

## THE NORTHERN THAI DIALECT USED IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

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### ABSTRACT

Thailand has main four dialects spoken as the mother tongue in each region. This article will explore how the Northern dialect is used in Chiang Mai. The data was collected from the daily conversation at four public places: local markets, shopping malls, public transportation, and university cafeterias. The mixed method is the sample's non-participation observation and unstructured interview in the four research areas. The research concept is sociocultural linguistics. The research findings disclose that the local people still speak the Northern dialect in public places in the Chiang Mai centre. It is also found that they use the Northern dialect interspersed with the Bangkok language. The topics of conversation were food, travel, costume, study, entertainment, and sports. These issues were related to the place. All places found a large number of Bangkok language speakers. The findings also imply that the Northern dialect has less used than Bangkok in shopping malls and universities. Chiang Mai is an important tourist city, so people all over the country visit or move to this city with their different languages. It would appear in linguistic phenomena of code-mixing or code-switching between the Northern and Bangkok languages in this area, which should be a different research topic.

**KEYWORDS:** Northern dialect, Lanna language, Mother tongue, Code-switching, Bangkok language

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand has four main dialects according to the region: Northern dialect, Central dialect, Northeast or Isan dialect, and Southern dialect. Bangkok language is the national language and the official language of the country. However, most of the country's population, or approximately 60%, speaks a dialect or ethnic languages as their mother tongue [1]. Several previous pieces of research on dialects have shown similar results that dialects in different regions have been influenced by the Central Thai or Bangkok language [2][3][4].

Northern dialect, or called Lanna language, after the name of the original kingdom of this region. The northern dialect is also divided into sub-dialect in different provinces. Generally, when Thais mention about the Northern dialect or Lanna, it usually refers to the Northern Dialect spoken in Chiang Mai province. Chiang Mai used to have their alphabets itself, namely Lanna. The monks with Lanna's language knowledge taught the local people in the temples. >>>The new generation of people, however, is not interested in learning about Lanna. In the present, the Lanna scripts have

been presented on the signs at temples or cultural places to show how Lanna's script and language prestige in the past. Lanna has only named the spoken language in Chiang Mai without the alphabet, similar to the other dialects or local languages in Thailand. Figure 1 is the Lanna's sign in front of temple



**Figure 1: Lanna's sign in front of Temple, Chiang Mai**  
(<https://thailandtourismdirectory.go.th/th/attraction/3307>)

Chiang Mai is promoted as a cultural tourism city in Thailand. Therefore, international and domestic tourists from around the world come to this city. Developing Chiang Mai City into a world-class cultural tourism city makes it a hub of business activities to cater to those tourists. Furthermore, the Northern dialect has been adapted responsibly to local people's daily speech in this tourist city development. Local people use Bangkok language as the lingua franca of Thai people with different mother tongues.

Additionally, Chinese and English play an increasingly important role as the main tourist languages of the area. The immigration of Thai people from other regions and foreigners living long-term in Thailand increased with the city's growth and economic expansion, encouraging the use of the Bangkok language in everyday life. Reasonably, it is not surprising that the role of the use of the Northern language has decreased, while the role of the Bangkok language has increased, especially among teenagers who are bilingual in Bangkok and Northern languages.

A study of attitudes towards languages between the Bangkok language and dialects [5] presented that adolescent have more positive attitudes towards the Bangkok language than the dialects. However, they have differently insignificant levels of attitude towards each dialect [6]. In terms of the Northern dialects in Chiang Mai, the native borrowed the words from the Bangkok language to speak the Northern dialect [7]. Therefore, we chose Chiang Mai as a representative city of the Northern language in this research because it is a critical tourism province affecting the Northern dialect use in daily speech. Additionally, there has been the entry of other languages, including Bangkok and economic

languages related to tourists. Therefore, the Northern dialects in this province should be shown a future trend of dialect used in this region.

The research site collected four public places covering places of local people of various age groups, such as teenagers or students, working people, and the elderly. The research result could be compared to other Thai dialects in major tourist cities of Thailand, such as Southern dialects in Phuket and Eastern dialects in Chonburi Province. Moreover, this research finding will be an overview of the development of tourism cities that affect the use of Thai dialects.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research questions are how the Northern Thai dialect is used and the topics. The sampling is the Northern dialect native. The research sites are public places. A mixed method is a non-participatory observation and unstructured interviews with key informants. The four public places follow people's lifestyles and various ageing people: evening market, enormous shopping malls, public transportation, and university. The data will be analyzed and explained from a sociocultural linguistic perspective.

## **3. RESEARCH FINDING**

The public places are divided into four places, namely local market, shopping malls, public transportation, and universities. These places have settled in centre area of Ching Mai.

### **3.1 Place**

#### **1) Local Market.**

After school or work, the people enjoyed meeting friends or having dinner together with family at evening local markets closely their areas. The famous one is the front of Chiang Mai University. This evening market should be a hangout place for teenagers because there are three public schools and one university, so in the evening, it was crowded with teenagers. The market has various costumes, foods, and consumer goods.

The Northern dialect was used between customers and merchants. The merchants often start to ask the people to buy their stuff or foods. It was presented that the merchants and customers are local people. The Bangkok language also was used between them. It was found that if the merchants were teenagers and adults, they often used the Bangkok language. At the same time, the elderly merchants speak the Northern dialect rather than the Bangkok language. They used the Northern dialect to their customers because they are local people and native. In the early period of this market, most customers were university students. They speak Northern dialect even though they are not Chiang Mai original but speak other Northern dialects from their province accent. In the current period, the owner market welcomes new shops or merchants. They can be migrants from other provinces, so they prefer to speak the Bangkok language to the customers. The younger merchants mostly used the Bangkok language instead of the Northern dialect. However, the Northern dialect and Bangkok language were probably



used in mixing and switching between both languages. Figure 1 is the local night market or evening market in Chiang Mai, where the local people hang out and relax with their friends or family.



**Figure 1: Night market at Chiang Mai, Thailand**  
(<https://thai.tourismthailand.org/Articles/10>)

## 2) The shopping mall

There is a lot of big shopping mall in Chiang Mai. A famous one is Maya. It was settled in a popular tourist area, namely Nimman road. This road is well-known by foreigners such as Japanese, Chinese, and Western people that let this area have a big shopping centre for services the tourist business. It should be an agent tourist public place and a significant economic city. This mall has a brand name and various lifestyles such as a food centre, sports centre, cinema, and teenager and kid activity areas. This shopping mall, therefore, has various ages of people. This place reveals how the local language faces the foreign languages in tourist cities. Figure 2 is the Maya shopping mall.



**Figure 2: Maya shopping centre at Nimman Road, Chiang Mai**

(<https://mayashoppingcenter.com>)

Many languages are used in the malls. The primary one is the Bangkok language used by workers and merchants in the mall. The English and Chinese languages were used as the tourist's languages. The Northern dialect has not many people used; however, it was used at food centres where local foods are. So, the local merchants would like to present the local food in the local language for showing the tourist from other regions of Thailand. The customers in the food centre also use the Northern dialect in their conversation. The language switching was not found significant in the shopping mall because it differed from the evening market above.

The result is 1) and 2), implying that the local market and shopping mall has different language use between Northern dialect and other languages. So the Northern dialect will be used when the speakers can decide which language they can use that is in the local market, while a shopping mall has various people who are different natives, including the shopping mall's language policy that the workers have to use Bangkok and English or Chinese language in conversation with customers.

### **3) Public transportation**

The centre of Chiang Mai city is massive busy; traffic jams, not enough car parking, narrow road and footpath. The popular transportations are hire-motorbike, local taxis, Tuk Tuk. The language behaviour observation of the native found that they speak the Northern dialect of local taxis, namely Song-thaew. Tuk-Tuk and hire-motorbike. The drivers explain that they often speak the local language to the Thai customers even they do not support whether customers are local people. If they are local people, the Northern dialect will be used. Most public drivers are local people and speak the native Northern dialect. However, the younger drivers prefer to speak Bangkok rather than their dialect. This result implied that the public drivers have their mother tongue language royalty.

Regarding the passengers on the public transportation, they use Northern dialect with their friends on local taxis. All public drivers would first use the Northern dialect with their customers when they drive on the same route from communities to universities or shopping areas. If they drive on the tourist route such as Night market, tourist points, and hotels, they will switch from the Northern dialect to the Bangkok language because the tourist mostly visits these place. This result implied language switching between Northern dialect as mother tongue and Bangkok or English languages of the drivers in Chiang Mai or other tourist cities and revealed the drivers' language skills and multilingual of the drivers.

### **4) University cafeteria**

Chiang Mai is popular and famous higher education in Thailand. The students from Thailand and neighboring countries, particularly Chinese students, have moved into this city. The local students who are native from the other provinces of the Northern region live here. The cafeteria is where students spend the time eating and chatting during the lesson gap. This research collected two cafeterias in

Rajabhat Chiang Mai University and Chiang Mai University as they are popularly local universities by local students.

The research finding was shown that the Northern dialect had been used less than the Bangkok language by the merchants and students. The merchants explained that they are local people and speak the Northern dialect as their mother tongue, but they could not recognize whether the student speaks their native language; therefore, they would prefer to use the Bangkok language instead of their local language. In terms of the students' language in the cafeteria, the students at Rajabhat Chiang Mai university use the Northern dialect more than the Bangkok language, while another cafeteria uses a different one. The result was that Rajabhat Chiang Mai University has primarily local students from neighboring provinces in the Northern region, while Chiang Mai university has various students from many regions and Chinese exchange students. This result implied that the dialect would be used more in places with local people than places with various students' backgrounds.

### 3.2 Topics

The research method is a non-participatory observation, so the topics acquired the shop seller and customer conversation and the customers with their friends or family at four different places in 1) above. The research finding was shown that most conversation topics using the Northern dialect focused on six issues; foods, travel, costume, study, entertainment, and sport.

**Food:** Most topics in the conversation of food, including drink, are tasty, new restaurants, new menu, coffee, and local food. The conversation topics are related to the places in the evening market, food centres in shopping malls and university cafeterias. The detail about tasty is the most in the local people's conversation.

**Travel:** The topic about travel mainly contains the travel choice to other places such as back home, go to dinner, go shopping, price of public transportation price, weekend travel, including motorbike travelling. The conversation about travel was found at public transportation places, cafeterias, and markets. It was a short conversation between people and people and drivers.

**Costume:** The costume topic mainly occurs between the seller and customer or among the students at the market, shopping mall, and cafeteria. At the shopping mall, the Northern dialect will not be allowed to use between the workers and customers; however, in the food centre zone of the shopping mall, the merchants would prefer to speak the local language with the customer if their product is a local souvenir, local food, traditional costume.

**Study:** The topic of study often occurred in the cafeteria in universities rather than the other places. The conversation focuses on the subject, examination, report, teacher, friends in the classroom, university accommodation, library, and so on. However, this topic was found at the market among the

merchants about the information on students' schedules, particularly online and onsite teaching related to getting the students at the market.

**Entertainment:** The entertainment topic is mostly TV movies, singers, famous actors and their favourite series. This topic was found in all places but mostly appears in evening markets among teenagers because they have free time to eat and chat. Teenagers and adults also engage in conversations about series such as Korean series and singers. So people have a long conversation on this topic.

**Sport:** The topic about sport mostly is the football league in Europe, notably in the United Kingdom among the guy or boys at the evening market where the teenagers and workers hang out. The market has drink shops and big TV showing football matches of European countries service the customers. The Northern dialect will be used when they watch the match and discuss with each other. The boys or guys seem to prefer the Northern dialect to the Bangkok language in this topic.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The research found that the Northern dialect has been used in public places, markets, shopping malls, public transportation, and universities. The Bangkok language as the national language was spoken by the local people more and more in these public places. The evening market remarks the dialect use rather than the other places because this place serves the local people and local merchants. The dialect in the shopping mall has been used less than in the local market because of various people's languages and foreign tourists. The public transportation drivers have spoken dialect to their customers to present how they have mother tongue' royalty. The universities differ in dialect because Chiang Mai University has students around Thailand and neighboring countries, so the dialect is minor while the Bangkok language is the major. The Rajabhat Chiang Mai mostly students are local people, so they use the dialect naturally. The result implied that place is a crucial factor in dialect use.

Regarding the topic, the research found that the topics related to the place. There is food, travel, costume, study, entertainment, and sports topics. The research limitation is non-participation observation; therefore, the other topics could be found in subsequent research. The finding reveals that the Northern dialect in Chiang Mai is still maintained by native and local people in public places even though it faces Bangkok as the Thai national language and coming migrants and tourists. The finding is similar to the previous research that presented that Thailand's dialects have been changing, particularly lexeme.

#### **5. DISCUSSION**

The Northern dialect was spoken as the mother tongue in the Northern region of Thailand. The tourist sector development policy has focused on the traditional culture in the Northern part, especially in Chiang Mai province. The city's growth and business let people from the outside move into the province, including foreign tourists worldwide. The Bangkok language is crucial in public places with various people's languages. English is an international language in the tourism sector, while the



Chinese language is used to service the massive number of Chinese tourists each year visiting Chiang Mai. The city's growth direction by supporting tourist development affects dialect use in public places.

Chiang Mai is a representative tourist and economic city model in the country's development, similarly Phuket model in the southern region. The previous research article published [3] has revealed the dialect contact with Central Thai or Bangkok language influence. At the same time, the regional languages have hardly powered to get a place in their community. The local government has built up the mother tongue's awareness for the children to learn their parents' language. It seems not achieved shortly.

In Chiang Mai the local government has attempted to promote the local language by showing the Lanna letter on place signs. However, it seems that it could not face the role of the Bangkok language and foreign languages in the present. By the way, the local people, such as public drivers, local merchants, and local shop sellers, would prefer to speak their Northern dialect to the customer, while the shopping mall workers must speak the Bangkok language. Language is valuable in traditional culture; therefore, the dialect would be used to present as it is a part of the beautiful culture in the Northern region of Thailand.

## 6. OTHER RECCOMENDATION

The future study should be on code-switching between the Northern dialect and Bangkok Thai in a public place to understand and gain new linguistic phenomena of dialect situation in tourist cities as Thailand has promoted the tourist world-class. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the dialect or local languages in the countries should be maintained and promoted as it is a valuable culture in this beautiful country.

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### Author Profile



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