

## CODE-MIXING AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO COMMUNICATION AT THE THAI TERTIARY CONTEXT AND BEYOND

Valentin Valentinov Tashev

Assistant Professor

Woosong Language Institute (WLI), Woosong University (WSU),  
South Korea

**Email:** valiotasev@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The following study examines the use of code-mixing or the mixing of Thai and English in the process of communication mainly between Thais and non-Thais at the Thai tertiary context and beyond. This study suggests that code-mixing occurs as a result of the transfer of Thai socio-cultural norms and elements that intersect with the English language and characterize the emergence of a newly-nativized variety or norm of English used in Thailand. A recurring theme of this study is the idea that the status and nature of English in Thailand have been constantly changing and this trend largely concerns the communication mainly between Thais and non-Thais, as well as to some extent between Thais themselves and between non-Thais themselves, especially in the educational domain. In light of this, this study suggests that educators and educational policy-makers need to promote awareness of the evolution of English as a global language and implement practices and policies oriented towards teaching and assessing English from a more inclusive and pluralistic perspective, concerning both instructors and students of English in Thailand and beyond.

**Keywords:** Code-mixing, English language, Thai language, Thai tertiary context

### List of Abbreviations/Acronyms

Assumption University of Thailand (AU)

English as a lingua franca (ELF)

English as an international language (EIL)

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT)

Native Speaker (NS)

Non-native Speaker (NNS)

Thai English (ThaiE)

World Englishes (WEs)

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

According to Ho (2007), code-mixing is the practice of combining one language with another in the same sentence or utterance. It is a common phenomenon that occurs in societies where there are bilingual or multilingual elements. Ayeomoni (2006) defines code-mixing as the embedding of various linguistic units, such as morphemes, words, phrases used so people would understand each other better.

In this regard, Kongkerd (2015) argues that as Thai communicate in English with other Thais in Facebook chats, they apply the methods of code-switching and code-mixing to show respect and politeness, convey feelings and meanings more clearly, as well as express their

Thai identity or group membership. For example, they still have to use politeness markers, such as ‘*ka*’ or ‘*krub*’ because of the strong influence of seniority culture and respect due to age and status. In addition, if people come from the same region or province or cultural background, they might use the same dialect to project their shared culture and identity.

Furthermore, investigating the mixing of Thai and English in English-based discourses in Internet chat rooms, Yiamkhamnuan (2011) found that the insertion of Thai content words was quite a common linguistic phenomenon that was used in English-based utterances. Thus, users often added final-sentence particles in their written conversations in English, such as ‘*ka*’, ‘*krap*’ (or ‘*krub*’), as well as ‘*ja*’, in order to express politeness to whoever they were speaking to. In this regard, participants in the study explained that any sentences without these particles were “not beautiful”. Yet again, this practice reveals the extent to which socio-cultural values and principles are reflected and translated into the communication of Thais in social media while using English. Similar observation is made by Singhasak and Methitham (2016) who also mention and analyse the socio-cultural meaning behind the use of particles, such as ‘*ka*’ in English by Thais.

Furthermore, Trakulkasemsuk (2012) explains that Thai users of English often translate the nature and experiences of their socio-cultural inter-relationships by using kinship terms, titles, social status terms and birth rank terms when addressing each other. For example, they might use the title ‘*khun*’ before the names of acquaintances. Similarly, they would always use the word ‘*Acharn*’ (meaning ‘*a teacher*’) when addressing teachers to show respect to teachers, who indeed hold a high status in Thai society. The underlying cause of these practices is indeed rooted in Thai culture and, more precisely, the fact that Thai people are concerned to a great extent with social status and age, and this habit or routine is transferred into their ever-day usage of English—a phenomenon which the writer defines as Thai English or ThaiE. Thus, the author argues that to a certain extent, the English language has been influenced by the existing norms and practices of Thai culture, and as Thais communicate in English, they indeed bring their own social and cultural norms and values into their every-day communication, as a result.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Throughout most of my teaching practice at Assumption University (AU), I did conduct a classroom action research as a longitudinal study mostly with Thai undergraduate students studying English at AU at the freshman level. This classroom action research consisted mainly of methods of classroom observation and, in particular, observing the nature of my communication with my students as well as how other foreign English teachers communicated with their Thai students. However, this study still extends beyond the AU environment and includes freshmen undergraduate students as participants from several other universities in Thailand. Moreover, this research study also analyses the nature of my correspondences with my Thai former colleagues at those institutions teaching English and my former lecturers at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), when I was pursuing my Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics (English language Teaching).

## 3. RESULTS

In light of this, I have noticed that students and former lecturers from the respective institutions, especially those from AU and KMUTT, would quite often resort to code-mixing when they have to illustrate a certain point or communicate a certain message. For example, my students would often use the expression ‘*OMG*’ standing for ‘*Oh, my God!*’ usually expressing a sense

of surprise or a sense of anticipating that the up-coming exam would require a lot of hard work and effort. In addition, when they want to express the notion of confirmation, they would end the sentence with the expression ‘*na*’, such as, for example, ‘*Test next week, na?*’.

In addition, my former lecturers from KMUTT would end an email message with the expression ‘*ka*’ or address me as ‘*Acharn*’ and so will my Thai ex-colleagues at AU and other tertiary institutions, teaching English. Sometimes, non-Thai English instructors would address me and each other as ‘*Acharn*’ too. In fact, my long-term observation and experience in Thailand have led me to the conclusion that all English instructors, whether they are native or non-native English teachers, would be addressed as ‘*Acharns*’.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings obtained as a result of the classroom action research, which stretched over a long period of time, have led me to believe that Thai students as well as Thai teachers of English often resort to code-mixing or the mixing of Thai and English when communicating with foreign English instructors and even when communicating with one another (i.e. Thais communicating with other Thais).

Indeed, the practice of code-mixing reveals that the nature and status of English in the Thai tertiary context and beyond has been evolving dramatically, especially over recent years. On the one hand, Thais translate their beliefs and cultural practices into their every-day communication in English, the result of which is a newly-emerging nativized variety of English which concerns both Thais and non-Thais. As such, the findings of this study support the findings of Kongkerd (2015), Yiamkhamnuan (2011) and Trakulkasemsuk (2012), who also illustrated the extent to which socio-cultural factors influence the status and nature of English in Thailand.

On the other hand, as this present study reveals, this newly-emerging variety of English has been gradually becoming a repertoire of foreign English instructors as well, who have had to adjust their speech in English so as to achieve their communicative objectives, especially when communicating with Thais as their interlocutors in the educational domain. They, thus, have become accustomed to using code-mixing or some of those expressions to communicate their meaning, especially when dealing with Thais and when sometimes dealing with non-Thais too. Thus, as it was mentioned above, they often might mix Thai and English when addressing each other (i.e. non-Thais communicating with other non-Thais), such as when addressing each other using the word ‘*Acharn*’ in a sentence.

Yet, it should be mentioned that the implications of this study extend well beyond the domain of academia and education. Thus, the findings of this study shed a light on the underlying causes and the newly-emerging trends and movements in the evolution of the English language in a local, Thai context. Thus, English in Thailand has been recently in a constants state of influx, transformation and transition due to various social and cultural factors. Thus, the findings of this study support the theories of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a lingua franca (ELF) or World Englishes (WEs), each of which investigates variously the extents to which the English language has been evolving recently and the reasons behind it.

Lastly, the findings of this study reveal that educators and educational policy-makers need to address and reflect those changes in their curricula and syllabi designs, as well as in their every-day communication with foreign instructors of English, especially, both from the perspectives of theory and practice. Rather than developing syllabi and curricula based on the native-speaker (NS) paradigm solely, they need to teach both instructors (foreign and Thai) and students of

English about notions of the hybridity of the English language, the internationalization of the language, other non-native speaker (NNS) norms and standards of English, and, above all, why English should be both taught and assessed in Thailand from a pluralistic perspective.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

At large, I believe that an investigation into the field of the language-culture inter-relationship will guide us further to how languages evolve and what factors determine the evolution of English as a universal or a global language of communication. An awareness of the dialectic between language and culture would thus lead us to understand the key factors behind the emergence and invention of new types and variations of Englishes globally, such as EIL, ELF and WEs, as people constantly interact and respond actively to the English language, being in many ways both old and new. In light of this, Svartvik and Leech (2006: 244) argue that understanding the local context in which English functions is essential for understanding the emergence of various Englishes around the world.

As language practitioners, I believe we also need to know how English has evolved that would help us re-adjust our teaching practices that would suit best the objectives, interests and expectations of our students. Lastly, an enquiry into those areas would help us understand best the nature of our ever-day communication with both Thais and non-Thais, NSs and NNSs, as we all share a common language of communication, which however is in a constant state of change, influx and a series of influences-a trend that affects us all in many and different ways.

## **REFERENCES**

- Ayeomoni, M. 2006. Code-switching and Code-mixing; Style of Language Use in Childhood in Yoruba Speech Community. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15 (1): 90-99.  
Available from:  
<http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/pdf-files/vol15num1/ayeomoni.pdf>
- Ho, J. 2007. Code-mixing: Linguistic Form and Socio-cultural Meaning. *The International Journal of Language Society and Culture*.  
Available from:  
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1bf1/e973b7dac5b68e6374da28b261b29ba9dd81.pdf>
- Kongkerd, W. 2015. 'Code Switching and Code Mixing in Facebook Conversations in English among Thai Users'. *Executive Journal*, 35 (1): 126-132.  
Available from:  
[https://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/executive\\_journal/jan\\_june\\_15/pdf/aw13.pdf](https://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/executive_journal/jan_june_15/pdf/aw13.pdf)
- Singhasak, P. & Methitham, P. 2016. Non-native English Varieties: Thainess in English Narratives. *English Language Teaching*, 9 (4): 128-138.  
Available from:  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1095537.pdf>
- Svartvik, J. & Leech, G. 2006. *English-One Tongue, Many Voices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trakulkasemsuk, W. 2012. Thai English. In Ee-Ling Low and Azirah Hashim (Eds). *English in Southeast Asia: Features, Policy and Language in Use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Yiamkhamnuan, J. 2011. The Mixing of Thai and English: Communicative Strategies in Internet Chat Rooms. *Kasetsart J. (Soc. Sci)*, 32: 478-492.  
Available from:

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/bea1/3504367d16f69217ee1d8bdeb08ba0f2f5fa.pdf>

**SHORT BIO-DATA**

Ajarn Valentin Tassev taught English in Thailand for about eight years. From August 2012 until January 2019, he taught English at Assumption University of Thailand (AU). Since January 2019, he has been teaching English at Woosong University (WSU), South Korea. He is educated mostly in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences. He is passionate about learning foreign languages as well as learning more about foreign cultures. He has embarked on a life-time journey of pursuing more and more knowledge! He is therefore hungry for knowledge!