Fronting and backing topicalization in Thai

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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 phûuyûn khon nîi sûay
   eye woman class. this beautiful
   “The eyes of this woman are beautiful.”

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

2. phûuyûn khon nîi taa sûay
   woman class. this eye beautiful
   “The woman’s eyes are beautiful.”

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

3. dichân kfiat phûuchaay khon nán mân mân
   I (female) hate man class. that much
   “I hate that man a lot.”

4. phûuchaay khon nán dichân kfiat mân
   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:

MON-KHMER STUDIES 27:303-306
5. phûучаay khôn năn dichăn kliat khăw màak 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 rōnḥâay thān wan son male I cry all day
“My son cries all day.”

(6) can be topicalized as (7).

7. lûukchaay phôm man rōnḥâay thān 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’, năn ‘that’, nôn ‘that yonder’, nûun ‘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. phôc cà pay nây father will go where
“Where are you going?”

When phôc ‘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 nây phôc 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 yâak háy kaⁿkeen tua nîi khăw ləey 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 kaⁿkeen tua nîi ‘this pair of pants’, which is definite, is topicalized, it is moved to the end of the sentence.
11. dichăn mà yàak hày khàw loy kañkheñ tua níi
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 hày ‘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. phòc sìi kañkheñ sōn tua maa hày phòm
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. kañkheñ ‘pants’ is a goal of the verb sìi ‘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. phòc sìi kañkheñ maa hày phòm sōn 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 hày phòm ‘gave me’.

14. phòc sìi kañkheñ maa sōn tua hày phòm
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. kañkheñ sōn tua níi (or nán) phòc sìi maa hày phòm
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, níi 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


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