

Double marking in Tai Khamti: reanalysis and reinforcement

Tai Khamti [ISO 639-3: kht] is a member of the Southwestern Tai branch of the Kra-Dai language family. Like most languages in its family, Tai Khamti is primarily a monosyllabic and isolating language, and makes heavy use of compounding. Haas (1964) used the name ‘class term’ to describe a type of semantic classifying head that occurs frequently in Thai noun compounds, and is commonly found throughout the family, including in Tai Khamti.

In such compounds, the first morpheme gives the semantic class that the noun belongs to, and is obligatory. The class term is in an unstressed position, and as a result many undergo phonological reduction, which involves tone bleaching and vowel centralization, resulting in what looks like a classic Southeast Asian sesquisyllable (see Butler 2014). However, rather than totally replace their unreduced counterparts, these reduced forms not only exist in variation with the full forms, but in many cases the reduced form is once again paired with the unreduced class term, as a form of morphological reinforcement. The result is three variants that coexist in the Tai Khamti lexicon with apparently identical semantics, as seen in (1) and (2):

(1) a. paa4 lung1 b. pa-lung1 c. paa4 pa-lung1
 fish large fish-large fish fish-large
 ‘freshwater fish sp.’

(2) a. maak6 mong2 b. ma-mong2 c. maak6 ma-mong2
 fruit mango fruit-mango fruit fruit-mango
 ‘mango’

This process occurs in less noun-like contexts, and even in the verb complex, as in (3) and (4):

(3) a. mu2 ngaa4 b. ma-ngaa4 c. mu2 ma-ngaa4
 when yesterday when-yesterday when when-yesterday
 ‘yesterday’

(4) a. kaa6 taa2 b. ka-taa2 c. kaa6 ka-taa2
 go IMPER go-IMPER go go-IMPER
 ‘Go!’

This talk will examine the coexistence of these competing forms and relate them to comparable phenomena in the morphological literature. It will also discuss the distribution of their occurrences in a corpus of elicited sentences, in order to identify which morphological direction this trend may ultimately go.

References

Butler, Becky. 2014. *Deconstructing the Southeast Asian Sesquisyllable: A Gestural Account*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University.

Haas, Mary R. 1964. *Thai-English Student's Dictionary*. Stanford University Press.