

USAGE OF CLASSIFIERS IN THAI

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Abstract : Classifier can be defined as a word or morpheme which is used with numerals, nouns and verbs, denoting some perceived or imputed characteristics of the entity to which it is associated. Classifiers can be both generic and specific. Thai classifiers form a linguistic system of great richness and complexity. Classifiers exhibit many vital functions, both morpho-syntactic and semantic. The Thai language exemplifies universal patterns of classifier systems. It has been observed to be constructed on an interesting blend of arbitrary linguistic convention and extra-linguistic motivation. Taking cues from the earlier studies regarding the usage pattern of classifiers, the present study attempts to deal with the usage of classifiers among the native speakers of Thai belonging to different age groups. The data have been collected from the Thai speakers belonging to both the sexes and from different educational backgrounds. Both the linguistic and extra linguistic factors that are involved in such a grammatical construction have been taken into consideration for the purpose. A field investigation has been conducted to have a glimpse at the usage pattern of the Thai classifiers among the native speakers of the language.

Key Words : semantic, extra linguistic, universal, usage, generic, specific

1. Thailand and the Thai language

Thailand, (which was known as Siam before 1949) a South-East Asian country is bordered to the north by Burma and Laos, to the east by Laos and Cambodia, Gulf of Thailand and Malaysia to the south, Andaman sea and southern extremity of Burma to the west with an area of 198,114 sq.m.¹ Thailand has a population of over 63 million.² Ethnically Thai constitutes 75% of the population. The rest includes the other communities like Chinese, Malay, Mons, Khmers, hill tribes and a number of expatriates from developed countries.

Thailand had to pass through many political changes. The first Thai or Siamese state prior to 12th century is traditionally considered to be the Buddhist kingdom of Sukhothai, founded in 1238. After the decline of the Khmer empire in 13th-14th c, the power of Sukhothai was overshadowed by the kingdom of Ayutthaya, a new kingdom which was established in the mid 14th c on the bank of Chao Phraya river. In 1767 with the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese, the capital of Thailand was moved to Thonburi by king Taksin. In 1782 the current Rattanakosin era of Thai history started with the establishment of Bangkok as the capital city of Chakri dynasty. 19th century witnessed the western influences that led to the loss of territory on the eastern and southern regions. Later during 1980's Thailand moved towards a stable democracy.

The official language of the country is Thai, a Tai-Kadai or Kadai language closely related to Lao. Thai language is principally used in the government and in education. The central Thai variety is considered as the standard variety. According to Campbell (1995: 531) “there are four main dialects, differing mainly in tonal and phonological respects.” He also mentions that the central dialect is used as the literary language which is considered as the Bangkok standard. Official or Standard Thai is based on the idealized speech of the educated elite of Bangkok and large portions of the Central plain. Perhaps as many as half of the population of Thailand (total population being 60 million, approximately) speak central/standard Thai at home, school, or business houses. The other varieties of the language are southern Thai, spoken in the southern provinces, the northern Thai called ‘Lannathai’ spoken in the northern provinces and the Isan Thai spoken in the north-eastern provinces. In addition, there are other varieties also such as Korat Thai, Phu Thai, Song etc. The Sanskrit and Pāli words available in the Thai language owe its origin to Ayuthaya period. Over the centuries Thai has borrowed many words from Chinese, Khmer, Pāli, Sanskrit, and more recently, from the European languages such as French and English. The Thai language is tonal, and the tones serve to distinguish meanings of words otherwise pronounced alike. There are five tones: high, middle, low, rising and falling. The Thai language has its own alphabet which was adopted in the 13th c. The Thai script is an Abugida script which is alphasyllabary, based on consonants and in which vowel notation is obligatory but secondary.³ Thai is written from left to right.

The genetic classification of the Thai language has yet not been very clearly established. According to Grierson (1966:59, 65) Thai belongs to the Indo-Chinese language family forming cognates with Korean and Chinese. Benedict (1942, 1975:1) claims Thai to be a member of the Austronesian languages.⁴ Some scholars claim it to be a member of the Tai sub-group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. A number of scholars and linguists consider Kam-Tai and the Austronesian languages as branches of Austro-Tai. This observation has been controversial (Hudak, 1990:29). Hudak also goes into the historical background of Thai and points out a number of historical events and processes through which Thai has developed and got its present form. He points out that the languages of the Tai family include languages spoken in Assam (e.g., Khamti in Assam, a northeastern state in India), northern Burma (Myanmar), all of Thailand including the peninsula, Laos, Northern Vietnam and Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guizhon (Kweichon) and Guangxi (Kwangsi). According to Crystal (1987:310), Strecker (1987:747-756), Campbell (1995:531), Ostapirat (2005:107-131) and Ratanakul (2007:189-232) the Thai language is a branch of the Tai or Tai-kadai family. The Tai family has been found in many areas of Southeast Asia including the Thai language. Strecker (1987:749) argues that “Tai is the most widespread and best known subgroup of the Kadai or Kam-Tai family.” He observes that Thai or Siamese also belongs to the group of the Tai family. According to

him the total number of native speakers of the Tai languages is about 60 or 70 million approximately. The largest number of speakers lives in Thailand.

2. Defining Classifiers

Thai classifiers form a linguistic system of great richness and complexity. Thai classifiers exhibit many vital functions, both morpho-syntactic and semantic. The Thai language exemplifies universal patterns of classifier systems. It has been observed to be constructed on an interesting blend of arbitrary linguistic convention and extra-linguistic motivation. Carpenter (1991:94) finds about forty classifiers in everyday use of the Thai language whereas, another set of twenty classifiers are used relatively infrequently.

Classifiers have been defined in different ways. Crystal (1985:48) defines classifiers as “morphemes whose function is to indicate the formal or semantic class to which items belong. ...The marking of lexical items as belonging to the same semantic class is an important feature of many languages (e.g. Chinese, Vietnamese, Hopi), and sometimes quite unexpected bases of classifications are found, in terms of shape, size, colour, movability, animacy, status and so on.” In the Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics (1996:75) “classifiers refer to something countable in the denotation of the noun. ...In many languages (especially in East Asia), classifier constructions are very common, because a noun cannot be directly connected to a numeral.” Matthews (1997:55) defines classifier as “a form which marks a noun of a specific semantic class and which has to accompany e.g. a numeral.” Classifiers have been viewed by different scholars like Lanyon-Orgill (1955), Noss (1964), Emeneau (1964), Burling (1970), Bhattacharya (1976), Allan (1977), Lehman (1979), Ahmed (1986), Pacioni (1996), Aikhenvald (2000), Grinevald (2002) and others, from different points of view. Taking cues from the scholars, a classifier can be defined as a word or morpheme which is used with numerals, nouns and verbs, denoting some perceived or imputed characteristics of the entity to which it is associated. Classifiers can be both generic and specific. Generic classifiers are general in nature. One generic classifier can be used with any or almost any noun replacing other more specific classifiers. Generic classifiers refer to more than one class of individual elements, e.g., */tua/* in Thai refers to different classes of items; similarly, */ti/* or */ta/* in Bengali refers to both animate and inanimate entities. On the other hand specific classifiers are restricted in use. They refer to particular objects, e.g., */law/* in Thai refers to a particular class of nouns indicating flute; similarly, */ḍon/* in Bengali refers to human beings only.

3. The Study of the Usage pattern of Thai Classifiers in Retrospective literature

Haas (1942 : 201-205) argues in brief for the use of numeral classifiers in Thai. She mentions that the classifiers in the Thai language are attributes to the noun phrase and the verb phrase in a sentence. The use of classifiers can occur with both animate and

inanimate objects. She identifies five classifiers which are commonly used in referring to human beings. These are— */khon/* as a classifier for ‘human beings’, */ʔoŋ/* as a classifier for ‘Buddhist monk, Buddha image, god, prince’, */rû:b/* as a classifier for ‘Buddhist monk, picture’, */thân/* as a classifier for ‘people in high rank such as prime minister etc.’, and */ton/* as a classifier for ‘ghost, hermit, giant etc.’ The usage of all classifiers except */ton/* are not found to occur with general human beings. The classifier */ton/* mostly refers to ghost, giant, hermit etc. The classifier */ʔoŋ/* for ‘Buddhist monk, Buddha image, god, prince’ is used according to the social rank order which is referred to the royalty such as king, queen etc. */rû:b/* ‘Buddhist monk, picture’ and */thân/* ‘people in high rank’ are used to indicate the general high position or respectful persons in society such as ‘monk’, ‘prime minister’ etc. Apart from this, the use of the variety of classifiers with numerals is discussed in order to enumerate the counting patterns. She observes that the classifier usage in Thai is a phenomenon governed by the culture and social status when they are used as classifiers to attribute or indicate person or things.

Wattanaprasert (1983:16-53) discusses the use of classifiers in a comparative study conducted in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai dialects. She finds that the usage of classifiers in both the dialects is a shared phenomenon of the area. Classifiers are used in both noun and verb phrases. She categorizes the use of the classifiers in a noun phrase into the following eight types which have been observed to be similar in case of both the dialects.

1. Classifiers used for human beings
2. Classifiers used for non-human beings
3. Classifiers used for animals
4. Classifiers used for plants
5. Classifiers used for things
6. Classifiers used for places
7. Classifiers used for abstract nouns
8. Classifiers used to indicate the measurement

She also classifies the use of classifiers in modifying the verb phrase as realized in both the dialects. She classifies verb classifiers into two major types as given in the following:

- a. Use of classifiers to modify verbs of action which are both direct and indirect.
- b. Use of classifiers to modify verbs of condition which are direct condition and indirect condition.

The study reveals that the usage of classifiers in different areas is dependent on the situation of those places which makes it a culture governed phenomenon. Both the dialects use classifiers to modify the category of things.

Sunkaburanuruk (1999) studies the use of classifiers in modern standard Thai by the speakers belonging to different age groups. She considers the classifier words suggested by The Royal Institute to study and identify the use of classifiers by the speakers of

different ages. Generic classifiers and repeater classifiers are found to be more in use than specific classifiers. She opines that people, who belong to the age group of more than 40 years, use classifiers more correctly in a sentence than the younger generation who are less than 25 years in age, though the younger group uses classifiers more than the older group. She justifies the situation by stating that the younger group is having formal education in the language which enables them to use the classifiers with more intricacy.

James (2001:27) while studying the usage pattern of the Thai classifiers states “It is absolutely imperative to be able to master the use of classifiers when talking about classes of nouns in Thai. To use the wrong classifier when talking about a specific group of nouns would elicit lack of comprehension on the part of a Thai audience.” She discusses in brief the usage of Thai classifiers. She argues that a Thai speaker uses special words to identify particular groups of items. It has been pointed out that a classifier in the Thai language is an ‘extension of the numbering system’. The native speakers, who are learned, understand the mode or pattern of classifiers usage with appropriate use of classifiers in the sentence.

Higbie and Thinsan (2003:36-40) discuss in brief the use of classifiers in Thai. They observe two kinds of classifiers in Thai— /jà:ŋ/ ‘kind, type, manner’ and /sìŋ/ ‘thing.’ According to them a classifier /jà:ŋ/ ‘kind, type’ is a general term used in the sentence while a classifier /sìŋ/ ‘thing’ is more specific and a formal term used in the sentence.

Smyth (2004:31-38) observes in brief, the structure and usage of classifiers in Thai. He mentions that a classifier is an obligatory component used with noun phrases which are modified by numerals in a sentence. He observes the use of specific classifiers, such as, /khon/ ‘human being’ used for counting people, /tua/ ‘body’ used as a classifier for ‘animals, for objects with four legs’ and /lêm/ as a classifier for ‘sharp-pointed objects like books, knives, axes, pins, needle, carts, etc.’

Jaturongkachoke (2005:34-57) discusses the classifiers and discourse in a paper. She collected the data of classifier usage from three stories and four conversations from different informants at different places. The discussion focuses on the use of classifiers in the Thai language that is dependent on the social status of the speaker. For example, /thân/ as a classifier for ‘human being’ is used for the person respected in the Thai society but the classifier /khon/ ‘human being’ is used for the general people.

A classifier can be used in both formal and informal discourse. She finds that the classifiers can be used in Thai with noun deletion permissible to the intuitive knowledge of the language of the native speakers. So, from her point of view, the usage of classifiers in the Thai language is controlled by context and cultural factors. Jaturongkachoke (2005:55) says, “In the process of using classifiers to classify, people achieve other communicative goals (cohesion of text, flowing of intended message) and the meaning

of classifier is inevitably affected. The semantics of the classifier, therefore, alters from one context to another.”

Kookiattikoon (2005:15-33) mentions that the classifiers in the Thai language are not used with numbers only but are required to be used for quantifiers too. Classifiers in Thai normally follow the numeral in a sentence. For example, */sôm sǎŋ:lû:k/* ‘two oranges’. In addition to this he discusses the use of classifiers in Thai. He refers to 75 classifier words which are mentioned by Hiranburana (1979). He mentions that the Thai language uses repetition of a noun to function as a classifier in a sentence such as */práthêd sǎŋ práthêd/* ‘two countries’ etc.

Burusphat (2007:145-147) discusses the general usage of classifiers with specific reference to three general classifiers, such as */ʔan/* a classifier used for ‘small thing’, */lû:k/* used for ‘mountain, fruit, egg, etc.’ and */tua/* used for ‘animal, shirt, trouser, chair, table etc.’ in the Thai language.

Nagamatsu (2007) is a comparative study of classifiers in Thai and Japanese. According to him the classifiers in the Thai language are mostly used to indicate social status, jobs and sexes. He categorizes the classifiers into eight types while providing a comparative study of the usage of classifiers in both the languages. The eight categories are presented in the following.

1. The classifiers used with animates
2. The classifiers used with plants
3. The classifiers used with things
4. The classifiers used with groups
5. The classifiers used with abstract nouns
6. The classifiers used with places
7. The classifiers used with kinds

However, he offers a general statement that the usage of classifiers in language depends on the culture and knowledge of the native speakers.

4. The Study of the Usage of Thai Classifiers

Taking cues from the earlier studies regarding the usage pattern of classifiers, the present study attempts to deal with the usage of classifiers among the native speakers of Thai belonging to different age groups. The data have been collected from the Thai speakers belonging to both the sexes and from different educational backgrounds.

Both the linguistic and extra linguistic factors that are involved in such a grammatical construction have been taken into consideration for the purpose. A field investigation has been conducted to have a glimpse at the usage pattern of the Thai classifiers among the native speakers of the language belonging to different age groups and sexes. Four popular stories have been taken into account for the purpose of data collection. Sampling of data has been done from the informants, the number of informants being sixteen belonging

to four different age groups. The informants belonging to four different age groups are, 0-20, 21-40, 41-60 and 61-80. The detailed information regarding the informants taken for the study is presented below.

Sl.no.	Name	Age	Sex	Education/ Qualification	Place of residence
1.	Mr. Paramuch Asawakittimatin	9	Male	Grade 3	Bangkok
2.	Ms. Thitima Vilaipornsawai	13	Female	Grade 7	Surat Thani
3.	Mr. Kati Thongsri	16	Male	Grade 9	Bangkok
4.	Ms. Patcharapak Suriwong	18	Female	Grade 12	Nonthaburi
5.	Ms. Nusra Kingwan	28	Female	B.A.	Udon Thani
6.	Phra Prawit Bunjai	30	Male	M.A.	Ayuthaya
7.	Ms. Tongta Wannawong	31	Female	Certificate in Accountancy	Sisaket
8.	Phramaha Suwit Nalat	38	Male	Ph.D.	Bangkok
9.	Mrs. Siriporn Somboonboorna	43	Female	M.A.	Nonthaburi
10.	Mr. Viriya Sawangchot	45	Male	M.A.	Nonthaburi
11.	Phra Palad Songkrit Mongkolsin	46	Male	Ph.D.	Nakhonsawan
12.	Mrs. Waree Khosungnoen	50	Female	B.A.	Nakhonratchasima
13.	Mr. Komol Pannak	63	Male	B.A.	Srakeaw
14.	Mrs. Mutita Kanchanapoom	63	Female	Grade 8	Bangkok
15.	Mrs. Poem Phimthong	67	Female	Grade 4	Udon Thani
16.	Mr. Manit Kanchanaphoom	75	Male	Grade 9	Bangkok

5. Methodology of the Study

In the investigation an attempt has been made to identify the usage pattern of the classifiers in the Thai language as realized in the use of classifiers in the given popular stories by the informants belonging to different sex and age groups.

The method of our study takes into account the four very popular short stories which most of the Thai speakers are acquainted with. The four stories are mentioned in the following:

Story No. 1: "The shepherd boy"

Story No. 2: "The hare and the tortoise"

Story No. 3: "The farmer and the snake"

Story No. 4: "The blind man and the elephant"

6. The Classifiers Used by the Informants

The data (the four stories from 16 informants) collected for the purpose exhibit the use of the following classifiers:

No.	Classifier	As classifiers for
1.	<i>/bæ:b/</i>	model, type, style, pattern, form
2.	<i>/fũ:ŋ/</i>	flock, herd of animals, group of airplanes
3.	<i>/hæŋ/</i>	place, location
4.	<i>/jàŋ/</i>	kind, sort, variety
5.	<i>/khă:/</i>	leg, microphone pole
6.	<i>/khâ:ŋ/</i>	side of things, shoulder, hand, part of shoe, sock, side of body part
7.	<i>/khon/</i>	human beings
8.	<i>/khrô:bkhrual/</i>	Family
9.	<i>/khrû:/</i>	time (moment)
10.	<i>/khrâŋ/</i>	time, instance, event, incident, occurrence
11.	<i>/mhî:/</i>	meal
12.	<i>/ŋî:b/</i>	time (of a nap)
13.	<i>/phâk/</i>	time (moment)
14.	<i>/phráʔoŋ/</i>	king, queen, royalty
15.	<i>/phû:/</i>	human beings
16.	<i>/phæ:n/</i>	paper, breath, CD, phonograph record
17.	<i>/rîaŋ/</i>	story, event, instance, play, tale, anecdotes
18.	<i>/th:n/</i>	time (of sleep)
19.	<i>/thî:/</i>	time, instance, occasion
20.	<i>/thî:/</i>	location, place
21.	<i>/tual/</i>	all kinds of animals, all kinds of objects with four legs, letter, nail, shirt
22.	<i>/wan/</i>	Day
23.	<i>/ʔoŋ/</i>	Buddhist monk, Buddha image, god, royalty

The generic and specific classifiers that are found to have been used by the informants in the data are given in the following:

Generic Classifiers:

No.	Classifier	As classifiers for
1.	<i>/bæ:b/</i>	model, type, style, pattern, form
2.	<i>/fũ:ŋ/</i>	flock, herd of animals, group of airplanes
3.	<i>/hæŋ/</i>	place, location
4.	<i>/jà:ŋ/</i>	kind, sort, variety
5.	<i>/khă:/</i>	leg, microphone pole
6.	<i>/khâ:ŋ/</i>	side of things, shoulder, hand, part of shoe, sock, side of body part

7.	<i>/khráŋ/</i>	time, instance, event, incident
8.	<i>/phǎ:n/</i>	paper, breath, CD, phonograph record
9.	<i>/ríʔŋ/</i>	story, event, instance, play, tale, anecdotes
10.	<i>/thi:/</i>	time, instance, occasion
11.	<i>/thî:/</i>	location, place
12.	<i>/tual/</i>	all kinds of animals, all kinds of objects with four legs, letter, nail, shirt
13.	<i>/ʔoŋ/</i>	Buddhist monk, Buddha image, god, royalty

Specific Classifiers:

No.	Classifier	As classifiers for
1.	<i>/khrrô:bkhrual/</i>	Family
2.	<i>/khrû:/</i>	time (moment)
3.	<i>/khon/</i>	human beings
4.	<i>/mhî:/</i>	meal
5.	<i>/ŋî:b/</i>	time (of a nap)
6.	<i>/phâk/</i>	time (moment)
7.	<i>/phráʔoŋ/</i>	king, queen, royalty
8.	<i>/phû:/</i>	human beings
9.	<i>/tî:n/</i>	time (of Sleep)
10.	<i>/wan/</i>	Day

7. The Pattern of the Usage of Classifiers

The pattern of the use of classifiers across the different age groups in the data (four given stories) has been quantified in terms of percentage of vocabulary items for the sake of analysis. The picture is presented below in the following table.

Table No.1

The percentage of classifiers used in terms of total vocabulary items

Age group	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80
Story 1	3.9	2.8	6.2	5.7
Story 2	1.9	2.4	3.8	8.7
Story 3	2.2	5.9	3.7	3.6
Story 4	5.9	4.5	6.09	9.3

8. The Observation

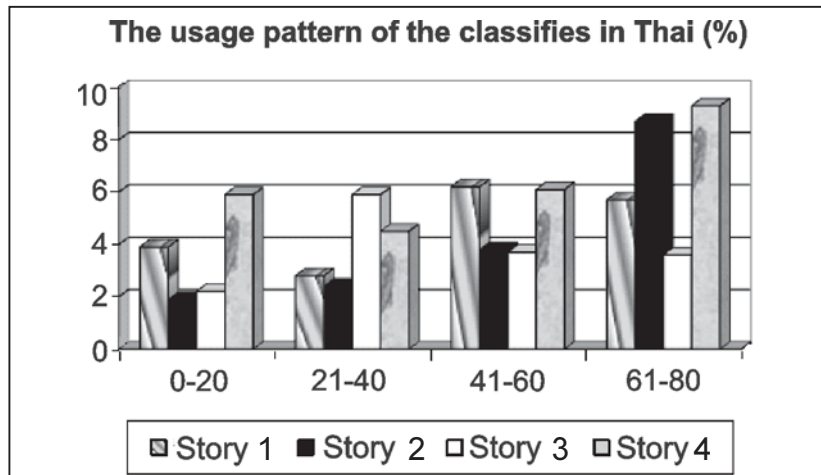
The usage pattern of the classifiers in Thai among the native speakers of the language belonging to different age groups as mentioned earlier reveals the following scenario.

I. The use of classifiers is consistently and relatively high with higher age groups and relatively low with lower age groups along with some marginal exceptions. Only one exception has been noticed in case of the use of classifiers among the age group 21-40 in the story number 3.

The above observation has been graphically represented in the following.

Chart No.1

The number of classifiers (in terms of percentage) used by the informants of different age groups



II. The tendency to use generic classifiers is more than the tendency to use specific classifiers.

Such a tendency shows consistency with respect to all the age-groups.

The following table and the graph substantiate the statement.

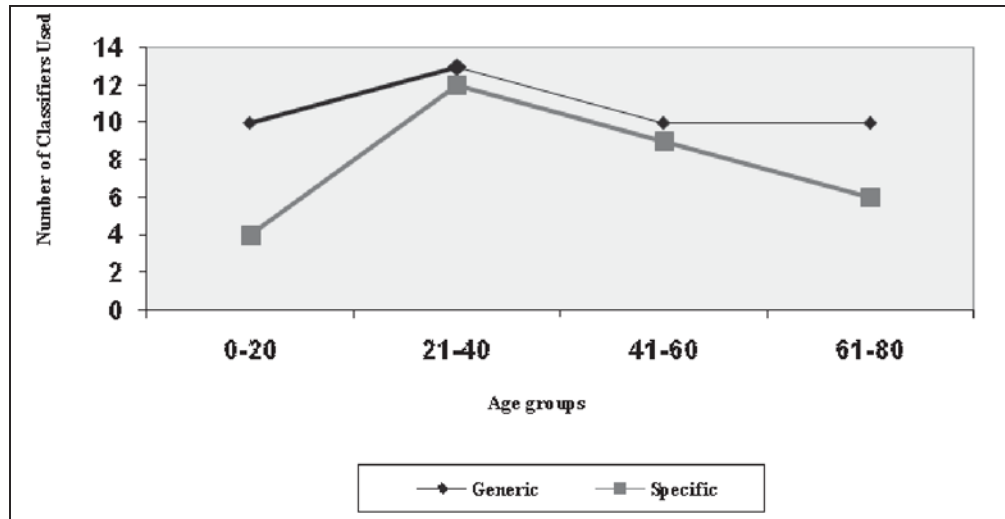
Table No. 2

Number of generic and specific classifiers used by the informants of different age groups

Number of Classifiers Used	Age Groups			
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80
Generic	10	13	10	10
Specific	4	12	9	6

Graph No.1

The tendency to use the generic and specific classifiers among the people of different age groups



III. The tendency to use classifiers is more among the people with formal education (in Thai, the mother tongue) than among those without formal education. The reason may be the initiation of the grammatical structures of the language is more formal in case of those who undergo formal education.

8. Conclusion

Therefore, it can be argued that though the use of classifiers in Thai is a very natural and general phenomenon from the point of view of the grammatical structure of the language, the usage pattern of the classifiers reveals the significance of different social and cultural factors that remain involved in the use of this particular grammatical form.

Notes

- 1 The information has been taken from <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/thailand.htm>
- 2 According to <http://www.nso.go.th/>
- 3 According to Anuman Rajchadhon Phraya (1968:122) the Thai script is derived from the Khmer script which is again modelled after the Brahmi script. In 1283 A.D. Ramkhamhaeng, the great King of the Thai of Sukhothai dynasty introduced the present Thai alphabet. The oldest known inscriptions in the Thai writing began to appear around 1292 A.D.
- 4 Benedict proposed that the languages of Southeast Asia should be reclassified. He removes Thai from its traditional association with Chinese and Tibeto-Burman and groups it with Indonesian, Kadai, Mon-Khmer etc. and thus places it within the Austro-Thai group.

Appendix-1
Thai Segmental and Supra-segmental Phonemes
Thai Vowels

There are eighteen vowels in the Thai Language as shown in the table below.

	Front		Central		Back	
	Short	Long	Short	Long	Short	Long
Close	i	i:	ɨ	ɨ:	u	u:
Mid	e	e:	ə	ə:	o	o:
Open	æ	æ:	ɑ	ɑ:	ɔ	ɔ:

Thai Diphthongs

There are three diphthongs in Thai which are shown in the table below.

ia
ɨa
ua

Thai Consonants

Thai is a tonal language. There are forty-four letters for consonants in the Thai language, but there are twenty-one segmental consonant phonemes. This is shown in the table below.

	Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops:Voiced Unaspirated	b		d			
Stops:Voiceless Unaspirated	p		t			ʔ
Stops:Voiceless Aspirated	ph		th		kh	
Affricates:Voiceless Unaspirated				c		
Affricates: Voiceless Aspirated				ch		
Voiceless Fricatives		f	s			h
Nasals	m		n		ŋ	
Lateral			l			
Trill			r			
Semivowel	w			j		

Thai Tones

There are five phonologically contrasting tones in Thai. These are shown in the table below.

Tone	Symbol	Example
Mid-Level	Unmarked	khɑ:= to be lodged
Low	`	khà:= a kind of aromatic root
Falling	^	khâ:= servant, to kill
High	ˊ	khá:=to do business
Rising	ˋ	khǎ:=leg

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