

Signifying Units in an Isolating Language The Case of Thai

The signifying unit, or to put it more simply, the word, is a fundamental notion which is generally taken for granted. Moreover, it is also generally taken for granted that signifying units are the same in any language—whatever the definition which may be used depending on the linguistic school one belongs to, it is implied that differences occur simply at the levels of phonological, syntactic and semantic systems between different languages and not at the level of signifying units. The only known

บทคัดย่อ

ความเข้าใจตามแนวแบบจารีตที่ว่าภาษาไทยมีจุดเด่นแตกต่างจากภาษาอื่น ๆ ตรงที่ระบบของคำ โดยมีลักษณะเป็นภาษาคำโดด คำแต่ละคำมีพยางค์เดียว เน้นความต่างที่เสียงวรรณยุกต์ ผู้เขียนจะแสดงให้เห็นว่า สำหรับภาษาศาสตร์สมัยใหม่แล้ว หน่วยความหมายในภาษาของภาษาคำโดดนั้นไม่มีความแตกต่างโดยพิเศษจากภาษาอื่น ๆ ความแตกต่างที่มีเป็นพิเศษจะอยู่ที่ความสัมพันธ์ภายในโครงสร้าง ซึ่งส่งผลกระทบต่อระบบโดยรวม อันเป็นข้อเท็จจริงที่มักมองข้ามไป โดยอาศัยการวิเคราะห์ที่ตัวอย่างงานภาษาไทยเปรียบเทียบกับงานภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งเป็นภาษาในตระกูลอินโดโรเบียน การวิเคราะห์นี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงข้อดีของความเข้าใจในแนวแบบจารีตได้อย่างแจ่มชัด

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I wish to thank Mr Todd Babcock for proof reading this paper

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exception to this rule is what is labelled the traditional school, which considered differences between languages in terms of word structure, classifying languages such as Thai among tonal, monosyllabic, isolating languages. Thus, one contribution of modern linguistics is to treat words indifferently in various languages, paying little or no attention to whether they are monosyllabic or not, whether they are isolating, synthetic or anything else. After all, words in any language meet the basic conditions of form and meaning which institute them as such, and other characteristics may be disregarded as secondary curiosities illustrative of the variety between languages.

However, these characteristics, though not really important in themselves, are indicative of systemic features which bear quite a few consequences. Units in isolating languages may not be different in nature from other languages, but they are somewhat different in their modalities, and the difference proves to condition the system as a whole, a fact which appears to be generally overlooked.

To demonstrate this assertion, a short Thai text of 100 words has been analysed¹. The sample may seem too small to support generalizations but actually it proves sufficient for the demonstration. A comparison has also been made with an English text². The comparison proved fruitful because it permits to identify some characteristics of Thai which would otherwise have remained unnoticed. English was chosen as an example because it is an Indo-European language, and the methods of linguistics have been elaborated mostly in the context of Indo-European languages, and because it shows, superfi-

¹ดอกไม้สด, *กรรมเก่า*. กรุงเทพฯ หน้า ๓๔. Dokmai Sot, *An old malediction*. Bangkok. p. 34. See annex.

²Paul Auster, *Leviathan*. London. 1992. p. 173. See annex. The two texts are comparable as they are both extracts from modern novels which contain mostly dialogues.

cially, some of the characteristics of isolating languages (monosyllabic words and reduced morphology).

Concerning the basic concepts, we will rely on a Saussurian approach, defining a signifying unit as an element which meets the following conditions:

- It is the product of a form and a meaning which are inter-dependent within it;
- Both form and meaning identify in terms of differences;
- It cannot be divided as a whole, a necessary condition to be considered as a unit.

A quick glance at the Thai text confirms what is already known, namely that words are monosyllabic in their majority. The text contains as many as 74 occurrences out of 100 of monosyllabic words, such as หมอ /mǎ:/ "doctor". First of all, the result is induced by the choice of a text. If the count had been made from randomly selected pages of the dictionary, the results would certainly have been quite different, as the dictionary lists all the words, treating equally those which are quite common, and usually monosyllabic, and those which are rare, and commonly polysyllabic. As a matter of fact, the text chosen contains only 51 units which are monosyllabic, some of which, like ไม่ /mâj/ "negative not", being repeated several times. Concerning the 26 occurrences of polysyllabic words, they involve 22 units, implying that polysyllables are not used so repeatedly as monosyllables³. Nearly half of these polysyllabic units (10) are compounds which can be segmented into monosyllabic words though they behave as units. For example, เดินทาง /dɔːntʰaːŋ/ "to travel" works as

³In two cases, the polysyllables are repeated proper nouns because they are the topic of the sentences.

a syntactic and semantic unit but it is composed of two monosyllabic words which could be used independently from each other: เดิน /dɔːn/ “to walk” and ทาง /tʰaːŋ/ “way, path”. The few remaining words are loans from Sanskrit-Pali, retaining a strong flavour of their origin (บริโภค /bɔːrɨpʰhɔːk/ “to consume, to eat”), words of Thai stock which cannot be segmented in the present usage (อะไร /araːj/ “what?, something”) and proper nouns for which the monosyllabic feature is not really relevant (หลังสวน /lǎŋsuan/ “Lang Souan, name of a town”). To sum up, words in Thai are monosyllabic in their great majority, and when not, they can be segmented into monosyllabic signifying units, and the remaining cases are few. Thus, even though the constraint is only quantitative, it appears to occur in a high proportion.

The observation of the English text reveals an even higher number of monosyllabic signifying units, with 83 occurrences and 46 units. The number of units involved is proportionately quite lower, which means that more units are repeatedly used, as is the case of the article *the*. As a matter of fact, English uses frequently such monosyllabic grammatical words, whereas Thai is not so constraining in that respect. Also, the number of compounds is nearly equivalent in English (9).

Consequently, one must admit that an English text can contain a comparable or even higher proportion of monosyllabic units. It would be wrong to assume that monosyllabism is an original feature of Thai, or an isolating language in general, even simply in quantitative terms as the contrary can be true.⁴ In fact, the difference proves to be qualitative, as will be shown, which finally makes the

⁴The result is in part induced by the sample: another comparable English text gave only 62% of occurrences of monosyllables.

comparison between English and Thai poorly relevant.

There are in English quite a few cases of monosyllables which contain more than one signifying unit. 6 syllables contain two signifying units (e.g. *tried* = *try* + *-ed*), and 3 contain three signifying units (*couldn't* = *can* + *preterit* + *-not*). Concerning the latter case, we can count two syllables with a syllabic /n/ and we also note that words intermingle to the point that we cannot really assert from a synchronic point of view that there are two units (*can* + *preterit*) in *could*. The last two remarks actually rather show that we are raising problems which do not exist in English. Even though the cases of several units in one syllable are comparatively rare in English, it is important to note that there are no such examples in Thai and it is certainly impossible to find any in any text. Thus, a first difference between the two languages is that, in Thai, there can be no more than one signifying unit in a syllable, whereas in English it is possible.

The second difference is that the Thai chain can be divided into syllables with strict limits, whether they form signifying units or not, whereas in English it is not really possible, or it is rather pointless. If we take the example of the Thai polysyllabic unit พิถีก /p^hílyk/ "strange", it can only be divided into พิ ถี ก /p^hí lýk/ exclusively of *พิถี ก /p^hí lýk/, which cannot even be properly written in Thai. This segmentation is compulsory since 1) the consonant /l/ cannot appear at the end of a syllable, 2) a vowel does normally not appear at the beginning of a syllable without being preceded by a glottal stop, and 3) the high tone would be quite abnormal in that context. In such a case, there are three constraints which impose concurrently a process of segmentation and impose it in a way exclusive of another one. To generalize, we can say that any combina-

tion of syllables in Thai can be thus segmented, whether it involves several words or just one polysyllabic word. There can sometimes be more than three constraints at play, sometimes fewer, but in all cases, syllables are separated in one way or another⁵. Concerning the English text, we note that the operation of division in syllables is not so easy. In *instead*, it is possible to identify two syllables, but it is not possible to determine if the first syllable ends at *in-*, *ins-*, why not *inst-*, and if the last one begins at *stead*, *-tead* or *-ead*. More important, the operation proves useless in English as the language does not impose systematic constraints on the delineation of syllables and whether one solution or the other is chosen makes no difference. Thus, the second originality of monosyllabism in Thai is that the language compels to delineate the syllables between each other, whether the syllables are in contact within a signifying unit or a phrase, whether the syllables constitute independent signifying units on their own or not.

We finally observe that the original characteristic of an isolating language such as Thai does not lie in the fact that a word must consist of just one syllable, this is just a quantitative constraint, but in the facts that there can be no more than one signifying unit in one syllable and that any chain must be delineated in syllables with clear borders. Consequently, it is possible to institute in Thai a level of analysis corresponding to the syllable, intermediate between the phoneme and the word. It must be stressed that this level is not so important as these last two, in particular because phonemes and words are units, whereas syllables are not, but it cannot be overlooked in the case

⁵There are exceptions with Sanskrit-Pali polysyllabic words where usage hesitates.

of Thai. It can be in English because it does not really offer ground for description and anyway is not very important but, in Thai, this level not only can be described but also plays some part in the system since the constraints that the syllable imposes on the signifying unit are one of the parametres affecting its behaviour.

To describe the syllable in Thai, it must first be noticed that it is subjected to many combinative restrictions between phonemes. To give the most important ones, a syllable rarely starts with more than one consonant; only a limited number of consonants can be used in an initial consonant cluster; in the case of an initial cluster, there can never be more than two successive consonants; there can only be one consonant at the end of the syllable; only a limited number of consonants can appear at the end of a syllable; the tones cannot appear on any syllable but are restricted depending on the rhyme, etc.

Syllables are also submitted to many demarcating constraints, as evoked above. The demarcation is operated by a complex of devices, the most important of which are as follows: quite a few consonants like /s/ can only appear at the initial position and their presence always indicates the beginning of a syllable; many combinations of consonants are impossible in the same syllable and their co-occurrence always indicates the end of a syllable and the beginning of another one in the chain -for example the joint presence of /t/ necessarily indicates that the /t/ delineates the end of a syllable and the /l/ the beginning of the following one; the stops receive a different phonetic realization whether they appear at the beginning of a syllable or at the end, as the plosion is not realized in the latter case; a glottal stop regularly appears before a vowel preceded

by no consonant and after a short vowel followed by no consonant, etc. As a result, the contact of two syllables is indicated either at both contiguous extremities of each or at only one, but never does it remain without indication.

We see that the sets of constraints imposed on the phonetic structure of words in Thai are quite numerous and heavy, all the more so, if we take into account the fact that most words are composed of only one syllable. It is sometimes said that because of these limitations, Thai can create only a restricted number of units. The restriction, if any, does not appear to be a handicap for the language in any way, and it is more important to remark that the combined sets of constraints are quite important for the system.

A first consequence is that there is very little or no room at all for redundancy in the phonic composition of words, that is, there is rarely more than a single phoneme in a word which differentiates it from others. If we take the example of มา /ma:/ "to come", all the three phonemes of the word are alone distinctive, as the word is opposed to ตา /ta:/ "eye", มี /mi:/ "to have" and ม้า /má:/ "horse". Every time a single phoneme is changed, we thus encounter a different word. Any variation, under the pressure of context or for any other reason, would not produce another form of the same word but another word. It would of course be easy to find examples where there are two phonemes or more which are redundantly distinctive but the general situation is that there are too many cases where a change in the form of a unit would produce a confusion with another unit for the possibility to be exploited as a device.

Another fact to note is that syllables cannot intermingle in any way because their borders are always strongly delineated in a chain.

To give a contrary example taken from English, there can be some intermingling process between *will* and *not* into *won't*. In Thai the negative, as any other word, cannot fuse with another syllable as it is delineated just like the word that it precedes. For example, the combination from the Thai text ไม่แสดง /mâj/ sàdɛŋ/ /negative not/ to show/ cannot intermingle in any way. On the contrary, both words have clear borders, and when it is not the case, it is their very contact which indicates their respective borders. Also, any variation in the form of one word or of two words in contact would produce too high a risk of confusion to maintain the set of differences that a language obligatorily needs to function. Actually, the two characteristics under examination (the scarcity of redundancy and the strict delineation of syllables) are interrelated in so much as they constrain and support each other: a syllable cannot vary in its form as its borders make impossible the interference of another one from the context and as it may lose its identity to another word in the process.

Consequently, syllables in a Thai chain can only occur one after another with nothing similar to the mesh we are familiar with in Indo-European languages. A given word retains its complete identity, without being affected in any way by its context and it displays impenetrable borders with the contiguous ones, to which it remains completely indifferent. Conversely, it compels the contiguous ones to manifest in the same way and syllables thus mutually coerce to behave indifferently to each other. A Thai chain consists simply of syllables lined up one after another with no incidence on each other.

Furthermore, each syllable in Thai is constrained to be complete in itself. It cannot depend on any other to achieve its completion and on the other hand, it can neither contribute to the completion of another

one. As a matter of fact, whether they are composed of a single syllable or several, words are always complete in themselves and need neither combination nor complement to achieve their completion. To this situation can be contrasted the case of Sanskrit where some words may have no full form but depend on some context to acquire it, such as in the word root *ईत्-* /*ètsà-*/ “horse” found in some compounds used in Thai as loanwords. The completion by itself of the syllable, and of the word as it proves to amount to the same thing in that respect, is indeed an outstanding feature of Thai.

It is worth noting that quite a few of the characteristics at the formal level of the syllable and the word described above can be transposed to the syntactic level. Actually, the invariability of words in Thai is not merely syntactic but both phonic and syntactic in character.

It is easy to verify that words in Thai are syntactically invariable as no word in the Thai text would vary if transposed to another context. To this, one must oppose the English text, in which are found 43 occurrences of words which can vary depending on their context for 21 units, as the units which are more often repeated are those which can change form, such as *do* (*did, done*) or *the* (/ðə/ /ði:/). English is sometimes compared to isolating languages, but it appears that nearly half the words of the text examined are subject to variation depending on the context.

As noted, the Thai text presents no example of words liable to formal variations, but the assertion has to be qualified. First of all, the text contains one of the very few cases where a variation of the form of the word is possible. The word *อย่างน้อย* /*sàk*/ “at least” in the

phrase สักที /sàk/ t^{hi}i:/ /at least/ occasion/ “some time” can be pronounced /sàkà/ = /sàkàt^{hi}i:/ by a jocular speaker. This word can also be pronounced with a different tone, ซัก /sák/ “at least”, with no difference in meaning. Then, there is another occurrence of what can be considered as an example of form variation in the case of จัดแจง /càt/ cɛ:ŋ/ “to prepare, *here* to pack up”. In this compound, one can identify a base จัด /càt/ “to prepare”, and a sort of derivative, that is a modified form of the base, แจง /cɛ:ŋ/, which makes no sense if translated in the compound by the meaning it bears when it is used independently, “to explain” or “to classify”. It is merely an expletive complement of the first unit จัด /càt/ “to prepare”, with which it shows phonetic similarities, in keeping with a common device in Thai. A third example from the text is the case of ค่ะ /k^há/ “polite particle”, which is rendered as ค่ะ /k^hâ/ “*polite particle*” in assertive contexts. Finally, these three cases make quite a few exceptions for a language in which words are invariable. But from these remarks, two observations must be made. The first observation is that the variability is a property of the individual words, not of the syllables. Considering that ซัก /sák/ “at least” is related to a homonym “to wash”, we note that only the former has an alternative form, the latter remaining always invariable. The same for จัด /càt/ “to prepare”: its homonym “strong, intense” never appears under the form: จัดแจง /càt/ cɛ:ŋ/. In conclusion, it is not so much the word which is invariable in Thai as the syllable. Once the syllable reaches the level of word, it may, though it rarely happens, be subject to formal variation. At this point, we find the utility of establishing a level of analysis at the syllable in Thai, as it permits to identify more precisely where the characteristic of invariability lies.

The second observation is that all the examples found, as well as those which occur in other texts, manifest the same characteristic: the words subject to variation hold the same syntactic and semantic behaviours as those they are derived from. For example, *จัดแจง* /càt /cɛ:ŋ/ “to prepare” is in no way, syntactically or semantically, different from *จัด* /càt/ “to prepare” it is derived from. The same could be said concerning the other examples taken from the text quoted above. If we take an example out of the text, *สนุกสนาน* /sànúk/ sàná:n/ “to be amusing”, is not different from its base *สนุก* /sànúk/ in terms of syntactic behaviour, and if the compound could be rendered as “to be very amusing”, it would be over translated, and besides, the meaning can be described as the same. In spite of many particular cases, the general rule holds true: when a word varies in its form, the variation has no syntactic or semantic function, it simply has a formal function. The variation is motivated in terms of rhythm, euphony, style, etc., but no functional role can be assigned to it. This is another characteristic of Thai language, or better say of the usage of Thai language by Thai speakers: words are not only meant to mean but also to sound. As they are exempted of being functional in their variation, they can be modified for various expressive reasons and speakers indeed regularly make an extensive usage of the possibility.

Another notable fact is that the invariability of words in Thai manifests itself in quite an extended number of contexts, or rather is never challenged in any circumstance.

First, a word remains identical within a compound unit. In the text, for example, the word *หน้า* /nâ:/ “face” remains identical in the

compound in which it appears สีหน้า /sǐ:/ nâ:/ /colour / face/ "facial expression", as in any other compound or any syntactic context. The rule can be generalized with very few exceptions.

Then, signifying units remain invariable whatever their immediate context in the chain, contrary to, for example, the preterit tense form *-ed* of English met in the text (/it/, /-t/, /-d/...).

Words do not modify either depending on their function. For example, เรา /raw/ "1st person plural" remains identical, whatever its function in the sentence, contrary to its English equivalent *we*, which can appear under the form *us*.

Words also remain identical even if they are syntactically polyvalent, that is if they can assume various unrelated syntactic roles, for example ท้อง /tʰɔ̃:ŋ/ suffers no modification of its form, whether it is used as a noun, such labels prove sufficient, and is then translated by "stomach", or as a verb and is then translated by "to be pregnant". On the contrary, we find in English such cases as *catch*, which possibly undergoes variations in its verbal use (*caught*) that are unknown when it is used as a noun (a catch).

The cases taken into account above are of course those which are induced from the observation of other languages, but it is necessary to emphasize that Thai words remain invariable in all their uses. It is not a possibility which is offered to some of them or to some of them in some context, but an obligation which applies to any word in any context.

As a last remark on the subject, words remain invariable in abstraction, in the dictionary for example. The observation may go without saying but it confirms the assertion that words in Thai are complete in themselves. They can be abstracted from any context

and inserted in any context, as they are complete in their form and meaning(s) and need nothing additional to achieve this state.

When dealing with the level of signifying units, we can only repeat what was said concerning the level of the syllable, namely that words are neither affected by the others nor affect the others –they stand as achieved elements in the combinations and compel the others to behave in the same way. The only dependency they can be submitted to is the effective hierarchical relations they contract with other words within a given sentence and from which they can be abstracted in their total identity.

An important consequence of the invariability of the form of words in Thai is that the form alone provides and maintains the identity of the unit as a whole. Of the two individual components of the signifying unit (form + meaning), the form alone is in charge of providing the conditions for a unit to retain its identity in spite of its different uses. To put it differently, the formal side of signifying units in Thai not only has the charge of distinguishing units between one another but also the charge of maintaining the identity of the units thus distinguished in all the treatments they receive. In contrast, the English text reveals quite a few units which maintain their identity in spite of the formal changes they may undergo, as is the case of do which can appear under the forms does, did, and done, depending on the context, for which we have to identify one and a same unit in spite of the differences of form.

Actually, it is noticed that a same word in Thai can be assigned different meanings, not simply meanings identified as derived, but meanings which one would be at a loss to analyse as related. Though

the meanings may be judged as different, the unit retains its identity as a whole, because the form maintains it. For example, we find the word ต้อง /tɔ̃:ŋ/ in the Thai text, which the *Royal Academy Dictionary*⁶ lists under just one entry, with definitions which call for the following translations: *correct, to touch, must*. Though these meanings do not appear as related, they are associated by the dictionary with a single unit. It must be recognized that the *Royal Academy Dictionary* is not always coherent in its choices and that the analysis may be debatable, but it is worth noting that the differences in terms of meaning are dismissed on the account of the identity of form.

More important is the observation that the form maintains the identity of the unit in spite of differences in terms of syntactic uses, that is when a word is polyvalent. As noted by many observers of Thai, a same word in Thai can assume different roles, that is receive different treatments which are not related to each other. For example, ดี /di:/ found in the sample Thai text can be used as a verb (“to be good”), an adverb (“well”) or an adjective (“good”). Another example from the same text, ของ /kʰɔ̃:ŋ/ is attested both as a noun (“thing”) and preposition (“of”). Though, this assertion would need to be further substantiated and though the terms “verb”, “adverb”, etc. may not be the best, it is possible to progress in the observation on this basis.

In the Thai text, there are 38 occurrences of words presenting this characteristic for 26 units as some of them are repeated. A research done by LINKS⁷ about 40% of occurrences of polyvalent words. Though the methods used may be different, the results lead to the

⁶พจนานุกรมฉบับราชบัณฑิตยสถาน. พ.ศ. ๒๕๒๕. *Royal Academy Dictionary*. 1982.

⁷*Linguistics and Knowledge Science Laboratory*. Virach Sornlerlamvanich, <http://www.links.nectec.or.th/virach/wordstat.html> The data are dated 29 September 1995.

same conclusion: any given Thai text contains a high number of words which are polyvalent. Again the quantitative facts are not so important as the qualitative ones: the phenomenon of polyvalence is not simply the result of occasional economies consisting in re-using an existing unit but a recurrent feature in the use of words on the whole. As such, the phenomenon is a device which is regularly exploited and is part and parcel of the system. But before examining the part it plays in the system, let us make again a comparison with the English text.

The English sample contains fewer comparable polyvalent words: 23 occurrences involving 18 units. Admittedly, the quantitative difference is not very important but a closer comparison between the two texts reveals an important qualitative difference, with the treatment of cognates. Here, we will pay attention chiefly to one type of cognates, namely words which are both formally and semantically related and syntactically differentiated, as is the case of the English series, *decide*, *decision*, *decisive*, etc. The English texts contains as many as 25 of such words associated with cognates, whereas the Thai text contains none. This does not mean that words in Thai are never associated with cognates but that they are not associated with cognates which would correspond to different syntactic uses. In Thai, the devices used for the creation of new words out of existing ones are devoted to lexical needs, that is for the creation of words which are different in meaning and which may as may not be different in syntactic usage. It is the case of *รบ* /rɔp/ "to fight" which forms the compound *รบกวน* /rɔpkuan/ "to disturb", both having verbal uses. The process of compounding may also have different effects, such as creating a duplicated compound, as is the case of *จัด* /càt/ "to pack

up” which contributes to the nearly synonymous compound จัดแจง /càtce:ŋ/ “to pack up”. We incidentally note that the compounds are rarely exocentric too, that is of the type which creates units that are different in syntactic terms. In any case, there are no devices in Thai which create cognates simply to meet syntactic needs. There are very few exceptions, with for example, เดี่ยว /diàw/ “to be isolated” and เดียว /diaw/ “only one”. In this case, we note that the formal difference lies in the tone, which is not used as a device on a large scale to distinguish cognates. If one can find a few cases, there are no devices.

To sum up, there is nothing we can identify as syntactic cognates in Thai. This fact appears best when we compare in the two texts the Thai and English words which are equivalent. The English word *strange* is associated to quite a few cognates, *strangely*, *stranger*, *estrangle*, *estranged*, *estrangement*, the list may not be complete, whereas one of the Thai equivalents incidentally found in the text, พิลึก /p^hlǐyk/ “strange”, is associated to no similar cognates. It is of course possible to express the same notions as those in the English series above, but Thai does not resort to comparable devices of derivation. Another example where the comparison is interesting, is the English *in front of*, the equivalent of which in the Thai text is หน้า /nâ:/ “front, in front of”. When English uses a compound, that is a complex unit made out of a simple unit, Thai just uses the simple unit which undergoes no formal process. It would be easy to find examples contrary to this observation, nevertheless it is illustrative of a general tendency in Thai.

Thus, the respective situations of Thai and English appear completely different. Whereas English words are associated with a

series of syntactic cognates, Thai words are not. In the context of English, the use of a given form in its formal identity in spite of different syntactic behaviours is a means among others, whereas in Thai, it is the only possibility which is offered to words. Words in Thai are liable to assume various roles, as the language can resort to no other possibility, except of course to use a unit altogether different. Also, the English words which are not different in form but are different from a syntactic point of view are considered by analogy like those which are different both in form and syntax. For example, in the series *(to) sound*, *(the) sound* and *(the) sounding*, it is legitimate to identify three different units, though there are only two forms, because a difference of syntactic behaviour may, as may not, be accompanied by a difference of form, but the result is the same. In Thai, it is impossible to resort to such analogies, as there is nothing to support analogy and the problem must be examined in an utterly different way.

Commonly, the problem of polyvalent words in Thai is solved with the concept of homophony. If this concept can be used in the context of English, it is irrelevant to transpose it to Thai, where the context does not justify its use. There can be homophonous words only if there are different words in a set of associations, which is not the case in Thai. The concept may help to solve a few problems, but as a matter of fact, it also prevents from observing Thai in its originality as it remains to be examined how words behave.

First, it is noticed that Thai words are as invariable at the level of association as they are at the level of combination. In fact, these two characteristics are interrelated: if a word could vary depending on the context in which it appears, it could no longer be identical whatever its syntactic uses. Words in Thai are totally deprived of any dy-

namics in those respects and the fact is the result, as was shown, of the constraints imposed on them by their phonic structure.

The above observations confirm from a different perspective that words in Thai are complete by themselves. When abstracted, they retain their form and meaning, that is what belongs to them as individuals. On the contrary, they are free to contract different types of syntactic relations, that is they are not conditioned in abstraction by the constraints that the others may impose on them in the contexts of various sentences. The word ดี /di:/ found in the text is in abstraction neither a verb ("to be good"), an adverb ("well"), nor an adjective ("good"), as it can be used as the three. It is simply a form and a meaning, which is specialized to be used in some contexts, but its specialization is not exclusive.

Also, words in Thai are not simply occasionally used in various syntactic contexts but are assigned this task. We note that once a unit is instituted as such, it makes superfluous the institution of a new one to meet syntactic needs, provided the meaning of the existing unit is deemed suitable by convention to fulfil them. To take the same example as before, the verb ดี /di:/ makes superfluous the institution of an adverb or an adjective which would be different in a way or another. Another example, ลง /loŋ/ "to go down" makes superficial the institution of a verbal determiner, similar to the English adverb "down". It is important to stress that the tendency is generalized on a very large scale. It is difficult, not to say impossible, to find in the dictionary an adjective or an adverb which is redundant to a verb, a preposition which is not borrowed from a verb or a noun, a classifier which has no use as a noun, or occasionally something else, etc. The lexicon offers comparatively few cases where a unit is redundant to

another one, that is different in form but not really in meaning, and is instituted mostly or simply in response to syntactic purposes. The system extensively re-employs its units and rarely creates new ones when those existing can do.

Another striking feature of Thai which contributes to the system is the flexibility of grammar, as words can entertain relationships between each other rather freely and very often need no other procedures than to occur one after the other. As words may easily fulfil various needs in the sentence at a low syntactic cost, they tend to monopolize a great part of the semantic field they belong to. For example ไฟฟ้า /fajfá:/ "electricity" easily fulfils alone the roles which are assigned in English to a noun, an adjective ("electric" "electrical"), a verb ("to electrify"), etc., by simply using syntactic means. The equivalent of "an electric appliance" is เครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้า /k^hryâŋc^háj fajfá:/ /machine/ use/ electricity/, or even a simpler combination, เครื่องไฟฟ้า /k^hryâŋfajfá:/ /machine/ electricity/, with no real alternative. In such cases, the speaker is eventually constrained to use the word ไฟฟ้า /fajfá:/ "electricity" as he has no other choice, but on the other hand, the syntax of the language is flexible enough not to impose too restrictive limitations. Though the case of ไฟฟ้า /fajfá:/ "electricity" is similar in many respects to the one of ดี /di:/ "good", a distinction must be made: if ดี /di:/ "good" can receive different treatments which can be identified as verbal, adverbial and adjectival with proper characteristics, we can only identify a nominal treatment for ไฟฟ้า /fajfá:/ "electricity", this treatment making it possible for the word to assume various functions in the sentence through the agency of syntactic devices. The two cases are thus different on at least one point but in both cases, the result amounts to the same thing: Thai

does not create units to respond to various syntactic needs but uses the existing ones.

Another significant feature appears if we examine the attested combinations of roles among polyvalent words, that is if we analyze if polyvalent words are regularly used as verb and noun or as noun and adjective, etc. In the case of English the most common combination is verb + *noun*, with 8 examples out of 18, for instance (to) call, (a) call. This case is represented only once in the Thai text, with ท้อง /tʰɔ̌:ŋ/ “stomach”, “to be pregnant”. When talking of polyvalence, it is the pair *verb-noun* which is usually mentioned, but the regularity is not observed in Thai. Also, the English text presents another combination (*pronoun + adjective*, e.g. *that*) which accounts for 6 cases. These first two combinations thus account for 14 cases out of 18. On the contrary in Thai, for 26 units, one combination accounts for 6 cases (*verb + adverb + adjective*, e.g. จริง /ciŋ/ “to be real”, “really”, “real”), another one for 5 cases (*verb + “postverb”*, e.g. ขึ้น /kʰɯ̌n/ “to go up”, “up”), 2 for 2 cases and 8 for only 1 case. The conclusion is that there are regular tendencies in English but nothing comparable in Thai. The combinations of syntactic roles for a given unit in Thai depend on convention and are not subject to regularities or even significantly recurrent features which would permit to find some order in the phenomena in that perspective.

One more feature, which would need more developments that can be done here, is that, in Thai, grammatical words, or better empty words, are very often associated in a way or another with lexical, or full words. If we examine the examples found in the Thai text, it is difficult for a couple of cases to determine if the word is totally empty such as ให้ /hâj/, which is sometimes used as a verb (“to

give”), sometimes as a preposition (“for”), without excluding other possibilities. In this case, it is a full word which has the same function in the sentence as an empty word but retains some characteristics of a full word. Another example is ลง /loŋ/, which can be used as a verb (“to go down”) and a verb determiner (“down”), and in the latter case retains no syntactic qualities of the verb but is a determiner which can neither be determined nor coordinated. Actually, if we take a list of empty words in Thai, we notice that a good proportion of them belong to that last type. There are comparatively few empty words which are only used as empty words and not associated with a full word in that sort of way. We observe in Thai that the process of grammaticalisation of words is first visible and also rarely definitive, as many empty words remain associated, in a way or another, to full words. They are rarely reduced to simple tools, condemned to the constraints imposed by others, and if they are, it is only in particular sentences from which they can recover their liberty to be used as totally full words. There are however quite a few examples where a word is completely grammatical, as is the case of จะ /cà/ “future”, which has no use in contemporary Thai as a full word. Nevertheless, the grammaticalisation of this word, and of all the others of its type, is never irreversible as it retains all the characteristics of the full words, namely a complete form and meaning. It thus remains available in case the community felt the need for a usage of it other than as an empty word. To this, we can oppose the case of French, in which “future” appears regularly under the bound form /-r-/ which can in no way be motivated as a full word, under this form at least. In conclusion, words in Thai are never totally grammaticalised but always retain some sort of autonomy. Actually, this fact confirms

again an observation that was made before, namely that words in Thai have to be complete by themselves. A grammatical word is a word which is not complete by itself but needs a support to be attached to and on the other hand, head words in Thai need no grammatical words to achieve their completion and an association with totally dependent words may damage their own independence.

Before concluding, it is better to make explicit something which remained implicit: when words are subject to syntactic polyvalence, it is because their meaning makes them likely to be so. Thus, the word *ท่าน* /tʰân/ is used as a pronoun (“*polite 3rd person*”) and a classifier (“*respectful classifier for people*”), with an obvious link between the two meanings; *ว่า* /wâ:/ can be used as a verb (“to say”) and a conjunction (“that”) after declarative verbs. If we generalize, we note a frequent semantic motivation to the process of polyvalence. Many words which fulfil various syntactic uses are selected to do so because of the meaning they bear. However, there are no automatic rules as the decision always depends on the needs and whims of convention. As a result, in front of immediately obvious cases, there are others where it is more difficult to identify a semantic link: can *กำลัง* /kamlan/ “power” be related to “*progressive aspect, be... -ing*”? The question remains open but there is no readily available answer and anyway, if the answer is positive or negative, it makes no great difference. It is more important to stress that meaning does not make up for deficiencies in terms of form to distinguish formally indistinct words but is on the contrary the very reason why words may include various syntactic, and so to speak semantic, roles under the continuity of formal identity.

This last remark leads to the general conclusion of this paper – in Thai it is the form which plays the most important part in the process of distinction and maintenance of the distinction between signifying units. The constant identity of the form maintains the identity of the unit as a whole, in spite of the various semantic acceptations that it may include. Syntax plays an even less important part in the process, because far from creating and distinguishing different units to meet different syntactic needs, usage offers no real other solution than to employ units in different syntactic contexts maintaining their formal and, basically, semantic identity. This equilibrium between the three components of a signifying unit (form, meaning and syntactic treatment) is probably what constitutes the originality of an isolating language such as Thai.

It is remarkable that this originality stands out even when observing a very short sample of 100 words and out of which significant generalisations can be drawn. Also, the original characteristics may appear simply in quantitative terms but, added together, they form a system, a fact which would be prejudicial to overlook. The description of this system which was given before is certainly too sketchy but what can be asserted in any case is that the transposition of such a description is not valid for Indo-European languages, where, within a same signifying unit, a difference of form is possible and may be compensated by the identity of meaning and where no difference of form may be compensated by differences in terms of syntactic treatment. We should eventually admit that signifying units are not cast in the same mould in every language.

We also have to remember that the concepts used in linguistics were elaborated in the context of Indo-European languages and that

the concepts transposed to Thai may seem operational but eventually reveal inappropriate as they were not defined so as to take into account the specificities of an isolating language. Concerning the notion of signifying units and the debate around the terms of "word", "morpheme" or "monème", general linguistics takes into account the complications which exist in Indo-European languages, and linguistics as applied to Thai inherits all these complications, even though it should not be concerned and should try and define specific concepts for its own particular use. Apart from the very notion of word, we have also identified some points which should be manipulated with great caution when transposing to a language like Thai the concepts they imply, such as those of homophony and word class.

Finally, the traditional approach of considering Thai as a tonal, monosyllabic, isolating language deserves more attention than usually given. It is now needless to denounce its shortcomings but, as a matter of fact, it seems unsatisfactory mostly to describe the synthetic type to which the Indo-European languages belong and conversely offers the interesting advantage of examining languages on the perspective of their word structure and of apprehending languages first in their diversity.

Annex: the two texts taken as sample

"อัมพรไม่รับประทาน บอกว่าห้องไม่ค่อยดี"

คุณหญิงตอบพลางนั่งลง

"ควรจะไปให้หมอดตรวจเสียสักที" นุชกล่าวพลางนั่งลงตรงหน้าคุณหญิง "ประเดี๋ยวหัวประเดี๋ยวท้อง ยุ่งพิลึก"

คุณหญิงไม่ตอบว่าอะไร สีหน้าของท่านค่อนข้างขำขิ่ม ไม่แสดงว่าท่านอยากพูด นุชจึงไม่รบกวนต่อไป เมื่อได้บริโภคอาหารอยู่ด้วยกันเป็นครู่ใหญ่ ท่านจึงเอ่ยขึ้นว่า

วารสารอักษรศาสตร์

“นุชต้องจัดแจงเตรียมกระเป๋าเดินทาง อีก ๓ วัน เราจะไปหัวเมือง”

“โอ ตีจริง” นุชร้องด้วยความลึกลง “ไปไหนคะ”

“ไปหลังสวน”

“หลังสวนอยู่ที่ไหน”

ดอกไม้สด, กรรมแก้ว, กรุงเทพฯ หน้า ๓๔.

[“Amphorn is not eating, she says that she feels sick,” the mother says as she sits down. “She should have a doctor examine her,” says Nuch as sitting down in front of her mother. “Sometimes, it is the head, sometimes the stomach. That’s quite strange.”

The mother does not answer, she looks a bit solemn and does not show signs that she is in a mood to speak, so Nuch does not insist. A long time after having lunch together, the mother declares: “Nuch, go and pack up your luggage. In three days we are going to the province.”

“Hey! That sounds nice,” she exclaims full of joy. “Where are we going?”

“To Lang Souan.”

“Where is it?”]

“And what do you want from me, Benjamin Sachs? What are you doing here in front of my house in the middle of the night?”

“Maria’s tried to get in touch. She called you for days, and when she couldn’t get through, I decided to come out here instead.”

“From New York?”

“There wasn’t any other choice.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“Because I have something important to tell you.”

“I don’t like the way that sounds. The last thing I need is more bad news.”

“This isn’t bad news. Strange news, [maybe, even incredible news, but it’s definitely not bad news.]⁸”

Paul Auster, *Leviathan*. London. 1992. p. 173.

⁸The brackets indicate a part of the text necessary for the understanding but which was not examined, as the count of 100 signifying units was reached with the rest.