

Covert Prestige in middle-class females: A variationist study in a northern region industrial estate in Thailand

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This research has attempted to analyze the linguistic variation of rhotic onset (r) in the Northern Thai dialect (NT) by analyzing the glottal fricative variant [h]. [h] is the local form in NT but does not exist in Bangkok Thai (BKK)/ the standard dialect.

NT dialect, in Lamphun province, possesses a cultural heritage more than 700 years old, consisting of a unique orthography and grammar which is distinct from that of the BKK Thai dialect.

The influx of internal immigrants, who employ BKK dialect, to meet the demands caused by the emergence of the Northern Region Industrial Estate (NRIE), contributed to the radical change of an agricultural based community into an industrial province. A non-predictive pattern of certain linguistic features was found, especially the [h] variant, by conducting a logistic regression via Rbrul (Bailey 2002, Tagliamonte, 2006, Johnson, 2009). Even though the [h] frequency was not in the majority, in the model it was found that the middle-class female was the main linguistic preserver. A social network strength factor (Hirano, 2011) with adjusted technique showed the dynamic result, that certain groups of people with particular qualities, resisted conforming to BKK Thai pressure. Thus, the [h] variant may receive a social meaning as a covert prestige form (Labov, 2006; Trudgill, 1972) rather than a stigmatized form in this dialect competition.

Also, the finding revealed that this variationist study was predominantly motivated by social factors, especially speech style (Labov, 2006), rather than phonological predictors.

Typologically, this might be a unique characteristic of the Tai-Kadai language family's variation that shows the reverse trend (Preston, 1991, Chand 2010), that internal linguistic factors do not primarily dominate dialect variation.