Some Remarks on Lexical Modernization in Thai

by

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Thai is one of the languages of Asia whose place as the national language of the country in which it is domiciled has not had to be struggled for, has never, as a matter of fact, been in question. Thailand, or Siam, has been a continuing political entity for many centuries, and although it has had periods of temporary Burmese domination and lost some of its border territories to France and Britain during the Colonial Period, it entered the era of national modernization and development essentially intact, politically and culturally. This special history undoubtedly contributes to the relaxed attitude about, for instance, the liberal use in the language of contemporary borrowing, mostly from English.

It is not the case, however, that there is no antipathy to foreign terms or that only a minority of new words are produced from existing national resources. There is simply no obsession about the expulsion of things foreign or indecent haste about finding national replacements for them, and even when a national replacement is already to hand the foreign element may continue to be used as well for decorative purposes. This freedom from xenophobic neurosis is undoubtedly a positive feature, but it does have the negative consequence that new-word creation has not been taken seriously enough to receive more than an ad hoc, case-by-case approach where it would probably benefit from a systematic approach (see fn. 16, below).

Ways in Which New Concepts are Expressed in Thai

New concepts are expressed in Thai

1. By adding new meanings to words already in use: e.g., to /cern/ 'robber, bandit' was added the meaning 'guerrilla'; to /pom/ 'knot, kink, knotty problem' was added '(psychological) complex'; to /mey/ 'to send, emit' was added 'to transmit (radio, TV)'; to /rút/ 'to extract, press out' was added 'to iron'. Sometimes another word is added which clarifies the meanings: thus /rút/ 'to iron' will have an expressed object, as in /rút phút/ 'to iron cloth' in contexts where the object is not necessary in English; /jár/ 'resin, gum, rubber, tyre' clearly means 'tyre' when followed by /rót/ 'vehicle'. These added words, however, are not essential, and this distinguishes them from expressions of the type: 4(a) below. A good example of progressive addition to the meaning of a word is /tamriat/ 'a word of Khmer origin which originally referred to a female attendant who kept order in the king's harem. Later it was applied also to male attendants doing a similar duty in the rest of the palace. Then in the later nineteenth century, in the reign of Rama V, western-style police were introduced. These
were officially known as /phon trawm/, lit. "patrol forces", but popularly termed /po:li:t/, from Eng. police. The term /tamrat/ was then officially applied to this new force. The result is that today the term /phon trawm/ is obsolete, /po:li:t/ lives on in jocular speech, and /tamrat/ is now the ordinary word for "police" and is not widely known to have any other meaning.

(2) By desynonymization: the distinguishing of words which have hitherto been regular or occasional synonyms. Thus Prince Wun (see below) took the three words /rablap, rabop, rabop/, which had "custom" or "recognized procedure" in common as part of their semantic content, and distinguished them as meaning "order", "system" and "regime" respectively. The technique of desynonymization is particularly important with reference to words taken from Sanskrit and Pali (see 4(b) below).

(3) By borrowing foreign words: "Thai—English": First the concept "foreign" needs refinement, for a very large percentage of Thai vocabulary was borrowed centuries ago from Khmer, or Cambodian, including Khmerized words of Indic—viz. Sanskrit and Pali—origin. Subsequently many more words from these two Indic languages were borrowed directly by Thai. Some of these words are now completely ordinary, and some are felt to be learned or formal, but in no case are they felt to be alien and requiring to be replaced by something national. The word "foreign", then, has a temporal connotation, in the present connection, "belonging to another contemporary nation or culture". To describe the position of Indic and Khmer within Thai linguistic culture another term is needed: "classical". The foreign words in Thai come overwhelmingly from English. Now words which are difficult to understand, being either old, or new, or foreign, are known generically as /sap/ ("Skt. sabda"), and the expression for borrowing a word which is foreign in the sense just defined is /thap sap/. Three stages of "naturalization" of borrowings can be distinguished.

In the initial stage a word is spelled in roman script if this is technically convenient, and has no fixed spelling in Thai script. In the second stage the Thai—script spelling is quite established, and no need is felt to spell the word in roman, even when this is technically convenient. In these two stages the word is still restricted stylistically to informal or technical usage. In the third stage the word is accepted into the formal language. Examples of words in stage three are /karat/ "karat", /kau:tn/ "cartoon, comic strip, caricature" and /chik/ "to be shocked", all from English. It should be noted that another meaning of the expression /thap sap/ just mentioned, viz. "to transliterate" also applies only to foreign words that are foreign in the sense just indicated. It is not used to refer to the transliteration of words from Indic or Khmer. The most notable sphere in which foreign borrowing occurs is that of proper names of persons and places. Personal names of contemporary people are given in roman script, or else transliterated (raising the problem that there are often several possible transliterations), but in either case they are—with the partial exception of Romance—language, Indian, Chinese and Japanese names—nearly always read with the Thai national pronunciation of English (see below). With personal names from earlier epochs it is almost always the English form of the name which is chosen: e.g., /"Aesop/, /"William the Silent", /"Joan of Arc", /"Henry the
Again with the partial exceptions just specified, foreign place names are taken in their English form and given the Thai national pronunciation of English (again, see below), except for the names of certain places which the Thais have had occasion to refer to for centuries: e.g., /laksəmɛ̞nbaːk/ "Luxembourg", /swɪtsəˌlɛrn/ "Switzerland", /ˈeːsiə/ "Asia". Likewise from English are the terms for most scientific and technological concepts which were unknown to pre-westernized Thailand. The terminology of foreign sports is almost all English: e.g., /kɔːp/, themnit, warnteːbɔːn/ etc. It is noteworthy in connection with borrowings that Thai has a mechanism whereby, if necessary, the entire vocabulary of English can be drafted into services: an institutionalized national pronunciation of English. Let us call it (after Brown 1976) "Thai-English". This is a spelling pronunciation, and since it involves certain indeterminacies and irregularities, the pronunciation—or better, the reading—of each word must in practice be learned separately. It drastically reduces or modifies final consonants, takes little or no account of stress and its effects on the pronunciation of the various vowel letters, assigns tones which sound like misplaced stresses, and is in general rather remote from native speaker's pronunciation: e.g., /oɛːpən/ "Japan", /nɛːtʃənæl/ (see fn. 4: "National" (brand)), /ˈpʰairət/ "parade", /məːrɪ̯ kʰrɪtʃəmæst/ (see fn. 4, "Merry Christmas"). Such readings are enforced in the schools—except perhaps in the most exclusive schools—by teachers and students alike. Those students who by virtue of bilingualism are able to speak English with a good approximation to a native speaker's accent soon learn not to do so when their friends are in earshot, except perhaps when speaking to foreigners, and indeed it can be said that one of the purposes of the national pronunciation is precisely to enable one to use English words without sounding like a foreigner. It serves then, important sociolinguistic functions: it shows that the speaker is not trying to ape foreigners, to air his knowledge, or to put his interlocutor down, and it makes it all right to use almost any amount of English vocabulary in one's discourse (although, of course, if it has a high English content it will be informal or technical in tone). Wearing the Thai-designed uniform for aliens gives the alien word the freedom of the city, as it were, and it prevents the nationals from feeling overwhelmed. More than that, if foreign teachers were to cease trying to teach native-speaker pronunciation, as well as certain grammatical niceties, and generally were to give up behaving as if English were a living language, it is conceivable that English would before too long be elevated to the pantheon of classical languages, so that none of its contributions to the national language would not have to be replaced at all, even in the long run.

(4) By word- and phrase-coinings. Apart from foreign borrowings, another major source of expressions for new concepts and things in Thai is the coining of words and phrases. In Thai /banjat sap/, an activity of recognized importance in Thailand, which has been practiced by illustrious personages, including kings and princes, and which forms the subject matter of courses taught at university departments of Thai language and literature. The Thai-Royal Institute has a Word-Coining Committee, of which the chairman was, until his death about ten years ago,
ago, Prince Wan Waithayakon, a scholar, diplomat and statesman. But apart
from the official coinages that emanate from the Institute, in true Thai
laissez-faire spirit, anyone is free to try his hand at coining words and
phrases as the need arises, and to try to popularize them. The public is the
final arbiter, and not only do outsiders have a chance, but acceptance of the
products of the Institute is by no means guaranteed. In fact Prince Wan him-
self, acting in a private capacity, has had some notable successes, including
 servicio, to serve" /patikam/ "repairs", /majörba:/. "policy", /patiwät/ "Revolution" (a word which has been taken up and acted upon far more
enthusiastically in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia than in the land of its
princely birth) and /patirâyp/ "reform, to reform". The Prince was indeed,
until his demise, the doyen of word-"manufacturers", both official and unoffi-
cial, in Thailand. In discussing coined expressions in Thai we must distin-
guish those put together in the native Thai way and those compounded in the
Indic manner, as follows:

(a) Thai-style compounds: These are simply new instances of the ordi-
nary Thai compound word, or /khèm phàsom/, —new combinations, in the native
Thai manner, of existing words. They follow the Thai word order, with the
verb preceding its object and the noun its modifiers. Examples: the expres-
sions /rít phài/ "to iron" and /jàm ròt/ "tyre" referred to in section (1)
above, /kùd jàm/ "standpoint" from /kùd/ "point" and /jàm/ "to stand";
/râthhabàm phât thín/ "government-in-exile" from /râthhabàm/ "government",
/phât/ "removed from" and /thín/ "locality"; /khèm bin/ "aeroplane" from
/khràn/ "contrivance" and /bin/ "to fly"; /khèm bin saj phòm/ "jet aero-
plane" from /khèm bin/ as before, plus /saj/ "vapour" and /phòm/ "to spray",
hence lit. "sprayed-vapour aeroplane"; /rìà çàm nàm/ "a submarine" from /rìà/
"boat" and /çàm/ "to dive under"; /nàm/ "water", /jàm/ sañàkàt/ "space vehicle"
from /jàm/ "vehicle" and /sañàkàt/ "space"; /khèt plàt yàk/ "liberated
area" from /khèt/ "area", /plàt/ "to remove", /yàk/ "yoke", lit. "remove-
yoke area"; /poon dèj/ "in inferiority" and /nàt jíl nàm/ "to strike" (formal,
versus /sàtnaj/, informal, from Eng.) from /nàt/ "to make an appointment",
/jíl/ "to stop", /nàm/ "work". Abstract nouns are regularly formed from
action-verbs and stative verbs by the pre-placement of the grammaticized
words /kàm/ and /khàm/, respectively: thus /wì/ "to run" —> /kàm wì/ "the
process of running", /dèj/ "good" —> /khàm dè/ "goodness". Nouns too may
have /kàm/ placed before them, producing abstract nouns: e.g., /màñ/ "town"
—> /kàm màñ/ "politics"; /tálì/ "market" —> /kàm tálì/ "marketing";
/nàm/ "money" —> /kàm nàm/ "finance". Note that even though the constituents
may be of Indic origin, e.g., /jàm/ sañàkàt/, the compound is native-Thai
because of the method of combination.

(b) Indic style coinages: Indo-Thai and New Indo-Thai classicism and
"applied classicism": For the Thais the creation of new words from Indic ele-
ments is word-coin ing par excellence. Like Latin and Greek for the Europeans,

*complex* from /poon/ "knot, complex" (see above) and /dèj/ "to be inferior";