When Bargaining Was in Bloom:
Changing Language and Social Relationships in Thai Food Markets

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INTRODUCTION

A generation ago—or less—in Thailand, it was the rule to bargain, that is negotiate a final price, for many items—large and small—and for some services in Thailand. The housewife or servant, for example, would wend her way to the neighborhood market very early in the morning, most likely each morning, to procure the day’s käpkhāaw (literally ‘with rice’) items that are eaten as side dishes along with rice as the main staple. She might have taken a sāam lōo ‘samlor’ or ‘pedicab,’ if the distance were too far, her purchases too heavy, the weather a problem, or her household status demanded it. In both cases, whether in Bangkok or in a provincial town, these daily activities involved bargaining—haggling over a few bàat (then as now, the exchange rate was US $1 = 25 Baht), salīn ‘one quarter of a bàat,’ or satàann ‘one hundredth of a bàat.’ The farān ‘Westerner’ who knew how to speak even a minimal amount of Thai first learned to count and then to haggle, using the verbs lōt ‘to bargain, haggle,’ ?aw ‘to take or want,’ the pre-verb or auxiliary dāy ‘can, to be able to,’ the negative māy ‘not,’ the interrogative māy ‘particle in yes/no questions,’ and the wh-interrogatives thāwray ‘how much’ and kī ‘how many’ to process a procurement.

Language textbooks for teaching Thai to foreigners then and now contain dialogs and narratives centered around bargaining situations. Witness the following (Brown, 1969, p. 69), in which the situation details a (stereotyped) Westerner who cannot speak Thai, let alone know how to bargain, but is lucky enough to have two servants, one to market each day, while the second stays home to guard the house:

farān pay cāay käpkhāaw kō lambāak, phrī? phūt thay māy dāy.
khon khāay bōok khāay thāwray, kō tō rakhaa māy pen.

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‘It is difficult for Westerners to go shopping for food, because they can’t speak Thai. When the seller tells them how much, they don’t know how to bargain.’

A dialog between a Westerner and his servant (Brown, 1968, p. 101) instructs the student in the language used to bargain for a tricycle taxi (säamlóo). In this exchange the Farang, the student’s potential alter ego, does speak Thai:

(A: Westerner; B: Thai servant.)

B: säamlóo maa léew khráp. Here’s the samlor.
A: kháw ca ?aw kíi bát  
How much does he want?
B: sìp bát khráp.  
Ten baht.
A: pheøy pay.  
That’s too much.

thäam kháw wåa pêet bát dáy máy.  
Ask him if he’ll take eight.

Another record of the saliency of bargaining in making food purchases in the past are scenes from a documentary film made in the 1970s entitled Children of Bangkok.² This film depicts a typical day in the life of three young teenage boys, one of whom is a perambulating pedlar, who goes through back streets selling plaa mòk, banana leaf packets of fish steamed in coconut curry by day and jasmine garlands by night. As the boy walks through a slum neighborhood in Bangkok, he chants plaintively, “Steamed fish, ma’am/sir.” When he is stopped, his customers ask the price and the bargaining begins. The first customer (A) is a woman, alone. The young pedlar (B) rejects her offer to bargain, which can be explained in a number of ways. This is his first sale of the afternoon, and he wants to keep his price up so as to maximize his profit. Or, in addition, he quickly sizes up the woman, who is alone, and decides he is in a position where can get her to pay easily.

B: plaa mòk, khráp (chanted from a distance)  Curried fish (politely).

[Approaching his first buyer.]

A: khâay yannjay  
How much? (lit. How do you sell?)
B: hôo lá sônny bát  
Two baht per packet.
A: sääm hôo, háa bát, dáy máy  
How about five packets for four baht?
B: máy dáy  
No, I can’t.

[She makes the purchase. He walks on, singing out, “plaa mòk, khráp.” Then, he comes to his second customer, a woman. This time, on his own initiative, he changes the price structure to admit a bargain—the same that he just rejected from the first woman. He is now in a group of people, and he

²Children of Bangkok, a twenty-minute documentary produced in 1971 by Sterling Educational Films, 241 E. 34th St. New York, NY 10016, U.S.A.
possibly sees the chance to sell his entire tray of packets—or to appear more willing to bargain and thus attract a larger clientele for the present and future—and get back to his supplier quickly for a refill.]

A: *khāay yaŋŋay*  How much? (lit. How do you sell?)
B: *hōo lá sǒŋ, sāam hā* Two per packet; three for five.

[Now his first male customer approaches. The male, unlike the two women, does not bargain; he is very direct and to the point. It appears that “real men don’t bargain.” On the other hand, women, more frequent marketers, are experienced.]

A: *sǒŋ hōo thårāy yā?*  How much for two packets?
B: *sīi bāat hā*  Four baht (semi-politely)
A: *sīi bāat nā?*  Four baht, okay?

[The third female buyer comes. She bargains for just two packets, but she fails.]

A: *hōo thāwṛāy*  How much a packet?
B: *hōo lá? sǒŋ*  Two per packet.
A: *sǒŋ hōo tō dāy máy* Can I bargain on two packets?
     *sǒŋ hōo lia sāam bāat dāy máy* Can I get two packets for three baht?
     B: *māy dāy*  No, you can’t.

[The second male enters the scene. Like his male counterpart, he doesn’t bargain.]

A: *hōo mōk (hōo) lá? thāwṛāy*  How much per packet for the curried fish?
B: *hōo lá? sǒŋ*  Two per packet.
A: *ʔaw sāam hōo*  I’ll take three packets.

[The fourth woman interjects, speaking a Southern Thai dialect.]

A: *hōo mōk thawdāy*  How much for the curried fish?
B: *hōo lá sǒŋ*  Two per packet.

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3 Southeast Asian women are also managers of the household budget and diet. Hence, most women would be more motivated than men to bargain as a means of stretching their finances.

4 The buyer uses a very informal, friendly final particle, *yā?*, close to the particle *cá?* used by adults, usually women, in talking to kids; *yā?* is possibly a reduced form of -(yaŋ) intéressant *nī nā*. The seller, a teenage boy, responds to this subtlety by using the semi-polite, deferential particle *hā*. 
A: sään hào hàà ná? Three packets for five, okay?

What is significant about this scene documented in Bangkok a generation ago is that the steamed fish pedlar invites his clientele to purchase his foodstuffs by chanting afar to them in a soft and alluring manner, each call punctuated by the utterance-final polite male (speaker) particle khráp. When they approach him, he speaks to them in gentle and deferential terms, using the semi-polite utterance-final polite particle hà. The language and social relation between seller and buyer is one of social softness and gentility.

By contrast, in talking to people in Bangkok in 1993 who grew up in the 60s and 70s, one hears the lament, in reminiscing on the past, that the softer ways of yore have been swept aside. Middle-aged people recall the chants of pedlars walking through their neighborhoods selling foods and sweets in mid-afternoon, or mid-morning refuse collectors singing out for old bottles to recycle. Complaints are now heard that many sidewalk pedlars, whom they probably do not know well, shout in an effort to promote sales of their wares. Their language is rough, their social graces rude. And the buyers often feel they are at the mercy of the seller’s “take it or leave it attitude.” It is a sign of the times.

To test the currency of the explicit language and implicit social relationships in the A.U.A. language materials, I carried out some preliminary research in food markets (not among street hawkers) in several regions of Thailand in 1993 (Jan.–Apr.) and spoke to a number of urban Thais about their perceptions of the practice of bargaining and the social relations between sellers and buyers in food markets. The motivation for this research came from my participation in the 1992 University of Hawaii Intensive Summer Institute for Foreign Language Teachers. One of our training goals was to design a language activity centered around shopping. The Thai participants in the institute had problems in arriving at a consensus about the language used in marketing: choice of pronouns, use of deferential particles—even the most natural expression for asking how much an item costs. In the end, we prepared dialogs that we all felt might be classified as “imagined conversations” between a Thai seller and a Western (Farang) buyer bargaining for everything from mangoes to T-shirts. The language was necessarily imagined because we were writing scenes far from Thailand, both in terms of space and time. Some of us had not been back to Thailand in many years—in one case, as long as twenty years.

In the Bangkok of 1993, the year when thousands of brand new ice-cream-colored taxis suddenly poured out onto the streets and freeways of Bangkok, thanks to a removal of the old quotas restricting the number of taxis in the city, the 40-cent tricycle-taxi ride of 1968 has given way to metered taxis, whose minimum fare is $1.40 (35 baht)⁵—and no bargaining is allowed.⁶ The most significant official buzzword of the

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⁵ At the official exchange rate of U.S. $1.00 = 25 Baht.
⁶ In a CNN televised interview of June 15, 1993, the Mayor of Bangkok, in commenting on traffic gridlock, stated that the city would need to construct a four-lane freeway one kilometer long each day in order to accommodate the number of new vehicles coming on to the city’s roads daily, a feat that no city can perform.