A Componential Analysis of Kinship Terms in Thai

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INTRODUCTION

It is an illusion to believe that the kinship systems in all cultures are the same and that kinship terms can be translated easily from one language to another. Thai speakers learning English or doing some translation from English to Thai often have a little difficulty finding a perfect English equivalent of ้ฟิ่ /phi/ and ้นั้น /nang/ in Thai. The first word means ‘elder brother or sister’ and the second one means ‘younger brother or sister.’ There is no single word in English that means exactly the same as ้ฟิ่ or ้นั้น. On the other hand, the words brother and sister have no equivalent in Thai. Paraphrastic translations of the two words into Thai sound awkward: พี่สาวเครื่องยา /phi chaay ri nang chaay/ or พี่น้องเครื่องยา /phi phuu chaay ri nang phu chaay/ meaning ‘elder male sibling or younger male sibling’ for brother and พี่สาวเครื่องยา /phi saw ri nang saaw/ or พี่น้องเครื่องยา /phi phuu yi / or พี่น้องเครื่องยา /phi phuu yi meaning ‘elder female sibling or younger female sibling’ for sister.

More examples that illustrate problems arising from the discrepancy between the kinship terms in English and Thai are the words grandfather and grandmother in English on the one hand, and ้ย้า ้ตา ้ยาย /pëu, yáa, taa, yaay/ in Thai on the other. The word grandfather in English can be translated to ้ฟิ่ ‘father’s father’ or ้ตา ‘mother’s father’. Similarly, grandmother could be ้ย้า ‘father’s mother’ or ้ยา ‘mother’s mother’. This may create problems when the context is not clear. The translator often has to decide by himself/herself whether he/she is dealing with a paternal or maternal grandfather or grandmother.

Kinship terms may be divided into two major categories: basic and non-basic. Basic kinship terms are those that designate blood or consanguineous relationships. They are mostly single words, such as ้พ่อ /pho/ ‘father,’ ้แม่ /maa/ ‘mother,’ ้ลูก /luk/ ‘child’ in Thai. Non-basic kinship terms are those that designate relationships by marriage, such as husband, wife, son-in-law, mother-in-law in English. Scholars tend to pay more attention to basic kinship terms because they show significant relationships in the family and they are more frequently used.

Each particular language has its own kinship terms, which reflect the culture with which it is associated. The meanings of kinship terms reflect the relationships among kin in each particular society. Universally, it has been found that kinship terms may be differentiated by various features, e.g., by sex, as father and mother, son and

1. Child as someone’s offspring, not as a member of the class children ‘little human beings.’
2. The feature “parental side” is taken from my studies on Thai and Zhuang kinship terms.
daughter; by generation, as mother and daughter in English, ลูก /lúk/ ‘child’ and หลาน /láan/ ‘grandchild’ in Thai; by lineality, as father and uncle in English; by relative age, as น้า /náa/ ‘elder sibling’ and น้อง /nong/ ‘younger sibling’ in Thai; by parental side (father’s or mother’s side) as บิดา /býa/ ‘father’s father’ and แม่ /maa/ ‘mother’s father’ in Thai; and by the sex of the speaker, as in some Melanesian languages, which have two terms signifying the same relative—each term used exclusively by the male or female speaker. In addition, in some languages, kinship terms are differentiated by the fact that the relatives they designate are living or dead; in others, two kinship terms may be distinguished from each other by the fact that one signifies a relative that belongs to the “in-group” and the other signifies one in the “out-group,” as in Japanese.

From the dimensions of contrast mentioned above, different languages select different combinations of some of them to distinguish one kinship term from another. For example, English makes use of sex, generation, and lineality to distinguish one kinship term from another, whereas Thai adds two more dimensions to the three; i.e., relative age and parental side. Besides the difference in the dimensions of contrast, different languages also place a different degree of importance in each of the dimensions. In some languages, generation is the most important factor that differentiate the kin. In others, sex of the speaker is the most decisive factor. Thus, considering the large number of various combinations and the order of importance of the dimensions of contrast that each language can choose from, we may say that each kinship system is unique and should be dealt with individually.

An explicit analysis of kinship terms in a particular language yields a clear picture of the kinship system in the culture with which the language is associated. To understand and show explicitly the denotative meanings of a system of kinship terms, ethnosemanticists turn to an approach to lexical study known as componential analysis, which was introduced into ethnosemantic studies by Conklin (1955), Goodenough (1956), and Lounsbury (1956, 1964). The approach has been used with other lexical fields but seems to suit best an analysis of kinship terms. This may be due to the fact that kinship terms are of an appropriately limited number and clear-cut denotations.

In this paper, I will present a componential analysis of the basic and non-basic kinship terms in Thai. The approach adopted here is based on the principles put forth by Goodenough (1956), Lounsbury (1964), Katz & Fodor (1963), and Nida (1975). In explaining the meanings of some kinship terms in Thai, I may allude to some kinship terms in other languages, especially English. This, I hope, will help the reader understand better the meanings of the kinship terms in Thai and thus obtain a clear picture of the kinship system in Thai culture.
PREVIOUS STUDIES OF THE THAI KINSHIP SYSTEMS

Two publications in Thai on the Thai kinship system are based on anthropologists’ observations of Thai norms reflected in Thai people’s behaviors. Sanit Samakkarn (1976) states that in Thai society, blood kin is more important than affinal kin (pp. 5–6). In other words, consanguineal relationship is more emphasized than affinal relationship. Concerning inheritance, he claims that Thai parents do not favor either sons or daughters, or elder or younger children. There are no clearcut rules of inheritance. To which child the parents will leave most of their estate depends on their own decision based on different criteria, including emotional reasons (pp. 177–178). Niyaphan Wanasiri (1985) points out that ideally Thai society is monogamous, but in practice, some Thai men have more than one wife. (Only one wife is legal.) She asserts that this polygamous practice is a traditional Thai cultural trait (pp. 49–53). Concerning the relationship among family members, she concludes that Thais depend very much on their relatives. Some adults still depend on their parents in matters of economy and residence. Most wives depend on their husbands, who are mostly older than they are, and are regarded as their elder brothers, as evidenced in the wives’ addressing their husbands as /phii/ ‘elder sibling’ (p. 72). After marriage, there is no fixed rule as to where the couple will live. However, according to Wanasiri, if the bride and groom live in the bride’s home, their family life will be more stable than the opposite, because both will get support from the bride’s blood relatives, especially her mother, who will take good care of her son-in-law, as if he were her own son. On the other hand, if the woman lives with her husband’s family, she tends to have conflicts with her husband’s mother, who competes with her rather than accepting her as her own daughter (p. 80).

Other studies on Thai kinship were done by linguists including me. My paper on “Certain Significant Socio-cultural Characteristics as Evidenced in the Use of Kinship Terms in Thai” (Prasithrathsiint, 1990) shows how Thai kinship terms are used as pronominals, terms of address, and parts of compound words. The terms used as pronominals and terms of address when a Thai person speaks to non-kin people are limited to those signifying the kin who are on the mother’s side and older than the person. This suggests an emphasis on matrilineality and seniority in Thai society. This point is also supported by the favorable metaphorical meanings of the term /mæe/ ‘mother’ and /phii/ ‘elder sibling’ in compound words, such as /mæe-thāp/ ‘commander of an army’ and /phii-lian/ ‘one who takes care of a younger or weaker person.’ The morpheme /mæe/ seems to suggest ‘leadership and importance,’ and the morpheme /phii/ seems to imply ‘strength and experience.’ I found that in this paper of mine, which deals only with the basic kinship terms, the explanation of the denotative meanings of the terms is not complete and explicit. In another paper by me (Prasithrathsiint, 1996), I compare the Zhuang and Thai kinship systems. My conclusion is that Zhuang kinship terms in the generations below EGO’s are cognate with the Thai terms, such as /lühk/ ‘child,’ /lāan/ ‘grandchild,’ and /lēen/ ‘great-grandchild,’ and that the terms for kin in older generations are borrowed from
Chinese. The implication is that the Zhuang kinship systems seem to be shifting from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system. In that paper, no detail of the approach was given and non-basic kinship terms were excluded.

A study by Vipusarin Prapuntasiri (1992) on “Kinship Terms in Kham Muang: An Ethnosemantic Analysis” makes use of componential analysis, which enables her to compare and show clearly the difference in the kinship terms in four dialects of Northern Thai: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, and Lamphun. The findings show that in Chiang Rai and Lampang dialects, there is no differentiation as to the mother’s or father’s side, whereas such a trait exists in the Chiang Mai and Lamphun dialects.

It should be noted that none of the above-mentioned studies on Thai kinship systems cover non-basic kinship terms. In addition, the analysis of the basic kinship terms in those studies lacks an explanation of the methodology used and details of the denotative meanings. Therefore, in the present paper I will analyze both basic and non-basic kinship terms in Thai as explicitly as possible. The data are based partly on the findings in previous studies and partly on new data from interviewing ten native speakers of Bangkok Thai. My analysis covers only Standard Bangkok Thai.

**THAI BASIC KINSHIP TERMS**

In Thai, there are 17 basic kinship terms. They are listed here with their meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinship terms</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>พ่อ /phɔː/</td>
<td>Fa⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>มัน /mán/</td>
<td>Mo⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ปู่ /pûː/</td>
<td>FaFa, FaFaBr, FaMoBr⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ยาย /yáː/</td>
<td>FaMo, FaFaSi, FaMoSi⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ตา /tāː/</td>
<td>MoFa, MoFaBr, MoMoBr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ยาย /yāːy/</td>
<td>MoMo, MoFaSi, MoMoSi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ทวด /thùat⁸</td>
<td>FaFaFa, FaFaMo, FaMoFa, FaMoMo, MoFaFa, MoFaMo, MoMoFa, MoMoMo, FaFaBrFa, FaMoBrFa, FaFaSiFa, FaMoSiFa, FaFaBrMo, MoFaBrFa, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>เที่ยง /thèːt⁹</td>
<td>FaFaFaFa, FaFaFaMo, MoMoFaFa, MoMoMoMo, MoFaMoFa, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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¹The denotative meanings listed here are in abbreviated notations adapted from Wallace and Atkins (1960).

⁴Fa means ‘father.’

⁵Mo means ‘mother.’

⁶Br means ‘brother.’

⁷Si means ‘sister.’

⁸Some use the word ขวด /chùat/ instead of ทวด /thùat/.

⁹This term is rarely used today, especially among young people.