

Akha, Dara-ang, Karen and Mlabri language minorities in Northern Thailand – their self-perception and identity

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Multilingualism has always been deeply anchored in the history of Thailand (Baker and Phongpaichit 2022, Dolińska, Nayak and Suraratdecha 2024, Lee 2019, Suraratdecha, 2021), even though the Thai constitution recognizes only one official, standard Thai language. In this presentation the authors seek the answer to the question how Akha, Dara-ang, Karen and Mlabri (Enfield 2021) minorities in Thailand perceive the role of their languages in their every-day lives, as well as in preserving and reclaiming their cultural heritage. Furthermore, the authors' goal is to determine whether the users of these languages have had a positive impact on the preservation of the indigenous knowledge concerning the biodiversity of the regions inhabited by these communities, for example by recording the names of the endemic plants in their language.

The results of field work carried out in the periods of March-April, November-December 2023 and March-April 2024 in the Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Nan provinces have been analyzed with the help of sociolinguistic methodological apparatus. At the very center of the conducted structured interviews stood the self-perception of the Interviewees in reference to the current condition of their language, its prospects for the future and observed contemporary changes within their languages. Furthermore, the Interviewees were asked about their own efforts to preserve and reclaim their languages and cultures, as well as whether they believe scientists can (at all) support them in such efforts in the future. The answers to this question, in turn, highlighted the need for serious academic discussion on how academics indeed need to develop and maintain successful relations with Indigenous language minorities so that the benefits from such cooperation are mutual and long-lasting. Last but not least, the conducted interviews have shown than more often than not the social concerns of language minorities in Thailand overshadow their focus on language and culture preservation and need to be addressed at least alongside the question of language preservation.

Complementary to the conducted interviews, the correlation between biodiversity and multilingualism (Gorenflo et al. 2012) in the region of Northern Thailand has been analyzed with the help of computational methods, which rendered a broader perspective on the ecological, social and cultural factors influencing and sustaining the dynamic linguistic and ecological aspects of northern Thailand.

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