

HIGH AND LOW THAI: VIEWS FROM WITHIN

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INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic complexity in Thai has attracted the attention of foreign travellers and scholars for some time, but the Thais themselves have also been keenly aware of the richness of their language in this regard.¹ The Thai language calls itself *phasăa thay* (or *phasăa thay*, see (17)). The term *phasăa* easily combines with qualifiers to indicate linguistic varieties quite in line with what Sapir called 'language subforms', now more generally referred to as styles or 'registers' (Halliday 1978:31-35):

(1) official register	<i>phasăa rāatchakaan</i>
legal register	<i>phasăa kòtmăay</i>
'educationese'	<i>phasăa kaansũksăa</i>
'market patois'	<i>phasăa talàat</i>
written register	<i>phasăa náŋsũw</i>
oral register (lit. <i>spoken</i>)	<i>phasăa phũut</i>
oral register (lit. <i>of the mouth</i>)	<i>phasăa pàak</i>

STYLE AND CONTEXT

Thai scholars and educators frequently observe that the Thai language is differentiated according to 'contextual features' (*kaanlá?theesà?*, a Sanskrit compound of 'time' and 'place'; see e.g. Thichinphong 1979:164). There is clear realisation that many linguistic forms vary and must be selected with reference to social relationships holding among interlocutors. Posakritsana (1978:13) has gone so far as to point to the complex personal reference system in Thai, which is very sensitive to comparative social standing and ascribed deference, and to extol it as an improvement over the impoverished systems of English or other Western languages.

It is of particular interest that in spite of a well-codified 'doctrine of purity' introduced mainly in the early 20th century under indirect Western influence, leading Thai scholars have understood that 'too correct' a register may be inappropriate on certain occasions. Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, for years one of the leading figures in Thai language studies and an editor of the official normative dictionary, observed

- (2) Receptive understanding on the part of the listener is not simply a matter of receiving words which have been expressed by the speakers. That which is unexpressed or repressed by the speaker may be received and understood by the listener as well. In ordinary speech there is apt not to be full

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linguistic specification. Anyone who makes such full specifications will be considered scornful or 'pedantic'. For example, rather than saying, 'Do you see or not?' one might simply say 'See?'; or one might only clear one's throat; in each case the listener would understand what is meant.

(Rajadhon 1956:177; translation provided)

It is not far from this idea to the notion of 'reciprocity of perspectives' and of the 'indexical' nature of informal communication as articulated in the phenomenological sociologies of knowledge of Schütz, Garfinkel, et al. The use of the term 'scornful' (dàtcarìt) above is of particular significance, since it indicates that Thai scholars have been aware of complicated interconnections between register differentiation, degree of overt specification, appropriate level of intimacy or informality, and subjective emotional consequences of the various register assignments (or misassignments).²

The term *register* has been used above intentionally, since Thais' discussions of their sociolinguistic situation frequently incorporate this notion, even though the actual form phasàa may be used. Gedney (1961:109ff) has noted that earlier foreign scholars misunderstood the nature of Thai royal vocabulary (raachaasàp), believing it to be a "separate language" to be used when speaking to or about royal persons. Gedney shows that this conception is inaccurate, and that, as its name in Thai indicates, it is rather a system of lexical substitutions or "highly conventionalized euphemisms" quite limited in scope (some 250 items in all, by his count). 'Register', it would seem, could subsume the royal and closely-related ecclesiastical varieties, since predictable occurrence of particular forms is again the function of contextual features (kaanlá?theesà?). Also, the degree to which available royal forms may be substituted in a given discourse is contextually determined in a manner again suggesting register. However here 'context' needs to be differentiated into what Ricoeur and other literary analysts have called 'inner' and 'outer' contexts. 'Palace speech', when used by commoners about royalty, is mainly determined by inner context or 'text-internal' reference (whether the 'text' is referring to a prince of such-and-such a rank). Yet there is the possibility that outer contextual features, such as discourse participant identity and speech-act factors, may enter into how many or which 'royal forms' are selected too. In some informal situations many Thais, especially less-educated ones, would react to 'overuse' of royal forms as either a playful showing-off or even as a gesture of scorn (dàtcarìt, as above) directed at those who had not had opportunity to learn their 'proper' use.

Whether or not the term *diglossia* is appropriate in the Thai context is an interesting related question. Greek and Arabic represented linguistic situations which Ferguson took as paradigmatic for diglossia when he introduced the term in 1959. These language communities both resemble and are different from what one finds in the Thai community. The title of this paper rather to the contrary, there is really no absolute high-low bifurcation of Thai into two discrete languages or styles (and this appears to be the case at least for Greek as well). On the other hand, virtually any native speaker of Thai can quite effortlessly classify a great range of phonological, lexical and even syntactic material in the language, including paired variants, into 'relatively higher' and 'relatively lower' categories. The Thai terms for *high* and *low* (sǔuŋ, tām) may even be used spontaneously by Thais when discussing these phenomena, and a binary emphasis of such type is frequently found in educational materials used in Thai primary and secondary schools. Yet even here it is clear that there is more to the problem than simple two-way layered classification. Apart from specialised topics like palace and ecclesiastical speech, there are archaic-poetic, technical-urban and

rural-dialectal varieties and issues, each of which adds separate dimensions. It is perhaps in the up-country regional areas that local rural and national standard bidialectalism most closely approaches the condition of classic diglossia, with two discrete and theoretically 'self-sufficient' varieties co-existing side-by-side, but used for different social purposes. In these situations the national standard is referred to as *phasǎ klǎaŋ* (*central language*) which appears to have both geographical and functional connotations: Central Region or *high koiné*. (Even here structured mixing may occur, with the definition of local 'urban hybrid' forms of speech; see Diller 1979.) But socially tiered local-rural/urbanised national-standard contrasts are familiar the world over, and 'diglossia' is perhaps better reserved for more restricted usage. In any event, the Thai speech community is replete with 'diglossic contrasts', and perhaps sociolinguistic variation of the type discussed here might be termed *diglossic register differentiation*, or to make use of the earlier Sapirian term, distinction of *diglossic subforms*.

One promising operational approach to diglossic analysis is in the amount of overt attention paid to speech. Labov (1970) has even suggested that varieties or styles can be ranked, in theory at least, in a single dimension on this basis. Would this be a plausible device for arranging Thai registers along a high-low scale? The problem is that Thai varieties which are spontaneous and unedited for certain social groups - which have in fact been naturally acquired mainly in early childhood rather than through formal education - for social 'outsiders' represent an overt learning task to which much conscious attention must be paid if the registers are to be mastered. An excellent if rather specialised example can be found in the opening chapters of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's epic novel *Four Reigns* [sǐi phèndin], where we learn that in former days young girls brought up in the inner 'forbidden city' of the king's harem acquired the proper use of royal vocabulary as a matter of course, but for outsiders its acquisition was an awkward and difficult task requiring much conscious attention.³ Similarly, present-day Thai children brought up in well-educated urbanised families learn spontaneously much of what children from uneducated rural backgrounds would need to acquire through conscious or semi-conscious effort. Not that there is nothing left in terms of linguistic register for urban-elite children to learn consciously: various literary forms and styles remain to be acquired through formal education. The point is that for rural or working-class children there are additional demands on 'linguistic attention'. Labov's ranking might then apply for any given individual as a single-dimension arrangement of registers, but it would be inadequate as a means of coming to terms with register complexity in the Thai speech community as a whole.

On the other hand, it is certainly fruitful to study terms used consciously by Thais themselves in characterising various Thai registers, realising with Labov that such explicit attention will tend to single out specialised diglossic strata. In addition to terms such as those introduced in (1), the following adjectival descriptors are common in characterisations of speech or text samples under some sort of evaluative consideration:

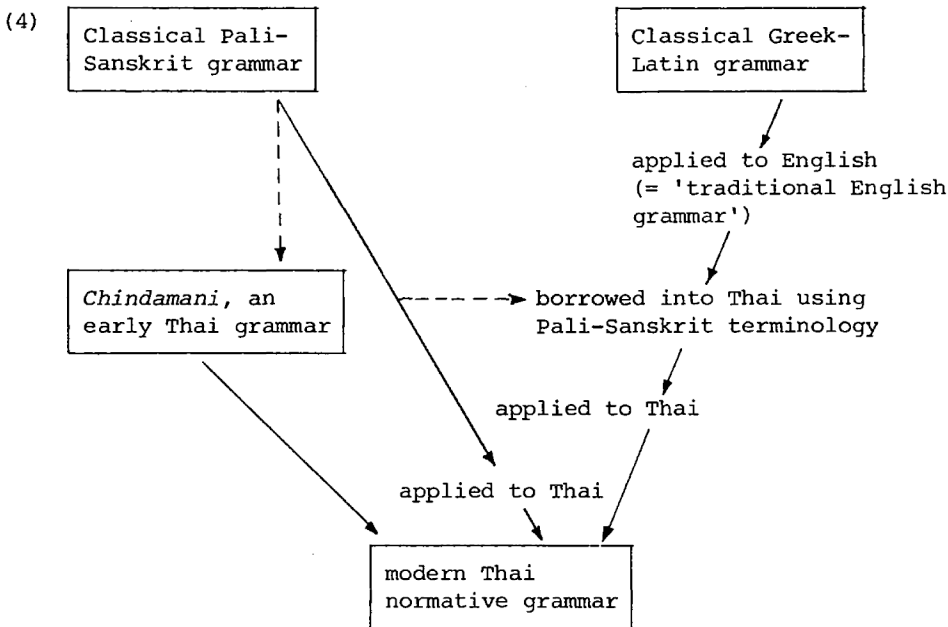
- | | |
|-------------|--------------------|
| (3) polite | suphǎap |
| refined | pranít |
| harmonious | phayrǎʔ, phrǎʔ |
| elaborate | salǎʔ-salǎy |
| clear | chát-ceen, chát |
| correct | thùuk-tǔŋ |
| grammatical | thùuk làk (phasǎa) |

ungrammatical	phìt làk (phasăa)
hypercorrect, pedantic	dàtcarìt
rude, coarse	yàap
rustic, brogue-like	nəə
ambiguous	kamkuam
curt, too direct	húan

Most of these terms also occur in the negative.

TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

For the linguist, a clarification is in order for the terms glossed *grammatical, ungrammatical*.⁴ The present constitution of Thai normative-prescriptive grammar is a rather complicated series of superimpositions and syntheses which might be represented as follows:



Thus terminology pertaining to the Pāṇinian analysis of Sanskrit morphophonemics, such as terms describing phonological alternation or semantic case-role (kāra) phenomena have found their way into Thai prescriptive grammar:

(5)

sandhi	sǒnthí?
vṛddhi	phrútthí?
nominative case	kantùkaarók
accusative case	kammakaarók

So have additional Indic neologisms, created in the 1920s and 1930s to translate terms of English traditional grammar (in turn based on Latin and Greek):