Choosing Lao Pronouns for Conversational Purposes: Negotiating and Establishing Relationships Verbally

Carol J. Compton
University of Wisconsin-Madison

0. Abstract

Building on my earlier work on the use of Lao pronouns in dialogues found in Lao fiction (Compton 1992), this study analyzes the choice of pronouns in both formal and informal conversations in Lao. Pronominal choices are discussed in terms of the actual pronouns used, as well as the factors which may influence speakers to make the choices they do. Both "standard" pronouns and kintype pronouns are discussed, as are the social contexts and situational factors involved in choosing them.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of the second phase of a research project on Lao pronouns, kinship terms, and their use.

Numerous studies exist, for a wide variety of languages, which focus on how various social relationships influence a speaker's selection of terms of address and second person pronominal usage. For some languages, there are studies of social influence on first and third person pronominal usage as well (see the work of Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). As John Spencer (1977:vii) comments:

Such studies open up a picture of the processes of personal interaction in a given society, showing how address forms and pronominal usage indicate difference or dominance, intimacy or distance, equality or differential status. Relationships between individuals are not necessarily, of course, static or permanently fixed; and changes in relationships may be marked, and perceived, by changes of address form or pronoun. In fact, individuals may utilise
the options offered by these forms to manipulate the attitudes towards them of those they address.

At this point in my research on pronominal usage in Tai languages, I am not ready to make even tentative conclusions about the manipulation of attitudes which may result from the use of particular pronoun sets or kinship terms used pronominally. However, I do have some observations about the process of negotiation and selection which appears to be in use for Lao pronouns and kinship terms. I submit that we will find similar processes of sociolinguistic negotiation in use in a number of other Southeast Asian languages. For most Tai languages, both first and second person pronouns, including kinship terms used pronominally, may be involved in negotiation and third person pronouns may be affected as well.

In this paper, I present a theoretical model for viewing Lao sociolinguistic relationships and a description of a variety of techniques that I have observed being used by speakers of Lao to determine, select or change pronouns or kinship term use. I discuss some of the exceptions to the use of "sets" of pronouns or "reciprocal pairings" of kinship terms used pronominally. Then I indicate a number of social situations which may limit negotiation. Finally, I present an outline of steps used in determining Lao pronoun selection.

2. A Model for Viewing Lao Sociolinguistic Relationships

Linguistic interpersonal social distance varies from society to society and from language to language, as well as within a particular language and society. I present here a theoretical model for Lao to illustrate the sociolinguistic position of speakers in relation to ego. (A graphic for this model can be found in the appendix.) A series of concentric circles are used to represent rings of society within which ego interacts. At the center ring is ego. In the ring immediately surrounding ego are those who have an intimate or semi-intimate relationship with ego. In the next ring are those who are unknown or somewhat distant from ego. This is the area of most neutral relationship to ego. Farthest from ego, in the
outer ring are those who deserve or demand respect in society through status, age, position or role. Linguistic usage will depend upon a speaker's position in the circle of relationships with ego.

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the outer ring of the model, some of the forms which ego may use in conversation include: 1) high respect pronouns such as thàan (second person) or phàn (third person); 2) a role or occupational title such as khùu ('teacher'); 3) a respect term such as ŋáa in front of a kinship term used pronominally such as mèe ('mother') thus producing a form such as ŋáa mèe.¹

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the next ring in from the outside, that is those about whom ego has little information or whom ego may wish to keep at a distance, some of the forms which ego may use in conversation include: 1) standard pronouns for 'you' and 'I' such as ców and khỳ and for the third person, a pronoun such as láaw; 2) avoidance of pronoun or kinship terms whenever possible.

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the ring closest to ego, quite a number of pronouns are available in Lao. In addition, one can select the most appropriate (in terms of age and sex) kinship term to be used pronominally. It should be made clear that for such terms to be used, one is not necessarily related to the person with whom one uses such a kinship term. (Occasionally, one may choose to use a kinship term in an environment such as the market or a restaurant, even though the recipient is in fact not an intimate.) Examples of forms which ego might use in conversation with members of this group include: 1) pronouns such as kùu, tōo, and mán (first, second, and third person respectively, but not a set per se); and 2) kinship terms used pronominally such as pàyay ('older brother/male only a little older than ego') or pāa ('aunt/female somewhat older than one's parents').
Finally, elsewhere I noted (Compton 1992:113) that when kinship terms are used pronominally, they have, in fact, floating person. The first, second or third person aspect is determined primarily by the real world relationship in age between those conversing or conversed about, and is not a feature of the word being used pronominally itself.

3. Techniques of Initial Negotiation

On initially meeting another for the first time, speakers may skillfully participate in a "pronoun selection dance." There are a number of steps in this dance, any of which may be used to arrive at the correct conversational pattern.

A common technique used by speakers observed in my research is that of initially avoiding the use of pronouns in conversation when interacting with another for the first time. Lao (and Thai) allows for this possibility because, once engaged in conversation, the subject slot may be left empty. The situational context is one in which "you" and "I" are obviously the two speaking to each other; thus there is generally no need to mark the obvious fact that when I am speaking, "I" is the speaker and "you" is the addressee. A variation on the avoidance of personal pronoun usage is to use a known title to address the unfamiliar person, at the same time avoiding any use of personal pronoun for the self.

Another frequently used technique is to defer a decision on more appropriate pronominal usage by staying with the neutral pronoun set, câw and khjy, 'you' and 'I' respectively. This pronoun set may be appropriately used while one gathers more social information about the other. The new social information can then help one to determine what pronominal adjustments might be more appropriate in the conversation.

A technique which appears in conversations of women is to use one's personal name (usually a nickname) to refer to self (i.e. in the grammatical slot for and with the meaning of 'I') and to use the role or title for addressing the other.

An attempt by one speaker to initiate a pronoun set usage (other than the neutral set) may result in what I call a