

# ERRORS IN TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH INTO THAI OF THE THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS, NAKHON PHANOM UNIVERSITY

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate grammatical and semantic errors in translation of English into Thai produced by twenty students majoring in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Nakhon Phanom University. The data was a 20-item test of English-into-Thai translation. The findings revealed that the participants produced 170 errors: 80 were grammatical, 90 semantic. The grammatical errors found in the translated sentences produced by the participants were influenced by their misconceptions about passive voice, tenses, and dummy subjects, while all semantic errors found were influenced by the participants' misperception and misunderstanding of homonyms, phrasal verbs or two-word verbs, and idioms.

**Keywords:** Errors; Translation Problems

## Introduction

At present, there are many Thai universities that are required students in English major to enroll in the English-Thai Translation Course e.g. Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University Khon Kaen University, Ubonratchathani University and Nakhon Phanom University, and they usually find that what they translate into the Thai version is not what the English version means. This may be partly due to the fact that they lack a clear understanding of English grammatical structures and homonyms, words with multiple-meanings. Significant research studies have found that Thai students have translation problems which can be classified into three

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types: (1) words, (2) phrasal verbs, and (3) grammatical structures. Saengaramruang, (2002: 257) concluded that Thai students have the following translation problems: grammatical errors caused by the interference of their mother tongue language; choosing the wrong meaning of homonyms; misinterpretation of idioms, expressions, similar words, phrasal verbs, proverbs, and sayings; misplaced modifiers; translating the English text they do not understand; making mistakes in translating coherent and cohesive devices causing discontinuity of the language and confused thoughts; lack of cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries causing word-for-word translation; using Thai words inappropriate to Thai culture; and lack of knowledge about the lexicon of specific fields leading to use of language and styles which are awkward. Wimonchalao, (2000: 163-164) found the causes of errors Thai students made in translation to be along the same lines as those found by Saengaramruang. Wimonchalao (2000: 163-164) pointed out that the translation mistakes made by Thai students are caused by the influence of the Thai language. When writing or translating into English, Thai students think first in the Thai language and then relay translation into English verbatim. This study is significant because no research has been done before with the English major students of Nakhon Phanom University who are taking the English-Thai Translation Course. From our teaching experience, we have found that most of our English major students are not knowledgeable about the grammatical structures of English and multiple-meaning words as much as they should as shown in the example below.

### Example 1

**Sentence:** It is said that all men are created equal.

**Thai Translation:** มันถูกกล่าวว่าผู้ชายทั้งหมดถูกสร้างเท่าเทียมกัน  
มันได้รับการพูดว่าผู้ชายทั้งหมดถูกสร้างเท่าเทียมกัน  
เป็นที่ถูกพูดถึงว่าผู้ชายทั้งหมดถูกสร้างเท่าเทียมกัน

**Correct Translation:** กล่าวกันว่ามนุษย์ทุกคนเกิดมาเท่าเทียมกัน

From Example 1, the students made three translation errors. The first error is from the dummy subject “it (มัน)”;

The second error is using the word “ถูก”, which has the negative meaning and is inappropriate to Thai culture. The third mistake is a homonym error. The word “men” was translated as “ผู้ชาย (adult males)”. The word “men” in this context means “human beings” or in Thai “มนุษย์”. The student chose the wrong meaning of the homonym.

### Example 2

**Sentence:** She was killed by her husband.

**Thai Translation:** หล่อนฆ่าสามีของหล่อน

**Correct Translation:** หล่อนถูกสามีของหล่อนฆ่า

From Example 2, the student misinterpreted passive voice as active voice. In the Thai translation, she used active voice and misinterpreted that "she" was the doer who killed her husband. This showed that the student did not understand the passive voice.

From the problems found in the translation class, it is worth doing research exploring the translation problems of Thai students. The results of the research will contribute to the pedagogical implications leading to more efficient teaching and learning in the English-Thai Translation Course and help improve students' translation abilities and their English language proficiency.

### Objectives

To find the problems in translation of the third-year English major students at Nakhon Phanom University.

### Definitions of terms

1. Translation refer to the process of translating words or texts from one language into another.
2. Error refers to mistakes both English to Thai and Thai to English translation
3. Semantic errors refer to mistakes in choosing an appropriate words for

certain contexts

### Benefits of the Research

1. Lecturers can develop efficient teaching methods to prevent future students from making mistakes.
2. Lecturers can develop translation principles and techniques from students' mistakes to help improve students' translation.
3. Students' mistakes will be corrected and all students will be aware of their mistakes. Consequently, they will improve their English proficiency and translation skills.

### Literature review

The errors of translation have three perspectives involved in translation-culture, syntax and semantics.

Supol (1992: 65) said that translation is dependent on interpretation of culture. He gave the example of Eskimo culture of which meaning is related to the state of mind. He illustrates this notion by giving an example of the word *liver* of Eskimo language. If the translators do not understand the culture of Eskimo, they may mistranslate in the sentence. His *liver* is heavy. It means that he is *sad*.

Wimonchalao (1994: 186) identifies the different between English and Thai that trigger incorrectness in translation. For the example, the word "yes" in English is not usually used in negative sentence but Thai students usually do it as their culture. Moreover, Thai people often use family terms to call others who are not their real relatives, which is unusual in English.

For syntax, Wimonchalao (1994: 78) said that if students lack of structural knowledge, their translation cannot be correct. The following structure can mislead Thai students to understand that the word *bad* modifies the verb created. In fact, it modifies the noun *men*.

All men are created bad.

Incorrect translation                      มนุษย์ถูกสร้างมาอย่างไม่ดี

All men are created badly.

Correct translation    พระเจ้า (หรือธรรมชาติ)สร้างมนุษย์มาให้มีนิสัยเลว

God (or nature) made us to be bad.

Supol (1992: 66) gave an example of the sentence *John talked about the murder last night*. This sentence is ambiguous. The word last night may modify either the verb *talked* or the noun *the murder*. If there are some people interpreted incorrect way, a mistake can be made.

For semantics, Kemmer (2003) has a strong statement that loanwords are troublesome to their users. Some words are borrowed, their meanings are changed. The meanings adaptation always causes error in translation. Wimonchalao (1994: 59) said that semantics mistake can occur in translation if any students lack of vocabulary and idioms knowledge. She said that students do not know that many English words have various meanings, depending on where and how they are used

## Methodology

The samples of the study were gained by purposive sampling. They were the third-year English major students of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Nakhon Phanom University. They were enrolled in the English-Thai Translation Course in the first semester of the academic year 2019. The sample was comprised of three male students and seventeen female students, totaling 20 students.

The research method designed for this study was a qualitative. The instrument used for collecting the data was a 20-item test of English-into-Thai translation constructed by the researchers and its reliability was 0.97. The statistics used for analyzing the data were frequency and percentage.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

#### Part 1 Analysis of the Frequency of Errors in the Translation

The analysis of the errors found in the translation of English into Thai of the third-year English major students from the translation test of 20 items showed that the students had errors in translating grammar and structure, vocabulary, and idioms/phrasal verbs. The results of the research revealed errors in grammar and structure made by the Thai students as shown in Table 1 below:

The students had the highest frequency of errors in translating passive voice with 48 frequencies representing 60 percent, followed by the translation of tenses with 21 frequencies representing 26.25 percent, and by the translation of dummy subjects with 11 frequencies representing 13.75 percent respectively.

**Table1: Errors in Grammar and Structure**

Rating	Error	Number	Percent
1	Translation of Passive Voice	48	60
2	Translation of Tenses	21	26.25
3	Translation of Dummy Subjects	11	13.75
	Total	80	100

Moreover, from the analysis of errors in vocabulary and phrases as shown in Table 2, it was found that the students had the highest frequency of errors in translating idioms with 49 frequencies representing 54.44 percent, followed by the translation of multiple- meaning words with 41 frequencies representing 45.56 percent.

**Table 2: Errors in Vocabulary, Idioms, and Phrasal Verbs**

Rating	Error	Number	Percent
1	Translation of idioms/phrasal verbs	49	54.44
2	Translation of multiple-meaning words	41	45.56
	Total	90	100

## Part 2: Examples of Errors

### 1. The Errors in Grammar and Structure

It was found that the students had errors in translation of passive voice and tenses as shown in the samples below.

#### Translation of Passive Voice

Two problems were found about translating passive voice. Some students who were not knowledgeable about passive voice translated the below sentence “A lost boy has been found by the police.” as “A lost boy found the police.” Some students who were knowledgeable about passive voice used the inappropriate Thai word “ถูกเจอ”, which has a negative meaning instead of the positive Thai word “ได้พบ”.

#### Example 1

**Sentence:** A lost boy has been found by the police.

**Translation:** เด็กผู้ชายที่หายไปพบตำรวจ  
เด็กผู้ชายที่หายไปเจอตำรวจ

**Correct Translation:** ตำรวจพบตัวเด็กที่หายไป

#### Example 2

**Sentence:** A lost boy has been found by the police.

**Translation:** เด็กผู้ชายที่หายไปถูกพบโดยตำรวจ

**Correct Translation:** ตำรวจพบตัวเด็กที่หายไป

#### Translation of Tenses

The verb of the English language will change its structure when changing time, but in the Thai language, the verb does not change according to time. Therefore, students who learn English as a foreign language are confused or lack understanding of the meanings of verb tenses of sentences.

#### Example 1

**Sentence:** Have you finished your project?

**Translation:** คุณมีทำเสร็จโครงการของคุณแล้วยัง

**Correct Translation:** คุณทำโครงการของคุณเสร็จแล้วยัง

The student translated the present perfect tense verbatim instead of translating based on the meaning of the present perfect tense.

In addition, it was found that the students had a problem finding main verbs in the sentences and made mistakes in their translation.

#### Example 2

Sentence: The ideas that had been presented in the previous meetings were discussed.

Translation: ความคิดแสดงในการประชุมครั้งก่อนอภิปรายไปแล้ว

Correct Translation: ความคิดที่ได้รับการแสดงในการประชุมครั้งก่อนได้รับการนำมาอภิปรายต่อ

Example 2 shows that the student had a problem with sentences having an adjective clause used as a modifier and could not identify the main verb of the sentence.

## 2. The Errors in Vocabulary and Idioms/Phrasal Verbs

It was found that the students made mistakes in translating sentences with multiple-meaning words and idioms/phrasal verbs as illustrated below with examples:

### Multiple-Meaning Words

The findings revealed that the students had problems with multiple-meaning words. For example, the students were confused with the meaning of the word "rose" (past simple verb) in which the context and sentence structure means "stood up" but students thought that it was a kind of flower and translated it as "ดอกกุหลาบ (a rose)".

#### Example 1:

**Sentence:** He quickly rose from his seat.

**Translation:** เขาเอาดอกกุหลาบจากที่นั่งอย่างรวดเร็ว

**Correct Translation:** เขาลุกขึ้นจากที่นั่งอย่างรวดเร็ว

### Idioms

It was found that the students had errors in translating idioms and trans-



lated them verbatim. For example, they translated the idiom “all the time in the world” in the sentence “We have all the time in the world” verbatim instead of translating it as an idiom meaning “having enough time” as shown in the sample below.

Example:

**Sentence:** We don’t have to rush. We have all the time in the world.

**Translation:** ไม่ต้องรีบร้อน เรามีเวลาทั้งหมดในโลก

**Correct Translation:** ไม่ต้องรีบร้อน เรามีเวลาเหลือเฟือ

### Phrasal Verbs

It was also found that the students had errors in translating phrasal verbs and translated them verbatim. For example, they translated the phrasal verb “put off” in the sentence “The meeting is put off until next Monday” verbatim instead of translating it as a phrasal verb meaning “postponed” as shown in the sample below.

Example:

**Sentence:** The meeting is put off until next Monday.

**Translation:** การประชุมวางปิดจนกระทั่งวันจันทร์หน้า

**Correct Translation:** การประชุมได้รับการเลื่อนออกไปเป็นวันจันทร์หน้า

### Discussion

The research findings can be discussed as follows:

1. The analysis of errors in the translation of English into Thai of the third-year English major students from the translation test of twenty items showed that the students had errors in grammar and structure, homonyms, idioms, and phrasal verbs. The analysis of data using such statistics as frequency and percentage shown in Table 1 revealed that the students had the highest frequency of errors in translating passive voice with 48 frequencies representing 60 percent, followed by the translation of tenses with 21 frequencies representing 26.25 percent, and by the

translation of dummy subjects with 11 frequencies representing 13.75 percent respectively.

2. The analysis of errors in vocabulary, idioms, and phrasal verbs using such statistics as frequency and percentage as shown in Table 2 revealed that the students had the highest frequency of errors in translating idioms with 49 frequencies representing 54.44 percent, followed by the translation of multiple-meaning words with 41 frequencies representing 45.56 percent.

In summary, from the research results, it was found that most students still lack background knowledge of the grammatical structures of the English language. They were not knowledgeable about multiple-meaning words, idioms, and phrasal verbs. They were also uninformed about the culture of native English speaking countries. Furthermore, they had problems with using Thai words appropriately and did not know the techniques and principles of effective translation. Lack of knowledge about grammatical structures and semantics of the English language as well as the culture of native English speaking countries is the cause of the failure in conveying the meanings of both the grammatical structures and the meanings of the words/idioms/phrasal verbs in the sentences of the translated texts.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the research study were consistent with Panchai Thantham's (1994) and many other studies' which discussed the errors of translation of Thai students that the lack of knowledge about grammatical structures, the meanings of multiple-meaning words, expressions, idioms, phrasal verbs, and proverbs of the English language as well as the cultural knowledge of the native English speaking countries make Thai students fail to convey the meanings of sentences and cause errors in translation.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations from Research Results

The findings of the study have a number of pedagogical implications for future practice as follows:

1. Before starting the English-Thai Translation Course, lecturers should have students do a pretest on English-Thai translation so that lecturers will know their English proficiency and their problems of translation.
2. Lecturers should provide teaching methods/principles/techniques in accordance with the problems found in the students' translation test.

### Recommendations for Further Research Studies

1. Researchers increase the size of population and samples for the generalizability.
2. Researchers construct a more detailed instrument using a test including more contents to ascertain all of the Thai students' translation problems.

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