

Words and Meanings in Thai Traditional Folk Songs and Cultural Communication across the Regions in the Thai Context

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Abstract— This article mainly focuses on words and meanings used in traditional folk Songs of Isan (the northeastern part of Thailand) and cultural communication across the regions in the Thai context. Through YouTube, opinions and attitudes of listeners from other regions were investigated to compare with those of people from Isan region. It was found that listeners in the Isan region and from other regions regularly exchange their opinions in terms of words and meanings based on the context of Isan culture and cultures of other regions, leading to the comparison in relation to similarities and differences of words in each different region.

Keywords— Words and Meanings, Isan Traditional Folk Songs, Cultural Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Isan region in Thailand has the highest population of the county when compared with other regions in Thailand.

As a result, traditional folk songs are so popular among people in the region as well as people from other regions. This leads to cross-cultural communication in the Thai context. Hence, it is recommended that attitudes and opinions of the listeners through YouTube in terms of words used in the song and meanings are meaningful to investigate. Apart from this, exchanging the ideas and comparing the similarities and differences of people with different background are also crucial aspects in this study.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A. Cross-cultural Communication

Dignen (2011) explains the ways to understand other cultures as follows:

1. You need to have an understanding of your own culture and the target culture you are dealing with. This means researching and analysing the national, regional and corporate cultures of the people you are dealing with;
2. You need to be flexible in the way you communicate with people from other cultures. This means adapting your style of communication to fit the situation;
3. You need to develop an international style of communication that will enable you to get your message across effectively in all business and social situations (Dignen, 2011, p. 4)

B. Thai culture and Cross-Cultural Communication

According to Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999, cross-cultural communication in the Thai Context is discussed as the following:

The Thai society today consists of people sharing a rich ethnic diversity. More than 90% of Thais believe in Buddhism, the national religion. Spoken and written Thai is used as the national language. Thailand has often been described as the land of smile. Not only are the Thai people frequently depicted with smiling faces, but they are also characterized by their optimism, ambition, pursuit of knowledge, and pride of being Thai.

As noted by Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin (1999), Thais believe that inner freedom is best preserved by maintaining an emotionally and physically stable environment. Therefore, they believe that social harmony is very important and in general, people will do their utmost to avoid any personal conflict in their contacts with others. They state,

Outward expressions of anger are also regarded as dangerous to social harmony and are obvious signs of ignorance, crudity, and immaturity. The person who is

serenely indifferent will be respected for what is considered as important virtue (Sriussadaporn-Charoengam & Jablin, 1999, p. 384, cited in Watcharakaweelip, 2008).

These citations lead to the conclusion that we need to understand the culture of other people from other regions. We also need to develop our communication strategies to communicate with people with different backgrounds which will lead us to gain an insight of the similarities and differences.

C. Studies of Words and Meanings (Semantics)

In terms of *words and meanings*, Bovee, Thill, & Schatzman (2003) place an emphasis on the aspect of Denotation and Connotation is placed as the following: The Denotation is literal of which meaning is explicit and specific. The connotative meaning is the implicit and associative meaning which includes all the associations and feelings evoked by the words (Bovee, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003, p. 124).

Additionally, Bovee, Thill & Schatzman (2003) carry out an analysis of Functional Words and Content Words. Words can be divided into two main categories; Functional Words express relationships and have only one unchanging meaning in any given context. They include conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Content Words are multidimensional and therefore subject to various interpretations. They include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These words carry the meaning of a sentence. Both functional words and content words are necessary, but your effectiveness as a communicator depends largely on your ability to choose the right content words for your message.

(Bovee, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003, p. 124)

Aitchison (1999) studies the semantic field as the following:

Clearly, the question of meaning is to a large extent connected with the meaning of individual words, or (more accurately) lexical.

Three preliminary points need to be clarified in connection with word meaning. First of all, we shall be concerned primarily with content words, such as *zoo, apple, jump, red*, rather than with function words such as *of, that, by, which*, whose role is mainly to show the relationship between syntactic units (through the distinction between the two is not always clear-cut). Second, we shall be dealing only with straightforward descriptive meaning, and ignoring what is sometimes called 'emotive' meaning or connotation'. For example, the word *adolescent* will be taken to mean someone who is between childhood and adulthood. We shall be ignoring the fact that some people use the word to imply that the person concerned is also likely to be awkward, immature, obstinate and moody. Third, we must be aware that meaning is double-faced. The meaning of a lexical item such as *tree* must be considered in two

ways; first of all, as one element in a language system, whose meaning is dependent on relationships with the other words in the system. Second, its meaning is linked up with a certain class of recognizable objects in the external world.

(Aitchison, 1999pp. 83-84)

D. Studies on Words and Meanings in the Thai Context

According to Plawong (2015), we study semantics to know the meanings of words. We use language to convey meanings. In this regard, we need to study the human mind and the process of creating pictures in human mind based on the experience of humans.

ทำไมนักภาษาศาสตร์จึงต้องศึกษาอรรถศาสตร์ หรือ
ความหมายซึ่งเกิดจากการใช้ภาษาในการสื่อสาร
การศึกษาอรรถศาสตร์จำเป็นต้องศึกษาปัจจัยหลัก
ในการสื่อความหมาย ๑
แนวคิดในเรื่องวิธีการใช้ภาษาเพื่อสื่อความหมาย อาทิ
จึงต้องศึกษาบริบทของจิตใจของมนุษย์ (human mind)
กระบวนการของความคิด
กระบวนการเรียนรู้และรับรู้จนกลายเป็นมโนทัศน์
และการสร้างมโนทัศน์
จนกลายเป็นความหมายเชิงมโนทัศน์ กระบวนการต่าง ๑
เหล่านี้จะร่วมกันกับประสบการณ์ต่าง ๑
ที่มนุษย์มีต่อโลกโดยใช้ภาษาสื่อเป็นความหมาย
(Plawong, 2015, p. 1)

III. PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To investigate the opinions of people from various regions in Thailand in terms of meaning of words used in the traditional folk songs.
- 2) To study the cross-cultural communication in the Thai context

IV. METHODOLOGY

- 1) Data Collection: Five Months: October 2016 February 2017
- 2) Instrument: Social Media YouTube
- 3) Theoretical Framework: Semantic field: Words and Meanings
- 4) Data Analysis: Based on the social media *Youtube*, the researcher selected only songs which Thai people made their comments on in terms of cross-cultural communication, and analyzed their opinions as well as attitudes specifically.

V. RESULTS

Only some relevant comments were specifically selected and analyzed in this part.

1. A case study of learning words and meanings

Song 1: *ผู้สาวขาละ* *Phu Sao Kha Lo* (A girl who likes to travel around.) Status 1: คำว่า *ละ* แปลว่าอะไรครับ (What does the word *lo* mean?). Based on this status, several groups of people expressed their opinions as the following:

Group 1: Learning words and meaning

Comment 1A: สายเที่ยว วันๆไม่ทำงาน ชอบเที่ยวเตร่ (travel around, no work)

Comment 1B: ละแปลว่าเที่ยว (travel around)

Comment 1C: แปลว่าผู้หญิงชอบเที่ยวไม่ใช่ผู้หญิงที่ชอบเรียน (She likes to travel, doesn't like studying.)

Group 2: Exchange the culture in terms of dialects

Comment 2A: เมืองน่าน ก็ว่าละแปลว่า เที่ยว หรือ แอ้ว เหมือนกันครับ I am from the North, it means the same.

Comment 2B: ละก็อแปลว่าแอ้วนะคับ ผมคนเจียงฮาย ความหมายเหมือนกัน (I am from the North too, in my town it means the same)

Comment 2C: ใๆๆ เค้าก็เป็นคนเหนือ แต่ไม่รู้ว่ ขาละ คืออะไร แต่ถ้า ชอบเที่ยว ภาษาเหนือ จะพูดว่า โละแอ้ว อี้ (I'm the North, the word means the same in my hometown, just the pronunciation is different.)

Comment 2D: ผม กอ็คิดว่าภาษาอีสาน บเหมือนคนเจียงใหม่ (At first, I thought that it's has a specific meaning of the Northeast, but now I know that it means the same.)

Regarding attitudes of Thai people toward this song, it can be concluded that *group 1* is the group of people from the Northeast who share their knowledge regarding the daily life, experience, and their own culture. Group 2 indicates the people from the North who wish to exchange their knowledge of the dialect they speak to compare the similarities.

2) Situation 1: Attitudes toward cross-cultural communication

The song *Ku Kong* (คู่คอง), of which its original language is the dialect of the Northeast, is presented in various dialects of Thailand. This examples illustrate opinions of people from the South.

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Comment 1: เพราะหนัดที่ต้อง เห้อ น่องฟังภาษาอีสานไม่รู้เรื่อง ที่เอามาแต่งเป็นภาษาใต้ถึงฮายมันถูกใจ (This song is beautiful, I can't understand the original song, thanks so much for this version.)

Comment 2: มันก็อซึ้งง ในแบบฉบับ ใ้ นะเราวยังผมคนใ้เข้าถึงเนื้อเรยย (So touching for people in the South.)

Comment 3: ถึงจะไม่เพราะเหมือนอีสานก็ไม่เป็นไร เพราะมาครับ ใครไม่ชอบข่างมันแต่ผมชอบ (Even though it doesn't sound as good as the original one, but I like it.)

Comment 4: ไม่ว่าจะภาคไหนถ้ร้องเพลงเพราะใ้อารมณ์ มันก็เพราะหมดแหละครับ ผมคนอีสาน ผมยังชอบเลยเวอร์ซันใ้ (I am from the Northeast but I can understand this song. Wherever we are, we can understand each other.)

To sum up, from these two situations, culture is a shared system of symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and norms for behavior. The most obvious is the culture we share with all the people who live in our own country. In addition, we belong to other cultural groups, including an ethnic group, probably a religious group, and perhaps a professional that has its own special language and customs. All members of a culture have similar assumptions about how people should think, behave and communicate, and they all tend to act on those assumptions in much the same way.

As illustrated in the examples, words and meaning differ according to the regions. Cross-cultural communication occurs when people from different parts of the country communicate with each other. To enhance the cultural sensitivity among people from various parts of the country, you may learn their own language or dialect to understand each other better.

Besides, through several kinds of the social media, we as researchers can gather some grounded data and valuable information from these resources for our further studies. This is because the information we gain is based on communication in the real world.

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