

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis presents results of a social and linguistic study of Thai immigrants, specifically of those in the United States, in King County, WA. Of particular interest is the state of vitality of their heritage tongue, the Thai language. A number of methods of research and analysis reveal the possible condition of the Thai language in this particular speech community.

A speech community is a body of people who share enough characteristics of speech in order to be understood by others, where the grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and manner of speech used identifies them with each other (Salzmann 2004). Thai immigrants to a region of the United States who use Thai amongst each other would be considered a speech community for this reason. Although their mother tongue may actually be something other than Standard Thai, including tribal tongues, such as Hmong or Karen, or even languages of neighboring countries such as Laos or Cambodia, they are identified with each other when they meet by the Standard Thai they use amongst themselves.

Being a minority language in the USA means that Thai does not enjoy the same wide usage as does English. For Thai immigrants to maintain or pass their language on to their children requires intentional impartation of Thai. The fact that Thai immigrants come from a culture which places high value on Standard Thai is an important aspect to the possible current vitality of Thai here. However, despite this intrinsic value, Thai may still be endangered in this Washington state speech community. Factors contributing towards this endangerment are apparent, including the lack of intergenerational use of the language.

1.1 Thai immigrants of Washington's King County

Participants of this survey consider themselves to be Thai by descent although some may have mixed heritages. They represent a variety of Thai provinces and social backgrounds, speaking with each other in their own dialects when appropriate, and eagerly switching to Standard Thai or English when necessary. They have formed a speech community within the nation of their immigration by actively seeking the common ground of the language and/or culture they share, their main forum being that of the Thai Buddhist temple. This speech community also includes Thais who do not speak Standard Thai well. These include second and third generation Thais who consider themselves part of the speech community because they feel they are Thai. In the same way, others of the speech community consider them members because they are of Thai heritage. Members of this Thai speech community are not necessarily bilingual in Thai and English. While there is a continuum of bilingual language ability between these and those who speak both well, the individuals are still members of the Thai speech community through the Thai heritage they share. These descriptive characteristics will be described in greater detail through this thesis.

1.2 Background of Thai immigrants of this speech community

The nation from which the Thai population in the USA has immigrated is both a multilingual and a multiethnic country, with a population of 65 million people (Rappa 2006: 105). Standard Thai is both the official and national language (2006: 110), but there are yet many others in co-existence with it. The ability to speak Standard Thai is a marker of Thainess in Thailand (2006: 107). In contrast to this expression, it is interesting that the language of Thailand has not been included in Thailand's motto of unity (researcher's experience): unity 'for our nation, religion, and King' (เพื่อชาติ ศาสนา และพระมหากษัตริย์ p^hû:a t^hâ:t sà:tsà?nă: lé? p^hrâ? má?hă:kà?sàt). The nation has never fallen under colonial rule (2006: 109), indicating to Thailand's people and visitors alike that at the heart of the people is a sense of ethnic unity. In fact, Bradley notes that besides the religion and monarchy of Thailand, Thai identity is actually centered in Thai ethnicity (1995: 14).

Buddhism is Thailand's national religion. 'If you're Thai, you're Buddhist' (2006: 108) is a common phrase the researcher has heard repeated over her years in Thailand. Rappa has pointed out that

Because the king is seen to embody what it means to be Thai, this has implications for how issues of language and religion are viewed in the context of national identity. The language and religion that are associated with royalty are respectively, Standard Thai and Buddhism. The ideal Thai, then, is expected, like the king, to speak Standard Thai and to be a Buddhist (2006: 108).

Intrinsic to the Thai people is a value for ethnic identity, Buddhism, and Standard Thai. It is the typical Thai person who has immigrated to the United States, who makes up the speech community in question. Of interest to the researcher is whether these values still hold true for Thais living abroad. The following sections outline points which the researcher uses in order to measure the sociolinguistic nature within this group.

1.3 Guiding points

Important to the direction of this thesis are the research questions, objectives, hypotheses, scope and limitations of the work. The following sections briefly outline these topics and are more fully described in Chapters 3 and 5.

1.3.1 Research questions

Questions in this research have been chosen in regards to a Thai immigrant population, especially as it is revealed through the social networks of contacts centered around two Buddhist temples in Washington. These questions are as follows:

- Does a Thai speech community exist within the King County of Washington State?
- If so, does it have strong, innovative ties with multiple relations?
- Does lack of links between Thais affect their sense of Thai identity and language vitality?
- Do language usage and attitudes support the preservation of their Thai language abilities?
- Does exposure to Thailand provide stronger language vitality for them?
- Does strong language vitality define immigrant identity here?

These research questions have guided the direction this survey work has taken. Methodology as described in Chapter 3 has coordinated with these in order to acquire data relevant to this thesis topic.

1.3.2 Objectives

The objective of this study is to collect sociolinguistic data on this Thai speech community in order to:

- 1) Discover through Social Network Analysis the extent to which the Thai immigrant community in King County, WA, has strong, innovative ties with multiple relations, or even if there is a Thai speech community present,
- 2) Assess whether language attitudes and usage supports the preservation of Thai as an immigrant language, and
- 3) Discover if the Thai language of the immigrant community here is vitally strong or not or if there is indication of language endangerment for this small speech community in WA State.

Gleaning data based upon these driving objectives enabled the researcher to remain focused upon her ultimate hypotheses. Methodology supporting these objectives is discussed in Chapter 3; data analysis contributing to answers toward this end is discussed in Chapter 4.

1.3.3 Hypotheses

The researcher began her survey with an idea about Thai immigrants in WA. These hypotheses are described below.

- 1) Depending on how long respondents have resided in the USA, Thai immigrants who have grown up in Thailand will show stronger Thai language vitality than those who immigrated before the age of 5, and especially more so than those who have not visited Thailand within their first year of immigration.
- 2) Second and third generation Thais will not have strong Thai language vitality but this will not define their sense of Thainess.
- 3) A local Thai social network with just as strong ties to non-Thais as with other Thai immigrants will not negate Thai immigrants' sense of Thainess. This unusual situation may or may not be due to the hierarchical phenomenon described by Smalley (1988). In Thailand this hierarchy allows a sense of freedom in moving up or down the social hierarchy without detracting from one's identity.

These hypotheses with which the researcher began her survey work were in some ways confirmed and in other ways refuted by the data she was able to collect. Full results of this work are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, while concepts used above in the hypotheses are further discussed in Chapter 2.

1.3.4 Scope and limitations

In this study of Thai language vitality amongst immigrants, the researcher pursued sociolinguistic data by networking along lines of social contact mapped in a social network. Criteria which qualifies respondents for participation is that they 1) reside in King County, WA, and 2) that they are ethnically Thai. The mother-tongue dialect of Thai which they speak did not override these criteria. This research is based on the assumption that the respondents, being American Thais, will have either been exposed to Standard Thai as the language Thailand has designated as the medium of education, or will be familiar with English. This will allow them to be able to interact with the various tools of survey.

Attention was given to how information received through the questionnaire revealed the correlation among exposure to Thailand, language attitude and usage, and language vitality. The survey encompassed 19 respondents who were raised in Thailand and 18 more who were born in the USA.

The researcher's view of the Thai speech community here initially came from a place of self-introduction rather than an introduction by a friend. Therefore, inroads into the Thai social network did not come through the first few interviewees. Interacting with open friendliness by using the Thai language created an environment of relationship and trust, but still did not completely open the network up to the researcher. This reality was of interest to the researcher as it played a role in describing the social aspect of the linguistic reality of the speech community. Also, although an interest in the vitality of their own language was a real value for some of these Thais, it was apparently not so for all whom the researcher met. Any such lack of interest may have been, in a sense, a research limitation and in the same instance, an illumination of the sociolinguistic reality of Thai within the Thai speech community in this region.

This thesis will first review concepts relevant to the discussion of immigrant speech communities and language vitality, looking also at the Thai situation in particular. It will then discuss methodological tools and techniques used in this sociolinguistic survey process. Finally, the thesis will assess data gathered and how it relates to the guiding thesis questions and objectives. Conclusions will tentatively depict the current language vitality situation for this particular speech community in WA.

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