# The Use of Address Terms in Thai during the Bangkok Period[1]

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## Abstract

This study investigates the use and change in the use of address terms in Bangkok Thai during 200 years of the Ratanakosin (Bangkok) Period : 1782-1982. The data on which the analysis is based were taken from conversations in 157 novels and short stories, randomly selected from 5 sub-periods of the Bangkok period : the beginning of the Bangkok period, the dawn of modernization, the period after the abolition of slavery, the "Democracy" period, and the period after October 14, 1973.

The study finds that an address term in Thai consists of two parts : the obligatory and the optional parts. The latter is a "final" particle, such as *kha*. The other can be any or a combination of two or several of these words in this order : pronominal, kin-term, rank, occupation/title, name, and expressive phrase.

It was discovered that the three most frequently used address terms are *name, pronominal + name*, and *pronominal*. The use of these three forms of address are determined by the degree of respect and intimacy the speaker expresses toward the addressee. With regard to change, the data show that there has been little change in the address terms used by the "senior" (phu-yai), but those used by the "junior" (phunoi) have changed in such a way that they tend to show more equality since the "Democracy" period. As for the address terms used among equals, they have changed so that the speaker expresses more intimacy toward the addressee.

## 1. Introduction

Previous studies on terms of address in various languages show several significant aspects of this domain. Firstly, languages differ in the kinds of term used in addressing a person. Brown and Ford (1964) and Ervin-Tripp (1972) showed that first name and title + last name are the most common terms of address in American English. In other languages, it has been found that besides names, kinship terms, are commonly used as terms of address, e.g. in Bengali (Das, 1968), Korean (Hwang, 1975), and Hindi (Mehrotra, 1977). Secondly, some studies show

that the choice of a term of address in a particular language depends on cultural values and sociological variables, as can be seen in the studies by Brown and Gilman (1960), Brown and Ford (1964), Jonz (1975), Kramer (1975), McIntire (1972), Friske (1978), and Bates and Benigni (1975). Moreover, it is also found that the use of address terms may vary with the speaker's psychological condition, e.g., attitudes toward the addressee, self-confidence, and self-respect, etc. (see Slobin et al., 1968 ; Moles, 1974 ; Lambert & Tucker, 1976). Finally, other studies show that social changes may cause change in patterns of address, e.g., in European countries (Brown & Gilman, 1960), in Sweden (Paulston, 1976; Mitchell, 1979) and in Indonesia (Wittermans, 1967).

With regard to Thai, there has not been any study that deals particularly with terms of address, although the sociolinguistic study of pronominal strategies in Thai by Palakornkul (1972) indirectly concerns this issue. It refers to various terms that can be used for address, such as kinship terms, names and occupation terms.

The purpose of this study is to find out what terms of address were used in Bangkok Thai from 1782 to 1982 and describe their patterns and change during the period.

A term of address is defined here as a word or words used by a speaker to direct his speech to the person he is talking to. The term is not used arbitrarily but as a social identification of the speaker and the addressee. Linguistically, a form beginning with a pronominal in Thai, such as /khun/ 'you (polite)' and ending with a final particle, such as /khráp/ (male, polite) is counted as a term of address, e.g. /khun pàa maalii khráp/ 'aunt Malee'. Also, a form that could occur between a pronominal and a final

particle is considered a term of address, such as /pàa maalii/ 'aunt Malee', /pàa/ 'aunt'.

The hypotheses on which the analysis is based are as follows :

1. Choice of a term of address in Thai is determined by the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, e.g., elder relative and younger relative, teacher and student, husband and wife, etc. .

2. Use of terms of address in Thai has changed through time, and the change is related to some significant social changes in Thailand during the Bangkok period.

The data for analysis were taken from the dialogue in 157 novels and short stories, randomly selected from five sub-periods of 200 years of the Bangkok period (1782-1982).

The five sub-periods were established on the basis of marked sociocultural changes in Thailand that were likely to have impact on the use of address terms in Thai. They are as follows.

1. The beginning of the Bangkok period (1782-1851)

This period of 70 years is from the beginning of Rama I's reign to the end of Rama III's reign.

2. The "dawn of modernization" period (1852-1905)

This covers 54 years starting from the beginning of Rama IV's (King Mongkut's) reign to the year Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) formally declared the abolition of slavery in Thailand. This is the period during which these two monarchs prepared the country prior to opening it fully to the Western world.

3. The period after the abolition of slavery (1906-1932)

This period of 27 years is from the year after the abolition of slavery to the

year of the political revolution, which turned Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a democracy with a constitutional monarchy.

4. The "democracy" period (1933-1973)

This covers 41 years starting from the year after the political change to the year of the October 14 riot (1973), which overthrew the military power.

5. The period after "October 14" (1974-1982

This period of 9 years is from the year after October 14 riot to 1982.

## 2. Patterns of address in Thai during the Bangkok period

### 2.1 The structure of address terms in Thai

Based on the data, a term of address in Thai consists of two parts : the obligatory and the optional part. The optional part is a final particle, such as /khà/ (polite, female), /khráp/ (polite, male). The obligatory part may be any one or a combination of two or more of the following terms in the given order : pronominal, kinship term, rank, title/occupation, name and expressive phrase.

In this study, we define these terms as follows :

*i) Pronominal:* a term the speaker uses to refer to the hearer. It can be a so-called personal pronoun such as /thân/ 'you (deferential)', /khun/ 'you (polite)' or a word or phrase which refers more specifically

to the hearer and which does not designate the hearer's kinship, rank, title or occupation, e.g., /mɛ̂ɛ-sǎaw-nɔ́ɔy/ 'little girl'.

*ii) Kinship term:* a term that designates a relationship by blood or marriage between the speaker and the hearer, e.g., /mɛ̂ɛ/ 'mother' (used when addressing one's mother),/yaay/'grandma' (used when addressing one's grandmother or an old woman).

*iii) Rank:* a term that designates an official grade of a person, e.g., /naay-phon/ 'general'.

*iv) Title/occupation :* a term that designates a formal appellation attached to a person by virtue of office, attainment or occupation, such as /mɔ̌ɔ/ 'doctor', /ʔaacaan/ 'university teacher', /khruu-yài/ 'principal'.

*v) Name :* In this study the term 'name' is used to refer to all kinds of personal name, e.g. first names, which are found to be used most frequently as address terms, such as /sǒmsàk/ 'Somsak',/canthanaa/ 'Chanthana', or nick names, such as /nɔ́ɔy/ 'Noi', /dɛɛŋ/ 'Dang'.

*vi) Expressive phrase :* a term used by the speaker to show his feeling towards the hearer. It can be a word or a phrase. e.g., /thîi rák/ 'Darling'.

The structure of address terms in Thai seems to be rather complex. Therefore, we propose the following rules to generate all possible terms of address in Thai[2] :

| (1) | address term | ------> | a + (b) |
|---|---|---|---|
| (2) | b | ------> | final particle |
| (3) | a | ------> | (i) (ii) (iii) (iv) (v) (vi) |
| (4) | i | ------> | pronominal |
| (5) | ii | ------> | kinship term |
| (6) | iii | ------> | rank |
| (7) | iv | ------> | title/occupation |
| (8) | v | ------> | name |
| (9) | vi | ------> | expressive phrase |

Note that rule (3) states that the obligatory part of an address term in Thai is one or more than one of i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi in that order. The linking brackets mean that the units in these brackets are optional but at least one of them has to be chosen.

The following are examples of terms of address in Thai found in the data :

### Single words

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| /khun/ | (pronominal) | 'You (polite)' |
| /pâa/ | (kinship term) | 'Aunt' |
| /nay-krom/ | (rank) | 'Prince' |
| /ʔaacaan/ | (title/occupation) | 'Teacher' |
| /mɔɔ/ | (title/occupation) | 'Doctor' |
| /phûu-càt-kaan/ | (title/occupation) | 'Manager' |
| /kaancanaa/ | (name) | 'Kanchana' |
| /thîi-rák/ | (expressive phrase) | 'Darling' |

### Groups of words

/khun ʔaa/  'Uncle'
you (polite) + father's younger brother
(pronominal + kinship term)

/thân naay-phon/  'General'
You (deferential) + general
(pronominal + rank)

/khun mɔ́ɔ/  'Doctor'
you (polite) + doctor
(pronominal + title/occupation)

/nǔu yài/  'Yai'
you (non-respectful) + Yai
(pronominal + name)

/khun thîi-rák/  'Darling'
you (polite) + dear
(pronominal + expressive phrase)

/phîi lǔaŋ/  'Brother'
elder sibling + rank
(kinship term + rank)

/luŋ mɔ́ɔ/  'Uncle'
father's/mother's elder brother + doctor
(kinship term + title/occupation)

/nɔ́ɔŋ tûm/  'Tum'
younger sibling + Tum
(kinship term + name)

/mùat daaraa/　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'Dara'
rank + Dara
(rank + name)

/thân/chaay thuun-hǔa-khɔ̌ɔŋ- mɛ̂ɛ/　　　'Thanchay,
rank + on head of mother　　　　　　　　mother's
(rank + expressive phrase)　　　　　　　darling'

/phûu-kamkàp ʔìtsarà?/　　　　　　　　　'Inspector Isra'
Inspector + Irsa
(title/occupation + name)

/ʔùsa yɔ̌ɔt-rák/　　　　　　　　　　　　'Dearest Usa'
Usa + top love
(name + expressive phrase)

/khun pâa ʔaacaan/　　　　　　　　　　'Teacher'
you (polite) + aunt + teacher
(pronominal + kinship term + title/occupation)

/khun phráʔ palàt/　　　　　　　　　　'Your Excellency
you (polite) + rank + deputy　　　　　　Mr. Deputy'
(pronominal + rank + title/occupation)

/khun phráʔ wisèet/　　　　　　　　　　'Your Excellency
you (polite) + rank + Wisate　　　　　　Mr. Wisate'
(pronominal + rank + name)

/thân ayyakaan samǐŋ/　　　　　　　　　'Your Excellency
you (deferential) + prosecutor + Saming　Mr. Prosecutor
(pronominal + title/occupation + name)　Saming'

/khun nít khɔ̌ɔŋ-phǒm/　　　　　　　　　'My Nit'
you (polite) + Nit + of I
(pronominal + name + expressive phrase)

## 2.2 Use of terms of address in Thai

Terms of address in Thai are not used arbitrarily. The choice of each term of address seems to be determined by the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. In order to test this hypothesis, we looked at the occurrence of each of the terms of address found in the data in relation to the relationship of several kinds of conversational dyads. We identified nine major different relationships[3], which can be grouped into three types : symmetrical, non-symmetrical, and neutral relationships.

1) A symmetrical or reciprocal relationship is a relationship in which both sides of the dyad are equal as far as their interactional roles are concerned, such as friends, sweethearts, acquaintances, and non-acquaintances.

2) A non-symmetrical relationship is a relationship in which one side of the dyad is of a higher status than the other, such as elder

relative-younger relative, husband-wife[4], teacher-student, and superior-subordinate.

3) A neutral relationship is a relationship in which both the speaker's and the addressee's roles are irrelevant or where it is hard to determine which is of higher or lower status, such as the relationship between providers of services and recipients of services.

Three kinds of address term that are most commonly used in all the relationships mentioned above are :

1) name, e.g. /maalii/ 'Malee'

2) pronominal + name, e.g. /khun maalii/ 'you (polite) + Malee'

3) pronominal e.g. /khun/ 'you (polite)'

The choice of these three kinds of address terms is determined by the degree of respect and intimacy the speaker feels or intends to show to the addressee. Accordingly, we propose the following diagram to represent the use of these three kinds of terms :

| – respect | name | + intimacy |
|---|---|---|
| ↓ | pronominal + name | ↑ |
| + respect | pronominal | – intimacy |
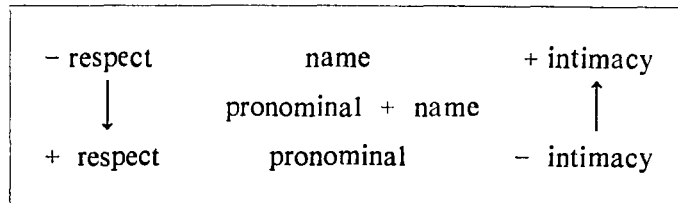
Based on the diagram, we may state that using a name implies a lack of respect and/or the highest degree of intimacy. In fact, the data show that a name is never used when one speaks to a person of higher status. On the other hand, the use of a pronominal suggests the highest degree of respect and/or very little or no intimacy. The data show that this kind of address tends to be used by a person of a lower status, or *phunoi* (lit. 'little person'), when speaking to a person of a higher status, or *phuyai* (lit. 'big person').

The form of address which lies between these two forms is *pronominal + name*. If this pattern is used by a *phunoi* speaking to a *phuyai*, it implies that he shows less respect and more intimacy toward *phuyai* than when he uses just a pronominal to address him. On the other hand, if *phuyai* uses *pronominal + name* to address *phunoi*, it implies that he wants to show more respect to the latter than when he addresses

him by just his name. In a symmetrical relationship, e.g., between friends, the use of *pronominal + name* marks less intimacy than the use of name.

### 3. Change in the use of Thai address terms during the Bangkok period

The study found that terms of address in Thai changed through the Bangkok period. Only the kinds of address term that are noticeably frequent in use will be explained here.

#### 3.1 Name, pronominal + name, and pronominal

In a non-symmetrical relationship, namely elder relative-younger relative, husband-wife, teacher-student, superior-subordinate, there has been no change in the use of address terms on the part of *phuyai*. *Phuyai* tends to address *phunoi* by his/her name or a pronominal plus his/her name.

As for *phunoi*, the address term he uses has changed since the "democracy"

period. That is in this period *phunoi* started to use a name more frequently as part of an address term. The most striking change in the use of address terms by *phunoi* is those used by a wife. In the "democracy" period wives began to address their husbands by their name. Although this pattern is less frequent than *pronominal* + *name* in wives' address terms, it is striking because it never exists in any other kind of *phunoi*'s address system. This may be because the gap between Thai husbands and wives is not as wide as between other kinds of *phuyai* and *phunoi*. Also the change from no incidence of *name* to frequent use of *name* in wives' address system seems to suggest that the non-symmetrical husband–wife relationship is developing into a symmetrical one.

In symmetrical relationships, such as between friends, sweethearts, acquaintances, and non-acquaintances, and neutral relationships, such as between providers and recipients of services, change in the use of address terms is also found in the "democracy" period. This can be described as a change from the tendency to use *pronominal* + *name* to the tendency to use just *name* among friends, sweethearts, and acquaintances. As for non-acquaintances, although there has been no occurrence of *name*, the use of *pronominal* + *name* has increased considerably since the "democracy" period. The reason that non-acquaintances never use *name* in addressing each other is that the use of such kind of address implies the highest degree of intimacy or absence of respect, which non-acquaintances obviously cannot show to each other.

In brief, the changes have a lot to do with the use of names. Since the "democracy" period, equals have used names more frequently

in addressing each other, and *phunoi* has used a name more frequently as part of an address term when addressing *phuyai*. As we have seen earlier the use of *name* implies intimacy and lack of respect or equality. Thus, we may conclude that the Thai society has changed in at least two aspects concerning the symmetrical relationship between equals and the non-symmetrical one between *phuyai* and *phunoi*: more intimacy in the former and more equality in the latter.

### 3.2 Kinship term, pronominal+kinship term, and kinship term + name

Other important kinds of address terms are *kinship term, pronominal* + *kinship term* and *kinship term* + *name*. The most frequently used among the three is *pronominal* + *kinship term*, and the second is *kinship term*. Pronominals add the meaning of more respect and less intimacy. It was found that during the "democracy" period the use of *kinship term* + *name* was introduced and replaced some use of *kinship term*. The former suggests more intimacy and equality. However, this trend is not true of the latest period dealt with in this study, i.e., the use of *kinship term* has become more frequent than *kinship term* + *name* again.

Kinship terms were also found to have been used more frequently among acquaintances, non-acquaintances, and providers and recipients of services since the period after the abolition of slavery.

Generally speaking, however throughout the Bangkok period, the use of *kinship term, pronominal* + *kinship term* and *kinship term* + *name* is quite inconsistent. More research is needed on the use of kinship terms as terms of address in Thai.

### 3.3 Title/occupation

Another important kind of address term in Thai is *title/occupation*. It has been used noticeably among friends, acquaintances, and providers and recipients of services since the "dawn of modernization" period. Its change is not consistent.

### 3.4 Expressive phrases

Another kind of address term that should be mentioned particularly is the use of expressive phrases, such as /thîi-rák/ 'darling'. It is remarkable that the use of these terms started in the "democracy" period. Shortly before and during this period, Thailand was greatly influenced by the Western world in several aspects, including the adoption of modern literary genre – – the novel, and its style of writing. It is safe to say that in translating Western novels into Thai, conversations with the use of English expressive terms might find their way into Thai way of talking. However, the data show that in the latest period (1974-1982) this kind of address term is rarely used.

Another relevant fact that should be noted here is that only speakers of higher status such as elder relatives, husbands, superiors, and equals such as friends and acquaintances use expressive phrases. *Phunoi* never expresses his feeling toward the *phuyai* he is talking to.

### 4. Conclusion

This study has attempted to describe the patterns of address Thai people used from 1782 to 1982 and to explain the changes that occurred to these patterns during this period.

The findings of this research show that verbal behaviour is closely related to cultural values. From another point of view, we may state that language reflects the world view of its speakers. What is found here, especially about the difference in the use of address terms in Thai caused by the relative status of the speaker and hearer, is a solid piece of evidence to support what has been observed by some anthropologists about the Thais' world hierarchy. Hanks (1962, cited in Pothisita 1985 : 32) stated that "the Thai perceive that all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective...."

**Notes**

1. This paper was presented at the 18th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Bangkok, 27–29 August 1985. It is based on the research report submitted to Chulalongkorn University in November 1985. The research project was sponsored by the Research Fund for the Promotion of Academic Advancement, Chulalongkorn University, which was administered through the Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

2. There are 45 possible patterns of address generated by the rules, but only 25 patterns were found in the data.

3. The nine major relationships are elder relative–younger relative, husband–wife, superior–subordinate, teacher–student, providers of services–recipients of services, friends, sweethearts, acquaintances, and non–acquaintances.

4. Traditionally, in Thai society the status of the wife is considered to be lower than the husband. This may be because the wife is normally younger than the husband and usually depends on him economically. A saying in Thai compares a husband to /cháaŋ tháaw nâa/ 'elephant's front feet' and a wife to /cháaŋ tháaw lǎŋ/ 'elephant's hind feet'

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