

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research Problem

Foreigners who come to work and live in Thailand are often told, “You must not be too direct when dealing with the Thais. At all costs, don’t make them ‘lose face’.” One does not have to live in Thailand too long before he/she recognizes the impact of this statement on handling relationships in the Thai culture. Phrases such as *k^hǎaj nâa¹* ‘sell face’, *sǎa nâa²* ‘lose face’, *nâa tɛ̀k³* ‘broken face’, and *ráksǎa nâa⁴* ‘preserve face’ come to the fore very early in one’s stay in Thailand. Why this emphasis on the ‘face’? Why must one avoid being too direct or avoid confrontation when dealing with the Thai in general? What is the reason behind this aspect of social behavior?

It is well-known that language and culture are closely interrelated. In fact, language is a cultural phenomenon while culture is a social heritage (Hiebert 1976). Without language, there is no culture. Language is also the representation of thought. Anything that a culture sees as important will be emphasized in that language. For instance, a particular word pertaining to an important concept in that culture will be used frequently and in many ways, exploiting polysemy, metaphor and metonymy. Conversely, anything that a culture sees as unimportant or not meaningful will not be saliently reflected in the language.

¹ขายหน้า

²เสียหน้า

³หน้าแตก

⁴รักษาหน้า

The Thai language contains many figures of speech related to ‘face’, ‘heart’ and ‘eyes’ and other parts of the body. These figures of speech are mainly idioms in that the native speakers of the language no longer have to think about the comparison on which the idioms were based. These idioms in fact are no longer thought of as out-of-the-ordinary but they have become a part of the conventional vocabulary of the language. The semantic structure of these idioms is grounded in the Thai culture.

Idioms based on the word *t̂saj*⁵ ‘heart’ have been well documented, e.g., Moore’s book called *Heart Talk* (1992) which is a compilation of 330 Thai ‘heart’ idioms. However, no in-depth study on idioms based on *nâa*⁶ ‘face’ has been located.

This thesis describes ‘face’ idioms in standard Thai and details how they are used in real-life situations in the Thai context. The concept of ‘face’ as used metaphorically in the Thai language is analyzed along the lines of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1987) and the different ways the concept of ‘face’ is significant in the culture will be described.

1.1 Research Design and Procedure

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my research design and the procedure that I followed in collecting and analyzing the data.

⁵ใจ

⁶หน้า

1.1.1 Objectives of the Study

My objectives include the following:

1. To analyse the different metaphorical uses of *nâa* in the idioms collected.
2. To categorize these idioms on the basis of metonymic structures of *nâa*.
3. To discover the motivation that maps the basic domains to their metaphoric extensions.
4. To study how these idioms reflect the Thai culture.

1.1.2 Procedure

I started off by collecting as many idioms as I could which contain the word *nâa*. My sources included dictionaries, both Thai and Thai-English, books on Thai idioms, and radio and the television programs. In addition, I culled examples from conversations and built up the database by interviewing native speakers of Thai for the ways that they used 'face' idioms.

After the idioms were collected, I conducted an informal group interview with seven Thai adults. The demographic description of these informants is as follows:

- ages between 22 and 44 years
- two male, five female
- most have at least a college degree
- two informants are from Bangkok, three from Chiangmai, one from Lamphun, one from Chiangrai

The following questions were used as a guideline for eliciting the data:

- Can you think of any sayings, idioms, or phrases containing *nâa*?
- What does it mean? (Check with the rest of the group.)
- Can you give an example of when you used that phrase? Or, can you think of a situation where one would use that idiom?
- How do you feel if someone uses that idiom with you? How would you react, or, what would you say?
- What is the difference between this idiom and that idiom? (To get shades of meaning)

When they could think of no more idioms on their own, I asked about the examples of idioms from the other sources that they did not mention. The interview was recorded using a cassette recorder. As time went on, more and more idioms were collected from different sources. I subsequently checked the meaning and the use of all these idioms with several native Thai speakers. This allowed me to gauge the degree to which particular usages were conventionalized for the society as a whole, rather than represent idiosyncratic usages.

After all the idioms were collected, a semantic analysis of the metaphorical use of the lexeme *nâa* was done using the cognitive linguistics approach⁷, particularly, utilizing Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of metaphor and Lakoff's view of the embodiment of semantics (Lakoff 1987). The idioms were then categorized on the basis of metonymic structures of *nâa*. Then, each idiom was analyzed to discover how the character of the basic domains and the grammatical structure motivated the

⁷Cognitive linguistics is an approach to language based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it (Ungerer and Schmid 1996:x). Taking this approach, the meaning of words is encyclopedic, i.e., everything you know about the concept is part of its meaning (Langacker 1991:4; Kövecses 1993).

Thai metaphors and their extensions. Finally, a discussion of how the use of these ‘face’ idioms reflects the Thai culture was described.

1.2. Limitations of the Study

This thesis focuses on a specific subset of metaphorical usages of the body part nominal *nâa* ‘face’ in Thai compounds and idioms. The idioms which contain *nâa* in which the lexeme does not literally mean ‘face’ as a part of the body are not included in the analysis.⁸ Furthermore, due to the large number of ‘face’ idioms collected, not all the idioms actually incorporated into my database will be analyzed in detail.

⁸ See Section 2.1.1 for the other definitions of *nâa*.