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Cultural Lexical Loss of Isan language in Thailand

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the cultural lexical loss of Isan language as a regional language in Thailand. According to an influence of the standard Thai language toward its regional languages lead the loss of regional lexicons especially cultural lexicons. The lexicons loss in terms of linguistic perspective is used to explain the level of loss. The 5 levels of dialect loss developed by Chanthao (2016) is the framework of this research. The 70 Isan lexicons being 3 domains; appliances, instrument objects, and tradition were the data. They were collected by dictionaries and key informants. These lexicons were checked by 50 teenagers being between 20-25 years old living in Khon Kaen province, Thailand as the sampling group. The research finding was found that the 32 Isan lexicons have been used by speakers or they are being not loss or alive but there are 38 lexicons being in 5 levels of loss. Most of lexicons or 16 lexicons is in the highest level. There are 10 lexicons in the lowest level. There are 6 lexicons in high level, 3 lexicons being in medium level and 3 lexicons in low level. The lexical loss key factors of Isan language are an influence of Thai standard as only one language used in school, official as well as mass media. Having no Isan language course in primary school is one factor of lexical loss. The Isan community changed to be modern society lead to way of life change. The teenagers' attitude toward their mother tongue, moreover, play an in crucial role to less Isan language using in the present. These issues, however, should have been studied in next research.

Keywords: Lexical loss, cultural words, Isan language, Thailand, dialect, language death

Introduction

Lexical Loss is one of language changes which is occurred when the speakers of one language change their attitude; in other words, lexicons are unclear for delivering expressions and thoughts, therefore, borrowed or modern lexicons are used instead. Consequently, traditional lexicons are slowly disappeared from the language. Chanthao (2016) states that lexicon loss might gradually happen, and an obvious level of loss is a lexicon change.

Lexical loss, moreover, could be the result of the progress of technology since people use new objects instead of the traditional ones which are rarely used. Hence, old lexicons of those objects are gradually lost and replaced by new lexicons as Panakul (1992) mentions that in many ranges of human life, some lexicons are created and lost according to time changes. However, even though new lexicons match with recent technology and cultural transfer, it must be still determined by social acceptance, which unaccepted lexicons are slowly lost due to rarely use.

In the Northeast of Thailand or I-san, Northeastern Thai dialect or Isan dialect has been widely used in every province with approximately 21 million speakers in northeast

and all over the country. To date, there is a decreased use of Northeastern Thai dialect that could lead to Northeastern Thai dialect lexical loss which Premsrirat (2006) points out that dialect lexical loss could be interpreted as losing identity and local wisdom with an abundant cultural heritage which will be passed down from generation to generation. In Thai social context, standard Thai language which is used in Bangkok numerously influences people in regions and the existence of Northeastern Thai dialect. It contextualizes Isan people lives at home, school, workplace, as well as public places. As the situation, for instance, of Northern Thai dialect or Kam Mueang, the standard language of eight provinces of upper north is the most spoken dialect, however, Premsrirat (2006) finds that local lexicons are going to disappear soon due to Thai standard lexicons use with local accent or Thai standard lexicons use; in other words, people merely use a local accent but not lexicons.

According to documents and studies of variation and lexical changes in Northeastern Thai dialect, elders remain using local lexicons more than teenagers (Suwanmusik, 2004; Akharawatthanakun, 2012; Jaimaitee and Sungkaman, 2016) as a result of influences of standard Thai which is an official language, other dialects, as well as creating new lexicons instead of traditional lexicons.

Therefore, this research aims to study a lexical loss of Isan culture among teenagers in Khon Kaen province, Northeastern region of Thailand by applying the concept of lexical loss to indicate the identity of Isan culture and urban teenagers. Khon Kaen province, for instance, is the center of Northeastern civilization where urbanization changes a lifestyle of Isan teenagers from a traditional way, thus Isan cultural lexicons might be lost among Isan people especially teenagers in urban economics. Hence, the area of study in Khon Kaen downtown probably is a representative of main downtown area in Isan region, as well as a distinct reflection of Northeastern Thai dialect lexical loss. An important point having to do this research is that it is not only understood the level of Isan lexical loss, but it also is able to use this research finding to plan for teaching Isan cultural lexicons in school specially to maintain mother tongue of Isan people. The figure 1 below will be shown the Northeastern region of Thailand and point out the field work area that is Khon Kaen province by the star symbol as follows.



Figure 1 *The Northeastern region of Thailand or Isan region*

Research Methodology

This part is divided into 4 sub part that is research framework, scope of study, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Framework

This study is Thai linguistic research using lexical loss framework of Isan cultural lexicon. 70 vocabularies of appliances and instruments were collected from Isan-Thai standard dictionary of Khon Kaen University (1989).

The data were collected from a sampling group which was 50 teenagers or students between 20-25 years old living in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. In this study, questionnaire and case interview were mainly used with the subject of knowledge and using Isan cultural lexicons. In addition, parents of teenagers from 10 families were also interviewed in order to gain more understanding of using Isan dialect in daily life and lifestyle which were related to Isan cultural lexical loss. This research is qualitative and quantitative research presenting descriptive analysis and quantitative data with a percentage.

Theory or Concept

The concept of lexical loss is a part of language death or endanger language that it has been studied in terms of comparative linguistics. However, the lexical loss is not dominantly such in a few years, it took such a long period to occur. The trace of lexical loss is able to record in mono dictionaries each language when they rewrite the words and word's meaning the new one. The older lexicons can be changed the meaning in the different periods and completely lost in the end when it was not recorded in the nation's dictionary. In the present time, language loss is the phenomenon appearing widely in various languages, therefore this concept has been applied to study in many languages including dialects and ethnic language in Thailand.

Scope of the Study

1) Lexicon lists are 70 cultural lexicons of Isan dialect related to food. Lexicons are collected from Isan-Thai standard dictionary of Khon Kaen University (Khon Kaen University, 1989). The vocabularies which generally reflect Isan culture are as follows.

2) Sampling group is 50 people consisted of 25 males and 25 females. The researcher also controls other variants by choosing sampling group with a similar background including

A researcher selects 20-25 years old as a sampling group since those under 20 years old probably don't have sufficient lexicons and experiences which might affect the perception of words. The suitable representative of teenagers, therefore, is between 20-25 years old.

A researcher intends to gain an overview of both males and females language use, hence, data are collected from males and females with Thai nationality and ethnicity whose homeland and birthplace is Khon Kaen province, who have never migrated to other places, who daily use Khon Kaen Isan dialect, who have Khon Kaen Isan dialect as a mother tongue, and who graduate not exceed high school.

Data Collection

The researcher, as an Isan dialect speaker, will carefully examine the meanings of vocabularies with parents of 10 families for the relevance of using Isan dialect in daily life. Subsequently, a sampling group will receive a questionnaire of vocabularies which definition and example of sentences are not provided. Sampling group, however, will be

asked the meaning and each vocabulary usage so that they can connect these vocabularies with the usage by their own knowledge. In consequence, if a sampling group could not connect the meaning and context of usage, they will be regarded as not using those words.

Data Analysis

All data will be analyzed as an average and divided into 6 levels of lexical loss Chanthao (2016) as follows:

Level [5] Highest	Level [4] High
Level [3] Medium	Level [2] Lowing
Level [1] Lowest	Level [0] No loss

The level [5] Highest means there are 81-100 percentages of sampling group having not use the word. The level [4] means there are 61- 80 percentages of sampling group having not use the word. The level [3] means there are 41-60 percentages of sampling group having not use the word. The level [2] is there are 21-40 percentages of sampling group having not use the word. The level [1] is there are 1-20 percentages of sampling group having not use the word. And the level [0] mean all of sampling group use the word.

Research Question

There are 2 points of research questions.

- 1) Is the Isan culture lexicons loss?
- 2) If it has been a loss, how the level of loss is?

Literature Review

The previous studies of Thai dialects loss and change will be reviewed in this part. The early period studies revealed the dialect change in phonology and vocabulary using of people living in regions and ethnicity's languages. Suwanmusik (2004) shown the vocabulary variation of people living in Koh Samui (Samui Island) in the Southern Thai. Dialect in this island rather is primitive dialect because of this area far from the mainland. The language in the present had influenced by the Central Thai language as a major language of Thailand and English language as tourist language, moreover, the borrowing words from Chinese and Khmer also has been used in this island. The people in 3 generations, therefore, use variously of the daily language. The vocabularies were divided into 4 categories of level loss that is the first group tended to quit while the second one was high using. The third group was low using while the last group was inaccurate using. The study of Boonkua (2010) in changing the idiom using of Isan dialect or Northeastern dialect by two generations was found that there are five categories of idiom meaning change; wider, narrower, better, lower, and shift. Most of the wider idiom meaning used by the young generation while the older generation used the idiom in terms of narrower meaning. Akharawatthanakun (2012) studied of the variation and change of vocabularies and phonology in dialects spoken at Nan province, Northern region was shown that the external social factors such language contact, major language influence, mass media affect to dialect variation both vocabularies and phonology system. The studies of Sawangdee (2014) about changing of the Northern food terms revealed that people different age used the local food terms differently that is the young generation used the Thai food terms instead of the local terms. This study has shown the decreasing tendency of local food term using in the future. The similar study by Chanthao (2016) about the loss of Isan food terms in teenager was found that the young people in the present time prefer to use the new terms by Central Thai dialect than Isan terms in calling food and preparation of Isan

terms. Chanthao (2016) proposed the five level of vocabulary loss that is in the topic of data analysis above. In this study discloses the few terms in the preparation process of Isan cooking being in lever [5] Highest lost. These terms were instead by the Central Thai. The key factors of losing were the change of Isan way of life of cooking that is replaced by buying from the market or eating outside. This lifestyle has affected to loss of Isan cooking and preparing terms.

It seems that the early period of studies has interested in the variation and change phenomena in vocabularies, and it was focused at provinces. The later studies were extended to the regional level while the vocabulary was focused on a meaning level. However, there are also studies of variation in an ethnic language such as Jaimaitee and Sungkaman (2016) This study has shown the variation of vocabularies of Phuan, an ethnicity living in Lobburi province at the Central region of Thailand. The finding was shown that the older generation has maintained their vocabularies that different from Central Thai dialect or other Phuan groups living in Thailand while the young generation has used the Central Thai dialect for communication in works and education.

The studies above shown the decreasing tendency of regional or local vocabularies in every region of Thailand including in ethnic language. This article also will explain the loss phenomenon of Isan vocabularies in terms of cultural lexicons of which imply to loss of Isan culture. In addition, this research finding will disclose limpud of lexical loss phenomenon in Thailand especially in terms of dialect or regional language.

Research Finding

The research finding will be revealed the level of loss. The detail will be shown in table and explanation under the table. The lexicons are divided into 2 main groups that is the first group is cultural objects and the second group is cultural ceremonies. The table 1 below shown the number and percent of cultural lexicons in level of loss.

Table 1
The Number and Percent of Cultural Lexicons in Level of Loss

Level of Loss (%)	Cultural Objects		Cultural Ceremonies		Totally	
	Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent
Level [0]	22	48.89	10	40.00	32	45.71
Level [1]	3	6.67	7	28.00	10	14.29
Level [2]	3	6.67	3	12.00	6	8.57
Level [3]	2	4.44	1	4.00	3	4.29
Level [4]	2	4.44	1	4.00	3	4.29
Level [5]	13	28.89	3	12.00	16	22.85
Totally	45	100	25	100	70	100

Table 1 illustrates that the total numbers without lexical loss or Level [0] are 32 vocabularies (45.71) while 38 vocabularies (54.29) are in lexical loss condition through level 1-5 as follows:

There are 10 lexicons (14.29) in Level [1] “Lowest”. The result found that these lexicons refer to general appliances found in a daily life of Isan people in the past. These vocabularies, therefore, still are used in the present time, so it’s not in a lexical loss

situation. In addition, some lexicons are used mixing with Thai standard language, hence, they remain used in Isan cultural context.

There are 6 lexicons (8.57) in Level [1] “Low”. The lexicons are still used in everyday life or at a very low loss level, since in the present time, appliances, rituals, and activities are parts of Isan people’s way of life.

There are 3 lexicons (4.29) in Level [3] “Medium”. These lexicons are also at very low loss level yet higher than Level 1. Sampling group does not use the vocabularies in everyday life as they do not know the meaning, even though some people do know it, they would rather use standard Thai language which contains the same meaning.

There are 3 lexicons (4.29) in Level [4] High. These lexicons are at a high level of lexical loss; in other words, teenagers tend to do not use it in daily life.

There are 16 lexicons (22.85) in Level [5] “Highest”. The result found that these lexicons are in the highest level of lexical loss, or teenagers know and use these lexicons greatly little. It can be said that there is a rapid possibility of lexical loss.

From the information above, it indicates lexical loss phenomenon of Isan culture that most lexicons are in a lexical loss situation, and abundant of them are in the “Highest” level which is a similar number to lexicons without loss situation. For this reason, if these 38 lexicons are completely disappeared in the future, that is to say, none of the sampling group uses the lexicons anymore, these lexicons might finally be lost from the language sooner or later.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study results of Isan culture lexical loss points that there is lexicon which is rarely used by teenagers. Hence, it seems that the Isan lexical group could possibly be lost permanently in Khon Kaen province in the incoming future.

A lexical group which is not lost or in the level of [0] contains 32 words, and another lexical group which is in the lost situation in each level contains 38 words. Respectively, the total number of words in the level of [1] which is “Lowest” is 10 words (14.29%). The level of [2] “Low” is 6 words (8.57%). The level of [3] “Medium” is 3 words (4.29%). The level of [4] “High” is 3 words (4.29%). And the level of [5] “Highest” is 16 words (22.85). The Isan culture lexical loss phenomenon which most lexicons are in the lexical loss situation and in the level of “Highest”. The amount is quite a lot or close to the amount of words which are not lost. Therefore, for those 38 words, if there is permanent lexical loss in the future, in other words is that there is no people using those lexicons, those lexicons could be finally lost. Causes are listed below.

The progress of Technology and globalized communication causes plenty of technologies taking place. Furthermore, there is communication through radio, television, and Internet which is faster and more convenient. It also increases different types of contact and communication connecting almost people around the world together. This causes the old things, the old thoughts, and the old beliefs in the past disappear. Khanittanan (1983) said that the reason of lexical loss might be that those things and those thoughts have disappeared from the society, so there is no chance to use those lexicons in the society. Thereby, teenagers do not know those lexicons which are hardly used or are not used in daily life, so they do not know the meaning. Or else, they might know the meaning, but they do not use them in everyday life.

This phenomenon is related to the concept Chrystal (2000) and Premsrirat (2006) is that losing even a word is losing wisdom and culture identity of the community. Chanthao (2016) stated that a cause of lexical loss is because kids have never learned Isan culture and spoken Isan language widely in daily life. In contrast, they use standard Thai language

word instead of Isan language, or they use Thai word mixing with Isan language. This phenomenon could point us about language change.

This study indicates the overview of lexical loss in another Thai dialect. In other words, lexical loss or lexicon which tends to be lost in other Thai dialects occurs because those lexicons are rarely spoken, they might be used by only older people. In the meanwhile, teenagers often use new lexicons instead of the old ones, especially because of the prestige of standard Thai language. The study result is related to Akharawatthanakun (2013) that lexicons tending to disappear from a Thai dialect in Nan province is the lexicons which are hardly spoken or there are only old people or middle-age people using them. Teenagers often use new lexicons instead of old lexicons. Besides, the influence of other languages is also an important factor of lexical loss in a language as well. Standard Thai language is a language influencing four Thai dialects. In addition, the result is related to Seangyen and Liamprawat (2017) who studied lexical usage transformation of people in three levels of age using Phu Tai Ka Pong dialect in Sakon Nakhorn province, Thailand. They found that the important cause of lexical loss in Phu Tai Ka Pong language because of the change from society, welfare, and technology, so people quit using the old lexicons and the old things or old appliances are gone as well. It resulted in this way because representatives of adolescent group do not know the lexicon because they have never heard or used, but they use lexicon from standard Thai language, English language, and Laos lexicon from another ethnic group.

As mentioned before, it shows that lexical loss reflects that Isan lexicon related Isan culture had gradually disappeared or played less role. In this case, the researcher predicts that people using Isan Thai language might use standard Thai lexicon to communicate with local people and outsider increasingly in the future. This cause could affect Isan language slowly decreased importance or reduced role. However, since the way of life which families still use Isan language in daily life, those lexicons could be with Isan society continuously.

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