

Is the Copula /pen/ in Thai Meaningless?¹

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Abstract

When speaking of the semantic qualities of the copula in various languages, one would find that the copula does not have any intrinsic meaning. In the case of the Thai language, Uppakitsinlapasan, a well-known traditional grammarian, has also claimed that the copula in Thai is a semantically empty verb that relies on the semantic content of the linguistic unit succeeding it in the predicate to form a complete sentence. The main objective of this study is to test these claims pertaining to the semantic emptiness of the copula /pen/ in Thai by investigating the behavior of /pen/ in various contexts. This will determine the types of occurrences one sees, as well as if /pen/ has any inherent/implicit meaning in the various contexts; if there is, the intent is to elucidate those meanings. This research is based on a total of 1,200 samples of data obtained from the Thai National Corpus (TNC). This study found that the copula /pen/ in Thai can be both the main verb of a sentence and the last verb of a multi-verb construction. The linguistic element preceding /pen/ is usually a noun phrase, while the linguistic element succeeding /pen/ is variable in that it can be a noun phrase, an adjective phrase or a prepositional phrase. The semantic analysis of /pen/ has uncovered three different implicit meanings of /pen/: ‘belonging to a group,’ ‘having the attribute (of)’ and ‘to be in one’s possession.’ The linguistic elements in the pre-copula and post-copula positions are related by a ‘one of all’ meaning, which is a unique characteristic of the copula /pen/ in Thai.

Keywords: semantics, Thai language, verb, copula

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Introduction

The copula, a linguistic element in many languages that links the subject of a sentence to a subject complement, has been studied extensively. Syntactically, Pustet (2003: 2, 5), who studied copulas in over 150 languages from a cross-linguistic perspective, stated that the copula occurs as a predicate nucleus and has many different functions, including the following: 1) to link the subject and predicate; 2) to act as a “hitching post” to which affixes can be attached; and 3) to be a predicator for other linguistic elements that may not stand alone. Conversely, semantically, the view is that the copula is meaningless, ‘semantically empty,’ ‘lacks semantic content,’ or that it does not add any semantic content to the predicate in which it appears.

In Thai, Uppakitsinlapasan (1950: 84-85), who was a well-known traditional grammarian, defined the copula as “a verb that is semantically empty and must depend on the semantic content of the succeeding linguistic element in the predicate for it to be complete.” For example:

- (1a) kháw pen mǔɔ̌
 s/he COP doctor
 ‘S/He is a doctor.’
- (1b) kháw pen phûuchaay
 he COP man
 ‘He is a man.’

The copula /pen/ in (1) occurs in the syntactic structure [NP + /pen/ + NP]. Uppakitsinlapasan (1950: 84 - 85) likened the word /pen/ to a “buoy” which the words /mǔɔ̌/ and /phûuchaay/ can attach themselves onto with the sole purpose of making the sentence complete.

I contend that the copula /pen/ does have semantic content because /pen/ can be substituted with verb phrases while preserving the sentence’s original meaning. For example, (1a) can be paraphrased as *having /kháw/ be (in the category of)/(grouped together with) /mǔɔ̌/*, likewise (1b) can be paraphrased as */kháw/ being in the same category of /phûuchaay/*.

If /pen/ could be paraphrased in a similar fashion, it must mean that /pen/ possesses certain meanings in itself, contrary to some of the previously published views.

The objectives of this paper are to investigate the behavior of /pen/ in various contexts to determine the types of occurrences, and to see if /pen/ does have any inherent/implicit meaning in the various contexts and, if it does, to elucidate those meanings.

This research is based on data from the Thai National Corpus (TNC) managed by the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University (2013) as well as 200 of each of the following types of textual documentation: fictional works, newspapers, academic publications, non-academic writings, statutes and miscellaneous texts. Together, these give rise to a total of 1,200 pieces of writing that came under analysis for this study.

The syntactic analysis of the copula /pen/ in this study adopts some main principles from the Structural grammar and Lexicase grammar which appeared in Panupong (1995) and Prasithrathsint (2010), respectively.

This paper is divided into five parts: the first part is the introduction; the second is the literature review pertaining to the copula /pen/; the third deals with the structure/syntax of /pen/; the fourth covers the implicit meanings of /pen/, and the fifth is the summary.

Literature review related to the copula /pen/

There are three parts to this section. The first part covers the differences between sentences containing the copulas /pen/ and /khuuu/ since these two verbs are usually analyzed side by side. The second and third parts will cover only /pen/, with the former discussing the grammatical status of /pen/ and the latter discussing the types of constructions that succeed /pen/ in a sentence.

1) Differences between sentences containing the copulas /pen/ and /khuuu/

In Thai, the copulas /pen/ and /khuuu/ have very similar uses syntactically. There are many examples where both verbs occupy the same position in a sentence. For instance:

- (2a) John pen khon thîi chán rák
 John COP person that I love
 ‘John is a person that I love.’
- (2b) John khuuu khon thîi chán rák
 John COP person that I love
 ‘John is the person that I love.’

Thai people in general may not see the above two sentences as different, or they may typically be unable to differentiate the two sentences. In fact, even the dictionary defines /khuuu/ as /pen/ (Royal Institute of Thailand, 2013: 752).

However, Kuno and Wongkhomthong (1981) showed that the two copulas are different in meaning. In (2a), the copula /pen/ shows that the unit succeeding /pen/ is one of the qualifications or attributes that the subject of the sentence (‘John’) has, i.e. John has the attribute of being someone the speaker (‘I’) loves. In (2b), on the other hand, /khuuu/ shows that John and the person the speaker loves are one and the same. In essence, /pen/ is used in characterizational sentences whereas /khuuu/ is used in identificational sentences.

Other than the above, Kuno and Wongkhomthong (1981) also provided examples where /pen/ and /khuuu/ may not be used interchangeably. For example:

- (3a) yîipùn pen prathêet ?uttasāhakam
 Japan COP country industry
 ‘Japan is an industrial country.’
- (3b) prathaanathîpboodii khǎw sahàrát khuuu Carter
 president of America COP Carter
 ‘The president of America is Carter.’

In (3a), /pen/ may be used as the copula rather than /khuuu/ whereas in (3b), only /khuuu/ may be used as the copula; that is to say,

it is ungrammatical to use /pen/ in this sentence. By considering the meaning of each sentence, we can see that /pen/ in (3a) shows that being an “industrial country” is only one attribute out of many attributes that Japan possesses (for example, Japan is also a country with four seasons, Japan is also a country in Asia, etc.). For (3b), the use of /khuuu/ serves to identify both “the president of America” and “Carter” as the same person.

Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom (2005: 221) stated that the copula /pen/ occurs in attributive contexts, i.e. /pen/ indicates that an object, a person, or a concept is in some state. On the other hand, the copula /khuuu/ occurs in definitive contexts where it introduces the name, label or definition of an object, person or concept.

Hedberg and Potter (2010) conducted a study on the use of the copulas /pen/ and /khuuu/ by native speakers, sending questionnaires containing sample sentences to native Thai speakers and asking them to choose the copula they thought was more appropriate in the circumstances of each sentence. The results show that native speakers tend to use /pen/ in predication sentences, but use /khuuu/ in equative sentences.

Moreover, Wongwattana (2015) stated that the copula /pen/ is a predication copula used to state individuals’ properties, while the copula /khuuu/ is a non-predication copula that has many senses, such as specifying who (or what) someone (or something) is or defining the meaning of a word/phrase.

These researchers all agree that the copula /pen/ and /khuuu/ have different shades of meaning.

This study supports the functions/usages of the copula /pen/ stated above and emphasizes elucidating its implicit meanings to further explicate the attributive functions of /pen/ or its function as a characterizational predicative. By analyzing the unique characteristics of the copula /pen/ in Thai, the differences between /pen/ and /khuuu/ can be substantiated.

2) Grammatical status of copula /pen/

Uppakitsinlapasan (1950), Chiravate (2012) and Wongwattana (2015) considered the copula /pen/, which occurs in the structure [NP1 + /pen/ + NP2], to be a verb in Thai. Chiravate (2012: 4-5) explained that /pen/ can co-occur with negators such as /mây dâay/ while Wongwattana (2015: 108) claimed that /pen/, just like other regular verbs, can co-occur with negators and words expressing modality. For example:

- (4a) kháw mây dâay pen khruu
 s/he NEG COP teacher
 'S/he is not a teacher.'
- (4b) kháw khonj (cà) pen khruu
 s/he likely COP teacher
 'S/he is likely to be a teacher.'

Almost all previous studies on the copula /pen/ have emphasized /pen/ as the main verb of the sentence, since their focus was on /pen/ occurring between noun phrases. However, I contend that there are other interesting uses of the copula /pen/ that are worth investigating; its co-occurrence with other verbs sees a high frequency of usage in the language. There have not yet been extensive studies on /pen/ used with other verbs, so this paper aims to fill the gap and analyze these uses, such as /pen/ occurring in a serial-verb construction, that is, a string of verbs/verb phrases within a single clause that has no element (such as a clause-linker) linking them (Haspelmeth, 2016: 296; SIL International, 2018), as in (5).

- (5) kháw tàt kradàat pen rûup mæew
 s/he cut paper COP shape of cat
 'S/he cut the paper into the shape of a cat.'

3) Types of linguistic units succeeding copula /pen/

In her typological study, Pustet (2003) grouped the Thai language under AV languages where adjectives (A) (in this case, A refers to predicative adjectives) and verbs (V) share the same characteristics: both adjective phrases and verb phrases can function as predicates on

their own in the absence of copulas. The presence of a copula immediately renders the sentence ungrammatical.

- (6a) *kháw pen lǝɔ
 *he COP handsome
- (6b) kháw lǝɔ
 he handsome
 ‘He is handsome.’
- (6c) *kháw pen wĭŋ
 s/he COP run
- (6d) kháw wĭŋ
 s/he run
 ‘S/he runs.’

Conversely, nouns (N) in the predicate must co-occur with copulas as in (1a) “kháw pen mǎɔ” and (1b) “kháw pen phŭuchaay” above, unlike adjectives (A) and verbs (V). Should the sentences omit the copula /pen/, the sentences would become ungrammatical.

Previous studies on the copula /pen/ in Thai have mostly dealt with it occurring in the structure [NP + /pen/ + NP]. In the subsequent sections, I illustrate how /pen/ can occur in other contexts and constructions.

Structures of copula /pen/

Based on the data collected from the Thai National Corpus (TNC), it is found that the copula /pen/ in Thai can occur in the following structures:

Structure 1 [Pre-copula + /pen/ + Post-copula]

Structure 2 [Pre-copula + Verb(s) + /pen/ + Post-copula]

In the above structures, the pre-copula refers to the linguistic element preceding the copula /pen/, i.e. the subject of the sentence. In general, the pre-copula is a noun phrase or a linguistic element equivalent to a noun phrase.

The post-copula refers to the linguistic element succeeding the copula /pen/ which displays interesting characteristics due to its variability and complexity. The post-copula can take the form of a noun phrase, an adjective phrase and even a prepositional phrase.

Structure 1: [Pre-copula + /pen/ + Post-copula]

The copula /pen/ in Structure 1 is the main verb of the sentence as in examples (1a) and (1b). Panupong (1995) and Prasithrathsint (2010) provided some criteria for what constitutes a verb: a verb in Thai must be able to be modified by negators and auxiliaries that express mood, tense or aspect. Since the copula /pen/ satisfies these criteria like other verbs in Thai as shown in examples (7a) and (7b), it is certainly a verb. In examples (7a) and (7b), the copula /pen/ and the verb /kin/ ‘to eat’ exhibit the same syntactic behavior as they can co-occur with the negator /mây dâay/ and /yaŋ/ (which is an imperfective aspectual marker). The result is that, if /pen/ is a verb, so too must /kin/ be a verb, but /pen/ and /kin/ are nevertheless categorized differently as a copula verb and a transitive verb, respectively.

- (7a) Tony yaŋ mây dâay pen mǎɔ
 Tony IMP.ASP NEG COP doctor
 ‘Tony is not a doctor yet.’
- (7b) Tony yaŋ mây dâay kin kǔaytǎaw
 Tony IMP.ASP NEG eat noodles
 ‘Tony has not eaten noodles yet.’

Structure 2: [Pre-copula + Verb(s) + /pen/ + Post-copula]

In Structure 2, the copula /pen/ follows one or more other verbs. The present study regards /pen/ in Structure 2 as a verb in a multi-verb construction, which is a construction composed of at least two verbs in sequence where other elements may or may not be inserted in between the verbs, such as a clause-linker (e.g. /léɛw/ ‘and then’) or an adverbial expression (e.g. /phûa/ ‘in order to’) (Enfield, 2008: 22-24). Serial-verb constructions are also a kind of multi-verb construction, as in example (5).

The copula /pen/ is the last verb in the multi-verb construction, so it occupies the same position as prepositions in Thai, thereby leading to much debate regarding the word class of /pen/. One camp considers /pen/ a verb, such as Chuwicha (1993) and Thepkanjana (2006), while the other considers /pen/ a preposition having undergone

grammaticalization² such as Intratat (1996) and Prasithrathsint (2010).

In the present study, I consider the copula /pen/ a verb in Structure 2 because other verb phrases can replace /pen/. This concept is elaborated in the following section.

Implicit meanings of copula /pen/

One may elucidate the implicit meanings of the copula /pen/ by substituting it with another verb phrase. If the verb phrase can substitute /pen/ while preserving the original meaning of the sentence with /pen/, that meaning will be the implicit meaning of /pen/. However, the paraphrased sentence may sometimes not sound as natural as the sentence with /pen/ to a native Thai speaker because the paraphrased sentence is a translated version of the more conventionally-spoken sentence. Using this approach with the obtained data, it is found that /pen/ has a total of three meanings.

1) The meaning of ‘belonging to a group’

The copula /pen/ with this meaning occurs in the construction [/pen/ + NP] only. For example:

- (8a) Peter pen khon ʔaŋkɾit
 Peter COP Englishman
 ‘Peter is an Englishman.’
- (8b) pen phûan khǒŋ chán
 COP friend of I
 ‘(Peter) is my friend.’
- (8c) lé pen nákkhàaw thîi ʔaayú nóŋ
 and COP journalist that young
 ‘And (Peter) is a young journalist.’

One can paraphrase the sentence in example (8a) - (8c) as ‘*Peter*’ *belonging to a group of ‘Englishmen,’ a group of ‘my friends’ and a group of ‘young journalists.’*

² Grammaticalization is defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms and from less grammatical to even more grammatical forms (Heine and Kuteva, 2002: 2).

- (9) loomaa waan lé phayuun pen sàt líang lùuk dūay nom
 dolphin whale and dugong COP mammal
 ‘Dolphins, whales and dugongs are mammals.’

The sentence in example (9) can be paraphrased as ‘*dolphins, whales and dugongs*’ belonging to a group of ‘*mammals*’, or the relationship between the two elements can also be a hyponym-superordinate relationship (Lyons, 1977: 291) where ‘dolphins’, ‘whales’ and ‘dugongs’ are hyponyms to the superordinate ‘mammals’.

- (10) 3 b̀̀ak 3 pen 6
 3 plus 3 COP 6
 ‘3 plus 3 is 6.’

The sentence in example (10) can be paraphrased as ‘*3 plus 3*’ belonging to a group of results that is the number ‘6’.

The meaning of the copula /pen/ in example (10) may seem to be ‘is equal to,’ but if the positions of the elements in the pre-copula and post-copula were swapped, that is to say “6 pen 3 b̀̀ak 3,” the sentence would become ungrammatical in Thai. This is because the elements preceding and succeeding the copula /pen/ are not of equal status as it is not only “3 plus 3” that belongs to a group of results that is the number 6, but also “3 times 2” and “7 minus 1” and so on. This is analogous to example (9) where dolphins are not the only element in the group “Mammals,” but whales and dugongs also do belong to the group “Mammals.”

- (11a) Somsak mii ɲən pen phan
 Somsak has money COP thousand
 ‘Somsak has money in the thousands.’
 (11b) *Somsak mii ɲən pen h̃aa
 Somsak has money COP five

The sentence in (11a) can be paraphrased as *the money that Somsak has belongs to the group of denomination ‘thousand.’*

As seen from the ungrammatical sentence in (11b), not all numerals can individually occur after the copula /pen/. Those numerals

that may occur require rounding and to be of different denominations such as /róy/ ‘hundred’ and /láan/ ‘million.’ This is because these words have the attributes of being a category or a lump, which is an important characteristic that allows them to occur after /pen/.

2) The meaning of ‘having the attribute (of)’

The copula /pen/, when it has this meaning, can occur in three constructions, namely [/pen/ + Noun Phrase], [/pen/ + Adjective Phrase] and [/pen/ + Prepositional Phrase] as follows:

2.1) [/pen/ + Noun Phrase]

- (12) kháw tàt kradàat pen rûup mǎa
 s/he cut paper COP shape of dog
 ‘S/he cut the paper into the shape of a dog.’

The sentence in (12) can be paraphrased to *the paper that s/he cut has the attribute of the shape of a dog or the attribute of a dog*, not a cat or any other animal.

- (13) phôo dùum bia pen khàat khàat thúk wan
 father drink beer COP bottles every day
 ‘Father drinks bottles of beer every day.’

The sentence in (13) can be paraphrased as *the beer that Father drinks has the attribute of having the capacity of bottles*, or *the beer that Father drinks has the attribute of being in bottles* instead of being in cans, cups or jugs.

- (14) kháw nǎn khòt tua pen mǎew
 s/he sleep coiled COP cat
 ‘S/he slept curled up like a cat.’

The sentence in (14) is a metaphorical comparison that one may paraphrase as *the curled sleeping posture of his/hers having the characteristic of the sleeping posture of a cat*. In other words, his/her own sleeping posture and that of the cat share the characteristic of being curled up.

2.2) [/pen/ + Adjective Phrase]

Adjectives in general do not co-occur with the copula /pen/ in Thai because adjectives share similar syntactic qualities with verbs and those adjectives can stand alone in the predicate without /pen/ - see example (6) for this.

There nevertheless exists a group of adjectives in Thai that differs from the usual adjectives. The adjectives in this group appear in the post-copula position, which is usually occupied by nouns or noun phrases. Such adjectives include the words /ciŋ/ 'true,' /thúk/ 'unhappy,' /bâa/ 'mad,' /pòkkàtì/ 'usual,' /phísèet/ 'special,' etc.

- (15a) rûang thîi kháw lâw pen ciŋ
 matter that s/he spoke of COP true
 'The matter s/he spoke of is true.'
- (15b) kháw pen thúk yùu
 s/he COP unhappy PROG.ASP
 'S/He is (being) unhappy.'
- (15c) kháw kamlaj pen bâa
 s/he PROG.ASP COP mad
 'S/He is (being) mad.'
- (15d) chán tùun cháaw pen pòkkàtì thúk wan
 I awake early morning COP usual everyday
 'I wake up early in the morning as usual every day.'
- (15e) wannîi Kate tɛŋtua sǔay pen phísèet
 today Kate dress up pretty COP special
 'Today, Kate dressed up especially prettily.'

Example (15a) can be paraphrased to *the matter that s/he spoke of having the attribute of truth*.

Example (15b) and (15c) can be paraphrased as *s/he is having the characteristic of being unhappy and mad*, respectively.

In Example (15d), *waking up early in the morning has the attribute of usualness*.

In (15e), *the pretty dressing up of Kate today has the attribute of specialness*.

Nouns can occur after the copula /pen/, but an adjective that occupies the same post-copula position must have some qualities of a noun, such as in the case of an adjective equivalent to a noun. In the above examples, the adjectives /ciŋ/ ‘true,’ /thúk/ ‘unhappy,’ /bâa/ ‘mad,’ /pòkkàtì/ ‘usual’ and /phísèet/ ‘special’ have a meaning equivalent to ‘truth,’ ‘unhappiness,’ ‘madness,’ ‘usualness,’ and ‘specialness,’ respectively.

In general, there exists a morphological mechanism to convert an adjective into a noun. Adjectives in Thai can take on the prefix /khwaam/ to derive the noun, such as in the case of /ciŋ/ ‘true’ becoming /khwaam ciŋ/ ‘truth.’ However, in the above examples, these particular adjectives can exhibit the nominal meaning without actually undergoing nominalization using the prefix /khwaam/. Another way to consider this phenomenon is that /ciŋ/, /thúk/, /bâa/, /pòkkàtì/ and /phísèet/ are nouns with zero marker, so the adjectival and nominal forms are identical (Brinton and Traugott, 2005: 37).

2.3) [/pen/ + Prepositional Phrase]

(16a) khwaam rák pen mǔan yaa phít
 love COP like poison
 ‘Love is like poison.’

(16b) chán tŋkaan pen yàaŋ khruu Anchalee
 I would like COP like teacher Anchalee
 ‘I would like to be like Ms. Anchalee.’

Example (16a) can be paraphrased as *love has the characteristic of poison*.

Example (16b) can be paraphrased as *I would like to have the characteristics of Ms. Anchalee*.

The word /mǔan/ in (16a) can be considered as the last verb in a multi-verb construction and/or a preposition (because /mǔan/, in this example, cannot co-occur with negators such as /mây/), whereas the word /yàaŋ/ in (16b) can be considered as a noun and/or a

preposition. Their parts of speech are ambiguous because the words /mũan/ and /yàaŋ/ are currently undergoing grammaticalization, resulting in semantic bleaching, loss or reduction of lexical content (Bisang, 1998: 777; Heine and Kuteva, 2002: 210; Intratat, 1996) as follows:

- verb /mũan/ ‘be identical, be the same’> preposition /mũan/ ‘(be) like’
- noun /yàaŋ/ ‘type, way, manner’> preposition /yàaŋ/ ‘(be) like’

3) The meaning of ‘to be in one’s possession’

The copula /pen/ with this meaning occurs in the structure [/pen/ + Prepositional Phrase] only. For example:

- (17a) thîidin phũun níi pen khǎŋ chán
land CLF this COP of I
‘This piece of land is mine.’
- (17b) námto̍k níi pen khǎŋ caŋwàt Chumphon
waterfall this COP of province Chumphon
‘This waterfall is of the Chumphon province.’
- (17c) phôw yók khəndoo níi hây pen
father bestow condominium this CAUS COP
khǎŋ nóŋ chaay
of younger brother
‘Father bestowed this condominium upon my younger brother.’

Example (17a) can be paraphrased as *this piece of land being something in my possession*.

Example (17b) can be paraphrased as *this waterfall is something in the possession of the Chumphon province*. In other words, Chumphon province possesses this waterfall.

Example (17c) can be paraphrased as *the condominium that Father bestowed is something in the possession of my younger brother*.

The copula /pen/ followed by a preposition showing possession /khǎŋ/ arose because of the grammaticalization of /khǎŋ/. Originally,

the noun /khǎw/ (whose meaning is ‘thing, object’) would follow /pen/, but /khǎw/ underwent grammaticalization to become the preposition /khǎw/. This latter occurrence allowed the copula /pen/ to be followed by a preposition [/pen/ + /khǎw/ (noun meaning ‘thing, object’) > /pen/ + /khǎw/ (preposition or genitive marker)] (Matisoff, 1991: 391; Heine and Kuteva, 2002: 296).

Conclusion

Investigation of the semantic qualities of the copula in various languages has led many linguists, including Thai grammarians, to conclude that copulas are semantically empty. This study investigated whether the copula /pen/ in Thai is indeed semantically empty by analyzing data from the Thai National Corpus in various contexts. This allowed the analysis of the kinds of occurrences of /pen/ elucidating the implicit meanings of /pen/ in each context.

The meaning or sub-meaning of the copula /pen/ has never been clearly indicated by researchers in the past. Moreover, the majority of past research has focused only on investigating /pen/ as a main verb presented between noun phrases without analyzing all the other uses of the copula /pen/ as exemplified above. For these reasons, this study aimed to fill the gap and prove that /pen/ is not meaningless.

The study found that the copula /pen/ is a verb that may be subdivided into two types: as the main verb of the sentence or the last verb in a multi-verb construction. The linguistic elements that can succeed /pen/ are diverse and can be noun phrases, adjective phrases or prepositional phrases.

The implicit meanings of the copula /pen/ in the various structures exist in three types: the ‘belonging to a group’ meaning, the ‘having the attribute (of)’ meaning and the ‘to be in one’s possession’ meaning. The three types of meanings are correlated, and the element in the pre-copula position and the element in the post-copula position may have the following relations:

Pre-copula element	/pen/	Post-copula element
Member	/pen/	Group/Collection/Category/Type
Hyponym	/pen/	Superordinate
The possessed object	/pen/	Owner

The pre-copula and post-copula elements above are related by a ‘one of all’ meaning, and this is a unique characteristic of the copula /pen/ in Thai.

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