Research on address and self-reference in Southeast Asian languages has highlighted the dominance of a hierarchical, kinship-based model. Hierarchy manifests itself in people's sensitivity to age and generational, institutional and socio-economic differences.

Studies of person reference in interaction have shown that the hierarchy-based system is as fixed as it is dynamic. While the terms for indexing age and generation within the same family are not alterable, people can negotiate positioning through alternative strategies.

Despite this flexibility, it has been noted that, to convey symmetrical relations one may have to “step outside the system” in selecting terms, which illustrates a tension between hierarchy and equality. This also tells us that social hierarchy remains the reference point relative to which practices of symmetry are measured. It also affirms our understanding of hierarchy as structurally stable ordering of social relations inherently intolerant of parity.

But what if it is possible to accomplish parity without stepping out of the system? How can we reconcile the tension between hierarchy and equality? Is reciprocal use of terms indexical of symmetrical relationship, or is it that we cannot assume reciprocal forms are synonymous with equal status? Is there a place for an argument that all social relations are inherently asymmetrical?

This workshop will bring together scholars with expertise on Southeast Asian languages to debate these issues and offer a fresh perspective on the relationship between language and social hierarchy, and in doing so, arrive at greater understanding of how addressing and self-reference practices constitute a fundamental aspect of social life in the region.

When:
21 – 22 June 2019

Where:
SLC Common Room
Level 5, Brennan MacCallum Building A18

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