Language endangerment and community empowerment: Experience form community training in the Moken language documentation and preservation project

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ABSTRACT

Language endangerment and extinction is currently a critical issue among linguists around the world. It is known that language attrition and loss dramatically progress, work on documentation and preservation should be done prior to the last speaker of such language passing away. It is found that there are at least fifteen languages in Thailand which suffer from language decline and will be extinct very soon. Moken language (ISO 693-3 code mwt) is one of language which is regarded as the dying languages. Like other endangered languages, Moken language and local heritage knowledge gradually decline without any transmission to younger generations. Thus, the Moken language documentation and preservation project (MLDPP) was initiated with an attempt to document and preserve Moken language and its oral literature before its extinction. As a part of MLDPP, this paper describes about how the community-training program is maneuvered. This contributes to collaborative language documentation and preservation project. As participatory action research, a grounded-theoretical approach together with on-the-job-training was adopted for contributing to the most benefit of community members. Based on almost-three-month training, the native researchers were able to initiate documenting their local knowledge and to manage the fieldwork without the researcher. They were able to document over 100 video records of Moken place names in Surin Islands with 27 min long and over 50 video records of traditional ecological knowledge with 20 min long without the linguist's supervision.

Introduction

Moken Language Documentation and Preservation Project, henceforth MLDPP, was initiated in 2013. Its primary goal was to document and preserve Moken language and oral literature, including local knowledge, on Surin Islands in Phang-nga Province. Engaging intensively in Surin Islands Moken community, the researcher explored that the language situation of this community was not as good as my expectation. It seemed that on one in this community was aware of language and local knowledge declination situation. It was observed that several signs were shown up that Moken language in this community was declining such as monosyllabization, semantic loss, semantic overgeneralization, Thai words borrowing and replacement, local knowledge transmission gap between Moken adults and kids etc. (see more in Kraisame, 2012). Even these linguistic phenomena could be generally found in every language but these could be significantly important signs with ethic minority languages which no writing system nor official language

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standardization. The disappearance of the actual Moken words, lexical meaning, and local knowledge transmission have weakened younger generations to their ancestors and less opportunities to acquire formal styles of syntactic structure and lexical knowledge (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Together with the less number of its speakers, Moken language becomes one of 15 endangered languages in Thailand (Premsrirat, 2007). As a documentary linguist, language documentation and sustainable language preservation must be conducted before disappearing of the last speaker.

Grenoble and Whaley (2006) addressed that the key success of sustainable language preservation is community engagement from the very first step through the whole process of documentation and preservation. This corresponds to Czaykowska-Higgins (2009, pp. 15—50). She stated that researchers need to constitute "the community" regarding how it looks like for the purpose of the project from grass-roots speakers, language learners to various bodies in that specific "community". Thus, our attempt to working *for community, with community* and *by community* lead to empowerment and language work sustainability in the target community.

In terms of grounded-theoretical research, "an empowering research approach" and "a community-based language research" were conflated and adopted to be a framework (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Rice, 2006). Based on these grounds, the researcher developed five components of "a collaborative language documentation and preservation" in Surin Islands Moken community as following: 1) partnership building; 2) orthography development; 3) technical preparation and native speakers' capacity building; 4) data gathering and eliciting and 5) mobilization and implementation (Kraisame, 2016). Both local and non-local stakeholders were invited to participate and discuss about the project's objectives and each stakeholder's expectation at the beginning of the project.

There were five interested stakeholders, excluding the researcher, accepted the invitation for round-table discussion: Moken community members, a teacher in Moken community learning center, a community-primary healthcare officer, Mahidol University language revitalization program facilitators (LR facilitators), and a documentary film maker. The primary objective of the stakeholders' invitation was not only to clarify the research's objective and to discuss the expectation of stakeholders but to seek a possibility to work sustainability and to build up partnership in the project.

As a result from the discussion, every stakeholder whom were invited agreed to participate and join as a team member. However, four stakeholders were identified as direct partners and the rest one was an indirect partner of MLDPP. The direct partners, as shown in Figure 2, were the first group who can intensively contribute to the project's outcomes. At this stage, the first group of direct partners were the Moken community members, the teacher in Moken community learning center, the Mahidol University language revitalization program facilitators (LR facilitators), the documentary filmmaker and the researcher. While, the community-primary healthcare officer was identified as an indirect partner who would provide supports and facilitate the team during the project.

In this paper, the researcher will highlight and discuss on "technology preparation and native speakers' capacity building" which is the part of a documentation process of Moken language. The technology preparation and native speakers' capacity building was done through *"training process"* which focused on both management skills and language documentation skills. The researcher believes that this training process empowers the community members carry out their own language work without or less dependent on linguists or academic expertise. Thus, the aim of this paper is to share the field experience in training indigenous people to document and preserve their own language and local knowledge.

Moken: Geographic, Demographic and Linguistic Information

Moken language (ISO 693-3 code mwt) is a member of Malayo-Polynesian branch of Austronesian languages family. It is spoken by 6,000 speakers approximately in Myanmar and Thailand's territories (Moken, n.d.). Moken is one of the three sea nomadic ethnic groups (or semi-nomadic people) who have been settled in Thailand, namely Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi'. Generally, they are called by Thais as/cʰaːw leːy/(sea people) or/cʰaːw tʰay may/(new Thai). Moken people have lived in Mergui archipelago (Myeik archipelago) where is from Tavoy island in Myanmar' territory to three southern west coast provinces of Thailand (Ivanoff, 1997). The research site is situated in Surin Islands. It is located approximately 60 km away from the mainland of Phang-Nga province. Surin Islands consists of five islands and one rock which is 141.25 square kilometres entire the archipelago: North Surin island, South Surin island, Ri island, Klang island, Khai island and Richelieu rock. In 2016, there are about 260 Moken speakers living in this community.

From linguistic evidences, three of them belong to the same language family but in different sub-branches. As shown in the following figure, Moken and Moklen belong to Proto Moken-Moklen sub-branch but Urak Lawoi' belongs to Malay sub-branch with Malay language. Even Moken shares many lexicons with Urak Lawoi', these sharing words are cognate to Austronesaian Language family (Chantanakomes, 1980; Larish, 1999; Swastham, 1982). As so many studies have been done on dialects of Moken language (Naw Say Bay, 1995, p. 194; White, 1992), six dialects of Moken are tentatively listed: Dung, Jait, Lebi, Niawi, Jadiak and Moklen. Moken speakers have lived from Mergui Archipelago (Myeik Archipelago), Tavoy Island, in Myanmar to Pi Pi Island in Thailand. In Thailand, only Jadiak dialect and Moklen dialect have been found; Moken language in Surin Islands is categorized in Jadiak dialect according to a mutual intelligibility test. The distribution of Moken and Moklen speakers can be found across the south-western coast of the country in 4 provinces, namely Ranong, Phang-Nga, Phuket and Krabi province. However, Moklen dialect has been found only in Phang-Nga province. A language family tree diagram of Moken language is shown below Figure 1.