Register and Pragmatic Particles in Thai conversation*

Preeya Ingkaphirom Horie (The National Language Research Institute, Japan)
Shoichi Iwasaki (University of California, Los Angeles)

1. Introduction.

Register refers to the appropriate mode of speech which conversational participants create with verbal and non-verbal cues on the basis of variables, such as speech participants and situation. In our earlier paper (Iwasaki and Horie 1995), we specifically examined the role played by speech level markers such as khá, khráp and há and speech participant reference terms, such as phóm, chán, kuu, phíi, nüu and nicknames. In this paper we will shift our attention to a group of words we call "pragmatic particles." In particular we will examine the way in which pragmatic particles are related to the register phenomenon in Thai conversation.

In Iwasaki and Horie (1995), we identified two different dimensions of register. They are Formality and Deference dimensions. The Formality dimension is controlled by the situation in which conversation takes place and the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and addressee. Independent of the Formality dimension, there exists the Deference dimension which is defined by a positive psychological bond that exists between two acquaintances who are not equal in terms of age, social rank and/or occupation. This affection can be an intimacy coalesced with the respect that an inferior has for the superior or fondness that a superior feels towards an inferior. By definition, deference does not exist between two equals and in general it is inapplicable in the case of two strangers.

Formality Dimension is marked by a host of special words. One such group of words is pronominals (see Cooke 1968, Campbell 1969, Palakornkul 1972, Chirasombutti 1995). A male speaker refers to himself with kraphóm or phóm when the situation is formal, but he may use chán or kuu when the situation is informal. A female speaker may choose the appropriate pronoun among dichán, chán, kháw and so forth depending on formality of the situation. The second person pronouns are also sensitive to formality, and a range of signs is available from the most formal sign, kʰun, to the least formal, mujący. Use of nicknames in reference to the speaker and addressee also indicates a low degree of formality. Another group of linguistic signs that mark formality is the speech level markers. For example, khá (female)/khráp (male) and their phonological variants are formal speech level markers. High formality and/or high ranked addressee induce the use of these speech level markers. On the other hand, há and its variants (used by both male and female speakers) are markers of mid-level formality. There are also the very casual speech style markers wá and wóoy, which code an extremely casual speech register.

Deference, or the positive psychological bond, is indicated by different markers, such as kinship terms, occupational terms and other nominal references. For example, an older person in a conversation may refer to himself and/or be

* We dedicate this paper to the memory of the late John Hinds, who died on the 27th of September, 1994. We appreciate his friendship and scholarship in the field of discourse study. We acknowledge the following people who helped in various ways in the process of writing this article. Supa Chodchoey, Phensri Jenjantra, Amy Meepeo, Wichian Sittipraphapon, Kamol Sirichan, and Kanok Singkarin. Data collection was funded by the University of California's Pacific Rim Research Program (1993-1995) and the Office of International Studies and Overseas Program of UCLA (1992).
referred by others as phi (older sibling), or a younger female speaker may refer to herself or be referred to by an older conversational partner as nu (a mouse).

Since Formality and Deference are independent dimensions in register, it is possible to express two values simultaneously. A most interesting mixture appears when a sign indicating formality and that indicating deference appear together in one utterance. For example, when a younger female speaker addresses her older addressee with phi khá, she is expressing both intimacy and respect. As will be shown in this paper, pragmatic particles signal the speaker's understanding of the message he is conveying and his assessment of the addressee's readiness to accept the information, thus figuring yet another dimension in the register phenomenon.

2. Data

In the present research we used four separate conversations which give different impressions of register. (These conversations were also used in our previous study.) The length of each conversation data set was measured in terms of intonation units (IU) (Chafe 1993; 1994, Iwasaki in this volume), as indicated by the number in the parentheses. Most IUs relevant for our discussion are of the clausal type.

(a) "Students (SS)" - (298 IU): A casual conversation between male and female students on a university campus in Thailand. They argue about why they failed to meet as they had planned before the conversation took place and what they did after they parted the night before.

(b) "Earthquake" (EO) (285 IU): A conversation between two strangers (both students studying at colleges in Los Angeles) talking about their personal experiences during and after the Northridge earthquake of 1994. They also discuss the damage that their friends suffered and their impression about Americans' reactions to the disaster.

(c) "Teachers" (TT) - (210 IU): A conversation between senior and junior college teachers, both female, recorded in a school office in Bangkok. They discuss the senior teacher's recent operation and school matters.

(d) "Interview" (INT) (306 IU): A job interview between a male interviewer and a female interviewee who has applied for a waitress position at a hotel in Bangkok. The interviewer solicits information on the applicant's English ability, past job experience, and other relevant matters.

3. Pragmatic particles
3.1. Preliminary

Pragmatic particles, though they may appear within a sentence, usually show up sentence finally (see Iwasaki this volume). They express a speaker's evaluation at the message being conveyed with respect to the addressee. Thus, na, for example, indicates that the speaker considers the message he is communicating to be a rather minor point (Cooke 1989:16-7), and na, for example, shows that he encourages the addressee to accept the message being transmitted.

Pragmatic particles used here correspond to part of Peyasantiwong's (1981) "mood particles" and Cooke's (1989) "Sentence Particles." Exact membership of pragmatic particles is difficult to determine due to many phonological variants and similar functions shared by different groups of words.
In this study we will selectively examine the following seven particles which appear most frequently in the data. Brief descriptions of particles 1 through 4 and 7 are adapted from Cooke (1989). The analysis of \( nA \) is from Peyasantiwong (1981:237), and that of \( g\&a \) is our own analysis.

1. \( nA \) (agreement desired)
2. \( n\&a \) (minor, incidental matter)
3. \( lA? \) (critical point reached, or sole-alternative indicator)
4. \( ?a \) (shorter form of \( nA \) or \( lA? \))
5. \( niiA (nii "this" + \( n\&/lA? \))
6. \( g\&a (yaq nii"like this " + \( n\&/lA? \))
7. \( g\&y (known or rememberable referent)\)

Pragmatic particles code neither formality nor deference directly. They may be followed by a speech level marker (e.g., \( nA k\&a \)), and in fact, as we will see shortly, their distribution is not limited to any particular type of conversation. Having said that, we still notice a tendency of pragmatic particles to appear more in informal conversation than in formal conversation. We will argue later that this is because what these particles reveal is the speaker’s understanding of the message with respect to the addressee.

3.2 Frequencies of pragmatic particles in the data

Observing the frequency of speech level markers, we can assess the formality level of the four conversations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( wA/wA&amp;y )</th>
<th>( h&amp; )</th>
<th>( k&amp;/khr&amp;p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Table 1] Frequency of speech level markers

Table 1 indicates that SS is the least formal of the four since it lacks high and mid level formality markers, but instead contains several casual speech level markers, \( wA \) and \( wA\&y \). INT, on the other hand, is the most formal since it contains 53 formal markers of \( k\&/khr\&p \) and 33 mid-speech level markers, \( h\& \). EQ and TT fall in the middle of these two extremes containing 3 tokens of \( k\& \) (in EQ) and 12 and 20 tokens of \( h\& \), in EQ and TT, respectively. We can predict from this finding that SS contains the most pragmatic particles and INT the least. The results are shown below.
Table 2 presents the number of each pragmatic particle used by the participants in the four conversations. This table partially confirms our prediction. As we predicted, SS contains the most pragmatic particles (57). What is not confirmed is the actual frequency of pragmatic particle in INT. Since this is the most formal conversation among the four according to Table 1, it should contain the least number of particles, but it shows as many as 47 tokens (second to SS). We will explore the cause of this in the next section.

4. Discussion

We will argue in this section that pragmatic particles contribute to the register phenomenon differently than speech participant reference terms and speech level markers. The use of speech participant reference terms and speech level markers can be, to some extent, predetermined when the participants and speech situation are set. (However, refer to the notion of "middle ground register," in which participants negotiate the register by manipulating the variety and frequency of these markers (Iwasaki and Horie 1995). On the other hand, the use of pragmatic particles is not predetermined. The speaker must consider how the information he is communicating should be received by the addressee(s): "Can or should the addressee take it as known information?", "Can or should he take it as a minor point in the interaction?" and so forth. These decisions must be made constantly as the conversation proceeds by considering the content of information and the speaker's assessment of the addressee's knowledge.

If the interlocutors are long standing acquaintances with each other, they can rely on a vast amount of shared knowledge. The reason why there are more particles in TT (between two colleagues) than in EQ (between newly acquatinted college students) is probably due to this reason. Consider the next excerpt from TT, in which the pragmatic particle pâi appears in line 30. Prompted by J(unior) teacher’s question in 29, the S(enior) teacher says that she is waiting for the medical room to open.

(1) TT

29 J: phi ja ?aw ?arai há
-> 30 S: nát phâu pôkhroog dêk gây
31 J: ?ñas
32 S: nát phâu pôkhroog maa cao kan thíi hóng phyabaan
kö̖u pen lán phií noq há
33 S: lěw kū
34 S: bag ?aen nát phií noq khâw nát wây háy bêst moog nía