

TWO TYPES OF SEMANTIC CONTRAST BETWEEN THAI AND LAO

THOMAS W. GETHING

The close genetic relationship between Thai and Lao and, indeed, among the various languages in the Tai family, is well known and equally well documented (Li 1960:951). However, since comparative studies to date have been largely restricted to phonology and lexicon, it seems appropriate to begin to consider other aspects of these languages. The results of such comparisons may prove useful in evaluating the extent to which semantic structure, for example, may be relevant in comparative analysis in the Tai family and may also enhance our understanding of the modern vernaculars.

Even a casual comparison of surface phrase structures of Lao and Thai reveals a remarkable degree of similarity. This similarity can be seen despite differences between particular lexical items which may perform the same syntactic and semantic function in the two languages. The following pairs of sentences are illustrative:

- (1) L /wánphūt ?aacaan háy nākhían ?athibaay lʔaŋ kaanpòkkhóŋ/
- (2) T /wanphút ?aacaan háy nákrían ?athíbaay rʔaŋ kaanpòkkhróŋ/
'Wednesday the professor had the student explain (about)
government.'
- (3) L /thaháan ñáŋ bōŋ dày pay hóŋsinèe máa/
- (4) T /thaháan yaŋ mây dây pay rooŋnăŋ maa/
'The soldier hasn't come back from the movie theater yet.'
- (5) L /náay khúu māk ñāŋ máa hóŋhían thūk mʔi/
- (6) T /khun khruu chōp dæŋ maa rooŋrian thúk wan/
'The teacher likes to walk to school every day.'

(7) L /khôy hēt kaan nám ?àay láaw/

(8) T /phǒm thamṅaan kàp phīchaay khǎw/

'I work with her/his older brother.'

These examples are interesting also because they show a progression from complete identity of lexicon, item by item, to a total dissimilarity of lexicon, item by item (the tonal, consonantal, and vocalic correspondences between the cognate forms being regular throughout). The explanation of any one of these dissimilarities would be a useful exercise, since a variety of processes is involved. For example, sentence 3 has an apparent case of borrowing (/sinèe/ from French ciné), while /māk/ in sentence 5 may be related by semantic shift to Thai /māk cà/ 'likely to' (cf. the relic form preserved in the idiomatic /māk mâak/ 'to be very greedy'). The discussion below is devoted to an inspection of two aspects of the semantic structure of Thai and Lao.¹

Two types of contrast between Thai and Lao are exemplified in the following sentences:

(9) L /khám ?ù y mēen khón (thī māk mâkmūaṅ)/

'Khamoui is the person (who likes mangoes).'

(10) L /pinkhám pen náay khúu/

'Pinkham is a teacher.'

(11) T /praanii khiṅ khon (thī chṅop mámuṅaṅ)/

'Prance is the person (who likes mangoes).'

(12) T /wílay pen khruu/

'Wilai is a teacher.'

(13) L /sṅdam yūu nīi/

(14) T /dinsṅ yūu thī nīi/

'The pencil is here.'

(15) L /sṅdam yūu phīi/

'The pencil is right here.'

(16) T /dinsṅ yūu thī nōon/

'The pencil is over there.'

¹A number of useful comments by my colleague, D. Haigh Roop, on an earlier version of this paper have been incorporated here. I am indebted to him for his views and to two of my assistants in the University of Hawaii Department of Indo-Pacific Languages for their willingness to share with me their native speaker reactions to the examples cited in this paper. I would like to acknowledge with thanks the help of Vilai Prathnadi Grandstaff and Thao Kham-Oui. I must, however, be held accountable for the interpretation of the data.

The dialects represented in the data are educated standard (Central Plains) Thai and educated standard (Vientiane) Lao. The transcription is that of Gething (1972) for Thai and an adaptation of the same system for Lao. The Lao tones are marked as follows: ∅ lower mid level; - upper mid level; ' high; ˇ rising; ˘ high falling; ^ low falling.

Looking first at examples 9-12 we see two pairs of structures which are identical semantically and syntactically. Sentences 9 and 11 are equational sentences, while 10 and 12 fill the indefinite functions of the copula; all are NP V NP strings. For a more detailed discussion of the syntax of the Thai copula see Warotamasikkhadit (1969 and 1972: 14-15) and Needleman (1973:55). Turning to the semantic structure we find here a situation which contrasts with English structure. In English the syntactic structure is complex, namely NP V Art NP, and the single copula, 'to be', functions with the definite article (as in the translations for 9 and 11) or with the indefinite article (as in the translations for 10 and 12). For Thai and Lao the semantic structures are isomorphic. The diagrams below (adapted from Gething 1972) may help illustrate the point.

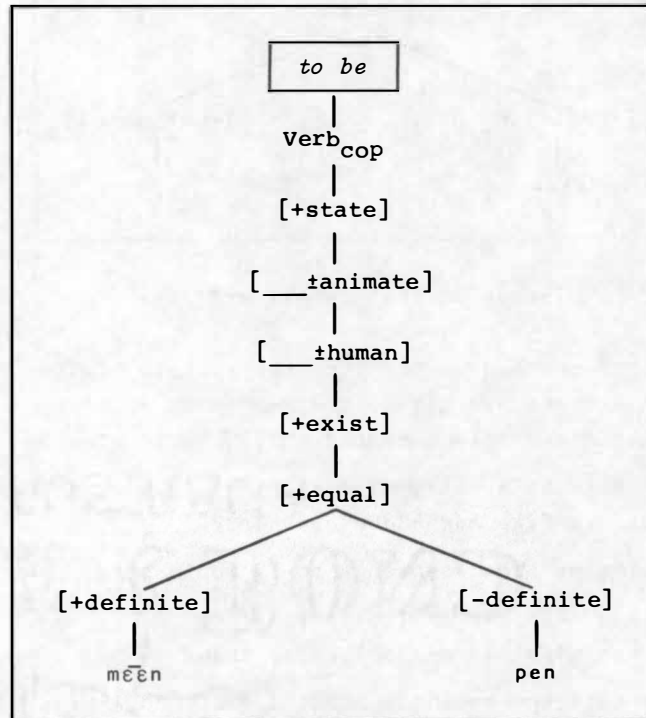


Diagram 1, Lao /mēēn/ and /pen/

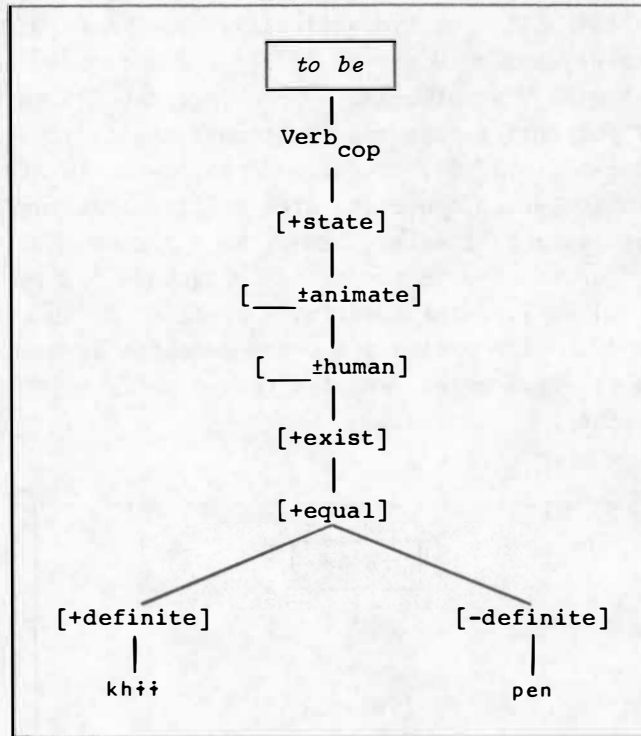


Diagram 2, Thai /khi:/ and /pen/

It is important to observe that the Lao cognate of Thai /khi:/ has a quite different semantic structure and serves as an example of one type of semantic contrast: simple semantic shift. Note example 17 below.¹

- (17) /khám ?ùý khíi ?àay láaw/
 'Khamoui is like his older brother.'

The nearest equivalent Thai sentence to 17 would be:

- (18) /naay kɔɔ mʃan kàp phîichaay khǎw/ or
 /naay kɔɔ mʃan kàp pen phîichaay khǎw/

Diagram 3 represents the semantic structure of Lao /khí:/ and may be compared with Diagram 2 above.

¹The existence of a homophonous form /khí:/ in Lao with a semantic structure virtually identical to Thai /khi:/ appears to be a very late borrowing from Thai into Lao. Lao /khí:/ 'to be (equational, definite)' occurs only in platform address and is used for introductions.

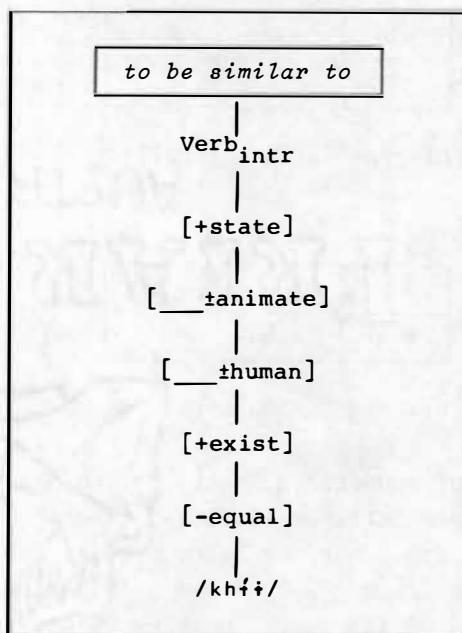


Diagram 3, Lao /khfi/

In looking at the second type of semantic contrast the evidence of sentences 15 and 16 is relevant. That 15 and 16 are semantically isomorphic can be readily seen. However, sentence 15 and sentence 16 both stand alone, that is, 15 has no close match in Thai and 16 no close match (short of circumlocution) in Lao. The following additional examples are needed to complete the inventory of demonstrative adjectives (or locative nouns) in Thai and Lao:

- (19) L /sǎdam yūu phùn/
'The pencil is there (somewhere).'
- (20) L /sǎdam yūu hân/
'The pencil is right there.'
- (21) T /dinsǎo yūu thīnân/
'The pencil is there.'

A graphic arrangement of the locatives in the two languages may help to illuminate the contrast (see diagrams 4 and 5). Here a cautionary note is in order. A semantic distinction between /nīi/ and /thīnīi/ [proximal] plus ['in sight'] versus [proximal], but not necessarily within eyesight, has not been reflected in Diagram 4 to permit a more felicitous presentation of the contrast under discussion.

nîi	nân	nôn

Diagram 4, Thai Locatives

nîi	hân	
phîi	phùn	

Diagram 5, Lao Locatives

Note, for the sake of comparison, that English has only two primary locative forms; the upper left box is filled ('*here*') and the upper middle one ('*there*'). The remaining boxes require secondary, derived forms of circumlocutions, e.g. '*over there*', '*right here*'.

For some speakers of Thai a fourth primary locative exists, although it looks suspiciously like a derived form (by an albeit morphophonemically unique, *ad hoc* rule): /nûn/ '*way over there*'. The data presented in Diagram 6 are the most general and usual locatives for Thai.

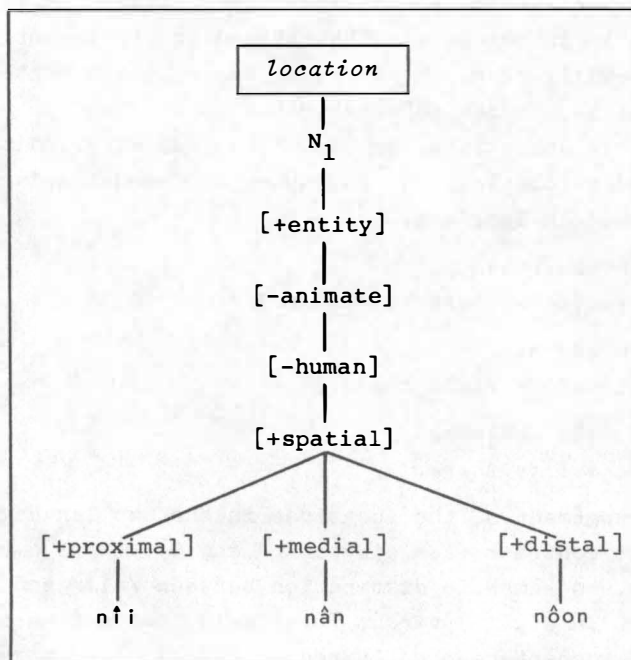


Diagram 6, Thai /nîi/, /nân/, and /nôn/

Before diagramming the Lao forms a comment on variation is necessary. The presentation here is based chiefly on the idiolect of a single native speaker. It appears from a few spot checks with other Laotians that the locative system varies somewhat from speaker to speaker. Some natives do not differentiate semantically between /nîi/ and /phîi/ nor between /hân/ and /phùn/. It is tempting to speculate that these speakers may be losing (or, better perhaps, have already lost) a contrast which was formerly quite widespread. It is possible that pressure from Thai or systemic pressure within the Tai family could account for this putative case of semantic loss in Lao.

By way of an aside it should be observed that the meanings diagrammed here are only one set of senses for these words. Thai /nîi/ and /nân/, for example, are polysememic forms and in other contexts in the language are the sole locatives, functioning in a two-way, English-style system. The complexities of an exhaustive analysis of the total semantic system have been avoided, however, in order not to obscure the basic argument about contrastive structures in the two Tai languages.

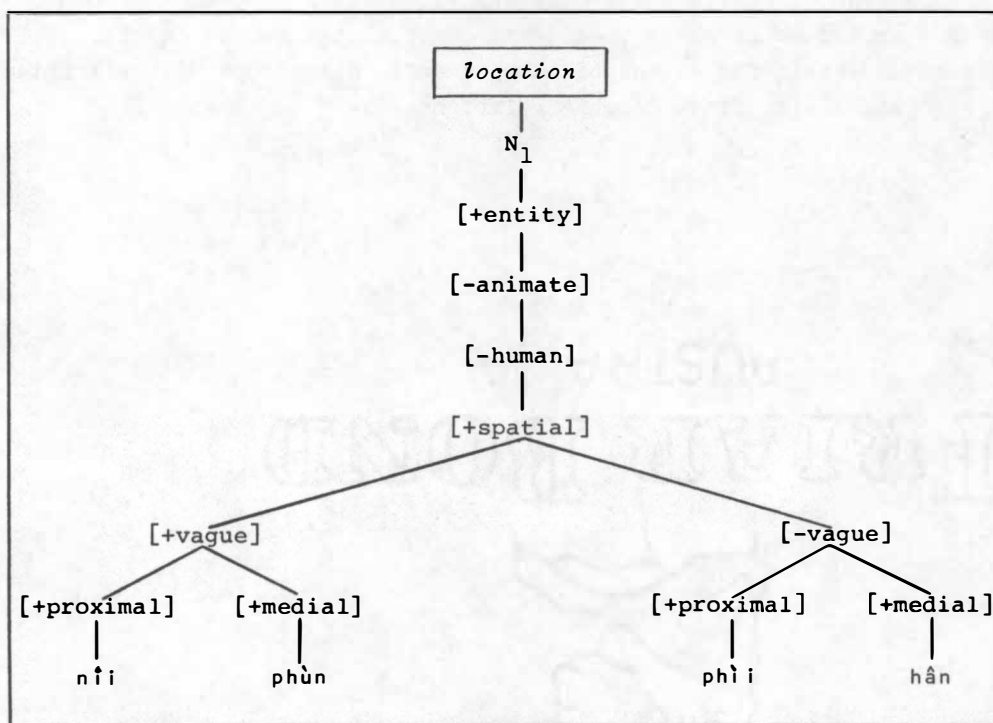


Diagram 7, Lao /nîi/, /hân/, /phîi/, and /phùn/

If we contrast Thai (diagrams 4 and 6) with Lao (diagrams 5 and 7) we see a uni-dimensional categorisation of the semantic notion of "location" with three defining features on the one hand and a bi-dimensional categorisation of "location" with two defining features on the other.

It is worth observing that the Lao cognate of Thai /nîi/ does not carry the meaning significatum of preciseness found in the Thai form (as indicated by the feature [+vague]). The historical relation between the remaining locative terms in Thai and Lao is beyond the scope of this discussion.

To recapitulate, we have analysed examples of two kinds of semantic contrast between Lao and Thai. The first case was one of semantic shift in which the semantic dimensions were entirely coterminous. The second case showed semantic dimensions which were in sharp contrast with each other. Of the two types of contrast the former is the more usual in Thai and Lao in terms of gross frequency of occurrence. Indeed, it is likely that further research will show that the majority of the lexical items in the two languages do not contrast in semantic structure at all. The second type of contrast is, however, extremely interesting. More attention should be given to these, and other, languages in the Tai family to ascertain the extent of this semantic dimension "disequilibrium" among languages with close genetic relationships.