

**Uses of Pronouns and Kinship Terms
in Lao Performance Texts
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INTRODUCTION. In their discussion of varieties of pronoun systems, Mülhäusler and Harré (1990:63) note that “we cannot exclude the possibility that the very notion of participant roles is a culture-specific one, which has to be redefined and reassessed for each language under study.” In the course of studying the Lao pronominal system, I have found that the sociocultural roles of participants in discourse are crucial in selecting noun substitutes. The most frequently used noun substitutes in dialogues and conversational exchanges in many styles of Lao are not “standard” pronouns, but rather kinship terms used pronominally.

This paper discusses the use and distribution of the terms used in referring to oneself and to the other in 388 lines from a Lao oral performance text. The type of performance text chosen, Lao courting poetry, involves only two speakers; thus the data from such a performance has a certain degree of cultural and linguistic cohesiveness. There appear to be certain sociocultural expectations for the kinds of kinship terminology which will occur in such texts, and these are generally born out by this data.

THE PROBLEM. I was interested in finding out, by analyzing oral texts which focused on the relationship between a male and a female, exactly what forms were used for self-reference and what forms were used for reference to the other by each performer. I also wanted to learn which forms were used most frequently and under what conditions; I did not look at anaphora. This performance is in poetic form, and I was interested in finding out if there was some poetic pressure to use particular forms more often than others. In summary, I looked at the forms, their frequency, the linguistic conditions under which they were found, and the poetic constraints.

RELATED RESEARCH. In addition to the general work on pronoun theory by Mühlhäusler and Harré quoted above, there are a number of authors who have looked at the use of pronouns and kinship terms in Southeast Asian languages. The ones most relevant to this study include Cooke (1968) in his work on Thai, Burmese and Vietnamese, Campbell (1969) in his work on noun substitutes in Thai, Hoonchamlong (1992) in her article on the uses of *phǒm* and *dichǎn* in Thai, and Gething in his work on Lao personal pronouns (1976), as well as my own work on kinship terms used pronominally (Compton 1992, 1994).

Cooke notes in his conclusion

Probably the most obvious phenomenon revealed by a comparison of pronominal reference in Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese is the frequent use that all three languages make of a variety of personal pronouns, kintype pronouns, and name nouns (147).

It is just such frequency and variety of forms that we find in the Lao oral performance text under discussion here.

Campbell states that "Proper names, titles and kinship terms...have pronominal characteristics of distribution." He goes on to say that these are particularly noteworthy for Thai since with great frequency "the speaker in certain social situations will use a given name, a kinship term, or a professional or political title instead of one of the pronoun forms...." (21). It is this same kind of usage pattern that I noted in Lao texts and conversation (Compton 1992, 1994).

Hoonchamlong (1992) discusses the uses and distribution of first person pronouns in Thai and suggests some possible sociological factors that might have influenced the changes in usage, while Gething (1976) provides semantic information on Lao personal pronouns.

THE DATA. The first two sections of this performance of courting poetry provided the data for this analysis. The form, Lam Sithandone, was performed by two mohlam, a man,

Mohlam Sunee, and a woman, Mohlam Duangphaeng. I selected this material because it was a performance by Lao speakers for an audience of Lao speakers.

Every instance in which a pronoun or kinship term was used by the performers to refer to self or the other was recorded on cards including the linguistic environment in which each item appeared. Occurrences of other pronouns in the data were also noted.

Table I. illustrates the tremendous variety in the words used for self-referral ('I,' 'me,' 'my') by the female singer. In Duangphaeng's first turn alone we find, in descending order of frequency of occurrence, eleven different words or phrases.

Table 1. Duangphaeng's Terms of Self-Reference

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text Reference</u>
ນາງ	náaŋ	56	'woman'	I, me, my
ນ້ອງ	nôuŋ	22	'younger sib'	I, me, my
ຂ້າ	khàa	7	'I'	I, me, my
ສາວນາງ	săawnáaŋ	7	'young woman'	I, me, my
ດວງແພງ	dūaŋphéŋ	4	'Duangphaeng'	I, me, my
ສາວໝໍລຳ	săaw mǝw láam	2	'female singer'	I, me
ໝໍລຳ	mǝw láam	1	'expert singer'	I, me
ໝໍດວງແພງ	mǝw dūaŋphéŋ	1	'Expert Duangphaeng'	I
ແພງ	phéŋ	1	'Phaeng'	I
ສາວດວງແພງ	săaw dūaŋphéŋ	1	'Miss Duangphaeng'	I
ຂ້ອຍ	khòy	1	'I'	I

These eleven different usages emphasize different aspects of the self in relation to the other performer. These references include a noun, a kin term, two pronouns, and various

combinations for 'woman' and 'mohlam,' as well as her own name. In 229 lines of poetry, she referred to herself 93 times. Note that the singer used her own name, Duangphaeng, five times and the shortened form Phaeng once. This contrasts with Sunee, who did not use his own name at all during his first turn.

Sunee, the male singer, does use a variety of references for himself, though his are not as numerous as those of Duangphaeng. In the following table, presented in descending order, are the references he uses in his first turn.

Table 2. Sunee's Terms of Self-Reference

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text</u> <u>Reference</u>
ພີ	phii	15	'older sibling'	I, me, my
ອ້າຍ	âay	6	'older male sibling'	I, my
ຮຽມ	híam	6	'I' (poetic)	I, me
ໝໍລຳ	mǝólám	3	'expert singer'	I, me
ຂ້າ	khàa	2	'I'	I
ຂ້ອຍ	khòoy	2	'I'	I
ຊາຍ	sáay	2	'male'	me

His first turn consists of 159 lines, and in it Sunee refers to himself 36 times. He uses two kin terms, three pronouns, a profession, and a noun. It is interesting to note that whereas the female singer used her personal name extensively, Sunee does not use his at all in this turn. He does not totally avoid, it however, because in his second turn in the performance he does use it two times, both times with his title, Mohlam Sunee; however, we have not included data from the second turn here.

Just as she shows great variation in the terms for ‘I’ or self, when the singer Duangphaeng refers to the male performer, Sunee, she uses a wide variety of terms for ‘you.’ Below is a table which presents that variation and the frequency of each word or phrase for ‘you’ or ‘your’. I have indicated which terms can also be found as terms of address.

Table 3. Duangphaeng’s Terms for ‘You’

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text Reference</u>
ອ້າຍ	âay	33	‘older male sib’	you, your, yours
ສຸນີ	suníi	9	‘Sunee’	you, address
ເຈົ້າ	câw	7	‘you’	you
ຟີ	phii	6	‘older sibling’	you, your
ຕາຂຳ	tāakhām	2	‘dark eyes’	you
ນີ	níi	2	‘Nee’	you, address
ນາຍ	náay	2	‘sir, boss’	you, address
ຊາຍ	sáay	1	‘male’	you
ຍອດຊາຍ	h̄wót sáay	1	‘wonderful male’	you, address
ຍາອ້າຍ	h̄áa âay	1	‘respected elder male sib’	you
ອ້າຍສຸນີ	âaysuníi	1	‘elder male sib Sunee’	you
ອ້າຍໝໍລຳ	âay m̄wólām	1	‘elder male sib Mohlam’	you
ນວນ	núan	1	‘gentle one’	you
ສເນຫາ	saněhăa	1	‘sweetheart’	you
ອີພໍ່ຕາຫວານ	īphwō tāawăan	1	‘dear sweet-eyed man’	you

Note that some terms occur sometimes with the meaning ‘you’ in a sentence such as ‘You (Sunee) said...’ and sometimes as terms of address, as in ‘Think about it, Sunee dear.’

Sunee also shows variation in the terms he uses to refer to Duangphaeng. Note that Sunee uses the standard pronoun *câw* ‘you’ only about one-fourth of the time in his performance. The kin term *nôwŋ* ‘younger sibling’ dominates, with about half of the appearances in the data, closely followed by *náaŋ* ‘woman; female.’

Table 4. Sunee’s Terms for ‘You’

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text Reference</u>
ນ້ອງ	<i>nôwŋ</i>	32	‘younger sibling’	you, your
ນາງ	<i>náaŋ</i>	14	‘woman’	you
ເຈົ້າ	<i>câw</i>	11	‘you, your’	you, your
ນາງເອຍ	<i>náaŋ ǎy</i>	7	‘dear woman’	dear woman
ຂໝ່ອມນ້ອງ				
	<i>khamǎwm nôwŋ</i>	2	‘royal younger sib’ (same)	
ອວນ	<i>ǎn</i>	2	‘beloved’	beloved
ໝ່ອມພະນາງ				
	<i>mǎwm pha náaŋ</i>	1	‘royal woman’	royal woman
ສເນຫາ	<i>saněhǎa</i>	1	‘sweetheart’	sweetheart
ສາວ	<i>sǎaw</i>	1	‘unmarried woman’ (same)	

Since the two performers are ostensibly courting each other, it is not surprising that there are not many occurrences of pronouns or kinship terms for the third person in the data. Duangphaeng does have a third person pronoun which she uses quite a bit, but it is generally used to refer to respected others in the plural (‘they’), though it also occurs with a singular reference ‘he’ or ‘one’s.’ The distribution and use of this pronoun is shown in the table provided below.

Table 5. Duangphaeng's Use of the Pronoun *phən*

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Pronoun</u> <u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text</u> <u>Reference</u>
ເພິ່ນວ່າ	phən waa	8	'they'	They say
ຂອງອ້າຍຜູ້ເພິ່ນສວຍ	khɔ̌wŋ âay phùu phən sŭay	1	'he'	Of such an attractive man
ບັດນີ້ເພິ່ນຕັ້ງແກ້ງ	bat nîi phən tâŋ kĕŋ	1	'he'	Now he pretended...
ເສັ້ງແຮງເພິ່ນແລ້ວ	sĭa hĕŋ phən lĕw	1	'one's'	It's a waste of one's energy

Other pronominal forms appearing in Duangphaeng's section of the performance are listed below.

Table 6. Other Pronouns in Duangphaeng's Material

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Text</u> <u>Reference</u>
ເຮົາ	hăw	3	'we, our'	we, our
ໃຜ	phăy	3	'who, whoever'	who, whoever
ເອງ	ĕŋ	3	'own self'	self
ເຂົາ	khăw	1	'other; he, him; she, her'	someone else

Each time it occurs, the pronoun *háv* 'we' refers both to Duangphaeng and to Sunee; thus, I did not include it in the table on self referral. Similarly, the term *ěŋ* 'self' was not included in Table I because it was used in this data to refer to the other performer.

Finally, a phrase, ຍາອ້າຍໝໍແຄນ *ñáa áay mǝǝkhéen*, which includes a title of respect (*ñáa*), a kin term (*áay*), and a profession (*mǝǝkhéen*), is used by Duangphaeng to address the instrumentalist accompanying the performance: 'respected (elder brother) *khene* player.'

Only two pronouns which are not first or second person were found in Sunee's turn. They are given below.

Table 7. Other Pronouns Used by Sunee

<u>Lao</u>	<u>Transcription</u>	#	<u>Gloss</u>	Text
				<u>Reference</u>
ມັນ	mán	5	'it'	it; there (is)
ໃຜ	phǎy	1	'who; anyone'	anyone

DISCUSSION. I had expected to find that the kin term for younger sibling would be used by the female performer to refer to herself, and that she would use the kin term for older brother to refer to the male performer. Similarly, I had expected that the male performer would refer to himself as older brother and to the female performer as younger sibling. I did not expect to find heavy usage of pronouns for 'I' and 'you' since this was courting poetry and thus the speech was about entering into an intimate relationship. This was essentially what was found in analyzing the data, but with some interesting differences.

The female performer, Duangphaeng, did indeed refer to herself using the term for younger sibling (22 times); however, she was more than twice as likely to use a term for woman as her term of self reference (56 times). (See Table I.). In terms of actual frequency of self reference, Duangphaeng used standard

pronouns 7% of the time, the term for younger sibling 21% of the time, and terms for woman 60% of the time. The rest of the time she used versions of her own name and versions of her profession, (mohlam), or a combination of the two, for about 10% of the time.

The male performer, Sunee, did indeed use the term for older brother as I had expected; however, the term which he used most frequently for older brother was *phii*, not the more common term for older brother, *âay*. (See Table II.) The term *phii* is more likely to occur in Thai and does not often occur in most dialects of Lao in Laos. As a young man, Mohlam Sunee had lived in the Campassak region which was under Thai governance in the early 1940s. It is possible that this influenced his usage, for he uses both *phii* and *âay* in the data, though *phii* is more prominent. Combining these two terms, we find that Sunee used kinship terms for self referral 58% of the time. He used *híam*, the poetic pronoun for 'I,' 17% of the time, standard pronouns 11% of the time, and his profession (mohlam) or the word for male 11% of the time.

When Duangphaeng referred to Sunee (the other, you), she also used both of the kinship terms for older brother; however, for her the term *âay* is used much more frequently than is *phii*. Combining these two terms, we find that Duangphaeng used kinship terms to speak to Sunee 60% of the time. She used a version of his name 17% of the time, and the pronoun *câw* 'you' 10% of the time. Titles, profession and affectionate terms made up the remaining 13% of the references.

When Sunee sang to Duangphaeng (the other, you), the term he used most frequently was the kinship term *nôjɲ*, in fact in nearly half of the references (48%) he used this term. Terms for woman, *náaɲ* and *săaw*, occurred 32% of the time, the standard pronoun *câw* appeared 15% of the time, while affectionate terms and titles made up the remaining 5% of the references.

As noted above, both performers did not use standard pronouns very often. The most common usage was of *câw*

‘you.’ When this pronoun was used, it sometimes appeared in the tone requirement slot in the poetry for the second tone mark, *mây thóo*. There are five such required positions for the second tone mark in one verse of *kõn ñhôn* poetry, but the pronoun *câw* can be found only occasionally in these positions in the performances of both of the singers.

As for kinship terms found in the required positions for the second tone mark, more than half of the occurrences of *nôw* ‘younger sibling’ used by Sunee (19) appeared in such positions. Similarly, Duangphaeng used this term in poetic positions that require the second tone mark half of the time. She also used *ây* in second tone positions about one-third of the time.

There are four positions in this poetic form that require the use of a word with the first tone mark, *mây êek*. Only one of the kinship terms used in this performance, *phii*, has that tone, and this word occurred only once in such a position. None of the standard first or second person pronouns in this data uses the first tone mark. Another pronoun that did appear in a particular position in the poetry was found in the phrase ‘they say’ which occurred eight times in Duangphaeng’s performance in the introductory phrase in a line.

CONCLUSION. The analysis of this data leads one to conclude that in essentially intimate speech between adults, kin terms and personal names, titles, and affectionate terms are likely to dominate self-reference and other-reference. “Standard” pronouns were used infrequently between the two speakers in the performance analyzed, usually less than 20% of the time. In fact, it appears that pronouns should be considered the exception rather than the rule in such discourse. The kin terms used have “floating person,” for when used by one speaker, they reflect the ‘I’, but when used by the other, the ‘you’ is indicated.

Another finding is that the term *náaŋ* was used with great frequency, as least in this Southern Lao dialect, as a woman’s term of self-reference in extended discourse. This is significant

because *náaŋ*, meaning ‘woman,’ is not a kinship term, but a noun used as self-reference in the subject and object slots in numerous sentences (56) in the data. This same term is also used by the male speaker to refer to the female speaker in the positions in the sentence where a pronoun for ‘you’ or ‘yours’ or a kinship term for younger sibling would generally appear.

For both speakers, the kinship terms were used with much greater frequency, to refer to self (I, me, my) than were the actual first person pronouns. Similarly, the kinship terms were used with much greater frequency to refer to the other (you, yours) than were standard pronouns. In terms of the poetic structure, with the exception of the word for younger sibling, it appears to be sociocultural usage and not poetic pressure which has influenced the choice of pronouns and kinship terms in this performance. Furthermore, this data clearly illustrates that it is not standard pronouns, but kinship terms used pronominally that are preferred by Lao speakers in intimate discourse.

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