

The Malay Dialects of Central Thailand: a Preliminary Survey¹

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1. Introduction

The first mention of Malay speaking communities in central Thailand is found in Maxwell's 'Manual of the Malay Language', written in 1881. In the introduction, there appears the following sentence: "Siam proper has a large Malay population, descendants mainly of captives taken in war, and the language is therefore in use there in places..." (Maxwell 1907(1881):2). By using the term 'Siam proper', the writer could not have meant the northern Malay sultanates which had come under Siamese suzerainty, but rather the core Thai area.

Over a century later, Seni Mudmarn, in an article on the issue of language loyalty in southern Thailand, mentioned having visited some groups of Muslims "around Bangkok" who still used the Malay language². Thus, at least some of the Malay speaking communities mentioned by Maxwell have survived the present time. They are the topic of this paper.

I would like to mention that after having arrived in Thailand, I discovered that phonological sketches of two Malay dialects of central Thailand had recently been written: Thawika 1990 and Phongthep 1990. These provided me with invaluable background information.

2. Historical Background

It is not known exactly when the first Malay speaking communities in Thailand were founded. We do know that in 17th-century Ayutthaya, there were many foreign settlements, including a Malay one. Many muslims who are descended from these (and other) Muslim settlers at Ayutthaya still live in this province today. However, they no longer use the Malay language.

In 1785, as part of a larger campaign to repulse a Burmese invasion, the northern Malay sultanate of Pattani was conquered by Siam (Wyatt 1984:151). Many of the vanquished Pattani Malays were taken to the vicinity of the victors' capital, to serve as slave laborers, as was the custom in those days (Saowani 1989:108). In 1791, Pattani rebelled against Siamese rule (Wyatt 1984:158).

The rebellion was crushed, and again many prisoners of war were brought up to central Siam (Thongkham 1983:1), not only to serve as laborers, but also as a measure to prevent future revolts. Another revolt in 1820 met with the same fate (Thongkham 1983:2). In 1831, there was yet another major rebellion, which started in Kedah, but then spread to Pattani, Kelantan, and Terengganu. By 1832, the rebellion was suppressed, and again thousands of war captives were carried away to the vicinity of Bangkok (Wyatt 1984:172).

These Malay captives, who were brought to central Thailand between a century and a half and two centuries ago, are the forefathers of today's Malay speaking communities of central Thailand.

3. The geographical setting of the dialects

James T. Collins, has already demonstrated that Malay dialect research in Malaysia should not be conducted following the modern state boundaries, which mean little as far as dialectology is concerned. Rather, the proper parameters are topographical in nature: river basins and coastal strips (Collins 1989). In Malay dialect research in central Thailand, coastal strips are not relevant, but river basins still are, and even more so - canals. Mosques are also of great importance. Let me illustrate this point with the speech community group in which I have been doing most of my work.

From the official point of view, this is not a community at all, but rather many unrelated communities: about seven or eight villages (mubahn) located in four subdistricts (tambon) and two districts (amphur). However, when one talks informally to the villagers, they never refer to their communities in these terms. Rather, they say 'my son lives by so-and-so canal', or 'I was born by such-and-such mosque.' From their perspective, which is the dialectologically correct one, their speech community is divided primarily into three adjacent canals: Khlong Phraphimon, Khlong Lamri, and Khlong Ladkhon. However, there are other villages along these canals, including Muslim village which no longer use Malay, and non-Muslim villages. In order to distinguish themselves from these villages, the Malay speakers call their villages by the popular names of their mosques: the Green Mosque, the Red Mosque, and the Middle Mosque. (These mosques all have official Arabic names, but these are rarely used in everyday conversation.)

Officially, these are not villages, and sometimes there is even a subdistrict division line running through the middle of a village. But as far as the villagers

(and their speech) are concerned, that does not make any difference.

Going by such guidelines instead of administrative division lines, the communities I visited include nine villages, four in Nonthaburi Province, four in Pathumthani Province, and one in Samut Prakan Province. These represent the main body of Malay speakers in Nonthaburi and Pathumthani.

In addition to these villages, I have reliable reports of pockets of Malay speakers in various areas in eastern Bangkok province: Minburi, Nongchok, Phrakhanong, and Bang Kapi. I have not had the chance to do any research in these communities yet, but it appears that only some of the oldest residents have any knowledge of Malay. The shift to Thai has been practically completed.

4. The nature of the dialects

From the initial findings, it would appear that all varieties of Malay spoken in central Thailand are ultimately derived from Pattani Malay, with various independent innovations and possible interference from other peninsular Malay dialects. Also, these dialects have been influenced to a greater extent by Thai than the Pattani dialect. Another point in which the local Malay dialects are different from Pattani is the total lack of direct loans from English.

These linguistic facts regarding both the geographical origin and the time-frame of the Malay speakers of central Thailand seem to correspond to the historical facts, obtained from older informants as well as from independent sources. Most Malays in the central area are descended from Pattani Malays, which explains why their dialects resembles Pattani Malay so closely. These Malays were brought here before the massive British penetration into the peninsula, which accounts for the lack of direct loans from English.

4.1 The Phonology

Overall, the phonology of the Malay dialects of central Thailand shows close resemblance to Pattani Malay. However, there are some interesting differences, not only between Pattani Malay and central Thai Malay, but also among the dialects of central Thailand themselves. Time and space do not allow me to discuss all of them, but following are some interesting examples.

One the best known features of Pattani Malay is the change of final /-aŋ/ to /-E/. Thus the Standard Malay sentence (1) orang makan ikan semalam would be (2) /orE makE ikE s@malE/. This rule, which can be noted

informally as (3) /a/ --> /E/ / _N#, is interesting, because it appears to lack phonological motivation. The study of the Malay dialects of central Thailand is enlightening in this case, because it helps explain this obscure sound change. In central Thai Malay, we find that Pathumthani Malay has the same sound rule, and the above sentence would sound about the same in it as it does in Pattani Malay (example no. 2 above). However, the Samut Prakan dialect seems to preserve an earlier stage of development: the vowel /a/ is maintained, and so is the nasalization which had been left behind after the final nasal deleted. Here, the rule should be written as two:

(4) V --> [+nas] / _N and (5) N --> 0 / a_# .
Our shibboleth in Samut Prakan would thus yield
(6) /oraːˀ makaːˀ ikaːˀ sɛmaːlaːˀ/.

Nonthaburi Malay has another kind of mutation: the combination sequence /-aŋ#/ becomes /-iəŋ/. On the one hand, the final nasal is maintained (as a neutralized /ŋ/); on the other hand, the vowel is changed even further, and diphthongized into /iə/:

(7) /oriəŋg makiəŋg ikiəŋg səməliəŋg/.

It would thus appear that the Pattani Malay rule (3) did not operate abruptly, as the notation implies: prior to deleting, the final nasals had all neutralized to /ng/, and after deleting, the vowel must still have been nasalized for a while. It is this nasalization that had caused the raising of /a/ to /E/. Again, the evidence that there is something in the nasalization that causes the vowel to rise is gleaned from a Malay dialect of central Thailand.

In Pattani Malay, there is a rule that changes /a/ to /o/ in a final syllable if it is open or ends in a glottal: (8) /a/ --> /o/ / _ { 0 } #.
 { [+glot] }

For example, Standard Malay (9) ayah anak itu ada banyak tanah ('that child's father has a lot of land') is (10) /ayOh anO' tu adO banyO' tanOh/.

In Pathumthani Malay, we find that in some words, this /O/ is raised to /u/: (11) /ayOh anu' tu adO banyu' tanuh/. Similarly, the final vowel /E/, whether derived from an original /-ai/ (see below) or /-aN/, is sometimes raised to /i/. Thus Standard Malay (12) enam orang dalam sungai (meaning 'six people in the river') yields (13) /nnE orE daleE sunga/ in Pattani Malay, but (14) /ni orE daleE sungi/ in Pathumthani Malay.

A closer look at examples (11) and (14) would reveal that the vowel is raised in Pathumthani Malay only if it occurs after a nasal stop, in other words when it is