Abstract

Amidst the uncertainty in the survival of minority languages scattered around the world, concerns also went to Urak Lawoi Language, a minority language spoken among a group of sea gypsies in the South of Thailand.

This paper is a part of a two-phase project aimed at investigating the existence and the future of the language in two areas, Bulon Island and Lipeh Island in Satun Province. Its main purpose was to gather the lexicon existing in the language through participatory action research. Thirty-eight, (22 male and 16 female) and thirty-seven (10 male and 27 female) informants residing on the two islands provided the primary data. Informants from Bulon were all adults while those from Lipeh were mainly young people, age 9-18. Picture and word cues were employed in data collection together with in-depth interviews, and observations. Each word sought was crossed examined four times, two with the informants of Bulon and two with those of Lipeh. In addition to the major output of the project (a three language mini-dictionary of lexicon), two findings were obtained. First, it was found that Urak Lawoi language lacked certain words existing in English and Thai, the main stream language of this minority group. Lexicons to name different hues do not exist in this language, for instance. The speculation was that the language may have ceased developing once its speakers reached and settled in a mainstream community where various factors in the community came into play. It was also found that the future of this language on Lipeh Island does not seem to be threatened; young children were observed to speak the language both at home with parents, siblings, playmates, acquaintances in the neighborhoods and at schools with classmates, although it was not the case with Bulon Island.
Key words: Urak Lawoi language, language survival, lexicon dictionary, language development

Background

Urak Lawoi’ (UL) is one of several minority groups in Thailand with an approximate population of 4,000 (WWW.endangeredlanguage.com/lang/UL). While most minorities in the country have settlements on high lands, mostly in the North with a smaller number in the North East and the West, this group of people has their settlement on the seaside or on certain islands in the Southern provinces. The largest number of them lives on Lipeh Island in Satun province where their ancestors first settled. From there they sailed to several islands, Bulon islands in Satun, Lanta Yai, Cam Island, Phi Phi Don in Krabi, Sireh Island, Rawi Beach, Sapum Bay and Tukkae Cape in Phuket (http:///www.nomadslipe.com, June 20, 2013). UL is known for their maintaining inherited cultures: leading economic and social life, as well as speaking their own language.

As the socio-economic influence of the mainstream culture is aggressively approaching / coming into play in the UL communities, all facets of their lives have bee in certain degrees affected (Grandbom, 2005). In the past, they totally depended on the sea, fishing for life. Today, however, many of the UL have become employees working in the fast growing tourism business. Men sail in long-tailed boats taking tourists to snorkeling while women working in resorts, all of which are owned by investors from the mainland Satun or other provinces and non-Thai nominee investors.

Being involved in those new jobs, coupled with other factors including the mainstream media, has increased the amount of exposure to the out-group culture. It, thus, created a concern of the survival of the cultures. As has been known, UL language is considered one of the world endangered languages.
Having no written script of its own may also result in an even a faster pace of vanishing. Therefore, our main purpose was to help conserve the language by documenting the language into written transcription using the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) with two-language translation: Thai and English. Although IPA transcription was used to record UL lexicon in some previous research papers, it simply incorporated it as a glossary of the main findings or text. Those documents are by no means easy to access or handy for use. The output of the present study in the mini-dictionary format, thus, will be a version of a document on UL language prepared especially to be utilized by tourists or any interested individuals.

**Related Studies**

Previous investigations were on various aspects of this minority group, origin, inhabitation, socio-economic conditions, education, and language. Regarding the language, it has been in the interest of both Thai and non-Thai researcher for decades. The very first study was conducted by a Thai researcher (Krasame, 1970) who investigated the language maintenance and shift of the Urak Lawoi’ living in an area called Radsada in Phuket. Another early study was the Master’s Degree thesis by Amon Saengmani (1979) in which the researcher focused on the UL language phonological characteristics. Also in Thawisak’s work in his work “Phasa Chaole (Urak Lawoi)” (1986) he provided a summary of the people’s history as well as the description of the language. A more recent study, also on phonology of UL language, was also a Master’s Degree thesis project (Thongkhamchum, 1998). The investigation embraced the language phonological patterns of UL’s language spoken by UL living on Cam Island of Krabi province. It was reported in the study that UL language contain two types of intonation groups, three types of stress, three types of syllable, and 19 consonant phonemes. The most recent work is by Kraisame (2013) in which the
author discussed the changes and conservation of Urak Lawoi’ language in Radsada area of Phuket.

Non-Thai researchers have also studied UL language of certain aspects. David Hogan and Stephen Pattenmore (1988), for example, studied the changes of cultures and way of life UL residing at Lipeh Island and Adang-Rawi Archipelago. Likewise, David Andrew Creech (2011) studied aspects of UL people, including the changes in ways of living, such as forms of entertainment, health care as a result of external factors like modern media and outside capital and the change in political power on the Lipeh Island.

An intensive investigation on UL life and language was conducted by Jacob Y.de Groot (2012). His study embraced both the people’s ways of living and analysis of the language. He classified UL language into three dialects—the dialect spoken in Phuket, Lanta, and Lipeh, respectively.

As reported in the literature, UL language has been in the interest and concern of social science researchers and various Thai script and Romanized literature materials have been prepared (WWW.endangeredlanguage.com/lang/UL, Retrieved October, 20, 2013). So far, however, results of all the investigation is in the research report of certain types—theses and research articles, for instance. The present study was aimed at providing a hands-on reference to this endangered language which can be accessible to any individual interested. The output of the present study are two versions of UL lexicon, a categorical glossary and a mini-dictionary of three languages. Our investigation focused on one objective: to document the language into a written form, the IPA transcript with three languages translation, and a research question: Will UL language survive amidst various threatening factors?
Research Methodology

Participants

Seventy-five Urak Lawoi individuals residing in Bulon Islands and Lipeh Island, in Satun Province participated in this participatory action research. The informants consisted of 38 (22 male and 16 female) and 37 (10 male and 27 female) UL residing on the two selected research sites, Bulon Islands and Lipeh. Those from Bulon were all adults while the informants of Lipeh were mainly young people, age 9-18. They were asked to provide the UL language lexicon tokens. All adult informants speak three languages: Thai, Malay, UL, and some speak basic everyday English. Most of the child informants, on the other hand, do not speak Malay. Their average education was elementary Thai literacy with some having no formal education. Most adult male informants carried two jobs, fishing and certain kinds of service—mainly leading sea tours. The female counterpart were of two types—those in old age spent their time helping younger ones taking care of the young children while younger women worked as resort service personnel during the holiday season, or spent time idly otherwise. Regarding the youth, they were all school children studying grade 1 to 9 at the only school on Lipeh Island.

Materials

The primary data were sought from three kinds of research instrument, picture cue cards, word cue cards, and word lists written in Thai. Together the instrument contained about 2000 target words expected to find the matched UL lexicon tokens. Besides the instrument, observations were made to complementarily answer the second question: ‘Will the UL language survive amidst various threatening factors?’.
Data collection

The output of the present study is a mini-dictionary of three languages with IPA transcription, was from the data collection performed at two research sites—the two Bulon Islands and Lipeh Island. The procedure carried out at the first area consisted of interviews using colored picture cues and word cue cards (Picture A). Each target word was sought from one informant or a group of two or three adults while they were socializing in the village; as seen in the pictures below, they usually gathered in groups in their free time. The data collected were subsequently crossed examined three times with three different informants of groups of informants depending on their convenience. All the sought words were finally re-examined with an informant who was respected for having multi-lingual literacy and a university degree. Altogether each word was cross examined four times.

Pictures A: interviews with cue cards

The data collection at Lipeh Island was rather similar to that performed at Bulon Islands. The child informants also provided language data through the use of the instrument described above at the second search site.
In addition to the cards and word lists, observations were made at different occasions. The adult males were observed while they were preparing boats and travel gears for sea trips or spending time relaxing on the beaches with tribe fellows. The female counterparts, on the other hand, were observed while they were gathering at the ground in front of their dwellings (Picture B). Observations were also made while they were participating in the annual memorial day of their ancestors (Pictures C).

![Picture B: Socialization](image)

![Picture C: Data collection](image)
Results

The main purposes of the present study were two folds: 1) to document the existing lexicon of UL language in the written form containing three languages and an IPA transcription—a mini-dictionary, and 2) to find out the survival condition of the language, as it is characterized as one of the world endangered languages (http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/urk). UL language lexical entries were sought and documented in the final output.

It was found that there were no matching UL words for some of our target words. Thus, our final output contains only some target words we prepared, while some were dropped. Shown below are examples of the entries contained in the final output.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Phonology in IPA</th>
<th>Phonology in Thai</th>
<th>Thai translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bottle</td>
<td>[bu-li]</td>
<td>บู้ลี</td>
<td>ขวด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cigarette</td>
<td>[mi-zah]</td>
<td>มีซะ</td>
<td>บุหรี่</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fire</td>
<td>[a:-pi]</td>
<td>อาปี</td>
<td>ไฟ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gulf</td>
<td>[ta-loah]</td>
<td>ตะโละ</td>
<td>อ่าว</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knife</td>
<td>[bi-za:ɔ]</td>
<td>ปีขาว</td>
<td>มีด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loin cloth</td>
<td>[ga:-jed pa:-ŋæk]</td>
<td>กาเย็ด ปาญัก</td>
<td>มีขาวมัก</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>market</td>
<td>[pʊ-a- ɡad]</td>
<td>ปิกลก</td>
<td>ตลาด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mirror Glass</td>
<td>[dʒʊ-o-маɛn]</td>
<td>จิชมน</td>
<td>กระจก/แก้ว</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needle</td>
<td>[ja:-roab]</td>
<td>ยาโร๊บ</td>
<td>เข็มขัด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ring</td>
<td>[dʒi-dred]</td>
<td>จิเร็ด</td>
<td>แหวน</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trash</td>
<td>[za:-pa]</td>
<td>ขาปา</td>
<td>ชำะ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>[a:-jei/ a:-ja]</td>
<td>อาเย/อาะ</td>
<td>น้ำ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wind</td>
<td>[a:-ŋæn]</td>
<td>อาเฝน</td>
<td>ลม</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was theorized in the present study that the number of lexicon documented was smaller than that expected due to two reasons. The first explanation is the nonexistence of those identities in their habitation area. Those identities included animals, plants, household utensils, etc. We did not find words in UL language to name certain animals and avian, such
as deer, eagle, hawk, falcon, for instance. The same were experienced when we tried to seek words for plants (fruit and flower). No UL words were created to name rose, jasmine, and grape, for example.

The other theory made in the present study was the cessation of language development. As is well documented, civilization flourishes when people are psychologically healthy—when they do not need to struggle to feed themselves and families. The lives of UL people could be considered harsh, depending almost totally on the changing nature in the coastal areas where they settled. They created living gear simply to survive minimally—no comfortable garment or living place, or delicacy of all sorts was created. It was not surprising to not find lexicon to name identities of trivial difference. We did not find word to name different hues of color as red and pink, light blue and dark blue, for example. We also found that UL use only one word [raː-gaː] to name different kinds of basketwork, while different names are given to those containers. Shown below are some of several basketry products, each with a particular Thai name.
Regarding research question two, through the interviews and observations performed at both research sites, a positive perspective was discovered. The youth asked to participate in our study were all able to speak UL language; they were speaking the language (not Thai) among their siblings and playmates. They were able to provide the UL lexicon immediately if they were terms they used daily or concrete words. The turned to each other to discuss in UL language if the terms are abstract or the identities in the picture were unfamiliar to them. It was an impressive experience to observe the children talking, and even arguing to reach a solution –the UL word for a particular target word presented to them in picture or word and acting (researcher assistants acted it out in case difficulty was encountered). Like the young, adult in the two research areas were observed speaking UL daily. While asked about words they did not use daily, they discussed entirely in UL language. In addition, they spoke to their children in UL all the time we were conducting our interviews and observations.

**Summary and Discussion**

The present study was conducted in two research sites: Bulon Islands, and Lipeh in Satun Province. We recorded the language lexicon in IPA transcript with translation of Thai and English. The number of language tokens to be included in the final output—a mini-dictionary will be about 1200 words, while our original target words were 2016. In addition, we found from the observations that the future of this minority group language is still not severely threatened because all young generation—age 1 to 18--, as well as adults spoke the language in their daily communication.

It is suggested, however, the authority launch certain projects to encourage this group of people to maintain their several facets of culture. A love-home project, for example, should be initiated to keep the young from leaving their ancestral settlement.
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Curriculum Vitae

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