

Negation in Thai Serial Verb Constructions: A Pragmatic Study

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INTRODUCTION

Negation has been analyzed in terms of truth-values in propositional semantics for a long time. Logicians postulated that “if a proposition is true, then the negated proposition is false.” However, Givón (1984, pp. 321–351) pointed out that negation in our natural language needs to be examined from the epistemic and cognitive viewpoints rather than the logical one, because negation is used in discourse in the context when the speaker assumes that the hearer tends to believe in the corresponding affirmative, and the negative speech act is then a denial or contradiction of that assumed belief (Givón, 1984, p. 324). Negation, therefore, is essentially placed within the domain of pragmatics, which accounts for linguistic phenomena from the user’s point of view and emphasizes the motivation of our usage of language in context.

Although a considerable number of studies have been made on serial verb constructions¹ (henceforth, SVCs) in Thai, for example, Sereechoensatit (1984), Thepkanjana (1986), and Chuwicha (1993), there is no study that is exclusively dedicated to negation in Thai SVCs. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the pragmatic constraints we encounter in negating verbs in SVCs in Thai by providing motivation for the behavior of SVCs with respect to negation. Pragmatic and cognitive concepts, such as purpose, relevance, expectation, volition, saliency, and so on, postulated by Givón (1984), form the theoretical framework of this study. The data used in this study were collected from a Thai corpus² of newspaper and magazine articles. The collected SVCs are classified into three groups, and the behavior of each pattern of SVC is then investigated. The SVC classification is based on Chuwicha (1993), who postulates 12 patterns³ of basic SVCs⁴ in Thai. Chuwicha’s SVC patterns are in turn based on the semantic properties of the kinds of verbs that appear in the first and second positions of the SVC. SVC patterns postulated by Chuwicha, which are adopted in this study, are summarized below.

¹The definition of a serial verb construction according to Chuwicha (1993) is primarily based on the surface forms of sentences. That means, if two verbs with or without direct objects occur in a row, they represent serial verb constructions.

²The data used in this study are drawn from the Thai language corpus that belongs to the Linguistics and Knowledge Science Laboratory (LINKS), National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, Thailand.

³Patterns 7, 11 and 12, which include the equative verb **pen** ‘be characterized as,’ are excluded from this study because there exists an unresolved problem concerning the idiomaticity of the verb **pen** in certain expressions.

⁴The basic SVC is SVC which is composed of only two verb phrases (Chuwicha, 1993, p. 39).

TYPES OF BASIC SVC'S CLASSIFIED BY CHUWICHA (1993)

In this section, we will have a look at Chuwicha's classification of basic SVCs in Thai. Each pattern of SVC is composed of two verb phrases (henceforth, VPs). Chuwicha (1993, pp. 51–59) classified the SVCs into 12 patterns as shown below. Each pattern is distinguished by the semantic properties of the two verbs that co-occur in the string. The semantic property of the verb is expressed below after the colon.

Pattern 1: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: non-primary action verb

Example: wĭŋ lɔp
 run avoid
 'run and avoid something or somebody at the same time'

In the first pattern of SVC, the first verb expresses a "primary action," i.e., action in which we can perceive clearly which body part is used, whereas the second verb expresses a "non-primary action," i.e., action in which we cannot perceive clearly which body part is used in carrying out the action named by the verb. Both primary and non-primary actions expressed by this pattern occur at the same place and time and are carried out by the same person. It can be concluded that this pattern expresses a single but semantically complex event which is viewed along two "dimensions." In the example above, in the first dimension the event expresses a motion which is carried out by means of two legs at a rather high speed, and in the second dimension the same event is an action of avoiding somebody or something.

Pattern 2: VP1: body posture verb + VP2: action verb

Example: nāŋ duu nǎŋsǔu
 sit look book
 'sit looking at a book'

In the second pattern, the first verb expresses a body posture, whereas the second verb expresses an action carried out by an animate being while holding the body in the posture indicated by the first verb. Like the first pattern of SVC, the event expressed by the verb in each position occurs at the same place and time.

Pattern 3: VP1: non-directional motion verb + VP2: directional motion verb

Example: wĭŋ khāw bān
 run enter house
 'run and enter a house at the same time'

This pattern expresses an event of motion that provides information of two kinds. The first kind indicated by the first verb is the means or manner of carrying out the motion. The other kind of information indicated by the second verb is the direction of the motion. In this pattern, the motion verbs in both positions semantically constitute a single path but provide different perspectives for viewing the path.

Pattern 4: VP1: action verb using a sense organ + VP2: perception verb

Example: mɔɔŋ hɛ̃n
look see
'look at something and see it'

This pattern of SVC expresses a complex event consisting of an action carried out by means of a sense organ and also a perception which is a consequence of the first action. It can be said that the events denoted by both kinds of verbs occur at the same place and time.

Pattern 5: VP1: verb expressing feeling or attitude towards an action + VP2: action, state, process verb

Example: klua hòklóm
fear fall
'be afraid to fall down'

This pattern of SVCs expresses a feeling or an attitude towards an occurrence of an event. The first verb of this pattern is semantically incomplete. It needs a complement to complete its sense. Therefore, it is called a complement-taking verb.

Pattern 6: VP1: verb expressing manner in doing an action + VP2: action verb

Example: rêŋ kɛ̀p khôm̩muun
hurry gather data
'gather data in a hurry'

This pattern expresses the carrying out of an action in a certain manner. The manner in this case is encoded as a verb occurring in the first position of the SVC. The second verb indicates an action carried out by the subject of the sentence. The verbs indicating manner are not semantically complete in themselves. Since they need verbal complements to complete their sense, they are also called complement-taking verbs.

Pattern 8: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: action verb

Example: pîŋ plaa kin
grill fish eat
'grill fish to eat'

This pattern of SVC expresses a sequence of two actions. The two transitive verbs of this pattern share the same direct object. The times of occurrence of the two actions named by the two verbs are so close to each other that we usually perceive them as one single but structurally complex event. In addition, since the two transitive verbs in this pattern are volitional verbs that denote two actions occurring consecutively, this pattern is often perceived as denoting an objective in carrying out a certain action.

Pattern 9: VP1: deictic directional verb + VP2: action verb

Example: pay thamŋaan
go work
'go to work'

This pattern of SVCs expresses the subject's motion from a certain place to carry out a particular action. The first verb in this pattern of SVC consists of two deictic directional verbs, namely, **pay** 'go' and **maa** 'come.'

Pattern 10: VP1: primary action verb + VP2: inchoative verb

Example: paa kêew tøk
 throw glass break
 'throw a glass and the glass breaks'

This pattern expresses two events occurring consecutively. The first transitive verb indicates an action that causes another event to occur. As there is no delay between the two events, this pattern is often perceived as denoting a single complex event.

PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF NEGATION IN SVC'S

All patterns of SVCs mentioned above behave differently with regard to negation (henceforth, NEG), as shown below. It is claimed here that the behavior of SVCs with respect to negation can be explained in terms of pragmatic principles postulated by Givón (1984). All of the patterns of SVCs mentioned above may be classified into three groups as far as negation is concerned, as below.

Group 1

Group 1 is composed of patterns 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9. SVCs of group 1 do not allow NEG to intervene between the two VPs; they allow NEG to occur before the first VP, and both the first and the second VPs are then within the scope of negation, as shown in the formula below.

(a) * VP1 NEG VP2,⁵

(b) NEG VP1 VP2

The SVCs in this group may be subclassified into two groups on the basis of the type of event which they indicate. The first subgroup consists of patterns 1, 2, 3, and 6. The two action verbs in each pattern of SVC in this subgroup express events that are carried out by the same subject, and occur simultaneously at the same place.

Examples:

Pattern 1 (1A) *wĩŋ mây lõp
 run NEG avoid

(1B) mây wĩŋ lõp
 NEG run avoid
 'do not run to avoid'

Pattern 2 (2A) *nân mây duu nãŋsũũ
 sit' NEG look book

⁵ "*" before an example means that the expression is odd or hardly acceptable in unmarked contexts.

- (2B) mây nâŋ duu năŋsũu
 NEG sit look book
 'do not sit looking at a book'
- Pattern 3 (3A) *wĩŋ mây khâw bâan
 run NEG enter house
- (3B) mây wĩŋ khâw bâan
 NEG run enter house
 'do not run to enter a house'
- Pattern 6 (6A) *rêŋ mây kèp khôŋmuun
 hurry NEG gather data
- (6B) mây rêŋ kèp khôŋmuun
 NEG hurry gather data
 'do not gather data in a hurry'

The second subgroup of SVCs consists of patterns 8 and 9. The verbs in each of these patterns express two sequential events. The times of occurrence of the two events are so close to each other that we are inclined to think that they represent single, although complex, event.

Examples:

- Pattern 8 (8A) *pĩŋ plaa mây kin
 grill fish NEG eat
- (8B) mây pĩŋ plaa kin
 NEG grill fish eat
 'do not grill fish to eat'
- Pattern 9 (9A) *pay mây thamŋaan
 go NEG work
- (9B) mây pay thamŋaan
 NEG go work
 'do not go to work'

The fact that the second verbs in the two subgroups above cannot be negated is not arbitrary. It will be shown in this paper that this fact is based on an important pragmatic principle postulated by Givón (1984). It is generally known that the major function of declarative sentences in discourse is to convey new information. However, according to Givón, the negative variant of a declarative sentence is used to convey new information of a very different sort from the corresponding affirmative. In postulating the pragmatic theory of negation, Givón discusses a number of restrictions on the distribution of negatives which have an ontological-cognitive basis underlying our concept of negative events. Givón claims that negative events are less informative than positive ones. This claim is only warranted by a gestalt-pragmatic principle which states that events are changes in an inert universe. The event is informative saliently only if the background of inertia or non-eventness of the universe is more frequent, normal, and routine. When negative sentences occur, there must be a reversal of the figure-ground relation, so that the corresponding affirmative somehow becomes the expected, unsurprising background. Against such a background, the negative sentence then becomes salient or informative as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

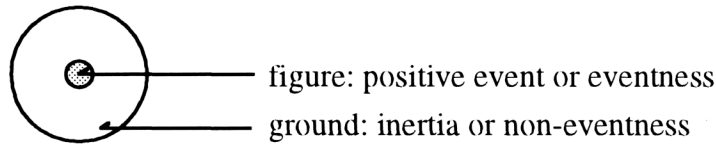


Figure 1. The figure-ground relation in the case of affirmative sentences.

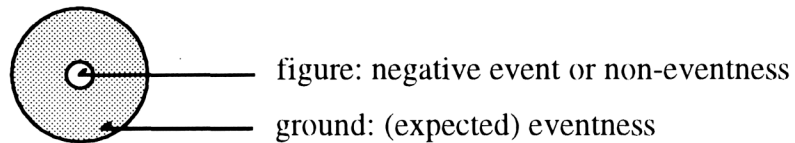


Figure 2. The figure-ground relation in the case of negative sentences.

It will be shown in this paper that the restrictions on the distribution of the negative word in the SVCs are explained in terms of the pragmatic principle stated above. In the first subgroup of SVCs, the affirmative sentences are informative and appropriate against the background of inertia or non-eventness. The affirmative sentences in the first subgroup consist of two action verbs occurring in series that share the same subject. The events expressed by these two verbs occur at the same time and place. There are many possible ways in which the two events are perceived as occurring simultaneously at the same place as discussed above. Sentences (B) in which NEG appears before the first verbs are felicitous in the case where the corresponding affirmatives are the expected background. In other words, the occurrence of an event denoted by the affirmative sentence becomes the presupposed background, whereas the non-occurrence of an event becomes salient, informative, or in other words, new information.

In negating the whole strings of verbs as in sentences (B), there exists some vagueness as to what action or what part of the complex actions is negated. For example, in (1B) **mây wíŋ lỏp** 'do not run and avoid,' it is vague as to which action, i.e., to run or to avoid, does occur and which does not. One possible interpretation is that neither action occurs. The same kind of vagueness exists in other (B) sentences. The interpretation thus depends on the situational context. In contrast, sentences (A) indicate that the first actions do occur whereas the actions indicated by the second verbs do not. Sentences (A) would be appropriate only in the context where it was expected that the first actions had further specific characteristics expressed by the second verbs. For example, sentence (1A) would not sound odd if it was expected that the action of running is also the action of avoiding something or someone at the same time. Likewise, sentence (2A) would be appropriate if it was expected that the actor of the sentence studied the book while sitting. However, there are no clues in the context that yield such interpretations.

The second subgroup of SVCs express two sequential events that share the same subject and occur at the same place. The fact that these two events share the same subject and occur at the same place and almost at the same time, leads us to think that

these SVCs express one complex event. In the (B) sentences in which NEG appears before the first verb, the same kind of vagueness exists as in the (B) sentences in the first subgroup. That is, there are three possible ways to interpret the negative sentences in which NEG appears before the first verb. On the other hand, the (A) sentences in which NEG intervenes between the two verbs could be interpreted to mean that the subject performs the first action or gives rise to the first event in order not to do some specific action, or in order for the second event not to occur. For example, sentence (8A) could be interpreted to mean that the actor grills the fish in order not to eat. Likewise, sentence (9A) could be interpreted to mean that the actor goes in order not to work. It is obvious that such a kind of interpretation sounds odd in the real world. In the normal case, if we have an objective in performing an action, we usually want something else to happen as a consequence of the action that we have performed. It would be odd if we performed an action in order not to perform another action, or so that another event might not happen. In addition, there is no clue in the context of sentences (A) indicating that the events expressed by the second verbs are the expected background. This is the cause of the communicative ineffectiveness of sentences (A) in the first subgroup.

In short, sentences (B) in both subgroups may be used to encode three situations, i.e., (1) only the first action is carried out, (2) only the second action is carried out, and (3) neither action is carried out. Which interpretation is appropriate depends on the context of the situation. Sentences (A) sound odd because they lack appropriate real-world contexts in which we could interpret the sentences in which only the second verbs are negated.

Group 2

Group 2 is composed of patterns 4 and 10. SVCs of group 2 do not allow NEG to appear before the first VP; they allow NEG to appear between the two VPs, and only the second VP is then within the scope of negation, as shown in the formula below.

(A) VP1 NEG VP2,

(B) *NEG VP1 VP2

The SVCs in this group have one semantic element in common. The first verbs denote actions, while the second verbs denote the result or the culmination of the carrying out of the first actions.

Examples:

Pattern 4 (4A) มอญ ม่าย หั้น

look NEG catch sight of, see

'look at something but fail to catch sight of it'

(4B) *ม่าย มอญ หั้น

NEG look catch sight of, see

Pattern 10(10A) ปาา กะเวย ม่าย ทะเือก

throw glass NEG break

'throw a glass but the glass does not break'

(10B) *ม่าย ปาา กะเวย ทะเือก

NEG throw glass break

It is noted that the events indicated by the second verbs can be viewed as the expected and natural consequences of the first actions. The event of visual perception is the expected consequence of the action "see" and the event of the glass breaking is the expected consequence of the action of throwing the glass. In other words, in this case, the affirmative becomes the expected, unsurprising background. Therefore, negating the second verb in the SVCs above is appropriate because the negative becomes salient and informative. On the other hand, putting NEG before the first verb makes the sentence sound odd. Again, there is vagueness in interpretation, as discussed above. If the sentences above were interpreted in such a way that the first verbs are negated, which means that first actions do not happen, we might ask why the second verbs appear where they are. If the first actions do not occur, there is no way in which the second actions indicated by the second verbs will occur. That is, if we do not look, the seeing is not likely to occur. If we do not throw a glass, it is unlikely that the glass will break except in the case that it breaks accidentally, as when it falls off a table. The second verb then becomes redundant in this interpretation. However, there is one interpretation that will make sentences (B) appropriate. Sentences (B) will become acceptable only if they are interpreted as the actor performing an action in such a way that the second event does not happen as a result of the first action. Such an interpretation is possible in sentence (10B). It is possible to imagine a situation in which the actor throws a glass carefully and without using too much force so that the glass will not break. However, it is not possible to imagine a comparable situation for sentence (4B). We could not possibly look at something in such a way that we do not see it. Therefore, sentences (B), with certain verbs, are appropriate only in special contexts.

Since giving redundant or unnecessary information may damage the communication process, we avoid using (4B) and (10B) in our actual communication. Sentences (4B) and (10B) give redundant information, which makes the sentences communicatively ineffective. It can be concluded that these sentences are not informative.

Group 3

Group 3 is composed of pattern 5. Normally, SVCs of group 3 allow NEG to appear before the first VP. However, they allow NEG to intervene between the two VPs only in special contexts. The position of NEG in the SVCs in this group is shown in the formula below.

(A) NEG VP1 VP2,

(B) VP1 NEG VP2 (only in special contexts)

The verbs that appear in the first position of the SVCs in this group constitute a kind called complement-taking verbs, such as **yàak** 'want,' **khǒo** 'ask for,' **temcay** 'be willing,' **sǒncay** 'be interested,' and **phayaayaam** 'try.' These verbs are characterized by not being semantically complete in themselves. They need some other verbs to complete their sense. In addition, most of them express some kind of feeling or attitude towards the actions denoted by the following verb.

Examples:

Pattern 5 (5'A) **yàak** **mây** **pay** **thamjaan**
 want NEG go work
 'want to go not to work' (with sarcastic meaning)

- (5'B) mây yàak pay thamjaan
 NEG want go work
 'do not want to go to work'
- (5'A) phayaayaam mây nân
 make an effort NEG sit
 'make an effort not to sit'
- (5''B) mây phayaayaam nân
 NEG make an effort sit
 'do not make an effort to sit'

The negative SVCs in this group, in which NEG appears before the first verbs, indicate that the subjects do not have certain attitudes or feelings named by the first verbs towards the actions named by the second verbs. For example, sentence (5'B) indicates that the subject does not have a desire to go to work. However, in this case we can put NEG between the two verbs as in (5'A), and the resultant negative sentence means that the subject has a desire not to go to work. This sentence is appropriate if it is used as a sarcastic statement. We can put NEG between the two verbs in the SVCs only if we can construct a situational context that yields the interpretation that the subject has a certain attitude or feeling towards not doing something. Some complement-taking verbs do not allow us to construct such context as shown below.

Examples:

- (A) * sǝncay mây ?àthíbaay
 be interested NEG explain
- (B) mây sǝncay ?àthíbaay
 NEG be interested explain
 'do not be interested in explaining'

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we investigate the constraints in negating verbs in SVCs in Thai on the basis of pragmatics. We see that the behavior of SVCs in Thai with respect to negation is determined by the patterns of SVCs, and is explained in terms of cognitive concepts and communicative efficiency in actual usage. These pragmatic constraints stem from our way of recognizing phenomena in the world and our efforts to make communication efficient. *This paper contributes another piece of evidence that syntactic behavior in natural languages is not arbitrary.* In contrast, it is well motivated and reflects our efforts in making communication as effective as possible.

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