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## Language Identity of Thai Women in Transnational Family on Intercultural Communication



**Abstract:** - Transnational marriage between Thai women and western men is a prominent phenomenon in Thai society. The Thai women have their own language identity in daily speech or group peculiarity. This article describes the language identity characteristics. The data was collected from non-participant observations in public conversation contexts in Udonthani city: airports, immigration police, shopping place, and tourist spots, and 10 Thai women's YouTube channels. This research is qualitative that analyzes data using the content analysis to find out the linguistic identity and intercultural communication of Thai women.

The research finding showed the language identity of Thai women in five categories: multilingual, code-switching, code-mixing, translation, and language loyalty to their mother tongue. These women learned English as a medium for their husbands and learned a third language, the husband's language. Therefore, they have become multilingual speakers. That is Isan dialect as the mother tongue, Thai as the national language, English as the international language, and the husband's language, which is not English. Multilingualism causes language use by switching and mixing words in another language, especially English. Thai switches with Isan dialect or English are naturally used in communication through her YouTube channel. They are loyal to languages and take pride in their mother tongue by teaching and speaking their mother tongue language to their children, even if they live in their husband's country. However, how Thai women in transnational families who have to live in their husbands' countries can maintain their mother tongue in western society challenges further research.

**Keywords:** Code switching, Intercultural communication, Multilingualism, Language identity, Transnational family.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The intercultural communication concept believes that different cultures of speakers create different communication systems and cultural communication. Interlocutors with different cultures will do three characteristics differently; interactions, cultural adaptations, and production communication processes (Chi, 2015) Intercultural communication from a linguistic perspective is the use of language that is linked to the social and cultural contexts of speakers as a tool for interpretive analysis (Martin & Nakayama, 2010) It is different from the same language interlocutor's communication. For instance, there are linguistic characteristics related to intercultural communication such as code-switching, code-mixing, language acquisition, translation and interpretation.

Thai women who married western men and immigrated to their husband's country have linguistic characteristics relevant to transnational marriage and living in a much different culture and society. The transnational marriage between Thai women and western men, mainly American and European, is a prominent phenomenon in Thailand. The first period of transnational marriages in Thai society causes rural areas the parents to expect their daughters to marry western men in order to improve their family's economic and financial status, particularly in the northeastern region (Phromphakpaeng et al, 2005; Preedaphan & Ayuwat, 2015; Lapanan, 2018). Therefore, the family economic factor of Thai women is essential in creating values for rural women in Isan to marry a foreign husband and move to live and work in their husband's country (Chanthammo and et al, 2018). However, nowadays, most transnational families are settling back in Thailand after their retirement. They prefer to live in economic cities close to their wife's former family, especially in the Northeast or Isan region, such as Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, and Udonthani provinces.

Married couples from different languages and cultural backgrounds must adapt to one another to maintain family security, including taking care of their children despite the cultural differences among their parents (Crippen & Leah, 2007). A critical problem with adaptation is intercultural communication in which language plays an important role. International marriage's communication considers one's cultural background and communication in the social culture of the country where they live (Matin & Nakayama, 2010). Therefore, transnational families must be aware of intercultural communication to prepare before smoothly immigrating to a husband's country with a vastly different culture and language (Sluzki, 1980). However, the current research on transnational families in Thai society mainly focuses on cultural and social adaptation issues. Only the finding by Soikudrua (2012) indicates that

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communication problems among transnational families are caused by the language skills of wives to communicate with foreign husbands, especially in English.

An increasing of migrant families who have lived abroad are returning to Thailand and living in economic cities. Thai people are now open to the diversity of multinational families, and it is a common phenomenon for Thai women to marry western men and live in various urban areas of the country. The Thai women in transnational families use the daily language differently from Thai women in general. These women gradually formed language identities because they could speak many languages. Their mother tongue is Thai or the Isan dialect, but they have to learn English as a medium language for communicating with their husbands. After marriage, some people have to learn the national language of the husband to communicate with the husband and to be able to work in the husband's country. The difference in the language use of Thai women in transnational families is expressed through language in daily life and on their YouTube channels. This linguistic characteristic has become increasingly prominent as their group's language identity.

Most women are from the Northeast, where there are a variety of vernacular and ethnic languages. They, therefore, are bilingual speakers. Isan language is their mother tongue while Thai language is the national language. After marriage foreigner husband the women have to learn English or husband language under the condition of transnational marriage is related to the language use that differs from the average Thais. This article will reveal the language identity of Thai women in transnational families. The data was collected in 2 sources that is the public places in 3 cities of the northeastern or Isan region of Thailand. The data reveals the practically daily speech of the Thai to her husband in Thai social and culture by using non-participant observations in where these families engage in daily activities. The second source was collected the women's language on YouTube channel. There have many numbers of YouTube channels of Thai women married western husband sharing her stories and living abroad experiences. Language in the channels discloses the language characteristic of the women living in western countries of her husband. Both sources could represent the language identity Thai women in transnational family under intercultural communication in daily speech and on social media.

The finding will increase the knowledge of transnational families in Thai society, and it will lead to policy formulation to support an increase of these families in Thailand, such as giving a piece of crucial information in Thai culture contexts. In addition, Thailand has launched a new policy as Thailand to be an alternative country for long-term living or a second home for retired tourists from wealthy countries. As a result, the transnational families with Thai wives, especially northeastern people, will inevitably come back to settle after retirement in Thailand, which means generating income through their various spending, which generates local income and local development.

## II. TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY IN THE NORTHEAST PART OF THAILAND

Transnational marriages are common in all regions of Thailand today, but marriages between women in the Northeast or Isan women and foreign men are an early phenomenon. During World War II, the United States established military bases and expanded its military influence to Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines and Thailand. In Thailand, essential U.S. military bases are located near Muang District in Udonthani Province and a naval base in Thailand gulf in the eastern part of Chonburi province. The presence of military service and establishing military bases were critical factors in early marriages between Isan women and U.S. men. After the end of the war, Isan women emigrated with their husbands back to the United States. Therefore, there was a phenomenon of migration of Thai women following their husbands to western countries at that time (Boonmattaya, 2005). Subsequently, transnational marriages were associated with five themes: cultural assimilation, expansion of the service and tourism economy, transnational migration, linkage and bargaining between local and globalization and household resource management (Lapanan, 2006). Later, these issues were studied and widely published in dissertations and research works. However, there was no focus on intercultural communication.

In the past, Isan people had rather lower income than other regions because natural resources such forest and water was not support enough for agriculture sector including earth quality. The north region has much mountain and river and tourist places, so the people have more chance than Isan region while the south region is promoted international tourist and fishing business. The Isan people must move to work outside region in industrial and tourist areas especially Isan women. They have worked in the tourist sector and others in the tourist cities such as Pattaya and Phuket where they meet her western husband. Figure 1 will point the Isan region and tourist cities.



**Figure 1.** The part of northeast or Isan part of Thailand  
 (<https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/thailand-region-map.htm>)

Currently, the marriages between Isan women and western men have expanded in many countries such as Germany, England, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Canada and Australia. It was partly due to the factor opening the country to receive post-war development through trade and investment cooperation between Thailand and these countries. Therefore, transnational marriages have shifted from Isan married couples who work in the maid and restaurant sectors to Isan women working in Bangkok or economic cities. Most Isan women want to migrate from the poor Isan region to a better society in their husband's country (Raphaphat & els, 2005). Transcultural marriages with men from developed countries will allow them to have a better life through immigration or living destination or residence in the countries of foreign husbands (Lapanan, Mettarikanon & Apichartwanlop, 2007). Previous research disclosed that transnational marriage is increasing rapidly in Thai society. Seemingly online dating values are more comfortable with modern communication technologies and language translation programs. A huge research in various areas in global have revealed the online dating influence to find the romantic and sexual partner [Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Barger, 2005]. In the past 20 years, having a foreign boyfriend or husband has become a trend or value for Isan women in rural, especially from developed countries with good economic status. The financial stability factor of foreign husbands affects the decision of Thai women to marry foreigners (Hong-Ngam, 2021). Transcultural marriages were reproduced and created representations through social media, especially YouTube and Facebook, by Thai women who have a western husband and moved to their country. The adaptive problem of transnational marriage is a language, especially English as an international language. Intercultural communication of differently cultural couples is, therefore, still a key for transnational families in both the husband's country and Thailand.

### III. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY

Intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary related to communication, business, administration, social sciences, anthropology, and cultural studies, including linguistics. In terms of language and culture, these differences in cultural background, living and using different languages have always been a problem for migrant couple's adaptation (Kim & others, 2017; de Klerk, 2001). The international language will somewhat reduce the problem of intercultural communication among spouses, but interlocutors' unequal language skills and the culture that are the building blocks still impede communication in the intercultural environment (Lee, 2005). Therefore, the agreement to use English as the communication medium among inter-lingual and intercultural interlocutors is not always smooth in all conversation contexts. Intercultural communication requires avoiding the phenomenon of language shock, which is an adaptation problem among immigrants to a language context different from each language clearly

(Agar,2002). Cultural differences, whether sub-cultures of small communities or corporate cultures, as well as at the national level, have common characteristics. Communication partners need to focus on different cultures from their own and be aware of the communication context under each culture (Hopstede,2011). However, the typical world has a universal communication culture as a preliminary criterion. Therefore, the success of intercultural communication is also related to the awareness of spouses.

Martin & Nakayama (2010) raised several issues of language's influence on intercultural communication in linguistic perspectives, such as cultural variation in communication style, variations in contextual rules, multilingualism, language and identity, translation and interpretation and code-switching. These linguistic features were used to guide the language identity analysis of Thai women in transnational families. The results of this research lead to an overview of their group identity. However, the language identity formation of one group does not occur and is observed for a short time, but it goes through a period of formation and becomes a different language identity from the others. When people in a society can separate their language identity from the community in general, it becomes a dynamic group identity that adapts to its context and culture continuously (Edward,2012). Understanding intercultural communication in transnational family, therefore, contexts in Thailand is linked to subcultural differences.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative from the linguistic perspective and intercultural communication. The data resources are divided into two categories: daily language used at public places by Thai married western husbands living in northeastern Thailand and language used on the YouTube channel of these Thai women. The collecting data methods are non-participant observations in the couple's communication in various public locations; airports, immigration police, shopping place, and tourist spots and the data on language usage on 10 YouTube channels posted by Thai women. The research findings will be explained by the descriptive analysis method.

The study sample was Thais women who married foreigners from western countries randomly sampled in places where most transnational families engage in daily activities at Udonthani city and sampling from YouTube channels published by Thais in 10 clips. The research question how about the language identity of Thai women in intercultural communication in daily life and on YouTube is. The hypothesis is that Thai women in transnational families should have code-switching in daily speech and on YouTubes.

The conceptual framework is language identity provided by Edward (2009) and intercultural communication provided by Martin and Nakayama (2010). These frameworks could point out the importance and relationship of language and intercultural communication in linguistics that can be used to analyze the language identity of Thais married to western men. The research results will be provide the academic research on Thai linguistics and intercultural communication of transnational families in Thai society even they live in other countries.

The symbol in the research finding will use the phonetics and linguistic as follows.

//	is the sentence
1 2 3 4 5	is the Thai tonal markers. They will be used on top of the letter.
' '	the meaning in English

#### V. RESEARCH FINDING

The research finding revealed that Isan women in transnational families had five distinct language identities multilingual speaker, code-switching, code-mixing, language translation, and language loyalty.

##### 5.1 Multilingual

Recently, the world's people are probably multilingual due to the openness of borderless communication through modern communication technologies, which is an essential mechanism for self-learning other languages (Alina & Simba). Thai women in transnational families are multilingual because they have many language skills and use them in daily speech. The women have Thai or Isan dialect as their mother tongue. They communicated with their husbands in English at the beginning of their relationship. In addition, they had to learn more in their husband's native language that was not English, such as German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, and French. At least they can speak the Isan dialect as their first language, Thai as the national language, English as the international language and the national language of the non-English speaking husband. However, they are unlikely to have a similar skill level in all languages; most languages spoken are bilingual: English or their husband's language and Thai language.

After marriage, Thai women want to migrate to their husbands' predominantly European countries because they have language skills and cultural knowledge of the destination country to communicate and work. European countries require migrant spouses moving to the country to have the proficiency test as required by the state. In

addition, those governments provide language courses for immigrants. Being multilingual speaker has made their language identity in everyday life noticeably, especially on their YouTube channel.

### 5.2 Code-switching

There are a number of scholars who have published the code-switching in terms of sociocultural linguistics in lots of countries (Negoescu & Simona,2016) the world. Code-switching is a linguistic feature that results from being a multilingual speaker that can occur naturally in language usage in daily speech (Lowi,2005). It generally characteristic reflected language contact of multilingual [Manfredi,2015; Shana,2001; Chorol,1987). Code-switching or language choice among multilinguals allows access to group identities (Margalita,1986). In Thailand, women switch dialect or Thai with their husband's language. They switched the Thai and their husband's languages in urban areas. The families who live in rural areas switch between the Isan dialect with local people and use Thai as lingual Franca, while English or the husband's language are switched to talk with her husband. Therefore, this research's results suggest that Thai women's code-switching is associated with different places, namely urban and rural areas, depending on the primary language in a living area.

The language identity of Thai women on their YouTube was found to have two switching categories. The first category is the switching between English and Thai. The second one is between Thai and Isan. This bilingual switch is probably related to the communication regulations on YouTube channels. These Thai women run YouTube channels to earn money from viewer numbers, so they use the national or international language rather than the Isan. The findings of this research point out that the communication channel on YouTube is a crucial factor in the code-switching of Thai women in transnational families and disseminating their stories to the Thai women as the target audience. The most apparent code-switching category is Thai and Isan as the mother tongue. However, the switching phenomena are relevant to the audient and their mother tongue language.

Example 1: Code switching of Thai and Isan dialect (Ep.152 mai thai in france channel)

Thai language:

/phi:<sup>3</sup>-nɔ:<sup>4</sup>du:<sup>1</sup> na-ja, si:<sup>5</sup> khiaw<sup>5</sup> kha:n<sup>3</sup> bon<sup>1</sup>// mai<sup>3</sup>-chaj<sup>3</sup> khaw<sup>5</sup> tha:<sup>1</sup> si:<sup>5</sup> yaŋ<sup>1</sup> mai<sup>3</sup> set<sup>2</sup>/  
'All, look at the green color on the wall, it was not mean not finished painting'

Isan dialect:

pha:-sa:<sup>5</sup> e-sa:n<sup>5</sup> khaw<sup>5</sup> ʔə:n<sup>3</sup> wa:<sup>1</sup> khia<sup>4</sup>, man<sup>1</sup> pen<sup>2</sup> khia<sup>4</sup> khing<sup>3</sup>-ning<sup>3</sup> ʔə:k<sup>2</sup> pay<sup>2</sup>/  
'In Isan language, it was called Khia (climber). Its vines slithered *straight up*'

Thai language:

/ man<sup>1</sup> na:<sup>3</sup>-kua<sup>1</sup> na na:<sup>3</sup>-kua<sup>1</sup> mian<sup>5</sup> ton<sup>3</sup>-maj<sup>4</sup> pi:<sup>1</sup>-sa:t<sup>2</sup> /  
'it is scary terrifying like a devil's tree'

The major language in the woman's clip above is Thai language. The speaker switched from Thai to Isan when would like to explain the climber on the building wall. Isan dialect as her mother tongue was used in code-switching related to use the Isan vocabularies in the sentence. The example above the speaker prefer to use the word /khia<sup>4</sup>/ 'climber' and /king<sup>3</sup>-ning<sup>3</sup>/ 'straight up' in Isan dialect. Code-switching related to local meaning and vocabularies used naturally. This

### 5.3 Code-mixing

Code-mixing is the vocabulary use of one language to another within the same utterance or in the same oral or written texts. It is common in societies where two or more languages are used (Hun,2007). The English language as an international language is commonly mixed in languages (Slavo,2007;Bahumaid,2015;Chanthao and Unthanon,2021) including Thai (Bunnui,2019). The one reason of the mixing is to show the modernization (Kamwangamalu, 1989). In Isan region the Thai and Isan were mixed in rural area generally (Chanthao,2022) . In this research showed that the Thai language is mixed with English language in communication contents, especially culture. The mixing can occur in more than one language in conversation. For example, Thai is the mother tongue mixed with English or the husband's language. While the Isan dialect is the mother tongue, it will be mixed with Thai or English. However, this research did not find that the husband's language or not English were used and mixed with other languages. Many types of vocabulary are mixed, such as nouns, verbs, suffixes, exclamations, and pronouns. Especially the Isan pronouns. Code-mixing implies the native language of speakers. They, therefore, mix their mother tongue with other languages of communication, especially the cultural vocabulary that is the identity of Isan society. Most code-mixing are semantic interpretations, comparing the meanings of words in two languages and, for instance, using Isan words to describe word meanings in another language. The code-mixing is related to the word interpretation so that the listener can understand more clearly the meaning. In addition, the Thai women living western countries would like to show the Thai culture by language and gesture, they mixed Thai words in

speaking the major language in her husband country. For instance, code-mixing the Thai word in spoken French of Thai women Youtuber at local weekend market.



**Figure 4.** Code-mixing in Thai women YouTube channel  
 ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig1ZRt1C48A&t=649s> )

The language identity of the Thai woman on YouTube in figure 4 shown that the woman mixed Thai language when she spoke French language with the customers. This mixing related the Thai greeting gesture ‘Wai’ (Thai cultural greeting). The Thailand’s flag has shown in the place with Thai language was used as the language identity.

**5.4. Language translation**

As the Thai women are multilingual or bilingual, they have translation competence (Lorscher,2012). The code-switching and mixing of speakers serve some purposes. One of them regularly takes place is the word meaning explanation and the meaning comparison between Thai and another language to understand clearly. For example, on YouTube, the woman informed about marriage documentation and visa to enter her husband's country. However, the specific English words were interpreted in the Thai language. Language translation during communication or conversation has thus become another language identity of Thai women on YouTube.

The translation or interpretation from Thai or Isan into English or husband's husband commonly appears by Thai women of transnational married women. That is, the foreign husband could speak Thai or understand Thai but not well; therefore, his wife will be translator when they go out together in public places. Seemingly, the translation on YouTube occurs naturally when the speakers would explain the Thai meaning to English language. The instance, language translation between Thai and English languages in order to explain Thai food for her husband’s friends in her channel ‘American-Daughter in Law’.

Example 2: Language translation in conversation.

Woman: (Thai)	/wan <sup>1</sup> -ni: <sup>4</sup> phian <sup>3</sup> raw <sup>1</sup> ma: <sup>1</sup> jiam <sup>3</sup> //raw <sup>1</sup> ja <sup>2</sup> tham <sup>1</sup> ?a: <sup>1</sup> -ha:n <sup>5</sup> e-sa:n <sup>5</sup> pia <sup>3</sup> phuak <sup>3</sup> -khaw <sup>5</sup> /	
(English)	today. friends. we. come. visit. we. will. do. food Isan. for. them.	
	‘Today our friends come visit. We would cook Isan foods for them’	
Husband:	Don’t step what does that translate to, Baby. It is Laap Moo ?	
woman: (Thai)	/chai <sup>3</sup> man <sup>1</sup> mai <sup>3</sup> -chai <sup>3</sup> Laap <sup>3</sup> -Moo <sup>5</sup> original Thai <sup>1</sup> na /	(1)
(English)	It not Laap-Moo original Thai fp.	(2)
	‘It was different style cooking from my Thai original Laap.’	

In the conversation above, it was commonly situation when the woman showed Thai food or cultures. The woman is the translator for her husband and his family or friends in English language. The sentence (1) the speaker used Thai to her husband or audient of her channel that is the woman is translator between Thai and English. The sentence (2) She translated the sentence (1) in English for his friends. The translator function is language identity of Thai women who live in transnational family and the member of family has been in different language and culture.

**5.5. Language loyalty**

Language loyalty is related to a speaker's attitude towards a language, including the choice of a multilingual speakers. The language loyalty in Isan dialect or their mother tongue of Thai women in transnational family living in abroad shows through the language choice and code-switching in their YouTube channel communication. They are proud and confident to speak the Isan dialect on their YouTube channels and speak it to Isan people when they

meet abroad. In addition, many families also teach Isan and Thai languages to their husbands and children. Loyalty to their language reminds them to warm themselves in a foreign country by speaking their mother tongue, which reflects their Thai identity. Language loyalty in Isan also allows them to communicate comfortably and be confident.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Conclusion

Linguistic identity is a recurring phenomenon of language use of communication naturally. The people in a community could see the linguistic features of a group or a speaker until it can be identified that is a language identity. The results of this research highlighted the language identity of Thai women married to foreign husbands in five key areas: being multilingual with more than three languages: Thai as the national language, Isan as a first language, English as an international language, or her husband's national language. Code-switching and mixing occur through multilingual language skill. The code-switching between the Thai and the Isan language is marked on YouTube, while the switching between Thai and the husband's language is marked in a daily speech in public areas.

Regarding code-mixing, vocabulary levels related to Thai and Isan culture were found on YouTube. In a daily speech, the mixing showed that the English or Thai words were mixed with the husband's language. The purpose of mixing is to describe meanings or compare two language terms. In addition, Thai women have the skills to be a translator or use the language in the form of translation. Most language translations describe the meaning of the words being discussed and compare the meaning in two languages while addressing the content of other societies. The code-switching and using Thai or Isan in their daily speech or on YouTube reveal their language loyalty toward their mother tongue.

### 6.2 Discussion

Thai women married to foreign husbands living in Thailand or migrating to their husband's country gradually build a group's language identity through everyday language use in Thai society and on their YouTube channel. There are five linguistic identity main characteristics: multilingual, code-switch, code-mixing, language translation, and language loyalty. The Thai women's multilingualism stems from her requirement to migrate to her husband's country. The language policy of western countries is to encourage foreigners living in non-English speaking countries to have language skill assessments to communicate and understand the western culture in their husband's country. This policy benefits Thai women in daily communication, work, joining the local culture, and adjusting to a new society. Thailand should apply this policy to foreign husbands who migrate to live in Thailand.

Code-switching and code-mixing are a natural phenomenon on YouTube, while it serves the specific purpose of communicating in everyday life and relation to one's interlocutor. These phenomena let the women use Thai or Isan to translate word meaning explanation. Therefore, the code-switch is related to the interlocutor, especially the husband, who has no Thai language skills to communicate with Thai people in the Thai social context. This issue relates to Thai policies that will likely encourage foreign husbands to have sufficient Thai language and cultural skills to communicate daily and live in Thailand.

## VII. RECOMMENDATION

This research finding leads to further research issues to complement the knowledge of the linguistic identity of Thai women in migrant families, as follows:

Research the content identity of Thai women in foreign countries on YouTube to highlight the points of their narrative, which would help learn about the problems and decide to marry a foreign husband and immigration to a new society in the husband's country.

Research on the preservation of the mother tongue of Thai women living abroad to shed light on the methods of preserving the mother tongue and the contributing factors to the preservation of the mother tongue abroad.

Research on the consolidation of critical terms of intercultural communication to create knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures concerning the context of transnational marriage and adaptation to the social culture of the husband's country.

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