

## **Social Variation of (l) in Thai**

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### **1. Background of the study**

This study is concerned with social variation of (l) in Bangkok Thai, or simply Thai, pronounced by native speakers. Previous studies of the Thai (l) indicate that it has variants. Saengchant (1986) finds that, in the single prevocalic position, (l) is almost always realized as [l]. In consonant clusters, according to Beebe (1974) and Saengchant (1986), (l) occurs most frequently as a lateral [l], and l-deletion [ø]. The most recent work on (l) clusters, i.e. Suthida (1994), finds that in casual speech and in interview, young Thai speakers use predominantly [ø]. In addition to [l] and [ø], all the studies above have found other minor (l) variants. They are the so-called hypercorrected r variants of (l), i.e. a trill [r], a tap [ɾ], and an approximant [ɹ].

Although all the three works include conversational style, their concentrations are different. Both Saengchant (1986) and Suthida (1994) deal with stylistic variation of (l). Beebe (1974), however, explores the relationship between three social factors and variation of the (l). The social variables are age, educational level and occupational class. Sex was not included in Beebe's study (1974:27) because "it was found to have no significant effect upon consonant cluster variation". In the present study, attempts will be made to explore the relationship between sex and job level on one hand, and the use of (l) on the other.

In this study, employees of first class hotels in Bangkok who have direct contact with hotel guests are the target population (see 4.). The data used here are the same set of data as the one used in an earlier study of Thai (r) and English (r) variations in the speech of the same subject group (Boonruang 1993a, 1993b).

### **2. Purpose of the study**

The aim of the present study is twofold:

1. To analyze the variation of (l) in Thai spoken by Bangkok Thai speakers.
2. To find out whether or not and to what extent the variation is conditioned by two social factors: sex and job level.

### **3. Hypotheses**

The analysis of this study is based on the following hypotheses:

1. Male and female speakers have different patterns of use of (I) variants
2. Speakers of different job levels have different patterns of use of (I) variants.

#### 4. Methodology

There are two social variables used in this study: sex (male/female) and job level. The subjects are categorized into four levels of job position, based on responsibility, the nature of work and salary:

**Job Level I** - Professional and managerial e.g. beverage manager, assistant executive housekeeper

**Job Level II** - Supervisory e.g. assistant outlet manager, reception supervisor

**Job Level III** - Skilled e.g. captain, front office receptionist

**Job Level IV** - Semi-skilled e.g. waiter/waitress, room attendant

In this study, Job Level I is the highest status position, and Job Level IV, the lowest status.

The subjects in this study consist of 58 Bangkok Thai speakers of Thai nationality who are employees of three first class hotels in Bangkok: the Regent of Bangkok, the Dusit Thani Hotel and the Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok. They have been residing in Bangkok for at least the last ten years and they do not speak any other dialects or minority languages at their place of residence. Their work involves face-to-face interaction with hotel guests. Thus most of them are drawn from three departments: food and beverage, front office and house keeping. As can be seen from Table 1, there are approximately equal numbers of male and female subjects in each job level.

Table 1 - Distribution of subjects by sex and job level

Job Level	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
I: Professional and managerial	8	27.6%	7	24.1%	15	25.9%
II: Supervisory	7	24.1%	7	24.1%	14	24.1%
III: Skilled	7	24.1%	7	24.1%	14	24.1%
IV: Semi-skilled	7	24.1%	8	27.6%	15	25.9%
Total	29	100%	29	100%	58	100%

Each subject was tape-recorded in a face-to-face single interview with the researcher for about 15 minutes at the subjects' place of employment. The subjects were not informed of the real purpose of the study but were instead told that the interview was aimed at finding out their background in English language learning.

The conversation topics were mainly concerned with the subjects' biographical information (e.g. name, age, place of birth, place of residence, marital status), educational background, languages acquired, English learning experience, work experience and their ambitions or plans for the future. Like Beebe's (1980:381), there was no attempt to elicit specific words or sounds. Thus, the number of tokens for each phonological variable vary with the speaker. The data collection was conducted in March and April, 1992.

The first ten minutes of each subject's recorded conversation were transcribed into written texts. All the Thai words with the (l) variable occurring in the initial and postconsonantal position were underlined and transcribed phonetically. English words with an (l), e.g. *Shangri-la*, *Landmark*, *Mayflower* and *fluke*, are not included in the study. The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test at the one per cent level of significance ( $p < 0.01$ ) is used to test whether or not there is a relationship between the variables concerned and the phonological variable.

## 5. Analysis of the data

### 5.1 Variants of (l)

The analysis of (l) in this study finds four variants. They are:

1. the lateral [l]
2. the voiced alveolar tap [ɾ]
3. the voiced approximant [ɹ]
4. the non-occurrence of (l) in clusters, i.e. (l) becomes [ø]

[l] and [ɹ] are found to occur in both positions of occurrence. [ɾ] is found to occur only in the initial position, and [ø] only in clusters. [ɾ] and [ɹ] are two of the three r variants (the other being the trill [r]) that Beebe (1974:47) calls hypercorrected variants. The term hypercorrection is used by Beebe (ibid.) to mean the use of r variants for (l).

### 5.2 Number of all the tokens

There are altogether 2,367 tokens of the (l) variable. As shown in Table 2, the initial (l) variants account for 89% of all the tokens, the remaining 11% occurring in clusters.

Table 2 - Number of tokens of (l) by place of occurrence

Initial (l)	88.9%	2,103
Cluster (l)	11.1%	264
Total	100%	2,367

### 5.3 Frequency of initial (l) variants

As shown in Table 3, in the initial position, the lateral [l] accounts for more than 99%. Other variants are almost non-existent.

Table 3 - Frequency of initial (l) variants

Initial (l) variants		
[l]	99.4%	2,091
[r]	0.1%	10
[ɹ]	0.5%	2
Total	100%	2,103

The subjects' rate of initial (l) variants is comparable to the one found in Saengchant's study (1986:38). She gives the following figures for the [l], [r] and [ɹ] respectively: 99.58%, 0.17% and 0.17%.

### 5.4 Frequency of cluster (l) variants

As can be seen from Table 4, [ø] accounts for approximately two-thirds of all the cluster (l) occurrences, followed by [l] accounting for almost one-third. [ɹ] is the only hypercorrected r variant in clusters and the usage is less than 1%.

Table 4- Frequency of cluster (l) variants

Cluster (l) variants		
[l]	31.4%	83
[ɹ]	0.8%	2
[ø]	67.8%	179
Total	100%	264

The rate of the predominant use of l-dropping by Bangkok Thai speakers in the present study seems to be in line with the results of most other research. In Beebe's investigation, the average percentage of l-reduction is 50.2% (based on the figures in Beebe (1974:159)). The most recent work on cluster (l) in Thai by Suthida (1994:56) gives the figure 87% for the schoolgirls' rate of [ø] in interview. Only Saengchant's study (1986) is an exception: her subjects use [ø] only 35.8% in interview style. This might have been due to the fact that her subjects are Bangkok's F.M. radio newscasters who have to use Standard Thai in news broadcasting. Their daily work of using a formal style in Thai may have had caused them to be more conscious of cluster (l) retention than other people. In short, [ø] is the prominent variant in (l) clusters, irrespective of the group of informants.

### 5.5 Variation of (l) by sex

As can be seen in Table 5, in the initial position, both male and female speakers almost invariably pronounce [l] for (l). The former have occasional use of hypercorrected r-variants [r] and [ɹ] for (l). The differences in the use of initial (l) variants of both sex groups are not significant although this cannot be statistically tested. (The frequency in each cell should not be empty to be tested for significance.)

Table 5 - Frequency of initial (l) variants by sex

Initial (l)	Male		Female	
[l]	98.8%	980	100%	1,111
[r]	0.2%	2	-	-
[ɹ]	1.0%	10	-	-
Total	100%	992	100%	1,111

Table 6 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by sex

Cluster (l)	Male		Female	
[l]	23.0%	26	37.7%	57
[ɹ]	1.8%	2	-	-
[ø]	75.2%	85	62.3%	94
Total	100%	113	100%	151

$$\chi^2 = 6.04 \quad df = 1 \quad p > .01$$

As shown in Table 6, the males use l-deletion 75% of all of their cluster (l) occurrences while the females use it 62%. Conversely the males' rate of [l] is about 14% lower than the females'. Table 6 also shows that, once again, only male speakers use hypercorrected r-variants, and in this case, [ɹ] occurs. However, the different patterns in the use of (l) variants between the two sex groups are not statistically significant.

The results of data analysis reject the hypothesis that male and female speakers have different patterns of (l) variation in both places of occurrence. The findings, especially in the case of clusters, agree with Beebe's (1974:27).

### 5.6 Variation of (l) by job level

As can be seen from Table 7, all the four groups of speakers share a similar pattern of initial (l) usage. In particular, the first three job levels always pronounce [l] for the (l). On the other hand, although the lowest status subjects make some use of the hypercorrected r-variants for (l), their usage of [l] is 97%. The differences in the use of initial (l) among all the four job levels are, therefore, not significant.

Table 7 - Frequency of initial (l) variants by job level

Initial (l)	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	100%	612	100%	464	100%	579	97.3%	436
[r]	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5%	2
[ɹ]	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.2%	10
Total	100%	612	100%	464	100%	579	100%	448

In clusters, the highest status group has the lowest rate of l-deletion and at the same time the highest rate of [l]. The lowest status, on the other hand, has an opposite pattern. They have the highest rate of [ø] and the lowest rate of [l]. As for the two middle status groups, Job Level III speakers have a higher frequency of [l] and a lower rate of [ø] than Job Level II. However, as shown in Table 8, the differences of these two middle groups are not statistically significant, suggesting that linguistically they belong to the same group.

Table 8 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by job level

Cluster (l)	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	50.6%	41	21.7%	13	33.3%	24	9.8%	5
[ɹ]	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.9%	2
[ø]	49.4%	40	78.3%	47	66.7%	48	86.3%	44
Total	100%	81	100%	60	100%	72	100%	51

$\chi^2$  for all four job levels = 26.69 df = 3 p < .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level II = 12.22 df = 1 p < .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level III = 4.66 df = 1 p > .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level IV = 21.81 df = 1 p < .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level II and Job Level III = 2.19 df = 1 p > .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level II and Job Level IV = 2.56 df = 1 p > .01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level III and Job Level IV = 8.55 df = 1 p < .01

The differences in the use of postconsonantal (l) variants of all four job levels are statistically significant. Nevertheless, there are no significant differences between

- a) Job Level I and Job Level III
- b) Job Level II and Job Level III, and
- c) Job Level II and Job Level IV.

The data, thus, do not totally support the hypothesis that speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (l) variation. The strongest generalization that can be made is the highest status speakers have the lowest rate of l-deletion and the lowest status have the highest rate of cluster l-simplification.

### 5.7 Variation of (l) by sex controlling for job level

In 5.5, it has been shown that contrary to the hypothesis, male and female speakers as a whole do not show different patterns of (l) usage. A further analysis of (l) variation of both sex groups in each job level, as presented in this section, also points to the same direction. That is male and female speakers of the same job level do not differ with regard to (l).

In the initial position, as can be seen in Tables 9-12, both sex groups of the same job level consistently use [l] for (l). A slight difference can be observed in Job Level IV, in which male speakers pronounce r-variants 6% while their female counterparts use [l] 100%. Even so, the differences are not significant.

Table 9 - Frequency of Job Level I's initial (l) variants by sex

Initial (l)	Job Level I			
	Male		Female	
[l]	100%	261	100%	351
Total	100%	261	100%	351

Table 10 - Frequency of Job Level II's initial (l) variants by sex

Initial (l)	Job Level II			
	Male		Female	
[l]	100%	234	100%	230
Total	100%	234	100%	230

Table 11 - Frequency of Job Level III's initial (l) variants by sex

Initial (l)	Job Level III			
	Male		Female	
[l]	100%	307	100%	272
Total	100%	307	100%	272

Table 12 - Frequency of Job Level IV's initial (l) variants by sex

Initial (l)	Job Level IV			
	Male		Female	
[l]	93.7%	178	100%	258
[r]	1.0%	2	-	-
[ɹ]	5.3%	10	-	-
Total	100%	190	100%	258

In clusters (Tables 13-16), female speakers have a lower use of [ø] and at the same time a higher use of [l] than male of the same job level, except the lowest status, in which the males use l-reduction less frequently than the females. It can also be noted that the lowest ranking males are the only group that uses the hypercorrected r variant [ɹ] (8%). However, a closer examination of the data reveals that there are only two (out of seven) male speakers of the lowest status job level who use the hypercorrection. Also, these two subjects are the only speakers who use [r] and [ɹ] for (l) in the initial position (Table 12).

Table 13 - Frequency of Job Level I's cluster (l) variants by sex

Cluster (l)	Job Level I			
	Male		Female	
[l]	39.3%	11	61.2%	30
[ø]	60.7%	21	38.8%	19
Total	100%	32	100%	49

$$\chi^2 = 5.57 \text{ df} = 1 \text{ p} > .01$$

Table 14 - Frequency of Job Level II's cluster (l) variants by sex

Cluster (l)	Job Level II			
	Male		Female	
[l]	15.4%	4	26.5%	9
[ø]	84.6%	22	73.5%	25
Total	100%	26	100%	34

$$\chi^2 = 0.27 \text{ df} = 1 \text{ p} > .01$$

Table 15 - Frequency of Job Level III's cluster (l) variants by sex

Cluster (l)	Job Level III			
	Male		Female	
[l]	25.8%	8	39.0%	16
[ø]	74.2%	23	61.0%	25
Total	100%	31	100%	41

$$\chi^2 = 1.36 \text{ df} = 1 \text{ p} > .01$$

Table 16 - Frequency of Job Level IV's cluster (l) variants by sex

Cluster (l)	Job Level IV			
	Male		Female	
[l]	12.5%	3	7.4%	2
[ɹ]	8.3%	2	-	-
[ø]	79.2%	19	92.6%	25
Total	100%	24	100%	27

$$\chi^2 = 1.94 \text{ df} = 1 \text{ p} > .01$$

As shown in Tables 13-16, the differences in each case are not statistically significant. Therefore, the hypothesis that male and female speakers have different patterns of (l) usage is rejected again in all social class levels.

In summary, male and female speakers as a whole or of any particular job level do not display different variation patterns of (l) in both positions of occurrence.

## 5.8 Variation of (l) by job level controlling for sex

### 5.8.1 Variation of (l) by job level: male

As might be expected, in the initial position (Table 17), (l) invariably becomes [l] for the first three job levels. The lowest ranking male speakers, however, pronounce two hypercorrected r-variants for (l), i.e. [ɹ] (5%) and [r] (1%). The differences among the four groups of male speakers are not significant.

Table 17 - Frequency of initial (l) variants by job level: male

Initial (l)	Male							
	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	100%	261	100%	234	100%	307	93.7%	178
[ɹ]	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.0%	2
[r]	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.3%	10
Total	100%	261	100%	234	100%	307	100%	190

In clusters, the bottom male speakers once again become the only group that use r-variants for (l). In this case they use only [ɹ] and the frequency is 8%, as shown in Table 18. Table 18 also shows that the highest status male speakers have the lowest rate of [ø] while Job Level II speakers have the highest rate of l-deletion. However, the differences among all job levels or between any two job levels of male speakers are not statistically significant. The results are, thus, in contrast to the ones in 5.6, in which job level alone is considered. Therefore, the research findings

on male subjects reject the hypothesis that speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (l) variation.

Table 18 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by job level: male

Cluster (l)	Male							
	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	39.3%	11	15.4%	4	25.8%	8	12.5%	3
[ɪ]	-	-	-	-	-	-	8.3%	2
[ø]	60.7%	21	84.6%	22	74.2%	23	79.2%	19
Total	100%	32	100%	26	100%	31	100%	24

$$\chi^2 \text{ for all four job levels} = 9.78 \text{ df}=3 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level I and Job Level II} = 2.68 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level I and Job Level III} = 0.54 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level I and Job Level IV} = 1.22 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level II and Job Level III} = 0.92 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level II and Job Level IV} = 0.24 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

$$\chi^2 \text{ for Job Level III and Job Level IV} = 0.18 \text{ df}=1 \text{ p}>.01$$

To summarize, male speakers of all job levels do not produce different variation patterns of (l) usage either in the initial position or in clusters.

#### 5.8.2 Variation of (l) by job level: female

Like their male counterparts (5.8.1), female speakers of all job levels invariably pronounce [l] for (l) in the initial position, as shown in Table 19. Obviously, there is no difference among all the four social class groups of female speakers in the use of initial (l).

Table 19 - Frequency of initial (l) variants by job level: female

Initial (l)	Female							
	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	100%	351	100%	230	100%	272	100%	258
Total	100%	351	100%	230	100%	272	100%	258

In clusters, the highest ranking female group has the highest rate of l-retention (61.2%) and the lowest rate of l-deletion (38.8%) among all the subgroups of female (and male) speakers. Conversely the lowest status female group has the lowest usage of [l] and the highest usage of [ø] among all the subgroups of female (and male) speakers. As for the two middle ranking groups, Job Level III speakers have a higher frequency of [l] and a lower frequency of l-deletion than Job Level II. However, the differences between the two female middle status groups are not statistically significant.

As can be seen in Table 20, the differences in the use of cluster (l) variants of all four job levels of female speakers are statistically significant. However, there are no differences between

- a) Job Level I and Job Level III
- b) Job Level II and Job Level III, and
- c) Job Level II and Job Level IV.

Table 20 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by job level: female

Cluster (l)	Female							
	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	61.2%	30	26.5%	9	39.0%	16	7.4%	2
[ø]	38.8%	19	73.5%	25	61.0%	25	92.6%	25
Total	100%	49	100%	34	100%	41	100%	27

$\chi^2$  for all four job levels = 23.91 df=3 p<.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level II = 9.75 df=1 p<.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level III = 4.39 df=1 p>.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level I and Job Level IV = 20.69 df=1 p<.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level II and Job Level III = 1.32 df=1 p>.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level II and Job Level IV = 3.69 df=1 p>.01

$\chi^2$  for Job Level III and Job Level IV = 8.37 df=1 p<.01

The data, thus, do not totally support the hypothesis that speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (l) variant usage. However, it can be generalized that the highest status female speakers have the lowest rate of l-deletion and the lowest status have the highest rate of l-reduction.

It should also be noted that the females' variation pattern of (l) in clusters by job level as shown in Table 20 is similar to the pattern in Table 8, when job level alone is taken into consideration.

In summary, female speakers of different job levels have the same pattern of initial (l) usage. In clusters, they differentiate themselves: the highest status female speakers have the lowest usage of l-deletion and the lowest status conversely have the highest usage of l-deletion. As far as (l) is concerned, the two middle status groups of female speakers belong to the same group.

## 6. Discussion

The hypotheses of the present study, i.e. male and female speakers have different (l) variation patterns, and speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (l) variation, are based on findings of the earlier study of variation of (r) in Thai (and (r) in English) of the same subject group (Boonruang 1993a, 1993b). In that study, variation of (r) is found to be related to both social variables. That is

the patterns of (r) of male and female speakers are different. Female speakers have a higher rate of prestigious variants than males. Likewise, speakers of a higher job level tend to have a higher usage of prestigious variants than those of a lower. However, using the same set of data, the findings of the present study of (l) in Thai obviously yield different results from those of (r) in Thai.

To begin with, the results of the present study provide evidence that sex has no effect upon cluster (l) variation. The fact that sex is no significant factor with regard to consonant cluster variation has in fact been suggested earlier by Beebe (1974:27). However, this finding is in contrast to (r) of the same subject group.

In the earlier study, it was found that the two sex groups have different variation patterns of (r) (Boonruang 1993a). Second, the fact that the highest status speakers have the lowest rate of l-reduction while the lowest status have the highest usage of l-deletion has also been reported in Beebe's (1974:126). However, the present study investigates further by taking sex groups into consideration. It is found that such significant differences only occur with female speakers, and not male. Male speakers of different job levels do not show different patterns of (r) variation. Thus, the results tend to suggest that while female speakers of different social classes are conscious of the use of cluster (l) to different degrees, male speakers of all job levels are not.

In the study of variation of (r) in Thai according to job level (Boonruang 1993b), it was found that not only do speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (r) variation, but both males and females of different job levels do also. These provide additional evidence that (r) and (l) vary according to the same social variable of job level, though to different degrees.

Since (r) and (l) in Thai behave differently, it can, therefore, safely be concluded that the (r) and (l) belong to separate sets of phonological variables despite the fact that each can occur in clusters. (r) is a strongly salient phonological variable while (l) is less marked by social variables.

Finally, some comments should be made with regard to the two lowest ranking male speakers who use hypercorrected r variants for (l) in both positions of occurrence (5.3, 5.4). According to Beebe's (1974:355), this is a kind of "hypercorrection", i.e. "an instance where an individual believes a linguistic rule has applied in a case where it has not actually applied".

In the earlier study of (r), it was found that their rate of prestigious variants surpasses other higher status groups (Boonruang 1993a), causing another kind of hypercorrection, as used by Labov (1966), or "statistical hypercorrection" as used by Wolfram and Fasold (1974:87-88). According to Wolfram and Fasold, this second type of hypercorrection results when the lower middle class wants to attain upper middle class status, and so strives to emulate the upper middle class and

attain equal status. This striving makes them very conscious of the external reference group with which it has contact but by which it is not completely accepted. The linguistic insecurity of this position is reflected in the fact that this group uses frequency levels higher than the more secure upper middle class when speech is in primary focus. Therefore, the two lowest status male speakers provide a good example of both types of hypercorrection used in sociolinguistic studies. Based on their use of both kinds of hypercorrection, it can be concluded that they are well aware of the role of the variants used to the extent of being careful when using (r) and too careful when using (l) in their speech.

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