Typology and universality of languages without the adjectival category: A dilemma in labeling the so-called adjectives in Thai

AMARA PRASITHRATHSINT

ABSTRACT

Word classes in Thai, an isolating language in which morphological marking is totally absent, are not easily categorized and identified. The most controversial class is the so-called adjectives, which have been labeled as such by linguists who depend on semantic and functional criteria, and as verbs by those who notice their similarity to verbs. Despite a great deal of argument on the controversy, there has not been any study that provides convincing evidence to determine their identity. This paper, which is a result of research on parts of speech in Thai based on syntactic distribution and co-occurrences, shows that in actuality the so-called adjectives in Thai behave virtually the same as verbs in main syntactic environments. Both are used as sentence predicates and nominal modifiers. Both occur in negative and imperative sentences. They co-occur with the same aspect markers and nominalizers. They both can be modified for intensification and comparison and can co-occur with classifiers in a noun phrase construction. Thus, it is concluded that typologically Thai belongs to the group of languages which do not have the distinct category Adjective and that the so-called adjectives are actually a sub-class of verbs.

Keywords: adjectives, parts of speech, word classes, typology, universals, Thai

1. Introduction

Among universal fundamental categories, adjectives seem to be recognized as distinctive as nouns and verbs. Croft (1990: 13, 69) considers "*adjective*" to be a "fundamental grammatical category" among other familiar categories such as *noun, verb, subject, object, head, modifier, main clause, subordinate clause*, etc. He also labels adjectives as a "major syntactic category equal to nouns and verbs". Bhat (1994) shows that in many languages the *adjectival category* has identifiable characteristics that distinguish it from the *nominal, verbal* and *adverbial categories*.