

# AN EVALUATION OF SO LANGUAGE VITALITY IN THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

Thomas M. TEHAN

*Payap University and SIL International*  
[tom.tehan@sil.org](mailto:tom.tehan@sil.org)

Linda MARKOWSKI

*Payap University and SIL International*  
[linda.markowski@sil.org](mailto:linda.markowski@sil.org)

## Abstract

This paper explores the vitality and endangerment of So [sss] speech communities in Thailand. Beginning with a review of sociolinguistic survey results for five So communities in Thailand to ascertain the likely need for vernacular language development in So, additional data to cover the rest of the So community are provided. The language vitality of the So communities in Thailand is then assessed using Expanded GIDS and the Sustainable Use Model (SUM, Lewis & Simons 2015<sup>2</sup>), an expansion of the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS, Fishman 1991). This vitality model indicates that many So villages display vigorous language vitality whereas other villages are threatened by language shift. Some initial efforts at revitalization and language development show promise. Several additional activities are suggested to enhance the vitality of the language and help the So to resist the regional trend towards language shift to Northeastern Thai (Isaan).

**Keywords:** So language, EGIDS, Language vitality/endangerment indicators  
**ISO 639-3 codes:** [sss]

## 1 Introduction

The present paper assesses the level of vitality of the So (also written Sô) [sss] language spoken in Thailand, by presenting and applying recent developments in the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) and the Sustainable Use Model (SUM), with some reference to previous studies that allow for some comparison among languages' vitality/endangerment levels. For a fuller introduction to endangered languages and reversing language shift on languages in Thailand see Tehan and Nahhas (2007, 2009) on Mpi, Tehan and Dawkins (2010) on Tai Ya, and Tehan and Markowski (2011) on So. All three of these papers compare different models for assessing language endangerment and vitality. Language vitality can be described the following way: 'Language vitality is demonstrated by the extent that the language is used as a means of communication in various social contexts for specific purposes. The most significant indicator of a language's vitality is its daily use in the home. A language with high vitality would be one that is used extensively both inside and outside the home, by all generations, and for most, if not all, topics' (SIL International). Lewis et al. (2016) list a total of 7,097 languages, with 360 of them being extinct. So with its 70,000 speakers in Thailand based on a 2006 survey by Mahidol University, Bangkok, is listed as having a status of 6a 'vigorous'.

After introducing the So people of Northeast Thailand and their language, this paper gives an overview and evaluative comments on some assessment tools, followed by a summary of some past and current development efforts within the So community. A quick summary is given of results from a sociolinguistic

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an updated, revised and extended version of a preliminary research report, *So in Thailand, Present and Future: Reversing Language Shift* (Tehan & Markowski 2011). Fieldwork for the present research was funded by Asian Minority Language Research Committee (AMLRC), grant PJ-1002.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis & Simons 2015 was revised and republished in 2016. This paper refers to the 2015 version.

survey of selected So language communities (Choo 2008; see also Choo 2012, Choo et al. 2012), followed by a summary of a previous So language vitality assessment by the authors (Tehan & Markowski 2011). The present study then evaluates the language vitality of So by reviewing and applying newer developments in Lewis & Simons' EGIDS, especially the Sustainable Use Model and FAMED conditions (Lewis & Simons 2015). Lastly, the future of the So language is speculated on.

Earlier vitality assessments of Mpi (Tehan & Nahhas 2007, 2009) and Tai Ya (Tehan & Dawkins 2010) were able to be rather exact in the evaluations, because these languages had only two villages in Thailand that showed significant vitality. However, since there are scores of So-speaking villages, the method has been adapted to group villages by EGIDS levels to develop an overall vitality picture. From that first approximation, we applied the other evaluation schemes to the same groupings. It is hoped that this adapted vitality evaluation method will be applied to other languages and continually refined, by comparing the results of all evaluation schemes across a number of languages.

## 2 The So people and their language

The So (or Sô) language [ISO 639-3 code: sss] is a Katuic language spoken in Thailand and the Lao PDR. Katuic languages have long been included as a branch within the Mon-Khmer language family, but more recent studies suggest that the Katuic language family is directly rooted under Austroasiatic (Sidwell 2005, 2015). The classification of languages within Katuic has also varied greatly among researchers, but So is consistently placed in West Katuic along with the closely related Bru languages (Gehrmann 2016, Sidwell 2015).

This paper focuses on the So speakers in Thailand, who are predominantly found in the provinces of Sakon Nakhon (Kusuman district) and Nakhon Phanom (Phon Sawan and Tha Uthen districts).<sup>3</sup> A few scattered villages of So speakers are also reported in other districts, such as Pla Paak of Nakhon Phanom, or in neighboring provinces, such as Mukdahan, but vitality is very weak in these isolated locations.<sup>4</sup> The Ethnologue reports the population of So speakers in Thailand at 70,000. However, data collected from among the So community during previous research (Markowski 2009, Tehan & Markowski 2011) estimates less than 30,000 known to be currently speaking So in around 50 villages.

The difference in numbers may be related to the number of proficient speakers dropping, or to potential confusion with language names. The autonym used by So speakers in Thailand is [tʰrɔː], while the Thai pronunciation is [soː]. However, the name [soː] is also sometimes used to refer to speakers of other Katuic languages, such as varieties of Western Bru [brv] in Sakon Nakhon and Mukdahan provinces, or to speakers of the Vietic Thavung language [thm] in Sakon Nakhon. So speakers are also found in the Lao PDR, but due again to language name variation, more linguistic research needs to be done to clarify the relationships. The 2005 census of the Lao PDR (Lao Department of Statistics 2005) does not use the name So, but lists around 118,000 Makong people, with 43,000 in Khammouane province, 74,000 in Savannakhet province, and a few elsewhere. These figures are included in the Ethnologue total population figures for So [sss], and Makong is listed there as an alternate name for So, though these are not necessarily the same.

Many of the Makong in Khammouane, who may identify themselves as Bru (Brou) or So, do appear to speak the same language as the So in Thailand, since speakers from Kusuman are able to communicate easily with speakers from many of these villages. In fact, though it is not well documented, the So in Thailand are reported to have come from Khammouane province, Lao PDR. The earliest record of a So settlement in Thailand is in Muang Kao, Sakon Nakhon province, in 1844, which was resettled in Kusuman in 1850 after an outbreak of disease in Muang Kao (Pratheuang Yaybangkaew, personal communication). This relatively recent population movement explains the close similarity of So varieties on either side of the Thai-Lao border.

However, other villages classified in the Lao PDR census as Makong, especially those in Savannakhet, seem to vary. For example, some calling themselves Bru speak a Western Bru language most similar to the Bru of Dong Luang district, Mukdahan province, Thailand (Ryan Gehrmann, personal communication). So speakers from Kusuman, Thailand, have difficulty communicating with these speakers. Further language survey is definitely needed.

<sup>3</sup> Thai administrative district terms are translated as follows: จังหวัด Jangwat = Province, อำเภอ Amphoe = District, ตำบล Tambon = Subdistrict.

<sup>4</sup> These isolated villages are not included in the present evaluation of vitality, due to lack of information. Reports suggest that these villages currently have very weak vitality, with limited use of the So language.

Figure 1: Map of So villages in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces

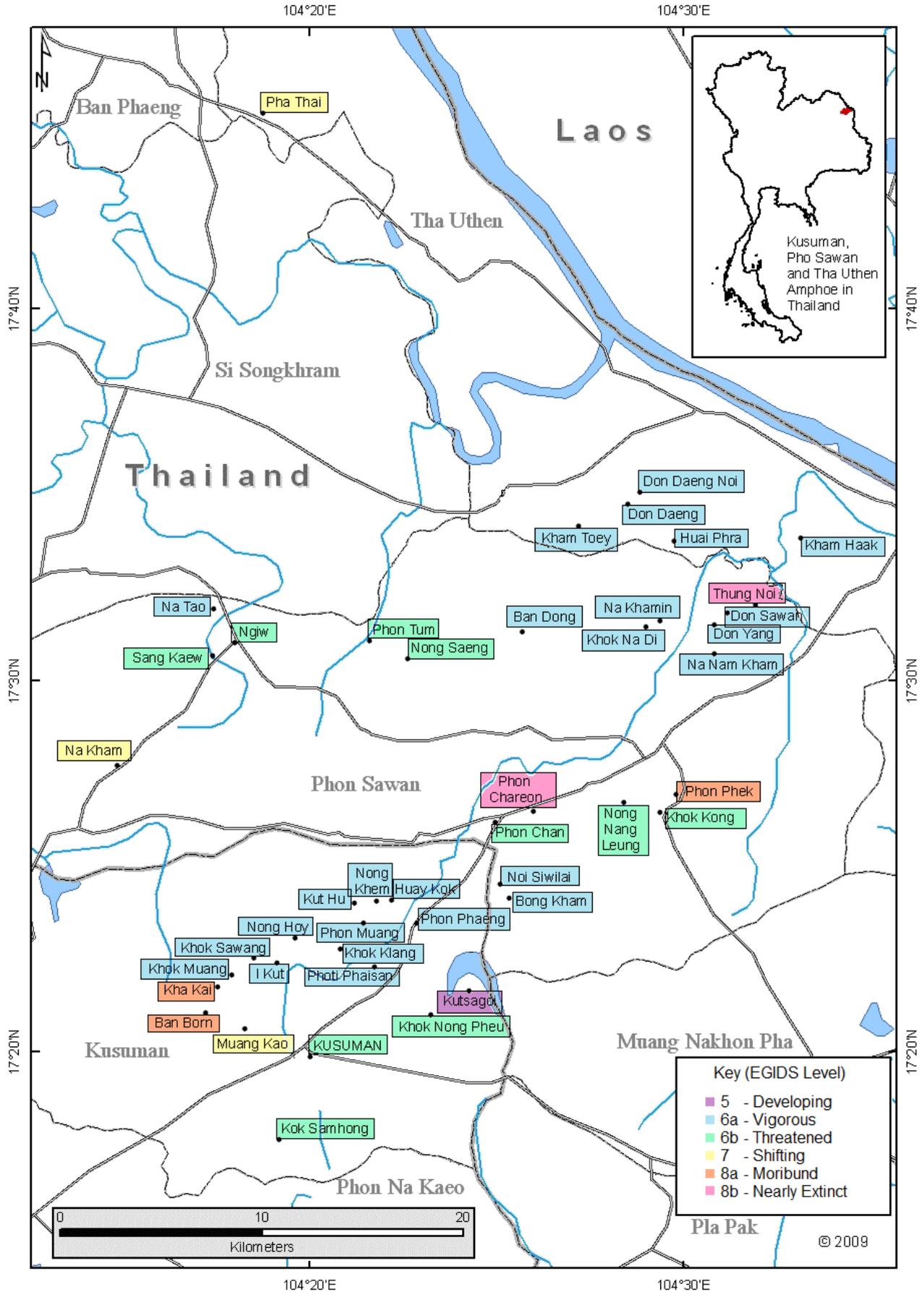


Figure 1 provides a map of So villages in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom provinces in Thailand. A table of So villages (หมู่บ้าน) in Thailand and their locations in Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan provinces, indicating District (อำเภอ), Subdistrict (ตำบล), EGIDS Level and Approximate Latitude (N), Longitude (E) can be found in Appendix 6 of Tehan and Markowski 2011.

The So villages in Thailand evaluated for vitality in this paper form a single dialect. Some minor phonological variation is found in some villages, along with a few lexical differences, often due to the sporadic replacement of native So etyma by Tai loan words, but there is mutual comprehension across all villages.

As will be seen in the analysis sections of this paper, there are some So communities in Thailand where the language is being spoken less than in the past. Yet more than half of the villages are strongly So, with all generations regularly using So, and minimal numbers of non-So speakers living in those villages. Literacy in So is still very limited, but there are some promising efforts, described in Section 4.

Three So villages from Kusuman district are mentioned frequently in this paper: Kusuman (in Kusuman sub-district), Photi Phaisan and Kutsakoi (both in Photi Phaisan sub-district), all located within a few kilometers of each other. The Kusuman district is where the So first settled, and the language there is accepted by other locations as good So (Choo 2008). The town of Kusuman is located along a main highway between the two provincial centers of Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom. Also, the Thai-So museum, which holds the annual So Remembrance Festival<sup>5</sup> (see Section 4), is located in Kusuman, making it a central location for the So. However, being a district center along a main route, Kusuman has become more linguistically mixed, with a large percentage of Northeastern Thai (Isaan, also locally referred to as Lao) people, as well as people from other Tai languages. This is likely the reason that linguistic research and language development efforts have been based mainly in Photi Phaisan sub-district, which has a concentration of So villages with high language vitality very close to Kusuman but off the main road. A strong interest in language maintenance has been shown by some speakers in Photi Phaisan and Kutsakoi villages. Section 4 will describe language development efforts, especially at the local elementary school in Kutsakoi, as well as among church members who have learned to read So and are regularly using So written materials.

### 3 Vitality assessment tools

Several different perspectives on language vitality and reversing language shift have been suggested by scholars over the years. Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) has shaped the debate about language endangerment and vitality since its proposal in 1991. Lewis and Simons (2010) proposed an Expanded GIDS. This expansion, EGIDS, is the primary tool used in this paper for assessing language vitality. Factors relating to language vitality and endangerment were also suggested by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Brenzinger et al. 2003). Obiero (2010:221) provides a valuable critique of these and several additional assessment tools beyond those discussed here, summarizing that '(s)ince GIDS, the proposals appear to have moved away from mere classification of the world's languages with respect to whether they are viable or not, to what can be done to the less viable ones'. The GIDS, the Expanded GIDS and the UNESCO plan are discussed in the following sections.

#### 3.1 Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)

Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (1991:81-121) was designed to give sociolinguists and activists an indicator scale to describe 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. This tool has been used regularly in language development and language endangerment research.

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). Relevant aspects of the GIDS are summarized in Table 1.<sup>6</sup> Stages 1-4 and 8 are not relevant to the subsequent discussion in this paper, and so are left out here. Stages 5 and 7 seem outside the current core characteristics of the So

<sup>5</sup> Thai name: งานเทศกาลโสร้อยรำลึก

<sup>6</sup> The descriptions in the table add in the distillation and expansion of reformulations by Suwilai and Malone (2003:2), as well as Lewis & Simons (2010), of Fishman's various statements. For the original formulation of the GIDS, see Fishman (1991:81-121).

language community as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Issues relevant to the assessment of the So language situation are presented in bold type.

**Table 1: Summary of relevant portions of GIDS (Fishman 1991)**

Stage	Description
Stage 5	Language is used in a vital oral socio-cultural way in the community, and socialization involves <b>extensive literacy</b> , usually including non-formal local language schooling.
Stage 6	Language and identity socialization of children takes place in home and community; <b>children are learning the oral language naturally</b> in an intergenerational context; <b>this is the threshold level for language maintenance, the level at which small languages continue to survive and even thrive</b> (cf. Lewis 1996: 8; Fishman 1991: 92).
Stage 7	<b>The older generation (those beyond child-bearing age) uses the language but children are not using it</b> ; 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.

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. Fishman emphasized that to move a language from Stage 7 to Stage 5 and above, it must first move through Stage 6, and only after attaining Stage 6 can higher stages be addressed. In other words, using the language in formal education will not alone reverse language shift. Fishman states, 'One cannot jump across or dispense with Stage 6' (1991:95; cf. 2000:4). This concept is carried into the EGIDS system and the Sustainable Use Model.

The GIDS has been and continues to be a valuable tool. However, the limitations of the GIDS is evident at these stages. Stage 5 is vague about the role literacy is playing in the language community. Stage 6 also lacks distinctions based on how many of the children are learning the language in the community. There is also no diachronic dimension; thus, it is hard to answer questions about trends of language acquisition patterns in terms of favoring or discouraging language vitality and maintenance. For instance, is there a movement toward increased literacy? or are there fewer children learning the language over time?

### 3.2 UNESCO's Nine Factors in Language Vitality and Endangerment

The UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages has proposed nine factors relevant to language vitality and endangerment (Brenzinger et al. 2003). For each factor, a scale from 0 to 5 is used to evaluate the vitality or endangerment of the language.<sup>8</sup> The nine factors are: 1. Intergenerational language transmission scale; 2. Absolute number of speakers; 3. Proportion of speakers within the total reference group; 4. Loss of existing language domains; 5. Response to new domains and media; 6. Materials for language education and literacy; 7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies; 8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language; and 9. Type and quality of documentation.

An example of assessment levels in one of the nine factors, Factor 4 on domain usage, is found in Table 2. Similar levels and point assessments are available for the other factors.

<sup>7</sup> The EGIDS allows further distinctions at levels 5-7 where the GIDS only allows three levels.

<sup>8</sup> More details about the factors relating to language vitality and endangerment which were suggested by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages can be found in Brenzinger et al. (2003) and Tehan & Markowski (2011).

**Table 2:** Example from UNESCO's Nine Factors in Language Vitality and Endangerment

Factor	Degree of Endangerment, Grade and Description
4. Loss of existing language domains: 'Domains and Functions'	<i>Universal use</i> (5 points) The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
	<i>Multilingual parity</i> (4) Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
	<i>Dwindling domains</i> (3) The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
	<i>Limited or formal domains</i> (2) The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
	<i>Highly limited domains</i> (1) The language is used only in a very restricted number of domains and for very few functions.
	<i>Extinct</i> (0) The language is not used in any domain for any function.

One concern in totaling up the numbers in parentheses from the nine factors is that it assumes an equal weighting of factors. Nevertheless, the resulting sums do allow for a degree of comparison for a 'vitality rating' among languages, especially in comparing those that share a somewhat similar cultural and physical environment in SE Asia. Totals for a language consistently rated as the first, second, etc. choice in each of the nine factors, yields the following totals: Safe 45; Unsafe 36; Definitely Endangered 27; Severely Endangered 18; Critically Endangered 9; and Extinct 0. Future vitality studies on languages of SE Asia can determine the extent to which these totals are predictive, i.e. if the magnitude of the numbers is indicative of continued vitality (or decline) through future decades.

The UNESCO scale has been and continues to be a valuable tool. Lewis & Simons (2010) point out that some of the lack of distinction at the more endangered levels in Fishman's GIDS is made up for by the UNESCO framework with more categories at lower levels of the scale. However the UNESCO scale has fewer categories relating to the top half of the GIDS, simply relegating languages at those levels to a category of 'safe'. Obiero (2010:208-209) has a more detailed discussion of problematic issues that 'make the UNESCO framework rather cursory, but not worthless' and adds that the UNESCO framework provides 'a clearer reconceptualization of the factors indicative of language loss or vitality'.

### 3.3 Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)

Lewis & Simons (2010) proposed an extension to the GIDS in certain areas to allow for distinction between significantly different communities at important GIDS Stages; for example, a Stage 6 community that was 'climbing' to a higher stage through language development and a Stage 6 community that was experiencing language shift toward Stage 7 should have that difference reflected in some way. The EGIDS system also includes aspects of institutional roles in wider transmission of the language in Stage 5 and above.

EGIDS allows the investigation of language 'vitality by exploring the functions (domains of use), acquisition (transmission across generations), motivation for use, governmental policy regarding language use, and distinctive niches (*particular* contexts where the language is used), as these factors foster the ongoing use of a language' (SIL International).

Lewis & Simons sought to incorporate descriptions from UNESCO's nine factors, as well as those employed in the Ethnologue. In the 2009 edition, the Ethnologue had simply categorized languages based primarily on number of speakers as: Living, Second language only, Nearly Extinct, Dormant and Extinct (Lewis 2009). The EGIDS and SUM are now used as the basis for the language status listed in the Ethnologue for each language.

#### 3.3.1 EGIDS Levels

Because of the hierarchical nature of the EGIDS scale<sup>9</sup>, each higher (stronger) level of vitality is built on the characteristics of the lower levels. The core of the EGIDS (and GIDS) is the measurement of disruption in passing the language on to younger generations. When the language is no longer being learned by generations of new speakers, it eventually settles at the weakest vitality levels: EGIDS 9 'Dormant' (an ethnic group's

<sup>9</sup> See Lewis & Simons 2010:110-113, Lewis & Simons 2015:79ff, and 'Language Status' in Lewis et. al. 2016 for more detailed discussion of EGIDS levels.

identity is associated with the language only as symbolic reminder of their identity) or EGIDS 10 ‘Extinct’ (people no longer associate the language with their identity).

The levels relevant to this paper are summarized in the following table<sup>10</sup>. After the description column, a corresponding label from the UNESCO system is included. (Levels 1-3 are not applicable to the So situation, since they relate to more institutionalized languages.)

**Table 3:** Selected levels from Lewis & Simons’ Expanded GIDS (Lewis & Simons 2015:100, adapted)

Level	EGIDS Label	Short description	UNESCO label
4	Educational	The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.	Safe
5	Developing	The language is in vigorous use by all generations, with literature in a standardized form being used by parts of community, but literacy is not yet widespread or sustainable.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and learned by children as their first language. The situation is sustainable.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children. It is losing users.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The language is used by the child-bearing generation among themselves but it is not being transmitted to their children; the number of domains the language is use in is decreasing.	Definitely Endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.	Severely Endangered
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically Endangered
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
10	Extinct	The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

The EGIDS system is not tied to only one method of assessment, although some tools for quantifying the appropriate EGIDS level have been supplied. The tools allow one to move beyond a ‘best guess’ based on general knowledge (although even that can be useful) to include a more structured set of five key ‘Diagnostic Questions’ (Lewis & Simons 2010:113-116).<sup>11</sup>

A language can be assigned to a level based on the answers to the five key questions, which are summarized in Table 4. The questions encourage engagement with vital factors involved in language maintenance and development—identity, vehicularity (use by others as a second language (Lewis & Simons 2010:115)), the status of intergenerational transmission, literacy acquisition, and generational language use. The characteristics of So based on the five key questions are also listed in the table.

<sup>10</sup> The Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2016) website has the latest descriptions of these levels, cf. ‘Language Status’ in Lewis et. al. 2016. The definitions in this table utilize wording from the definitions on the web site in part.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis & Simons 2015 was revised and republished in 2016 with only four key diagnostic questions, but the So analysis had been completed following the five questions described in Lewis & Simons 2010 and 2015.

**Table 4:** EGIDS Key Questions and Answers

Number	Key Question	Allowable Answers	Answers for the So community
1	What is the identity function?	Historical; Heritage; Home; Vehicular	Home
2	What is the level of official use?	International; National; Regional; not official	Not official
3	Are all parents transmitting the language to their children?	Yes; No	Yes
4	What is the literacy status?	Institutional; Incipient; None	Incipient (or None)
5	What is the youngest generation that has at least some proficient speakers?	Great Grandparents; Grandparents; Parents; Children	Children

Lewis & Simons (2015) offer a more streamlined approach where only two out of five questions need to be answered to assign a level with the newer flow chart. So is for question 1 ‘a local language used at Home’. With this answer, the second question to then ask is ‘What is the sustainability status?’ The three possible answers to this are: ‘Vigorous and used in written form, but literacy is not yet sustainable’ = Level 5 ‘Developing’; ‘Used orally by all generations and the situation is stable’ = Level 6a ‘Vigorous’; or ‘Used orally in all generations, but lacks a key condition of sustainability’ = Level 6b ‘Threatened’ (2015:92-93). However, since the 2010 set of questions give a little more insight, they are included in the discussion here.<sup>12</sup>

To the extent that the answers to questions 3 and 4 from the earlier five question set are not ascertainable for the whole population, the following labels could be applied. From Table 5, levels 5 through 7 are evident in different villages of So speakers, but level 4 is not yet evident.

**Table 5:** Selected levels from the Expanded GIDS (Lewis & Simons 2010 adapted)

Question 1	Questions 2-5	Level	Label
Home	3. Yes; 4. Institutional	4	Educational
Home	3. Yes; 4. Incipient	5	Written
Home	3. Yes; 4. None	6a	Vigorous
Home	3. No; 5. Children	6b	Threatened
Home	3. No; 5. Parents	7	Shifting

The levels relevant to the So language community are expanded on below.

EGIDS levels 4 ‘Educational’ and 5 ‘Developing’ highlight the amount of reinforcement given through the use of the language in education and literacy, especially with regard to standardization, literacy acquisition and institutional support. EGIDS levels 6a ‘Vigorous’, 6b ‘Threatened’, and 7 ‘Shifting’, (as well as 8a ‘Moribund’ and 8b ‘Nearly extinct’) highlight daily face-to-face language use and amount of language transmission among the generations in the speech community.

A person who is knowledgeable about the general language situation can make a valid and useful ‘best guess’ evaluation with an understanding of the concepts discussed above. A language development program can be based in part on the answers to these questions.

### 3.3.2 The Sustainable Use Model (SUM)

Another approach to assessing EGIDS levels of language vitality, allowing for more fine detail and depth in analysis, was expounded in Simons & Lewis (2012) using the five FAMED conditions (see section 3.3.3) and the Sustainable Use Model (SUM) grid. The SUM begins ‘not with language, but with the notion that local communities must concern themselves with the preservation and transmission of knowledge that is, for them, crucial to their survival as a distinct group’ (Lewis & Simons 2015:2, cf. 94ff). Speakers of minority language

<sup>12</sup> See Lewis & Simons (2010:113-117) for a more detailed discussion of these questions and a flow chart.

groups must decide what role the language will play in that transmission. It is not just their language that is endangered, but also their bodies of knowledge (Lewis & Simons 2015:31-36) and even their identities.

The Sustainable Use Model was developed not only to assess a current level of language vitality of a speech community but also to make predictions about which levels are sustainable (stable) over longer periods of time. Some levels are inherently unstable. That is, it is highly unlikely that the community will be able to remain at that level for an extended period of time, but rather will slide down to the next lowest sustainable level. 'A sustainable level of language vitality is one in which the behaviors associated with that level of use are widespread within the community, broadly accepted and consensually enforced' because the majority of the community value the benefits of conformity to the established norms of where and when to use each language (Lewis & Simons 2015:113).

There are four of the levels in the EGIDS/SUM that are sustainable. SUM Level 4 'Sustainable Literacy' corresponds to EGIDS Level 4 'Educational'. Once it has been reached, the activities utilized to reach that level are then sufficient to maintain that. However, SUM Level 5 'Developing Literacy' is not sustainable. It will by nature decline into SUM Level 6a 'Sustainable Orality', corresponding to EGIDS Level 6a 'Vigorous'. If a community has not attained SUM Level 6a, then SUM Levels 6b through 8b will have a tendency to eventually deteriorate to a sustainable level at SUM Level 9 'Sustainable Identity', corresponding to EGIDS Level 9 'Dormant'. At this level, the language is no longer used for daily functions and few or no speakers of the language are alive. However, part of the community's identity is that the language is a heritage language and it can be used for special occasions such as festivals, ceremonies, cultural performances, etc. Thus the language would still have a place in the community although no one would have acquired fluency in the language in a natural way as he or she grew up (Lewis & Simons 2015:140ff). SUM Level 10 'Sustainable History' corresponds to EGIDS Level 10 'Extinct', provided that there is enough documentation on the language.

Each community can determine its desired target among the four sustainable levels and commit resources to achieving and maintaining the appropriate level. The SUM is in part designed to help the language community focus their efforts on the factors which are likely to yield the desired outcomes (Lewis & Simons 2015:14). A graphic representation of the four sustainable levels in the 'Hierarchy of Sustainable Use' can be found in Lewis & Simons (2015:148).

In using the SUM, the assessor evaluates not the EGIDS level as a whole, but each of the five FAMED questions in turn, and then forms a consolidated answer. A more in-depth knowledge of the language community is required of the assessor than for the previous general assessment schemes. It is also encouraged that a speech community evaluate each language functioning in their environment, not just the mother tongue (Lewis & Simons 2015:112).

### 3.3.3 FAMED: *Function, Acquisition, Motivation, Environment, and Differentiation*

FAMED<sup>13</sup> is an acronym for Function, Acquisition, Motivation, Environment, and Differentiation. Assessing these conditions provides not only a more fine-tuned approach to evaluation, but also a way to 'categorize the multiple factors [that should be addressed for language development] so that resources can be more adequately and efficiently allocated' (Lewis & Simons 2015:126). 'The FAMED conditions provide a way to analyze the state of stable multilingualism (diglossia) in the speech community' (Lewis & Simons 2015:18). Each of these are conditions that allow a more detailed evaluation of the level of language vitality within a given speech community and can feed into an EGIDS assessment. Each level in one of the FAMED conditions is associated with certain activities that could sustain, support or possibly improve the vitality of the language in that area. In fact, analysis of the FAMED conditions should lead to concrete steps for language development.

The following list provides a quick orientation to each one of the FAMED conditions. Further description of the levels relevant to the assessment of So are included in Section 6.1. The various levels in the FAMED conditions are mapped onto various EGIDS levels in a many-to-many mapping.

- **Functions** are uses of bodies of knowledge, i.e. the content of knowledge about a domain, that exist and are recognized within the community in its language and culture, e.g. rice agriculture knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> See Lewis & Simons (2010:110-113, 126ff) for a more detailed discussion; and Ghoemeh (2015 a & b) for an application to the Akha language community in Myanmar.

- **Acquisition** relates to the means (functions and habits) that must be in place in the community for the next generation to acquire proficiency in the language.
- **Motivation** relates to the community's perception of the benefits of using the language for those functions; if they perceive language use as providing adequate benefits, they will keep using it, e.g. do people benefit from being able to talk about rice agriculture in the language.
- **Environment** relates to the degree to which the relevant policy-making bodies encourage, discourage or are neutral toward use of the language in the community. This is the sociolinguistic environment in which the functions must operate.
- **Differentiation** relates to the degree to which the community perceives that certain functions 'belong' to the language of the community, or to some outside language, e.g. do people talk about rice agriculture in this language and no other.

The FAMED conditions represent a multifaceted way to analyze the language vitality situation, by analyzing aspects of ethnolinguistic vitality into components. Each of the component scales is associated with an EGIDS level, which represents the highest possible EGIDS level that could be attained with those particular characteristics. Thus the FAMED conditions assessment is a way to quantify the present reality as well as the present potential (Lewis & Simons 2015:153-159).

#### 3.3.4 Reflection on assessment scales

No single tool can be ideal for every objective or every setting, but there may be valuable uses for each of the scales described. One positive trend is that these assessment scales are continually being modified to better serve the needs of the speakers of the languages being assessed. Scales like EGIDS are helpful for being able to assess all languages in such a way as to allow for useful comparison.

The strengths of the SUM/EGIDs model are helpful in assessing language vitality among the So, especially in providing more distinction in EGIDS levels 5 through 8. The concepts of sustainable levels allows for discussion of trends in language use and acquisition in the So villages. However, when the goal is to provide more detailed vitality assessment in more local communities as part of planning and monitoring language development and revitalization efforts, parts of the SUM and the FAMED conditions are needed, not only to allow for a more solid evaluation, but also provide for identification of language development issues leading to more focused applications. The FAMED conditions were designed to 'serve an even more valuable purpose as a diagnostic tool that provides community-based language developers with an agenda to guide their planning and implementation' (Lewis & Simons 2015:160).

However, when considering how to possibly apply the Sustainable Use Model in So language communities there are still questions. The method expects a representative group within the community to make executive decisions about which bodies of knowledge will be preserved and transmitted in which language, but this assumes that a top-down decision can impose itself across the community, which may conflict with So cultural methods. Also it is not yet clear how these 'essential bodies of knowledge' overlap with domains of use. Choice of language use within the So community is based more on context and who is present in the conversation, rather than by topic, and tend to be governed by cultural expectations (e.g. shifting language for the sake of those not speaking So). So it seems that all bodies of knowledge would theoretically be developed in all languages, and then used in the appropriate setting. This issue may be clarified as the SUM is applied in more language settings.

A significant uncertainty encountered when working to apply any of the various available assessments to language situations like found for So is the question of how variation within the wider language community is dealt with. In critiquing the EGIDS, Obiero observed that 'the continuum reflected between level 0 and 6a could refer to the same language in a number of settings around the world' (2010:212). More specific guidelines are needed on how to weigh and interpret the variation found across different settings and its potential impact. This may be less needed when seeking a single assessment of overall vitality for a whole language (as in the Ethnologue), but is essential to consider when helping a community plan for language maintenance and revitalization. For example, when orthography development and mother tongue literacy are attempted but not sustained, an assessment of the relevant factors is needed to help determine which activities and efforts have had the most positive effects, and which have not, then determine what barriers still remain, and how to deal with them.

#### 4. Efforts towards So language development and revitalization

There are some significant efforts which have been or are currently being made towards strengthening the So language and culture, mostly initiated from within the So community. Many are focused primarily on culture preservation and presentation rather than language, and those that do focus on language may be small and unpublicized, yet all events are encouraging pride in being So, and many could easily add a language component.

Initial documentation of the So language along with development of a Thai-based orthography for So began around the 1970s, first with the help of foreign linguists from New Tribes Mission. It has continued off and on over the years since, involving linguists and others from various institutions and organizations, including SIL International and Thai universities. Linguistic data is being collected and used to support literature development. A small team of So from two local churches have received training on various linguistic topics, such as orthography and literature development, translation principles, and discourse analysis, and are working full-time creating and translating written materials in So, some of which are regularly read. Some of the written materials are now being converted for use on mobile technology. In the process of creating these materials, the team is regularly working through complex issues towards establishing standards for written So.

In 2008, the Committee for Preservation and Development of the So Language was established, having about 20 members, with linguistic support from SIL and Payap University. The initial main objective of the committee was to evaluate the existing working orthography, and then applying linguistic principles and local input, to adjust this orthography for acceptance by the wider community. The committee worked toward a tentative revised orthography, selected picturable key words for all letters in various positions, and practiced reading and writing (Markowski 2009). This committee was later replaced by other initiatives.

Kraisorn Hardkadee, who served as head of that committee, has long been an advocate of preserving So language and culture. He has promoted So participation in activities sponsored by the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (NIPT), such as performing traditional music and dance at the annual Festival of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand, typically held around August 9 in Chiang Mai. The focus of the festival is on culture exchange rather than language, but participation in the event has served to strengthen pride and value for being So, and provided opportunities for openly expressing their ethnicity.

Hardkadee and others have also been working closely with researchers from Mahidol University<sup>14</sup> to pursue further language development among the So. This includes an extensive project supported by the Thailand Research Fund on teaching and learning the So language in the school system through community involvement. After initial research and documentation, curriculum and reading materials (which so far include 10 primer lessons and 20 or so books for shared reading) are being developed and used in the Kutsakoi elementary school, where Hardkadee teaches. These newly developed lessons are taught to students in grades 4-6 twice weekly. There are plans for expansion to other schools, but this is pending finding adequate teaching staff. The project has also been encouraging movement towards a standardized orthography. A future project is planned for documentation of botanical terms.

While assisting with this research and development, Hardkadee completed a thesis on ‘Thro:’ phonology and orthography (Hardkadee 2016) to obtain a master’s degree in Applied Linguistics. Having a professional So mother-tongue linguist is a significant step in the potential for language development.

Within the larger So community, a visible cultural preservation effort is the Thai-So Cultural Museum in Kusuman, which was built in 1981, and has been redeveloped and expanded over the past 35 years. It mainly houses a small collection of artifacts used by So in daily life in the past, and handicrafts or tools traditionally used in daily life today, with also some recent artwork by students. There is no specific language component, but possibly adding written descriptions for each of the displays in So, with translations in Thai and English, would help to promote the status of the written language.

A significant activity sponsored by the Thai-So Cultural Museum, the Kusuman Municipality, and many other groups, is the annual So Remembrance Festival. It is held in Kusuman either in January or February (with dates being determined by the lunar calendar), and is quite widely attended. Activities include general music and sports competitions, but the main attraction is the re-enactment procession of the So people’s arrival to the Kusuman area, complete with traditional dress, handmade tools and artifacts used in everyday life of the So people, along with a demonstration of a ceremony related to traditional religious beliefs. As for language, the emcees for this event mainly use the national language, Thai, due to the large number of non-So visitors

---

<sup>14</sup> Particularly in the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA).

attending; however, some explanation is also announced by So emcees. In 2009 during the festival, the Committee for Preservation and Development of the So Language sponsored a story-telling competition and other word game contests in So, between teams of students from different schools. It was not widely publicized, and thus not very well attended, but similar events could be held either at future annual festivals or at another time during the year separate from the festival.

Similar cultural festivals on a smaller scale have been held in several other So communities, including Huay Phra, Phon Caan, and Pha Thai. Khok Muang has held celebrations in conjunction with the Learning Center for So History. This project includes traditional style houses built on the grounds of the Khok Muang school, furnished with various artifacts.

In terms of public media, for many years there has been weekly local radio broadcasting in So. A small number of songs in So have been produced. Some Thai documentary video programs have also been produced on the So culture, and news clips have occasionally featured So events or the education project in Kutsakoi. And as access to social media is increasing even in very rural areas, the So are beginning to experiment with writing messages in So.

While there is definitely some interest among the So for having a written language, the literacy initiatives have faced challenges in sustaining interest and committed involvement over time. Still, these multiple efforts, and others not listed, are all positive steps in working towards preservation and revitalization of the So language in both oral and written form. The hope is that as these activities are carried out, it will draw further interest and involvement from a wider range of So people, from all ages and all villages. If So from the villages for which this paper reports weaker language vitality can become involved in some of these activities, it will help to slow or reverse their shift away from loss of So.

## **5. Previous research on So language vitality**

In 2008, a sociolinguistic survey of So was carried out through interviews using a sociolinguistic questionnaire, with data collected from five villages (Choo 2008). Then in 2011, a Payap University research project on So language vitality was completed by the present authors. Aspects of these projects are reported briefly here in Section 5, while more general insights related to EGIDS and combining the past research with the present research are addressed in Section 6.

### **5.1 2008 Survey Results**

The sociolinguistic survey in 2008, collected responses to sociolinguistic questionnaires from five villages in Nakhon Phanom province of Thailand: Noi Siwilai, Nong Nang Leung, Don Yang, and Na Tao in Phon Sawan district, and Kham Toey in Tha Uthen district (Choo 2008). The purpose of the survey was partially to evaluate the potential for sharing written materials that are currently being developed in Kusuman and Photi Phaisan districts of Sakon Nakhon province.

The results of the 2008 survey cannot necessarily be extended to the vitality of the So community as a whole. However, they are still useful as one part of the picture. Some of the more relevant results of the survey are summarized here.

It was reported in the survey that most So speakers are multilingual. A majority can use the Isaan (Northeastern Thai) language well orally, as a language of wider communication (LWC), though it is not used for reading and writing. Most So also have some proficiency in Central Standard Thai, including basic literacy for those in the middle generations and below, though they are generally more comfortable using Isaan than Thai. The younger generation have stronger Thai skills through education. The oldest generation in some villages reportedly do not speak Isaan or Central Thai well.

Four of these five villages indicate strong language vitality for So, with Nong Nang Leung being a little weaker. In all villages surveyed, the majority of children were then using the So language in most daily domains. Children learn So first and use it while playing. So speakers generally have a positive attitude about continuing to use So language as their mother tongue. Most So have a positive ethnic identity, desiring their children to continue in their cultural values.

Most So speakers in the villages surveyed use the So language exclusively at home and with all other So people, whether family, friends or in the market. A non-So language is used when the presence of non-So speakers requires it. It is possible to find So spoken in public meetings and in funeral ceremonies, though not common. There are So radio programs that are well-known and listened to by many So.

### 5.2 2011 Payap University Research Project Results

In 2011 a preliminary study of the overall vitality of the So language community was conducted (Tehan & Markowski 2011). The purpose of the project was to bring together data from several sources in order to gain a better understanding of the vitality of the So language.

From the GIDS perspective, the So language in Thailand was then being maintained in many villages, but was threatened in other villages. Use of the GIDS suggested that a healthy number of So villages are at Stage 6, with all generations orally using the So language, though there may be some in the youngest generation not using So in some of these villages. Other So villages are at Stages 7 or 8. As for Stage 8, it is likely that there may actually be a greater number of villages than those listed, since the villages where people used to speak So but no longer do, no longer tend to be identified as So villages. Since so many of the So villages are presently at Stage 6, strong literacy development in those villages would likely strengthen and augment the vitality.

More detail was gleaned from analysis of the nine factors in language vitality endangerment proposed by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Brenzinger et al. 2003). For each factor, a scale from 0 to 5 is used to evaluate the vitality or endangerment of the language. All So villages did not rate at the same levels within each factor, so an averaging method with some rounding was employed to try to capture the complexity of the picture.

So was evaluated as strongest in:

- Factor 1, intergenerational language transmission, with an average score of **4**, corresponding to ‘Unsafe’ because the language was used by **some** children in all domains and by all children in limited domains. However, many villages would rate as a **5**, corresponding to ‘Safe’, used by **all** children in all domains.
- Factor 2 rated with a **4**, for having between 10,000 to 50,000 total speakers.
- Factor 3, considering the proportion of speakers within the total reference group, a majority of the total So group speak the language, for a score of **3**.
- Factor 4, domains and functions, could be considered either as dwindling domains (3) or possibly multilingual parity (4), depending on the interpretation of ‘most’ or ‘many’ functions or social domains. So can be used in almost any situation, but the feeling may be that for certain functions (such as official meetings), use of the dominant language is ‘normal’, so a **3** is probably appropriate.
- Factor 5, response to new domains and media, could be described as receptive, for a score of **3**, since the language is used in many domains, except that for unknown terminology, borrowed terms are typically used and adapted phonologically to fit So.

In the remaining factors, So was rated at lower levels:

- Factor 6, materials for language education and literacy scores only a **2**, since while written materials exist, they are only used by a small portion of the community.
- Factor 7, government policies and attitudes, there is a policy allowing for use of minority languages, but it would not yet be appropriate to say that the ‘use of the So language is prestigious’, so a score of **3**, passive assimilation, can be given.
- Factor 8, community members’ attitudes vary greatly throughout the community, but as a whole, it would be best to say that only some members support language maintenance, for a score of **2**.
- Factor 9, the documentation of the So language can be considered fragmentary, for a score of **2**. Although there are some significant linguistic articles written, and some wordlists and texts collected, not all of it is widely available, and there is little audio or video documentation.

This yielded a total score of 26, which could be considered in the ‘Definitely Endangered’ category. It seems that even if the villages with lower vitality were to lose the use of So, the stronger villages would continue to indicate the lesser degree of endangerment for the language as a whole, except for the total proportion of speakers.

When considering only a subset of the So language, such as the large group of villages designated as ‘Vigorous’ on the EGIDS, then a few points could be added. Kutsakoi could be used as a specific example. For the intergenerational transmission factor, it would be safe, for 5 points. Some of the children are exposed to the written form at school, giving an additional point for ‘accessibility of written materials’. For factor 8, more members in Kutsakoi support language maintenance than in the villages with weaker vitality. So Kutsakoi could be assigned a total of 29 points, above ‘Definitely Endangered’, moving towards ‘Unsafe’. These labels strike us as giving a more pessimistic assessment than is warranted.

The total points by this way of assessment would give 26 points to weaker So villages, and 29 for some of the strongest such as Kutsakoi. In comparison to other similar previous assessments, the Tai Ya speech community consists of 2 villages given 10 and 16 points, and the Mpi speech community with 2 villages given 11 and 18 points. In contrast the national language, Standard Thai, could be given 45 points, and the languages of wider communication for their respective regions, both Northern Thai and Northeastern Thai (Isaan) given 34 points. As can be seen from these totals, So is in much better shape than Tai Ya or Mpi, but obviously much weaker than the other more dominant languages in its area.

Regardless of whether or not absolute numbers can accurately describe the degree of endangerment, the descriptions within each category can point to areas of strengths or weaknesses. The weakest areas for So as a whole are those areas evaluated at a score of 2 points, for the following areas: Factor 6: written materials, Factor 8: community members' attitudes, and Factor 9: documentation. Both the So speech community and the scholarly community have it within their power to address these weaker areas. Suggestions for increasing vitality and moving away from endangered status would need to focus most strongly on increasing the number and availability of written materials, continuing to develop a curriculum for using So in the schools, collecting a wider variety of texts, documenting local knowledge, producing more literature and dictionaries, and making annotated audio and video recordings. Attitudes may be more difficult to influence, but educating parents and community members about the effects of language loss versus language maintenance, with examples from other language communities, could prove useful. Supporting language use across more domains may also be possible.

Intergenerational transmission is generally succeeding for the So of Thailand. Many villages have enough active speakers of all generations so that they have a community of So speakers. However, even with that, the total numbers of So speakers will remain a small drop in relation to the Northeastern Thai speech community ocean in which they are immersed for work, education, religion and entertainment. The standardization of an orthography, increased documentation, and continuation of non-governmental corpus and status development programs, will add significantly to the vitality of So. If support of So were undertaken by the government and school system, as is beginning to develop through support from Mahidol University, especially at Kutsakoi school, even more points could be added to the totals. Ideally, these changes would indicate a strengthening of the vitality of So in these communities.

## 6. Insights into the Vitality of So in Thailand

In the present section, an expanded perspective on language development and reversing language shift is applied in order to analyze the current vitality of the So language in Thailand. This section highlights insights from applying some of the developments of Lewis & Simons' (2010, 2015) Expanded GIDS. The assessment of vitality is based mainly on information collected by Markowski during field research among the So community from 2005 to the present, as well as a research trip by Tehan and Markowski in 2016.<sup>15</sup> This assessment includes significant input from members of the Committee for Preserving and Developing the So Language and personal visits to more than 20 of the villages.

### 6.1 EGIDS & SUM applied to So

The Expanded GIDS which Lewis & Simons propose is intended to lead to applications depending on the community's response to the question of which sustainable level is an appropriate target for it. Table 6 shows the current estimates of levels on the Expanded GIDS scale based on individual villages (only showing those levels relevant to the So communities in Thailand).

---

<sup>15</sup> Funded in part by the Asian Minority Language Research Committee (AMLRC).

**Table 6:** *Vitality of So villages using Lewis & Simons' (2010, 2015) Expanded GIDS*

Level	Label	Number of So villages	Names of So villages at this level
5	Developing	1	Kutsakoi
6a	Vigorous	25	I Kut, Nong Hoy, Khok Muang, Khok Sawang, Photi Phaisan, Phon Phaeng, Huay Kok, Nong Khem, Kut Hu, Khok Klang, Phon Muang, Na Tao, Bong Kham, Noi Siwilai, Ban Dong, Khok Na Di, Na Khamin, Don Yang, Don Sawan, Na Nam Kham, Huai Phra, Don Daeng, Don Daeng Noi, Kham Teuy, Kham Haak
6b	Threatened	10	Kusuman, Kok Samhong, Khok Nong Pheu, Ngiw, Sang Kaew, Phon Tum, Nong Saeng, Phon Chan, Nong Nang Leung, Khok Kong
7	Shifting	3	Muang Kao, Na Kham, Pha Thai
8a	Moribund	7	Ban Born, Kha Kai, Phon Phek, Na Kha Tha, Kaeng Samhong, Lao Suan Kluay, Noy Luang Mong
8b	Nearly Extinct	3	Phon Chareon, Thung Noi, Khok Sung

As seen in Table 6, just over half of the So communities in Thailand are at Level 6a 'Vigorous', with much smaller numbers at levels 5 'Developing', 6b 'Threatened', 7 'Shifting', 8 'Moribund', and 8b 'Nearly Extinct'. As for the villages where vitality is described as 'Nearly Extinct', it is important to realize that in this case the term 'Extinct' is referring only to use of the language in these specific villages, not to the language as a whole. Also it is likely that there may be more villages at this level without it being known that they at one time had So speakers.

Classifying Kutsakoi village as Level 5 'Developing' may be tenuous, as only a small number of So are literate in So, and in the GIDS evaluation earlier, this village would not be considered to be at Level 5. However, for EGIDS, the answer to question #4 about literacy for this village could be 'incipient', since 'literacy in the language has been introduced into the community' (Lewis & Simons 2010:116), placing it in Level 5. Lewis & Simons' 2010 description of Level 5 'Developing' begins by saying, 'This is the level at which literacy is incipient, more often-than-not informally transmitted and with only weak or transient institutional support' (2010:111). The current description of Level 5 for EGIDS (see 'Language Status' in Lewis et. al. 2016) restates that as having 'literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.' Literacy has indeed been introduced in Kutsakoi (and to a few individuals scattered in other villages), where a small number of the community have been learning to read and write So, but it is still in the process of standardization. Furthermore, the Kutsakoi elementary school is beginning to support the development of literacy materials in So, meaning that institutional support is existent but still weak.

When considering the language situation as a whole, we are not aware of a standard procedure to be applied as to whether to choose the level at which there is the greatest number of villages, or whether there can be a formula developed which will weigh the various levels and the number of villages at that level. Even within a given village there is sometimes a difficulty in evaluation, if there is variation within the village or in determining the portion of children still using the language. These issues need to be explored as a greater number of languages are evaluated, to see how variation relates to overall vitality levels.

An important consideration for Lewis & Simons on this issue is whether or not the vitality trend as a whole is strengthening (with use of the language increasing overall) or weakening (with language use declining), based on the judgment of evaluators who know the situation well. Within the So community there appears to be some of both, with some villages showing increasing disruption of intergenerational language transmission, while at the same time there is a significant amount of new effort by groups of community members towards preservation and development of the So language, so that the trend seems to be towards potentially rising to stronger levels in some villages. In the So language environment, Central Standard Thai would be at EGIDS Level 1 'National', and Isaan (Northeastern Thai) would be at EGIDS Level 3 'Wider communication'. The tendency will be for these stronger languages to expand to dominate more and more speech domains and functions in the So language community.

The application of the Sustainable Use Model (SUM) to So vitality is as follows. The So community is at SUM Level 5, but it has the potential of achieving a stable SUM Level 4. The activities and functions of stable SUM Level 6a are all in place, and for the moment the level seems sustainable. SUM Level 6 ‘Sustainable Orality’ is based on the majority of the community being highly proficient in So since they learned it as their first language and continue to use it as default in many functions in day-to-day life. SUM Level 4 ‘Sustainable Literacy’ is characterized by widespread reading and writing in the heritage language passed on through sustainable institutions that use a growing body of literature in that language.

**6.2 FAMED applied to So**

As described in Section 3.3.3, the FAMED conditions provide both a more fine-tuned approach to evaluation, and a way to categorize factors relevant to language development. This paper will not be able to explore all the applications of investigating the FAMED conditions, but will use the FAMED conditions to help quantify our ‘diagnostic evaluation’ of So language vitality.

The next few paragraphs and tables review the FAMED conditions and describe levels relevant to the assessment of So.

**Functions** are uses of bodies of knowledge, i.e. the content of knowledge about a domain, that exist and are recognized within the community in its language and culture.

**Table 7: Function scale (slightly adapted from Lewis & Simons 2015:167)**

Level	Description	Highest EGIDS potential
F2	Enough literature exists in this language for some Functions to exemplify the value of literacy in this language.	5 ‘Developing’
F3	The language is being used orally for the Functions of day-to-day life by everyone, but there is no written use of the language.	6a ‘Vigorous’
F4	Some members of the community use the language orally for the Functions of day-to-day life, but an increasing number no longer do so.	6b ‘Threatened’ to 8a ‘Moribund’

It seems that F2 is not accurate to describe the overall So situation. Some literature exists, but not enough to support a particular body of knowledge associated with a Function. The villages where the language is strongest could be rated at F3 (or perhaps F3+ if there is some incipient literature in So being used). Other villages are experiencing more displacement of language in various Functions.

**Acquisition** relates to the means (functions and habits) that must be in place in the community for the next generation to acquire proficiency in the language.

**Table 8: Acquisition scale (Lewis & Simons 2015:171)**

Level	Description	Highest EGIDS potential
A2	There are adequate materials in this language to support literacy instruction in the language and some members of the community are successfully learning to read and write about some bodies of knowledge in the language.	5 ‘Developing’
A3	There is full face-to-face transmission of this language to all children in the home and community; literacy acquisition, if any, is in another language.	6a ‘Vigorous’
A4	Only some of the child-bearing generations are transmitting the language by normal means to their children.	6b ‘Threatened’

Acquisition is similar to Function. Level A2 might be a goal to aim for, but not many members of the community are yet employing reading and writing for cultural bodies of knowledge. Some instructional materials are being developed, but are not yet widely used. Villages with more vital oral use of the language would be at Level A3, and those where only some of the children are learning the language would be at Level A4.

**Motivation** relates to the community’s perception of the benefits of using the language for those functions; if they perceive language use as providing adequate benefits, they will keep using it.

**Table 9:** Motivation scale (Lewis & Simons 2015:175)

Level	Description	Highest EGIDS Potential
M2	Some members of the speech community perceive the benefits of reading and writing in this language, but the majority of them still do not.	5 ‘Developing’
M3	Members of the speech community perceive the benefits of using this language for face-to-face communication, but they perceive no benefits in reading and writing it.	6a ‘Vigorous’
M4	Some members of the child-bearing generation perceive the benefits of using this language for face-to-face communication, but others find more benefit in shifting to another language.	6b ‘Threatened’

Motivation is similar in that even in Kutsakoi or other areas beginning to use written materials, very few members of the community understand the benefits of reading and writing So, thus Level M2. There are many villages where the oral use of So is valued, but speakers perceive no benefits in reading or writing it. Thus Level M3 for villages with more vital use of the language would be appropriate. There are also villages where the benefits of shifting to another language work against all of the children learning So, thus M4.

**Environment** relates to the degree to which the relevant policy-making bodies encourage, discourage or are neutral toward use of the language in the community. This is the sociolinguistic environment in which the functions must operate.

**Table 10:** Environment scale (Lewis & Simons 2015:179)

Level	Description	Highest EGIDS Potential
E2	The external policy environment encourages the development of this language, but the policy-making bodies are making no investment in the implementation of such policy.	5 ‘Developing’
E3	The external policy environment has nothing to say about ethnolinguistic diversity or language development and thus raises no impediment.	5 ‘Developing’, 6a ‘Vigorous’
E4	The external policy environment affirms the oral use of this language, but calls for the language to be left in its current state and not developed.	6a ‘Vigorous’, 6b ‘Threatened’

It is hard to say whether E3 or E4 apply across the So community. Perhaps there is some variety school district by school district. The stated national policy allows for development of minority languages, but implementation may not yet be at a level encouraging it, so this could be characterized by either Level E2 or E3.

**Table 11:** Differentiation scale (Lewis & Simons 2015:183)

Level	Description	Highest EGIDS Potential
D1	Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use this language orally and in writing versus when to use another language.	4 ‘Education’
D2	Members of the speech community have a set of shared norms as to when to use this language orally versus when to use other languages, but for writing, some use this language while others use another language for many of the same Functions.	5 ‘Developing’
D3	Members of this speech community have a set of shared norms as to when to use this language orally versus when to use other languages and they never use this language in written form.	6a ‘Vigorous’
D4	Some members of the child-bearing generation use this language orally for Functions of day-to-day life, while others use a different language for many of the same Functions.	6b ‘Threatened’

**Differentiation** relates to the degree to which the community perceives that certain functions ‘belong’ to the language of the community, or some outside language.

Differentiation perhaps could be rated at D3+, for it seems most So speakers know when to use So orally, and when to use another language in their repertoire. It seems that those who read and write, use Thai to do it, and only a few regularly read and write So.

The FAMED conditions represent a multifaceted way to analyze the language vitality situation, by breaking aspects of ethnolinguistic vitality down into components. The EGIDS level associated with each of the component scales represents merely the highest possible EGIDS level that could be attained with those particular characteristics. Thus the FAMED conditions assessment is a way to quantify the present reality as well as the present potential. The correlation among the various factors is found in the table below. The last column indicates the youngest generation using the language: Y1 is children, Y2 is parents (Lewis & Simons 2015:153-159). The shaded cells represent the assessment level of the So villages with the strongest language vitality.

**Table 12:** SUM assessment grid worksheet (Lewis & Simons 2015:183)

EGIDS level	Functions	Acquisition	Motivation	Environment	Differentiation	Youngest L1 users
4 Educat.	F1	A1	M1	E1	D1	Y1
5 Develop.	F2	A2	M2	E2, E3	D2	
6a Vigor.	F3	A3	M3	E4	D3	
6b Threat.	F4	A4	M4		D4	
7 Shifting	F5	A5	M5			Y2

The stronger villages would be characterized by: F3, A3, M3, E3 and D3. It would seem that the many So villages with a strong language vitality would be assessed as being solidly at the Level 6a ‘Vigorous’, and that there are indicators that elements of Level 5 ‘Developing’ are being manifested. If this is a direction upward toward Level 4 ‘Educational’, then several of the FAMED conditions need to be strengthened.

The villages where the language is not so vital would be characterized by: F4, A4, M3-4, E3 and D3. The So language in these villages would be characterized as Level 6b ‘Threatened’ in the first three conditions (FAM), but those villages would have the same E and D levels as the stronger villages, thus perhaps exerting an influence upward. The biggest challenge for these villages will be to solidify the Y1 feature, where all children are learning the language. Otherwise there will be a distinct tendency for conditions to deteriorate and eventually Y2 will apply and the language vitality will have fallen a notch into Level 7 ‘Shifting’.

## 6.2 Summary

Obiero (2010) mentions that both GIDS and EGIDS are inherently and perhaps inevitably static in that the snapshot evaluation they give applies to a moment in time. By the time the snapshot is shared, it is already in the past and changes will have taken place in the language community. A second criticism of his is that EGIDS tends to give a summary view, when in reality the same language has different levels of vitality in different communities. This criticism is especially valid when considering languages scattered across the globe (2010:212). In the present study the issue seems to apply to a lesser extent: the So language is concentrated in a rather small geographical area, and in the tables reflect much of the variety in levels of vitality.

Therefore, the SUM/EGIDS model has been helpful in assessing language vitality among the So. The EGIDS distinctions in levels 5 through 8 facilitated a village by village evaluation of language vitality. It is hard to identify villages that used to be So-speaking but now are extinct; and there are probably other villages that might be evaluated as nearly extinct. The concepts of sustainable levels allowed for discussion of trends in language use and acquisition in the So villages.

Finally, some aspects of assessing vitality for languages having a variety of speech communities need to be explored more, such as whether coming up with a single summary figure is enough, or what value might be found in applying to EGIDS/SUM model to each individual village. That has been done in this study but a theoretical model for processing this information has not yet been found. Questions to be considered include looking at whether the number of villages at each level, or the size of those villages, or the balance across the vitality scale, would have an impact for the language as a whole on future trends up or down the vitality scale. For example, how does one capture the situation where a good number of villages are at the sustainable level

of 6a, but also there are a number of villages at lower levels that are not sustainable? What if the total number of villages which are So-speaking communities diminishes? How would it affect a summary statement like: ‘The EGIDS level of vitality for the So community is 6a’? At the moment, answers to these questions are not obvious.

The next step in this EGIDS/SUM assessment would be to explore the ‘Bodies of Knowledge’ (2015:31-36) that are crucial to some aspect of life and the language used to express it. These bodies of knowledge correlate with the Functions outlined in the previous section. The Sustainable Use Model assists community members in determining which of the languages used within the community will be associated with each Function. However, exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

## 7. Conclusions on the future for So in Thailand

The activities listed in Section 4 demonstrate that at least a portion of the So-speaking community is making efforts towards preserving and revitalizing the use of the So language, having more success and making more progress than that shown in the earlier studies on Mpi and Tai Ya. These efforts, if continued and built upon, will continue to strengthen the So language. Yet based on the GIDS and UNESCO analyses of vitality, the So language is in a threatened state, with some portions of the community no longer speaking So. The future could lead them either towards greater language vitality or closer to endangerment. Table 13 summarizes the assessments of various So villages.

**Table 13:** *Summary of the evaluations of So language vitality*

EGIDS	1 village at Level 5 – Developing 25 villages at Level 6a – Vigorous 10 villages at Level 6b – Threatened 3 villages at Level 7 – Shifting 7 villages at Level 8a – Moribund 3 villages at Level 8b – Nearly Extinct
-------	---

It may or may not be practical to develop a formula to determine an exact level of language vitality or endangerment. However, looking at the various perspectives and the unique considerations of each perspective or model, we can glean much important information for helping the So language spoken in Thailand to move up all of the scales and have a stronger language vitality, to prevent movement in the direction of endangerment.

From the EGIDS perspectives therefore, what would further help the So language to survive, grow, and prosper? First of all and foundationally, the So speech communities at EGIDS level 6a ‘Vigorous’ must continue to maintain their language. If villages that are at lower levels of vitality decide that they will value and speak So in the home and community, and that the children will be expected to learn it, obviously the vitality of the language would increase. This would not necessarily be reflected in all of the scales, since those villages would simply move into the group of existing strong villages, but overall numbers could be increased motivation for further revitalization. Various community events could serve to educate So speakers of the necessity to pass the language along, and to improve the attitude of the So toward their own language.

Secondly, the literature on vitality and endangerment emphasize a prerequisite foundation of an accepted standardized orthography in use throughout the community and written literature available. This foundation is currently being addressed, but it must be continued and strengthened, with So in all villages able to access written So. With a recent sudden increase in use of smartphones among young people even in remote areas, the distribution of reading materials is now much less of a barrier. Reading materials of whatever kind in themselves would be useless to maintain a vigorous language unless the foundation in the home and community is in place first, and then literacy classes or reading guides must be widely accessible. Further technical and financial support will likely be needed from outside to maintain and expand on current efforts.

Also, additional documentation<sup>16</sup> of the So language is warranted: grammars, dictionaries, a text corpus, audio and video recordings, interviews of people with specialized knowledge, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Current documentation on So includes: Chinowat 1983; Gainey 1985; Hardkadee 2016; Lerthirunwong 1980; L-Thongkum 2000; Markowski 2009; Migliazza 1992, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005; Miller 1994; Miller & Miller 1994, 1996; Sidwell 2005, 2015.

It should be noted that, as research in multilingualism clearly shows, strengthening the So vitality does not imply monolingualism, but can well support multilingualism in Northeastern Thai and Standard Thai. Insights from the Sustainable Use Model can guide efforts in establishing stable multilingualism through community decisions on developing the So language to be used for more functions, but this will have to be balanced with cultural considerations. The FAMED conditions could also be explored with So community members, to see whether this model would be helpful for planning.

Alongside this, though, now that some language development activities have been put into place, it is crucial to find appropriate assessment tools for continually evaluating and redirecting these efforts, and monitor on-going changes in vitality (Obiero 2010). Many of the activities promoting So language and culture described in Section 4 started out admirably but faded quickly. The reasons for this need to be looked at in order to move towards sustaining and expanding these efforts. Current initiatives must be maintained and expanded, and other appropriate initiatives started.

It would also be worthwhile to survey the situation in the So (or Makong) communities of the Lao PDR. Research there may also help with development of literature and resource materials. Since many villages are more difficult to access, there may be less contact with majority language speakers and a better-preserved vocabulary. It would be useful to compare the language vitality assessments, as well as look at a combined analysis of the entire So community in both countries.

In summary, So (as with Mpi, Tai Ya, and many other minority languages) is at a critical point. Time, energy and finances, if they are applied strategically, could make a crucial difference in preserving the language. If things continue as they are, there will likely continue to be mother-tongue speakers of So. But it will take only a few more So speakers not to pass on their language to their children for the threat of language shift and eventually death to become a reality.

## References

- Brenzinger, Matthias, Akira Yamamoto, Noriko Aikawa, Dimitri Koundiouba, Anahit Minasyan, Arienne Dwyer, Colette Grinevald, Michael Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama, Rieks Smeets, and Ofelia Zepeda. 2003. *Language vitality and endangerment*. Paris: UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on Endangered Languages. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>.
- Chinowat, Ekawit. 1983. A comparative study of the morphological processes of Kui, Bruu and So. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University MA thesis.
- Choo, Marcus. 2008. A sociolinguistic survey of So in Northeastern Thailand. Research Project #SU8. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University. <http://li.payap.ac.th/images/stories/survey/So%20in%20NE%20Thailand%20report%20%28FINAL%29.pdf> downloaded 14 July 2011.
- Choo, Marcus. 2012. An investigation of intelligibility between So varieties in Northeast Thailand: the Bru in Khok Saat. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University. [http://li.payap.ac.th/images/stories/survey/So\\_RTT\\_Report.pdf](http://li.payap.ac.th/images/stories/survey/So_RTT_Report.pdf)
- Choo, Marcus, Jennifer Herington, Amy Ryan & Jennifer Simmons. 2012. Sociolinguistic survey of Bru in Phang Khon and Phanna Nikhom Districts, Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University. [http://li.payap.ac.th/images/stories/survey/sociolinguistic\\_survey\\_of\\_bru\\_in\\_thailand.pdf](http://li.payap.ac.th/images/stories/survey/sociolinguistic_survey_of_bru_in_thailand.pdf)
- Fishman, Joshua A. 1991. Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fishman, Joshua A. 2000. Reversing language shift: RLS theory and practice revisited. In Kindell, Gloria & M. Paul Lewis (eds.), *Assessing ethnolinguistic vitality: Theory and practice*, Selected Papers from the Third International Language Assessment Conference, 1-26. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Gainey, Jerry. 1985. A comparative study of Kui, Bruu and So phonology from a genetic point of view. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University MA thesis.
- Gehrmann, Ryan. 2016. The West Katuic language: Comparative phonology and diagnostic tools. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University MA thesis.
- Ghoemeh, Ah Suhn. 2015a. Language vitality among the Akha in Myanmar. International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies: Burma/Myanmar in Transition: Connectivity, Changes and Challenges.

- Ghoemeh, Ah Suhn. 2015b. Assessing the vitality of Akha in Myanmar with the Sustainable Use Model. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University MA thesis.
- Hardkadee, Kraisorn. 2016. การศึกษาระบบเสียงและระบบตัวเขียนภาษาโห้บ้านกุดสะกอย. [A study of Thro language phonology and orthography development of Ban Kutsakoy.] Bangkok: Mahidol University MA thesis.
- Jenny, Mathias & Paul Sidwell, eds. 2015. *The handbook of Austroasiatic Languages*. Vol. 1. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Lao Department of Statistics. 2005. Population Census 2005. <http://www.nsc.gov.la/PopulationCensus2005.htm>
- Lerthirunwong, Malai. 1980. A syntactic description of So: An Austroasiatic language in Thailand. Bangkok: Mahidol University MA thesis.
- Lewis, M. Paul. 1996. Language maintenance in seven K'iche' communities. *SIL Electronic Working Papers* 1996-002, July 1996. [http://www.sil.org/silewp/1996/002/silewp\\_1996-002.html](http://www.sil.org/silewp/1996/002/silewp_1996-002.html).
- Lewis, M. Paul. (ed.). 2009. *Ethnologue: languages of the world, 15th edition*. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>.
- Lewis, M. Paul, & Gary F. Simons. 2010. Assessing endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS. *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 55. 103-20.
- Lewis, M. Paul, & Gary F. Simons. 2015. Sustaining language use: Perspectives on community-based language development. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version: <http://leanpub.com/sustaininglanguageuse>.
- Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2016. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, Nineteenth edition*. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>. Accessed repeatedly since its publication.
- Markowski, Linda. 2009. So orthography revision and committee process. PYU Working Papers in Linguistics 5. Chiang Mai: Payap University.
- Migliazza, Brian. 1992. Lexicostatistic analysis of some Katuic languages. International Symposium on Language and Linguistics (ISLL) III. 1320-1325. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House.
- Migliazza, Brian. 1998. A grammar of So - A Mon-Khmer language of northeast Thailand. Bangkok: Mahidol University PhD thesis.
- Migliazza, Brian. 2002. The So people. In TU-SIL-LRDP Committee (ed.), *Minority language orthography in Thailand: Five case studies*, 539-574. Bangkok: TU-SIL-LRDP Committee. <http://msealing.info/digidata/306/b09800-so.pdf>. Accessed and viewed 18 June 2008.
- Migliazza, Brian. 2003. So stories: A preliminary analysis of texts in a Mon-Khmer language. *Mon-Khmer Studies* 33. 67-158.
- Migliazza, Brian. 2005 Some expressives in So. *Ethnorema* 1 (1): 1-18. <http://www.ethnorema.it/pdf/numero%201/BRIAN%20MIGLIAZZA.pdf>. Accessed and viewed 18 June 2008.
- Miller, Carolyn. 1994. Perceptions of ethnolinguistic identity, language shift and language use in Mon-Khmer language communities of Northeast Thailand. *Mon-Khmer Studies* 23. 83-101.
- Miller, John & Carolyn. 1994. Notes on phonology and orthography in several Katuic Mon-Khmer groups in Northeast Thailand. *Mon-Khmer Studies* 24. 27-51.
- Miller, John & Carolyn. 1996. Lexical comparison of Katuic Mon-Khmer languages with special focus on So-Bru group in Northeast Thailand. *Mon-Khmer Studies* 26. 255-290.
- Obiero, Ogone John. 2010. From assessing language endangerment or vitality to creating and evaluating language revitalization programmes. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 19(4). 201-226.
- Premrirat, Suwilai & Dennis Malone. 2003. Language development and language revitalization in Asia. [http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/plenary\\_papers/suwila\\_and\\_dennis\\_malone.pdf](http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/plenary_papers/suwila_and_dennis_malone.pdf) (9 September 2005).
- Sidwell, Paul. 2005. The Katuic languages: Classification, reconstruction and comparative lexicon. Lincom Europa: Muenchen, Germany.

- Sidwell, Paul. 2015. Austroasiatic classification. In Jenny, Mathias & Paul Sidwell (eds.), *The handbook of Austroasiatic Languages*, 144-220. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- SIL International. 2015. Language Assessment. <http://www.sil.org/language-assessment/language-vitality>. Accessed on 07 May 2015.
- Simons, Gary F., and M. Paul Lewis. 2013. The world's languages in crisis: A 20-year update. *Responses to Language Endangerment: In Honor of Mickey Noonan. New Directions in Language Documentation and Language Revitalization* 3. 20.
- Simons, Gary F. and M. Paul Lewis. 2012. The SUM Assessment Grid. Dallas, TX: SIL International. <http://www.sil.org/resources/archives/57632>. Accessed 27 Nov 2016.
- Tehan, Thomas M. & Erin Dawkins. 2010. Tai Ya present and future: Reversing language shift. Research Project #53-01 in Linguistics Department Research Series. Chiangmai, Thailand: Payap University. Unpublished.
- Tehan, Thomas M. & Linda Markowski. 2011. So in Thailand, present and future: Reversing language shift. Research Project #54-01 in Linguistics Department Research Series. Chiangmai, Thailand: Payap University. Unpublished.
- Tehan, Thomas M. & Ramzi W. Nahhas. 2007. Mpi present and future: A first look at reversing language shift. Research Project #309 in Linguistics Department Research Series. Chiangmai, Thailand: Payap University. Unpublished.
- Tehan, Thomas M. & Ramzi W. Nahhas. 2009. Mpi present and future: Reversing language shift. *Mon-Khmer Studies* 38. 87-104.

---

Reviewed: Received 11 November 2016, revised text accepted 23 January 2017, published 1 February 2017  
Editors: Editor-In-Chief Dr Mark Alves | Managing Eds. Dr Paul Sidwell, Dr Nathan Hill, Dr Sigrid Lew