

Broadening ‘DEAF-initions’ of Linguistic Diversity in Southeast Asia

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Like other areas on the world, Southeast Asia is a linguistically and culturally diverse region. Among scholars as well as the public at large, however, understanding and appreciation of the full extent of that diversity not been fully realized because an entire class of languages—sign languages—have been overlooked and excluded from most documentary anthropological linguistic accounts. This was certainly the case in Thailand. The Kingdom is a highly multilingual society with a complex language ecology that includes numerous spoken languages as well as several distinct signed languages.

Using Thailand as a case study, this presentation demonstrates both the need and the potential for broadening ‘DEAF-initions’ of linguistic and cultural diversity through the study of languages expressed in the manual modality. This presentation begins by identifying examples of different types of extant sign languages found in the country; describing typical characteristics of their respective speech communities; and assessing each language’s current state of vitality or endangerment. Examination of unusual features of those signing varieties, in turn, will illustrate the ways in which research on un(der)documented manual-visual languages is expanding and enhancing our collective understanding of language typologies, language universals, historical comparative linguistics, and so on.