

Some Observations on phǒm and dichǎn: Male and Female 1st Person Pronouns in Thai

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Introduction

This paper presents some observations on the status and usage of, as well as some peculiarities of, *phǒm* and *dichǎn*, the “polite” first person male and female pronouns in Thai.¹ The paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides general background on Thai pronominal references, drawing mainly from three studies on Thai pronominals. The second part imparts some observations and “guesses” on the history of these two pronouns that are considered to be recent innovations in the Thai language. It is suggested that changes in society might have had some influence on reinforcing the gender-specific features of these pronouns. The third section discusses some peculiarity in the distribution of usage of these two pronouns. It also shows that social attitudes influence the imbalance in distribution of these “paired” pronouns.

General Background to Thai Pronominal Reference

ในการเขียนเรื่องชนิดนี้ความลำบากขั้นแรกคือจะใช้สรรพนามสำหรับผู้เขียนว่าอย่างไร ทุกครั้งที่เขียนบทความชนิดที่เป็นสารคดี ข้าพเจ้าต้องเสียเวลาในการขังใจวินิจฉัยแล้วตัดสินใจ เรื่องเอกลักษณ์ของไทยอันนี้ไปบางครั้งก็หลายวัน สำหรับเรื่องนี้ก็เข่นกันถ้าใช้ผู้เขียน บางโอกาสก็ทำให้เกิดความขรุขระ และฟังดูน่าเหินจากผู้อ่าน จะใช้ดิฉันผู้อ่านส่วนมากก็คงจะเป็นคนในฐานะศิษย์ดั่งที่กล่าวไว้แล้ว ในที่สุดจึงตัดสินใจใช้ ข้าพเจ้า เพราะว่าเป็นคำที่มี

¹ The phonetic transcription for Thai words in this paper follows the transcription described in Brown (1968), except for the words or data quoted from other sources, in which case the original transcription is retained.

ความหมายอ่อนน้อมมาแต่เดิม และใช้เป็นคำกลาง ๆ ในปัจจุบันนี้ จะหาคำใดมาใช้ให้เกิดความสนิทสนมกับท่านผู้อ่านยิ่งกว่านี้ ก็ไม่ได้ ขอให้ท่านผู้อ่านเปลี่ยนสรรพนามกันเองตามที่ท่านต้องการ สำหรับท่านผู้เป็นที่เคารพ บังเอิญได้อ่านหนังสือเล่มนี้ก็โปรดตีความสรรพนามนั้นไปในทางอ่อนน้อม ตามความหมายเดิมของคำนั้นด้วย

In writing on this kind of subject, the first problem is to choose the appropriate pronoun to refer to the author. Every time that I write an article such as this one, I have to spend some time evaluating and making decisions about this "unique Thai [linguistic] characteristic." As for this particular book, if I used *phūukhīan* ('the author'), on some occasions it would sound inappropriate and distant from the readers. If I used *dichān*, [it would not be appropriate since] most of the readers would probably be my former students. I finally decided to use *khâaphacâw* because it originally signified respect and nowadays is used as a neutral pronoun. I could not find any other word that would convey some closeness to the readers better than this one does. The readers may change this pronoun to whatever they feel would be appropriate. As for those whom I respect, if you should happen to read this book, please interpret the meaning of that pronoun (*khâaphacâw*) as showing respect, as it originally did.... (Bunlua 1971: 13, translated by the author)

The above is extracted from the preface of an autobiography by M. L. Bunlua Thepyasuwan, a well-known Thai scholar and writer. She intended the book to be a gift to be distributed to her colleagues and friends, some of whom were her former students, on the occasion of her 60th birthday. This short paragraph from her work reflects, to some degree, the complicated system of self-reference and other dimensions of pronominal usage in Thai, with the numerous pronominal variants determined by the social roles and the role relationships of speech participants, which, in turn, are governed by social and cultural factors.

Thai pronominal usage has been discussed in some detail by a few scholars of the Thai language. The works specifically dealing with Thai pronouns and other pronominal usage are by Cooke (1968), Campbell (1969), Angkab (1972), and Hatton (1978). All four studies mentioned here deal primarily with spoken Bangkok Thai, exclusive of dialect varieties.

Types of Pronominally Used Forms in Thai

In Thai, forms other than personal pronouns can be used pronominally to refer to addresser, addressee, or referent. Cooke (1968) classified them into three general types: personal pronouns, kin-type nouns, and name nouns. Angkab (1972) further divided them into eleven categories, which can still fall into the three types discussed by Cooke. Following Hatton (1978: 44), five types of pronominal elements that can be used to refer to the speaker are discussed here:

1. Personal Pronouns Proper
2. Names
3. Titles
4. Kinship Terms
5. Zero

Personal Pronouns Proper. We can classify the personal pronouns proper into three groups according to a defined set of forms used for the three main social hierarchies in Thailand:

1. The Royalty
2. The Buddhist Monks
3. The Commoners

Up until 1932, Thailand was governed by an absolute monarchy. The Thai Kingdom was founded in the early 13th century. In the 14th century, under cultural influences from the Khmer Kingdom, the Thai kings adopted the practice of divine kingship. The Thai court adopted elaborate court language, etiquette, and rituals. At the beginning of the Ayutthaya Period, King U Thong introduced the palace law that formally endowed the King with divine rights and registered the royal family into a hierarchy of rank and statuses (Angkab 1972: 60; Cooke 1968: 35). The *râachasâp* 'royal vocabulary' was set up for the commoners and noblemen to use in speaking to the royal family. This royal language is based on Sanskrit, with strong Khmer and Pali influences. At the same time, the Buddhist monkhood was also granted special status. Special vocabulary was also created to be used by monks in speaking to non-monks and vice versa. In each set of the special vocabularies, there are different forms for different degrees of nobility or sacredness. It has been noted by many scholars that in the royal vocabulary, the highest respect shown towards the second person, that is the King, is reflected in the literal meaning of the forms used as first person pronouns. Cooke (1968: 9) states:

First person forms often denote, literally, the head or some related part of the body, such as the crown of the head, or the

hair. Many deferential second person forms denote 'the sole of the foot' or 'underneath the foot'. The significance of these expressions, at least from a historical point of view, seems to be that the inferior speaker places the sole of his hearer's foot, or the dust beneath the foot, on a par with his own head or hair—the most respected and highest part of the body.

In this paper, only the first person pronouns used among commoners in everyday life will be discussed. References to the royal vocabulary will be made when relevant to the discussion.

The commonly used first person pronouns in Bangkok Thai are as follows:

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|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. <i>phǒm</i> | 2. <i>dichǎn</i> | 3. <i>kraphǒm</i> | 4. <i>khâaphacâw</i> |
| 5. <i>chǎn, chǎn</i> | 6. <i>khâa</i> | 7. <i>raw</i> | 8. <i>khǎw, khǎw</i> |
| 9. <i>kan</i> | 10. <i>kuu</i> | 11. <i>nǐi</i> | 12. <i>tua ʔeeŋ</i> |
| 13. <i>nǔu</i> | | | |

There are also two loanwords used as first person pronouns:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 14. <i>ʔua</i> (from Chinese) singular | 15. <i>ʔay</i> (from English) singular |
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Of these variants, only three forms seem to have an inherent feature denoting the sex of the speaker:

dichǎn denotes a female speaker

phǒm, *kraphǒm* denotes a male speaker

The rest of the forms carry no gender distinctions. Speakers of either sex can use these other forms, the choice of which depends on other socio-cultural factors such as status, intimacy, solidarity, and so on. However, certain variants are preferred by one sex. For example, *nǔu* is more frequently used by female speakers than by male speakers.

It should also be noted here that *chǎn*, which is related to *dichǎn*, is not gender specific.

Names. It is common for Thais to use names as self-reference forms. Both nicknames and given names are used for this purpose.

In Thailand, a nickname is normally given to a child before an appropriate given name can be decided upon. Most nicknames are monosyllabic. They may be meaningful, indicating smallness or some other physical characteristics, or they may not have any intrinsic meaning and are used only because they sound pleasant. Thai children normally use their nicknames as self-reference when talking to acquaintances in informal situations, since nicknames are felt to have a friendly or affectionate connotation (Nantana 1983).