

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.¹

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

¹ 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-sǎn</i>	'head of a royal family member'
<i>sǎn</i>	'head of a Buddha image'
<i>klâw</i>	'head', respect form (special usage)
<i>keesǐ</i>	'head' (poetic)
<i>sǐisá?</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 *hŭa* would be appropriate. Suppose one says the same thing to a senior. The word *sŕ: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 *hŭa* would be natural and common for these speakers, rather than *sŕ:sà?*. The word *hŭa* 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 *hŭa* 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-mǔj</i>	doctor	apt to act like a doctor
<i>hǔa-khamooy</i>	thief	inclined to pilfering

Characterized by a certain mentality

<i>hũa-khít</i>	think	inventive, creative
<i>hũa-kàw</i>	old	conservative
<i>hũa-booraan</i>	ancient	conservative, old-fashioned
<i>hũa-lěem</i>	sharp	sharp-witted
<i>hũa-sũuŋ</i>	high	acting 'high-class'
<i>hũa-nốk</i>	outside	(a Thai) obsessed with Western ideas or fads

Characterized by a brain substitute

<i>hũa-khii-lăay</i>	sawdust	stupid
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Characterized as a hoodlum or rogue using a specific weapon

<i>hũa-máay</i>	stick	club-carrying rogue
<i>hũa-mít</i>	knife	knife-carrying rogue

Origin (mainly noun phrases)**First part of an event or time period**

<i>hũa-khâm</i>	evening	twilight
<i>hũa-lom</i>	wind	first gust of wind

First or leading item in a time period

<i>hũa-pii</i>	year	first, oldest one ²
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Starting points (of items with ends)³

<i>hũa-rũa</i>	boat	bow of a boat
<i>hũa-banday</i>	stairs	top of the stairs
<i>hũa-thanốn</i>	road	beginning of a road
<i>hũa-thếew</i>	line	beginning of a line
<i>hũa-taa</i>	eye	tear duct part of eye
<i>hũa-khíw</i>	eyebrow	beginning (centermost part) of eyebrow

Tubers or bulbs⁴

<i>hũa-hốcm</i>	onion	onion (bulb)
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² Mainly used as adjectival verb: for example, *lũuk-hũa-pii* 'first child'; *maphráaw-talaay-hũa-pii* 'first coconut bunch'.

³ There are opposite-orientation compounds in: *plaay* 'end', *hàaŋ* 'tail' or *tiin* 'foot'.

⁴ These items are "classifier compounds," since *hũa* may be used to count them. Another consequence is that a specific object—the bulb—is indicated, not the rest of the plant or the species or substance.

<i>hũa-krathiam</i>	garlic	garlic (bulb)
<i>hũa-man</i>	potato	potato
<i>hũa-phuak</i>	taro	taro

First most concentrated product from extraction

<i>hũa-yaa</i>	medicine	concentrated (herbal) cure
<i>hũa-kathí?</i>	coconut extract	top grade coconut cream
<i>hũa-lâw</i>	whiskey	top grade whiskey
<i>hũa-nom</i>	milk/breast	creamy milk
<i>hũa-náamsôm</i>	vinegar	undiluted vinegar

Leading Item (in a group of similar items; noun phrases)

Focus of content

<i>hũa-rêaŋ</i>	story	theme, title
<i>hũa-praden</i>	point	topic, main point(s)

Leader

<i>hũa-muu</i>	group	leader
<i>hũa-nâa</i>	face	boss, chief

Favorite or best item

<i>hũa-khrây</i>	desire	most loved one
<i>hũa-rák</i>	love	most loved one
<i>hũa-?òk</i>	chest, thorax	chest
<i>hũa-kraden</i>	spurt, skip	the 'number one' item

Items With Bulging or Protruding Features (noun phrases)

Roundish body parts

<i>hũa-khàw</i>	knee	knee (area)
<i>hũa-tapòok</i>	hip	hip (area)
<i>hũa-bàa</i>	shoulder	shoulder (area)
<i>hũa-cay</i>	heart/mind	(physical) heart ⁵

Small body protrusions

<i>hũa-nom</i>	breast/milk	nipple
<i>hũa-flí</i>	abscess	surface of abscess
<i>hũa-síw</i>	pimple	pimple

⁵ For the semantics of *cay*, see Gething 1977. Perhaps "origin" could also account for *hũa* in this compound.

Protruding geographical features

<i>hũa-khắw</i>	hill, mountain	hill (coming outwards)
<i>hũa-lếem</i>	sharp	point, peninsula ⁶

Geographical toponyms

<i>hũa-màak</i>	betel nut	Hua Mak, a suburb
<i>hũa-hỉn</i>	rock	Hua Hin, a town

Miscellaneous manufactured items

<i>hũa-nom</i>	breast/milk	pacifier
<i>hũa-thian</i>	candle	spark plug
<i>hũa-nók-kracỏk</i>	sparrow	alternator
<i>hũa-nỏt</i>	nut (English)	bolt
<i>hũa-kỏk</i>	tap (British 'cock')	spigot

Some items in the lists above occur more than once, such as *hũa-lế:m* 'to have a pointed head'; 'to be sharp-witted'; 'peninsula'; also *hũa-nom*, and others.

Other items seem to apply to more than one relevant feature, such as *hũa-mế-muu* 'thumb' and *hũa-mế-tiin* 'big toe'; these are roundish body parts, but they also could be thought of as leading members of sets. The blossom or spathe of the banana plant is called *hũa-plii*; it might be thought of as a protrusion or as a source.

More complicated is the double coding of some terms. Thus, *hũa-kathỉ?* basically means 'highest grade coconut cream', but it can be used colloquially as a metaphor to mean best people (in a group); and so in that meaning it is transferred to the category of 'starting point'. Sometimes other modifiers help this transfer: *hũa-rủa-yây*, literally 'head-boat-big', 'the big bow of the boat'; as a metaphor this can refer to a pushy 'big shot'.

In some longer expressions, there are other extensions such as *thắw-hũa-liq*, 'monkey-head vine' (*Scarcolobus carinatus*; Royal Institute Dictionary 1982). These are quite straightforward: the fruits of this vine resemble a monkey's head, hence the name.

Which of the *hũa* compounds above are sensitive to the speech level and taboo issues mentioned earlier? Here we must distinguish three speech situations, depending on what is being referred to and on how formal the context is.

When referring to royal items in a formal situation, the word *hũa* and all of its compounds, such as those mentioned above, are avoided. We saw previously that there are special euphemistic substitutes which should be used in formal reference to the head of a monarch or royal family member. There are also substitutes, sometimes more than one, for body parts of royal

⁶ Perhaps *hũa-sapha:n* 'the head/end/foot of a bridge or jetty' belongs here, but there seems to be some confusion as to how exactly this word is used.

persons. Examples: for a king's thumb, avoid *hũa-mêe-muu* and instead use *phrá-ʔaṇùt*; for a king's heart avoid *hũa-cay* and use instead *phrá-kamon*, *phrá-hathay*, or *phrá-harúthay*.

But even other items associated with royalty are affected by the convention of avoiding *hũa*. There are manuals of royal vocabulary that give lists of substitutes that should be used (Pin Malakun 1983; Sutthi Phibanthaen n.d.; Chamnong Thongprasert 1975). There are two strategies. One is rephrasing. For example, for *hũa-plii* 'banana blossom or spathe', the manuals say to use *plii-klûay*, literally 'spathe-banana', instead. Another way to avoid *hũa* is to substitute *śīisàʔ* (from Sanskrit), a higher word meaning 'head', as more generally described in the following section. There are a few extra possibilities for this type of substitution in a royal context, for example, 'the bow of a boat'. If it is the king's boat, the bow should not be referred to as *hũa-rua*, but rather as *śīisàʔ-rua*. The same is true for plants, and so on, with *hũa* in their name, such as *thăw-hũa-liṇ*. According to one manual (Sutthi Phibantaen n.d.), if one mentions this vine to a royal person, one should say instead *thăw-śīisàʔ-waanɔɔn*. It is interesting that not only must *hũa* go to *śīisàʔ*, but that the Thai word for 'monkey' *liṇ*, must go to the Pali equivalent. One should note that, except in royal contexts, neither 'bow of a boat' nor 'monkey-head vine' would be referred to by using *śīisàʔ*.

In formal, respectful, or literary situations, but not when royalty is being mentioned, some *hũa* compounds are acceptable, but for others *śīisàʔ* should replace *hũa* in the compound form, especially if the compound refers to something associated with a respected person. The following semantic principle applies: the closer to the literal, physical reference to a human 'head', the more apt it is for *śīisàʔ* to be substituted for *hũa*. So the substitution would be usual, giving *śīisàʔ-láan* 'bald', and so on. In the section dealing with *human emotions*, the substitution would be less usual, and some people would feel it was a little affected (*dâtcarîṭ*), or maybe humorous. For items dealing with *human characterization*, substitution seems even worse, although barely possible, but for the category *origin* or *items with bulging or protruding features*, no substitution at all is acceptable (with the royal exception mentioned above). In the latter compounds, *hũa* forms like those listed can be quite freely used. In quite formal contexts or among speakers who are especially careful of their speech, there may be some evasion or rephrasing along the lines of the preceding section.

A good way to see the principle in operation is to examine expressions like *hũa-lěem* that occur in more than one category. For this item, if the meaning of the compound refers literally to a human head, the *śīisàʔ* substitution is normal in formal contexts, giving *śīisàʔ-lěem*. In the somewhat extended meaning of 'sharp-witted' the substitution might be used, but some people would find it affected. In the meaning of 'peninsula', the substitution would not be possible except as a joke.

When speaking about commoners in informal situations, the only real pressure against *hǔa* was discussed in the early part of the paper: most speakers would only substitute *sīsà?* when speaking to a respected person and mentioning that same person's head, or else when a *hǔa* compound refers directly to the listener's head or mental state. Phya Anuman Rajadhorn (1956) shows that other sets of compounds, such as those in *lūuk* 'offspring', *mēē* 'mother', and so on, are quite similar to *hǔa* at this level. There are polite substitute forms available for the base nouns (*bùt* 'offspring', *maandaa* 'mother'), but the substitutions do not occur in compounds with extended meanings at all.

Productivity, the ability to form new compounds in *hǔa*, is also affected by semantic considerations. Most compound types are productive, but the degree of productivity differs considerably. Here the main principle seems to be how well-formed and open the set of modifiers are in a particular category of *hǔa* compounds. But in a few cases, such as items indicating *leader* or *miscellaneous manufactured items*, the modifiers are not a very well-formed set, but still the category is quite productive. In the latter case, as a result of recent industrialization, maybe a convention or analogical pattern is established: if a small nub-like item is introduced on machinery, then someone will probably think of a *hǔa* compound for it, and the name might catch on.

Consider compounds referring to the physical shape of a head. This category is quite open and productive, since there are many possible shape and size words that could reasonably be used to describe a head. Also, for the category *being good at a discipline*, the set of disciplines has a high degree of consistency, is open, and a new discipline could probably be used in a new *hǔa* compound of this type, such as a 'computer-head'. When carrots were imported into Thailand, it was natural to call them "carrot-heads", following the paradigm of *tubers* or *bulbs*. However, for emotional terms, the set of qualifiers ('spoil', 'spin', 'clear', 'dense') is not quite so well defined, and the category of compounds as a whole seems only slightly productive: that is, one might make up new compounds, but they probably would seem odd or poetic or humorous.

Consider now *roundish body parts*. Here, even though the set has a high degree of consistency, by its very nature, it is closed and limited; new body parts cannot be invented, and so new compounds would not normally occur for this group. (Other categories, like *brain substitute* and *leading item in a time period* are also restricted.)

Some of the semantic categories have a four-syllable semiproductive pattern in *hǔa* that can be used to associate other compounds with them. Consider:

riaw-reeng

strength (a compound)

hǔa-riaw-hǔa-reeng

strongman (a split compound)

Here the word *hũa* occurs twice to break up a compound, with the resulting four-syllable expression making one think of similar items in categories, *leaders* and maybe *characterizations*. Similarly:

dèt-khà:t

definite

hũa-dèt-hũa-khà:t

(I) definitely (won't, and so on)

Here it seems the four-syllable expression relates to emotions; that is, the speaker feels quite emphatically about something, and the expression acts syntactically as an adverbial modifier.

Other four-syllable expressions with *hũa* are not so easily accounted for by the above analysis; it is hoped they can be treated in a future paper.

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