

HOW MUCH IS ENGLISH INFLUENCING THE LANGUAGE OF THE EDUCATED BANGKOK THAIS?

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The Bangkok way of life has been to a certain degree Westernised or to be more particular it has been Americanised. Hot dogs, hamburgers, ice-cream cones, blue jeans, American movies, the latest popular songs from Europe and America are prevalent in Bangkok. American television programs like 'Truth or Consequences' or 'The Newly Wed Game' are imitated on Thai television. Many teenagers and educated people are living an American way of life in Bangkok.

Not only have they been living an American or Western-style life, they have brought many English features into their language. Many words, phrases, and sentences used by educated people, especially people educated overseas are often esoteric. One often hears remarks such as, "You almost have to be able to speak English to understand this Thai article." This sounds peculiar but this is what is happening in the daily usage of the Thai language in Bangkok by educated Thais.

Lots of English words are imported into educated Bangkok Thai. They are used as part of the daily vocabulary. Not that Thai lacks the words the educated Thais want to use. Native words are thought of as not being as expressive as the English ones. Words that are used quite frequently include tax, class, test, progress, service charge, lecture, nominate, private, semester, part time, advisor, and shake hands.

People educated overseas sometimes have difficulty making themselves understood because they have a different accent. They sometimes have to repeat what they have just said twice or three times before they can get a soft drink they order in an ordinary coffee shop. The names of the soft drinks that they have most difficulty with are 'Sprite' and 'Green Spot'. The normal local people pronounce them [sa-páy] and [kiyn-sa-pòt] thus they become baffled when they hear the original English pronunciation.

Not only do the people educated overseas have an incomprehensible pronunciation, they also used Thai words which an average person cannot understand. Words such as

- [chán] 'class'
 [khâa-ní-yom] 'value'
 [chôn-wâaŋ] 'gap' as in 'generation gap'
 [kɔɔ-ra-nii-sɨk-sǎa] 'case study'
 [nùay-kít] 'credit' as used in universities

are all translated from English into Thai and these words are used only among educated people.

Very often, the people educated overseas would use phrases or sentences that a native Thai would not use, for example:

- (1) khòɔp-khun sǎm-ráp ʔaa-haǎn-yen
 thank you for dinner
 'Thank you for dinner.'
- (2) nân pen kham-thǎam thîi dii
 that is question which good
 'That is a good question.'
- (3) phǒm dii-cay thîi khun thǎam
 I glad that you ask
 'I am glad that you asked.'
- (4) nân mây leew ləey
 that not bad at all
 'That is not bad at all.'

An average Thai would say only [khòɔp-khun] 'thank you' or [khòɔp-khun mâak khráp] 'thank you very much' with a polite particle for male speaker. And he would say nothing in the second and the third cases. He would go ahead and answer the question he is being asked without making any comment on the question and the questioner. In the fourth case, he would make a more particular comment which could be translated as 'it's beautiful', 'it's delicious', etc. The expressions in the examples above are definitely translated from English.

Many new sentence structures have been brought into use in educated Bangkok Thai from English. The two most popular ones are as follows:

The Passive Voice Sentence Type

phǒn-ŋaan khǔɔŋ-khǎw thùuk khát-lɨak pay sa-dxxŋ thîi ŋaan
 work his passive choose go show at fair
 marker?

'His work was chosen to be displayed at the fair.'

khaw thòuk l̄ak pen h̄a-n̄a khon-gaan
 he passive choose be leader worker
 marker?

'He was chosen to be the leader of the workers.'

khaw thòuk chom t̄o-n̄a
 he passive praise in front
 marker?

'He was praised to the face.'

The word [thòuk] is taken to be a passive marker by most Thai students and grammarians. That is why the people educated overseas use it whenever they want to make a passive voice sentence which sounds awkward to any native Thai. But the Thai language does not have passive voice sentence type in the same sense as the English language does. That is in Thai not all active voice sentences with transitive verbs can be changed into passive voice sentences. For example, in Thai one can say,

khǎw h̄n mxxw
 he see cat

'He saw the cat.'

and

khǎw kin ma-m̄uaŋ
 he eat mango

'He ate the mango.'

but not

*mxxw thòuk khǎw h̄n
 cat passive he see
 marker?

'The cat was seen by him.'

*ma-m̄uaŋ thòuk khǎw kin
 mango passive he eat
 marker

'The mango was eaten by him.'

As Professor Pongsri Lekawatana pointed out in her article "The so-called Passive in Thai", that [thòuk] and [dooy] are verbs not passive voice markers. As verbs they mean to suffer or to experience something unpleasant. Thus they can be used only with a subject that suffers or experiences something unpleasant. They cannot be used with animate subject, e.g. rulers, stones. When the educated people use the verbs [thòuk] and [dooy], they violate all these restrictions. They use them in sentences in which [thòuk] and [dooy] do not convey unpleasant experiences such as:

khaw thòuk ch̄en
 he passive invite
 marker

'He was invited.'

nǎŋ-sǎi khaw thòuk klàaw th+ŋ yàaŋ-mâak
 book his passive talk about a lot
 marker

'His book is talked about a lot.'

Though this type of sentence is understandable, it is peculiar to an average Thai who does not speak or know English.

The 'It is ...' Type

This type of sentence is so widely used among the educated and students now that it almost sounds like a native sentence structure. But it is this type of sentence that those who do not speak English get confused with most. For example:

(1) man pen khwaam-khít khǒŋ-kháw thii ca pay
 it be idea his which will go

'It is his idea to go.'

(2) man pen riãŋ pra-laàt thii kháw ca maa
 it be matter strange which he will come

'It is strange that he will come.'

(3) man pen khwaam-rák kháŋ-rǎk khǒŋ-kháw
 it be love first his

'It is his first love.'

Those who do not know English would use the following sentences instead:

(1) kháw khít ca pay
 he think will go

'He thinks of going.' (?)

(2) pra-laàt kháw ca maa
 strange he will come

(3) khwaam-rák kháŋ-rǎk khǒŋ-kháw
 love first his

For them, [man] 'it' is normally used as a third person singular pronoun. When it is not used as a person pronoun, it does not occur with the verb 'to be' [pen], for example [man cèp] 'it hurts'.

I once read two passages written by a teacher and a student educated overseas to my relatives who live in a province next to Bangkok in order to find out how much they could understand. The passages were about the life of university students and the life of Bangkok people. The passages contained translated words and translated sentence types as described above. The relatives were common rice farmers who could read and write. They were able to understand about half of what the passages were describing and that could be partly guess work too.

This could be a universal trend in developing countries where people go to English-speaking countries to get educated. When they come back they bring many things with them, among them a different dialect of their own language. Since they are those who do more writing work than average people they impose changes on their language in the long run.