USAGE OF ADDRESS TERMS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THREE SOCIAL GROUPS

Presented at the International Conference
on Thai Studies
22-24 August 1984
Bangkok

by

WILAIWAN KANITTANAN
LIBERAL ARTS
THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
Address in the Thai language is a very complicated matter. In fact it is so complicated that very often speakers avoid addressing their listeners, not knowing with assurance which proper term to use. Address terms can be expressed linguistically by any of the following categories of terms:

1. Second-person pronouns
2. Kinship terms
3. Titles
4. First names and nicknames
5. Honorifics

Second-person pronouns. There are various words for second-person pronouns namely: [khun], [than], [the] [nai] [oey] [naai] and [nui]. The choice among these terms is determined by the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee which in turn depends on age and status. Since many discussions and studies have been done on personal pronouns the usage of the second-person pronouns will not be discussed in detail here.

Of the seven second-person pronouns cited above only the first two can cooccur with kinship terms, names and titles. Both [khun] and [than] convey the feeling of politeness and respect. However, their usage is distinguishable. [Khun] is used among equals and in informal situations. It is most commonly used before names to show that the speaker is polite to and respect the addressee. [Than] is used with superiors and in most cases it is used in formal situations. The only informal situation where [than] is used is when the addressee is a high ranking member of the royal family. [Than] is also a third-person pronoun for a respected person.
Kinship terms. Kinship terms like "grandfather" [čaa], [p̂u], "grandmother" [yai], [yai], "uncle" [luy], "aunt" [pañ], [nāa], "older sibling" [phī] and "younger" sibling" [nāp] are commonly used as address terms in informal situations to show intimacy and respect. It shows intimacy in that the speaker is talking to the addressee as if he/she were his kin though he/she may not be. It shows respect to the addressee if the term used indicates that the addressee is older. It means that the speaker acknowledges that the addressee is older and that he may be in the same generation as the speaker or he may be in the same generation as the speaker's parents or grandparents, depending on the term chosen. In the traditional Thai culture "being older" is automatically "superior".

However, today, being older does not necessarily mean "better". Besides, with the prevailing western influences, people do not want to be thought as "old". Thus one feels better when addressed as [phī] rather than as [nāa] or [pañ]. Likewise it is probably more courteous to address a person as [pañ] or [luy] than as [čaa] or [yai].

Titles. Titles are used both in formal and informal situations. In formal situations, the use of titles indicates that the speaker acknowledges that the addressee is an important person in an organization or that he is recognized as important person socially. In informal situations, titles can be categorized as names. Titles commonly used in academic circles are as the following:

[čaa - čaa] "teacher, instructor and sometimes professor"
[kha - na - bō - dii] "dean"
[?a - thi - kaan - bō - dii] "reector"
[hu - nāa] "Head"
[phī - ?a - nuai - kaan] "director"