A Verb-Subject Construction in Thai:
An Analysis of the Existential Verb "mii"

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0. Introduction

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 Surintramont (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', keeet 'occur', duumian '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 basis 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 mxx/ phO0mxx/ 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 thamlaaai 'destroy', respectively.
(3)
a. $s[ \text{np[phaayu rxn]} \text{kEEtkhIn b0ybOy}]$
   storm strong occur often
   "A strong storm often occurs"
b. $s[ \text{np[phaayu rxn]} \text{thamlaai muubaan}]$
   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. $[\text{mii np[phaayu rxn]}]$
   exist storm strong
   "There is a strong storm"
   $*[\text{np[phaayu rxn]} \text{mii}]$
   $*[\text{np[phaayu]} \text{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. $s[\text{np[can]} \text{kliat np[phaayu rxn]}]$
   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. $s'[\text{kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]} \text{kEEtkhIn b0ybOy}]$
   comp storm blow strong occur often
   "That storms blow strongly often occurs"
b. $s'[\text{kaanthii s[phaayu phat rxn]} \text{thamhai}]$
   comp storm blow strong cause
   $s[\text{can kluaj}]$
   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 imperative 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] "Occurring often"
b. kaan + tvp[ thamlaa miuubaan] -->
   Nom destroy village
   np[ kaan thamlaa miuubaan] "Destroying a village"

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

(7a. *[kaan s[ phaayu phat rxn]]
   Nom storm blow strong
b. *[kaan s[ phaayu thamlaa miuubaan]]
   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 naaklua]
   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 muubaan nii thawnan]
   storm destroy village this only
   "The storm destroyed only this house"

b. s[ phaayu PAUSE vp[jon thamlaai muubaan nii]
   storm PAUSE Imp destroy village this
   "Storm, PAUSE destroy only this village!"
   */?? s[ phaau jon thamlaai muubaan nii thawnan na]

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

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

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

d. *s[ muubaan 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 [NP1 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).

a. s[ phaayu thamlaaı np[ muubaan nii]]
   storm destroy village this
   "A storm destroyed this village"
b. s[ np[ muubaan nii] thuuk phaayu thamlaaı]
   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 thamlaaı np[muubaan 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 thaleesaa ni thiawanan]  
    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 thaleesaa ni thiawanan na]  
    exist in desert this only  
    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 thaleesaa ni thiawanan 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 นิย. 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 นิย 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 kaanbann]
   student N.cl this do homework
   yaandii thiiidaw]
   well quite
   "This student does homework quite well"

c. s[vp[ tham kaanbaan yaandii thiiidaw]
   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 nakrian '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 thiiidaw 'quite'. Thus the whole VP can be topicalized, yielding the VP-subject construction.

(19d) shows that VP in (19a) cannot be topicalize
because the subject nakrian is not emphasized; nor is the VP or the adverb yaandii in the VP.

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

   Topicalization of the than 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 than '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 NPphaayu 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]
   exist 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.

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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.

REFERENCES


