

# Functions of English versus Other Languages in the Domain of Buddhism in Thailand

หน้าที่ของภาษาอังกฤษต่อภาษาอื่นในบริบทของพุทธศาสนาในประเทศไทย

ร.อ.หญิง ปริญญาพร ปรีชา  
Parinyaporn Preecha

ดร.อุดมกฤษณ์ ศรีนนท์  
Udomkrit Srinon, PhD

## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาวิจัยนี้มุ่งนำเสนอหน้าที่ของภาษาอังกฤษต่อภาษาอื่นในบริบทของพุทธศาสนาไทย บทความนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นว่า ภาษาอังกฤษมีผลต่อการปฏิบัติทางศาสนาและการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษบริบทของศาสนาได้รับการพัฒนาเพื่อตอบสนองต่อสังคมที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลง กรอบทฤษฎีของการวิจัยนี้ตั้งอยู่บนพื้นฐานจากงานวิจัยต่างๆในภาษาของพิธีกรรมของศาสนาฮินดูจากงานวิจัยของPandharipande (2012) และ Herat (2015) เป็นที่กล่าวอ้างว่า ในอดีตภาษาอังกฤษไม่ได้รวมอยู่ในพิธีกรรมทางด้านพุทธศาสนาในประเทศไทย ดังนั้น บทความนี้ จึงพยายามจะนำเสนอข้อมูลการวิจัยที่สำคัญเบื้องต้นตามข้อเท็จจริงที่ว่า ปัจจุบันนี้ภาษาอังกฤษมีผลต่อการปฏิบัติทางศาสนาและการแพร่หลายในบริบทสังคมไทยในระดับหนึ่งด้วย โดยมีเหตุผลคือ 1) สื่อส่งเสริม และ 2) ภาษาอังกฤษมีผลระดับหนึ่งต่อหน้าที่ทางภาษาที่ใส่เข้าไปในพิธีกรรมต่าง ๆ งานวิจัยนี้ตั้งคำถามและหาคำตอบในสองประเด็นคือ 1) มีแนวทางอะไรบ้างที่ภาษาอังกฤษและภาษาอื่น ๆ ปรากฏในบริบทของพุทธศาสนา 2) มีลักษณะสำคัญอะไรบ้างของภาษาต่าง ๆ และเนื้อหาที่พระสงฆ์ นักปราชญ์ และผู้คนทั่วไปใช้เมื่อกล่าวถึงพุทธศาสนา งานวิจัยนี้ใช้การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาเพื่อมุ่งเน้นไปที่การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการใช้ภาษาในบริบทของพุทธศาสนาซึ่งส่งเสริมความเข้าใจที่ดีเกี่ยวกับการปฏิบัติทางศาสนา งานวิจัยนี้ได้ให้ข้อเสนอแนะเกี่ยวกับบริบทของภาษาอังกฤษโลกและการใช้หน้าที่ทางภาษา

**คำสำคัญ:** หน้าที่ของภาษาในพิธีกรรมทางศาสนาพุทธ การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในชุมชนชาวพุทธ ภาษาอังกฤษในพุทธศาสนาและภาษาโลก

## Abstract

This study focuses on the functions of English versus other languages in a Thai Buddhist context. It demonstrates that English has an effect on religious practices and the use of English in the religious domain has been developed to serve the changing society. The framework for this study is based on a previous works on the language of Hindu rituals by Pandharipande (2012) and Herat (2015). It is stated that in the old days, English was excluded from Buddhist rituals in Thailand. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight primarily research

data in a fact that: nowadays, English has an effect on religious practice and diffusion in a Thai context in some degree because (a) the media promotes it; and (b) it impacts the degree of functional load for the languages of rituals. The following research questions are examined: (1) What are the ways in which English and other languages work in the domain of Buddhism? (2) What are the main characteristics of languages and contents used by monks, scholars and other people regarding Buddhism? The content analysis was employed to focus on data analysis regarding language use in the domain of Buddhism which promotes some better understanding on religious practices. Further suggestions are made within the domain of World Englishes and functional use of languages.

**Keywords:** Functions of languages in Buddhist rituals; English use in Thai Buddhist community, Buddhist English and world Englishes

## Introduction

English in Thailand is not yet seen as fully developed in the nativized variety and Thai people do not associate themselves with the English language (Chamcharatsri,2013). However, Thai people had perceived the English language formally since the British established the diplomatic relations in 1612 when the East India Company ship “*The Globe*” arrived in Siam carrying a letter from King James I for the Siamese king. The dual relationship is a result of trade contacts, travellers, missionaries, traders, and soldiers, and include Buddhist scriptures and literary works (British library, 2015).

Particularly after the British defeated the Burmese in 1837, the Siamese elite introduced the concept of modernity and Westernisation in response to global political circumstances. King Rama IV opened the country to the West inviting missionaries who brought knowledge of sciences and technological advancement and the importance of English Language was concerned. His son, Prince Chulalongkorn (King Rama VI) learned English from Mrs. Anna Leonowens during 1862-1867. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Thailand in 1518 and they were allowed to open a Christian mission. Protestant missionaries arrived in 1828, and the continuous residence of American missionaries dates from 1833. Later, the Presbyterian mission entered the Kingdom of Siam. In 1888, John A. Eggins started the earlier boys’ school which would later become Bangkok Christian College. The main purposes of the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam (Thailand) were: Evangelism (sharing the gospel with the Thai people); Education (teaching Thai young people basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills as well as English language and about the Christian faith); and Medical Care (healing and ministering to the sick among the Thai people) (Up-ngern,2012).

Apart from the purpose of missionaries, the spread of Christianity in Thailand, Buddha's teaching is also translated into English for worldwide diffusion. Furthermore, the functions of English in Thailand are partly for religious purposes. In Thai contexts, English language teaching associates with religious content in a more degree where Buddha's teachings are translated into English for the purpose of religious propagation. Monks do not really speak English in Buddhist rituals, but they speak English when they give sermons in foreign countries. Hereby this study serves as a pilot project to explore religions, especially Buddhism in Thailand that plays an important role in the tide of global English and the perspective of the English-speaking world. The investigation draws on Fishman's (1972) theory on domains of language use.

### **Buddhism in Thailand**

The only work that discusses a similar topic is Pandharipande (2013, 2010), and Herat (2015) who analysed the patterns of language use in religious rituals of the diasporic in the US and Sri Lankan communities, where they observe English is a new code added to the religious Community's repertoire of languages of rituals in both countries. They state that religious identity was extremely important in maintaining language. Hinduism and Buddhism are similar to other religions, have many sects, which subscribe to diverse beliefs and practices. Sri Lankan Buddhists practise "Theravada Buddhism" which means "the view of the elders" which is similar to the practice in Thailand, the closest to the Buddha's original teachings in the first century C.E. "Theravada Buddhism" in Thailand has also been heavily influenced by the spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, especially in the 200s BCE. Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhists consider it important to commit sections of Pali texts to memory to be used in Buddhist rituals. However, the spoken variety in Thailand consists of formal and colloquial Thai used in ordinary conversation and mixture between Thai and Pali in Buddhist rituals (Wood, 2016).

Globalisation and the new cultural context had an effect on language use and maintenance of the languages of Buddhism for the Thai Buddhist community in Thailand. This is the result of elevating languages to the status of supporting academic, cultural and religious aspects in the diaspora. The nature of diaspora Buddhism may be changed by the next generation of Buddhists. In this regard, Buddhists temples offer many Buddhist programmes such as meditations as well as series of sermons in both English and Thai websites. Many free resources of Theravada Buddhism in the form of audio visual material enable devotees to listen or watch Buddhist rituals as they are performed in the original Pali, Thai and English language (Pandharipande, 2013).

Likewise, it is also observed that the schools plays an important role in connecting Buddhists or those interested in Buddhism together with English learning communities all over the countries excluding in media the through the dissemination of Buddhist content using the language for sermons and explanations. Furthermore, use of English for Buddhist practice, like Vipassana meditation and preaching were authenticated through translations of Buddhist chanting for prayers and authorising the production of audio CDs and DVDs songs by locals and celebrities containing mixed Pali and English verses for the spread of Buddhism in the world context (Herat, 2015). Although this is not a wide use, it is a particular use, as it shows an expansion of domain functions for English within the religious domain. However, the continuation of Buddhist rituals in Thai and Pali will ensure the longevity of these languages.

The functions of English in Thailand are mainly for educational and economic purposes (Foley, 2005). However, Thai people increasingly use English as a part of their daily life and rituals. It is possible that English could be developed into another nativized variety in Southeast Asia although the scope for rejection of the concept of English is extremely high due to the fact that Thai people pride themselves on having not been colonized (Baker&Phongpaichit,2009). Recently, English has expanded beyond the academic purpose in EFL context and “Thainess” is stated as “Thai way of using English in a religious domain”. The modern Thais seem to carry some positive impressions of the hybrid discourse, namely translation old Pali chanting into Thai and English languages. When people use English in a religious domain in combination of the sound of the sacred language, Pali, it refers to the existence of variety of English usages. This phenomenon can be explained by the following statement “ English is a powerful and prestigious language inside and outside the religious domain, which is associated with the educated elite of society” although English is not the first language for Thais (Herat, 2015). Besides, the temples recruit many native speakers of English to the monkhood. This confirms the assimilation to the both cultures, Thai and Western. Continue to live as Buddhists, foreigners will be encouraged to learn some Pali and to memorise “Dhamma” and perform rituals with local Buddhists. There are evident changes taking place and challenges to maintaining Thai and Pali. Therefore, it is uncertain to predict that these languages will be completely replaced by English especially when native monks employ English as the language for global communication in the worldwide context.

## **World Englishes and World religions**

There are some questions that linguists, philosophers and theologians, have been debating for centuries. How does language mediate the concept of the

world ? And is it reliable guide to the world ? How does it enable a community to constitute itself in terms of shared beliefs ? All these questions relate to religions. Language needs to adopt particular forms and meanings, in order to serve the needs of religions, in particular ways. There is a gap that the sociolinguists avoid to study when they answer these questions because they think that the domain of religion belongs to anthropologists, philosophers and theologians. However, the sociolinguists will still need to know: First, how language variation aligns with religions; Second, whether the use of languages in a religious context bring about changes in languages, and Third, what are the properties of a religion as a sociolinguistic domain. The Kachruvian conceptualization created a space in World Englishes that involves cultures as a part of context and religions or other belief systems are parts of culture derived from the particular type of society and cultural inheritance. The role of English, as well as other languages, are studied to indicate the relationship between languages involved in a religious context. Is there a tension between Pali and English in a Thai context ? Are World Englishes flexible to adapt for the users' implication in religious domain or is religion diaspora affected by the conservative ideology of religious groups? According to Daniel (2013), to understand the relationship of languages in religious domains, we will confirm the idea that English is nativized or adapted by the speakers to the needs of contexts across the global world. Anyway, world religions have also undergone the changes according to social movement within their cultures, so attention is bound to come around to the role of participants who adhere to a religion in that society and their impact on the domain of religions as well (Daniel, 2013).

## **Theoretical Background**

In this current study, the theoretical background and concepts are developed from the core value theory (Smolicz & Secombe, 1985) and functional load of languages (Pandharipande 2006, 2010). A language is maintained if it has a higher "functional load" and it is "transparent" to its function. The maintenance of a language depends on the "Functional load" : A language used in more domains has higher functional load than a language which is used in fewer domains. The higher the functional load, the better the chances for that language to survive (Pandharipande 2006, 2010). This is associated with the sociology of language that focuses on the "core value" which plays a crucial role in cultural identity. Languages can be seen as core value by ethnic groups and it is the most fundamental component of the group's culture. Thais have adopted English in religious practice as well as including Thai and Pali. The chance of maintaining or losing the languages is examined by the functions of each language in a Thai context. The languages are the symbols and identity of group membership,

especially in a religious domain. People who are interested in core values will use languages to serve their purpose and put their commitment to languages into practice. The data is supplemented by media sources and documentary reviews to examine the use of languages that are authenticated by people involved in religious domains in a Thai context.

### **The popularity of Buddhism**

The popularity of Buddhism, for example in U.S.A., can be measured by the rise of public conversation in periodicals and the large increase in the number of periodicals published in U.S.A. (Dankan & Tomoe,2010). However, the tours were taken by the approximately 10 million visitors who are interested in temples and Buddhism in Thailand each year. Thailand has gained an influential position as a centre of learning and knowledge of Buddhism and its reputation as a safe and peaceful destination is attracting thousands of foreigners from all over the world to learn more about the long tradition of Buddhist faith. One example of its most famous practices can be observed in the art of meditation at Wat Mahathat, the primary centre of meditation studies in Bangkok where nearly 4,000 foreigners have taken courses between 1998 and 2003, and foreign monks are predicting steady growth in the years ahead. This can be explained by the fact that the West is becoming increasingly enamoured with the ways of the East. High-profile figures like the Dalai Lama, a Nobel Prize winner, have helped attract more interest in the faith and Buddhist philosophy, especially seeking to enhance concentration and mind-power (Mahachulalongkorn Rajvidyalaya University,2016). Other popular Buddhist study sites and meditation centers, for example, include Sunday Buddhist Center of Wat Borwornniwetviharn in Bangkok, Wat Ampawan in Singburi province, Wat Pananachart, Wat Nongpapong in Ubonratchathani province, Wat Pa Ban Tat in Udonthani province and so on.

### **English and Buddhism: English speaking monks in religious domains**

Thailand is one of the world's most heavily populated Buddhist countries. The vast majority of Thai people are practitioners of Theravada Buddhism, the official religion of Thailand, (About 93.6 percent of all the people in Thailand are Buddhists; and about 4.6 percent of the population is Muslim). The king is the defender of all religions whereas this country is one of the largest Buddhism population in the world (Hays, 2014).English is used in different domains and becomes the dominant language in the secular domain in Thailand, as it is the language of work, education, commerce, etc. whereas in the religious domain, English is becoming more powerful than it used to be in the past.

The arrival of the foreign Buddhist priests to learn Buddhism results in the mixed code that is predominant among English speaking Buddhist priests in Thailand. Their conversation among native friends and preaching in foreign countries is in English because of the worldwide spread of Buddhism, but when being in Thailand, they are always encouraged to speak Thai while preaching as most of the audiences are Thais. The foreign monks also show attempts to be inclusive by integrating into Thai society.

## **Research questions**

Following the framework used by Panharipande (2013) and Herat (2015), this study seeks to answer the following research questions :

1. In a global sociolinguistic situation, what are the ways in which English and other languages work in the domain of Buddhism ?
2. What are the main characteristics of languages and contents used by monks, scholars and other people regarding Buddhism ?

## **Methodology**

The study focuses on the relationship between language and religion and it discusses how and why English becomes dominant in the religious domain among Buddhists in Thailand. The data for the investigation was collected through authentic VDO clips and the data also supplemented from literature review. The data was analyzed and followed by the discussion of examples of language use. The implications of this discussion are useful for predicting the future religious language change in global context. The investigation draws on what Crystal (2000) mentioned as “English as a killer language”. So, it is a question that “Will English replace Pali in a Thai context ?”

## **Analysis and Findings**

### **Samples of language use in the Buddhist domain**

Buddhism adopted Pali and Sanskrit as its main language. Since the time of Homer, Greek and other European languages have been influenced by Sanskrit and Pali. Many words from Pali and Sanskrit are shared between Greek and other European languages for everyday use (Hopkins, 2016). However, in the following section in the religious context, we will consider some samples of language from the recorded data to illustrate the functions of English and other languages in Buddhist rituals. The keyword analysis of the recorded transcripts showed that the most frequent words that were used among international Buddhists was the word

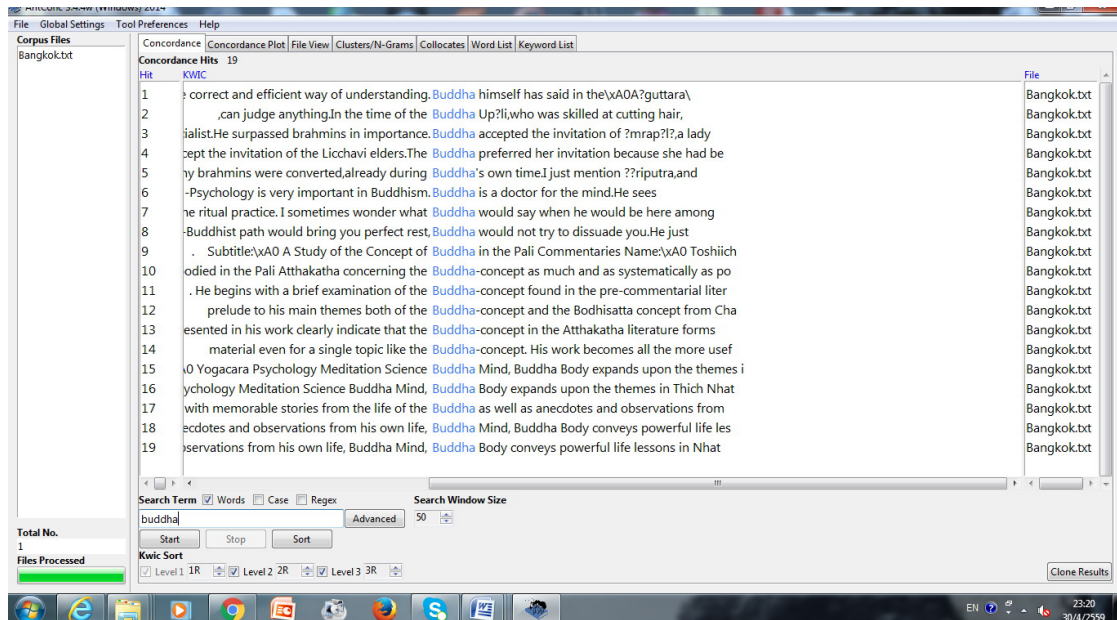
“ Buddha” which is commonly observed according to Thai Buddhist website. In this example, some key words are selected by the corpus analysis program from the website for international Buddhist college in Thailand ,“ http://www. ibc.ac.th/en/” which is followed by more than 245,080 people in social networks.

**Table 1 : The number of key words appeared by the corpus analysis program“ AntConc program”**

Key word	Buddha
(Frequency )	50

According to AntConc program , the author used the word “ Buddha” 50 times

**Table 2 : The sample results from AntConc program 3.4. 4w window 2014**



### Example (1) : “Buddham Saranam Gacchami”

As Example (1) demonstrates, although Thai is used for the Buddhist teaching, Pali words for important Buddhist concepts are mentioned by monks. So religion has a strong influence on Pali maintenance. The following chanting is very common for Buddhists and no words in English or Thai language can replace it effectively. It is recited in its Pali as part of the ritual worship.



As Example (2) is shown below, the continued use of Pali in ritual chanting can always be observed as a fact that religion has a strong influence on language maintenance. However, these rituals are shared by students who are studying English in school. Some samples from the recorded data confirmed that English is being used at national Buddhist chanting contests and the worshippers are students in different school and grades. The English language that was used for praying can be found in the contest. Evening, morning and other kinds of chants are also translated into English.

### **Example 2 : Praise to the Triple Gem**

*Araham Sammā-sambuddho Bhagavā Buddhāṃ Bhagavantāṃ Abhivādemī*

The Lord, the Perfectly Self-Enlightened One, I pay homage to the Buddha, the Awakened One, the Blessed One.

*Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo Dhammāṃ Namassāmi*

The Teaching is well expounded by the Blessed One, I pay homage to the Dhamma

(prostrate once)

*Supaṭipanno Bhagavato Sāvaka-saṅgho Saṅghāṃ Namāmi*

The Sangha, the Blessed One's disciples have practiced well, I pay homage to the Sangha.

([www.buddhanet.net/pali\\_chant.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/pali_chant.htm); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-402SYMkGdM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-402SYMkGdM))

According to the hybrid form of chant, the authority of the school, as providers of education, they can decide which languages can be used in chanting or make decision for cross –curriculum integration, more than one academic discipline like Buddhist teaching and English are connected. There is also a close relationship between the school and the Buddhist's institution and people look up to the monks as teachers and guides.

Many schools were installed inside temples. Some Thai monks are volunteers for teaching English in Buddhist temple schools or inside temples in Thailand ([www.thaiworldview.com/society/day5](http://www.thaiworldview.com/society/day5); [www.msn.com/th-th/news/world/](http://www.msn.com/th-th/news/world/)).

The increased use of English is supported by the intervention of good ethics or Buddhist teaching in the classroom context. Nowadays Teaching ethics and the content regarding Dhamma has become more prevailing. Basic Buddhist ethics are written in simple English Vocabulary, in an attempt to make the text more modern. For example, Phra MahaSompong's text is in Thai (2008), but half of the title is in English. The monk "W.Vachiramedhi" wrote many books on applied Buddhism which are translated into English (W.Vachiramedhi,2012) Some teachers and scholars designed their English lessons based on the reading of Lord

Buddha's life and Buddhist's ethic. In Buddhist Sunday schools in Thailand, many monks teach English and provide their own materials in English (Sasson,2012). As it can be observed in Table 3, the following Buddhism vocabulary are found in the website for teaching English for Buddhist teaching.

**Table 3: An example of Thai–English Buddhist Dictionary**

ทำบุญ = make merit	พระ = monk
ใส่บาตร = offer food to the monk(s)	สามเณร = novice
บาตรพระ = alms bowl	เด็กวัด = temple boy
บริจาค = donate	วัด = temple
ปิดทอง (บนองค์พระ) = put gold leaf onto (the Buddha image/statue) /to gild	เจดีย์ = pagoda
กราบพระ/ไหว้พระ = pay respect to (the monk/the Buddha image)	พุทธศาสนา = Buddhism
กรวดน้ำ = pour water of dedication /to make a libation	พระพุทธเจ้า = The Lord Buddha
อธิษฐาน/สวดมนต์ = pray	พระพุทธรูป = The Buddha image/statue
	พระเครื่อง = small Buddha image used as amulet
	เครื่องรางของขลัง = amulet
	พุทธศาสนิกชน = Buddhist
Source: Thai–English Buddhist Dictionary ( <a href="http://www.tipitaka.org/thai/Dhamma2.pdf">http://www.tipitaka.org/thai/Dhamma2.pdf</a> )	

As it can be observed in Table 4, the role of religious institutions like Vipassana meditation centers is to produce songs and use English for religious diffusion in worldwide context due to sociocultural change and globalization that have impacts on the use of world language. The songs were originally composed to serve religious purposes and were sponsored by the Sathira Dhammasathan Center in Bangkok. The lyrics are composed both in English and Thai and is accompanied by a mixture of the modern music and the gesture of meditation. The text of the song is as follows:

**Table 4 : The song “Flower Bloom”**

.“Flower Bloom”	
I’m breathing in	I’m breathing out as flowers bloom
The mountain’s high	The river as sign.
Here and there I breath I fly	

As observed in Example 3, The media and celebrities use English to connect Buddhists across oceans and allows them to create a global religious community. Moreover, a DechenShak-Dagsay is a Tibetan artist whose ambition is to bring ancient mantra chants to a younger, modern audience within her own Vajrayana Buddhist tradition and the Theravada tradition which is dominant in Thailand. Her work and her attitude are described as follows :

### Example(3)

“A very special musical cooperation started in 2009 with the project BEYOND, with *Tina Turner*<sup>1</sup> and Regula Curti on which Dechen represents the Buddhist voice on a spiritual album promoting peace and understanding between the various religious faiths. The “BEYOND” records went gold and platinum ([www.bangkokpost.com/print/756748](http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/756748)).

### Conclusion

It is concluded that sociocultural change impacts the language of religion. Languages ranging from Pali, to the Thai languages are used as well as English. This could be observed as a natural consequence of the contact of Buddhism with the new sociocultural context of a global world, where English is the dominant language. English now appears in the spiritual realm. It is acceptable to pray in English in different Thai Buddhist contexts. It is a question for further research in a sense that “Does the use of English mark the ‘secularization of Buddhism?’” It is a fact that English can be used in both the secular domain and in the domain of religion, and in order to express and communicate the religious meaning to the other people in the world and therefore, the use of English is almost mandatory. In addition, English is seen as a language of the identity of the educated Buddhists. That is to say, the use of Pali is not fully articulated and implemented by the monks and therefore, the use of Thai and English for translation is necessary for Thais

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1 Tina Turner became a Nichiren Buddhist in the early 1970s. She joined the project and said “ This project is about another love, a love of coming together, a love of spreading it in a different way across the planet. Now I am on another stage of passing another word in another way without the short dress and the red lips. I got the attention with that in order to help support this movement, which is much greater. I am happy that I did join.” She added “ I began chanting ‘Nam MyohoRengeKyo’ over and over. I found something changed inside of me, the load of the pressure of my life started to lift. I started to become happy and then slowly the thoughts came to me of what to do to change my life. My spiritual practice of singing the prayer helped me to go back on stage as myself.” (<http://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/beyond-all-differences-interview-with-tina-turner-and-the-beyond-music-quartet>)

and foreigners. This can also be observed in the text of a devotional song from a CD or VDO clip prepared by famous artists and religious institutions which show how media is used as a mechanism or method of authenticating the change in the Buddhism practices for global communication. The secular audio-visual media which uses English to promote spiritual practices on –line is important for the propagation of Buddhism. The translations of religious chants which appear in the mass media is also determined by the availability of that sponsored institution.

From the text above, it is possible to see an English speaking community that shares the same ideology and this indicates that English has a great “**functional load or lines up with functional purposes**” because it can be used in many domains. So it has higher functional load than the language which is used in fewer domains. Moreover, in Thai contexts, there is no nuanced tension between the role of Pali, Thai and English. In summary, English is learned as tool to understand other diverse cultures in world Englishes due to the fact that it is also widely used in the religious domain. According to intercultural attitudes, nowadays people share the same world religion in an inner circle, an outer circle and an expanding circle. Therefore, English is able to cope with variety of people with different values or backgrounds and provide a chance for better understanding while interacting with one another in religious domain (Krachu 1992;Beneke 2000).

## **Recommendation**

The use of English are authenticated and sanctioned by people who have authority to use it: the mass media, organizations, monks, educators and students. This also includes productions of recorded information in form of VDO clips on line that contains mixed Pali, Thai and English in the religious domain. However, the way Thais nativize the languages into Thai culture needs further investigation to pinpoint how they adopt the phonetic structure to facilitate the local pronunciation and created the new forms of pronunciation from creativity that may not be comprehensible for native speaker of English or English speaking people in the global context.

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