Variation of Cluster (l) in English of Thai Speakers

Boonruang Chunsuvimol*

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study is concerned with social variation of cluster (l) in conversational English of Thai speakers. To date, there have been studies on social and stylistic variation of cluster (l) in Thai of various groups of speakers (i.e. Beebe (1974), Saengchant (1986), Suthida (1994) and Boonruang (1995)). Most of the studies indicate that /l/ in clusters is most frequently deleted, less frequently occurring as a lateral [l], followed by a small proportion of hypercorrected r variants of (l), i.e. a trill [r], a tap [r] and an approximant [r]. On the other hand, Pornpimol's study (1989) of variation of cluster (l) in English loanwords in Thai reveals an opposite result. The findings show that Thai speakers have a higher rate of (l) retention than that of (l) deletion.

There has been no study on social variation of cluster (l) in English of Thai speakers, however. The recent studies of cluster (r) in Thai and cluster (r) in English (Boonruang 1993), or cluster (r) in German (Sudrutai 1995) of Thai speakers reveal that there is a higher rate of cluster r-deletion than retention in Thai but vice versa when they speak English or

* Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University.

German. In view of these studies, as well as that of Pornpimol (1989) on English loanwords in Thai, it would be interesting to find out the pattern of English cluster (l) of Thai speakers in conversational style, and to see whether or not it displays the same pattern as cluster (r) in English, cluster (r) in German, or cluster (l) in English loanwords in Thai, i.e. having a higher rate of retention than reduction. In the present study, attempts will be made to determine the variation of (l) in English of Thai speakers and to explore the relationship between three selected social variables, i.e. sex, job level and English language background, and the use of (l) in English of Thai speakers. The data used here are the same set of data as the one used in an earlier study of Thai (r) and English (r) variations (Boonruang 1993) of the same subject group. Part of the data in the present study is taken from Boonruang (1996).

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study is twofold:

1. To analyze the variation of cluster (l) in English spoken by Thai speakers.

2. To find out whether or not and to what extent the variation is conditioned by three social factors: sex, job level and English language background.

3. HYPOTHESES

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

1. (l) in conversational English of Thai speakers has variants.
2. Male and female speakers have different patterns of use of (l) variants.
3. Speakers of different job levels have different patterns of use of (l) variants.
4. Speakers of different English language backgrounds have different patterns of use of (l) variants.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Variables

There are two types of variables in this study: phonological and social variables. One phonological variable is investigated, i.e. (l) in English clusters. Three social variables are selected: sex (male/female), job level and English

language background. With regard to job level, the subjects are categorized into four levels of job position, based on responsibility, the nature of work and salary:

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

Job Level II (JL II) - Supervisory e.g. assistant outlet manager, reception supervisor

Job Level III (JL III) - Skilled e.g. captain, front office receptionist

Job Level IV (JL IV) - Semi-skilled e.g. waiter/waitress, room attendant

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

As for English language background (ELB), the subjects are classified into three types of English language background, based on experience and years of exposure to English.

Type I - extensive

Speakers falling into this category are those who have been abroad for at least one year studying and/or working in a place where English is the medium of communication. Also included in Type l are those who have been exposed to interaction in English with English speaking people since primary school. When they were schoolchildren, they had to listen and speak to expatriate teachers whose English was their second language or native tongue. Type I subjects are more exposed to English than the other two groups although their work experience in a hotel may be less than the latter.

Type II - job-experienced

Subjects classified into this group have been working in a hotel for at least five years. Their first opportunity to speak English began when they came to work in a hotel. They may have been abroad for a short visit but never worked or studied overseas.

Type III - beginner

As the name implies, these are employees who are new to the job, thus their English exposure is limited. They have worked in a hotel for less than five years. Like Type II category, they never worked or studied abroad. In addition, they never spoke English at school.

Type I is considered most exposed to English and Type III least exposed.

4.2 Subjects and procedure

The subjects in this study consist of 58 Bangkok Thai speakers of Thai nationality who are employees of three first class hotels in Bangkok: the Regent of Bangkok, the Dusit Thani Hotel and the Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok. They have been residing in Bangkok for at least the last ten years and they do not speak any other dialects or minority languages at their place of residence. Their work involves face-to-face interaction with hotel guests. Thus most of them are drawn from three departments: food and beverage, front office and house keeping. As can be seen from Table 1, there are approximately equal numbers of male and female subjects in each job level. After interviews with the subjects, information on their English language background was obtained. In Table 2, the subjects are classified by sex, job level and English language background.

Table 1 - Distribution of subjects by sex and job level

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

Table 2 - Distribution of subjects by sex, job level and English language background

ELB	Male				Female				Total
	JL I	JL II	JL III	JL IV	JL I	JL II	JL III	JL IV	
Type I	2	1	1	-	5	1	2	-	12
Type II	6	5	3	1	2	5	1	-	23
Type III	-	1	3	6	-	1	4	8	23
Total	8	7	7	7	7	7	7	8	58

Each subject was tape-recorded in a face-to-face single interview for about 15 minutes in English with a British or an American. The interviews were conducted at the subjects' place of employment. The subjects were not informed of the real purpose of the study but were instead told that the interview was aimed at finding out their background in English language learning. The conversation topics were mainly concerned with the subjects' biographical information (e.g. name, age, place of birth, place of residence, marital status),

educational background, languages acquired, English learning experience, work experience and their ambitions or plans for the future. Like Beebe's (1980:381), there was no attempt to elicit specific words or sounds. Thus, the number of tokens for (l) varied with the speaker. The data collection was conducted in March and April, 1992.

The first ten minutes of each subject's recorded conversation were transcribed into written text. All English words with the cluster (l) variable were underlined and transcribed phonetically. The chi-square (χ^2) test at the one per cent level of significance ($p<0.01$) was used to test whether or not there is a relationship between the variables concerned.

5. VARIANTS AND FREQUENCIES

5.1 Variants of (l)

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

1. the lateral [l]

e.g.	[kʰ lin]	/klin/	"clean"
	[flɔ]	[flɔ]	"floor"

2. the approximant [ɹ]

e.g.	[kʰ ɹin]	/klin/	"clean"
	[kʰ ɔmpʰ ɹe:n]	[k ɔmplein]	"complain"

3. the non-occurrence of (l) in clusters, i.e. (l) becomes [ø]

e.g.	[kʰ in]	/klin/	"clean"
	[f ɔ]	/flɔ /	"floor"

[ɹ] is one of the three r variants (the others being the trill [r] and the tap [r) that Beebe (1974:47) calls hypercorrected variants. The term hypercorrection is used by Beebe (ibid.) to mean the use of r variants for (l).

5.2 Frequency of (l) variants

There are altogether 340 tokens of the (l) variable. As shown in Table 3, [l] accounts for 70.3% of all the cluster (l) occurrences, followed by [ø] accounting for slightly more than one-fourth. [ɹ] is the only hypercorrected r variant in clusters and the usage is only 2.1%.

Table 3 - Freaquency of cluster (l) variants

(l) variants	%	No.
[l]	70.3	239
[ɹ]	2.1	7
[Ø]	27.6	94
Total	100	340

6. SOCIAL VARIATION

6.1 Variation of (l) by sex

Table 4 illustrates the frequency of (l) variants in the cluster position of both sex groups.

Table 4 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by sex

(l) variants	Male		Female	
[l]	73.7%	112	67.6%	127
[ɹ]	0.7%	1	3.2%	6
[Ø]	25.6%	39	29.2%	55
Total	100%	152	100%	188

$\chi^2 = 0.79$ $df = 1$ $p > 0.01$

As shown in Table 4, both sex groups have a higher rate of [l] than [ø]. Between the two groups, the males use [l] more frequently than the females (73.7% as against 67.6%). Conversely the males' rate of [ø] is slightly lower than the females'. Table 4 also shows that both male and female speakers have a minimal use of hypercorrected [ɹ] for (l).

The differences in the use of (l) variants between the two sex groups are not statistically significant. Therefore, the hypothesis that male and female speakers have different patterns of (l) is rejected.

6.2 Variation of (l) by job level

As can be seen from Table 5, all the four groups of speakers share a similar pattern of (l) usage. They have a higher rate of [l] than l-deletion. They use [l] more than 70%,

The differences in the use of postconsonantal (l) in English of all the four job levels or between any two of them are not statistically significant. The data, thus, do not support the hypothesis that speakers of different job levels have different patterns of (l) variation.

Table 5 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by job level

(l) variants	Job Level I		Job Level II		Job Level III		Job Level IV	
[l]	71.4%	50	74.5%	70	58.6%	41	73.6%	78
[ɹ]	-	-	1.1%	1	7.1%	5	0.9%	1
[Ø]	28.6%	20	24.4%	23	34.3%	24	25.5%	27
Total	100%	70	100%	94	100%	70	100%	106

χ^2 for all four job levels = 3.30 df =3 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level I and Job Level II = 0.29 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level I and Job Level III = 1.05 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level I and Job Level IV = 0.21 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level II and Job Level III = 2.75 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level II and Job Level IV = 0.00 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for Job Level III and Job Level IV = 2.40 df =1 p>0.01

6.3 Variation of (l) by English language background

As shown in Table 6, speakers most exposed to English have the highest rate of [l] (83.1%) and the lowest rate of [ø] (16.9%). Of the other two less exposed to English, speakers with the least exposure to English have a slightly higher rate of l-retention and a slightly lower rate of l-deletion. However, the chi-square tests show that the differences of the three groups or between any two of them in the use of cluster (l) are not statistically significant at the one per cent level of significance.

Table 6 - Frequency of cluster (l) variants by English language background

(l) variants	ELB Type I		ELB Type II		ELB Type III	
[l]	83.1%	54	66.7%	88	67.8%	97
[ɹ]	-	-	0.7%	1	4.2%	6
[Ø]	16.9%	11	32.6%	43	28.0%	40
Total	100%	65	100%	132	100%	143

χ^2 for all three types of ELB = 5.52 df =2 p>0.01
χ^2 for ELB Type I and ELB Type II = 5.50 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for ELB Type I and ELB Type III = 3.50 df =1 p>0.01
χ^2 for ELB Type II and ELB Type III = 0.40 df =1 p>0.01

To summarize, the study results show that the subjects, irrespective of their social backgrounds, use [l] most frequently in their English conversation, ranging from 58.6% (Job Level III, Table 5) to 83.1% (ELB Type I, Table 6). Their use of l-deletion is always less than half of all occurrences. In fact, the highest frequency of l-deletion is at 34.3% (Job Level III, Table 5), and the lowest at 16.9% (ELB Type I, Table 6). The study results also show that each of the social variables has no statistically significant relationship with English cluster (l) variation.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Since comparisons of cluster (l) in Thai and in English of the subjects have been made in an earlier study (Boonruang 1996), the discussion in this section will mainly be concerned with comparisons of clusters (r) and (l) in English.

First, the hypotheses of the present study, i.e. speakers of different sex groups, job levels and types of English language background have different patterns of (l) variation, are based on findings of the earlier study of variation of (r) in English of the same subject group (Boonruang 1993). In that study, the variation of (r) is found to be related to each of the social variables. That is, female speakers have a higher rate of the standard variant [ɹ] than males. Speakers of a higher job level tend to have a higher usage of the standard variant than those of a lower level. Likewise, speakers with more English language background tend to have a higher usage of the standard variant than those with less. However, using the same set of data, the findings of the present study of (l) in English obviously yield contrasting results from those of (r) in English. The results of the present study provide evidence that sex, job level and English language background have no effect upon English cluster (l). Since (r) and (l) in English behave differently, it can, therefore, safely be concluded that they belong to separate sets of phonological variables despite the fact that each occurs in clusters. For Thai speakers, English cluster (r) is socially conditioned while (l) is not at all.

Second, Beebe (1974) has demonstrated convincingly that of the two clusters (r) and (l) in Thai, the rate of "full cluster retention", i.e. the use of the respective standard variant ([r] for (r) and [l] for (l)), is always higher in (l) than in (r). Conversely, the rate of cluster simplification is always lower in (l) than in (r). According to Beebe (ibid., 156), between (r) and (l) clusters, the former are the less stable with regard to full cluster retention. In contrast, cluster reduction is more advanced in (r) clusters than in (l) clusters (ibid., 159). A close examination of study results of clusters (r) and (l) in Thai of the subject group in the present study (Boonruang 1993, 1995) reveals the same patterns. (Note that in the following discussion, [r] in Thai represents both standard variants, i.e. a trill [r] and a tap [ɾ]).

With regard to the use of standard variants, the subjects have a lower occurrence of [r] for (r) than [l] for (l), as shown in Table 7. Likewise, the subjects of each social group display a similar pattern, as can be seen in Tables 8-10. The use of [r] ranges from 1.8% (Job Level III, Table 9) to 5% (Female, Table 8) as against that of [l] from 9.8% (Job Level IV, Table 9) to 50.6% (Job Level I, Table 9).

Table 7 - Percentage of standard variants in Thai (r) and (l) clusters

Cluster type	Variant used	%
(r)	[r]	2.8
(l)	[l]	31.4

Table 8 - Percentage of standard variants in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by sex

Cluster type	Variant used	Sex	
		Male	Female
(r)	[r]	1.9%	5.0%
(l)	[l]	23.0%	37.7%

Table 9 - Percentage of standard variants in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by job level

Cluster type	Variant used	Job level			
		I	II	III	IV
(r)	[r]	3.3%	4.6%	1.8%	2.7%
(l)	[l]	50.6%	21.7%	33.3%	9.8%

Table 10 - Percentage of standard variants in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by English language background

Cluster type	Variant used	English language background		
		Type I	Type II	Type III
(r)	[r]	4.5%	2.6%	2.6%
(l)	[l]	43.8%	30.3%	24.4%

Conversely, the occurrence of cluster simplification is lower in (l) than in (r), as shown in Table 11. Such pattern is also prevalent in each social group of the subjects, with only one exception in Job Level IV (Table 13). Tables 12-14

Table 11 - Percentage of cluster simplification in Thai (r) and (l) clusters

Cluster type	Variant used	%
(r)	[Ø]	79.6
(l)	[Ø]	67.8

Table 12 - Percentage of cluster simplification in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by sex

Cluster type	Variant used	Sex	
		Male	Female
(r)	[Ø]	82.0%	75.8%
(l)	[Ø]	75.2%	62.3%

Table 13 - Percentage of cluster simplification in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by job level

Cluster type	Variant used	Job level			
		I	II	III	IV
(r)	[Ø]	74.4%	82.6%	79.6%	82.6%
(l)	[Ø]	49.4%	78.3%	66.7%	86.5%

Table 14 - Percentage of cluster simplification in Thai (r) and (l) clusters by English language background

Cluster type	Variant used	English language background		
		Type I	Type II	Type III
(r)	[Ø]	69.7%	84.6%	80.5%
(l)	[Ø]	56.2%	69.7%	73.9%

show that the occurrence of cluster l-simplification ranges from 49.4% (Job Level I, Table 13) to 86.3% (Job Level IV, Table 13) and the rate of r-reduction from 62.3% (Female, Table 12) to 84.6% (ELB Type II, Table 14).

The findings on the use of English clusters (r) and (l) of the subjects also suggest similar results despite the fact that the occurrences of standard variants of (r) and (l) are much higher, respectively, in English than in Thai. The data on the use of English r-deletion are drawn from the previous study (Boonruang 1993), compared to its corresponding l-deletion in the present one. The standard variant of English (r) is [ɹ].

Table 15 shows that the subjects as a whole have a lower occurrence of [ɹ] than [l]. In Tables 16 - 18, each social group shown to have a similar pattern, i.e. a lower occurrence of [ɹ] than [l]. The rate of [ɹ] ranges from 31.9% (Job Level IV, Table 17) to 67.4% (ELB Type I, Table 18) while that of [l] from 58.6% (Job Level III, Table 17) to 83.1% (ELB Type I, Table 18).

Table 15 - Percentage of standard variants in English (r) and (l) clusters

Cluster type	Variant used	%
(r)	[ɹ]	48.5
(l)	[l]	70.3

Table 16 - Percentage of standard variants in English (r) and (l) clusters by sex

Cluster type	Variant used	Sex	
		Male	Female
(r)	[ɹ]	42.1%	56.0%
(l)	[l]	73.7%	67.6%

Table 17 - Percentage of standard variants in English (r) and (l) clusters by job level

Cluster type	Variant used	Job level			
		I	II	III	IV
(r)	[ɹ]	56.7%	49.2%	49.0%	31.9%
(l)	[l]	71.4%	74.5%	58.6%	73.6%

Table 18 - Percentage of standard variants in English (r) and (l) clusters by English language background

Cluster type	Variant used	English language background		
		Type I	Type II	Type III
(r)	[ɹ]	67.4%	41.4%	42.0%
(l)	[l]	83.1%	66.7%	67.8%

On the other hand, Table 19 shows that the frequency of cluster simplification in English of the subjects is higher in (r) clusters than in (l). Likewise, a similar pattern can be found in each social group, as shown in Tables 20 - 22, with only one exception, i.e. Job Level I (Table 21). In this case, the rate of r-reduction is 26.6% as against l-reduction at 28.6%. The rate of cluster r-simplification ranges from 20.3% (ELB Type I, Table 22) to 52.5% (Job Level IV, Table 21) whereas that of [l] from 16.9% (ELB Type I, Table 22) to 34.3% (Job Level III, Table 21).

Table 19 - Percentage of cluster simplification in English (r) and (l) clusters

Cluster type	Variant used	%
(r)	[Ø]	35.2
(l)	[Ø]	27.6

Table 20 - Percentage of cluster simplification in English (r) and (l) clusters by sex

Cluster type	Variant used	Sex	
		Male	Female
(r)	[Ø]	39.6%	30.1%
(l)	[Ø]	25.6%	29.2%

Table 21 - Percentage of cluster simplification in English (r) and (l) clusters by job level

Cluster type	Variant used	Job level			
		I	II	III	IV
(r)	[Ø]	26.6%	33.1%	36.6%	52.5%
(l)	[Ø]	28.6%	24.4%	34.3%	25.5%

Table 22 - Percentage of cluster simplification in English (r) and (l) clusters by English language background

Cluster type	Variant used	English language background		
		Type I	Type II	Type III
(r)	[Ø]	20.3%	35.5%	47.4%
(l)	[Ø]	16.9%	32.6%	28.0%

To conclude, it can be generalized that, irrespective of language used, Thai speakers' occurrence of the standard variant is lower in (r) clusters than in (l). In contrast, the occurrence of consonant cluster simplification is higher in (r) clusters than in (l) clusters. These generalizations are made although, according to previous studies (Boonruang 1993, 1996), the occurrences of the standard variants of (r) and (l) are much lower, respectively, in Thai than in English. Conversely the cluster simplification of (r) and (l) is much higher, respectively, in Thai than in English.

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Gywn Williams.