A Typological Comparison of Thai and Chinese: Word Formation and Word Order

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Abstract

This paper compares Thai and Chinese through the lens of linguistic typology, focusing on word formation and word order. Both languages are analytic, but not to the same degree: Chinese has kept a set of derivational affixes, while Thai depends almost entirely on word order to do grammatical work. Both are SVO languages, yet their modifiers sit on opposite sides of the noun — Chinese before, Thai after. This combination of surface similarity and structural divergence is what makes Chinese acquisition difficult for Thai learners in fairly predictable ways. Drawing on this comparison, the paper outlines the kinds of errors Thai learners are likely to produce — in modifier order, adverbial placement, and affix use — and suggests some classroom approaches for addressing them.

Keywords: linguistic typology, contrastive analysis, second language acquisition

Introduction

Thai is the national language of Thailand, belonging to the Tai-Kadai language family. It is a tonal, analytic language with SVO word order, spoken by approximately 68 million people worldwide (Ethnologue, 2022). Chinese, also analytic and SVO, is the world's most widely spoken language by native speakers. Despite these shared features, the two languages diverge in ways that create consistent difficulties for Thai learners of Chinese — most visibly in how modifiers attach to nouns (Zhang, 2023). That gap between surface similarity and persistent error is the starting point of this paper.

Thailand is now among the larger Chinese-learning populations in Southeast Asia. The error patterns documented in prior research are consistent with classroom observations reported in the teaching literature, and they are not random — they reflect deep structural differences between the two languages that are predictable from a typological standpoint (Ma & Jin, 2023; Greenberg, 1963). This paper draws on that typological perspective to understand why the errors occur and what can be done about them.

There is also a practical dimension worth noting. If teachers can anticipate which errors are likely to appear, they can plan around them rather than respond to them one at a time. For learners, understanding that a recurring mistake comes from L1 transfer — not from weak ability — is genuinely important. It reframes the problem in a way that reduces anxiety rather than reinforcing it. As Thai-Chinese educational exchange continues to grow, this kind of research also feeds into the broader picture of cross-linguistic understanding between the two countries.

The structural gap between Thai and Chinese runs deeper than it first appears. This paper traces that gap to two specific features — the reversal of modifier placement and the mismatch in derivational morphology — and argues that together they produce the kinds of errors Thai learners make most consistently. Understanding where those errors come from, and why, is the first step toward teaching in a way that actually addresses them.

Research Objectives

This study sets out to:

1. Compare Thai and Chinese at the levels of word formation and word order using a linguistic typology framework.
2. Identify the specific typological features that distinguish the two languages in modifier placement and derivational affix use.
3. Predict specific error types likely to arise in Thai learners' Chinese interlanguage based on those differences.
4. Propose evidence-based pedagogical recommendations for teaching Chinese to Thai native speakers.

Scope of the Research

1. Population Scope — This study focuses on Thai native speakers acquiring Mandarin Chinese as a second language, particularly learners at the beginner-to-advanced levels in formal educational settings. It does not extend to heritage language learners or learners of other Chinese varieties.

2. Variable Scope — The study examines two linguistic variables: word formation (specifically, the degree of analytic features and derivational affix use) and word order (modifier placement and adverbial positioning). Phonology, lexicon, pragmatics, and discourse-level features are outside the scope of this study.

3. Time Scope — The study draws on published research from 1957 to 2023, covering foundational typological frameworks (Greenberg, 1963; Lado, 1957) through to recent empirical studies on Thai learners' errors in Chinese acquisition (Zhang, 2023; Huang, 2017; Zhang, 2021).

Literature Review

Typology looks for structural patterns across languages regardless of genetic relationship. Ma and Jin (2023) sort languages into three morphological types — analytic, synthetic/fusional, and agglutinative — placing both Chinese and Thai in the analytic camp, since both lean on word order and function words rather than inflection. Greenberg (1963) is the other major reference point: of his 45 language universals, Universal 20 is the most relevant here, predicting that modifier placement follows a system — Chinese modifiers go before the noun, Thai modifiers go after.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis offers a useful starting assumption: when L1 and L2 structures differ substantially, those differences tend to translate directly into acquisition difficulty (Lado, 1957). This holds up for Thai and Chinese. Ke (2012) found that reversed modifier order is a real sticking point for Thai learners, and Zhang (2023) showed the resulting errors are not random — they follow a pattern. Similar findings appear for adverbials: Thai learners tend to push temporal and locative phrases toward the end of the sentence, following L1 habit (Zhang, 2021; Huang, 2017). Ke (2012) further notes that Thai's affix system is much thinner than Chinese's, relying instead on separate words to do what Chinese suffixes do.

'Acquisition' is used here in the broad sense adopted by most SLA researchers — the process of developing knowledge of a second language, whether through classroom study or natural exposure. This is worth clarifying because Krashen (1985) uses the term more narrowly, drawing a firm line between subconscious 'acquisition' and conscious 'learning'. That distinction has been widely debated — Ellis (2008), among others, argues that the boundary between the two is far less clear-cut than Krashen proposes — and this paper does not rely on

it. The Thai learners discussed here are primarily classroom learners of Chinese, and references to their 'acquisition' of Chinese throughout this paper refer to the development of their Chinese proficiency through formal instruction.

The affective dimension of language learning is also relevant here. Horwitz (1986) established that language anxiety — the fear or apprehension associated with L2 use — is a significant factor in acquisition outcomes. When learners attribute their errors to personal inadequacy rather than structural causes, anxiety tends to increase. A typologically-grounded explanation of error sources can therefore serve not only a descriptive function, but a motivational one.

It is worth being upfront that Thai-Chinese word order comparison is not a new area (Ke, 2012; Zhang, 2023; Huang, 2017). Most existing work, however, stays within a fairly narrow "teaching Chinese as a foreign language" frame. This paper extends the comparison in two ways. First, it places Thai and Chinese within a broader multilingual frame — Thai as the learner's mother tongue, Chinese as a migrant and global language — rather than treating the comparison as a purely pedagogical problem. Second, it brings in the affective side of learning more directly: framing errors as the predictable result of L1 transfer, rather than a personal shortfall, is something the existing literature touches on only lightly.

Research Methodology

1. Research Methodology — This study employs two complementary methods: contrastive analysis and documentary analysis.

2. Research Steps — First, Thai and Chinese structures are laid side by side at the word formation and word-order level using established typological frameworks. Second, existing empirical findings on Thai learners' errors are synthesised to ground the comparison in attested learner data. Third, error predictions are derived and pedagogical recommendations are formulated.

3. Data Collection — The documentary corpus for this study comprises eleven published sources spanning 1957 to 2023, including two foundational typological frameworks (Greenberg, 1963; Ma & Jin, 2023), four empirical studies on Thai learners' errors in Chinese acquisition (Zhang, 2021; Huang, 2017; Zhang, 2023; Ke, 2012), three SLA theoretical frameworks (Lado, 1957; Ellis, 2008; Krashen, 1985), one study on language anxiety in L2 learning (Horwitz, 1986), and one language demographic source (Ethnologue, 2022). Sources were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to Thai-Chinese structural comparison and to the acquisition of Chinese as a second language by Thai native speakers.

4. Data Analysis — Structural features of Thai and Chinese are compared systematically. Patterns of divergence are identified and used to predict likely error types in Thai learners' interlanguage, following the logic of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

It should be noted that this study is based on documentary synthesis rather than an original learner corpus. The error predictions put forward are grounded in prior empirical research, but remain theoretical until tested against new data.

Research Results

1. Word Formation

Both languages are analytic in the basic sense: verbs do not inflect, and tense comes from time words rather than verb form. Where they differ is in how much morphology each still carries. Chinese keeps a handful of productive suffixes — -者 (agent nominaliser), -化 (verbaliser), -性 (abstract nominaliser) — that can still build new words systematically (Ma &

Jin, 2023). Thai has almost none of this, relying instead on free words and word order (Ke, 2012: Ma & Jin, 2023). Table 1 illustrates this contrast.

Table 1: Word formation comparison of Chinese suffixes and Thai equivalents

Grammatical function	Chinese suffix	Example	Thai equivalent
Agent nominaliser	-者	教育者 jiào yù zhě (educator)	free phrase: khon thîː sɔ̀ːn (person who teaches)
Verbaliser	-化	现代化 xiàn dài huà (modernise)	free phrase: tham hâj pen (make it become)
Abstract nominaliser	-性	可能性 kě néng xìng (possibility)	prefix: khwaːm + adjective

Both languages are analytic, but Thai is the more purely analytic of the two — it has almost no affixes at all, while Chinese still keeps a small set of productive suffixes.

2. Word Order

Both are SVO at the sentence level, but inside the noun phrase they are mirror images of each other. As Table 2 shows, every modifier type — adjectives, possessives, demonstratives, numerals, relative clauses — goes before the noun in Chinese and after it in Thai, consistent with Greenberg's (1963) Universal 20. Temporal adverbials follow the same logic: before the verb in Chinese, sentence-finally in Thai. The same reversal thus appears systematically across different grammatical structures.

Table 2: Modifier placement, Chinese vs. Thai

Modifier type	Chinese (before noun)	Thai (after noun)
Adjective	红花 hóng huā (red + flower)	flower + red
Possessive	我的书 wǒ de shū (my + book)	book + of + me
Demonstrative	这本书 zhè běn shū (this + CL + book)	book + CL + this
Numeral	两个人 liǎng ge rén (two + CL + person)	person + two + CL
Relative clause	我买的书 wǒ mǎi de shū (I-bought + book)	book + that + I-bought

Discussion

The pattern of "macro-similarity, micro-difference" produces three predictable error domains for Thai learners of Chinese.

Modifier order errors — Learners will likely post-pose modifiers in Chinese the way they do in Thai (*书我的 shū wǒ de instead of 我的书 wǒ de shū; *花红 huā hóng instead of 红花 hóng huā), because that is the structure already deeply embedded from L1 (Ke, 2012; Zhang, 2023). These errors are systematic, not random, and persist even at intermediate and advanced stages.

Adverbial order errors — Temporal and locative phrases will tend to drift sentence-finally or after the verb (*我吃饭昨天 wǒ chī fàn zuó tiān instead of 我昨天吃饭 wǒ zuó tiān chī fàn), and getting multiple adverbials in the right sequence stays hard even at advanced

levels (Zhang, 2021; Huang, 2017). The difficulty is compounded when several adverbials co-occur, as Chinese requires a strict ordering — temporal before locative before manner — that has no direct equivalent in Thai.

Derivational affix errors — Learners may omit suffixes (*教育 jiào yù instead of 教育者 jiào yù zhě), misuse similar suffixes (*工作家 gōng zuò jiā instead of 工作者 gōng zuò zhě), or overgeneralise (*重要性的事情 zhòng yào xìng de shì qíng instead of 重要的事情 zhòng yào de shì qíng), since Thai learners have no equivalent morphological system to draw on. The absence of a comparable suffix system in Thai means learners must build this knowledge from scratch rather than adapting an existing L1 framework.

None of this reflects low ability. These errors persist because correcting them means rebuilding a whole word-order schema — and that kind of deep restructuring takes time regardless of how capable the learner is. When learners understand this, it can meaningfully reduce the anxiety that often accompanies repeated correction (Horwitz, 1986). As Thai-Chinese educational ties continue to deepen, keeping this affective dimension in view alongside the structural findings seems both honest and useful.

Conclusion

This study has compared Thai and Chinese at the levels of word formation and word order using a linguistic typology framework, identifying a consistent pattern of "macro-similarity, micro-difference." Both languages are SVO and analytic, yet Thai and Chinese diverge systematically in modifier placement — Chinese is left-branching, Thai right-branching — and in the degree of derivational morphology each carries. These structural differences generate predictable error types in Thai learners' Chinese interlanguage across three domains: modifier order, adverbial placement, and derivational affix use.

Beyond its linguistic contribution, this study makes a case for reframing how errors are understood in the Thai-Chinese classroom. When mistakes are explained through typological distance rather than personal failure, the relationship between teacher and learner shifts — correction becomes a shared investigation of structural difference, not a verdict on ability. That shift, small as it sounds, may matter more than any specific grammar point. Typological research has long focused on what languages do; this paper suggests it also has something to say about how learners feel when they try.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for the application of research results — Teachers should present Thai and Chinese word orders side by side to make the reversal explicit, using Thai-to-Chinese conversion exercises (Ke, 2012). Errors are best addressed through immediate recast during communicative tasks rather than isolated grammar drills (Ellis, 2008). Word order rules should be introduced gradually following Krashen's (1985) i+1 principle — single modifiers first, multiple-modifier sequences next, derivational affixes last — keeping the challenge manageable and reducing learner anxiety in the process.

2. Recommendations for future research — The error predictions in this study are grounded in documentary synthesis rather than original learner data. Future research should test these predictions against a corpus of Thai learners' Chinese production, and investigate whether explicit typological instruction reduces both error frequency and language learning anxiety among Thai learners.

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