

## Register and Pragmatic Particles in Thai conversation\*

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### 1. Introduction.

Register refers to the appropriate mode of speech which conversational participants create with verbal and non-verbal cues on the basis of variables, such as speech participants and situation. In our earlier paper (Iwasaki and Horie 1995), we specifically examined the role played by speech level markers such as *khá*, *kháp* and *há* and speech participant reference terms, such as *phǒm*, *chán*, *kuu*, *phii*, *nǔu* and nicknames. In this paper we will shift our attention to a group of words we call "pragmatic particles." In particular we will examine the way in which pragmatic particles are related to the register phenomenon in Thai conversation.

In Iwasaki and Horie (1995), we identified two different dimensions of register. They are Formality and Deference dimensions. The Formality dimension is controlled by the situation in which conversation takes place and the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and addressee. Independent of the Formality dimension, there exists the Deference dimension which is defined by a positive psychological bond that exists between two acquaintances who are not equal in terms of age, social rank and/or occupation. This affection can be an intimacy coalesced with the respect that an inferior has for the superior or fondness that a superior feels towards an inferior. By definition, deference does not exist between two equals and in general it is inapplicable in the case of two strangers.

Formality Dimension is marked by a host of special words. One such group of words is pronominals (see Cooke 1968, Campbell 1969, Palakornkul 1972, Chirasombutti 1995). A male speaker refers to himself with *kraphǒm* or *phǒm* when the situation is formal, but he may use *chán* or *kuu* when the situation is informal. A female speaker may choose the appropriate pronoun among *dichán*, *chán*, *kháw* and so forth depending on formality of the situation. The second person pronouns are also sensitive to formality, and a range of signs is available from the most formal sign, *khun*, to the least formal, *mug*. Use of nicknames in reference to the speaker and addressee also indicates a low degree of formality. Another group of linguistic signs that mark formality is the speech level markers. For example, *khá* (female)/*kháp* (male) and their phonological variants are formal speech level markers. High formality and/or high ranked addressee induce the use of these speech level markers. On the other hand, *há* and its variants (used by both male and female speakers) are markers of mid-level formality. There are also the very casual speech style markers *wá* and *wóoy*, which code an extremely casual speech register.

Deference, or the positive psychological bond, is indicated by different markers, such as kinship terms, occupational terms and other nominal references. For example, an older person in a conversation may refer to himself and/or be

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referred by others as *phīi* (older sibling), or a younger female speaker may refer to herself or be referred to by an older conversational partner as *nūu* (a mouse).

Since Formality and Deference are independent dimensions in register, it is possible to express two values simultaneously. A most interesting mixture appears when a sign indicating formality and that indicating deference appear together in one utterance. For example, when a younger female speaker addresses her older addressee with *phīi khā*, she is expressing both intimacy and respect. As will be shown in this paper, pragmatic particles signal the speaker's understanding of the message he is conveying and his assessment of the addressee's readiness to accept the information, thus figuring yet another dimension in the register phenomenon.

## 2. Data

In the present research we used four separate conversations which give different impressions of register. (These conversations were also used in our previous study.) The length of each conversation data set was measured in terms of intonation units (IU) (Chafe 1993; 1994, Iwasaki in this volume), as indicated by the number in the parentheses. Most IUs relevant for our discussion are of the clausal type.

(a) "Students (SS)" - (298 IU): A casual conversation between male and female students on a university campus in Thailand. They argue about why they failed to meet as they had planned before the conversation took place and what they did after they parted the night before.

(b) "Earthquake" (EO) (285 IU): A conversation between two strangers (both students studying at colleges in Los Angeles) talking about their personal experiences during and after the Northridge earthquake of 1994. They also discuss the damage that their friends suffered and their impression about Americans' reactions to the disaster.

(c) "Teachers" (TT) - (210 IU): A conversation between senior and junior college teachers, both female, recorded in a school office in Bangkok. They discuss the senior teacher's recent operation and school matters.

(d) "Interview" (INT) (306 IU): A job interview between a male interviewer and a female interviewee who has applied for a waitress position at a hotel in Bangkok. The interviewer solicits information on the applicant's English ability, past job experience, and other relevant matters.

## 3. Pragmatic particles

### 3.1. Preliminary

Pragmatic particles, though they may appear within a sentence, usually show up sentence finally (see Iwasaki this volume). They express a speaker's evaluation at the message being conveyed with respect to the addressee. Thus, *nā*, for example, indicates that the speaker considers the message he is communicating to be a rather minor point (Cooke 1989:16-7), and *nā*, for example, shows that he encourages the addressee to accept the message being transmitted.

Pragmatic particles used here correspond to part of Peyasantiwong's (1981) "mood particles" and Cooke's (1989) "Sentence Particles." Exact membership of pragmatic particles is difficult to determine due to many phonological variants and similar functions shared by different groups of words.

In this study we will selectively examine the following seven particles which appear most frequently in the data. Brief descriptions of particles 1 through 4 and 7 are adapted from Cooke (1989). The analysis of *níá* is from Peyasantiwong (1981:237), and that of *gíá* is our own analysis.

1. *ná* (agreement desired)
2. *nà:* (minor, incidental matter)
3. *la?* (critical point reached, or sole-alternative indicator)
4. *ʔa* (shorter form of *ná* or *la?*)
5. *níá* (*níi* "this" + *na/la?*)
6. *gíá* (*yaŋ níi* "like this" + *na/la?*)
7. *gay* (known or rememberable referent)

Pragmatic particles code neither formality nor deference directly. They may be followed by a speech level marker (e.g., *ná khá*), and in fact, as we will see shortly, their distribution is not limited to any particular type of conversation. Having said that, we still notice a tendency of pragmatic particles to appear more in informal conversation than in formal conversation. We will argue later that this is because what these particles reveal is the speaker's understanding of the message with respect to the addressee.

### 3.2 Frequencies of pragmatic particles in the data

Observing the frequency of speech level markers, we can assess the formality level of the four conversations.

	<i>wá/wóoy</i>	<i>há</i>	<i>khá/khráp</i>
SS	8	0	0
EQ	0	12	3
TT	0	20	0
INT	0	33	53

[Table 1] Frequency of speech level markers

Table 1 indicates that SS is the least formal of the four since it lacks high and mid level formality markers, but instead contains several casual speech level markers, *wá* and *wóoy*. INT, on the other hand, is the most formal since it contains 53 formal markers of *khá/khráp* and 33 mid-speech level markers, *há*. EQ and TT fall in the middle of these two extremes containing 3 tokens of *khá* (in EQ) and 12 and 20 tokens of *há*, in EQ and TT, respectively. We can predict from this finding that SS contains the most pragmatic particles and INT the least. The results are shown below.

	ná	ná	la?	ʔa	nia	ɲia	ɲai	Total
SS	1/2	1/0	3/0	8/14	4/2	6/10	3/3	26/31 (57)
EQ	0/1	2/0	0/1	0/0	0/1	1/4	0/2	3/9 (12)
TT	3/14	0/0	1/0	10/3	2/1	1/1	2/0	19/19 (38)
INT	6/3	0/2	1/2	1/15	3/2	0/6	2/0	13/34 (47)

[Table 2] The number of each pragmatic particle

[The numbers are separated by a slash to indicate each participant's production of a particle. Use the following reference: SS (male/female), EQ (senior/junior), TT (senior/junior), INT (male/female)]

Table 2 presents the number of each pragmatic particle used by the participants in the four conversations. This table partially confirms our prediction. As we predicted, SS contains the most pragmatic particles (57). What is not confirmed is the actual frequency of pragmatic particle in INT. Since this is the most formal conversation among the four according to Table 1, it should contain the least number of particles, but it shows as many as 47 tokens (second to SS). We will explore the cause of this in the next section.

#### 4. Discussion

We will argue in this section that pragmatic particles contribute to the register phenomenon differently than speech participant reference terms and speech level markers. The use of speech participant reference terms and speech level markers can be, to some extent, predetermined when the participants and speech situation are set. (However, refer to the notion of "middle ground register," in which participants negotiate the register by manipulating the variety and frequency of these markers (Iwasaki and Horie 1995). On the other hand, the use of pragmatic particles is not predetermined. The speaker must consider how the information he is communicating should be received by the addressee(s): "Can or should the addressee take it as known information?", "Can or should he take it as a minor point in the interaction?" and so forth. These decisions must be made constantly as the conversation proceeds by considering the content of information and the speaker's assessment of the addressee's knowledge.

If the interlocutors are long standing acquaintances with each other, they can rely on a vast amount of shared knowledge. The reason why there are more particles in TT (between two colleagues) than in EQ (between newly acquainted college students) is probably due to this reason. Consider the next excerpt from TT, in which the pragmatic particle *ɲai* appears in line 30. Prompted by J(junior) teacher's question in 29, the S(enior) teacher says that she is waiting for the medical room to open.

##### (1) TT

- 29 J: *phii cà ʔaw ʔarai há*  
 -> 30 S: *nát phuu pòkhrɔŋ dèk ɲai*  
 31 J: *ʔɔ*  
 32 S: *nát phuu pòkhrɔŋ maa cəə kan thii hɔŋ phayabaan*  
*khəu pen lán phii nɔŋ hà*  
 33 S: *léw ká*  
 34 S: *baŋ ʔəən nát phii nɔŋ kháw nát wáy háy bèet moŋ nía*

- 29 J: What are you looking for?  
 30 S: I have an appointment with the guardian of a student.  
 31 J: I see.  
 32 S: I told the guardian to come to meet at the nurse's room. (She) is Nong's niece.  
 33 S: And  
 34 S: (I) happened to have an appointment with Nong, so she made an appointment for me at 8 o'clock.

According to Cooke (1989:24), *gay* "signals that a given referent is identified or identifiable as or in terms of something previously mentioned, something rememberable, something either commonly or mutually known, something readily knowable." In other words, the information "I have an appointment with a guardian of a student" is marked as obvious information with *gay*, despite the fact that J did not share this information at all at this point in the conversation. We know that J does not have this information because in 32 through 34 S explains the background explicitly.

S used *gay* in this context to demand that J make a connection between why she is waiting and the "obvious" reason. Demanding of this sort would be inappropriate when the situation is formal or the addressee is not close, while it is tolerated in an informal conversation between close acquaintances, as this one is. In other words, the use of pragmatic particles depends crucially on the correct assessment of the socio-cultural understanding of what assumption one can make about the knowledge of the addressee at the time an utterance is produced and how much demand one can impose on the addressee regarding the message being displayed. Another example of *gay* is from SS.

(2) SS

33 M *kôn pay kô tởn hễn*

34 F *mây chầy nẳg tở rêek tề lủm pay khâu hỏn nẵm gay*

33 M: (I) went upstairs (so I) should have seen you.

34 F: No, no, I was sitting on the first desk, but I went to the restroom.

M and F are very close friends and before this exchange M has been accusing F of not being at the place where they had agreed to meet. F says in line 30 (not shown here) that she was sitting on a desk waiting for M. M confronts F saying that he would have seen her if she had been sitting on the desk (in line 33). Then F explains "No, no. I was sitting on the desk, but I went into the restroom." Speaker F attaches the pragmatic particle *gay* to this statement, thereby demanding the connection between her absence and the information "I went to the bathroom."

We will now examine the Interview data in detail. Let's review the setting of this conversation again. In this interview, a male interviewer solicits information from a female job applicant. The situation is very formal and the relationship between the two interlocutors is non-equal. The male participant has the power of not only deciding whether or not to give the applicant a job, but also of directing a conversation to satisfy his goal, i.e., getting relevant information from the applicant. This situation and relationship forces the female applicant to mark many of her utterances with the most formal speech level marker for female, *khá*. Thus, her responses in lines 16 and 18 are felt to be appropriate in this context.

## (3) INT

- 14 M: ʔəə  
 15 M: (.2) pen khon cagwàt  
 -> 16 F: nákhonláatsiimaa khà  
 17 M: phûut [khoolaat]  
 -> 18 F: [khoolaat] khà
- 14 M: umm  
 15 M: (.2) Which province are you from?  
 -> 16 F: I am from Nakhonlaatsimaa  
 17 M: Do you speak Korat dialect?  
 -> 18 F: Yes, I do.

She uses *khà* also to give positive responses as in 22 and 24 below.

## (4) INT (After F says she has been in Bangkok for only two, three years)

- 21 M: sǎŋ sǎam pii ʔeəŋ  
 -> 22 F: khà  
 23 M: yùu khoráat talǎot ləəy  
 -> 24 F: khà
- 21 M: Only 2, 3 years!  
 -> 22 F: Yes.  
 23 M: Were you in Korat all the time?  
 -> 24 F: Yes.

Now, consider F's line 9 in the next excerpt.

## (5) INT

- 7 M: ʔəə (mái sáap)  
 8 F: máy páy ní man:  
 -> 9 F: (.2) páy chəu man hǎay ʔa khà
- 7 M: umm (what happened)  
 8 F: No, the name tag ...  
 -> 9 F: (.2) The name tag got lost.

In line 7, the interviewer starts to ask about a name tag which F should be wearing. In lines 8 and 9, F explains it has been missing. Despite the fact that F attaches *khà* at the end, Line 9 does not accord well in this conversation. The reason for this discord is the use of ʔa, a phonologically reduced form of *nā*. According to Cooke (1989:16), *nā* "signals that some fact, event, consideration is a simple matter, a matter of minor or passing importance, something of incidental or low-key relevance, something that is no big issue, not out of the way, require no major adjustment in the addressee's thinking or behavior." That is, F demands that M take this piece of information as non-significant. In reality, however, losing a name tag in the job interview situation may be considered a serious problem, and F herself knows it. (Notice she was quickly responding to M's bewilderment with *máy* 'No' in line 8.)

Another similar example is observed in line 27 in the next excerpt. This portion is a continuation of the earlier excerpt regarding the length of F's stay in Bangkok.

## (6) INT

- 25 M: ?aw léw phasáa thay klaaŋ dáy ma càk náy há.  
 26 F: kǝ thǝ b-  
 -> 27 F: sǝnǝy kǝ phǝut yaŋ-ŋǝi-a khǝ.  
 28 M: ?ǝ léw thǝi báan phǝut phasáa náy há  
 25 F: phǝut yǝŋ-ŋǝi khǝ pǝkkǝtǝi  
 25 M: *Then how did you learn the standard Thai language?*  
 26 F: *That's ..*  
 -> 27 F: *I usually speak like this.*  
 28 M: *I see. What dialect do you use at home?*  
 25 F: *We speak like this usually.*

M shows his surprise in line 25 (as demonstrated by ?aw) at the fact that F can speak the standard dialect though she is from upcountry. The expression in line 27, *yaŋ-ŋǝi-a khǝ* reveals that F demands again that M take this information as trivial, and he should not be surprised. Notice here that we analyze *yaŋ-ŋǝi* as *yaŋ-ŋǝi-ǝ*, and the last pragmatic particle gives rise to the speaker's stance towards the message and her demand on the addressee. All of these uses of ǝ, a phonologically reduced variant of *nǝ*, communicate F's stance, "Why do you make a big thing out of a small thing?"

It is possible to characterize F's speech as inappropriate at several phases in the interview. Notice the next excerpt. (She uses *há*, a mid-level speech marker, in line 53, but since she produces enough tokens of *khǝ*, this does not disturb the register.)

## (7) INT

- 49 F: *lian kǝawkǝp sǝp*  
 50 F: *kǝamsǝp*  
 51 M: = *há*  
 52 F: = ?ǝǝ paydǝk  
 53 M = *há*  
 -> 54 F: ?*alay ŋǝi khǝ*  
 49 F: *I studied words.*  
 50 F: *vocabulary*  
 51 M: = *yes*  
 52 F: = *and sentences*  
 53 M: *yes*  
 -> 54 F: *Something like that.*

F explains that she studied English vocabulary at elementary school in line 49 and 50, and adds that she also studied sentences, in line 52. Line 54 sounds a little out of place. Inappropriateness of 54 may be complex (e.g., it may be too abrupt), but one reason is the presence of pragmatic particle in *ŋǝi*. If she had answered ?*a lay yaang nǝi khǝ* or ?*alay tham nǝŋ nǝi khǝ*, "Something in that manner" without a pragmatic particle, it would sound more appropriate. Again the force of pragmatic particle tips off the balance of register. Our final excerpt from the interview is the following.

## (8) INT

- 33 M: ʔəə (.2) rian phasǎa ʔangkʰit tǎgtɛɛ dɛk dɛk máy há  
 -> 34 F: tǎgtɛɛ mɔɔ nùŋ máy khá  
 -> 35 M máy khá

33 M: umm (0.2) Have you started to study English since you were a child?

- > 34 F: Probably since the seventh grade.  
 -> 35 M Probably?

Answering M's question "So, you've been studying English since you were a child?", F says "Since 7th grade" with *máy*. This word *máy*, though not included in the seven particles in the study, is a pragmatic particle and signals a "tentative statement, a guess" (Cooke 1989:13). The interviewer was puzzled by this response ("You mean you don't remember?") and in line 35 requests clarification (request for a "repair" to use CA's terminology) by repeating part of F's preceding utterance.

The reason why the interviewee speaks the way she does is irrelevant in our study (she may be very nervous, never had an opportunity to speak formally etc.), but we can confidently assess that the interviewee is not creating the most appropriate register in this conversation, and inappropriate use of particles is a cause. This is despite the fact that she uses speech level marker, *khá* and *hà* frequently enough.

We must note, however, that it is not the case that a subordinate participant is not allowed to use pragmatic particles in conversation. In other words, the subordinate's use of pragmatic particles is not the reason why the interview data is slightly off the appropriate register. For example, in the next excerpt from EQ, the junior student uses *gay*.

## (9) EQ

187 P: tɔ̀n sǎay .. lɛɛw bɛ̀p phɔɔ bɛ̀p sɛ̀t lɛɛw fay man dǎp gay há

I woke up late and like when like it finished then the electricity went out.

P (junior) and T (senior) have just talked about a series of aftershocks of the major earthquake, then in line 187 P says, "I woke up late, and when it was over, the electricity went out." She marked the information about outage of electricity with *gay* (accompanied by *há*). The two participants know that they experienced the earthquake and because P knows that electricity outage affected the whole city, she can safely assume that T also knows this information. The demand that P makes with *gay* is thus justified.

When the subordinate demands that the superior notice some fact with *gay*, he follows it up with *hà* (as in 187 in the excerpt above) or with a marker of deference (as *phǐi* in the next excerpt), thereby maintaining the proper relationship

## (10) TT

190 J: thǐi nǐi khon man tem gay phǐi

This place is filled with people, y'know, sister.

## 5. Conclusion.

We showed that the principle behind the use of pragmatic particles is different from the use of speech level markers and speech participant reference



terms. The latter two are more rigidly constrained by the context and the relationship between the interlocutors. In other words, what speech level markers and speech participant reference terms code are a simple direct tie between the speaker and the addressee and between the speaker and the situation. The tie which the pragmatic particles refer to is more complex and is the relationship between the information, addressee, and speaker.

In our previous paper, we identified the Formality and Deferential dimensions in register in Thai conversation. In this paper we clarified how pragmatic particles reflect a speaker's understanding of the message and the addressee. By this series of research we hope to have enriched our understanding of the elusive notion of register in conversation.

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