



The Phenomenon of Code-Mixing of Phu Thai Language and Isan Language in the Society of Phu Thai Native Speakers

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Abstract

This article explores the sociolinguistic dynamics of code-mixing between Phu Thai and Isan speakers in northeastern Thailand, focusing on the bilingual community in Nongyasai Subdistrict, Wang Sam Mo District, Udon Thani Province. Rooted in the Southwestern Tai language family, the Phu Thai dialect serves as a vehicle of ethnic identity and cultural transmission, yet faces increasing pressure from the dominance of Standard Thai in formal domains and the widespread use of Isan in public life. Through qualitative data from interviews, natural speech recordings, and field observations, the study examines the structural patterns, functional domains, and sociocultural motivations for code-mixing among bilingual speakers. The author presents the code-mixing frequently occurs in informal and semi-formal settings such as markets, family interactions, and community events, with lexical borrowing and pragmatic adaptation serving to express identity, negotiate social relationships, and facilitate communication across dialects. The phenomenon reflects both linguistic resilience and shifting language ecologies, highlighting the role of everyday speech in balancing tradition and modernity. This research contributes to the fields of contact linguistics and minority language maintenance by demonstrating how multilingual speakers actively shape their communicative repertoires in response to social, cultural, and institutional pressures.

Keywords: Code-Mixing, Phu Thai dialect, Bilingual society, Sociolinguistics, Language Maintenance

1. Introduction

In the multilingual landscape of Southeast Asia, language contact and bilingualism have become common features among ethnic minority groups. The Phu Thai people, an ethnolinguistic community primarily located in northeastern Thailand, represent a rich cultural and linguistic heritage rooted in the Southwestern Tai language family. While the Phu Thai dialect serves as a vital medium for cultural transmission and community bonding, its status is increasingly challenged by the national prominence of Standard Thai, which dominates formal education, governance, and media. In such sociolinguistic

contexts, bilingualism often leads to code-mixing; an integrative process in which elements from two or more languages are combined within the same utterance or discourse. Unlike code-switching, which often preserves structural boundaries between languages, code-mixing involves a deeper interweaving of grammatical, lexical, and phonological features. For Phu Thai speakers, this manifests in the incorporation of Thai words, sentence patterns, and expressions into their native dialect, especially among younger generations exposed to Thai-medium schooling and digital communication. This phenomenon is not merely linguistic but reflects broader social changes, including modernization, mobility, and shifting identity constructs. Code-mixing, thus, becomes both a communicative strategy and a symbol of sociocultural hybridity. While some scholars interpret such mixing as a sign of language erosion, others view it as a marker of creative linguistic adaptation and resilience. Understanding how code-mixing functions in the Phu Thai bilingual community is essential for developing policies and practices that support linguistic diversity and intercultural competence.

The northeastern region of Thailand, commonly known as Isan, is home to a complex multilingual society where multiple Tai dialects coexist. Among these, the Phu Thai language is spoken by the Phu Thai ethnic group, while Lao Isan (often simply referred to as Isan) is the dominant regional dialect. The linguistic interaction between Phu Thai and Isan exemplifies a form of community-level bilingualism where individuals are fluent in both varieties and use them functionally based on context, social roles, and interlocutor relationships. This summary discusses how bilingualism operates among Phu Thai speakers, how it affects language maintenance, and the broader sociolinguistic implications for minority language survival in Thailand.

This article aims to investigate the structural patterns and sociocultural functions of code-mixing among Phu Thai speakers through the code-mixing of Phu Thai language used by the native speakers and Lao Isan native speakers in the social contexts in which mixing occurs, and the underlying motivations of the Phu Thai-speaking community in Nongyasai Subdistrict, Wang Sam Mo District, Udon Thani Province. The author explores the functional distribution and language domains, sociolinguistic implications and code-mixing of Phu Thai language and Isan language draws on qualitative data collected through interviews, natural speech recordings, and field observations, contributing to the broader field of contact linguistics and sociolinguistic diversity.

2. Functional Distribution and Language Domains

The Phu Thai ethnic group is a Tai-speaking ethnolinguistic minority primarily residing in northeastern Thailand, with significant populations in provinces such as Kalasin, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, and Sakon Nakhon. The origins of the Phu Thai trace back to migrations from the regions of present-day Laos and Vietnam over two centuries ago (Smalley, 1994). As one of the culturally distinct groups in Thailand, the Phu Thai maintain a rich cultural heritage, including traditional dress, ceremonies, and language practices. Their dialect, which belongs to the Southwestern Tai language family, exhibits unique phonological and lexical features distinct from both Central Thai and other regional dialects (Trudgill, 2000).

The Phu Thai dialect serves not only as a practical medium of daily communication but also as a crucial marker of group identity and cultural continuity. Language plays a

pivotal role in affirming ethnic belonging and reinforcing ties across generations. In festivals, storytelling, and oral traditions, the use of the dialect underscores shared history and regional pride (Fishman, 1991). However, despite its cultural significance, the dialect faces challenges due to social and institutional pressures that prioritize Standard Thai as the national language.

Bilingualism has become increasingly common among Phu Thai speakers, especially with the nationwide implementation of Thai-medium education and mass media dominated by Central Thai. Children grow up speaking Phu Thai at home while acquiring Standard Thai through formal schooling, resulting in a diglossia environment where different languages are used for different functions (Rappa & Wee, 2006). This sociolinguistic shift has introduced widespread code-switching practices and has led to a decline in the exclusive use of Phu Thai among the younger generation. The dominance of Thai in public and educational domains has contributed to linguistic assimilation, though many Phu Thai speakers continue to use the dialect in private and cultural settings as a means of maintaining their ethnic identity.

Bilingualism in the Phu Thai–Isan context follows a functional distribution pattern. According to Tingsanchali (2001), Phu Thai is primarily reserved for intra-ethnic communication; it is used within families, during traditional rituals, and in community-specific cultural settings such as folk songs, oral storytelling, and local festivals. This specialized use underscores Phu Thai’s symbolic role in maintaining ethnic identity.

In contrast, Isan is the dominant language for broader social communication. It is widely spoken in markets, schools, workplaces, and local government offices. As a dialect of Lao with strong Thai influence, Isan is mutually intelligible with Lao and enjoys widespread acceptance in everyday communication throughout northeastern Thailand. Due to its functional utility and wider currency, Isan acts as the *lingua franca* in multiethnic communities (Enfield, 2007).

In bilingual communities, the concept of language domains helps explain how speakers use different languages according to specific contexts or areas of life. A language domain refers to a sphere of activity in which a particular language or dialect is regularly used (Fishman, 1972). In the case of the Phu Thai–Isan bilingual setting in northeastern Thailand, language choice is strongly domain-specific. This structure not only reflects sociolinguistic realities but also helps maintain ethnic identity while accommodating regional communication needs. The analysis of language domains offers insight into how both Phu Thai and Isan are maintained and functionally balanced in society.

The author describes the major language domains as a summary in the following

1. Home and Family Domain

The home domain is the strongest stronghold for the Phu Thai language. Within the family, particularly among older generations, Phu Thai is the dominant means of communication. It is the first language learned by many children in rural or ethnically concentrated areas. In this setting, Phu Thai fulfills affective and cultural functions, reinforcing familial bonds, transmitting traditions, and maintaining ethnic pride.

However, in younger generations, especially in urbanized areas or mixed-ethnic families, Isan or even Thai may begin to replace Phu Thai in domestic conversation. This gradual shift suggests that language transmission at home is a critical domain for preservation efforts (Miller, 2007).

2. Religion and Ceremonial Domain

In religious and ceremonial life, Phu Thai retains an important role. It is used during community-based rituals, traditional blessings, and religious storytelling. Buddhist monks or village elders often employ Phu Thai during sermons and chants in Phu Thai villages. These ceremonial domains reinforce language loyalty and connect the Phu Thai people with their ancestral heritage.

3. Education Domain

In the education domain, Isan and Thai are more dominant. While Thai is the language of formal education, students often speak Isan informally with peers and teachers. Phu Thai has minimal presence in schools unless specific community-based programs are established. The lack of Phu Thai in formal education contributes to its decreasing usage among children and adolescents (Tingsanchali, 2001).

4. Marketplace and Public Services

The marketplace and public service domains are almost exclusively Isan-dominated. Vendors, customers, and public service workers communicate in Isan due to its widespread intelligibility across northeastern Thailand. Phu Thai may occasionally be used between known ethnic peers, but Isan is the language of default in these functional settings.

5. Media and Technology Domain

In the media and technology domain, Thai dominates, followed by Isan. Television, internet content, and social media often promote Thai or Thai-influenced Isan usage. Phu Thai has limited visibility in mass media, although recent efforts include producing Phu Thai folk music, local radio broadcasts, and YouTube channels aimed at preserving the language.

The concentration of Phu Thai in private domains like home and ritual, contrasted with the expansion of Isan and Thai in public, institutional, and technological domains, reflects a classic case of language domain shrinkage. If younger generations stop acquiring Phu Thai in the home and fail to use it in religious and cultural functions, the language risks being confined to passive use or ceremonial recitation without communicative vitality.

3. Sociolinguistic Implications

The bilingualism observed among Phu Thai speakers reflects broader themes in sociolinguistics, particularly regarding language ecology, identity formation, and linguistic hierarchy. While bilingualism enables effective communication and cultural exchange, it also introduces asymmetrical power dynamics between dominant and minority languages. In this context, Phu Thai remains deeply tied to ethnic identity, while Isan functions as a regional medium of exchange and Thai as the national standard.

Importantly, this bilingual dynamic does not represent simple language replacement, but rather a complex balancing act between linguistic loyalty and sociocultural adaptation. As long as functional and emotional value is attached to the Phu

Thai language, and community structures support its use, it will likely endure alongside Isan despite external pressures.

Sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, addressing how language reflects and shapes social structures, identities, and cultural practices (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). In multilingual communities like those in Isan, where bilingualism is the norm, the choice of language is seldom neutral. Language choice encodes power relations, cultural identity, group solidarity, and socio-economic access (Fishman, 1972).

The Phu Thai language, though mutually intelligible with Isan, is used mainly in private or ritual contexts and is often viewed as less prestigious. In contrast, Isan functions as the dominant spoken variety in northeastern Thailand but is still marginalized in formal domains due to the dominance of Central Thai (Smalley, 1994). These contrasting roles make the study of their sociolinguistic implications critical to understanding linguistic inequality, language shift, and the potential for revitalization.

Language serves as a key marker of ethnic and regional identity. Phu Thai, spoken in provinces such as Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin, and Nakhon Phanom, is deeply intertwined with ethnic heritage and cultural practices. It is used in family conversations, oral storytelling, and religious rituals. By speaking Phu Thai, community members express their ethnic distinctiveness and ancestral continuity (Tingsanchali, 2001).

On the other hand, the Isan language while derived from Lao, it has come to represent a regional identity that transcends ethnic divisions. It is spoken by ethnic Lao Isan, Phu Thai, Khmer, and other minority groups as a common communication tool. Its widespread use in popular culture (e.g., Mor Lam music, radio, and comedy) enhances its social function but does not necessarily grant it formal status or power.

This dual linguistic reality illustrates the concept of “unequal bilingualism”, where languages are spoken side-by-side, but only one enjoys broader institutional or societal support (Diller, Edmondson, & Luo, 2008).

In many multilingual communities, languages are distributed across specific domains: home, education, religion, media, and markets, according to their perceived utility and prestige (Fishman, 1972). This functional distribution is evident in the Phu Thai–Isan context:

1. Phu Thai is used in the private sphere: family communication, village rituals, traditional performances, and community gatherings.

2. Isan is used in the public and semi-formal sphere: market interactions, regional schools (informally), community meetings, and media.

3. Central Thai is used in formal education, administration, and national media.

Such distribution results in domain shrinkage for Phu Thai, especially as younger generations adopt Isan and Thai for education and employment. If unaddressed, this pattern may lead to a gradual language shift from Phu Thai to Isan and eventually to Thai threatening the linguistic diversity of the region (Miller, 2007).

Thus, a sociolinguistic study is needed to assess not only how languages are used, but also how they are perceived, valued, and transmitted. The aim is to understand whether functional bilingualism supports heritage language maintenance or merely delays language attrition.

Another key sociolinguistic implication is the prevalence of code-switching and code-mixing between Phu Thai, Isan, and Thai. Speakers often fluidly alternate between

these varieties depending on context, interlocutor, and purpose. These linguistic strategies serve multiple social functions:

1. Signaling group membership
2. Indexing formality or informality
3. Expressing solidarity or hierarchy
4. Accessing different linguistic capital

For example, a Phu Thai speaker may use Phu Thai in greeting an elder, switch to Isan in market conversation, and use Thai in an official school setting. Such practices reveal speakers' linguistic agility and social navigation skills (Gumperz, 1982). At the same time, the reduced use of Phu Thai in public discourse may contribute to its symbolic relegation.

Studying these phenomena helps to document the ways language is used not only for communication but for performing identities, building relationships, and negotiating power in everyday life.

4. Code-Mixing of Phu Thai Language and Isan Language

Most Phu Thai speakers are bilingual or even trilingual, as they typically acquire Phu Thai at home, Isan in their local environment, and Central Thai through formal education and media. This results in a high degree of code-switching and code-mixing, especially among the younger generation (Gumperz, 1982). Code-switching between Phu Thai and Isan often depends on the speaker's setting, intention, and interlocutor. For instance, a speaker may use Phu Thai to express solidarity with ethnic peers but switch to Isan when addressing a broader audience.

Additionally, language mixing occurs when lexical items from one language are embedded into the grammatical structure of the other. This is common in informal speech and reflects the fluid nature of linguistic boundaries in bilingual communities. However, it also leads to concerns about the erosion of distinct Phu Thai features, particularly as younger speakers increasingly blend Isan or Thai words into their Phu Thai usage (Miller, 2007).

As the author has presented the information taken from the areas of both languages spoken in each other by the local people, the author has presented as the sample conversation between code-mixing of Phu Thai and Lao Isan language as the follows.

Sample: Communication between Phu Thai and Lao Isan Speakers

Context: Two neighbors, one Phu Thai speaker (Kaem) and one Lao Isan speaker (Yupin), meet at the market in Wang Sam Mo market.

Yupin (Lao Isan speaker): “สวัสดีจ้า! ไปไสมมาแต่เช้าแน่น้อ?”

(Sawasdee ja! Pai sai maa tae zao thae na?)

"Good morning! Where have you been this early?"

Kaem (Phu Thai speaker): “ไปตลาดนะ ไปซื้อของกินจกน้อย เห็นว่าเจ้ามีมะโม่่งใหม่บ่น้อ?”

(Pai talaad na, pai seu kong kin jak noi. Hen waa jao mee ma mong mai bor no?)

"I went to the market to get some food. I heard you have new mangoes, is that right?"

Yupin: “มีอยู่เด้อ! จ้า หวานคักๆ ข่อยเก็บเมื่อวานนี้ละ ถ้าอยากได้นะ เอาไปโลนึ่งก่อนกะได้”

(Mee yoo der! Ja waan khak khak. Khoy kep muea waan nee la. Tha yak dai na, ao pai lo neung gon ka dai)

"Yes, I do! Super sweet, I picked them yesterday. If you want some, I'll give you a kilo first."

Kaem: “ขอบใจหลายๆเด้ออ้อย จักบาทละ?”

(*Khop jer lai lai der ury. Jak baht la?*)

"Thanks a lot! How much per kilo?"

Yupin: “เอาแบบบ้านๆ ละ โดละห้าสิบบอ ให้ราคาคนกันเอง”

(*Ao baep baan baan, ka lo la haa sip por. Hai rakhaa khon kan eng*)

"Just a local price: 50 baht per kilo, for a friend."

Kaem: “เอาโลนึ่งเด้อ แล้วสิพื่อเด่งงานบุญหน้าวัดมือเสาร์นี้บ่ละ?”

(*Ao lo neung der. Laew si por doew ngaan bun naa wat muea sao nee bor la?*)

"I'll take one kilo then. See you at the temple fair this Saturday?"

Yupin: “ไปแน่นอน! อ่าลิ้มใส่ชุดพื้นเมืองเด้อ จะได้ถ่ายรูปงามๆ”

(*Pai nae non! Ya luem sai chut pheun mueang der, ja dai thai ruup ngaam*

ngaam)

"Absolutely! Don't forget to wear your traditional clothes, so we can take nice pictures!"

From the above conversation, the author has explained that the conversational exchange between Kaem, a Phu Thai speaker, and Yupin, a Lao Isan speaker, in the Wang Sam Mo market offers a rich lens into the sociolinguistic realities of northeastern Thailand, where inter-dialectal communication is fluid and natural. Though Phu Thai and Lao Isan are linguistically related, both originating from the Tai-Kadai language family, their speakers often maintain distinct ethnic identities. This interaction demonstrates functional bilingualism, mutual intelligibility, and subtle code-mixing that typifies language use in ethnolinguistically diverse rural markets.

Markets serve as informal domains where ethnic boundaries soften, and language choice is often dictated by interpersonal relationships, community solidarity, and ease of communication. This sample, therefore, provides important data for sociolinguistic research concerning language maintenance, language shift, and interethnic cohesion through language.

Language Choice and Functional Distribution

From the dialogue, it is evident that both speakers understand and accommodate each other's dialects. Although Kaem is a Phu Thai speaker, and Yupin primarily speaks Isan, both converse comfortably using shared vocabulary and overlapping phonological features. This supports the notion of mutual intelligibility, particularly common in regions where interethnic interaction is part of daily life (Enfield, 2007).

For example, Yupin greets with: “สวัสดีจ้า! ไป!สมมาแต่เช้าเท้น้อ?”. This greeting blends a Thai/Isan greeting (สวัสดี) with Isan lexicon and structure. Kaem responds naturally using expressions like “มังโม่้ง” (mango), a Phu Thai-specific lexeme, indicating that localized vocabulary may persist even in cross-dialectal communication.

The choice of language is not strictly separated but rather functionally flexible. The interaction remains intelligible because both dialects share syntactic and semantic frameworks, while variation exists more prominently in lexical items and idiomatic expressions. This confirms Fishman's (1972) view of domain-based functional distribution in bilingual/multilingual societies.

Code-Mixing and Identity Signaling

Code-mixing and borrowing are prominent in this exchange, particularly in Kaem's speech. For instance: “ขอบคุณหลายๆเด้ออ้อย” (Thanks a lot!)

The word “เจ้อ” (jer) is a Phu Thai term for “thank you”, not found in standard Isan or Thai, which typically use “ขอบคุณ” or “ขอบคุณ.”

“มะม้ง” (ma mong - mango) is another Phu Thai lexeme not commonly used in standard Isan speech, where “มะม่วง” would be more common.

The deliberate use of these words signals ethnic identity, while the rest of the sentence remains structurally intelligible to the Isan speaker. This kind of selective lexical insertion into an otherwise mutually intelligible syntactic framework is a marker of intra-ethnic identity reinforcement during inter-ethnic discourse (Gumperz, 1982).

Meanwhile, Yupin, while speaking Isan, adjusts her tone and expression to maintain communal politeness and shared cultural norms, using familiar suffixes like “เด้อ” and “บะ” which are widespread in both dialects, further softening boundaries.

Cultural Functions Embedded in Language Use

The conversation is rich with cultural markers, reinforcing how language encodes traditional values and practices. Consider the concluding lines:

Kaem: “แล้วสิพี่อเค้งงานบุญหน้าวัดมือเสาร์นี้บะ?”

Yupin: “ไปแน่นอน! อ่าสิมใส่ชุดพื้นเมืองเด้อ จะได้ถ่ายรูปงามๆ”

This exchange touches on religious events (งานบุญ), social gatherings, and the importance of traditional clothing (ชุดพื้นเมือง). These references are not merely social niceties; they reflect how language functions to preserve cultural continuity and group cohesion.

The implicit cultural understanding allows both speakers to communicate not just meaning, but shared value systems. Thus, language acts as a cultural vehicle, conveying the nuances of community life, mutual support, and ethnic pride especially in rural Isan communities where festivals and temple fairs play a vital social role (Smalley, 1994).

This conversation offers clear evidence of community-based multilingualism, where cooperation across dialects facilitates both functional communication and identity preservation. Although each speaker exhibits dialect-specific traits, their ability to engage with ease suggests:

1. A high degree of receptive bilingualism.
2. An informal code-switching norm that does not require translation or clarification.
3. Shared discourse strategies and pragmatic norms that prioritize harmony, friendliness, and reciprocity.

These interactions strengthen interethnic relationships while allowing individuals to retain their distinct identities. The community, therefore, models what Hymes (1974) calls communicative competence: the ability not only to use language correctly but appropriately within social contexts.

Moreover, such exchanges emphasize the role of everyday communication—rather than formal schooling or media as a primary site of linguistic and cultural preservation in multilingual settings.

5. Summary

In the multilingual setting of northeastern Thailand, particularly among the Phu Thai ethnic group, code-mixing between Phu Thai and Isan languages illustrates a dynamic sociolinguistic adaptation shaped by cultural identity, communicative function, and language hierarchy. While Phu Thai remains central to ethnic expression in private and ritual domains, Isan serves as the regional lingua franca in public life, and Thai dominates formal institutions. This layered bilingualism results in frequent code-mixing, especially among younger generations who incorporate Thai and Isan lexical and syntactic elements into their Phu Thai speech. Such linguistic blending, as exemplified in market conversations and daily interactions, not only facilitates mutual intelligibility across ethnic lines but also reflects a deeper negotiation of identity, tradition, and modernity. Studying these patterns helps illuminate the ways language functions as both a cultural anchor and a flexible tool for social integration in contemporary Thai society.

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