

# Fronting and backing topicalization in Thai

Udom WAROTAMASIKKHADIT  
Ramkhamhaeng University

## 1. Introduction

Topicalization generally concerns a movement of an argument to the leftmost position or the front of a sentence. The topicalized argument is usually emphasized to attract a listener's attention. In Thai a topicalized argument can be moved to the front, to the end, or to the middle of a sentence depending on the function of the argument or the position of the argument as it appears in the sentence.

## 2. Fronting Topicalization

When an argument is topicalized, it is usually moved to the leftmost position or the front of a sentence. Udom Warotamasikkhadit (1983:2-11) found that the Thai language is no different, for example:

1. taa phûuyǐŋ khon níi sǎy  
eye woman class. this beautiful  
“The eyes of this woman are beautiful.”

When one wants to emphasize *phûuyǐŋ khon níi* ‘the woman’, the argument *phûuyǐŋ khon níi* can be topicalized by moving it to the leftmost position of the sentence.

2. phûuyǐŋ khon níi taa sǎy  
woman class. this eye beautiful  
“The woman’s eyes are beautiful.”

The object of a sentence can be topicalized, for example:

3. dichǎn kĭiat phûuchaay khon nán mâak  
I (female) hate man class. that much  
“I hate that man a lot.”

4. phûuchaay khon nán dichǎn kĭiat mâak  
man class that I hate much  
“That man I hate a lot.”

A third person pronoun can be left as a trace for the topicalized argument, for example:

5. phûuchaay khon nán dichăn kfiat khăw mâak  
 man class that I hate him much  
 “That man, I hate him a lot.”

It must be noted that an argument which functions as the subject of a sentence and appears at the beginning of a sentence can also be topicalized by adding a third person pronoun after the subject.

6. lûukchaay phôm rớŋhây tháj wan  
 son male I cry all day  
 “My son cries all day.”

(6) can be topicalized as (7).

7. lûukchaay phôm man rớŋhây tháj wan  
 son male I it cry all day  
 “My son, he cries all day long.”

It must be noted that a topicalized argument must be made definite by containing a determiner, *nii* ‘this’, *nán* ‘that’, *nóon* ‘that yonder’, *núun* ‘that far away’, or there must be a pronoun, which is always definite, added.

### 3. Backing Topicalization

When an argument is emphasized or attention-centered, it can be moved to the end of a sentence or to the middle of a sentence depending on the degree of emphasis.

8. phôw cà pay năy  
 father will go where  
 “Where are you going?”

When *phôw* ‘father’ is used as a second person pronoun and is certainly definite, it can be moved to the end of the sentence.

9. cà pay năy phôw  
 will go where father  
 “Where are you going, Father?”

It can be seen that when the leftmost argument is topicalized it must be moved to the back of the sentence.

10. dichăn mây yàak hây kaankeeŋ tua níi khăw lăy  
 I not want give pants class. this he at all  
 “I do not want to give this pair of pants to him at all.”

When *kaankeeŋ tua níi* ‘this pair of pants’, which is definite, is topicalized, it is moved to the end of the sentence.

11. dichăn mây yàak hây khăw ləəy kaŋkeŋ tua nīi  
 I not want give he at all pants class this  
 “I do not want to give him at all, this pair of pants.”

It must be noted that a sentence with a definite NP following a benefactive verb *hây* ‘to give’ can have backing topicalization. The NP following the benefactive verb can be topicalized by moving it to the end of the sentence.

12. phōw sīi kaŋkeŋ sǝŋ tua maa hây phǝm  
 father buy pants two class. come give I  
 “Father bought two pairs of pants and gave them to me.”

In Thai, this is a single sentence, not a compound predicate with a conjunction as appears in the translation. *kaŋkeŋ* ‘pants’ is a goal of the verb *sīi* ‘to buy’. The numeral and the classifier modifying the noun, but not the whole NP, can be topicalized by moving them to the end of the sentence.

13. phōw sīi kaŋkeŋ maa hây phǝm sǝŋ tua  
 father buy pants come give I two class.  
 “Father bought two pairs of pants for me.”

Navavan (1982:172) observed that the numeral and the classifier modifying the noun can also be moved to the middle of the sentence to show a lesser degree of topicalization because the primary emphasis is on *hây phǝm* ‘gave me’.

14. phōw sīi kaŋkeŋ maa sǝŋ tua hây phǝm  
 father buy pants come two class give I  
 “Father bought two pairs of pants and gave them to me.”

(13) and (14) are rather similar in meaning excepting that (13) puts more emphasis on ‘the two pairs’ than (14) because (14) puts more emphasis on ‘gave me’ than on ‘the two pairs’.

(13) can also have a fronting topicalization as follows:

15. kaŋkeŋ sǝŋ tua nīi (or nán) phōw sīi maa hây phǝm  
 pants two class. this that father buy come give I  
 “These two pair of pants, father bought for me.”

It must be noted here that a determiner, *nīi* or *nán*, is needed to modify the topicalized NP in (15).

#### 4. Conclusion

Topicalization seems to be closely related to emphasis. In Thai, topicalization can occur at the beginning of a sentence, in the middle of sentence, or at the end of a sentence. The topicalized argument at the beginning of a sentence seems to be definite and usually accompanied by a determiner, or a pronoun is added after it. The topicalized argument at the end of a sentence must be a NP or a numeral and a classifier with or without a determiner being moved from the

beginning or the middle of a sentence. The topicalized argument at the middle of a sentence is not a NP, it usually is a numeral and a classifier with or without a determiner being moved from the middle of the sentence to another position in the middle of the sentence.

### REFERENCES

- Navavan Bandhumedha. 1982. *Thai Grammar*. (in Thai). Bangkok: Rung Rueng San Printing.
- Udom Warotamasikhhadit. 1983. "Subjectivalization in Thai." *Ramkhamhaeng University Journal* 9.1: 2-11.

Received: 21 August 1996

35/15 Latphrao 23  
Chatuchak District  
Bangkok 10900  
THAILAND