

**Language development in a minority language community:
Report of the Chong Writers Workshop
Klong Phlu Village, Khao Kichakut District
Chantaburi Province
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Background

The Chong language is a member of the Pearic branch of Mon-Khmer, part of the Austro-Asiatic language family, with about 2,000 speakers living in Chantaburi and Trat Provinces in southeastern Thailand¹. According to Schliesinger (2000),

The Chong language has no script, is not taught in the local schools and only a few of the younger generation are able to speak it. The older Chong people are pressuring the Thai authorities to introduce Chong language study in the local schools, so it does not become extinct. (p. 72)

¹Schliesinger (2000) gives 2,000 as the probable population of Chong. Smalley (1994), on the basis of 1989 data., estimates Chong population at 4,000, but with only a "40% confidence" (p. 365).

Members of the Chong language community are also taking active steps on their own to ensure the future of their ethnic language. This report presents one such step.

Introduction

“By late afternoon the books were finished. There were at least 15 books. It was the first time that I had seen the Chong people make books on their own ... I saw broad smiles on the Chong writers’ faces. They held the books and showed them to the others. Some of us took photographs and promised to send them later. I could imagine how happy they were. They deserved to be proud of the books no matter how they looked.” *Solot Sirisai, Ph.D. student, Report on the Chong Writers Workshop*

The Chong Writers Workshop took place between the 4th and 6th of August 2000. The workshop developed as a result of a collaboration between the Linguistic Department of the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development (ILCRD) at Mahidol University (Salaya) and members of the Chong language community. The ILCRD Ph.D. course “Literacy for Minority Languages” provided the academic context for the workshop. The expressed desire from Chong leaders for help in developing a Chong writing system provided the community context. Workshop planners set three goals: (1) to provide a natural follow-up activity to the Chong Orthography Workshop that had been held in November 1999 at the ILCRD, (2) to meet a need that was being expressed by Chong community leaders for literature in their mother tongue, and (3) to provide an opportunity for students in the course to be involved in a hands-on applied linguistics project.

Genesis of an ethnic language writers workshop

The Chong Orthography Workshop (November 1999) grew out of a relationship developed between Professor Suwilai Premasirat of the ILCRD and the Chong community in which she had worked at various times over the previous nine years. As a result of Dr. Suwilai’s visits to the area, Chong leaders invited ILCRD students to come to the Chong community to practice linguistic fieldwork methods. During the 1998-1999 school year, two students from the ILCRD did their fieldwork in the Chong community and subsequently decided to do their M.A. thesis research there.

In July 1999, students in the “Literacy in Minority Languages” course conducted a sociolinguistic survey in the community to assess language and literacy attitudes and uses in the Chong community. As a result of this survey, Chong community leaders expressed a strong desire to resolve some of the problems they had encountered in writing Chong. Thus, the ILCRD and members of the Chong community held an Orthography Workshop in November 1999 at Mahidol University-Salaya, led by Dr. Suwilai and involving six Chong speakers. Participants developed a tentative Thai-based orthography with the provision that a

follow-up workshop would be held the following year to deal with any problems that might be identified as the orthography was being tested over the following months.

The close relationships developed by Dr. Suwilai set a pattern for similarly close relationships developed by the graduate students doing field work in the Chong villages. These relationships encouraged members of the Chong community to seek assistance from the ILCRD in developing a writing system for their language. (See “The Workshop” below for specific goals stated by community members during the workshop).

The Chong Writers Workshop was organized as a logical activity to accompany the follow-up orthography session, and was scheduled for August 2000. The workshop then became a project for students of this year’s “Literacy in Minority Languages” course at the ILCRD.

Workshop preparation

In the year 2000, the course “Literacy in Minority Languages”, supervised by Dr. Suwilai, was taught by a team of visiting lecturers—Dr. Dennis Malone, Dr. Kimmo Kosonen and Dr. Susan Malone who trained the five Ph.D. students in planning, preparing for and conducting a writers workshop. All five students had previous experience as lecturers in various other academic subjects. Therefore, they came to this project with skills and experience in the use of adult education and rural development techniques. The course lecturers showed them ways to facilitate various creative writing activities, and to edit and prepare stories for printing in the minority language. A schedule for a three-day workshop [appended] was prepared to organize activities that would give the Chong participants practice writing their language.

The Ph.D. students divided the presentation of workshop components among themselves, with Dr. Suwilai supervising the opening section on Chong orthography. Mr. Solot took responsibility for the introductory and closing sessions, Ms. Mayuree and Ms. Supapas took responsibility for the story writing session and the discussion of other forms of writing that can be done in Chong. Mr. Chalermchai took responsibility for the session on editing and re-writing. Ms. Umaporn took responsibility for the session on preparing stories for printing, and Dr. D. Malone took responsibility for the session on doing illustrations.

Prior to the workshop, the student facilitators produced large charts of the Thai characters used in the Chong writing system, comparing them, where appropriate, with corresponding Thai and phonetic symbols and giving examples of their use in Chong vocabulary. These charts also illustrated some of the problems that needed to be resolved in the Chong writing system.

The workshop staff also prepared materials that would help the Chong participants discuss the purposes for writing, the ingredients of a good story, general writing skills, editing and rewriting stories, and preparing stories for printing.

One important preparatory event in class was the background report by Mr. Isara Choosri, an M.A. student doing research in the Chong community who is

knowledgeable about Chong language and culture. His background information proved to be quite valuable in preparing for the Workshop.

A key emphasis during the preparation for the Workshop was the need to be flexible with respect to the schedule. The three days allotted for the Workshop included travel time from Salaya to Ban Klong Phlu and back. Thus, the total time for Workshop components was closer to two days than three. The students therefore planned their presentations so that changes could be made where necessary.

The workshop

As it turned out, the need for flexibility became evident even before we arrived at the Workshop site. Road construction forced us to take a longer route and we arrived at the opening ceremony about forty minutes late. That all the Chong participants, invited leaders, and government officials waited patiently for our arrival is perhaps an indication of the interest and concern of the Chong community for their language and culture. Our group included Dr. Suwilai, Dr. Kosonen and his wife Tuula, the five Ph.D. students, three other students from the ILCRD who are doing linguistic research in the Chong community and myself.

The Workshop took place in a large, open area beneath classrooms of the Klong Phlu Witthaya Secondary School. Long tables were arranged in two rows providing participants with a view of the orthography charts and other visual materials, as well as ample space to work in.

Day 1: OPENING CEREMONY. Kamnan Chern, former sub-district leader, and the primary community organizer for the Workshop, introduced us and the honored guests. The District Director spoke enthusiastically and knowledgeably about the value of local language and culture. As one student noted, the Director's background—he grew up in Surin and his mother is a Northern Khmer speaker—may have contributed to his positive feelings towards the Chong community's efforts to maintain their own language and culture. Dr. Suwilai also spoke. The District Education Supervisor was in attendance, as were a television news team.

The opening ceremony also served to highlight for the students the importance of a collaborative and interdependent relationship among all levels of the local community. In addition to the participants, the community and District governments were represented, as were local education leaders and the staff and students from Mahidol University. In multilingual settings like those that exist throughout Thailand; it is good for as many stakeholders as possible from the community to participate if language planning efforts are to succeed. The participants themselves initially included two young women and two monks, the latter playing active roles in the workshop activities.

Day 1: ORTHOGRAPHY DEVELOPMENT. This component was scheduled for an hour-and-a-half during the morning session. However, due to our late arrival and subsequently late start, the shortened orthography session proved too little to deal adequately with the lingering problems with respect to writing certain vowels and with representing aspiration and what seems to be a fourth "register". Thus, we used the "flexibility principle" and gave another hour-and-a-half to the

orthography session in the afternoon, including practice by the participants in writing their language.

Day 1: WHY WRITE CHONG? This afternoon session was led by Mr. Solot, one of the Ph.D. students, who facilitated a discussion among the participants about reasons why Chong community members want to be able to write their language. Mr. Solot demonstrated to the group how to do a “concept map” on a large sheet of chart paper. He had them make two lists, one that included all the reasons why the people are proud of their language and culture and one that included all the reasons they feel sadness about the local language and culture situation. These different ideas were then “mapped” onto the paper, with “pride” reasons on one end and “pity” reasons on the other. In their individual reports about the Workshop experience, several of the Ph. D. students remarked with interest—and amazement—that almost all of the purposes for writing minority languages they had discussed in class at the University were expressed by the Chong participants. Mr. Solot also noted that in all of their responses to his question regarding how they can preserve their own language, no one mentioned financial assistance from the government or other outside sources.

Two M.A. student researchers, Mr. Isara and Ms. Sirichan presented their findings from the literacy survey they did in 1999. They reported that almost all of the 40 survey participants indicated that they would regret the loss of their language, that they considered learning and using the Thai language as very important, and that a majority of them wanted to be able to write Chong as well as speak it. One interesting conclusion from the research was that the younger generation and the older generation have opposing opinions of why children are not learning to speak Chong. The children replied that their parents do not speak to them in Chong and that is why they have not learned it. The adults replied that the children are uninterested and ashamed to speak Chong therefore parents have not taught the language to them.

Day 1: WRITING A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Ms. Mayuree and Ms. Supapas, leaders of this session, faced several challenges. First, they needed to stimulate the Chong participants to think about something they could express in writing. Ms. Mayuree and Ms. Supapas did this by telling about their own personal experiences. Second, they had to accommodate a wide range of educational backgrounds. It quickly became obvious that some of the participants had never tried to write their language before and they had completed their formal education in Thai many years earlier. The two presenters demonstrated their skills and experience in facilitating adult learning by encouraging and helping each individual participant to write about their own personal experiences. Rather than making an issue of the mechanical and spelling mistakes many writers were making, the workshop leaders concentrated on encouraging each one to write their story and admired their efforts. As a result, all of the participants began writing. By the end of the afternoon session, the participants were keen to take their stories home and complete them there.

In the evening the students and lecturers met to assess the day’s activities and to revise the schedule for Day 2 as necessary. Because of our belated start, we decided to eliminate the “illustration” session and allow more time for writing and re-writing the stories. We dropped the session on illustrating stories because several young women from the secondary school would be attending on Day 2 to help

illustrate stories as the participants finished them and some of the participants could use their own drawing skills to illustrate their stories. We also discussed the editing and re-writing session and decided to go ahead with it as planned although several people questioned the plan for demonstrating the editing process.

Day 2: EDITING & RE-WRITING STORIES. The editing and re-writing section proved to be the most sensitive and potentially destructive session of the workshop. The participants brought their stories in the morning and several of the students helped them transfer the stories from their exercise books to large sheets of chart paper. The charts were then used by the authors to share their stories with the group as a whole.

Following the basic principles of editing and re-writing that we had discussed in class at the University, Mr. Chalermchai used one of the stories that had been read to demonstrate the process of editing and re-writing. This editing activity turned out to be a near disaster because the author of the story used for the demonstration reacted very negatively to the process². He felt that the changes being suggested were criticisms of his writing and declared that he would quit altogether, throw away the story and write a different one. Again, the situation demanded flexibility. Several Workshop staff were able to intercede at this point and encouraged the Chong participant to continue working on his original story.

The student facilitators learned through this experience that the editing and re-writing process—which involves both praise and criticism of a particular piece of writing—is a new approach to the minority language participants. The fact that several of them had stayed up writing and re-writing their stories the night before “so there would be no mistakes” should have alerted the staff to the sensitivities present in the group. The primary purpose of the Workshop was to provide an opportunity for the Chong participants to learn how to write their language and enjoy the process so that they would continue writing after the Workshop ended. The inclusion of the editing and re-writing session almost prevented that goal from being reached. It is, perhaps, significant that despite the hurt feelings of that episode, the participants did not leave, nor did they stop writing. Rather, they continued working and completed a rather impressive amount of writing between Friday and Sunday. It seemed to us that the participants’ desire to see their language in written form was strong enough to overcome their fears of failure.

Day 2: PREPARING STORIES FOR PRINTING. When a number of the participants were finished with their stories, Ms. Umaporn demonstrated a process by which they could make their stories into small books. She showed them templates of the title page with a space for an illustration, a template for a story page with a picture, and a template for a story page without a picture. She also demonstrated the importance of using clear, easy-to-read handwriting in the books. The secondary school students and some of the workshop staff helped writers with illustrations for their stories. The rest of the afternoon was then taken up with writing, illustrating and making books.

²As coordinator of the workshop, I should have ensured that a neutral text be used for the editing demonstration.

It was good to see the kids [secondary students] and the old people working together to make a Chong book. It took about 3-4 hours to complete a 4-6 page book. But everybody seemed to enjoy working very much. I heard them chuckling, talking, and arguing with each other all afternoon even though they could have been drowsy after lunch. *Solot Sirisai, Ph.D. student, Report on the Chong Writers Workshop*

That night all the Workshop staff were invited to attend a Chong wedding which turned out to be a very interesting cultural event that underscored the Chong community's pride in and commitment to their cultural heritage. However, as a result, no debriefing meeting was held that night by the workshop staff.

Day 3: WHAT OTHER KINDS OF WRITING ARE THERE? Ms. Mayuree and Ms. Supapas began the final day's activities with a very interesting session during which they encouraged the Chong participants' to discuss other kinds of writing (in addition to the experience stories, folktales, and poems produced during the Workshop). Student workshop facilitators had made a similar list themselves while preparing for the Workshop so that they would have a quick reference list in case the participants did not catch on to the activity. Thus, we were all amazed when the participants produced their own even longer list with very little stimulus from the facilitators. (The list is also appended.)

Day 3: WHAT DO WE DO NEXT? Solot finished the workshop by facilitating a discussion among the participants based on the question "What is your vision for the Chong language?" With leadership from Kamnan Chern, the participants agreed on the goal of "all the new generation of Chong children speaking the Chong language within the next five years". During the discussion of how this goal could be reached, the issue of teaching Chong in the primary and secondary schools was discussed. Significantly, the principal of the secondary school and the principal of one of the primary schools were both present and both expressed strong support for teaching Chong in their school programs. The process by which Chong teachers could be trained to use and teach Chong in the classrooms was discussed. Although the participants were not expecting that process to be so long and complicated, they now have a more realistic vision of what a revival of Chong language requires. Mahidol lecturers strongly emphasized the need for Chong parents to speak Chong to their young children. This is a major change in language use of the community and will require more than a single weekend writers workshop to be successfully implemented. However, the workshop participants are now aware of their language situation and of the changes that can and need to be made. That is a beginning.

Student observations and reactions

One of the long-range goals of the Chong Writers Workshop—that Ph.D. students would have a meaningful hands-on experience in applied linguistics—seems to have been accomplished. On the 8th of August, the Literacy for Minority Languages class held a debriefing situation. The following is a summary of

observations made and insights gained by students and staff during the three days in Chantaburi.

- No women. Students observed that the workshop was dominated by men. Two young women who attended the Friday morning session did not return after lunch. If the benefits of Chong literacy are to flow in a natural way to Chong children, the women will need to be active participants in the education process.

- Importance of relationship building. Students and staff all commented on the very positive relationship that had been built between the community and the Mahidol linguistic staff and students who have been working there. The warm welcome, the genuine hospitality, the enthusiasm of workshop participants for the difficult task of developing a writing system for their language, all these were attributed to prior work of Dr. Suwilai and M.A. students Mr. Isara, Ms. Sirichan, Ms. Siriphen and others who have lived and worked in the Chong community.

- Convergence. Several of the students mentioned that prior to this experience, they had not been able to envision a logical connection between linguistics and rural development. Now they can. One student wrote the following in his report:

Chalermchai said, 'It is my first time to see how linguistics can apply to other disciplines such as education and rural development.' Not only Chalermchai; I also learned that language is an important entry point to the community system. Literacy enhances the community strength, particularly among marginal people. *Solot Sirisai, Ph.D. student, Report on the Chong Writers Workshop*

- Internal politics. Students also noted that the internal political situation affected the workshop. The Chong community is apparently divided into two main political groups. Only one of those groups were represented at the workshop. In the future, efforts should be made to include participants from both groups so that the Chong literacy program can serve the community as a whole.

- Discrimination. During interactions with the participants, students heard first-person accounts of prejudice and discrimination experienced simply because of the Chong ethnic language and culture. These experiences included stories of Chong students being punished for using Chong at Thai school and of not being allowed to play football with Thai boys. One monk shared his experience of not being allowed to learn the Pali canon because he was Chong. (These vignettes add another dimension to language attitudes in the Chong community. They may help to explain

the younger generation's predisposition toward learning Standard Thai and the older generation's willing participation in this language shift³.)

- **Bilingualism.** One student remarked about the high degree of Chong-Standard Thai bilingualism among the older generation. Without the use of Thai as a lingua franca, the smooth and meaningful interaction between the Mahidol group and the workshop participants would not have been possible. This observation correlates with the Chong parents' desire for a similar bilingualism for their children which will allow them to live actively, productively in both cultural contexts.

- **Language & culture maintenance & tourism.** Recently, interest in Chong language and culture by non-Chong people has increased. This interest has been the source of fascination for the Chong people, remarking that even "outsiders" are curious about Chong language and culture. Apparently, a planned Chong cultural center is meant to encourage the tourist trade. However, this initiative has caused tension because, as one student observed, not all the Chong are happy about having their community become a tourist destination. (This again helped students to see that the sociolinguistic context of any development program is a very complex situation, necessitating good channels of communication among all the stakeholders.)

- **Community leadership.** Students noted that strong leadership within the Chong community came from both the secular and religious sides in the former sub-district head and the local monk, respectively. "Both are catalysts of the literacy program and dedicate themselves to the preservation of the Chong culture and language" (student report). This is a good sign because most successful interventions in language shift situations require strong leadership from within the ethnic group.

- **Multi-level participation.** Students also noted that the presence of the school principals at the workshop will encourage the community to think about introducing Chong into the formal education system. The District Director's keen interest in, sympathy for and knowledge of the Chong situation was also viewed as a strong point for a successful Chong program. Also, one of the workshop participants was a non-Chong man who has lived in the community a long time and has published his own Thai-language translation of a Chong folktale. He has professional understanding and experience in the publishing business. His interest and respect for Chong language and culture are another favorable indicator for a Chong literacy program.

- **Socioeconomic needs.** Students also observed that the Chong economic situation is relatively depressed. Although they have orchards for growing fruit like rambutan, durian, mangosteen, and pomelo, most of the Chong farmers are heavily in debt. The financial requirements for a large language and culture maintenance effort will have to come from outside the community. The degree to which their

³Discrimination, of course, cannot account for all the language shift taking place. As well-documented by sociolinguists over the past several decades, other socioeconomic factors are clearly at work here. (cf. Baker, 1996; Paulston, 1992; Fishman, 1991; Fasold, 1984).

collaboration with the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development will enable them to secure the material resources needed is yet to be seen.

Conclusion

A project like the Chong Writers Workshop entails a certain risk. Probably the best that a three-day workshop can accomplish is to stimulate the participants to write about their culture in their own language, and to help them “catch” the vision for developing written Chong literature. However, without follow-up, the initial enthusiasm for writing in the ethnic language will probably evaporate and there is less likelihood that interest rekindled in the future. Thus, one of the last activities of the workshop was to agree on a plan for the future. Future plans now include the development of a Chong lesson book (primer) for teaching Chong literacy, which will be followed by a workshop for training Chong teachers. A description of the amount of time and effort involved in this process had a sobering affect on the Chong participants. Most human activities that have a chance of making a lasting and beneficial impact upon a language community are more complicated and more difficult than we would like them to be.

However, the fact that local community members can collaborate with university staff and students on the challenging project of developing a Chong writing system should encourage the group to go forward. Neither the Chong community by itself, nor the linguists and university staff and students by themselves can implement a successful language development program. By working together the task becomes less daunting and the possibilities for the future of Chong multiply.

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Appendix 1. List of kinds of writing in Chong

1. experience
2. folktale
3. poem
4. word list / dictionary
5. song
6. history
7. proverb
8. traditional medicine
9. ceremonies (wedding, funeral, etc.)
10. letter
11. sign
12. joke
13. diary
14. local games (Saba, etc.)
15. recipe
16. birth and death
17. numeral system
18. article about Chong people

**THREE-DAY ORTHOGRAPHY & WRITERS WORKSHOP
FOR CHONG LANGUAGE COMMUNITY**

August 2000

	FRIDAY, 4TH AUGUST	SATURDAY, 5TH AUGUST	SUNDAY, 6TH AUGUST
9:00-9:30	Opening Ceremony	Read stories to the whole group.	Talk about the process: discuss problems
9:30-10:30	Chong Orthography	Edit & re-write stories	What other kinds of writing are there?
10:30-11:00	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
11:00-12:00	Chong Orthography	Prepare stories for printing	Closing
12:00	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH
1:00-2:30	Why write the mother tongue? What makes a good story? What are general writing skill? Tell a story about a personal experience	Illustrate stories	MAHIDOL FOLKS RETURN TO BANGKOK
3:00-4:30	Write a personal experience story		