

SOME REMARKS ON “ MĂY QUESTIONS ”

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There are two distinctive groups of Thai yes - no questions, which are illustrated in the following dialogue :

A: *thəə khəəy ʔaan naŋsɿɿ rɿan* Pride and Prejudice
(you)(ever)(read) (book) (title)

{	<i>chây mǎy</i>	}	<i>chăn</i>	<i>cam</i>	<i>dây</i>	<i>wāa</i>
	<i>chây rɿɿ plàaw</i>		(I)	(remember)	(able)	(that)
	<i>mây chây rɿɿ</i>					
	<i>*rɿɿ plàaw</i>					
	<i>*mǎy</i>					
	<i>*rɿɿ</i>					

thəə khəəy lâw rɿan nǐi hây chăn fan
(you) (ever) (tell) (story) (this) (give) (I) (listen to)

“ You have read Pride and Prejudice before, haven't you?
I remember you once related the story to me. ”

B: *chây khəəy ʔaan hǒn nɿŋ naan lǎaw*
(correct)(ever) (read) (time) (one) (long time) (already)

“ That's right. I read it once a long time ago. ”

In this dialogue, A believes that B has read “ Pride and Prejudice ” before. This belief is revealed in the second half of his utterance *cam dây wāa thəə khəəy lâw rɿan nǐi hây chăn fan* “ I remember you once related the story to me. ” Since A is quite certain that he knows that B has read this book, he is asking B this question not to check whether B has done so or not, but to obtain from B confirmation of his belief. In other words, A has enough information about what he is asking that he thinks he knows what the answer will be. The question markers *chây mǎy*, *chây rɿɿ plàaw*, and *mây chây rɿɿ* are appropriate here, whereas *rɿɿ plàaw*, *mǎy*, and *rɿɿ* are not. From this, we can say that Thai yes/no questions are classified into two groups:

1. Questions whose question markers do not contain the word *chây*. The question markers belonging to this group are *rɿɿ*, *rɿɿ plàaw*, and *mǎy*. The questions of this group will be called the ‘ non - *chây* Questions. ’

2. Questions whose question markers contain the word *chây*. The question markers belonging to this groups are *chây mǎy*, *chây rɿɿ plàaw*, and *mây chây rɿɿ*. The questions of this group will be called the ‘ *chây* Questions. ’

NON - CHÂY QUESTIONS

When asking non - *chây* questions, the speaker does not have enough information or has no information at all, so he cannot be certain about the answer. He asks the question not to confirm his belief since

he does not have any belief, but to have the hearer provide him with the information he is asking for.

The question markers used in the non - **chây** questions are **rǎi**, **rǎi plàaw**, and **mǎv**.

mǎy Questions.

Dialogue I:

The speaker simply wants to know whether the hearer has read *Pride and Prejudice*.

A: thəə khəy ʔaən nǎŋsɿ rʔaŋ Pride and
 (you) (ever) (read) (book) (title)

Prejudice khʒɔŋ Jane Austin
(belong to)

ṛɿɿ plàaw
 mǎy
 * ṛɿɿ
 * mǎy chây ṛɿɿ
 * chây mǎy
 * chây ṛɿɿ plàaw

“ Have you ever read Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice*? ”

B: khœy ʔaan hɔ̃n n̩ŋ naan l̩æw
(ever) (read) (time) (one) (long time) (already)

“ I read it once a long time ago. ”

In this dialogue, A does not know whether B has read the book *Pride and Prejudice* and wants to know whether B has done so or not, so A is asking B this question using either the **mǎy** or **rǎi plàaw** marker. This shows that **mǎy** and **rǎi plàaw** questions are alike in the sense that the speakers of both questions want to show the hearer that they do not

know the answer and want to get an answer to remove their ignorance. The question marker $r\ddot{y}i$ is inappropriate here because in asking a $r\ddot{y}i$ question, the speaker wants not only to know whether what he is asking is true or not, but also to show the hearer that he thinks what he is asking is true.

Dialogue II:

A: chǎn phên klàp maa càak Mainland
(I) (just) (return) (come) (from)

pay New York, Washington D.C. |à? Miami.
(go) (and)

" I just came back from the Mainland. I went to New York, Washington D.C. and Miami. "

B: l'æw pay Chicago d'ay { rɪ+ plæw }
(and) (go) (also) *mɔɪ }

“ Did you also go to Chicago? ”

In this dialogue, B has information about A's going to the Mainland, and since he thinks that those who have gone to the big cities like New York, Washington D.C. and Miami may also have gone to Chi-

cago, he draws the inference that A should have done the same thing. B asks the question with rʔi:plàw marker to show A that although he has some background information about the possibility of A's

going to Chicago, he does not want to predict the answer and wants A to be fully responsible for the answer himself.

The reason why the question marker **măy** is inappropriate here is because in asking **măy** questions, the speaker does not have any information about the thing he is asking. He is completely ignorant about the answer so he asks the question hoping that the hearer will supply the answer to remove his ignorance. In this dialogue, in which it is obvious that B bases his question on the information he has, only the question with **r̥t̥t̥ plàaw**, not **măy** is used.

The fact that in asking **măy** questions the speaker does not have any information about what he is asking helps to explain the limited use of **măy** questions when asking about something that has already happened. To clarify this point, let us consider the following sentences :

1. tɔɔn thîi khăw taay thəe jùu
(when) (that) (he) (die) (you) (be)
kăp khăw
(with) (he)
{ r̥t̥t̥ plàaw }
{ *măy }

"When he died, were you with him?"

2. pii thîi lăaw thəe pay
(year) (that) (already) (you) (go)
Chicago
{ r̥t̥t̥ plàaw }
{ *măy }

"Did you go to Chicago last year?"

3. pii thîi lăaw thəe pay
(year) (that) (already) (year) (go)
Chicago bɔɔy
(often)
{ r̥t̥t̥ plàaw }
{ măy }

"Did you go to Chicago often last year?"

All these three questions ask about things that happened in the past. **măy** cannot be used in either sentence 1 or sentence 2 because in asking about specific actions in the past like **pay** 'go' or **jùu** 'be' the speaker must have some information from which he can draw inferences about these actions. For example, the speaker of sentence 1 may have the following information prior to the uttering of sentence 1:

nɔɔŋsăaw chăŋ bɔɔk chăŋ wăa
(sister) (my) (tell) (me) (that)
m̥t̥awaannîi thəe pay
(yesterday) (you) (go)
hăa khun sǎəŋ thîi bân.
(visit) (Mr.) (Sang) (at) (house)
tɔɔn thîi khăw taay thəe jùu kăp khăw
r̥t̥t̥ plàaw.

"My sister told me that you went to visit Mr. Sang at his house yesterday. When he died, were you with him?"

And for sentence 2, the following may be considered to be the information the speaker has before uttering 2 :

thəe chɔɔp pay Chicago chây măy.
(you) (like) (go) (Q - marker)
pii thîi lăaw thəe pay (Chicago) r̥t̥t̥
plàaw.

"You like going to Chicago, don't you?
Did you go there last year?"

It is unlikely that anyone can ask these two questions without having any prior assumption. So only **r̥t̥t̥ plàaw**, not **măy** is appropriate here.

As for sentence 3, it is different from sentence 2 only in that there is the word **bɔɔy** 'often' in the former, but not in the latter; and this word alone triggers the use of **măy**. The reason behind this is that the speaker of sentence 3 may have some information about the action **pay Chicago** 'going to Chicago', but does not know anything about how often the action really took place. As he does not have any background information about how often the hearer went to Chicago last year and wants to know this, he asks the question with the question marker **măy**.

The question marker **r̥t̥t̥ plàaw** can also be used here because the speaker might have been able to make some inferences about the hearer going to Chicago often, as illustrated below :

pii thîi lăaw thəe pay Chicago bɔɔy r̥t̥t̥
plàaw.

khon bɔɔy si? ná? p̥h̥ɔ?
(perhaps) (often) (particle) (particle) (because)
nɔɔŋ thəe jùu thîi nân
(younger brother) (you) (be) (at) (there)
nîi
(particle)

"Did you often go to Chicago last year? I guess you should have because your brother is there."

From the above analysis, it is legitimate to say that **măy** questions cannot be used to ask about specific actions in the past that require the speaker's prior assumption. In other words, **măy** questions are appropriate only when what is asked does not require the speaker's assumption as shown in sentence 4 :

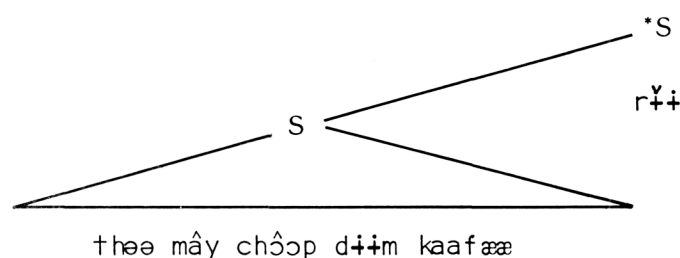
4. t h ə k l ə y p a y C h i c a g o m ă y
(you) (ever) (go)
" Have you ever been to Chicago? "

It is also noteworthy that the questions in which the speaker's assumption is not a necessary condition are those that ask about the degree of things, for example :

5. m ̂ a k h ̂ i n k h ̂ a w k r ̂ o o t t h ə
(last night) (he) (be mad at) (you)
m ̂ a k m ̂ y
(you) (much)
" Was he very mad at you last night? "

Another point about **măy** which is worth mentioning is the fact that the question marker **măy** never co-occurs with the negative word **mây** in the same sentence. So the following negative question is not acceptable in Thai,

6. * t h ə m ̂ y c h ̂ o p d i i m k a a f ̂ æ
(you) (NEG) (like) (drink) (coffee)
m ̂ y
(Q - marker)



This sentence is unacceptable because it offers both negative statements whereas yes/no questions must offer the choice between positive and negative statements.

This analysis seems to work well with **măy** interrogative sentences because it can provide an explanation for the non-co-occurrence of **măy** and **mây** in the same sentence. But if another question marker -- **r̂i i plāaw**--is taken into consideration, we

" Don't you like drinking coffee? "

whereas the positive correspondence is :

7. t h ə c h ̂ o p d i i m k a a f ̂ æ
(you) (like) (drink) (coffee)
m ̂ y
(Q - marker)

" Do you like drinking coffee? "

Linguists working on Thai syntax who have tried to explain the syntactic function of **măy** are Upakitsilpasarn (1956) and Warotamasikkkhadit (1963). They propose that **măy** is derived from **r̂i i m ̂ y** 'or not'. Warotamasikkkhadit further explains that the phrase **r̂i i m ̂ y** is derived from a full negative sentence. So, for him, the sentence

8. k h u n c ̂ a 2 m a a m ̂ y
(you) (will) (come) (Q - marker)
" Will you come? "

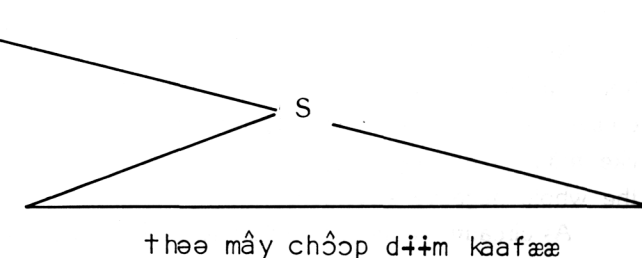
is derived from

- k h u n c ̂ a 2 m a a r ̂ i i m ̂ y
(or) (NEG)

which originated in the deep structure as

- k h u n c ̂ a 2 m a a r ̂ i i m ̂ y m a a

We will propose an explanation of the unacceptability of sentence 6, following the analysis proposed by Upakitsilpasarn and Warotamasikkkhadit. The following is the tentative deep structure of sentence 6 :



will see that the same analysis does not work for **r̂i i plāaw** interrogative sentences.

Both **măy** and **plāaw** have been referred to in Thai grammar texts together as 'negative words.' However, when we compare the sentences in which these words occur we see that these two words have some different grammatical functions. Notice the following sentences :

1. a. chǎn mǎy chōp kaafæ
(I) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

"I don't like coffee."

- *b. chǎn plàaw chōp kaafæ
(NEG)

- II. a. A: thəə ʔaw nǎŋsʔ chǎn
(you) (take) (book) (my)

pay

(away)

"You took my book."

- B: chǎn plàaw
(I) (NEG)

"I didn't."

- B': chǎn mǎy dāy ʔaw
(I) (NEG) (take)

nǎŋsʔ thəə pay

(book) (your) (away)

"I did not take your book."

- b. A: thəə ʔaw nǎŋsʔ
(I) (take) (book)

chǎn pay

(my) (away)

"You took my book."

- *B: chǎn mǎy
(I) (NEG)

A difference that can be seen in these examples is that **mǎy** is a negative particle that occurs with the verb phrases **chōp kaafæ** 'like coffee' and **ʔaw nǎŋsʔ thəə pay** 'took your book', so it can be considered a negative adverb.

As for **plàaw**, it seems to have a different function. **plàaw** in IIB's response to A's accusation is equivalent to IIB', so it is proposed that **plàaw**, unlike **mǎy**, is a negative pro-form, which stands for the whole negative statement.

As already mentioned, **plàaw** is another negative word, and if its negativity is the conditioning factor, then, according to the above analysis, the sentence

9. thəə mǎy chōp dɨm
(you) (NEG) (like) (drink)
kaafæ rʔ plàaw
(coffee) (Q-marker)

"Don't you like drinking coffee?"

should be unacceptable because both conjuncts contain the negative words--**mǎy** and **plàaw**. But such is not the case since sentence 9 is an acceptable sentence in Thai. Following this, it is then illegitimate to say that the derivation of **mǎy** from **rʔ mǎy** can be used to explain why **mǎy** never co-occurs

with **mǎy** in the same sentence. And it is also doubtful if **mǎy** is really derived from **rʔ mǎy** at all.

Since the syntactic explanation fails to solve the problem, we have to look for another explanation. In this case we find that the speaker's assumption may play an important role.

It is interesting that **mǎy** is the only question marker that cannot co-occur with **mǎy** in the same sentence as observed by Noss (1964) and also Campbell (1964). The following sentences are illustrations of this:

10. thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ rʔ
(you) (NEG) (like) (coffee)

11. thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ rʔ plàaw

12. *thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ mǎy

13. thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ chāy rʔ plàaw

14. thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ chāy mǎy

15. thəə mǎy chōp kaafæ mǎy chāy rʔ

Mǎy questions are also the only questions for which the speaker does not have any information about what he is asking. In the other questions, the speaker must have some background assumptions prior to the uttering of the questions. Does the fact about the speaker's lack of background assumptions in **mǎy** questions have anything to do with the non co-occurrence of **mǎy** and **mǎy** in the same sentence? The following analysis will show that it does:

In uttering a negative question, the speaker must have some background information whereas in the positive questions such may not be the case. For example, we can say

16. khun càʔ ʔaw kaafæ
(you) (will) (want) (coffee)

mǎy

(Q-marker)

khàʔ

(polite particle)

"Do you want coffee?"

to a guest although we do not know if he drinks coffee or not. That is to say, we can ask this positive question without having any assumptions about what we are asking. But we cannot say

17. khun càʔ mǎy ʔaw kaafæ + Q-marker
"You don't want coffee, do you?"

unless we assume the addressee probably does not want coffee. **mǎy** questions, in which the speaker does not have any information about what is being asked, are then inappropriate to ask about negative propositions.

The last point I would like to mention about **mǎy** concerns the situation in which both **mǎy** and **rǎi plàaw** questions can be used; the former is considered to be more polite than the latter. This is not at all surprising since in asking **mǎy** questions the speaker shows that he is completely ignorant of the answer and that he knows less than the hearer. And one way of showing someone that you know less than he is to show deference to him; **mǎy** questions are considered to be the questions that are used by the speaker to show deference to the hearer, and thus are polite questions.

rǎi plàaw, on the other hand, is completely different from **mǎy** in this respect. In uttering **rǎi plàaw** questions, the speaker shows that he has some

information about what he is asking but he chooses not to use it to predict the answer. He wants to give the hearer the opportunity of providing an answer for him; and by doing this he thinks of himself as being equal to or superior to the hearer.

This explains why **mǎy**, not **rǎi plàaw**, questions are usually used when people with lower social status talk to people with higher social status, for example secretaries to bosses, students to teachers, children to parents, etc. Following this, it is natural that those with higher social status should feel free to use either **mǎy** or **rǎi plàaw** questions when talking to their inferiors or to those with similar status, which is exactly the case in Thai society.

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