

Early Protestant Missionaries and the Development of Thailand's Hierarchy of Multilingualism

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Vichin Panupong, to whom this volume is dedicated, grew up speaking Paktay (Southern Thai) and Standard Thai. She was educated first in Standard Thai, and then did at least her doctoral work in English (Panupong, 1970). Like many of her peers, therefore, she exemplifies use of the upper and middle levels of Thailand's hierarchy of multilingualism.

Thailand's language hierarchy, as I have discussed it elsewhere (Smalley, 1988, 1994, pp. 67–70, 342–349), is created by widespread non-reciprocal adult language learning preferences and practices.¹ Thus, many speakers of Paktay learn Standard Thai, or would like to know it, but proportionately fewer speakers of Standard Thai learn Paktay or would like to know it; likewise, many speakers of any Thailand language learn English, or would like to know it, but few native speakers of English learn Standard Thai, much less such lower² languages as Paktay or Lao (Northeastern Thai) or Kammüang (Northern Thai).

But Thailand's hierarchy of languages is just one branch of a world hierarchy, which is summarized in Table 1. Not all of the levels shown there are present in all countries, and additional levels are often to be found in various local situations, as well. For example, Thailand has a level of marginal regional languages like Northern Khmer (spoken in the southern provinces of Northeast Thailand) and Pattani Malay (spoken in the southern provinces of the panhandle). However, it has no level of multinational language, because none of the languages spoken on both sides of Thailand's borders are national or official languages in Thailand.

A single language, furthermore, may function simultaneously on more than one level of the hierarchy. For example, English is the world language in all countries, an international language in South Asia, East and South Africa, and North America (among others), a multinational language in North America, a national language in the U.S.A., Canada, and Great Britain, and a regional language (English vs. French) in Canada. Nyah Kur (Chaobon), at the other extreme, is an enclave language found only in Thailand.

Clearly, the present world hierarchy is modern, although it is successor to earlier, more limited hierarchies with smaller geographic domains. At various times such ancient languages as Egyptian, Assyrian, Phoenician, Syriac, Greek, and Latin were the equivalents of modern international languages, but none of them were learned all over the world. English, in fact, is the first. The very idea of nation-states with fixed boundaries, assumed in Table 1, is in itself also relatively modern. However, the fact that earlier periods in history did not necessarily have countries with fixed boundaries

¹Many of the assumptions about Thailand and its hierarchy that underlie this paper are discussed more fully at various points in Smalley (1994).

²“Lower” only in the sense of the hierarchy of preference, of course. This has nothing to do necessarily with the intrinsic value of a language.

does not invalidate the concepts of language dominance and hierarchy for older times, even though the classificatory categories used here may not be appropriate for those times. In this paper I am forced to use circumlocutions like, "the area which is now Thailand" for the evolving nation-state.

Table 1. *World hierarchy of languages*

External languages

World language

English

Primary or secondary external language for all countries, learned by native speakers of lower languages

International languages

English, French, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Russian

Primary external languages for respective major geographical blocks of countries, learned by native speakers of lower languages spoken within the blocks

Languages both internal and external

Multinational languages

All of the above languages, plus

(e.g.) Malay/Indonesian, Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, Swahili, German, Italian

National/official languages shared between (usually) neighboring countries, learned by native speakers of lower languages within the countries

Internal languages

National/official languages

All of the above languages, plus (e.g.) Thai, Lao (in Laos), Vietnamese, Burmese, Malay, Japanese, Filipino

Official or unofficial "languages of the country" learned by native speakers of lower languages within the country

Regional languages

(e.g.) Thaiklang (Central Thai), Kammüang (Northern Thai), Lao (Northeastern Thai), Paktay (Southern Thai), Javanese, Cebuano, Marathi, Tamil, Hausa

Dominant languages in regions of a country or countries, learned by native speakers of lower languages within the region

Enclave languages

(e.g.) Lavüa' (Lawa [Thailand]), Nyah Kur (Chaobon [Thailand]), Navajo (U.S.A.), Welsh (U.K.), Basque (France), Ainu (Japan), Munda (India)

Languages enveloped by more dominant languages, not typically learned by speakers of other languages

Modern or ancient, language hierarchies raise questions about what creates language dominance and decline. When, where, and how did English spread and become the world language? How did the form of Thai (then known internationally as Siamese), spoken by the elite in Bangkok, become standardized and established all over Thailand as the national language? Historians and sociolinguists occasionally

study such questions, but rarely do they deal with one closer to the human reality: How do widespread learning patterns which create the language hierarchy emerge from *individual experiences and individual choices, when individual speakers of individual languages come into contact in sufficient numbers*?

In this paper I will look at one small cluster of people and events which contributed to the development of the Thailand hierarchy. The people are a few of Thailand's early Protestant Christian missionaries, often interacting with two of Thailand's kings. The missionaries contributed to the introduction and spread of English, the standardization of the Thai of the Bangkok court, and its establishment as a national language, doing so both independently of, and under the invitation and/or direction of, the kings or their officials.

The picture presented here is a limited one. I will not attempt to cover the wide-ranging other actions of the kings which did not involve the missionaries. Not included, also, are the parts played by Catholic missionaries and other Westerners in general. And I will look at the role of those missionaries who are included here primarily from their own perspective, as seen in some of their own accounts. Their perspective was no doubt different from that of the kings and of the other Thai people with whom they had contact.

THAILAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth-century Protestant Christian missionaries made the contributions discussed here because they happened to be in what is now Thailand at a time when some of their Western skills were needed. The critical period for the changes under discussion was 1851–1910, when King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn brought Thailand into the modern world and shaped the direction in which the country would develop. These two kings saved Thailand from the threat of military conquest by the British and/or the French, in part through their policies of assimilating enough of European ways to fend off complete European domination. They were the first rulers of Thailand to look beyond the Indian and Chinese culture spheres for political and cultural models, and to use modifications of European concepts and skills to strengthen their country and their power. They cast their nets widely for information and for individuals to help provide the knowledge or skills they needed. Some of the missionaries at hand therefore proved to be useful to them. The missionaries were mostly bit part players in all of these changes, but in a few cases their part was important.

The first Protestant missionaries came to Bangkok in 1828, just four years after Prince Mongkut began his long formative and creative period as a Buddhist monk. The existing language hierarchy in the area looked somewhat different from what the present one does. There was then no world language, but English and French were the two Western international languages flanking Thailand to the West and the East. Neither was yet an international language in Thailand, however, as neither was known by more than a handful of Thai individuals, if any.

I can only guess why Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn were more interested in English than in French, for they had to deal with both England and France. They did encourage some of their children to learn French and other European languages, but they obviously favored English. Before he became king, Prince Mongkut chose to learn Latin rather than French with the help of French Catholic Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, while he learned English with the help of American Protestant

missionaries (Chakrabongse, 1960, pp. 181–182). Then, when he became the first Thai king to know English, King Mongkut invited teachers of English into the country and into the palace. King Chulalongkorn, who learned English under his father's policy, sent sons and nephews out of the country to be educated in English more than in other languages, and eventually established a government school system for the country, a system which included English instruction, but not French.

Did the kings prefer English because they sensed that English was in its ascendancy as an international language, while French was in its decline? Did they see England as more powerful than France (Wyatt, 1982, p. 185)? Was it because King Mongkut saw France as a greater threat, and liked the quality of British diplomats, like Sir John Bowring (Lord, 1969, pp. 192–193)? Did the fact that England was a monarchy, but France was not, have a bearing? King Chulalongkorn's children who were sent to study in various countries of Europe were allowed to visit France, but not live there, because France was a republic (Chakrabongse, 1960, p. 231). But whatever the reasons, the kings did choose English, and in so doing they steered their country in the direction of participation in the modern world language hierarchy, with English as the world language. The Indochina countries, on the other hand, had to add English to French after World War II.

The area we now call Thailand had no national language either, when the missionaries began to arrive. Nor was it a modern state, such as is assumed in the present world hierarchy model depicted in Table 1. Its borders were fluid, gradually becoming more nearly fixed by international treaties during the period under discussion. Within the territory, furthermore, rulers of the various *müang* (local city-states) were still semi-independent, although they owed allegiance to, paid tribute to, and sent daughters as wives to the king in Bangkok. The present regional languages (Thaiklang, Kammüang, Lao, and Paktay) were the languages of the several *müang* in their respective areas, and of the monasteries in which any education took place in those areas. Kammüang and Lao were even written in a script different from that of Thaiklang. Paktay was not written at all.

The variety of Thaiklang spoken in and around the court in Bangkok, however, was often learned by elite in the outlying regions, and so was clearly dominant over other languages in the area of present Thailand, although it was then neither standardized³ nor national. It was the foundation on which the standard language would be built when it could be promoted by a school system with a central curriculum, grammar books, dictionaries, media, and other modern props.

King Mongkut's predecessor had sometimes temporarily restricted missionaries, suspicious of them as bearers of a foreign religion and culture. His Phra Klang (the second king, leader of the powerful Bunnag family and a power behind the throne) was steadily friendly and encouraging, however (Lord, 1969, pp. 106–108). King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn protected missionaries and encouraged them in those aspects of their work which contributed to the welfare of Thai people and to the modernization and development of the country. Occasionally the kings also sought missionary help.

³ For a discussion of the nature of standardization in Thai see Smalley (1994, pp. 26–40). Linguists and others often confuse Standard Thai with the Thaiklang of Bangkok (Smalley, 1994, pp. 14–15, 109–111).