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## INTERLINGUAL WORD TABOOS

By MARY R. HAAS

SOME years ago, a Creek Indian informant in Oklahoma stated that the Indians tended to avoid the use of certain words of their own language when white people were around. It turned out that the avoided words were those which bear some phonetic similarity to the "four-letter" words of English. These words were avoided even though it is doubtful that a white person not knowing Creek would, when overhearing Creek utterances delivered at a normal rate of speed for that language, be likely to catch these words and attach any special significance to them. For one thing, not understanding the language, he would be unlikely to concentrate sufficiently to notice the rather rare sequences of sounds which might cause him to think he was hearing English obscene words.

How then did the taboo develop? It may be suggested that it arose as a direct result of bilingualism among the Creeks. The more English they knew and used, the more conscious they would be of the phonetic similarity between certain Creek syllables (no full words or even morphemes coincide) and the tabooed words of English. Thus the avoidance grew as bilingualism increased among the Creeks (white people normally do not learn Creek) and as they came more and more to think in terms of the white man's taboos.

Among the words pointed out as being avoided are the following: *fákki* "soil, earth, clay," *apiswa* "meat, flesh," and *apíssi* "fat (adj.)."<sup>1</sup> Creek monosyllabic words are very rare. Hence the words given here all contain more than one syllable, only one of which bears any resemblance to an English tabooed word. The resemblance may appear to be strengthened by the fact that it is the accented syllable which bears the similarity, but composite words containing the words quoted above may also be avoided, and in such cases the accent has generally shifted to another syllable, e.g. *fakkitalá:swa* "clay," *fakkinú:ta* "brick," and *apisnihá:* "meat fat."

A few years later it became apparent that Thai students studying in this country also tend to avoid certain words of their own language which bear a phonetic resemblance to English obscene words. Here again they avoid the words only when English speakers are about, but the reason for the avoidance appears to stem from their own uncertainty about the propriety of using the words because of their knowledge of English. The tradition of avoidance is a continuous one. Thai students already residing in this country teach each suc-

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<sup>1</sup> The Creek (or Muskogee) language has the following consonants: voiceless unaspirated or weakly aspirated stops *p*, *t*, *k* and affricate *c*; voiceless spirants *f*, *s*, *h*; voiced semivowels *y*, *w*; voiced nasals *m*, *n*, and defective *-ŋ-* (of rare occurrence); voiced lateral *l*. Vowels are *i* [i], *a* [a], *u* [u], *i'* [i'], *a'* [a'], *u'* [o'], and the rare *-e-* (occurring only before *y*).

ceeding group of newly arrived students about the taboo, and in this way the avoidance is kept alive from year to year.<sup>2</sup>

The phonetic nature of Thai is such that there are more words on the taboo list than there are in Creek. Furthermore, since Thai is largely, though not exclusively, monosyllabic, the words tend to bear a greater resemblance to the English tabooed words than do the corresponding avoided words of Creek.

These secondarily tabooed words of Thai include the following: *fàg* "sheath, (bean-) pod," *fág* (1) "to hatch," (2) "a kind of pumpkin or squash," *phríg* "(chili) pepper," and *khán* "to crush, squeeze out."<sup>3</sup> In connection with the last word, it is to be noted that there are other words having the same sequence of sounds except for the tone, e.g. *khan* (1) "to itch," (2) classifier for vehicles and other objects, and *khăn* (1) "to be funny," (2) "to crow," (3) "water-bowl," but it is only the word having the high tone that bears, to the Thai ear, a strong resemblance to the English tabooed word. The reason for this is twofold: (1) English words with final stop consonants are borrowed into Thai with a high tone, e.g. *kéb* "(gun-) cap," *kóg* "(water-) tap," and (2) the high tone on a syllable lacking a final stop is accompanied by glottal stricture when spoken in isolation or when occurring in phrase-final position. The Thai ear equates the final stop of the English word with the glottal stricture of the Thai word; hence the English word, as pronounced in English, sounds like the Thai word *khán*, whereas *khan* and *khăm* do not.

The word *phríg* "(chili) pepper" (also used as an abbreviation for *phrígthaj* "ground pepper, esp. black pepper") caused one group of students to be faced with a dilemma, since, when eating out, it was necessary to use this word frequently. In order to observe their self-imposed taboo and at the same time provide themselves with a substitute term, this group adopted the device of translating the obscene connotation of the word (if interpreted as English) into the elegant Thai term of the same meaning, namely *lyy* "the lingam" (derived from the Sanskrit term). Thus in one limited circle of intimates (men), the word *lyy* acquired a secondary meaning "pepper" by the round-

<sup>2</sup> Since the Thai do not immigrate to this country, the taboo exists only among students. Occasionally a student is found who is uninterested in observing the taboo. Such a student will usually be found to have come from a section of Thailand other than Bangkok or its environs. Elaborate gradations of politeness and vulgarity of speech are particularly characteristic of the Bangkok area.

<sup>3</sup> The Thai consonants are: voiced stops *b, d, -g*; voiceless unaspirated stops *p, t, c* (palatal stop), *k, ?*; voiceless aspirated stops *ph, th, ch, kh*; voiceless spirants *f, s, h*; voiced semivowels *j* [y], *w*; voiced nasals *m, n, ŋ*; voiced liquids *l, r*. The vowels are: front unrounded *i, e, ε* [æ]; central unrounded *y, ə, a*; back rounded *u, o, ɔ*. All nine of these vowels may occur doubled (phonetically lengthened, e.g., *ii, ee, εε*, etc., and the heterophonous vowel clusters *ia, ya, and ua* also occur. There are five tones: middle (unmarked), low (˘), falling (ˆ), high (ˆ), and rising (ˆ). The final stops *b, d, and g* are briefly voiced but unreleased; they therefore resemble the English final stops *p, t, and k*.

about method of translating a Thai word as if it were an English word. This example of transference of meaning is exceptionally revealing for two reasons: (1) Most types of vulgarity<sup>4</sup> and familiarity of speech are not avoided by the Thai among intimates (generally persons of the same sex- and age-group). Therefore, although *lyy* actually has the meaning they were trying to avoid when using it as a substitute for *phríg* (if this is interpreted as English), this particular substitution must, under the circumstances, have been virtually, if not actually spontaneous. (2) Vulgarity and familiarity of speech should be avoided in the presence of those who are not intimates. Therefore since the word *phríg* might be overheard by persons who were not intimates (in this case, speakers of English) and since, in this event, it was liable to interpretation as an obscenity, the word had to be scrupulously avoided.

Other instances of avoidance also occur in Thai. These are particularly interesting in that they are far less likely to be misinterpreted as obscenities by speakers of English than are the words quoted above. Thai has no phoneme  $\text{ʃ}$  (English sh), the nearest equivalent sound being the phoneme *ch*, an aspirated palatal stop. Another sound bearing a certain resemblance to English  $\text{ʃ}$ , from the Thai point of view, is *c*, an unaspirated palatal stop. In pronouncing English words the normal substitution for English  $\text{ʃ}$  is Thai *ch*, but avoidance taboos, of the type mentioned above, extend also to Thai words beginning in *c*. As a consequence of this, the following words also often come into the tabooed category: *chíd* "to be close, near" and *cíd* "heart, mind" (<Pali-Sanskrit *citta*). The latter word occasionally occurs as a component of given names in Thai, and at least one man whose name was *sóm-cíd*, literally "suiting the heart" (a very pleasing name in Thai), was so embarrassed by this fact that he avoided the use of his Thai name wherever possible while residing in this country and adopted an English nickname instead.<sup>5</sup> Other examples of name-changing under somewhat comparable circumstances are taken up in a later section of this paper.

The examples of avoided words quoted in the immediately preceding paragraphs range all the way from words whose phonetic resemblance to English tabooed words is very close to others whose resemblance is so slight as to escape detection by the average speaker of English. Therefore the careful avoidance of these words in the presence of speakers of English arises from an exceptionally acute anxiety about the proprieties and niceties of speech. This anxiety is

<sup>4</sup> The word "vulgarity" is not used here as a loose synonym for "obscenity." The Thai word *jàab*, which I translate "to be vulgar," for lack of a more adequate term, has a much wider application than "obscene." Thus, to touch the head of another person, to call attention to one's feet by kicking or any unnecessary movement, to use certain pronouns of derogatory connotation, to use any of various kinds of uncouth language, whether obscene or not, to speak loudly or laugh hilariously, all these things are *jàab*. It is in this sense, then, that the words "vulgar" and "vulgarly" are to be understood when they are used with reference to the Thai.

<sup>5</sup> Many others also adopt English nicknames for various other reasons.

very well reflected in the Thai language itself, for one of its most prominent characteristics is the existence of a very large number of synonymous sets of words differentiated only by the varying degrees of vulgarity and politeness associated with their use.<sup>6</sup> The Thai is consequently willing to go to extreme lengths to avoid even the slightest suspicion of vulgarity. Vulgar speech, when used, is deliberate and intentional. To give the impression of vulgarity unwittingly is unthinkable.

The problem of tabooed words also exists in reverse. That is, certain perfectly harmless English words may bear a phonetic resemblance to tabooed or obscene words in other languages. A striking example of this is found in the Nootka Indian language of Vancouver Island.<sup>7</sup> The English word *such* bears so close a resemblance to Nootka *sač* "*vāgīna ūmens*" that teachers entrusted with the training of young Indians find it virtually impossible to persuade their girl students to utter the English word under any circumstances.

Other examples occur in Thai. The English word *yet* closely resembles the Thai word *jéd* "to have intercourse" (vulgar and impolite). The resemblance is heightened by the fact that the Thai word has a high tone. Thai taboos against the use of words which correspond in meaning to the English "four-letter" words are not puritanical in origin, as they are in English. Most of the words are at least considered printable in certain situations, for example, in dictionaries, or in textbooks designed to instruct students concerning words which must be avoided in the presence of royalty. The word under consideration here, however, is an exception—it has not been found listed in any Thai dictionary, nor in a textbook. Even so, the word is not one which would be avoided among intimates (i.e., persons of the same sex- and age-group). Nevertheless, the English word *yet* is very often a source of embarrassment to the Thai, particularly girls studying English in school, since the Thai word is definitely one of several which would be avoided in the classroom. The English word *key* also causes embarrassment to some, because of its resemblance to the Thai word *khīi* "excrement" or "to void excrement" (vulgar), and since English monosyllables not having final stop consonants are often borrowed into Thai with a falling tone; hence a Thai, when first learning English, would pronounce *key* exactly as *khīi*. However, the Thai word *khīi*, though vulgar, falls somewhat short of being obscene and its use is permissible in some circumstances. For example, words like *khīiphŷy* "beeswax" (lit. "bee-excrement") or *phriḡkhīinūu* "bird chili or guinea pepper" (lit., "mouse-excrement pepper"),

<sup>6</sup> Thus there are at least eleven words meaning "to eat" connoting varying degrees of politeness or vulgarity. Such elaboration of speech is largely restricted to the Bangkok area. In other parts of the country other dialects are spoken, and these are marked by greater simplicity in this respect than is the Bangkok dialect.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Sapir and Morris Swadesh, *Nootka Texts* (William Dwight Whitney Linguistic Series, Yale University, 1939).

and numerous other similar words, are generally quite freely used without fear of the stigma of vulgarity. Such words would, however, be strictly avoided in the presence of royalty.

Two other examples of accidental phonetic resemblances between perfectly harmless words of one language and impolite or obscene words of another language may be cited here.

The first example involves the Chinese and Burmese languages and the locale is Rangoon. At least two common Chinese family names, Li and Chi, sound like Burmese *li* "phallus" and *chi* "excrement."<sup>8</sup> It has not been possible to ascertain the attitude of the Rangoon Chinese toward the matter beyond the statement of a Burmese informant to the effect that it is not serious enough to cause the Chinese to change their names; contrast this with the example taken up in the immediately succeeding paragraphs. Burmese Rangoonians, on the other hand, are quite aware of the interlingual similarity and cannot help but find it amusing; at the same time they feel that the resulting ambiguity is somewhat alleviated by the use of a title meaning "Mr." in front of the name.

The second example involves interlingual similarities between impolite or unflattering words and personal, that is, given names. This situation arises between Northeastern Thai and Central Thai and the locale is Bangkok. There are a number of given names of not infrequent occurrence among the Northeastern Thai which sound vulgar or impolite in the Bangkok dialect (Central Thai). Other given names sometimes used in Northeastern Thailand are of a type which is considered highly unflattering or derogatory in the Bangkok area. As a consequence, a Northeastern Thai bearing one of these given names will, on going to Bangkok, be obliged to change his name.<sup>9</sup>

One not uncommon northeastern Thai name is *tâw*,<sup>10</sup> a personal name of a man, sometimes of a woman.<sup>11</sup> This is equivalent to Bangkok *tâw*, which in one of its meanings is an obscene term meaning "vagina."<sup>12</sup> In northeastern Thai-

<sup>8</sup> In the Burmese words quoted here *l* and *ch* are more or less equivalent to English *l* and *ch*; *i* is [i]; the tone mark (ˊ) indicates a high tone in non-final position or a falling tone in final position.

<sup>9</sup> If he does not, he will lay himself open to constant teasing and ridicule.

<sup>10</sup> Northeastern Thai is not phonemically identical with Central Thai (see footnote 3). Northeastern Thai has a consonant phoneme *ɲ* (the palatal nasal), not found in Central Thai, and lacks *ch* and *r*, which are common in Central Thai. The vowels, on the other hand, have the same values in the two dialects, though they often differ in their distribution. Northeastern Thai has seven tones, as follows: high-falling (ˊ), lower high level (ˊ), lower high-falling (ˊ), mid level (unmarked), low level (ˊ), very low level (ˊ), and rising (ˊ). The tonal equivalences between Northeastern Thai and Central Thai normally follow certain regular rules.

<sup>11</sup> Some northeastern personal names may be given either to men or to women, some only to men, and some only to women. Each name is marked accordingly.

<sup>12</sup> There are at least seven Bangkok words having this meaning; the one cited here is very nearly at the bottom of the scale in degree of vulgarity. The Bangkok word is either *tâw* or *tâw*.

land animal names are sometimes used as personal names; in the Bangkok area, names of this type are strictly avoided. Thus NE *mǎa*, personal name (m. or w.), also means "dog"; Bangkok *mǎa* means only "dog" and would never be used as a name. NE *thúj*, personal name (m.), is equivalent to Bangkok *thuj* "water buffalo having abnormal or stunted horns." NE *sĕen*, personal name (m.), is equivalent to Bangkok *sĕen* "rufous stump-tailed monkey" (not found in Northeastern Thailand). NE *thĕon*, personal name (m.), also refers to a kind of monkey found in the northeast; there is no Bangkok equivalent, but the name would be changed in Bangkok because it refers to a kind of animal. NE *tūn*, personal name (m. or w.), also means "bamboo-rat," and is equivalent to Bangkok *tūn* which means not only "bamboo-rat" but also occurs in a common phrase *γδoηāw tāvūn* "extremely stupid."

The last example quoted above is changed not only because it refers to an animal but also because it is unflattering in its reference to stupidity. Other names are changed solely because they are unflattering, e.g. NE *kŷm*, personal name (m.), which also means "not clever." Though it has no Bangkok equivalent, it is changed because it fails to meet Bangkok concepts of suitability in a name. If the parents dislike or hate their daughter they may name her *thĕom*, which also means "not pretty and not good, rather stupid." The word has no Bangkok equivalent, but its connotation in the northeast is so unflattering that it will be changed.

A few northeastern Thai personal names are changed because they are considered displeasing in sound. Some of these have no other meaning but are changed solely because of their sound, e.g. NE *pŷy*, a common personal name (m.). Others have other meanings besides their use as names, but they are changed because of their sound rather than because of their meaning, e.g. NE *mŷy*, personal name (m.), also meaning "black gunpowder," and NE *mŷm*, personal name (w.), also meaning "black."<sup>13</sup>

A common stimulus for name-changing among the Northeastern Thai arises when the person bearing the name goes to Bangkok. Some persons, however, may change their names even though they remain at home, particularly upon attaining an official position. But even in this latter event, the change appears to be due to the influence of the culture of the capital, since standards for what befits a person attaining an official position are set largely in Bangkok. Note that not all instances of name-changing quoted above are the result of interlingual word taboos, i.e., word taboos arising from interlingual ambiguity. All, however, are the result of taboos imposed by another culture.

The problem of interlingual word taboos has, as far as is known, received little if any attention among linguists. Many other examples could no doubt

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However, the tonal equivalences between Northeastern Thai and Central Thai are such that NE *tāv* is equivalent (in sound correspondence, not in meaning) to Bangkok *tāv* but not to *tāv*.

<sup>13</sup> "Black," as a name, is not usually considered unflattering.

be adduced if some attention were given to the matter.<sup>14</sup> It is a type of problem that can easily escape notice, particularly if the period of field contact is short. The Creek-English and Thai-English examples cited came to attention accidentally after periods of long contact and in informal conversations, not during formalized questioning periods. The Chinese-Burmese and Northeastern Thai-Central Thai examples, on the other hand, were uncovered by direct questioning after interest was aroused in discovering more examples of such taboos.

In general it is the speakers of the minority language who feel obliged to observe the taboo, which, though the result of contact, is not actually imposed by the speakers of the majority language; for the latter, in their ignorance of the minority language (except when proper names are involved), are normally quite unaware of the problem.

The examples brought forth in this paper illustrate two quite different types of situations. The Creek-English example is the result of acculturation. The same is true of the Northeast Thai-Central Thai example. In both of these instances it is conceivable that in time the supposedly objectionable words of the minority language may become obsolete or obsolescent.<sup>15</sup> The Thai-English example, on the other hand, is a matter of temporary avoidance and will never have any permanent influence on the Thai language. Thai students may try to avoid certain English-sounding Thai words while residing in this country, but they do not continue to observe the taboo after they return to their own country, even though some speakers of English also reside there. The Chinese-Burmese example is interesting for still another reason. Here, even though the interlingual ambiguity causes amusement to the majority group (Burmese), the minority group (Chinese) has no inclination to be affected by this attitude and makes no attempt to effect an adaptation or change.

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<sup>14</sup> Certain conditions, however, have to be present before the problem arises. First of all, the phonetic conditions must be present. In other words, the languages which come in contact must have certain sounds and sequences of sounds in common. For example, Japanese speakers residing in this country do not encounter this problem because Japanese is utterly lacking in the sequences of sounds which are found to occur in English "four-letter" words. Similarly, Burmese students studying in this country are likewise untroubled by the problem because Burmese lacks the necessary sounds and sound sequences.

<sup>15</sup> Of course it is also possible that Creek as a language may die out before the taboo imposed from English has had time to exercise its full effect.