

Mpi present and future: Reversing language shift

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Abstract

The vitality of the Mpi language of Thailand was assessed using questionnaires. Joshua Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), David Crystal's language revitalization prerequisites, and the UNESCO's proposed language vitality and endangerment assessment are used to help analyze the significance of the results. These three different vitality models indicate that the Mpi language is endangered. However, several things could be done to enhance the vitality of the language. It is not a foregone conclusion that Mpi will become extinct, but the next decade or so is a crucial time if Mpi is to reverse its language shift to Northern Thai.

Introduction: endangered languages and reversing language shift

Brenzinger et al. suggest that “at least 50 per cent of the world's more than 6,000 languages are losing speakers. We estimate that 90 per cent of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the twenty-first century” (2003:3), highlighting a catastrophic loss of language varieties in the world. Estimates of the total number of endangered languages range from 50% to 90% of the over 6,000 currently existing languages in the world, not counting the number of dialects that will pass away (for a few examples, see Crystal 2000, Krauss 1992, and Suwilai 1995). Over the past two decades, an increasing number of researchers and activists have sought to document and/or revitalize the endangered languages of the world.

Two communities of Mpi speakers in Thailand were surveyed by three researchers during November 19-23, 2004, and it was determined that they speak slightly different but mutually intelligible dialects (Nahhas 2005, 2007a). In one village, Ban Sakoen, Mpi is moribund: very few speakers remain, and these are mostly older. In another village, Ban Dong, Mpi would be considered endangered—survival is a possibility, but the language is under heavy pressure and only favorable circumstances will allow survival and growth.

It is natural to ask if Mpi is one language or two. Many different languages exist under very different sociolinguistic situations in different places. When the vitality of a language is ‘measured’, it is really the vitality of a language in a certain speech community located in time and space that is

measured. In some ways the two villages could be considered as if they were two separate languages. Mpi is one language, but the two communities are at different levels.

A. Who are the MPI? MPI an example of an endangered language

The Mpi live in only two villages in Thailand, Ban Sakoen and Ban Dong. Ban Sakoen is located in Nan Province, very close to the border of Phayao Province, while Ban Dong is just east of the capital of Phrae Province (see Figure 1 below, reproduced from Nahhas 2005:3).

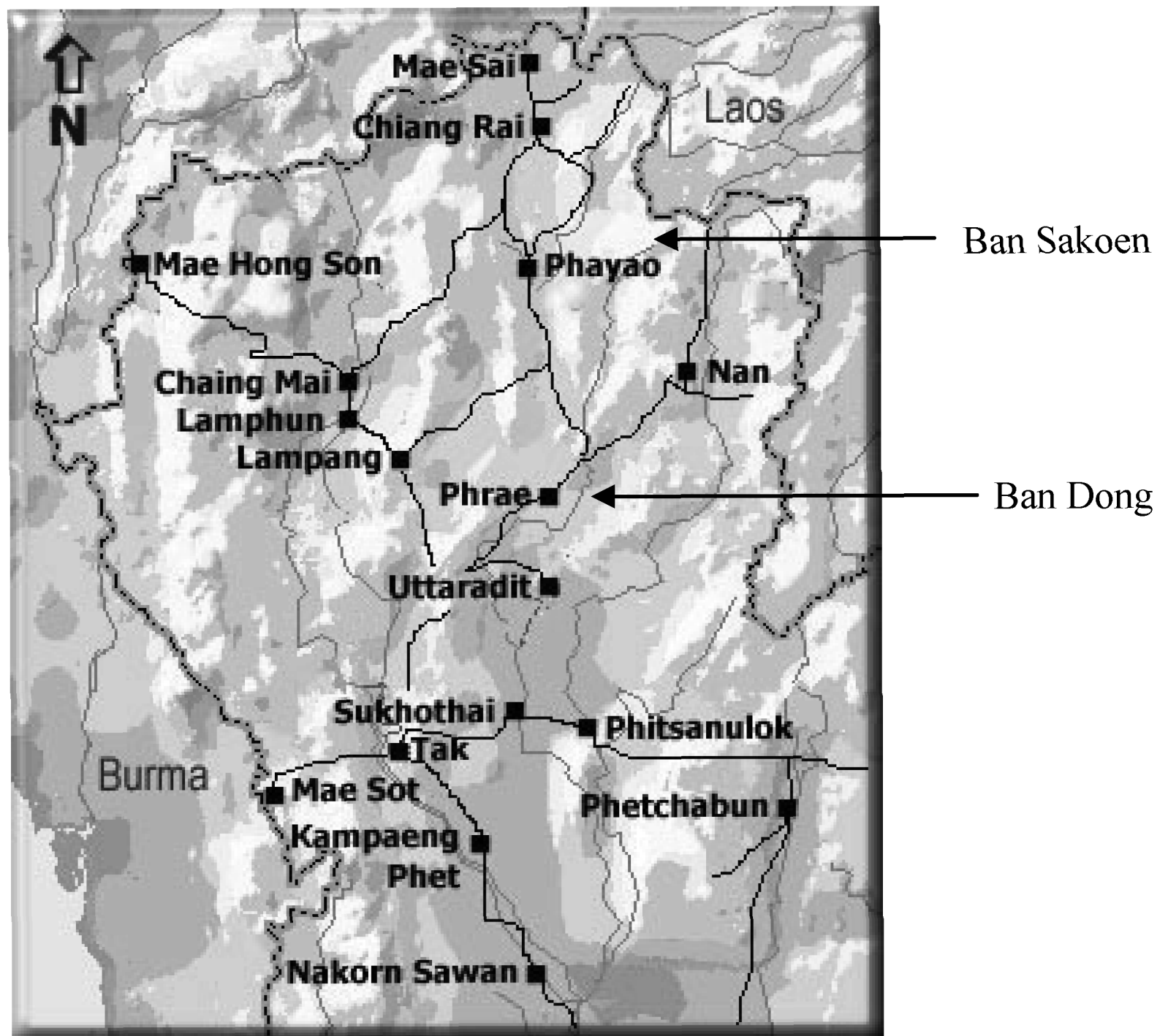


Figure 1. Location of the Mpi in Northern Thailand

It is also rumored that some Mpi can be found in Mueang La, Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China, but this has not been confirmed. The community in China may be from a related language group, perhaps Piyo. The Mpi contend that they originally came from Sipsongpanna, in Yunnan Province, China. They report that 300 years ago, they fled to Laos to avoid fighting in Sipsongpanna. The princes of Phrae and Nan (in what is now Thailand) captured them and brought them to Ban Sakoen and Ban Dong. They were brought to Ban Sakoen to mine “din fay”, which is used in making gunpowder. Six couples were brought to Ban Dong to care for the princes elephants and other animals (Nahhas 2005:5-9).

The Mpi language is placed in the Southern Loloish branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Bradley 1997:40). Other languages in Thailand in the Southern Loloish branch include Akha, Akeu, and Bisu. Sometimes the Mpi are referred to by other names. In Ban Dong, they call themselves *m̄ɿ pī* and dislike the name *kɔ̄* as they feel it causes a confusion with the Akha, who are also referred to by that name. However, in Ban Sakoen, they call themselves *kɔ̄* but state that the fuller name is: *kɔ̄ piī daō* (Nahhas 2005:7).

The purpose of the Mpi survey was to assess the need for vernacular literature development among the Mpi people. If there were to be a need, then it was desired also to determine which Mpi varieties would require development. Language vitality was assessed during the survey as it is one indicator of need for vernacular literature development. Sociolinguistic questionnaires were administered in both Ban Dong and Ban Sakoen. Additionally, a 436-item word list was elicited and recorded in each location. Based on the word list analysis and the reports of the subjects, Nahhas (2005:31) concluded that the Mpi spoken in Ban Dong and Ban Sakoen are two varieties of the same language that differ only in some vocabulary and pronunciation. In particular, he found about 86% lexical similarity and a few regular sound correspondences (*j* vs. *ɿ* following a bilabial consonant, *t* vs. *tɕ*, and *t^h* vs. *t^hɕ*) (2005:21).

It is unlikely that Mpi will continue to be spoken by future generations, although the situation is somewhat more hopeful in Ban Dong than in Ban Sakoen. The Mpi are shifting to the use of Northern Thai and Central Thai. They have no negative attitudes toward the Thai language that would prevent their use of Thai literature. Thus, Mpi literature need not be developed because they are adequately served by Thai literature. However, the Mpi do need language development work if their language is to be preserved (Nahhas 2005:30-31)¹.

A certain amount of work has been done in researching the Mpi. An Mpi dictionary was compiled by Srinuan (1976), an Mpi-speaker from Ban Dong. Sittichai analyzed part of the grammar of Mpi (1984). To our knowledge, a thorough phonology of Mpi has never been produced. Srinuan listed a set of phones that he used in his dictionary (1976). Kitjipol has collected (and included in his appendix B) a short wordlist of 100 Mpi items used in a lexicostatic analysis of several Southern Loloish language varieties (2006:41-42, 176-182). Nahhas includes a 436 item wordlist in his sociolinguistic survey (2005:84-102). These wordlists and the dictionary would serve as a good starting place for a more detailed phonology leading to a proposed orthography of Mpi.

¹The two villages are in contact, but not frequently due to the distance. There is some intermarriage and they gather for common festivals at times. Probably about 90% of Ban Dong is Mpi while only about half of Ban Sakoen is Mpi.

So what possible future work (both language development and research) might be attempted to benefit the Mpi? Perhaps a university would like to start a revitalization project; Mpi could be a good candidate for such a project. It would be worthwhile to try to ascertain the existence of Mpi village(s) in China and survey the situation there. It could be worthwhile to do the same in Laos, as well, where theoretically some Mpi might have ended up during their move from China to Thailand. The importance is in that simply finding other speakers of a language can often help to revitalize a language. The Mpi situation is an ideal one for an MA thesis that would develop a proposed orthography for Mpi.

The remainder of this paper assesses the degree of endangerment of the Mpi language and suggests issues to be considered in striving to revitalize the Mpi language. To our knowledge, none of these ideas have been pursued in relation to Mpi in Thailand. Three different perspectives on language development and reversing language shift are applied to the survey data. First, Fishman's GIDS (1991) is described, and some suggestions about Reversing Language Shift (RLS) among the Mpi language in Thailand are proposed. Second, some issues highlighted by Crystal (2000) on language revitalization prerequisites are also considered in relation to the Mpi language in Thailand. Finally, the factors relating to language vitality and endangerment which were suggested by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Brenzinger et al. 2003) are considered and applied.

B. Fishman's GIDS

Since Joshua Fishman proposed his Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS 1991), it has been used regularly in language development and language endangerment research. The GIDS is summarized in the following sub-section. After that some suggestions for Reversing Language Shift (RLS) among the Mpi language in Thailand are proposed and applied to the Mpi language situation.

The graded intergenerational disruption scale

In chapter 4 of *Reversing Language Shift* (1991:81-121), Joshua Fishman proposed the GIDS to give sociolinguists and activists a scale to use in addressing the vitality and endangerment of a speech variety. The GIDS is designed as an indicator of the amount of disruption in the transmission of a language from one generation to another and the contribution of that disruption to the ongoing language shift process.

The GIDS is focused on reversing language shift. Language maintenance is another perspective on the same process, since reversing language shift results in language maintenance (cf. Lewis 1996:8). The GIDS

is summarized below in Table 1, beginning with the most endangered stage (Stage 8) and progressing through the less endangered stages.²

Table 1. GIDS summary

Stage	Description
Stage 8	So few (usually elderly) speakers of the language are available that the community needs to re-establish language norms; often the expertise of outsiders is needed.
Stage 7	The older generation (those beyond child bearing age) uses the language but children are not using it; the language is still spoken in the home and integrated somewhat into the family domain; however, the disruption is occurring between the child-bearing generation and the latest generation of children
Stage 6	Language and identity socialization of children takes place in home and community; children are learning the language naturally in an intergenerational context; this is the threshold level for language maintenance, the level at which small languages continue to survive and even thrive (cf. Lewis 1996:8; Fishman 1991:92).
Stage 5	Language is used in a vital socio-cultural way in the community, socialization involves extensive literacy, usually including non-formal local language schooling.
Stage 4	Local language is used in children's formal education in conjunction with the national or official language; the language is used in both the core (intimate) domains of the community and in the less intimate domains of primary education and literacy.
Stage 3	Local language is used in workplaces of larger society, beyond normal local level boundaries, where specialized language skills are not needed.
Stage 2	Lower governmental services and local mass media are open to the local language.
Stage 1	Local language is used at the upper governmental level (although perhaps not exclusively).

In part, Fishman's GIDS was proposed to enable an ordering of priorities for language planning to help speakers revitalize their language, i.e. reverse the shift of use from one language to another within a speech community. If a speech community desires to try to reverse language shift, the GIDS can help them prioritize actions that might be profitable. Fishman emphasized that to move a language from stage 7 to stage 4 one must first move it to stage 6, and only after attaining stage 6 can stages 5 and 4 be addressed. In other words, using the language in formal education will not reverse language shift unless the grandparents talk to their children and

²The descriptions here are a distillation and expansion of Suwilai and Malone's (2003:2) reformulations of Fishman's various statements. For the original formulation of the GIDS, see Fishman (1991:81-121). For a short overview of the GIDS, see Spolsky (2004:186-190).

grandchildren in the local language. The number of informal domains in which the local language is used in the community also needs to be increased.

The GIDS applied to Mpi

When the GIDS is applied to the Mpi speech communities, it becomes obvious that the two villages are at different levels. The four upper levels (stages 4 to 1) do not apply to the Mpi situation at the moment.

Stage 8 seems to be the best descriptor for Ban Sakoen since proficiency is limited mainly to older people (Nahas 2005:v, 22).

Stage 7 is probably the best descriptor for the situation in Ban Dong. However, Stage 6 is within striking distance. Even though many Mpi children in Ban Dong do not speak Mpi, some can speak a little and many do have a passive understanding. In fact, about 70% of the Mpi adults interviewed in Ban Dong said they use Mpi at home, so many children are still exposed to the language. About the same proportion of respondents reported that children learn Northern Thai first; the others reported that children learn Mpi first. Also, about 30% of the respondents said that some children use Mpi (mixed with Northern Thai) when playing. Nahas indicates a tendency for Mpi to dominate the home domain; however, in the local community language use is mixed and favoring Thai (see Nahas 2005:v, 21, 22, 25, 68, 72). Table 2 proposes some possible interventions to encourage the vitality of the Mpi language community.

Table 2. GIDS summary and application to Mpi: Stages 8 to 5

Stage/ description	Mpi situation	Possible interventions
Stage 8: A few elderly speakers.	The situation in Ban Sakoen seems to be at this stage. The language vitality in Ban Sakoen would be strengthened if it could attain Stage 7.	Time is needed for the younger people to spend in real life social situations with the older people who speak the language well. Recordings and transcriptions also need to be made, and the grammar and phonology need to be analyzed, because the time is approaching when the language will need to be relearned or re-taught from this documentation.
Stage 7: The older generation uses the language but children are not using it.	The situation in Ban Dong seems to be at this stage. Intergenerational transmission of Mpi is increasingly disrupted.	The Mpi could make an adaptation of language nests-small communities where Mpi is practiced in the socio-cultural context as a part of normal everyday life (a similar suggestion is made in Nahas 2005:31-32).

Stage/ description	Mpi situation	Possible interventions
Stage 6: Children are learning the language naturally in an intergenerational context	In order to preserve the Mpi language, it is necessary for the Ban Dong community to progress to Stage 6.	If the Mpi choose to strive for Stage 6, encouragement to value, appreciate and participate in the use of the Mpi language would be helpful. Outside experts could help to make the Mpi aware of what other endangered language communities in the world have done.
Stage 5: Language is vital in the community, involving extensive literacy.	Mpi is not at this level. However, attainment of this level could stabilize the language shift situation for Mpi, if it is built on a solid foundation of Stage 6.	Design and adoption of an orthography (a phonological analysis would be needed first). Production of primer and introductory Mpi readers in a voluntary literacy program. Other programs such as literature in use and development of ethnomusicological material could reinforce this Stage.

The Mpi language is definitely endangered. Preservation of the Mpi language must begin immediately to have much hope of success. In Ban Sakoen, the language is in Stage 8, a level often called ‘moribund’. Unless some of the things suggested in the table above are done very soon there, the language will die with the present grandparent generation. In Ban Dong, the situation is somewhat better. However, it is important for the survival of this language that Mpi be preserved as the productive and useful language of all generations in the home, and as much as possible in the local community.

If Stage 6 can be attained, then development of an orthography and a literacy program could be a valuable support. However, until Stage 6 is attained, this kind of language development would likely serve only to document the language, not preserve its use. Introducing an orthography and trying to teach people to read Mpi would likely prove futile unless Stage 6 is reached. “One cannot jump across or dispense with Stage 6” (Fishman 1991:95; cf. 2000:4).

In terms of orthography and its effect on language vitality, how does Mpi compare to the languages of other minority people groups in South East Asia? Mpi, with no orthography, has the opposite problem of a few languages of South East Asia, where two or more orthographies split the language communities and dilute literacy efforts. Two of the more extreme examples of this are the Lisu with five proposed orthographies, not counting adaptations and revisions (Morse and Tehan 2000), and Akha with 10 contending orthographies (Kya Heh and Tehan 1999a, b; 2000). Many languages in the area have (just) one orthography (e.g. Western Lawa, see Nahhas 2007b).

However, it is impossible to evaluate the effect of these orthographies on language vitality since an orthography probably would not have been developed had the language *not* had vitality to begin with.

An example of a language in Thailand that has an orthography that was developed for the purpose of language revitalization is Nyah Kur. Unfortunately, the presence of this orthography does not seem to be helping as much as one would hope (SIL MSEAG 2007). Eastern Lawa is an example of a language in Thailand without an orthography which, like Mpi, faces strong pressures to shift to Thai but, unlike Mpi, has strong vitality (see Nahhas 2007b). It is very likely, of course, that an orthography would further strengthen the vitality of Eastern Lawa. These examples simply illustrate that, while it would certainly support language revitalization, the creation of an orthography is not the whole answer. Once again, in Fishman's terms, you cannot skip Stage 6.

C. David Crystal's 'six prerequisites'

In a very accessible book on endangered languages, an additional perspective on endangered languages is provided by David Crystal's six prerequisites for language revitalization. He describes these 'six prerequisites' as "progress towards the goal of language being used in the home and neighborhood as a tool of intergenerational communication" (Crystal 2000:130). After explaining these six prerequisites below, they are applied in relation to the Mpi language situation in Thailand.

The six prerequisites

Crystal's chapter 5 "What can be done?" is full of ideas for promoting revitalization (Crystal 2000:127-166). According to Crystal, real progress in language vitality depends on: 1) the language community itself being "interested in obtaining help," 2) "a positive political climate," and 3) the involvement of professionals in the pursuit of the agreed-upon tasks (Crystal 2000:102). The 'six prerequisites' he proposes are described in Table 3. In addition to the six prerequisites, documentation, which he calls "a major enterprise," is given a place in the summary table.

Table 3. Crystal's (2000) six prerequisites for language revitalization

Prerequisite	Description
1	Increased prestige within the dominant community.
2	Increased wealth relative to the dominant community.
3	Increased relative power in the eyes of the dominant community.
4	A strong presence in the educational system.
5	A writing system for the language.
6	Access to electronic technology.
Documentation	Documentation is also suggested as a factor although it is not listed as a prerequisite.

The Six prerequisites applied to Mpi

The six prerequisites which Crystal proposes are applied to the Mpi situation in Thailand in the first column in Table 4, and the third column provides both (A) an assessment of the current situation for Mpi, as well as (B) some enhancements that might be attempted to improve the situation.

Table 4. Crystal's (2000) six prerequisites applied to Mpi

Prerequisite	Mpi situation	Positive or negative at present
1 Prestige	If the Mpi could get to the stage where they are less reluctant to speak Mpi in the presence of Thai speakers, then ...	(A) Neutral to negative currently: lower prestige, some are reluctant to use Mpi in non-Mpi situations. (B) Enhancement: media perceived community activity, increased visibility.
2 Wealth	Can they increase their economic status?	(A) Unknown (B) Enhancement: tourism
3 Power	How much power do they have? Can they be empowered?	(A) Unknown (B) Enhancement: Thai Non-Formal Education, UNESCO, etc. involvement
4 Presence in Education	At the moment, Ban Sakoen has some presence in the school system with teaching some phrases. Unknown in Ban Dong.	(A) Negative: Thai is dominant. (B) Enhancement: good materials, teacher training
5 Writing	This seems very attainable if the community is willing to invest time and resources. An outside consultant could be of use here.	(A) Negative: no orthography at present. (B) Enhancement: literacy materials
6 Electronic technology	If their economic status permits it, and if a suitable orthography can be developed, this factor can become positive.	(A) Unknown (B) Enhancement: web page
Document.	Existing documentation: Mpi history. Phonology. Phrases and clauses. Mpi dictionary. Mention in various articles on Tibeto-Burman languages.	Needed: an orthography, grammars, more dictionaries, a text corpus of different patterns of discourse, interviews of people with specialized knowledge, audio and video recordings, etc.

The areas of overlap from Crystal's analytical scheme with applications from the GIDS include: support for more public use for the Mpi language, development of an orthography and accompanying literacy materials, and increased documentation. Areas of non-linguistic intervention to benefit Mpi vitality are suggested in Crystal's analysis: increased prestige, increased wealth and increased power, any or all of which might very well contribute to increased presence in the local educational system and increased usage of electronic technology.

D. UNESCO's nine factors in language vitality and endangerment

The UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages has proposed nine factors in language vitality and endangerment (Brenzinger, Matthias, et al. 2003). For each factor, a scale from 0 to 5 is used to evaluate the vitality or endangerment of the language.

In Table 5 below, the factors relating to language vitality and endangerment which were suggested by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Brenzinger et al. 2003) are considered. In Table 6, they are applied to the Mpi language situation in Thailand, with Standard Thai added for reference.

Nine factors in language vitality and endangerment

The following chart is an adaptation of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group's recommendations, as summarized and stated by Lewis (2005). The rating system that the Group gave to associate with each factor is discussed in Table 5. The Group did not give rating points for factor 2 in the absolute number of speakers, so we have supplied our own working system with values that seem plausible for language communities in SE Asia.

Table 5. UNESCO's Nine Factors in Language Vitality and Endangerment

Factor	Degree of endangerment, grade and description
1. Intergenerational language transmission scale: 'Speaker Population'	<p><i>Safe</i> 5 The language is used by all ages, from children up.</p> <p><i>Unsafe</i> 4 The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.</p> <p><i>Definitively endangered</i> 3 The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.</p> <p><i>Severely endangered</i> 2 The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.</p> <p><i>Critically endangered</i> 1 The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation.</p> <p><i>Extinct</i> 0 There exists no speaker.</p>

Factor	Degree of endangerment, grade and description
2. Absolute number of speakers ³	<p>No point scale was associated with this factor in the original report. For the present paper, the following scale was employed:</p> <p><i>less than 1000—0 points;</i> <i>1000-3000—1 point;</i> <i>3000-6000—2 points;</i> <i>6000-10,000—3 points;</i> <i>10,000-50,000—4 points;</i> <i>50,000-100,00—5 points;</i> <i>100,000 plus—6 points.</i></p>
3. Proportion of speakers within the total reference group (population)	<p><i>Safe 5. All speak the language.</i> <i>Unsafe 4. Nearly all speak the language.</i> <i>Definitively endangered 3 A majority speak the language.</i> <i>Severely endangered 2 A minority speak the language.</i> <i>Critically endangered 1 Very few speak the language.</i> <i>Extinct 0 None speak the language.</i></p>
4. Loss of existing language domains: 'Domains and Functions'	<p><i>Universal use 5 The language is used in all domains and for all functions.</i> <i>Multilingual parity 4 Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.</i> <i>Dwindling domains 3 The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.</i> <i>Limited or formal domains 2 The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.</i> <i>Highly limited domains 1 The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few functions.</i> <i>Extinct 0 The language is not used in any domain and for any function.</i></p>

³It is not known if these are the best choices for this region of the world, but these figures allow what seem to be appropriate distinctions among many language groups in SE Asia.

Factor	Degree of endangerment, grade and description
5. Response to new domains and media: 'New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language'	<p><i>Dynamic</i> 5 The language is used in all new domains.</p> <p><i>Robust/active</i> 4 The language is used in most new domains.</p> <p><i>Receptive</i> 3 The language is used in many domains.</p> <p><i>Coping</i> 2 The language is used in some new domains.</p> <p><i>Minimal</i> 1 The language is used only in a few new domains.</p> <p><i>Inactive</i> 0 The language is not used in any new domains.</p>
6. Materials for language education and literacy: 'Accessibility of Written Materials'	<p><i>[no degree of endangerment labels associated]</i></p> <p>5 There is an established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.</p> <p>4 Written materials exist, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.</p> <p>3 Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.</p> <p>2 Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.</p> <p>1 A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.</p> <p>0 No orthography available to the community.</p>
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies: 'Official Attitudes Toward Language'	<p><i>[Degree of support: no degree of endangerment labels associated]</i></p> <p><i>Equal support</i> 5 All languages are protected.</p> <p><i>Differentiated support</i> 4 Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.</p> <p><i>Passive assimilation</i> 3 No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.</p> <p><i>Active assimilation</i> 2 Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.</p> <p><i>Forced assimilation</i> 1 The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized or protected.</p> <p><i>Prohibition</i> 0 Minority languages are prohibited.</p>

Factor	Degree of endangerment, grade and description
<p>8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language: 'Community Members' Attitudes toward Language'</p>	<p><i>[no degree of endangerment labels associated]</i> 5 <i>All</i> members value their language and wish to see it promoted. 4 <i>Most</i> members support language maintenance. 3 <i>Many</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss. 2 <i>Some</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss. 1 Only <i>a few</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss. 0 <i>No one</i> cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.</p>
<p>9. Type and quality of documentation: 'Nature of Documentation'</p>	<p><i>[Documentation rating: no degree of endangerment labels associated]</i> <i>Superlative</i> 5 There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts; constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high quality audio and video recordings exist. <i>Good</i> 4 There is one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally-updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings. <i>Fair</i> 3 There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation. <i>Fragmentary</i> 2 There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation. <i>Inadequate</i> 1 Only a few grammatical sketches, short wordlists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated. <i>Undocumented</i> 0 No material exists.</p>

The nine factors applied to Mpi

The following table is an adaptation of the UNESCO Group's recommendations. Each Mpi community is rated separately. Standard Thai is the standard variety of Thai used in education, government, national media, etc.; it is based on Central Thai. Northern Thai (which is not rated here) is the common spoken variety of the northern provinces of Thailand; it is not completely mutually (inherently) intelligible with Central Thai. A total for each column is supplied at the bottom of the table. It is not known to what extent these numerical totals are comparable, but it seems likely that they provide some means of comparison between language communities with large point totals being indicative of different degrees of speech community vitality. Thus Mpi as spoken in Ban Dong was assigned 18 points, making it somewhat stronger than the mere 11 points of Ban Sakoen; however, neither Mpi speech community comes close to the strength and vitality of Standard Thai in Thailand.

Table 6. Evaluation of Mpi and central Thai according to UNESCO's nine factors

Factor	Ban Sakoen	Ban Dong	Standard Thai
1. Intergenerational language transmission scale	2 points: Severely endangered: used by a few grandparents	3 points: Definitely endangered: used by parental generation plus	5 points: Safe: used by all ages from children up
2. Absolute number of speakers	0 points: ca. 240 people	1 point: ca. 1250 people	6 points: millions of people
3. Proportion of speakers within the total reference group (the Mpi)	1 point: Critically endangered: Very few speak the language	3 points: Definitely endangered: a majority, but not all, speak the language	5 points: Safe: all speak the language
4. Loss of existing language domains	1 point: Highly limited domains: very few domains and functions	3 points: Dwindling domains: even the home is threatened	5 points: Universal use: all domains and functions
5. Response to new domains and media	0 points: Inactive: not used in any new domains	0 points: Inactive: not used in any new domains	4 points: Robust and active: most new domains ⁴

⁴As in many languages of the world, the newest technology comes from outside with its own descriptive words also from outside. In Thailand, the words are usually 'Thai-ized' rather quickly and they become a part of the Thai language repertoire.

Factor	Ban Sakoen	Ban Dong	Standard Thai
6. Materials for language education and literacy	0 points: No orthography	0 points: No orthography	5 points: Educational and governmental use
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies	3 points: Passive Assimilation: no explicit policy	3 points: Passive Assimilation: no explicit policy	5 points: Passive Assimilation (3 points)+Standard Thai is the assimilation goal (2 points) ⁵
8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language	2 points: Some support, but some indifference	3 points: Many support, but some indifference	5 points: All members value the language
9. Type and quality of documentation	2 points: Fragmentary but present	2 points: Fragmentary but present	5 points: Superlative: Comprehensive
Total	11	18	45

We hope to eventually compare these totals to other languages in the area.⁶ The totals indicate that Mpi as spoken in Ban Sakoen is severely endangered, while Mpi as spoken in Ban Dong could be described as definitely endangered. In agreement with the GIDS, Factor 1 highlights the need for more children to be using Mpi in more domains; notice how Factor 4 highlights the dwindling domains of use. Factor 2 highlights the need to have more speakers of Mpi, and the logical place to look for those speakers is among those who are ethnically Mpi and increasing the number of Mpi people who actually speak the Mpi language (Factor 3). All three of these evaluation schemes indicate the lack of an accepted orthography (Factor 6). Factor 7, Prerequisite 6 and GIDS level 5 all point to the possible contribution of official institutions, especially the educational system. Factor 8 and Prerequisite 1 both identify the need to increase the prestige of the language. Both Crystal and Factor 9 encourage increased variety and quality of documentation.

⁵The government policy is not different in the abstract. However, since Central Thai is the goal of that assimilation, it seemed logical to award full points to it. The scale is not made to rate the national languages, but this seems to follow the intent of the Group's rating system.

⁶For comparison, we did look at some Venezuelan languages rated in the UNESCO documents Appendix 1. At 10 points "Mapayo is a Cariban language no longer spontaneously spoken, but remembered by a handful of elders in a multi-ethnic community all of whose members communicate in Spanish, which is also the first language learned by all the Mapayo children. [At 21 points] Kari'na is a Cariban language as well, but has many more speakers, most of whom are bilingual. Some elders learned Kari'na as their first language and can speak it fluently, although nowadays Spanish is the preferred language for most Karina" (Brenzinger 2003:19). If one changes the proper nouns, the descriptions seem a rather good fit for the Ban Sakoen and Ban Dong Mpi speech communities.

Intergenerational transmission is failing for the Mpi of Thailand. Only in Ban Dong does there seem to be enough speakers to create a community of Mpi speakers, but even then the total numbers of Mpi speakers will remain a very small drop in relation to the Northern Thai speech community ocean in which they are immersed for work, worship, education and entertainment. The development of an orthography or the actual promotion of Mpi by the government and school system could add more 'points' to the totals. In addition, more points could be added if more documentation were developed. Ideally, these increases in points (perhaps pushing the totals into the mid-20s) would indicate a strengthening of the vitality of Mpi in these communities.

Conclusion: The future for MPI

What would help the Mpi language to survive, grow, and prosper? First of all and foundationally, the Mpi speech communities themselves must decide that they will value and speak Mpi in the home and community, and that the children will be expected to learn it. This does not rule out multilingualism in Northern Thai and Central Thai. Various community events could serve to educate Mpi speakers of the necessity to pass the language along, and to improve the attitude of the Mpi toward their own language.

If this foundation is addressed, an orthography could then be designed and adapted, followed by a primer and other literacy materials for use in local schools and in the community. These materials in themselves would be useless unless the foundation in the home and community is in place first. Tourism, media attention and a web page could increase the prestige of the language, and perhaps generate additional income to use on language development. No matter what, additional documentation is warranted: grammars, dictionaries, a text corpus, audio and video recordings, interviews of people with specialized knowledge, etc.

All three perspectives referenced in this paper identify the need for an orthography in helping to strengthen the vitality of an endangered language. An orthography is necessary to implement the literacy program of Fishman's stage 5. Crystal's fifth prerequisite is a writing system of the language. And in the UNESCO scheme, Factor 6, Mpi received 0 points for literacy and educational materials since Mpi lacks the requisite orthography.

Mpi is at a critical point. Time, energy and finances, if they are applied strategically, could make a crucial difference in preserving the language. It is possible that there will still be mother-tongue speakers of Mpi at the turn of the next century. But that possibility might only become reality if changes are made soon.

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Received: 15 January 2007

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