

# DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF THAI DEMONSTRATIVES: A CASE ON PRAGMATICALLY CONTROLLED IRREGULAR FUNCTIONS.

Unchalee Singnoi  
Naresuan University

## 1. Introduction

In Thai, demonstratives can be divided into two types morphologically and syntactically: DEMONSTRATIVE ADJECTIVES, hereafter DADJ (*nīi* ‘this/that’, *nán* ‘that/those’, *nóon* ‘that/those’, and *nūun* ‘that/those’), and DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS, hereafter DPRON<sup>1</sup> (*nīi* ‘this/these’, *nán* ‘that/those’, *nóon* ‘that/those’, and *nūun* ‘that/those’). Generally speaking, a DADJ functions as a modifier indicating deixis and definiteness while a DPRON functions as a reference. However, with some pragmatic forces, these functions are found to become vague or even reversed. In this paper, in order to construe the syntactically irregular uses of demonstratives, I need to begin with the (simple) syntax of demonstratives, both internally and externally. I then discuss their roles in semantics and pragmatics, which are significant to the syntax of demonstrative construction as well as the selection of particular lexical demonstratives in different contexts.

## 2. Syntactic Structures of Demonstratives

### 2.1. Internal syntax

The internal structures (morphology) of these two types of demonstratives are related to each other, in that they contain the same demonstrative stem, /n/. DADJs are marked with a high level tone as /n’/ (e.g. *nīi* ‘this/these’) and DPRONs with a falling tone as /ň/ (e.g. *nīi* ‘this/these’). In parallel, these two demonstrative types are possibly distinguished by up to four degrees spatially and temporally from the speaker, as represented by four distinct vowels scaled from the most

unrounded vowel to the most rounded vowel, /i,a,o,u/. The four-term system of demonstratives is presented in the table below:

**Table1:** Thai Demonstrative System

		Distance/Tempo			
		nearer		farther	
		<----->			
		i	a	o	u
Adjective	'	níi	nán	nóon	núun
Pronoun	^	nîi	nân	nôn	nûun

2.2. External Syntax

2.2.1. Syntactic Structure

A DADJ always occurs, in the scope of a noun phrase (hereafter NP), to the right of the head noun that is generally a common noun, as exemplified.

- (1) [bâan nán] sǎay  
house that beautiful  
'That house is beautiful.'

In the demonstrative construction, a classifier, which normally can occur before any modifier such as a relative clause, possessive phrase, or prepositional phrase (see Singnoi (2000) for further details), can also occur before a DADJ, as shown:

- (2) [bâan lǎŋ nán] sǎay  
house CLF that beautiful  
'That house is beautiful.'

A DPRON substitutes for an NP, as shown:

- (3)     nân    khɛɛ    rooŋ rian  
           that   be     school  
           ‘That is a school’

It is odd or even ungrammatical if the correspondent DADJ occurs in this slot:

- (4)     nán     khɛɛ     rooŋ rian  
           that    be       school  
           ‘That is a school’

Also a DPRON is able to stand for a classifier phrase (where the head noun is a classifier) like *lǎŋ nán* in (2):

- (5)     bâan    [lǎŋ    nán]  
           house CLF    that  
           |                    |  
           bâan                nân

Its modifying of a noun or classifier is ungrammatical:

- (6)     \*[bâan   lǎŋ    nân]   sǔay  
           house CLF    that    beautiful  
           ‘That house is beautiful.’

However, the choice of using the two types of demonstratives is not determined solely by such syntactic facts. Rather, it is the semantics and/or pragmatics that also determine the usage of demonstratives. In fact, a DADJ may also modify a proper noun or pronoun and even be used as a pronoun. These uses are pragmatically driven (that is, the pragmatic facts drive the syntactic irregularity of these demonstratives) as discussed in section 4.

### 2.2.2 Syntactic Functions

The demonstratives have a primary syntactic function in marking a boundary of an NP. That is to say, they mark where NPs end. The boundary-marking function of

demonstratives is quite rigid, so that other things preceding or following them are considered in or out of the scope of the NPs, respectively. Thus consider:

- (7) a. [bâan nán] lék mâak  
 house that small much  
 'That house is very small.'
- b. [bâan lék nán] mâak  
 house small that much  
 'Those little houses, there are a lot of them.'
- c. [bâan lék mâak nán]  
 house small much that  
 'that very small house'

We can see that, by placing the demonstrative *nán* before the verb as in (7a), after the first verb in (7b), and finally as in (7c), the verbs 'small' and 'much' are excluded from the NP, the former is included in the NP, and both of them are included in the NP, respectively. Consider also:

- (8) a. [bâan lăŋ thîi-sǎŋ]  
 house CLF second  
 'the second house'
- b. [bâan nán] lăŋ thîi-sǎŋ  
 house that CLF second  
 'the second house'
- (9) a. [bâan khǎŋ chǎn]  
 house POSSM 1  
 'my house'
- b. [bâan nán] khǎŋ chǎn]  
 house that POSSM 1  
 'That house is mine.'

The placement of the DADJ *nán* before the classifier *lǎŋ* in (8b) and possessive marker (POSSM) *khǎŋ* in (9b) even causes them to be interpreted as the nominal predicates of those clauses.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Semantic Functions: Deictic Notions and Definiteness

In Thai, demonstratives are inherently deictic both spatially and temporally. The phoneme /i/ is reserved for referents closest to the speaker, and /a, o, u/ are used to refer to remote referents (least to the most degree respectively), or to the referents whose distance from the speaker is unspecified or irrelevant. The hearer seems irrelevant to the referents of the two nearer degrees, but does have relevance to the two father terms. This fact can be presented as the figure below:

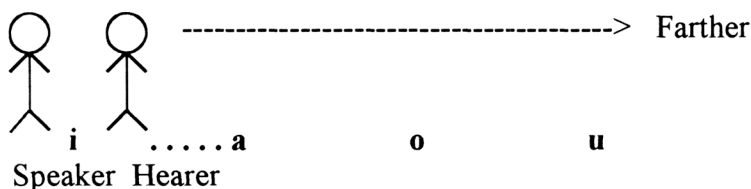


FIGURE1: The Referents of the Four-Way Demonstrative System

In Figure 1, /i/ 'this (one) right here' is close to the speaker, and /a/ 'that (one) away' from the speaker is characterized by moderate distance from the speaker. These two demonstratives are used without reference to the hearer (i.e., it does not matter whether or not the object is close to the hearer). The representation /o/ 'that (one) over there' is likely to be farther away from both the speaker and hearer and /u/ 'that (one) far away' is quite remote from the entire situation.

However, only the two nearer terms are far more common and formal. The full four-term system is used only when more than two things are simultaneously referred to in relative distance or time. Where all the four terms are used, it is not quite clear that the three distal terms are used contrastively and one can only tell which one is more or less distal. For example, consider a short dialogue between A and B below:

- (10) A: mây chây ?an nán ?an nóon  
 not be CLF that CLF that  
 'Not that one, the farther one.'

- B: mây chây ?an nóon ?an núun  
 not be CLF that CLF that  
 'Not that one, the farther one.'

Aside from the expression of deixis, demonstratives in Thai play an important role in indicating the definiteness of NPs. According to Deepadung (1989), when an NP in Thai consists of a single noun, especially a common noun, as the sole constituent, the whole NP has an opaque interpretation. For example, consider:

- (11) [bâan] sǎy  
 house beautiful  
 'A house is beautiful.'

The NP above is constituted by a noun 'house'. By itself, 'house' is referred to, but indefinite. Therefore, the NP in (11) needs a demonstrative to specify the particular house. However, as claimed by Mithun (1987) and Givón (1990a), among others, the interpretation of an NP depends on text-based definite referents so that the context of the house is known:

- (12) [bâan nán] sǎy  
 house that beautiful  
 'That house (known by the situation) is beautiful.'

Therefore, DADJs in Thai are not inherently definite. (For other languages Lyons (1999) provides an example of an indefinite demonstrative in English that exists in the form of *such*.) That is, in Thai DADJs do not simply indicate definiteness. Sometimes it is even found that the use of DADJs does not determine the definiteness of an NP at all. For example, consider:

- (13) *kây mii thúapay tææ [pèt nán] hǎa yâak*  
 chicken exist generally but duck that find difficult  
 ‘Chickens are common, but ducks are difficult to find.’

In (13) the DADJ *nán* ‘that/those’ does not mark the definiteness of ‘duck’; namely, the NP is not specified to particular ducks. The DADJ, failing to indicate definiteness (and even deixis), only tells us that ‘ducks’ is something else not relevant. In this case, to indicate definiteness of the NP, the DADJ must be accompanied by a classifier, as shown:

- (14) *kây mii thúapay tææ [pèt làaw nán]*  
 chicken exist generally but duck CLF that  
  
*hǎa yâak*  
 find difficult  
 ‘Chickens are common, but those ducks are difficult to find.’

Since it appears that the definiteness of NPs is interpreted on the basis of the contexts of the NPs, it is worth nothing to account for the demonstrative constructions without involving the pragmatic fact.

#### 4. Pragmatic/ Discourse Functions

So far the meanings of demonstratives in Thai are thought to be based on concrete spatial/ temporal circumstances and inherently definiteness. There are studies of the uses that derived from the actual meanings of demonstratives, e.g., the use of demonstratives in discourse (Mithun 1987). In Thai, demonstratives are also pervasive, powerful tools in the organization of discourse. Their discourse functions, at least, include DRAWING ATTENTION, SWITCHING ATTENTION, TRACKING ENTITIES, CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF INFORMATION and REINTRODUCING A TOPIC. Some of these functions are particularly involved in category changes or irregular use of demonstratives and pragmatic word ordering. In this section,

the data are drawn from a short story, *Saw Chin Luk Isan* (The Chinese-Isan Girl) by Boonthawee (1993)

A crucial pragmatic role of demonstratives is that of drawing attention. The function in this use is that of a powerful orienting role. At the beginning of a passage, for example, a preface, DAdjs may be used to focus the attention of the reader on a specific event, time, place, or character. Consider two prefaces in Boonthawee (1933):

- (15) nawaniyaay thîi klawkhōŋ kàp [khon-ciin nay  
 novel which involve with Chinese in  
 bâan raw nán]...  
 house our that  
 ‘that novel which is about Chinese people in our country...’  
 (Boonthawee 1993: 3)
- (16) [nawaniyaay rîaŋ sǎaw ciin lûuk ʔisǎan nîi]...  
 novel story girl Chinese offspring Isan this  
 ‘this novel named “The Chinese-Isan Girl”...’  
 (Boonthawee 1993: 5)

The preface (15) begins by talking about specific novels that involve Chinese people in Thailand, and the writer draws the attention of the reader to the particular topic by using the distal DADJ *nan̄*. In fact, the use in (15) has nothing to do with its semantic functions, the deictic notion and definiteness. In (16), the proximate DADJ *nĩ* is used to focus the attention of the reader on a specific novel initially mentioned in another preface. In this use, the DADJ has an irregularly syntactic function; that is, it modifies a proper noun, which normally needs no modifier.

Another discourse function of demonstratives is that of switching the attention of the addressee to a new referent; an idea that is related to, but different from, what has already been discussed. For example, Boonthawee uses the DADJ *nǎn* 'that/those' to introduce or switch to another topic. We are first told that some members of the mentioned family have their



own daily duties and activities. Then the writer turns to a ‘daughter’ in the story by using the DADJ to modify the noun in question, as shown:

- (17) [sùan ʔiilǎn lûuksǎaw khon yà nán] tɔɔn nǐ  
 part Lan daughter CLF big that time this

mây khôoy dâi pay nǎy  
 not often get go where

‘....About Lan, that oldest daughter, does not often get anywhere.’

(Boonthawee 1993: 109)

In this case, *sùan ʔiilǎn [lûuksǎaw khon yà nán]* ‘About Lan, that oldest daughter’ is the new topic to which the author switches. Although it has not been explicitly mentioned in the preceding sentences, it is already known to both the hearer and the speaker.

In switching attention, demonstratives are also used to emphasize the contrast between topics in discourse. To do this, Boonthawee, for example, uses the distal DADJ *nán* to contrast another character with the ones he has already introduced:

- (18) thit-côoy chôp kin lâw kwàa lun klom  
 Thit Choy like eat whisky than uncle Klom

sùan koo-lii rǎ [naay-lii nán] mây kin læy  
 part Ko Li or Mr. Li that not eat at all

‘Thit Choy likes drinking whisky more than uncle Klom, but (that) Ko Li or Mr. Li doesn’t drink at all.’

(Boonthawee 1993: 116)

Again, the demonstrative occurs here as a modifier of the “proper noun”. Even though this use is syntactically irregular, it is pragmatically useful; the DADJ shows ‘Mr. Li’ in contrast to ‘Thit Choy’ and ‘uncle Klom.’ This is also the case where the demonstrative does not indicate a syntactic structure, but does mark information structure. The passage would be

syntactically grammatical without it, but the demonstrative is useful in drawing our attention and linking the topics.

Once objects or events are introduced, they may be tracked or reidentified with demonstratives as overt reminders that these things were discussed earlier. This is particularly useful in Thai where there is no definite article. Thus, consider the example below where *nĩ* refers to some 'customers' mentioned earlier:

- (19) *lũukkháa thĩi maa sǎ..... [khon làaw nĩ]*  
 customer who come buy..... person CLF this

*pen phũak thĩi maa yũu mǎy*

be group which come stay new

'The customers who have come to buy..... These people are the ones who came live here recently.'

(Boonthawee 1993: 113)

The NP *lũukkháa* 'customers' was mentioned previously, and is followed by another piece of information. After that, it is picked up and discussed again using the new NP *khon làaw nĩ* 'These people'. Here, the DADJ *nĩ* indicates that the noun it modifies has already been mentioned.

In discourse, demonstratives also control the flow of information by linking subsequent mention of objects or events. In doing this, demonstratives frequently stand for longer units. Interestingly, in this use a DADJ rather than a DPRON stands for an object or event mentioned earlier. For example, Boonthawee often uses the distal DADJ *nǎn* as a pronoun to refer to an entire long event when he links the next event to the aforementioned event:

- (20) *càak nǎn chǎn cam mǎy dǎy rǔok wǎa*  
 from that 1 recall not able PRT Comp

*khay tham ʔaray bǎn*

who do what some

'After that, I can't recall who did what.'

(Boonthawee, 1993: 107)

Prior to sentence (20), the writer describes a situation in which many activities occur that are relevant to the character expressed by *chǎn* 'I'. The writer then proceeds with the story, linking it to the preceding long event with the DADJ *nǎn*. In this case, the DADJ does not function as a noun modifier, but instead has an irregularly syntactic function as a pronoun referring to the aforementioned event. This, thus, illustrates another case in which the pragmatic force drives the irregular syntax of demonstratives.

Finally, a demonstrative may function to reintroduce a topic that was mentioned earlier but subsequently dropped off. Again, Boonthawee uses a DADJ to reintroduce a topic that he had finished talking about, as below:

- (21) *chǎn khəəy    bōk læəw    wāa    [tua    chǎn nǐ]*  
 I        used to    tell        already    Comp    body    I        this

*dây rúu    dây faŋ    rīaŋ    plæək-plæək*  
 get    know    get    hear    matter    strange-strange  
 'I used to tell (you) that I myself have known and heard  
 about strange things.'

(Boonthawee 1993: 110)

Once the character 'I' has finished talking about herself and has gone on to other matters, she can return to the origin topic by modifying the NP with the demonstrative *nǐ*, even though the NP, a pronoun, syntactically needs no modifier.

In addition to having discourse functions as such, demonstratives function as topic markers to focus attention on certain elements. As seen in (15-21), demonstratives shed light on *khon-ciin* 'Chinese people,' *nawaniyaay* 'novel,' *ʔi-lǎn* 'Lan,' *naay-lii* 'Mr. Li,' *khon* 'people,' 'that (event),' and *tua chǎn* 'I' respectively, and contribute to the efficient functioning of pragmatic word order. Mithun (1987:192) claims that "constituents are ordered according to their descending order of newsworthiness: the most significant, unpredictable information appears early, followed by increasingly predictable

information.” The objects that are pragmatically marked with demonstratives as in (15-21) are in that way brought into focus and raised to the sentence-initial position.

The same is also true in speech. A demonstrative, typically a DPRON, can also function as an optional topic marker. In Thai, a topic always occurs in the sentence-initial position, and it can be separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause or by a demonstrative. Thus consider regular clauses in (22a) and (23a) and a topicalized subject in (22b) and topicalized object in (23b) marked with a demonstrative.<sup>3</sup>

- (22) a. thəə khîikiat caŋ  
           2    lazy        very  
           ‘You are very lazy.’
- b. thəə nîi           khîikiat caŋ  
           2    DPRON lazy        very  
           ‘You, (you) are very lazy.’
- (23) a. rîit kaankeeŋ yâak  
           iron pants        difficult  
           ‘It’s difficult to iron pants.’
- b. kaankeeŋ nîi        rîit yâak  
           pants        DPRON iron   difficult  
           ‘These pants, it’s difficult to iron them.’

## 5. Conclusion

In the present work, I have discussed different aspects of demonstrative constructions in Thai such as syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors. I have pointed out that it is the pragmatic function that is more powerful, so that it could drive irregular syntactic and semantic functions in a number of cases. This study suggests that in accounting for the grammar of demonstratives in Thai, various types of information, rather than simple atomic syntax, are needed as the core or principal rules. In choosing methodologies for such a linguistic description, therefore, we must consider how well they work

and how much progress in understanding fundamental grammatical concepts the method allows. It is obvious that a better way to construe the Thai grammar as presented is the approach that allows for complex bundles of information viewed as the fundamental concepts of grammatical pattern.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Savetamalya (1989) calls the latter type “locative pronoun”.
- <sup>2</sup> Savetamalya (1989) has also noticed this phenomenon, but does not note the relevance of the placement of demonstratives, rather she merely mentions that these elements also structurally occur as nominal predicates.
- <sup>3</sup> Sometimes the particle *nâ?* is used in this function. In this case it may be simply a reduced form of a demonstrative.

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