

# *On the Semantics of Thai Compounds in hŭa 'Head'*

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Thai has many compound expressions in which the item *hŭa* 'head' is the first component, followed by a qualifier. An outline of the semantic types involved is suggested, and it is shown that the classification helps to specify 1) which compound expressions are liable to undergo "euphemistic" substitutions, relating to Thai cultural taboos, and 2) which types are relatively productive.<sup>1</sup>

In "Special Vocabularies in Thai," Professor Gedney wrote of the Thai so-called "royal language" [*râachasàp*] as follows (1961: 109-110):

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....[One] may use the ordinary term for 'hand' when speaking to royalty but only the special term in referring to the hand of a royal person, or about royalty. Highly conventionalized euphemism would perhaps be a more accurate characterization than tabu.

Gedney (1961: 113) then calls attention to the problem of treating "sets of near synonyms" that are not "mechanically interchangeable" not just for royal reference but in other situations as well. In this paper we look at some aspects of the problem, focusing on how the Thai word *hŭa* 'head' and some of its compound expressions relate to what Gedney referred to as conventionalized euphemism.

In this section we briefly summarize some well-known beliefs and practices of Thai people relating to the head. Thai people have rather strong feelings and important social practices concerning the head. These probably affect, at least in an indirect way, the use of the most common word for

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Tony Diller for comments on this paper and for help in converting it into academic English. The transcription is a modification of the Thai Royal Institute's system; colons indicate long vowels (other than long diphthongs), and the tone-marking system of Haas (1964) is used.

'head' in Thai, *hǔa*. This is one of many words in Thai that are avoided in some situations and have conventionalized euphemisms.

The Thais believe the head is an exalted part of the body, while the feet are base. As a result, a Thai person will not casually touch an adult's head; if this happens accidentally, it is necessary to quickly beg the pardon of the person touched, otherwise there may be an angry incident. An exception is with very young children, in which case touching the head may be a token of affection. It is also considered very impolite to pass objects over the head of another person.

Even pictures showing the heads of respected persons, such as the Buddha or the King, are put up in high places, such as over a doorway. Also, if such pictures are in a bedroom, they should be hung on the wall above and behind the head of a bed, so that sleeping persons would not be pointing their feet at them. One would never put such pictures opposite one's feet.

The opposition of head-foot is strengthened by behavior such as how to sit. If a Thai person sits with legs crossed, care is taken not to point the feet at someone else; that would be very impolite, as would using the foot to point at some object. Even calling attention to the foot, for some reason, usually requires one to say "excuse me" first.

Levels of vocabulary are important in the Thai language, and there are often several words for one concept, but as Gedney observed, they are not mechanically interchangeable. The choice of words like this is conditioned by the social status of the speaker and listener, their age, their educational backgrounds, the degree of formality, and also by what is being talked about. Some words are considered higher, while others are considered lower, or even taboo. In the case of a monarch's head, a term meaning 'lord' is supposed to be used as a euphemistic substitute. In fact, the concept 'head' has at least eight Thai lexical units to represent it:

<i>phrá-câw</i>	'head of a monarch'
<i>phrá-sĭan</i>	'head of a royal family member'
<i>sĭan</i>	'head of a Buddha image'
<i>klâw</i>	'head', respect form (special usage)
<i>keesĭ</i>	'head' (poetic)
<i>sĭisá?</i>	'head', high form, commoners
<i>hǔa</i>	'head', common form
<i>kabaan</i>	'head', low form

These items should be chosen properly or else a speaker will be considered rude. M. L. Pin Malakun (1983), an authority on Thai usage, writes: "the words *tiin* [foot], *kin* [eat], *dyrn* [walk], *nɔɔn* [lie down] should not be rude words at all, but if they are used to a senior person they are considered rude. Instead, one should use different words."

This type of vocabulary alternation seems quite natural and easy for educated Thais, especially in the matter of first-person/second-person relationships. That is, a speaker will have no hesitation in selecting the proper item for 'head' if the listener's head is the thing indicated. However, in the third-person situation, where the head is only mentioned in the discourse but does not relate directly to people in the speech situation, then a speaker might become careless and use a form that may not be considered proper. In fact, in some circumstances, use of the proper form would seem affected or "overacting"; Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1956)—on the use of *dàtcarit*—observed that if higher forms are used in improper contextual circumstances or *kaaláthe:sà*, the effect may be artificial or overacting). This is because if a situation is informal, and if the speaker-listener relationship is one of intimacy, the common or relatively lower forms seem appropriate; this could conflict with the principle of choosing vocabulary on the basis of the referent's status. This potential conflict is decided in different ways by different Thai people.

An example may make this clear. Suppose two people of equal status are speaking together. One says, "Be careful of your head." The word *hǔa* would be appropriate. Suppose one says the same thing to a senior. The word *sǐ:sà?* would be appropriate. In other words, the choice of the word for 'head' depends on the relative position of the listener. But now suppose two friends are talking together informally and the head of a senior person is mentioned. The choice of *hǔa* would be natural and common for these speakers, rather than *sǐ:sà?*. The word *hǔa* might even be used in such a situation in referring to a picture of a royal person. (But for a group of two other friends, the higher forms or more correct forms might be used instead.)

We return to the special vocabulary or speech level later, after examining some *hǔa* compounds in the following paragraphs.

Body-part compounds, including metaphorical ones, are common in many languages. English, of course, has many extended uses of the word 'head', some of which form compounds: headline, headland, headquarters, headman, headway, and so on. Extensions of 'head' have been the subject of interest for many years. Greenough and Kittredge (1965) used the term "radiation" to explain how the meaning of 'head' became extended from the basic body-part meaning. For the period when they wrote, they say it radiated in ten directions:

Type	Example
1. top of something	the head of a page
2. leadership	the head of a school
3. side with 'head' figure	the head of a coin
4. source	fountainhead
5. hydraulic sense	headwaters

6. promontory	Beechy Head (a placename)
7. armed force	(now obsolete)
8. single individual	five head of cattle
9. main point	head item
10. mental power	clear-headed

Thai is also rich in radiated or extended uses of *hǔa* 'head', some similar to English and some not, as we see in the examples below. Often a Thai noun phrase can be formed with *hǔa* as the first or main noun element followed by a modifier, which may be either a noun or a verb. (Other syntactic patterns, for example, where *hǔa* is the final element, are beyond the scope of this paper.) If such a form begins to function as a conventional lexical item, we consider it to be a compound here, but precise definitions of "compound" for Thai could differ. In some cases, lexicalization means that the [*hǔa* + modifier] noun phrase can take on a verbal function and be used as a predicate or as a noun modifier.

### 'Head' Modified in Literal Sense

(used as noun phrases or as adjectival verbs)

Compound	Meaning of Modifier	Meaning of Compound
<i>hǔa-láan</i>	bald	bald(-headed)
<i>hǔa-thuy</i>	elongated	having an elongated head
<i>hǔa-too</i>	large	having a large head
<i>hǔa-lěem</i>	sharp	having a pointed head

### Human Emotion (mainly used as adjectival verbs)

<i>hǔa-sǎa</i>	spoil	be in a bad mood
<i>hǔa-pàn</i>	spin, turn	agitated
<i>hǔa-mǔn</i>	spin, whirl	confused
<i>hǔa-sǎy</i>	clear	clear-headed
<i>hǔa-thúp</i>	dense	dull-witted

### Human Characterization (mainly used as adjectival verbs)

#### Good at some discipline

<i>hǔa-kòtmăay</i>	law	having a legal bent
<i>hǔa-sěethakìt</i>	economics	good at economics
<i>hǔa-wítthayasàat</i>	science	scientifically inclined
<i>hǔa-kaanmuaŋ</i>	politics	politically inclined

#### Acting like professionals

<i>hǔa-mǔɔ</i>	doctor	apt to act like a doctor
<i>hǔa-khamooy</i>	thief	inclined to pilfering