Honorific unpredictability and hybrid role relations in a changing Thai sociolinguistic landscape

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Politeness conventions in some languages are formulaic to the extent that they are built into the grammar of those languages, but counterpart conventions in other languages can be less so. Studies in this area thus far tend to underscore the presence and/or absence of politeness devices, and provide a description which rationalizes their observance and/or non-observance. In this presentation, I introduce a phenomenon which I term "honorific unpredictability" in Thai. It represents cases of arbitrary shifts of honorifics, whereby forms traditionally requisite for one role relation are crossing borders into another and, oftentimes, back (and then forth) again. Even when interactants’ sociolinguistic identities remain intact and with no apparent change of context, shifts are observed in many possible formats: unilateral and bilateral shifts, honorifics shifted to non-honorifics or vice versa, institutionalized honorifics shifted to solidarity-oriented honorifics or vice versa, a mixture of these in adjacent turns, etc. Data are taken from the Thai subset of Mr O Corpus data and my own collection of conversations between Thai speakers. While reasons behind such highly randomized shifts of honorifics have yet to be more fully investigated, my hypothesis is that this practice is driven by the shifter’s preference for a more relaxed atmosphere of talk, interspersed with his/her underlying awareness of the conventional role held with the other party and of the imperative that this is something he/she should resume at some stage. But the urge to be friendly may direct shifts in another direction again. The process can be repeated over and over again, with no specific pattern. This dynamic phenomenon will be discussed within the Emancipatory Pragmatics tradition (Hanks et al., 2009 and Hanks, 2012), so as to describe both Thai language usage conventions from the native speaker’s viewpoint and the dynamics of hybrid social relations in contemporary Thai society.

Keywords: "honorific shifts", "hybrid identities".