

Syntactic Variations in Thai Poetry

Udom Warotamasikkhadit

Introduction

This paper attempts to study different types of syntactic variations found in Thai poetry—*khloong*, *chǎn*, *kàap*, and *klɔɔn*—from the past to the present. Morphological and semantic variations are excluded from this study, even though they present major problems in understanding Thai poetry. It should be pointed out that syntactic variations seem to recur in all types of Thai poetry written by different poets.¹

Major Types of Syntactic Variations

Five major types of syntactic variations can be found in Thai poetry.

SVO becomes SOV. Subject Verb Object (SVO) is a general syntactic pattern in the present Thai language. Object Subject Verb (OSV) is also found in the Thai language when a sentence undergoes a subjectivalization transformation (Warotamasikkhadit 1983). It is interesting to find that SOV is rather common in Thai poetry. For example:

- (1) *fan* *pàak* *màak* *khíaw* *côy*
tooth mouth areca nut chew easily

cêm *ʔuān* *nuan* *khǎaw*
bright fat creamy white

The teeth in his mouth can easily chew betel. He is active, fat, and healthy.

—from *Nirat Suphan*²

The word *màak* 'betel, a combination of betel leaf, lime, and areca nut' would normally appear after *khíaw* 'chew' in (1); however, in this line

¹ This study was originally dedicated to Sunthon Phu on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of his birth in 1986. (Note that I use the Royal Institute system of romanizing Thai names, not a phonemic one.)

² Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Suphan*," in *Wannakam nirat khong Sunthon Phu* (Bangkok: Sinlapa Bannakhan, 1977), p. 416, line 4.

màak 'betel' is moved in front of *khíaw* 'chew' in order to rhyme with *pàak* 'mouth'.

- (2) *nóy kàp phûm phǎan ráy nay phraysǎn*
 Noi and Phum friend be without in forest

(I) am travelling in the forest without a friend, except Noi and Phum.
 —from *Nirat Muang Klaeng*³

The word *phǎan* 'friend' should appear after *ráy* 'be without' in (2), but it is moved in order to leave *ráy* 'be without' rhyming with *nay* 'in'. It should be noted that the subject of this sentence is an understood I.

- (3) *thǐng khon mây ʔaay kô ʔaay phǐi*
 even person not shy then shy spirit

Even though (you) are not shy of human beings, (you) should be shy of spirits.

—from *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*⁴

When the subject is 'you' understood as it is in (3), normal Thai word order would have *khon* 'person' appearing after *ʔaay* 'be shy of'.

- (4) *khɔʔ ʔǎn kô tên tiin sɔy*
 tap call attention then jump foot take short steps

If you tap a horse to get its attention, it jumps and takes short steps.

—from *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan*⁵

The word *tiin* 'foot' should appear after *sɔy* 'take short steps' in (4). The subject of this sentence appears in the previous line in the poem. However, *sɔy* 'take short steps' is left at the end of the line because in this position, it provides the obligatory rhyme with a word in the ensuing line.

Subject Verb (SV) becomes Verb Subject (VS). A subject usually precedes an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb in the Thai language, but it happens that an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb can be moved to the position before the subject. For example:

³ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Muang Klaeng*," p. 1, line 7.

⁴ King Rama II, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Bangkok: Bannakhan, 1971).

⁵ Chit Burathat, *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan* (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1977), p. 39, line 4.

- (5) *tìn taa nâa phàt mòt lîat sàñ kaay*
 be frightened eye face pale finish blood shake body

Their eyes are frightened, their faces are pale without blood, and their bodies are shaking.

—from *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan*⁶

In (5), *tìn taa* should be *taa tìn* 'the eyes show fright' and *sàñ kaay* should be *kaay sàñ* 'their bodies are shaking'. In these cases, *taa* 'eye' rhymes with *nâa* 'face' in the same line, and *kaay* 'body' needs to rhyme with a word in the following line.

- (6) *kràphîam náam phráphràñ phròoy krachòok*
 be in ripples water repeatedly spill over

chăan kràchòn chon
 be scattered everywhere water

The water ripples repeatedly. It spills over and is scattered everywhere.

—from *Inlarat Kham Chan*⁷

In (6), *náam* 'water' should precede *kràphîam* 'be in ripples' and *chon* 'water' should precede *kràchòok* 'spill over'.

- (7) *man sĕen priăw bĭaw nâa khâw hăa kan*
 it very sour distorted face get seek each other

It is very sour and everyone's face is distorted.

—from *Nirat Muang Klaeng*⁸

In (7), *bĭaw* 'distorted' should appear after *nâa* 'face', but *bĭaw* 'distorted' is needed to rhyme internally with *priăw* 'sour' and *nâa* 'face' with *hăa* 'seek'.

- (8) *chum nák phàktòp sóon bōon sĕeŋ*
 plentiful very marsh herb pile up tuberous plants inserted

⁶ Chit Burathat, p. 43, line 1.

⁷ Phraya Si Sunthon Wohan, *Inlarat Kham Chan* (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1972), p. 16, line 4.

⁸ Sunthon Phu, "Nirat Muang Klaeng," p. 18, line 8.

Marsh herbs are plentiful. Tuberous plants are inserted (among marsh herbs).

—from *Nirat Suphan*⁹

In (8), *phàktòp* 'a marsh herb' should appear before *chum* 'plentiful', but it is needed in that position in a *khloog* in order to have a low tone in the second syllable. It is also interesting to find that an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb is moved before a subject in Thai poetry, whereas such a transformation cannot apply to a sentence in a daily conversation. Readers of Thai poetry must be able to identify an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb in order to locate its subject which, in this case, follows the verbal. Those who are not familiar with the structure of the Thai language may confuse the transformed structure of this type with a normal SVO pattern where the subject is understood or deleted. Thus, the subject may be taken as object of the preceding verb.

Noun+Modifier becomes Modifier+Noun. A modifier in the Thai language usually follows the noun it modifies, but in poetry it may precede a noun it modifies, for example:

- (9) *bɔɔn pàak yâak cà kêe mây sîn lín bɔɔn*
gossipy mouth difficult will correct not end tongue gossipy

It is difficult to correct a gossipy mouth. Gossipy tongues are ceaseless.

—from *Nirat Suphan*¹⁰

In (9), *bɔɔn* 'gossipy' should follow *pàak* 'mouth', but *pàak* rhymes with *yâak* 'difficult' for the poet's satisfaction.

- (10) *laaŋ làw chèk sùk sàlǎa*
some group is like ripe areca nut

Some groups (are dressed) in the color of ripe areca nuts.

—from *Lilit Taleng Phai*¹¹

In (10), *sàlǎa* 'areca nut' should precede *sùk* 'ripe'.

- (11) *yon thǎoŋ pròoŋ chǎoŋ chuan boŋ*
look at hall airy space invite look at

⁹ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Suphan*," p. 383, line 17.

¹⁰ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Suphan*," p. 384, line 2.

¹¹ Krom Somdet Phra Paramanuchitchinorot, *Lilit Taleng Phai* (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1960), p. 113, line 4-5.

The spacious hall invites our gaze
—from *Inlarat Kham Chan*¹²

In (11), *pròŋ* 'airy' should follow *chôŋ* 'space', but it does not because *chôŋ* 'space' alliterates with *chuan* 'invite'.

- | | | | | |
|------|-------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| (12) | <i>tàbà</i> | <i>bə̀ək</i> | <i>rábii</i> | <i>bun</i> |
| | austerities | open | renown | virtue |

The blossoming of his austere practices bears fruit—the
reputation of his merit spreads.
—from *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan*¹³

In (12), *rábii* 'renowned' should follow *bun* 'virtue', but it does not because the second syllable of *rábii* 'renown' alliterates with *bun* 'virtue'.

It must be noted here that (9)-(12) illustrate a noun phrase with a modifier preceding a noun, whereas (5)-(8) illustrate a sentence with a verb preceding a noun.

Auxiliary fronting. An auxiliary usually follows a subject or a negative and precedes a verb in daily conversational Thai language. In poetry, an auxiliary is often moved to the beginning of the line, for example:

- | | | | | | |
|------|---------------|-------------|------------|---------------|-------------|
| (13) | <i>coŋ</i> | <i>phôŋ</i> | <i>lú</i> | <i>lâap</i> | <i>dâay</i> |
| | may | you | reach | fortune | can |
| | <i>phàdèt</i> | <i>dâaw</i> | <i>dēn</i> | <i>sàyaam</i> | |
| | conquer | boundary | country | Siam | |

May you reach your goal in conquering Siam.
—from *Lilit Taleng Phai*¹⁴

In (13), *coŋ* 'may' should precede *lú* 'reach', but it is moved to the beginning of the line to express a wish.

- | | | | | | |
|------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| (14) | <i>khuan</i> | <i>mêe</i> | <i>wáy</i> | <i>tàaŋ</i> | <i>nâa</i> |
| | should | you | keep | replace | face |
| | <i>phii</i> | <i>phúun</i> | <i>phaaylǎŋ</i> | | |
| | older brother | far away | afterwards | | |

¹² Phraya Si Sunthon Wohān, p. 28, line 7.

¹³ Chit Burathat, p. 19, line 16.

¹⁴ Krom Somdet Phra Paramanuchitchinorot, p. 13, line 16.

You should keep (this gift) to remind you of me afterwards.
—from *Nirat Narin*¹⁵

In (14), *khuan* 'should' should appear before *wáy* 'keep', but it is moved to the beginning of the line to express a wish as in (13).

- (15) *cam riam niraa sàmdɔn sàmdɔ chûp*
reluctantly I leave woman equivalent life
must

I reluctantly must leave the woman I love as my life.
—from *Lilit Taleng Phai*¹⁶

In (15), *cam* 'reluctantly must, unwillingly must' should precede *niraa* 'leave', but it is moved to the beginning of the line to express unwillingness.

- (16) *mây nâa sàk ʔây phámâa cà maa dâay*
not should troop title Burmese will come can

Burmese troops should not be able to come.
—from *Nirat Phrabat*¹⁷

In (16), *mây nâa* 'should not' should precede *cà* 'will', but they are moved to the beginning of the line to show subjunctiveness.

Negative raising. In conversational Thai, a negative is usually placed in front of the verb it negates. In poetry, a negative raising transformation is often applied to the first element of a verb string. For example:

- (17) *yôok nák bay lòn mây thon dâay*
shake too much leaf fall not endure can

If the tree trunk is shaken too much, its leaves cannot endure
and they finally fall.

—from *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*¹⁸

The negative *mây* 'not' should appear in between *thon* 'endure' and *dâay* 'can'. Since a negative raising transformation is applied to the sentence, *mây* 'not' is raised to the higher node.

¹⁵ Narinhibet, *Nirat Narin* (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1973), p. 36, line 12.

¹⁶ Krom Somdet Phra Paramanuchitchinorot, p. 10, line 3.

¹⁷ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Phrabat*," p. 36, line 4.

¹⁸ King Rama II.

- (18) *tèε yŋ diaw mây ráksǎa dāay*
 but woman only not protect can

(You) can protect but only one woman.
 —from *Ramakian*¹⁹

The negative *mây* 'not' in (18) should appear in between *ráksǎa* 'protect' and *dāay* 'can'. In this case *mây* 'not' is moved to the front of *ráksǎa* 'protect'.

- (19) *cà ñaw klàp láp nǒŋ mây mɔɔŋ hěn*
 will turn back disappear female you not look see

When (I) turned back, you disappeared. I did not see (you).
 —from *Nirat Thawarawadi*²⁰

A negative *mây* 'not' in (19) should appear between *mɔɔŋ* 'look' and *hěn* 'see'. A negative raising transformation moves *mây* 'not' in front of *mɔɔŋ* 'look'.

- (20) *yaŋ samraan rǒŋkhàp mây lăp loŋ*
 still happy sing not asleep down

(People) are still enjoying themselves. Some are singing.
 (They) are not asleep.

—from *Nirat Muang Klaeng*²¹

The negative *mây* 'not' in (20) should appear in between *lăp* 'asleep' and *loŋ* 'down'. It is not necessary to apply a negative raising transformation in (20), but the poet preferred to undergo the negative raising transformation.

Conclusion

This study confirms that syntactic variations occur in Thai poetry in such a way that they do not violate universal pattern restrictions, in which the OVS pattern has never been found as a derived pattern of SVO. Many Thai poetry readers find that reading poetry is more difficult than reading Thai prose because a higher level of transformation usually applies to sentences in poetry in addition to a few other complicated problems, such as

¹⁹ King Rama I, *Ramakian* (Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya, 1963).

²⁰ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Thawarawadi*," p. 384, line 2.

²¹ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Muang Klaeng*," p. 2, line 2.

subject deletion, object deletion, faraway reference, words used with different meaning, and reversed noun compounding. The study of syntactic variations will at least help minimize difficulty in reading Thai poetry.

References

Chit Burathat

1977 *Samakkhi Phet Kham Chan*. 15th printing. Bangkok: Khurusapha.

Narinthibet

1973 *Nirat Narin*. 25th printing. Bangkok: Khurusapha.

Paramanuchitchinorot, *Krom Somdet Phra*

1960 *Lilit Taleng Phai*. 15th printing. Bangkok: Khurusapha.

Rama I, *King*

1963 *Ramakian*. Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya.

Rama II, *King*

1971 *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. 15th printing. Bangkok: Bannakhan.

Si Sunthon Wohan, *Phraya*

1972 *Inlarat Kham Chan*. 21st printing. Bangkok: Khurusapha.

Sunthon Phu

1977 *Wannakam Nirat Khong Sunthon Phu* [Literary Works of Sunthon Phu (including *Nirat Muang Klaeng*, *Nirat Phrabat*, *Nirat Suphan*, *Nirat Thawarawadi*, and others)]. Bangkok: Sinlapa Bannakhan.

Warotamasikkhadit, Udom

1983 "Subjectivalization in Thai." *Ramkhamhaeng University Journal* 9: 2-11.