

On “Thook” as a Main Verb in Thai

Timothy Gould

1. The Problem

This paper will focus on determining the nature of the lexical item “thook” in Thai. “Thook” has traditionally been considered an auxiliary, or a kind of “helping verb” used to form passive sentences. Mary Haas, in her “Thai-English Student’s Dictionary,” defines it as “[a] verbal element; used in making passive constructions”(Haas 1964 p.219). The issue of classifying “thook” is not a straightforward one, however, in that Thai does not make any use of inflection on nouns or verbs. Danvivathana’s (1987 p. 7) claim that “there are no hard and fast rules that make Thai words belong to a particular part of speech,” though possibly too strong, captures, I believe, the native speaker’s difficulty in placing “thook” in a specific grammatical category. Intrasai and Boonmee (2015 personal communication) agree that in Thailand, “thook” is presented as the analog to English passives, and that most Thai speakers accept the notion that “thook” serves exactly the same function as the auxiliary “be” in English passives.

2. The Hypothesis

I will examine two Hypotheses in order to determine exactly which lexical category “thook” should be considered a member of. The first, which I will call the Infl Hypothesis, supports the traditional view in Thai that “thook” is used to make passive constructions. Under this view, as the name implies, “thook” is an auxiliary verb. The second, which I will call the V Hypothesis, supports the notion that “thook” is a main verb which requires a CP complement. Basing my arguments on the patterns exhibited by other non-controversial verbs and auxiliaries in Thai, I will show that “thook” is, indeed, a main verb. Below, for clarity, is a restatement of the two Hypotheses under examination.

INFL Hypothesis

“Thook” is an auxiliary element used to form passive voice sentences in Thai.

V Hypothesis

“Thook” is a main verb which requires a sentential complement.

3. Brief Outline of Thai Syntax

The canonical word order of sentences in Thai is Subject, Verb, Object. Since there are no overt case markers, word order is crucial.

- (1) khao tii chan
 he/she/they hit I
 “He/she/they hit me.”

Notice that when the order of the subject and object in (1) is reversed, the form of the pronouns remains the same.

- (2) chan tii khao
 I hit he/she/they
 “I hit him/her/them.”

These sentences clearly show that Thai does not make use of overt case marking on NP's. Additional syntactic features of Thai will be explored as they become relevant to development of the following arguments.

4. The INFL Hypothesis

The Infl hypothesis proposes that passive formation in Thai is virtually identical to passivization in English and that “thook” occurs under Infl. A passive verb then, will not subcategorize for an external argument and it “loses” the active verb's ability to assign accusative case. To satisfy the Case Filter, overt NP's in Thai must receive abstract case, which in passives is accomplished by moving the direct object NP to [Spec,IP], where case is assigned by Infl. An auxiliary verb is also needed in both languages: “be” in English and “thook” in Thai. Following are examples of simple active sentences and tree structures of their passive transformations in both languages.

- (3) Mom hit me.

(4) Mae tii chan.

mom hit I

“Mom hit me.”

In both Thai and English, as shown below, the agent of the active verb may optionally be omitted in the passive sentence.

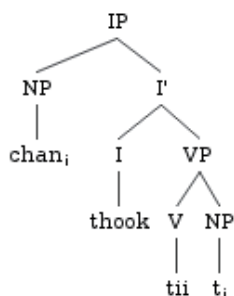
(5) Chan thook tii.

I suffer hit

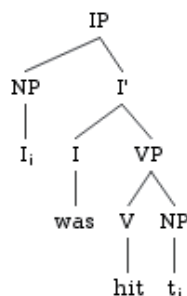
“I was hit”

(6) I was hit.

(5i)



(6i)



A number of issues immediately surface. First, notice that while the English Infl carries tense and number, the Thai Infl is uninflected. This is relatively uninteresting in this sentence, but the lack of any overt marking on “thook” prevents use of the Infl Hypothesis to confirm or deny this placement of the word. More straightforwardly, since there is no inflection, we cannot ascertain if “thook” really belongs in Infl. Additionally, while “be” is semantically neutral, “thook” carries a connotation of negativity. The translation of “thook” is usually “suffer,” but as I will show in later arguments, it may sometimes be translated more accurately as “experience” or “undergo.” This “negativity condition” on the verbs with which “thook” appears, though, is indicative of a constraint on Thai “passives” which does not hold for English. Consider the sentences in (7) and (8).

(7) chan kap rot.
I drive car
“I drive a car.”

(8) *rot thook kap.
car undergo drive
“The car was driven.”

The English passive of (8), “the car was driven,” is perfectly acceptable, but while the construction in (8) is syntactically identical to (5), the sentence is ungrammatical. This is an unexpected result; passive markers are not usually employed to convey their own semantic notions. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that the verb appearing with “thook” is not solely responsible for the unpleasant interpretation Thai speakers give “thook” constructions.

(9) chan thook John jup
I suffer John kiss
“I was kissed by John.” (and it was not a pleasant experience)

For (9) to be an acceptable sentence, the kissing *must* be given a pejorative reading. But the verb “kiss” does not carry any negativity itself, so the unpleasant meaning comes from “thook.” Although none of the above examples constitute a direct indictment of the Infl Hypothesis, they certainly raise suspicion of its validity. So far we have seen that when the agent of the verb is omitted, passivization seems to operate in Thai as in English, with a couple of important caveats. First, we are unable to determine if movement of the direct object to [Spec,IP] has occurred because there is no overt marking of case on Thai pronominal NP’s. As I mentioned above, this merely eliminates a potential confirmation of passivity in Thai, it does not deny it. Second, unlike most other languages which use a semantically neutral auxiliary type verb to form passives, “thook” conveys a distinct pejorative meaning. Again, this simply raises suspicion of the accuracy of classifying “thook” as an auxiliary element. Based on these suspicions, the following arguments will confirm that “thook” cannot appear in Infl. In both Thai and English, the agent of the passive verb can be optionally omitted in the S-structure of a passive sentence. In English, the agent NP appears in a prepositional “by” phrase, but in Thai the agent always follows “thook”. (5a) and (6a) below are (5) and (6) above with

overt agents.

(6a) I was hit by mom

(6ai)



Since the verb “hit,” in its passive form, cannot assign accusative case, the direct object must move to [Spec,IP], where it gets nominative case from Infl. This case marking of the NP makes the chain of which “I” is the head visible so the tail of the chain can receive the verb’s theta role. The overt agent NP “mom,” then, receives accusative case from the preposition “by.” In this way, all overt NP’s in English passives satisfy the Case Filter. Thai also has a word that translates as “by,” but it cannot be used to capture the verb/agent relation in a “thook” construction.

(10) Chan pai doi rot

I go by car

“I go by car.”

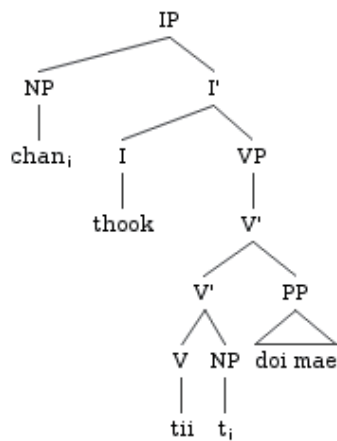
If we try to place the agent in a “by” phrase adjoined to the verb, we get the ungrammatical (5a)

(5a) *chan thook tii doi mae

I suffer hit by mom

“I was hit by mom.”

(5ai)*

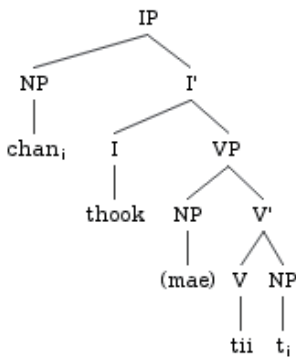


This sentence is deceptively well formed for English speakers, but it is simply unacceptable in Thai. The grammatical “thook” construction which includes an overt agent is (5b).

(5b) Chan thook mae tii
 I suffer mom hit
 “I was hit by mom.”

The tree diagram for (5b) exposes a real problem for the Infl Hypothesis.

(5bi)



As the tree above is drawn, “mae” ‘mom’ is in [Spec,VP], the only available position. The problem presented here is that the Infl Hypothesis assumes that passive verbs,

indicated by the appearance of “thook” in Infl, do not have an external argument, so [Spec, VP] in this sentence should be empty. Even if we do allow it, “mae” ‘mom’ should have to move to [Spec,IP] to get case. Obviously this is an impossible move, as “chan” ‘I’ is already occupying that position. An attempt could be made to rescue the structure by adjoining a “mae” headed NP between I’ and VP or between VP and V’. Either of these options, though, would only exacerbate the problems already noted. If we adjoin another NP phrase above the VP, we will have an overt NP that cannot get a theta role and is blocked by the NP “chan” from moving to get case. We would also lose the information that “mae” *is* the logical subject of the sentence and that [Spec, VP] is exactly where we find it in active sentences (assuming the “subject in VP hypothesis”). An adjoined NP above V’ would violate X’ Theory and cause the same problem. The Infl Hypothesis is thus unable to account for the overt agent’s grammatical appearance in a “passive” construction.

Sentences containing other auxiliaries can appear in constructions containing “thook.” The following arguments will show that because these elements are “real” auxiliaries which reside in Infl (except for negation), “thook” must belong somewhere else. First, I will consider the progressive auxiliary “kamlang,” best translated as “V-ing.” Consider the following sentence with tree diagram.

- (11) Chan kamlang kap rot muwan.
 I -ing drive car yesterday
 “I was driving the car yesterday.”

(11i)



This sentence is uncontroversial. “Kamlang,” under Infl, always precedes the verb and in this sentence makes “kap” ‘drive’ progressive. Unless we invoke the Split Infl Hypothesis to open another node in the tree, “kamlang” occupies the only space available, namely Infl. Now consider (12) in which “kamlang” and “thook” occur together in a grammatical sentence.

- (12) Rot kamlang thook chan kamoy.
car -ing suffer I steal
“The car is being stolen by me.”

Again, under the Infl Hypothesis, there is no place in the structure to support both “kamlang” and thook. Additionally, as shown above, “kamlang,” in all other instances, precedes main verbs, so we must conclude that “thook,” contrary to the Infl Hypothesis, is not in Infl.

Another argument along the same lines uses the future auxiliary “ja” ‘will.’

The lexical item “ja” always precedes the verb in Thai sentences, which gives us active sentences like (13).

- (13) Chan ja kamoy rot.
I will steal car
“I will steal a car.”

Which can be made into a “thook” construction.

- (14) Rot ja thook chan kamoy
car will suffer I steal
“The car will be stolen by me.”

The Infl Hypothesis is unable to explain this construction. According to the Infl Hypothesis, two auxiliaries “thook” and “ja,” would have to occupy Infl at the same time. Since this is impossible, we must conclude that “thook” is not an auxiliary in Thai.

We have seen that the Infl Hypothesis fails in a number of ways to account for constructions in Thai which contain “thook.” All of the problems stem from the inability

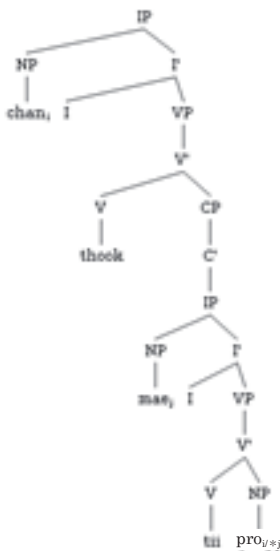
of a syntactic structure which posits “thook” as the head of Infl to account for lexical items appearing in grammatical sentences. I first showed that overt agents are unable to be case marked when “thook” is in Infl. Then I showed that since other auxiliaries (“kamlang” and “ja”) always appear before verbs, the fact that they also precede “thook” makes it impossible for them to belong to the same lexical category. “Thook’s” appearance after negatives raises the same problem for the Infl Hypothesis, so the negation argument will not be fully explored in this section. Based on these findings, I dismiss the Infl Hypothesis as a possible accounting for “thook.” The following section will explore a more likely hypothesis.

5. The V Hypothesis

Under the V Hypothesis, “thook” is a main verb which requires a sentential complement. I will show in the following arguments how this structure can accurately account for all grammatical occurrences of “thook.” Consider (5b) rewritten as (15); the V Hypothesis structure for a “thook” construction with an overt agent.

- (15a) Chan thook mae tii
 I suffer mom hit
 “I was hit by mom.”

(15b)



In (15a), “chan” is base generated as the subject of the main verb “thook” (In these representations I assume the subject has already moved from [Spec,VP] to [Spec IP]). In this position it receives case from Infl and an external theta role from the verb “thook.” In the embedded clausal complement, the overt agent “mae” ‘mom’ is no longer problematic, it receives case from Infl and a theta role from the “active” verb “tii” and it remains the understood, and real subject of “tii.” Under the V Hypothesis, the direct object of the embedded verb is the covert NP “pro” which does not require case. Since covert NP’s are not bound by the Case Filter, we no longer have to posit movement. This gives the V Hypothesis a theoretical advantage in that movement in Thai is highly marked (only rarely occurring in topicalization and possibly in the UG “subject in VP hypothesis”). The above argument satisfactorily addresses all the difficulties faced by the Infl Hypothesis, strongly suggesting that “thook” is a main verb. The following arguments will confirm this status.

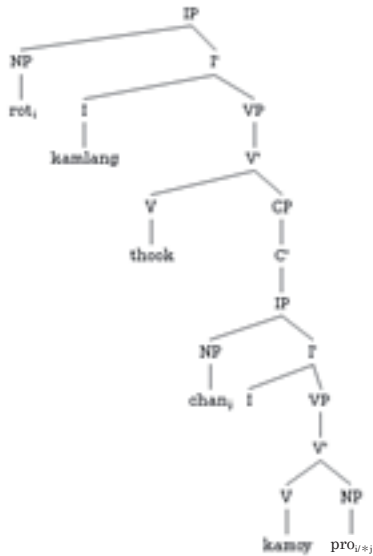
Remember from arguments presented against the Infl Hypothesis that auxiliaries in Thai always come before main verbs. Under the V Hypothesis, “thook’s” consistent appearance in that position is naturally accounted for. Consider again sentence (12), which the Infl Hypothesis was unable to produce. (12) is repeated here as (16a) and the tree diagram (16b).

(16a) Rot kamlang thook chan kamoy.

car -ing suffer I steal

“The car is being stolen by me.”

(16b)



Referring back to (11), we see that “thook” patterns in exactly the same way as a main verb when it appears with an auxiliary element. “Kamlang” “V -ing” always appears before the verb it modifies. Since it also appears before “thook,” we can be certain that “thook” is a verb. At this point, the V Hypothesis seems to account ably for the patterns “thook” exhibits in grammatical Thai sentences, so before I make additional arguments confirming this via the future auxiliary “ja” and negation, I will address the issue of the “gaps” found in “thook” constructions. This gap, thus far found in the direct object position of the embedded clause, is coindexed with the base generated subject in the matrix [Spec,IP]. A pattern begins to emerge here that may partially account for the “special” status of “thook.”

6. Digression concerning the “gap” in “thook” constructions.

Thai speakers are taught in the course of their formal education that “thook” is used to form two types of passives, direct and indirect. All of the examples so far ((5), (9), (12), (14), (15), (16)) have demonstrated the effect of “direct passive” “thook” constructions, namely that the direct object position of the embedded verb is left empty. For example, in the trees for (15b) and (16b), the NP’s that are coindexed with the subject of “thook” cannot be overt. And as shown in (17), if the coreferring NP is overt, the sentence crashes.

(17) *Chan thook mae tii chan.

I suffer mom hit I

*“I was hit me by mom.”

While the ungrammaticality of the English translation for (17) is easily defined as a violation of the Case Filter, the situation in Thai is not so clear cut. If we look again at the tree diagrams in (15b) and (16b), it is not apparent exactly why the direct object NP of the embedded clause must be covert. Since the lower verb is active, it should assign accusative case and a theta role to its direct object NP, essentially licensing the NP to be overt. Recourse to Government and Binding Principles does not provide much insight. PRO must be ungoverned, and this sister of V position is obviously governed by V, disqualifying it as a potential candidate for PRO. Little *pro* can appear in object position, but according to Haegeman (1994), it must be recoverable. In Italian, “recovery of the content of object *pro* [] is due to a rule of arbitrary interpretation” (p. 462) which assigns the features [+masculine, +plural] to *pro* (Haegeman 1994). But Thai pronouns are not marked for person, number, or gender (cf. (1) above) and the empty coreferential position may also be coindexed with an R-expression, making it irrecoverable without recourse to the matrix [Spec, IP] position. Forced to draw I have chosen to “abstract away” from the issue and use the combination term “Pro” to refer to the gap in the direct object position (and sometimes in the subject position, as shown below) which is coindexed with “thook’s” [Spec,IP]. The distribution of the empty category, though, is easily captured with the following stipulatory condition: *Any NP’s coindexed with the subject of “thook” must be covert.*

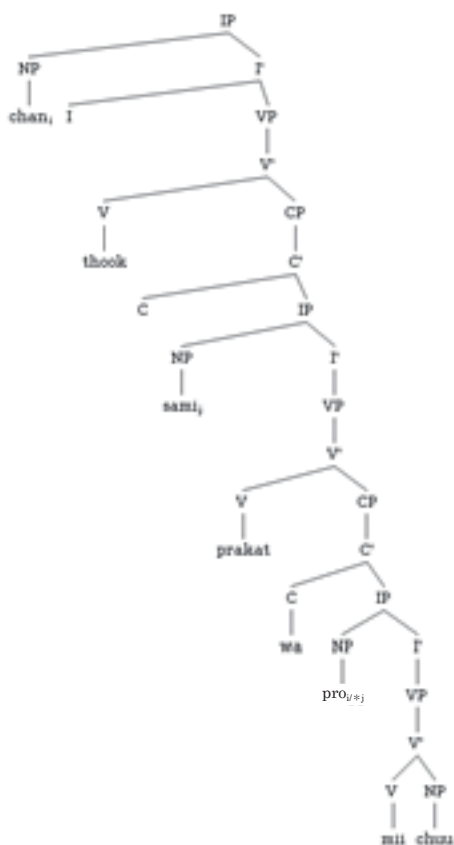
This definition predicts that the grammatical position of a coreferential NP in a “thook” construction is irrelevant; a prediction borne out by (15) and (16) and further confirmed by the following sentences. These sentences are considered in traditional Thai grammar as “indirect passives”.

(18a) Chan thook sami prakat wa mii chuu.

I suffer husband announced that have lover

“I suffer the fact that my husband announced that I have a lover.”

(18b)



In (18), the subject of the doubly embedded CP is coindexed with the subject of “thook,” and as predicted, it must be covert. A reading where “sami” ‘husband’ is the person with an illicit lover is impossible unless an overt pronoun replaces “Pro.” In that case, no NP’s would refer to the subject of “thook” and the sentence would be grammatical. The “Pro” gap can also occur in possessive NP’s as shown in (19).

- (19) Chani thook joan_j kamoy waan Pro_{i/*j}
 I suffer thief steal ring (I/*thief)
 “My ring was stolen by a thief.”

The combined force of (15), (16), (18), and (19), provides powerful empirical evidence that “thook” constructions are not divided into direct and indirect “passives,” indeed they

are not passives at all, but are the sole reflex of a (subcategorization?) constraint barring overt NP's that corefer to the subject of the main verb "thook."

7. Three final arguments for "thook" as a verb.

These final arguments will solidify the accuracy of the V Hypothesis claim that "thook" is a main verb. The first refers to the tree (18b) above. Notice that the doubly embedded CP is a complement of "prakat" 'announced.' The single lexical item that can appear alone between a subject and an embedded CP is a verb. Since "thook" appears as the only word between the matrix subject and the first embedded CP, it, too, must be a verb.

The second argument is that the modal "ja" 'will' cannot occur without a verb, as evidenced by (20).

- (20) *Chan ja rongrian
I will school
*"I will school."

In a grammatical sentence it always precedes the main verb.

- (21) Chan ja pai rongrian
I will go school
"I will go to school."

When the modal "ja" is in a "thook" construction, it precedes "thook."

- (22) Chan ja thook mae tii.
I will suffer mom hit
"I will be hit by mom."

Based on this pattern, "thook" is a main verb.

The third and final argument is based on the fact that main verbs always follow negation in Thai.

(23) Chan ja mai pai rongrian.

I will not go school

“I will not go to school.”

“Thook” also follows negation when they appear in the same sentence.

(24) Chan ja mai thook mae tii.

I will not suffer mom hit

“I will not be hit by mom.”

Once again “thook” patterns like a main verb, confirming that that is exactly what it is.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the V Hypothesis, which claims that “thook” is a main verb in Thai, is empirically and theoretically superior to the Infl Hypothesis, which claims that “thook” is an auxiliary element used to construct passive voice sentences. The preponderance of empirical evidence supporting the V Hypothesis also entails that there is no “passive” as such in the Thai language. The Infl Hypothesis collapses as soon as it is pressed into service to explain any but the simplest Thai “passive” constructions with covert agents. Although my conclusion is resoundingly in favor of the V Hypothesis, “thook” does have some special properties not found in other main verbs.

9. Two further issues.

The first of these, which was noted in the digression, is that NP’s coindexed with the subject of “thook” must be covert. This feature is not found with any other verbs in Thai (Boonmee and Intrasai 2015 personal communication). The second unique property is that “thook” is the only main verb that can and must appear without an overt complementizer.

(25) Chan chua waa khao pen khon dii

I believe that he is person good

“I believe that he is a good person.”

- (26) John puut waa Mary ja maa sai
John said that Mary will come late
“John said that Mary will come late.”

Although these unique properties of the verb “thook” are not specifically the focus here, I believe that they are probably responsible for “thook’s” traditional treatment as an auxiliary element.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my Thai informants: Jiraporn Intrasai and Sirintip Boonmee

References

- Danvivathana, N., (1987), *The Thai Writing System*, Hamburg: Buske.
- Haas, M. R., (1964), *Thai - English Student’s Dictionary*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Haegeman, L., (1994), *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*, Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Carnie, A., (2011), *Modern Syntax: A Coursebook*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.