

## Negative Markers in Dialects of Northern Thai

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Negative markers in Thai are often used as a tool for lexical classification (either verbs or non-verbs). However, forms and functions of this type of words are rarely mentioned in Thai reference grammar books. The present study aims to investigate the realization and syntactic characteristics of negative markers in dialects of Northern Thai. Using Thai Concordance Program, example sentences where negative markers occur were elicited from a narrative corpus of dialects of Northern Thai. Results show that there are two subdialects of Northern Thai (Lower and Upper Northern Dialects) which used different forms of negative markers /mâj/ and ๓/, respectively. In relation to syntactic characteristics, it was found that negative markers are used as (1) pre-modifiers (/mâj/ and ๓/) indicating negative meaning and ( - /) indicating non-negative meanings (either question or persuasion). Moreover, it was claimed that the two types of negative markers are two allomorphs of the same morpheme because they occur in complementary distribution. In relation to meaning, the relationship between negative and non-negative meanings is proposed. Future study on grammaticalization is also suggested in order to prove the relationship between the negative and non-negative forms.

### Negative Markers in Dialects of Northern Thai

Thailand is a country which is rich with cultures and languages. In terms of geography, different dialects of Thai are used in different areas while Standard Thai is used as the official language. In terms of linguistic similarity and difference, it can be said that communication between Thai people from different dialects could be, to some extent, effective. This is because the dialects share a number of same vocabulary items and syntactic structures. This paper focuses its attention on Northern Thai Dialect, the dialect used by Thai people in 17 provinces to the northern part of the country. Particularly, the phonetic variants and the syntactic characteristics of negative markers are explored.

In standard Thai, /mâj/ is used as an adverb functioning as negator and is normally placed in front of the verb it negates as shown in the following examples:

wíchaj mâj tham kaan bâan  
 Wichai NEG<sup>1</sup> do homework  
 “Wichai did not do homework.”

kháw mâj mii ñen  
 he NEG have money  
 “He does not have money.”

From the examples, it can be seen that /mâj/ is always followed by verbs (/tham/ and /mii/); it has a closer relationship with verbs than other lexical items in the sentences.

Accordingly, /mâj/ is identified as a verb-related lexical item and is usually used as the indicator of verbs (Indrambarya, 1998; Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom, 2005; Panupong, 1970; Upakitsilapasarn, 2000). Semantically, /mâj/ contains only grammatical meaning of negation in which meaning cannot be clearly understood without a following verb which contains lexical meaning. Although its meaning is quite marginal, syntactically /mâj/ is a significant linguistic device used as part of criteria for the classification of lexical items into different parts of speech. Panupong (1970) used /mâj/ for the subclassification of “preverb<sup>2</sup>” while Indrambarya (1998) used /mâj/ as a verb determiner as opposed to adjective—which cannot be preceded by /mâj/<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, nominal lexical items might possibly receive the sense of negation when they function as complement of a copular (/châj/, /pen/), or a verb phrase consisting of an auxiliary and a copular (/dâaj pen/), which would be preceded by the negative marker /mâj/ as shown in the following examples:

sǝmbàt mâj châj khâatak๓ n  
Sombat NEG be murderer  
“Sombat is not the murderer.”

chán mâj pen wàt  
1SG<sup>1</sup> NEG be cold  
“I do not have a cold.”

chán mâj dâaj pen khamooj  
1SG NEG MOD<sup>1</sup> be robber  
“I am not (was not) the robber.”

Although /mâj/ plays an important role in the syntactic structure of Thai, the forms and functions of this type of word are rarely mentioned in reference grammar books of Thai. The usage of /mâj/ is embedded as a small and brief descriptive section related to verbs and in the part of negative sentence structure (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom, 2005; Panupong, 1970; Upakitsilapasarn, 2000).

In terms of dialects, /mâj/ is not only used in Standard Thai, but also in other dialects of Thai, including Central Thai and South

๓/ is used instead of /mâj/. From literature review, it was found that research and textbooks related to grammar of dialects of Thai are not only very rare but they seem to ignore some grammatical lexical items such as /mâj/ completely (Saekho, 1977; Wimolkasem, 2006).

It seems that there are two possible reasons for the lack of detailed study of Thai negative markers. Firstly, negative markers have been commonly used as a tool for syntactic testing especially in the case of verb and nonverb distinction. Accordingly, this leads to the second possible reason, that their syntactic characteristics are simply viewed only as preverbal modifiers—an adverb preceding a verb.

Moreover, it is observed that in spoken language, in addition to /mâj/ as a negative marker placed before a verb, there is also /máj/, another linguistic form similar to /mâj/ which

is placed at sentence-final position—functioning as a discourse marker—and can be used to express non-negative meaning (question or persuasion) as shown:

dam mâj paj tham ɲaan  
 Dam NEG go do work  
 “Dam did not go to work.”

paj tham ɲaan máj  
 go do work PART<sup>1</sup>  
 “Do you go to work (today)?”; “Let’s go to work.”

From the above examples, it is questioned (1) whether the negative marker /mâj/ and the discourse marker /máj/ are related, and (2) if the similarity in terms of linguistic form could possibly suggest a connection in terms of meaning. In other words, does the change of form (from /mâj/ to /máj/) affect the shift of meaning (from negative to non-negative)? In order to prove this, linguistic data from different dialects might have to be taken into consideration.

The present study focuses its attention on the examination of negative markers in dialects of Northern Thai, which is a dialect of Thai spoken in the northern part of Thailand. In addition to the descriptive findings about the syntactic characteristics of negative markers, the investigation of forms and functions of negative markers in dialects of Northern Thai might be used as a piece of evidence to support (if similar syntactic behaviors of negative markers can also be found in dialects of Northern Thai) or to reject (if syntactic behaviors of negative markers of Standard Thai and dialects of Northern Thai are different) the relationship between the negative marker /mâj/ and the discourse marker /máj/ in Standard Thai.

### Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the occurrence of negative markers in dialects of Northern Thai in two aspects:

1. The realization (phonetic forms) of negative markers in natural speech.
2. The syntactic characteristics (positions and functions) of negative markers in communicative contexts.

### Methods

#### *Definition of Terms*

*Negative markers.* The term *negative markers* is used to refer to any lexical items which are relevant to the word /mâj/ in Standard Thai in terms of meanings (containing the sense of negation or other related senses) and functions (functioning as negative markers or other related functions).

*Standard Thai.* Standard Thai is a dialect of Thai which has been officially announced to be used as a means of communication among governmental organizations and educational institutions.

*Dialects of Northern Thai.* In the present study, the classification of northern Thai conforms to governmental regional classification—set up by Ministry of Interior. Accordingly, dialects of Northern Thai are dialects of Thai which are used among local people of 17 provinces in the northern part of Thailand, including Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Phayao, Phrae, Nan, Tak, Sukhothai, Uttaradit, Kamphaeng Phet, Phitsanulok, Pichit, Phetchabun, Nakhon Sawan, and Uthai Thani.

#### *Data*

A corpus of dialects of Northern Thai was developed in order to be a source of data for this study. Narratives of Local Thai people from 17 northern provinces of Thailand were recorded, transcribed, and computerized in .txt format. The size of corpus is approximately 370,000 words.

#### *Data Elicitation*

In order to elicit data for the purpose of analysis, the Thai Concordance Program (Aroonmanakun, 2009) was used. By this program, some particular negative markers together with contexts in which they occur will be randomly selected, as shown in Figure 1.

According to the processes in Figure 1, it was found that in Northern Thai Dialect there a

๖/(with total of 10,000 example sentence s).

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of data was divided into two major parts: the realization (phonetic forms) and the syntactic characteristics (positions and functions) of negative markers.

In relation to realization, the focus is on phonetic forms of markers found in 17 northern provinces. The difference of phonetic forms will then be use for the division of dialect.

In relation to syntactic characteristics, the positions of negative markers together with their functions in the particular communicative contexts will be analyzed.

#### *Findings*

##### *The Realization of Negative Markers in Northern Thai: Variation of Forms and the Division of Dialects*

From the investigation of negative markers elicited from the spoken Northern Dialect corpus, it was found that negative markers used by people in 17 northern provinces of



Figure 1 An example of result page for the distribution of the word ม้าย/māj/ (in red) in spoken corpus of Northern Thai

Thailand can be divided into two significant forms: ๘/. On the one hand, the form /māj/, which is the same as that of the Standard Thai, is predominantly used by people in nine provinces including Tak, Sukhothai, Uttaradit, Kamphaeng Phet, Phitsanulok, Pichit, Phetchabun, Nakhon Sawan, and Uthai Thani.

๙/) is significantly used among local people in eight provinces including Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Phayao, Phrae, and Nan. Proportions of usage between the forms /māj/ and ๘/ are shown in Figure 2.

From Figure 2, it is obvious that either /māj/ or ๘/ are preferred by local people of almost every province except Phetchabun, where the proportion between /māj/ and ๘/ is equally found (50:50). In terms of geography, it was also found that provinces preferring /māj/ are all in the southern part of the northern region whereas provinces where ๘/ is predominantly used are all in the northern part.

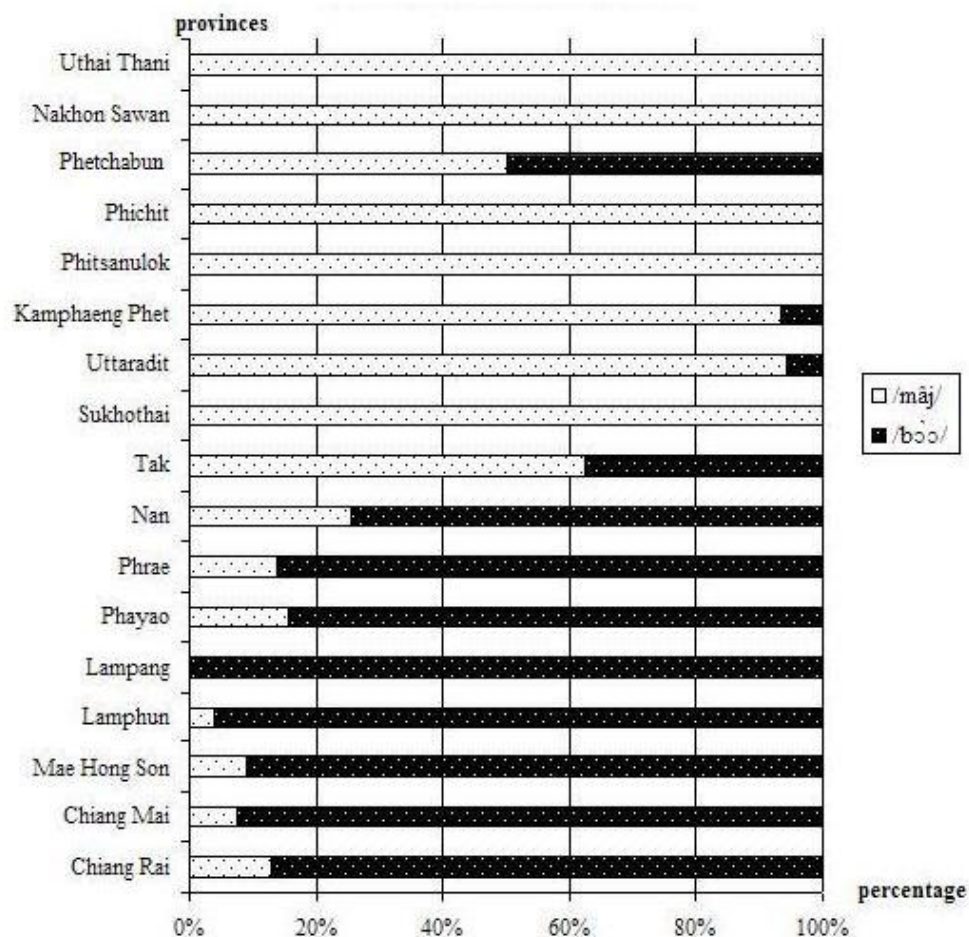


Figure 2 Proportion of negative markers usage  
in 17 Northern provinces of Thailand

Accordingly, the results might lead to a tentative classification of dialects in Northern Thai into two dialects: Upper Northern Thai (UNT) and Lower Northern Thai (LNT) as shown in Figure 3.

It should be noted that Lower Northern Thai shares the same lexical characteristics—forms or realizations of forms—with Standard Thai. In other words, the same form of negative marker /māj/ is used in both dialects<sup>4</sup>.

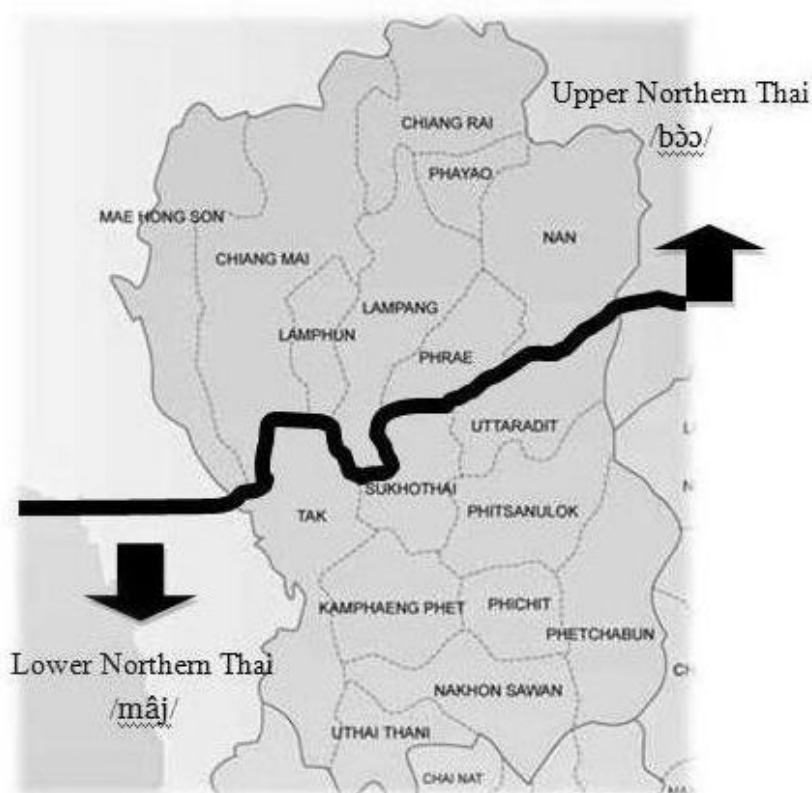


Figure 3 Geographical division of dialects in Northern Thai  
according to the distribution of negative markers /mâj/ and /bòɔ/

In terms of communication, /mâj/ in Lower Northern Dialect means “a well,” not “no.” On the other hand, /bòɔ/ in Lower Northern Dialect means “a well,” not “no.” On the other hand, /mâj/ is used in Upper Northern Dialect to refer to “something burnt.” However, because the word /mâj/ is also used in Standard Thai, which is the official language of Thai and is widely used in educational institutions, speakers in Upper Northern Dialect are bidialectal by nature and

regularly according to who their conversation partners are, a phenomenon known as “code switching.” In other words, if they talk to speakers in the same region, /bòɔ/ will be used while it will be shifted to the Standard Dialect with the negative marker /mâj/ if the hearers are from Lower Northern Dialect.

On the other hand, the phenomenon seems to be different for speakers in Lower Northern Dialect. Because Lower Northern Dialect is similar to Standard Thai, which is used as the official language, speakers of this dialect are not familiar with—or some might not know—Upper Northern Dialect. This means that they cannot speak or even understand the Upper

Northern Dialect. As a result, Lower Northern Dialect is still used even though the hearers are from the Upper Northern Dialect.

*The Syntactic Characteristics of Negative Markers in Northern Thai Dialect*

Analyses in relation to syntactic characteristics involve two related aspects: positions and functions of negative markers. From data of spoken language, it was found that /mâj/ and ɔ̌/ are used as modifiers. Although they predominantly co-occur with verbs, the distribution of negative markers can also be found among words in other parts of speech. Using syntactic criteria, the occurrences of /mâj/ and ɔ̌/ can be divided primarily into two environments with different functions in terms of use: pre-modifier and post-modifier.

*Pre-modifier markers.* As pre-modifiers, negative markers are usually put in front of words they modify. Data from the Upper and Lower Northern Thai dialects show that the negative markers /mâj/ and ɔ̌/ normally precede verbs (intransitive, transitive, and auxiliary) and function as negators of the particular verbs as shown in the following examples:

LNT: w jaŋ \_\_\_\_\_ i maw ləəj  
 Drink liquor PERF<sup>1</sup> 4 glass still NEG drunk (vi) PART  
 "I did not get drunk even though I have drunk four glasses of liquor."

UNT: ɔ̌ \_\_\_\_\_ wcaj  
 1st also NEG understand (vi)  
 "I also don't understand."

LNT: \_\_\_\_\_ i mii a  
 NEG have (vt) problem  
 "There is no problem."

UNT: n \_\_\_\_\_ n j  
 3rd NEG eat (vt) eel  
 "She does not eat eel."

LNT: jaŋ \_\_\_\_\_ i khəj paj ləj  
 Doi Tung also still NEG ever (aux) go PART  
 "I also never go to Doi Tung."

UNT: ɔ̌ \_\_\_\_\_ kəəj  
 NEG ever (aux) go where far than Singapore and China  
 "I never travel farther than Singapore and China."

In addition to verbs, adverbs and demonstrative pronouns can also be negated as shown:

UNT: j khɔm \_\_\_\_\_ aŋ



use computer NEG able to/well (adv)  
 “I cannot use computer well.”

UNT: i p ca pen n t  
 sport COMP<sup>1</sup> like will be play badminton  
 ၁ ၁ w  
 NEG that CONJ<sup>1</sup> go swim PART  
 “The sport that I like is badminton otherwise go swimming.”

In the case of nouns, it was found that nouns will be negated by using a verb phrase (a negative marker + the copular j/ for the Lower Northern Dialect) as shown:

LNT: i j aj  
 NEG be Laotian speak NEG can  
 “If (he) is not a Laotian, he will not be able to speak (Lao).”

UNT: m ၁ c j a  
 father mother 1SG NEG be northern people  
 “My parents are not northern people.”

From the data, question words are also found to co-occur with negative markers as shown:

LNT: i  
 tuition fee CONJ NEG how much  
 “The tuition fee is not much (expensive).”

UNT: ɬaŋ i i khon paj ၁ wdaj  
 fair New Year year this people go NEG how much  
 “Not many people attended the New Year Fair this year.”

LNT: i ɬaraŋ an  
 New Year CONJ NEG what PART be home  
 “I did not do anything at New Year. Just stayed home.”

UNT: A: ɲ paj ɲ  
 today do what PERF PART  
 “What did you do today?”

B: ၁ ɲ  
 NEG what any CLF<sup>1</sup>  
 “I did not do anything at all.”

From the examples it can be seen that when the negative markers precede question words, meanings of the question words seem to deviate from the original such as i

/ to / **j** / (how much > not much) and /□araj/ to / **j** □araj/ (what > do not do anything). It is especially true for the case of / **j** □araj/ (NEG + what), where it seems that the question word □araj/ (which is a pronoun by nature) can be used to substitute a noun (when it occurs in isolation, in question, or follows a transitive verb) and a verb (when it follows a negative marker).

In addition to the co-occurrence between negative markers and words in other parts of speech, two fixed formulaic expressions using /mâj/ and ɔ/ as their components are also found: (1) the expression means “Never mind. / That’s all right.” (j pen raj/ [LNT] or / ɔ pen ŋ/ [UNT]); and (2) the expression means “This is also” (/ j a/ [LNT] or / ɔ a/ [UNT] [literally means “not” and “said,” respectively]), which can be used with nouns, noun phrases, verbs, or verb phrases as shown in the following examples:

LNT:        i pen raj  
NEG be what  
“Never mind./That’s all right.”

UNT:                      ŋ  
NEG be what  
”Never mind./That’s all right.”

LNT:           a            
 also    affair good or bad    1SG also present    all  
 “I presented both good and bad things.”

UNT:   haw       aj       naj                     mwan ɔ       a ca   pen                     u  
         1SG can use   in       daily life       also               will be speaking  
                            an  
 writing  
 “I can use (English) in daily life both in speaking and writing.”

*Post-modifier markers.* In relation to post-modifier, it was found that in Standard Thai (ST) there is a linguistic form similar to the negative marker /j/ called //, which occurs at utterance-final position. The word / / functions as a discourse marker modifying the whole sentence and providing the sense of question and persuasion instead of negation as shown:

ST:                      aw \_\_\_\_\_  
eat rice        QUES/PERS<sup>1</sup>  
“Do you eat?” / “Let’s eat!”

From the example, it is questioned whether / *h* / and / *h* j / are two allomorphs of the same morpheme. Although they are different in terms of form and function, their distributions—as pre-modifier versus post-modifier—are obviously complementary. In order to support this claim, data from Northern Thai Dialect are used in comparison with that of the Standard Thai. It is proposed in this study that if syntactic behaviors of the negative markers in Northern Thai Dialect are the same as those in Standard Thai—that is, there are two similar forms of negatives markers occurring in complementary distribution and provide different functions—/ *h* / and / *h* j / should be taken as allomorphs of the same morpheme.

Data of Lower and Upper Northern Thai show that in post-modifying position the forms /mâj/ and ɔ̌/ are not used; instead, their similar forms, /mâj/ and ɔ̌/, are found at utterance-final position as shown in the following examples:

LNT: aj \_\_\_\_\_  
do test items can QUES  
“Can you do the test?”

LNT: paj                      aw kan        \_\_\_\_\_  
go buy sweater together QUES/PERS  
“Will you go to buy sweaters with me?” /  
“Let’s go to buy some sweaters!”

UNT: Tomorrow go temple QUES/PERS  
 “Do you go to the temple tomorrow?” /  
 “Let’s go to the temple tomorrow.”

From the examples it can be seen that on the one hand, in Lower Northern Thai instead of /mâj/, / / is used at utterance-final

instead of ๓/. It is obvious that syntactic characteristics of /mâj/ versus / / in Standard Thai are the same as /mâj/ versus / / in Lower Northern Dialect and ๓/ versus / in Upper Northern Dialect. Accordingly, the primary conclusion about the relationship between /mâj/ and / / or ๓/ is that they are two allomorphs of the same morpheme which occur in complementary distribution and provide different semantic functions, as shown in Figure 4.

From the supporting evidence in Northern Thai Dialect it is then asked whether such variation in terms of form and function might—to some extent—lead to another hypothesis of whether the post-modifier / *h* / is grammaticalized from the pre-modifier / *h* / j/. In relation to this, it is suggested that the semantic relationship between senses of “negation,” “question,” and “persuasion” seems to be—to some extent—explainable in terms of a continuum change of meaning: negation >>> question >>> persuasion.

In relation to the change of meaning from “negation” to “question,” the speakers provide some alternative choices for the hearers to answer their questions as “yes” or “no”—indicated by the use of a negative marker with a slight change of tone at the end of the utterances. Accordingly, the negative meaning is shifted from immediate negation to the opening of choices for the hearer to choose between a positive or negative answer.

In relation to the change of meaning from “question” to “persuasion,” it might be explained that the sense of question has been lost. The speakers use question as a polite form for persuasive purposes.

DIALECT	Standard Thai and Lower Northern Thai		Upper Northern Thai	
FORM	/mâj/	/mâj/	/bòɔ/	/bòɔ/
DISTRIBUTION	Pre-modifier	Post-modifier	Pre-modifier	Post-modifier
FUNCTION	Negation	Question or Persuasion	Negation	Question or Persuasion

Figure 4 Forms, distributions, and functions of negative markers in Standard Thai and the two dialects of Northern Thai

#### Conclusion

Using a narrative corpus of local people in 17 northern provinces of Thailand, negative markers in Northern Thai Dialect were investigated in two major aspects: realization and syntactic characteristics. In relation to realization, it was found that in the area of northern Thai there are two linguistic forms dominantly used in two different areas. The form /mâj/—which is the same as in Standard Thai—is normally used in nine provinces to the southern part of the region whereas the form /bòɔ/ is dominantly found in eight provinces to the northern part of the region. Accordingly, it is proposed in this study that Thai language spoken in the northern area of Thailand should be divided into two subdialects: Lower Northern Thai and Upper Northern Thai.

In relation to syntactic characteristics, distributions and functions of the negative markers were examined. For distributions, it was found that negative markers in the two subdialects can occur as pre-modifier modifying verbs (intransitive, transitive, and copular verbs), adverbs, pronouns (demonstratives and question words), and can occur as a part of fixed expressions. The distributions of negative markers in pre-modifying position demonstrate only negative meaning to the words they modify.

In addition to the pre-modifying distribution, there are similar linguistic forms /mâj/ (in Standard Thai) and /bòɔ/ (in Upper Northern Thai) which are the similar forms to the pre-modifier negative markers /mâj/ and /bòɔ/ but occur in the utterance-final position and provide non-negative sense (persuasive and question functions). This phenomenon is the same as that of Standard Thai. Such similarity seems to suggest the connection between /mâj/ or /bòɔ/, which is a negative marker, and /mâj/ or /bòɔ/, which is a discourse marker. Although their forms are slightly different in terms of tonal characteristics and they are used to serve different functions, they occur in complementary distribution. Accordingly, it is claimed that /mâj/ and /bòɔ/ are the same morpheme in Upper Northern Thai. In addition

to the complementary distribution of the forms, the relationship in terms of meanings seems not to be impossible. It is claimed that there are some semantic shifts from negation (immediate rejection) to question (alternatives for either acceptance or rejection) and some meaning loss might occur when the form is used for either question or persuasive purpose (no answer needed). However, a diachronic study about grammaticalization of /mâj/ or ๖/ is suggested in order to affirm such claim.

### Notes

#### 1. List of Abbreviations:

1SG	first person singular pronoun	CLF	classifier
COMP	complementizer	CONJ	conjunction
MOD	modality marker	NEG	negative marker
PART	final particle	PERS	persuasive marker
PERF	perfective aspect marker	QUES	question marker

2. Panupong (1970) used the negative marker /mâj/ for the subclassification of “pre-verbal auxiliaries” such as /ca/ and ๖ into pre -verbal auxiliaries (๖ ca mâj

— mâj khəə j  
I mian̩ thaj —“Snow never falls in Thailand.”)

3. Indrambarya (1998) uses syntactic criteria for the classification of parts of speech in Standard Thai. One of the criteria claims that any lexical items belonging to a “verb category” shall be preceded by the negative marker /mâj/ while the items belonging to an “adjective category” shall not. This leads to the classification of the word such as ka j (beautiful), /dii/ (good), and /kəj/ (good at...) as verbs in Thai because these three words can be preceded by /mâj/.

4. From the point of view of dialectology, Lower Northern Thai Dialect, the term used in this study, is normally classified as Standard Thai (Burusphat, 2000; Kingkham 2001). However, many studies about lexical variation reported that the use of more than one dialect of Thai was found in some provinces in the northern part of Thailand (Burusphat, 1981; Nakpunthawong, 1987).

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