

A Verb-Subject Construction in Thai:

An Analysis of the Existential Verb "mii"

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0. Introduction ¹

In this paper I provide an analysis of the postverbal subject in Thai. Thai is described as a SVO language by Hawkins (1983) and by Thai grammarians Surinramont (1979), Sripen (1972), Warotamasikkhadit (1972), Kullavanija (1968) and in Thai traditional grammar books. However, these analyses seem to be problematic due to the peculiar characteristics of such verbs as **mii** 'exist', **KEET** 'occur', **duumlan** 'seem', **praakot** 'appear' as well as some verb-like adjectives, which do not require any element or unit at all in the position right before them in a declarative sentence. These particular verbs have been analysed as taking a nonovert subject or a deleted subject. This phenomenon raises the following questions: Do these verbs and some verb-like adjectives require subjects? If so, where are they located? If not, what types of verbs are they? Are some Thai sentences subjectless when spoken or written in isolation?

To argue that there is a verb-subject construction in Thai, I show in sentences spoken in isolation occurrences of the existential verb **mii**. In this analysis, I first present the forms of subjects and objects of intransitive and transitive verbs, including an element or a unit in the postposition of the verb under investigation. I argue that the **mii**-construction is a sentence, not a verb phrase. Then I argue that the element following the verb **mii** 'exist' is a subject, not an object, of this verb. Based on this investigation I propose that there are two subject types in Thai: preverbal (subject-verb construction) and postverbal (verb-subject construction).

I divide the paper into four sections. Section 1: The Notion "Subject"; Section 2: Background of the Thai Language: the points relevant to this particular analysis; Section 3: The Analysis; and Section 4: Conclusion.

1.0. The Notion "Subject"

To define the term "subject" for my analysis, I follow Keenan's (1976) properties of a basic subject of a basic sentence.

Keenan lists thirty properties which subjects characteristically possess and three types of characteristic subjects. The properties may be pragmatic, semantic or syntactic. He presents four major categories of basic subject properties: (1) autonomy, which includes independent existence, indispensability and autonomous reference; (2) case-marking; (3) semantic role; and (4) immediate dominance. He divides the characteristics of subject into three types: coding properties, behavior properties, and semantic properties. He postulates that certain subject properties are more difficult for derived subjects to acquire than others and further hypothesizes a Promotion Hierarchy, claiming that coding properties are the most easily transferred, while the semantic ones are the most difficult to acquire.

Despite the availability of a number of properties, not all can be taken as valid tests for determining the grammatical relation of a postposition of the verb *mii*. One reason is that Thai is a non-inflectional language; there are no case markers for subjects and objects; nor is there any agreement between a verb and a subject, or between a verb and an object. Secondly, both subject and object in Thai share several properties. For instance, both can be deleted or omitted, topicalized, questioned, relativized, as well as being a possible controller of stipulated coreference. The only properties left to be employed as valid tests to find the exact status of the postposition of the existential verb *mii* are imperativization, passivization and VP topicalization.

I focus in this paper the type of subject which Keenan describes as a basic subject, not a derived one.

2.0. Background of the Language

In Thai, the verb form does not agree with its subject or object in person, number and gender; nor does it change according to the tense and time of an event or an action. (1a) and (1b) show that the verb *thamnaan* 'work' is invariant regardless of the particular personal pronoun and the temporal expression. Although the verb is uninflected, it is accompanied by adverbs which indicate the time.

(1)

- a. s[khaw thamnaan thukwan/ mIawaannii
 he/she work everyday yesterday
 they (m/f)
 "He/she/they (m/f) work(s) everyday" or
 "He/she/they (m/f) worked yesterday"
- b. s[can/ raw/ khun thamnaan thukwan/ mIawannii
 I we you work everyday yesterday
 "I/we/you work everyday" or
 "I/we/you will work yesterday "

The evidence above thus shows that properties of subjecthood or inflection marking the subject are not reflected in the verbal morphology.

(2) shows that there is no agreement between a verb and an object in Thai.

- (2) s[can rak maxx/ phOOmaxx/ khaw]
 I love mother parents he/she/they (m/f)
 "I love mother /parents/ her/ him/ them(m/f)"

Subjects and objects in almost all sentences spoken in isolation in Thai are indicated by position. That is, a subject occurs before a verb, while an object immediately after verb and a prepositional object after a preposition.

3.0. The Analysis

To argue that there is a VS construction in Thai, I divide this section into three: 3.1. illustrates forms of a subject, an object and an element in the postposition of the verb *mii*. In 3.2. I argue for the sentencehood of the *mii* construction. Based on the argument in 3.2., I further argue in 3.3. that an element in the postposition of the verb *mii* is a subject, not a direct object, of this verb.

3.1. The Forms of Subject and Object in Thai

This section shows that NP, S and S' all function as both subjects and objects in intransitive-verb (INTV) and transitive-verb (TV) sentences. It also presents their occurrences as the postposition of the *mii* construction. In this analysis I focus on TV, INTV and the *mii* construction.

3.1.1. NP

Sentences (3a-b) show that NP *phaayu rxn* 'strong storm' functions as a subject of INTV *kEEtkhIn* 'occur' and TV *thamlaai* 'destroy', respectively.

(3)

- a. s[np[phaayu rxn] kEEtkhIn bOybOy]
 storm strong occur often
 "A strong storm often occurs"
- b. s[np[phaayu rxn] thamlaai muubaan]
 storm strong destroy village
 "A strong storm destroyed a village"

Sentence (3c) shows that the verb **mii** takes NP **phaayu rxn** in the object position only.

- c. [mii np[phaayu rxn]]
 exist storm strong
 "There is a strong storm"
 *[np[phaayu rxn] mii]]
 *[np[phaayu] mii rxn]

Comparing (3c) with (3d), we see that both the existential verb **mii** and TV **kliat** 'hate' have NP **phaayu rxn** in the object position. This NP is the object of the TV **kliat** sentence (3d).

- d. s[np[can] kliat np[phaayu rxn]]
 I hate storm strong
 "I hate a strong storm"

3.1.2. Complementized Sentence (S')

Complementizers usually used in Thai are **kaanthii** and **thii**. Some verbs take both, while others allow one of them. This is due to certain characteristics of certain verbs. Sentences (4a-b) show occurrences of S' as a subject of INTV **kEEtkhIn** 'occur' and TV **thamhai** 'cause/make', respectively.

(4)

- a. s[s'[kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]] kEEtkhIn bOybOy]
 comp storm blow strong occur often
 "That storms blow strongly often occurs"
- b. s[s'[kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]] thamhai
 comp storm blow strong cause
 s[can klua]]
 I scare
 "That the storm blows strongly makes me scared (or scares me)"

(4c) and (4d) show occurrences of S' in the object position of the TV **hen** 'see' sentence and the **mii** construction, respectively.

c. s[can hen PAUSE s'[thii/*kaanthii s[phaayu
 I see PAUSE comp storm
 phat rxn]]
 blow strong

"I saw that the storm blew strongly"

d. [mii PAUSE s'[thii/kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]]]
 exist PAUSE comp storm blow strong
 "That a storm blows strongly exists"

Similar to TV hen, the verb **mii** takes S' with comp **thii**, and a pause between S' and **mii** itself. In contrast to TV hen, this verb also takes S' with comp **kaanthii** right after it.

3.1.3. Sentence (S)

Sentences (5a-b) show that S functions as a subject of INTV **kEEtkhIn** 'occur' and TV **thamlaai** 'destroy', respectively.

(5)

- a. s[s[phaayu phat rxn] kEEtkhIn bOyboY]
 storm blow strong occur often
 "(That) storms blow strongly often occurs"
- b. s[s[phaayu phat rxn] thamphai s[can klua]]
 storm blow strong cause I scare
 "(That) storms blow strongly scares me"

Like TV hen 'see' in (5c), the verb **mii** takes S in the object position, as shown in (5d).

- c. s[can hen s[phaayu phat rxn]]
 I see storm blow strong
 "I saw the storm blow strongly"
- d. [mii s[phaayu phat rxn]]
 exist storm blow strong
 "There is a storm (that) blows strongly"

To sum up, NP, S and S' occur in the postposition of the **mii** construction. Such elements occur as subjects of both INTV and TV as well as objects of TV. The verb **mii** allows comps **thii** and **kaanthii** in S' which follows it. However, only S' with comp **thii**, not **kaanthii**, is taken by TV hen 'see' as its object. The selection of comp(s) thus depends on certain characteristics of certain verbs.

3.2. Sentencehood of the Mii Construction

In Thai all verbs and verb phrases except the copula **khii** 'be' can be nominalized, hence becoming verbal nouns. All sentences can be complementized, hence

becoming S'. The nominalization morpheme (Nom) for verbs is **kaan**, and the complementization morphemes (Comps) for sentences are **kaanthii** and **thii**. To argue that the **mii** construction is a sentence, I illustrate nominalization of INTV, TV and the verb **mii** in 3.2.1., complementization of S and the **mii** construction in 3.2.2. and imperativization in 3.2.3.

3.2.1. Nominalization

Illustrated in (6a) and (6b) is nominalization of intransitive and transitive verb phrases in Thai, respectively, yielding verbal noun phrases.

(6)

- a. **kaan** + intvp[**kEetkhIn** **bOyboY**] -->
 Nom occur often
 np[**kaan kEetkhIn bOyboY**] "Occuring often"
- b. **kaan** + tvp[**thamlaai** **muubaan**] -->
 Nom destroy village
 np[**kaan thamlaai muubaan**] "Destroying a village"

Sentences (7a-b) show that Nom **kaan** does not take S.

- (7)a. *[**kaan** s[**phaayu** **phat** **rxn**]]
 Nom storm blow strong
- b. *[**kaan** s[**phaayu** **thamlaai** **muubaan**]]
 Nom storm destroy village

(7c) shows that **kaan** preceding the **mii** construction is only mildly better.

- c. ?[**kaan** [**mii** **phaayu** **rxn**]]
 Nom exist storm strong

To produce grammatical strings for (7), thus having S' as a result, either Comp **kaanthii** or Comp **thii** must precede sentences (7a-b) and the **mii** construction in (7c). This is illustrated in the following subsection.

3.2.2. Complementization

In this subsection I illustrate the complementization of INTV and TV sentences as well as the **mii** construction, all of which function as subjects of nonlocative copula **pen** sentences. The complementization of INTV and TV sentences is illustrated in (8a) and (8b), respectively, and that of the **mii** construction in (8c).

(8)

- a. s[s'[kaanthii/thii s[phaayu phat rxn]] pen
 comp storm blow strong be
 rIan naakllua]
 matter scary

"That a storm blows strongly is a scary matter (or is scary)"

- b. s[s'[kaanthii/thii s[phaayu rxn thamlaai
 comp storm strong destroy
 muubaan]] pen rIan naaklua]
 village be matter scary

"That a strong storm destroyed a village is a scary matter (or is scary)"

- c. s[s'[kaanthii/thii [mii phaayu rxn]] pen
 comp exist storm strong be
 rIan thammadaa]
 matter normal

"That there is a strong storm is a normal matter (or is normal)"

(9a) and (9b) show that Comps kaanthii and thii cannot precede either an INTV phrase or a TV phrase.

(9)

- a. *s[s'[kaanthii/thii vp[phat rxn] pen
 comp blow strong be
 rIan naaklua]
 matter scary
- b. *s[s'[kaanthii/thii vp[thamlaai muubaan]]
 comp destroy village
 pen rIan naaklua]
 be matter scary

The evidence above shows that the mii 'exist' construction behaves like a sentence in that it does occur grammatically after Comps kaanthii and thii.

From 3.2.1. and 3.2.2. it should be concluded (1) that Nom kaan takes only TV and INTV phrases to form verbal noun phrases. However, for kaan to take the mii construction is questionable; (2) that Comps kaanthii and thii take TV and INTV sentences as well as the mii construction, but not verb phrases, to form complementized sentences.

3.2.3. Imperativization

This subsection illustrates the imperative construction in Thai to show that an element or a unit immediately following the existential verb mii behaves like a subject of S, which can be given an order or a command. Like other languages, only a subject, not an

object, in Thai functions as an addressee and therefore can undergo imperativization. There are two types of imperative: vocative when an addressee is named, and nonvocative when an addressee is omitted as understood.

An order or a command is given to the second person, both singular and plural, which includes human beings, animals and the nature such as the sky, the wind, etc. A number of Thais in the past generations as well as old people in the present generation have believed in supernatural power. Such beliefs have been expressed in folklores and literature work. In case that an addressee is nonhuman, the vocative imperative is generally used.

Imperatives in Thai are expressed in the following pattern.

- (10) (Addressee given an order < PAUSE) <
 (Imperative morpheme jon) < VP < (Imperative morpheme na)

(10) states that VP is obligatory in vocative and nonvocative imperatives. There are two optional imperative morphemes denoting emphasis: preverbal jon and postverbal na. In a vocative imperative, an addressee given an order is obligatory, and it must be followed by a pause and a VP, respectively.

Shown in (11a) is an indicative S, and in (11b) a nonvocative imperative derived from sentence (11a). Here the addressee Dang is understood.

(11)

- a. s[dxn yuu nai baan]
 Dang be[Loc] in house

"Dang is in the house"

- b. [yuu nai baan na]
 be[Loc] in house Imp

"Be (stay) in the house"

(11c) is a vocative imperative derived from (11a).

- c. s[dxn PAUSE vp[jon yuu nai baan na]]
 Dang PAUSE Imp be[Loc] in house Imp
 "Dang, PAUSE stay home!"

In case a person who gives an order has power over the nature, the latter is an addressee. Shown in (12a) is an indicative S, and (12b) its vocative imperativization, in which the subject NP phaayu is an addressee. Without a pause after an addressee in a vocative imperative, the output is ungrammatical.

(12)

- a. s[phaayu thamlaai muubaaan nii thawnan]
 storm destroy village this only
 "The storm destroyed only this house"
- b. s[phaayu PAUSE vp[jon thamlaai muubaaan nii]
 storm PAUSE Imp destroy village this
 "Storm, PAUSE destroy only this village!"
 */?? s[phaau jon thamlaai muubaaan nii thawnan na]

(12c) is the output of a nonvocative imperativization of (12a). Here the addressee **phaayu** is understood.

- c. [thamlaai muubaaan nii thawnan na]
 destroy village this only Imp
 "Destroy only this village!"

(12d) shows that the vocative NP **muubaaan nii** 'this village' and the subject NP **phaayu** cannot cooccur. Recall that only a subject, not an object, has a vocative possibility.

- d. *s[muubaaan nii PAUSE phaayu jon thamlaai na]
 village this PAUSE storm Imp destroy Imp
 "This village, storm destroy!"

Now compare a nonvocative imperative (12c) with the indicative **mii** construction in (12e). Here we see that the behaviour of the **mii** construction is different from that of the INTVP and TVP. While the former cannot express the imperative meaning, the latter can.

(12e) shows that the **mii** construction is an indicative, not an imperative. Hence it cannot yield the imperative meaning.

(12)

- e. [mii phaayu nai thaleesaai nii thawnan]
 exist storm in desert this only
 "There is a storm in this desert only " Or
 "A storm exists in this desert only"
 *"Storm, exist in this desert only!"

Based on the analysis in 3.2., I propose that the existential **mii** construction is a sentence, not a VP. And according to this proposal, we can take one of the two positions: (1) NP, S and S' which occur right after the verb **mii** are objects of this verb since they occur in the object position, in which all direct objects of TV occur. The second position supports the idea that S must have a subject of two types: preverbal and postverbal. Given in the following section is my argument that NP, S

and S' which occur after the verb **mii** is a subject, not the object, of this verb.

3.3. Subjecthood of Element After Existential Verb **mii**

To argue that an element in the postposition of the verb **mii** is a subject, not an object, of this verb, I provide three tests: passivization in 3.3.1.; imperativization in 3.3.2. and topicalization of VP in 3.3.3., respectively.

3.3.1. Passivization

Like other languages, in Thai only a transitive S, not an intransitive one, can undergo passivization. The passive construction in this language is shown in (13).

- (13) Given a simple transitive [NP 1 TV NP2 X]
the corresponding passive is [NP2 Passive morpheme
thuuk/ doon (NP1) TV X]

(14-16) illustrate passivization of the TV, INTV and **mii** sentences. (14b) is passivized from a TV sentence (14a).

(14)

- a. s[phaayu thamlaai np[muubaaan nii]]
storm destroy village this
"A storm destroyed this village"
b. s[np[muubaaan nii] thuuk phaayu thamlaai]
village this passive storm destroy
"This village was destroyed by a storm"

(14c) is ruled out because it does not respect the passive construction in (13); **phaayu** 'storm', as NP1, cannot occur right before the passive morpheme **thuuk**.

- c. *s[np[phaayu] thuuk thamlaai np[muubaaan nii]]
storm passive destroy village this

Sentence (15b) shows that the INTV **yim** 'smile' S cannot be passivized from sentence (15a).

(15)

- a. s[can yim]
I smile
"I smiled"
b. *s[np[can] thuuk yim]
I passive smile

Like an INTV sentence, the **mii** sentence cannot be passivized either, as shown in (16b).

(16)

- a. s[mii np[phaayu] thiinii]
 exist storm here
 "There exists a storm here"
- b. *s[np[phaayu] thuuk mii thiinii]
 storm passive exist here

The evidence shows that the *mii* S acts like an intransitive S, not a transitive one. Like the NP subject can 'I' in (15), the NP *phaayu* 'storm' in the object position of the verb *mii* in (16) can never occur right before the passive morpheme *thuuk*. Thus we see that an element in the object position of the verb *mii* behaves exactly like subjects of INTV and TV sentences, not an object of a TV sentence.

3.3.2. Imperativization

In addition to the use of the imperative structure which argues that the *mii* construction is S, not a VP, I continue to use the same structure to show that elements, especially NP, which occur postverbally are subjects, not objects, of this existential verb.

(17)

- a. s[mii phaayu nai thaleesaai nii thawnan]
 exist storm in desert this only

"A storm exists in this desert only"

(17b) shows the vocative property of an element following the verb *mii*. In a vocative imperative, the NP *phaayu* occurs sentence-initially, and it is followed by a pause.

- b. s[np[phaayu] PAUSE mii nai thaleesaai nii
 storm PAUSE exist in desert this
 thawnan na]
 only Imp

"Storm, PAUSE exist in this desert only!"

But in a nonvocative imperative, the NP *phaayu*, as the understood addressee, does not occur in the S, as shown in (17c).

- c. [mii nai thaleesaai nii thawnan na]
 exist in desert this only Imp
 "Exist in this desert only!"

Since only the subject has the vocative property as stated before, (17b-c) clearly show that an NP following the verb *mii* is a subject, not a direct object of this verb.

3.3.3. Topicalization of VP

In this subsection I illustrate the topicalization of a VP constituent in Thai to argue for the subjecthood of an element in the postposition of the verb *mi*. When both VP and its subject are emphasized, VP can be topicalized, yielding a VP-subject construction. However this process is optional; this means that S with the emphasized subject and emphasized VP can remain in the subject-VP construction. The emphasized subject appears either as a subject followed by the emphasis morpheme *na* or as a subject followed by definite words. To say that a VP is emphasized means that either a VP is modified by an adverb of intensification, or an adverb under a VP is modified by a degree, or a quantifier is modified by degree. The VP topicalization rule is given in (18).

(18) VP Topicalization

Given [Subject[+Emp], VP[+Emp]], the corresponding VP topicalization is
[VP[+Emp] < subject[+Emp]]

(18) states that the emphasized VP precedes the emphasized subject.

(19a) shows S in which neither a subject nor a VP is emphasized. An emphasized subject is illustrated in (19b), and an emphasized VP in (19c), respectively.

- (19)
- a. s[np[nakrian] vp[tham kaanbaan yaandii]]
student do homework well
"A student does homework well"
- b. s[np[nakrian khon nii] vp[tham kaanbaan
student N.cl this do homework
yaandii thiidiaw]]
well quite
"This student does homework quite well"
- c. s[vp[tham kaanbaan yaandii thiidiaw]
do homework well quite
np[nakrian khon nii]
student N.cl this
"Does homework quite well, this student"]

(19b) can be VP-topicalized, yielding the output as shown in (19c) because (1) the NP subject *nakria* 'student' is emphasized or modified by the definite morphemes *khon* + *nii* 'noun classifier + this'; and (2) adverb *yaandii* 'well' in VP is modified by the degree word *thiidiaw* 'quite'. Thus the whole VP can be topicalized, yielding the VP-subject construction.

(19d) shows that VP in (19a) cannot be topicalized

because the subject **nakrian** is not emphasized; nor is the VP or the adverb **yaandii** in the VP.

- d. *s[vp[**tham** **kaanbaan** **yaandii**] np[**nakrian**]]
do homework well student

Notice that a transitive VP cannot be topicalized without its object, as shown in (19e-f).

(19)

- e. *s[vp[**tham** **yaandii** **thiidiaw**] np[**nakrian** **khon**
do well quite student N.cl

nii np[**kaanbaan**]]
this homework

- f. *s[vp[**tham** **yaandii** **thiidiaw**] np[**kaanbaan**]
do well quite homework
np[**nakrian** **khon** **nii**]]
student N.cl this

Topicalization of the **tham** VP fails in (19e) and (19f) because its object **kaanbaan** 'homework' does not follow as part of VP in the former, and this NP object does not occur in the correct position (that is, right after TV **tham** 'do') in the latter. This phenomenon argues for the existence of a VP constituent in Thai.

(20) shows a topicalization of verb **mii**. The **mii** VP in (20a) can be topicalized, having the NP **phaayu rxn bxxp nii** 'this kind of strong storm' follow it, as shown in (20b).

(20)

- a. s[vp[**mii**] np[**phaayu** **rxn** **bxxp** **nii**]]
exist storm strong kind this
pp[pp[**nai thaleesaai**] advp[**thawnan**]]
in desert only

"This kind of strong storm exists in a desert only"

- b. s[vp[**mii** **nai thaleesaai** **nii** **thawnan**]
exust in desert this only
np[**phaayu** **rxn** **bxxp** **nii**]]
storm strong kind this

"Exists in this desert only, this kind of strong storm"

From 3.3., we see that an element following the verb **mii** does act, again, exactly in the same manner as a subject does. That is, it follows the whole VP which is topicalized, forming the VP-subject construction. From the analysis in Section 3, we can conclude that an element in the position after the existential verb **mii** is a postverbal subject, and thus there exists a VS structure in Thai.

Acknowledgement: I present my thanks and appreciation to

Ray Clines for his comments and Winai Yaowanoyothin for his kind help with the computer.

ENDNOTE

1 In my analysis, I use the symbol "I" for the central high vowel, "E" for the central mid vowel, "O" for the mid back "open /o/ vowel" and "x" for the front low vowel.

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