

The Pronoun SHE in Thai Informal Style¹

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Abstract

In some languages like Thai, multiple first and second person forms are commonly used to index gender, age, rank and status. It has been pointed out that contact with English as a global language, especially through the media, has resulted in the borrowing of English first and second person pronouns. Recently, however, the third person pronoun SHE has also been observed in informal Thai interaction and in particular on the Internet. The present study focuses on the social indexing of the pronoun SHE in informal Thai. Data were collected from two Thai public web boards, one targeting general readership and the other specifically attracting a gay audience. The data were compared and analyzed in three dimensions, namely public exposure, genders of the referents, and also connotations of the speakers. Data analysis reveals that the pronoun SHE in informal Thai is syntactically different from its English counterpart in that it remains morphologically uninflected for case. It is used primarily among women and gay men. With regard to its expressive and social functions, similar to the pronoun *she* in some varieties of English, it indexes negative stereotypes of (Western) femininity of the referent. At the same time, SHE when used by gay men, asserts the gay sexual orientation of the speaker. This pronoun borrowing phenomenon may be motivated by the combination of two mechanisms of contact-induced language change: passive familiarity and deliberate decision.

Keywords: personal pronouns, pronoun borrowing, language contact

บทคัดย่อ

สรรพนามบุรุษที่หนึ่งและสรรพนามบุรุษที่สองในภาษาทั่วไป โดยเฉพาะภาษาไทยสามารถบ่งชี้ปัจจัยทางสังคมได้ เช่น เพศ อายุ หรือสถานะของผู้พูดและผู้ฟัง ปัจจุบันภาษาอังกฤษ

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เป็นภาษาสำคัญของโลกและมีอิทธิพลต่อภาษาไทย ส่งผลให้มีการยืมรูปสรรพนามบุรุษที่หนึ่งและบุรุษที่สองเข้ามาในระบบภาษาไทย นอกจากนี้ผู้วิจัยสังเกตว่ายังมีการยืมรูปสรรพนามบุรุษที่สามของภาษาอังกฤษมาใช้อีกด้วย งานวิจัยนี้จึงมุ่งเน้นศึกษาการบ่งชี้ปัจจัยทางสังคมของสรรพนามบุรุษที่สาม SHE ในภาษาไทยแบบไม่เป็นทางการ ข้อมูลที่ใช้วิเคราะห์รวบรวมมาจากการदानข่าวสาธารณะของไทย 2 แห่ง ได้แก่ กระดานข่าวสำหรับผู้ทั่วไปและสำหรับผู้ที่เป็นเกย์ ผู้วิจัยนำข้อมูลมาวิเคราะห์และเปรียบเทียบใน 3 มิติ ได้แก่ ความเป็นสาธารณะ เพศของผู้ที่ถูกอ้างถึง และความหมายโดยนัยของผู้พูด ผลการวิเคราะห์พบว่าสรรพนาม SHE ในภาษาไทยแบบไม่เป็นทางการมีความแตกต่างจากสรรพนาม SHE ในภาษาอังกฤษ เนื่องจากไม่มีการเปลี่ยนรูปตามการก นอกจากนี้สรรพนาม SHE มักใช้โดยผู้หญิงและกลุ่มเกย์ อย่างไรก็ตามผู้วิจัยพิจารณาจากความหมายโดยนัยของผู้พูดพบว่าสรรพนาม SHE ในภาษาไทยมีลักษณะคล้ายคลึงกับสรรพนาม SHE ในบางวิภาษษาของภาษาอังกฤษ กล่าวคือ มีความหมายโดยนัยที่สื่อในเชิงลบและแสดงให้เห็นบทบาททางเพศของผู้พูดในกลุ่มเกย์ ผู้วิจัยคาดว่าอาจเป็นเพราะกลวิธีการเปลี่ยนแปลงภาษาจากการสัมผัสภาษา 2 กลวิธี ได้แก่ *passive familiarity* และ *deliberate decision*

คำสำคัญ: บุรุษสรรพนาม การยืมสรรพนาม การสัมผัสภาษา

Introduction

Language as an interactive process performs multiple functions, including the expressive and social, by which speakers are able to “display personal and social identities, to convey attitudes and perform actions, and to negotiate relationships between self and other” (Schiffrin, 2001: 54). These two functions are especially apparent in the pronominal system of a language like Thai, with its multiple first and second person forms to index gender, age, rank and status. It has been pointed out that contact with English as a global language especially through the media, has resulted in the borrowing of English first and second person pronouns (Simpson, 1997). Recently, however, third person pronoun SHE has also been observed in informal Thai interaction and in particular on the Internet. The present study focuses on the social indexing of the English third person personal pronoun SHE in informal Thai found on Thai public web boards.

Thai Personal Pronouns

Numerous studies (such as Cooke, 1968; Palakornkul, 1972; Simpson, 1997; Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom, 2009; Higbie & Thinsan, 2003) suggest a similar result, that personal pronouns in Thai, unlike those in English, can convey not only grammatical functions (such as person and number) but also some social meanings, including gender and the relationship between conversation interlocutors. For example, the first person pronouns /phǒm/ and /dì.chan/ are different in terms of the gender of the speakers. The former is used exclusively by males while the latter is exclusive for females. Apart from gender, the distinction of pronoun choice can be caused by the level of formality. In most formal situations, the speakers may refer to themselves as /khaâ.phá.cào/ while in most intimate and private conversations, the speakers use the pronoun /kuu/. These studies illustrate how pronouns are selected in Thai conversations.

Identity, Indexicality and Linguistic Borrowing

Bucholtz and Hall define identity as “the social positioning of self and other” (2005: 586). It entails not only the broad demographic categories traditionally employed in sociological studies, but also “ethnographically specific cultural positions” as well as “temporary interactional stances and participant roles” (592). As such, identities are “in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of larger ideological processes and structures” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 606).

Identities are construed through indices of various kinds. An obvious example is the labels we assign to relatives and certain professions. Other semiotic and linguistic indices include implicatures, stances, styles or linguistic structures and systems. In Thai and other Asian languages, the indexing function of language is especially apparent in the pronominal systems. Multiple first, second and third person pronouns index social status – gender, relative age, degree of intimacy, rank, etc. – and must be negotiated interactionally (Simpson, 1997). Languages like these are said to have “‘open’ pronoun systems in which there may be dozens of ways to say ‘I’ and ‘you,’ depending

on (among other things) social relations between a speaker and a hearer” (Thomason, 2001: 84).

One source of the profusion of pronouns in open pronoun systems is linguistic borrowing. While pronoun borrowing is considered to be rare in the languages of the world, in fact it is rather common among Southeast Asian, Austronesian and Papuan languages (Thomason, 2001). Thai in particular has a long tradition of pronoun borrowing, including the entire set of royal pronouns from Khmer (Thomason, 2001: 84) and Chinese equivalents of “I” and “you” used especially by young men among peers. More recently, contact with English as a global language, especially through the media, has resulted in the borrowing of English first and second person pronouns. Although these pronouns have been borrowed into Thai, they haven’t replaced native Thai pronouns, but instead are simply added to the repertoire of reference forms available for use.

The Current Study

Based on a preliminary study (Rhekhailit, 2011) and on our casual observations and discussions, we hypothesized that the pronoun SHE can be used with the following conditions. First, it is used primarily by gay men. It also mainly refers to female celebrities and transgendered persons, and finally it conveys negative attitudes toward the referent. Data were collected from two Thai public web boards, namely Pantip.com and Palm-plaza.com, targeting two different genders of the audience. It should be noted at this point that the public web board is different from Social Networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook or Bebo in that the participants are supposedly anonymous, and they do not personally or necessarily know each other well like friends on SNSs. In addition, the topics discussed in public web boards are divided based on the interest of the audience, who will share knowledge and experiences similar to a virtual community. As a result, the language posted on the web board is more natural and diverse among different audiences. In addition, the audience of public web boards may represent

various groups of language users with different backgrounds unlike those on SNSs, who normally share the same experience or backgrounds.

Table 1 Distinctive features of the selected web boards

Pantip (Straight web board)	Palm-Plaza (Gay web board)
• Several topics are divided into rooms. • General topics are discussed. • The banners and advertisements are general and various, such as movies, hotels, cosmetics, cars, etc. • Pictures vary according to topics of discussion.	• Several topics are divided into rooms, but one room is for chatting. • Gay pornographic photos and clips are available for downloading. • The banners and advertisements are gay-oriented, e.g., porn DVDs, condoms and male cosmetics, etc. • Male pictures are highly welcomed.

Table 1 compares the characteristics of the selected web boards as the source of data. The first site, named Pantip, is well known among Thai users. It is divided into rooms based on topics, including sports, cosmetics, movies, and so on. The banners and advertisements found on the site also aim to attract general and various groups of audiences. In contrast to Pantip, the other site, Palm-Plaza, generally targets gay users. Even though it includes several general topics similar to those on Pantip, some topics on Palm-Plaza focus mainly on gay lifestyles. There are some banners and advertisements such as male cosmetics, food supplements, sexual items, etc. targeting gay audiences. Finally, male pictures are highly welcomed and popular. The total data gathered from each web board was approximately 4,000 words.

The gathered data were classified into groups based on the gender of the users. We set up criteria to identify the gender of the users as follows. From Pantip, the straight web board, the users were identified by their choice of language use, including final particles, either /khrap/ or /khà/, and reference terms. Specifically, the users who used the final particle /khrap/ were considered male users while those employing the particle /khà/ and its variant /kha/ were classified as women. Apart from final particles, we also considered the gender of the users by their choice

of referent terms, as some referent terms in Thai can identify the gender of the referents such as /phǒm/ for male speakers and /di.chǎn/ for females. Apart from linguistic characteristics, the contexts were also included as relevant clues, such as the reference to husband, girlfriend, or mother-in-law. The criteria are summarized in Table 2. While the users on Pantip were classified as male or female, those on Palm-Plaza were classified only as gay men. Gay women or lesbians were excluded, as they were not the targeted group of the web board itself.

Table 2 Classifying criteria of users' genders from the Pantip web board

Male users	Female users
• Final particle /khrap/ • Self-referent terms such as /phǒm/	• final particle / khà/ and its variant /kha/ • Self-referent terms such as /di.chǎn/ and /nǔu/

Based on the above criteria, the writers of the straight website were classified by their genders as shown in Figure 1. From the data, nearly half of the writers were females (up to 49 percent) while only a miniscule 10 percent were male users. Unfortunately, the rest of the users were unidentifiable, as summarized in Figure 1.

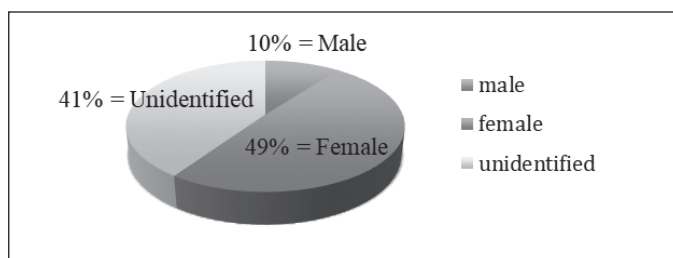


Figure 1 Gender distinction of the writers on the straight website

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data were analyzed among three dimensions, namely, public exposure, gender and connotation.

Public Exposure Dimension

We analyzed the referent of the pronoun SHE in Thai by identifying the level of its public exposure, according to three levels – celebrities, strangers, and family members – based on the familiarity or social closeness between the writers and the referent. As summarized in Figure 2, the level of the referent’s public exposure can be identified by the linguistic expressions referring to the referent (or the antecedent of the pronoun SHE). Specifically, if the referent is identified by a proper name, he or she is considered a celebrity commonly known to the public. If the referent is identified by common nouns such as transgender, nurse, or a receptionist, he or she is considered unfamiliar to the writers. Finally, when the referent is denoted by a kinship term, such as /phîi/ (older brother or sister) and /nóŋ/ (younger brother or sister), it is considered a family member with social closeness to the writer.

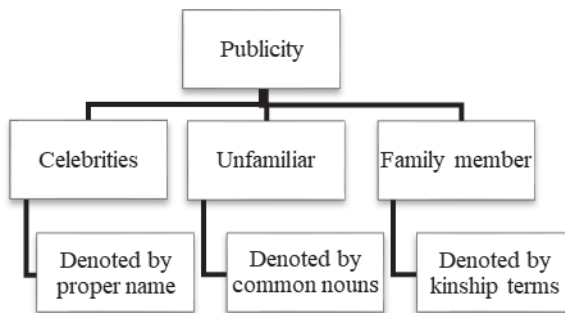


Figure 2 Degree of public exposure of the referent

The following figure (Figure 3) reveals the distribution of the pronoun SHE by the level of public exposure, according to the genders of the writers. From the data, the straight writers tend to use SHE when referring to the antecedent to all three levels of public exposure while gay writers do not use it when referring to their family members. However, the data show that the gay writers tend to use SHE mostly to refer to celebrities (up to 85 percent).

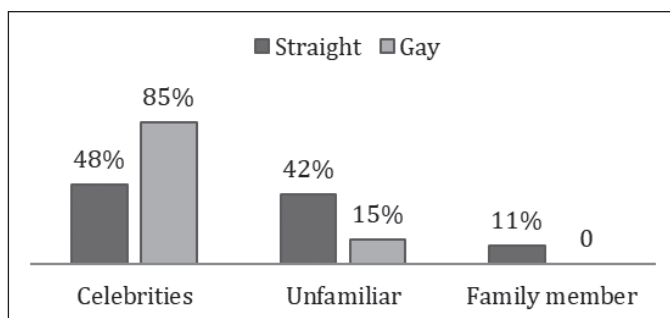


Figure 3 Use of SHE based on degree of public exposure of referent, straight vs. gay websites

Gender Dimensions

Apart from the levels of publicity, we also analyzed the gender of the referents. As summarized in Figure 4, the data analysis shows that in the majority of cases both gay and straight users employ SHE when referring to female referents, 69 and 95 percent respectively. However, a mere five percent of the uses of SHE by straight users refer to male referents. In contrast, the gay users use it up to 30 percent of the time when referring to male referents.

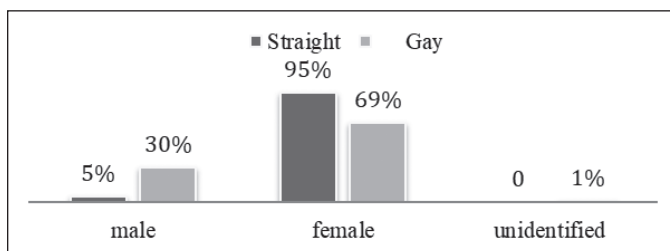


Figure 4 Distribution of the pronoun SHE by gender of the referents

Connotative Dimension

The last dimension of the analysis is the connotative dimension, which refers to the attitude of the writer toward the referent. It can be divided into three aspects, namely positive, neutral and negative, as summarized in Figure 5.

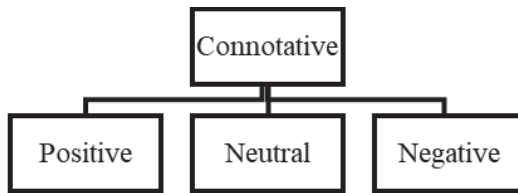


Figure 5 Connotation regarding the referent

The attitude of the writers can be detected by the choice of lexical items co-occurring with the pronoun SHE. First, the attitudes of the writers can be expressed by verbs. For example, verbs with positive meanings such as *love*, *like*, *admire*, *adore*, etc. can express positive attitudes of the writers, while verbs with negative meanings, such as *hate*, *dislike*, etc., express negative attitudes. Apart from verbs, the adjectives modifying the referent in the sentences can also index the attitude of the writers. Those with positive meanings such as *beautiful*, *well-built*, etc. can index positive attitudes of the writers while those with negative meanings such as *hot-tempered*, *stupid*, *arrogant*, etc. indicate negative attitudes.

The data analysis reveals that the writers of both genders use the pronoun SHE equally to express positive attitudes toward the referent at 35 percent. However, as can be seen in Figure 6 below, when expressing a negative attitude, the pronoun SHE is used more frequently by straight than by gay users. It is assumed that the pronoun SHE can express negative feelings of straight writers. However, when focusing on the use of SHE only with a negative attitude, gay men tend to use it when referring to male referents more than to females, as summarized in Figure 7. In addition, gay writers tend to use it in more neutral contexts (up to 24 percent compared to 11 percent of the straight users). Finally, more gay than straight users choose SHE when expressing a neutral attitude.

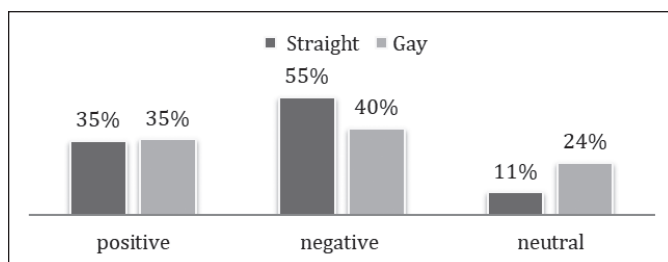


Figure 6 Attitude of the writers toward the referent

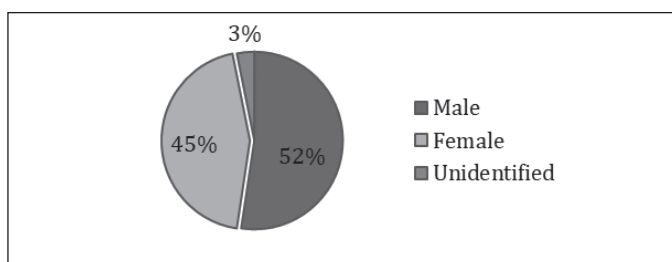


Figure 7 Gender distribution of SHE used by gay writers in negative contexts

Discussion

The pronoun SHE is used by both straight and gay writers on Thai web boards. The straight writers who use the form are predominantly, though not exclusively, women. Unlike its original counterpart, in all cases, the borrowed pronoun SHE in Thai is morphologically uninflected for case. That is, it remains in nominative form whether in subject or object positions of the clause. Linguistically, the borrowing of SHE is consistent with the open-class nature of the Thai pronominal system and fills a semantic gap in the Thai personal pronoun system, which displays gender distinction in first and second person, but not in third.

From a language contact perspective, the use of the form may be an example of two mechanisms of contact-induced change (Thomason, 2001), namely passive familiarity and deliberate decisions. Language change through passive familiarity “occurs when a speaker acquires a feature from a language that s/he understands but has never

spoken actively” (Thomason, 2001:139). At the same time, speakers may deliberately change their language in order to differentiate themselves from others more sharply (Thomason, 2001: 150).

From a sociocultural linguistic perspective (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), writers in both groups construct identities, however temporary and context specific, in part through the use of a linguistic device that is “ideologically associated with specific personas and groups” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 594). That language choice can be indexical of social and cultural identities has been widely documented. In a careful study of code-switching among young educated Thais on Thai social network sites, Seargeant found that, because English dominates the internet, Thai-English code-switching “could be said to index this English-speaking, technology-savvy group of young Thais, and to signal a strong sense of their group identity” (2012: 526). A similar case could be made for the use of SHE in Thai public chat rooms. Use of the form aligns the writers, both straight and gay, with a larger international, cosmopolitan, tech-savvy community and distinguishes them from the larger, more provincial Thai population. Furthermore, it reveals the stance of the writer toward the referent as *diva*, or a female celebrity.

The use of SHE often, though not always, indexes a negative attitude on the part of the speaker toward the referent. Sentence 1, below, is written by a straight woman complaining about her foreign mother-in-law’s habit of leaving the bathroom naked.²

1) แม่สามีมาเมืองไทยที่ไร่ออกจากห้องน้ำก็เดินแก้ผ้าไปทั่ว ลูกชายเค้านั่น SHE บอกว่าคนกันเองทั้งนั้น เหม่อ

‘Whenever my mother-in-law comes to Thailand, (SHE) comes out of the bathroom naked. Her son complains but SHE says we’re all just family.’

In sentence 2, a straight man is complaining about his daughter, who won’t drink the powdered milk the doctor prescribed to address the problem of her underweight condition. In this case, the father’s use of SHE suggests his daughter’s stubbornness.

² The Thai examples from the web boards in this paper were reproduced without any changes.

2) ลูกสาวผม ... น้ำหนัก ตัวตกเกณฑ์ หมอให้นมผงเสริม เพื่อทำ
น้ำหนักตัวเพิ่ม เราพยายาม แต่ SHE ไม่กิน

‘My daughter,(is) underweight; the doctor gave her powered
milk to help her gain weight. We tried but SHE wouldn’t drink (it).’

When used by gay men with a negative connotation, the pronoun SHE is most often used to refer to other men, either gay or perceived to be so. In sentence 3, the gay male writer is complaining about a co-worker who is going to get married, but who the writer believes is very gay. In this example, the writer not only uses SHE (in Thai script) to refer to the co-worker, he also marks his own speech with the female particle /khà/.

3) ตกใจมากคะ /khà/ เพราะว่าได้ข่าวว่าตุ๊นางหนึ่งที่บริษัทกำลัง
จะแต่งงาน ้วยซีแอ็บขนาดนั้น ชะนีดูไม่ออกหรอนี้

‘I was surprised to hear that one queen at the office is going to
get married.

Man, SHE pretends so hard to be straight. Can’t the woman see it?’

Here the gay writer’s use of SHE to refers to the co-worker and the feminine particle /khà/ to index himself not only as a part of the larger tech-savvy Thai community, but also within a cultural space shared with the larger international gay community distinct from the normative roles of the straight world. This positioning has been documented in any number of gay communities (e.g., Motschenbacher, 2010: 27) and it indexes not gender or sexual identity but rather sexual orientation.

This negative connotation is not only idiosyncratic to SHE in Thai, but also found in some varieties of English. According to Wales (1996), the pronouns SHE and HE in English also index some inherent characteristics of inanimate referents through the process of personification. As she states, “the ‘masculine’-marked words were grouped to ‘manly’ attributes... such as strong, active, aggressive (manly); versus weak, timid, passive... as mostly ‘feminine’-marked words” (p.148). A similar result is also found in Mathiot (1979 cited in

Siemund, 2008). When referring to inanimate objects by using the animate third person pronouns, HE and SHE (instead of the neutral IT), men and women speakers tend to implicitly express different images about themselves as well as about the opposite sex. Men, according to Siemund, regard women *“incompetent, beautiful, a challenge/reward and as prized possessions, whereas they think about themselves as competent, ugly, brave and good-natured”* (p. 106).

The use of female pronouns to refer to gay men is limited to specifically gay contexts. It is important to note that this linguistic strategy is not intended to reflect a feminine persona so much as to dissociate the speaker from heterosexual alliances. As such, it is a statement of sexual orientation rather than of sexual identity. The men who use these feminine forms to refer to themselves or to other gay men are designating themselves, as well as the referents, as defectors from heterosexual masculinity. The very act of referring to another man in the feminine, even if the speaker never uses feminine designators in reference to himself, indicates participation in this countercultural, anti-heterosexual discourse mode. According to Livia (1997:359), speakers thereby underline their own alliance with the sissy, the nelly, the drag queen, and in fact create this alliance by their use of the feminine gender.

In the case of Thai, the introduction of SHE to fill the semantic gap in the Thai pronoun system allows the gay Thai writer writing in Thai to position himself within this community in a way that would not be available to him otherwise.

The use of SHE as a rhetorical strategy by both straight and gay chat room users can be seen as an example of the rationality principle of Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Both groups, through their use of the English SHE, position themselves so as to create an association in the readers' minds between the users and a cosmopolitan internationalism. In addition, the gay group aligns itself with a larger international gay community through its use of the form to refer to men. At the same time, the use of SHE by both groups distinguishes them from Thais who don't have the “affordances” (Seargeant et al., 2012) of either English

knowledge or information technology. For the gay writers, the use of SHE for male referents subverts the normative gender roles in straight society, thus differentiating them from it.

Together, the data from the two groups highlights the importance of the interactional context for interpreting these indices. Eckert emphasizes that “the meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings – an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable” (Eckert 2008: 454). In this case, the constellation of ideological meanings might include, for example, sophistication, internationalism, ‘diva-ness,’ a degree of technological know-how, some basic knowledge of English and a subversion of traditional values.

Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at the use of the English pronoun SHE in Thai chat room correspondence. We have shown the following points:

- 1) pronoun borrowing is not an unusual phenomenon in open-pronoun languages like Thai,
- 2) the pronoun SHE does not replace, but rather enriches the repertoire of devices for constructing and indexing identities, and
- 3) it fills a semantic gap in the language.

We have also suggested that this case of contact-induced change may be the result of both passive familiarity and deliberate decision. Finally, we have proposed that SHE is used by both straights and gays to construct and index identities, though where each group positions itself in the indexical field (Eckert, 2008) with respect to the variable SHE differs somewhat.

What we haven’t done, and what still needs to be done, is a detailed discourse analysis of the contexts of the utterances we’ve examined. For example, what other linguistic and semiotic resources within the context would support our analysis? Is the variation between using Thai script for SHE versus inserting Roman orthography for the

word in any way systematic? It would also be insightful to examine the use of SHE in other contexts, for example, among radio disc jockeys, to determine what other features might be associated with this linguistic variable. Finally, interviews with Thais might provide insights regarding what kinds of identities are created and what kinds of language ideologies are expressed through the use of the term.

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