

AN ETHNO-SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ADDRESS TERMS UTILIZED BY ETHNIC GROUPS IN BURIRAM PROVINCE

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Abstract

This study aimed to 1) comparatively examine the ethnolinguistic characteristics of language use among ethnic groups in Buriram Province as the contextual background for address term utilization; 2) comparatively analyze the types of address terms, reasons for choosing them, and social factors influencing their use; and 3) explore the cultural values reflected in address terms among the four ethnic groups in Buriram Province. An explanatory sequential QUAN → QUAL mixed methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 200 respondents, with 50 participants from each group, using a 25-item seven-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Qualitative data were collected from 40 key informants through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that all five analytical dimensions were rated at a ‘Strongly Agree’ level, confirming the sociocultural significance of address terms. Ethnic languages predominated in family, community, and informal domains, whereas Standard Thai served formal, educational, official, and interethnic communication. Address term selection was influenced by respect, politeness, familiarity, solidarity, age, seniority, social status, kinship, situation, and occasion. Welch’s one-way ANOVA found no significant differences for most items. Only Q6, concerning respectful or honorific address terms for elders, differed significantly across groups, $F(3, 109) = 3.093$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2 = .078$. The Games–Howell post hoc test indicated that Thai-Khmer respondents scored significantly higher than Thai-Kui respondents on this item. Qualitative findings clarified that respect for elders was a shared cultural value, although each ethnic group expressed it through different local address systems. The concept of “Shared Respect with Ethnic-Specific Relational Mapping” explains how common sociocultural values are realized through distinct ethnic linguistic resources, contributing to ethno-sociolinguistic theory, language maintenance, intercultural communication, and community-based documentation of ethnic linguistic heritage.

Keywords: Address Terms, Ethnic Groups, Ethno-Sociolinguistics, Language Use, Buriram Province

Introduction

Southeast Asia is one of the most ethnolinguistically diverse regions, with language closely linked to cultural identity and social relationships. Thailand is home to ethnolinguistic communities associated with five major language families: Austroasiatic, Kra-Dai, Sino-Tibetan, Austronesian, and Hmong-Mien (Premsrirat & Pisitpanporn, 1996; Srithawong et al., 2015). Buriram Province, located in Thailand's lower northeastern region, is a multilingual and multicultural setting where four major ethnic groups: Thai-Lao, Thai-Korat, Thai-Kui or Thai-Suai, and Thai-Khmer coexist. Standard Thai serves formal and interethnic communication, while ethnic languages remain important in family, community, cultural, and informal domains (Premsrirat et al., 2004; Vail, 2007).

In multilingual communities, language use is not merely a medium of communication but a sociocultural practice shaped by domain, participant relationship, social status, setting, communicative purpose, and identity negotiation. Foundational sociolinguistic work has long shown that speakers select codes according to who speaks what language to whom, when, and for what purpose (Fishman, 1972; Hymes, 1974; Holmes, 2013). Recent scholarship also emphasizes that multilingual speakers draw on their linguistic repertoires to negotiate identity, belonging, social relationships in changing social contexts (Almashour, 2024; Demir et al., 2025; Gayton et al., 2025; Genemo, 2021). Therefore, address terms are valuable analytical sites for understanding how multilingual speakers maintain social harmony while performing ethnic identity in everyday interaction. The study of address terms in multilingual communities has practical and academic significance. As linguistic and cultural heritage, local address systems may be affected by language shift, urbanization, Standard Thai-based education, and changing intergenerational communication. The documentation of address terms supports language maintenance, local curricula, community archives, bilingual materials, and knowledge transmission (Grenoble & Whaley, 2005; Harrison, 2007). Academically, address terms reflect relationships, identity, and values such as elder respect, politeness, seniority, kinship, hierarchy, intimacy, and harmony (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Previous studies in Buriram also identify age, gender, kinship, power, and solidarity as key influences, particularly among Northern Khmer speakers (Pimrat, 2022; Sodsongkrit, 1998). This study therefore applies an integrated ethno-sociolinguistic framework to examine language-use patterns, address-term selection, social relationships, and cultural meanings among Thai-Lao, Thai-Korat, Thai-Kui, and Thai-Khmer speakers.

Previous studies demonstrate that address terms Sansamak (2002) found that social status, speaker-addressee relationship, age, and gender affected the address system in Northeastern Thai. Similarly, Sodsongkrit (1998) revealed that sex, age, relationship, power, and solidarity influenced Northern Khmer address terms in Buriram. Pimrat (2022) further demonstrates that Khmer kinship-based address terms reflect seniority, lineage, gender, age, marital relations, and cultural values. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the social and cultural dimensions of address-

term use, most of them focus on one language, one ethnic group, one community, or limited types of data. This limitation leaves a comparative research gap concerning how multiple ethnic groups living in the same multilingual province may share similar sociocultural values while maintaining distinct ethnic-specific address systems.

As discussed above, this study addresses the gap by comparatively examining address terms utilized by four major ethnic groups in Buriram Province from an ethno-sociolinguistic perspective. Practically, it records local address systems and helps preserve ethnic linguistic heritage that may be affected by language shift, urbanization, Standard Thai-based schooling, and changing intergenerational communication. Academically, it extends previous research by integrating quantitative comparison and qualitative interpretation to reveal both shared patterns and group-specific meanings. It also explains how cultural values, especially respect for elders, are expressed through distinct ethnic linguistic resources in a contemporary multilingual society, as illustrated in Figure 1.

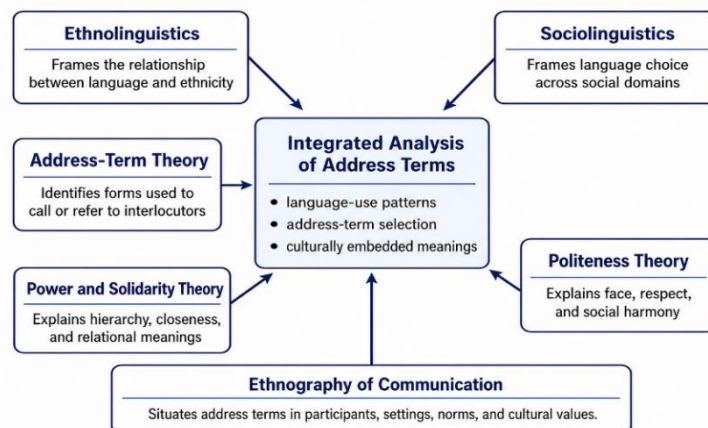


Figure 1: Integrated Analytical Framework for Examining Address Terms in Multilingual Ethnic Communities

Research Objectives

1. To comparatively examine the ethnolinguistic characteristics of language use among ethnic groups in Buriram Province as the contextual background for address term utilization.
2. To comparatively analyze the address terms utilized by ethnic groups in Buriram Province in terms of types, reasons for choosing them, and social factors influencing their utilization.
3. To explore the cultural values reflected in the address terms utilized by ethnic groups in Buriram Province.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential QUAN → QUAL mixed-methods design. Quantitative data identified patterns of language use and address-term utilization among ethnic groups in Buriram, while semi-structured interviews explained their underlying sociocultural meanings from an ethno-sociolinguistic perspective.

2. Population, Sample, and Key Informants

The participants consisted of four ethnic groups in Buriram: Thai-Lao, Thai-Korat, Thai-Kui/Thai-Suai, and Thai-Khmer. The quantitative sample included 200 respondents with 50 per group from four districts: Lam Plai Mat, Nang Rong, Nong Ki, and Prakhon Chai, while the qualitative phase involved 40 purposively selected key informants with 10 per group based on long-term residence, experience in ethnic language use, knowledge of address terms, and willingness to participate in the study. The informants could provide culturally grounded and linguistically meaningful information.

3. Research Instruments and Validation

The study employed a 25-item, seven-point Likert-scale questionnaire covering five analytical dimensions: (1) linguistic phenomena of language use, (2) types of address terms, (3) reasons for choosing address terms, (4) social factors influencing address term usage, and (5) cultural meanings reflected in address terms. A semi-structured interview form was designed to explain the quantitative findings. Five experts validated both instruments, yielding IOC scores of 1.00. The reliability of questionnaire was verified through a pilot study, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Qualitative trustworthiness was established through member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, an audit trail, and thick description.

4. Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected from respondents in Lam Plai Mat, Nang Rong, Nong Ki, and Prakhon Chai Districts through Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents from the four ethnic groups in equal proportions, with 50 respondents from each group. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 40 selected key informants. The interviews focused on language use, types of address terms, reasons for selecting address terms, social factors affecting address term usage, and cultural meanings reflected in address terms. The qualitative data provided deeper insight into and expanded the statistical findings obtained from the quantitative phase.

5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Welch's one-way ANOVA, and the Games-Howell post hoc test. Qualitative data were conducted through content and thematic analysis to identify shared values and ethnic-specific practices. Both findings were then integrated to explain language use and address-term utilization from an ethno-sociolinguistic perspective.

Results

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives. Overall, language use and address-term utilization were socially structured and culturally meaningful, expressing respect, politeness, seniority, kinship, social harmony, and ethnic identity.

1. Quantitative Findings

All five analytical dimensions were rated at the “Strongly Agree” level ($M = 6.17 - 6.26$), demonstrating consistently high agreement of across the dimensions of language use, types of address terms, reasons for choosing address terms, social factors, and cultural meanings.

Table 1 Summary of Quantitative Findings by Five Analytical Dimensions

Analytical Dimension	Thai-Lao		Thai-Korat		Thai-Kui		Thai-Khmer		Overall		Level of Agreement
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Linguistic phenomena of language use	6.24	0.66	6.11	0.70	6.01	0.74	6.31	0.63	6.17	0.68	Strongly Agree
Types of address terms	6.35	0.61	6.18	0.67	6.02	0.73	6.39	0.58	6.24	0.65	Strongly Agree
Reasons for choosing address terms	6.29	0.64	6.21	0.68	6.10	0.72	6.34	0.60	6.24	0.66	Strongly Agree
Social factors influencing address-term usage	6.32	0.62	6.25	0.66	6.11	0.71	6.36	0.59	6.26	0.65	Strongly Agree
Cultural meanings reflected in address terms	6.33	0.61	6.24	0.65	6.08	0.70	6.37	0.58	6.26	0.64	Strongly Agree

Note. M= mean, SD= Standard Deviation.

As presented in Table 1, Thai-Khmer respondents demonstrated the highest mean scores across all five dimensions, particularly in types of address terms, social factors, and cultural meanings. Thai-Lao respondents also demonstrated consistently high agreement, followed by Thai-Korat, and Thai-Kui respondents. With respect to Objective 1, ethnic languages were mainly maintained in informal, family, and community domains, whereas Standard Thai was used in formal, official, educational, and inter-ethnic contexts. For Objective 2, address terms were selected according to respect, age, kinship, familiarity,

politeness, and social context. For Objective 3, address terms reflected cultural values, social harmony, hierarchy, and ethnic identity.

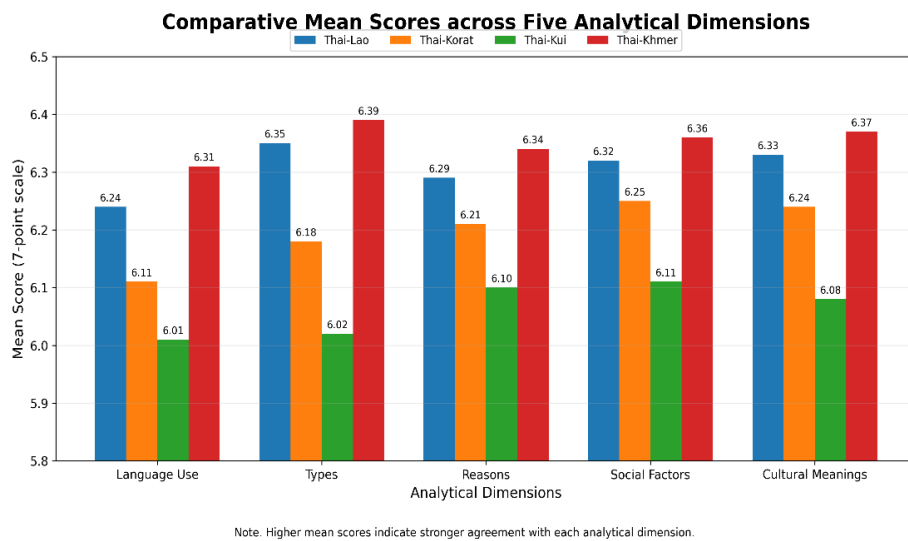


Figure 2: Comparative mean scores across five analytical dimensions.

Similarly, Figure 2 presents the comparative mean scores of four ethnic groups across five analytical dimensions: language use, types of address terms, reasons for choosing address terms, social factors, and cultural meanings.

2. Comparative Quantitative Findings

Welch's one-way ANOVA revealed that most questionnaire items did not differ significantly among the four ethnic groups. Of 25 items, only Q6, concerning respectful or honorific address terms used with elders, showed a statistically significant difference, $F(3, 109) = 3.093$, $p = .030$, $\eta p^2 = .078$, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Significant Comparative Finding

Item	Focus of Comparison	F	df1	df2	p	Result
Q6	Use of respectful or honorific address terms when speaking to elders	3.093	3	109	.030	Significant

The Games-Howell post hoc test revealed that Thai-Khmer respondents demonstrated significantly higher agreement than Thai-Kui respondents on Q6, concerning the use of respectful or honorific address terms when addressing elders, with a mean difference of 0.380, $t(96.1) = 2.87$, $p = .026$. The other pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Games–Howell Post Hoc Test for Q6.

Pairwise Comparison	Mean Difference	t	df	p	Interpretation
Thai-Khmer – Thai-Korat	0.200	1.48	95.2	.452	Not significant
Thai-Khmer – Thai-Kui	0.380	2.87	96.1	.026	Significant
Thai-Khmer – Thai-Lao	0.060	0.466	97.2	.966	Not significant
Thai-Korat – Thai-Kui	0.180	1.25	97.9	.595	Not significant
Thai-Korat – Thai-Lao	-0.140	-0.998	97.4	.751	Not significant
Thai-Kui – Thai-Lao	-0.320	-2.318	97.8	.101	Not significant

3. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from 40 key informants identified five key themes: ethnic language as everyday and community communication, address terms as respect and seniority, address terms as politeness and social harmony, social factors shaping address term selection, and address terms as reflections of ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

Table 4 Summary of Qualitative Findings by Theme.

Theme	Key Qualitative Finding	Representative Evidence
Ethnic language as everyday and community communication	Ethnic languages are mainly used in family, community, and informal contexts, while Standard Thai is used in formal, official, educational, and inter-ethnic communication.	Thai-Lao or Isan, Korat, Kui, and Khmer were described as natural, familiar, and suitable for local communication.
Address terms as respect and seniority	Address terms are strongly connected with age hierarchy, respect for elders, and kinship-based social relations.	Thai-Lao uses phor yai, mae yai, lung, pa, ta, and yai; Thai-Khmer uses om/um, taa, yaey, and bong.
Address terms as politeness, familiarity, and social harmony	Address terms are chosen to express politeness, affection, humility, solidarity, and conflict avoidance.	Informants stated that proper address terms help avoid impoliteness, misunderstanding, and conflict.
Social factors influencing address-term selection	Age is the strongest factor, followed by gender, kinship, familiarity, social status, situation, and occasion.	Thai-Khmer terms such as om-pr ^{oh} and om-srey show gender distinction, while terms for younger people also vary by age and gender.

Address terms as ethnic identity and cultural continuity	Address terms function as markers of ethnic identity, local tradition, and cultural continuity.	Thai-Kui terms such as phɔː/nuʔ, mɛː/ʔeːw, luːŋ, paː, kɔːŋ, and thaw reflect Kui identity and family hierarchy.
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Qualitative findings confirmed that ethnic languages remained important in family and community domains, while Standard Thai predominated in formal settings. All groups used various address terms: kinship terms, honorifics, titles, names, nicknames, and ethnic-specific forms. Thai-Lao and Thai-Korat forms emphasized kinship, familiarity, and respect; Thai-Kui forms reflected hierarchy and seniority; and Thai-Khmer forms encoded age, gender, kinship, politeness, and identity. These address terms also preserved cultural heritage and transmitted local values across generations.

4. Integrated Findings According to the Research Objectives

Table 5 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Research Objective	Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Finding	Integrated Interpretation
Objective 1: To comparatively examine the ethnolinguistic characteristics of language use	The overall mean for linguistic phenomena was high ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.68$). Ethnic language use in informal situations had the highest item mean.	Ethnic languages are used in family, community, and informal contexts, while Standard Thai is used in formal, official, educational, and inter-ethnic contexts.	Language use is context-sensitive. Ethnic languages maintain intimacy, identity, and community belonging, while Standard Thai serves institutional and inter-ethnic communication.
Objective 2: To comparatively analyze address terms in terms of types, reasons, and social factors	Types of address terms, reasons for choosing them, and social factors were all rated at the Strongly Agree level. Respect for elders was the strongest item.	Address terms are selected according to age, seniority, kinship, familiarity, gender, status, situation, and occasion.	Address-term selection is not random but socially governed. Respect, politeness, seniority, and relational appropriateness are central principles.

Research Objective	Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Finding	Integrated Interpretation
Objective 3: To explore cultural values reflected in address terms	Cultural meanings reflected in address terms had a high overall mean ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 0.64$). Respect and hierarchy had the highest item mean.	Address terms reflect ethnic identity, cultural continuity, hierarchy, harmony, solidarity, and adaptation to social change.	Address terms function as cultural resources that preserve ethnic identity while maintaining social harmony across groups.

The integrated findings demonstrate that language use and address term utilization are shaped by both shared sociocultural norms and ethnic-specific linguistic practices. Quantitatively, respondents from all four ethnic groups showed strong agreement across the analytical dimensions, with only Q6 revealing a statistically significant difference. Qualitatively, key informants explained that all groups value respect for elders, although each group expresses this value through different local address terms. Therefore, the central finding can be conceptualized as “shared respect with ethnic-specific relational mapping,” meaning that respect is a shared sociocultural value, while each ethnic group maps social relationships through its own linguistic and cultural system.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that language use was shaped by communicative domains and social relationships. Ethnic languages primarily expressed intimacy and ethnic belonging, whereas Standard Thai served educational, administrative, and interethnic communication, supporting Fishman’s domain-based perspective and Hymes’ ethnography of communication. Address term selection reflected age, seniority, kinship, familiarity, gender, status, and context. Respectful terms conveyed power and hierarchy, while kinship and familiar forms expressed solidarity and intimacy, supporting Brown & Gilman (1960). The findings also extend Brown & Levinson (1987) by showing that politeness functions not only as a face-saving strategy but also as a shared practice of elder respect, kinship extension, and community harmony.

The significant difference in Q6 showed Thai-Khmer respondents indicated stronger use of respectful or honorific address terms for elders than Thai-Kui respondents. Thai-Khmer address systems may encode age, gender, and kinship more explicitly. However, this does not suggest that Thai-Kui speakers value respect less; they may be more expressed through family roles, affinal relationships, ritual practices, and situational behavior or other relational forms. Thus, the difference reflects linguistic explicitness and relational mapping rather than differences in cultural value.

The findings confirm that address terms reflect status, relationships, age, gender, seniority, lineage, and cultural values (Pimrat, 2022; Sansamak, 2002; Sodsongkrit, 1998; Tingsabadh & Prasithrathsint, 1989). This study extends earlier research by comparing four ethnic groups and integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence. This comparative interpretation strengthens ethno-sociolinguistic understanding of how unity and diversity coexist in multilingual societies.

The findings on cultural meanings show that address terms convey elder respect, hierarchy, politeness, harmony, solidarity, ethnic identity, and cultural continuity. This finding aligns with Pimrat (2022), who found that Khmer kinship terms in Buriram reflected seniority, lineage, gender, age, marriage, and cultural values. It also corresponds with Tingsabadh & Prasithrathsint (1989), who showed that Thai address forms reflect social status, relationships, hierarchy, and cultural norms.

Beyond Buriram Province, the findings contribute to broader discussion of multilingualism, ethnic identity, and intercultural communication. Address terms are not only local lexical items but also sociocultural tools for managing relationships across generations, ethnic boundaries, and communicative domains. In multilingual societies, shared values may support intergroup harmony, while ethnic-specific forms maintain cultural distinctiveness. This insight is relevant to language maintenance, multilingual education, community heritage documentation, and intercultural communication in other culturally diverse settings.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study covered four ethnic groups in selected Buriram districts, and purposive quota sampling limited statistical generalizability. Although assistance was provided when needed, self-reported questionnaire data may also differ from natural interaction. Using Google Forms may have created digital-literacy and socioeconomic biases among older, rural, or digitally disadvantaged participants. Moreover, the 40 key informants may not represent younger, urban, or digitally active speakers. Future studies should combine online and paper-based surveys with natural conversation data, longitudinal designs, and interprovincial comparisons.

Body of knowledge

The new knowledge generated from this study is the concept of “Shared Respect with Ethnic-Specific Relational Mapping.” This concept indicates that Thai-Lao, Thai-Korat, Thai-Kui or Thai-Suai, and Thai-Khmer speakers in Buriram Province share common sociocultural values, especially respect for elders, politeness, seniority, social harmony, kinship relations, and cultural continuity. However, each group expresses these shared values through its own ethnic language and ethnic-specific address-term system, as illustrated in Figure 3.

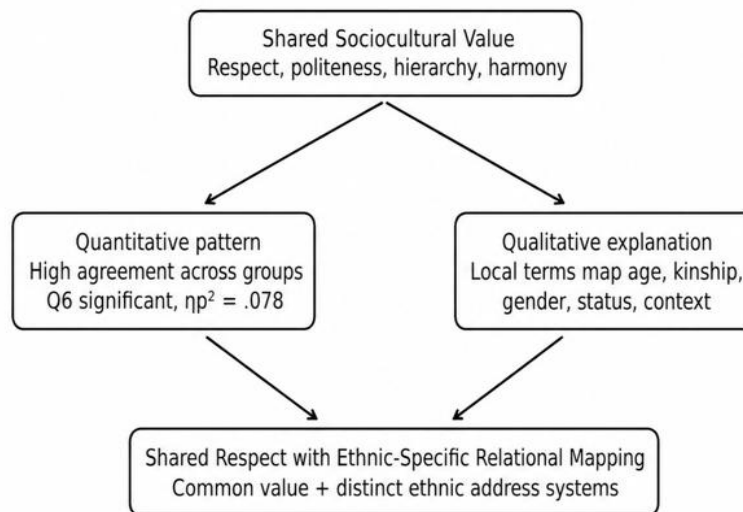


Figure 3: Conceptual Model of Shared Respect with Ethnic-Specific Relational Mapping.

This concept is different from classic address-term, politeness, and power–solidarity theories by focusing on a comparative ethno-sociolinguistic perspective. “Shared Respect with Ethnic-Specific Relational Mapping” extends classical address-term, politeness, and power–solidarity theories by explaining how shared values are expressed through distinct ethnic linguistic resources. In Buriram’s multilingual context, address terms function as pragmatic adaptations to language domains, hierarchy, age, relationships, and ethnic identity. This comparative concept contributes to understanding multilingual communication in Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found that language and address-term use among Buriram’s four ethnic groups are socially and culturally meaningful. Ethnic languages mainly express intimacy and identity in informal domains, whereas Standard Thai serves formal and interethnic communication. Address-term selection reflects age, seniority, kinship, familiarity, gender, status, and context. Although most group differences were not significant, Q6 differed significantly between Thai-Khmer and Thai-Kui respondents. All groups value elder respect but express it through distinct local systems. Therefore, this study concludes that Buriram’s address term practices are best understood as “Shared Respect with Ethnic-Specific Relational Mapping,” showing how common values are realized through ethnically distinctive linguistic forms.

1. Policy Recommendations

1) Educational and cultural policymakers should recognize ethnic languages and address terms as valuable cultural resources and include them in local heritage policies.

2) Local curriculum developers should integrate community-based lessons on Thai-Lao, Thai-Korat, Thai-Kui or Thai-Suai, and Thai-Khmer address terms, including

pronunciation, meanings, contexts of use, and cultural values.

3) Provincial cultural agencies, schools, temples, community leaders, and local universities should collaborate to document oral histories, address-term glossaries, ritual expressions, and intergenerational narratives.

2. Operational Recommendations

1) Schools and communities should develop bilingual or multilingual learning materials, community-based glossaries, short video clips, and digital archives of local address terms.

2) Intergenerational activities such as storytelling, elder interviews, local language days, and cultural festivals, and classroom-community projects should be promoted to preserve traditional address terms and transmit ethnic knowledge to younger generations.

3) Possible challenges including limited youth interest, variation within ethnic groups, orthographic differences, and the dominance of Standard Thai in formal settings should be addressed through participatory documentation, school-community partnerships, and digital media formats that appeal to younger users.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

1) Future studies should compare address-term systems across provinces in the lower northeastern region and other multilingual areas of Thailand.

2) Further research should examine generational language change, youth address practices, and the effects of schooling, migration, and urbanization on ethnic address-term use.

3) Digital communication contexts including Facebook, LINE, TikTok, and community online groups should be investigated to identify how traditional address terms are adapted in contemporary media.

4) Future research should analyze naturally occurring multilingual interactions to examine code-switching, address-term negotiation, politeness strategies, and pragmatic adaptation. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine intergenerational changes in address-terms practices.

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