Some Observations on phôm and dichăn: 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, phôm and dichăn, the “polite” first person male and female pronouns in Thai. 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

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.
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 phúukhían (‘the author’), on some occasions it would sound inappropriate and distant from the readers. If I used dîchân, [it would not be appropriate since] most of the readers would probably be my former students. I finally decided to use khaâphacâw 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 (khaâphacâw) 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 pronomi-

nally to refer to addressee, 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 pro-
nouns 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 cen-
tury, 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 cre-
ated 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 per-
son 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:

1. phóm
2. dichăn
3. kraphôm
4. khâaphacâw
5. chân, chân
6. khâa
7. raw
8. khâw, khâw
9. kan
10. kuu
11. nîi
12. tua ṭeeŋ
13. nâu

There are also two loanwords used as first person pronouns:

14. ṭúā (from Chinese) singular
15. ṭay (from English) singular

Of these variants, only three forms seem to have an inherent feature denoting the sex of the speaker:

dichăn denotes a female speaker
phôm, kraphôm 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, nâu is more frequently used by female speakers than by male speakers. It should also be noted here that chân, which is related to dichăn, 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).