NOMINALIZATION AS A MARKER OF DETACHMENT AND OBJECTIVITY IN THAI ACADEMIC WRITING[1]

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Abstract

This study is about whether academic writing in every language is marked by nominalization, and what role nominalization plays in academic writing.

Since there has been no study that analyzes Thai academic writing specifically, this study aims to analyze academic writing in Thai with a focus on nominalization and find out what function nominalization performs in this genre.

In order to find out whether nominalization is an outstanding feature of academic writing, I compared this genre with editorials with reference to nominalization. The data is composed of a number of academic articles and a number of editorials, which are 51,163 and 71,267 words long, respectively. A quantitative analysis was done by counting the occurrences of kaan-nominalization (e.g., kaan-kin 'eating', kaan-phatthana 'development') in academic papers and editorials. Also, a qualitative analysis was done in order to interpret the function of nominalization in academic writing.

The results of the analysis confirms the claim that nominalization is a marker of academic writing. The data shows that it occurs more frequently in academic papers than in editorials—5 vs. 2.6 out of 100 words. To the question why academic writing needs nominalization, the answer is that nominalization creates the quality of detachment and objectivity, which are necessary in writing academic papers. In academic writing, even though the author argues for a certain point he believes in, he cannot be biased. In other words, he has to be ***detached****. Furthermore, what is stated in academic papers is based on closely-investigated knowledge, and in order to present the knowledge with credibility, the author must have* ***objective*** *stance.*

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of the importance of nominalization in academic writing.

Introduction

Nominalization means derivation of an abstract noun from a verb. The derived noun is normally labeled a "deverbal noun," or a "nominalized verb," e.g., *evaluation* (<*to evaluate*), *development* (<*to develop*), *swimming* (<*to swim*).

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It has been suggested in handbooks on writing good English that excessive use of nominalization may cause a text to be clunky, unclear, and difficult to understand. Indeed, in many publications on English writing, there has been "a plain English campaign" for less use of nominalization and more use of verbs. David Bowman[3], the Owner and Chief Editor of Precise Edit[4], expresses his opinion against the use of nominalization. He says, "Avoidance of nominalization will allow your sentences to be more direct, clearer, more graceful, and more powerful." Giving this sentence as an example: "*His **expulsion** by school officials caused serious personal **reflection**,*" he claims that the two nominalizations (*expulsion* and *reflection*) "make this sample sentence dry, ungainly, and a little tedious to read." He suggests that such a sentence be edited into one with verbs instead of nominalizations as (1) or (2) below.

(1) *He **reflected** on his life seriously when the school officials **expelled** him.* OR
(2) *Being **expelled** from school caused him to **reflect** seriously about his life.*

More examples were given to illustrate how one can edit sentences with nominalizations into ones with verbs, as in (3) and (4).

(3) a. *Their **ability** allowed them to make many **rationalizations**.* →
b. *They **could rationalize** many things.*
(4) a. *His absolute **dedication** to his visions resulted in **overcoming** all his obstacles.* →
b. *He **overcame** all obstacles because he was absolutely **dedicated** to his vision.*

Despite the above-mentioned negative view of nominalization in English writing, some scholars maintain that nominalization is necessary in academic writing. Holes (1995: 260) states that nominalization enables the writer to give the required flavor of objectivity to his or her statements and claims. Since academic writing requires objectivity, nominalization is often used in this style of writing. Many other scholars point out the frequent use of nominalization in academic writing; for example, Biber (1988), Swales (1990), Halliday and Martin (1993), Francis (1994), Guillen Galve (1998), Charles (2003), Hartnett (2004), Hyland (2006), Gao (2008), Baratta (2010). All of them agree that nominalization plays an important role in academic discourse because nominalized forms contain more condensed information, create more discourse cohesion, and convey an impersonal tone. All of these are distinctive features of academic writing. In addition, in a study by Biber et al (1999), it is found that there is difference in the distribution of nominal elements in news reports, academic texts, novels and conversations (news reports: 80%, academic texts:75%, novels: 70%, and conversations:55%).

That nominalization is a marker of academic writing is also realized by those who deal with teaching English as a foreign language. Hinkel (1997) analyzes indirectness devices and markers, including nominalization, in English academic discourse written by native and non-native speakers of English. His study reveals that native speakers of English and speakers of Malay, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian who speak English as a foreign language do not differ significantly in their use of nominalization. Gallagher and

[3] http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=David_Bowman
[4] http://PreciseEdit.com

McCabe (2001) study the role of nominalization in academic registers. Based on data of English essays written by Japanese and Spanish university students, they found that these non-English native speakers' academic essays contain much less nominalization than standard ones written by native speakers of English. The authors assert that there should be more inclusion of classroom activities promoting the role of nominal groups in academic writing." Gao (2012) analyzes the frequency of nominalization in English medical papers written by native speakers of English and by Chinese speakers. He adopts the idea proposed by Halliday and Martin (1993) that nominalization is grammatical metaphor since it transforms a process into a more abstract phenomenon and that it is a common feature of scientific discourse. The findings show that Chinese writers use nominalization less frequently than English native writers. Gao's study also shows that metaphorical expression is more characteristic of the language of native English speakers than those with English as a second language like Chinese. He emphasizes that nominalization turns the whole text into a solid block of information and suggests that attention should be paid to the application of nominalization in teaching English academic writing to Chinese.

In addition to English, it may be interesting to see whether nominalization also plays the same role in other languages. A study by Maynard (1996) confirms that nominalization is important in Japanese writing. She argues for the differences in the use of nominalization (nominal clauses and nominal predicates) in Japanese and English novel writing and shows that nominalization occurs significantly less frequently in English than in Japanese. The authors concludes that nominalization, together with certain other features, contribute to a rhetorical style. In French, Schleifer et al (1992: 57) also states that nominalization (mostly labeled "substantification") creates "rhetorical effect of objective scientific phenomena, which can be manipulated and configured."

Thai is another language in which nominalization might play a significant role in academic writing since Thai academic writing is a distinctive genre or register that scholars use for disseminating their research findings or innovative ideas among themselves or to the public. Moreover, as indicated in Prasithrathsint (1988), the emergence and development of academic writing as a genre was due to modernization of Thailand around the beginning of the 20th century. At the beginning of the development of this genre, Thai academic papers were translations of English ones. Later on, they became original in content, but the form of academic papers was adopted from English. Thus, it may be worthwhile to find out whether Thai academic writing is marked by nominalization like English. In other words, there are two questions addressed in the present study. Is nominalization a universal marker of academic writing? What is the significant role of nominalization in academic writing? No study has been done to answer these questions with regards to Thai.

Therefore, the present study aims at analyzing academic writing in Thai with a focus on nominalization and to find out what quality nominalization creates for this genre. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide a better understanding of the importance of nominalization in academic writing in general.

The data that the analysis is based on were taken from a number of academic articles

and editorials. The former were selected from nine academic journals. They were altogether 51,163 words long. The editorials were altogether 71,267 words long, taken from four popular Thai newspapers. The reason for choosing editorials as the comparison genre is that the two genres are similar in that they aim to inform the reader, but editorials are opinion-based, while academic papers are based on facts. Occurrences of nominalization were counted in both genres in order to get the frequencies to compare.

The analysis was divided into two steps. First, a quantitative analysis was done by counting the occurrences of *kaan-* nominalization in the selected academic articles and editorials. *Kaan-* nominalization is the most common pattern of nominalization in Thai. It is formed by adding the prefix *kaan-* (meaning 'matter') in front to a verb. Therefore, its pattern is *kaan*+VERB, e.g., *kaan-kin* 'eating', *kaan-phátthanaa* 'development,' *kaan-plìan-plɛɛŋ* 'change,' *kaan-phûut* 'speaking.' [5]

The second step of analysis is a qualitative analysis to find out what qualities nominalization contributes to academic writing.

The occurrence of nominalization in Thai academic writing

The results of the analysis confirms the general claim that nominalization is a marker of academic writing. The data show that it occurs more frequently in academic papers than in editorials (5 vs. 2.6 out of 100 words), as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

[5] In transcribing Thai words here, the hyphen is used to separate morphemes in a word.

Table 1: Frequency of nominalization in academic papers and editorials

	Length of the texts (words)	Occurrences of nominalization	Frequency (Percentage)
academic papers	51163	2559	5
editorials	71267	1844	2.6

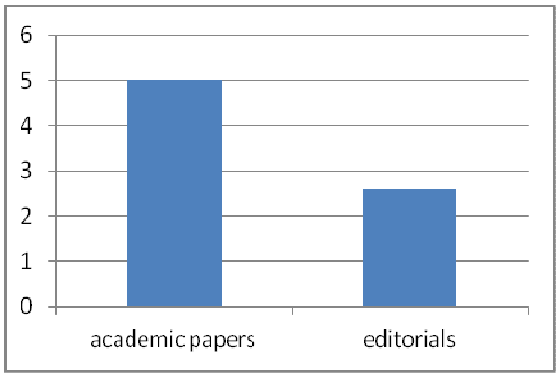

Figure 1: Occurrence of nominalization in academic papers and editorials

As can be seen in Figure 1, nominalized forms occur nearly twice as often in academic papers as in editorials. That nominalization is a marker of academic writing in Thai supports to the universal claim that nominalization is an important feature that distinguishes academic writing from other genres. It implies that there must be some attributes of academic writing represented by nominalization. In the next section I will attempt to justify this implication.

Nominalization creates detachment in academic writing

The result of the present study shows that nominalization brings about the quality of detachment in academic writing. Detachment

here means separation of one's self from the environment or absence of personal involvement. Detachment in academic writing is achieved by nominalization because nominalization enables the author to argue for a certain idea without being involved personally; that is, it allows the author to eliminate the need to specify participants, such as the agent and the patient. This results in the shift of focus in the proposition—from the "doer" to the "deed". Consequently, the following is achieved in academic writing:

a) Freedom from self assertion
b) Freedom from getting involved
c) Freedom from presenting one's volition
d) No control of the reader's thought
e) No imposing ideas on others

The use of nominalization frees academic statements from self assertion, getting involved, presenting volition, controlling the reader's thought, and imposing ideas on others, as can be seen in example (5)a, which shows nominalization and its counterpart--(5)b in which there is no nominalization.

(5) a. การวิเคราะห์นำไปสู่การพบทฤษฎีใหม่

kaan-wî-khrɔ́ *nam pay sùu*
NOM-analyze lead go to
kaan-phóp *thrîtsadii mày*
NOM-find theory new
'The analysis leads to the finding of a new theory.'

(5) b. ผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์และพบทฤษฎีใหม่

phûu-wî-cay ***wî-khɔ́*** *lɛ́*
researcher analyze and
phóp *thrîtsadii mày*
find theory new
'The researcher analyzed and found a new theory.'

It is clear that (5)a, which contains nominalized verbs (*kaan-wî-khrɔ* 'analysis,' *kaan-phóp* 'finding), is free from self assertion, getting involved, presenting volition. Thus, we can say that it is more detached than (5)b, which contains true verbs (*wî-khɔ́* 'to analyze,' *phóp* 'to find'). The theme of (5)a. is 'the analysis,' while that of (5)b is 'the researcher.'

Example (6), as follows, contains four nominalizations.

(6) ผลการวิจัยพบว่าสตรีหลังคลอดส่วนใหญ่หลีกเลี่ยงการทำงานบ้านหนัก การออกกำลังกายที่หนัก และการเดินทางไกล

phŏn ***kaan-wî-cay*** *phóp*
result NOM-research find
wâa satrii lăŋ-khlɔ̂ɔt sùan-yày
that woman postpartum most
lîik-lîaŋ ***kaan-tham*** *ŋaan-baan nàk*
avoid NOM-do work house heavy
kaan-ɔ̀ɔk-kamlaŋ-kaay *thîI nàk*
NOM-exercise-body that heavy
lɛ́ ***kaan-dəən-thaaŋ*** *klaay*
and NOM-travel far

(a) literal translation:
'The research result finds that most postpartum women avoid **doing** hard domestic chore, **exercising** heavily, and **travelling** far.'

(b) non-literal translation:
'The research result shows that most postpartum women avoid doing hard domestic chore, performing hard physical exercise, and taking a long trip.'

As can be seen, example (6) aims to present new ideas to the reader so that the latter believes in them. The four nominalized forms in (6) help make the statement free from imposing the ideas on the reader and controlling his/her thought. Without imposing and controlling, the statement sounds informative. In brief, nominalization creates detachment and makes the readers turn their attention to the information rather than its owner. The focus of the statement shifts from "who does it?" to "what is done." Thus, it makes academic writing informative rather than narrative.

The argument in the present study concerning the role of nominalization in creating detachment in academic writing supports what Stubbs (1998) says about the function of nominalization as follows:

> Nominalization turns "X criticized Y" into "There has been criticism of Y." For example, *There was a rise in the price of milk* instead of *The authorities put the price of milk up*). Nominalization, thus, suspends or disconnects normal relations between participants, making it unclear who did what to whom. Nominalizations have the discourse function of allowing information to be packaged," which converts the verbal process with its ensuing participants into one nominal structure.
>
> (Stubbs 1998: 369-70)

Also, Halliday and Matthiessen (1999: 429) consider nominalization to be "grammatical metaphor," which is not simply an alternative realization of the same meaning, but a distinct construing of experience, e.g., *power failure, heart failure, crop failure.* They argue that nominalization turns all phenomena into classifiable forms which are **detached** from ordinary experience and makes an element take on a new semantic feature.

In brief, it can be concluded that nominalization brings about detachment, which is a significant feature of academic writing, by shifting the focus of the text from participants' activities to packed information and also creating new categories of phenomena.

Nominalization creates objectivity in academic writing

Objectivity here means expressing facts without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations.

In this section, I will argue that objectivity is also achieved by nominalization. It is composed of the following features:

a) No judgment
b) No bias or prejudice
c) No personal preference
d) Having to do with closely-investigated knowledge and generalized fact

Example:

(7) การดื่มน้ำ การเคี้ยวฝรั่ง หรือการเคี้ยวแตงกวา สามารถลดระดับความเข้มข้นของกลิ่นปากที่เพิ่มขึ้น ภายหลังการรับประทานกระเทียมได้อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ

kaan-dɯ̀m *náam* ***kaan-khîaw*** *faràng* ***rʉ̌ʉ*** NOM-drink water NOM-chew guava or
kaan-khîaw *tɛɛŋ-kwaa* *saamâat* NOM-chew cucumber can
lót *radàp* *khwaam-khêm-khôn* reduce level intensity

khɔ̌ɔŋ klìn-pàak thîi phầəm khɯ̂n
of bad breath that increase rise
phaay-lăŋ kaan-ráp-prathaan khrathiam
after NOM-eat (formal) garlic
dâay
able

(a) literal translation:
'**Drinking** water, **chewing** guava, or **chewing** cucumber can reduce the intensity of bad breath that has increased because of **eating** garlic.'

(b) non-literal translation:
'If you drink water, chew guava, or cucumber, you will be able to reduce bad breath caused by garlic.'

(8) หาดทรายแก้วเป็นแหล่งท่องเที่ยวที่มีกิจกรรม การเล่นน้ำทะเล การรับประทานอาหาร และการ พักผ่อน

hàat-saay-khêɛw pen lɛ̀ɛŋ-thɔ̂ŋ-thîaw
*Haad-say-kaew(*name) be place-tour
thîi mii kìt-cakam ***kaan-lên-náam*** *thalee*
that have activity NOM-play water sea
kaan-ráp-prathaan *aahăan lé*
NOM-eat (formal) food and
kaan-phák-phɔ̀n
NOM-rest

(a) literal translation:
'The White-sand Beach (Haadsaykaew) is a tourist spot full of these activities: **swimming** in the sea, **eating** food, and **resting**.'

(b) non-literal translation:
'The White-sand Beach is a tourist spot full of activities. People come to swim in the sea, eat food, and take a rest.'
As examples (7) and (8) show, nominalizations turned the statements into generalized facts, not personal or specific propositions. In (7), the sentence was put forward as a theoretical statement. The nominalized forms create objectivity; i.e., the statement has no personal preference, no judgment, no bias and sounds like an inference from research experiments. Similarly, in (8) nominalization also makes the statement sound objective, and the reader would accept it as a significant generalized fact about the White-sand-beach, not a personal preference or advertisement. If we look back at example (6), we will see the same argument. What is said about postpartum women sounds generalized and theoretical because it does not relate to only postpartum women used as subjects in the study, but such women anywhere.

That nominalization brings about objectivity has been recognized by many scholars. Quirk and others (1985: 1289) say that "nominalization disengages the speaker/writer from commitment to the truth of his/her statements by allowing him/her to make "unattributable claims." Hatim (1997:114) says that nominalization can blur or mystify the agent, thus "masking real intentions." Also, Hatim & Mason (1997: 25) confirms that nominalization has to do with the notion of "depersonalization." Holes (1995: 260) maintains that nominalization allows the writer to create the required flavor of **objectivity** in his or her statements and claims". Finally, according to Stålhammar (2006 cited in Çakır 2011), nominalization enables the academic writer to remove human agency, and achieve **objectivity** and anonymity.

Conclusion

This study shows that in Thai nominalization is a marker of academic writing. When compared to editorial writing, academic writing contains twice as much frequency of nominalization. The role of nominalization is examined, and it is found that it brings about the attributes of detachment and objectivity in academic writing. Detachment refers to absence of identity expression, and objectivity means presenting facts without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations.

To sum up, there are three reasons why academic writing is marked by nominalization. Firstly, in academic writing, the author has to be unbiased or impartial even though they are arguing for a certain point they believe in. They cannot be personal or emotionally involved in the argument. Nominalization helps them achieve that by creating **detachment** in their writing. In other words, academic writers have to be **detached**. For example, to say *phŏn* ***kaan-wĭ-khrɔ́*** *sadɛɛŋ wâa…*' 'The result of the analysis shows that…' sounds more detached than *phŏm* ***wĭ-khrɔ́*** *lɛ́ phóp wâa..* 'I analyzed and found that…' Secondly, in actuality, academic writers have to take sides and choose to argue for one and against another. In order to convince or persuade the reader to follow them, they must base their statements on scientific evidence. Such statements can sound objective by using nominalization. For example, the statement *hàat-saay-khêɛw pen lèɛŋ-thɔ̂ŋ-thîiaw thîi mii kìt-ca-kam* ***kaan-lên-náam*** *thalee* ***kaan-ráp-prathaan*** *aahăan lɛ* ***kaan-phák-phɔ̀n*** 'The white-sand beach is a tourist spot full of these activities: swimming in the sea, eating food, and taking a rest.' sounds objective because of the nominalized forms in it; otherwise, it would become merely a report from personal observation. Thirdly, academicians aim at arriving at a theory. In dealing with theories, they need concepts. Concepts in academic disciplines are represented by abstract nouns. They are what Halliday and Martin label as "grammatical metaphor" (Halliday and Martin 1993). They are used as abstraction of ideas to build theories or models, which are generalized and objective.

Finally, the findings of this study confirm what has been suggested or found in previous studies concerning the relationship between nominalization and academic writing in English and other languages. At this stage, it may be safe to generalize that nominalization is a key feature of academic or scientific writing. In such writing, actions are often described as entities, and processes as phenomena. Also, actors are normally omitted. Entities and phenomena mentioned in academic or scientific writing are mostly abstract concepts, which are represented by nominalized forms. Abstract concepts are detached from personal involvement and convey objectivity of a message. In brief, nominalization creates detachment and objectivity for academic writing.

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