1.0 Introduction

Wander through Thailand’s ancient monuments and you will be struck by an abundance of ancient inscriptions. Look closer, and you will realize that a diversity of scripts are carved in the stones: Khmer, Mon, Burmese, Chinese, Jawi, Tamil-Brahmi, Javanese, Devanāgarī, as well as several ancient Tai scripts.

These artifacts reflect Thailand’s place as a crossroads of diverse languages and cultures. Empires have expanded and contracted through the region, bringing together the unique amalgam of language and culture that is Thailand.

Despite this culturally diverse history, modern Thailand, in the words of Mahidol University’s Suwilai Premsrirat, “thinks of itself as being essentially monolingual.”

While most Thai people have some awareness of the northern hilltribes in their exotic costumes and the southern Malayu-speaking Muslims, there remains a general sense of apathy regarding the true ethnolinguistic diversity of the country. An official from the National Statistics Office, for example, responded with disbelief when told that roughly 70 languages are spoken within the country!

This paper, then, endeavors to summarize historical facts related to language usage, policy, and practice in Thailand, as well as to give an overview of current language trends leading up to the Royal Institute’s National Language Policy, approved by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on 7 February 2010.

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1 Affiliations: Department of Linguistics, Payap University (Chiang Mai) and SIL International. Member, National Language Policy Committee, Royal Institute of Thailand.

2 Suwilai Premsrirat. Comité International Permanent des Linguistes (The Permanent International Committee of Linguists) Award Acceptance Speech. 18th International Congress of Linguists, at Korea University, Seoul, Korea. 2008. http://www.ciplnet.com/data/premsrirat.html Accessed 22 October 2010. It should be noted that Thai scholars prefer to be cited by first name (rather than surname), a convention that will be followed in this paper.

2.0 Historical overview
Language practices (and, by implication, explicit and implicit language policies) in Thailand have been molded by historical, political, and economic factors.

2.1 Language in Siam before the Revolution
At some points during the Ayutthaya Period (1351 to 1767), at least two and sometimes four languages were used in Royal inscriptions and decrees, reflecting an ethnically diverse population. Sheik Ahmad Quomi, a Persian merchant, became a cabinet minister within a few years of his 1605 arrival in Ayutthaya, as did Greek adventurer Constantine Phaulkon a generation later. Both of these incidents were connected with Ayutthaya’s international trade. At the dawn of the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) Period (1782-1932), literary works from Chinese, Mon, Burmese, Persian, Malay, and Javanese were translated into Siamese. During the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851-68) and King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V, reigned 1868-1910), the Thai elite became increasingly attuned to Western languages, with many royals pursuing education in Europe. Simultaneously, the promulgation of modern education, largely through the efforts of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943), favored Siamese, overshadowing the traditional monastic schools (where local scripts were more likely to be taught) and missionary schools in the North (where Lanna script was used). Not only was a national language needed for communication throughout the Kingdom, it was also a necessary ingredient for nationhood in an era when Siam’s territorial integrity was under constant threat from the colonial powers.

5 http://www.bunnag.in.th/english/history_01.html. Accessed 22 October 2010. Sheik Ahmad’s descendants, the Bunnag family, have continued this tradition of service to Thailand through the present. Mr. Tej Bunnag, for example served as Foreign Minister from 2008-2009. Ms. Jiraporn Bunnag served as the Deputy Secretary of the National Security Council, as well as an important member of the Royal Institute’s National Language Policy Drafting Committee.
7 Wyatt, 55.
9 Through astute diplomacy, Siam was indeed the only country in Southeast Asia not to fall under the colonial powers, a significant point of national pride to this day. Nonetheless, some Thais point out that, had Siam been colonized, English abilities in the nation would be higher.
2.2 Language Policy after the Revolution

In the years following the 1932 revolution (which abolished the absolute monarchy and led to the 1939 change of the name of the country from Siam to Thailand), Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkram pursued a policy of nationalism and modernization. As Royal Institute Academy of Arts Chair Udom Warotamasikkhadit relates:

The declaration of the Thai language as the national language of Thailand was made on 24 June 1940 during the regime of Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkram, the country’s third prime minister. The declaration, State Convention number 9, did not mention working languages at that time, such as Teochew, Patani Malay, and many other minority languages because the government was concerned about national security and ignored the importance of languages other than the Thai language used in the Kingdom of Thailand.

At that time, it was felt that every citizen of Thailand must learn and write in the Thai language only, and learning of other languages was considered a threat to national security. State Convention number 9 brought, among others, the following three benefits: significantly improved literacy rate in the country (the high rate is comparable to that of most other countries in Asia); the development of Thai-style democracy, and modernization.\(^\text{10}\)

As Udom explains elsewhere, the Pibunsongkram administration sought to revise the Thai alphabet:

To facilitate wider literacy, a major revision of the Thai writing system was undertaken. *The Royal Gazette* 59.35.1137-1141 announced on 29 May 1942 that the Meeting of the Committee on Thai Language Promotion on 23 May 1942 decided to revise the Thai writing system in order to make it easier for learners by deleting redundant vowels and consonants.\(^\text{11}\)

This revision, which was abandoned shortly after its implementation, would not merit mention in a paper on Thai language policy, were it not for an interesting incident during World War II. Japan had occupied Thailand, and suggested that Thailand adopt the language of the Empire. The Pibunsongkram administration was willing to acquiesce, but asked that Japanese language adoption be delayed until the Thai alphabet revision had been fully implemented. The war ended before that was accomplished!

The status of Thai as the national language would remain in effect, both consciously and unconsciously, through the present. During the expansion of communism, for example, Chinese schools in Thailand faced new restrictions as to how much Chinese language

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\(^\text{11}\) Some reductions had already been undertaken previously, to facilitate the development of Thai typewriters. The 1942 revision, however, was much more dramatic, and was eventually abandoned. Udom Warotamasikkhadit, *Revision of the Thai Writing System*, m.s. 2010.
instruction was permitted. Vietnamese migrants who made their way to Thailand in several waves after World War II were viewed with distrust, their children encouraged to abandon their heritage language in favor of Thai. The study of Russian was viewed with extreme suspicion. Ethnic minorities, including the Northern hilltribes, the Northeastern Khmer groups, and the Southern Malay-speaking Muslims, were encouraged to embrace the Thai language as part of assimilation policies ("Thai-ization").

2.3 Precursors to the Current Situation
During the late 1980s, government attitudes toward ethnic minority groups relaxed somewhat. The Communist threat dissipated, and Thailand became a magnet for western tourists fascinated by the “exotic” hilltribes. In the North, Christian churches that had conducted their services in Standard Thai since World War II resumed the use of spoken Kammuang (Northern Thai/Lanna), while Northern monasteries resumed teaching the ancient Lanna script to novices and laypeople alike. This trend continued through the 1990s, as reflected in the 1997 Constitution’s tolerant attitude toward local culture and the National Education Act of 1999’s child-centered approach, which encouraged the integration of “local wisdom and culture” into the curriculum. Nonetheless, the fact that languages like Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malay, and Arabic were not included as electives on the national university entrance exams discouraged the serious study of heritage languages. Meanwhile, the nation as a whole became increasingly obsessed with learning English and, to a lesser extent, Japanese and Chinese, the languages of international trade. Middle class Thais flocked to language classes, and many furthered their studies abroad as the economic policies initiated in the late 1980s resulted in greater prosperity for many urban Thais.

3.0 “Does Thailand Need a National Language Policy?”
Given the historical situation, one might legitimately ask whether contemporary Thailand needs a language policy. Is state-level language intervention or planning needed in an increasingly market-driven language situation? Does Thailand need a national language policy?

This question was raised over a meal during the First World Congress on the Power of Language. The diners included two fellows from the Royal Institute of Thailand—Dr. Prasert Na Nagara and Dr. Udom Warotamasikkhadit—and three multilingual education consultants from SIL International—Dr. Susan Malone, Dr. Dennis Malone, and Dr. Udom Warotamasikkhadit, personal communication, 2008.

12 Responses to “Thai-ization” varied. Many of the Northern hilltribes genuinely appreciated the opportunity to receive a Thai education, although some came to mourn the resulting weakening of their languages and cultures. By contrast, many Southern Muslims perceived Thai-ization as a direct assault on their language, culture, and religion, contributing to periodic armed conflict.

14 In the years following the 1932 revolution, Lanna texts had been publicly burned as part of the language centralization/reform process. (Diller 2002: 89).

15 This conference was held in Bangkok, 22-25 May 2006.
Kimmo Kosonen. Dr. Udom observed that if a newly-formed country like Timor-Leste had a formal language policy, surely an ancient kingdom like Thailand ought to have one. Given the Royal Institute’s role as the official authority in matters pertaining to the Thai language, it seemed only natural that the Royal Institute should take a principal role in developing the national language policy (NLP).

Dr. Udom organized several meetings to further explore this idea. These included videoconferences held at the US Embassy in Bangkok with language policy experts Dr. Bernard Spolsky and Dr. James W. Tollefson. On the basis of these discussions, the Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) was officially constituted by the Royal Institute of Thailand in December of 2006.

4.0 The Royal Institute Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) (2006-2010)

The Royal Institute is a long-standing Thai government body that serves as an academic resource for the nation. It has its roots in the “Royal Council” established by King Prajadhiipok (Rama VII) in 1926. In 1933, it was renamed the “Royal Institute” through an act of the post-1932 revolution parliament. The 2001 Royal Institute Act stipulates that the Royal Institute should report directly to the Prime Minister and carry out such functions as:

- To compile dictionaries, encyclopedias, terminologies in all fields of knowledge, and coin new words
- To establish criteria of Thai usage in order to preserve and promote the Thai language, a national identity.
- To act as a consultant and advisory body on academic matters as requested by the Prime Minister or the Cabinet.

The Royal Institute is comprised of three academies: the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, the Academy of Science, and the Academy of Arts. Outstanding scholars representing diverse fields may be appointed as “Fellows” (of which there are 84 persons), “Associate Fellows” (of which there are 79 persons) or “Honorary Fellows (of which there are 4 persons). Non-fellows can be appointed to serve alongside fellows on the Royal Institute Academic Committees (of which there are 80 committees).

The CDNLP was thus formed in 2006 as one of the Academic Committees under the Academy of Arts, with Dr. Udom as committee chair.

From the outset, Dr. Udom and many committee members regarded language as a resource. This viewpoint, which was heavily influenced by the committee’s reading of

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16 Dr. Bernard Spolsky later visited Thailand, meeting with the Royal Institute and speaking at the Royal Institute-sponsored “International Conference on National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity” (2008).
the Australian National Policy on Languages, prompted the CDNLP to ask, “How can this resource of language be developed to benefit the country as a whole, as well as individuals within the country?”

This required an assessment of both the current language situation in Thailand, and a forecast of the country’s future language-related needs. Thus, the committee was divided into six subcommittees, each responsible for one of the following six NLP areas:

1. Thai for Thai Students and Thai Nationals
2. Regional Languages (including ethnic minority languages)
3. Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages
4. Teaching Thai to Migrants Seeking Employment in Thailand
5. Language Needs of the Visually and Hearing Impaired
6. Translation, Interpretation, and Localization Standards

The subcommittees, with the support of the CDNLP, embarked on a process of information gathering and research. This was accomplished through a number of academic conferences and public forums. Some of these were held in Bangkok while others were held in the northern and southern regions of the country. Stakeholders from many walks of life were involved in these events, including university professors, government officials from several ministries, United Nations staff, ethnic minority people, language professionals (translators, interpreters), representatives from the blind and deaf communities, foreign diplomats, educators (from both domestic and international schools), business people, etc. Over 1000 people attended at least one CDNLP event, while others joined in via live radio and internet broadcasts. This process was crucial to the formation of the language policy as it provided the CDNLP with a clearer picture of the language situation in the nation.

In the next section, then, I will return to the question of “Does Thailand need a language policy,” highlighting the findings and specific policy recommendations of the CDNLP subcommittees.

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17 Dr. David Bradley, long a friend of Thailand and Dr. Udom, recommended the Australian policy and facilitated contact with its author, Dr. Joseph Lo Bianco. Although the policy is no longer in print, a copy was located in the UNESCO-Bangkok library and made available to all the members of the CDNLP. Dr. Lo Bianco was unfailingly generous in providing advice to the CDNLP via email and his participation in the CDNLP’s two international events— the “Forum on Bilingual and Multilingual Education in the National Language Policy” (2007) and the “International Conference on National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity (2008).”

18 The activities of the committees, including domestic and international conferences, consultations with stakeholders, etc., are described in Cholticha’s paper, and are thus not repeated here.
4.1 Subcommittee on Thai for Thai Students and Thai Nationals

4.1.1 Scope
Of the six subcommittees, this is the one most in sync with the traditional activities of the Royal Institute. Its role was to survey the current state of the Thai language and make recommendations.

4.1.2 Findings
This subcommittee naturally re-emphasized the status of Thai as the national language, a source of national unity. As such, it should be learned by all Thai citizens. The subcommittee also reflected the concerns of many in the Royal Institute, the Ministry of Education, and elsewhere that the language be maintained and developed in the face of globalization. This would include defending the Thai lexicon and Thai grammar from undue influence from English. There are also concerns that the many middle and upper-class Thai children attending international and bilingual schools are receiving inadequate grounding in Thai.

4.1.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)
*Every Thai Citizen will effectively learn and use the Thai language, which is the national and official language.*

4.2 Subcommittee on the Regional Languages

4.2.1 Scope
This subcommittee had some commonalities with the “Thai for Thai” subcommittee, in that its purview included what are commonly considered the four “regional dialects” of Thai—Isan (Northeastern Thai), Kammuang (Northern Thai), Klang (Central Thai, the basis of Standard Thai), and Tay (Southern Thai). However, it also was responsible for ethnic minority languages.

4.2.2 Findings
As mentioned earlier, Thailand thinks of itself as a monolingual state. The reality is that Thailand is home to roughly 70 languages, as can be seen from the Thailand entry in the *Ethnologue*, as well as Mahidol University’s *Ethnolinguistic Map of Thailand*. Some of these languages are small and severely endangered, including Chong, Bisu, Malbri, Same, Mokena, and Mani. There are also much larger groups: Malayu (Pattani Malay) and Thai Khmer each boast in excess of 1 million speakers, in addition to half a million Saw Karen (roughly equivalent to the population of Wales) and tens of thousands of Lisu, Khmu, Ache, Lau, etc. As many as 1 out of every 15 children in Thailand speak a non-

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19 All policy quotations represent an unofficial translation of the policy document, and an official translation has not yet been prepared. The Thai original must be regarded as the final authority on all questions related to the policy.
Tai language in the home.\textsuperscript{20} And while an increasing number of minority people are becoming bilingual in Standard Thai, the combination of higher birth rates (in comparison to urban Thais) and immigration from neighboring countries, plus language-related activism and preservation efforts, indicates that these languages will continue to be spoken.

This linguistic diversity impacts society in a number of ways. In terms of education, an increasingly large body of statistics indicates that the monolingual Thai approach to education is not producing satisfactory results among ethnic children. While it can be said that most of these children are learning at least some Thai, they often lag far behind their native Thai-speaking peers. Ministry of Education statistics from 2007, for example, found that 25-35\% of second grade children in the far North, deep South, and Northeast border regions were functionally illiterate in Thai, compared to a mere 1\% in Bangkok. The situation is particularly troubling in the Malayu-speaking South, as described in a recent Bangkok Post article:

According to the Ministry of Education's 2008 National Standard Test, 25.50\% of Grade 3 students in the deep South cannot read Thai at all, and 17.08\% need improvement. This compares to the national averages of 4.18\% and 3.52\%, respectively. Thai writing skills are even worse--42.11\% are unable to write and 20.86\% need improvement, comparing to the national averages of 5.81\% and 10.53\%.\textsuperscript{21}

While troubling enough in their own right, the statistics above do not address the problem of out-of-school children. It is widely believed that a disproportionate number of ethnic children have either dropped out or never been enrolled in school. While the Ministry of Education is taking steps to improve enrollment and retention (including a policy of offering completely free primary education, with no fees or other costs that could prevent poverty-stricken children from attending school), many who have investigated this matter in depth (including UNICEF, UNESCO, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Mahidol University, and SIL International) have concluded that mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs in which the students learn to read and write their mother tongue before bridging to Thai are needed. Pilot projects among Malayu, Mon, Pwo Karen, and Hmong speaking children have produced encouraging results, leading some to call for expansion of the MTB-MLE approach throughout the country.

Thailand’s ethnic diversity also holds implications for such areas as public health and legal services. UNICEF’s 2007 MICS study, for example, found that vaccination rates and awareness of AIDS/HIV issues was lower among ethnic minority language speakers

\textsuperscript{20} This figure is the result of my calculations, based on statistics gleaned from a number of sources. However, it should be noted that truly comprehensive statistics on the number of minority language speakers in Thailand do not yet exist.

in comparison to the population as a whole. Recognizing this fact, the Thai Ministry of Public Health, as well as UNICEF and UNESCO, have used ethnic languages, as well as immigrant languages (primarily Burmese and Mon), in health campaigns. On the issue of legal services, Hilltribe activists claim that some ethnic people have been unfairly imprisoned because they did not understand police or court proceedings, as Thailand has no statutes mandating court interpreters for non-Thai speakers.

4.2.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)

Every individual has the right to use his/her mother-tongue language to communicate within a group, and the rights to learn both their mother-tongue language/ native Thai language and the national language for communication at the national level.

The government shall maintain that the language and traditions of the ethnic groups are a national treasure of value and importance.

4.3 Subcommittee on Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages

4.3.1 Scope

This subcommittee was charged with investigating the roles of various languages of commerce—principally English, but also Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. In addition, they investigated the language situation vis-à-vis the languages of neighboring countries, languages that are of no interest to most Thais.

4.3.2 Findings

As expected, this subcommittee found that English is gaining importance in Thailand daily. Nonetheless, the subcommittee was concerned about Thai children being thrust too quickly into English, without acquiring a sound foundation in Thai listening, speaking, reading, and writing first. Indeed, a British Council official who attended some subcommittee meetings cautioned that too much English too soon could actually damage children. The subcommittee chair felt that some Thai children in some of the less reputable bilingual (Thai-English) and international schools were actually becoming “illiterate in two languages.” Thus, this subcommittee agreed with other subcommittees on the importance of early learning taking place in the child’s mother tongue.

As for languages other than English, the subcommittee found an increased interest in the Korean language, brought about in part from Korean cultural imports (music, movies, television series, food) and secondarily from Korean business interests. Japanese continues to enjoy a level of popularity. Chinese has grown in importance to the business sector. While most Thais of Chinese ancestry are no longer fluent in the language (due to past assimilation policies and social tendencies), many are now studying the language, or encouraging their children to do so.

Thais remain largely apathetic where languages of neighboring countries are concerned. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, offered 12 scholarships to study
Cambodian; only 2 students applied. However, this indifference may be causing Thailand to miss out on opportunities. Chinese-built (and to a lesser extent Korean-build) roads now crisscross the Mekong region, making overland travel much more convenient than ever before. When the bridge is completed connecting Laos to Thailand’s northernmost province of Chiang Rai, it will only take six hours to drive from Thailand to China. Similarly, the trip from Northeastern Thailand to the Vietnam coast can now be made in a single day, and it is possible to drive from Bangkok, to Phnom Penh, and on to Ho Chi Minh City. All these things would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

The situation of neighboring languages is one area where Thailand truly has underdeveloped resources. Northeastern Thailand is home to many Vietnamese immigrants; while many have abandoned their heritage language, there is still a significant Vietnamese-speaking community. Policies encouraging the preservation of the language among these communities could pay dividends for Thailand later. Similarly, the 1 million Thai-Khmer speakers along Thailand’s eastern border would be able to learn Standard Khmer with relative ease.22 23

Thus, Thailand has a vested interest in developing these language resources, not only for commerce with neighboring countries, but also for social and political reasons. Everyday, economic migrants from these countries stream into Thailand. The Chinese roads will only make this easier. For immigration officials, police officers, and health officials to manage this influx, language skills will be needed.

Thailand’s neighbors, by contrast, are very interested in learning Thai. Thai language university courses in Yunnan (PRC), Vietnam, and Cambodia are well attended. Chinese students have enrolled in Thai universities by the hundreds, taking courses where Thai is the medium of instruction. Lao speakers easily acquire Thai listening skills via Thai television and radio, as do Shan speakers in northeastern Burma.24 As Thai Finance Minister Koran Chatikavanij recently told the author, “We are happy for them all to learn Thai!” Nonetheless, this could put Thailand at a linguistic disadvantage, if the country is forced to depend on non-Thai nationals to facilitate communication with neighboring countries.

22 It should be noted that there are significant dialect differences between the Khmer dialect spoken in eastern Thailand and the standard Khmer spoken in Cambodia. Special classes would be required to teach Thai-Khmer speakers the systematic differences between the varieties.

23 This is another area in which the Regional Language Subcommittee findings overlap with the Regional Languages Subcommittee: Thai-Khmer speaking children tend to do poorly in school. Some in the Thai-Khmer community have asked Mahidol University for assistance in starting a MTB-MLE program. This could simultaneously improve the students’ school performance while also giving them the tools to serve as bridges between Thailand and Cambodia.

24 The Thai, Shan and Lao languages are closely related members of the Southwestern Tai family.
4.3.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)

*The government shall encourage the populace to attain abilities in the use of important languages, including such official and national languages that offer occupational benefits.*

4.4 Subcommittee on Teaching Thai to Migrants Seeking Employment in Thailand

4.4.1 Scope
This subcommittee necessarily overlaps somewhat with the Subcommittee on Languages of Commerce. It differs in that it is mainly concerned with teaching the Thai language to immigrants from neighboring countries, particularly Myanmar.

4.4.2 Findings
Estimates vary, but there may be as many as 2 million legal and illegal migrants in Thailand. Most of these are from Myanmar, with a smaller portion from Laos and Cambodia, respectively. They typically work in low-paying service jobs that are unattractive to Thais.\(^{25}\)

The migrant situation has introduced stresses into the public health system, which has acknowledged the need for language services in migrant languages. The Ministry of Education has been challenged to respond to the educational needs of migrant children, many of whom do not attend school. Businesses employing large numbers of migrants have cooperated with the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission to offer Thai classes.

4.4.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)

*No specific recommendations at this time, pending additional information.*

4.5 Subcommittee on Language Needs of the Visually and Hearing Impaired.

4.5.1 Scope
This subcommittee looks after the unique language-related access needs of Thailand’s visually and hearing impaired communities.

4.5.2 Findings
The blind and deaf communities in Thailand are well-recognized and well-organized. An extensive nationwide network of schools, many under royal patronage, address their unique educational needs (although mainstreaming is growing in popularity). Some television programs, such as news reports or parliamentary debates, are interpreted in

\(^{25}\) Foreigners from “developed” countries are typically not considered “migrants,” although some of them, such as this author, make Thailand their home!
sign. The visually impaired are able to access Thai-language computer tools enabling them to function well in the information arena. The Thai government’s policy for the hearing impaired is considered a model in the region.

Nonetheless, there remain some obstacles in ensuring equal access to information, particularly in relation to government services.

4.5.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)

The government shall ensure that the people with disabilities are able to access and understand the media.

4.6 Subcommittee on Translation, Interpretation, and Localization Standards

4.6.1 Scope

This subcommittee was charged with researching the translation industry in Thailand, working with translators, interpreters, government officials, and businesses to investigate the current situation and determine future directions.

4.6.2 Findings

The translation industry in Thailand is, at present, completely unregulated. Anyone, regardless of training or knowledge, can open a translation business—as evidenced by the many “Translation in All Languages” signboards in downtown Bangkok! This is distressing to the higher caliber translation professionals, who feel that their industry would benefit from government-imposed regulations and standards. In addition, foreign embassies have expressed concern about the quality of translated documents they receive.

English-Thai/Thai-English translation is the dominant player in the marker. Nonetheless, other languages are gaining in importance. Bangkok has positioned itself as a global health hub, resulting in hundreds of thousands of “medical tourism” patients from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, resulting in new opportunities for Arabic-speaking Thai Muslims and other minority groups. Thousands of Thai-German marriages have fostered a growing need for translation between those languages.

Even subtler is Thailand’s position as a global center for MICE—Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions. This creates a need for unique translation pairs, such as English-Russian or Japanese-Chinese. Similarly, Bangkok is a major hub for agencies of

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26 For ease of reference, and unless indicated otherwise, “translation” is here used as a general term to encapsulate “translation [written], interpretation [oral], and localization”

27 The German Embassy, for example, will now only accept translations done by one specific professor.

28 The Thai Ministry of Education does not yet recognize the validity of degrees issued by many of the Middle Eastern universities that Thai Muslims attend, limiting job opportunities and leading to frustration.
For large events involving languages other than Thai, businesses must “import” temporary translators. However, again, this is not due to a lack of local languages resources. While there may be few or no Thais able to translate between Chinese and Japanese or Russian and French, there is a large community of expatriates living in Thailand. Current labor regulations reserve “skilled” professions (a category which includes translators) for Thai nationals. Thus, there is an interest on the part of some businesses (particularly among computer-assisted localization firms working in multiple languages) in both relaxing labor laws for translators and implementing a system of translator licensing comparable to that found in many western countries and China.

As in the case in many countries, awareness raising needs to take place among the business community, to help them realize the nuances of translation, interpretation, and localization. That, paired with a qualification system for translators and, by implication, translation training to prepare qualified translators should have a positive impact on the industry as a whole.

### 4.6.3 Policy Statement (from the National Language Policy draft approved by the Prime Minister 9 February 2010)

*The government shall encourage the establishment of studies in translation and interpretation, and encourages better quality and standardization for professions in translation and interpretation*

### 5.0 Conclusion

The National Language Policy of Thailand (2010) represents a significant first step in a systematic effort to develop the language resources of the kingdom. More than three years of work has gone into developing the policy, much of that effort being directed toward gathering information from related stakeholders and raising awareness of the complexities of the language situation among government officials and the general public.

The Royal Institute Committee to Draft the National Language Policy (CDNLP) was deeply excited when Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva signed the NLP on 7 February 2010. Yet much work remains to be done. With his signature, the Prime Minister also authorized the formation of a strategic implementation committee, to be composed of cabinet-level officials from various ministries. The strategic implementation committee will be supported by a working committee in the Royal Institute, comprised of many of the same individuals who worked on the CDNLP. It is the deep hope of all on the CDNLP that these policy recommendations can be translated into concrete action, for the benefit of all Thais.

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29 Reliable sources estimate that there are 3000-4000 United Nations staff based in Bangkok.