

Beyond the Words: Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding and the Construction of Cultural Understanding among Foreign Learners of Thai

Ei Myat Mon Thwe

Mea Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand

Email: 6731005002@lamduan.mfu.ac.th

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23391734

ABSTRACT

Learning Thai requires foreign learners to master far more than tones, script, and vocabulary. Many of the most persistent difficulties arise where the literal meaning of an utterance diverges from what it accomplishes socially. This article examines how cross-cultural differences shape the ways foreign learners interpret, and misinterpret, Thai language use, and how such misunderstandings can become a resource for deeper cultural understanding. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive design, the study analyses published research on Thai pragmatics and cultural values, reference grammars of Thai, and documented patterns of learner difficulty, using Hall's distinction between high- and low-context communication, Komin's account of Thai value orientations, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Thomas's typology of pragmatic failure as analytic lenses. Four domains of non-literal meaning are identified: the encoding of social hierarchy in pronouns, kinship terms, and particles; kreng jai and the preference for indirectness; mǎi pen rai and the cultivation of emotional composure; and phatic routines tied to face. The analysis shows that learners' misunderstandings are rarely linguistic errors in a narrow sense; they arise from transferring first-language assumptions about sincerity, directness, and equality onto Thai forms whose meaning is relational. The article argues that Thai language teaching should treat pragmatic meaning as explicit content, use misunderstanding episodes as reflective material, and frame cultural knowledge as interpretive competence rather than a list of etiquette rules.

KEYWORDS Thai as a foreign language; cross-cultural pragmatics; intercultural communicative competence; kreng jai; pragmatic failure; cultural understanding

1. Introduction

Interest in learning Thai has grown alongside Thailand's role as a destination for tourism, international education, regional business, and long-term residence. Foreign learners now include

exchange students, expatriate professionals, migrant spouses, missionaries, diplomats, and academics in Thai studies. Many of them report a similar trajectory: after the initial hurdles of five lexical tones and an unfamiliar script, they reach a stage at which they can construct correct sentences yet still feel that something important escapes them. They are told *mâi pen rai* ('never mind') when they sense that something does matter; they receive a cheerful 'yes' that is never acted upon; they are addressed as *phii* ('older sibling') by strangers and are unsure how to respond.

These experiences point to a familiar insight in applied linguistics: communicative competence includes knowing what an utterance does in a particular social and cultural context, not only what it says (Kramsch, 1993). Thai is often described as a language in which much meaning is carried by relationship, situation, and shared values rather than by explicit propositional content. For learners socialised in cultures that value directness and explicitness, this produces a gap between surface meaning and intended meaning which grammar instruction alone cannot close.

This article addresses three questions. First, what kinds of non-literal, culturally embedded meaning in Thai most commonly cause difficulty for foreign learners? Second, how can the resulting misunderstandings be explained with reference to underlying cultural differences? Third, what do these findings imply for the teaching and learning of Thai as a foreign language? The article contributes to a literature that has examined Thai politeness and pragmatics in depth (Intachakra, 2004, 2012; Ukosakul, 2005) but has more often focused on Thai speakers of English than on foreigners learning Thai.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Language, Culture, and Meaning beyond Words

The idea that language and culture are inseparable has been central to language education since at least the 1990s. Kramsch (1993) argued that culture is not a fifth skill added to listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but the context within which all language use becomes meaningful. Agar (1994) coined the term 'languaculture' to capture the way grammar and vocabulary are bound up with local ways of seeing the world, and suggested that the most valuable learning moments are 'rich points', when an outsider's expectations break down and a different cultural logic becomes visible.

Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication offers a broad framework for this gap. In low-context communication, most of the information is carried in the explicit code; in high-context communication, much of it is located in the physical setting, the relationship, and shared background knowledge. Thailand is commonly placed toward the high-context end, while many Western learners come from more low-context traditions. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) similarly characterise Thai society as relatively collectivist and relatively high in power distance, dimensions that shape how requests, refusals, and disagreements are expressed.

Pragmatic theory provides more precise tools. Brown and Levinson (1987) model politeness as strategic attention to 'face', the public self-image that interactants seek to protect. Their framework has been criticised for its individualist assumptions, and scholars of Asian languages have stressed that politeness in many societies is as much about recognising one's place in a social order as about strategic choice (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Wierzbicka (2003) further argues that speech acts such as

thanking, apologising, or refusing carry culture-specific semantic content, so that apparently equivalent expressions across languages often differ in what they presuppose.

Thomas (1983) distinguishes two kinds of 'pragmatic failure'. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when a learner uses or interprets a linguistic form with a pragmatic force different from that assigned by native speakers. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when the learner misjudges the social conditions on language use, such as relative status, the size of an imposition, or what may be talked about. Thomas notes that such failures are often judged more harshly than grammatical errors, because listeners attribute them to personality rather than to language level. This distinction is central to the analysis below.

2.2 Thai Cultural Values Relevant to Language Use

Komin's (1990) large-scale survey of Thai value orientations remains a key reference. She identified a cluster of 'ego' and 'grateful relationship' values, including face-saving, avoidance of open criticism, *kreng jai*, and *bunkhun* (indebtedness for kindness received), alongside a value placed on smooth interpersonal relations and on *sanùk* (enjoyment). Mulder (2000) describes Thai everyday life as structured by hierarchical relationships in which the senior party offers protection and the junior offers deference. Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995), writing for foreign professionals, highlight the same values as recurrent sources of misunderstanding in the workplace.

Within Thai pragmatics, Intachakra (2012) argues that Thai politeness is motivated by an orientation toward the feelings of others, captured in the many compound expressions built on *jai* ('heart, mind'), together with a 'binary' sensitivity to whether a relationship is one of hierarchy or intimacy. Ukosakul (2005) shows, through the rich system of idioms involving *nâa* ('face'), that face in Thai is closely linked to shame and to one's standing in the eyes of others. These works suggest that Thai utterances frequently index relationships and feelings more than they convey information, a point with direct consequences for learners.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on documentary and conceptual analysis. No new interview or survey data were collected. Instead, the analysis draws on three bodies of material: (a) published research on Thai pragmatics, politeness, and cultural values, including studies conducted by Thai scholars; (b) descriptive reference grammars of Thai, which document the forms of pronouns, particles, and address terms (Cooke, 1968; Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie, 2005); and (c) documented patterns of difficulty reported in the literature on second-language pragmatics and on intercultural adjustment in Thailand (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, recurrent expressions and interactional routines that the literature identifies as problematic for outsiders were collected. Second, these were grouped thematically according to the type of cultural meaning they carry. Third, each theme was interpreted through the frameworks introduced above, with attention to the specific assumptions a learner might transfer from a first language. Short illustrative exchanges are used in Section 4 to make the analysis concrete; they are composite examples constructed from patterns described in the cited literature, not transcripts of recorded interaction. The study therefore offers an analytical synthesis rather than an

empirical test, and its conclusions should be read as propositions that future classroom and ethnographic research can examine.

4. Analysis: Domains of Non-Literal Meaning in Thai

Four domains emerged from the analysis. Table 1 summarises representative expressions, their literal glosses, the culturally embedded meanings they carry, and the misreadings commonly attributed to learners.

Table 1. Selected Thai expressions: surface meaning, cultural meaning, and common misreadings

Expression	Literal / surface gloss	Culturally embedded meaning	Typical learner misreading
<i>mâi pen rai</i> (ไม่เป็นไร)	'It is nothing'	Restores harmony; releases the other from obligation; signals emotional composure	Indifference, or that the matter is truly closed
<i>kreng jai</i> (เกรงใจ)	'Fear-heart'	Reluctance to impose on or inconvenience others, especially superiors	Shyness, lack of initiative, or dishonesty
<i>kh râp / khâ</i> (ครับ / ค่ะ)	'Yes' (polite particle)	Acknowledgement of having heard and of the relationship, not necessarily agreement	Assent or commitment to act
<i>kin khâaw rǎu yang</i> (กินข้าวหรือยัง)	'Have you eaten rice yet?'	Phatic greeting expressing care and inclusion	Literal question or an invitation to a meal
<i>phîi / nǒng</i> (พี่ / น้อง)	'Older / younger sibling'	Address terms placing speakers in a relative-age hierarchy with mutual duties	Over-familiarity, or an inquiry into one's age
<i>khǎw khít duu kǎw</i> (ขอคิดก่อน)	'Let me think about it first'	Conventional soft refusal that avoids loss of face	Genuine deferral; expecting a later answer

Note. Romanisation broadly follows Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom Horie (2005). Glosses are compiled from the sources discussed in Section 4.

4.1 Hierarchy Encoded in Grammar: Pronouns, Kinship Terms, and Particles

The first difficulty learners face is that Thai offers no socially neutral way to say 'I' or 'you'. Cooke (1968) documented an extensive system of personal reference in which the choice of form depends on the speaker's sex, the relative age and status of the participants, and their degree of intimacy. In everyday speech, Thais frequently avoid pronouns altogether and refer to themselves and others using names, nicknames, occupational titles such as *khruu* ('teacher') or *mǎw* ('doctor'), or kinship terms such as *phîi* ('older sibling') and *nǒng* ('younger sibling') (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie, 2005).

For learners from languages where 'I' and 'you' are universal and largely neutral, this system creates both a grammatical and a conceptual challenge. A learner who consistently uses the textbook pronoun *khun* ('you') with everyone may sound correct but distant; one who calls a market vendor *phîi* may be surprised that this is warmly received rather than considered presumptuous. Conversely, being asked one's age soon after meeting is often read by foreigners as intrusive, when its function is to establish

who is *phii* and who is *nóng*, and therefore how both parties should speak. In Thomas's (1983) terms, this is a sociopragmatic issue: the learner lacks the social knowledge that makes the question relevant.

Sentence-final particles present a parallel case. The polite particles *kháp* (male speaker) and *khâ* (female speaker) mark deference and courtesy, while particles such as *ná* soften requests or seek affiliation. Because *kháp* and *khâ* also serve as response tokens, learners often hear them as 'yes'. Yet in many contexts they mean 'I have heard you and I respect you', not 'I agree' or 'I will do it'. The misreading becomes consequential in workplaces, where a foreign manager may treat a subordinate's repeated *kháp* as a commitment (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995). The error is pragmalinguistic: a form is assigned the force it would carry in the learner's first language.

4.2 Kreng Jai and the Preference for Indirectness

Perhaps no concept is more frequently cited as difficult for foreigners than *kreng jai*. The term combines *kreng* ('to fear, to be in awe of') and *jai* ('heart, mind'), and refers to a disposition to avoid imposing on others, causing them inconvenience, or placing them in an awkward position, particularly when they are senior or not intimate (Komin, 1990). It shapes how Thai speakers make requests, decline offers, express disagreement, and ask questions.

Consider a composite exchange. A foreign teacher asks a Thai colleague whether she could take over a class the following week. The colleague smiles and says, *khǎw khít duu kòon ná khá* ('let me think about it first'). The teacher waits several days for an answer that never comes, then raises the matter again and senses discomfort. From a Thai perspective, the first response was already a refusal, phrased so that neither party would lose face. From the teacher's perspective, the colleague was indecisive or evasive. Neither interpretation is linguistically mistaken; they rest on different assumptions about how refusals should be expressed.

The same disposition shapes classroom behaviour. Learners teaching or studying alongside Thais sometimes interpret silence, reluctance to ask questions, or reluctance to correct a superior as lack of interest or initiative. Within a *kreng jai* framework, these behaviours can express respect and a wish not to burden others. Hall's (1976) high-context model helps explain the pattern: the refusal or disagreement is present, but it resides in the context, the hesitation, and the relationship rather than in the words. For learners, the challenge is to notice that something has been communicated when nothing explicit has been said.

Kreng jai also highlights a deeper cultural difference concerning sincerity. Many learners hold an implicit belief that honest communication is direct communication, and that indirectness is a form of concealment. In Thai interaction, however, consideration for the other person's feelings is itself a form of sincerity (Intachakra, 2012). Learners who judge indirect Thai speakers as 'not telling the truth' are therefore applying a moral framework, not merely a linguistic one.

4.3 Mâi Pen Rai and the Value of Emotional Composure

Mâi pen rai, often translated as 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter', is among the first expressions foreigners learn and among the last they fully understand. It is used to accept apologies, to decline thanks, to reassure, and to bring a potentially tense moment to a close. Intachakra's (2004) contrastive study of apologies and thanks in English and Thai shows that Thai speakers frequently

respond in ways that minimise the significance of the event, rather than explicitly accepting thanks or acknowledging an offence as English speakers often do.

Learners tend to read *mâi pen rai* in one of two misleading ways. Some take it as indifference: the speaker does not care. Others take it as a literal statement that the matter is resolved and need not be revisited. In practice, the expression often signals that the speaker is choosing composure over the display of negative emotion, in line with the high value placed on *jai yen* ('cool heart') and the avoidance of open conflict (Komin, 1990). A Thai host who says *mâi pen rai* after a guest has broken a dish may genuinely wish to put the guest at ease; whether the matter is 'nothing' is another question. For learners, the important point is that the expression protects the relationship rather than evaluating the event.

This domain also illustrates how a culturally embedded expression can be over-generalised. Learners who adopt *mâi pen rai* enthusiastically may use it in situations where it sounds dismissive, for example in response to a colleague's report of a serious problem, or as their own reply when they have caused an inconvenience. Here the learner has acquired a form and a broad function but not the conditions under which it is appropriate.

4.4 Phatic Routines, Face, and Social Inclusion

Thai greetings and small talk contain several routines whose literal meaning misleads learners. *Kin khâaw rǎu yang* ('have you eaten rice yet?') and *pay nǎy* ('where are you going?') function primarily as expressions of attention and care. Answering them in informational detail, or treating them as intrusive, misreads their phatic function. Comments about appearance, weight, or skin colour can likewise strike foreigners as personal, while within Thai conversational norms they are frequently routine forms of noticing and inclusion.

Face, or *nâa*, is closely bound up with these routines. Ukosakul (2005) shows that Thai has a dense vocabulary of face idioms, including expressions for losing face (*sǎa nâa*) and for giving face to others, which reflects how public standing is negotiated in everyday talk. Behaviours that may be acceptable in some learners' home cultures, such as openly correcting a colleague in a meeting, raising one's voice to resolve a problem, or praising oneself directly, can cause loss of face for both parties. Learners may experience the consequences without understanding the cause: a relationship cools, or cooperation becomes slower, without any explicit complaint.

4.5 Patterns of Misunderstanding

Across these domains, three patterns of misunderstanding stand out. The first is literal decoding: learners assign the literal, dictionary meaning to expressions whose primary function is relational, as with *khǎp*, *mâi pen rai*, and phatic greetings. The second is value transfer: learners interpret Thai behaviour through first-language assumptions about sincerity, equality, and efficiency, so that indirectness appears evasive and deference appears passive. The third is partial acquisition: learners acquire a form and its general function but not its conditions of use, and consequently over-generalise or misapply it.

These patterns map onto Thomas's (1983) categories. Literal decoding is primarily pragmalinguistic; value transfer is primarily sociopragmatic; partial acquisition combines both. The distinction matters because the two types call for different responses. Pragmalinguistic problems can often be addressed

through explicit teaching of forms and their functions. Sociopragmatic problems touch on learners' values and identities and therefore require reflection, not only information. Importantly, misunderstanding is not a one-way process. Thai interlocutors may also misread foreign learners, interpreting directness as rudeness or a failure to use particles as arrogance. Intercultural understanding involves both parties.

5. Discussion: From Misunderstanding to Cultural Understanding

The analysis suggests that the most significant obstacles for advanced learners of Thai are interpretive rather than structural. Learners often know the words but do not yet share the frame within which the words make sense. This conclusion supports Kramsch's (1993) view that cultural understanding cannot be reduced to factual knowledge about a society. It requires the capacity to recognise that one's own interpretations are culturally shaped, and to consider how the same utterance might be heard from another position.

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence is useful here. Alongside knowledge and skills, Byram emphasises attitudes of curiosity and openness, the ability to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, and critical cultural awareness. Deardorff (2006), synthesising expert opinion, likewise places attitudes such as respect and tolerance of ambiguity at the foundation of intercultural competence. In the Thai context, a learner who can say, 'When my colleague said she would think about it, I assumed she meant later, but she may have been declining politely', is demonstrating precisely this kind of competence.

Misunderstanding episodes can thus be reframed as Agar's (1994) 'rich points': moments that reveal cultural logic and offer opportunities for learning. Research in second-language pragmatics suggests that learners benefit from consciously noticing pragmatic features rather than encountering them only implicitly (Schmidt, 1990; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Several implications for Thai language teaching follow.

First, pragmatic meaning should be taught as explicit content from the early stages. Lessons on pronouns and particles can present them not only as grammatical forms but as tools for positioning oneself in relationships. Expressions such as *mâi pen rai*, *kreng jai*, and *khǎw khít duu kòon* can be introduced with the contexts that give them their force, and with examples of how they may be misread.

Second, learners' own misunderstandings can serve as course material. Reflective journals, critical incident analysis, and guided discussion of puzzling encounters allow learners to articulate their assumptions and compare them with Thai perspectives. This approach is consistent with intercultural language teaching frameworks that treat learning as a process of noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Third, cultural knowledge should be presented as interpretive resources rather than fixed rules. Lists of 'dos and don'ts' about Thai etiquette risk producing stereotyped expectations, ignoring generational, regional, and social variation, and reducing Thai speakers to cultural types. Values such as *kreng jai* are not uniform behavioural laws but resources that Thai speakers draw on differently according to context and relationship (Intachakra, 2012). Teaching should help learners ask, 'What might this mean here, between these people?' rather than, 'What does this always mean?'

Fourth, Thai teachers and Thai interlocutors can play an active role. Teachers who make their own cultural assumptions explicit, and who explain the reasoning behind routines that seem natural to them, provide learners with the background knowledge that high-context communication otherwise leaves implicit. Such explanation also invites a dialogue in which learners' cultures become objects of comparison, reinforcing that intercultural understanding is mutual.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the cross-cultural dimension of learning Thai as a foreign language, focusing on meanings that lie beneath the surface of the words. Four domains were identified as particularly significant: the encoding of hierarchy in pronouns, kinship terms, and particles; *kreng jai* and indirectness; *mâi pen rai* and emotional composure; and phatic routines associated with face. Across these domains, learners' misunderstandings were found to arise less from linguistic deficiency than from literal decoding, the transfer of first-language values, and partial acquisition of forms and their conditions of use.

The central argument is that learning Thai well involves learning to read relationships and feelings as carriers of meaning. Misunderstanding is therefore not merely an obstacle to be eliminated, but a point of entry into another way of organising social life. Language teaching that makes pragmatic meaning explicit, uses learners' experiences reflectively, and treats culture as interpretive competence is better placed to support this development.

As a conceptual and documentary study, this article has limitations. Its illustrative exchanges are composites drawn from the literature, and the patterns identified require empirical verification. Future research could use interviews, classroom observation, and discourse completion tasks to compare learners from different linguistic backgrounds, to examine how pragmatic competence in Thai develops over time, and to investigate how Thai speakers themselves perceive and accommodate foreign learners. Such work would deepen understanding of how cross-cultural meaning is negotiated in a language that is growing in regional and international importance.

References

- Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. William Morrow.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Cooke, J. R. (1968). *Pronominal reference in Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese*. University of California Press.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Press/Doubleday.

- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Holmes, H., & Tangtongtavy, S. (1995). *Working with the Thais: A guide to managing in Thailand*. White Lotus.
- Intachakra, S. (2004). Contrastive pragmatics and language teaching: Apologies and thanks in English and Thai. *RELJ Journal*, 35(1), 37–62.
- Intachakra, S. (2012). Politeness motivated by the 'heart' and 'binary rationality' in Thai culture. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(5), 619–635.
- Iwasaki, S., & Ingkaphirom Horie, P. (2005). *A reference grammar of Thai*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2002). *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Blackwell.
- Komin, S. (1990). *Psychology of the Thai people: Values and behavioral patterns*. National Institute of Development Administration.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mulder, N. (2000). *Inside Thai society: Religion, everyday life, change*. Silkworm Books.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 129–158.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (Ed.). (2008). *Culturally speaking: Culture, communication and politeness theory* (2nd ed.). Continuum.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91–112.
- Ukosakul, M. (2005). The significance of 'face' and politeness in social interaction as revealed through Thai 'face' idioms. In R. T. Lakoff & S. Ide (Eds.), *Broadening the horizon of linguistic politeness* (pp. 117–125). John Benjamins.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2003). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction* (2nd ed.). Mouton de Gruyter.