SPECIAL VOCABULARIES IN THAI

One of the most interesting of the recent trends in linguistics is the search for features of semantic structure in the lexicons of languages. It is the purpose of this paper to point out in the Thai language an exceedingly simple structural feature manifested in various segments of the vocabulary. This feature is the conventional substitutability on a one-to-one basis of special terms in certain contexts for particular items of the ordinary vocabulary.

Perhaps the most obvious of these special vocabularies is the special set of forms used in speaking of and to royal persons. It is well known that Thai and many other languages of South and Southeast Asia have such special royal terms. They are often described by tourists and even scholars as a special royal language. This is an exaggeration, perhaps encouraged by the tendency of speakers of the language to grumble about the alleged difficulty in

mastering and controlling these special royal forms. The royal terms do not constitute a special language, nor even a special dialect. They consist simply of a limited list of special lexical items, usually single words but sometimes phrases, which are substituted for corresponding items in the common vocabulary when speaking to or about a royal person.

This royal vocabulary is called in Thai raachaa-sàp, literally "royal words." The list has been published frequently in school textbooks. Perhaps the most authoritative version of the list is that formerly issued in pamphlet form for use by students in the Royal Pages' School.\(^1\) This list contains 92 terms for parts of the body, a couple of dozen kinship terms, 66 terms for animals and miscellaneous objects, and 73 terms for actions of various kinds. These categories occupy roughly half of the small volume. The remainder consists of an alphabetical finder-list according to the ordinary synonyms.

Analysis of such published lists of royal terms are misleading in that they suggest that the special royal vocabulary is more extensive than it actually is. From our point of view the list is found to be padded with various polite and euphemistic synonyms for vulgar terms of ordinary speech, but these polite terms—comparable to "limb" for "leg" in English—do not actually belong to the special royal vocabulary. Additional confusion for the lexicographer's purposes is that many of the entries in the published lists are not separate items at all, but merely illustrative phrases.

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The failure in the past to perceive the special characteristics of the royal terms and separate them out from such lists accounts for the confused and wasteful treatment given the royal vocabulary in existing dictionaries.

The key to the whole phenomenon is clearly the principle that certain special terms are conventional substitutes in situations involving royalty for ordinary terms of the common vocabulary. This becomes clear from the use of the special royal terms as substitutes for the corresponding ordinary terms not only in straightforward literal contexts but also in various idiomatic and metaphoric expressions; that is to say, wherever the ordinary term would occur in ordinary speech, the royal term is substituted for it if the situation involves royalty. It is as if the ordinary term were tabu in such a situation, but the term tabu is hardly applicable. For example, one may use the ordinary term for "hand" in speaking to royalty, but only the special term in referring to the hand of a royal person, whether speaking to royalty or about royalty. Highly conventionalized euphemism would perhaps be a more accurate characterization than tabu.

These royal terms have been used in Thai at least from the time of the oldest records of the language, beginning with the celebrated Sukhothai inscription of 1292 A.D., and similar special sets of royal terms are found in the languages of the other Southeast Asian countries that derived their higher culture from India. In Thai some of the royal terms
are native Thai words; many are loanwords from Cambodian; by far the greatest number is Indic.

No doubt in the days of the absolute monarchy they were one of many devices which served the function of augmenting royal power by marking with the utmost clarity the distinction between royalty and subjects. Other features of the traditional culture may be noted which appear to have had a similar function. Only royalty in the old days could possess certain types of gold objects. Only royalty could, and indeed was expected to, marry within the family, while for commoners incest was as adversely regarded as among other peoples elsewhere.

Although it seems clear that in the past the special royal vocabulary served this function of emphasizing the distinction between royalty and commoner, there is nowadays an opposite tendency to play down this distinction, to encourage the view that royalty is human. The result is that many now regard the special royal vocabulary as an unfortunate and awkward interference. It is not uncommon for princes who participate in public affairs, as many do, to ask their friends not to use the special royal terms. More than one Thai monarch of the twentieth century has turned to English in conversation and correspondence with Thai friends and relatives to avoid the complications of the royal terms.²

Use of the royal terms in the future will no doubt decrease. Journalists and others still try to use them properly, but slips are viewed leniently. Another factor which will also work for a decrease is the simple fact that the number of royal persons,