

USING GIS FOR DISPLAYING AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC MAP OF THAILAND

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Southeast Asia is one of the most linguistically diverse area of the world. Thailand which is situated right at the heart of SEA represents one of the most complex areas of languages and ethnicities. In the present age of globalization, the modern economic development, the powerful mass media, and a new urban culture have a vital role in destroying indigenous languages and cultures. The languages of wider communication heavily influence the small vernacular languages. The Mahidol research project on the Ethnolinguistic Map of Thailand at this stage, aims at providing a language database as the point of reference for mapping the distributions of ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand.

I. Research methodology

The data was collected at the village level by the use of questionnaires. There are altogether about 70,000 villages all over the country. The questionnaires were sent out to key local personnel such as village headmen, teachers, health workers, development workers, district and sub-district officials, etc. to get the information about the language spoken in the home and the number of the speakers of each language. Field work was conducted at certain places and on certain ethnic groups for data rechecking by the researchers of this project and in cooperation with the linguists and specialists who work on each ethnolinguistic group. The data was then computerized. The enormous language data cannot be easily handled by the normal dBase program. After trials and errors, the Shoebox program and Microsoft Access, etc. are used initially for organizing the ethnolinguistic database. For mapping, the GIS program (Geographical Information System) such as Arc/Info, ArcView, etc. is later used for joining the ethnolinguistic data to the geographical data. Problems and limitations are in the

quality of the base map available and accuracy of the latitude and longitude coordinates provided by the Ministry of Interior. Apart from that some discrepancies rising from the data collection by questionnaire at the village level was unavoidable.

II. Research result

Thailand is illustrated as a complex area of languages and ethnicities. More than 60 languages classified by ethnonyms are presented. By the use of GIS the maps of various scales showing the distributions of each individual language as well as the co-occurrence of various languages in different geographical areas can be produced. The distributions of the ethnolinguistic groups in different administrative areas such as village, district, provincial, regional and national can be displayed as well as those distributed in the river basins or mountain ranges. In this paper the genetic and social relationship of ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand are discussed and displayed with special attention on the distribution of endangered languages.

1. Genetic relationship of languages in Thailand

All languages belong to five language families: Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien. Maps displaying languages in each language family are provided.

1. The majority of the population in Thailand speak Tai-Kadai languages. There are 24 Tai dialects and languages.
2. The more numerous and smaller groups which are scattered all over the country are speakers of Austroasiatic languages, the indigenous languages of SEA. There are altogether 23 languages.
3. The Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien speakers are mainly concentrated in the north and northwest. There are 15 Sino-Tibetan languages and two Hmong-Mien languages.
4. The Austronesian speakers are mainly found in the south. There are only three languages.

2. *Social relationship of languages in Thailand*

The co-existence of languages in Thailand is justified by the fact that they are related in a hierarchical way. Each language belongs to different level of language hierarchy in Thai society. There is no fighting and no competition. Each language has a role and function in the society.

Here is the language hierarchy proposed by Smalley (1988 and 1994)

1. Standard Thai
2. Regional Language:
Khammuang, ThaiKlang, Lao, Paktay
3. Minority language
 - 3.1 Displaced Language
 - 3.2 Town Language
 - 3.3 Marginal Language
 - 3.4 Enclave Language

1. At the top of the hierarchy is standard Thai which is a prestigious official and national language used in education and mass media all over the country. Even though it is based on Central Thai, it is not a vernacular language of any particular ethnolinguistic group so it is not displayed on the map. The distributions of the languages at the lower levels of the language hierarchy (major regional, marginal, displaced and enclave languages) are displayed.

2. The second level of the hierarchy is the major regional languages. They are the four major Thai dialects which are spoken by the majority of the people in various parts of the country: northern Thai or Khammuang in the north, northeastern Thai or Lao Isan in the northeast, southern Thai or Paktay in the south and central Thai in the central part of Thailand. Each language is spoken by the majority of the population in the region. It is a vernacular language as well as a lingua franca of minority languages in the region.

3. The next lower level or under each regional language is for minority languages which are classified into four groups.

3.1 Displaced languages are Tai languages that have the history of people moving from their homeland to settle in Thailand. Wars, famine and work opportunities are the main reasons of immigration. Some have their ancestors as prisoners

of wars from the neighbouring countries in the early years of Rattanakosin period, examples are Phuan, Song, Phuthai, Lao Wiang, Lao Khrang, Nyoh, Yooy, Kaloeng, etc. They are found concentrated mostly in central Thailand.

3.2 Town languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese are spoken in the town area. They are not displayed.

3.3 Marginal languages are mainly non-Tai minority languages found near the border with a majority of speakers living on the other side of the border. They are Tibeto-Burman and Hmong-Mien languages in the north and northwest such as Karen, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Hmong, and Mien, etc., Austroasiatic languages such as Khmu and Praj-Mal in the north, Northern Khmer and Kuy in the northeast, and Mon in the northwest, etc. and Austronesian languages such as Malay in the south. Some are indigenous to the area. They are found across the countries such as Khmer which is found in Thailand as well as in Cambodia and South Vietnam or the Khmu which is found in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and South China. Northern Khmer, Khmu and also Malay are called marginal regional languages because they are large ethnolinguistic groups and their languages are used as a lingua franca of other smaller groups in the region.

3.4 Enclave languages are at the lowest level of the language hierarchy. They are languages spoken by small isolated ethnolinguistic groups such as those living in the mountainous area and those who are surrounded by totally unrelated languages and wholly contained in the country. There is no access to communicate with relatives outside. Some are the descendents of people in the ancient empires who lived here before the Tai-speaking people, such as the Nyah Kur who settled right at the center of Thailand. They are believed to be descendants of old Mon in Dhavarvadi kingdom. The Chong, Kasong and Samre are in the east near the Cambodian border which was a part of the Khmer kingdom. Other enclave languages are the So (Thavuong) on the upper Korat plateau who migrated from Laos about one hundred years ago, Guong in the central plain, Bisu and Mpi in the north and Moklen and Urak Lawoi in the south.