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HERITAGE SCRIPTS, TECHNICAL TRANSCRIPTIONS, AND PRACTICAL ORTHOGRAPHIES: A MIDDLE PATH TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION FOR THAILAND’S ETHNIC MINORITY LANGUAGES

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Abstract: As interest in mother-tongue first, multilingual education (MT-MLE) for Thailand’s ethnic minority people increases, the issue of how to write minority languages has come to the forefront. Some of Thailand’s ethnic languages have no orthography (alphabet) whatsoever. Other languages have as many as twelve competing orthographies—twelve different alphabets for one language! Existing minority orthographies manifest a diversity of origins. They may be based on Roman, Thai, Burmic, Monic, Chinese, or Arabic scripts. They may have been created by religious leaders, academics, ordinary villages, or language activists. Some language groups have long-established heritage scripts that are cherished as a symbol of ethnic identity; others seem to have no particular love for any of their orthography options. At the same time, many educators, academics, and activists are posing important questions, such as: “If children learn to read and write using a Thai-based minority language script, will their Thai abilities be handicapped?” “Will learning to read and write in a Roman-based minority script provide adequate transition to Thai?” “Can a language have more than one orthography?” This paper endeavors to survey the current state of minority language orthographies in Thailand, address some of the important questions mentioned above, and suggest a “middle path” for understanding the relationship between spoken languages, the written word, cultural preservation, and multilingual/multicultural education.

Key Words: Orthography, Mother Tongue, Multilingual Education

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Thailand is home to some seventy language groups (Suwilai, 2007; Gordon, 2005). Some of these languages are “endangered,” meaning that there are very few active speakers, such that the language is likely to become extinct without outside intervention. Other language groups, however, number in the hundreds of thousands.

In recent years, the Thai Ministry of Education has worked tirelessly to extend education to the most remote areas of the kingdom. Nonetheless, the performance of some ethnic minority children has been quite disappointing. Indeed, a Ministry study found that 25%-36% of second grade students in ten districts in the North, Northeast, and South are illiterate in Thai, compared to 1% of Bangkok second graders (Sirikul, 2007). The vast majority of illiterate children are members of ethno-linguistic minority groups, living on the cultural and geographic fringe of the nation.

In response, Thai educators are researching mother-tongue first, multilingual education (MT-MLE), using the child’s first language to build bridges to the Thai language. Although MT-MLE is new to Thailand, it has gained wide acceptance in development circles, and has been highlighted in recent publications and conferences of international organizations including UNESCO, UNICEF, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Save the Children, Care International, SIL International, and the World Bank.

If a mother tongue is to be used in education, it needs to be written. So how are Thailand’s many minority languages written?
Some of Thailand’s ethnic languages have no orthography (alphabet). Other languages have three, six, or even twelve competing orthographies!

Existing minority orthographies manifest a diversity of origins. They may be based on Roman, Thai, Burmese, Mon, Chinese, or Arabic scripts. They may have been created by religious leaders, academics, ordinary villagers, or language activists. Some language groups have long-established heritage scripts that are cherished as a symbol of ethnic identity; others seem to have no particular love for any of their orthography options.

At the same time, educators, academics, and activists are posing important questions, such as: “Can a language have more than one orthography?” “If children learn to read and write using a Thai-based minority language script, will their Thai abilities be handicapped?” “Will learning to read and write in a non Thai-based ethnic script (especially a Roman-based script) still benefit an ethnic students’ acquisition of Thai?”

What are the answers to these questions, and how can we arrive at a “middle path” for these issues?

2.0 ONE LANGUAGE, ONE ORTHOGRAPHY?

Can a language have more than one orthography? In my view, this is akin to asking, “Can one person wear more than one hat?” I say this because the orthography merely represents the language—it is not itself the language.

If asked, “Does the Thai language have only one orthography?” the majority of Thai people would respond, “Yes.” Nonetheless, there are actually many different ways in which Thai is written.

For example, we might look to how Thai was written in the past. Thai history books point with pride to the emergence of Thai as a written language in the Sukhothai period. Sukhothai monuments and the Sukhothai style of Thai script are immediately recognizable to most people. Indeed, Sukhothai-looking fonts are sometimes used to write modern Thai on signboards and museum documents designed to evoke nostalgia for the past.

Nonetheless, no one would argue that all Thai children should learn to read and write the Sukhothai script. The shape of the letters is different from that of modern standard Thai and the spelling is very different. Indeed, most modern Thai people can access Sukhothai era inscriptions only through modern Thai translations—which is entirely normal, since all living languages change over time. Nonetheless, I am certain that the majority of Thai people consider the Sukhothai script to be inherently “Thai.”

Of course, people are most familiar with the modern Thai script, as standardized by the Royal Institute, taught in schools and used in the media. Modern Standard Thai has fewer letters than the Thai of previous eras, but maintains some clues of word origin, especially where Pali, Sanskrit, and even English are concerned. These “linguistic fossils” sometimes challenge new readers, as they do not completely follow common pronunciation rules.

However, this is not the only way that Thai is written in contemporary society. Table 1 demonstrates this diversity, drawing on the Thai word meaning “eternal.”
Table 1. Representations of the Thai word meaning “eternal.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Thai</th>
<th>นิรันดร</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation Guide (technical)</td>
<td>นิ-รัน-ดอน</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Institute Romanization</td>
<td>nirandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Phonetic Alphabet</td>
<td>ní-ran-dɔn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.thai-language.com">www.thai-language.com</a></td>
<td>ní\textsuperscript{M} ran\textsuperscript{M} daawn\textsuperscript{M}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karaoke (hypothetical)</td>
<td>née-run-don</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first row contains the Standard Thai spelling. However, due to the “linguistic fossils” mentioned above, the pronunciation is not immediately transparent. Thus, Thai dictionaries employ pronunciation guides using the Thai script—a Thai-based technical transcription, as shown in the second row.

Rows 3-5 illustrate different ways in which Thai can be romanized. First is the Royal Institute’s standard romanization method. The purpose of this method is to provide an official, standardized basis for transcribing personal names, place names, etc., for non-Thai documents, signs, etc. However, this system of romanization is not intended to be, and is indeed incapable of being, either a linguistically complete representation or a helpful tool for foreigners learning Thai, as it does not represent the five Thai tones.

Thus, most “Thai for Foreigners” resources utilize other forms of romanization that include tone. The way in which these teaching materials transcribe Thai varies widely; some utilize the International Phonetic Alphabet (a script only accessible to foreigners who have studied linguistics), while others have developed alternate methods in the hope of making Thai more innately accessible to the average, non-linguist learner. This can often be confusing to a new learner, as he or she will encounter different transcription systems in different books and webpages!

Beyond the realm of teaching materials lies the land of entertainment. In recent years, “Karaoke Thai” has become increasingly popular, such that most Thai karaoke videos feature transcription in both Standard Thai and an informal system of romanization that does not indicate tone. This is done so that foreigners, including people in Laos, China, and Myanmar, as well as Thai people who have grown up overseas and are thus not fluent readers of Thai, can sing along to Thai music videos!

We can therefore say that the Thai language has taken different written forms throughout its history. Even today, different forms are utilized for different purposes. I believe that this diversity of written forms has not “damaged” the Thai language in any way; rather it has expanded the reach of the Thai language, making it more accessible to a wider audience of people. This is a good thing for the language! Of course, the standard, official, Royal Institute-sanctioned Thai orthography will always retain its status as the authoritative orthography. Indeed, these alternate systems serve as bridges to introduce people to the “True Thai” writing system!

In short, one language can wear several hats!iii

3.0 CATEGORIZING ORTHOGRAPHIES

The ethnic language orthographies currently used in Thailand can be informally grouped into three basic categories, each of which has a distinct purpose or role: heritage scripts, transcriptions, and practical orthographies. I will explain each of these as we proceed.

3.1 Heritage Scripts

By heritage script, I mean a script that has a history, connected to what Bernard Spolsky calls a “Great Tradition” (Spolsky, 2004). On the positive side, these scripts are often beautiful, unique, serving as symbols of pride for the language group. They may be considered sacred. On the negative side, these
scripts can often be difficult to learn. They may have been designed for one specific language variety/dialect, so people from different dialects might find them difficult to learn. In addition, the language may have changed so much through history that learning the heritage script is akin to learning a different language, just as the Sukhothai script is difficult for modern Thai people. The spelling can be very different from modern pronunciations. However, since the script may be considered ancient and sacred, people might not be open to spelling reform.

One of the languages in the North, for example, has at least three scripts—Thai, Roman, and heritage. In 2007, at a forum hosted by Chiang Mai University, a person from this group shared how he had started a class at a village school to teach the children their language, using the heritage script. On the first day, 105 children came. However, only two students stayed in the class until the end of the term. The heritage script was too difficult. It did not correspond to the students’ understanding of the language, or their instincts of how their language could be represented phonetically. Unfortunately, the teacher concluded that the failure of the children to learn the heritage script meant that his language would die; there was no hope of passing it on to future generations. One wonders whether the children would have responded differently if the teacher had used the Thai or Roman orthography, both of which correspond much more closely to the modern state of the language.

Another language group in the North has likewise been hampered in their language development efforts by allegiance to a heritage script. In this case, the heritage script is not so ancient: it was developed in the 1940s. Only one document was ever written in this script—the story of the Biblical character Joseph. The heritage script was borrowed from an old, non-Roman form of Chinese Pinyin, a form currently used only in dictionaries published in Taiwan. Nonetheless, some people in this group remain convinced that, due to this historical precedent, they must revive this peculiar, unfamiliar script in order to preserve their language; suggestions that they develop a Thai or Roman-based script have not yet found support. The tragedy in this is that by insisting that only the heritage script be used, they may be dooming their language to extinction. Worldwide experience has shown that scripts that are difficult to master will be learned and used by only a handful of exceptionally committed people, as the average person often lacks the time, energy, and motivation to master a complex heritage script.

Another example comes from western Thailand, where a conflict has developed over the use of a heritage script by mutually unintelligible dialects that share common cultural features. The southern group is unhappy that their northern cousins have adopted a Thai-based script for a MT-MLE program for preschool children, rather than using a Burmese-based script (which, in itself, is but one of at least twelve different scripts used for the language over the past 200 years). The fact that the southerners and northerners cannot truly understand each other’s dialects, to the point that they must use Thai to communicate verbally, has not changed the minds of some activists. The project organizers have expressed willingness to introduce the heritage script in later grades, when the children are fluent in reading and writing their mother-tongue as well as Thai, and would thus be able to learn a dialect dramatically different from their own, but this compromise is still unacceptable to some activists. One activist has charged that using a Thai-based script under any condition condemns the language to death—an ultimately self-defeating position.

3.2 Technical Transcriptions
Thai scholars have been very active in documenting minority languages. In many cases, they have devised systems for precisely writing those languages with Thai letters for dictionaries, phrase books, etc. These are essentially phonetic transcriptions, comparable to the phonetic pronunciation guides found in Thai or English dictionaries. Many of these languages have sounds that that cannot be rendered in standard Thai, so scholars have devised innovative ways to mark different consonants, vowels, tones, etc. The purpose of these technical transcriptions is to provide an academic record of the language. They are not necessarily easy for villagers to read and write, just as average English speakers find the pronunciation guides in dictionaries difficult to understand!
For example, Northern Thai scholars have designed a way to transcribe ancient Lanna documents into Standard Thai script. The Lanna alphabet has two symbols for the unaspirated glottal /k/. Since Central Thai has only one symbol, ko kai {k}, to represent /k/, the scholars agreed to use kho khwai ค, which represents /kh/ in Standard Thai, for the second /k/. Thus, the original spelling can be deduced from the transcription, something that is quite important for historical studies. The scholars know the system, and are thus able to force themselves to de-aspirate kho khwai ค when reading these transcriptions aloud. However, when villagers look at such materials, they laugh and say, “This isn’t our language” and set the books aside. This technical transcription accomplishes the purpose for which it was created—preserving ancient texts—but fails at a task it was not designed to do—community usage.

The scholarly technique of using seldom-used Thai letters to represent ethnic language sounds can also be problematic for language communities. For example, several linguists have used kho rakhang ฆ, which represents /kh/ in a small number of Standard Thai words, to represent /g/—a sound not found in modern Thai (Smalley, 1976). This is partly based on the scholarly belief that kho rakhang ฆ was indeed voiced (/g/) in ancient times. Nonetheless, native speakers of some of the languages thus written have objected to this reassignment of sounds, which they feel to be in conflict with the Thai alphabet as learned by every preschooler. Again, this convention succeeds in accomplishing its purpose—scholarly documentation—but does not necessarily meet the felt needs of language communities.

In some cases, the perceived authority of a technical transcription can also be problematic. People may mistakenly believe that, since the technical transcription was devised by “experts,” it must be the only “correct” way to write the language. Any other way is “wrong.” Thus, more practical ways of writing the language may be resisted, even by people who themselves are unable to truly use the technical transcription.

As is the case with heritage scripts, learning a technical transcription system often requires a great deal of time, energy, and effort, such that most speakers will be unable to truly master it.

3.3 Practical Scripts
While technical transcriptions are designed to meet the needs of scholars, practical scripts are designed to meet the needs of language users. Practical scripts should be easy to teach, easy to learn, easy to write, and easy to input into a computer. The development of practical scripts should involve cooperation between all stakeholders— ordinary people, religious leaders, linguists, educators, etc. Practical scripts should closely reflect the intuitions of native speakers, not the impressions of outsiders. Those intuitions can be gauged by a thorough phonemic analysis of the language, coupled with extensive community discussion. As much as possible, practical scripts should closely correspond to the national language, so that children can easily transfer from their script to the national language, and so that adults who already know the national language can easily learn their mother-tongue script.

A number of Thai ethnic groups have practical scripts, most of which are of relatively recent origin. In general, practical scripts devised prior to the 1970s were Roman based, while more recent ones are Thai-based. In several cases, both Roman and Thai-based systems exist for a single language, and are sometimes printed side-by-side.

It is very important to note that people who do not speak the language will never pronounce the script correctly. Few people would expect an American who had never learned French to be able to read French correctly, merely because the languages share the same Roman script. However, on many occasions I have observed Thai people trying to read a Thai-based, minority language script and concluding that the script is “wrong” because the way someone from Bangkok would read the word is
different from the way a native speaker pronounces it. This can be especially discouraging to ethnic people when people in places of authority, such as teachers or government officials, say such things.

4.0 SCRIPTS AND EDUCATION
We now return to the point mentioned earlier in the paper: addressing the literacy problem among ethnic children.

For successful MT-MLE programs, script choice is very, very important! If the heritage script is dramatically different from the spoken language, it will be nearly impossible for young children to learn. It would be like forcing Bangkok preschool children to read Sukhothai inscriptions! The benefits of MT-MLE would be lost. The children would become frustrated with their language, and perhaps conclude that they themselves are stupid. Insistence on a heritage script that does not match modern pronunciation can actually contribute to the death of a language—the children will not want to maintain it!

Similarly, mere technical transcriptions are difficult for children to learn. Many native speakers, adults and children alike, are not consciously aware of the phonetic details of their language. Phonetic transcriptions often do not match the phonemic “linguistic reality” within the minds of native speakers. This mismatch results in unnecessary learning obstacles.

Practical scripts developed with the input of native speakers, based on a detailed phonemic analysis of the language, offer the greatest potential to harness the power of MT-MLE. They are the easiest to learn and easiest to use, because they are based on the phonemic sound system which each native speaker already carries in his or her head. Such scripts offer bridges to other languages, and can be readily produced on computers, without resorting to complicated font or keyboarding schemas not readily accessible to the community at large.

In saying this, I do not want to dishonor the heritage scripts. They are very important and valuable. However, I would recommend that, in most cases, heritage scripts NOT be used for small children, for whom a practical script would be more useful. Heritage scripts COULD be taught in grade 4 or 5, after the children are able to read and write their ethnic language and Thai fluently—so that their growing brains would be able to understand and absorb the heritage script.

5.0 ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS
Let’s return to our first question: “Can one language have more than one script?” The answer, I feel, is YES! Different scripts are used for different purposes in many languages, including Thai.

By this, am I suggesting that all of the 70 languages of Thailand need new scripts? The answer is NO! Many of them have scripts that are practical enough to be used in education.

This leads us to another vital question: “If children learn to read and write using a Thai-based minority language script, will their Thai abilities be handicapped? Will they always mispronounce Thai?”

Again, the answer is NO! Almost everyone involved in teaching ethnic minority children complains that they do not speak Thai properly, and have problems with reading and writing. If the children learn to read and write their mother tongue first, and then are systematically introduced to Thai, their Thai abilities will not be damaged—they will rather be improved!

Consider the hundreds of languages throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia that use Roman scripts. The way in which a Roman letter is pronounced differs from language to language. If I learn to read and write English, then later study French, will my English reading abilities harm my French? NO! My English reading abilities will help me learn French, because I already know most of the letters. Yes,
there are some differences in pronunciation, but I will learn about those differences systematically when I learn to speak and then read and write French. Americans learn Vietnamese and Indonesian more readily than they learn Thai or Chinese. Why? Because of the Roman scripts! Therefore, ethnic children using a Thai–based script will be helped, not hurt nor confused, by the script!

Indeed, the fact that the Thai script can be adapted to write many ethnic languages reflects the glory and genius of Thai! Just as the Thai, Khmer, Burmese, Mon, and many other scripts have their origin in Indic scripts, so modern Thai can serve as a strong tree from which other orthographies grow and prosper!*

Another question concerns the several languages of Thailand that utilize non-Thai scripts that are vigorously used and loved by the community, and that are easy for the children to learn. Should those people be forced to adopt Thai-based scripts?

The answer, I feel, is NO! Children can learn to read and write their language in a non-Thai script. The important thing is that they master literacy skills. Literacy experts maintain that we only learn to read once. The basic literacy skills that the children have learned in reading and writing their mother tongue will transfer to all future languages they learn—Thai, English, Japanese, etc.! Having a Thai-based script might make the transition easier, but if the community truly loves and actively uses their non-Thai script, and if that script is easy for children to learn, it can be used for MT-MLE programs. It will still benefit their Thai language learning.

We can find evidence for this among the Kamvi people of China. Like Thai, the Kam language is a member of the Tai-Kadai family. Kam children as a whole have performed very poorly in Chinese schools, to the point where some teachers consider their Kam students to be “stupid” or innately inferior. However, a few Kam schools are now involved in a pilot MT-MLE project where the children learn to write Kam in a Roman script, then slowly transfer to Mandarin Chinese. Annual exams have revealed that Kam children in the MT-MLE programme outperform Kam children in “normal” Chinese immersion school by an impressive margin—not only in their Chinese language abilities, but also in math and science (Malone, 2007). Thus, if the Roman-based Kam script is able to help children transition to ideographic Chinese writing, non-Thai-based ethnic scripts could help children transition to Thai.

6.0 CONCLUSION: TOWARD THE “MIDDLE PATH”

This paper set out to address script issues as they relate to MT-MLE programs for Thailand’s ethnic languages, and to answer key questions posed by educators, academics, activists, and parents. These questions, and the answers posited in this paper, are summarized below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can one language have more than one orthography?</td>
<td>Yes! Heritage scripts, technical transcriptions, and practical orthographies can all be used to represent a language for different purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If children learn to read and write using a Thai-based minority language script, will their Thai abilities be handicapped?”</td>
<td>No! Their Thai abilities will be helped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Will learning to read and write in a non Thai-based ethnic script still benefit an ethnic students’ acquisition of Thai?”</td>
<td>Yes! If the non-Thai script is used, loved, and easy to learn, it will serve as a stepping-stone for the mastery of Thai literacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What, then, is the “middle path” to which this paper aspires?
The “middle path” gives consideration to all the factors mentioned in this paper. The “middle path” does not insist on “one size fits all” solutions to script problems. The “middle path” recognizes the unique features of heritage scripts, technical transcriptions, and practical orthographies, and seeks to harness the strengths of each. The “middle path” encourages cooperation between all stakeholders in mapping out the best ways to preserve ethnic languages and cultures while giving the children all possible advantages in interacting with the larger world.

NOTES

1 I will be deliberately vague in this paper on the identification of some of these languages, as I do not want the speakers of those languages or the activists who promote them to feel that I am criticizing them. Rather, I want to foster a “neutral” position from which these issues can be discussed calmly and rationally—in search of the “middle path” of the title.

2 One could also add popular conventions for SMS—Short Text Messaging—on mobile phones. For example, “555” represents laughter (a play on the Thai word for the number five: haà). Similarly, Thai people using web-based email systems frequently employ informal Roman transcriptions when accessing Thai-script based tools is inconvenient.

iii Mandarin Chinese and Japanese could be cited here as languages that have more than one officially sanctioned orthography. Mandarin characters share space with the romanized Pinyin (phonetic) system, while Japanese utilizes Kanji (characters borrowed from Chinese), Hiragana (phonetic), and Katakana (phonetic rendering of foreign words). Children in both countries learn the phonetic scripts for their respective languages first, then move on to characters.

iv I, for example, did not know anything about English phonetics until I tried to teach English in Thailand, and thus realized that English pronunciation is indeed strange and confusing! Before studying linguistics, I was completely unable to explain to students why English behaves in such an odd manner! Many other English teachers in many countries have had similar experiences!

v I am indebted to Dr. Kenneth Gregerson for this analogy.

vi This group is sometimes referred to by cultural outsiders as the “Dong.” “Kam” is what they call themselves.

References


