

Review of "A reference grammar of Thai"

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BOOK REVIEW
A REFERENCE GRAMMAR OF THAI
BY SHOICHI IWASAKI AND PREEYA INGKAPHIROM

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1. INTRODUCTION

The volume under review is a landmark in Tai linguistics. Although exceeded in terms of scope and depth of analysis by Enfield's (2007) *A Grammar of Lao, A Reference Grammar of Thai* (henceforth RGT)—first published in 2005 and reissued in paperback in 2009—is the first comprehensive grammar of a Tai language written from a functional perspective. It makes extensive and effective use of well-transcribed interactional data, as well as of the manifold insights and decades of experience of its two authors, one of whom is a native speaker of Thai. As its title suggests, RGT is conceived somewhat differently from most grammars being written by descriptive linguists nowadays. Namely, as a “reference grammar”, RGT is explicitly designed to be of equal use-value to linguists and to students and teachers of the Thai language. This is no simple task. To satisfy the needs of the first group, the authors must provide sufficient and theoretically well-grounded information regarding the distribution, semantics, and grammatical status of every form and construction which is identified. To satisfy the needs of the second group, the authors must provide accessible, well-exemplified descriptions of use which can be readily built-on in practice, with a minimum of jargon and theoretical or typological discussion. Added to this is the seemingly simple matter of representation of data, which must be both accurate and, in a sense, normalized, if it is to provide both the level of detail regarding variation and reliability to satisfy the needs of both groups. In this reviewer's opinion, the authors achieve their desired balance about as effectively as anyone could. Nonetheless, by the very nature of the enterprise, there are likely to be areas in which description and analysis are insufficient for the purposes of some linguists, and, there are indeed several. Thus, while RGT is and will almost certainly remain the leading “first stop” reference work on Thai grammar for many years to come, it is far from the last word on the topic. Below, I provide a summary of RGT's presentation in section 2, followed by a brief general evaluation in section 3.

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2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

RGT is divided into 30 chapters, each one helpfully introduced by a succinct functional overview of the topic at hand (usually illustrated with examples from English). This main body is preceded by a very helpful general preface which includes information regarding data and transcription employed in the work, and is followed by both a subject index and a handy index of Thai words which are prominently employed in grammatical constructions (in Romanization). Here, the authors' transcription conventions are worthy of note. Faced with the difficulty of representing "natural" discourse in a major national language notorious for complications relating to speech register, effects of orthography and pedagogy, and extensive importation of loanwords and other conventions from languages of diverse structure (Diller 1988), the authors settle on the insightful solution of including two lines of transcription throughout the work: a first line in Thai orthography, in essence representing the conservative view of what "should" have been said, and a second line in IPA-based Romanization, representing what actually was said. The only exception is with "constructed" data which, kept to a minimum in this work, is scrupulously identified as such (in those cases, both lines of transcription represent the more conservative approach).

Chapter 1 is a useful, if brief, introduction to the Thai language, summarizing its phonological structure, orthography, lexicon, and syntax. Especially helpful for students will be the discussion of orthography and tones, which is exemplified by several excellent reference charts. This chapter also, however, reveals one of RGT's major weaknesses from a descriptive perspective, which is its thin treatment of phonology (totalling less than three-and-a-half pages). For example, "stress" is only mentioned as a concomitant of the lengthening or reduction of certain types of monosyllabic morpheme; there is no overall treatment of rhythm, nor is the word "iambic" even mentioned. In addition, certain orthographic conventions are introduced here which are designed to "increase readability", including the decision not to represent an ostensibly phonemic glottal stop except in contexts where it is "unpredictable" (so, for example, glottal stops which follow short vowels, since no short vowel can occur without a following glottal stop, are not transcribed). It remains to be learned whether at least some readers will find the text easier-to-follow as a result of this decision, but in view of the relevance of glottal stop to certain grammaticalization processes (Diller 2001), other readers will probably find its under-transcription unnecessary and unfortunate.

Chapter 2 discusses the structure of words, and presents several categories of prefix, suffix, compound, reduplication and other word-formation type—some of which have only rarely been discussed in the literature, such as acronyms— together with ample illustrative word sets. Non-Tai origins of certain formative types (such as Mon-Khmer infixes) are also helpfully discussed in passing, although more detailed discussions of productivity and selectivity in this context would have been ideal. The difficult topic of prefixal depth of grammaticalization is also broached here, together with the topic of "prefixes" which take certain

phrase types under their scope. Little analysis of the latter, however, is offered, leaving room for additional research in this area.

Chapters 3-6 discuss noun phrase structure and constituents. Chapters 3 and 6 are particularly useful and worthy of note here: 3 introduces “personal reference terms”, and encompasses pronouns, proper names, kinship terms and titles. Drawing heavily on Cooke (1968) as well as previous work by the authors (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie 2000) the authors illustrate a very insightful discussion of social hierarchy, viewpoint deixis and reciprocal use conventions with extended passages culled from actual discourse (then summarized in several useful charts). Missing here is a discussion of the (mainly nominal) lexical origins of many terms involved, which can also help explain some aspects of their conventional uses. Chapter 6 similarly discusses demonstratives from a highly informed discourse perspective, and includes detailed and well-exemplified discussions of prosodic functions (also drawing from discussion in Diller and Juntanamalaga (1989)); these discussions are sure to be as helpful to Thai language students as they will be to general linguists, shedding light on aspects of Thai vernacular discourse rarely treated in textbooks or other general works.

Chapters 4 and 5—discussing noun phrase structure and classifiers respectively—are somewhat less remarkable, mainly making use of constructed examples and containing little discussion of use and variation. Particularly confusing is the authors’ treatment of NP “headship” and “headless” NPs. As the authors note in passing, many (probably most) NP operators in Thai are derived from lexical nouns which continue to occur as such in the language, such as the genitive linker *khǎw* < ‘possession’ and the primary relativizer *thîi* < ‘place’, not to mention dozens of familiar classifiers. NP “headship” in Tai languages has accordingly long posed an analytical challenge (cf. Hundius and Kölver (1983) for one possible solution). The authors are not by any stretch alone among Tai scholars in being a little less than clear about the respective “head” statuses of, say, lexical nouns and classifiers and the structural and functional implications of ellipsis of either constituent; suffice it to say, then, that these are topics which remain to Tai scholars to fully and explicitly work out.

Chapters 7 and 8 treat adjectives and adverbs, being two aspects of one of the most controversial topics in South-East Asian linguistics, namely the lexical class-affiliation of such terms (cf. Prasithratsint (2000), Enfield (2004a) and Post (2008), among others). RGT largely sidesteps this controversy, by treating “adjective” and “verb” as labels for particular *constructional slots* rather than as labels for independent word classes as such (i.e., the same lexeme is viewed as an “adjective” when it modifies a noun and as a “verb” when it heads a predicate). This division notwithstanding, many constructions then analyzed as centrally adjectival are also based on, or may apply to, the predication construction, such as comparatives, leaving the class status of such forms somewhat unclear (since only property terms can usually head a predicative comparative construction; see Enfield (2004a) and Post (2008)). Far more useful is the treatment of adverbs, which contains an effective distributional subclassification that has not, so far as I

am aware, been found in any other work to date. While necessarily succinct in its analysis due to space concerns and the functional versatility of many of these forms, this Chapter is nonetheless well-exemplified by extended exchanges drawn from discourse and should provide numerous avenues for additional research in this area.

Chapters 9-12 turn to purely predicate-oriented matters, treating lexical and functional verbs and other verbal modifiers. Chapter 9 divides lexical verbs into intransitive, transitive and ditransitive types, and also helpfully identifies a number of verbal subclasses whose semantic properties (e.g. object thematic role subcategorization) correlate with certain syntactic features (e.g. accessibility to “passivization”). Ambitransitive verbs are treated as “lexically hybrid”; in essence, polysemous among two or more verbal subclasses. Oblique noun phrases and their marking are also treated in this chapter, for reasons which are somewhat less than clear. Chapter 10 presents what seems to this reviewer to be a new analysis of the often-discussed particle *cà?* (see Diller (2001)). Usually labeled ‘Irrealis’, the authors analyze *cà?* as a “challengeability marker”, indicating the speaker’s assessment of whether the information mentioned is or is not challengeable by an addressee as fact. In suggesting that *cà?* may mark a speaker’s modeling of the addressee’s belief state, the authors depart radically from the traditional view that *cà?* primarily conveys the *speaker’s own* evaluation of information as real/factual or unreal/hypothetical. Accordingly, this would seem to provide a useful departure for additional discourse-based empirical investigation. Chapter 11 turns to modality, and treats a number of “modal auxiliaries” which are, in essence, pre-head serialized verbs giving functions related to necessity, obligation, and degree of conjecture (they are not auxiliaries in the sense of hosting most predicate operators, for example). The addition of a section treating periphrastic expressions of “evidentiality” is a little odd, as this does not seem to constitute a well-grammaticalized category in Thai; nevertheless, from a functional perspective it is of course useful to understand how Thai handles things like hearsay, and this may be helpful to a Thai language learner as well. Finally, Chapter 12 is a very effective chapter on aspect; here, the authors quickly and quite correctly dispense with the applicability of “tense” to Thai grammar (in which “tense” operators are understood as deictically-bound time pointers, which certainly do not occur in Thai, nor, quite probably, do they occur in any Mainland Southeast Asian languages at all), and instead fearlessly expose the reader to an overview of no fewer than nineteen aspectual operators and their interactions with different verbal subclasses and with temporal adverbs. The discussions of lexical sources and functional values for the forms concerned are in general lucid, and the examples—mainly drawn from discourse here—are well-chosen, particularly in an extended analysis of inchoatives presented in Section 12.4.

Chapters 13-15 discuss “particles”, and focus on the “linking particle” *kô* in Chapter 13, “speech-level” formality particles such as *kháp* and *khâ* in Chapter 14 and the very large collection of “pragmatic particles” (mainly marking speaker

attitude towards the information expressed in a clause, as well as its function and status in the speech situation) in Chapter 15. Chapter 15 is especially worthy of note: drawing on previous research by the authors (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie 2000), the authors subdivide a very wide array of particles on the basis of functional content; namely, “general” particles occur with all varieties of speech act, and primarily assist the speaker in negotiating common understandings in the speech situation. “Information-oriented” particles more closely depict speaker attitude towards information content, and do not, for example, generally occur in imperative clauses, and a minor category of “action-oriented” particles are found only in imperatives. Especially useful here, and indicative of the functional principles guiding the authors’ presentation, is attention to the functional values of prosodic variation in particles, sensitivity to the emergence of “new” particles from construction-based variation, and the lexical and constructional sources of well-established particles. Approximately twenty pages of primarily conversational data effectively exemplify the analyses.

Chapter 16 treats “body-part expressions”, a topic which was effectively analyzed in previous work by Matisoff (1986) and Iwasaki (2002) (i.e., constructions such as *khǎw cay dii* ‘s/he is kind’ and *khǎw dii cay* ‘s/he is happy’). Treating the nominal attributee as a “topic” and the body-part-term/attribute complex as a “comment”, the authors decline to relate the structure to a construction-free account of grammatical relations between the three terms (if any such thing exists). Treating order variation as expressing an alternation between “external” and “internal” states, as in the previously-cited studies, RGT offers a broad semantic subclassification of Physical traits, Personalities, Sensation and Emotion together with dozens of well-chosen examples.

Chapter 17 discusses copular predication, primarily treating clauses based on equative/identity and attributive copulas *khǐi* and *pen*; a “semi-verbal” status of the latter is argued-for in terms of non-prototypical behavior in negative polarity contexts (section 17.3), and functional extensions of the copulas are also covered (including uses in clause-linking and hesitation). Verbless clauses are also briefly treated as cases of ellipsis of one or the other copula; very usefully, the authors also discuss discourse conditions for ellipsis in this context.

Chapter 18 covers the consistently challenging topic of serial verb constructions in Thai, for their analysis of which the authors rely considerably on the well-known work of Thepkanjana (1986). A broad division is made between “subordinative”, “coordinative” and “hybrid” types. The choice of terminology here is not entirely clear, since no argument is made for the existence of syntactic subordination in absence of morphological marking, and coordination with overt syntactic linkers in Thai is quite different from “coordinative” serialization (for example, no purposive implication is entailed by the former, unlike the latter); nevertheless, several functional bases underlying the division are adduced in passing (again, often relying on work by Thepkanjana). The overview is ultimately extremely rich in content; so much so that a tabulated summary of the findings (indicating subject-coreference, entailed event structure, semantic

implications, mechanics of negation, and verbal classes open to the constructions identified, at a minimum) would have been very, very helpful.

Chapters 19-22 discuss multi-clause constructions, including relative clauses (Chapter 19) complement clauses (Chapters 20 and 21) and adverbial clauses (Chapter 22). Chapter 19 quite lucidly presents markers and subtypes of restrictive relative clauses; non-restrictive relative clauses are treated as “subordinate clauses”, and are shown to associate relatively more closely with the “formal” relativizer *sĭŋ*. The licensing of relativizer-deletion is also discussed, although a more complete description—showing that relativizer-less clauses are in fact compositionally clauses rather than lexicalized compounds, despite semantic and functional similarity—may be found in Kuno and Wongkhamthong (1981) (also see the summary overview in Post (2008), where the term “attributive clause” is introduced to describe this modifying clause type).

Chapter 20 discusses complementation types other than those involving the speech verb-derived complementizer *wâa*, most of which are analyzed as being based on a juxtapositive “topic-comment” presentation. Chapter 21 contains an extremely detailed and, as far as I am able to judge, comprehensive overview of the very many functions of grammaticalized speech verb *wâa*, which is very well-exemplified by data from extended conversations. Here too, a summary table would have been very helpful. Particularly useful here is discussion of the more or less verbal properties of *wâa* in various constructions, often justified on the basis of complement semantics (discussion of the structural possibilities of negation here would also have been helpful).

Chapter 22 treats “adverbial clauses”, including temporal adverbial phrases, conditional subordinations, and reason and cause connectives. Markers of subordination, of which there are several, receive primary focus (rather than syntax), although some discussion of bare juxtaposition—in which lexical semantics and contextual pragmatics serve to decode an implied logical relation among clauses—is also included.

Chapters 23-24 treat polar (“yes/no”) and content (“wh-”) questions and related constructions respectively. Here, Chapter 23 notably provides a very useful chart giving several sample question types, illustrating the various types of rejoinder required by different polar question constructions. The distinction between polar question markers *măy* and *iřĭ* is somewhat unusually treated in this Chapter as a matter of speaker’s (*măy*) versus public (*iřĭ*) “territories of information” (rather than degree of speaker confidence in his/her model of the addressee’s information state). This topic would certainly merit additional research.

Chapter 24 divides question words into the traditional “nominal”, “adjectival” and “adverbial” forms (although the adjectival forms, at least, do not distribute very much like adjectives at all), and reveals a host of mainly in-situ uses of question words in Thai. Of particular value in this Chapter is the section on indefinite constructions—which employ the same set of lexemes as do content interrogatives—helpfully identifying indefinite uses in terms of the constructions

in which they most often occur; namely, conditional, negative, “modified”, and marked via a question marker such as *mǎy*. However, since indefinite readings are not exclusively licensed via particular constructions in Thai—contextual pragmatics and intonation often play a role—it would have been useful to also discuss and explain cases of syntactic ambiguity among interrogative and indefinite readings, since these can be a real source of difficulty for intermediate to advanced learners.

Chapters 25-29 focus on specific constructions which are prominent in Thai grammar, most of which involve functional uses of serialized verbs. Chapter 25 discusses reciprocals, distributives and collectives, all of which make use of a post-verbal, plural subject-referencing operator *kan*. Here, the different semantics and referential values of the three construction types are explained in terms of interaction between verb type (verbs of affect yield a reciprocal reading while activity verbs yield a distributive) and the composition of the subject noun phrase, as well as the addition of certain disambiguating operators (such as *duây* ‘also’ in the case of collectives).

Chapter 26 on “the passive” defines a passive functionally as an operation of “viewpoint shifting” between agent and patient (thus avoiding a definition based on syntax or argument marking), and primarily treats the transitive verb-derived passivizers *thùuk*, *doon* and *ráp* and the more preposition-like *dooy*. It is a pity here that treatment of objects is not more extensive in this chapter, as the interaction between object treatment and passivizer type in Thai is a topic of considerable potential interest. However, a closing section on *ráp*-V constructions is very thorough, and seems to contain a new and well-exemplified analysis of a complex predicate nucleus which should provide numerous avenues for additional research.

Chapter 27 discusses causative functions, distinguishing between lexicalized and periphrastic causatives in which an action verb serves as a serialized result complement to a main verb of causation like *do*, *make* or *give*. Here, the authors draw a clear distinction among causative verb types in terms of degrees of control. Of particular typological interest here will be the authors’ special focus on the role of *hây* ‘give’ in causative functions, which is shown to enable fine-grained control over depiction of causee volitionality.

Continuing on from Chapter 27 and building on extensive research in the area by the first author, Chapter 28 treats benefactive and purposive constructions also employing the verb *hây* ‘give’. The analysis here is fine-grained and well-exemplified, and includes extensive discussion of constructional semantics. Last in this group, Chapter 29 discusses functions of post-head serialized verbs *dây* ~ *dâay*, *pen* and *wǎy* in terms of varying semantics of potential projected onto the subject. Result serializations are also discussed in this context.

The final Chapter 30 is on discourse, and is—not surprisingly, perhaps, given the authors’ discourse orientation—probably the best in the volume. Rarely is a more helpful introduction to these often challenging topics offered by a descriptive grammar, and more rarely still in such a succinct form. The distinction

of “topic” and “subject” is clearly laid-out, and non-subject topics as well as proximate demonstrative-derived topicalizing operators are discussed and exemplified in good detail. Sections on pronoun use and referent-tracking in discourse are also clear and well-exemplified, and can be read profitably together with previous work by Cooke. Finally, variation-with-seeming-stability in the order of clause constituents is helpfully analyzed in terms of a preferred core argument structure S-V-DO-IO, which is yet subject to continual rearrangement due to factors of discourse prominence.

3. GENERAL EVALUATION

As an explicitly functional grammar, RGT generally achieves its aims. The organization is clear, logical and fairly comprehensive, examples are in general well-chosen and more than ample in quantity, and the inclusion of an index of forms makes RGT a useful reference from the point of view of both function-oriented and form-oriented queries. The presentation is succinct but rarely lacking in depth of analysis, and the discourse perspective of RGT both suggests a solid empirical basis for the authors’ findings and provides ample scope and suggestive lines of inquiry for additional discourse-based research. As was noted in passing at several points above, there are certain aspects of RGT’s analysis which differ (often strongly) with traditional views in Thai linguistics, and the book could—in this reviewer’s opinion—have benefitted from a more solidly construction-oriented approach at times (bracketing and labelling of constituents at many points would have been extremely useful in this context, although perhaps also a bit off-putting from a language teacher or student’s perspective).

My main criticisms have to do with some aspects of the book’s presentation. Several of these are not at all the fault of the authors, but rather reflect a generally lacklustre editing of a volume which deserves better (and not once but twice at that). The font chosen for phonetic characters, which appears to me to be SIL Doulos Unicode (if it is, the font developers are not properly credited) produces a mismatched line spacing as well as sometimes illegible placements of tone markers (particularly when forced into italics, which is something the font was not designed for). Worse, the alignments of morphemes and glosses in examples throughout the book are sometimes correct, but are much more often very irregular; this often makes it necessary to read through examples four or five times to be sure one has matched-up forms and glosses correctly. This is on the publisher’s side. My main criticism of the authors’ presentation—and this criticism applies to many, many other works in the Tai linguistics tradition—concerns glossing of functional morphemes, many of which in RGT receive no more informative a label than PP (pragmatic particle), ASP (aspect marker) or CLS (classifier). Particularly in a highly functionally/semantically-oriented grammar, such glosses tell the reader next-to-nothing, and often severely impede comprehension of examples. There are dozens of particles and classifiers in Thai; in fact, classifiers in Tai languages are, arguably, an open class (Enfield 2004b). Accordingly, it is no more appropriate to gloss a particle or a classifier ASP or

CLS than it is to gloss a lexeme “N”, “ADJ” or “V” (i.e., leaving semantic content almost entirely to the reader’s deduction). But as I said, RGT is by no means unique in Tai linguistics in adopting this practice whose days, I hope, are numbered.

In sum, RGT is an excellent functional grammar of the Thai language, marred by only a few flaws of presentation and occasionally uncertain analyses. It should prove to be as helpful to its two target audiences as the authors intend, and should certainly be used as a model for the development of functional grammars for other Mainland South-East Asian Languages.

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