

## Bak: Is it a Vulgar Word or a Pronoun in Isan Dialects?

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### Abstract

This article aims to study 1) the meanings and origin of the word *bak* in the context of Isan dialects, and 2) the way *bak* is used with other words in distinct contexts in Isan dialects, with the hypothesis that *bak* is a complete basic word and can be integrated with other words to enhance its meaning in those contexts. This usage is different from that in standard Thai where the word *bak* usually has a negative meaning. Data were gathered from documents, including books and dictionaries, as well as from voice-recorded interviews of Isan dialect speakers. The results of the study show that, 1) *bak* is a basic word generally used in Isan dialects; it has various meanings similar to a homonym Standard Thai, including interesting meanings apart from a vulgar meaning, and 2) the word *bak* is used to construct other words in the form of nouns, verbs, and adverbs in distinct contexts of Isan dialects. The word *bak* when combined with other words or phrases can become a new idiom in Isan dialects. Therefore, *bak* is not only a vulgar word, but also has a role as a compound noun, pronoun, and various idioms.

**Keywords:** pronoun, vulgar word, words with several meaning, homonyms, Isan dialects

### Introduction

The Royal Institute Dictionary (Royal Society of Thailand, 2011) defines *bak* as: 1) a noun used to refer to a man who is of equal status, similar to the word *ai* (local context), and 2) a vulgar word for penis (local context). According to the Matichon Dictionary of the Thai Language

(Photchnanukrom chabap matichon, 2004), which is widely used in mass communications currently, *bak* is defined as: 1) the title of a man whose status is equal or lower than the speaker, and is considered impolite if applied to the elderly or people of higher status, and 2) a colloquial or vulgar word for penis. The definitions given by this dictionary suggest that *bak* is considered an impolite word to address a man. Moreover, the word *phak bung*, which means a kind of vegetable (morning glory), is defined as an impolite word because when it is reversed, the new word, *phung bak*, that results, is an impolite word (*phung* meaning to crash into or thrust). Nevertheless, in the local context (Isan), *bak* has several functions and meanings; *bak la* means a small child, *bak ka lung* is a collar for cattle made of wood or metal, and *bak mii* is jackfruit. However, certain words, such as *bak ha khwua mung* [f\*\*k you], and *bak pop* (a vulgar word for anus), still need to be defined in context to determine if they are rude or not. Moreover, since local languages tend to be the original form of the present language used, *bak* in the local context should not be considered a vulgar word as defined by the main Thai dictionaries.

### Research Methodology

Two tools were used for the assessment – documents and interviews. The documents included the following: the Dictionary of Northeastern Dialects by the Cultural Division Committee (1992); Isan Dictionary (Pimworamaythakul and Pimworamaythakul, 2002); the Isan Dictionary of Kamphun Bunthawee (Sudsung, 2005); the Royal Institute Dictionary (Royal Society of Thailand, 1976, 1987, 2003, 2013), and the Matichon Dictionary of the Thai Language (*Photchananukrom chabap matichon*, 2004).

The interviews were conducted with people aged 50 and above. The purpose was first to study the examples of Isan spoken words, idioms and idiomatic meaning of the language produced, and then analyze the origin of the language used by those people in different contexts to find out the original versions of words or vocabulary used for the word *bak*.

### Framework, Limitations of the Study and Related Theory

Semantics is the study of the meaning of a language and how the words perform and function in a sentence to give definition to both literal and idiomatic meanings (Rattanakul, 2001). The authors of this article choose to study the meaning of sense, word meanings and phrases. Words are different in function, usage and meaning. A word can be used as a noun, a verb or an adjective. Some words, however, have no real meaning, but play an important role in a sentence as linkers (Plawong, 1999).

Therefore, the study explored the root of the word *bak* to give the correct idea about how the word functions in a sentence, especially in the local language, which linguists believe is more closely connected to the way the ancient language was used in the past. A comparison of the word *bak* in past and present documents found interesting uniformity that remains despite the changes of language or language process. The constant changes in the language are referred to as the “lexicalization process” of a language (Kullawanit, 2002). The meanings of words can change over time, and new meanings result when the original words are combined with other words. An example can be seen in the Thai word, *i* (อี หรือ อี้), which in the past was used as a title, as in *i mae* (อีแม่), meaning “mother,” but is now a rude word, implying disdain in referring to a woman, such as *i Daeng* (อีแดง).

*Bak* is a good sample of the transition process. The word is used with new meanings, as in *bak la*, *bak kham*, *bak khak*, etc. Moreover, *bak* is combined and often used with other words to convey another meaning. There are some contexts of combination which are needed to be described when the contexts are used in different circumstances, for example, *buat lang bak*, *bak wai na khaeng*. An explanation is needed to define exactly what *bak* means.

There have not been many research studies about *bak* because it is generally used as pronoun for Isan people and most researchers conduct their work on a language as whole or in general, not on a particular word. But there is one research paper that shows the multilayered aspect of pronouns in Ubon Ratchthani province by Prakopsaeng (1999: 386). That study categorizes the pronouns according

to the voices, meanings, and forms by social factors. There is a section on the word *bak* as a pronoun used to call a man in Isan society.

Another study, that of Sunandha (2008), concentrates on the pronouns addressed in Laos at the present time. The study includes components, forms and factors of how Lao people choose to use words. Although *bak* is not mentioned in this paper, *ai* and *i*, which are in the same group as *bak*, are defined as pronouns. The formula is [pronoun + name] which is the same as how the word *bak* is used.

A close study of the history and theory related to the linguistic aspects of a word and how the word *bak* as used locally will provide deeper understanding of how the word is used in various contexts.

### The Meaning of *bak* in the Local Language (Isan dialects)

*Bak* in Isan contexts is a general word which is used by people in Northeastern Thailand. There are many meanings, both old and new. Both have negative and positive contexts. The sets of meanings shown below are from the local Isan dictionary by Somdet Phra Maha Virawong (1972: 231). There are three different meanings and usages for *bak* in this dictionary.

*bak* 1 N. a word to address a man who has the same or lower status, similar to the word *i* for women

*bak* 2 V. to chop or cut into small pieces or decline into smaller amount

*bak* 3 Adj. things which appear to be thin or slender

In the Isan-Thai-English Dictionary (Pinthong, 1989: 462), *bak* is also defined in several ways, as follows.

*bak* 1 N. a word to address a man whose age is the same as or younger than that of the speaker. For example, *bak si* refers to Mr. Si, and *bak sa* to Mr. Sa.

They are considered general words, not impolite or vulgar.

*bak* 2 V. to chop or cut into small pieces or decrease into a lesser amount, for example, *bak kok mi* means chop or cut the jackfruit tree; *bak kok muang* means chop or cut the mango tree; *bak kok than* means chop or cut the monkey apple tree.

*bak* 3 Adj. things that are seen as thin or slender.

The Isan Dictionary (Pimworamathakul & Pimworamathakul, 2002: 511-512) gives the following definitions of *bak* which are similar:

- bak* 1 N. a man, a pronoun which adults use to call children or people on the same social level, for example, *bak ha* (kid); *bak thit* (novice); *bak siao* (buddy);
- bak* 2 N. a word for fruits that begin with *mak* or *ma*, for example, *bak kham* (tamarind); *bak mi* (jackfruit); *bak muang* (mango); and also to refer to other fruits and vegetables, for example, *bak thua* (nut); *bak ue* (pumpkin); *bak ton* (winter melon).

This local dictionary gives special meanings about fruit and vegetables which are not shown in other dictionaries. It indicates that *bak* can be used as a pronoun to refer to things as well as people.

The Isan-Thai Dictionary KKU–Isan College Council (Khon Kaen University, 1989: 138) also defines *bak* in three different meanings:

- bak* 1 V. chop or cut, for example, *bak mai*
- bak* 2 V. set a date, for example, *bak mue bun*, (set the merit-making day)
- bak* 3 Adj. wavy, thin, slender; for example, *aeo bak* (slender waist)

These four Isan dictionaries define the word *bak* in the same or similar ways – as a noun and a pronoun to address a man who is equal or lower in status. As an adjective, it defines things which are slim, thin or slender. These meanings are similar to *bak* as used in Northern Thailand. It is shown in the dictionary of Northern dialects (CMRU Art culture, 1996: 406) as follows:

- bak* 1 V. wavy, chop or cut, make curving or wavy
- bak* 2 V. specify
- bak* 3 N. process, step or rhythm

Two of the meanings of *bak* in the Northern dictionary are similar to those in the Northeastern dictionaries. The difference is found only in the third meaning, process, step or rhythm. There is no indication

of a vulgar meaning in any dictionary, except when *bak* is combined with another word, for example, *bak woe* (a vulgar word for penis, used to criticize or curse someone). *Bak* by itself is not a vulgar word.

But when comparing the Royal Institute Dictionary, the Dictionary of Southern Dialects (Institute for Southern Thai Studies, 1982) and the Dictionary of the Khorat-Nakhon Ratchasima Dialect (Vongchavalitkul University, 2014), it is clear that the Royal Institute Dictionary is the first Thai dictionary (published in 1950, 1982, 1999, 2011) to give the meaning of *bak* as follows:

- bak* 1 N. (local) a word used to address a man who is equal or lower in social status, similar to the word, *ai*
- bak* 2 N. [a vulgar word for] penis

The Matichon Dictionary of the Thai language (2004) gives the same meanings:

- bak* 1 N. (Isan local) a word used to address a man who is equal or lower in social status, but cannot be used with ones who higher in status or older
- bak* 2 N. [a vulgar word for] penis

The Matichon Dictionary of the Thai language (2004), however, defines the word *bak* in Isan contexts, which are different from those in the Royal Institute Dictionary. The Dictionary of the Khorat-Nakhon Ratchasima Dialect (Vongchavalitkul University, 2014: 109) gives the meaning, penis, which is the same as the one in the Dictionary of Southern Dialects. The second meaning in that dictionary is “collar bone.”

When all of these meanings are considered together, it appears that *bak* is not considered a vulgar word in Isan contexts because it is a pronoun used with humans, animals and things, and even in the names of some fruits and vegetables, unlike the meanings in Northern and Southern contexts. The Central Thai language defines it as a vulgar word until today in Thai society.

Further study finds that older sources are more descriptive and give actual facts about the word *bak*.

The meaning of *bak* as defined and described above shows that the word has various meanings. In some local areas, *bak* is pronounced differently, with the low tone or the rising tone, according to the accent and the actual meaning in that community. *Bak* standing alone cannot be a vulgar word or considered a negative word from Isan contexts which are shown in dictionaries other than the Royal Institute Dictionary, the Dictionary of the Khorat-Nakhon Ratchasima Dialect and the Dictionary of Southern Dialect. *Bak* standing alone has six meanings, as summarized and categorized below.

- 1) A noun used for addressing or referring to a man who is of equal or lower status, the same age or younger. It can imply looking down on someone;
- 2) A pronoun used in referring to all kinds of fruit;
- 3) A noun meaning penis;
- 4) A verb meaning to chop, cut or make slimmer or thinner;
- 5) A verb meaning to specify;
- 6) An adjective meaning wavy, skinny or slim.

### The Background of the Word *bak* in Isan Contexts

*Bak* has many meanings and functions, as described in the previous section. In searching for the background of those meanings, we find that Misathan (2004) explains that *bak* originally was a verb meaning to chop or cut or make smaller. It also can be an adjective which means things with slim shapes; thus, *bak* in Isan contexts describes a man who is small or thin. Some people believe that the connotation of smallness can refer to the penis (Misathan, 2004). In ancient times, before high technology medical equipment could determine the gender of a fetus, people needed to wait until the delivery of the baby to know the gender. Boys needed to come with a male organ and that was called *bak*, and the word might also refer to the shape of the top of the penis which is thin and small. Thus, *bak* is used to call a young boy, which can be explained by the theory of metonymy, according to which a thing or concept is referred to by the name of something closely associated with that thing or concept.

Misathan (2004) further explains that speakers of Isan dialects use *bak* to refer to a boy who has a “perfect” penis. Parents can feel at ease when people call their baby *bak* because it shows that the baby has the important organ of male identity. Later, according to the theory of word building, the word *bak* became the title of a male human, as well as a name for certain fruits and vegetables or other things in the daily life of the local people.

### Using *bak* in Various Isan Contexts

The study of *bak* in various documents found that there are various popular uses of the word in three different aspects:

- 1) in ancient words,
  - 2) to identify the male gender,
  - 3) to accompany other words where it creates different meanings depending on the contexts and situations used.
- More details of the three aspects are described as follows.

1. *Bak* is used according to its original meaning found in Isan dictionaries.

*Bak* in this meaning is complete in the meaning itself. There is no need to combine it with other words. The word identifies the original meaning.

Example 1 *Bak* the bamboo first, I will use it as a fishing pole.  
*ao mai phai pai bak kon, khoi si dai ao pai het bet tok pla*

เอาไม้ไผ่ไปปักก่อน ข่อยสิได้เอาไปเส็ดเบ็ดตกปลา

The word *bak* in Example 1 is a verb that means to chop or cut into a smaller piece to use as a fishing poll.

Example 2 Young lady, your *bak* waist is very beautiful.

*phu sao aeo bak khue ngam thae*

ผู้สาวเอวปักคืองามแท้

The word *bak* in Example 2 is an adjective defining the slender shape of a woman who looks attractive to the speaker.

## 2. *Bak* as a pronoun or title of a man or a boy

*Bak* is used as a pronoun or a title of a man or a boy who is younger or lower in status. The speaker should be equal or above those addressed. *Bak* in this meaning can be used as the object or subject of a sentence. It can be used as a collective noun also.

Example 3 *Bak* Si is a kid who sniffs glue, never takes a shower, is smelly when he goes out in public.

***bak*** Si pen dek dom kao, nam bo khoey ap chak thuea, yang kai khon pho cha pen lom

บั๊กสี่เป็นเด็กดมกาว น้ำบเคยอาบจักเทื่อ ่างกายคนพอจะเป็นลม

The word *bak* in Example 3 is a pronoun or title of a man or a boy who is younger or lower in status. It is used to identify a male named Si.

Example 4 Go call a few *bak*, I want them to help.

pai oen dek noi ma chak song sam ***bak*** du, si ao pai soi het wiak

ไปเ็นเด็กน้อยมาจักสองสามบั๊กดู ลีเอาไปชอยเฮ็ดเวียก

Example 4 illustrates *bak* as a collective noun that indicates the number of boys the speaker wants to have help with something. If the speaker had used the word, “kid” *dek*, (*เด็ก*), instead of *bak*, the listener would misunderstand that the speaker means girl children, not boy children. Using the word *bak* shows that the speaker would like to have boys, not girls, in his/her context.

Example 5 *Bak* La, go and get some clothes for me.

***bak*** la pai ao pha nai tu hai nae

บั๊กหล่าไปเอาผ้าในตู้ให้แน

The usage of *bak la* in Example 5 shows that *bak* can be combined with the word *la* and it means the youngest boy or son in the family. The speaker feels that *bak la* is cute and this word gives a positive meaning and feeling to the listener. The listener cannot misunderstand about gender because *bak la* identifies boys, while *i la* identifies girls. In this example, the positive meaning of *bak* is shown also.

3. *Bak* is used to accompany another word and creates different meanings depending on the contexts and situations used.

Combining the word *bak* with another word can add more meaning or function to the adjectives. The words can be used to identify plants, animals, things or even to create new words which can transform the words into idiomatic meanings.

### 3.1 Accompany another word to form a new meaning

Adding *bak* in front of the word (prefix) can change the meaning of words; for example, *bak yai*, which means very big (*yai* is big), *bak aep*, which mean very spacious (*aep* means wide). *Bak khak* means fun or very enjoyable. *Bak lai* means a lot.

This method is a way to emphasize words or accentuate the degree of words by adding *bak* in front of the target words.

### 3.2 Accompany another word to change the part of speech (adj.).

Adding *bak* to the main words to change the function of the words into adjectives is another way *bak* is used. Examples:

*aeo bak* (*aeo* means waist) so *aeo bak* means a very slender or slim waist.

*na bak* (*na* means face) so *na bak* means an injured face with scars and wounds.

*dang bak* (*dang* means nose) so *dang bak* means a misshapen nose.

*mai bak* (*mai* means a stick) so *mai bak* means a stick that is not straight.

All the nouns represented here are the main nouns which can be defined more in their meaning by using adjectives, so when *bak* is added in front, it introduces new meanings to the words.

### 3.3 Accompany other words to form the names of things, plants and animals

For nouns in Isan, *bak* is a common word found as a pronoun or title, like the word *mak* or *i*. It is used to specify that this is the item

or person that the speaker is talking about; for example, *bak hoi* (*hoi* means a shell), *bak hep* (*hep* means a dog tick). *Bak* can also occur in front of nouns that refer to certain things; for example, *bak ka long* means the bell used as a ring attached to the collar of cattle, *bak king lo* is a tree trunk which is chopped into pieces to make children's toys. *Bak chok* is a spade or mattock, *bak kham* is a tamarind. *Bak muang* is a mango, *bak ue* is a pumpkin. These are examples of putting a prefix in front of fruit and certain things. Misatan (2004) gives the idea that the adding of *bak* in front of the names of fruit originated from the shift of the voiced sounds /m/ or /ŋ/ and /b/ or /p/ because they are voiced sounds which are pronounced with the lips. The word *ma:k* can shift into *mak*. It refers to round fruit. The sound shifts again into *bak* when the speaker breathes through his/her mouth instead of through the nose as usual.

Thepkanjana (2016) gives a different idea about *bak*. She explains that *mak* refers to a tree, for example, *mak yom* (*yom* means a star gooseberry tree) and *mak fueang* (*fueang* means a starfruit tree). However, with fruit, *bak* is used instead of *mak*. *Bak khuea* means eggplant; *bak fueang* means starfruit.

Moreover, according to the Isan Cultural Club Chulalongkorn University (2017), *bak* is a specific Isan word used for special kinds of fruits; for example:

<i>bak kham</i>	tamarind
<i>bak khiap</i>	custard apple
<i>bak than</i>	monkey apple

These fruits can also be called *mak kham*, *mak khiap*, and *mak than*.

3.4 Creating a new word to use in a conversation or for communication.

*Bak* also is used to create new words, most of which are nouns.

Example 6: *bak + ti* or *i V.* *bak ti* means a kind of children's play or game  
*bak + li V.* hide *bak li* means playing hide and seek  
*bak + baen V.* throw, target *bak baen* means shooting an object to a target, or goal, as in basketball

*Bak* in these contexts is combined with other nouns and verbs to create new words that are mostly nouns.

### 3.5 Act as a proverb or in idiomatic meaning

The appearance of *bak* in Isan contexts is from the word *bak* combined in words and phrases. They are commonly used in proverbs or shown in idiomatic meaning; for example, *bak la kham phaeng*, *buat lang bak*, *bak wai na khaeng*, *bak bap*, *bak mue bak wen*, *bak dai bak nan*.

Example 7 Today, where is *bak la kham phaeng*?  
*mue ni chak bak la kham phaeng man pai ha len au sai*  
 มื้อนี้จักบักหล่าคำแพงมันไปหาเล่นอยู่ไส

The use of *bak* as shown in Example 7 demonstrates the use of *bak la kham phaeng*, which means the cute youngest son. The speaker uses this word in reference to the son he loves and cherishes. A positive meaning is shown here as the listener must be pleased when hearing *bak* used this way. *Bak* by itself also has a positive meaning of the love which the speaker might feel toward the child who is listening.

Example 8 *Bak Daeng* (Mr. Daeng) comes back so quickly from being a monk.  
 Did he *buat lang bak* only?  
*bak Daeng man khue suek ma wai thae, pai buat lang bak sue sue bo*  
 บักแดงมันคือสึกมาไวแท้ไปบวชตั้งบักชื่อ ๑ บ่

*Buat lang bak* is an Isan proverb which means a man who becomes a monk for a very short period of time or a monk who is still a bad person after being a monk. In this example *bak* has a negative meaning:

Example 9 Whatever bad things you do, please *bak na khaeng* (remember)  
*het i yang bo di wai, hai bak wai na khaeng doe*  
 เอ็ดอิยังบตีไว้ให้บั๊กไว้หน่นข้งเค้อ

*Bak na khaeng* is an Isan proverb which means remember or let's remember. *Bak* can mean chop or cut or to remember in the future time. This example shows negative connotations of *bak*. Some of the contexts in which *bak* has a negative meaning or implication are *bak ngua bak kwai* (cattle), *bak pet* (a kind of ghost), *bak pop* (a kind of evil spirit), *bak kuem* (to be silly or stupid). It is commonly used with males to imply stupidity or foolishness, as shown in example 10.

Example 10. If you are so foolish, just go eat grass, you dumb buffalo!  
*khan si ngo pan ni, pai kin ya lot pai bak kwai oey*  
 ขันสิโงปานหนีไปกินหญ้าโลดไป บักควายเอ๊ย

Another interesting meaning of *bak* in Isan contexts is *bak siao*. Thai people who are not from Isan believe that the word implies stupidity, but it does not mean that in Isan contexts. *Bak siao* in Isan means a beloved friend. Consequently, it can be seen that the meanings in Thai and Isan contexts for this word are totally different.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this study shows that the word *bak* is used in various contexts and has various meanings. *Bak* is widely and popularly used in Isan contexts and it appears in many Isan dialects. There are six different meanings of the word in Isan contexts, including a pronoun to address a man, a vulgar word for penis, and so on. There are both

positive and negative meanings of the word. *Bak* is not only a noun, but it can also act as a verb or an adjective in a sentence. *Bak* also appears to indicate the idiomatic meaning of a word in a sentence. It can be used as part of an Isan proverb. *Bak* is a word that people outside of Isan society use to show disdain for a man, but it also has many good or positive meanings in various contexts.

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