Language Policy and Bilingual Education in Thailand: Reconciling the Past, Anticipating the Future[1]

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Abstract

Despite a century-old narrative as a monolingual country with quaint regional dialects, Thailand is in fact a country of vast linguistic diversity, where a population of approximately 60 million speak more than 70 languages representing five distinct language families (Luangthongkum, 2007; Premsrirat, 2011; Smalley, 1994), the result of a history of migration, cultural contact and annexation (Sridhar, 1996). However, more and more of the country's linguistic resources are being recognized and employed to deal with both the centrifugal force of globalization and the centripetal force of economic and political unrest. Using Edwards' (1992) sociopolitical typology of minority language situations and a comparative case study method, the current paper examines two minority language situations (Ferguson, 1991), one in the South and one in the Northeast, and describes how education reforms are attempting to address the economic and social challenges in each.

Keywords: Language Policy, Bilingual Education, the Thai Context

Background

Since the early Twentieth Century, as a part of a larger effort at nation-building and creation of a sense of "Thai-ness." (Howard, 2012; Laungaramsri, 2003; Simpson & Thammasathien, 2007), the Thai government has pursued a policy of monolingualism, establishing as the standard, official and national language a variety of Thai based on the dialect spoken in the central plains by ethnic Thais (Spolsky, 2004). In the official narrative presented to the outside world, Thais descended monoethnic and monocultural, from Southern China, bringing their language with them, which, in contact with indigenous languages, borrowed vocabulary. This is the narrative often fund in tourist guides:

"When the first Thais began emigrating from southern China to North Thailand, they naturally brought language with them. ... However, as the Thais moved south into the Central Plains, they conquered and merged with the Mons and Khmers, thereby absorbing certain words of their languages."
(Hoefer, 1977, p. 292)

In this narrative, the major geographic dialects are recognized, but often as quaint regionalisms, leaving no doubt as to their status:

"... Each of Thailand's four main regions has its own dialect: Northern Thai, Northeastern Thai (Lao), Central Thai (with several subdialects), and Southern Thai. ... However, standard Thai, a synthesis of central dialects, is the one language taught in schools throughout the country and recognized as the official government medium."
(Hoefer, 1977, p. 292)

Recently, however, globalism and regionalization, economic crisis and political unrest have created "tensions between globalizing discourses and local identities." (Hornberger & McCarty, 2012, p. 3)

Globalization and Regionalization
Globally, the centrifugal forces of a globalized market economy pull toward the learning of English. Regionally, 2015 marks the implementation of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community, a free market facilitating the free flow of goods and services, investments, capital and skilled labor among the ten member nations of ASEAN (Pornavalai, 2012, p. 1). While the Thai government would have to overcome some legal hurdles (i.e., the Foreign Business Act and the Alien Employment Act), the prospect of 2015 has raised the specter of skilled labor from outer circle member countries (Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines) taking good jobs from Thais who might not be as proficient in English. This, in turn, has accelerated the teaching of English. The newly revised language policy stresses the importance of one's mother tongue and a language of wider communication. It also recognizes English as the first language of wider communication and mandatory study of it now begins in the first grade. Among the growing Thai middle class, English-medium international schools, Thai-English bilingual programs in public schools, special English language schools and private tutorial lessons are popular options for gaining a competitive edge.

Local Unrest
At the same time, the on-going armed resistance to the central government in the southern Muslim provinces and a recently politicized citizenry, especially in the Northeast (Keyes, 2014), have challenged national stereotypes about what it means to be Thai.

The Southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Naratiwat and Sathun, once independent sultanates, were incorporated into the Thai state in the Nineteenth Century. The population of over one million is predominantly Muslim and speak a dialect of Malay called Pattani-Malay (PM). Repeated attempts by the Thai government to assimilate this population have failed and there has been "continual government pressure on both language and schooling in the region," An illustration of that pressure has been the government's "refusal to accept the existence of the term 'Malay' as an ethno-linguistic label for reference to this group, officially replacing the term 'Malay-Thai' with 'Muslim-Thai'" (Simpson & Thamasathien, 2007, p. 403). Not surprisingly, children in these provinces perform at the bottom of the country on national standardized tests.

The Northeast, also known as Isan, was historically first a part of the Lao kingdoms of Lan Xang and later Luang Prabang. It is the poorest and most populous region of the country, with about a third of Thailand's total population. The predominant language is Isan or Lao, though both the Northeast and the Lao PDR exhibit considerable regional dialect variation. Among Thais from other regions, this language variety is held in low esteem; in the field of entertainment, for example, it is often the dialect of buffoons or petty criminals. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Northeast was the site of armed insurgency "associated with communists and foreign support from Indochina." (Simpsonn& Thamasathien, 2007, p. 398) While the insurgency was put down, the region remains the poorest in the country, stereotypes of the region as backward persist, and students rank along with those from the Southern provinces at the bottom of national

test results. In 2010, demonstrators, many from the Northeast, disrupted Bangkok commerce for months and ended in violence.

The 1997 Economic Crisis
In 1997, the Thai economy collapsed, calling attention to the influence of the West in the global economy, the potential of a regional response to it, and the need for internal re-examination and reform. One such reform was the National Education Act of 1999, which opened the way for "more decentralized authority and decision making, local participation, curricular relevance and student centered learning." (Jungck & Kajornsin, 2003, p. 31; also see Ampra and Thaithae, 2000; Howard 2012) Local participation and curricular relevance" have often been interpreted to mean "local wisdom." (ibid.) As a result, the past decade has seen a "regrowth of interest in regional language and culture, … and a revival of languages that previously were sidelined during the promotion of the national language." (Simpson & Thamasathien, 2007, p. 406)

Under the umbrella of local wisdom, some communities have elected to incorporate the study of their heritage language. Others have initiated full maintenance and revitalization programs. Two such programs the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalisation Programme (ICMRP: Draper 2012a; Draper & Nilaiyaka, 2014) and the Patani Malay-Thai Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Program (PMTMTBEP; Premsrirat & Samoh, 2012), share many of the characteristics of Edwards' typology of minority language situations (Edwards, 1992). Yet the proposed programs differ in significant ways, each responding to the specific contexts of situation.

Two Contexts, Two Responses
Each of the two language groups represents indigenous populations of considerable size (Pattani Malay: 3.1 million; Isan: 15 Million, Kosonen, 2007, p. 132) Both share a history of past non-affiliation with the central Thai government. And both share three features the geographic context for minority languages. (Edwards, 1992) First, both varieties are minority languages in Thailand, but majority varieties elsewhere, what Edwards calls "local-only minorities." (Edwards, 1992, p. 38) Isan is a "minority" language in Thailand but is one variety of Lao, the official language of the Lao DPR. Similarly, Pattani-Malay is a minority in Thailand but is a variety of the office language of Malaysia. In both cases, the local variety is spoken in regions adjacent to the country in which an official variety is codified (Edwards, 1992, pp. 38-39). Finally, both varieties are spatially cohesive, involving concentrations of speakers within a given region, rather than dispersed among a larger population.

The speakers of both varieties are stigmatized in the larger Thai society, but subject to the same central Thai government policy with regard to minority language use and education, and in both regions, children perform at the very bottom of Thai measures of academic success. Yet for both groups, proficiency in Standard Thai as a necessary prerequisite to advanced education and economic mobility. Consequently the younger speakers of both varieties are exhibiting signs of language shift toward Standard Thai. On Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), the spoken varieties of both languages would stand or 6 or 7. Written Isan is at Stage 8, while there is no written variety of PM. These similarities are summarized in Figure 1.

Features of Context	Isan	Deep South

Large population	+	+
Previous non-Thai affiliation	+	+
"Local-only minority"	+	+
Adjoining SL region	+	+
Spatially cohesive	+	+
Stigmatized stereotypes	+	+
Poor academic performance	+	+
Generational language shift	+	+
Fishman's GIDS	spoken = 6/7, written = 8	spoken = 6/7, written = NA

Figure 1: Similarities of the language situations in the Northeast and the Deep South.

a. Cultural, Religious, Linguistic Differences

But there are significant differences between the two language situations, especially as both relate to the national language and culture. The Isan people of the Northeast share cultural, religious and linguistic roots with Central Thais. The literature and arts of both show heavy influences from India through ancient Cambodia, and the dominant religion of both is Taravata Buddhism. Both Isan and Thai are members of the Southwestern branch of the Tai language family. Both varieties have borrowed heavily from Sanskrit, Pali and Khmer, and they use similar Indic-based scripts. While Lao of the LPDR has been codified (Enfield, 1999), the domains for written Isan have all but disappeared and few can read the ancient script, resulting in a diglossic situation in which Standard Thai is used for formal events and literacy while Isan is the spoken language of the home and community. Though there is growing cultural pride and general dissatisfaction with their relationship to the central Bangkok government, there is no discernible movement toward secession.

In contrast, the people of the Deep South share cultural, religious and linguistic roots with Malaysia and Indonesia to the south. Like their neighbors to the south, PM speakers are overwhelmingly Muslim. Their language, a variety of the official language of Malaysia, is a member of the Western-Malay-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family. Differences in phonology, grammar and vocabulary from Standard Malay, however, sometimes make mutual comprehension difficult or impossible. PM is an oral language and there is no codified script for it. However, an Arabic-based script, Jawi, is used, primarily in the religious and symbolic domains, to represent Standard Malay, which across the border is written in Rumi, a Romanized script. The result is a triglossic language situation in which PM is the spoken language of the home and local community, Standard Malay written in Jawi is used in the religious and symbolic domains and Central Thai is used in the government domain and for interactions at the national level. Attempts to assimilate this population into the larger Thai community, sometimes forcibly, have been met with resistance, though there are signs of

language shift among the younger, more urban speakers, resulting in a hybrid Pattani Malay-Thai variety (Premsrirat, personal communication 9/23/12).

Along with other non-Thai languages spoken in Thailand, it has "the lowest status in the [country's] language hierarchy." (Luangthongkum, 2007, p. 188). These differences are summarized in Figure 2.

Features of Context	Northeast	Deep South
Culture	Related to that of Standard Thai	Related to that of Malaysia, Indonesia
Religion	Buddhist	Islam
Language	Tai	Austronesian
Orthography	Indic (like ST; obsolete)	None for L Variety; Arabic-based (for H Variety)
Language Use Patterns	Diglossic: Isan and ST	Triglossic: PM, ST and SM (Jawi)

Figure 2: Differences between the language situations of the Northeast and Deep South

    a. Responding to the Contexts of Situation

In response to these language situations, the Isan Cultural Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (ICMRP) in the Northeast and the Pattani Malay Thai Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Program (MTBEP) in the Deep South have taken advantage of the educational reforms of the 1999 Constitution to address problems of faced in each region. Both projects have as their goal the maintenance and revitalization of the minority language, a rekindling of pride in the local culture, and the improvement of academic standards in the regions. Both projects were initiated as action research on the part of faculty at Thai universities (ICMRP: Khon Kaen University; MTBEP: Mahidol University) and each is supported by external funding (ICMRP: EU; TMBEP: UNESCO and the Thai Research Foundation). Each began by building a base of local support and has limited the initial stages of the program to only a few select sites.

   c. The Isan Cultural Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (ICMRP)

But the two projects also reflect the typological features of their respective language situations. Of the two projects, the ICMRP faces a much less complex language situation. As the newer of the two projects, many of its activities are still in the planning stage. However, its objectives are to:

1. Increase the prestige of Isan;
2. Reverse language shift and cultural decline;
3. Ameliorate the educational situation through mother-tongue education; and
4. Develop a locally-based economy. (Draper, 2012, p. 750)

To achieve these objectives, the project involves a comprehensive program of activities, including the establishment of an "Isan Day," the promotion of locally produced products, the construction of an online multimedia database of Isan cultural performances, and the creation of multilingual signage in the target municipalities.

The expansion of the domains of use that these activities promote highlights the need to address issues of corpus, including standardization of Isan grammar (no easy feat since linguists have identified at least 14 regional varieties of Isan), the construction of a dictionary and the selection from among the various Isan orthographies one to be the standard. Finally, to ensure the maintenance and transmission of Isan language and culture, the project proposes to develop a curriculum, instructional materials and teacher training modules in preparation "for teaching oral and written Isan from grades 1-12." To my knowledge, however, to date only the important groundwork of conducting language surveys and establishing local planning committees has been completed.

   d. Pattani Malay-Thai Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Program

Like the ICMRP, the goals of the Pattani Malay-Thai Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Program reflect the socio-political context of the language situation in the Deep South, namely –

1. To facilitate Patani Malay speaking children to speak, read and write well in both Patani Malay,
2. To retain their Malay identity at the local level and Thai identity at the national level, and
3. To be able to live with dignity in the wider Thai society to foster true and lasting national reconciliation." (Premsrirat, 2011, p. 10)

Preliminary research for the MTBE Program began in 2007 with a language survey. Corpus issues needing to be addressed include vocabulary expansion, linguistic analyses and grammars of PM, dictionaries, and literature. But the most sensitive corpus issue is that of script selection. Premsrirat and Samoh describe the options:

"Since PM has existed only as a spoken language without a formal written language, its orthography needed to be developed for literacy purposes. In the region, there are three scripts used. ...Jawi script, which is an Arabic-based script used for writing Central Melayu (not PM, but widely used in religious texts and contexts) and also in important documents .... Rumi script, which is a Romanized script popular

among scholarly groups. … a Thai-based script for PM, which is widely used in non-formal education and in PM lessons for teaching Thai government officials." (Premsrirat & Samoh, 2012, p. 89)

The use of Rumi might be seen by officials in Bangkok as a threat to national identity, since it is the script used in neighboring Malaysia. The use of Jawi for PM was seen by some local leaders as inappropriate, since it is the script of the formal SM reserved for religious and symbolic domains. A Thai-based script had the advantage of being easier to learn by non-PM speaking Thais, but more importantly, it was argued, it would facilitate transition to literacy in Thai for young PM speakers.

A challenge for acquisition planning was how to revitalize the heritage language while honoring the official centralized Thai curriculum, especially with regard to Thai and global language requirements. The project has adopted a unique maintenance-transitional model that includes the progression of components presented in Figure 3.

Grade	Language Development Focus
P3 – P6	- Continued oral language and literacy development in Pattani Malay and Thai
	- Oral language and literacy development in Standard Malay (Jawi, Rumi)
	- English or other global language instruction
P1 – P2	- Oral language development and literacy in Thai
	- Oral language development and literacy in Pattani Malay
K2	- Oral language development in Thai
	- Literacy in Pattani Malay (Thai-based script)
K1, Semester 2	- Oral language development in Thai
	- Pre-reading in Pattani Malay
K1, Semester 1	- Oral language development in Pattani Malay

Figure 3: Planned Language Skills Development in the MTBEP.

Initial implementation of the MTBEP curriculum was limited to level K1 in three pilot schools. It has now been implemented to grade P2 in the pilot schools and this year has been expanded to another 12 schools.

Initial assessment of the program in the early grades has been promising. Premsrirat reports,

"Comparing the test scores of learners of the Patani Malay pilot bilingual classes with the scores of learners belonging to control groups, it was found that the students in the pilot classes scored higher

(average 72.14%) than those belonging to the comparison groups (41.91%). Furthermore, it was also observed that the learners in the pilot classes were happy, talkative, and creative. They loved going to school and loved reading and writing. The teachers were also happy and the parents were proud of their children." (2012, p. 12)

Discussion

Both of these programs are very ambitious in scope. Both were initiated by academics who won the support of local residents. Both have as a major objective the maintenance and revitalization of a local language. To that end, both face serious corpus and acquisition planning challenges. Whether they will succeed in reversing language shift and addressing the issue of academic underachievement is yet to be determined. For example, how will the Isan Cultural Maintenance and Revitalization Programme incorporate Isan into the K-12 curriculum? And will the introduction of Thai literacy in grade P2 and of both Rumi and Jawi script for literacy in SM in grade 3, along with the addition of a global language will pose too great a challenge for students and teachers alike? Continued documentation of these projects will provide answers. But the initial success of the MTBEP in particular has been instrumental in a revised language education policy developed by the Royal Thai Institute and endorsed by two Prime Ministers.

Even at this early stage, a comparison and contrast of features of two language situations can begin to unveil patterns of language use, the sources for these patterns and the implications for "language acquisition, language maintenance, language change, language shift, language planning, and linguistic theory." (Huebner, 1996, p. 17). For example, throughout Thailand, there is universal awareness of the close cultural, religious, historical and linguistic ties between Isan and Thai. As a Tai language, it is on the second tier of the language hierarchy in Thailand. (Luangthongkum, 2007). A major impetus for the project, then, is to enhance the status of Isan, both locally and within the larger Thai context. Corpus decisions concerning the selection of a standard spoken variety and a standard orthography, while not without controversy, are not perceived as a threat to national unity. At the same time, acquisition efforts include a heavy emphasis on the expansion of domains of use for the language.

By way of contrast, the deep cultural, religious, historical and linguistic differences between the Deep South and the more general Thai society are obvious to all and have created a sense of alienation on the part of Thai Muslims. As a non-Tai language, PM is relegated to the lowest level in the Thailand language Hierarchy. Within this context, the MTBEP has included a focus on developing a sense of Thai national identity and fostering national reconciliation. This is reflected in corpus decision to adopt a Thai-based script for PM and in the acquisition planning decision to introduce oral Thai in the second semester of the first year of kindergarten and written Thai in the first grade of elementary school.

In conclusion, the Edwards framework for the analysis of the language situations for languages in danger of loss can provide insights into the patterns, causes and potential consequences of language planning actions.

Endnote
[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Dallas Texas, March 18, 2013.

About the Author

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