

Classification of Early Written Tai Dialects; a Matter of Socio-Political Factors

Watit Pumyoo

Chiang Mai University

This research is aimed to classify the written Tai dialects based on a corpus of early Tai inscriptions from 1300 – 1500 C.E. containing of 50,000 words by comparing written forms and vocabulary of the inscriptions from different areas of Thailand. It is found that half a century after the emergence of the first Tai inscription produced in upper central Thailand's SuKhothai in 1292 C.E., the written language diffused widely to other areas as the later inscriptions found in lower central Thailand (Ayutthaya) and northeastern Thailand (SaKon NaKhon). At that time, varieties of written forms existed and the Tai dialects can be divided into three regional dialects by their different written forms as upper Tai, central Tai and northeastern Tai. In 1410s, the upper Tai was split into two regional dialects since a new written form was emerged in Northern Thailand's Phayao as called northern Tai. In the 1410s, the northern Tai found in Phayao had significant varieties of nobility and commoner. Although the two varieties were written in the same Kind of form, they used different vocabulary. The nobility still used the same vocabulary as the upper Tai (SuKhothai) but the commoner used the local vocabulary. After 1450, there were no significant differences in the written forms and vocabulary between the two varieties. The nobility had changed to use local vocabulary as the commoner. Therefore, a change from below had happened. This change co-occurred with the event that SuKhothai lost her autonomy to Ayutthaya in 1440s. By 1500, the northern Tai had completely split from the upper Tai and the upper Tai merged into central Tai. Therefore, the written dialects in early 16th century were northern Tai, central Tai, and northeastern Tai. The research result shows that socio-political factors are related to merge and split of dialects.