”Let’s create our story”: Thai linguistic practices in task-based interaction and the Buddhist notion of interdependent self

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Previous research on task-based communication in various languages (e.g. Katagiri 2007, Fujii 2008, 2012, Kim 2011) reveals that people from different cultures follow different interactional norms and principles. As for Thai, little has been done on this type of conversation. The present study aims at examining linguistic practices in task-based interaction and their relation to the Buddhist ideology of self. The data consist of 11 transcriptions of problem-solving task from the “Mister O Corpus”. The informants are Thai female college students. Even though a cultural comparison is not an aim in the present study, the findings in Fujii (2012) will be adopted as the reference points in analyzing Thai.

The results here reveal that linguistic devices adopted by the Thai pairs signal collaborative effort and non-confrontational style. The Thai participants propose ideas mostly through question forms and mitigating expressions to show hesitation and induce the partner’s response. It appears that the Thai interactional style shares some features with the Japanese. That is, both Thai and Japanese speakers prefer to work together and help each other to establish a collaborative floor rather than a one-person-at-a-time floor. Nonetheless, there are significant differences between the two datasets. Even though the Thai participants prefer not to impose their ideas, they do not seek consent as frequently as the Japanese. Moreover, the Thai also prefer the device of teasing and joking to achieve oneness. Yet, the device is rarely found in the Japanese dataset. It is further argued that the Thai interactional style adopted by the Thai pairs can be interpreted by the Buddhist notion of interdependent self and the Thai cultural concept of sanuk ‘having fun’ – an implicit mechanism for maintaining harmonious social relations in Thai society. With sanuk as an underlying value, the participants can smoothly accomplish a difficult task.

Keywords: Emancipatory Pragmatics, Buddhist concept of self, Thai interaction.