	/tǎlǔm/	—
8 /tǎm/ 'short, low'	/mótktót/	/ʔótktót/, /ʔaʔtʔaʔ/
9 /cɛɛŋ/ 'light, bright'	/sɛɛlɛɛ/	/phɛɛlɛɛ/, /sǎlɛʔsǎlɛɛ/
10 /sũuŋ/ 'tall'	/kɔŋdɔŋ/	—
11 /mũm/ 'blunt'	/muʔhuʔ/	/muʔkuʔ/
12 /mýyt/ 'dark'	/typtýy/	/týptýy/, /týʔtýy/
13 /ŋaam/ 'beautiful'	/phǐlǐi/	—, /phǐlǐi/
14 /dɛɛŋ/ 'red'	/pýŋlýŋ/	—, /pǎlýŋ/
15 /lýaŋ/ 'yellow'	/ʔýaʔtýaʔ/	/ʔýaʔcýaʔ/, /ʔɛɛmsɛɛm/
16 /lýk/ 'deep'	/ciwwiw/	—, /cǐwwǐw/
17 /dam/ 'black'	/pýtpýy/	—, /khǎlýʔtýʔ/
18 /phɔɔm/ 'thin'	/kɔŋdɔŋ/	—
19 /suk/ 'ripe'	/tǐaʔtǐaʔ/	none found
20 /hǎak/ 'to vomit'	/lótʔlótʔ/	—, /lótʔlótʔ/
21 /sǎn/ 'short'	/pukluk/	—, /ʔuttut/, /ʔottót/, /mítktít/
22 /lýam/ 'shiny'	/lýammeʔlýammeʔ/	—, /mɛ́pmɛ́p/, /mǐpmǐp/, /mǐpmǐpmɛ́pmɛ́p/
23 /khǎaw/ 'white'	not listed	/cwɔʔ/, /swɔʔcwɔʔ/
24 /mɛ́n/ 'smelly'	not listed	/týŋ/, /týŋ/
25 /tũj/ 'fat'	not listed	/ʔótktót/, /ʔúttút/, /ʔýŋpýŋ/
26 /ʔɔɔn/ 'weak'	not listed	/mǐaʔmǐaʔ/, /ʔǎlúptúptáap/ /ʔǎlúppúppáap/, /pǎlɛmtɛmtɛɛ/

are extremely rare. Purnell further subclassifies the two-syllable intensifiers, the largest group, into subgroups depending on whether they are continuous, where the two syllables are repeated in sequence, or discontinuous, where the two syllables are separated by the adjective. There are many instances of continuous two-syllable intensifiers (e.g. #9 /sɛ̌ɛlɛ̌ɛ/) but much fewer of the discontinuous type (e.g. #22 /lɿ̌am mɛ? lɿ̌am mɛp/). No regularity seems to emerge which would govern the relationship between the adjective and the number of syllables its corresponding intensifier contains. Example #6 refutes any claim that the number of syllables in the intensifier is predictable from either the structure or meaning of the adjective, because the adjective /lɛ̌w/ 'smashed' is modified by a one-syllable intensifier /lɛ̌t/, a discontinuous two-syllable intensifier /lɛ̌w fɛ? lɛ̌w fɛn/, and a four-syllable intensifier /pàlɛ̌mtɛ̌mtɛ̌s/.

For a linguist who is interested in discovering patterns of rule-governed behaviour in human language, it is frustrating to work with a corpus such as this, in which often no neat regularities nor useful generalisations arise. One might even be tempted to paraphrase Sapir by stating in exasperation that "all languages leak". Despite the fact that intensifiers vary greatly in their structure and usage and are an unusually creative and dynamic part of the language, regularities can be noted and recorded. These regularities are listed as informal observations in this paper because the corpus is not large enough to justify a more formal presentation in terms of rules. Furthermore, such a presentation would necessarily be based on a detailed phonology of Northern Thai. Until a more ambitious study such as the latter is undertaken, any formal analysis of restricted intensifiers in terms of rules and phonological features would be *ad hoc* and unsatisfactory.

PHONOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

The first question that naturally arises concerns a possible relationship between the phonological configuration of the adjective and that of the intensifier which modifies it. We have already seen that it is impossible to predict the number of syllables in the intensifier from the structure or meaning of the adjective; however, is it possible to work backwards and discover any regularity in the phonological pattern of the adjectives from the phonological pattern of the intensifiers? At least one such regularity is apparent. One-syllable intensifiers (see #1-6, and #23,24) are found with adjectives which contain long vowels and end with either a sonorant or zero. Adjectives /mon/ 'round' (#4) and /men/ 'smelly' (#24) are exceptions because they both contain short

vowels. With the exception of intensifier /lɪw/ (#5 which, incidentally, was listed in the language text but not confirmed by any of the informants), all one-syllable intensifiers contain short vowels and end with stops. According to traditional Thai terminology, this canonical pattern (i.e. short vowel plus final stop) is called a "dead syllable" [คําตาย]. Contrast this type with the pattern just described in the adjectives which are "live syllables" [คําเป็น] (i.e. long vowel plus sonorant or zero). It appears then that one of the characteristics that typifies the use of one-syllable restricted intensifiers in Northern Thai is dissimilation of syllable patterns, a "live syllable" adjective is contrasted with a "dead syllable" intensifier.¹

Adjective	Intensifier
"live syllable"	"dead syllable"
/CVV { \emptyset sonorant }/	/CVC/

One more point should be added concerning the patterning of four-syllable intensifiers. They seem to follow a definite rhythmic pattern of three short-vowel syllables followed by a long-vowel syllable. In addition, the first syllable is always low tone and unstressed.

- (#6) /pàlěmtěmtěɛ/
 (#26) /ʔàlúptúptâap/
 /ʔàlùppùppàap/
 /palěmtěmtěɛ/

Intensifier (#22) /mípmpípměpmép/ is not considered to be a four-syllable intensifier but a repetition of one two-syllable intensifier.

Looking at the distribution of tones among the intensifiers listed in the corpus, it is interesting to see that of the six Northern Thai tones (the five found in Standard Thai plus /~/), all except the mid tone are represented. Intensifier (#16) does have mid tone, /ciwwiw/, as an alternate along with rising tone, /cɪwwǐw/, but this is the only exception. Considering the rarity of mid tone in contrast to the frequent use of the other five tones in the intensifiers, it might be hypothesised that since intensification is a grammatical symbol of exaggeration or magnification, the speaker would tend to resort to the marked tones

¹Another way of stating this is to view these syllable shapes in terms of William J. Gedney's tone boxes, where the adjectives are found in columns A, B, and C and the one-syllable intensifiers are found only in column D. The tone-syllable schema proposed by Dr Gedney in 'Future directions in comparative Tai linguistics' would be germane to any historical investigation of restricted intensifiers in Thai.

rather than the mid tone which, it is assumed, would be the unmarked tone in a detailed phonological description of Northern Thai. This transition from unmarked to marked pitch in phonology, used to reflect a parallel transition from "normal" to "exaggerated" speech in discourse, is of universal importance and is found in emphatic stress in Standard Thai (e.g. /kháw wīŋ réw rew/ 'He runs extremely fast.') as well as in contrastive stress in English (e.g. 'I said he entered a SEMINARY, not a cemetery!').

If we allow the concept of marked v. unmarked phonological features to be extended to an examination of vowel distribution in Northern Thai intensifiers, we can again observe that there is a preference for marked forms when intensifiers are employed. If we take the following tentative classification to be a distinctive feature analysis of vowel height in Northern Thai, we can see that the mid vowels are designated by both -High and -Low, that is, in terms of distinctive features, they are unmarked for height.

Vowel Height	Features	Vowels		
High	+High -Low	ii i	yy y	uu u
Mid	-High -Low	ee e	əə ə	oo o
Low	-High +Low	ɛɛ ɛ	aa a	ɔɔ ɔ

Now let us turn to the distribution of vowel sounds in the intensifiers as they are shown in Table II (next page). The bracketed vowels are not found in any of the intensifiers listed in the corpus, whereas the unbracketed vowels are. Observe that the mid vowels, unmarked for height in terms of distinctive features, are not used in intensifiers in Northern Thai, although the mid vowel /o/ is a stubborn example of the persistent exceptions which seem to pervade the data. It occurs in examples #10 and #20. From the evidence presented in Table II we can generalise again and claim that the lack of mid vowels, the ones unmarked in the phonological analysis suggested, is congruent with the general tendency for the language to use marked phonological features in "exaggerated" forms such as restricted intensifiers. Just as there is a tendency to avoid using the unmarked tone in intensification, there is a similar tendency to avoid vowels unmarked for height. We must be careful to remember the earlier warning against making generalisations without the foundations of a formal phonological analysis of Northern Thai. Until an adequate distinctive feature analysis is written for the entire phonology of the language, it is premature to accept the preceding

argument for markedness too enthusiastically. At the same time, it is hoped that when the foundations have been laid, the hypothesis proposed here that markedness is an important phonological feature of intensification and, perhaps, of all forms of emphatic or exaggerated speech, will be confirmed. In addition, rules can be proposed to account for such curious phenomena as the absence of long back vowels in the corpus and the scarcity of diphthongs.

Table II

THE DISTRIBUTION OF VOWEL SOUNDS IN NORTHERN THAI INTENSIFIERS
(bracketed vowels are not found in the data)

	<i>Front</i>		<i>Central</i>		<i>Back</i>	
	long	short	long	short	long	short
<i>High</i>	ii	i	yy	y	uu	u
<i>Mid</i>	ee	e	əə	ə	oo	o
<i>Low</i>			aa	a	ɔɔ	ɔ

A closing comment about vowel distribution concerns vowel length. Comparing the two intensifiers listed for example #13, /phĩilĩi/ and /phĩlĩi/, we can note that long vowels can be shortened in unstressed syllables, a phenomenon which is well-documented elsewhere in the vowel system of the Thai language.

Looking at the distribution of consonant sounds, no clear patterns or generalisations are apparent. Unlike the vowels, there seem to be very few gaps in the consonant sounds represented. Those that exist tend to reflect the consonant structure of Northern Thai as compared with Standard Thai (e.g. there is no /r/ in Northern Thai; "low class consonant" stops in Standard Thai [w, ɲ, ɳ, ʄ, etc.] are unaspirated). There does not appear to be any correlation between the initial and final in the adjective and the corresponding consonants in the intensifiers. It might be added in retrospect that no such correspondence held between the vowels of the adjective and the intensifier either.

Turning to the syllable structure, it is slightly easier to find some patterns emerging. Besides the contrast between "live" and "dead" syllables illustrated previously with the adjectives and their corresponding one-syllable intensifiers, there is an obvious pattern to the two-syllable intensifiers. We find a strong tendency for the two syllables in the intensifiers to match in tone, vowel, and final. This matching

provides the distinctive rhyming pattern that is one of the major characteristics of intensifiers in Thai and accounts for their unique and somewhat whimsical nature. This pattern of rhyming syllables is an important characteristic of "itsy-bitsy" words in English as well (cf. "teensy-weensy", "topsy-turvy", "hunky-dory").

SYNTACTIC OBSERVATIONS

We can dispense with the syntactic level of analysis rather quickly, simply because there are few observations worth making. Intensifiers can only be used with the corresponding adjective, and thus would be accounted for by a lexical insertion rule in a generative grammar of Northern Thai, but one informant did suggest that occasionally, an intensifier was used without the adjective (e.g. /dɔ̀k phĩĩĩ/ 'The flower's very beautiful.').

Recalling that intensifiers were defined as modifiers of general adjectives, it is interesting to point out that intensifiers (#3) and (#20) are used to modify verbs (note the English gloss 'TO disappear' and 'TO vomit'). It would be of interest to discover if other Thai dialects ever use intensifiers with verbs and also to determine whether this is a relatively recent grammatical innovation. If it is, intensification is an active and dynamic feature of Northern Thai. This would be in contrast to the unanimous feeling voiced by the three informants that Northern Thai intensifiers are being rapidly lost or displaced by Standard Thai words. Whereas it is probably true that the northern dialect is being gradually displaced by the standard language because of increased communication, standardised education, and socio-economic assimilation, it does not necessarily imply that Northern Thai is becoming fossilised or lacking in innovation.

SEMANTIC OBSERVATIONS

More interesting considerations crop up when we turn to a discussion of the semantics of Northern Thai intensifiers, for intensifiers not only intensify the meaning of the adjective as their name implies, but they can also serve to sharpen and narrow the original meaning of the adjective head.

First of all, intensifiers are used simply to expand and strengthen the meaning of the adjective. For example, according to the informants, there is a successive increase in darkness in the usage of the three phrases listed below.

Adjective used alone

/mâyɥt/ 'dark'

Adjective used with unrestricted intensifier

/mâyɥt nák/ 'very dark'

Adjective used with restricted intensifier

/mâyɥt týptýy/ 'extremely dark', 'pitch black'

This usage which increases or intensifies the original meaning of the adjective is probably the most common manner in which restricted intensifiers are employed in Northern Thai.

A second way in which they are used, however, is to modify the degree of intensity for the meaning of the adjective. This is done when there are two restricted intensifiers: one which denotes a slight degree of intensity, and another which denotes a larger degree. Compare the use of intensifiers with example #20, which the informants claimed reflect different degrees of magnitude for the original meaning of the unmodified word.

/pên háak/ 'He vomited.'

/pên háak lǎʔ lǎʔ/ 'He threw up a little.'

/pên háak lǎʔ lǎʔ/ 'He threw up all over the place.'

A third way in which intensifiers are used is to sharpen or focus the broader meaning of the adjective. There are many examples of this, and some disagreement among the informants over the exact usage of these words, but this is only to be expected when dealing with such a creative and capricious aspect of the language. An example that comes immediately to mind are the intensifiers listed for (#25). When used alone, /tǔj/ simply means 'fat'; when it is modified by /púttút/ it means 'very short and fat' like a small chubby child; and when it is modified by /ʔýŋypýŋ/ it means 'extremely fat' like a fat man at a carnival. Another example of how different intensifiers can reflect different shades of meaning is illustrated by item (#17). The intensifier /pýtpýy/ has a neutral meaning and merely intensifies the meaning of black so that /dam pýtpýy/ means 'extremely black'. As such, the phrase could be used to describe a handsome person who happened to have a very dark complexion. On the other hand, the expression /dam khàlǎʔtýʔ/ not only implies 'extremely black' but also 'very ugly'. It would never be used in place of the example just cited above, but would be more appropriate in describing the swarthiness of a monster like King Kong.

ETYMOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

One of the interesting aspects of restricted intensifiers that has not yet been investigated is the question of where they come from and how they arose in the colloquial language. When presented with this question, the informants and other Chiangmai residents either begged ignorance or answered that these words were playfully invented to decorate the language. Most of them insisted with some conviction that the intensifiers in themselves had no meaning nor were they derived from archaic words. Given this sentiment and the danger of speculating about the origins of words used in colloquial speech where it is impossible to resort to written, dated records, it is fruitless to pursue the etymology of these interesting words too deeply. However, a few speculations are offered in the belief that honest curiosity is better than academic indifference and that even a folk etymology is better than no etymology at all.

After persistent inquiry, one informant offered a plausible explanation for the etymology of three intensifiers. He suggested that the second syllable for the intensifier /ʔāaʔtāaʔ/ of (#8) /tām/ 'short, low' came from the word /tāaʔ/ 'to be short in stature'. Similarly, he suggested that /ʔŋpŋʔ/, one of the intensifiers for (#25) /tūj/ 'fat', is an expansion of the verb /pŋ/ 'to inflate' and conveys the idea of 'overinflated' when used to modify 'fat'. He also thought that the word listed in Furnell and Hope 1962 as the intensifier in #19, /suk tīaʔtīaʔ/ 'extremely ripe', came from the word /tīaʔ/ which means 'over-ripe' in Northern Thai and was not really an authentic intensifier. In fact, as can be seen from Table I, none of the informants accepted /tīaʔtīaʔ/ as a legitimate intensifier. These explanations appear similar to the ones often suggested for the "itsy-bitsy words" in English (e.g. 'itsy-bitsy' is an expansion of 'bit', 'teensy-weensy' is an expansion of 'tiny', and 'topsy-turvy' is an expansion of 'top'). Other intensifiers in the corpus lend themselves to this type of explanation. For example, it is quite possible that the first syllable of /tŋptŋʔ/, the intensifier for (#12) /mŋyt/ 'dark', is derived from the Northern Thai word /tŋp/ 'dense, opaque'.

A more speculative etymology can be proposed for the intensifiers of (#23) /khāaw/ 'white'. The word /cwśʔ/, or its two-syllable expansion /swśʔcwśʔ/, might be a corruption of the Teochiu Chinese word for 'paper' /cūa/; /khāaw cwśʔ/ 'white as a sheet of paper'. A final speculation concerns the words /lśʔlśʔ/ and /lśʔlśʔ/, the intensifiers for (#20) /hāak/ 'to vomit'. One possibility is they are an alternate pronunciation of the Thai word /lśʔ/ 'to be splattered'. Another possibility is they are related to the Chinese loan word /lśʔ/ 'to discard'.

Despite the evidence that some intensifiers are derived or expanded from real words in Thai or Chinese, the majority appear to be nonsensical phonological creations. The frequency of rhyming syllables, the lack of phonological consistency, coupled with the belief expressed by native speakers that these words are meaningless syllables in themselves, all tend to support the notion that they are a creative adjunct to the basic lexical structure of the language. Purnell (1965:17) has suggested that some sounds used in intensifiers tend to be associated with certain general meanings. For example, he suggests that /ɔ, ɛ, i/ tend to be used with a diminutive meaning. This suggestion is intriguing when compared to a comment about English made by Langacker (1968:27) that "the sound /i/ gives the impression of rapidity or insignificance". Such a claim about sound symbolism is difficult to substantiate, but has interested linguists like Humboldt, Firth, and Householder over a span of years.

CONCLUSION

Intensifiers may be semantically nothing more than noisy gongs and tinkling cymbals, but they are a virtual musical overlay to the Northern vernacular, and the language would be something less without them. This paper has presented a few comments concerning the use of these colourful words; however, these observations are related to questions of general interest concerning the phonology, structure, and semantics of the Northern dialect of Thai, and of the Thai language as a whole. Hopefully, these questions will be pursued in the future by other investigators. And if the legacy remains undiminished, among them, no doubt, will be found Dr Gedney's students, and, in turn, his students' students.

