

ON “GETTING” THE THAI PRETENDED OBSCENE RIDDLE

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0. Introduction

The Thai pretended obscene riddle wittily plays with the unspeakable issues in Thai society. In general, a riddle itself is a form of rhetoric. Involving a riddle with taboo issues of obscenity in playful way makes it more appealing. In addition to a content analysis, a pragmatic look at the performance of pretended obscene riddling is necessary for discovering the key factors of how this kind of riddle works.

This paper discusses two meanings of “getting” the Thai pretended obscene riddle in two aspects. First, “getting” is viewed as a mark of the accomplishment of the speech act. It is argued that it is not “answering” but “getting” a pretended obscene riddle that signifies the success of the riddling. “Getting” in this aspect means discovering and understanding the hidden logical connection between a riddle question and its solution. Our second meaning of “getting” the Thai pretended obscene riddle is understanding how it works. To reach this goal, the pragmatic strategies used in this kind of riddle shall be analyzed.

The paper consists of six sections. The first section deals with the definition and the nature of pretended obscene riddles. The second section explains the method of study and the results. The third section discusses the importance of getting a pretended obscene riddle as the mark of the accomplishment of the speech act. The forth section examines the pragmatic elements involving in playing the Thai pretended obscene riddle. The fifth section investigates risk, reward, and limitation in playing this kind

of riddle in the context of Thai society. The last section concludes the whole discussion.

1. The Thai pretended obscene riddle

1.1 Definition of the pretended obscene riddle

Brunvand (1968: 52) defines the pretended obscene riddle as "a special subtype, usually of the comparative or enumerative type. The description suggests something risqué, usually sexual, but the correct answer is quite tame." In a particular study of this kind of riddle, Brown (1973: 90) widens its scope by including riddles that allude obscenity in the answer.

Brown (1973) gives some examples of what he terms the pretended obscene riddle. The first example is a riddle that alludes obscenity in the question.

What goes in hard, but comes out soft?

--- chewing gum--- (Brown 1973: 93)

The second example is a riddle that alludes obscenity in the answer.

What is the difference between a skinny broad and a counterfeit dollar bill?

--- a counterfeit dollar bill is a phoney buck--- (Brown 1973: 96)

However, in line with Brunvand, Brown notes that a great majority of the pretended obscene riddles holds the obscene allusion within the body of the question, with the answer being non-obscene. Brown (1973: 90) further discusses the nature of this kind of riddle that in almost all cases the obscenity is non-existent; no obscenity is voiced at all, but rather so implied as to force the riddlee to imagine an obscene situation that is never evidenced in the answer.

This paper focuses on this type of riddle found in Thai society. In our opinion, this group of riddle better fits the meaning of "pretended obscene" because the real subject matter of the riddle is not obscenity. A riddle question only misleads the riddlee to think about obscenity by using some pragmatic strategies. When the riddle solution is revealed, it drives away the obscene concept, which is ostentatiously alluded in the riddle question.

1.2 Examples

The following are three examples of the Thai pretended obscene riddles.

1) When someone gets in, you hear a cry; when he gets out, you (can) also hear a cry; when he gets further inside, he finds some liquid. What is that?

---Seven-eleven stores---

2) What is a male innate item? Some are short, but some are long. Women have to use it after getting married.

---Last name---

3) What begins with “พ” and has “~” in its spelling that women use for urinating?

---ห้องน้ำสตรี / hǒwngnáamsàttri/ (lady's room)---

The examples above can be classified into two groups.

Riddle 1 and 2 play with the description of the answers while riddle 3 mainly plays with a linguistic unit, specifically the spelling of the answer. In other words, the former group plays with the signified whereas the latter group plays with the signifier. The first group can survive translation and can also be found in other cultures. On the contrary, the latter group is more culture-bounded and cannot survive translation. Therefore, it is unintelligible for non-Thai speakers.

2. Method and result

In the present study, we posed the three riddles above to 30 respondents without letting them know our purpose and observed their verbal and non-verbal response. After that we explained them our purpose and interviewed them their experience and opinion.

The riddles' first responses after being posed the riddles include laughing loudly, laughing shyly, smiling and pondering. In most cases, the riddlees could not answer the riddles and asked อะไรละ /ʔàray làʔ/ (what is that?) or said ไม่รู้ /mây rú / or ไม่รู้หรอก /mây rú lòok/ ((I) don't know) and

gave up by saying ขอม /yɔɔm/ (give up) or บอกมาเถอะ /bòɔk maa thəʔ/ (tell me the answer).

Only one riddlee could answer riddle 1. This is because she had ever read it from a web site. Four riddlees could give the correct solution to riddle 2. Two of them could figure out the solution themselves. The other two had ever heard the riddle and the solution. Only one riddlee could give the correct solution to riddle 3 because she had previously heard the riddle. For those who had heard the riddles and the solutions, we asked whether they could figure out the correct solutions themselves when they were first posed those riddles. All of them responded that they could not.

The immediate responses after each solution was revealed included exclaiming ออ /ʔɔ́w/ (Oh! Yes), ออหรือ /ʔɔ́w rǎ/ (really?) เออใช่ /ʔə cháɰ/ (Oh...yes), เออว่า /ʔə wàʔ/ (Yes, right.) or เออจริง /ʔə ciŋ/ (Yes, right.) or saying คิดได้ยังไง /khít dáay ɣaŋɣay/ (How can you create it?) กระแล้ว /kàʔ lææw/ (That is what I thought) with a laughter, a smile, or a nod. However, a few riddlees said ไม่เข้าใจ /mây kháu cay/ (I don't get it) or asked ทำไมล่ะ /thammay làʔ/ (Why?). This occurred mostly with riddle 1. After we providing the further explanation, all of them responded by exclaiming ออ /ʔɔ́w/ (Oh! Yes).

3. Getting the pretended obscene riddle: the accomplishment of the speech act

3.1 The speech act of riddle

When talking about a riddle, people usually think of it as a kind of question. This is because they focus only on the first part, which mostly takes the form of a question. Many scholars also consider riddle in this way (i.e., Paris 1877; Taylor 1943, 1951; Georges and Dundes 1963; and Abrahams and Dundes 1972). For example, Abrahams and Dundes (1972: 130) define riddles as “questions that are framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answer.” Nonetheless, it is crucial