Changing to the new world: high-tech verbalization in Thai

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1. Introduction.

The relationship between Thailand and England began in the Ayudhaya period (1350-1767). However, during that time the Portuguese and other Westerners, i.e. the French, were more familiar to the Thais than the English. Thus, not many English loanwords are found in the old documents from that time. Even in the reign of King Rama I of the Bangkok Period (1782-1809) there was no contact from any Englishman. Then in the reign of King Rama II (1809-1824) there was an official contact from England. Thus, English loanwords started to appear in various documents. The loanwords increased in the reigns of King Rama III (1824-1851) and King Rama IV or King Mongkut (1851-1868) due to more contact with Englishmen and Americans. King Rama IV himself studied English and was able to use it fluently (Changkhwanyuen 1983).

Unlike in other Asian countries where Christian missionaries had access only to the lower classes, in Thailand missionaries made a distinct impression on the ruling classes. They, however, were more interested in the missionaries’ knowledge of Western sciences and modern technology than Christianity. They realized also that, in order to better pursue their scientific interest, they had to be proficient in English.

King Mongkut’s successors, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reign 1868-1910) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, reign 1910-1925), were more confident in dealing with Western powers than their forefathers had been. They realized that the adoption of Western ways and the
utilization of Western techniques were the tools of modernization (Masavisut et al 1986).

Today with the invasion of radio, telephone, television, video tape, fax machine, cable TV, satellite TV, computer network, and finally Thailand’s own satellite, Thaicom\(^1\), the Thais cannot escape high-tech terms in everyday life. Thailand is now in the world communications systems. The problem is how to cope with them in the Thai language.

2. Early Adaptation

Before the appointment of the word-coinning committees of the Thai Royal Institute there were 3 ways of adaptation: loan blending, loan translation, and word building (Prugsapramool 1989).

2.1 Loan Blending

Loan blending is a compound word consisting of partly Thai and partly English. Either a Thai word or an English word may serve as the main part. English word may be the whole word with original meaning. For example:

เครื่องแบ่งเติม  khruangbattery\(^2\) (/khruang/ =
implement),
เครื่องไนโตรมิล  khruangdynamo, khruangradio,
ลูกบอลลูน  lukballoon (/lūuk/ = rounded thing),
หม้อแบ่งเติม  mobattery (/mäh/ = pot), mometer,
โรงฟักเติม  rongfactory (/room/ = factory),

Otherwise it may be a part of the original word, for example:

ถุงเมล็ด  thungmail (/thūŋ/ = bag, mail is cut from mail-bag),
คณะฟุตบอล  khanafootball (/kháná/ = group, football is cut from football team),
2.2 Loan Translation

Loan translation is a direct translation, either word for word or with some adaptation. For example:

แรงม้า raengma ‘horsepower’ (/ระม้า/ = power, /ม้า/ = horse),
รถยนต์ rotyon ‘motor car’ (/รถ/ = car, /ยนต์/ = machine),
รถไถ rot-ai ‘steam car’ (/รถ/ = car, /ไถ/ = steam),
ทางรถไฟ thangrotfai ‘railway’ (/ทาง/ = way, /รถ/ = car, /ไฟ/ = fire) (/รถไฟ/ = train),
รถไฟฟ้า rotfaifa ‘electric car’ (/รถ/ = car, /ไฟ/ = fire, /ฟ้า/ = sky) (/ไฟฟ้า/ = electricity).

2.3 Word Building

Word building is an interpretation of new things or ideas, for example:

แผ่นเสียง phaensiang ‘disk’ (/พ่นสียง/ = thin piece thing, /เสียง/ = sound),
แรงไฟ raengfai ‘volt’ (/แรงไฟ/ = power, /ไฟ/ = fire, electricity),
ลูกสูญชั่ว luksawan ‘balloon’ (/ลูกส่วน/ = rounded thing, /ส่วน/ = heaven),
ตู้เย็น tuyen ‘refrigerator’ (/ตู้เย็น/ = cabinet, /เย็น/ = cool).

Besides the meaning-oriented adaptation mentioned above, another way to use loanwords is sound-oriented adaptation. The English sounds are equated to Thai sounds of familiar words which are not necessarily related to the original words, for example:

สถานี satethaen ‘station’ (/สตาที/ sounds like a kind of food, /สถานี/ = stand, platform).
กะปิตัน kapitan ‘captain’ (/kàpɨ/ sounds like shrimp paste and /tan/ sound like a Thai words meaning being clogged up, not hollow, dead end).

ตะลับแกป talaepkaep ‘telegraph’ (there are many Thai words beginning with /tǎ/; /læp/ and /kæp/ are easy to pronounce).

Both ways of adaptation reflect the Thai ways of thinking in that they think of the new technology in terms of the familiar things in their own culture, either Thai things or Thai sounds. If they cannot equate the new things to anything in Thai they choose to adapt the foreign sounds to the Thai sounds.

3. The Royal Institute Rules

From the very start of word-coining the work has been unofficially carried out by Thai scholars including members of the Royal family and the kings themselves.

When Prince Wanwaithayakon came back from Europe in 1919, word-coining was coming into vogue, due mainly to the necessity of establishing a Thai version of the Civil and Commercial Code after the English draft of each Book of the Code was ready. At the change of Regime in 1932 he became active in coining words. He started a newspaper and felt that it was necessary to coin new words. In his opinion, to get to the people one cannot use English words which have not penetrated into the system of thought. If one can get hold of a Thai word it would be better, but if not, one can have recourse to Pali and Sanskrit words which have come into the Thai language (Wanwaitayakon 1970).

Therefore the general word-coining rules of The Royal Institute go like this (Royal Institute 1992):

1) Find a Thai word first. If no Thai word is appropriate then,
2) Find Pali and Sanskrit words already used in Thai.