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**An exploratory study of the use of a Thai politeness marker by  
Thai-English bilingual adolescents**

**Short title: Use of a Thai politeness marker by bilinguals**

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# **An exploratory study of the use of a Thai politeness marker by Thai-English bilingual adolescents<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the use of a Thai politeness marker, *khǎb* (ครับ), by two Thai-English bilingual brothers, aged 11 and 15, during their 3-year stay in the U.S. By examining spontaneous speech data collected over eleven months (from Month 15 to Month 25 from time of arrival in the U.S.) in the boys' home in the U.S., we show that the two brothers used progressively less *khǎb* (ครับ) in speaking to their mother as time passed. The boys' declining use of the politeness marker is explained in part by their greater use of other casual Thai particles as substitutes and, in the case of the younger brother, the English filler, 'uh-huh.' When the boys used *khǎb* (ครับ), it was often for reasons other than for expressing politeness, such as to soften short responses and mitigate potential conflict. This paper argues that the boys' use of this politeness marker reflects their ability to adapt to a new setting where there is less pressure to supply socially appropriate linguistic forms in Thai. By focusing on the continuing development of the first language of L2 learners of English, this paper presents a critical look at the changing linguistic needs of sojourners.

**Key Words:** bilingual development; linguistic politeness; Thai-English bilinguals; Thai politeness marker

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## **Introduction**

This paper reports on an exploratory study of the use of a Thai politeness marker, *khǎb* (ครับ), by two Thai-English bilingual brothers, aged 11 and 15, at home in the United States over eleven months. Sons of the first author, the two Thai brothers came to the U.S. when they were 9 and 13 years old respectively with their mother who was pursuing a doctoral degree at an American university. The boys were enrolled in American public schools and were educated in English during their three-year stay in the U.S. The data for the current study comes from that period. Upon completion of their mother's graduate studies, the boys returned to Thailand with her.

There is currently very little research on Thai-English bilingual children (but see, Chanseawrassamee & Shin, 2009). In addition, relatively few studies have addressed the first and second language development of sojourners who stay in the host country temporarily (Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Matsuda, 2000). Furthermore, we know of no study that has examined the use of Thai politeness markers by Thai adolescents who are in the process of becoming bilingual. Thai and English have very different linguistic conventions for expressing politeness (Deephuenton, 1992; Iwasaki & Horie, 2000; Simpson, 1997; Smyth, 2002). Proper use of *khǎb* (ครับ) is expected in Thai society and Thai children who fail to use it in their speech are frowned upon. However, as the pressure to speak socially appropriate Thai is reduced due to residence in the U.S., and as the boys become more proficient in English, does the pattern of their use of *khǎb* (ครับ) change? This exploratory study attempts to address this question.

## **Linguistic Politeness in Thai**

The past two decades have seen a great deal of interest among scholars in politeness theory. Following Brown & Levinson's (1987) seminal work, a large body of research has examined conventions of politeness across different speech communities (e.g., Beeching, 2002; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997; Watts, Ide, and Konrad, 1992). In addition, studies on the differences between English conventions and those in other cultures have included a substantial number of languages (see for example, Marquez Reiter (2000) for Uruguayan Spanish; Cook (1996) for Portuguese; Bayraktaroglu & Sifianou (2001) for Greek and Turkish; and Hendry (1993) for Japanese). In the field of second language acquisition, a great body of research has examined non-native speakers' use and acquisition of pragmatics in a second language (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Sharifian, 2008; Wierzbicka, 1992). Much of this research shows that second language learners differ from native speakers in their use of politeness devices and that these deviations are a result of native language influence and linguistic and socio-pragmatic transfer, as well as the different politeness orientations of the native and non-native groups.

Politeness may be defined in a number of ways and depends on various factors, including the relative age and social distance between speakers, the context, and how well the speakers know one another. A number of studies have examined how politeness is expressed in Thai, a language with multiple levels of politeness (Deephuengton, 1992; Iwasaki & Horie, 2000; Simpson, 1997; Smyth, 2002). According to Khanittanan (1988), there are two main ways in which politeness can be expressed at the end of utterances. One way is to lengthen the last syllable. A speaker who fails to do this may be blamed for speaking “without sounding the tail” (พูดจาไม่มีหางเสียง -- *phûudcaamâjmiihǎaŋsǎŋ* (Khanittanan, 1988: 353-354). Another way is through the use of gender-specific sentence-final particles, e.g. *khraab* (ครับ) for male speakers

and *khâ* (คะ) for female speakers (Deephengton, 1992; Howard, 2004; Iwasaki & Horie, 2000; Khanittanan, 1988; Peyasantiwong, 1981; Smyth, 2002). In general, *khráb* (ครับ) marks politeness as well as formality (Iwasaki & Horie, 2000; Peyasantiwong, 1981). Participants of lower status use *khráb* (ครับ) to show deference, respect, and politeness to those of higher social status. Speakers of higher social status, in turn, may use *khráb* (ครับ) to show patronage toward socially subordinate interlocutors, as in the case of a monk to a layman, a teacher to a student, or a doctor to a patient (Iwasaki & Horie, 2000: 521).

Thai children learn to use *khráb* (ครับ) and *khâ* (คะ) through explicit socialization practices at school and at home (Howard, 2004). Many Thai schools post classroom rules which state that students must speak politely and show respect to teachers by using *khráb* (ครับ) and *khâ* (คะ). Thai children are expected to use politeness markers in socially appropriate ways beyond the classroom in conversations with adults and people of higher status (Howard, 2004). Thai parents are often observed to be modeling the use of *khráb* (ครับ) when talking to their young children, and children are socialized to use it to show respect to elders especially in the presence of non-family members (Howard, 2004). A boy's failure to use *khráb* (ครับ) is often perceived as a reflection of his own lack of social competence and a result of bad parenting (Howard, 2004: 10). However, *Khráb* (ครับ) is not obligatory in family conversations though its use may sometimes entail reasons other than politeness and formality, such as flattering (Peyasantiwong, 1981).

In addition to expressing politeness and formality, *khráb* (ครับ) has the following related communicative functions, as summarized by Deephengton (1992: 10-11):

- (1) Addressing, e.g., *khun khráb* ('Ma'am!')
- (2) Questioning, e.g., *paj máj khráb* ('Will you go, sir?')

(3) Responding, e.g., *châj khráb* (‘Yes, that’s right.’)

(4) Short responses, e.g., *khráb* (‘Yes.’ or ‘Yes, I’m listening.’).

As in (1) above, *khráb* (ครับ) may be used after a name or a kinship term to attract the attention of the addressee. It may also be used to soften a question or to show agreement with the interlocutor (examples (2) and (3)). Since short responses such as *châj* (ใช่ -- ‘correct’ or ‘right’) may sound too abrupt, Thai speakers may add *khráb* (ครับ) after the short response to sound more polite (example (3)). Furthermore, *khráb* (ครับ) may be used in isolation as a “yes” response to show acknowledgment, agreement, or understanding (example (4)). For this last purpose, Thai speakers of equal status may opt to use other exclamatory particles in place of *khráb* (ครับ), such as <sup>2</sup>əə (เออ -- yes), <sup>2</sup>yy (อือ -- yes), <sup>2</sup>yym (อื้ม -- yes), <sup>2</sup>ʋʋ (อ้อ -- ‘Ah! Now I understand’), or <sup>2</sup>ʋʋ (อ้อ -- ‘I see’) as substitutes (Haas, 1964; Peyasantiwong, 1981; Smyth, 2002). Finally, when *khráb* (ครับ) is used repetitively in a series, it shows the listener’s attention and agreement (Smyth, 2002: 127). *Khráb* (ครับ) may also be used in a way similar to the English interjection ‘uh-huh’ (Peyasantiwong, 1981). Like the English filler ‘uh-huh’ which communicates meanings such as “absolutely,” “yes,” “it is so; as you say or ask,” “agreed,” “yes,” and “all right” (Schegloff, 1982), *khráb* (ครับ) can function as a conversational continuer, allowing the speaker to extend or finish what he or she is saying.

It is important to note that politeness is expressed variably in Thai. Although in theory, every single sentence or phrase can be accompanied by *khráb* (ครับ), a Thai speaker who is trying to be polite does not supply polite particles in every possible slot since doing so would result in stilted and unnatural speech (Peyasantiwong, 1981). It is thus difficult to accurately determine the total number of *khráb* (ครับ) called for in a given stretch of talk. Despite these



difficulties, the current study explores its use by Thai children who are learning English so as to glimpse one aspect of their continuing development in their first language.

In the following section, we first describe relevant demographic and social features of the Thai immigrant community in the U.S. including the sojourner group to which the first author and her sons belong.

### **Thais in America**

Thais constitute a small portion of the total U.S. population. The 2000 U.S. Census reported 146,577 persons of Thai ancestry living in the U.S., which is less than 0.1% of the total U.S. population. Of the Asian and Pacific Islander population in the U.S., Thais ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in number or 1.3% of the total Asian and Pacific Islander population in the U.S. The first group of Thais pioneered settlement in the U.S. in 1952-1953 via ‘a grant from a local hospital,’ but most settlers followed in 1960 (Codman-Wilson, 1992: 40). Because many of these early pioneers had worked with American missionaries or in missionary hospitals in Thailand, their English was already on a communicative level when they arrived in the U.S. Most of the children of these early immigrants were encouraged to speak English and eventually ‘lost their fluidity in the Thai language’ (Codman-Wilson, 1992: 40).

After the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 which gave immigration priority to foreign professionals, physicians and nurses formed the bulk of Thai immigration to the United States (Codman-Wilson, 1992: 2). Fueled by a shortage of medical professionals in the U.S. in the early 1960’s and lured by promise of new opportunities and money, many Thai doctors and nurses immigrated to the United States with their spouses,

children, and other family members (Codman-Wilson, 1992; Wibulpolprasert & Pengpaibon, 2003).

In the early days of Thai immigration to the U.S., there were very few Thai restaurants, grocery stores, or ethnic associations (Codman-Wilson, 1992). But as more Thais came to America, ethnic Thai associations were formed to provide psychological and material support to Thai immigrants. Often organized by Thai nurses, ‘the initial power bloc of the community,’ Thai associations were instrumental in helping many new immigrants adjust to their new life in America (Codman-Wilson, 1992: 41). In addition, informal pooling of financial resources made it possible for many Thais to open restaurants which relied mostly on family labor. Many Thais immigrated to the United States via Los Angeles and settled there (Reimers, 1985: 247) and operated Thai food markets, Thai restaurants, beauty shops, ice cream shops, and gas stations (Sakdisubha, 1987). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Thai immigrants consisted mostly of businessmen and students (Codman-Wilson, 1992: 43).

A significant portion of recent Thai immigrants to the U.S. is composed of students who are staying in the U.S. temporarily. The first author belongs to this group. The total number of Thai students in the United States increased from 34 in 1921 to 1,630 in 1964 (Barry, 1967: 2), and to 8,937 in 2003, ranking Thailand 9<sup>th</sup> among the top 15 countries that sent students to the U.S. (U.S. Embassy in Thailand, 2005). Many of these students bring their families with them, creating opportunities for their children to be educated in English in American schools. Given the perceived importance of English as a lingua franca, this option is increasingly favored by Thai students who are studying in English-speaking countries. The two participants in the current study attended American public schools for three years before returning to Thailand with their mother.

## **Participants**

Two Thai boys, aged 9 and 13 upon their arrival in the U.S., participated in this study. The two subjects were the first author's sons who came to the U.S. in spring, 2004 to live with their mother who was pursuing a doctoral degree at a U.S. university. Ethnically of mixed Chinese-Thai ancestry, the two boys are native speakers of Thai and are acquiring English as a second language. Detailed information about each subject follows.

### **Winner - the older brother**

Winner, the older brother in this study, was 13 years old when he arrived in the United States and was 15 during the data collection period. Prior to his arrival in the U.S., he had had some exposure to English. He was introduced to the English alphabet and children's songs in English when he was in kindergarten. Winner attended a private elementary school where he was exposed to minimal English and finished grade seven in a public middle school in Thailand before coming to the U.S. Academically gifted, Winner finished grade seven in Thailand with all A's and was first in his class. While attending middle school in Thailand, Winner was enrolled in a Mini English Program (MEP) on Saturdays. As an MEP student, Winner learned all school subjects in Thai on weekdays but studied mathematics, science, English, and conversational English in English on Saturdays. In the MEP, American-educated Thai teachers taught science, mathematics, and conversational English while foreign teachers (an American in the first semester and a Filipino in the second semester) taught English. Winner later stated that the English he learned in the MEP provided a strong foundation for his studies in the U.S.

However, upon his enrollment as a seventh grader in a public middle school in the U.S., he was assessed as a non-English speaker on the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT) and was placed in a high-beginning ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class. When he got into the eighth grade, he was initially placed in an intermediate ESOL class, but was quickly reassigned to an advanced ESOL class. As in Thailand, Winner has been academically successful in America. He was selected ‘Student of the Month’ in October, 2004 and was on the Honor Roll for four consecutive marking periods in eighth grade. Among his many scholastic accomplishments, he represented his school in a mathematics tournament and won third-place in the integers section. In May, 2005, Winner passed the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT) and exited the ESOL program. Thus, it took Winner one year and three months to be fully mainstreamed into English-only instruction. In high school, Winner continued to excel in all subject areas and finished the ninth grade with all A’s.

### **Willy - the younger brother**

Willy, the younger brother, celebrated his 9th birthday one day before he left Thailand, and was 11 years old during data collection. Like his older brother, Willy was exposed to some English from kindergarten through third grade at the same private elementary school his brother attended in Thailand. Although not as academically gifted as his older brother, Willy generally had positive views about schooling and being educated in the U.S. He even wrote in his personal journal that he loved school so much that he wished he could go to school on Saturdays too. Upon his arrival in the U.S., Willy knew some basic English vocabulary — such as ‘cat’ and ‘dog’ — as well as some formulaic expressions such as ‘How are you?’ and ‘Thank you.’

Willy also took the IPT and was assessed as a non-English speaker. He was pulled out for ESOL instruction for approximately 30 minutes a day, twice a week. A student's ESOL progress is divided into three stages: emergent (beginning acquisition and occasional application of skills), progressing (frequent application and extension of skills), and independent (consistent application and meaningful use of skills). At the end of his fourth grade (June, 2005), his English was assessed as 'progressing' and 'independent' except in punctuation, grammar, and information organization. Then in the middle of fifth grade (January, 2006), his abilities in listening and reading were assessed as 'independent.' Willy exited the ESOL program in June, 2006. It took Willy two years and three months to be fully mainstreamed into English-only instruction, one year more than the amount of time his older brother took to be mainstreamed. Even though Willy remained in the ESOL program longer, his confidence in English grew steadily throughout his stay in the U.S., resulting in higher skills in subject areas such as mathematics, science, and social studies. Like his older brother, Willy achieved the Honor Roll for all marking periods. In fifth grade, Willy was placed in a gifted and talented (GT) mathematics class and in GT science, but still struggled with reading and writing in English. Willy finished the fifth grade with A's in all subjects except for English reading and social studies. His homeroom teacher recommended that he 'enlarge and extend his language arts abilities' during summer. Willy was recommended for placement in GT mathematics and GT science courses in middle school.

## **Methods**

The data for this study comes from audio-recordings made over eleven months (from Month 15 to Month 25). All 24 audio-tape recordings, lasting 30 minutes each (12 hours total),

were made in the living room in the boys' home, where the three family members — Winner, Willy, and their mother (the first author) — had meals together on the floor around a big tea table in front of the television. The audiotape recorder was placed on a cupboard in the corner of the living room next to the television. There were four different conversational grouping categories for the audio-recordings. Of the 24 recordings, 18 were dyadic conversations (1) between Winner and Mother; (2) between Willy and Mother; and (3) between Winner and Willy. The 6 remaining recordings were triadic conversations among (4) Winner, Willy, and Mother. The current study draws from the two dyadic conversational groupings between each boy and his mother ((1) and (2) above) and the triadic conversations ((4) above) as these included the boys' mother as a conversational participant and thus provided occasions for the boys to use *khraáb* (คร่ำบ).

All six dyadic conversations between Winner and his mother took place while Winner ate dinner. Winner usually came home from school about one and a half hours earlier than did his younger brother; as a result, Winner spent this time alone with his mother. There were only five recordings of dyadic conversations between Willy and his mother because it was generally more difficult for her to completely separate the boys so she could be alone with Willy. The six triadic conversations among Winner, Willy, and their mother took place during dinnertime. Dinnertime was chosen because, as a social, linguistic, and cognitive event, it provided ample opportunity for shared act of storytelling and recounting of daily events (Ochs, 1993; Ochs & Taylor, 1992). Dinner involved the process of preparation and cooking (before), as well as eating (during), and cleaning-up (after) (Ochs & Taylor, 1992).

In our analysis of the data, we first counted the number of *khraáb* (คร่ำบ) produced by each participant in each session. We then divided the total number of *khraáb* (คร่ำบ) produced by each

boy in each session by the total of his utterances in that session in order to make comparisons across the two participants over time. In determining the total number of utterances, we first counted the number of complete sentences with verbs since these provide potential occasions for *khráb*. However, many utterances in our recording did not contain a verb (e.g., forms of address (as in *mêε khráb* ('Mom!')), yes-no responses (as in *châj khráb* ('Yes.')), and one-word responses (as in *khráb* ('Yes.' or 'Yes, I'm listening.')). Given that each one of these examples provides potential occasions for the use of *khráb* (ครับ), and some more than once, as noted by Deephuengton (1992:10-11), we needed to include these in our count. However, placing utterance boundaries was not always straightforward because it was not clear when one utterance ended and another utterance began. For example, '*khráb khráb khráb*' ('Yes, I'm listening. I'm in agreement with you.') would be counted as one utterance because the three words are uttered rapidly in succession with no pause in between. However, utterances separated by more than a 1 second pause were considered separate utterances. Although this temporal criterion may seem rather arbitrary, we believe that given the highly variable nature of *khráb* (ครับ), this is a reasonable way to establish a close-to-a-maximum reference point for comparing the two participants over time.

As we will see in the following section, the rate of occurrence of *khráb* (ครับ) generally decreases over time for both participants. The subsequent qualitative analysis will then show how their use of the politeness marker changes. We will first show how they use *khráb* (ครับ) in the earlier months and compare that to their substitutions with other Thai linguistic markers and the English filler 'uh-huh' in the later months.

## **Results**

Tables 1 through 4 show the results of the quantitative analysis. Figures 1 and 2 extrapolate the results from Tables 1 through 4 and compare each boy's use of *khráb* (ครับ) in dyadic and triadic conversations. As can be seen in Figure 1, both participants generally used fewer *khráb* (ครับ) in their conversations with their mother as the months passed. A similar downward trend can be found in the triadic conversations (Figure 2). The rates of the boys' use of *khráb* (ครับ) over time were subjected to an analysis of variance. A  $p$ -value of .047 ( $p < .05$ ) suggests that a significant difference exists on the boys' use of *khráb* (ครับ) over time in both dyadic and triadic conversations and that its occurrence over time was not due to chance. Notice that Willy generally produces more *khráb* (ครับ) in his conversations with his mother than does his older brother. For both boys however, the biggest drop is observed between sessions 1 and 2 (Months 19 and 21 respectively).

We should note that the higher rates of *khráb* seen in some of the later months are mostly around Christmas and New Year's holiday season and March, which is Willy's birth month. During these times, the boys had more contact with Thais through phone calls and personal visits, which occasioned more opportunities for their use of the politeness marker. It is not clear however why the boys used more *khráb* with their mother since it is clearly not required in the family setting. The recordings were done at home while no one else besides the boys and their mother were around. It seems that the boys may have been in a more "Thai frame of mind" during these times, acting and talking in line with what is expected of Thai boys with good manners. Behaving like "good Thai boys" has clear rewards during festive times like the Christmas holidays and birthdays. Since their mother was their only sustained connection to other Thai people and the only person who could verify their good behavior, they may have tried to please their mother by using more *khráb* with her so that she could tell other Thai adults how



“good” the boys have been and therefore deserve good gifts. Whatever the motivation, however, the downward trend, with some fluctuations, continues until the politeness marker disappears almost entirely in the last months.

(Insert Tables 1 through 4 about here.)

(Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here.)

The overall decline in the use of *khǎb* (ครับ) seems to reflect the boys’ adaptation to a new environment where proper use of the linguistic marker is not scrutinized. Since the boys have little opportunity to speak Thai or interact with Thai-speaking adults in America, they may not feel as pressured to speak Thai in socially appropriate ways as they would in Thailand. Had the family lived in a large Thai community in America where Thai people would observe and judge the boys’ speech and behavior, the boys and their mother may have been more mindful of their Thai. Furthermore, as sojourners, the boys and their mother wanted to take maximum advantage of their limited time in America to learn English. Proper use of Thai, especially if the situation did not call for it due to lack of opportunities to interact with other Thai speakers, may not have been as critical as learning to speak English correctly.

Although the rate of occurrence of *khǎb* (ครับ) decreases over time, the subsequent qualitative analysis will show that the boys make other modifications to their speech including substitutions with other Thai linguistic markers and the English filler, ‘uh-huh,’ showing their skills as bilingual conversationalists.

### **The boys’ use of *Khǎb* (ครับ) in the earlier months**

Excerpt 1 shows Willy's use of the politeness particle *khráb* (ครับ) to address his mother. In this episode, Winner and Willy talk about their classmates at school while their mother listens to their conversation.

1        Willy:        <sup>?</sup>əə        m̂ɛɛ        khráb / SIENBROOK dii        pà / SIENBROOK  
EXCL mother PP        good QP  
(Mom! Is the Sudbrook Middle School good?)

2        Res:        hý /  
EXCL  
(What?)

3        Willy:        SIENBROOK /

4        Res:        SAINT BROOK? /

5        Willy:        SADBROOK / <sup>?</sup>əə /  
yes  
(SADBROOK. Right!)

6        Winner:        SADBROOK khráb m̂ɛɛ /  
PP mother  
(Sudbrook, Mom!)

7        Res:            *hy*       /

EXCL

(What?)

8        Winner:        SUDBROOK ACADEMY   /

In line 1, Willy addresses his mother by calling her *mêe* followed by the polite particle *khraáb* (ครับ). As already discussed, this pattern is generally used to show respect toward an elder (Deephuegton, 1992). Although it is not required in family talk, Thai boys who use it are perceived to be well-mannered and well-educated (Peyasantiwong, 1981). On the other hand, in line 6, Winner's use of *khraáb* (ครับ) softens his confirmation in the presence of his mother that Willy pronounced "Sudbrook School" correctly. Peyasantiwong (1981) observes that, despite its canonical placement at the end of utterances, *khraáb* (ครับ) can be inserted anywhere in an utterance to suit the speaker's purpose. Here, in line 6, Winner inserts *khraáb* (ครับ) to soften his clarification before addressing his mother.

Another use of *khraáb* (ครับ) found in the current data is to soften short responses (Deephuegton, 1992; Peyasantiwong, 1981; Smyth, 2002). In Excerpt 2, Winner talks about his favorite book: *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In this example, Winner uses the polite particle *khraáb* (ครับ) to soften his short response (สิบสอง *sìbsǎwng* -- 'twelve') in line 6 and his long clarifications in lines 3, 6, and 7. These are done so as not to sound too abrupt and to move the conversation along.

**Excerpt 2:     Winner talks about the book *A Series of Unfortunate Events***

**#11: *The Grimm Grotto* (Session 1, Month 19).**

- 1 Res: (Looking at a book catalogue)  
           ʔəw nîi ηaj lêm thîi sibʔəd ʔaj GRIMM  
           EXCL this MP CLASS number eleven uh
- 2 GROTTO nîa /  
           this  
           (Oh, this is the 11th episode of [A Series of Unfortunate Events],  
           Grimm Grotto.)
- 3 Winner: phǝm ʔaan léew **khǝráb** sýy léew dúaj /  
           I read already PP buy already too  
           (I already bought and read it.)
- 4 Res: khǝwη thəə mii thǝŋ lêm thîi tháwrəj  
           of you have up to CLASS number how much
- 5 léew /  
           already  
           (What episode did you have up to now?)
- 6 Winner: sibsǝwη **khǝráb** / dǝaw ʔəwǝg OCTOBER léew **khǝráb**  
           twelve PP soon launch already PP
- 7 dyan níi lè / phǝm tǝdtaam **khǝráb** mǝɛ /  
           month this MP I follow PP mother
- 8 man rew ná-nîa / phǝm tǝdtaam (3.5) / ...  
           it fast MP I follow  
           (They will launch the 12th episode this month, October. I follow the news,  
           [don't worry]. A new episode comes out so fast.)

**Excerpt 3: Mother asks Willy about his school day (Session 1, Month 19).**

- 20

(I know. I'm listening to you.)

8 Res: <sup>?</sup>yym /

EXCL

(OK.)

9 Willy: kin khâaw sèd kôw lén tòw / <sup>?</sup>áj māj chāj paj MATH  
eat rice finish then play further EXCL not right go

10 klàb maa / MATH sèd kôw lén FOOTBALL tòw /  
return DV finish then play further

11 [tèɛ wâa wan nîi ] /

but that day this

([Today] I had lunch and then played [with friends]. No, [that's not right].

[After lunch], first, I went to the math class. Then I played football after the math  
class. But today...)

12 Res: [<sup>?</sup>ɔw wan nîi mii phág dúaj rǎə] / <sup>?</sup>ɔw maa lén

EXCL day this have recess too QP EXCL DV play

13 tɔw phág rǎə /

time recess QP

(Oh, you went out and played in the school field today?)

14 Willy: **kh ráb** /

PP

(Yes.)

15 Res: lén FOOTBALL nâ rǎə /

play MP QP

(You played football. Really?)

16 Willy: *châj khráb* /

right PP

(Yes.)

17 Res: *tham<sup>?</sup> araj* / *lên* FOOTBALL *tham<sup>?</sup> araj lûug* /

do what play do what child

(What did you do in playing football, son?)

18 Willy: *kôo paa ηaj khráb* /

then throw MP PP

(We threw balls.)

19 Res: *lên paa* FOOTBALL *nâ rǎə* /

play throw MP QP

(Really? Did you throw a football?)

20 Willy: *châj khráb tɔɔn nán* / *phǒm hǒo wan nîi phǒm*

right PP time that I EXCL day this I

21 TOUCHDOWN *dâaj khráb* / *phyan paa maa* /

MODAL PP friend throw DV

(Yes. Today, I made one touchdown. My friend passed the ball to me.)

22 Res: *<sup>?</sup>ô lîi* *lên* AMERICAN FOOTBALL *nâ sii* /

EXCL [Wil]ly play MP MP

(I see. You played American football.)

23 Willy: *châj khráb* /

right PP

(That's right!)

24 Res: *phýan wâa ηaj mâη lâ /*

friend say what some MP

(What did your friends say [about your touchdown]?)

25 Willy: *phýan kôw bôw wâa GOOD JOB /*

friend then say that

(They said, "Good job!")

In excerpt 3, the researcher criticizes Willy for not drinking milk (lines 3 through 6). In response, Willy uses *khráb* (ครับ) in line 7 to confirm that he understands what she said and to mitigate her irritation so she would not keep badgering him to drink milk. This example suggests that Willy's use of *khráb* (ครับ) in short responses may not convey politeness per se but rather deflect negative statements. Similarly, notice that Willy's subsequent talk about playing football at school is accompanied by six instances of *khráb* (ครับ) (lines 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, and 23). It seems as though Willy's strategy of using the polite particle is working as his mother becomes more agreeable to listening his stories and not bother him about drinking more milk.

### Substitutions in the later months

In examining the data closely, we found that the boys used more casual forms in Thai in the later months to achieve communicative functions that may have been performed by *khráb* (ครับ). The patterns of substitution differed somewhat from one boy to the other however. Winner used the casual forms, <sup>2</sup>əə (เออ -- 'yes') and <sup>2</sup>yy (อีอ -- 'yes'), while Willy used <sup>2</sup>əə (เออ -



- ‘yes’), <sup>2</sup>yy (อือ -- ‘yes’), and <sup>2</sup>ว (อ้อ -- ‘Ah! Now I understand’) as well as the English expression ‘uh-huh.’ As previously mentioned, the politeness particle, *khraab* (ครับ), and Thai casual forms (e.g., <sup>2</sup>๑๑ (เออ -- ‘yes’), <sup>2</sup>yy (อือ -- ‘yes’), อีม่ <sup>2</sup>ym (อืม่ -- yes), and <sup>2</sup>ว (อ้อ -- ‘I see’)) have similar meaning to the English ‘uh-huh’ (Peyasantiwong, 1981: 35).

Consider Excerpt 4 where Winner talks about wearing clothes appropriate for the weather. Notice that he uses the casual Thai marker, <sup>2</sup>yy (อือ -- ‘yes’), as a short response in lines 10 and 14. In earlier months, we could very well have seen the polite marker, *khraab* (ครับ), in exactly the same places. The casual form is usually used among intimate equals or when a person of higher status is talking to people of lower status in terms of age, class, and/or occupation. A possible explanation for Winner’s switch from *khraab* (ครับ) to <sup>2</sup>yy may be that he feels more comfortable interacting with his mother on a more equal level. Some research suggests that as Thai students live in the U.S., they become less sensitive to social hierarchy (Barry, 1967). Another potential explanation is that, due to a lack of cultural requirement and expectation (e.g., absence of non-family members), Winner may feel less pressure to use the more formal language with his mother.

**Excerpt 4: Winner and mother talk about wearing appropriate clothes for the weather**

**(Session 6, Month 25).**

- |   |         |   |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Winner: | <i>wannîi phýan phǒm thǎam wâa thammaj wannîi</i><br>today friend I ask that why today                                      |
| 2 |         | <i>mâj sàj mâj sàj jágkêd /</i><br>not wear not wear jacket<br>(Today, my friend asked me, “Why didn’t you wear your jacket |

- today?”)
- 3 Res: *hỹy /*  
EXCL  
(You didn’t wear your jacket?)
- 4 Winner: *phýan phỏm kháw hẻn phỏm sàj tàlồd ηaj /*  
friend my he see me wear all the time MP  
(My friend normally sees me wearing it everyday.)
- 5 Res: *ʔyy /*  
EXCL  
(I see.)
- 6 Winner: *phỏm bồg wâa* TODAY IT’S NOT (0.5) IT’S NOT COLD  
I tell that  
(I replied, “Because today, it’s not cold.”)
- 7 Res: *ʔyym /*  
EXCL  
(And so?)
- 8 Winner: IT’S HOT.
- 9 Res: *kồ ʔookhee châjmáj lâ /*  
then OK QP MP  
(It’s a good idea [to wear the jacket], right?)
- 10 Winner: *ʔyy /*  
EXCL  
**(Right!)**

- 11 Res: *kôw khêe ciŋ ciŋ léew thaə kôw tɔɔncháaw*  
 then just real real already you then in the morning
- 12 *man khônkhâaŋ jen ŋaj / tɛɛ tɔɔnjen klàb maa*  
 it rather cold MP but in the evening return DV
- 13 *mâj tɔŋ sàj léew /*  
 not must wear onwards
- (Because actually, it's rather cold in the morning. But take it off later in the afternoon.)
- 14 Winner: *ʔyɿ /*  
 EXCL  
 (OK.)

Aside from the boys' substitution of *khráb* (ครับ) with Thai casual forms, Willy, the younger brother, used the English expression 'uh-huh' in much the same manner as *khráb* (ครับ) in the later months. In Excerpt 5, Willy talks about his friend whose Yu-Gi-Oh!™ cards were stolen by a classmate and then confiscated by his teacher. In lines 11 and 14, Willy uses 'uh-huh' to confirm his mother's assessment of the situation. Notice that he could have uttered *khráb* (ครับ) in place of 'uh-huh'. Willy's use of 'uh-huh' partly explains his decreasing use of *khráb* (ครับ) in later months, which roughly coincides with his overall shifting preference for English. While Winner used both English and Thai to more or less equal degrees throughout the data collection period, Willy clearly preferred English over Thai. Willy's use of 'uh-huh' in an otherwise Thai discourse seems to be a direct result of his increasing comfort level in English and his developing bilingual capacities.

**Excerpt 5: Willy and mother talk about his classmate whose Yu-Gi-Oh!™ cards were stolen (Session 5, Month 24).**

- 1 Willy: . . . *khon nán kháw bə̀əg* GIVE ME MY CARD BACK /  
                   person that he say
- 2 *kháw kə̀ə rə̀əhəaj chəj rə̀əplàaw lá /*  
                   he then cry right QP MP
- 3 *tèè wāa phǒm phǒm jaŋ māj rúu wāa*  
                   but that I I yet not know that
- 4 *khə̀əj khraŋ ciŋ ciŋ / léew khruu ləj jəd paj /*  
                   of who real real then teacher so take DV
- 5 *khon nán kháw ləj rə̀əhəaj / tèè wāa phə̀ədi*  
                   person that he then cry but that exactly
- 6 *khon khamooj kháw māj rə̀əj /*  
                   person steal he not cry

(That boy said, “Give me my card back!” But I don’t really know yet whose [Yu-Gi-Oh!™ cards] they were. So, the teacher took them away. The card owner cried, but the card stealer didn’t.)

- 7 Res: *ʔāaw kə̀ə saadeəŋ wāa pen khə̀əj khon nán sì /*  
                   EXCL then show that be of person that MP
- 8 *kə̀ə khruu jəd paj jaŋ māj sǒncəj ləj /*  
                   then teacher take DV yet not care at all

(This means that the cards belong to the crying boy, right? The stealer didn’t need to care whether or not the teacher took the cards.)

- 9 Willy: *há* /  
EXCL  
(What?)
- 10 Res: *kháw jýd paj châjmáj lâ* /  
he take DV QP MP  
(The teacher took it, right?)
- 11 Willy: **UH-HUH** /
- 12 Res: *léew lîi bôog John / khon thîi pen khon*  
then [Wil]ly tell person that be person
- 13 *jùu naj kammyy khôog John jùu châjmáj lâ* /  
be in fist of be QP MP  
(Then, you said that John had the cards, right? The cards were in John's hands, right?)
- 14 Willy: **UH-HUH** /
- 15 Res: *kháw māj sīacaj ləaj ʔâ / tɛɛ khon thîi pen*  
he not sad at all MP but person that be
- 16 *châwkhôog thîi théeciŋ kháw tōŋ sīacaj sɪ* /  
owner that true he must sad MP  
(John didn't cry because the cards didn't belong to him. If he was the owner, he must have been really sad when the cards were taken away.)
- 17 Willy: *tɛɛ wāa khon nán kháw khêɛ THIRD GRADE ʔeeŋ* /  
but that person that he just only



substitution of *khǎb* (ครับ) with ‘uh-huh’ is one example of this general shift into English, which is observed in his overall speech patterns as well as his writing.

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory study examined the use of a Thai politeness marker, *khǎb* (ครับ), by two Thai-English bilingual brothers at home during their temporary stay in the U.S. This study is limited by the small number of participants and the relatively short duration of the study. It is also limited by the absence of data on the boys’ Thai after they have returned to Thailand. Despite these limitations, this study provides some useful insights into the linguistic adaptations made by the bilingual boys. Our analysis of the boys’ conversations with their mother shows that they used progressively less *khǎb* (ครับ) during their stay in the U.S. The boys instead used increasing numbers of other Thai particles such as <sup>?</sup>əə (เออ -- ‘yes’), <sup>?</sup>yɯ (อือ -- ‘yes’), <sup>?</sup>yɯm (อื้ม -- ‘yes’), <sup>?</sup>wa (อ้อ -- ‘Ah! Now I understand’), and <sup>?</sup>wa (อ้อ -- ‘I see’) in places where *khǎb* (ครับ) may otherwise be expected. We argued that this trend is suggestive of the boys’ adaptation to their new life in America where there is less emphasis on speaking socially appropriate Thai. Since the boys had little opportunity to interact with Thai-speaking adults who may make judgments about their speech, they may have felt less pressure to produce this polite marker.

In addition, we have seen that while both boys substituted *khǎb* (ครับ) with more casual Thai markers, only the younger brother used the English expression, ‘uh-huh’ in an otherwise Thai discourse. The differences in substitution patterns support the argument that bilingual development depends not only on discourse factors, but also on individual differences in language preference (Alfonzetti, 1998; Jørgensen, 1998; Li, 1998; Sebba & Wootten, 1998). The two brothers were of different ages at the time of arrival. As the older brother, Winner clearly

had more developed Thai than did Willy. On the other hand, Willy was exposed to English at an earlier age and the societal and personal pressure to learn English quickly left little opportunity for him to further develop his skills in Thai. Willy's clear preference for English and Winner's more balanced preference for both Thai and English are supported by research evidence that suggests that younger immigrant children are more prone to language shift than are older children (Shin, 2005; Wong Fillmore, 1991). It is often the case that for younger children the societal language becomes the dominant language while the home language dwindles from lack of use.

However, children who stay in the host country only temporarily are in some ways shielded from the socially and economically dominant language and are likely to develop further in their first language. Bilingualism in childhood or adolescence usually occurs because of the need to communicate with those who play an important role in the child's life – parents, siblings, other family members, peers, and teachers (Grosjean, 1982). The child will remain proficient in a language as long as the need to communicate in that language is present. As the two participants return to Thailand and resume schooling there, they will again be held accountable for speaking socially acceptable Thai in much the same way as are monolingual Thai children. Thus it is predicted that the boys' use of *khráb* (ครับ) will increase upon their return to Thailand. On the contrary, since the boys' need to communicate in English will be diminished, their English is likely to regress to a certain degree. Although this study is limited by the relatively short duration of data collection, the results and predictions for the boys' bilingual trajectory support the observation that children move in and out of bilingualism according to changing life circumstances (Grosjean, 1982). They also show that bilingual development is a complex and



dynamic process in which the speaker's use of L1 and L2 is continuously shaped by multiple social, personal, and situational factors.

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## **Tables and Figures**

**Table 1: Occurrence of *khráb* (กรับ) in dyadic conversations (Winner)**

Session	Total Number of Utterances	<i>khráb</i> (กรับ)	%
1 (Month 19)	444	27	6.1
2 (Month 21)	235	4	1.7
3 (Month 21)	362	11	3.0
4 (Month 23)	292	5	1.7
5 (Month 24)	357	0	0.0
6 (Month 25)	318	4	1.3
Total	2,008	51	2.5

**Table 2: Occurrence of *khráb* (กรับ) in dyadic conversations (Willy)**

Session	Total Number of Utterances	<i>khráb</i> (กรับ)	%
1 (Month 19)	349	36	10.3
2 (Month 21)	490	33	6.7
3 (Month 21)	463	18	3.9
4 (Month 21)	478	28	5.9
5 (Month 25)	515	19	3.7
Total	2,295	134	5.8

**Table 3: Occurrence of *khráb* (กรับ) in triadic conversations (Winner)**

Session	Total Number of Utterances	<i>khráb</i> (กรับ)	%
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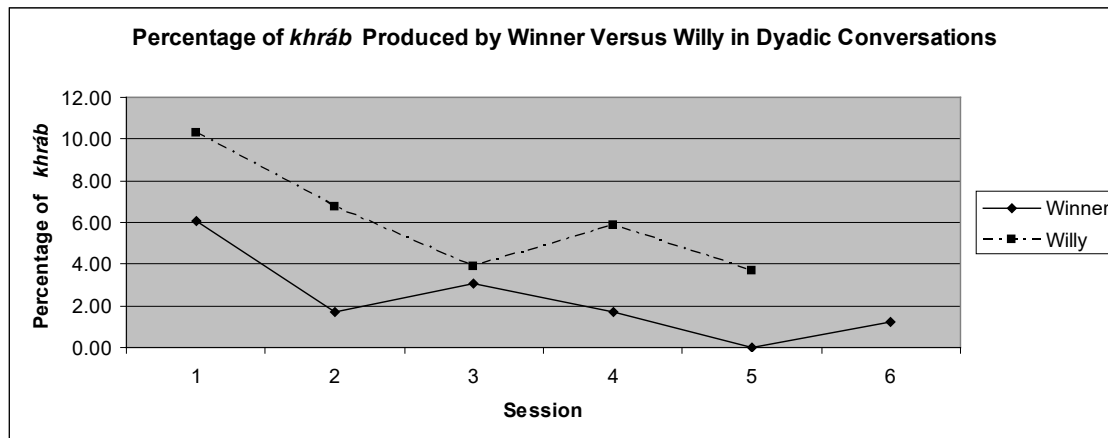
<b>1 (Month 15)</b>	89	10	11.2
<b>2 (Month 18)</b>	169	0	0.0
<b>3 (Month 22)</b>	136	6	4.4
<b>4 (Month 23)</b>	274	2	0.7
<b>5 (Month 24)</b>	137	3	2.2
<b>6 (Month 25)</b>	166	1	0.6
<b>Total</b>	971	22	2.3

**Table 4: Occurrence of *khráb* (จรับ) in triadic conversations (Willy)**

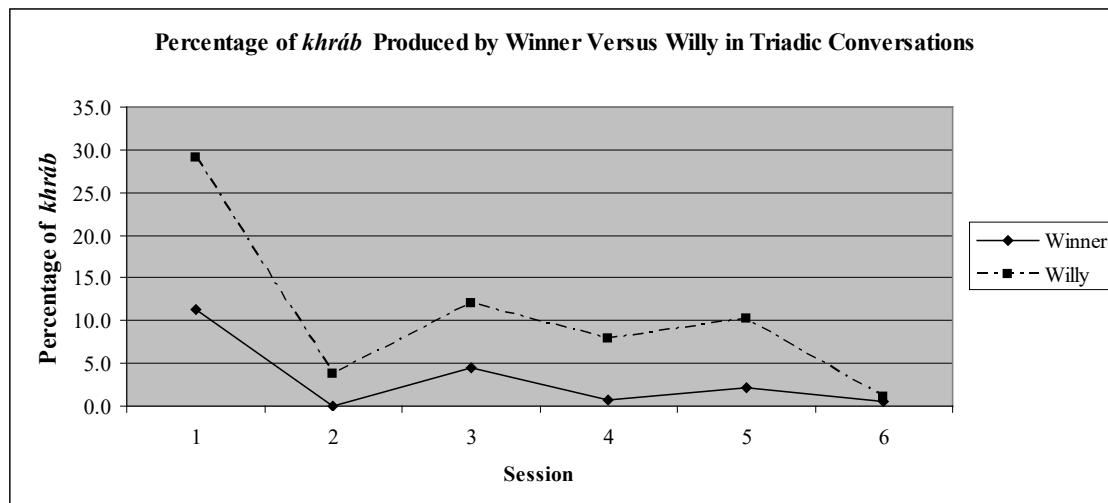
<b>Session</b>	<b>Total Number of Utterances</b>	<b><i>khráb</i> (จรับ)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>1 (Month 15)</b>	86	25	29.1
<b>2 (Month 18)</b>	108	4	3.7
<b>3 (Month 22)</b>	299	36	12.0
<b>4 (Month 23)</b>	115	9	7.8
<b>5 (Month 24)</b>	165	17	10.3
<b>6 (Month 25)</b>	178	2	1.1
<b>Total</b>	951	93	9.8



**Figure 1: Rate of *khraáb* (ຄຣັບ) in dyadic conversations**



**Figure 2: Rate of *khraáb* (ຄຣັບ) in triadic conversations**



## APPENDIX: LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAUS	Causative marker
CLASS	Classifier
COMP	Comparative marker
DV	Directional verbs
EXCL	Exclamation
FILLER	Speech filler in Thai (e.g., <i>bêeb</i> or <i>bêeb wâa</i> ) which is equivalent to the words <i>sort of</i> in English.
FUT	Future tense
INTENSE	Intensifier
IPP	Impolite particle (as opposed to PP—polite particle)
MODAL	Modal verb
MOOD	Mood particle
NDERIV	Noun derivative
QP	Question particle
PASS	Passive marker
PAST	Past tense
POSS	Possessives
PP	Polite particle (as opposed to IPP—impolite particle)
PT	Polite title
PROG	Progressive marker