

Dialect power to communication for development

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Abstract: Four main dialects of Thailand are identified on the basis of regions. In general, the Standard Thai [ST] is used by Thai people to communicate. However there are differences between the dialects and the standard form of the language mostly in terms of vocabularies. There is difference in understanding of the standard form of Thai language among the rural and urban dwellers of Thailand. In rural area, elderly people do not understand the standard Thai language clearly. This paper explains the importance of using local dialects to communicate in rural areas. The written and spoken forms of the dialects used by the government officers to communicate with the villagers in formal and informal situations are used as the data. This research is done from a sociolinguistics perspective related to language and power or privilege in the society. The observation and interview with the villagers in rural areas of the northeastern region or Isaan of Thailand are part of the research methodology as well as the questionnaires to compare the average percentages between the three sampling groups of different age groups young, middle and elderly groups. The research findings have shown that the elderly group understands the information contents sent by the government through three channels (meetings, broadcast tower, and documents) less than the other groups and less skilled in the usage of standard Thai language. While the young group can understand the information contents more than the other two because the medium of instruction is in the ST. The middle and elderly groups prefer to communicate in the Isaan dialect of Thai particularly in the economic and health service topics, as it is their mother tongue. This finding reveals that dialect has privilege of efficient communication whereas on the other hand it is also the barrier in communication between the government and the common people. The dialect is a good medium supporter for country's development, if the communicator knows how to let it work.

Key words: Language and power; Isaan language; Sociolinguistics; Language choice

1. Introduction

The Standard Thai [ST] is the national language of Thailand, so it is widely used in communication between the government and the citizens. Thailand also has four main dialects categorized on the basis of four main regions: north, northeast, central, and south. But they have been used only in spoken language. Seemingly the rapidly increasing role of ST in the regional life of people contrasts with the decreasing use of dialects. According to Spolsky (1998), as the modern world roads are built and as the radio and television enter more homes, the dialects tend to diminish and more homogenized.

The important role of standard language (SL) is also tied to economic, education, culture and politics as well as capitalism and unification of nation (Fairclough, 1989). Based on that Thai people who need to access the government's information have to be good in ST skills particularly in reading and listening. The educational and economic gaps between people living in the urban and rural areas of Thailand still exist. The elderly people in rural villages are not able to understand ST fluently because of the vocabulary differences, new words, and academic words.

Although ST and its dialects share some linguistic features and vocabularies, they also have different cultural styles in each speech community. Language is a part of culture therefore the language style of each region represents different cultures in Thailand. Kramsch (1998) referred to Sapir - Whorf hypothesis that the famous theory of the relation between language and thought regarding why different language can lead people to behave differently is because language filters their perception and the way of categorizing experiences. The influence played by languages for communication as well as the roles played by the standards and dialects therefore display partiality. The SL has more roles and power than its dialects as reflected in the government policies of the modern world but the findings of this research article reveals the other sides of dialect that play crucial roles for communication among the government officers and the rural villagers of Thailand.

Although ST is an official language, the central dialect or Bangkok dialect [BD] is the one generally used for communication instead of ST. Elderly people in the rural areas are not highly educated or mostly educated at the elementary school level. Earlier the government did not control the use of ST or BD at school level, therefore the local dialect was spoken as the mother tongue. At present, the

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government's language policy is to use ST as medium of instruction in schools so the young people can use ST as their mother tongue. The country is growing and the importance of ST among the regional people evokes the gap between elderly and the young generation people as well as the urban and rural citizens in terms of education, economic and government services. The written language in communication with the villagers is not enough for clear understanding, so the spoken language has to be used to mean what the government wants to inform the villagers. However, the officers always use ST or BD without caring much about what the local people understand (Rattana, 2002).

2. Dialect in sociolinguistic perspective

Language cannot be seen by itself without its speakers and the speakers use the language to explain their world view and perspective. Consequently language is linked with the social changes. The change of social policy is important to dialect changes. Hilton (2010) examines the change of dialect in Norway and shows that it has few main factors. One is the standardization and language planning policy of the government. Cusmin (2001) explains that mother tongue learning in elementary schools can help student's learning of second language and encourage other student's abilities. Accordingly, the various languages in a society are not the problem of learning SL but it might be the problem of the government's management. To solve this language problem the government plans to promote only the SL for use as the medium of learning in schools which in contrast manipulates and limits the scope of mother tongue or dialects usages. This government policy is not only neglecting the mother tongue but it also discards the villagers who use only mother tongues or in other words, leaves the differences in language use to be the problem of the villagers for communication.

3. Objective, material and method

This research is a qualitative and quantitative research in sociolinguistics perspective. The field works were conducted in two rural villages of Kumpawapi District and Udontani province of northeastern region of Thailand. The objectives are to (1) compare the understanding of information contents, language skills, language choice, and (2) to know whether the dialect has any powerful influence for communication between the government officers and rural villagers. The sampling groups are between 20-60 years old divided into different ages; young (20-30 years old), middle (35-45 years old), and elderly (50-60 years old). Each group consisted of 15 people.

Data collection was done through questionnaire, in-depth interview, and participant observation in this research that were used with the sampling groups who used to join or get the information from the government offices in 1) the meeting 2) from the

broadcast tower in the villages, and 3) read the documented information. The topics selected were only about five development topics; policy, law, economic, health service, and public service.

4. Result

4.1. Isaan or north eastern region

Isaan or northeastern region of Thailand has around 21 million people from 18 provinces and people from this region are living in all parts of Thailand. Majority of the population are farmers and they live together as extended families. The older generation people are educated mostly in the elementary schools of their villages but their children are mostly educated from secondary schools as government's compulsory policy. Khon Kaen is an important province which is the Centre of the economic, education, and government offices of the region. The people in rural areas have moved to the economically developed cities for work and education and the older generation people in the villages either stay alone and/or take care of their grandchildren.

The arrival of modernization and urbanization to rural areas of Isaan region evoke Isaan ways of life to change and an increasing gap between the older and young generation is noticed. The key factors for this change have been to promote the higher education, economic development, and search for new and better occupations in the cities. Identically, this generation gap is taking place also in the area of communication among the people in the communities. Use of different languages in daily life of the elderly and young generations or the officers and villagers is a clear example of such a gap.

The Figs. 1 to 4 show the northeastern region of Thailand, Khon Kaen city and the villages in rural area respectively. The local governments communicate with the villagers in many channels such as meeting groups of the village leaders, broadcast towers supported by the government in each village as the channel for communication and also the information sent in the document form. The first channel is the most popular one.



Fig. 1: Northeastern region of Thailand (Source: <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=Thailand+map&espv/1Feb2016>)



Fig. 2: Khon Kaen City (Source:

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=Central+of+Khon+Kaen+city&espv/1Feb2016>)



Fig. 3: Villagers work in their rice field (Source:

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=rural+village+in+northeastern+thailand&espv=2&biw/31Jan2016>)



Fig. 4: Ceremony in Isan village, Northeast, Thailand (Source:

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=www.northeastern+village+Thailand&espv=2&biw=1033&bih/31Jan2016>)

Village's leaders meet at a official place of the city and the local government's officers are informed about the government policies, news and they are responsible for sending the information to the villagers. The village leaders receive the information documents at the meeting. Normally the information at the meeting are announced by the leaders using the broadcast tower in every early morning before the villagers go to work at the rice fields or farms, or the news are announced again in the evening after villagers are back home.

The information topics mostly concern to the policies, laws economic development activities and plans, health service, and public services for the village development, however, there are other topics such as culture, ceremony, festival but this research focuses on five topics related to the development of

villages. The channel for communication with the villagers is important because this is what is used for working with and accessing to public services and the language used to communicate in the channel is more important for effective communication. There is not much interesting research done on this topic or not much publication observed in Thailand, however, language is not only the medium for communication but it has the power to change the people's behavior or convince them.

The regional identity is able to be shown by the language because language is their culture so language for communication with the different groups is an important part for the communicational efficiency especially the communication from the government. Isaan dialect [ID] is the regional language used widely in this region. However it does not have any separate alphabets for writing. Mostly elderly population in rural areas uses ID as mother tongue and rarely uses ST in daily life. The ST is the only one language that acts as an official language used widely in mass media and as medium of instruction in education. The local dialect has not been included by the government for teaching at schools so the students learn and use ST more than their mother tongue.

This research does not focus on whether we should encourage the dialects learning in schools or learning but it shows its concern that it will be better if we have many languages in society and we can make a choice from different languages for different objectives with different groups of a community to communicate successfully.

4.2. The informational content understanding

The information provided by the government officers is available in only Standard Thai [ST] both in spoken and written forms. The language skills of ST seen in each group are different. The young group has more ST skills than the middle and elder groups because both of the later groups are mostly educated up to the elementary school level while most of the subjects in the young group are educated up to the secondary school level. Table 1 shows the percentage variations of the understanding of information contents by the three age groups. The information contents are divided on the basis of the language used by channels to provide information that is 1) Meeting, 2) Broadcast towers in villages and 3) Documented information. The first two channels' information is given in the spoken language form and the last channel is in the written language form, however, ST is used by all the channels.

Table 1 The informational content understanding

Channel	Young	Middle	Elder	Average
1. Meeting	77	63	53	66
2. Broadcast tower	96	66	42	68
3. Document	97	83	31	70
Average percentages	90	70	42	67

The research finding in Table 1 above shows that the young group understands the contents of information more than the elder groups. 90% of the young generation of the total percentages and 42% of the average percentages of the elder groups understand the information contents in ST. This represents the understanding of ST percentages related to language skills of each group.

In terms of the channels to communicate with the villagers, it seems that 'Meeting' is the best channel. Because 'Meeting' is a two-way communication but the 'Broadcast tower' and the 'Document information' are one-way communication methods. The Figs below presents the channels that the government uses to communicate with people in rural villages. Fig. 5 is the Meeting example in a village and Fig. 6 is the Broadcast tower. Fig. 7 displays reading of the document information.



Fig. 5: Meeting in the village



Fig. 6: Broadcast tower



Fig. 7: Elders reading a document

4.3. Language skills

The ST skills have a mainly important role to understand the information contents because each group has different levels of language skills. The sampling groups are bilingual that means that they can use both ST as their second language and official language but use ID as their mother tongue. Table 2 shows the average percentages of language skills of the sampling groups in terms of ST and ID.

(E=excellent, G=good, F=fair, P=poor, B=Bad)

Table 2: Language skills

Language	Skills	Young	Middle	Elder
Standard Thai [ST]	1 Speaking	G	G	P
	2 Listening	E	G	F
	3. Reading	G	G	P
	4. Writing	G	F	B
Isan Dialect [ID]	1 Speaking	G	E	E
	2 Listening	G	E	E
	3. Reading	-	-	-
	4. Writing	-	-	-

Isaan Dialect is the regional language and is the mother tongue of Isaan or northeastern people. It has no script so it is used only in spoken language form. The Table 2 as shown above means that the ST skills of elder group is 'Fair' in listening, 'Poor' in reading and 'Bad' in writing. Similarly the middle age group is 'Fair' in writing skill. To understand the information contents they should be good or excellent in listening and reading skills. If we look back at the Table 1 before we can see that the villager's ability to understand the information contents is directly related to the ST skills particularly among the elder groups. The young and middle groups have life styles which are different from the elder group that is both the groups live for education or work in the urban areas or the big cities having more chances to use ST than ID while the elder groups work at farms or rice fields in the rural villages.

On another hand, the ID skills of middle and elder groups are 'Excellent' in speaking and listening while the young group is 'Good' in these skills. The middle and elder groups is the main target of the government in such communication because the key information is important for their works, way of life and accesses to public services. Hence the government officers should use the ID to communicate with elder groups.

4.4. Language for communication

According to the language skills of villagers as shown in Table 2 the middle and elder groups want to communicate with the government officers in ID while the young group can use the ST. Table 3 shows the percentages of what language should be used for communication with the sampling groups.

Table 3: Language for communication

Languages	Young	Middle	Elder
1 Standard Thai	93	11	0
2 Isan Dialect	5	87	96
3. Standard Thai or Isan Dialect	2	2	4

The Table 3 shows that the young group wants to use ST but the middle and elder groups want to use ID to communicate with government officers. The problem of using ST is in the use of academic word meanings which they had never known. The ST skills of the elder group moreover obstruct the communication with the officers.

4.5. The topics to communication by Isaan dialect

There are various topics that the government informs the villagers. However this research focuses on only the important topics related to development in five topics; policy, law, economic, health services, and public services. The importance of the topics which entails the importance of using the ID for communication is shown through the percentages in the Table 4 below.

Table 4: Topic as per importance

Languages	Young	Middle	Elder
1. Policy	34	5	2
2. Law	29	7	3
3. Economic	17	56	9
4. Health service	8	10	65
5. Public service	12	22	21
Totally	100 %	100%	100%

Table 4 shows the importance of topics as compared to the various age groups. The ratio of young group is 34% that needs to use the policy topics and 29% of the young group uses the law topics. Both topics are more than half of all the other topics. The middle age group as shown clearly in the table that 56% of the total needs to use ID for the economic development topics as well as the elderly group which requires ID to communicate for the topics of health services that constitute 96% of the total. The young group needs to understand the deep contents of the policies while the middle age group which is the working group needs ID for using economic development topics because these are very important for their works and the health services topics are important for the elderly group which should be provided in ID for successful communication with them.

5. Conclusion

The first objective of this study is to compare the understanding of contents of information of the sampling groups who are the villagers living in rural areas of Kumphawapi district and Udon thani province of Thailand. The three channels that the government uses to communicate with the villagers are the meeting in the village, broadcast tower for announcements, and documented information. The first two channels use the spoken form but the last channel requires reading in written form. The research findings show that the young groups can understand the information contents more than the two elder groups because of their close association with the Standard Thai skills and the elder group less understands the information contents. From the comparison of the three channels, the findings show that the percentage average is not significantly different in terms of channel use of the government. But the significant number is shown among the elder group that they understand the information contents at a very low percentage while reading the 'Document information' provided by the government

officers. That reflects that they do not have enough ST reading skill to understand the policies. So the government should encourage the officers to communicate using the local ID with the elder group while using the document information. The language that the sampling groups particularly the middle and elder groups prefer to use is the ID to communicate with the government officers. It seems that the channels using spoken language; meeting and broadcast tower for announcements are the better choices to communicate with both of these groups.

The topics that should include the ID for communication with the young group are about the policies of law and government. For the middle age group are the economic policies which are related to jobs and work and for the elderly group, it is mostly about health policies. All the topics are related to their lives. The young group needs to know the policies or law but the middle group needs to know the economic information so that they are able to take decisions while most of the elders have problems related to their health, so the topics of health are very important for them.

6. Discussion

Language and its society are closely related to each other. People's language skills deal with the ability to be good receivers and listeners. The Standard Thai (ST) plays an important role in many domains of its use in Thailand. However non-natives cannot use ST well as their mother tongue. Isaan dialect (ID) is the mother tongue of northeastern people. The elder group does not have good ST skills to communicate with the government officers in meeting, broadcast tower announcement in the villages and reading the documents. So the government should encourage use of the ID to communicate with them particularly for the important topics of each group. The problem of language skills related to ST of the rural villagers should not be overlooked by the government. This problem is not only inefficiency for communication but it will also lead to gaps between the villagers and officers. Language should not be a barrier of country's development because language is the medium of communication. If we recognize the choice of language for each group well, we will benefit from the power of language if utilized well and we will also be able to see how the country can develop faster.

Abbreviation Note

ST: Standard Thai
 BD: Bangkok Dialect
 ID: Isaan Dialect (or North Eastern Thai Dialect)

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