Three ways to modify classifiers in Thai

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1. Introduction

Research Question: Semantically distinct groups of modifiers can license classifiers in Thai. What is the nature of these constructions, and can they be unified?


Evidence: The three constructions have clearly different syntactic and semantic properties. Diagnostic tests reveal the proper analysis of each construction.

2. Three ways to modify classifiers

- The three sequences below appear syntactically parallel:

  **Type (1) Classifier/measure + physical adjective:**
  a. māa tua jāj
     dog CLF big
     ‘(a/the) big dog(s)’
  b. naäm khìat lék
     water bottle small
     ‘a/the small bottle of water’

  **Type (2) Classifier + deictic modifier:**
  a. māa tua níi
     dog CLF this
     ‘this dog’
  b. mɔɔ khon diw
     doctor CLF sole
     ‘the sole doctor’

  **Type (3) Classifier + relative clause (or other XP):**
  māa tua [RC thìi REL kàt dèk]
  dog CLF REL bite child
  ‘the dog that bit the child’

- Hass (1942:204) conflates (1) and (2), labeling both “NOUN+CLASSIFIER+INDICATOR/ADJECTIVE.”

- Yet the interpretations provide an early clue that these sequences are distinct (Visonyanggoon 2000):
  - The noun phrases in (1) can be interpreted as indefinite; both (2) and (3) must be definite.
  - The noun phrases in (1) can be interpreted as plural; both (2) and (3) must be singular.

- Based on their shared interpretative differences from (1), Visonyanggoon (2000:67-70) conflates (2) and (3).
Yet the semantics of the modifiers in (2) and (3) are distinct:
- The modifiers in (3) are intersective predicates, while the modifiers in (2) are non-predicative deictic items.
- Syntactic tests are needed to more clearly distinguish between these three kinds of modifiers.

### 3. Different behaviors of classifier-modifier sequences

#### Type 1: Clf + Size.Adj

**Test 1: Omit the classifier**

(4)  mùa jà̀
    dog  big
    ‘big kinds of dogs’ (e.g. rottweilers)

- The adjective now modifies the dog-kind.

**Test 2: Change the noun**

(5)  mɔ̌ɔ tua jà̀
    doctor  body  big
    ‘the large doctor’ = big-bodied

- The ‘body’ classifier is retained, otherwise restricted to animals, furniture, and clothing.

**Test 3: Use clf-mod sequence as a predicate**

(6)  mɔ̌ɔ khon níi tua-jà̀
    doctor  CLF  this  body-big
    ‘This doctor is big-bodied.’

- The putative clf-adj sequence can be used as a predicate.

- This “classifier” is part of a compound predicate (cf. Visonyanggoon 2000).

#### Type 2: Clf + Deixis

**Test 1: Omit the classifier**

(7)  * mùa níi / diiw
    dog  this / sole

- The classifier cannot be omitted.

**Test 2: Change the noun**

(8)  mɔ̌ɔ khon níi / diiw
    doctor  CLF  this / sole
    ‘this doctor’ / ‘the sole doctor’

- The classifier for humans must be used.
Test 3: Use clf-mod sequence as a predicate

(9) *mɔɔ̌ɔ thîi ní thîi diiw
    doctor CLF this CLF sole
    ‘this doctor’ / ‘the sole doctor’

➢ This is not a well-formed sentence or DP.

➢ The classifier in this construction is genuine and obligatory.

Type 3: Clf + XP

Test 1: Omit the classifier

(10) maa thîi __ kàt diêk
    dog REL bite child
    ‘(a/the) dog(s) that bite children’

➢ Plural and indefinite meanings emerge.

Test 2: Change the noun

(11) mɔɔ̌ɔ thîi __ kàt diêk
    doctor CLF person REL bite child
    ‘the doctor that bites children’

➢ The classifier for humans must be used.

Test 3: Use clf-mod sequence as a predicate

(12) * mɔɔ̌ɔ thîi ní thîi __ kàt diêk
    doctor CLF this CLF REL bite child
    ‘this doctor that bites children’

➢ The Clf-RC sequence is now appositive, a pause is needed after the demonstrative.

➢ The classifier here is genuine but leads to a definite interpretation.

4. Possessor control and the complex predicate

• The Clf-Adj sequence in Type 1 is a compound predicate:

(13) a. tua-sûnû body-tall ‘tall’
    b. hùn-dii figure-good ‘in good shape’
    c. phôm-sû-kém hair-color-dark ‘brunette’
    d. soŋ-klom shape-round ‘round’
    e. caj-yen heart-cool ‘calm’
Three Ways to Modify Classifiers in Thai

• These sequences pass criteria for Thai adjective-hood, such as intensive reduplication (Visonyanggoon 2000: p. 201):

(14) mɔɔ khon níi caj-[yen-yen] / [[caj-yen]-caj-yen]
doctor CLF this heart-cool
‘This doctor is quite calm.’

(15) **Generalization:** [NP/DP Possessor [A Possessum – Adj]]

• (13-15) follow if a PRO-possessor is associated with N →

• In noun phrases AP is adjoined to NP.

• Evidence against movement:
Idiomatic meanings are lost when Clf-Adj sequences are separated.

5. Deictic modifiers and classifier obligatoriness

• Deictic modifiers can be either head-like (a-c) or phrasal (d):

(17) a. mɔɔ khon níi this ‘this doctor’
b. mɔɔ khon nɨŋ one ‘a certain doctor’
c. mɔɔ khon rɛ̂k first ‘the first doctor’
d. mɔɔ khon [thī thām] third ‘the third doctor’

• In some cases deictic modifiers can recur:

(18) mɔɔ khon rɛ̂k níi
doctor CLF first this
‘This first doctor.’
• (17-18) follow if deictic modifiers are adjuncts to ClfP:

(19)  

• Definiteness arises due to a null determiner.
• Singularity arises due to a null numeral ‘one’, licensed by D.
• For NP-movement, see Visonyanggoon (2000), Simpson (2005), a.o.

6. Null determiners and the CMC

• The null determiner and numeral ‘one’ in (19) are ad hoc. The Type 3 “Classifier-Modifier Construction” (CMC) provides further support for them.
• Only predicative modifiers appear in the CMC, semantically distinguishing the CMC from deictic modifiers:

(20) a. nák-tên sūaj dancer beautiful dancer CLF beautiful
    b. nák-tên khon sūaj
    i. ‘a good dancer’
    ii. ‘an attractive dancer’ (only)
• While the classifier is optional, somehow it is licensed by the predicative modifier, a puzzle:

(21) * mɔɔ khon
toon doctor CLF

• Recall that the CMC must be definite and singular (see 10).
• (20-21) can be derived if the predicative modifier is a relative clause complement of D (Kayne 1994):
Three Ways to Modify Classifiers in Thai

(22)

![Diagram of word structure]

- The classifier in (21) is ruled out due to the availability of definite bare nouns (Piriyawiboon 2010) in Thai via structural economy (Jenks 2011).
- The classifier is licensed in (22) because the classifier is no longer a complement of D (see Jenks 2011 for details).

8. Conclusions

- The three constructions in (1-3) require three different structures despite superficial similarities.
- The putative “classifier” in (1) is not a classifier at all, but the nominal component of a compound predicate.
- Closer investigations of (2-3), on the other hand, provide support for the presence of a null D head in Thai.

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References