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3. Name of author: Natsuki Matsui
4. Affiliation: Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan (and Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, from April 2008-March 2009)
5. E-mail address: matsunatsu@kwansei.ac.jp

Eventivity and Stativity in Thai Predicates

Abstract

This paper elucidates the semantic differences of eventive and stative predicates in Thai, with a view to shedding light on the problem of the categorial distinction. Despite the common assumption that Thai does not distinguish between verbs and adjectives syntactically as well as morphologically, explicit differences are found in the usage of certain predicates.

- (1) naroN pen khon {suuN- suuN / *phuuut- phuuut}.
 Narong COPULA person tall-tall / *speak-speak
 ‘Narong is a {very tall/*talkative} person.’
- (2) fauay tham-Naan {nuay / dii}
 Faay work tired /good
 ‘Faay worked and got tired./ Faay worked well.’
- (3) {phuuut / maw / dii} siu
 speak /drunk /good FINAL PARTICLE (IMPERATIVE/EMPHATIC)
 ‘{Speak! / Get drunk! OR (I’m) drunk, indeed / Good, indeed}.’

In (1), predicates like ‘good’ can be reduplicated to emphasize the meaning, but others like ‘speak’ cannot. In (2), predicates like ‘tired’ are interpreted as the second verbs of the serial verb construction, but others like ‘good’ are interpreted as manner adverbs. In (3), ‘speak’ has an imperative reading with the particle *si^u*, while ‘drunk’ allows both imperative and emphatic readings, and ‘good’ has only an emphatic reading.

Enfield (2004) classifies “adjectives” as a sub-type of verbs in Lao, a language similar to Thai. By extending this view to Thai, I claim that “adjectives” should be treated as a particular class, though not as a syntactically independent category. My claim is based on the semantic properties of various types of predicates, as represented by Lexical Conceptual Structure (LCS). Thai predicates are divided into four types, each with a distinct LCS representation: (i) EVENTIVE PREDICATES (e.g. *tham-Naan* ‘work’), (ii) INHERENTLY STATIVE PREDICATES (e.g. *ru^u* ‘know’), (iii) INCHOATIVE PREDICATES (e.g. *maw* ‘be drunk/get drunk’), and (iv) ADJECTIVAL PREDICATES (e.g. *chala^uat* ‘clever’). The classification is based on the predicate’s property associated with “eventivity” (cf. Kageyama 2006). The major distinction lies between eventive (i.e. (i), (ii), and (iii)) and non-eventive (i.e. (iv)) predicates. Group (i) is consistently eventive, while (iii) is originally eventive but may be shifted to non-eventive by a certain semantic operation I propose. Group (ii) is seemingly stative but arguably involves backgrounded events in LCS. This leaves us with group (iv), which I propose to identify as the “adjectival” category in Thai. The semantic mechanism of predicates that I introduce can explain not only the above phenomena but also the semantic ambiguity of the predicate such as *p^u↔^u↔^u* ‘open/be open’ which is pointed out by Thepkanjana (2000).

References

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