

Productivity and Pragmatics of Thai Classifiers

Author(s): Kathie Carpenter

Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1986), pp. 14-25

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

Productivity and Pragmatics of Thai classifiers¹

Kathie Carpenter
Stanford University

Introduction The complex classifier system of Thai has fascinated linguists for decades (cf. Grierson 1903). Surprisingly few, though, have studied the use of classifiers in discourse. Most accounts list each classifier and its accompanying class of nouns, and analyze the semantics of the relationship between the two, with some speculation as to underlying organizing principles or historical tendencies in classifier languages. Such work has led to some important discoveries about the cognitive and cultural bases for classification (cf. Adams & Conklin 1973, Denny 1976) and diachronic tendencies (cf. Greenberg 1977, Delancey 1986). However, with the exception of Haas (1942) and Conklin (1981) there have been no studies of the pragmatics of classifier use in Thai.

In this paper I will present evidence that a lack of attention to the discourse uses of classifiers has led to the misapprehension that semantic distinctions are disappearing from the Thai classifier system. I will show that semantic distinctions are not only alive and well but semantically productive. I will describe some pragmatic constraints on the semantics of classifier use, and discuss some of the discourse-level consequences of loss of semantic specificity, showing that leveling semantic distinctions can bring a different kind of richness to the language.

Thai classifiers Thai is an SVO, five-tone isolating language with largely monomorphemic and monosyllabic words, although there is much compounding and many unanalyzed multisyllabic loan words from Sanskrit and, increasingly, English. Thai is the national language of Thailand, thus officially spoken by almost fifty million people. It shares many areal features with the other languages of Southeast Asia, and is most closely related to the other members of the Tai language family, such as Shan and Laotian. Other members of the Tai language family can be found as far north as China, as far east as the central highlands of Hainan and as far west as Assam in India. The Tai languages are widely regarded as members of the Austro-Thai group, which also includes Indonesian, Balinese, Fijian and Polynesian (Benedict 1975). Notable among the areal features characteristic of the Southeast Asia region as well as the familial features of the Tai languages are numeral classifiers, or unit counters of the type sheet in English two sheets of paper.

The normal word order for a Thai classifier construction is Head noun-Quantifier-Classifier, as in the following example:²

มีพี่น้องกี่คน
/mii phii nawng kii khon/³
have older younger siblings how many CL-human
"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

Classifiers are used anaphorically when previous mention or context makes the reference clear, as in the answer to the preceding question:

มี ๒ คน
/mii sawng khon/
have two CL-human
"Two."

Classifiers are also used in other individuating contexts, such as with demonstratives:

รู้จักคนนี้ไหม
 ruujak khon nii may
 know CL-human here INT
 "Do you know this person?"

with adjectives:

มีแต่ลูกเล็กๆ
 /mii tae luuk leklek/
 have but CL-round small-small
 "There's only little ones"

and, less frequently, with possessives and with relativizers.

For all of these contexts, the words that appear in the classifier position are drawn from the same set, consisting of about 40 classifiers, conventional measures (e.g., kilo), ad hoc measures (e.g., bag) and an open set of repeaters, or nouns that serve as their own classifier. Repeaters are a semantically specifiable set of nouns, usually geographical terms, body part names and the nouns for certain abstractions like song. Quantifier and modifier uses are widely viewed as a single system, although not all classifier languages use classifiers in all these contexts. Greenberg (1977) has presented evidence that enumerative uses are diachronically original, and that the classifier construction spreads first to demonstratives, then to adjectives, possessives and relative clauses.

Thai has another system of classifiers, known as generics or class terms. They are superordinate compound heads, similar to tree in oaktree, but used far more extensively. The two systems overlap, and generics are often a source for new numeral classifiers (Conklin 1981, Delancey 1986).

Table 1 - Generics and numeral classifiers

Compound	Gloss	Classifier		Semantic description
Generic - เครื่อง				
เครื่องบิน	airplane	ลำ	lam	long, hollow things
เครื่องดื่ม	beverage	ยาง	yaang	kinds
เครื่องเล่นแผ่นเสียง	record player	เครื่อง	kreuang	machines
เครื่องแกง	curry paste	ขีด	khit	100 grams
Generic - ลูก				
ลูกไก่	baby chick	ตัว	tua	animals
ลูกมะพร้าว	coconut	ลูก	luuk	round things
ลูกกุญแจ	key	ดอก	dawk	flowers
ลูกคิด	abacus	อัน	an	things in general

In Table 1, it can be seen that เครื่อง /khreuang/ is the generic compound head for airplane, beverage and record player, among other things, yet only one of these, record player, also takes เครื่อง /khreuang/ as a numeral classifier. Furthermore, other nouns that do not take เครื่อง /khreuang/ as a generic compound head do get classified with it. In the same way, ลูก /luuk/ is the generic compound head for offspring of both animals (ลูกไก่ /luuk kay/ "baby chicken"), and of plants (ลูกมะพร้าว /luuk mapraaw/ "coconut"), as well as of balls (ลูกเทนนิส /luuk tennis/ "tennis ball") and keys (ลูกกุญแจ /luuk kunje/ lit. "son of lock.") It is only the classifier for roundish things like fruits and balls, however and (rarely) for keys. Animal babies are all classified with ตัว /tua/ the animal classifier. Generic classifiers are often overlooked in studies of Tai linguistics, but they are important to the present discussion because they are frequently the source for new numeral classifiers.

Two general classifiers The Thai classifier system is one of the semantically most elaborate in the world. However, semantically specific classifiers do not get used in every possible context. Like many classifier languages, Thai has a general unmarked classifier อัน /an/, which can be used with the names of most inanimate things when the more specific classifier is not readily retrievable, much like the English word thing in "Put that thing down" or "Is that thing loaded?" This usage with nouns referring to inanimates is unmarked, and is not considered an error, although the more formal a situation is, the more likely speakers are to use the more specific classifier. อัน /an/ may not be used with nouns referring to animals or humans in the quantifying context. Whether or not อัน /an/ may be used in place of a more specific classifier depends on the referent, not on the classifier that อัน /an/ is replacing. อัน /an/ can be substituted for ตัว /tua/ if the head noun is chair, but not if it is dog. There is also a set of nouns that are used only with อัน /an/. They tend to be the names for small, irregularly shaped objects, including coathangers, toothbrushes, paper clips, rulers, bottle brushes and, for many speakers, forks and spoons.⁴

The widespread use of อัน /an/ as a general classifier is often interpreted as indicating that it is expanding its domain at the expense of the other classifiers. However, another classifier, the animal classifier ตัว /tua/, also appears to be gaining ground. ตัว /tua/ is not as widely used as อัน /an/, but the following table shows that even accepted conventional uses encompass a semantically quite diverse group of nouns, and documented actual uses form a class that appears quite arbitrary.

Table 2 - Conventional and colloquial uses of ตัว /tua/

CONVENTIONAL	COLLOQUIAL (some speakers)
all animals, table, chair, doll	cigarette, guitar, taperecorder, towel,
ghost, trousers, mannequin,	university course, microphone,
shirt, skirt, letter, number,	underwear, bathing suit

Although the semantic motivation for the addition of each new member noun to the conventional class is clear when considered on a case-by-case basis, the net effect is a category that is hard to motivate. When the colloquial, frequent but prescriptively incorrect uses are also considered, it appears that ตัว /tua/ is behaving more and more like a general classifier. In contrast to อัน /an/, ตัว /tua/ is stylistically marked. The

contrast is similar to the distinction in English between thing and more marked slangy terms like gizmo or thingie. University students comprise the group that uses ตัว /tua/ most extensively, and an examination of the specific documented uses listed shows that many are "youth culture" type items.

Table 3 - Classification of novel nouns

Classifier	Old nouns	New nouns
1. saay สาย	waterway, belt	airline, busline, catheter, IV tube
2. sen เส้น	noodle, hair, string	chromosome, spaghetti
3. met เม็ด	seed, button, gem	coffee bean, pill (e.g., Valium)
4. dam ด้าม	pen, fan	Magic marker*
5. thaeng แท่ง	pencil, ingot	Magic marker*, popsicle, chalk, chocolate bar, lipstick
6. lam ลำ	boat, bamboo tube	airplane, helicopter, bus* submarine
7. bay ใบ	leaf, food container	petri dish, saucer, teacup, stamp*
8. duang ดวง	ticket, certificate	stamp*, lightbulb, lamp, satellite
9. phaen แผ่น	star, seal, medal	record, pizza, bread slice, pancake, Kleenex, stamp*
10. phuang พวง	tile, plot of land, dried mango paste	steering wheel, bunch of keys
11. luuk ลูก	garland	apple, strawberry, nuclear bomb, baseball, key*
12. ton ต้น	fruit, ball, wave	Christmas tree
13. reuang เรื่อง	mountain	movie
14. kawn ก้อน	plant	bar of soap, French bread, mothball, battery
15. muan ม้วน	story	toilet paper, tape cassette*
16. laang หลาง	lump (clay), cloud	bungalow (at resorts)
17. lem เล็ม	rolls of things	magazine
	house, mosquito net	
	knife, book, needle	

Note: * indicates use by some speakers but not all

The widespread acceptability of อัน /an/ and ตัว /tua/ as substitutes for other classifiers in casual speech has led to claims that semantic distinctions are being leveled. If this were the case, one would predict that whatever semantic regularities there might be among class members would not be available for use in extension of the class to novel nouns. In particular, the semantically specific classes would not be productive, and new nouns would be used either with the general classifier or some arbitrary classifier designated as the classifier for new nouns, or they would be used as repeaters. However, Table 3 shows that nouns that have come into Thai as the names for novel objects recently introduced to Thailand are assigned a conventional classifier in keeping with the traditional semantics of the system. This shows quite clearly that

speakers use the system's underlying semantic regularities to extend classes to novel nouns in a principled manner.

The list of novel nouns includes calques (e.g., หลอดทดลอง /lawt thotlong/ tube test "test tube"), neologistic compounds (e.g., รถไฟ /rot fay/ vehicle fire "train"), and loans (e.g., pizza, apple, stamp). Many of the innovative classifier assignments follow the classifier assignment of a noun that is superordinate to the novel noun. For instance F16 and F14 are ลำ /lam/ because airplane is ลำ /lam/. The names for all fruits are ลูก /luuk/, so strawberry and apple are also ลูก /luuk/. Compounding is the most productive word-formation device in Thai, and many assignments are based on the generic compound head used to form the new word. For instance, the word coined for "record" is /แผ่นเสียง phaen siang/ (lit. sheet sound), so the classifier is also แผ่น /phaen/. Innovative classifier assignments are a blend of conventional, formal forces as well as perceptual and functional ones. It is necessary to understand what an object is in order to assign a classifier to the noun that refers to it. For instance, I once asked a friend what the classifier for petri dish was, handing him two to examine. He said อัน /an/, the general classifier, looking at them, then asked "What are they anyway?" I told him the Thai name, จานเพาะเชื้อ /jaan paw cheua/ which means literally "plate culture germ" and he quickly changed his mind, saying "Oh if it's a plate, it has to be ใบ /bai/." Classifier assignment is clearly perceptually based for words like pizza, chromosome and pancake for which there is really nothing similar in traditional Thai culture. When the semantics of a new noun are such that either of two or more classifiers is plausible, then there is variation among speakers between the semantically reasonable choices (see * instances in Table 3).

Table 4 - New Classifiers

CLASSIFIER	PRE-CLASSIFIER MEANING	NOUNS IN CLASS
1. kreuang เครื่อง	paraphernalia	typewriter, computer, radio
2. khem เข็ม	needle	hypodermic injections
3. chut ชุด	dress, suit	sets of things, dress, bathing suit
4. rian เหรียญ	coin	dollar
5. lawt หลอด	tube	test tube, light bulb, drinking straw
6. klawng กิ่ง	to pound in a mortar, telescoping tube	camera

The entire system is also productive in terms of accommodating new objects by developing new classifiers, a process that continues in Modern Thai. (See Table 4.) Where do these new classifiers come from? New classifiers come from several different sources, but most become classifiers by first acting as partial repeaters in the form of generic compound heads of newly-coined nouns. For instance:

(1) most of the terms for mechanical devices are compounds of เครื่อง /khuang/ + a Sanskrit word related to the machine's function, as เครื่องโทรศัพท์ /kruang thoorasap/ (lit. distant voices) "telephone." Although the formal language tends to favor either native or Sanskrit

sources for new words, popular usage tends to pick up English terms. For instance, TV, and tape (recorder), borrowed directly from English, have replaced the native words for these things. In current usage เครื่อง /kreuang/ is rarely used as a generic compound head for machine names, but it remains the productive classifier for mechanical devices.

(2) เข็ม /khem/ means "needle", and เข็มฉีดยา /khem chit yaa/ "needle shoot medicine" was the name coined for hypodermic syringes. As the vehicle for medicine that is injected, it functions as an ad hoc measure, and became the conventional classifier for the action of getting shots. (One cannot say "I had to go get injected 14 times." Only "shots 14 needles" is acceptable.)

(3) ชุด /chut/ was borrowed into Thai from English suit and is the Thai word referring to dresses and Western style suits, as well as the generic compound head for pajamas and bathing suits. It is used to classify sets of things, for instance musical recordings (equiv. to English album), litters of kittens and snacks of several ingredients sold as a set. Many speakers also use it as the classifier for bathing suit and dress although other speakers use ตู /tua/ for these nouns. ชุด /chut/ has virtually replaced the old classifier for sets สาร์ฟ /samrâp/, a Khmer loan word.

(4) เหรียญ /rian/ means "coin" and is now used colloquially for counting dollars, including American, Singapore and Australian dollars. (So when Thais ask how much something would cost in the U.S. they ask how many เหรียญ /rian/ rather than how many dollars.)

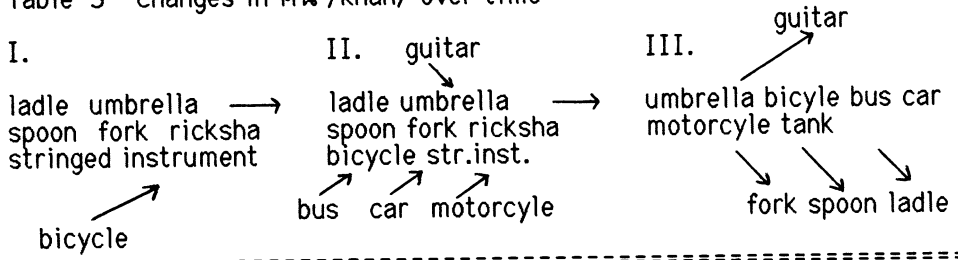
(5) หลอด /lawt/ "tube" is the generic compound head in the nouns coined for lightbulbs (lit. tube fire sky "electric tube") and test tubes. It is also used as a repeater with drinking straw which translated literally just means "tube".

(6) กล้อง /klawng/ is the generic compound head in กล้องถ่ายรูป /klawng thai ruup/ "camera", which is usually shortened to just กล้อง /klawng/ colloquially. Therefore, กล้อง /klawng/ functions as a repeater, which in this case is unusual because cameras are not typical of the class of nouns that generally function as their own classifier. กล้อง /klawng/ has attracted a class of nouns that use it as a classifier when they are used synonymously with "camera", showing that it is a true classifier and not just a repeater, as in อะะ มินนิกันก๊กล้อง /eh! mii nikon kii klawng/ "Oh! How many Nikons do you have anyway?"

Category reorganization Speakers sometimes reorganize classes that are too arbitrary or too disjunctive in order to renew the semantic motivation. A good example is คัน /khan/. Today's prescriptive class includes car, motorcycle, bicycle, bus and the names for other vehicles (with the exception of oxcart) and spoon, fork, umbrella, traditional musical instruments and other utensils with handles (but not knife). Lexically, คัน /khan/ originally referred to something long and thin - "long handle" and "dike between rice paddies" are both lexical meanings it has had through this century. It was the classifier for things with long handles, like ladles, umbrellas, traditional musical instruments, and rickshas (introduced to Thailand in 1871.) Of the other vehicles, the first to be introduced to Thailand was the bicycle, also an object with salient long handles. Words for other vehicles that were introduced to Thailand, such as automobiles, trincars, motorcycles and tanks, also were assigned the classifier คัน /khan/, as a class extension based on the functional concept of vehicle. This has resulted in what today is a disjunctive category, consisting of handled things like ladles, spoons, forks and umbrellas, and vehicles like

motorcycles, cars, and tanks. Many speakers seem to be reorganizing this class around the notion of vehicle, and assigning other classifiers to non-vehicle members. In an experimental elicitation of classifier uses, only 10/20 subjects classed fork with คัน /khan/, and 12/20 classed spoon with คัน /khan/. On the other hand, all 20 subjects classed umbrella and bicycle with คัน /khan/. It is not clear why umbrella remains such a strong class member. Perhaps it is less able to fit into other classes. Most of the alternative classifications of spoon and fork used อัน /an/, and perhaps umbrella is not as good a member of that class. Loss of spoon, fork and guitar (which is colloquially classed with ตูว /tua/) already make คัน /khan/ a more coherent category, and perhaps a coherent category with one salient exception is easier for speakers to deal with than a wholly disjunctive one.

Table 5 - Changes in คัน /khan/ over time



Reanalysis has also taken place in the noun class associated with เล่ม /lem/. In this class today are book and magazine, knife, needle, candle, scissors and oxcart. This is a disjunctive category, with on the one hand long things (an oxcart has a very salient long tongue for hitching the oxen to) and on the other hand printed, bound things. Originally, these two concepts came together in the traditional books of Thailand, which were long, rectangular pieces of stiff palm leaf, strung together. As the culture has changed, the class has appeared more and more arbitrary. Today, speakers are reorganizing the class around the notion of "bound printed matter" and in the elicitation, knife and scissors were used with เล่ม /lem/ by only 12/20 and 6/20 subjects, respectively. The real "odd man out" in this class is oxcart. Although to someone who uses an oxcart, the wagon tongue is highly salient, few urban Thais have contact with oxcarts. In the elicitation, only 9/20 adults classed it with เล่ม /lem/. Three adults moved it into the คัน /khan/ class on the basis of its function as a vehicle.

Although the คัน /khan/ and เล่ม /lem/ classes have been reorganized by many speakers, the equally heterogeneous class of ตูว /tua/ has not, and this may have been a factor in the choice of ตูว /tua/ as the marked general classifier.

Pragmatic focus and classifier semantics Abstract noun class semantics can be manipulated by speakers to convey pragmatic focus. In numeral classifier languages, the unmarked noun refers to the collective entity, and cannot be pointed to without an intervening word to individuate specific instances of the collection (Greenberg 1977). Since Thai classifiers pick individuals out of a collection, Thai speakers can use classifiers to indicate the group out of which they are individuating. Choice of classifier is thus relational, based on what group the individual

object is being individuated from. Different pragmatic focuses call for different semantic choices in classifier use. There are three levels of possible contrast: 1) a thing in contrast to everything else; 2) a physical object in contrast to other physical objects; 3) a member of a specific category in contrast to other members of that category. In this system, อัน /an/ the general classifier picks out objects as things contrasted with other things, ตัว /tua/ picks objects out as physical things contrasted with other physical things, and specific classifiers pick out category instances (mango, animal, book) and contrast them with other members of the same category. Which classifier to use with a demonstrative, for instance, depends on whether it is being used for simple deixis or to mark an explicit contrast. To speak of a mango as a thing among things, as when only one mango is present, one would use the general thing classifier อัน /an/:

เอาอันน ไหม
/aw an nii may/
take CL-thing here INT
"Do you want this?"

อันนี้เรียกว่ามะม่วง
/an nii riak waa mamuang/
CL-thing here call say mango
"This is called a mango."

However, if an explicit contrast is implied, one is more likely to use the fruit classifier ลูก /luuk/, focusing on the mango as a mango contrasted with other mangoes:

จะเอาลูกไหน
/ja aw luuk nay/
will take CL-round where
"Which one do you want?"

จะเอาลูกนี้
/ja aw luuk nii/
will take CL-round here
"I'll take this one."

ลูกนี้น่ากิน
/luuk nii naa kin /
CL-round here should eat
"This one looks good to eat."

All these utterances are grammatical no matter how many mangoes are present but lack of an explicit contrast favors อัน /an/. อัน /an/ can even be used with demonstratives to refer to human beings:

อันนี้เป็นฝรั่ง
/an nii pen farang/
CL-thing here is foreigner
"This is a foreigner"

อันนี้แฟนผม
/an nii faen phom/
CL-thing here fan lpsgM
"This is my girlfriend."

ไปกับใคร กับอันนี้เออ
/pay kap khray kap an nii uh/
go with who with CL-thing here huh
Who did you go with? With him, huh.

Similarly, using classifiers in connection with a physical attribute increases the use of ตัว /tua/ the animal classifier. This is most common with the adjectives big, little, thin, goodlooking and fat but can also occur with demonstratives.

อันนี้ตัวเล็กเป็นคนโต
/an nii tua lek pen khon too/
thing-CL here animal-CL small is CL-human grown
"This one, the little one, is the oldest."
(a woman, introducing her son)

รู้จักไหม โน้น ตัวอ้วน ผมยาวๆ
/rujak mai noon tua uan phom yaawyaaw/
know INT there animal-CL fat hair longlong
"Do you know her? There! The fat one. With long hair."
(a secretary, indicating a professor)

I even heard ตัว used with a demonstrative to refer to a monk:

ตัวนี้ตายไปแล้ว
/tua nii tay pay leew/
CL-animal here die go already
"This one's already dead"
(a man, explaining the identity of a monk pictured in a pamphlet.)

ตัว /tua/ is usually defined as having the lexical meaning "body" and it could therefore be argued that these are references to the bodies of the people, rather than the people themselves, i.e., "This one, with the little body" rather than "This one, the little one." However in the following example, the choice of verb, is rather than has, is evidence that the reference is to the person as an entity, although the focus is on her body.

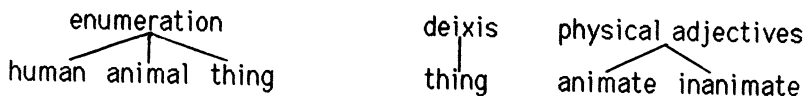
แปนตัวเล็กๆ เหมือนคนไทย
/pen tua leklek meuan khon thai/
is CL-animal small same person Thai
"She's a little one, just like a Thai person"
(a teacher, surprised to see a small American)

If the speaker had been referring to the person's body, rather than to the person, the verb has would have been used.⁵

Obligatory minimal distinctions While pragmatic focus helps determine classifier choice in these different syntactic contexts, each syntactic context has certain minimal contrasts that must be maintained, regardless

of focus. In enumeration, for instance, the human-animate-inanimate distinction must be maintained. No matter how casual the situation, one never hears "buffalo two things" or "teachers two animals."⁶ In deictic uses, none of these distinctions need be maintained. In certain adjectival uses, the human-animal distinction need not be maintained, and the animate-inanimate distinction is the only mandatory one, although this is not the case for all adjectives.

Table 6 - Obligatory minimal distinctions



Although the decision to use *อัน* /an/, *ตัว* /tua/ or a more specific classifier is essentially pragmatic in Thai, it correlates well with a purely syntactic pattern, namely that *อัน* /an/ the general classifier will be used in non-numeral contexts. In certain other Tai languages the distinction is apparently syntactically rather than pragmatically based. In Nung, for instance, *อัน* /an/ is the only classifier that can be used in non-quantifier constructions to refer to inanimates.

The obligatory minimal distinctions are often elaborated upon for pragmatic considerations, including genre, formality and other aspects of the extra-linguistic situation, individual speaker variation, and intention to express an implicit or explicit contrast. While formality favors use of the more specific classifiers, it is not the only important extra-linguistic variable. Contexts where many things are being enumerated favor classifier use over situations where the emphasis is not on enumeration of many different objects in different forms. Commercial transactions particularly favor semantically specific classifier uses.⁷

Stylistic reclassification Reclassification for humorous or insulting purposes is rare, and such uses are more likely to be regarded as erroneous or anomalous than as insulting. In one TV situation comedy, for example, there was a running gag involving a peasant servant-girl from a remote rural area who regularly overused *หน่วย* /nooey/ the general classifier from her upcountry dialect as in *มีแขกมา ๒ หน่วย* /mii khaek maa 2 nooey/ "Two guest-things have arrived." Although this was a predictable gag that never failed to get a laugh, the source of the humor was more her uneducated "country-bumpkin" style of speech than the misclassification per se. I also heard *ตัว* /tua/ the animal classifier used once for a pair of especially rambunctious children with the implication that they were little monsters. However the speaker, who knew I was studying classifiers, was directing the comment as a joke to me. I never heard it in any other circumstances. I also once heard Buddha images classified as "round objects" by a person who was known to be strongly anti-religious, as a joke as well as a political statement. All these examples are humorous because of their anomaly, but are not really insulting because misclassification is not a conventionalized insult.⁸ The only really frequent stylistic reclassification I heard was overuse of repeaters. This is the cliché child error, and Thais I asked said they perceived adults who overused repeaters as "cute".

Conclusions The goal of this paper has been to show that classifiers should be looked at as a dynamic system, rather than as static word lists.

Thai noun class distinctions are conventional and contain many exceptions, but they also show many semantic regularities that speakers are aware of and that they exploit for social, stylistic and linguistic purposes. Although the general classifiers อัน /an/ and ตัว /tua/ are used frequently at the expense of other classifiers, the more specific classes are productive, and speakers exploit semantic rules to enrich their discourse. Furthermore, this situation has probably been stable for a long time. The other languages of the Southwestern and Central branches of the Tai family also use /an/ as their general classifier, and Delancey (1986) has reconstructed /an/ as one of the classifiers in Proto-Tai. In fact, the Standard Thai system has certainly been elaborated relative to the other Tai languages, and the elaboration process appears to be continuing into the present time.

As technological change and contact with other cultures flood the language with new nouns, classes become less transparent. Speakers of a language with semi-opaque classes can deal with them in either of two ways. They can assume the system is essentially arbitrary, and reanalyze class distinctions as formal ones, or they can assume the system is essentially semantically motivated, and juggle classes to make them more coherent. The first strategy is apparently the one taken with the Bantu noun classes, and the second is the one apparently followed by Thai speakers with regard to Thai numeral classifiers.

When considering semantic systems, one must keep in mind that reduction of contrast on one level often brings enrichment on another level. The choice of classifier pertains not only to the classification of a category member, but also to the level of contrast the speaker wishes to draw attention to. In different speech styles, certain levels may be more important than others. For instance the leveling of semantic distinctions with wider use of ตัว /tua/ brings a new stylistic dimension to its use, namely the identification of a casual, slangy speech style, and identification of a new "youth culture," a style only appropriate in certain contexts. In other contexts, more specific classifiers must be used. The Thai system, in other words, has been enriched rather than impoverished by the use of general classifiers alongside the specific ones.

NOTES

1. The field portion of this project was part of dissertation research funded by a Fulbright Dissertation Fellowship and the Sloan Foundation, and stateside analysis has been supported by NICHHD grant #5R01HD18908. Help from these three sources is gratefully acknowledged. I also wish to acknowledge the generosity of Dr. Wattana Suksamai, Prof. Dheera Chudananda and Prof. Woralak Tiyaporn of the Faculty of Humanities of Chiang Mai University, and Mrs. Sumol Saikeo of the National Research Council of Thailand. I am indebted to Eve V. Clark and Elizabeth C. Traugott for invaluable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. They, of course, have nothing to do with such errors and misconceptions as may persist in the final version.
2. Data used in this paper come from actual overheard usages noted in a journal during my stay in Thailand, combined with an experimental elicitation performed on university undergraduates, all native speakers of Standard Thai. Diachronic conclusions are based on dictionaries published in 1940 and 1944.
3. Thai examples will be given in their original orthography, followed by a Romanization in slash brackets.

4. In an interesting twist to the problem of determining actual usage from native speakers' intuitions, Thai speakers typically under-report their use of semantically specific, prescriptively correct classifiers. When asked about their attitudes towards substitution of the general classifier for more specific classifiers, native Thai speakers will cheerfully say that they know such use of อัน /an/ is "wrong," but that the more specific classifiers are "too hard." Classifiers are widely perceived as "difficult" and as something that "even Thai people make mistakes on."
5. While ตัว /tua/ is usually glossed as "body" in dictionaries, it is not at all equivalent in usage to the English word "body". Expressions like "strong body", "sexy body", "dead body", "tired body" etc. all use nouns other than ตัว /tua/. The phrases in which ตัว /tua/ comes closest to meaning "body" translate into English as reflexives, as แต่งตัว /teng tua/ "get dressed", ตัวเอง /tua eng/ "oneself", and ตัว /tua/ alone, used colloquially as a 2nd familiar pronoun, mainly among women.
6. Even in English, with its very simple classifier system, enumeration favors the most specific classifier uses. This seems to relate to identity requirements for counting, i.e., "You can't count apples and oranges."
7. It should be pointed out that marketing is not a particularly formal situation in Thailand, but rather in many ways a social and recreational activity. For instance, kinship terms are widely used among buyers and sellers, and, for words with several, register-sensitive forms, such as "know", "eat", "dog", "husband" and wife", the informal terms are used.
8. While the animal-human distinction is commonly breached for insulting purposes, this is usually not done with classifiers, but rather with nouns (dog, buffalo, lizard), vulgar kinship terms or verbs for eating.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Karen L. & Nancy F. Conklin 1973 Toward a theory of natural classification. Papers from the 9th Reg. Mtg., Chicago Ling. Soc.
- Benedict, Paul K. 1975 Austro-Thai language and culture, with a glossary of roots. New Haven: HRAF Press
- Conklin, Nancy F. 1981 The semantics and syntax of numeral classification in Tai and Austronesian. Univ. of Michigan Ph.D Dissertation
- Delancey, Scott 1986 Toward a history of Tai classifier systems. in Craig, Collette Grinevald, ed. Categorization and Noun Classification. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins (In press)
- Denny, J. Peter 1976 What are noun classifiers good for? Papers from the 12th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society: 122-32
- Greenberg, Joseph H. 1977 Numeral classifiers and substantival number: Problems in the genesis of a linguistic type. Stanford University: Working Papers on Language Universals 9: 1-39
- Grierson, G.A. 1903 Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. II: Mon-Khmer & Siamese-Chinese Families. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass
- Haas, Mary R. 1976 The use of numeral classifiers in Thai. Language 18: 201 - 206
- McFarland, George B. 1944 Thai-English Dictionary. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Setraputra, So 1940 New Model English-Thai Dictionary. Samud Prakan, Thailand: So Sethaputra's Press