

Gender-Differential Tendencies in LINE Use: A Case of Thailand

Napat Jitpaisarnwattana
Silpakorn University
napat.jit@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the gender-differential tendencies in the use of Thai final particles and virtual stickers in LINE, a popular instant-messaging platform in Thailand. The data are gathered from a group chat of 13 participants who are or were working for a company in Thailand. Three thousand, three hundred and eighty four messages were analyzed and four participants were selected for follow-up interviews. The results reveal that the female users tend to use final particles more than the male users do. However, the male users appear to use more virtual stickers than the female users do. The study concludes that such differences are not solely determined by gender; rather, they are socially constructed and shaped by the nature of the platform.

Keywords: gender differences, Thai final particles, virtual stickers

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษาแนวโน้มความแตกต่างทางเพศในการใช้คาลังท้ายและสติ๊กเกอร์ในไลน์แอปพลิเคชันไลน์เป็นแอปพลิเคชันที่เป็นที่นิยมมากในประเทศไทย ข้อมูลได้มาจากกลุ่มการสนทนา ที่มีจำนวนสมาชิก 13 คน โดยทั้ง 13 คนทำงานให้กับบริษัทแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย ข้อความจำนวน 3,384 ข้อความถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์ หลังจากนั้นสมาชิกของกลุ่มจำนวน 4 คนถูกเลือกมาเพื่อทำการสัมภาษณ์ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้ใช้เพศหญิงมีแนวโน้มที่จะใช้คาลังท้ายมากกว่าผู้ใช้เพศชาย อย่างไรก็ตามผู้ใช้เพศชายมีแนวโน้มที่จะใช้สติ๊กเกอร์ มากกว่าผู้ใช้เพศหญิง งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้สรุปได้ว่าความแตกต่างที่เกิดขึ้นนั้น อาจจะไม่ได้เกิดจากความแตกต่างทางเพศเพียงอย่างเดียว แต่ยังเกี่ยวกับสภาพสังคม และธรรมชาติของตัวแอปพลิเคชันอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ ความแตกต่างทางเพศ คาลังท้าย สติ๊กเกอร์ในไลน์แอปพลิเคชัน

Introduction

In recent decades, language and gender has been popularly studied by researchers in the field of linguistics. Also, a great number of studies have claimed that there were some gender differences in language use in terms of face-to-face interaction (Coates, 1993; Hirschman, 1994; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990). From the very earliest study, Jespersen (1922) mentions that men were the ones who formulate and modify the language of the community and women have less lexical resources than men. However, his work has been criticized of having a sexist perspective and for stereotyping women to be inferior in a supposedly more systematic manner (Cameron, 1992).

Later, Lakoff (1975) suggests that men's language is superior to that of women since women tended to seek for support and solidarity. Similarly, Tannen (1984) proposes that males tend to dominate females in conversations and females have social disadvantages. Some scholars claim that males speak in a more assertive and dominant way, whereas females are likely to be more supportive and indirect in interactions (Coates, 1993; Fishman, 1983). To my knowledge, even though some of these studies have been criticized for being too negative in making assumptions about female's linguistic features or some being too male-dominant, I think that there are certainly differences in the language used by men and women, however, such differences are driven by the background of the language community, and interactional context, rather than the biological gender itself.

In the past two decades, technology has changed the way people communicate, moving from face-to-face to online platforms. Inevitably, the study of language and gender has expanded its body of research to various online platforms as well. One of the most frequently-discussed issues in this area is gender differences in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Initially, CMC has attracted linguists' interests, as they wanted to know whether the gender dichotomies in face-to-face conversation would also be the same in online communication. There was the optimism that the anonymity afforded by the medium would neutralize the gender roles (Danet, 1998; Graddol & Swann, 1989 as cited in Baron, 2004). However, in later studies, it has been found that online communication usually duplicates offline gender differences (Guiller & Durndell, 2006; Herring, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2003; Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001).

The research on gender-differential tendencies in CMC is expanding especially amongst synchronous CMC, however, the research on language and gender in Thai CMC is very limited. In fact, Thai is a gender-rich language meaning that men and women use different aspects of language when they speak. One of the most gender-exclusive elements in Thai is in the use of final particles. Being a native Thai speaker, and aware that there certainly are differences when Thai men and women speak, I decided to investigate whether such differences will still play out in the most popular synchronous CMC among Thai people, LINE.

This study investigates gender-differential tendencies in linguistic and multimodal features of LINE use among 13 Thai workers. It was carried out in a group chat afforded by the LINE application. This paper consists of 8 main sections. First I present the background of the LINE application and gender in Thai culture. Next, a literature review on Gender and CMC is discussed. Then, I discuss the research questions which shaped the present analysis followed by the research methodology, the results and data analysis. Lastly the findings from the analysis are discussed as well as the limitations and conclusion.

Background

LINE

Due to the fact that LINE is a novel phenomenon in CMC, there is no existing literature on it yet; therefore, the definition here is based on the researcher's experience as a regular user for two years. LINE is a form of instant messaging that offers a synchronous chat platform with several unique features. Such features are texting, voice over internet protocol (VOIP), sharing photos, audio messages, videos, links, and a distinctive feature: virtual stickers which will be described in the next section. Also, the communication in LINE can consist of 2 users in private chat and up to 100 users in a group chat

Virtual Sticker

Virtual sticker is an exclusive feature offered to LINE users. Their function is mainly similar to large-sized emoticons in that they are used to show emotion and feeling (See figure 1). As Herring (2003) notes, females tend to use more emoticons and laughter. Therefore, a virtual sticker is a tool used to express emotions and feelings, it is interesting to see whether the tendency in LINE is still replicable with the previous studies.



Figure 1. The Use of Virtual Sticker to Express Feeling

Gender and language in Thai culture

Thai women hold a considerably active role and high status in Thai society wherein Thai women often are highly educated and hold important roles in public professions. While Thai have such high status, most of the well-paid professions and leadership roles are occupied by Thai males. The status of women is equal to men by law, however, in reality the differences are relatively prominent. Perceptually, females are socialized to be care-giving and submissive, where they are expected to be pleasing to men and in some cases a sex object (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2007). On the other hand, males are perceived to be the leader of a family. Also, they are expected to take care of females physically and financially. Even though Thai males and females are now more socially equal, such perceptions still exists to some extent in Thai society.

As for language, Thai is considered gendered specific language meaning that Thai men and women use different types of languages according to their roles in the society. However, the differences are not solely because of gender, but rather sex discrimination (Ingkaphirom, 1994). As mentioned earlier, Thai males and females are not socially equal, i.e. males are considered superior to women. Therefore, it is expected that the language of women should be more polite than that of men. To clarify this, in conversations, the speakers, regardless of their gender, are expected to use polite final particles and pronouns. However, in reality this is not always the case. While it is acceptable for men to use impolite final particles or pronouns in informal conversations, it is not acceptable for women. If a Thai female uses such language, she will be regarded as rude and unfeminine (Ingkaphirom, 1994). In this study, I will take a close look at one of the features that indexes gender differences in Thai language, final particles. However, it should be noted that there are a lot of other features that can indicate gender differences in Thai language such as: pronouns, exclamations, repetition, idioms, and even lexical items which can be pursued in further research (Ingkaphirom, 1994).

Final Particles in Thai: Politeness and feeling expressions

In Thai, the word “particle” is usually defined as, “pragmatically use of words in an utterance that convey emotions, feelings and expressing attitudes of speakers” (Angkapanichkit, 2012). Regarding its position, it can be classified as “initial particle,” occurring at the initial part of a sentence, “filler,” occurring in the middle or at the beginning of a declarative sentence and “final particle,” positioned at the end of a sentence. The last one appears most commonly in Thai speech. Final particles and other particles are used only in everyday speech or informal contexts and they are completely omitted in the formal style of use (Angkapanichkit, 2012). However, they, especially final particles, are very active and dynamic in interaction. Functionally, they add extra meaning to the meaning of a whole sentence. Semantically and pragmatically, Cooke (1989) divided Thai particles into four main types: speaker-addressee relationships, or status particles, calling for response from addressee, or question particles, speaker’s response to the situation and contextual orientation, or mood particles (for details of Thai particles see Cooke, 1989).

In Thai, some particles are used exclusively by females; some by males and some are neutral. On the one hand, *kha* is the final particle that is exclusively used by Thai females. Generally,

it is used to show politeness toward the other party. On the other hand, *khraph* is the final particle used by Thai males in order to be polite and respectful to the other party (see example 1).

- (1) Male speaker: /Khun **Khrab**.Khoorthood. Hongngam yuu thinhai **khraph**?/

1 2 3 4 5
 “Excuse me. Where is the bathroom?” (Literally “you”)

2 5 4 3 1
 Female speaker: “yuu throngnee **kha**”

6 7
 “It is over here”
 6 7

(A man speaks to a female stranger in a department store.)

As you can see from the example above, the contribution of the final particles *kha* and *khraph* to the sentence is semantically, rather than syntactically meaningful in that they add extra meaning to the sentences (to be more polite). However, without them, the sentences are still comprehensible. These two particles are the most commonly-used by Thais. Also, as Thai language is tonal, there are other variations of these words determined by tone of the speakers. However, it does not seem to be the case with CMC as it is text-based and the words are not pronounced.

Furthermore, there are other final particles that are neutral and used commonly by both males and females. The examples are *na*, *ja*, and *la*. *Na* is used to express desire and signal that the speaker wants or expects some response from the addressee. *Ja* is used to show intimacy and affection between the speakers. It is chiefly used by women and children, but men use it occasionally as well. *La* is used to show that an important point has been reached or passed (Cooke, 1989). These are the three most common final particles used by Thai speakers in speech. However, it is paramount to note here that the definitions given here are only for the frequent use of each word and there are many other variations that these particles can be used, pronounced and interpreted.

Literature review

The language of CMC

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as a, “communication that takes place between human being via instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996). Even though CMC has become more multimodal because of new features afforded by the development of technology, a lot of CMC studies still place their focuses on text-based CMC. This is probably because the differences in terms of linguistic features between text-based CMC and the traditional ways of communication (e.g., face-to-face interaction, talking through the phone or even letter writing) are more prominent than other modes such as images or audio

(Mei, 2006). In this study, the focus is placed on one form of text-based synchronous CMCs, instant messaging.

Linguists agree that there are differences between the language of CMC and the language of written and spoken communication, but with slightly different perspectives. As Luke (2003) suggests, the language of IM is linguistically multimodal at its core because it combines speech and writing altogether. Similarly, Baron (2000) describes language in email communication as, “an emerging language centaur – part speech, part writing.” However, some scholars propose that the features of CMC have led to the creation of its own special linguistic features. As a result, there has been a notion that describes CMC as a, “third medium” (Crystal, 2001). With the combination of speech and writing, and the properties that CMC possesses in its nature, are both contributing factors to the recognition of its status as a unique communication medium.

However, as Baron (2004) proposes, each type of CMC has its own properties which in turn affect its linguistic features. Therefore, the nature of IM especially LINE needs to be taken into account. Previous studies have pointed out some linguistic features of IM such as the use of abbreviations, non-standard language and emoticons to name but a few (Baron, 2004; Lee, 2007; Randall, 2002). As LINE is a recent phenomenon, there is, to my knowledge, no study on its linguistics features yet. However, drawing from my own experience, LINE appears to possess all of the features mentioned above with the addition of virtual stickers.

Gender differential tendencies and linguistic features

Previous studies on Language and gender have shown that males and females possessed dissimilar tendencies in their use of linguistic features. Lakoff (1975) suggests that females were more likely to use more euphemisms, tag questions, hedges and indirection to avoid expressing strong opinions and to seek approval for their feelings. Also, they tended to be more polite in their language. In addition, Coates (1993) proposes that males generally speak in an assertive, direct and dominant manner, whereas females tended to be more supportive, indirect and tentative in their utterances. Regarding feelings and emotions, Mcmillan, Clifton, McGrath, and Gale (1977) suggests that women tended to show stronger feelings and emotions by stretching words. Furthermore, females were more likely to use first person pronouns because they wanted to share their feelings and experiences (Hirschman, 1994).

Furthermore, there are a number of linguistic features that have been indicated by previous studies namely, minimal responses, laughter, hedges, questions, intensifiers and code-mixing (Coates, 1993; Fishman, 1983; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988). Some of these features are preferred by males and others by females. However, not all of these features seem relevant in the CMC environment. Also, it is demonstrated in a study by Guiller and Durndell (2006) that the differences in linguistic features, such as first-person pronoun, hedges and questions between male and female language in an online discussion group, are not significant. The only prominent difference they found was that females are likely to use more intensifiers than are males.

Gender and CMC

There was initial optimism that the anonymity afforded by CMC would neutralize gender differences (Danet, 1998; Graddol & Swann, 1989 as cited in Baron 2004). However, it was later discovered in several studies that the gender-differential tendencies in speech still exist in one-to-many CMC. Herring (1992, 2000) found that real-life identity is preferred by users in online discussion groups because it is more credible. Also, in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), gender is usually revealed as conversations unfold. In addition, a number of studies have found that gender differences in traditional communication media also appear in CMC. Herring (2003) provides a comprehensive analysis of language and gender in one-to-many CMC platforms both asynchronous (listservs and newsgroups) and synchronous (MUDs and MOOs). She reports that, for asynchronous CMC, males are likely to be dominant in the discussion by posting longer messages, beginning and finishing topics. Also, they tend to be assertive and competitive by showing strong opinions and manifest an adversarial orientation toward their interlocutors. Females, on the other hand, tend to be less assertive, make more apologies and express support to their interlocutors (Herring, 2003).

For synchronous CMC, despite the more equal participation, gender differences still permeated. Herring (2003) notes in her study of MUDs and MOOs that males are more aggressive and insulting in conversation, whereas females are more aligned and supportive. Also, females use far more representation of smiles and laughter. Additionally, Baron's (2004) findings in her study of gender-differential tendencies among American university students in their IM use are consistent with Herring (2003) who found that females have a higher tendency to use emoticons than do males. Moreover, she further claims that female participants tend to follow the formal written standard more so than do male participants.

As you can see, studies have shown that gender differences still exist in both synchronous and asynchronous CMC; however, we need to be mindful, especially in this study, when considering the literature on gender and CMC. This is because the social conditions for participants in this study are quite different from those in the literature. To explain this, most of the platforms found in the previous studies are open to a large number of users, and most of them do not know their interlocutors in their offline lives. Users can also represent themselves to be an age or gender which does not necessarily correspond to who they really are in reality. In the context of this study, IM conversations are between participants who know one another and have face-to-face relationships with the supplementation of online discourse. As a result, even though some of the gender findings from the literature might be pertinent with a gender analysis of this study (e.g., emoticons, smiles and laughter), some findings (e.g., conversation dominance, aggressiveness and insult) might not be well-applied.

Research Question

It can be seen quite clearly from the literature that males and females are likely to use linguistic features differently when they participate in online communication. However, in Thai, final particles are meaningful in interaction in terms of politeness and feeling

expressions. Also, they are used exclusively by different genders. Therefore, first, I will investigate the tendencies of Thai males and females in their use of final particles. Moreover, based on the findings from previous studies where females tended to use more emoticons and representation of smiles and laughter in their conversation I wanted to examine whether this is still true in a Thai context. Therefore, two research questions were formed:

- 1. Do female users tend to use more final particles than male users?**
- 2. Do female users use virtual stickers to show their emotion more than male users?**

Research Method

Participants and research context

The study was conducted with 13 Thai workers who are, or were, working for a company in Thailand. Six are males and seven are females. All of them are bilingual in Thai and English. The group chat is used for many purposes both work-related and non-work-related. Mainly, it is used for sharing information about work, arranging travelling plans, chatting, gossiping etc. All of the participants know, and have face-to-face interactions, with one another in their offline lives. The group has been in use for over a year.

Linguistic context

All of the participants are native speakers of Thai with a very high level of English (the company is an international company where English occupies 90% of the communication). Also, the conversations are bilingual and a lot of code-mixing occurs. However, it is paramount to mention that this study focuses only on the use of final particles and virtual stickers; therefore, the data for final particles was collected regardless of the language they are represented (Thai or English).

Data collection

As the researcher and one of the group members, the researcher asked all of the participants to participate in this study via the group chat. Also, the researcher was allowed by all of the participants to use any data that appeared in the group chat of this research. 3384 Messages from January 2015 to March 2015 were taken from the group chat for the analysis. All of the messages are naturally-occurring. The reason why the researcher chose data from this period is because the number of group members has increased gradually since the beginning of the group. However, since January 2015, the number of members has been the same. Therefore, it would be more relevant and credible to collect the data in the period that all of the participants are actually involved in the conversations.

All of the messages were analyzed for linguistic features according to two categories: final particles and virtual stickers. Final particles and virtual stickers were counted and identified whether they were produced by male or female participants. Also, the final particles are

categorized into male-exclusive, female-exclusive and neutral. After that, four participants were interviewed in order to better understand the reason behind the tendencies found.

Results and Data Analysis

In the data analysis, 3384 messages were analyzed according to 3 categories: the use of sex-exclusive final particles to show politeness, the use of final particles to express feeling, and the use of virtual stickers to express emotion. Of all the messages, 1,240 were produced by male participants and 2,144 were produced by female participants.

Table 1

The Use of Sex-exclusive Final Particles to Show Politeness

	Khrab (M)	Kha (F)	Total	% of Sex-exclusive Final Particles amongst All the Messages of Each Gender Group
Male	27	11	38	3.08%
Female	6	124	130	6.06%

The use of sex exclusive final particles to show politeness

The data in table 1 illustrates that females tended to use sex-exclusive final particles more frequently. One hundred and thirty messages produced by females contain final particles, whereas only 38 messages produced by males do so. Also, the percentage of females' messages containing sex-exclusive final particles is almost two times higher than the males' at 6.06 % and 3.08% respectively.

(2) F1: Which restaurant kha?

M1: Ivillage (name of a restaurant)

(3) F2: Can I have hr email please? Anyone know?

F3: Hrteam@[REDACTED].in.th

F2: Thanks ka

(4) M : 2มีเบอร์ที่ทอมไหมครับ (?Do you have Tom's number kub)

F4: 0905741334 ka

Furthermore, it can be seen from the examples (2), (3) and (4) that the final particles are attached to any type of sentences (interrogative, declarative etc.) to show politeness towards other users. Also, it is interesting to discern that if the preceding sentence contains final particles, do the respondents tend to include final particles in their sentences (see example (4))? This tendency appears to be true in this group chat across all the messages regardless of gender.

- (5) F5: Resigning process la
 F5: Waiting for approval n return stuff
 M3: Su su **ka** (Romanized Thai literally translated- fighting ka).

Interestingly, the use of cross sex-exclusive final particles was found (5). Eighteen messages containing such use of final particles were found in the data (11 by males and 6 by females). This behavior is a recent phenomenon that has never really been mentioned in the previous studies of Thai final particles. Therefore, this issue was raised in the follow-up interviews with the participants who produced such particles. Female participants reported that they sometimes used *khraab* when they interacted with younger male users in order to make sentences less polite and formal than using *kha*, but still not too curt. On the other hand, male participants reported that they sometimes use *kha* when they interacted with other female users to soften the tone of voice and to be gentle. In addition, one male participant, who fancies another female user in the group chat, reported that he used *kha* when he interacted with that female user he likes because it sounds more flirtatious.

Table 2

The Use of Other Final Particles to Express Feeling

	Ja	Na	La	Total	% of Final Particles amongst All the Messages of Each Gender Group
Male	3 (9.09%)	24 (72.73%)	6 (18.18%)	33	2.66%
Female	36 (20.57%)	97 (55.43%)	42 (24%)	175	8.16%

The use of other final particles to express feeling

Table 2 notes that female participants tended to use final particles *ja*, *na* and *la* more than male participants. The number of messages containing such particles produced by female users was 5 times more than the male messages at 175 and 33 respectively. Moreover, the percentage of using these final particles is considerably higher among female users than male users at 8.16 and 2.66 respectively.

- (6) F6: First, I put ur polo in the cabinet under the pc na
 M4: thanks krab
- (7) M5: Nok last day tomorrow. You guys wanna go out to eat?
 F7: I'm fine with that ja

In (6) *na* is used to signal that the response from the addressee is expected. Without the word *na*, the sentence would still be comprehensible; thus, its function here is to soften the tone of the statement to be more courteous. On top of that, in (7), *ja* is used to show imitate feelings towards the other users. In this case, it is not surprising to see that female participants used *ja*

far more than the male participants as *ja* is mainly used by children and women and somewhat considered feminine. On the whole, the tendency in this group chat is that females use more final particles to express their feeling, and this finding is not surprising and is consistent with the existing literature that females are likely to express their feelings more frequently.

Table 3

The Use of Virtual Stickers to Show Emotions

	Virtual Stickers	% of Virtual Stickers amongst All the Messages of Each Gender Group
Male	174 (42.86%)	14.03%
Female	232 (57.14%)	10.82%
Total	406	

The use of virtual stickers to show emotions

Due to the fact that virtual stickers function similarly to traditional emoticons, it was assumed based on previous studies that female participants would use them more than male participants. In this study, this tendency is not shown so clearly. Even though it can be seen from the Table 3 that female participants used more virtual stickers than did male participants, this could also be due to the fact that they produced more messages. Also, when compared with the number of virtual stickers to all the messages in each gender group, male users have higher percentage of using virtual stickers in their messages at 14.03 to 10.82 respectively.

In the follow-up interviews, male participants reported that they felt free to show their emotions in the chat group because all of the members know each other in their offline lives. They are not just colleagues, but friends. Interestingly, they also pointed out that virtual stickers are a good tool to enhance communication because communication in synchronous CMC lacks face-to-face interaction. Therefore, they sometimes do not see the stickers as a way to express emotion, but rather to communicate their messages more effectively.

Discussion

One of the main findings from the data noted that a number of the differences in linguistic features used by males and females mentioned in previous studies on gender and CMC were still be found in LINE group chat. However, it was interesting to discover that some of the features afforded by the platform (virtual stickers) had an impact on making gender less relevant. In addition, the nature and the purpose of the platform together with the relationship between users all contributed to this impact.

The use of sex exclusive final particles

It is not surprising to find that female participants tended to use more sex-exclusive final particles to show politeness than did male participants. This tendency is in accordance with previous studies on both face-to-face and CMC communication that females are likely to be more polite than males in conversations (Herring, 2003; Lakoff, 1975). Also, it supports the claim by Simpson (1997) that, in Thailand, women's language is expected to be more polite than men's language. In fact, it reflects the status of women in Thai society that men and women are not socially equal meaning that they are raised and socialized differently, which in turn effects their language use.

These findings indicate that the language of men and women in Thailand is socially constructed, however, this tendency may not be solely determined by gender. In this case, the age of the participants needs to be taken into consideration. This is because Thai culture places a great importance on seniority meaning that younger people need to show respect to older ones regardless of their gender. In conversations, such respect can be communicated via the use of sex-exclusive final particles. In this study, on the one hand, two male participants are significantly older than the other users; therefore, they may not feel obliged to use such particles. On the other hand, other users (mostly female) may feel that they need to include final particles when they post something in the group in order to not break norms.

Furthermore, the use of cross sex-exclusive final particles is a phenomenon that emerged from the findings. This also happens in face-to-face conversations but rather infrequently. The data is consonant with the usage in face-to-face conversation that males use them more often than females. Also, such use of final particles only happens in conversations where a certain level of intimacy appears, therefore, we should not expect to see this in any formal or professional conversations. In addition, as mentioned by a participant that he uses *kha* in order to sound flirtatious seems to reflect the way males who use *kha* are perceived in Thai society. Even though it can also be interpreted as being playful or gentle, most people perceive such use of cross sex-exclusive final particles as being flirtatious. However, it will be perceived as playful if a woman uses *khrab*.

The use of other final particles to how personal feeling

The result that female participants used other final particles (*na*, *ja* and *la*) more frequently may imply that such final particles are perceived by female participants as effective tools to show personal feelings and attitudes. This finding parallels with the findings from previous studies that females are likely to show their feelings in their words. Also, according to my data, a significant proportion of these final particles as well as the sex-exclusive ones appeared in English messages. This seems to violate the claim by Baron (2004) that females tend to follow the formal written standard. Using Thai final particles in English is a very popular code-mixing practice in online communication. However, it does not usually happen in face-to-face communication. Therefore, this code-mixing practice can be regarded as a characteristic of informal register in Thai online communities.

The use of virtual stickers to show emotions

Interestingly, this finding contradicts most of the findings from previous studies that females have a higher tendency of showing their feelings by using emoticons and the representation of smiles and laughter (Baron, 2004; Herring, 1998, 2003). There may be several reasons contributing to this contradiction. First, as mentioned by the participants that all the users of the group chat know one another in their offline lives, and all of them are friends, male participants may feel freer to express their emotions in the conversations. This notion is supported by Baron (2004) who claims that the relationship between users' needs to be considered when doing gender analysis of linguistic features.



Figure 2. The Use of Virtual Stickers to Facilitate Communication

Furthermore, in LINE, virtual stickers appear to possess more than one function. To clarify this, they are not always used as emoticons and are sometimes used to facilitate communication (see figure 2). The sticker in figure 2 is used as a tool to communicate with other users that the sender does not understand the conversation. It provides a new mode to enhance communication. Additionally, they are utilized as the representation of words or expressions (see figure 3). This can be observed in the sticker in figure 3 which is used to represent the expression *OK*, a practice frequently found in the messages from the data set. Therefore, it may be sensible to assume that the relationship between participants and the multifunction of the virtual stickers both contributed to the equal tendencies found in this study.



Figure 3. The Use of a Virtual Sticker to Represent an Expression

All in all, the results have demonstrated that gender differences in linguistic features are still found in LINE. However, it was also found that gender seems to be less relevant in some aspects. On the one hand, the differences exist because of the platform's nature, as a form of synchronous CMC in which users' gender is not anonymous; therefore, masculinity and femininity are easily displayed. On the other hand, the nature of the conversations where users know each other in their offline lives makes them feel freer to express their feelings and emotions, which in turn makes gender less relevant in this regard.

Limitations

This study is a very small-scale study and only two linguistic features were investigated. Other linguistic features that may be relevant to gender were omitted. Additionally, since Thai is a tonal language, some elements of the final particles may not be represented in text-based CMC. Furthermore, Thai culture is unique and does determine language use in the society, therefore, the finding from this study may not be well-generalized in other contexts.

Conclusion

This study investigated 2 linguistic features, namely Thai final particles and virtual stickers, among 13 Thai workers. It is discovered that there are gender-differential tendencies in the use of Thai final particles where females are likely to use them more frequently. However, the tendency does not seem to be determined solely by gender, other factors like age and the relationship between users both contributed to it. Also, the finding about the use of cross sex-exclusive final particles in Thai and the reasons behind such use is really captivating as the issue has never really been examined before either in face-to-face or online conversation. Furthermore, the finding about the use of virtual stickers to show emotion appears to be

different from the previous studies. Several factors contributed to this namely: the relationship between users, the multifunction of the stickers, and the way they are perceived by users as a communication tool rather than just emoticons. To conclude, the use of these two linguistic features by male and female users in a LINE group chat seems to be different, however, such difference is not merely determined by gender, but rather is socially constructed and shaped by the nature of the platform.

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