

A Systematic Literature Review of Literature Related to the Study of the Structure and Function of Prepositions in the Thai Language

Kaniknan Photchong

Department of Humanities, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
E-mail: kaniknan.ph@ssru.ac.th

Cholthicha Sudmuk

Graduate School, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
E-mail: cholthicha.su19@gmail.com

Suwaree Yordchim

Graduate School, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
E-mail: suwaree.yo@ssru.ac.th

Chen Li

Liaoning Institute of Science and Technology, China

Abstract

This research aims to systematically collect and review the literature related to the study of the structure and function of prepositions in the Thai language, using a linguistic theoretical framework as a documentary research approach. Data were collected from the following sources: 15 Thai-language grammar textbooks published between B.E. 2478 and B.E. 2562 (1935–2019 CE). The data were then analyzed and synthesized, classifying prepositions according to structure, function, and meaning, in order to show the development of concepts, the points of agreement, and the differences in the explanation of prepositions in Thai. Research Findings; The literature review on the study of prepositions in Thai found that linguists use criteria for studying prepositions that can be divided into two main approaches: (1) the use of Syntactic Criteria, and (2) the use of Both Syntactic and Semantic Criteria, with each approach having a different focus. Research using only syntactic criteria includes concepts from traditional grammar, structural grammar, and Lexicase Dependency Grammar, which aim to classify prepositions based on word position, word distribution, and the relationship of the word to other elements in the sentence. Most studies agree that prepositions tend to appear before a noun or between a verb and a noun, and function to connect the relationships between various elements of the sentence, although individual scholars use different sub-criteria depending on their theoretical framework. Research using both syntactic and semantic criteria holds that the classification of prepositions should consider both word position and semantic role together, since prepositions do not only function to connect elements of a sentence, but also express a variety of semantic relationships, such as place, time, direction, instrument, cause, purpose, possession, co-agent, beneficiary, and comparison. This makes it possible to explain the structure and function of prepositions more comprehensively and clearly. The results of the literature review reflect the development of the study of prepositions in Thai, from analysis focused on syntactic structure, which helps explain the characteristics of Thai prepositions comprehensively and in accordance with the article's objective of reviewing both the structures (preposition structures) and functions (preposition functions) of prepositions in Thai.

Keywords: prepositions, Thai language, language structure, word function



Introduction

A preposition is a word used to connect the relationship between one word and other words in a phrase or sentence, to show in what way the word or group of words following the preposition relates to the preceding group of words in the sentence. Prepositions play an important role in composing sentences with complete meaning, especially in isolating languages, since an isolating language is one in which words do not change form to express grammatical categories. Grammatical categories refer to any characteristics associated with each word class, particularly nouns and verbs.

Past studies show that there is a substantial body of research and academic literature studying prepositions in Thai under various different linguistic frameworks. Language scholars in both the traditional grammar group and the modern linguistics group have studied the function, structure, and meaning of prepositions in Thai, which remains a topic of ongoing discussion in the field of Thai linguistics. For example, Phraya Upakitsilapasarn (1996: 97) explains that prepositions in Thai are words used to precede nouns, pronouns, and verbs to indicate the function of the sentence, with the structure "preposition + noun/pronoun/verb." For example, the preposition *ต่อ* (*tòw*, 'to') precedes the noun ศาล (*sǎan*, 'court') in the sentence ยื่นคำร้องต่อศาล (*yûun-k'am-ròw-tòw-sǎan*, 'to submit a petition to the court'); the preposition *ของ* (*k'hòw*, 'of') precedes the pronoun ฉัน (*tc'hǎn*, 'I') in the noun phrase เสื้อของฉัน (*sûa-k'hòw-tc'hǎn*, 'my shirt'); and the preposition *เพื่อ* (*p'hûa*, 'in order to') precedes the verb อยู่ (*yûu*, 'to live') in the sentence เขา กินเพื่ออยู่ (*k'hǎw-kin-p'hûa-yûu*, 'He eats to live.') Phraya Upakitsilapasarn called prepositions "kriya saphawamala" (a state-indicating verb form), since these words are used to indicate purpose. Meanwhile, Kamchai Thonglor (1997: 278) and Prayoon Songsilp (2006: 153) state that Thai prepositions can precede adverbs and precede clauses when functioning as connectives, proposing that prepositions have the structure "preposition + noun/pronoun/noun phrase/verb/adverb." For example, in เขามาหาฉันโดยเร็ว (*k'hǎw-maa-hǎa-tc'hǎn-dooy-reo*, 'He came to see me as quickly as possible.'), the preposition *โดย* (*dooy*, 'by') precedes the adverb เร็ว (*reo*, 'fast'); and prepositions can also precede a clause, as in เขายืนใกล้กับนายดำทำงาน (*k'hǎw-yûun-klâj-kàp-naay-dam-t'am-ŋaan*, 'He is standing near Mr. Dam who is working.') where the word กับ (*kàp*, 'with') is a preposition that connects the preceding clause with the clause that follows. Scholars hold differing views regarding the classification of word classes and word functions.

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a widely accepted research methodology for systematically collecting, selecting, evaluating the quality of, and synthesizing evidence from research, using criteria and procedures for selecting documents, making the synthesis of knowledge more reliable than a traditional literature review (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). Applying this method to the study of Thai prepositions is therefore appropriate, since it helps bring together knowledge scattered across research from various periods and under diverse conceptual frameworks, in order to analyze, compare, and synthesize an overview of the study of the structure and function of prepositions in Thai.

This research article therefore aims to conduct a systematic literature review on the study of the structure and function of prepositions in Thai, with the goal of synthesizing theoretical concepts, methods of study, and key issues from the findings of related literature. The results of the study are expected to help build understanding of prepositions in Thai, support the development of a conceptual framework for Thai grammar, and serve as a database for further linguistic research.



Nitipong Pichetphan (2016) supports Udom's view, explaining that many words commonly classified as prepositions can be analyzed as other word classes, or are the result of a process of grammaticalization. He therefore holds that word classification should rely on syntactic properties rather than comparison with foreign languages.

1.2 The View that Prepositions Exist in Thai

Most linguists support the view that Thai does have prepositions, and that prepositions play an important role in sentence structure. These scholars include Phraya Upakitsilapasarn (1996), Banchob Bandhumedha (1991), Wijinthon Phanuphong (1989), Nitaya Kanchanawan (1992), Somsong Burusphat (1993), Kamchai Thonglor (1997), Prayoon Songsilp (2006), Nipapan Sripong (2008), Anan Laolertworakul (2009), Worawat Sriyapai (2013), Kittichai Fino (2015), Amornchai Kahakitkason (2015), and Sunan Anchalinukul (2019).

Although this group of scholars uses different theoretical frameworks, they share the common view that prepositions are words that function to show the relationship between words or phrases in a sentence, mostly appearing before a noun, pronoun, or certain types of verb, and functioning to indicate various relationships such as place, time, direction, possession, beneficiary, instrument, and purpose. For example, Phraya Upakitsilapasarn (1996) explains that *ต่อ* (*tò*, 'to') appears before a noun, as *ยื่นคำร้องต่อศาล* (*yûn-k'am-r'òw-tòw-s'ān*, 'to submit a petition to the court'); *ของ* (*k'w'w'ng*, 'of') appears before a pronoun, as *เสื้อของฉัน* (*s'êa-k'w'w'ng-te'h'ān*, 'my shirt'); and *เพื่อ* (*p'h'ua*, 'in order to') appears before a verb, as in he eats in order to live.

In addition, Wijinthon Phanuphong (1989) used the concept of structural grammar in his analysis, proposing that prepositions tend to appear before a noun phrase, or between a verb and a noun, as *วางบนโต๊ะ* (*waan-bon-tó*, 'to put on the table'). Meanwhile, Worawat Sriyapai (2013) and Kittichai Fino and Amornchai Kahakitkason (2015) analyzed prepositions as components of the prepositional phrase, and highlighted the role of prepositions in expressing meanings of time, place, cause, purpose, and possession.

The literature review found that the difference between the two views does not stem from different Thai-language data, but rather from the theoretical frameworks and word-classification criteria used in the analysis. The view that Thai has no prepositions emphasizes the syntactic properties of the words to the point of classifying them as other word classes, while the view that Thai has prepositions uses both syntactic and semantic criteria to explain them, and thus accepts prepositions as a word class in Thai. This synthesis reflects that the study of prepositions in Thai should consider both structure and semantic function together, in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the preposition system.

2. Criteria Used in the Study of Prepositions

2.1 Syntactic Criteria

The literature review found that one group of linguists classifies prepositions primarily using Syntactic Criteria, that is, by considering word position, word distribution, and the relationship of the preposition to other elements in the sentence, rather than considering the word's meaning. These criteria can be divided into three approaches: Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, and Lexicase Dependency Grammar.

2.1.1 Traditional Grammar

Research using traditional grammar criteria includes Kamchai Thonglor (1997), Prayoon Songsilp (2006), Nipapan Sripong (2008), and Sunan Anchalinukul (2019), who share the view that prepositions are words that appear before a noun, pronoun, or other words in order to connect the relationships between elements of a sentence, although individual



scholars extend the range of words that a preposition can precede somewhat differently. For example, Kamchai Thonglor and Prayoon Songsilp propose that prepositions can precede adverbs and clauses, while Nipapan Sripong emphasizes explaining the word-to-word relationships within a sentence.

The findings show that prepositions generally appear before a noun or between a verb and a noun, e.g., หนังสือของบิดา (*năŋ-sǔu-kʰǎw-bì-daa*, ‘father’s book’) นั่งบนเก้าอี้ (*nāŋ-bon-kāw-ii*, ‘sitting on a chair’) It is also proposed that prepositions can precede adverbs, e.g., โดยเร็ว (*dooy-reo*, ‘quickly’), and precede subordinate clauses, e.g., ใกล้กับนายดำทำงาน (*klâj-kàp-naay-dam-tʰam-ŋaan*, ‘near Mr. Dam who is working’). In terms of function, prepositions serve to connect the relationship between words or phrases and to express grammatical relationships such as possession ของ (*kʰǎw*, ‘of’), place บน (*bon*, ‘on’), and co-agency กับ (*kàp*, ‘with’).

2.1.2 Structural Grammar

Linguists who use the structural grammar approach include Wijinthon Phanuphong (1989), Worawat Sriyapai (2013), and Kittichai Fino and Amornchai Kahakitkason (2015), who use syntactic criteria to classify prepositions based on the position and relationship of words within the sentence structure. Wijinthon Phanuphong focused on analyzing the position of prepositions through Sentence Frames, while Worawat Sriyapai and Kittichai Fino and Amornchai Kahakitkason extended the analysis to the structure of the prepositional phrase and the use of prepositions in contemporary Thai.

The findings show that prepositions generally appear before a noun phrase or between a verb and a noun phrase, e.g., วางบนโต๊ะ (*waang-bon-tó*, ‘to put on the table’), while Worawat Sriyapai proposes that a prepositional phrase can appear in several positions: after a noun phrase, after a verb phrase, and at the beginning of a sentence. In terms of function, prepositions serve to form prepositional phrases that express semantic relationships such as place, time, cause, purpose, beneficiary, and possession, e.g., ไปเพื่อศึกษา (*paj-pʰua-sùk-sǎa*, ‘to go in order to study’), กลับมาเมื่อวานนี้ (*klàp-maa-mʰua-waan-nii*, ‘came back yesterday’), and รถของมหาวิทยาลัย (*rót-kʰǎw-ma-hǎa-wít-tʰá-yaa-laj*, ‘the university’s car’).

2.1.3 Lexicase Dependency Grammar

Amara Prasithrathsint (2010) is a linguist who used the Lexicase Dependency Grammar approach to study prepositions, classifying word classes based on syntactic criteria such as word distribution and co-occurrence with other words, rather than considering the meaning of the word. The findings show that prepositions can precede a noun or a verb, but cannot appear after the negator ไม่ (*mâj*, ‘not’); for example, เพื่อศึกษา (*pʰua-sùk-sǎa*, ‘in order to study’) is acceptable, while ไม่บนโต๊ะ (*mâj-bon-tó*, ‘not on the table’) and ไม่เพื่อศึกษา (*mâj-pʰua-sùk-sǎa*, ‘not for studying’) are not acceptable forms in the language. These criteria reflect that prepositions have distinct syntactic characteristics and function to connect relationships between various elements in the sentence, which helps clearly distinguish prepositions from other word classes.

2.2 Syntactic and Semantic Criteria

The group of linguists who use both syntactic and semantic criteria includes Phraya Upakitsilapasarn (1996), Banchob Bandhumedha (1991), Wijinthon Phanuphong (2012), Worawat Sriyapai (2013), and Kittichai Fino and Amornchai Kahakitkason (2015), who share the view that the classification of prepositions should consider both the word’s position in the sentence structure and its semantic role together. Although individual scholars



have different emphases — Phraya Upakitsilapasarn laid the foundation for the definition and characteristics of prepositions; Banchob Bandhmedha proposed that prepositions are auxiliary words that can sometimes be omitted without affecting the core meaning; while Wijinthon Phanuphong, Worawat Sriyapai, and Kittichai Fino and Amornchai Kahakitkason developed this concept further by explaining prepositions as components of the prepositional phrase and analyzing their use in real contexts.

The findings show that prepositions generally appear before a noun, pronoun, or state-indicating verb form, and are a component of the prepositional phrase, e.g., ต่อศาล (*tòw-sǎan*, 'to the court'), ของฉัน (*kʰwǎj-tɕʰǎn*, 'my / belonging to me'), เพื่อศึกษา (*pʰuá-sùk-sǎa*, 'in order to study'), and บนโต๊ะ (*bon-tó*, 'on the table'). In addition, prepositions function to express a variety of semantic relationships, including place, time, instrument, cause, purpose, possession, beneficiary, and comparison, e.g., ด้วยมือ (*dúaj-muu*, 'by hand'), เมื่อเช้า (*mú-a-tɕʰáaw*, 'this morning'), เพื่อการศึกษา (*pʰuá-kaan-sùk-sǎa*, 'for education'), ของฉัน (*kʰwǎj-tɕʰǎn*, 'belonging to me'), แก่ประชาชน (*kèɛ-prà-tɕʰaa-tɕʰon*, 'to the public / to the people'), and กว่าพี่ (*kwàa-pʰi*, 'more than [older sibling]')

Research in this group demonstrates that using syntactic criteria together with semantic criteria can explain both the structure and function of prepositions in Thai more comprehensively than considering syntactic criteria alone, and this is therefore an approach that has been widely accepted in contemporary studies of the Thai language.

Conclusion and Discussion

This systematic literature review examined research on the structure and function of prepositions in Thai published between B.E. 2478–2562 (1935–2019 CE). The findings show that research on Thai prepositions has developed under two main concepts: the view that Thai has no prepositions as an independent word class, since the words commonly classified as prepositions can be analyzed as verbs, nouns, or conjunctions; and the view that Thai does have prepositions as a distinct word class, which is the more widely accepted view, explaining that prepositions have syntactic characteristics and semantic functions that differ from other word classes.

The review also found that past research has used two main approaches to studying prepositions: the use of syntactic criteria, which encompasses the concepts of traditional grammar, structural grammar, and Lexicase Dependency Grammar, focusing on analyzing the position and behavior of prepositions within sentence structure; and the use of both syntactic and semantic criteria, which considers both word position and the semantic role that the preposition expresses. Comparing the two approaches, it was found that the approach integrating syntactic and semantic criteria is able to explain both the structure and function of prepositions more comprehensively, and is the approach favored in contemporary Thai-language research.

Regarding the findings, most studies agree that prepositions in Thai tend to appear before a noun, pronoun, or certain types of verb, and function as a component of the prepositional phrase. In addition, prepositions also function to express a variety of semantic relationships, such as place, time, direction, cause, instrument, purpose, possession, beneficiary, and comparison. This synthesis reflects that the explanation of prepositions in Thai cannot rely on syntactic structure alone, but must also consider semantic function together with it.

However, this literature review also identified gaps in the existing body of knowledge. Most research has focused on explaining grammatical characteristics and word classification,



while studies using approaches such as Corpus Linguistics, Cognitive Linguistics, Functional Linguistics, or Discourse Analysis remain relatively limited. In addition, there is not much research that systematically compares different theoretical frameworks in the analysis of Thai prepositions. Future research should therefore integrate concepts and methods from various fields, as well as apply language corpora and linguistic technology, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the structure, function, and use of prepositions in contemporary Thai.

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