THE THAI LANGUAGE AS A MAP OF THAI CULTURE

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Over the past two or three generations, students of language have chiefly undertaken their researches in one or more of the following manners. First, human language has been studied for its own sake. Scholars with this persuasion have looked at language structure, categorizing what they observe, in an effort to devise paradigms and discover a symmetry in the arrangements of their data. A second approach has been pursued by those who have studied language because they sought to learn about the mind and the way in which cognition develops (and proceeds) in the human species. These analysts have dealt with the creation or generation of phrases, studying linguistic data in strings or sequences and hypothesizing how the mind operates. The third "tradition" of study has examined language in its communicative mode. This approach has emphasized language as a medium of communication and much attention has been paid to cultural or societal messages that linguistic forms bear.

The distinguished honoree of this symposium has led those of us who are his former students through each of these three approaches to language. Wisely, he has trained us to glean insights from all three approaches in a selective fashion. Therefore I am eclectically calling attention to some data from Thai, but will stop short of claiming that I am drawing a precise map of Thai culture. I hope to show something of the way in which the mind operates, something of the syntactic paradigm of Thai, and something of Thai communication, but I do not yet command a firm notion of precisely what my data mean for the total grammar of Thai language, mind, and society.

Certain cultural constructs are revealed in language. For example, the English pronoun system reveals the concept of number, the concepts of subjectivity, objectivity, and possession, and the concept of sex. As evidence I would cite 'he' vs. 'they' (number), 'I' and 'me' and 'my' (subject, object, possessive), and 'she' vs. 'he' (sex). The analogous lexical set in Thai produces some rather different

conclusions about Thai cultural constructs. For the number concept it is difficult to conclude much beyond the claim that forms like /phŏm/ are singular, yet many other pronouns (/khun/, for example) may have singular or plural referents.[1] Similarly, subjective and objective are not explicitly marked and possessive is only optionally marked by the preposition /khŏɔŋ/. The concept of sex is unambiguously marked in the forms /phŏm/ and /dichăn/. A sharp contrast with English, however, is reflected by the second-person set: /ɬ+/, /thəə/, /khun/, and /thân/. These forms include semantic information about the status of the referent or the attitude of the user of the forms.[2]

If we are looking for symmetry of data we find it only in a partial fashion. Table 1 shows some of the semantic content of selected English and Thai pronouns, but the /¬/ reveals forms in which a cultural contrast significant elsewhere in the language is not distinctive.

TABLE 1

	Number	Sex	Status
I	sg	m¬f	¬
you	sg¬pl	m¬f	¬
he	sg	m	¬
she	sg	f	¬
phŏm	sg	m	¬
dichăn	sg	f	¬
khun	sg¬pl	¬	¬
thân	sg¬pl	¬	high
ɬ+	sg	¬	low
khăw	sg¬pl	¬	¬

We must conclude from these data that the concept of sex, for example, is significant for some pronouns (in Thai and English), but not all. It follows, therefore, that the mind of a speaker of Thai registers the speaker's sex, and in English a referred-to person's sex; in all other situations sex remains unmarked in the languages, so

we have only limited knowledge about the mind from these lexical items. We can claim tentatively that for Thai and English only under limited conditions is sex significant in each language.

Turning to kinship words we are confronted with other linguistic features and with data which suggest that a symmetrical paradigm for Thai kin terms cannot be devised. The cultural contrast between Thai and English which is reflected in the sibling terms has been noted by many students of the two languages (the dichotomy for sex in 'brother' and 'sister' as against a dichotomy for age relative to ego in /phîi/ 'elder sibling' and /nɔ́ɔŋ/ 'younger sibling'. More interesting still is the internal complexity of these Thai items:

(1) /ʔaa/ younger aunt or uncle (father's sibling)

(2) /náa/ younger aunt or uncle (mother's sibling)

(3) /luŋ/ older uncle (sibling of either parent)

(4) /pâa/ older aunt (sibling of either parent)

In forms (1) and (2) the sex of the kinsman is not relevant, while the sex of the linking relative is. Forms (3) and (4) have the reverse situation with the added overlay of relative age, in an analogous fashion to /phîi/ and /nɔ́ɔŋ/.

Additional data from the kin-terms set provide still further insights into the Thai situation:

(5) /pùu/ paternal grandfather

(6) /yâa/ paternal grandmother

(7) /taa/ maternal grandfather

(8) /yaay/ maternal grandmother

These forms are marked for both sex of kinsman and sex of linking relative, but unmarked in regard to age.

At this point we can refine our hypothesis to hold that in Thai sex and sex of linking relative are sometimes distinctively marked, sometimes not, and that relative age is frequently distinctively marked in certain lexical sets. When contrasted with English, Thai reflects age (and kin link) more, but sex less.

Looking at one other segment of the lexicon we find sex marked in still another manner in several of the words in the following list:

(9) /lûukchaay/ son

(10) /lûuksăaw/ daughter

(11) /phɔ̂ɔ/ father

(12) /mêɛ/ mother

(13) /phɔ̂ɔkháa/ businessman, male shopkeeper or vendor

(14) /mêɛkháa/ businessman, female shopkeeper or vendor

(15) /phrá/ monk

(16) /chii/ nun

(17) /phɔ̂ɔ sɨ̀+/ (male) matchmaker

(18) /mêɛ sɨ̀+/ (female) matchmaker

(19) /khruu/ teacher

(20) /tamrùat/ police officer

(21) /mɔ̌ɔ/ doctor

Sex is marked in the compound words (9), (10), (13), (14), (17), and (18) by the use of a noun which is sex-specific, /phɔ̂ɔ/, /mêɛ/, /chaay/ 'man', or /săaw/ 'young woman'. In the case of the pair (15) and (16), sex is unambiguously signaled; only men are monks and only women are nuns in Thai culture, so knowledge of the social context is critical to an understanding of these terms.

The words (19), (20), and (21) are not marked for sex. In the case of /khruu/, disambiguating compounds such as */khruu chaay/ and */khruu yǐŋ/ are rejected by native speakers. Only the phrasal constructs /khruu (thî+ pen) phûuchaay/ and /khruu (thî+ pen) phûuyǐŋ/ are possible. For (20) /tamrùat/ is interpreted as male because of cultural tendencies, since "female police officer" can only be captured with the compound /tamrùat yǐŋ/. In the case of /mɔ̌ɔ/, the same pattern as /khruu/ is followed: /mɔ̌ɔ phûuchaay/ and /mɔ̌ɔ phûuyǐŋ/.

The earlier attempts we have made at explanatory hypotheses benefit little from the thirteen words above. We are forced to conclude that the Thai lexicon includes words in which sex is marked in the simplex word, words in which sex is marked in one part of a compound, and words in which sex is unmarked (and is therefore

ambiguous). Our earlier observations about sex of linking relative and relative age (in the kinship terms) still stand.

We are left with some loose generalizations about certain features of semantic content in Thai words. These features reflect aspects of Thai culture, but we have only discovered a tool for analysis. The generalizations have little predictive power: we cannot synthesize new lexical items and thereby demonstrate the manner in which the mind operates. We must limit ourselves to categorizing the semantic content of Thai words in terms of the features that we have identified. Our only predictions would be of the following sort:

> (A) Thai nurses are women. 'Nurse' is /naaŋpháyaabaan/ (a compound consisting of /naaŋ/ 'women' and /páyaabaan/ 'to tend, to nurse'). If the profession attracts men, as has been the case in some other countries, */naaypháyaabaan/ should be coined for male nurses (using /naay/, a nonlearned word employed for many agent nouns, usually of males). That the attested coinage is /burùtpháyaabaan/ demonstrates how artificial the term is, since /burùt/ is a learned term and not parallel to /naaŋ/ (consider as well 'lawyer' /thanaaykhwaam/ and 'female lawyer' /thanaaykhwaam sàtrii/).
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> (B) If the human-potential movement were to be transported to Thailand, various terms would have to be created. Since /phûunam/ 'leader' is rather bland and impersonal, */phɔ̂ɔnam/ and */mêɛnam/ might be coined.

Notes

1. The transcription used follows Gething 1979.
2. For details on the pronouns, see Cooke 1968.

References

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