

LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES OF THAI CULTURE

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1. Introduction

Culture is a complex phenomenon, a sum total of behavior and belief of a society. This paper is an attempt to offer a partial description of the culture of "*khon thai*" or Thai people as reflected in the Thai language.

2. The "*mai-pen-rai*" people

"*Mai-pen-rai*" can be approximately translated as "It does not really matter." or "It is not a problem." The expression reflects Thai people's attitude towards themselves, the people they come into contact with and the world around them. Almost everybody and everything is acceptable to the Thais. Objections and conflicts are to be avoided at all cost. Thai people are known for their tolerance and compromising nature. This cultural trait can perhaps be traced back to the linguistic experience of the Thai people.

Thai people is a sub group in the language community in which the various languages of the *Tai-Kadai* family are spoken. The Tai-Kadai speakers live in an area which stretches east-west from the Southern coast of China to Assam in the North of India and north-south from Yunnan and Kwangxi in the South of China to the Indonesian Archipelago. When Tai-kadai speakers from different groups meet and start to communicate in their own languages, they can reach a certain degree of mutual intelligibility, especially at the lexical level. It does not take long after that for these Tai-Kadai speakers to feel a sense of solidarity or even kinship for reasons which will become clear later in this paper. The linguistic difference does not seem to hinder their desire and willingness to communicate and relate to one another.

The same linguistic diversity also exists at the dialectal level. In Thailand, people are said to speak the language called Thai; however, they do not speak the same dialect. The dialect one hears on radio and television is the Bangkok dialect, considered the standard dialect. Four main dialects are recognized, the "*khammuang*" or Northern dialect, the "*lao*" or Northeastern dialect, the "*tai*" or Southern dialect, and the "*klang*" or Central dialect. Speakers of these regional dialects are usually bi- or multi-dialectal. The regional dialect serves communication needs in the home domain, which in many cases means an entire village or group of villages. The standard dialect serves as a means of keeping in touch and catching up with the mainstream of society for these regional dialect speakers. A language attitude survey shows that there is no negative attitude towards either the Bangkok dialect or regional dialects. It is a well accepted social fact that one will speak only the Bangkok dialect if one is born in Bangkok and one will be bi- or multi- dialectal if one is born and raised outside of Bangkok. No social stigma is attached to any of these dialects.

Linguistic diversity in Thailand goes beyond dialectal difference. A few foreign languages are spoken in many Thai families. Chinese is spoken among descendants of Chinese immigrants. Malay is spoken in Moslem communities in the Southern provinces adjoining Malaysia. Apparently the government's unofficial policy of monolingualism through mass media and education system has been successful. Both Malay and Chinese are spoken less and less. This is also a consequence of intermarriage among the various ethnic groups, which has been practiced in Thailand since time immemorial.

Thai people are known for their hospitality to visitors, many of whom never leave. These visitors left a substantial number of traces in the Thai lexicon though some loanwords are more visible than others. Pali and Sanskrit loans stand out the most. They are evidence of the impact of Buddhism and the teaching of Brahmin experts of the royal court in the old days. Chinese loans are usually discernible only to trained eyes due to the very short linguistic distance between Thai and Chinese and inter-language borrowing. Among earlier loanwords, there are traces of words borrowed from Persian, Portuguese, and French, the languages spoken by merchants and mercenaries who came to the kingdom during the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries. It is not surprising then to find that right now a large number of English words have also found their way into the language as a consequence of the rapid expansion of modern science and technology. English loanwords present an interesting case of how the Thais manage conflicts. It is quite acceptable for one to lace one's speech with English words but it is severely frowned upon in the written language, which can remain as a permanent record. It is a task which is not taken lightly by Thai academic and professional groups and in particular the Royal Institute to coin new Thai words for the new imported concepts. Many words are proposed by different groups for the same concept. The conflict is resolved by allowing the words to compete in the linguistic market. The winner is awarded a permanent place in the lexicon and the winner is not always the Royal Institute either.

The same "mai-pen-rai" attitude makes the Thais an easy-going and compromising people. It is reflected not only in language but also in social interaction, religion and politics. Interpersonal conflicts do not lead to an open confrontation unless one is ready to take the risk of losing a relationship. Religious and ethnic conflicts are very difficult for the Thais to comprehend. It is very common to find a Buddhist family with Moslem and Christian in-laws as well as Chinese and American or European in-laws, the members of which are more than happy to attend all the various religious festivals celebrated by any of the members of the family.

3. The countless "yaat"

"**Yaat**" is a word the Thais use to refer to anybody who is, closely as well as remotely, related to them by blood, by marriage or just by association. The closest English equivalent is perhaps the word "relatives."

Thai people have always lived on the river plains. They have always been farmers. Land used to be common property of those who live in the same "**baan**," which used to mean "village" but has come to mean "house" in the present-day vocabulary. All who lived in the same "baan" shared the same resources for their livelihood and all felt related whether or not they followed the common practice of marrying someone in the same village. Children were taught to regard all who were older as aunts, uncles or grandparents. When a newcomer joined the village, they became a new "yaat." Even visitors could be granted a "**yaat**" status if they wished to be assimilated into the group.

The time of common land came to an end with the establishment of kingdoms. The "**sakdina**" system of the Ayuthya kingdom, which started in the thirteenth century, granted land ownership to princes, noblemen and soldiers. Common people were able to remain to farm the land but the male adults had to spend six to eight months per year working for or fighting in battles under the command of the noblemen or the soldiers who were granted the ownership of the land.

The common land tradition has been lost and the word "baan" has come to mean only a house instead of a village but the "yaat" system remains even today. Kinship terms are still used as terms of address as well as personal pronouns.

When strangers meet, the title "khun" will be adopted until a satisfactory relationship develops, at which time kinship terms will be used instead. Age or seniority determines the choice of kinship term. It is

interesting to note; however, that kinship terms on the maternal side are more preferable, perhaps because people feel closer to their mother than their father. Once kinship terms are adopted, both parties know that the relationship has reached a satisfactory level. To keep a distance is to ignore, explicitly or implicitly, the other party's attempt to use kinship terms and to maintain the use of the title "khun".

This kinship system is extended also to include newcomers and strangers. It is still common in rural villages, though no longer in Bangkok and other big cities, to treat even a stranger like a visiting relative. A stranger who arrives in the village usually uses kinship terms when he approaches the villagers for help. The use of the terms automatically makes him a relative of all the members of the family which takes care of him, which means almost everybody in that village.

Another interesting extension of the use of kinship terms is the word for "pupil, student, trainee, apprentice and disciple", which is "*luuk sit*" (lit. learning child). A teacher is regarded as having the same status and obligation as a parent. This may be a vestige of a tradition in those days when schools were not in existence and those who sought education or training had to live in the home of the teachers. No tuition was asked for but the learners had to help around the house as if they had been one of the younger "yaat". Figure 1 shows the system of kinship in Thai.

Figure 1.: Kinship terms in Thai

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| thuat/chuat (m,f) "great grand parent" | | |
| puu(m) "grandparent" | yaa (f) "grandparent" | taa(m) yaai (f) "grandparent" |
| | lung(m) "uncle" | paa (f) "aunt" |
| <i>(elder, both paternal and maternal)</i> <i>(elder, both paternal and maternal)</i> | | |
| pho(m) "father" | | mae(f) "mother" |
| | aa(m,f) "aunt/uncle" <i>(younger, paternal)</i> | naa(m,f) "aunt/uncle" <i>(younger, maternal)</i> |
| laan (m,f) "niece or nephew" | | |
| phii (m,f) "elderbrother/sister" | luuk (m,f) "child" "younger" | nong (m,f) brother/sister" |
| luukphiiluuknong "cousin" | | |
| laan (m,f) "grand child" | | |

4. "Thii tam thii soong"

The Thai expression "thii tam thii soong" literally means "high place and low place." Almost everything in the Thais' perception is situated in a hierarchical system. People can be "high" or "low" according to their age, family background, occupation or professional rank and whether they are Buddhist monks or clergymen in other religions. A Buddhist monk is treated respectfully even by the king. Older people are usually honored and respected. People of the same age and social status also show respect for one another with the use of the title "khun", as mentioned earlier. "Khun" can be literally translated as "Your goodness". Among good friends the title becomes optional.

This hierarchical concept of "thii tam thii soong" is most evident in the Thai pronominal system, which is one of the most complex system among languages. The choice of pronoun reveals the sex of the speaker, where the speaker places himself and his addressee in the hierarchical social system, his opinion about the degree of distance or intimacy in their relationship, and his evaluation of the speech situation. The choice of pronoun can also be manipulated to reflect the dynamism in interpersonal communication exchange. When a fifteen years old young lady meets a sixty years old man for the first time, she may use "dichan" as first person pronoun and "than" as second person pronoun. After an initial conversation in which both will try to establish a satisfactory relationship. She may switch to "noo" (lit. mouse) for herself and "khun lung" (lit. uncle) for her conversation partner. If the relationship should take an unwanted turn, she may switch to "dichan" or even "chan" for "I" to indicate her desire to keep a distance. If she is angry, the choice can be "chan" for her and "kae" for him. If she decides that she needs to be rude to discontinue the relationship, she may even go further as to use "koo" and "myng", at which time the rift is almost irreparable.

This "thii tam thii soong" concept also demonstrates itself in the honorific system of the language. Vocabulary used in relation to the royalty requires an extra effort and is learned only by those who have to work with the king and queen and the royal family. Since not all princes and princesses enjoy the same status, different sets of pronouns as well as nouns and verbs are used according to their royal ranks and titles. This is also true, though to a lesser extent, for those with ecclesiastic, civil and military ranks and titles. Common people have a pseudo honorific system also. Speech style is reflected in the lexical choice of a speaker. Speech situation varies and each requires different lexical variants of the same word. Speech situations range on a parameter of formality. A highly formal speech style requires vocabulary which is "pentaangkaan" (lit. official) and "phairoh" (lit. pleasant) and the absence of final particles for expressing politeness and courtesy on the part of the speaker. The following is a list of lexical variants for the question "Will you eat ?"

| "eat" | QUESTION MARKER | PARTICLE |
|-------------|-----------------|----------|
| rapprathaan | ryy mai | - |
| thaan | mai | khrap |
| thaan | mai | ca |
| kin | mai | - |
| kin | mai | ya |
| kin | paaw | wa |
| daek | mai | |

Not only humans are placed in hierarchy. Body parts are also assigned "thii tam" (lit. low place) and "thii soong" (lit. high place). Head and face are considered higher than other parts of the body. A study of metaphor in Thai reveals that there are more terms and more metaphorical expressions for head and face than for other body parts. This may perhaps explains why no Thai cares to have his head touched and they feel offended when a person points at something to them with his foot.

This concept of hierarchy is also expressed in nonverbal language. If one has to walk past somebody older or higher in rank, one needs to lower one's head and bow slightly, especially when that person is sitting or standing in a lower place. This is a gestural expression of one's respect for others.

5. Body parts and their meaning

A study of terms for body parts and metaphorical use of these terms reveals another interesting aspect in the Thai cultural personality.

Face is the most notable part of the body. Like in many languages, face or "*naa*" comes to mean "reputation, honor, respectability, credibility and integrity." A Thai can lose "*khaai*", save "*raksaa*", earn or gain "*dai*", and salvage "*koo*" his face.

Mouth is another interesting body part. The figurative meaning of mouth or "paak" is verbal skill and words. A person's mouth can be good "dii", bad "sia", light "bao", heavy "nak" and numerous "maak". "Paak dii" means to have a good speech skill. "Pak sia" means to be unrestrained with criticisms and comments. "Paak bao" means to be able to learn language at a very tender age. "Paak nak" is to refrain from voicing one's opinion and feeling.

Neck or "khaw" is associated interestingly with preference and taste. A "kaw kafee" likes coffee while a "khaw chaa" likes tea. "Kaw footbon" is a person who loves to watch football. "Kaw nang phleng" prefers musical films.

"Myy" or hand can figuratively means expertise, in addition to the ability to use one's hand to work and to touch. A "myy patiwat" is an expert in staging a coup d'etat while a "myy haasiang" is an expert in political campaigning. A thief can be called a "myy gaaw", literally meaning to have a hand with glue on it.

A most interesting observation in the study of body part terms in Thai is the distinction made in the Thai perception between one's head "hua" and one's heart "jai". This distinction is observed in compounds with the words "hua" and "jai".

The compounds can be divided into two structural types. In one type the word "*hua*" or "*jai*" is in the subject position of a predicate. In the other, it is in the object position. Semantically, the first structural type describes a person's intelligence and nature as in these examples.

- a. hua dii = intelligent (lit. good head)
jai dii = generous, kind (lit. good heart)
- b. hua on = obedient (lit. soft head)
jai on = sensitive, having a tendency to cry easily (lit. soft heart)
- c. hua khaeng = stubborn (lit. hard head)
jai khaeng = firm, unbendable (lit. hard heart)

This type of compound also describes a person's psychological and emotional state.

- a. hua sia = upset (lit. damaged head)
jai sia = discouraged (lit. damaged heart)
- b. hua mun = confused (lit. spinned head)
- c. jai haai = sad, distressed (lit. lost heart)
jai ron = impatient (lit. hot heart)
jai yen = patient (lit. cool heart)

The second type of compound describes what one can do or what can happen to a person's head or heart.

- a. pan hua = to confuse a person into taking an unwanted action (lit. to spin a person's head)
= to gang up with (lit. to pile up heads)
sum hua = to bribe (lit. to hit a person's head)
faad hua
- b. sia jai = sad (to lose one's heart)
tok jai = shocked, scared (to drop one's heart)
cham jai = distressed (to have one's heart bruised)

If frequency of occurrence can be taken as an indicator of the degree of attention and interest, Thai people seem to put more emphasis on their heart than their head. There are more compound words with "jai" than with "hua". Three of these "jai" compounds tell a great deal about interpersonal relationships of the Thais. These are:

- ow jai = to please (lit. to take a person's heart into consideration)
- khat jai = to displease (lit. to block a person's heart)
- krengjai = to give high priority to how another person feels or thinks about something (lit. to be respectful to a person's heart)

The Thais are taught from an early age to "kreng jai" other people, which means they have to be careful with what they say and what they do so that they will not in anyway offend, upset or displease others. As a consequence, Thai people usually try their best not to "khat jai" others. The eventual outcome is that most Thais seem to be very good at "ow jai" or pleasing others. What this means is that conflicts are to be avoided at all cost so that harmony can be maintained and the way to do it is to be attentive to those one comes into contact with. This confirms the "mai pen rai" nature of the Thai as demonstrated in their linguistic experience as discussed earlier. An interpersonal conflict is resolved usually with an intervention of an arbitrator, usually more senior in age, social status or rank and respected by both parties.

The Thais seem to have an extra body part. This is an abstract or spiritual part of their body. It is called "kwan". "Kwan" is where one's morale and psychological health resides. An age old practice which

is still found in rural village is the "suu kwan" or "riak kwan" ritual. This is performed to welcome visitors as well as returnees. A piece of cotton string will be tied around a person's wrist by the elders, regarded as parents or grandparents by all in the community, who will be calling his "kwan", which wandered away during the trip, to come back to his body. The importance of "kwan" is observed also in the event when a baby or a small child falls.

When his mother picks him up she will give him a hug and call his "kwan". The belief is that a person's "kwan" has to reside peacefully within one's body for the person to be healthy in body and in spirit. Any unusual experience, such as a fall, a shock or a long trip, can disturb "kwan", which has a tendency to always leave the body in fright. When a person sleeps, his "kwan", a wonderer by nature, will leave for a tour of the world outside. It will return when the person wakes up. The Thais are then taught to wake a sleeping person up as gently as possible.

The following compounds illustrate the Thais' perception of this spiritual body part.

kwan sia = to be demoralized (lit. to lose "kwan")
thamlaai kwan = to demoralize (lit. to destroy "kwan")
bamrung kwan = to give moral support (lit. to maintain "kwan")

The sweetest sounding of all is the line said by a mother when she picks her child up when he is frightened after a fall.

kwan euy kwan maa
Oh, Kwan, oh Kwan. Come back.

The Thai term for gifts and souvenirs is "khong kwan", which means objects for one's kwan. This concept of spiritual and psychological well-being is later coupled as well as confused with another concept, "winyaan". The latter can be equated with soul in Western thinking. For the Thais, "winyaan" remains with a person as long as he is alive. It leaves him when he dies to take up residence in the body of a new born baby.

6. "Bun" and "baap"

The Thai language is a record of the history of the Thais' religious belief. Originally, the Thais were animists who believed that all the elements in nature are governed by supernatural beings called "phii" and "jao". The two terms were used interchangeably, which might suggest the different aspects of the supernatural beings in nature. "Jao" implies a control over natural phenomena while "phii" implies the human quality of these supernatural beings. "Jao" needs to be paid respect or homage to. "Phii"; however, seems to have a closer relationship with humans. "Phii" can be offended or pleased by what people do. In the old days, a wrong doing was described as an offense against the supernatural beings, "phit phii". Success in one's attempt to do something or an unanticipated good fortune were considered a consequence of "wai dii plee thook", the correct pacification of the "phii". Animism is not an active component in the Thais' religious belief nowadays and the term "phii" comes to mean ghosts or bad spirits. When the terms such as "phii baan" (lit. house "phii") or "phii paa" (lit. forest "phii") are used, people know that reference is being made to the time gone by or a certain practice in a remote village.

The place of "phii" was taken over by "thep" and "phra". These two terms record the import of new religious concepts through Hindu or Brahman mythology and literature. The supernatural beings in

Hinduism are organized in a well structured hierarchy of cosmology. The Thais are good at adopting and adapting, as claimed by Prince Damrong, a prominent Thai historian. Hinduistic and animistic beliefs are combined and adapted. The supernatural beings residing in nature are promoted and become "thep" with the title "phra" for their names. Both "thep" and "phra" are derivatives of loanwords from Sanskrit. "Phii baan" is replaced by "phra phoom", the shrine for which is still found in the compound of many houses and business establishments. Other "phii" are replaced by various "thewada" or gods and goddesses.

The belief in gods and goddesses provides a different explanation for the ups and downs in life. The word "chata" and "phromlikhit" are used, which imply fatalism and predestination. A person's life is pre-programmed by "phrom" or Lord Brahman in Hinduism. The ups are considered "choke" or good fortune. The downs are "khroe" or bad fortune. Both imply man's inability to manage his own life independently. As a consequence, a profession develops and becomes an important institution in Thai society. This is fortune telling. Consulting a psychiatrist is a stigma but visiting a fortune teller is considered normal if not wise by many Thais. The Thai word for a fortune teller is "maw doo" or a doctor who can see one's fate and fortune.

Imported also from India shortly after Hinduism was Buddhism. With an explanation that Lord Buddha is a reincarnation of one of the Three Holy Lords in Hinduism, an usual and peaceful co-existence between the two faiths resulted in India and transported to Thailand also. According to Buddhism, there is also predestination. A person's life is predestined not by the Lord Brahman but by his own "karma" or deed in the previous life. However, life is not all predestination because it is also subject to the "karma" that a person performs in his life. There are two types of "karma": the good karma or "bun" and the bad "karma" or "baap". "Bun" can guarantee a happy and satisfactory life now and also in the next reincarnation. In many Thai people's thinking, "bun" is equated with a wealth or an asset. It can be earned and accumulated like money in a bank account. "Bun" is credit and "baap" is debit. This perhaps explains a practice among Buddhists called "tham bun", which means the making of good merit or "bun". A person can "thambun" by offering food to monks, making a donation of money for the use of a temple, setting free caged birds, giving to the poor or by meditating and reciting Buddhist chants. For many, "bun" and "baap" can cancel one other.

The three faiths still function in Thai society as evidenced in an opening of a new business company. With all his capital ready, an investor first consults a fortune teller about the prospect of his new venture. If the response is positive, he will ask for advice on the site which would be guarded by a benevolent protector "thep". The opening ceremony will be scheduled on the most auspicious day by his fortune teller, who may not share the same specialization as the one he consulted earlier. Part of the opening ceremony will be the officiating of the spirit house by Brahmins, who still live in a small community in Thailand. Another part will be a chant by nine Buddhist monks. Nine is an auspicious number, since in Thai the word for number nine is homophonous with the word for progress. Part of the food alm may later be given to children in an orphanage. The investor can now feel confident that he will have a successful business with all the auspicious calculation provided to him by his fortune tellers and the merit or "bun" he makes.

7. "Sanuk"

The word "sanuk" means to have a good time, to enjoy oneself and to derive pleasure and joy from something. A slang variant for the word is "man", which describes the feeling one can get when munching one's favorite food.

It is almost a rule of living for Thai people that whatever they do have to be "sanuk". The concept of "sanuk" goes beyond the having of a good laugh or a good time at a dance or a performance. Here are examples of "sanuk" activities.

thamngan sanuk = to enjoy one's work
khui sanuk = to enjoy talking; to be a good speaker
daa sanuk = to enjoy scolding other
thuuk daa sanuk = to enjoy being scolded

The same concept of deriving pleasure from whatever one does is reflected also in the use of the word "len", which literally means to play as in these examples.

len tuktaa = to play with dolls
len keela = to play sports
len klong = to play a drum

However, the meaning of "len" goes beyond to play. The word indicates the extent of attention and concentration for an activity. It also implies enjoyment and satisfaction.

len sataem = to collect stamps
len kaan myang = to be in politics
len kompewter = to work with computer
len kaanson = to specialize in teaching methodology

Another interesting aspect of the meaning of the word "len" is noticed in negative expressions such as "mai len duay", which means not wanting to have anything to do with.

With linguistic expression as discussed in this section, it would appear that the Thais are more inclined to play than to work or that they mix work with play. However, a closer examination of the meaning of the word "sanuk" and "len" should show that whether it is work or play, the important requisite is that one should be able to derive satisfaction and pleasure in what one does.

8. Conclusion

An appropriate conclusion for this discussion on linguistic perspectives of Thai culture is perhaps the answer the author is pressed to come up with to the question asked by a friend coming from a different cultural background. What is the priority of the Thais? I believe that the answer is people. A harmonious relationship and a well-being, especially the psychological well-being, of all people who are parts of the group or the community, whether this means a home, a work place, a neighborhood, a town, a country or the world. Thai words for concepts such as success, ambition, achievement, development or planning are new compounds, which might indicate that work and achievement are lower in the Thais' priority list. Perhaps it is because of their underlying belief that their life is not totally under their control so it is only wise to do good and be good to others.