

9 *The future of Nyah Kur*

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1 Introduction

Nyah Kur is a Mon-Khmer language of the Austroasiatic language family and is spoken in central Thailand. It belongs to the same sub-branch as Mon which is spoken in Thailand and Myanmar by about two million people. Nyah Kur and Modern Mon are too different to be dialects of the same language, yet, Nyah Kur is very similar to the Old Mon language which is found in inscriptions from the Dvaravati period. Diffloth (1984) in his book on Dvaravati, Old Mon, and Nyah Kur has proposed that Nyah Kur is an offshoot of Dvaravati Mon spoken about 2000 years ago. Payau (1979), Theraphan (1984), Subhab (1986) and Sudsawad (1990) have described various dialects of Nyah Kur spoken by the best speakers from various Nyah Kur villages in Chaiyaphum and Petchabun. All these dialects present typical Mon-Khmer characteristics.

A few years ago I happened to meet a Nyah Kur woman about twenty years of age who was working in a cafeteria at Mahidol University. She told me that her parents were Nyah Kur and that she spoke *nakun* instead of *nahkur*. This phonetic variation struck me as interesting and inspired me to investigate the current language situation in the Nyah Kur villages.

According to the *Ethnolinguistic map of Thailand* (Suwilai et al. 1998) the Nyah Kur people live in twenty-three villages in three provinces of Thailand: Nakhorn Rachasima, Chaiyaphum and Petchabun (see Figure 1). The population is between 4,000 and 6,000 speakers. However, all villages contain a mix of ethnic Thai Korat, Lao and others, as well as Nyah Kur. The degree of mixing between the Nyah Kur and other ethnic groups varies. The Nyah Kur population in Nakhorn Rachasima has almost died out with only a few Nyah Kur speakers in each of the three villages. They believe that after their generation Nyah Kur will certainly disappear from that area. In Petchabun the situation is a little better except for Ban Thaduang where there are more speakers. However, the Nyah Kur language has undergone some rapid changes. Although the linguistic situation in the Nyah Kur villages of Chaiyaphum is better, the language in each village is at a different stage of decline.

This paper describes the current Nyah Kur language situation and ventures a prediction of whether or not Nyah Kur will survive this age of mass communication. The investigation was carried out in 1997 and 1998 in four Nyah Kur villages in Chaiyaphum where the majority

of the population are Nyah Kur speakers. The purpose was to find out whether there is a chance of survival or any possibility of reversing the situation. This paper deals with two main aspects of the language situation:

- (1) Phonetic changes in Nyah Kur final consonants *r*, *l*, *c* and *ɲ* in the speech of speakers from three age groups; and
- (2) Attitudes toward the Nyah Kur language and community and Nyah Kur language usage and ability.

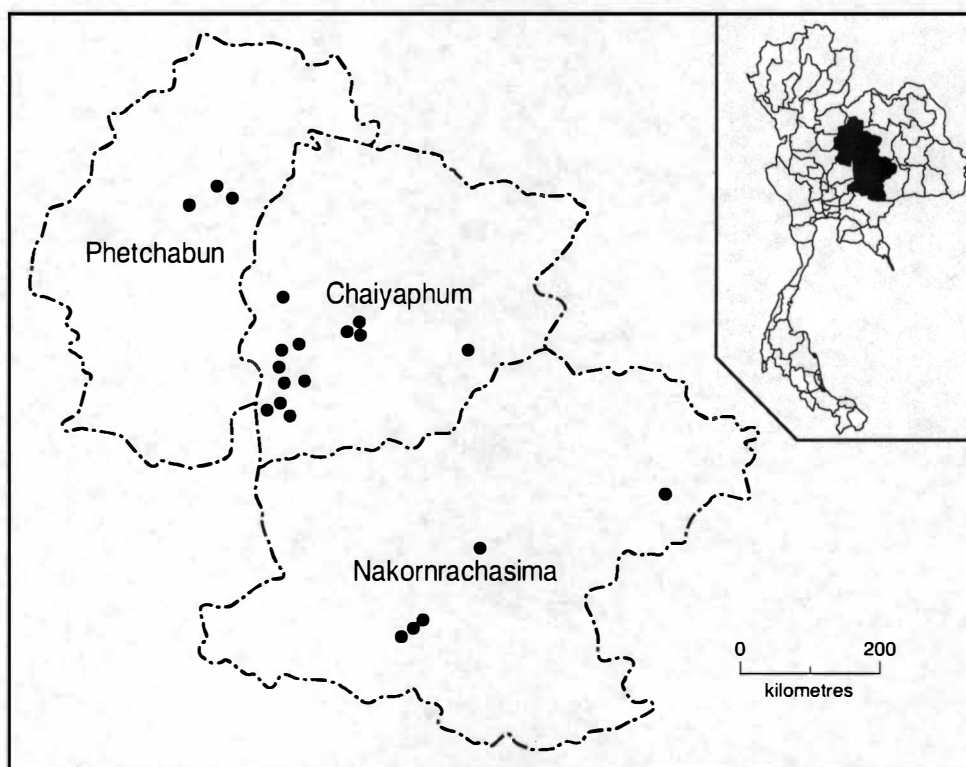


Figure 1: Nyah Kur settlements in Thailand

2 Phonetic changes in Nyah Kur final consonants

Final consonants *r*, *l*, *c* and *ɲ* are distinctive in Mon-Khmer languages. To investigate these final consonants the author examined the speech of three Nyah Kur age groups: (1) over fifty years of age, (2) between twenty-one and fifty, and (3) under twenty-one years of age. Five speakers from each age group in each of the four villages were investigated. In general this study revealed that younger Nyah Kur speakers appear to be strongly influenced by the Thai phonological system.

2.1 Final *r*

The investigation of the use of final *r* shows that the change starts with Nyah Kur speakers who are aged between twenty-one and fifty years. Some speakers use the flap *r* instead of trill *r*, and lateral *l* is used after long vowels by some people. However, all Nyah

Kur speakers under 21 use either *n* or *j* (but not both in variation) instead of final *r*, or totally omit the final *r* (this omission is represented as 0 ‘zero’ in Table 1 below).

Table 1: Phonetic variants of final *-r* in Nyah Kur for three age groups

English gloss:	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
‘dog’		<i>chûr</i>	<i>chûr/r</i>	<i>chûn/j/0</i>
‘pumpkin’		<i>mpî:r</i>	<i>mpî:r/r/l</i>	<i>mpî:n/j/0</i>
‘ear’		<i>katûær</i>	<i>katûær/r/l</i>	<i>katûæn/j/0</i>
‘salt’		<i>paʔû:r</i>	<i>paʔû:r/r/l</i>	<i>paʔû:n/j/0</i>
‘to roll’		<i>tamâr</i>	<i>tamâr/r</i>	<i>tamân/j/0</i>
‘short’		<i>chêr</i>	<i>chêr/r</i>	<i>chê:n/j/0</i>
‘mat’		<i>nhâ:r</i>	<i>nhâ:r/r</i>	<i>nhâ:n/j/0</i>
‘to fly’		<i>phâr</i>	<i>phâr/r</i>	<i>phâr/j/0</i>
‘dove’		<i>pûr</i>	<i>pûr/r</i>	<i>pûr/j/0</i>
‘to crawl’		<i>mama:r</i>	<i>mama:r/r/l</i>	<i>mama:n/j/0</i>
‘tomorrow’		<i>ŋu:r</i>	<i>ŋu:r/l/l</i>	<i>ŋu:n/j/0</i>
‘to carry by fingers’		<i>jəjə:r</i>	<i>jəjə:r/r/l</i>	<i>jəjə:n/j/0</i>
‘to turn upside down’		<i>kaŋâ:r</i>	<i>kaŋâ:r/r/l</i>	<i>kaŋâ:n/j/0</i>
‘mountain’		<i>kûr</i>	<i>kûr/r</i>	<i>kûn/j/0</i>
‘lime’		<i>mô:r</i>	<i>mô:r/r/l</i>	<i>mô:n/j/0</i>

2.2 Final *l*

The findings show that Nyah Kur speakers under twenty-one years of age use final alveolar nasal *n* instead of lateral *l*, whereas Nyah Kur speakers of other age groups still use final *l*.

Table 2: Phonetic variants of final *-l* in Nyah Kur for three age groups

English gloss:	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
‘lazy’		<i>ncʰî:l</i>	<i>ncʰî:l</i>	<i>ncʰî:n</i>
‘cotton’		<i>tûal</i>	<i>tûal</i>	<i>tûan</i>
‘to smooth’		<i>châ:l</i>	<i>châ:l</i>	<i>châ:n</i>
‘shallow’		<i>kadâ:l</i>	<i>kadâ:l</i>	<i>kadâ:n</i>
‘to plant’		<i>tâl</i>	<i>tâl</i>	<i>tân</i>
‘needle’		<i>nchul</i>	<i>nchul</i>	<i>nchun</i>
‘gourd’		<i>lul</i>	<i>lul</i>	<i>lun</i>
‘to give’		<i>kûl</i>	<i>kûl</i>	<i>kûn</i>
‘mortar’		<i>nû:l</i>	<i>nû:l</i>	<i>nû:n</i>
‘olive’		<i>kaʔî:l</i>	<i>kaʔî:l</i>	<i>kaʔî:n</i>
‘howl’		<i>khâl</i>	<i>khâl</i>	<i>khân</i>
‘leg’		<i>thɬ</i>	<i>thɬ</i>	<i>thɬn</i>
‘stump’		<i>takhâl</i>	<i>takhâl</i>	<i>takhân</i>
‘gibbon’		<i>juljûl</i>	<i>juljûl</i>	<i>juljûn</i>
‘heel’		<i>nə:l</i>	<i>nə:l</i>	<i>nə:n</i>

2.3 Final *c*

Findings from this study show that some Nyah Kur speakers under twenty-one years of age use final alveolar stop *t* and some use final palatal stop *c* (but not both in variation), whereas older speakers still use final *c*.

Table 3: Phonetic variants of final -*c* in Nyah Kur for three age groups

English gloss:	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
'to fear'		<i>phlî:c</i>	<i>phlî:c</i>	<i>phlî:c/t</i>
'torn'		<i>tíc</i>	<i>tíc</i>	<i>tíc/t</i>
'small'		<i>nê:c</i>	<i>nê:c</i>	<i>nê:c/t</i>
'pretty'		<i>mê:c</i>	<i>mê:c</i>	<i>mê:c/t</i>
'cloth'		<i>ne:c</i>	<i>ne:c</i>	<i>ne:c/t</i>
'to tear'		<i>chê:c</i>	<i>chê:c</i>	<i>chê:c/t</i>
'sweet'		<i>tadâ:c</i>	<i>tadâ:c</i>	<i>tadâ:c/t</i>
'pig'		<i>khî:c</i>	<i>khî:c</i>	<i>khî:c/t</i>
'to swallow'		<i>ɲu:c</i>	<i>ɲu:c</i>	<i>ɲu:c/t</i>
'bald'		<i>talâ:c</i>	<i>talâ:c</i>	<i>talâ:c/t</i>
'to steal'		<i>khác</i>	<i>khác</i>	<i>khác/t</i>
'to cut'		<i>kéc</i>	<i>kéc</i>	<i>kéc/t</i>
'to dive'		<i>múc</i>	<i>múc</i>	<i>múc/t</i>
'a kind of vegetable'		<i>phrû:c</i>	<i>phrû:c</i>	<i>phrû:c/t</i>
'chisel'		<i>phənʔû:c</i>	<i>phənʔû:c</i>	<i>phənʔû:c/t</i>

2.4 Final *ɲ*

The findings show that some Nyah Kur speakers over twenty-one years of age still use the final palatal nasal *ɲ*, and some use *n*, whereas some Nyah Kur speakers under twenty-one use alveolar nasal *n* and some use the palatal nasal *ɲ* (but one speaker does not use both nasals in variation).

Table 4: Phonetic variants of final -*ɲ* in Nyah Kur for three age groups

English gloss:	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
'ginger'		<i>pawî:ɲ</i>	<i>pawî:ɲ</i>	<i>pawî:ɲ/n</i>
'to swim'		<i>bî:ɲ</i>	<i>bî:ɲ</i>	<i>bî:ɲ/n</i>
'long'		<i>khlî:ɲ</i>	<i>khlî:ɲ</i>	<i>khlî:ɲ/n</i>
'grandfather'		<i>pê:ɲ</i>	<i>pê:ɲ</i>	<i>pê:ɲ/n</i>
'to lick'		<i>khla:ɲ</i>	<i>khla:ɲ</i>	<i>khla:ɲ/n</i>
'to shoot'		<i>pêɲ</i>	<i>pêɲ</i>	<i>pêɲ/n</i>
'to buy'		<i>ra:ɲ</i>	<i>ra:ɲ</i>	<i>ra:ɲ/n</i>
'yellow'		<i>pacû:ɲ</i>	<i>pacû:ɲ</i>	<i>pacû:ɲ/n</i>
'tiger'		<i>mpê:ɲ</i>	<i>mpê:ɲ</i>	<i>mpê:ɲ/n</i>
'red'		<i>phê:ɲ</i>	<i>phê:ɲ</i>	<i>phê:ɲ/n</i>
'elephant'		<i>cî:ɲ</i>	<i>cî:ɲ</i>	<i>cî:ɲ/n</i>
'fishing net'		<i>nêɲ</i>	<i>nêɲ</i>	<i>nêɲ/n</i>
'kite'		<i>khlîɲ</i>	<i>khlîɲ</i>	<i>khlîɲ/n</i>

According to oral histories related by elderly Nyah Kur speakers, the Nyah Kur were hunters and gatherers. They lived in a mountainous area that was malarial. About twenty years ago a road was built to this area, and the big trees were cut down by Thai businessmen from other areas. With the connection of electricity came television, and a primary school was opened. The Nyah Kur were then exposed to the outside world. More and more people from the outside, mainly Thai Korat and Lao speakers, started to settle in the same area as the Nyah Kur. The timing in this part of the Nyah Kur history corresponds well to what we have found in the speech of the Nyah Kur speakers. The younger generation of Nyah Kur speakers, especially those under twenty-one years, demonstrate clearly the change in the final consonants towards the Thai phonological system. The typical Mon-Khmer finals *r*, *l*, and *ŋ* have been changed to *n* and also to *j* in case of final *r*. Final *c* is changed to *t*. Alongside these changes in the speech of the younger generation are some changes in initial consonants, such as *ŋ* changing to *n* and deletion of final *h* and *ç*. For example, the word *ŋah kûr* 'people-mountain' which refers to their own language and ethnic group is pronounced *nakûn*.

It is also quite obvious that besides the changes towards the Thai phonological system, younger Nyah Kur speakers have lost about half the vocabulary which is still known to the older generation. Therefore, it is very clear that Nyah Kur is gradually changing to become more like Thai. However, it is also obvious that the younger speakers of Nyah Kur still keep some aspects of the general phonological system, such as voice quality, that is, the distinction between lax and tense voice. It is likely that in the future Nyah Kur will lose all Mon-Khmer final consonants and adopt the Thai system of finals and will also probably lose its original vocabulary. Nonetheless, it will keep the general phonological characteristics, so that in the distant future, when reflexification process is completed, this language will become a language that looks very much like Thai but has a special accent.

3 Language attitudes, language use and language ability

This section focuses on the Nyah Kur speakers' attitudes towards their language and ethnic groups, including Nyah Kur language use and ability. The investigation was conducted by the author in March 1999, in four villages — Wang Ajpho, Saliengthong, Wang Ajkhong and Namlat, Chaiyaphum provinces — by the use of questionnaires. The questionnaires are adapted from Benjamas Khamsakul (1998) and Wimon Thanapaes (1998). The research subjects were 120 Nyah Kur speakers of various backgrounds from four villages where Nyah Kur speakers are in the majority. The study also recorded each subject's age, sex, education, occupation, duration of time working outside the village, the ethnicity of parents and spouse, and so on.

3.1 Language attitudes

The questionnaire for investigating language attitudes is based on the theory of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Beliefs proposed by Allard and Landry (1986, 1992), Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977), and Kreidler and Kreidler (1972, 1976); this theory states that by determining the beliefs of a group regarding their language and other languages in the same area it is possible to predict a broad range of ethnolinguistic behaviours, including language attitude and language choice.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-three questions designed to investigate the Nyah Kur attitudes towards their own language and ethnic group. The questionnaire examined two

types of beliefs: Non-self beliefs and Self-beliefs. The Non-self beliefs section consisted of eight questions that involved the feelings of the native speakers of Nyah Kur toward the things that influence the vitality of the Nyah Kur group, such as demographic, economic, and cultural factors. The Self-beliefs section consisted of fourteen questions that focus on the feelings of the native Nyah Kur speakers about what is important in their minds as to the vitality of the group and what they think is appropriate for their group. Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. The questions and responses according to age groups are presented below. The scoring of the answers to these questions was as follows: strongly agree 5; agree 4; neutral 3; disagree 2; strongly disagree 1.

3.1.1 *Nonsel-belief*

As indicated in Table 5, the responses show that Nyah Kur speakers over fifty years old have a neutral attitude (23.70) whereas the Nyah Kur speakers between twenty-one and fifty years of age (26.00) and under twenty-one years of age (29.77) have a positive attitude in regard to these statements.

Table 5: Nonsel-belief about Nyah Kur language and Nyah Kur ethnic group

Statements (5 points each):	Ages:	Responses:		
		Over 50	21–50	Under 21
1.1 The Nyah Kur in this village are the majority.		3.58	4.27	4.21
1.2 The Nyah Kur in this village are wealthy.		2.36	2.35	2.04
1.3 Most leaders in this village are Nyah Kur people.		4.07	4.36	4.22
1.4 In 50 years there will still be Nyah Kur people in this area.		3.93	3.67	2.01
1.5 Most Nyah Kur people prefer to use Nyah Kur with Nyah Kur friends.		4.39	4.74	4.78
1.6 The school in this village has influence in promoting the Nyah Kur language among Nyah Kur students.		2.88	1.80	1.61
1.7 The government (local) has influence in supporting Nyah Kur culture.		3.68	2.63	2.61
1.8 The school here teaches Nyah Kur students to be proud of their ethnicgroup.		3.61	2.48	2.15
		23.70	26.00	29.77

3.1.2 *Self-belief*

As indicated in Table 6, the responses show that the Nyah Kur of all age groups are quite positive about their ethnic language.

Table 6: Self-belief about Nyah Kur language and Nyah Kur people

Statements (5 points each):	Responses:			
	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
2.1 If I could choose to be reborn, I would choose to be born Nyah Kur.		3.71	3.70	3.71
2.2 It is better to use Nyah Kur with children than other languages.		4.35	4.02	4.35
2.3 We should only use Nyah Kur in our family for its preservation.		3.77	3.63	3.77
2.4 It is not shameful that Nyah Kur does not have a writing system.		3.77	3.63	3.77
2.5 The government should support the culture of Nyah Kur		4.55	4.51	4.55
2.6 It would be better if there were only Nyah Kur people in this village.		4.55	4.26	4.55
2.7 Reducing Nyah Kur language use will have the effect of reducing the Nyah Kur identity.		4.46	3.05	4.46
2.8 It is shameful to be a part of the Nyah Kur group.		2.96	3.05	2.69
2.9 I feel more confident to tell people that I am Lao or Thai Isan than to tell them that I am Nyah Kur.		3.27	3.17	3.27
2.10 Knowing Nyah Kur language can help me get a good job.		2.80	1.92	1.98
2.11 It would be better to marry within the Nyah Kur group than with others.		4.23	3.58	4.23
2.12 This village is a place where Nyah Kur people will live forever.		4.64	4.46	4.64
2.13 Nyah Kur should have a writing system as do other languages.		4.49	4.67	4.49
2.14 If there is an election for leaders in this village, the Nyah Kur will elect Nyah Kur people.		4.76	4.68	4.76
		62.76	59.40	59.43

3.2 Language use

The use of the Nyah Kur language in various domains was studied to find out how often the Nyah Kur people use their own language. It is interesting to see the use of the Nyah Kur language in intra-group contact and inter-group situations. The intra-group situations include the nuclear family domain, extended family domain or relative domain, and neighbours in the same village domain. The inter-group situation includes the neighbours outside the village, in school, in trading and in government offices such as district offices. The nuclear family domain (24) includes father, mother, spouse, sibling, children over twenty-one and under twenty-one years of age. The extended family or relative domains (12) include older

relatives, younger relatives, and their children. The neighbours in the same village (12) are considered in terms of older neighbours, younger neighbours, and the children. The neighbours outside the village (12) are also considered in terms of older neighbours, younger neighbours and the children. The school domain (12) includes friends in school, friends out of school and teachers. Other domains are speaking with merchants (8) who come to sell things in the village and government officials (8) such as district officers, health personnel, and so on. The figures below show the use of Nyah Kur in different domains according to the age variable.

The responses show that the Nyah Kur still mostly use their ethnic language in their homes and among their family members. They also use Nyah Kur with relatives and friends in the village, but less with friends in other Nyah Kur villages. However, at school and in the local government office Nyah Kur is used very little. Speakers aged over twenty-one also speak Nyah Kur more than those under twenty-one years of age.

Table 7: Language use in seven different social domains of three age groups

Social Domains:	Ages:	Over 50	21–50	Under 21
Family domain (24)		17.79	14.51	9.94
Relatives domain (12)		9.52	9.85	8.32
Neighbour domain				
a. in the village (12)		9.51	9.65	7.91
b. out of the village (12)		7.75	7.07	2.88
School (12)		1.83	3.98	3.36
Trade (8)		3.04	8.47	3.12
Government officials (8)		0.08	0.42	0.06

3.3 Language ability

The questionnaire section on language ability of the Nyah Kur consists of two parts which both involve self-evaluation and can give us some insights into the whole situation of this preliterate or semi-literate society.

The first part of the questionnaire asked about ability to speak and understand the languages they come across in their daily life. These are Nyah Kur, Lao, Thai Korat and Standard Thai. The Nyah Kur speakers were asked to self-evaluate their ability to understand and speak each language: no understanding, a little, enough, good, and very good. The percentages for the ability at the 'very good' level according to the Nyah Kur of different age groups are presented below.

The responses show that the Nyah Kur speakers understand and speak Nyah Kur more than other languages found in their villages. The speakers over fifty years can understand and speak Nyah Kur the most (98%), whereas speakers 21–50 years of ages can understand and speak more (79.63%) than those under twenty-one years of age (42.4%). It is noticeable that the Nyah Kur can understand Lao, Thai Korat and Standard Thai more than they can speak them. Nyah Kur speakers under twenty-one years of age can understand and speak Standard Thai more than older people.

Table 8: Ability to understand and speak Nyah Kur, Lao, Thai Korat and Standard Thai for three age groups

Knowledge of languages:	Ages:	Ability:		
		Over 50	21–50	Under 21
1. Understanding Nyah Kur		98	79.63	42.4
2. Speaking Nyah Kur		98	79.1	51.5
3. Understanding Lao		21.95	16	6.1
4. Speaking Lao		15.5	11	6.1
5. Understanding Thai Korat		28.2	31.7	5.4
6. Speaking Thai Korat		10.6	20.03	5.9
7. Understanding Standard Thai		30.1	26.23	36.4
8. Speaking Standard Thai		22.75	22.53	33.3

The second part of the questionnaire on language ability of Nyah Kur speakers of different age groups asked them to self-test whether a Nyah Kur can speak in Nyah Kur on certain topics. The Nyah Kur speakers were asked to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. ‘Yes’ indicated a greater degree of ability. ‘No’ indicated a lesser degree of ability (although some ‘No’ answers may indicate a greater degree of ability).

The responses in Table 9 show that the Nyah Kur people still have a good ability in speaking the Nyah Kur language: 80% can speak in Nyah Kur on various topics.

Table 9: Self-test of speaking in Nyah Kur on various topics

Language ability:	Responses:	
	Yes	No
1. Can you say how to go from this village to the district office?	90.8	10.2
2. Can you ask and tell the time in Nyah Kur?	92.8	8.2
3. Can you tell the history of the settlement of your family in Nyah Kur?	90.2	10.8
4. Can you explain how to grow rice in Nyah Kur?	92.2	8.8
5. Can you give the details of the members in your family in Nyah Kur?	98.9	2.1
6. Can you tell someone to do something and understand when someone asks you to do something in Nyah Kur?	96.3	4.7
7. Can you explain about climate and vegetation in Nyah Kur?	93.22	6.8
8. Are there times when you cannot remember Nyah Kur words?	49.6	51.4
9. If Thai speakers talk with you about politics, can you talk about this?	73.6	27.4
10. If the doctor explains to you about disease and how to protect yourself from disease will you be able to understand?	92.5	7.5
11. Can you sing a song or tell jokes in Nyah Kur?	58.1	42.9
12. If you quarrel with a Nyah Kur, can you abuse him in Nyah Kur?	94.1	6.9
13. Can you voice your opinion about various things in Nyah Kur?	94.9	6.1
14. Do you often make mistakes speaking Nyah Kur?	62.4	38.6
15. Can you speak Nyah Kur like a native speaker?	87.5	13.5
16. Do people know that you are not ethnic Thai when you speak Thai?	32.1	67.9
	80	20

4 Conclusion

In the present era of globalisation, the mass media — especially television — are very powerful. TV can reach right into the homes of the villagers. The languages of wider communication are pushing out the smaller minority languages. Nyah Kur cannot escape this situation. The younger generation speaks Nyah Kur less than the older people. In the mixed family where the spouse is not a Nyah Kur speaker it is very likely that the children do not speak Nyah Kur. This type of family is becoming more and more common in Nyah Kur villages. However, this research investigated only the pure Nyah Kur race in four Nyah Kur villages in order to see what the situation is like and to find out whether there is any chance to maintain this language in the future.

A sample of 120 Nyah Kur speakers of different age groups were interviewed about their use of final consonants *r*, *l*, *c* and *ɲ* which are the typical final consonants of the Mon-Khmer language family, in order to see how much Nyah Kur speakers can still keep the characteristics of their ethnic language. I have found that the language of the young generation increasingly favours the Thai phonological system. This is actually a normal development and has happened to many minority languages in Thailand. However, it is also noticeable that the vocabulary of the younger generation has also decreased to about half that of the older generation. This shows that the Nyah Kur are going to gradually lose their language in the future if nothing is done to maintain it. This is also a natural process.

The results of the questionnaire survey of attitudes toward the Nyah Kur language and identity are still very positive. The Nyah Kur people have Nyah Kur people as their leaders and will elect Nyah Kur people to be their leaders. Most of them use their ethnic language at home with their relatives and neighbours in the villages. They think that the Nyah Kur language and culture give them their identity, and they want the government to promote their culture and identity. They also want to have an orthography for their language. This desire is very interesting as it shows that if the government officials and other authorities support efforts to encourage and help the Nyah Kur people, then the language should be able to survive in the 21st century.

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V

Historical linguistics

