

# An Analysis of Cultural Substitution in English to Thai Translation

Patcharee Pokasamrit

*Graduate School of Language and Communication,  
National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand  
Corresponding author: patcharee@nida.ac.th*

## Abstract

Cultural substitution refers to the translation of some known or unknown concepts in the source language by using the substitution from the culture of the receptor language rather than by other available means of meaning equivalence. For examples, *a black sheep* is translated into literal Thai as *a cub outside a pen* rather than *a person with different and unacceptable characters*, and *a corner stone* is translated as *a supreme pole*, rather than *an indispensable and fundamental basis*. This study analyzes cultural substitution in English to Thai translation in order to document its types, linguistic patterns, and cultural significance; and to find and draw conclusions as to the translators' opinion of this technique. In the first part of the study, culturally substituted items were randomly collected from 1000 pages of different types of English to Thai translated works which were published during B.E. 2542 (1997) to B.E. 2552 (2007). These data were then classified and listed according to their generic types and presented in categorized tables with their linguistic and cultural comments as findings. In the second part, 12 translators whose works have been published during the past 10 years were asked to fill in questionnaires and interviewed on their opinions on cultural substitute translation technique. The conclusions of the opinions are provided, and the recommendations for the use of the findings and for further research are offered.

**Key Words:** English to Thai Translation; Cultural Substitution; Language and Culture

## Introduction

English to Thai translation has had a long history in Thailand as a means of communication and technology transfer. In the field of communication, Thailand has been receiving and exchanging information on various areas of study, entertainment, and culture. Translation as a language skill has developed as a profession and an academic subject taught in schools and universities at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Since Thai is the only major native and official language of Thailand, knowledge, technology, and culture from English speaking people have found their ways into Thailand mainly through translation into Thai, especially prior to the last two decades, when more Thais have been exposed to and thus acquired better knowledge of English language and culture. At present, English to Thai translation is done in most areas of interest and has developed to be of high quality, with many competent translators who are equipped with a theoretical background of translation and excellent command of both English and Thai. Moreover, with globalization and widespread acculturation, many translators are doing their best to produce outstanding work according to the ethical standards of the business and academic world. Documenting and describing Thai language usage in the framework of descriptive linguistics through translated work, then, is one of the valid methods to compare English and Thai culture and the ways English and Thai people perceive the world. This study seeks to analyze the use of cultural substitution technique of English to Thai translation in order to record and document the different ways Thai and English people express their thinking and perspective of the world. The results of the analysis can also benefit the teaching and learning of translation by providing evidence and examples of translation, the types of the culture, and the varying opinions different translators have on the technique.

## Objectives of the Study

To analyze the cultural substitution in English to Thai translation in order to:

1. Identify the types of cultural substitution and their examples in order to document the language usage in the framework of Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics (Himmelmann and Bochum, 2007).
2. Analyze the technique of cultural substitution translation and describe its linguistic and cultural patterns (Denoun, 2000; Karamanian, 2002; Triveni, 2002).
3. Study the opinions of Thai translators on this cultural substitution technique compared to other standard translation techniques using the framework of Mildred M. Larson (1998).

### **Cultural Meaning of Words**

Larson (1998) indicates that the most difficult problem in translation is the differences between cultures. People of different cultures may look at things from their own perspective. *Pig* may be *good* and *valuable* in Papua New Guinea, but may be *bad* and *nonfood* in the Jewish culture. When translating *pig* from a Papua New Guinea context into a Jewish context, the cultural meaning must be sent across either by making the culture explicit, or if appropriate and possible, by using a cultural substitute with similar form or function. In Thai, *a water buffalo* may be a good substitute for *a turkey* in English, indicating *hateful stupidity*. Moreover, different cultures usually have different focuses in life. Americans focus on working, money, sports, schooling, and marriage; while in Papua New Guinea, people concentrate on gardening, fishing, foods, and ceremonies. As a result, the amount of vocabulary which is available to discuss a particular topic can reflect the different focuses and culture and is a challenge for the translator to select the exact word from the many available choices to create a natural translation.

### **Cultural Substitution in Translation**

Larson (1998) states that there will be some lexical items which neither a generic term nor a loan word with modification will be possible as a translation equivalence. In some incidents, the source language lexical items can only be best translated by using the thing, the image, or the event which is not exactly the same but does occur in the receptor language.

For example, when the form is not in focus, *coyotes* may be substituted for *wolf* and *bury* may be substituted for *place in the tomb* because these substitution have the same function in both languages. Larson does caution against the use of anachronistic substitution such as *a car* for *a chariot* because of the time difference and the fact that the translator must be true to the facts of a narrative. Cultural substitutes would work better in a text written to create a certain effect rather than to indicate facts or concrete information. Moreover, according to Larson, cultural substitutes always result in some distortion of meaning and should not be used unless the other possible techniques have proven inappropriate. In other words, translators should try other ways to reach the meaning equivalence first before settling down on a culturally substituted item. However, considering all the difficult and complicated tasks of translating, Larson stresses that a cultural substitute does work well and can produce dynamic equivalence without which the source language might not be understood.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative and descriptive analysis. There are two parts to this study; the language documentation, and the questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

## **Data Collection**

The data consists of randomly selected 1000 pages of English source language and their Thai translated version. It covers 10 areas of interest, with 100 pages from each area. The areas covered are:

1. Business
2. Idiom and proverb
3. Science and technology
4. Traveling and entertainment
5. News and information
6. Novels and literature
7. History
8. Arts and culture

9. Religion and belief
10. Academic textbooks

### **Data Documenting**

By comparing the English source language to the Thai translated receptor language, the documenting processes are:

1. The Thai version is compared to the English source language, carefully looking for culturally substituted items.
2. Each culturally substituted item is listed once with a cultural note from the context.
3. All the listed items are grouped according to their generic types and their forms and functions.
4. The classified types are shown in tables with the English and Thai versions side by side together with the cultural notes when required.
5. Discussion on each type of cultural substitute found is given concerning the techniques and the cultural points.

Examples of cultural substitutes

<b>English</b>	<b>Literal Thai</b>	<b>Notes on meaning</b>
underworld	world of God of Death	hell
mile	kilometer	measurement
rotted in hell	fried in copper pan	punished in hell
cornerstone	supreme pole	indispensable and fundamental basis
a turkey	a water buffalo	stupid and hateful
Helen of Troy	Queen Siida of Ramayana	beautiful and fought over by men
to use a sledge hammer to crack a nut	to ride on elephant to capture a grass hopper	excessive use

## Results of Data Analysis

Nine types of cultural substitution are found. Some examples of each types are:

### 1. Religion, belief

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
potion	holy water from a novice	not effective
holy day	Buddhist lent day	Buddhist culture
God	the Lord Buddha	Supreme god
Vampires	ghost bats	blood sucking evils
Thou shall not kill	the first Buddhist restriction	goodness
Turned religious	turned toward the temple	righteousness

Finding: Most religious beliefs are substituted by Buddhist culture and folk beliefs of the Thais who are mostly Buddhists and have long traditions and ingrained folklore.

### 2. People

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
Mary Poppins	a priestess	kind, innocent
Helen of Troy	Kaakii	infidelity
Casanova	Khun Phaen	famous lover
A Jurassic person	King Hao	old-fashioned
A beauty queen	Miss Apatsara	Thai Miss Universe
A hot rod	a ghost foot	reckless as a ghost
A sucker	a young chick	easily taken, Thai idiom
A bimboo	a sexy Mae Khong calendar girl	unacceptable but sexy

Finding: Most substitutes for people or idioms referring to people are from well-known Thais either from history, literature, folk, or legends. Substitutions are more effective and easier than trying to explain the people in the source language.

### 3. Objects

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
An elevator	a lift	British loan words came first
Melted butter	coconut cream	similar function
A fig leaf	tamlung leaf	similar shape
A beach ball	a bamboo container	big and round
Volk Beetle	Volk Turtle	similar shape
Lily	lotus flower	same function
A pudding bowl	a half coconut shell	shape and function
A U-bend	a goose neck	similar shape
A tornado	A monsoon	preferred name

Finding: Most substitutes are chosen because of their matching familiar form and/or function. Loan cultural substitutes are mostly borrowed British English words commonly used in Thai before American English arrived.

### 4. Time, measurement

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
700 feet	210 meters	
A half dozen	five or six	
Dozens	many tens	
In 1998	in 2541	
At 16.00	at 4 o'clock	
247,000 acre	617,500 rai	
360 degrees	around all direction	
A dime	two baht	
5 miles	8 kilo	
An arm length	About two elbows	

Finding: Substitutes are to facilitate easy understanding of the commonly used time and measurement systems. Some substitutes are required according to the field of communication such as business and engineering. Translators need to do the calculations for the readers.

## 5. Places

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
Utopia	Phra Siaraya Metrai	Thai perfect state
Tennessee	Roi-ed	up-country, remote
Slum	rat's holes	metaphor for slum
Alabama	Nong Maa Woe	Hill Billy, uneducated
A park	Lumpini Park	familiar place
T-junction	three-way intersection	use number for T shape
Red light district	Green lantern district	code name
heaven	chimplee	Thai heaven

Finding: Most place names are translated as loan words. Thai cultural substitutes are used as metaphor to reflect the form and function of such places, and to create a similar image.

## 6. Foods

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
Crepes	yellow bean sweet	
Fruits	banana, sugar cane	local fruits
Lunch box	rice-pack box	rice means a whole meal
Salt	fish sauce	salty taste
Peanut butter and jelly (sandwich)	rice with fish sauce	almost nothing to eat, to survive
Breakfast	morning rice	morning meal
Fast food	curry rice	Thai typical fast food
Pancakes	Chinese pie	salapao, typical Thai
Dumplings	Thai sweet	bua-loy, Typical Thai
Cereal	rice cereal	khao-mao, Typical Thai

Finding: Most substitutes can present only the function of such food being translated. Loan words with modification of form and/or function would work better than most of the substitution. The translators try to preserve the Thai atmosphere at the expense of the accuracy of form and taste.

## 7. Concept and idiom

<b>English</b>	<b>Literal Thai</b>	<b>Notes on meaning</b>
Married name	husband's last name	more emphasis on male
Mr. and Mrs. Baker	Baker and wife	male dominance
The mamas-trains-and pick-up trucks style of country music	up-country music of lower market	market reflects socio-economic class
Grand ma and grand pa	Grand pa and grand ma	males come first
affairs of the state	royal affairs	Thailand is a kingdom, royal can mean government
final admonition	proverb to teach women	women need to be taught
Soap opera	filthy-water drama	a waste of time to watch
A black eye	a bruised green eye	different interpretation of colors
Ladies and gentlemen	Gentlemen and ladies	cultural crash

Finding: Thailand is a kingdom and a male dominated society. The substitutes work to prevent cultural clashes when culture is not in focus. This type of cultural substitution works well in sending the meaning to Thais.

## 8. Animal

<b>English</b>	<b>Literal Thai</b>	<b>Notes on meaning</b>
A tadpole not a shark	a cat not a tiger	Thai metaphor
Worker bees	working ants	Thai metaphor
A horse out of the barn	a cow out of the pen	Thai metaphor
A heifer	a suckling baby buffalo	a crying loser, Thai metaphor

Finding: When animals are used in metaphor, substitutes are required to reach equivalence and can work well. Cultural substitutes for real animals are rare because of globalization and acculturation.

## 9. Proverb

English	Literal Thai	Notes on meaning
Talking to a brick wall	pour water on a stump	useless, wasteful
The wisest man may fall	even four-legged animals can miss	be cautious in what you do
To put one's foot in it	to wiggle your foot for a sliver	to ask for troubles
To turn a blind eye	to put your ears to the paddy fields and eyes to the farm	not to care
Still water runs deep	sharp in the sheath	real Thai proverb, not the translated version
Out of sight out of mind	three days away and a woman turns towards others	Thai bias towards women
Too many cooks spoil the broth	Too many lawyers, too many cases	different choice of profession in Thai

Finding: Cultural substitution works best on a proverb treated as a unit of meaning. Proverbs reflect culture, ways of thinking, and the many facets of life in a community. The substitutes provide image and flavor of the language. Some Thai proverbs are originally translated from English, e.g. “Still water runs deep”, therefore are not counted as cultural substitutes.

## Findings and Discussion

1. The grammatical forms of the source language are mostly kept in the receptor language, e.g., a noun is translated as a noun, adjective as adjective. This is also true in the phrase level, e.g., a noun phrase is mostly translated as a noun phrase.
2. Idioms and proverbs are treated as units of meaning and substituted by whole units of idioms and proverbs, in Thai, e.g., the idiom *He became red in the face* is translated as *he turned bloodshot in the face*; and the proverb *One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel* is translated as *One*

*rotten fish makes the whole catch stink.*

3. Cultural substitutes are chosen because of their matching form and/or function between the source and receptor language, e.g., *a turkey* in English and *a water buffalo* in Thai are both animal (form) and are both considered stupid (function).

4. A cultural substitute sends across the meaning and image comparable in the two cultures being translated. On the part of the translator, the source and the cultural substitute are compared as in the case of metaphor or simile. The translator looks for and selects a matching metaphor in the receptor culture. The readers easily understand the meaning and the emotional effect attached to the item because it is from their own familiar culture. For example, *Helen of Troy* is understood in English with all her famous history in a similar way as *Queen Siida* is known in Thai. *Queen Siida* is then a suitable cultural substitute for *Helen of Troy* when translating metaphor, expressing the meaning of a great beauty who is fought over by men.

5. Some types of cultural substitutes are more required than others. Substitution of time and measurement is sometimes a requirement in business translation while substitution of idioms and proverbs create more pleasure in the entertainment translation but are not required. Translation by cultural substitution is then, can be counted as an artistic side of translation.

## **Results of In-depth Interview and Questionnaires**

The sampling group consists of 12 translators who have had their work published during 1997-2007. The interviews were done in Thai and the interviewees were told about the technical terms used, e.g., one to one equivalent, implicit and explicit, form and function, generic and specific, loan and cultural substitute. The translators were asked to fill in questionnaires followed by in-depth interviews on their opinions of cultural substitution and other translation techniques.

### **Results of the questionnaires**

1. Some translators have checked whether readers appreciate their culturally substituted translation. (5)

2. Some translators believe that translating will be easier and more accurate because of acculturation. (5)
3. Most translators consider cultural substitution their last choice. (8)
  4. Most translators feel that cultural substitution is effective. (8)
  5. Most translators believe that there will be less use of cultural substitutes because of the continuing acculturation. (8)
  6. Most translators appreciate cultural substitutes when they read others' translation. (9)
  7. Most translators avoid cultural substitution when translating facts. (9)
  8. Most translators consider loan translation the best alternative for cultural substitution. (10)
  9. Most translators have encountered difficult cultural differences in their work. (10)
  10. Most translators think that cultural substitution is best for translating proverbs and idiom. (10)
  11. Most translators usually keep the grammatical forms of the source language when translating. (10)
  12. Most translators have used cultural substitution technique. (11)
  13. Most translators feel that they should try their best to translate culture accurately. (11)
  14. All translators consider one to one equivalence the best technique. (12)
  15. All translators believe that cultural substitution is the most difficult technique. (12)

### **Recommendations**

1. Documented data should be used in translation teaching and discussed in terms of meaning clarification and translation techniques.
2. Records of Thai usage and Thai language change in the fields of Thai Study and Sociolinguistics should include culturally substituted items in translation, reflecting English and Thai culture and world view.

3. Further research in translation should go beyond the language accuracy level to relate to other relevant social science fields involving communication, entertainment, and business.

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