

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

In this section, I take a look back at some assumptions and some perspectives gained.

Jackendoff's tree diagram showing no words at the bottom of his tree diagram that he used to illustrate the point that syntax concerns parts of speech not words, is important to bring back into discussion. Jackendoff's point was that words are "pieces of phonology" and that the syntax essentially was the structure of the tree. We have seen Muansuwan's tree structure which was hypothesized to be the syntactical structure of her example sentences. When the informants were asked how they would change these sentences to make them more "correct" most said to do that they would have to know what the sentences meant.

This simple fact shows, to my mind, that meaning dictates syntax rather than the reverse. If Malee had in fact crossed the bridge then *troŋ khaam* would be two words not one. In this simple case we see illustrated an example of where semantics can explain syntax but then syntax can hardly be autonomous. In Thai orthography generally there are no spaces between words to mark a word boundary. Verb clusters can be interpreted as successive actions or can cohere and be interpreted as referring to a single event. These semantic facts of meaning and usage cannot then be ignored in building abstract theoretical models since the quality of a theory is based on the quality of the data, and semantic and pragmatic data simply is the primary data.

The Essentialist practice focusing on context free sentences as the unit of analysis can create pseudo problems assuming that disambiguation has to be done through syntax. Thai speakers make inferences without the obligatory grammatical structures that force one strict interpretation of a clause or sentence. A general feature of languages in this region is that speaker/listeners have to keep open more interpretational options and pay more attention to context in order to interpret meaning at the clause level.

Collecting large data bases and empirically finding patterns of distribution for sets of verbs is definitely a worthy research goal. As Steedman (2011) notes, grammars of natural languages are complex- more like almanacs than algebraic formulae. His remark that “the real world need is for grammars that directly support low-complexity derivation of a considerable variety of surface constructions” is true for English but also true for languages with radically pragmatic grammars as found in SE Asia.

As shown by my word scramble and the sentence from the story Mom, Thai has few grammatical morphemes that syntactically structure the sentence and mark relations between the words. A syntactical grid with slots for large open classes of words does not exist but rather many collocated verb patterns some of which cohere into larger potential event descriptions. The selection restrictions are semantic and pragmatically governed and context is important for reconstructing meaning. What is seen in linguistics today as a problem, that is how to fit serial verb constructions into the greater conceptual scheme of description and classification, is evident by these quotes from Newmeyer. He quotes Aikhenvald’s (2006) list of characteristics of serial verbs then remarks, “the problem is that the components of her definition, namely notions like ‘acting as a single predicate’, ‘monoclausal’, ‘dependency of any sort’, ‘conceptualizing as a single event’, and so on are themselves either so vague or so controversial that her definition does not help us very much in separating the class of SVs from the class of non-SVs. The problem is that continua and prototypes explain nothing. At best they provide an ordered set data in search of a theory” (Newmeyer, 2004: 4).

Newmeyer then offers 13 pages of examples from the literature showing that current theories, both formal and functional, do not solve the puzzle of serial verbs. In Newmeyer’s view the suggestion serial verb constructions represent a fundamentally different view of viewing reality is “drastic and unwanted”. He concludes: “Suffice it to say in summary that the general confusion about what characterizes serial verbs at a descriptive level is matched within the generative community by uncertainty as to how to characterize them at a theoretical level” (Newmeyer, 2004: 17).

The admission of confusion is refreshing and spells opportunity for Thai speaking linguists to step up and explain why Thai and other isolating languages in this region manage well without structures thought to be necessary in the Eurocentric approaches

to syntactical analysis. Saussure originated the analogy between the grammar of a language and the rules of chess, 'the respective value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms' (Saussure, 1913: 88). This model is at the heart of the Essentialist view of grammar. The question remains however, can language be modeled with a formal system of rules?

Jackendoff's paper, *The State of the Art* (2007), upholds the concepts of formal algebraic structures for syntax but chides Chomsky for his "syntactocentrism". The title to his paper is obviously taken from a book by Hockett written forty years ago where Hockett developed a summary of 19 points that had to be accepted to agree with Chomsky's formal model of language. Hockett disagreed with Chomsky on 17 of those points. In the book Hockett created another analogy which I believe more accurately describes a natural language. "In sand lot chess inhabitants of an isolated village play chess their whole life only the rules are never written down and all learning is via observation and participation. Furthermore, the "rules" can be changed. They are whatever you can get your partner to accept. To our way of thinking, sand lot chess is not nearly so desirable a game as real chess. It is not very much like a language. But it is much more like a language than is real chess" (Hockett, 1968: 85).

On a personal note, I confess that my age and background had led me to assume that linguists were interested in learning natural languages and that most if not all linguists would speak several languages. I worked at the National Security Agency during my four years in the US Air Force as an intelligence analyst translating Russian and Spanish between 1970 and 1974. My exposure to academic linguists during that time involved very early efforts at machine translation and I was extremely impressed with the few professional linguists that I met and who all spoke several languages fluently and also seemed to have a profound respect for data.

That this is not the case now and that I was profoundly wrong about this is the only reason I can think of for this quote displayed proudly on a linguist's website.

"Asking a linguist how many languages they speak is like asking a doctor how many diseases they have". The fact that this quip is considered humorous enough to post on a linguistic website for professional linguists speaks volumes about the modern attitude about what the subject should be construed to be by professional linguists. I would like to conclude with some comments as to why an intimate knowledge of a language under

study might affect one's approach to linguistic theory. In Chapter 5 I discussed at length the descriptions of Thai and languages in this region of the world by Western trained linguists in terms of what the languages lacked. I would like to end with an example that bears on this issue.

Wittgenstein famously remarked, "Es gibt nur die Beispiele" (There are only examples). I understand this to mean that the object/data/referent under study has a greater truth claim than an analysis or interpretation of that example. In other words, postulated underlying principles are suspect and prone to be personal and unexaminable. They are further from "reality" than "some-thing" that can be observed equally by all interested observers. I offer as a final example, a word for word glossing of a Thai book title recently shown to me.

(60) Sentence #20

tâaj lɛɛw paj naj
die already go where

One possible English free translation might be, "Where do we go when we die" or perhaps there are better interpretations. For English speakers, the above gloss of just the four English words seems cryptic and open to different interpretations. We think we need to add referents for the verbs to make the phrase or clause understandable. Linguists with firm convictions about language structure, and this seems to be the huge majority of linguists, seem inclined to confidently leap into an analysis using abstract words that have theoretical underpinnings in present day linguistic theory. Let us try to examine this simple specific example in detail with open minds and see how translation and theory are intertwined.

For an English speaker it does seem that there are words missing. But are the words missing or is it that the English glosses of the Thai words have allowed the easy inference that the Thai words do have just these simple meanings shown by their English glosses. In other words, is the act of glossing in English hiding something? In my view the Thai words have differently delimited meaning per word than do English words. They have extremely general semantic senses as my quote from Grierson in Chapter 5 illustrates concerning Ahom. This fact about Thai is what confuses, frustrates and bewilders so many who attempt to learn the language. It is the opposite "complaint" of Thais who are frustrated with English and continually wonder why a

language needs so many extra words that do not need to be there. The genius of Thai is that often less can be more. I have to learn this lesson often when my translations of English sentences into Thai have baffled my listeners.

Knowing what one does not have to say to be understood by others, can be a most difficult lesson to learn. English speakers believe that these unsaid words simply must be there in the language- in some “deeper structure”. Just as linguists all believe that “main verbs” have to be there in all clauses since the form of a clause is modeled on the form of a logical proposition which clauses are assumed to be.

My experience with translating Thai into English is that verbs are often better thought of as gerunds. Perhaps “dying, then going where” is a better English translation of the book’s title. Linguists might say, this is a translation issue not a matter of theoretical linguistics but I maintain that it is a matter of utmost importance in the methodology of theoretical linguistics. How can implicit assumptions be challenged and brought out into the open if linguistic analysis is carried out in one language only? If linguists draw all their conclusions from English glosses, their perspective is seriously skewed and the almost ideological conviction that we all speak basically the same language becomes a truism. This issue may help explain the Gordian Knot of serial verb description discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

I believe that we will make progress in understanding why language is the way it is only by studying language as it is. Our methodology must acknowledge the limitations of our imaginations, our biases, and our proven tendencies as human beings to seek to maintain unexamined presumptions that serve to support our current notions of truth. I think the field of theoretical linguistics needs to embrace a more humble and appropriate attitude toward the still enormous challenge of natural language study where mysteries abound and where far more remains to be discovered than is currently understood.