

Diglossia and identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, social, and political hierarchy¹

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The paper explores diglossic relations between Central Thai and *phasa isan*, a variety officially known as a dialect of Thai, but linguistically close to Lao. *Phasa isan* is spoken by almost one-third of Thailand's population but its speakers in the Northeast are often stigmatized as uneducated and backward. We conducted field research mainly among university students in Ubon Ratchathani, a northeastern border province, by drawing upon data from survey questionnaires, reflective essays, interviews, and field observations. The findings suggest a transitional diglossic relationship in which Central Thai is the High and *phasa isan* the Low variety. These relationships are discussed in terms of nationalism, social hierarchy, and language maintenance and shift.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic language, diglossia, language shift, national language policy, Thailand, language attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a pluralistic, ethnically diverse country (Rappa and Wee 2006; Smalley 1994) where over 70 languages are spoken (Premrirat 2006). The dominant language of Thailand is generally referred to as *phasa Thai* ('Thai language'), also known as *Central Thai*, *Bangkok Thai*, or *standard Thai*; henceforth, 'Central Thai'. Some widely-spoken languages are officially referred to as *phasa thin* ('regional dialects') of Central Thai despite their significant linguistic differences. This is also the case with *phasa isan* (*Isan* is an Indic loanword for 'Northeast'), a linguistic variety closely related to Lao. In fact, several authors even refer to *phasa isan* as *Lao* (Diller 2002: 81; Smalley 1988: 249, 1994: 89). Despite being regarded as a dialect of Central Thai, *phasa isan* has distinct lexical and phonological properties and is traditionally referred to by its speakers as *Lao*. This is an example of how dialect assignment is not simply a linguistic, but also a socio-political matter, whose impacts extend beyond language to include questions of nationhood and associated ideologies (Haugen 1966).

Phasa isan is spoken predominantly but not exclusively in Northeast Thailand. According to the 2010 national census, there are about 19 million residents of Isan, 28.8 percent of the population (National Census Bureau 2010). At a conservative estimate (there are no official figures), at least 80 percent of the Isan population, or 15.9 million people, speak the language. The Northeast region, also called *Isan*, has become more politically active as evident in recent struggles for democracy in Thailand. It was a stronghold of the 2010 anti-government 'red shirt' protest movement (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011). Home to more voters than other regions, Isan holds significant political power in Thai parliamentary politics and since 2001 has shown consistently strong support for parties aligned with controversial former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Due to its ever-growing sociopolitical significance, the region has seen renewed scholarly interest from different perspectives (e.g. Elinoff 2012; Glassman 2010; Streckfuss 2012). To our knowledge, no recent research has been conducted on sociolinguistic dimensions of the region. Northerners' recent political struggles prompted a revisit of the vexed question of regional identity in this Lao-dominant but multiethnic region (Wongthes 2000). The primary goal of this paper is thus to explore the notion of Isan-ness as reflected in language use within the region. We conducted field research in Ubon Ratchathani province to examine language attitudes about *phasa isan* and Central Thai and how they motivate speakers' language choices. Sharing a common border with Laos and Cambodia, the province has a long history of rebellion (Wiphakpochanakit 2003[1970]). Ubon Ratchathani is predominantly inhabited by *phasa isan* speakers with some stateless ethnic Lao borderland dwellers (Thaweessit 2009). We acknowledge the complexity of the term *identity* (see Bucholtz and Hall 2004). For the purpose of this research, the term *identity* refers to what Tracy (2002: 18) called *master identity*, an identity associated with a person's ethnicity, gender, national and regional origin, that also constitutes social groups or categories with which individuals identify themselves (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

ISAN INFERIORITY

In many ways, economically-deprived Isan is considered lower in status than other regions of Thailand; its inhabitants are often disdained as *ban nok* ('country bumpkins'), socio-economically backward, unsophisticated, or downright stupid. Inferiority, both perceived and constructed, is partly a product of the region's earlier history with Bangkok. Historically, the region had strong cultural ties with Laos and was only linked to Siam (the pre-modern kingdom of Thailand) as a vassal state (Winichakul 1997). In 1899, the region was officially named 'Isan' after King Rama V ordered extensive centralized bureaucratic reforms to shape the sense of being a modern state in response to the threat of Western colonization (Wongthes 2000). Today,

sociocultural contact with Laos still exists through the influx of Laotian migrant workers, especially in border provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani; this contact makes *khon isan* more aware of any differences between them and Laotian citizens.

Isan is a casualty of the country's longstanding centralization policy that favors the growth of Bangkok, the capital city and center of power and development (Brown 1994; London 1977). The Isan way of life for a long time remained highly dependent on subsistence farming; greater economic development only came during the time of the Vietnam War (Kislenko 2004). A variety of terms have been used to describe the troubled and unequal relations between Bangkok and the Northeast: these include *parasitism* (London 1977: 58), *regional inequality* (Feeny 2003: 37) and *internal colonialism* (Brown 1994: 159). Problematic relations between Bangkok and the Northeast are also rooted in an entrenched socio-cultural divide. Testimonies by northeasterners and third-party observers confirmed deeply ingrained Bangkokian attitudes of condescension, which have persisted to the present day (Draper 2010; Hesse-Swain 2011; Textor 1961). In her ethnographic study Hesse-Swain (2011) found that the sense of ethnic inferiority is reflected in the perception of beauty in mainstream youth media. Informants in the study, who were Isan teenagers, often expressed that *na lao* ('Lao faces') did not have a place in the mainstream media industry except for comic roles portraying Isan people as 'ignorant, silly and clownish' (Hesse-Swain 2011: 102), further accentuating the sense of inferiority. The word *Lao* is a common slang term among Thai speakers, especially teenagers, suggesting not only intellectual backwardness but also physical unattractiveness.

THE RISE OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE *VIS-À-VIS* THE SUPPRESSION OF LINGUISTIC OTHERS

Prior to 1939, the country now known as Thailand went by the name of Siam. Siam was a multicultural polity where the existence of different ethnicities was widely acknowledged (Reynolds 2002; Streckfuss 2012), but after the name change to Thailand, such cultural heterogeneity became less and less visible, as did ethnic languages. The name change reflected state attempts to make these peoples develop a sense of nationhood by reducing cultural diversity (Barmé 1993; Laungaramsri 2003). The Central Thai language has been promoted by its association with the Nation-Religion-King trinity (see Rappa and Wee 2006 for further discussion). Subsequently, systematic efforts have been made to maintain its status as a symbol of national identity (see also Liu and Ricks 2012).

Thai nationalism engendered the notion of *Thai-ness*, a fuzzy construct largely defined by its opposite – *otherness*, which is deemed a threat to the nation (Winichakul 1997: 3–6). *Thai-ness* centers around kingship and Buddhism, which perpetuate hierarchical social relationships (Sattayanurak

2005). The process of making Central Thai, a symbol of Thai-ness, into a national language spanned decades and was never openly acknowledged in any of the country's eighteen constitutions. Early attempts included issuing laws which encouraged the use of Thai scripts to record Buddhist teachings at the expense of local scripts (Tiyavanich 1997), as well as cultural mandates promoting Central Thai during military rule (Reynolds 2002). Subsequent moves included the promulgation of laws and the establishment of state agencies to promote and maintain the status of Thai as a national language (Rappa and Wee 2006), notably the Ministry of Education.

Building and maintaining Thai national identity sometimes involved denigrating non-mainstream cultures by accusing them of posing so-called 'national threats' (Laungaramsri 2003). State actions take a variety of forms, ranging from referring to local language varieties as mere 'dialects' of Central Thai to coining words that single out and stigmatize highland dwellers as narcotic drug producers or communists. Laungaramsri further observed that nationalist policies which Thailand/Siam adopted during the nation-building period have succeeded in homogenizing ethnicities throughout the country (see also Streckfuss 2012). Consequently, 'non-Thai languages have been made subordinate to Thai and have no official recognition' (Laungaramsri 2003: 161). Not only do other languages lack recognition, they have been made 'un-Thai' and thus a threat to national identity. Furthermore, making Central Thai the sole official medium of instruction is a direct repression of non-standard languages. Through a centralized national education policy, Central Thai has become a vehicle for nationalist ideologies prescribing moral standards and responsibilities for Thai citizens (Barmé 1993). Where suppression of regional languages involves such coercion that it produces deep resentment, serious consequences may follow.

A case in point is the sense of cultural hegemony felt by Malay-speaking Muslims who live in Thailand's southern border provinces. Scupin has argued:

It appears that the Thai elite is involved in re-appropriating these traditional conceptions of hierarchy and status, including the honorifics and deference gestures and tying them to a nationalistic 'Thai' cultural identity to provide the basis for a new hegemony. (1988: 342)

While observing that Thailand has officially adopted a policy of cultural pluralism, Connors (2009) notes that the refusal to recognize Patani Malay, the majority language in the southern border provinces, fuels resentment and social exclusion.

Despite certain pockets of resistance, the success of the Thai nationalist discourse has been overwhelming. As a result of the rigorous attempts to instill Thai-ness, Central Thai has become 'the *de facto* official and national language' (Kosonen 2009: 33). Only recently did the state finally begin supporting efforts to revitalize minority languages (see Premsrirat 2008). Although it is the first

language of the largest group of Thai citizens (Eoseewong 1984), little attention is given to the status of *phasa isan* (see Draper 2010 for an exception). In short, the rise of Central Thai as a national language has mirrored the rise of Bangkok-centric cultural ideologies at the expense of other ethnicities. But what exactly are the ramifications of this? How do *phasa isan* speakers understand their linguistic identity?

The dominant Central Thai-normative nationalist discourse has created a linguistic backlash from Isan residents who felt their local cultural identity was threatened. McCargo and Hongladarom (2004) conducted ethnolinguistic research to explore the notion of Isan identity as perceived by undergraduate students and villagers in Mahasarakham province, and found that the students demonstrated a degree of confusion over their Lao-Thai identities. State promotion of Isan identity is a tool to distance Northeasterners from the feeling of Lao-ness (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004). Based on these findings, we took a sociolinguistic turn, so as further to explore manifestations of Isan identity through speakers' use of Central Thai and *phasa isan*. Due to the scarcity of the literature on sociolinguistic relations between the two varieties, we have aimed to make this research exploratory and descriptive in nature. Our research addresses the following broad research question: do northeasterners use *phasa isan* and Central Thai in different domains of use, in such a way that sociocultural values or attitudes associated with the use of each variety are related to Isan or Thai identity? We are well aware that our informants – primarily university students – do not constitute a representative sample of the Isan population. They do, however, offer important insights into language and identity questions as experienced by younger, more educated and more urbanized Isan dwellers, which may offer pointers to more general future trends.

This article attempts to examine the way young people in Ubon Ratchathani use different linguistic varieties, and their attitudes to that language use. Are they becoming 'more Thai' with a growing reluctance to use *phasa isan*? Or does the continuing vibrancy of the local variety testify to a sense of regionalism? Are young people in Ubon Ratchathani confused or conflicted about the dual identity reflected in their diglossia, or are they broadly comfortable with their sociolinguistic position? These are very important questions given the high levels of political polarization in today's Thailand where language choice and attitudes not only signal interpersonal relationships but also indicate where an individual stands in relation to prevailing nationalist discourse.

METHODS

We combined four different methods to examine the participants' use and their views:

- written questionnaires;
- reflective essays;

- audio-recorded semi-structured interviews; and
- field observations of language use in a variety of public places in both urban and rural areas in Ubon Ratchathani between July and December 2012.

A total of 145 informants participated in this research. All were recruited by word of mouth. We chose university students as our major group of informants because they represent a new generation with upward social aspirations, whose language choices would therefore likely reflect trends among younger Isan people. Because the corpus of data was a mix of Central Thai and *phasa isan*, the first author, who is a *phasa isan*-Central Thai bilingual, was responsible for the transcription of the data. In this paper, quoted texts from Central Thai and *phasa isan* data follow a transliteration system developed by the Royal Institute of Thailand. We compensate for its lack of tone-marking and vowel-length distinction by supplying all excerpts with an English translation. Where phonetic or phonological aspects are relevant, we adopt a transcription based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Each data-gathering method is described below.

Questionnaire

The goal of the questionnaire was to establish speakers' profiles of language use and to probe their attitudes about common themes in Central Thai and *phasa isan* usage. The questionnaire was written in Central Thai. The questionnaires were completed simultaneously in a large lecture theater at Ubon Ratchathani University. Respondents were 119 undergraduate students and three faculty members. Of these respondents, 110 were from 16 Isan provinces. The remaining 12 respondents were from nine provinces in the Central Plains and the North. We collected the respondents' demographic backgrounds and identity-related information as well as their language choices in different situations marked by different social statuses and distances. We also asked them to rate statements, some of which are evaluative, about *phasa isan* and Central Thai. The statements include the following:

- 'The majority of Isan people are of Lao origin.'
- 'Newer generations tend not to use Isan.'
- 'Speaking Isan on all possible occasions is socially inappropriate.'

Reflective essays

The goal of the essay-writing was to probe the informants' perception of any linkage between the notions of Thai, Isan, and Lao. Immediately after the questionnaire data was gathered, 72 of the original 122 questionnaire respondents agreed to write short essays in Central Thai in response to a set of questions, some of which were modeled after McCargo and Hongladarom (2004). Questions relevant to the present study are as follows:

1. *arai khue khwam pen isan* ('What is Isan-ness?').
2. *phasa isan mi botbat yangrai nai kan sang khwam pen isan* ('What is the role of *phasa isan* in the construction of Isan-ness?').
3. *phak isan mi khwam kiaokhong kap lao rue mai* ('Is the Isan region related to Laos or not?').
4. *khun khit wa khon isan kap khon krungthep khit yang rai to kan* ('What do you think Isan people think about Bangkok dwellers, and vice versa?').

Given that we were interested in examining the reasons for linking *phasa isan* with regional identity, we excluded from our analysis essays that failed to explain 'how' *phasa isan* helps to construct the sense of being Isan. It took the informants about 45 minutes to write these essays.

Student interviews

We conducted focus-group interviews with three groups of students totaling 14 students (11 females, three males) based on their native and primary language use in the household:

1. three Isan-born speakers of *phasa isan*;
2. four Isan-born speakers of other ethnic languages (Kuy and Khmer); and
3. seven Isan-born speakers of Central Thai.

None of these students took part in the questionnaire and essay tasks. Each group was interviewed individually. The first author was the main interviewer. The second author, a native speaker of English who is highly proficient in Central Thai, contributed to the interviews. The goal of the interviews was to elicit the informants' detailed reflections on language choices, their explanations for usage, as well as their personal experiences be they negative or positive. The language used in the interviews varied according to each group's primary household language. However, when interviewing Kuy and Khmer speakers, we used Central Thai. We acknowledge that the language used in the interviews may have an impact on the findings, but we felt that accommodating informants' language choices whenever possible would help them express themselves more freely. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

Non-student interviews

For the same reason as the student interviews, we further interviewed nine Ubon Ratchathani residents aged 40 to 65 (four males, three females), from different socio-economic backgrounds, namely, three university lecturers, three small business owners, one retired nurse, one general laborer, and one community radio host. All of them were married with children. All but one informant (from Roi Et) were born and raised in Ubon Ratchathani. All had spent at least 10 consecutive years in the province, and had a relatively high level of socio-political awareness. Five informants were interviewed individually on different occasions. One business owner and the nurse were

interviewed together at their request; this was also the case with the remaining two business owners. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

Field observations

Throughout the data collection period, the first author conducted observations and took field notes of social interactions at various public places and social gatherings including convenience stores, department stores, open-air markets, school and university campuses, government offices, hospitals, and other locations. The purpose was to observe language choices used by the general public in different socio-economic settings in the urban and rural areas in Ubon Ratchathani. The data gathered from observations are primarily used to validate findings based on data elicited by the other three methods. No video or audio recordings were made.

FINDINGS

We have observed that, in the Northeast, nationalist language policy has juxtaposed Central Thai (the national language) with *phasa isan* (the language of the masses), so creating a diglossic relationship in the Thai hierarchy of multilingualism (Smalley 1988, 1994; see also Diller 2002). We use the term 'diglossic' in a functional sense where two languages or varieties are differentiated by domains of use (see Fishman 1967; Pauwels 1988), not in the classic sense proposed by Ferguson (1959). Findings from the research are as follows:

Questionnaire findings

As our main source of data, the questionnaire generated responses that indicate a mixture of *phasa isan* and Central Thai in the respondents' daily communication, although the functions of the two languages were rather compartmentalized (see Fishman 1967). Central Thai and *phasa isan* are High and Low varieties, respectively. While *phasa isan* was primarily used with those whom respondents perceived as being of the same or lower in status, with a small social distance, or in informal encounters, Central Thai was used in formal settings, especially with interlocutors whom they perceived as holding a higher status or with greater social distance. However, the observed diglossic relation is not a strong case, since there is overlap in domains of use.

Central Thai signifies formality and professionalism and is used for bureaucratic communication. This is consistent with Diller (2002). Figure 1 shows that over 90 percent of the respondents reported using Central Thai at public service organizations run by the central state, such as district offices. The percentage of use dropped to 80 percent at another type of public service office, sub-district administrative organizations (known as Tambon Administrative Organizations or TAOs); these are local government offices which usually employ local residents. Central Thai is used the least among

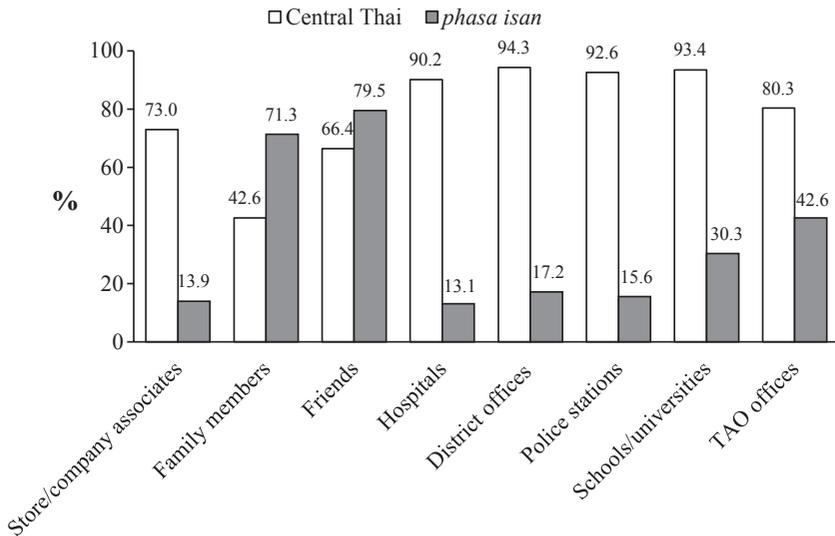


Figure 1: Percentages of language choices by interactional context (N = 122; note that the respondents were asked to identify their language choices in a non-mutually exclusive manner which allowed some informants to report using both languages in the same context suggesting an overlap of use, an indication of possible code-switching)

family and friends but still accounted for 43 percent of speakers in this domain. *Phasa isan*, on the other hand, is for the most part a language of solidarity and is used mainly with friends and family members. It places emphasis on *khwam pen kan eng* ('amicability'), rapport, and informality.

Figure 2 compares the distribution of *phasa isan* and Central Thai across informal domains. *Phasa isan* dominates informal relationships. Taking the pattern of use among friends as an example, here 79 percent of the respondents reported using *phasa isan* while 63 percent of the respondents reported using Central Thai.

Based on the use of both varieties across domains reported in Figures 1 and 2, it should be noted that in domains where Central Thai dominated, there was usually a wide gap between the percentages of Central Thai users and *phasa isan* users. In contrast, in domains where *phasa isan* dominated, this gap was much smaller. This means that Central Thai was relatively well used in those domains, even though to a lesser extent than was *phasa isan*.

Table 1 summarizes questionnaire respondents' judgments about *phasa isan*. The general pattern of responses is in favor of the variety: that is, the majority of the respondents generally agreed that *phasa isan* should be used more extensively in official transactions and amongst Isan people. The percentages of those who agreed with pro-*phasa isan* statements 1, 4, and 8 exceeded 60 percent of the responses.

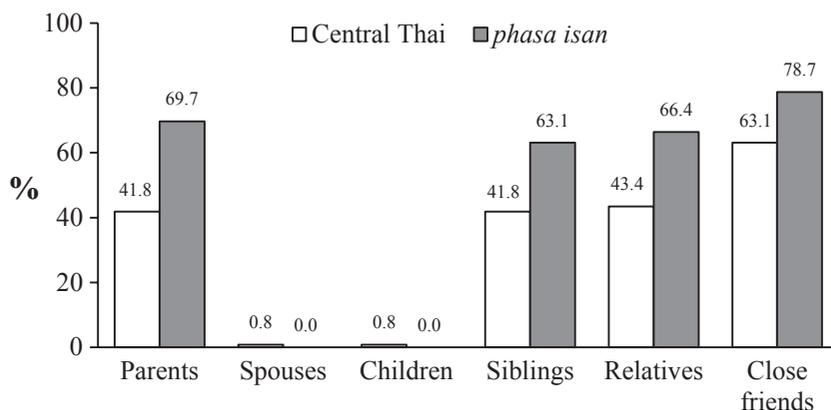


Figure 2: Percentages of language use in informal relationships (the limited language use reported with spouses and children reflects the fact that only one questionnaire respondent was married and had a child)

However, somewhat surprising findings were also observed. Statements 6 and 7 were phrased to compare respondents' self-perception of their speaking abilities. Given that a large majority of respondents were born speaking *phasa isan*, one might naturally assume that the respondents would be more likely to perceive themselves as fluent in the language and not as fluent in Central Thai. As the findings show, this is not quite the case: the majority of the respondents agreed that they were fluent in Central Thai (70%), while the majority also agreed that they were fluent in *phasa isan* (67%). More respondents denied being fluent in *phasa isan* than denied being fluent in Central Thai (17% vs. 8%). Even more interesting is the response pattern for statement 9. Forty-eight percent of the respondents – just short of a majority – disagreed with the statement that speaking *phasa isan* on all occasions is socially inappropriate; this is in line with their *pro-phasa isan* response patterns. Overall, respondents were generally reluctant to support the use of *phasa isan* on all occasions.

Also worth noting are response patterns for items 2 and 3. The two statements were deliberately phrased to address important issues on 'race' and ethnicity which often recur in the nationalist discourse (Streckfuss 2012). The goal was to capture the respondents' understanding of the two terms in Thai. In statement 2, the phrase *chuea sai Lao* implies an ethno-historical connection with Laos while the phrase *chuea chat Thai* ('Thai race/ethnicity') in statement 3, is a controversial theme in Thai nationalist discourse (Hong 2000). While the majority of the respondents agreed that most Isan people have Lao ethnic roots (62%), they contradicted themselves by expressing their agreement with the statement that *all* inhabitants of the region are ethnic Thais – unless they mentally subsumed *Lao* as a subset of Thai ethnicity.

Table 1: Percentage of responses to evaluative statements about Central Thai and *phasa isan* (N = 122; some statements did not return responses from all 122 informants and the raw numbers were therefore converted for comparison purposes)

Statement	Response (%)					Total
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	
1. The use of dialects should be encouraged for government service transactions.	3.4	18.8	18.0	41.9	18.0	100.0
2. The majority of Isan people are of <i>chuea sai Lao</i> .	7.7	12.8	18.0	43.6	18.0	100.0
3. All Isan people are of <i>chuea chat Thai</i> .	5.1	15.3	15.3	36.4	28.0	100.0
4. Isan people should be able to speak <i>phasa isan</i> .	5.0	8.4	12.6	45.4	28.6	100.0
5. Newer generations tend not to use <i>phasa isan</i> .	3.4	14.4	12.7	50.0	19.5	100.0
6. I speak Central Thai fluently.	1.7	6.7	23.5	46.2	21.9	100.0
7. I speak <i>phasa isan</i> fluently.	5.8	10.8	16.7	37.5	29.2	100.0
8. Newer generations should use <i>phasa isan</i> .	1.7	5.1	20.5	51.3	21.4	100.0
9. Speaking <i>phasa isan</i> on all occasions is socially inappropriate.	19.5	28.0	28.0	17.8	6.8	100.0

The questionnaire also asked the respondents to rank in order of importance the following self-identifying terms:

- *khon Thai* ('Thai person');
- *khon isan* ('Isan person');
- *khon Lao* ('Lao person');
- *khon Khamen* ('Khmer person'); or
- another ethnic descriptor of their choice.

Most respondents chose *khon Thai* as a category of status that best describes them. That is, 56 (46%) out of 122 respondents considered themselves to be Thai first and foremost. Another 47 respondents (39%) viewed themselves as *khon isan* first while only five (4%) regarded Lao as their first identification. Because the respondents chose only one as their top priority, the fact that almost half of them chose Thai first shows that their first priority was to define themselves as *khon Thai*. Interestingly, of the 97 respondents who could speak *phasa isan*, 57 identified themselves as *khon Lao*. However, only five of these 57 informants had *khon Lao* as their first choice descriptor.

Reflective essay findings

Not all of the essays directly addressed the questions asked, but they generally showed the students' understandings of what it meant to be *khon isan* who spoke *phasa isan*, expressed in terms of their views towards those they perceived as typical Thais (Bangkokians) and Laotians.

Accepting Central Thai as a language of power does not mean that the informants viewed the center in a positive light. The tension between Bangkok and Isan was often visible. Reflective essays predominantly show resentment towards Bangkokians as seen in the example below:

Example 1

Mostly, from my experience, Isan people see Bangkokians as selfish, obsessively materialistic, and exploitative. They look down on fellow Thais. And people from other regions who move to Bangkok will completely change and forget their hometowns and immediately become selfish types.

Perceived discrimination against Isan by Bangkokians is matched with a negative perception of members of the urban middle class living in the heart of Thailand. Self-centeredness and haughtiness were commonly attributed to Bangkok inhabitants. These typical attributes, however, were accompanied by other sentiments as well. Some informants hinted at an aspiration to enjoy the same material convenience afforded by Bangkokians. As one informant wrote:

Example 2

[Isan people] see them living in the center of the country, in an area with growth, modernity, as a center of administrative power. They have various conveniences, and keep up-to-date with all events.

The informants agreed that language is a key marker of Isan-ness. Forty-two informants stated in their respective essays that language was one of the key defining features of Isan-ness. Interestingly, they used different terms to refer to the language. While 13 respondents used the term '*phasa isan*', 10 simply called it a 'language', eight a 'dialect', four 'Lao language', three 'spoken language', two 'Isan regional dialect', and two '*samneang phasaphut*' (speech accent). They further asserted that Laotians and Isan people are related, on the basis of their linguistic mutual intelligibility. However, while several informants claimed that Isan and Lao were in fact the same language, others stated that 'similarities' between the two made both languages mutually intelligible, but they were not the same language because the scripts are different – the same reason given by Hesse-Swain's informants (2011). This linguistic connection does not translate into a strong solidarity with Laos as a country. While some informants believed that *Lao Isan* speakers, as they put it, were descendents of early Lao immigrants into the Isan region, some attributed the linguistic similarities merely to close geographical proximity with no reference to any ethnic connection. By keeping Isan and Lao separate, the speakers can maintain their regional identity. To this group, *phasa isan* is a key marker of Isan identity which is a cultural subset of Thai-ness. Isan identity is not a legal status, since virtually all those considered *khon isan* are Thai citizens; rather, it is a normative construct. As one informant wrote:

Example 3

I think everybody in Thailand is Thai, but each region has a unique culture and traditions. For example, people in Ubon and other provinces that speak Lao are called *khon Lao* while people in provinces that speak Khmer are called *khon Khamen* ['Cambodian'] although they are *khon Thai* who only differ from others by the language they speak. Even *khon Lao* living in Laos speak different dialects. The so-called *khon Khamen* in Thailand speak Khmer but they are actually Thai who speak the language with a different accent from people in Cambodia.

Thus, the notion of Isan-ness that emerges from these essays carries a strong sense of belonging with Thai society in spite of perceived discrimination and inequality. *Phasa isan*, though called by different names, including Lao, is a marker of regional, not ethnic identity.

Student interview findings

All seven interviewed students who were Isan-born speakers of Central Thai as a mother tongue reported one or both parents having government jobs or owning local businesses; all but one were raised in town areas. Although some of the parents used *phasa isan* among themselves, they taught their children to speak Central Thai partly to prepare the children for schooling and future job opportunities.

Six out of these seven students stated that they had learned to understand *phasa isan* from school friends. Most of them spoke the language fluently and had no trouble balancing their language choices by context of use. However, one student admitted struggling with her identity as a Thai and a *phasa isan* speaker because of her accent in both languages. Her parents, who were public school teachers in a rural village, taught her to speak Thai on all occasions, but the rest of the children in the village spoke *phasa isan*. She remembered a feeling of being left out as she did not speak *phasa isan* with school friends. As an Isan-born Central Thai speaker, she was also self-conscious about her accent due to a lack of Central Thai-speaking peers. In general, however, those students who were raised to speak Central Thai enjoyed using *phasa isan* with their friends. One student explained, 'There are certain feelings that Central Thai doesn't have a word good enough to describe. A Thai word may get you just about a third of what's in the feelings.' Another student added, 'Speaking in *phasa isan* is more engaging, more fun, and brings you closer together ... although I don't speak it fluently.'

None of the interviewees admitted to feeling embarrassed when using the language in front of non-Isan speaking outsiders themselves, but they often mentioned *phasa isan*-speaking friends who either pretended that they could not speak the language or simply refrained from using it in the presence of outsiders, even when the situations were casual and did not call for the use of Central Thai.

For students who primarily speak Khmer or Kuy, the diglossic relation described earlier is less salient. For some of those who can speak *phasa isan*, the language bonds them with neighbors, friends, and other community members. For instance, two interviewees of Vietnamese origin whose families went through serious ethnic discrimination in the 1980s found comfort in describing themselves as *khon isan* who *wao Lao* ('speak Lao'). As they explained, *Lao* refers to the local language which has no ties with Laos. It is simply a name of the local language that they grew up speaking, nothing more. However, while the variety can be called *Lao*, they themselves cannot. Three student informants who spoke *phasa isan* as their mother tongue explicitly stated that they were Thai and took offense when called *Lao* by outsiders. Being labelled 'Lao' was to be associated with underdevelopment and rusticity. However, when the word was used amongst fellow *phasa isan* speakers themselves, it did not provoke this negative sentiment.

Another student mentioned her grandparents who had fled from Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era and sought refuge in Thailand. The grandparents found themselves learning to use *phasa isan* to establish rapport with the locals. Speaking the local language helped them adjust and blend in with the new community.

Central Thai also serves as a *lingua franca* for Isan people living in multilingual communities, as reported by student informants from Surin, a multilingual Southern Isan province in which non-mutually intelligible

languages such as Kuy, Khmer, and *phasa isan* are spoken in adjacent communities only a few kilometers away from one another. Southern Isan is home to many speakers of languages unrelated to Lao or *phasa isan*. An increase in intra-regional mobility as a result of educational and career opportunities allows for more use of Central Thai as a medium of communication. Interviewed students who did not speak *phasa isan* reported that Central Thai was the sole medium of communication with their *phasa isan*-speaking peers. To them, it was a language that establishes rapport. Most students interviewed predicted that Thai will become more dominant in Isan. The most common observation was that parents nowadays are teaching their children to speak Thai at home, even when those parents speak *phasa isan* together.

Non-student interview findings

Non-student interviews uncovered a complex picture of *phasa isan*-Central Thai relationships. While acknowledging the power of Central Thai, some informants 'respond' to such power differently. In separate interviews, two male university lecturers shared different but related experiences about the power of Central Thai. The first lecturer recalled an incident in which he experienced verbal abuse by a local *amphoe* ('district') official when he went in to apply for a new identity card. Dressed in a T-shirt, he approached the service counter using *phasa isan* but the clerk there yelled at him, refused to process the application and told him in Central Thai to come back later in proper clothes. On a different day, he went back in a dress shirt and spoke Central Thai. This time the same official processed his application with no problem. The informant commented that the clerk did not seem to remember him. While we do not know whether it was the lecturer's clothes, language choice, both, or something else that triggered this reaction from the clerk, the fact that the clerk thought it was appropriate to refuse to serve, yell at and tell the informant to change his clothes before coming back can only be understood in terms of the unequal roles and relationships they brought into this verbal encounter. The second informant shared the view that Central Thai helped him to portray his academic self when discussing intellectual matters. As a university professor, he strictly used Central Thai with his students both inside and outside the classroom except for when he told jokes in class, which he did in *phasa isan*. He also switched to Central Thai when sharing academic opinions with a colleague with whom he otherwise spoke *phasa isan* when it came to non-academic verbal interactions. His language choices were strictly based on prevailing notion of *kala tesa* ('tempo-spatial constraints'). He gave two reasons for using Central Thai in teaching. He claimed that nobody taught in *phasa isan* and that he was accustomed to the Thai translations of technical terms and abstract concepts to be taught. Words for these concepts were not available in *phasa isan*. Therefore, it would be difficult to try to use the language

to explain the concepts to the students. The lecturer's explanation shows the impact of Thailand's mainstream literacy mediated by Central Thai.

Though rare, a backlash against the dominance of Central Thai could be observed. An interesting account was given by a community radio host who reminisced about his language use in court. He was one of the local red shirt leaders who were charged with masterminding the arson of the provincial hall in 2010 (see Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011). During the trial process, he mostly used *phasa isan* in court. For someone to use any language other than Central Thai in court was highly irregular, let alone a person accused of such a serious crime, which could cost him years in prison if convicted. The informant explained that he had asked the judge permission to use *phasa isan*, claiming that all his communication with his followers was in *phasa isan*. The judge agreed. He had explained to the court that he did not want any message to get lost in translation from *phasa isan* to Central Thai, which could jeopardize the case. He explained:

I was thinking about asking for a new judge if the one assigned to my case could not understand *phasa isan*. This was because I broadcast in *phasa isan*. That was what they recorded and used against me in court. If the judge could not understand *phasa isan*, someone must translate it. And if *than* [second or third person honorific form] did not have a deep understanding of the language, there would be a problem. There was one person who started a fire to burn weeds on a farm, but the fire spread and accidentally burned someone else's *thiangna* ['hut']. It was indeed *thiangna* but it was written in the indictment as *ban* ['house']. So the judge thought it was *ban*, which is much bigger. The judge thought it was a house fire . . . many judges are from central or southern provinces, there will be a big problem if we can't communicate.

He also stated that he used *phasa isan* with police officers, court officials, prison staff, and many other government authorities claiming that the language choice came naturally as he was born here, and many of these officials were *khon Lao* like himself. To him, it was not the social status and role of his interlocutor that determined what language he would use with them, but rather it was whether the person was *khon Lao* or not. If the person was *khon Lao*, then *phasa isan* was the only choice. He thought the use of Central Thai among *khon Lao* themselves was a pretentious act and further criticized those who do so as merely wanting to have a positive public image. By downplaying Central Thai as merely an image-creating tool, the informant essentially endorses *phasa isan* (or *Lao* in his word) as the only legitimate language among *khon Lao* locals; by using it, they adopted the political stance that Central Thai was not for them. In an ironic twist, the informant's two children spoke Central Thai as their mother tongue because his wife was from a province in the central plains. He insisted that he did not try to make his children speak *phasa isan*, but he did speak the language with them.

The radio host was not alone in feeling that he was imposed upon by pro-Central Thai social norms. In another interview, a female lecturer expressed

her discontent over the strict use of Central Thai in professional encounters among Northeasterners. She shared her sister's experience in attending an academic workshop hosted in Chiang Mai, a large city in the North. There, the sister found herself witnessing something that never happened in any professional training in the Northeast – the invited speaker's use of *kham muang*, a northern variety, to deliver the session. According to the lecturer, her sister was amazed at how naturally the session went. The lecturer concluded, 'we can't do it here [in other words, in Isan]; we have to speak Thai only'. With her strong sense of Lao identity, the lecturer often used *phasa isan*, which she called 'Lao', as much as possible even in teaching and communicating with co-workers regardless of the context.

With respect to self-perception, a degree of contestedness was observed. One lecturer, for example, stated adamantly that he was not Lao. He argued:

I call myself *khon Ubon* ['Ubon person'], born in Ubon, I am *khon isan*. I call myself *khon isan*, not Lao, because the word *Lao* refers to the people in Laos.

The informant further asserted that *chao ban* ('villagers') would call themselves *Lao* but educated people like himself would call themselves *khon isan*. In his view, Northeasterners used the word *Isan* to distinguish themselves from Lao people. In stark contrast to the lecturer's view, the community radio host stated:

I call myself *khon Lao* ['Lao person'], partly because I was born here as *khon Ubon*. A hundred percent Lao. Even though I'm Lao, I'm *khon Ubon*. *Isan* is just *kham suai ru* ['a fancy word'] they created to call us in King Rama V's reign. We're Lao!

Two informants who were born and raised in the same town with at least one parent who was an Ubon native held strikingly different views on the word 'Lao'. That the lecturer accepted a regional identity (Isan) and rejected Lao-ness was essentially a statement that he was Thai. On the other hand, the radio host made a distinction between his ethnic identity and nationality. As *khon Lao*, he acknowledged his cultural backgrounds including the language he spoke, but as *khon Ubon*, he claimed membership of Thai society. The informant, an outspoken, politically active radio talk show host in his fifties, has been involved in raising localist awareness among his frequent listeners about popular politics as well as local history. Despite their contrasting views toward Lao identity, both informants agreed that they were *khon Ubon*, and hence *khon Thai*.

Maintaining Lao ethnic roots by speaking the language and recognizing it as such does not mean the informants identified themselves with Laos the country. Rather, they saw themselves as legitimate members of Thai modern society as mentioned earlier. To some, being *khon isan* who speak *Lao* simply means being born and growing up in a community speaking the language. By contrast, older interviewees did not have any trouble being called *Lao*. They said it was something they were used to and did not think anything about it.

This suggests that negative connotations carried by the word 'Lao' were mediated by other factors.

As the official language and a medium of instruction in academic institutions, Central Thai is thus an indispensable, readily-accessible tool which provides access to education. Its instrumentality is one of the reasons that led informants to adopt Central Thai as their home language. Several informants with children taught their children to speak Central Thai at home even when the parents themselves spoke *phasa isan* to each other. The general laborer reflected on his decision to start using Central Thai when his son was about to enter school, although he had previously used *phasa isan* with the young child. He did not want his son to be laughed at, although he himself felt embarrassed about his accent when speaking Central Thai. The informant mentioned his inability to 'sound' Thai and his limited opportunities for using the language. Living in a low-income urban community where residents predominantly relied on wage-earning labor or street-side food vending in the neighborhood, his son found himself with no obligation to use Central Thai. He therefore reverted back to *phasa isan* when talking with his neighborhood peers but continued to speak Central Thai with his father. Suppressing feelings of unnaturalness and embarrassment to speak Central Thai with his son is just one example of Isan people with upward social aspirations who place a lot of importance on the ability to speak Central Thai.

Informants gave different reasons for using Central Thai in their households. By making Thai their first language, parents believe that attending school will be easier for their children. A second reason is associated with the negative attitudes projected towards non-native speakers of Central Thai. Several informants lamented that speaking accented Thai exposed them to ridicule and made them self-conscious. Two informants admitted that they attempted to use Central Thai with their children because they did not want them to end up with an Isan accent.

Intermarriage with people from outside the region helped to promote the use of Central Thai. Three out of four married interviewees whose spouses were from other regions spoke Central Thai with their children; the exception was the radio host. Using Central Thai in the household linguistically accommodated spouses who did not know *phasa isan*. Central Thai later became the children's mother tongue. None of the spouses attempted to learn *phasa isan* despite living in the region and being married to *phasa isan* speakers.

Field observations

Observations of public transactions showed that Central Thai was used extensively in state-run service encounters such as those at hospitals, provincial-level offices, and district offices, as well as at businesses with a corporate customer service style. For instance, at chain convenience stores such as the ubiquitous 7-Eleven, for example, clerks invariably used Central Thai with

customers, even when both parties spoke *phasa isan* as their mother tongue. Central Thai was also used at locally-owned convenience stores modeled after their Bangkok-based corporate counterparts. Central Thai was also used but was relatively less common in rural sub-district level government offices, where staff are usually from the local community. Here social interactions, be they formal or informal, tend to operate on grounds of solidarity. Solidarity, thus, is not only confined to home domains or circles of friends. It extends to day-to-day interactions with individuals of a lower socio-economic status. *Phasa isan* was extensively used to interact with street food and open-air market vendors, local shopkeepers, pedicab and taxicab drivers, bus conductors, and village headmen.

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss at length the linguistic properties of the two varieties, we think it is important to give examples of how the varieties mutually influence each other. Lexical choices and their pronunciation can also indicate attitudes towards the languages they are associated with (see Garrett 2010). As observed in other linguistic studies focusing on change in *phasa isan* (Boonkua 2010; Thongchalerms 2008), Central Thai dominance is not only seen in language choice but also in its influence on lexical, phonetic, and phonological features of *phasa isan* – a sort of linguistic convergence (Giles 1973) anecdotally observed or discussed by the informants themselves during the interviews. Kinship terms such as *yai* (Thai word for 'grandmother') replaced *mae yai* (pronounced as /mæpjai/) while *mae* ('mother'), *pho* ('father'), and *phi* ('elder sibling') are now commonly pronounced in a way that reflects the influence of the Central Thai tonal system. Phonetic substitution was also observed. For instance, the sound /s/ was replaced by the Central Thai $\sqrt{\text{ส}}$ (transliterated here as *s* and *ch*, respectively) in certain words such as *chong sip et* ('Channel 11'), *nak wichakan* ('scholar'), and *chat pan* ('ethnicity'). Likewise, the Thai sound /y/ replaced /j/ in words like *yung* ('mess with'). Phonologically, consonant clusters such as /kw-/ , /kr-/ , and /pl-/ are not typical in *phasa isan*, but some informants used them in words such as *khwai* /kwa:j/ ('water buffalo'), *khvam* /kwa:m/ (a nominalizing prefix), and *plian* /plian/ ('to change') instead of the typical *phasa isan* counterparts *khuai*, *khuam*, and *pian*, respectively. Additionally, observations of Central Thai used by local speakers show an 'Isan accent' marked by distinct phonological characteristics such as vowel nasalization and diphthongization. A further extensive linguistic analysis should shed light on the extent to which Central Thai interacts with *phasa isan* phonologically.

DISCUSSION

We set out to explore relationships between *phasa isan* and Central Thai in terms of language use and associated beliefs and attitudes. We have found that both varieties are in a transitional diglossic relationship in favor of Central Thai, the High variety, relative to *phasa isan*, the Low variety. In general, Central Thai is a

language of prestige, a lingua franca and national symbol while *phasa isan* is a language of humility, in-group means of communication, and regional symbol.

The general diglossic patterns of language use can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) whereby the informants identify themselves as *khon isan* and use *phasa isan* as their in-group identity attributes. The notion of *khon isan* transforms ethnolinguistic into regional traits; it is a group identity of the ethnically diverse peoples of the Northeast. That is, although the majority of *khon isan* speak *phasa isan*, *khon isan* identity does not exclude minorities in the region. Shared use of the term *khon isan* downplays their sense of being 'ethnic others'. As Laungaramsri (2003) has argued, the notion of *khon isan* is a product of the Thai state's successful suppression of the Lao identity of northeasterners. It created the notion of *khon isan* ('people of the northeast'), which has finally become ethnically neutral.

Social identity theory draws upon 'intergroup comparisons' as a basis on which speakers choose what language to use and the occasion to use it. That these bilingual *phasa isan*-Central Thai informants use Central Thai mainly when they need to access government services, illustrates that social distance is being determined by inter-group differences. By using Central Thai, *phasa isan*-speaking clients acknowledge that the officials in those transactions assume the role of 'others' with whom they cannot and should not participate in in-group language interactions.

What we have discussed above is based on general patterns of language use. Identifying group membership and comparing one to others is complex, context-dependent, and may even involve assuming multiple, contested identities. Thus, given the social and cultural context of Thailand, we find it useful to discuss *phasa isan*-Central Thai relationships under the following themes: nationalism; social stratification; and language maintenance and shift.

Nationalism

Although *khon isan* in this study view condescending attitudes towards them as emanating from Bangkok and the Central Plains, they do not relate this to the fact that Central Thai originated in the Central Plains. Instead of seeing Central Thai as a language of the outgroup (Central Plains Thai), they see it as a marker of national identity (standard Thai) (Rappa and Wee 2006). Their embrace of Central Thai as the High variety suggests that state-led nationalism has been generally successful; as Smalley (1994: 99) puts it:

Lao-speaking people in Thailand have a strong sense of being Thai citizens, of belonging to the Thai nation, of being under the Thai king.

While strong resistance is observed among Malay-speaking residents of the Southern border provinces, many of whom reject state schools in favor of private Islamic schools where the use of Patani Malay is more acceptable (McCargo 2008), our informants had no problems studying in school through the medium of Central Thai. Their sense of being primarily *Thai* is also seen in

informants' self-identifying terms. Most questionnaire respondents preferred to describe themselves first and foremost as *khon Thai* and considered *khon isan* as of the 'Thai race'. While the term *khon Thai* can refer either to ethnicity or simply to the legal status as Thai citizens, *khon isan* has no legal meaning. It is a socially constructed identity of people from this region. It does, however, play along well with the dominant nationalist frame of Thai-ness. Some informants refer to *phasa isan* as Lao. This suggests that these respondents regard Lao elements as not against Thai-ness. That Thai-ness, a questionable construct in itself, takes precedence over other, more historically grounded ethnicities is a legacy of the nation-forming process (Sattayanurak 2005). Since the term 'Isan' was introduced during the Fifth Reign more than a century ago, *khon isan* have gradually largely accepted their identity as a region of Siam/Thailand.

Accepting the identity of *khon isan* not only reinforces the Thai prescribed regional identity, but it also allows different ethnicities to identify themselves with their local roots without challenging the authority of Bangkok. The term *isan* also helps the speaker establish a space between the prestigious Thai and the perceived inferior Lao. When faced with a difficult situation involving identity, several opted to refer to themselves as *khon isan* in front of outsiders, resorting to their common regional traits (Smalley 1994) instead of highlighting ethnic cleavages within the region. As Hayashi puts it, 'the definition of Isan as a regional identity is relative to the context in which it is used and can be changed by users to reflect their relationship with others' (2003: 47).

Social stratification

Nationalism alone could not have easily placed these two varieties in this diglossic situation. Different and conflicting social, cultural, and religious values are some of the reasons that the Thai state has not been successful in assimilating the Malay-speaking population in the South (McCargo 2008). Based on the findings, we argue that *khon isan* share sociocultural values with the mainstream Thai society that are conducive to the juxtaposition of Central Thai and *phasa isan* in such a way that Central Thai connotes prestige and power and *phasa isan* inferiority and humbleness. The use of Central Thai in bureaucratic transaction symbolizes the institutional power represented by the official: a bureaucrat who controls the interaction, and in doing so creates power inequality (Philips 2004). That Central Thai is the medium of instruction reinforces schools and universities as 'the key site for the creation of the monolingual spaces of a nation-state' (Martin-Jones 2007: 175), one that automatically excludes a local language as an alternative medium of instruction. There must be a sociocultural mechanism that helps to justify and perpetuate such power imbalance. Deeply ingrained social stratification, very much influenced by Buddhist ideologies practiced widely in Thailand and Laos, play a role here. Various learned practices such knowing who is superior (*thi tam thi*

sung, or 'low place, high place') in placing oneself in a socially appropriate position relative to others, the concept of knowing *kala tesa* (tempo-spatial constraints) to conduct oneself in the manner appropriate to time and place (see also Hanks 1962), and the use of linguistic devices by social status (Khanittanan 1988), work in concert with Buddhist beliefs to place people in high and low statuses. Buddhist notions of *karma*, which explain current events as a result of past actions, help to justify sociopolitical inequality and support 'the monopoly of high status by a select few' (Hayashi 2003: 14), which in turn contributes to the creation of individual rank in society.

Such beliefs manifest themselves in attitudes to language, which are essentially attitudes towards speakers of particular languages (Edwards 2009). While complaining of being looked down upon (a common theme in social discrimination against *khon isan*), the majority of *khon isan* in this study accept this socially prescribed inferior status and see *phasa isan* as a language inferior to Central Thai. While negative attitudes about *phasa isan* were not overtly expressed, we observed in questionnaire findings that fewer respondents claimed to be fluent *phasa isan* speakers than considered themselves fluent Central Thai speakers. Additionally, interviewed students spoke of *phasa isan*-speaking peers who avoided speaking the language because of embarrassment. Why was this the case, when *phasa isan* is widely used in the region where the great majority of the respondents were born? Are these speakers reluctant to share honest self-assessments of their ability to speak the language because it is a language of inferior people?

But accepting one's lower, inferior place in the social hierarchy does not signal an intention to remain there permanently (Hanks 1962; Smalley 1988). Smalley specifically argues, 'language hierarchy makes upward mobility possible for those who can learn the behavior of people above them and who can manage the resources required' (1988: 257). For this reason, many speakers tend to adopt Central Thai, rather than try to elevate the lower status of *phasa isan*.

Language maintenance and shift

Edwards (2009) distinguishes two separable functions of language: communicative and symbolic. He further predicts, 'the loss or abandonment of a language in its ordinary communicative role must eventually lead to the dilution or, indeed, the disappearance of its symbolic or "associational" capacity' (2009: 57). That diglossia exists in the region testifies to the communicative functions of *phasa isan* and Central Thai. However, speakers' willingness to embrace the use of Central Thai in home domains shows that Central Thai is encroaching on *phasa isan*'s domains – something that also occurs in other diglossic situations (see, for example, Pauwels 1988; Schiffman 1993). As the majority of our informants are university students with upward social aspirations, a positive bias towards Central Thai might be expected. It

illustrates a key trend among university-educated younger generations who will be the future of the region.

In terms of symbolic functions, Central Thai is associated with a sense of national unity, modernity, and upward social aspirations. The speakers' language choice depends on how speakers relate to these three symbolic dimensions. For instance, informants see Central Thai as a language of upward social mobility, just as the command of English is a passport to career opportunities (see Fairclough 1989); increasingly, parents whose first language is *phasa isan* are choosing to raise their children in a Central Thai-speaking home environment. A general pattern is that *phasa isan* is confined to non-formal transactions and home domains. In these domains, the separation of communicative and symbolic functions is not readily visible. However, in transactions marked by social distance, we have seen some evidence for symbolic aspects of *phasa isan*, for example, the radio host's use of *phasa isan* in court. When talking among themselves, for *phasa isan* speakers to call their language *Lao* is a non-issue. However, when dealing with someone they perceive as an outsider, the word *isan* is often used as a regional extension of Thai-ness (see Hayashi 2003; McCargo and Hongladarom 2004). Given the popularity of Central Thai, the question then is: how long will *khon isan* continue to preserve the symbolic functions of *phasa isan*? Since speakers of *phasa isan* comprise almost one-third of the national population, we do not think obsolescence poses a serious concern for supporters of the language. Despite its limited domains of use, if speakers and later generations continue to maintain *phasa isan* in these domains, the variety is likely to endure. However, there is no guarantee that a substantial language shift will not occur. With its higher status, Central Thai is already very popular among younger, formally educated speakers, as shown in this study. We have already seen a change underway. Because it is so positively linked with urbanization and modernity, Central Thai may continue to encroach on language domains once dominated by *phasa isan*.

CONCLUSIONS

We set out to explore patterns of language use in Ubon Ratchathani. Specifically, we sought to answer the question of whether Northerners use *phasa isan* and Central Thai in different domains of use and how sociocultural values or attitudes associated with the use of each language related to Isan-ness or Thai-ness. Within the context of our study, we have found that *phasa isan* and Central Thai are in a diglossic relationship where Thai is the High, and *phasa isan* is the Low variety. Our findings confirm those in previous studies that Thai hierarchical ideologies manifest themselves in both the relationship between Central Thai and its so-called dialects including *phasa isan*. They are reflected in the adoption of the national language, Central Thai, in institutional settings and formal business encounters (the high place) and *phasa thin* (dialects) in non-formal encounters (the low place). However, not

only is Central Thai a symbol of power, it also has started to be used to show solidarity between parents and children in Northeasterners' home domains as well as among school peers of different ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the perceived distance between linguistic ties between Isan and Lao people has become more apparent, and *phasa isan* is now viewed as part of the regional identity. To a lesser degree, we have observed that deploying *phasa isan* still sometimes functions as a political statement, reflecting resentment over inequalities created by the state. Since our study was small-scale and drew heavily on the attitudes of university students, it represents the views of formally educated, younger generations but does not necessarily reflect the views of residents in other socio-economic circumstances. Further research that includes speakers from diverse backgrounds would give a more balanced view of this phenomenon.

NOTE

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