

# When Bargaining Was in Bloom: Changing Language and Social Relationships in Thai Food Markets<sup>1</sup>

John F. Hartmann

Northern Illinois University

## INTRODUCTION

A generation ago—or less—in Thailand, it was the rule to bargain, that is negotiate a final price, for many items—large and small—and for some services in Thailand. The housewife or servant, for example, would wend her way to the neighborhood market very early in the morning, most likely each morning, to procure the day's *kàpkhâaw* (literally 'with rice') items that are eaten as side dishes along with rice as the main staple. She might have taken a *săam lăo* 'samlor' or 'pedicab,' if the distance were too far, her purchases too heavy, the weather a problem, or her household status demanded it. In both cases, whether in Bangkok or in a provincial town, these daily activities involved bargaining—haggling over a few *bàat* (then as now, the exchange rate was US \$1 = 25 Baht), *saññ* 'one quarter of a *bàat*,' or *satàaŋ* 'one hundredth of a *bàat*.' The *fàràŋ* 'Westerner' who knew how to speak even a minimal amount of Thai first learned to count and then to haggle, using the verbs *lôt* 'to bargain, haggle,' *?aw* 'to take or want,' the pre-verb or auxiliary *dây* 'can, to be able to,' the negative *mây* 'not,' the interrogative *máy* 'particle in yes/no questions,' and the *wh*-interrogatives *thâwrày* 'how much' and *kǐi* 'how many' to process a procurement.

Language textbooks for teaching Thai to foreigners then and now contain dialogs and narratives centered around bargaining situations. Witness the following (Brown, 1969, p. 69), in which the situation details a (stereotyped) Westerner who cannot speak Thai, let alone know how to bargain, but is lucky enough to have two servants, one to market each day, while the second stays home to guard the house:

*fàràŋ pay càay kàpkhâaw kô lambàak, phrô? phûut thay mây dâi.*  
*khon khăay bôok khăay thâwrày, kô tồ rakhaa mây pen.*

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'It is difficult for Westerners to go shopping for food, because they can't speak Thai. When the seller tells them how much, they don't know how to bargain.'

A dialog between a Westerner and his servant (Brown, 1968, p. 101) instructs the student in the language used to bargain for a tricycle taxi (*săamlóo*). In this exchange the Farang, the student's potential alter ego, does speak Thai:

(A: Westerner; B: Thai servant.)

|  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| B: <i>săamlóo maa léew khráp.</i>        | Here's the samlor.           |
| A: <i>kháw ca ?aw kǐi bàat</i>           | How much does he want?       |
| B: <i>sǐp bàat khráp.</i>                | Ten baht.                    |
| A: <i>phœ̃n pay.</i>                     | That's too much.             |
| <i>thăam kháw wâa pèet bàat dâi máy.</i> | Ask him if he'll take eight. |

Another record of the saliency of bargaining in making food purchases in the past are scenes from a documentary film made in the 1970s entitled *Children of Bangkok*.<sup>2</sup> This film depicts a typical day in the life of three young teenage boys, one of whom is a perambulating pedlar, who goes through back streets selling *plaa mòk*, banana leaf packets of fish steamed in coconut curry by day and jasmine garlands by night. As the boy walks through a slum neighborhood in Bangkok, he chants plaintively, "Steamed fish, ma'am/sir." When he is stopped, his customers ask the price and the bargaining begins. The first customer (A) is a woman, alone. The young pedlar (B) rejects her offer to bargain, which can be explained in a number of ways. This is his first sale of the afternoon, and he wants to keep his price up so as to maximize his profit. Or, in addition, he quickly sizes up the woman, who is alone, and decides he is in a position where can get her to pay easily.

B: *plaa mòk, khráp* (chanted from a distance)      Curried fish (politely).

[Approaching his first buyer.]

|                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| A: <i>khăay yanṇay</i>                | How much? (lit. How do you sell?)     |
| B: <i>hǎo lá sǎoṇ bàat</i>            | Two baht per packet.                  |
| A: <i>săam hǎo, hâa bàat, dâi máy</i> | How about five packets for four baht? |
| B: <i>mây dâi</i>                     | No, I can't.                          |

[She makes the purchase. He walks on, singing out, "*plaa mòk, khráp*." Then, he comes to his second customer, a woman. This time, on his own initiative, he changes the price structure to admit a bargain—the same that he just rejected from the first woman. He is now in a group of people, and he

<sup>2</sup>*Children of Bangkok*, a twenty-minute documentary produced in 1971 by Sterling Educational Films, 241 E. 34th St. New York, NY 10016, U.S.A.

possibly sees the chance to sell his entire tray of packets—or to appear more willing to bargain and thus attract a larger clientele for the present and future—and get back to his supplier quickly for a refill.]

A: *khăay yaŋŋay* How much? (lit. How do you sell?)

B: *hǎo lá sǎoŋ, sǎam hâa* Two per packet; three for five.

[Now his first male customer approaches. The male, unlike the two women, does not bargain; he is very direct and to the point. It appears that “real men don’t bargain.” On the other hand, women, more frequent marketers, are experienced.]<sup>3</sup>

A: *sǎoŋ hǎo thârây yá?* How much for two packets?

B: *sǐi bàat hâ* Four baht (semi-politely)<sup>4</sup>

A: *sǐi bàat ná?* Four baht, okay?

[The third female buyer comes. She bargains for just two packets, but she fails.]

A: *hǎo thâwrày* How much a packet?

B: *hǎo lá? sǎoŋ* Two per packet.

A: *sǎoŋ hǎo tǎo dâi máy* Can I bargain on two packets?

*sǎoŋ hǎo lǐa sǎam bàat dâi máy* Can I get two packets for three baht?

B: *mây dâi* No, you can’t.

[The second male enters the scene. Like his male counterpart, he doesn’t bargain.]

A: *hǎo mòk (hǎo) lá? thâwrày* How much per packet for the curried fish?

B: *hǎo lá? sǎoŋ* Two per packet.

A: *?aw sǎam hǎo* I’ll take three packets.

[The fourth woman interjects, speaking a Southern Thai dialect.]

A: *hǎo mòk thawdây* How much for the curried fish?

B: *hǎo lá sǎoŋ* Two per packet.

<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asian women are also managers of the household budget and diet. Hence, most women would be more motivated than men to bargain as a means of stretching their finances.

<sup>4</sup> The buyer uses a very informal, friendly final particle, *yá?*, close to the particle *cá?* used by adults, usually women, in talking to kids; *yá?* is possibly a reduced form of *-(yaŋa)y níi nâ*. The seller, a teenage boy, responds to this subtlety by using the semi-polite, deferential particle *hâ*.

A: *săam hỏỏ hầa nắ?*

Three packets for five, okay?

What is significant about this scene documented in Bangkok a generation ago is that the steamed fish pedlar invites his clientele to purchase his foodstuffs by chanting afar to them in a soft and alluring manner, each call punctuated by the utterance-final polite male (speaker) particle *khắp*. When they approach him, he speaks to them in gentle and deferential terms, using the semi-polite utterance-final polite particle *hầ*. The language and social relation between seller and buyer is one of social softness and gentility.

By contrast, in talking to people in Bangkok in 1993 who grew up in the 60s and 70s, one hears the lament, in reminiscing on the past, that the softer ways of yore have been swept aside. Middle-aged people recall the chants of pedlars walking through their neighborhoods selling foods and sweets in mid-afternoon, or mid-morning refuse collectors singing out for old bottles to recycle. Complaints are now heard that many sidewalk pedlars, whom they probably do not know well, shout in an effort to promote sales of their wares. Their language is rough, their social graces rude. And the buyers often feel they are at the mercy of the seller's "take it or leave it attitude." It is a sign of the times.

To test the currency of the explicit language and implicit social relationships in the A.U.A. language materials, I carried out some preliminary research in food markets (not among street hawkers) in several regions of Thailand in 1993 (Jan.–Apr.) and spoke to a number of urban Thais about their perceptions of the practice of bargaining and the social relations between sellers and buyers in food markets. The motivation for this research came from my participation in the 1992 University of Hawaii Intensive Summer Institute for Foreign Language Teachers. One of our training goals was to design a language activity centered around shopping. The Thai participants in the institute had problems in arriving at a consensus about the language used in marketing: choice of pronouns, use of deferential particles—even the most natural expression for asking how much an item costs. In the end, we prepared dialogs that we all felt might be classified as "imagined conversations" between a Thai seller and a Western (Farang) buyer bargaining for everything from mangoes to T-shirts. The language was necessarily imagined because we were writing scenes far from Thailand, both in terms of space and time. Some of us had not been back to Thailand in many years—in one case, as long as twenty years.

In the Bangkok of 1993, the year when thousands of brand new ice-cream-colored taxis suddenly poured out onto the streets and freeways of Bangkok, thanks to a removal of the old quotas restricting the number of taxis in the city, the 40-cent tricycle-taxi ride of 1968 has given way to metered taxis, whose minimum fare is \$1.40 (35 baht)<sup>5</sup>—and no bargaining is allowed.<sup>6</sup> The most significant official buzzword of the

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<sup>5</sup> At the official exchange rate of U.S. \$1.00 = 25 Baht.

<sup>6</sup> In a CNN televised interview of June 15, 1993, the Mayor of Bangkok, in commenting on traffic gridlock, stated that the city would need to construct a four-lane freeway one kilometer long each day in order to accommodate the number of new vehicles coming on to the city's roads daily, a feat that no city can perform.



Bangkok of the 90s is “efficiency”—ประสิทธิภาพ (*prasithíphâap*)—and bargaining gets in its way, like a pushcart on a city freeway.<sup>7</sup>

Bargaining, although greatly diminished by economic and social changes<sup>8</sup> of the last decade, does still function in Bangkok, and even more so in smaller upcountry towns, where pedicabs too can still be found and hired for 40 cents or less. But in Bangkok the pedicabs have disappeared (they have fled to the quieter streets of some out of the way provincial towns<sup>9</sup> that “progress” has not yet visited), and bargaining and the special social relationships that surround it are fading fast, as fast as new supermarkets and shopping centers can be constructed where old “row shops” [*hōng thěw*] and neighborhood open air markets have been bulldozed to make way for closed, air-conditioned mass markets and parking structures.<sup>10</sup>

Still, tradition dies hard, and many if not most of the *talàat sòt* ‘fresh food markets’ remain intact and continue to supply most of the fresh food consumed by Thais. What has changed is a decline in bargaining on the part of middle-class Thais when shopping for most food items.<sup>11</sup> With the expansion of the middle class and the dramatic increase in their disposable income in the 80s, many urban Thais have found that “time is money” and no longer find that it pays to haggle over two baht here or one baht there. According to the Thais I interviewed or observed while shopping—all middle class—several new factors are at work.

In addition to the element of time, new market forces are at work. The practice of fixed prices, which are labeled on supermarket food items in packaging similar to what is common in the West, has spilled over into the traditional *talàat sòt*. Absent the price on a package in the *talàat sòt*, one may ask what the price is, but one does not bother to bargain, except in certain cases, which will be discussed later. When it comes to the prices of fresh food items, both radio and newspapers regularly report the going fresh food market prices. Information, then, on what the current market prices of food items are or should be is common knowledge on the part of buyers and sellers. Such wide public dissemination of market prices obviates the need to determine a fair price on an individual level through bargaining for each item. Even without access to, or awareness of, current market reports, frequent, even daily, shopping also means that the astute shopper knows the going price. By and large that urban shopper no longer has the time or interest in bargaining. Efficiency (ประสิทธิภาพ [*prasithíphâap*]) and standards (มาตรฐาน

<sup>7</sup> No freeways had been constructed in metropolitan Bangkok until the 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> Changes in the law might also have occurred. Prices are controlled on essential commodities to prevent price gouging. Sellers who charge excessively high prices can be prosecuted by law.

<sup>9</sup> One of the main tourist attractions in the northern Thai town of Pitsanuloke, which I visited in 1993, is an evening ride from the major hotel, where 15–20 pedicabs line up to take Farang couples to the night market. In Roi Et, a small provincial capital in northeastern Thailand, I often took a pedicab from the Post Office to the home of my host, the former city mayor, for 8–10 baht.

<sup>10</sup> The 1993 television series “The Mini-Dragons of Asia” devotes a considerable amount of footage in its Thailand segment on the building of a new shopping center in Bangkok.

<sup>11</sup> In other types of open-air markets, clothing stalls, for example, everyone—including the middle-class—bargains.

[*mâatrathăan*] in pricing are terms that define the new value system of the urban, consumer-oriented Thai.

## LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN FRESH FOOD MARKETS

My pilot project in market research covered, albeit superficially, the four major regions of Thailand: Bangkok (the Central Plains), Pattani (the South), Chiang Mai (the North), and Roi Et (Isan or the Northeast).

Bangkok is noted for its large concentration of ethnic Chinese, as high as 50% of the city's population. The concentration of ethnic Chinese is even higher in commercial centers, like the food markets. It is to be expected, then, that Chinese terms of address will be heard in Bangkok market exchanges with male and female vendors. It was my observation that in Bangkok, ethnic Chinese men (with an attending wife or family member perhaps) tend to be seen cutting up and selling meat and fish, while women deal more in fruits and vegetables. Overall, there is a decided male presence in the Bangkok markets. Chiang Mai—the few days I spent there—struck me as being very much in the Bangkok market mode. In the Northeast, represented by the markets of Roi Et, women sellers were more visible than men. However, men of working age, tend to be absent in general. They regularly migrate out of the region in search of work.<sup>12</sup>

In the South, by contrast, ethnic Malay women vendors appear to dominate in the markets.<sup>13</sup> The absence of ethnic Malay men can likely be best explained in religious terms—the rather strict separation of the two sexes is most evident in religious services and many social events. The few men sellers that I noticed and chatted with very briefly in the Pattani markets, appeared to be young men from northeastern Thailand. In the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun, Malay (locally called Jawi) is the speech of the majority, along with Islam as the major religion.<sup>14</sup> The adept non-Malay learns to address the largely ethnic Malay female sellers in as much Malay as possible and to be sensitive in the selection of appropriate Malay terms of address, equivalents of “aunt” or “mother.”

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<sup>12</sup>I recall how struck I was by the sharp contrast between the Northeast and the South in terms of animal husbandry. In the South, ethnic Malay men, usually grown men, can be seen tending cattle—cows, goats, sheep—which they take out in fields and along roadsides to roam and graze. In the Isan, I saw middle-aged women out with the cattle—by and large, water buffaloes. Several people commented to me that Isan villages have been emptied of working-age people of both sexes who outmigrate to earn money to send home. Hence, grandmothers look after water buffaloes, while grandfathers may work the fields, do chores around the house compound, and even look after grandchildren.

<sup>13</sup>This is a first impression only and needs empirical verification. The concentration of female ethnic Malay vendors might turn out to be a function of location in the city. Where a particular market is serving a Malay neighborhood, for example, one might reasonably expect to find that the majority of both sellers and buyers are ethnic Malay women.

<sup>14</sup>According to official 1990 statistics published by the Administrative Center for the Southern Border Provinces, Yala, the overall Muslim population in the five provinces is 52%; in Narathiwat it is 78.48%.

### TRYING ONE'S BEST TO BARGAIN

In Pattani, I was fortunate in having the cooperation of a university lecturer who was sympathetic to my research interests, when I explained to her that I wanted to make observations (and recordings, if possible) on language and social relationships in the city fresh food markets. She and her colleagues explained to me that her social class does not as a rule bargain for fresh foods. Time did not allow it, and it was not worth haggling over a few baht (U.S. nickels). In her own words,

I don't bargain. If you bargain, it is usually only one or two baht; if you ask for a five-baht reduction, they won't give it to you. It's not worth wasting your time in bargaining. Local people, with small incomes, are more likely to bargain. Civil servants (*khâarâatchakaan*), generally do not bargain. And they go to the *talàat khun naay*, the 'market of the wife of a government official.' [She and the other university lecturers with her laughed at her use of the term "khun naay," perhaps at the mild pretentiousness of the term.]

However, she invited me to go to the late afternoon market with her, and she would attempt to bargain, just to allow me to hear and record the language that one might use. This Pattani woman was ethnic Chinese; as a child, she spoke Chinese at home. Many of her neighbors were ethnic Malay; from them she learned to speak quite a bit of Pattani Malay. Having gone through the Thai educational system, she had standard Thai as her strongest language. She could switch to the Pattani dialect of spoken Thai when it seemed appropriate, which, for a university instructor, was probably not often at all. She was a gregarious person who described herself as

the type of person who likes to make small talk. I will talk to people I meet on the bus. When I go out to a village to visit, I will ask people about their activities—how many cows they have, how many they have sold, where "grandpa so-and-so" is.

In talking about her relationships with food sellers in the large, downtown market, "Talat Makrut" (Kaffir Lime Market), she has this to say:

I have known many sellers for many years, but the ones I felt closest to have left—or they come and go. I guess it depends on family responsibilities or the child-bearing and raising activities of the women. They disappear for a year or so because they have a new baby or have young children who need them at home. One of my former students wanted to be a teacher at first, but she left the profession after a while to become a seller in the market. She felt very close to me and many "ajans" (professors), who bought from her, because of her previous association with the university.

Several of the professors agree that one engages in "small talk" in the market with only those sellers judged to be trustworthy and sincere in wanting to know you and not to use the information against you. The same woman elaborated:

It is natural and okay for a seller who wants to establish a long-term, friendly, business relationship with you to ask some personal questions like, *tèŋŋaan léew rí yaŋ* 'are you married?' or, *mii lûuk kîi khon* 'How many children do you have?'

But they can also cross a line of familiarity that is judged to be bordering on the nosy and ask for information that could become market gossip. As I walked through the market with her, the professor (in her forties) was asked by one seller who I was. She replied nicely, "He is a person who has come to study buying and selling in the market." But then, perhaps feeling the impertinence of the question added: *yàa thăam yaŋŋánŋik, ná khá* 'Don't ask any more things like that, okay?'

A few steps away from the interrogator, the professor explained that sellers will try to get too familiar with the patrons by asking questions such as this:

*sî khǒŋ mâak yaŋŋîi, ʔaw pay líaŋ khray ...kîi khon*  
You're buying a lot of stuff. Who are you feeding and how many?

In the professor's mind the seller is trying to get at potentially juicy details of one's private life, and she does not like this kind of probing. Sometimes, if a woman is quite young, the seller will ask, *mii fēen léew rí yaŋ* 'Do you have a man yet?' or, *ʔaayú? thăwray* 'How old are you?' or, *mii ɲən dian thăwray* 'How much money do you make each month?'

But those kinds of questions don't make me angry. Maybe it's because of the influence of Western culture and my education that makes me want to not be asked personal questions.

One of the professor's colleagues back at the university said:

You will consider the educational level of your questioner too. If the person is educated, they will exhibit proper etiquette in asking and will ask for personal use, not to be a gossip, uneducated person.

This second professor said she had known and felt especially close to a particular seafood seller for over twenty years. "Her economic status hasn't improved after all of those years."

Tagging along with the polyglot professor was really an amazing experience for me. I recorded many of the exchanges and later, back at the university, replayed the recordings and had her clarify parts I could not pick up and also elaborate on matters I did not understand completely. The following are transcriptions from some of the exchanges, in which, in keeping with my interest in the language of bargaining, she attempted, at times, to bargain, but with little success—because, as a rule, it is no longer done by people of her economic status.

February 19 and 21, 1993—Pattani's Makrut Market

Ajan: *khăay yaŋŋay, ní-aa*

Seller: *khĩit lá hâa bàat*

Ajan: *khĩit lá hâa bàat, lăo*

*săoŋ khĩit kâaw, dâw máy*

Seller: *pradăm hây ní<sup>15</sup>*

Ajan: *hây máy há*

Seller: [nods in agreement]

How do you sell this?

Five baht per khĩit (1/10 kg.)

Five baht per khĩit, eh?...

Can you make it two for nine?

I can for the first customer.

You're giving it to me for that?

Later, the professor explained that *pradăm* means 'first'—in this situation, 'the first customer.' So this was not bargaining in the usual sense—that is a back-and-forth negotiating of a price; it was giving the customer a bargain price because she was ostensibly the first customer of the day. Among sellers, it is believed that if one gives the day's first customer a good price, good luck and brisk business will follow.

### Buying Pork

We next moved to buy pork. We came to an ethnic Chinese woman seller. (Muslims, of course would not sell pork because Islamic religious practice prohibits it.) The price of all kinds of meat is absolutely not bargained for; meat prices are fixed: *rakhaa taay tua*.

Ajan: *mũu săam chán, mii máy*

Seller: *săam chán mii khâ*

Ajan: *nía mũu, sũay máy*

Seller: *ráp thâwray dii khá*

*baaŋ máy*

*dâan níi, kô léew kan ná*

*?aw thâwray*

Ajan: *sák sĭp bàat phoo*

*mây ?aw mâak*

*săam chán, mây khôy dâw thaan*

*mâak*

*léew khăo sǎn năok*

Seller: *dây khâ. chín níi lâ*

Ajan: *?aw khĕŋ loo, dâw máy khâ*

Seller: *chín níi, dii máy khá*

Do you have side pork (bacon)?

Yes, we have side pork. (pol.)

Is the meaty part nice?

How much do you want? (pol.)

Do you want it thin?

This side, okay?

How much?

Just ten baht worth is enough.

I don't want a lot.

I seldom eat side pork.

Then I'll have some of the back part.

Yes. This piece, then.

Can I get half a kilo? (politely)

Is this piece good? (politely)

<sup>15</sup> ní is a southern Thai utterance-final emphatic particle.

Ajan: *thâwrày khá*

How much? (politely)

Seller: *sĩisĩp hâa, khâ*

Forty-five. (politely)

### *Small Talk*

The best demonstration of social relationships in the food markets often manifests itself in small talk that can take place before, during, or after the completion of a transaction. Here, the pork seller and the professor, package of side pork in hand, continue their conversation, with the professor taking a new move by offering the bit of news about a Korean acquaintance who used to come to the market with her before returning to Korea.

Ajan: *khun chæe yan mây dây klàp mian thai* Mr. Chae hasn't come back to Thailand.

Seller: *cà? maa máy*

Will he come?

Ajan: *mây maa léew*

He's not coming.

*kháw thamnaan toun nĩi*

He's working now.

Seller: *khun pũuchaay khǎo thĩi yũu  
mĩi thĩi yũu máy*

My husband asked for his address.

Do you have his address?

Ajan: *đĩaw ná.*

Wait.

*khraaw nãa ?aw maa hây*

I'll bring it to you next time.

Seller: *khòp khun m̃aak phĩi*

Thanks a lot, sister. (politely)

In this exchange, we notice that the buyer and seller share a common topic of interest, both having known a Korean visitor to Pattani in the recent past. The "sister" relationship that holds between the two women, seller and buyer, is a warm, supportive, quasi-family social relationship that both parties benefit from, economically and psychologically. One goes to this type of market to do more than just to buy food. Friendships are also to be found in a setting that is quite open socially, even in a society that is as stratified as Thai society is.

### *Buying Fish*

Moving on to try to bargain for fresh fish (again from a female seller), again, resistance to the idea of bargaining is met—first by suggesting a cheaper fish, then by giving a bargain price because the professor is ostensibly *pradæm*, 'the first customer of the day.' The fish seller does not appear to recognize a sister relationship here; she is a hard-nosed businesswoman.

Seller: *loo sãam hãa bàat*

Three-five (thirty-five) baht a kilo.

Ajan: *lót dây máy khá*

Can you lower the price?

Seller: *yan nĩi, loo yĩisĩp hãa bàat*

This kind is twenty-five baht a kilo.

Ajan: *lót hây sǎo bàat, kò léew kan khâ* Lower it two baht for me, then it's a deal.

- Seller: *săamsĭp sām, pradəəm* Thirty-three for being the first.  
 Ajan: *mây thĭn sĕamsĭp bàat, dĕy máy* Can you do it for less than 30?  
 Seller: *mây dĕy. sĭt maa lĕew* I can't. You've already bought it.  
 Ajan: *?aw khĕn loo ?een* I'll take just a half kilo.  
 Seller: *khĕn loo, ?aw sĭpcèt bàat* A half kilo will be seventeen baht.  
 Ajan: *yĭp hĕy tua ?ŭan ?ŭan ləəy* Pick up some really fat ones.  
*tua ?ŭan ?ŭan sĕy sĕy* Very fat and very transparent flesh.  
 Seller: *sām tua dĕy khĕn kiloo* Three of them makes a half kilo.  
 Ajan: *khǎo thĭn ?iik chán nĭn, dĕy máy khá* Can I have an additional (layer) bag:  
*sĭpcèt bàat, chĕy máy khá* (pol.)  
 Seventeen baht, right (politely).

### *Buying Cucumbers from an Ethnic Malay Woman*

The majority of the sellers in the Makrut Market rented space under the large roof covering the otherwise large, sprawling, open market. The roof provided shelter from sun and rain. In the periphery of the market, outside of the sheltering roof, other sellers set up stalls or sat on the sidewalks. We approached an ethnic Malay woman who had the equivalent of about a bushelfull of small cucumbers. Her shyness and her position on the sidewalk in the hot, four-thirty P.M. sun showed her to be a sometime seller. She might have grown the cukes herself and appeared quite eager to sell them and move on. Unlike the pork and fish sellers, who spoke Standard Thai, this woman spoke Pattani Malay for the most part. (This was my first exposure to any Malay dialect, and my hearing and transcription is only approximate.)

- Seller: *talae simĭlae* Not for nine baht.  
 Ajan: [comments in an aside to me in Thai]  
*mĕe khĕa khon nĭi mây hĕy* This seller won't give me the price I want.  
 [she—the professor—tries a new strategy]  
*?aw khĕn loo phoo* A half kilo is enough.....  
 [pauses to see if her strategy works.]  
*thĕa hĕy, kô ?aw kiloo nĭn* If you give it to me (for nine), I'll take a kilo.  
*thĕa mây hĕy, kô ?aw khĕn kiloo* If you won't, I'll take a half kilo.  
 [the strategy seems to work]  
 Seller: *loo nĭn kĕaw bàat lăə* A kilogram for nine, eh?  
 Ajan: *?aw. tòkloŋ* I'll take it. Okay.  
 [small talk—comment—diversion—change of topic?]  
*tĕen yă?, thĭn nəəy* A lot of cucumbers are tiring to carry.  
 Seller: *nyaanyoo. mblah kô?* Have pity. Twelve baht.  
 [twelve baht is the amount she must pay to rent the small spot on the pavement]

the seller weighs out about nine *khĩit*, not yet a kilogram (10 *khĩit*), as if reluctant, and picks up on the professor's small talk]

*thĩt nàøy nêe ləøy*

It's tiring to carry them for sure.

Ajan: [speaking Malay] *cəko do*

Is that it (a full kilo)?

Seller: *hây thěem*

I'll throw in an extra cuke.

The tug of war over one baht is, strictly speaking, won by the seller, who does not end up agreeing to the professor's proposal to buy a kilo (10 *khĩit*) for nine baht but quietly gives her nine *khĩit* for nine baht. But to soften her refusal to bargain, she throws in a "freebie," which turns out to be a common gesture on the part of most sellers—like the "baker's dozen" (i.e., 13). Afterwards, the professor commented to me:

You must think that I'm really cruel. I bargained over a single baht. It's true that this woman sat out in the hot sun for a long time, but I wanted to see how friendly she would be towards me—what kind of social relationship I could establish with her.

A few yards farther, as we walked back into the market building, we passed another cucumber seller who called out to us: *sĩt tɛɛŋ kwaa máy* 'buy some cucumbers?' The professor commented to me: "Sometimes the seller will try to catch your attention by saying, *chũay sĩt* 'please buy.'"

### "Opening" Strategies

In assisting me in my goal of studying the language of bargaining, the professor illustrated what she called making an "opening move," in which the buyer initiates bargaining without committing herself to any price. The noncommittal opening move is "Can you make it less?"

Seller: *cèt bàat, kiloo nĩ*

Seven baat a kilo.

Ajan: *mây thĩŋ, dâý máy*

Can you make it less?

Or in another setting,

Ajan: *hây pradəəm yĩisĩp, ləə*

You'll give me the first-buyer price of twenty, eh?

*təə nəøy ná?, sǝŋ loo*

Can I bargain—two kilos

*mây thĩŋ yĩisĩp ná?*

Under twenty, okay?

Seller: *sĩ maa phɛɛŋ*

I bought at a high price.

*khǝ hěncay câ, yàa təə mâak*

Be sympathetic; don't bargain a lot.

*sǝŋ kiloo sĩisĩp bàat*

Two kilos, forty baht.

*lót mây dâý*

I can't reduce the price.



[The professor relents and buys two kilos for forty baht.]

<sup>17</sup>In Central Thai, *thǎem hây nǐn lûuk*

*Buying Ginger*

The professor sees a woman selling ginger and stops to ask:

Ajan: *khĩn khăay yaŋŋay*

How do you sell your ginger?

Seller: *loo siphòk bàat*

A kilo is sixteen baht.

The professor thinks this is a good price, so she doesn't bargain. She knows it is usually twenty baht a kilogram.

Ajan: [picking up a clump of ginger]

*thâwray khá, ní*

How much is this?

Seller: *námna̋k sǎam khiit khri̋n. hâa bàat* It weighs 3 1/2 *khiit*. Five baht.

The professor said that she didn't stop to calculate, so she didn't know what she gained or lost by buying only a fraction of a kilo. (The seller did not jack up the price.)

*Buying More Fish*

In addressing the Malay sellers, she usually uses kin terms in place of the personal pronoun equivalent of *you*. The two Malay kin terms she used were *mə* 'mother, aunt' and *mŌç-jī* 'aunt.' In turn, she is addressed by the ethnic Malay sellers as *khani*? 'elder sister.'

Seller: [calls to the professor]: *khani*? Elder sister!

Ajan: [looking at her fish] *chĩn lá thâwray* How much per slice?

Seller: *yĩsĩp*

Twenty.

Ajan: *mây thĩn yĩsĩp, dâi máy*

Can you make it less than twenty?

Seller: *yĩsĩp thũuk léew*

Twenty is already cheap!

Ajan: [in Malay] *blah*

Slice (filet) it.

[The seller gives her a long story, in Malay, on how hard it is to filet it for her.]

Ajan: *khǎo rǎoŋ, mēē kháa*

I implore you, *mēē kháa*.<sup>18</sup>

*tham hây nǎoŋ*

Please do it for me.

*mĩit thĩi bân mây khom*

My knives at home are not sharp.<sup>19</sup>

Seller: *mĩit mây kin*

My knife won't cut.

[The seller relents reluctantly and filets the fish for the professor.]

<sup>18</sup> Female seller.

<sup>19</sup>The professor is playing on words here. If it is said of a Thai woman that "she has a sharp knife in her kitchen," it means that she "hen-pecks her husband."

## LANGUAGE AND SOLIDARITY

In summing up her code-shifting from Thai, to Malay, to Chinese, the professor said that it works to her advantage: It has "good economic value." One of the sellers really likes her because she can speak some Malay (and understand even more); the woman remembers who she is, and considers her "special." Another seller, who sold chickens, once invited her to her home. But now the woman had moved away. Similarly, the pork seller liked her because she can speak Chinese. She hesitated for a moment and said, "Mm....it makes me feel as though we are members of the same group: *phûak diaw kan*."

## PERSISTENCE OF ETHNICITY: OBSERVATIONS FROM BANGKOK

My direct observations of bargaining in Bangkok were limited to three markets: Khlong Toey (khlooŋ tœy), Sam Yaan (săam yâan), and Chattujak (càttúcàk). The first is a huge, sprawling market, where both wholesale and retail marketing takes place. Because of its mammoth size and the masses of people who trade there, the first impression it renders the observer is the comparative lack of sanitation. The latter two markets, by contrast, are models of cleanliness and order, a reflection of municipal government policy of deliberately establishing "Model Markets" and of the meticulousness of the middle class who drive up in their Mercedes Benzes and BMWs.

Only in Sam Yaan was I in the company of a Thai doing her shopping—with her teenage daughter accompanying her after school. The shopper was a full professor from nearby Chulalongkorn University, which owns much of the property in the Sam Yan district, from which it derives a reputedly large rental income.

It is necessary to point out that Chulalongkorn University is Thailand's oldest and most prestigious university. It was established by the monarchy, and Thai royalty have taught there and received degrees there as well. It has taken over the role that palace schools once played in training royalty and the sons and daughters of the elite. A striking atmosphere of civility and courtesy is palpable among the professors and their students, particularly in the liberal arts faculty. This particular professor was a prime exemplar of grace and etiquette in all of her movements and transactions. She was not condescending in the slightest. (Those who dislike courtly etiquette have been heard to classify this behavior as "stuck up," which was not at all true in this case.)

The professor appeared to have long been a client of the market; she went directly to those merchants she knew well. By and large, they were ethnic Chinese, as was she. In fact the most immediate items she needed that day were ceremonial in nature, because the next day she would accompany her husband to a Chinese annual ritual for paying respect to her deceased mother-in-law. For this she needed a nice-looking chicken (plump, with smooth, unblemished, pale-yellow skin) and a piece of pork with the skin on. She bought her chicken from a young butcher with little exchange of comment except that she wanted a nice one. She hesitated briefly over the price, 200 baht (U.S. \$8.00) but relented when the butcher responded by saying that he usually charged 220. She bought her pork from a middle-aged Chinese couple, who treated her with great deference.

The fish seller was an older man. It appeared that they had known each other some time. He addressed her as 'professor' (aacaan); she called him 'elder' (thâw kèe). He

began the small talk by asking her where the older daughter who usually accompanied her was. Her answer was that she was still at her piano lessons. Because the fresh fish was her last purchase (intentionally so) and was somewhat smelly and also heavy because it was packed in crushed ice, he carried it to the car for her. A true gentleman was serving a true lady in sincere but supremely deferential form. It was a delight to witness.

When I queried her about bargaining, she said she did not do it in the usual sense, but might achieve the same end by suggestion. For example, if a merchant would pile up 75 baht of vegetables, she might nicely suggest 70 and get it for that much for a number of reasons. The original amount of money (U.S.\$3) for the total purchase is large to begin with, and the vegetables may be plentiful because they are in season. The merchant may want to sell off his perishable produce quickly. He or she might also be in the mood to knock off five baht for a favorite customer. Remember too, that price controls do not apply to fruits and vegetables as they do to meat, fish, and rice.

As was the practice in the markets in Pattani, the Sam Yaan fruit and vegetable vendors did employ the notion of an extra or “freebie”: *thēm nīŋ ʔan* is what the merchant did in measuring out a purchase of sapodilla fruits for the Chula professor. A banana pedlar she next addressed as *cée* (Chinese for ‘older sister’) said that she could have a particular bunch of 18 bananas for 17 baht—again the equivalent of a freebie—to which the professor quickly replied *sīpcèt, ʔaw* ‘Seventeen — I’ll take it.’

When it came to buying two small steamed mackerel (*plaa thuu*) the fishwife would not deviate from her price of two for 25 baht. She said, “I can remember when they were only a baht apiece; now the poor can’t eat them!” To which the professor responded, “I’m not rich, but I like to eat them.” This prompted the fishwife to come back with, “Oh, you *are* rich, elder sister (*phīi ruay*)!”

Friends of mine who own a small printing shop and who had lived in the neighborhood of the Sam Yaan market for a generation noticed the change in attitude of the merchants since it became a “model market.” My friend’s wife said that if she tries to bargain at all now, she is met with something like a glare or look of derision. The merchants of Sam Yaan have now become middle class themselves and have adopted the new middle class value of not bargaining, i.e. haggling over a few cents.

The Chattujak market I went to last bore the greatest resemblance to a modern, western-style market. While it was not enclosed in air-conditioned space, it was immaculate. There was easy access in and out by car, and plenty of parking the day I went (Tuesday). Many items, e.g., segments of durian fruit, were packaged in shrink-wrap plastic. The stalls were well lighted by bright lights, and many items had signs propped up indicating fixed prices. This type of market is obviously competing with the new supermarkets and competing well by imitation in terms of merchandise display, price display, and convenience. This particular market is unique too in being available to small merchants who grow their own produce—a kind of cooperative market sponsored by the government.

## CONCLUSIONS ON REAL AND IMAGINED DIALOGIC BARGAINING BEHAVIOR

The research for this paper began with the formulation of a simple, rather naive question: How do Thais bargain in fresh food markets? It was based on a preconception that most Thais do in fact bargain when they shop for fresh foods in a traditional *talàat sòt*. The preconception, as it turned out, was soon proven to be wrong because of economic and societal changes in the past decade, crudely summarized as “the rise of the middle class.” Members of that class that I interviewed were quite consistent in stating that they usually do not bargain for fresh food items—fruits and vegetables, by and large. That is not to say that certain individuals do not bargain or that circumstances will not arise when a middle class buyer will buy only after a bargain has been struck. Among sellers too, there seems to have arisen the notion that the middle class should not bargain or have no need (or right) to bargain because of their relative affluence. Several middle class people I talked to report that their attempts to bargain with sellers are met with silence and accompanied by cold or defiant looks. The open-air markets that the middle class patronize, especially in Bangkok, tend to be more stratified and sanitized (the “model markets” at Saam Yaan and Chattujak, for example) and take on the chief attribute of a modern supermarket: fixed prices. Many of the established sellers have themselves achieved middle class status and have similarly acquired the values and behaviors of this class, which now has removed even the notion of bargaining for fresh foods from its repertoire of social and language behavior.

In the past, bargaining was a means of establishing a social relationship with particular vendors. In smaller communities, bargaining/social relationships often were based on kinship, quasi-kinship, or neighborhood ties. In general, one would gravitate towards sellers who could use the language of bargaining to build up a loyal clientele. Part of that dialogic behavior included safe, non-intrusive “small talk.” Nowadays, with the decline of bargaining among the middle class, small talk has probably assumed greater importance. The buyers I talked to and observed tended to gravitate towards vendors they had known and trusted for years, and transactions were begun that were relatively indifferent about price but attuned towards deferential behavior solicitous of the buyer’s social status and individual needs and tastes.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on language and social behavior in Thai markets needs to focus more on social aspects and the wider context of the market setting, especially ethnicity and gender. Finally, working-class behavior, which was not studied at all, is an area that should prove even more interesting than middle-class activities.

At the very least, these data do help to answer the question, How do middle class Thais actually talk and behave on a social stage open to all actors?

On a final note, I dedicate this paper to Aacaan Vichin Panupong on the occasion of her retirement. She has been a productive scholar and author of many interesting and pioneering works. In particular, I would point to her monograph entitled *Inter-Sentence Relations in Modern Conversational Thai* (Panupong, 1970) as a ground-breaking

study, one that inspired me. In addition, we all are indebted to her for her great contribution to the promotion of the study of linguistics in Thailand brought about as a result of her establishing the Department of Linguistics at Chulalongkorn University.

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