

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

First published in *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* (Helsinki) 14:109-14; and in Michael Zarechnak, ed., *Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics, 1961*, pp. 109-14 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1961). Reprinted courtesy of Georgetown University Press.

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.

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,

formerly very large as the result of the polygamous royal marriages, is rapidly dwindling now that their numbers are not being replenished by the twentieth-century monogamous kings.

To return to the lexicographical aspect of the royal vocabulary, it seems clear that lexicographers, both Thai and foreign, have made unnecessary work for themselves by failing to recognize that the correct treatment of these terms is simply to mark them as part of the royal vocabulary and then give the synonym from the ordinary vocabulary for which they substitute.

Traditional Thai culture was characterized by the high value placed on decorum and convention. In social manners, in official conduct, in artistic composition, and in many other aspects of life in the traditional social system, one is struck by the striving not for originality or for unique individual achievement, but rather for grace and elegance in manipulating strictly conventional forms. With this in mind, one is tempted to seek further in the Thai lexicon for more such highly conventional phenomena as that exhibited in the royal vocabulary described above.

A similar phenomenon is found in the forms used in speaking to or about Buddhist monks. These include a small number of special terms for "food," "to eat," "to sleep," etc., and here again it is clear that each special term substitutes automatically for a particular term of the ordinary vocabulary. Though the list of special terms for monks is much shorter than the list of special terms for

royalty, the terms for monks have no doubt always had a much wider use, since most Thais seldom if ever have occasion to speak to royalty but virtually all Thais are in contact with Buddhist monks constantly throughout their lives.

Continuing our search, we find a similar lexical phenomenon in a particular segment of the literature, the large body of literary works dealing with the Panji romance, a story cycle of Javanese origin. Literary works on this theme include some of the major masterpieces of classical Thai literature, as well as many minor poems.³ In all of these romantic tales dealing with Inaw, as the hero of the cycle is known in Thai, there occurs a special set of terms for "moon," "flower," and other similar items frequent in romantic stories. These terms occur only in works dealing with this story, and every youngster who studies classical Thai literature is required to memorize the list. Everyone is aware of the Javanese origin of the story, and the popular notion is that these special terms are loanwords from Javanese, but Thai scholars who have looked into the matter declare that these words are taken not from Javanese but from the local dialects of Malay spoken in the provinces adjacent to peninsular Thailand.

These terms are seldom so prominent as to impede comprehension. Their occasional occurrence must have served the function of reminding the readers or listeners that this is the Inaw story, not the Rama story or any other of the various standard classics. Here again, as in the case of the royal terms and monks' terms, the obviously correct lexicographical

treatment is simply to say "conventional synonym in the Inaw story for --."

In seeking other sets of conventionally substitutable synonyms similar to those described above, one is tempted to identify in traditional Thai poetry another class of special vocabulary in the various sets of highly conventionalized synonyms upon which the classical poets drew. Many of the major poetic classics were composed to be sung as accompaniment to the ballet. Simplicity was desired in order not to distract attention from the dance and the music. Originality was valued only as it contributed to a more elegant treatment of what was conventionally expected. Poets had for such common meanings as "king," "lady," "army," "horse," "elephant," etc., whole sets of conventional synonyms to draw upon, and in most cases the choice [was] clearly dependent upon nothing more than rhyme and meter. It seems clear that many of these conventional poetic terms are to be handled by the lexicographer in a way parallel to the treatment proposed above for the royal terms, monks' terms, and Malay terms in the Inaw story, that is, to gloss them by saying simply "conventional synonym in classical poetry for --." Even in cases where the earlier history of the word shows that it once had a somewhat different meaning, membership in one of these stereotyped sets of mutually substitutable synonyms seems to erase the semantic subtleties.

But although it seems clear that many terms in the poetic vocabulary are to be regarded in this way, they present a difficult problem in that it is frequently not easy to draw the line between sets of

stereotyped synonyms on the one hand and on the other hand sets of near synonyms which cannot be said flatly to be mechanically interchangeable. Although many poets seem to have made their choices on arbitrary metrical grounds, undoubtedly the better poets were aware of and utilized connotational or associative values in choosing among available synonyms or near-synonyms. Further study of the poetic vocabulary may make it possible to decide whether some among these terms are to be regarded as conventional synonyms, parallel to the conventional sets of substitutes described above.

Turning finally to ordinary speech, we find another set of items somewhat similar to the above sets in this feature of conventional substitutability. Virtually all students of Thai speak of "pronouns." It is by no means clear, however, that Thai has a syntactic class of pronouns that can be identified on more objective grounds than the fact that they translate the pronouns of western languages; certainly the published studies that speak of pronouns have not demonstrated such a class.

But leaving syntax aside and approaching the so-called pronouns from a lexical point of view, one is at once struck by the similarity to the above sets in the feature of conventional substitutability. The pronouns often go in pairs; that is, choice of a particular form for "I" determines the choice of another form for "you," and sometimes the final sentence particle is involved as well. It has often been pointed out that the large range of choices indicating relative status of the speaker and the person spoken to

reflects the stratification of social classes in the traditional social scheme.

The pronouns and associated final particles differ from the special vocabularies described above in that with the pronouns it is hardly possible to declare particular forms basic and then say that the others are conventional substitutes. The scope of this paper hardly permits us to deal properly with Thai pronouns, but it seems clear that they share somehow with the special vocabularies a feature of mechanical interchangeability.

It is perhaps no accident, in view of the many areas of the traditional vocabulary in which we find this feature of one-to-one interchangeability, that nowadays when new terms are coined to translate western technical terms each coinage is regarded as a conventional and arbitrary substitute for the western term on which it was modeled.

What does all this mean for the lexicographer? For practical dictionary-making purposes it means that in Thai, and perhaps in many other languages in parts of South and Southeast Asia where society and culture were formerly highly conventionalized, there are certain areas of the lexicon where the dictionary can and should take drastic short-cuts, merely indicating that the term belongs to a particular special set and in that set is a conventional substitute for a given item in the ordinary vocabulary. It is clearly an error to attempt, as all existing dictionaries do, to list again under the special terms all the meanings of the ordinary term for which it is substituted.

And on the theoretical level, it may be that in Thai and other languages of the area we have here a feature of lexical and semantic structure of a simple sort that should be dealt with first in our search for structure on these levels.

Notes

1. Royal Pages' School, *Raachaasàp*. Bangkok (2nd ed.), 1932. 52 pages. (In Thai.)
2. One member of the royal family writes, "Members of the Chakri Family have often written to one another in English to avoid the elaborate language required for the different ranks even amongst relatives." Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life* (New York, 1960), p. 271.
3. A definitive study of Thai versions of this Javanese tale is found in Prince Dhani Nivat, "Siamese Versions of the Panji Romance," *India Antiqua, a volume of Oriental studies presented by his friends and pupils to Jean Philippe Vogel . . .* (Leyden, 1947), pp. 95-101.