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How Thai Ties: A Discourse Analysis of Tying Techniques in Thai

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Introduction

As Halliday and Hasan (1976) state, "cohesion refers to relations of meaning that exist within text, and that define it as a text" (p. 4). Not only in written text, "cohesion" or "tying" is also a basic phenomenon that is observed in conversational interaction. Conversation participants normally produce utterances that are meaningfully tied to each other. A conversation or a stretch of talk can be meaningful either because the utterances are built around the same topic of talk, or because there is strong cohesion on the level of action structure (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990). As Sacks proposed in his *Lectures on Conversation* (1995), "fundamental to the working of the tying structures [is] that the operation of tying machinery serves as a basic means for showing understanding" (Vol. I, p. 733). Tying techniques are, therefore, procedures or strategies that participants employ to relate meaning between utterances or turns of talk in their conversation, and to demonstrate their understanding of the prior talk produced by the prior speaker. In other words, a conversational participant normally uses the prior speaker's materials to produce his/her own utterance and, at the same time, to demonstrate his/her understanding of the prior speaker's talk.

The purpose of this study is to investigate tying techniques used in native Thai speakers' conversations. In this paper, I analyze and discuss some of the tying techniques they use, from local tying techniques done in a next utterance, such as in adjacency pairs, to more global ones that tie across many turns of talk.

Data

The data used for the analysis are selected from audio-taped Thai conversations. The conversation used in this paper is between two native Thai speakers who lived in Los Angeles, Mac and Ad. The participants were brought together to share their experiences during and after the Northridge earthquake, which took place in Southern California in 1994.

Tying Techniques in Native Thai Conversation

As mentioned, tying techniques refer to procedures or strategies that co-participants use to relate meaning between utterances in their conversation in order to show their understanding. Following Sacks (1995), "pro-terms," i.e., pronouns and pro-verbs, are employed by co-participants as a basic tying technique for

achieving “economy in conversation.” In other words, speakers do not have to use a word again and again to refer to the same person, object, or action. Pronouns are used as one of the prototypical tying terms. Co-participants’ use of personal pronouns semantically ties utterances in their conversation by referring to the same person referent. For example, in data fragment (1), Mac asks Ad where he lives.

(1) EQ2: 323-324

- 1 Mac: *lếw nĩ yù thếw nãy*
 CONJ this live area which
 “And where do (you) live?”
- 2 Ad: *phỏm yù kay yù thếw menhắttần biỉf*
 1.m live far live area Manhattan Beach
 “I live far away. (I) live around Manhattan beach.”

Mac’s question in line 1, which is a first pair part of the adjacency pair, *lếw nĩ yù thếw nãy* ‘And where do (you) live?’, selects Ad to provide a second pair part to complete the adjacency pair, although a second person pronoun is not used in the question. In line 2, Ad responds to Mac’s question *phỏm yù kay* ‘I live far away’ with the use of a first person pronoun for male *phỏm* ‘I,’ and further elaborates his answer by providing a more specific location, however, without any use of a personal pronoun in the second clause.

By using a personal pronoun, co-participants know that a person who has been established in the talk, and/or has been talked about, is now being referred to. When pronouns mark gender and number distinctions, this makes the tying clearer as to who is referred to in the conversational interaction. While the first person pronouns in English are distinguished in terms of number (*I* vs. *we*), some Thai first person pronouns are distinguished in terms of gender, some are not, and some are not distinguished in terms of number either. For example, *phỏm* refers to a male speaker, and *chán* or *dichán* refers to a female speaker, whereas *raw* refers to one or more speakers, male or female.

Even when a language makes pronouns available for its users as a means to semantically tie their utterances, speakers of some languages which are called “pro-drop languages” such as Spanish or Italian, or languages with “null subjects” such as Chinese, Malay, and Thai, tend to omit pronouns after the referent has been established and maintained in the conversation. Although there is no morphological marking for the subject on the Thai verb, the referent is normally understood among co-participants. Data fragment (2) gives an example of the optional use of personal pronouns in Thai conversation.

(2) EQ2: 304-305

- 1 Ad: *yù thěw nǎy há nǎa*
live around which R.PRT PRT
“Where do (you) live?”
- 2 Mac: *yùu: toŋ nǎa keeŋi yùu mm*
live at here Gayley live mm
“(I) live around here, Gayley, live mm ...”

In this stretch of talk, it is shown that the use of a second person pronoun in line 1 is omitted. However, the personal referent is recoverable through the pragmatic context, i.e., the context in which the question is directed to only one addressee, and perhaps via the spatial orientation of the participants. Therefore, the optional non-use of a second person pronoun does not result in any ambiguity in the conversation. Data fragment (1) also gives us the same type of example and omits a second person pronoun subject in a question (the first pair part), which requires the addressee to provide an answer (a second pair part). In fragment (2), after the referent is implicitly established in line 1, the first person pronoun is also optional in the answer and is not used.

Although personal pronouns are frequently omitted in Thai conversation when the referent is retrievable and not ambiguous, important information in the conversation can still be recovered via a wide range of resources. Other tying techniques are available to the speaker, so that his/her utterance is coherent in terms of the previous talk and thus understandable.

Reusing parts of a previous utterance to produce subsequent utterances is another common tying strategy. A speaker can reuse elements produced in prior talk, i.e., a word or words, or a syntactic construction, and this is called “format tying.”

We will see that format tying, or the use of parallel constructions, is commonly found in Thai conversation. The adjacency pair in data fragment (2) (i.e., question - answer) shows a close relationship of one utterance to the other through the format tying strategy. Not only does Mac show his understanding of Ad’s question and provide an answer to the question, but also he reuses the verb *yù* ‘live’ as well as produces his utterance by using the same basic syntactic construction, that is:

- (2a) *locative verb + prep. + location*
- 1 Ad: *yù* *thếw* *nãy* *há* *nĩa*
 live around where R.PRT PRT
 "Where do you live?"
- 2 Mac: *yùu:* *toŋ* *nĩa* *keelji yùu mm*
 live at here Gayley, live mm
 "I lived around here, Gayley, live mm."

In line 2, while the main verb is reused, the rest of the utterance is changed to more specific information. The basic syntactic structure of Ad's question *yù thếw nãy* 'Where do you live?' is replaced by *yùu: toŋ nĩa* 'I live around here.' In Mac's answer, a more specific preposition replaces a general one, and a locative word replaces a locative question word in Ad's question.

We saw earlier how pronouns are used as a tying technique in Thai, which demonstrates some similarities to as well as differences from the use of pronouns in English. Like pronouns, pro-verbs are used as a basic tying technique as well. According to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work on *Cohesion in English*, the DO auxiliary is used for verb or clausal substitution. The pro-verb DO "functions as a carrier for anaphoric items, especially *it* and *that*" (p. 125), and "may be anaphoric to any process of the action type" (p. 126). For example, in an answer to the question *Do you have \$10?*, the 'do' in *Yes, I do* is a pro-verb; the speaker does not have to repeat the verb phrase 'have \$10' in his/her answer. However, Thai is a language that lacks this kind of pro-verbs. Due to the lack of linguistic resources such as pro-verbs that English and some other languages have, Thai speakers make use of other tying techniques that are available in the language instead. The lack of pro-verbs in Thai results in the frequent reuse of words in a stretch of talk by co-participants in order to make their talk coherent.¹ Data fragment (3) gives us an example in which co-participants reuse words in their utterances due to the lack of pro-verbs in Thai.

(3) EQ2: 232-237

1 Mac: *ʔə- léw bəp sùn máak lúçàk kan lǎ pàaw*
eh and like part many know each-other or not
“Eh, and- mostly (they) know each other or not ...”

2 *khon thay thí [nūn]*
person Thai at there
“Thai people there?”

3 Ad: *[lúçàk] há lúçàk*
know R.PRT know
“I know, yes, I know (them).”

4 Mac: *lúçàk bəp phûak um (.) phəm pum ʔalay ɲá*
know like group um Pam Pum what like-that
lá pà
or not
“Do (you) know those guys, Pam, Pum,
something like that, or not?”

5 *lúçàk pà há*
know or-not R.PRT
“Do (you) know (them or not)?”

6 Ad: *tən ní kô yaŋ yùu lǎ*
at this HL still be.LOC Q
“Are (they) still (here) now?”

7 Mac: *tən ní kô yaŋ yùu*
at this HL still be.LOC
“(They) are still (here) now.”

In spite of the lack of pro-verbs in Thai, the participants manage to tie their utterances by reusing the same verb, in this case *lúucàk* 'know.' This is clear in line 3, where Ad has to repeat the main verb to answer the yes/no question in lines 1-2 asked by Mac, instead of using a pro-verb.

In addition to the frequent reuse of terms, full repetition, which is the simplest type of format tying, is also used as another tying strategy.

- (3a) 6 Ad: *tɔn ní kɔ̌ yəŋ yùu lɔ̌*
 at this HL still be.LOC Q
 "Are (they) still (here) now?"
- 7 Mac: *tɔn ní kɔ̌ yəŋ yùu*
 at this HL still be.LOC
 "(They) are still (here) now."

In line 7, Mac uses not only the same syntactic construction but also exactly the same words to answer Ad's question, except that he leaves out the question marker *lɔ̌*. That is, he reproduces the whole semantic segment of Ad's question *tɔn ní kɔ̌ yəŋ yùu* 'they are still here now.'

We have seen that the lack of pro-verbs in Thai results in the frequent reuse of a word or words, and enhances the use of parallel constructions, or the format tying technique. In addition, a word can be used to tie a stretch of talk across many turns to keep the talk topic coherent. In data fragment (4), where Mac has told Ad that his major is communication studies, and that his courses are not only about television and media but also about laws governing use of media, the co-participants employ both the word-reusing technique as well as parallel constructions with the verb *?aw* 'take, get' to tie the whole stretch of talk together.

(4) EQ584-591

- 1 Ad: *>kòtmǎy thǐ ní kà muanthay mǎn kan lɔ̌<*
 law at this and Thailand same each-other Q
 "Are the law here and (the law in) Thailand the same?"
- 2 Mac: *tch! kɔ̌ mǎy mǎn*
 HL NEG same
 "Tch! Not the same."

3 *tê thi- lian thí nĩ man kô > bẻp wả<*
 but at- study at this it HL like
 “But at- studying here, (I), like-”

4 *ʔaw* *pay* *cháy dầy > ʔalay ɲia<*
 take DIR.go use PTL what like-that
 “can take it in order to use it, something like that.”

5 Ad: *ʔaw* *pay* *payúk cháy*
 take DIR.go apply use
 “Take it and apply it in order to use it.”

6 *khêe wả* *ʔaw*(.) *ʔaw*
 only that take take
 “Only to take- take- ...”

7 Mac: *ʔaw* *ʔaydia* *pay* *ʔà=*
 take idea DIR.go PRT
 “Take the idea.”

8 Ad: *= ʔaw* *ʔaydia* *pay* *chây máâ*
 take idea DIR.go right Q
 “Take the idea, right?”

In line 2 in this segment, Mac provides an answer to Ad’s question by reusing the most salient word in his question, i.e., *mũan* ‘same,’ which functions as an adjective. The word is reused in the answer because Thai does not make use of pro-verbs. And the fact that Thai syntax does not permit a copula to occur with an adjective predicate results in the recurrence of the adjective instead of a copular verb, as would be the case in English (e.g., *Is it the same?*; *No, it isn’t*).

What is of interest to me is the recurrence of *ʔaw* ‘take, get’ and its construction pattern, which are used to tie the stretch of talk from lines 4-8. *ʔaw* is used as a main verb, and it normally occurs with another verb *pay* ‘go’ in Thai serial verb constructions. In this serial verb construction, *pay* is used with a main verb such as *ʔaw*, ‘take, get,’ and functions as a directional marker rather than a main verb.

Observing the use of the verb *?aw* more closely, we can see parallel structure in lines 4-8. Not only is the verb *?aw* reused throughout the stretch of talk, and used with the directional marker *pay*, but also *?aw* is used in the same syntactic frame, that is, the serial verb construction:

(4a)		<i>?aw</i> + (object) + <i>pay</i> + (verb) + (verb)	
line 4	<i>?aw</i>	- <i>pay chy</i>	'take it in order to use it'
line 5	<i>?aw</i>	- <i>pay payk chy</i>	'take it and apply it in order to use it'
lines 7, 8	<i>?aw</i>	<i>?aydia pay</i>	'take the idea'

In fact, the syntactic construction is created according to how the participants deconstruct and reconstruct each other's utterances by reusing the main verb *?aw*. According to Goodwin (1990), participants' syntactic deconstructions and reconstructions, such as those done in African-American children's arguments, can be viewed as syntactic drills for language users, and useful for language learners.

In addition to format tying, full repetition is employed as another tying strategy in the same segment as well. In line 8, Ad reproduces the same syntactic construction as well as using the same words from Mac's utterance *?aw ?aydia pay* 'take the idea.' Ad's repeated segment is also followed by a question token *chy m* 'right?' to confirm his understanding.

Conclusion

In summary, tying techniques used in Thai conversation have some similarities to as well as differences from those used in English conversation. One difference between tying in English and tying in Thai that we have seen in this paper is in the use of pro-terms, i.e., pronouns and pro-verbs, as a tying strategy. While English pronouns are not optional, pronouns in Thai are optional and tend to be omitted once the referent has been established and maintained in the conversation, causing no referent ambiguity. Moreover, since Thai lacks pro-verbs, format tying and parallel constructions as well as the reuse of words and phrases are frequently employed in Thai conversation. In place of pro-verbs, words, phrases and constructions are reused in a stretch of talk as resources to construct new utterances.

It is common that the repetition of a word, or words, or a part of an utterance is done to display a participant's understanding of a prior utterance. The syntactic construction of Thai also enhances repetition as a tying strategy. Since a subject-verb inversion rule is not employed to construct a question in Thai, for

example, and the language lacks pro-verbs, full or exact repetition would be more commonly found in Thai conversation than in English.

Notes

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1. The definition of pro-verb here is limited to auxiliary such as DO in English, excluding those auxiliary verbs that can be used as tense/aspect markers, modals, the copula and auxiliary BE. However, in Thai, several tense/aspect/mood markers have the same function as pro-verbs, i.e., substituting a verb phrase or a clause mentioned in a prior turn, for example, the experiential marker *khəy*, and potential markers *dāy*, *pen*, *wāy*.

Appendix I Transcription Conventions

[A left bracket marks the point where a speaker's talk overlaps another speaker's.
]	A right bracket marks the point where the overlap ends.
:	Colon indicates a lengthened sound or syllable.
=	An equal sign indicates latched utterances.
!	An exclamation point marks an animated sound.
(.)	A period in parentheses marks a short pause or gap.
(.2)	A number in parentheses indicates a pause in tenths of a second.
<u>man</u>	An underline indicates increased volume or an emphasis of a word or sound.
> <	The talk speeds up.
()	Parentheses indicate when a segment of talk is uncertain.

Appendix II Glossary

CONJ	conjunction	DIR	directional marker
HL	highlighting device <i>kə</i>	LOC	locative marker
NEG	negative marker	PRT	particle
PTL	potential marker	Q	question
R	register	1	first person pronoun
.	joins two meanings of one morpheme		

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