On the Semantics of Thai Compounds in hūa 'Head'

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Thai has many compound expressions in which the item hūa '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


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 hūa '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, $hūa$. 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phrá-câw</td>
<td>'head of a monarch'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phrá-slan</td>
<td>'head of a royal family member'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slan</td>
<td>'head of a Buddha image'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klâw</td>
<td>'head', respect form (special usage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keest</td>
<td>'head' (poetic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stísâi</td>
<td>'head', high form, commoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hūa</td>
<td>'head', common form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kabaan</td>
<td>'head', low form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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], $drrn$ [walk], $noon$ [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 ătcarăt—observed that if higher forms are used in improper contextual circumstances or kaalāthe:sā, 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 hūa would be appropriate. Suppose one says the same thing to a senior. The word sf:sā? 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 hūa would be natural and common for these speakers, rather than sfisā?. The word hūa 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 hūa 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. top of something</td>
<td>the head of a page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. leadership</td>
<td>the head of a school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. side with 'head' figure</td>
<td>the head of a coin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. source</td>
<td>fountainhead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. hydraulic sense</td>
<td>headwaters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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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 *hūa* 'head', some similar to English and some not, as we see in the examples below. Often a Thai noun phrase can be formed with *hūa* 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 *hūa* 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 [hūa + 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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>Meaning of Modifier</th>
<th>Meaning of Compound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hūa-lāān</td>
<td>bald</td>
<td>bald(-headed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hūa-thuy</td>
<td>elongated</td>
<td>having an elongated head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hūa-too</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>having a large head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hūa-lēēm</td>
<td>sharp</td>
<td>having a pointed head</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

| hūa-sīa | spoil | be in a bad mood |
| hūa-pān | spin, turn | agitated |
| hūa-mūn | spin, whirl | confused |
| hūa-sāy | clear | clear-headed |
| hūa-thūp | dense | dull-witted |

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

##### Good at some discipline

| hūa-kòtmɑay | law | having a legal bent |
| hūa-seetkhit | economics | good at economics |
| hūa-witthayasɑat | science | scientifically inclined |
| hūa-kaammanŋ | politics | politically inclined |

##### Acting like professionals

| hūa-mɔɔ | doctor | apt to act like a doctor |
| hūa-khamooy | thief | inclined to pilfering |
Characterized by a certain mentality

*hūa-khít* think inventive, creative
*hūa-kàw* old conservative
*hūa-booraan* ancient conservative, old-fashioned
*hūa-lēem* sharp sharp-witted
*hūa-sūŋ* high acting ‘high-class’
*hūa-nōɔk* outside (a Thai) obsessed with Western ideas or fads

Characterized by a brain substitute

*hūa-khīi-lāay* sawdust stupid

Characterized as a hoodlum or rogue using a specific weapon

*hūa-máay* stick club-carrying rogue
*hūa-mīit* knife knife-carrying rogue

Origin (mainly noun phrases)

First part of an event or time period

*hūa-khām* evening twilight
*hūa-lom* wind first gust of wind

First or leading item in a time period

*hūa-pii* year first, oldest one

Starting points (of items with ends)

*hūa-rəa* boat bow of a boat
*hūa-banday* stairs top of the stairs
*hūa-thanōn* road beginning of a road
*hūa-thēɛw* line beginning of a line
*hūa-taa* eye tear duct part of eye
*hūa-khīw* eyebrow beginning (centermost part) of eyebrow

Tubers or bulbs

*hūa-hōɔm* onion onion (bulb)

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2 Mainly used as adjectival verb: for example, lūuk-hūa-pii 'first child'; maphraaw-talaay-hūa-pii 'first coconut bunch'.

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

4 These items are “classifier compounds,” since *hūa* 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.


|hūa-krathiam| garlic| garlic (bulb) |
|hūa-man| potato| potato |
|hūa-phuak| taro| taro |

**First most concentrated product from extraction**

|hūa-yaa| medicine| concentrated (herbal) cure |
|hūa-kāthī| coconut extract| top grade coconut cream |
|hūa-lāw| whiskey| top grade whiskey |
|hūa-nom| milk/breast| creamy milk |
|hūa-nāamsôm| vinegar| undiluted vinegar |

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

**Focus of content**

|hūa-rāṇ| story| theme, title |
|hūa-praden| point| topic, main point(s) |

**Leader**

|hūa-mūu| group| leader |
|hūa-nā| face| boss, chief |

**Favorite or best item**

|hūa-khrāy| desire| most loved one |
|hūa-rāk| love| most loved one |
|hūa-tōk| chest, thorax| chest |
|hūa-kraden| spurt, skip| the ‘number one’ item |

**Items With Bulging or Protruding Features** (noun phrases)

**Roundish body parts**

|hūa-khāw| knee| knee (area) |
|hūa-tapōk| hip| hip (area) |
|hūa-bāa| shoulder| shoulder (area) |
|hūa-cay| heart/mind| (physical) heart\(^5\) |

**Small body protrusions**

|hūa-nom| breast/milk| nipple |
|hūa-sī| abscess| surface of abscess |
|hūa-sīw| pimple| pimple |

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\(^5\) For the semantics of *cay*, see Gething 1977. Perhaps “origin” could also account for *hūa* in this compound.
Protruding geographical features

*hūa-khāw*  hill, mountain  hill (coming outwards)
*hūa-lēčem*  sharp  point, peninsula

Geographical toponyms

*hūa-māak*  betel nut  Hua Mak, a suburb
*hūa-hīn*  rock  Hua Hin, a town

Miscellaneous manufactured items

*hūa-nom*  breast/milk  pacifier
*hūa-thian*  candle  spark plug
*hūa-nōk-kračōok*  sparrow  alternator
*hūa-nōt*  nut (English)  bolt
*hūa-kōok*  tap (British ‘cock’)  spigot

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

Other items seem to apply to more than one relevant feature, such as *hūa-mēe-mua* 'thumb' and *hūa-mēe-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 *hūa-plii*; it might be thought of as a protrusion or as a source.

More complicated is the double coding of some terms. Thus, *hūa-kathī?* 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: *hūa-nua-yāy*, 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 *thāw-hūa-liŋ*, '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 *hūa* 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 *hūa* 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

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6 Perhaps *hūa-saphaːn* '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 ḫūa-mēe-mu and instead use phráʔanit; for a king’s heart avoid ḫūa-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 ḫūa. There are manuals of royal vocabulary that give lists of substitutes that should be used (Pin Malakun 1983; Sutthi Phibantaen n.d.; Channong Thongprasert 1975). There are two strategies. One is rephrasing. For example, for ḫūa-plii ‘banana blossom or spathe’, the manuals say to use plii-klūay, literally ‘spathe-banana’, instead. Another way to avoid ḫūa is to substitute sīsāʔ (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 ḫūa-ra, but rather as sīsāʔ-ra. The same is true for plants, and so on, with ḫūa in their name, such as thāw-ḥūa-liŋ. According to one manual (Sutthi Phibantaen n.d.), if one mentions this vine to a royal person, one should say instead thāw-sīsāʔ-waanc. It is interesting that not only must ḫūa go to sīsāʔ, but that the Thai word for ‘monkey’ liŋ, 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 sīsāʔ.

In formal, respectful, or literary situations, but not when royalty is being mentioned, some ḫūa compounds are acceptable, but for others sīsāʔ should replace ḫūa 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 sīsāʔ to be substituted for ḫūa. So the substitution would be usual, giving sīsāʔ-lāan ‘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 (dātcārīt), 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, ḫūa 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 ḫūa-lēem that occur in more than one category. For this item, if the meaning of the compound refers literally to a human head, the sīsāʔ substitution is normal in formal contexts, giving sīsāʔ-lēem. 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 hūa was discussed in the early part of the paper: most speakers would only substitute stilā when speaking to a respected person and mentioning that same person’s head, or else when a hūa compound refers directly to the listener’s head or mental state. Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1956) shows that other sets of compounds, such as those in lūuk 'offspring', mēe 'mother', and so on, are quite similar to hūa at this level. There are polite substitute forms available for the base nouns (būt 'offspring', maanda 'mother'), but the substitutions do not occur in compounds with extended meanings at all.

Productivity, the ability to form new compounds in hūa, 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 hūa 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 hūa 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 hūa 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 hūa that can be used to associate other compounds with them. Consider:

\[ \textstyle \text{tiaw-reen} \quad \text{strength (a compound)} \]
\[ \text{hūa-tiaw-hūa-reen} \quad \text{strongman (a split compound)} \]
Here the word hüa 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{dêt-khà:t} & \quad \text{definite} \\
\text{hūa-dêt-hūa-khà:t} & \quad (I) \, \text{definitely (won’t, and so on)}
\end{align*}
\]

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 hüa 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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