Syntactic Variations in Thai Poetry
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Introduction

This paper attempts to study different types of syntactic variations found in Thai poetry—khloog, chān, kàap, and kloön—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 subjectivization transformation (Warotamasikkhadit 1983). It is interesting to find that SOV is rather common in Thai poetry. For example:

(1) fan pàak màak khíaw cýy
    tooth mouth areca nut chew easily

    cèm ?ùan nuan khâaw
    bright fat creamy white

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

—from Nirat Suphan²

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

(2) nóm y kàp phûm phûán rây nay phrayân
   Noi   and   Phum   friend   be   without   in   forest

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

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

(3) thâng khon mây ?aay kâ  ?aay phi
   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

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

(4) kho? ûan kâ tên tiin soo y
   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

   The word tiin 'foot' should appear after soo y 'take short steps' in (4).
The subject of this sentence appears in the previous line in the poem. However, soo y '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 lan-
   guage, but it happens that an intransitive verb or a descriptive verb can be
   moved to the position before the subject. For example:

4 King Rama II, Khun Chang Khun Phaen (Bangkok: Bannakhan, 1971).
(5) ที่นั้น ตา้น้ำ พี่ตาย ตา้บัน ตาน้ำ กาย
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*

In (5), ที่นั้น ตา้ should be ตา้น้ำ 'the eyes show fright' and ตา้บัน ตาน้ำ กาย 'their bodies are shaking'. In these cases, ตา้ 'eye' rhymes with น้ำ 'face' in the same line, and กาย 'body' needs to rhyme with a word in the following line.

(6) กระฬุมน้ำผ่าพร้อมผ่อย กระช่วย
be in ripples water repeatedly spill over

ช้าน กระช่วย ชอน
be scattered everywhere water

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

—from *Inlarat Kham Chan*

In (6), น้ำ 'water' should precede กระฬุม 'be in ripples' and ชอน 'water' should precede กระช่วย 'spill over'.

(7) คนเส้นปริวบิลว่าน้ำข้าว ห้าว คำ
it very sour distorted face get seek each other

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

—from *Nirat Muang Klaeng*

In (7), บิลว 'distorted' should appear after น้ำ 'face', but บิลว 'distorted' is needed to rhyme internally with ปริว 'sour' and น้า 'face' with ห้าว 'seek'.

(8) ชุมน้ำผักตัดล้านบ่อน บ่อนเส้น
plentiful very marsh herb pile up tuberous plants inserted

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6 Chit Burathat, p. 43, line 1.
8 Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Muang Klaeng,*" p. 18, line 8.

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

—from Nirat Suphan

In (8), phàktòp 'a marsh herb' should appear before chum 'plentiful', but it is needed in that position in a khloōj 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) boon pàak yâak cà kēe máy sîn lîn boon
gossipy mouth difficult will correct not end tongue gossipy

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

—from Nirat Suphan

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

(10) laaŋ lâw chêk sùk sâlâa
some group is like ripe areca nut

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

—from Lilit Taleng Phai

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

(11) yon thòŋ pròŋ chòŋ chuan boon
look at hall airy space invite look at

The spacious hall invites our gaze
— from Inlarat Kham Chan.\(^{12}\)

In (11), \(\text{próø̄ø}^{}}\) 'airy' should follow \(\text{chōø̄ø}^{}}\) 'space', but it does not because \(\text{chōø̄ø}^{}}\) 'space' alliterates with \(\text{chuan}^{}}\) 'invite'.

(12) \(\text{tābā}^{}\) \(\text{bòøk}^{}\) \(\text{rábii}^{}\) \(\text{bun}^{}\)
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), \(\text{rábii}^{}}\) 'renowned' should follow \(\text{bun}^{}}\) 'virtue', but it does not because the second syllable of \(\text{rábii}^{}}\) 'renown' alliterates with \(\text{bun}^{}}\) '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) \(\text{coŋ}^{}\) \(\text{phōø}^{}\) \(\text{lú}^{}\) \(\text{lāap}^{}\) \(\text{dāay}^{}\)
may you reach fortune can

\(\text{phādēt}^{}\) \(\text{dāaw}^{}\) \(\text{deen}^{}\) \(\text{sāyaam}^{}\)
conquer boundary country Siam

May you reach your goal in conquering Siam.
— from Lilit Taleng Phai.\(^ {14}\)

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

(14) \(\text{khuan}^{}\) \(\text{mēe}^{}\) \(\text{wáy}^{}\) \(\text{tàŋ}^{}\) \(\text{nāa}^{}\)
should you keep replace face

\(\text{phūi}^{}\) \(\text{phúun}^{}\) \(\text{phaaylāŋ}^{}\)
older brother far away afterwards

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12 Phraya Si Sunthon Wohan, 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 *wāy* 'keep', but it is moved to the beginning of the line to express a wish as in (13).

(15) *cam riam niraa sàmtɔn sàmɔ̀ chũi p*
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) *māy nāa sîk ṭāay phāmāa cà maa dāay*
not should troop title Burmese will come can

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

In (16), *māy nāa* '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) *yōok nák bay lòn māy thon dāay*
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 *māy* 'not' should appear in between *thon* 'endure' and *dāay* 'can'. Since a negative raising transformation is applied to the sentence, *māy* 'not' is raised to the higher node.

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¹⁶ Krom Somdet Phra Paramanuchitchinorot, p. 10, line 3.
¹⁷ Sunthon Phu, "*Nirat Phrabat,"* p. 36, line 4.
¹⁸ King Rama II.
(18) ตี๋ ยิง ดิว มา ยก รักษา ได้
but woman only not protect can

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

The negative ไม่ 'not' in (18) should appear in between รักษา 'protect' and ได้ 'can'. In this case ไม่ 'not' is moved to the front of รักษา 'protect'.

(19) ค่า หน้า กลับ แล้ว น้อง ไม่ มอง แม่ มอง เห็น
will turn back disappear female you not look see

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

A negative ไม่ 'not' in (19) should appear between มอง 'look' and เห็น 'see'. A negative raising transformation moves ไม่ 'not' in front of มอง 'look'.

(20) ยัง สบาย ร้องเพลง ไม่ ตาม ลับ ลง
still happy sing not asleep down

(People) are still enjoying themselves. Some are singing. (They) are not asleep.
— from Nirat Muang Klaeng

The negative ไม่ 'not' in (20) should appear in between ตาม 'asleep' and ลง '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 Withaya, 1963).
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

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