A Comparative Study of Syntactic Structures of
Thai and English

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to compare and contrast different properties of English and Thai. The study examines the similarity and differences of English and Thai in light of noun phrases, adjectival phrases, verb phrases, adverbial phrases and the basic sentences structures of the two languages under study.

Introduction

Language is ‘a species specific’. It means that only human beings are capable to use language to express their feelings, ideas and concepts. It is a social phenomenon. All social activities are performed through language. It is the tool used for the communication between the addressee. In addition to a form of communication, language is a convention, a tradition and a social institution which can be systematic and unsystematic.

Thai is believed to belong to the Sino-Tibetan family. It is used in various places: Southern China, Burma, Northeastern India, Vietnam and Laos. The history of Thai (Tai) dates back more than 700 years. Thai is accepted as the national language. It is known as the standard Thai. It is the language used by the educated population and understood widely throughout the country due to its use at schools and in the mass media.

Thai belongs to the Tai language family, a subgroup of The Tai-Kadai family which originated in the southern part of China and northern part of Vietnam. The Tai family includes the language spoken in Assam, northern

Thai is a tonal, uninflected and monosyllabic language. Most polysyllabic words have been borrowed mainly from Khmer, Pali or Sanskrit languages. The written Thai, horizontally placed from left to right, consists of 44 consonants and 32 vowels. In writing, words in sentences are not separated. Punctuation is rare.

Thai as a tonal language has five phonologically contrasting tones: middle, low, falling, high and rising. Vowel sounds with different tones yield different meanings, for example:

- \( kha \) (mid) “to be unsettled”
- \( kh\dot{e}a \) (low) “galingale root”
- \( kh\hat{a} \) (falling) “value or to kill”
- \( kha' \) (high) “to trade”
- \( kha \) (rising) “leg”

Although there are five tones but there is no single word which is pronounced in all five tones.

Syntax is a term used for the study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences. Syntax governs the forms of strings by which a language is used to make statements, ask questions, give directives, and so on. Fundamental to understand the syntactic possibilities of words is a knowledge of the categories to which they belong. Words are conventionally divided into classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and so on, and it is on the basis of this division that higher units can be constructed. Syntax counts as the important constituent of language. Therefore it is very important to understand the syntax. With
the constituents of syntax well understood, the learners of language are in a better position to study the language more effectively.

Aims and Objectives

1. To study and analyze different properties of the syntactic structures of English and Thai.
2. To identify and compare the similarities and differences of the syntactic structures in English and Thai.
3. To facilitate Thai learners of English to learn English with a more satisfactory result.

Hypotheses

1. There are differences in the syntactic structures of English and Thai as the two languages belong to two different linguistic families.
2. The differences affect Thai learners of English as they face difficulties caused by the interferences of Thai syntactic structures. The researcher studies and finds out what the differences are.
3. The understanding of the syntactic structures of the two languages – English and Thai – will help the Thai learners to learn English effectively.

The present work examines the noun phrases in English and Thai and their constituents which include both pre-modification and post-modification. Noun phrases in Thai and their modifiers are divided into seven types: numeral, demonstrative, interrogative, genitive, adjective, prepositional and relative clause modifiers. The comparison of the noun phrases in English and Thai is illustrated as shown in the examples:

\[ \text{mamuang} /sak \ sip \ luuk/ \]
\[ \text{mongo} \ about \ ten \ CLS \]
‘about ten mangoes’
Attention is also given to the classifier, a unique modifier in Thai. The classifier words in Thai are the words used to specify the length, weight, volume, etc of an object. They act as a modifier of the head noun by adding more information. The following examples show how the classifiers play an important role in Thai noun phrases. They follow the head nouns which are in bold face. Noun phrases are singular. They are modified by the classifiers /bai/ and /tua/:

**suˇea** /tua/

shirtCLS

‘a shirt’

**mˇawn** /bai/

pillowCLS

‘a pillow’
The examples of the numeral modifiers of which the classifiers are a key part will clearly show how the classifiers as the constituent of the modifiers are important in Thai noun phrases. The classifiers require no translation in English.

As for the adjective phrases in English and Thai, the study provides a detailed account of adjectives in English and Thai. English adjectives are mainly pre-modified with some exceptions while Thai counterparts have a reverse order as they are post-modified only.

\[
\begin{align*}
H & \quad M \quad (Adj) \\
khon & \quad di: \\
\text{man} & \quad \text{good} \\
& \quad \text{‘a good man’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
dek & \quad uan \\
\text{child} & \quad \text{fat} \\
& \quad \text{‘a fat child’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
H & \quad \text{CLS} \quad M \quad (Adj) \\
ma: & \quad /\text{tua}/ \quad yai \\
\text{dog} & \quad \text{CLS} \quad \text{big} \\
& \quad \text{‘the big dog’} \quad (\text{a specific dog with a large body})
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ban} & \quad /\text{lang}/ \quad yai \\
\text{house} & \quad \text{CLS} \quad \text{big} \\
& \quad \text{‘the big house’} \quad (\text{a specific house’})
\end{align*}
\]

Intensifiers in English precede adjectives while Thai equivalent always follow adjectives.
Regarding the characteristics of verb phrases in English and Thai, the present work takes into account verb forms, types of verbs and functions of verbs. Verbs in Thai are different from English verbs, for example, they do not inflect to show an agreement with number, persons, tense etc. Auxiliaries in Thai which are divided into pre-verbal and post-verbal. For example: the main verb in Thai consisting of a sequence of a pre-verb, a verb and a post-verb, e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-v</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>Post-v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ma:</td>
<td>ao</td>
<td>pai/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>take</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘take it away’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| /ao   | kep  | wai/   |
|       | keep |        |
|       | ‘keep it’ |
Negative markers in Thai are compared to those in English. Common negative words in English are *no, not, never*. They are used to negate the expressions. In English, a sentence is typically negated through the verb by the insertion of *not* after the verb, for example, *the car is running* becomes *the car is not running*. If an auxiliary verb is present as in the sentence ‘the work will start’, *not* follows it as ‘the work will *not* start’. If no auxiliary is present, the relevant form of the auxiliary *do* (*do, does, or did*, according to tense and person) is used for the negation, for example, the sentence ‘they understand’ becomes ‘they do *not* understand’.

The negator in Thai is highly mobile as it can occur before the main verb, before the auxiliary verb and after the auxiliary verb. For example:

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/yang mai ma:/
still not come
‘still does/do not come’
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/ khong mai chawp/
probably not like
‘probably does/do not like’
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```
/ mai chawp/
not like
‘does/do not like’
```
The adverb phrases in English and Thai are remarkably similar as they can appear at the beginning or at the end of the sentences without changing the meaning of a sentence.

The initial position

/baːngthiː/ phom aːt pai/
sometimes i may go
‘I may go sometimes.’

The middle position

/khonthai suanmaːk mai kin plaː dip/  
Thai mostly not eat fish raw
‘Most Thais do not eat raw fish.’

The final position

/phom ruesuek buea baːŋkrang/
i feel bored sometimes
‘I feel bored sometimes.’
Conclusion

The followings are some findings in the study. There are considerable similarities between the two languages despite the fact that they belong to different language families. The differences are the main problems for Thai learners of English who are strongly affected by the mother tongue interference.

There are differences regarding noun phrases in Thai and English. It is found that the noun phrases in Thai are less flexible because they can have only post-modification, while the English noun phrases can have both pre-modification and post modification.

Example:

**English:** The beautiful(M) flowers (H) on the table (M).

**Thai:** /dokmai (H) suay bon toh (M)/

‘flower beautiful on table’

Noun phrases in Thai use the classifier for counting different types of objects. The noun phrases with the longer pre-modification poses a major problems to Thai learners as Thai has only the post-modification.

Adjectives and adverbs in Thai are usually put after the words they modify, for example:

**Adjective** / yai ma:k/ ‘big very’ = (very big)

**Adverb** /yang supha:p ma:k/ ‘politely very’ = (very politely)

Adjectives and adverbs in English are pre-modified, for example:

**Adjective:** very hot really good

**Adverb:** very quickly

Regarding the verb phrases in the two languages, the verb modifiers in English come before the main verb, while the verb modifiers in Thai can
precede and follow the main verb. The negative markers in English appear after the auxiliary verb while those in Thai can occur before and after the auxiliary verb.

The adverbial phrases in English are pre-modified. On the contrary, those in Thai are post-modified. However, adverbials in the two are flexible and significantly similar concerning the position in a sentence. They can appear at the beginning or at the end of the sentence.

Verbs in English can be changed into various forms such as *go, goes, going, went, gone* depending on the context. In contrast, verbs in Thai remain the same regardless of persons, tense or aspects, or persons.

There are seven basic clause patterns in English. Thai has five basic clause pattern with variations.

An unmarked sentence structure in the two languages is similar:

Subject – Verb – Object in the affirmative.

Example: English: He drinks water. (S+V+O)
Thai: /khao duem nam/ (S+V+O)
‘he drink water’

The sentence structure in affirmatives in English and Thai is remarkably similar. It begins with the subject, the verb and the object if any. The difference is found in the interrogatives. In English, the question words or the auxiliaries come first in the sentence. By contrast, the question words in Thai appear last.

Generally the head words of phrases in English have a left-branching and a right branching. The head words of phrases in Thai have only a right branching. As a result, Thai learners of English who are familiar with their own language structure find it hard to adjust to a left branching system. The situation is like a right-handed man who is forced to do things with his left hand.
Bibliography

English Version


**Thai Version**


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