From Sociolinguistic Variation to Inclusivity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality through Thai First-Person Pronouns

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Abstract

Pronouns have been shown to be important linguistic resources that reflect social diversity. Variationist studies highlight their role in enabling different forms of positioning and identity construction. In the Asia-Pacific context, research has demonstrated that first-person pronouns play a key role in stance-taking (e.g., Manns, 2012) and in the performance of gender and sexuality (e.g., Abe, 2004; Miyazaki, 2004). Pronouns also hold particular significance in representing gender and sexual diversity in inclusive ways. For example, third-person gender-neutral pronouns are often examined as tools for challenging the binary gender system and recognizing non-normative identities (e.g., Conrod, 2022). Thus, pronouns are central to both expressing diversity and promoting inclusivity.

Thai is a language with a particularly rich pronoun system. First-person pronouns in Thai, in particular, allow speakers to align themselves with varying levels of formality, power, and social distance depending on context. In this talk, I trace how Thai first-person pronouns have been shown to serve various interactional functions and to act as tools for negotiating and constructing gender and sexuality in interaction. This includes both earlier studies examining how Thai LGBTQ+ speakers navigate first-person pronoun choices within a binary gender system, and more recent research that focuses on how these pronouns convey pragmatic meanings, index stances, and contribute to the projection of gender and sexual identity.

Drawing on data from speakers of diverse gender and sexual identities, I demonstrate how the conventionally gendered first-person pronouns in Thai have been queered. I also examine the emerging use of an epicene first-person pronoun within Thai LGBTQ+ communities. While not originally associated with gender or sexuality, it has come to index gender neutrality and queer identity. Through these developments, I aim to show how Thai first-person pronouns—beyond their roles in stance-taking and identity construction—serve as a site where gender and sexual diversity intersect with socially meaningful variation, contributing to inclusive language practices. While this analysis focuses on the Thai context, I hope it offers insights relevant to language variation and inclusivity across the broader Asia-Pacific region.

References

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Keywords