



Development of the National Language Policy (2006-2010)

Committee to Draft the National Language Policy

The Royal Institute of Thailand

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Abstract

In 2006, the Royal Institute formed the Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP). The purpose of the committee was to research the language situation in Thailand and submit a policy that would benefit the Kingdom and all its people.

To gather information on the both the current language situation in Thailand and Thailand's future language-related needs, the CDNLP conducted research and organized academic conferences and public forums. These events were held in Bangkok as well as in the northern and southern regions of the country. Stakeholders from many parts of Thai society were involved, including university professors, government officials from several ministries, ethnic minority people, professional translators, representatives from the blind and deaf communities, educators (from both Thai and international schools and universities), business people, etc. Input was also sought from international community, including United Nations officials, internationally-renowned language policy experts, and diplomatic personnel.

This paper summarizes the findings of the CDNLP and demonstrates how the strategic implementation of the National Language Policy recommendations approved by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on 7 February 2010 will benefit the nation.

Key word: national language policy



1.0 Introduction

The United Nations (UN) declared 2008 the “International Year of Language”. By doing this, the UN drew attention to a fact supported by worldwide research: language is important. It is important for cognitive development. It is important for education. It is important for cultural preservation. It is important for social peace and harmony.

Every country has a way to manage language. There are 125 countries which mention one or more official languages in their constitutions. Other countries (such as the United States and the United Kingdom) include language policies in their human rights laws. Some countries do not have formal written language policies, but unwritten assumptions about language control their language choices (Spolsky: 2004).

Although Thai was declared the national language of Thailand in State Convention number 9, promulgated 24 June 1940 during the regime of Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkhram, most language decisions in modern Thailand are based on unwritten assumptions (Udom 2009: 90). Language is not mentioned in the current Thai constitution, and most Thai policy makers feel that the most important languages for the country are Thai and English.

However, this simple view of language could cause Thailand to miss important opportunities, because it does not consider many critical issues, such as the languages of Thailand’s neighboring countries, the unique language needs of Thailand’s visually and hearing impaired communities, the language situation of Thailand’s 70 ethnic groups, the potential of the translation/interpretation/localization industry, or the problems of the more than 2 million legal and illegal migrants working in Thailand.

Recognizing that a modern, comprehensive language policy could benefit Thailand, the Royal Institute formed the Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) in December, 2006. The purpose of the committee was to research the language situation and submit a policy that would benefit the Kingdom and all its people. The resulting policy was approved by then former Prime Minister Abhisit



Vejjajiva on 7 February 2010, and plans are being made for the strategic implementation of the policy.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process by which the policy was drafted and explain the important language issues addressed by the policy.

2.0 “Does Thailand Need a National Language Policy?”

The question of whether Thailand needs a new national language policy (NLP) was raised during the First World Congress on the Power of Language¹ in discussions involving leading Thai scholars such as Dr. Prasert Na Nagara, Dr. Udom Warotamasikkkhadit, Dr. Kanchana Naksakul, and Dr. Maneerat Sawasdiwat Na Ayutthaya, as well as international scholars such as Dr. Kimmo Kosonen, Dr. Susan Malone, and Dr. Dennis Malone. Dr. Udom observed that if a newly-formed country like Timor-Leste had a formal language policy, surely an ancient kingdom like Thailand ought to have one. Given the Royal Institute’s role as the official authority in matters pertaining to the Thai language, it seemed natural that the Royal Institute should take a principal role in developing the NLP.

Dr. Udom organized several meetings to further explore this idea. These included videoconferences held at the American Embassy in Bangkok with world renown language policy experts Dr. Bernard Spolsky and Dr. James W. Tollefson.² On the basis of these discussions, the Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) was established as one of the Academic Committees under the Academy of Arts of the Royal Institute, with Dr. Udom as committee chair.

¹ This conference was held in Bangkok, 22-25 May 2006.

² Dr. Bernard Spolsky later visited Thailand, meeting with the Royal Institute and speaking at the Royal Institute-sponsored “International Conference on National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity” (2008).



3.0 The Royal Institute Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) (2006-2010)

From the beginning many committee members believed that language should be seen as a resource. This viewpoint, which was influenced by the committee's reading of the Australian *National Policy on Languages*,³ prompted the CDNLP to ask, "How can this resource of language be developed to benefit the country as a whole, as well as individuals within the country?"

This required an assessment of the current language situation in Thailand and a forecast of future language-related needs. Thus, the committee was divided into six subcommittees, as follows:

1. Thai for Thai Students and Thai Nationals
2. Regional Languages (including ethnic minority languages)
3. Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages
4. Teaching Thai to Migrants Seeking Employment in Thailand
5. Language Needs of the Visually and Hearing Impaired
6. Translation, Interpretation, and Localization Standards

To gather information on the current language situation in Thailand, the CDNLP organized multiple academic conferences and public forums, a complete list of which can be found at the end of this paper. These events were held in Bangkok as well as in the northern and southern regions of the country. Stakeholders from many parts of society were involved, including university professors, government officials from several ministries, United Nations staff, ethnic minority people, professional translators, representatives from the blind and deaf communities, foreign diplomats, educators (from both Thai and international schools and universities), business people, etc. More than 1,000 people from more than 30 countries attended

³ Dr. David Bradley, a long friend of Thailand and Dr. Udom, recommended the Australian policy and facilitated contact with its author, Dr. Joseph Lo Bianco. Dr. Lo Bianco was generous in providing advice to the CDNLP via email and his participation in two of the CDNLP's international events: the "Forum on Bilingual and Multilingual Education in the National Language Policy" (2007) and the "International Conference on National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity (2008)."



these events while others joined in via live radio and internet broadcasts. Proceedings in English and Thai were published for many of these events.

In the following sections we will return to the question of “Does Thailand need a language policy?” highlighting the findings and specific policy recommendations of the CDNLP subcommittees.

3.1 Subcommittee on Thai for Thai Students and Thai Nationals

3.1.1 Scope

Of the six subcommittees, this is the one most in connected to the traditional activities of the Royal Institute. Its role was to survey the current state of the Thai language and make recommendations.

3.1.2 Findings

This subcommittee emphasized the status of Thai as the national language, a source of national unity. As such, it should be learned well by all Thai citizens. The subcommittee also reflected the concerns of many in the Royal Institute, the Ministry of Education, and elsewhere that the Thai language be maintained and developed in the face of globalization. This would include defending the Thai lexicon and Thai grammar from unnecessary influence from English. There are also concerns that the many middle and upper-class Thai children attending international and bilingual schools are not receiving an adequate foundation in the Thai language (The Nation, 2007).

Thai language exam scores for students throughout the nation are unacceptably low. This is due to multiple factors, including the following:

- a) Many Thai language teachers cannot logically answer their students' questions. For example, why is ชัยภูมิ pronounced [chaiyaphuum] while ชัยนาท is pronounced [chainâat]
- b) Many Thai language experts cling to traditional theories of language that are not informed by recent research or new theories.
- c) The Standard Dictionary of the Thai language of the Royal Institute of Thailand is full of words with multiple pronunciation rarely found in other dictionaries. Thai language teachers often complain that Thai people do not pronounce the words as prescribed by the Royal Institute. For example, Thai people often pronounce อาชญากรรม [ʔ atchayaakam], not [ʔ atyaakam] like in Pali and Sanskrit.



Eliminating unnecessary pronunciation variants in many lexical entries, would result in a slimmer dictionary that would give Thai language teachers focus in choosing words for pronunciation practice and examinations.

d) Thai students and Thai nationals are doubtful of why the origin of certain related words do not appear in the Dictionary of the Royal Institute of Thailand. Examples include *แพะ* [phræ̀æk], *แพะ* [phræ̀ŋ], and many other words.

e) Most Thai linguists and Thai language scholars are unaware of research done by linguists and phoneticians at the University of California at Los Angeles on consonantal strength, which sheds much light on Thai pronunciation.

f) Some Thais complain that many foreign companies and buildings show their signs in English only without Thai characters. Thailand should reserve the right to require foreign companies to write their names in Thai as well.

g) Names of some television stations and television programs use English instead of Thai.

3.2 Subcommittee on the Regional Languages

3.2.1 Scope

This subcommittee's area of interest included what are commonly considered the four "regional dialects" of Thai—*Isan* (Northeastern Thai), *Khammuang* (Northern Thai), *Klang* (Central Thai, the basis of Standard Thai), and *Tay* (Southern Thai). In addition, it was responsible for ethnic minority languages.

3.2.2 Findings

The meaning and the origin of many words in modern Standard Thai can be found in regional variants of the Thai language in Thailand or in Tai languages outside Thailand. Literature from different regions retains words that disappears in other regions and they are very useful in studying different shades of meaning. Students and scholars seeking to understand the richness and beauty of the Thai language must recognize the importance of these "regional dialects."

Thailand is home to 70 languages, as can be seen from the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), as well as the *Ethnolinguistic Maps of Thailand* (Mahidol University, 2547). Some of these languages are small and endangered, including Chong, Bisu, Malbri, Samre, Mokena, and Mani. There are also much larger groups: Malayu (Pattani Malay) and Thai Khmer each have more than 1 million speakers, while there are 500,000 Sgaw Karen speakers (equivalent to the population of Wales, UK) and tens of thousands people speak Lisu, Khmu, Akha, Lahu, and other hilltribe



languages. As many as 1 out of every 15 children in Thailand speak a non-Tai language in the home.⁴ And while an increasing number of minority people are becoming bilingual in Standard Thai, the combination of higher birth rates (in comparison to urban Thais) and immigration from neighboring countries, plus language-related activism and preservation efforts, indicates that these languages will continue to be spoken.

This linguistic diversity impacts society in a number of ways. In terms of education, the monolingual Thai approach to education is not producing satisfactory results among ethnic children. Ministry of Education statistics from 2007, for example, found that 25-35% of second grade children in the far North, deep South, and Northeast border regions were functionally illiterate in Thai, compared to 1% in Bangkok. The situation is particularly troubling in the Malayu-speaking South:

According to the Ministry of Education's 2008 National Standard Test, 25.50 % of Grade 3 students in the deep South cannot read Thai at all, and 17.08% need improvement. This compares to the national averages of 4.18% and 3.52%, respectively. Thai writing skills are even worse—42.11 % are unable to write and 20.86% need improvement, comparing to the national averages of 5.81% and 10.53% (Supara 2010).

In addition, many ethnic children have either dropped out of school or never been enrolled in school. While the Ministry of Education is taking steps to improve the situation. Many who have investigated this matter in depth (including UNICEF, UNESCO, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Mahidol University, and SIL International) have concluded that mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs in which the students learn to read and write their mother—tongue and then bridge to Thai are needed. Pilot projects among Malayu, Mon, Pwo Karen, and Hmong speaking children have produced encouraging results. For example, children in a MTB-MLE program in Thailand's Deep South scored 40% higher on Thai tests than children in monolingual Thai schools.

⁴ This number is calculated from statistics from a number of sources. However, it should be noted that exact statistics on the number of minority language speakers in Thailand do not yet exist. UNICEF (2007) claims that the figure is closer to 1 in 10.



Thailand's ethnic diversity also holds implications for public health and legal services. UNICEF's 2007 *Multiple Indicator Cluster Study of Women and Children in Thailand*, for example, found that vaccination rates and knowledge of AIDS/HIV was lower among ethnic minority language speakers in comparison to the population as a whole. Thus, the Thai Ministry of Public Health, as well as UNICEF and UNESCO, are now using ethnic languages, as well as immigrant languages (primarily Burmese and Mon), in health campaigns.

On the issue of legal services, hill tribe leaders claim that some ethnic people have been unfairly imprisoned because they did not understand police or court proceedings, as Thailand has no laws requiring court interpreters for non-Thai speakers. The National Reform Committee, chaired by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, reported that the unique educational needs of ethnic children and respect for ethnic identities are important for national reconciliation (National Reform Committee, 2554: 29, 33).⁵

3.3 Subcommittee on Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages

3.3.1 Scope

This subcommittee was charged with investigating the roles of various languages of commerce—principally English, but also Chinese, Japanese and Korean. In addition, they investigated the language situation vis-à-vis the languages of neighboring countries.

3.3.2 Findings

English is very important to Thailand. Nonetheless, some Thai children might be being forced to learn English too soon, without acquiring a foundation in

⁵ Since 1949, there have been 17 major United Nations declarations and resolutions related to the protection and preservation of ethnic minority languages and culture. The most recent of these was the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September 2007. Thailand was one of the 143 countries which voted in support of this resolution. Thus, the NLP is helping Thailand to come into compliance with international human rights standards by emphasizing that all Thai citizens of ethnic descent have the right continue to use their mother-tongue while also acquiring fluency in the Thai language.



Thai listening, speaking, reading and writing. A British Council official who attended several subcommittee meetings cautioned that too much English too soon could actually damage children. The subcommittee chair felt that some Thai children in some of the lower quality bilingual (Thai-English) and international schools were actually becoming “illiterate in two languages.” Thus, this subcommittee agreed with other subcommittees on the importance of early learning taking place in the child’s mother—tongue.

As for languages other than English, the subcommittee found an increased interest in the Korean language, due to Korean culture (music, movies, television series, food) and Korean business interests. Japanese continues to enjoy a level of popularity. Chinese has grown in importance to the business sector. While most Thais of Chinese ancestry are no longer fluent in the language (due to past assimilation policies and social trends), many are now studying the language, or encouraging their children to do so.

Thais remain apathetic toward the languages of neighboring countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, offered 12 scholarships to study Cambodian; only 2 students applied. This attitude may be causing Thailand to miss out on business opportunities, and also increases the chances for miscommunication between the countries.

Chinese-built roads now crisscross the Mekong countries, making travel much more convenient than ever before. When the bridge is completed connecting Laos to Thailand’s northernmost province of Chiang Rai, it will only take six hours to drive from Thailand to China. Similarly, the trip from Northeastern Thailand to the Vietnam coast can now be made in a single day, and it is possible to drive from Bangkok to Phnom Penh, and on to Ho Chi Minh City.

The situation of neighboring languages is one area where Thailand has underdeveloped resources. Northeastern Thailand is home to many Vietnamese immigrants; while many have abandoned their heritage language, there is still a significant Vietnamese-speaking community. Policies encouraging the preservation of the language among these communities could benefit Thailand. Similarly, the 1 million Thai-Khmer speakers along Thailand’s eastern border would be able to learn Standard Khmer with relative ease.^{6 7}



Thus, Thailand should develop these language resources, not only for commerce with neighboring countries, but also for social and political reasons. Everyday, economic migrants from these countries stream into Thailand. The Chinese roads will only make this easier. For immigration officials, police officers, and health officials to manage this influx, language skills will be needed.

Thailand's neighbors are very interested in learning Thai. Thai language university courses in Yunnan (PRC), Vietnam and Cambodia are well attended. Hundreds of Chinese students have enrolled in Thai universities, taking courses where Thai is the medium of instruction. Lao speakers easily acquire Thai listening skills via Thai television and radio, as do Shan speakers in northeastern Burma. As former Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij remarked, "We are happy for them all to learn Thai!" (Korn 2010). Nonetheless, this could put Thailand at a strategic disadvantage, if the country continues to depend on non-Thai nationals to facilitate communication with neighboring countries.

3.4 Subcommittee on Teaching Thai to Migrants Seeking Employment in Thailand

3.4.1 Scope

This subcommittee differs with the Subcommittee on Languages of Commerce in that it is mainly concerned with teaching the Thai language to immigrants from neighboring countries, particularly Myanmar.

3.4.2 Findings

Estimates vary, but there are at least 2 million legal and illegal migrants in Thailand. Most of these are from Myanmar, with a smaller portion from Laos

⁶ It should be noted that there are significant dialect differences between the Khmer dialect spoken in eastern Thailand and the standard Khmer spoken in Cambodia. Special classes would be required to teach Thai-Khmer speakers the systematic differences between the varieties.

⁷ This is another area in which the Regional Language Subcommittee findings overlap with the Regional Languages Subcommittee: Thai-Khmer speaking children generally have very poor school results. The Thai-Khmer community have asked Mahidol University for assistance in starting a MTB-MLE program. This could simultaneously improve the students' school performance while also giving them the tools to serve as bridges between Thailand and Cambodia.



and Cambodia. They typically work in low-paying service jobs that are unattractive to Thais.

The migrant situation has introduced stresses into the public health system, which has acknowledged the need for language services in migrant languages. The Ministry of Education has been challenged to respond to the educational needs of migrant children, many of whom do not attend school. Businesses employing large numbers of migrants have cooperated with the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission to offer Thai classes to their employees. The government must understand that investment in teaching Thai to migrants is not a waste of resources. It will be rewarded in the form of better production and friendly understanding among peoples of different culture.

3.5 Subcommittee on Language Needs of the Visually and Hearing Impaired

3.5.1 Scope

This subcommittee looks after the unique language-related access needs of Thailand's visually and hearing impaired communities.

3.5.2 Findings

The blind and deaf communities in Thailand are well-recognized and well-organized. An extensive nationwide network of schools, many under royal patronage, address their unique educational needs. Some television programs, such as news reports or parliamentary debates, are interpreted in sign. The visually impaired are able to access Thai-language computer tools enabling them to function well in the information arena. The Thai government's policy for the hearing impaired is considered a model in the region.

Nonetheless, there remain some problems in ensuring equal access to information, particularly in relation to government services.

3.6 Subcommittee on Translation, Interpretation, and Localization⁸ Standards

⁸ For ease of reference, and unless indicated otherwise, "translation" is here used as a general term to encapsulate "translation [written], interpretation [oral], and localization"



3.6.1 Scope

This subcommittee was responsible for researching the translation industry in Thailand, working with translators, interpreters, government officials, and businesses to investigate the current situation and determine future directions.

3.6.2 Findings

The translation industry in Thailand is completely unregulated. Anyone, regardless of training or knowledge, can open a translation business—as seen by the many “Translation to All Languages” signboards on Sukhumvit Road. This is frustrating to the true translation professionals, who feel that their industry would benefit from more regulations and standards. In addition, foreign embassies have expressed concern about the low quality of translated documents they receive.

English-Thai/Thai-English interpretation and translation are most common. Nonetheless, other languages are gaining in importance. Bangkok has positioned itself as a global health hub, resulting in hundreds of thousands of “medical tourism” patients from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, resulting in new opportunities for Arabic-speaking Thai Muslims and other minority groups. Thousands of Thai-German marriages have created a growing need for translation between those languages.

Thailand is also a global center for MICE—Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions. This creates a need for unique translation pairs, such as English-Russian or Japanese-Chinese. Similarly, Bangkok is a major hub for agencies of the United Nations.⁹ For large events involving languages other than Thai, businesses and United Nations agencies must “import” temporary translators and interpreters. However, this is not due to a lack of local languages resources. While there may be few or no Thais able to translate between Chinese and Japanese or Russian and French, there is a large community of expatriates living in Thailand. Current labor regulations reserve “skilled” professions (a category which includes translators) for Thai nationals. Thus, there is an interest on the part of some businesses (particularly among computer-assisted localization firms working in multiple languages) in both changing labor laws for translators and implementing a system of translator

⁹ Reliable sources estimate that there are 3,000-4,000 United Nations staff based in Bangkok, overseeing work in over 40 countries in the Asia-Pacific region.



licensing comparable to that found in many western countries and China. This would benefit Thailand economically, as it would support the work of multinational businesses.

4.0 Conclusion

The National Language Policy of Thailand (2010) represents a significant first step in a systematic effort to develop the language resources of the kingdom. More than three years of work has gone into developing the policy, much of that effort being directed toward gathering information from related stakeholders and raising awareness of the complexities of the language situation among government officials and the general public. Thus, the policy represents the opinions and the aspirations of people from many different parts of Thai society.

Although then former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva signed the NLP on 7 February 2010, much work remains to be done. With his signature, the Prime Minister also authorized the formation of a strategic implementation committee, to be composed of cabinet-level officials from various ministries. The strategic implementation committee will be supported by a working committee in the Royal Institute. It is the deep hope of all on the CDNLP that the NLP can be implemented for the benefit of all Thais.

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