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War of Words: Isan Redshirt Activists and Discourses of Thai Democracy

Abstract

Thai grassroots activists known as ‘redshirts’ (broadly aligned with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra) have been characterized accordingly to their socio-economic profile, but despite pioneering works such as Buchanan (2013), Cohen (2012) and Uenaldi (2014), there is still much to learn about how ordinary redshirts voice their political stances. This paper is based on a linguistic approach to discourse analysis and builds on Fairclough’s (2003) arguments concerning the ways in which speakers use intertextuality and assumption to construct social and political difference and consensus. It specifically explores redshirt understandings of democracy by examining intertextuality and presupposition through various linguistic strategies. It sets out to answer these questions: What are grassroots redshirt protesters’ understandings of democracy? How do they articulate those understandings verbally? The study is based on an analysis of 12 interviews conducted in 2012 with grassroots redshirts from Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand. It shows how informants voiced notions of democracy by making explicit intertextual references and alluding to implicit meaning through presupposition. The results show that informants had a definite understanding of democracy despite a degree of contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity. They also attempted to communicate political beliefs despite limits on their freedom of expression.

Keywords: intertextuality, presupposition, Thai politics, critical discourse analysis, grassroots protesters, everyday resistance

Introduction

This article examines the political language of grassroots redshirt protesters in Thailand (henceforth, redshirts), a socially underprivileged group who have often been negatively portrayed in the Thai mainstream media and in elite discourse. The language of political conflicts has previously been extensively examined from a critical discourse perspective. Often investigated are discourses of powerful figures, both politicians (for example, Bhatia, 2009; Chilton, 2003; Wodak, 2007) and news media (Bekalu, 2006; Callaghan and Schnell, 2001, for example). While previous research has demonstrated how gatekeepers of power employ different strategies to legitimize their position and remain in control of their respective domains of influence, little is known about how emerging oppositional forces respond to the gatekeepers' rhetoric and try to claim political space. Major political change, as in the 2011 Arab Spring revolution in Egypt (Hamdy, 2012), is often driven by ordinary people taking to the streets. In developing democracies such as Thailand, as more and more ordinary people from the lower strata of society begin to see themselves as stakeholders in national politics, more research into their beliefs about democracy and political participation is urgently needed.

Redshirt activists emerged on the political scene after the September 2006 military *coup d'état* after months of street protests organized by the largely royalist, conservative People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) against popularly elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whom they despised and accused of corruption and abuse of power. It is hard to understate the degree to which police-officer-turned-telecoms-billionaire Thaksin gradually antagonized the traditional elite – who declared him 'toxic' – and eventually polarized the whole of Thai society (see McCargo 2011). Claiming to fight for democracy and seeking to counter the anti-Thaksin movement, the redshirts, predominantly from the North and the relatively impoverished Northeast, staged a series of post-coup, broadly pro-Thaksin protests

between 2006 and 2010. The national-level United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was the organized voice of the redshirts, but many grassroots supporters of the movement were not members of the UDD (see Montesano, Pavin and Aekapol 2012). In 2010, redshirts took to the streets of Bangkok, urging then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat Party, to call a general election. Abhisit's Democrat Party had been able to assume power in late 2008 as a result of elite machinations, despite having lost the 2007 general election to pro-Thaksin parties. Between April and May 2010, the protesters camped out at the heart of an upscale Bangkok shopping district. The demonstration ended after more than 90 people were killed and around 2000 injured in the protests, mainly when redshirts were violently dispersed by the Royal Thai Army (Naruemon and McCargo 2011; Abhisit 2013).

The 2010 crackdown left Thai society deeply divided along colour-coded lines: those supporting Thaksin and sympathetic to the redshirts were bitterly opposed by groups with an anti-Thaksin, conservative, royalist orientation, popularly known as the yellowshirts, initially led by the now-defunct People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Many yellowshirts supported the 2006 coup and favoured the Democrat Party. In 2011, Abhisit finally dissolved parliament and called for a new election. Once again a pro-Thaksin party — Pheu Thai, led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra—won the election. She became the first female prime minister of Thailand but failed to see out her four year term, after anti-Thaksin forces regrouped, galvanized by ill-considered government moves to introduce a controversial amnesty bill. Anti-Yingluck street demonstrations were initiated by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which included some former allies of the PAD. PDRC rallies across central Bangkok finally led Yingluck to dissolve parliament in December 2013. But neither the house dissolution nor Yingluck's subsequent removal from office by the courts could satisfy the opposition. Continued street violence became a pretext for yet another

successful military coup on 22 May 2014. In the wake of the 2014 coup there was relatively little public resistance, even from diehard redshirt activists, the self-proclaimed guardians of democracy. Coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who did not hesitate to clamp down harshly on all forms of dissent, was readily able to appoint himself prime minister. The ease with which democratic modes of government could be suspended helps account for the knowing, subaltern view of politics adopted by redshirt activists.

Understanding the Redshirt Movement

The redshirt movement was a mass movement with hundreds of thousands of members: some of them were aligned with the national-level UDD, while others formed local groups often linked to self-help activities and to local radio stations. The redshirts were strongest in major provinces of the North and Northeast, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani and Ubon Rachathani. They were often depicted by their opponents as mere followers masterminded by Thaksin: unsophisticated, vulgar, violent, uneducated and paid protesters who should remain in the countryside rather than contaminating civilised Bangkok, caricatured as ‘from the countryside, less educated, and abandoned by the government for so long (New York Times, 23 May 2010).’ They were derided as *khwai*, ‘water buffaloes’ (Thai Post, 31 May 2013), a by-word in Thai for dim-witted ignorance. However, scholarly work on the redshirts has noted that the protesters were legitimate stakeholders in Thai politics, and were not simply paid protesters (see Keyes, 2012; Naruemon and McCargo, 2011; and Walker, 2012, for example). Far from being simply ‘poor farmers’, most redshirt activists were ‘urbanized villagers’ who were registered to vote in the provinces but derived the great majority of their income from non-farming activity, especially from small businesses and from selling their labour in urban areas (Naruemon and McCargo 2011: 1000–09).

The redshirts' emergence after the 2006 coup should have been a warning against elite complacency towards grassroots grievances. The reasons why the redshirts' demands provoked such a fierce counterattack in 2010 reflected the Thai political context, in which discourse tends to be dominated by voices from the centre, strongly characterised by didacticism, paternalism and what by western standards would be considered heavy-handed moralising. The discrepancy between the dominant voice of the capital city and the muted expressions of the countryside was captured in an influential argument coined by Thai political scientist Anek Laothamatas. Anek (1996) argued that Thailand was in fact 'two democracies', urban versus rural: urban dwellers voted along rational policy lines, while rural people were susceptible to vote-buying and other abuses of the electoral system. While containing elements of truth, Anek's argument neglected the agency exercised by many rural dwellers, and underestimated their political sophistication.

As the rural population from the country's hinterlands has become more politically active, Bangkok's elites, hitherto the gatekeepers of power, have been threatened by these formerly subservient, less privileged members of the Thai sociopolitical hierarchy. Grassroots activists from the provinces find their voice through engagement in demonstrations and rallies. In an era of 'rally politics' (McCargo 2012), speeches at mass rallies became a major source of political rhetoric for the redshirts. Popular speakers at rallies are aggressive orators with a gift for parodying and ridiculing the language of the traditional elite. These and other prominent redshirts also appeared on satellite television stations widely viewed in the Northeast such as Asia Update, which carried regular reports of seminars and proposals by apparently red-leaning academics and commentators. Such themes were repeated and embellished by the hosts of local redshirt radio stations who broadcast primarily in phasaan, a non-prestigious local variety linguistically closer to Lao than to Thai, and literally

translated the ideas and discourse of redshirt opinion-leaders into a form that chaw baan (ordinary people/villagers) or thaj baan in the local variety, could easily grasp.

A hybridised form of speech began to emerge in grassroots redshirts' discourse that incorporated abstract political terms similar to those used by redshirt leaders and commentators, while largely maintaining their linguistic identity as Northerners (see Saowanee and McCargo 2014). However, in defining democracy and displaying their knowledge about it, the redshirts often refer to their lived experiences and comment on events and political actors of a much higher social status. However, in a highly stratified society such as Thailand, being candid is a challenge for someone at the bottom of the hierarchy. How do these less privileged members of society go about expressing their beliefs, given the sociolinguistic constraints imposed by hegemonic Thai societal norms (for detailed discussions of stratified sociolinguistic norms in Thai society, see Diller 2002)? We decided to follow Fairclough's (1989) approach that draws upon two discursive features that link knowledge, power, and language: intertextuality and presupposition, in order to uncover their ideological beliefs.

Intertextuality and presupposition in political discourse

Language is not only a means of communication, but also indexes power relationships, identity, and conflicts. Language itself is an object both of desire and of human conflict (Foucault, 1972: 216). Based on his ethnographic study of a Malay village, James Scott (1985) underscores this important role by showing how ordinary villagers used language to encode their subversive messages in their daily-life conversations about those they perceived to be exploitative, miserly rich fellow villagers. While one may argue that such language use does not change the status quo, that people with less power still whisper their complaints and gossip about the bearers of their misfortunes shows that they do not completely submit to

imposition from powerful ones. Scott thus characterizes mundane verbal and non-verbal actions as ‘weapons of the weak’ which allow the relatively powerless to create solidarity and assert a degree of agency. As Scott writes:

When the poor symbolically undermine the self-awarded status of the rich by inventing nicknames, by malicious gossip, by boycotting their feasts, by blaming their greed and stinginess for the current state of affairs, they are simultaneously asserting this own claim to status (Scott 1985: 240).

While the redshirt movement is a national one, the ways in which individual red-aligned Northeasterners engage in a ‘war of words’ (Scott 1985: 241) to deny their cultural marginalization have significant parallels with Scott’s notion of village-level everyday resistance.

With a focus on language, this research follows the theoretical perspective that views text and talk as parts of social interaction in which speakers orient themselves toward difference (Fairclough 2003). In Fairclough’s view, intertextuality accentuates difference in ‘voices’ from other texts while assumption, under which presupposition is subsumed, minimizes such difference. Fairclough’s approach to a critical analysis of discourse further stresses the role that language plays in sustaining ideological assumptions that underpin society.

Intertextuality, a term introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1966 (Moi 1986) is defined as the property of a text as being shaped by other texts. This, however, is not only a matter of linguistic interconnectedness but also a nexus between language, history, and society. Fairclough (1992: 84) characterises the nature of the embedded texts as, ‘explicitly demarcated or merged in’ with the main text. The notion is characterised as verbal explicitness. According to Fairclough (2003), intertextuality involves only explicit references such as direct quotations or reported speech. We have adopted this view in this paper. Critical

discourse analysis of intertextuality has demonstrated that speakers use intertextuality to 'criticise' or 'comment on' the original text, hence the term 'critical intertextuality' (Gray 2006) such as in parodies of political campaign videos (Tryon 2008) or in parliamentary no-confidence debates (Gadavani 2002). Intertextuality can also be used as a form of evidentiality (Clift 2006; van Dijk 2000) to strengthen the speaker's argument by citing a claim in the original text. In doing so, the speaker essentially indicates solidarity with the producer of the original text. Intertextuality itself may be a source of conflict as the same text can be quoted, recontextualised, and assigned different meanings by stakeholders with opposing views (Hodges 2008). Intertextuality is therefore particularly useful in the analysis of how speakers position themselves or frame the voices of others (see Fairclough 2003).

Presupposition examined in this study is pragmatic or speaker presupposition (Levinson 1983; Stalnaker 2000). It refers to the assumptions and beliefs of the speaker, which must be understood in order to interpret the meaning of the utterance. While the speaker usually takes these assumptions for granted and may even be unaware of them, teasing them out from the text allows linguistic analysts to uncover the speaker's underlying beliefs.

Yule (1996) classifies presuppositions into 6 types: existential, factive, non-factive, lexical, structural, and counter-factual. Different linguistic devices invoke presupposed information. These are, for example, definite descriptions, implicative verbs (manage, forget), change of state verbs (begin, stop), cleft-sentences, and iteratives (return, before, again) (see Levinson 1983 for more examples). Critical discourse studies have shown that not only does presupposition carry with it underlying assumptions which forms part of the speaker's knowledge or beliefs, but it can also create a sense of 'consensual reality' (Chilton, 2004) which the speaker assumes the hearer to share in their common ground. It is a tool that helps to create a basis on which political terms and their associated ideologies are expressed

and understood at the discourse level. It can also serve as a self-positioning tool for the us/them dichotomy. For instance, in his analysis of the news media discourses of terrorism, Van Dijk (1995) demonstrated that presuppositions found in op-ed articles published in the New York Times and the Washington Post in 1993 support an ideological stance against what the authors characterise as ‘terrorism’. A quotation from one of the articles portrayed Muslims around the world as being ‘fearful of the contagiousness of Western political, religious and sexual freedoms,’ (Van Dijk 1995: 157). Van Dijk observed that the author of the quotation presupposes that the West has freedoms, which is a positive characteristic of the West. Van Dijk thus argues that presupposition is used here to indirectly emphasise positive attributes of speaker-hearer commonality and at the same time highlight negative characteristics of those perceived as enemy others. Speakers can also use presupposition to make explicit underlying belief for a variety of reasons, especially when such belief may not be politically acceptable or when explicit statements may cause serious repercussions. For instance, Wodak (2007) argues that anti-Semitic statements in Austrian political discourse made since 1945 were made using ‘linguistic clues and traces’ (p. 213), and thus the speakers could easily both evade responsibility and yet successfully allude to the hidden meaning. Through analysis of pragmatic devices used in invoking presupposition, we sought to reveal latent beliefs in the mind of these grassroots speakers, which were generally constrained by sociolinguistic norms of language use discussed earlier.

As democracy is essentially contested (Gallie, 1956; Swanton, 1985), we thus confined our exploration of redshirts’ understandings of the concept based on their lived experiences and knowledge of the world, which in turn influence their discourses. To do this, we specifically sought to answer the questions of what Ubon redshirts meant by democracy, and whether and to what extent they used intertextuality and presupposition to construct meanings for the concept.

The Study

This research was conducted in Ubon Ratchathani, a northeastern province of Thailand which borders Laos and Cambodia. The province is home to large numbers of redshirts and their sympathisers. Because we wished to explore the qualitative aspects of ordinary redshirts discussing of democracy through their struggles, we believe this small-scale, case study should suffice to characterize linguistic strategies employed. However, we acknowledge the limitation in generalizability of the findings.

The spoken corpus

The first author interviewed 12 redshirt supporters (referred to here by pseudonyms), eight of whom had participated in both the 2010 protests in Bangkok and the local, concurrent rallies in Ubon Ratchathani, two of whom had taken part only in the parallel protests in Ubon Ratchathani, and two of whom had participated in redshirt gatherings in the aftermath of the 2010 military crackdown. They all came from low socioeconomic backgrounds with no college education (see Appendix for their brief demographic information). The language used in the interviews was phasaa isaan, a language that lends itself to significant use of presupposition triggers on the part of informants, and one which is characterized by frequent recourse to intertextuality. The purpose of the interview was to generate a corpus of spoken texts about Thai politics and ideologies associated with the concept of democracy. The major question asked in these semi-structured interviews was: What were the redshirts fighting for? The average amount of time spent on each interview was 90 minutes, ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours and 15 minutes. The interviews generated an 11.7 hours (700 minutes) long corpus of spoken data. Because we aim to base our arguments on a linguistic analysis in which details and nuances in language use are carefully examined, the corpus was then transcribed using a segmental transcription invented by Haas (1964), while tones were left

unmarked. Speakers' use of phasaa isaan showed phonological influences from Central Thai, and their pronunciation was therefore transcribed as it was actually uttered. Proper names, however, were transliterated with the Royal Thai Institute system.

In each interview, the first author as the interlocutor in all conversations took care not to be the first one to introduce the word pra-chaa-thip-pa-taj 'democracy'. It should also be noted that none of the political terms discussed are common in the daily language use of the informants. The majority of these words are neologisms of Indic origin. Although some were created as phasaa isaan-Thai compounds, some stand as complete loan words by themselves. These words belong to a high register in the Thai register hierarchy (see also Diller 1985) and are commonly found in discourses of the educated such as academics and political commentators. Examples of these words are pra-chaa-thip-pa-taj (democracy), khuam-b๑๑-th๑๑-thiam (inequality), khuam-yu-ti-tham (justice), khuam-b๑๑-yu-ti-tham (injustice), sit-thi? (right), rat-tha-pa-haan or pa-ti-wat (coup), am-maat (aristocrat), phaj (serf/commoner), and pha-det-kaan (dictatorship). This fact that most political terms do not have equivalents in phasaa isaan is noteworthy; they are not endogenous in the day-to-day language of these ordinary residents of Ubon. While the concepts associated with these words are very much part of their political discourse, speakers do not use them outside of the context of political discussions, in which they see themselves as stakeholders in Thai politics, and adopt linguistic terms to show their engagement.

Findings and discussion

Contextualising the struggle for democracy

Informants invariably made reference to democracy sooner or later, and none of them was satisfied with the status of democracy in Thailand. Democracy was seen either as b๑๑ som buun b๑๑p 'incomplete' or b๑๑ mii 'absent', and thus informants used words such as dai maa

‘be achieved’ or *khyyn maa* ‘be returned’ to express their goal. Informants who regarded democracy as incomplete usually said they yearned for *pa-chaa-thip-pa-taj rɔɔj pəə-sen* ‘a hundred per cent democracy’ or with *bɔɔ mii naj yaʔ ʔɛɛp fɛɛŋ* ‘with no hidden agenda’. To better understand what the redshirt informants meant by democracy, it is important to first describe major political actors whom they regarded as their opposition. Words they used to refer to themselves included: *laat-sa-dɔɔn* ‘citizens’, *pa-chaa-chon* ‘people’, *laak-ɲaa* ‘grassroots’, *khon-baan-nɔɔk* ‘country bumpkins/villagers’, *khon-con* ‘poor people’, and *phaj serf/commoner*. In contrast, they identified those who opposed the movement as *phuak-pha-det-kaan* ‘dictators’, *naj-thun* ‘capitalists’, supporters of *phak-pa-chaa-thip-pat* ‘Democrat Party supporters’, *am-maat* ‘aristocrats’, and *puak-sya-lyan* ‘them yellowshirts.’ Several informants were reluctant to mention their opponents by name, opting for phrases such as *waw bɔɔ daj* ‘unable to say’ and *ɲaj hɛɛŋ* ‘very big’. Even when pressed, the informants opted not to elaborate on these words. Ban, a general labourer, simply smiled and looked away with silence while Krai, a street-side tailor, stated that he could not say anything about it. Likewise, some informants simply said, *hu huu kan yuu* ‘it’s known (among us),’ without further elaborating on the statement. However, upon being asked whether the redshirts knew what they were up against, they said, ‘yes.’ That informants resorted to metapragmatic comments on their inability to fully express their thoughts for fear of repercussions speaks volume about the lack of freedom of expression. As mentioned before, Ban used the phrase *naj-yaʔ-ʔɛɛp-fɛɛŋ* ‘hidden agenda’ to characterise the state of democracy in Thailand as shown in (1) below:

(1)

Ban:	<i>pɔʔ</i>	<i>haw tɔɔŋ-kaan</i>	<i>pa-chaa-thip-pa-taj tii</i>	<i>bɔɔ</i>	<i>mii</i>
	because	we want	democracy	that	not have
			<i>naj-yaʔ-ʔɛɛp-fɛɛŋ</i>		

hidden agenda

‘Because we want democracy with no hidden agenda.’

Interviewer: pɛɛ-waa tɔɔn-nii bɔɔ pen pa-cha-a-thip-pa-taj bɔɔ?

mean now no be democracy QUESTION

‘Does it mean we are not a democracy?’

Ban: pen tɛɛ-waa ((silence))

be but

‘(We) are but ...’

Ban ended his turn with silence. When asked what he meant by ‘hidden agenda’, he did not say anything, just smiling and shaking his head. The word ‘hidden agenda’ presupposes that there is a hidden motive behind the discourse of Thai democracy, and implies that this motive hinders democratic development. Furthermore, his silence carried a pragmatic meaning of the kind which Kurzon (2007: 1676) glossed as, ‘I will not speak,’ or ‘I may/must not speak.’ This silence implies that he has some concern over that he would say and thus refuses to say it, which ironically says a lot about the state of free speech in Thailand. Nonetheless, Ban did try to circumvent this suppression by making intertextual references to allude to the topic he found relevant to the discussion of democracy. For instance, he made an intertextual reference to the ancient Buddhist concept expressed in an Indic term as a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut, which was aggressively promoted by King Mongkut (Nattapol 2007). According to Nakharin (1992) the concept asserted that in Siam (now Thailand) under the absolute monarchy, succession to the throne was based on popular consensus. After the country adopted a constitutional monarchy in 1932, key conservative intellectuals began to reinterpret the term to equate it with democracy (Kriangsak 1993). In essence, proponents of this concept saw absolute monarchy as a system embodying a democratic characteristic—approval of royal succession by the people.

However, it should be noted that the concept is not widely known to the general Thai public. More importantly, royal succession, at least in the current dynasty, has always been by blood lineage. In fact, King Mongkut himself, as described in Baker and Pasuk, ‘tried to prove that legitimate patrilineal succession was the norm in Thai history (2009: 50).’ Ban’s use of this esoteric, academic term was rather surprising. Consider the exchange in example (2) where he was asked about what those who opposed the redshirts thought:

(2)

Ban: khaw waa khon sya dɛɛŋ hua lun-lɛɛŋ laʔ kaʔ ʔaat-caʔ
they say person red shirt head violent and so may
bɔɔ hen-duaj kap faaj thii yaak caʔ a-nu-lak yaan-chen
no agree with party that want will conserve such as
a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut
many-people-together-consensus

‘They say the redshirts are extreme and thus may not agree with those who want to conserve (some beliefs) such as the concept of a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut.’

Interviewer: i-nɔŋ kɔʔ a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut?
what PARTICLE many-people-together-consensus

‘What is a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut?’

phu-daj waw nɔɔ-ni?
who say QUESTION

‘Who said that word?’

Ban: ʔacaan thii phən waw phom cam bɔɔ-daj phən yuu
master that he/she say I remember not he/she live

thaaŋ phaak- isaan

in/at Isan region

‘I don’t remember which master said that. He/she is from Isan.’

Interviewer: pen pha? lyy ?acaan?

Be monk or teacher

‘A monk or a teacher?’

Ban: pen nak-kot-maaj

be lawyer

‘(The person) is a lawyer.’

Ban’s quote is ‘incomplete’ in the sense that he did not recall the person who he heard using the term a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut although the person was vaguely recalled as a lawyer and apparently not a key leader in the UDD movement. More important was his juxtaposition of the term and its believers-- ‘those who disagree with the redshirts’. To him these people thought the redshirts were extreme for being against pre-existing democratic beliefs that predated the 1932 revolution that marked the beginning of constitutional monarchy (Nakarin 1992). Without explicitly uttering the word ‘conservative,’ Ban opted to say, ‘what they want to a-nu-lak (conserve),’ which tones down his speculation about their belief. However, the words ‘they’, ‘disagree’ and ‘conserve’ in the excerpt above trigger a presupposition that there exists a group of conservatives (referred to as ‘they’) who disagree with the redshirts. This presupposition that the conservatives exist is crucial as it also implicitly suggests that the redshirts are not conservative, at least in Ban’s view. Furthermore, Ban’s use of a-neek-ni-kɔɔn-sa-moo-sɔɔn-som-mut was a striking instance of intertextuality in which Ban borrowed the term from the discourse of educated royalist intellectuals to construct a meaning of democracy as mediated by the Isan lawyer he mentioned. In doing so, Ban portrayed traditional understandings of democracy as not

supportive of the redshirt movement, and thus the term which he quotes here is the voice of ‘the Other’—the opposition.

Not all informants were equally articulate. Some were better spoken and more comfortable in sharing their thoughts than others. As they attempted to explain what they meant by democracy, they often shifted to a discussion of what democracy is not. Thus, for ease of discussion, their ideological discourse about democracy is discussed in two different sections: what democracy is, and what it is not.

What democracy is

The concept of democracy was associated with different key attributes for different informants, but an intertextual analysis revealed that they were connected against the backdrop of current Thai politics. Democracy was rarely completely defined in one conversational turn in each interview; rather, informants revisited the term throughout and either repeated the meaning previously assigned, added to it, or even contradicted it. ‘Justice’, ‘citizen participation’, ‘equality’, and ‘freedom of expression’ were some commonly mentioned defining features of democracy.

Justice. Two related words were used: *khuam-pen-tham* ‘fairness or justice’ and *khuam-yu-ti-tham* ‘justice’. In *phasaa isaan*, *khuam-pen-tham* can mean either ‘fairness’ or ‘justice’ depending on context of use. In certain contexts, it is not easy at all to distinguish between these two meanings. The informants often noted that a series of political events since the 2006 military coup created an absence of justice and equality, hence their motivation to demand ‘democracy’. While some openly stated that the coup against Thaksin was not acceptable, and so joined the redshirt movement to bring him back, others, such as Krai, a street-side tailor, and Somchai, a street-food vendor, were adamant that although they

appreciated his policy, they did not join the movement because of Thaksin. Rather they were motivated by what they saw as a series of unjustified attempts from different powers to eradicate Thaksin's power at all costs, to the point that they characterized as *kəən paj* 'too much'. It is these attempts that they saw as the lack of justice in the country.

None of the informants explicitly stated that fairness or justice existed before the country's political turmoil. However, the word *khyyn* 'return' in examples (3) and (4) presupposes that there had previously been fairness in Thailand:

(3)

kyy haw daj khuam-pen-tham la? ka? **khyyn** suu pa-theet-thaj haw
be we get fairness and so return to Thailand our
'(democracy) is (when) we get fairness, when it returns to our country-Thailand.'

(Wan)

(4)

khyyn khuam-yu-ti-tham haj khon suan-paj sa?...
...return justice give people majority PARTICLE
'(should) return justice to the majority of the people.'

(Tai)

Informants had contradictory views on ideas of justice. While the informants generally supported justice for the people in national politics, Wan, Somchai, Krai, Tai, Nit, and Noi all supported Thaksin's controversial 2003 'war on drugs', which allegedly led to extrajudicial executions of hundreds of purported drug dealers (Human Rights Watch 2008). Nit, a seafood vendor, liked this policy claiming **phəʔ** khaw pa-kaat soŋ-khaam kap yaa-sep-tit 'because he declared war on drugs'. The adverb because introduces her presupposition that counter-narcotics measures did take place and they were drastic, as hinted by the phrase

pa-kaat song-khaam ‘war’. The word khaw presupposes an authoritative figure who could declare such war. Because the discussion was about Thaksin, it was implied that khaw referred to him. None of them questioned the ‘justice’ of the drugs war killings. Such perspectives were not confined to grassroots redshirts, however – even many Thais who strongly opposed Thaksin supported his war on drugs.

Citizen participation. Elections were often mentioned as a means for the general public to participate in decision-making in a democratic system. Consider the examples in (5) and (6) in below:

(5)

haw liak -လၢၣ် pa-chaa-thip-pa-taj haw daj lyak-taj (Phon)
we demand democracy we get election
‘We had demanded democracy, and so we have had an election.’ (Phon)

(6)

pa-chaa-tip-pa-taj khyy siang caak pa- chaa-chon lyak သၢၣ်သၢၣ် khyyn maa
democracy be voice from people choose MP up come
‘Democracy is the voice of the people which selects Members of Parliament.’
(Krai)

Phon reminisced about his involvement in the 2010 protests by equating elections with democracy as shown in (5), using liak -လၢၣ် to presuppose that democracy was absent. The word daj here presupposes that elections and democracy are the same thing. For Phon, democracy meant elections. Phon, who was arrested in 2010 and spent over a year remanded in custody before being convicted on minor charges, stressed that all the protesters wanted

was simply a new election, because Abhisit had assumed the premiership illegitimately in 2008.

To explain that citizen participation is crucial, Chai, a taxicab driver, made an intertextual reference to motto signs posted in front of military compounds as shown in this exchange:

(7)

Chai: b๖๖-waa si? het n๑j pa-chaa-chon suan-n๑j **๓๑**
No matter will do anything people majority must
 mii suan-luam...
 have participation...
 ‘No matter what (the ruler) does, the majority of the people must participate.’

hen b๖๖ tha-haan khaw khian-waj **pa-theet-thaj**
see QUESTION soldiers they write Thailand
na-yok-rat-tha-mon-trii le? **pa-chaa-chon**
prime minister and people
pha-ma-ha-ka-sat le? **pa-chaa-chon**
king and people
chaat saat-sa-na pha-ma-ha-ka-sat le? **pa-chaa-chon**
nation religion king and people

‘Do you see that the military writes, “Thailand, Prime Minister, and the People... Monarchy and the People... Nation, Religion, King, and the People”?’

Interviewer: khian yu saj?
 write be where?
 ‘Where is (that) written?’

War of Words

Chai: taam hua

along fence

‘Along the fences.’

Interviewer: tɔɔn-daj?

When

‘When?’

Chai: khaj-tha-haan tem-paj-bət tuk paaj loŋ-taaj duaj kham waa

Military base all full every sign end with word that/as

pa-chaa-chon

people

‘Military bases, full of them ... All those signs end with the phrase “and the People”.’

The word **๖๗** presupposes that citizen participation is mandatory in a democracy. Chai made use of intertextuality by referencing military slogan signs to back up his beliefs about the importance of citizen participation. Chai also code-switched to Central Thai when he was recalling the text of the signs at military bases (in bold above, 7). That speakers try to mimic the prosodic qualities of the original text is common. It serves to distinguish their voice from the voice of the quoted text (Fairclough 2003). In this case, we believe that Chai turned to Central Thai in the quote to emphasise the importance of citizen participation, because the language is the voice of the nation; it forms part of the national identity (see Diller 2002; Saowanee and McCargo 2014). Chai symbolically used Central Thai to endorse his definition of democracy. It should be noted that the addition of the word ‘people’ to the military motto he mentioned, which is based on the traditional nationalistic slogan ‘nation-religion-king’, was as recent as in 1998 (McCargo 2015: 343; Royal Thai Army n.d.).

However, some informants further stressed that simply having an election is not sufficient as the prime minister must also come from the winning party. Kong, a rice farmer, stated that Yingluck Shinawatra became Prime Minister *duaj myy kh၁၁၅ pa-chaa-chon* ‘with the hands of the people’ who voted for her.

The informants also described democracy as putting the people’s needs and problems first. In doing so, they specifically alluded to Thaksin’s policies. In fact, Krai stressed that the people must vote for a candidate who promises to ‘*duu læ khon thuk khon **paak***’ ‘take care of poor people.’ He further stressed that a dictator would only take care of ‘*phuak luaj luaj*’ ‘them the rich’. It suggests that in Krai’s conception of citizen participation, **khon thuk khon *paak*** presupposes that most people are poor and want the government to take care of them – that informants are torn between rejecting and craving paternalism.

Freedom of expression. Some informants were very articulate about freedom of expression as Tai commented in (8):

(8)

Tai: *mii sit sa-d၁၅၅-၁၁က haw mii sit sa-d၁၅၅-၁၁က thuk khon*
 have right express we have right express every person
 ‘(We) have the right to express (ourselves). All of us have the right to express
 ourselves.’

ka-p၁၅-waa *la-b၁၁၁ pra-chaa-thip-pa-taj sa-d၁၅၅-၁၁က daj*
MARKER system democracy express able

‘As I said before, expressing (oneself) is allowed in a democratic system.’

The discourse marker **ka-p၁၅-waa** introduces her belief that a democratic system allows freedom of expression. The presupposition underlying this statement is that Thailand

is a democratic system. Otherwise she would not have used the marker. In phasaa isaan, the marker not only invokes common ground (referring to something that has been said or known among the interlocutors) but also indicates the speaker's annoyance at the interlocutor's inability to recognise such information, an attitude which can be glossed as 'you are making me say this again when you should have known it already.'

In example (9), Tai further commented on problems with the lack of freedom of expression by making an intertextual reference to an imaginary voice of the suppressive power, a sort of 'pseudo quote' or what Kotthoff (2002) calls 'staged intertextuality', as a pragmatic strategy to mimic the voice of the oppressive power:

(9)

Tai: phian-tɛɛ waa sit sian naj la-bɔɔp pa-chaa-thip-pa-taj pa-theet-thaj
 only that right voice in system democracy Thailand
 mii am-naat naj kaan-tat-sin yuu lɛɛw khyy
 exist power in decision-making exist already that is
 khaw tat-sin waj-lɛɛw waa mɛɛn **myŋ** si? maa laaj
 they decide already that despite you will come many
 paan-daj myŋ ka bɔɔ mii sit myŋ cam-ʔaw-waj **phuak-phaj**
 how you so no have right you remember you serfs
 'But rights in Thai democracy are predetermined by some power; **they** already
 decided that despite the many of you at the rally; "you have no rights.
 Remember that! You serfs."'

Tai used the pronoun **khaw** 'they' to refer to the supposed power. The power, in her pseudo quote, addressed the Redshirts with the derogatory second person pronoun **myŋ** and **phuak-phaj** 'you serfs'. The imaginary quote ended with 'You have no rights. Remember

that! You serfs!’ Taken together, the pronoun, address term, and the quote presupposes the existence of such dominating power, which she refused to explicitly name. One might infer from the word *phaj* that she tried implicitly to refer to the *am-maat* ‘aristocrats’, as in the typical *am-maat/phaj* dichotomy often voiced at redshirt rallies. Another reading would be that she tried to refer to another powerful, yet anonymous entity. But in any case, her use of *phaj* highlighted her view of inequality by likening the modern day elite to old-time nobles.

Tai used intertextuality and presupposition to critique the entrenched power that deprives ordinary people of their freedom of expression. The reference to *phaj* is a mockery of Thailand’s past as a feudalistic system. Again, the word *phaj*, along with its counterpart *am-maat*, was commonly heard at rallies and in redshirt media. But as we have seen, Tai did not stop at repeating rally-stage mantras; she further elaborated on them with staged intertextual references to make her case about democracy and the rights associated with it. She subsequently introduced the phrase ‘mute people’ to make her point; ‘mute people,’ who are unable to vocalise, are still compelled by the urge to express themselves and thus use written signs to communicate their thoughts.

Equality. Informants talked about equality under the law. In response to the question of what they meant by ‘democracy’, in (10) and (11) Ban and Kong stated, respectively:

(10)

sit-thi? se-rii-phap thii khon kəət-maa yaaŋ-thaw-thiam-kan
right freedom that person born equally

‘Equal rights and freedom that people are born with.’

Here, Ban presupposed that people are equal, and there are natural rights—an unconventional belief in Thai society.

(11)

ບ້ວ-ດາຈ ບຸ່ງ ອ່ອນ-ອ່ານ ມີ ສິດ ຕ້ວ-ກ່ານ

not divide social classes have right equal

‘There is no class division. (Everybody) has equal rights.

Kong further explained that in a democratic system elected representatives issue laws that benefit both pa-chaa-chon ‘citizens’ and khaa-laot-cha-kaan ‘government officials’ equally. Kong’s juxtaposition of the words pa-chaa-chon and khaa-laot-cha-kaan presupposes that there were two different social categories, which implies that the two had not been equal until the country became democratic.

What democracy is not

Informants had much to discuss when it came to what they perceived as undemocratic. Analysis of their discussion of un-democratic elements helps to bring to the fore their understandings of democracy.

Injustice and lack of fairness. For Wan, democracy cannot exist without khuam-pen-tham. In her view, fairness is not a prerequisite for democracy; it is democracy (see also example (3)). Wan said that justice became absent as a result the 2006 military coup. For her, overthrowing Thaksin, violently suppressing protestors in the 2010 military crackdown, and repeated denials of bail for redshirts held in prison while awaiting trial were examples of unfairness, and thus the absence of democracy. In her view, democracy would be restored once Thaksin comes back and once the people who she believed to have ordered the killings face imprisonment.

The lack of justice and fairness is also portrayed through the rhetoric of ‘double standards’. Krai made an intertextual reference to the concept of *သဘာဝ-maat-ta-thaan* ‘double standards’ complaining about the lack of justice as in (12):

(12)

sya-lyan het ၂၈၇ ka? ဝဲဝဲ phit
Yellow shirts do anything so not guilty
sya-dæŋ het ၂၈၇ ka? phit
Redshirts do anything so guilty

‘The yellow shirts are never guilty of anything they do, but the redshirts are always guilty no matter what they do.’

Krai’s resentment toward the lack of justice was a direct experience he had during his trial process in which he, Phon, and other redshirts were repeatedly denied bail, while the yellowshirts who seized the country’s main international airports in 2008 were still at large. Krai depicted the judicial system as being part of the *am-maat* network for not being fair to the redshirts and supporting the yellowshirts.

‘Double standards’ was also used to depict former Prime Minister Abhisit: informants claimed that he practiced such standards, and was a beneficiary of this practice by his allies (see Abhisit 2013 for his own account of the 2009-10 political crisis). Consider example (13), in which Tai used a direct quotation to make her point:

(13)

sen ၂၈၇ hœŋ ဝဲဝဲ het ၂၈၇ ka? ဝဲဝဲ phit
line big very PARTICLE do anything so not guilty
man mii ဝဲဝဲ? khon naj lok nii
it exist QUESTION person in world this

khon het naŋ la? bɔɔ ɲɔɔm-lap
person do something then not admit
waa cao-khɔɔŋ het phit cak-yaang
that he/she does wrong anything
thaŋ-thaŋ-thii khon pen sɛɛn pen laan
despite people be a hundred thousand be a million
kham-waw khɔɔŋ-man nan bɔɔ cam dɔɔk
said words its/his that not remember PARTICLE

thaa taaj phu nyŋ si? lap-phit-chɔɔp
if die person one then accept responsibility

duaj kaan-laa-ɲɔɔk tha pen phom

by resignation if be I

‘Such big backing! Nothing he’s done is wrong! Is there such a person in this world who does things and never admits guilt in any wrongdoing at all given that there are thousands and millions of people. His words, he doesn’t remember! “If one person died, I would if it were (me the one in power)”.’

Tai opened with a criticism of Abhisit as being able to evade responsibility for the wrongdoings he had committed. She did so by citing his connection with powerful figures, as suggested by the term *sen-naaj* ‘big backing’. Tai also made an intertextual reference to Abhisit’s oft-cited statement in parliament on 31 August 2008 when he was Leader of the Opposition. The statement was about the people’s democratic rights to protest against the government. However, in his original statement Abhisit did not say anything about deaths. Nor did he say that he would resign if an anti-government protestor died while he was prime minister (Somsak 2010).

The informant's voice was inserted into the text, linking Abhisit's original text with his lack of responsibility for the fatal crowd dispersal under his administration. In this striking instance of intertextuality, the boundary between his voice and hers is not readily visible. An audience without background information might assume that Abhisit actually said that he would resign, whereas in fact Tai either deliberately misquoted his original speech, or attempted to recall it accurately but genuinely failed to do so. This inaccuracy in the quote indicates a degree of misinformation in the discourse.

Coup d'état and revolution. The military intervention in 2006 surfaced as the major reason that the informants started seriously following national politics. As discussed earlier, the informants called the 2006 military coup either pa-ti-wat 'revolution' or rat-tha-pa-haan 'coup'. These two words are some of the most confusing terms in Thai politics. Even the MCOT, a mainstream Thai news media source, used them interchangeably (MCOT 2012).

As mentioned before, some informants used 'revolution' and 'coup' interchangeably, suggesting that they understood the words as either the same thing or closely related. Although the term rat-tha-pa-haan is commonly mentioned at redshirt rallies and on redshirt radio programs, Chai admitted that he did not quite understand the concept of rat-tha-pa-haan, but he was against it because the word contains pa-haan (execute/kill) which he บอ mak (disliked). Unlike some other informants, Pat, a rice farmer, distinguished between 'coup d'état' and 'revolution'. During the interview, he made a slip of the tongue using pa-ti-wat instead of rat-tha-pa-haan, but quickly corrected himself along with a metalinguistic judgment of บอ mæn 'not that'. Noi called the action a coup d'état and considered it to be 'wrong'. However, for her the coup was not wrong because it was against democracy, but because Thaksin was a 'good' prime minister whose policies helped the poor.

Waeng only used the word pa-ti-wat (instead of rat-tha-pa-haan) to refer to military overthrows of the government. He talked about pa-ti-wat as a means which the am-maat

‘aristocrats’ use to suppress the people in order for them to remain in power. According to Waeng, the military was associated with the am-maat although it seems that there were more figures involved. Consider the following excerpts in (14) and (15) taken from the interview with Waeng, as he responded to a question about the military’s involvement in the violent crowd dispersal in 2010 under the Abhisit administration; here Waeng stressed that the government had support from phuu-ɲaj ‘a powerful figure/senior’. He also used a metaphor of Abhisit as **dek-nɔj fan-naam-nom**, ‘a child with milk teeth’ to show that Abhisit did not have the real power. The really powerful figure, as Waeng claimed, had the goal of staying in power. The word *khon-waj* invoked his presupposition that these powers have been in existence for some time. Note the quote in (14) below:

(14)

Waeng: man khit waa het saʔ-som waj-haj luuk-laan man
 it think that do collect for child-grandchild their
 khyy-kan am-naat muan-nii တၢၢ် **khon-waj** naj pa-theet-thaj
 also powers these must remain in Thailand
 ‘He/she thinks that doing this would accumulate powers for his/her children
 and grandchildren. **These powers** must **remain** in Thailand.’

Interviewer: am-naat ɲaŋ tii တၢၢ် khon-waj am-naat tii khaw mii nii?
 power what that must remain power that he/she have this
 ‘What powers have to remain that they have?’

Waeng: am-naat am-maat am-naat tii ɲiŋ-ɲaj nya
 Powers aristocrats powers that great over
 laat-sa-dɔɔn ni-lɛɛw
 citizens **PARTICLE**
 ‘**Aristocratic powers, these** great powers over the people.’

In (15) Waeng alluded to the identity of the person behind the 2006 coup by using intertextuality in the form of reported speech:

(15)

Waeng: bak Sonthi Boonyaratglin man **kaʔ ɲaŋ** waa
 TITLE Sonthi Boonyaratglin it even/too say
 huu-yuu tɛɛ waw bɔɔ daj
 know but say not able

‘Even Sonthi Boonyaratglin has said he knew but couldn’t tell.’

Waeng further said that coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin knew who was behind the coup but refused to disclose the person’s identity (see *The Nation*, 31 March 2012). Waeng wondered why Sonthi refused to do so. Again using reported speech to draw attention to Sonthi’s much-publicised quote, Waeng declared: bak sonthi man waa taaj læw kaʔ tɔɔp bɔɔ daj ‘Sonthi said that even after (he’s) dead, (he) couldn’t answer (it).’ Despite appearing not to know the identity of the mastermind, Waeng was confident that it was someone extremely powerful. Like Tai, he used explicit intertextual references to allude to the implicitness of a presupposition that an unmentionable powerful figure was behind the coup.

There are a few important observations to be made about Waeng’s language use. First, Waeng’s use of the third person pronoun ‘man’, the equivalent of ‘it’ in English, to refer to a powerful coup mastermind is surprising and counterintuitive. When used to refer to a human being, ‘man’ is derogatory. Given the rich system of honorific pronominals to mark social deixis, it would be extremely impolite to refer to someone of a higher social status by the ‘wrong’ pronoun, as repercussions could be very serious. Early on in the interview,

Waeng called himself ‘someone with a fourth grade education’ who belonged to the class of *laat-sa-dǎn* ‘citizen/common people’. His choice of words implied that common people with little formal education belonged to a low stratum of the Thai social hierarchy. This was how Waeng positioned himself. Thus, explicitly naming the person who believed to be the mastermind would cost him dearly, since the person concerned was of a much higher social status. By calling the person ‘man’ while abstaining from being any more explicit, he essentially lowered the social status of the person in question to the point he could criticise the person freely. Waeng used both presupposition triggers and intertextuality to link together two separate major junctures in Thai politics, the 2006 coup and the 2010 crackdown on the Redshirts. They were connected in the narrative with triggers such as ‘these’ and ‘remain’ in ‘**these** powers have to **remain** in Thailand,’ and the intertextual reference to General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who had made a very telling comment about the identity of the person behind the coup. In so doing, Waeng indirectly suggested that it was the same group of people masterminded the coup and the deadly crowd dispersal.

In summary, to express their understanding of democracy, grassroots redshirts in this study employed intertextuality and presupposition to piece together various texts to define democracy. Embedded in these texts were political terms which were widely circulated in the news media and rally speeches; they were recontextualised to express meaning in the informants’ own terms. To strengthen their claims about democracy or undermine their opponents’, the informants drew different voices from both the discourses of the redshirts and their elite opponents. They left verbal clues that trigger presupposition in order to serve various pragmatic purposes including identifying group membership, indexing their opponents, and criticising undemocratic actions, forming their own ‘consensual reality’ which revolved around political frustrations among members of the movement. Despite inconsistencies, the redshirts in this study used language to reveal their roles as political

actors. As members of the lower echelon of Thailand's profoundly hierarchical society, faced with laws that carry harsh punishments for those who challenge the traditional social order (see Streckfuss, 2011), grassroots redshirts struggled with the double challenges of articulating their beliefs about democracy and doing so in a politically repressive environment.

Conclusion

This study sought to explain how grassroots redshirt protesters assigned meanings to democracy through the use of intertextuality and presupposition. We have shown that they largely defined 'democracy' based on their lived experiences and on what they witnessed in Thai politics. In doing so, they mainly used intertextuality when positioning themselves toward the different voices of speakers in the quoted or reported text. In the latter case, staged intertextuality was also used not only to discredit the content of the original text but also to satirise its producer for being anti-democratic. The informants used presupposition about characteristics of democracy. Interestingly, they also used it as a strategy to discuss undemocratic actions by powerful political actors. Given that phasaa isaan allowed various linguistic strategies as presupposition triggers, the informants employed them to express their understandings of democracy despite a degree of contradiction and confusion. Building on the arguments of Fairclough (2003) concerning self-positioning toward difference, this study has demonstrated that notions of presupposition and intertextuality may be pushed further to describe language use in political discourse of the marginalised; they amount to verbal 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) in the mouths of disadvantaged political actors seeking to articulate their aspirations within a context of cultural hierarchy and limited freedom of expression. The 2010 deadly dispersals under the Abhisit government and the tight grip over dissent following the May 2014 coup left the redshirts further disenfranchised, although still

fighting a largely private ‘war of words’. At the time of this writing, when the redshirts have gone remarkably quiet in the public sphere, further research into their use of political language may shed more light on the quality of popular participation in Thailand’s deeply troubled democracy.

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Appendix

Informants' brief demographic profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Profession	Education
Wan	56	F	Rice farmer/weaver	Grade 4
Somchai	49	M	Street food vendor/ rice farmer	Grade 12
Tai	45	F	Grocery vendor	2-year vocational diploma
Chai	46	M	Taxicab driver	Grade 9
Noi	53	F	Chicken meat vendor	2-year vocational diploma
Nit	46	F	Seafood vendor	Grade 12
Krai	47	M	Street side tailor	Grade 12
Waeng	62	F	Rice farmer	Grade 4
Ban	39	M	General labourer	Grade 12 equivalent
Kong	30	M	Rice farmer	Grade 9
Phon	46	M	General labourer	Grade 12
Pat	41	M	Rice farmer	Grade 6