

Thai speakers

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Distribution

THAILAND.

Introduction

Thai (formerly called ‘Siamese’) is a member of the Tai family of languages which are dispersed over a wide area of Asia, from northern Vietnam to northern India. Thai is the national language of Thailand and as such is spoken by over fifty million people. Distinct regional dialects of Thai are spoken in the north, northeast and south of the country, but the language of the Central Region is regarded as the standard and is used both in schools and for official purposes throughout the country.

Thai, like Chinese, is a tonal language, with the meaning of each syllable being determined by the pitch at which it is pronounced. Standard Thai has five tones – mid, low, high, rising and falling. It is a non-inflected language and much of its original lexicon is monosyllabic; a high percentage of polysyllabic words are foreign borrowings, particularly from the classical Indian languages, Sanskrit and Pali.

Thai is written in an alphabetic script that was originally derived from Indian sources. It is written across the page from left to right; words are not separated as in most European languages, and where spaces do occur, they very often correspond to some form of punctuation in English, such as a full stop or comma.

Phonology

General

There are significant differences between the phonological systems of Thai and English. In Thai, there are 21 consonant phonemes and 21 vowel phonemes. In the Thai consonant system, the aspirated voiceless

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stops /p^h/, /t^h/ and /k^h/ are distinct phonemes and not simply allophones (varieties) of /p/, /t/ and /k/ as they are in English. English has more fricatives than Thai, and Thais tend to have difficulty in producing these (e.g. /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/). Vowel length is significant in Thai, with a basic distinction made between long and short vowels.

Thais speak English with a ‘Thai accent’ because they try to fit every English word into the Thai phonological system. While this is to some extent true of every foreign accent, there does appear to be a peculiar reluctance among many Thai speakers to shed their accent. In Thailand, this can be explained perhaps by peer group pressure and not wanting to show off or be different in the classroom environment. But as numerous English loan words (including brand names of hundreds of consumer goods) have passed into everyday Thai, it has also become a perfectly normal and legitimate strategy to pronounce English words in a Thai way; to pronounce them any other way risks not being understood and sounding pretentious. This process is reinforced by teachers and English–Thai dictionaries providing transliterations of English words in Thai script in an attempt to clarify pronunciation. As a result, English consonants and vowels are widely pronounced as their nearest Thai equivalents.

- Some of the more common features of a ‘Thai accent’ in English are:
- Stress on the final syllable of words.
 - Problems in articulating certain final consonants and consonant clusters.
 - A staccato effect, deriving from:
 - a) a tendency to assign tones to syllables;
 - b) a tendency to give equal weight and timing to each syllable;
 - c) glottal stops before initial vowels;
 - d) insertion of a short vowel /ə/ between certain initial consonant clusters;
 - e) reduction of consonant clusters at the ends of words to single consonants.

Vowels

i:	ɪ	e	æ	eɪ	aɪ	ɔɪ
ɑ:	ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ	aʊ	əʊ	ɪə
u:	ʌ	ɜ:	ə	eə	ʊə	auə auə

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3. /g/ and /dʒ/ are often pronounced as unvoiced consonants by Thai speakers when they occur at the beginning of a word.
4. Although /r/ exists in Thai, it presents a problem to many Thai speakers even in their own language, where they may often substitute /l/. This strategy is then carried over when speaking English.
5. The glottal stop is a phoneme in Thai, and Thai speakers will often insert one at the beginning of English words that have an initial vowel sound; this tends to create a staccato effect and preclude juncture.

Consonant clusters

English has a much wider range of consonant clusters than Thai; consonant clusters never occur at the end of words in Thai. Among the initial two-segment clusters which do not occur in Thai are: /dr/, /fr/, /fl/, /fj/, /tw/, /sl/, /sw/, /sm/, /sp/, /sk/ and /st/. In pronouncing English words where such clusters occur, Thais tend to insert a short vowel, sometimes even creating another fully-stressed syllable:

smoke becomes 'sa-moke'

frown becomes 'fa-rown'

A similar process operates with English three-segment initial clusters:

screw becomes 'sa-crew'

strike becomes 'sa-trike'

There are, however, near Thai equivalents to initial /gr/, /gl/, /kr/, /kl/, /kw/, /pr/ and /pl/.

It is not uncommon, especially in Bangkok, for Thai speakers to drop the second segment of a two-segment consonant cluster at the beginning of a Thai word. Thus words like *khay* (= *who?*) and *plaa* (= *fish*) are frequently pronounced *khay* and *paa*. Thais who 'reduce' words like this in their own language may carry the process into English, and say 'bake' for *brake* and 'fee' for *free*; and 'fide rice' is often pronounced as 'fide lice'.

English final clusters present the Thai speaker with a problem and usually some way of 'reducing' them to a single manageable final consonant is sought. Generally, the first segment of the cluster is retained and the rest dropped.

pump becomes 'pum'

perfect becomes 'perfec'

Rhythm and stress

Every syllable in Thai carries a certain fixed tone. Thais tend to give equal weight and timing to each syllable and this, together with the fact that tonal pitch is located on single syllables (instead of groups of syllables, as it is in English) produces a rather staccato effect when transferred to English. The single most common mistake of Thai speakers is to stress the final syllable of polysyllabic English words, as in *but'ter*, *cof'fee*, *shop'ping*, and so on. More complex uses of stress, for example to alter meaning or to convey attitudinal meaning, are likely to present problems even to advanced learners.

Intonation

Intonation patterns in Thai are very different from those of English. Being a basically monosyllabic language, Thai has a sharp up-and-down pitch contour. Although questions in Thai are frequently marked by 'question words' at the end of a sentence which have an inherent rising tone, this does not automatically facilitate the reproduction of English question contours. Particular attention should be paid to the intonation of polite requests; Thai uses a whole series of untranslatable words or 'particles' at the ends of sentences to perform some of the functions fulfilled by intonation in English. When translating from Thai to English, the polite particles used in requests disappear, leaving a rather brusque imperative if the speaker has been too literal.

Juncture

In Thai it is impossible to produce new consonant clusters from the junctures of final and initial consonants; the glottal stop before initial vowels also tends to preclude a link between final consonant and initial vowel. Thai speakers are likely to be unaware of the phonetic changes that take place in English through juncture (e.g. *would you* /wudʒə/; *get back* /ge(p)bæk/) unless these are specifically pointed out.

Influence of spelling on pronunciation

Thais learning English obviously make numerous mistakes in pronouncing new words because of the considerable mismatch between spelling and pronunciation in English. Typical problems which persist even among fairly advanced learners are:

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1. Uncertainty as to when *th* is pronounced /θ/ and when /ð/ (assuming of course that the speaker can productively differentiate between the two sounds).
2. Uncertainty as to when *s* is pronounced /s/ and when /z/.
3. Failure to make a reduced pronunciation of the unstressed vowels in words such as *common, problem, police, possible, breakfast*.
4. Thais also tend to pronounce words such as *can, was, have* with their strong 'written' pronunciations instead of using weak forms.
5. The Thai spelling of common English loan words reinforces a non-English pronunciation, which then assumes a legitimacy which learners sometimes find hard to defy when dealing with the word in an English context.

Orthography and punctuation

Spelling and writing

Thai is written with an alphabetic system which runs across the page from left to right. There is no distinction between upper and lower case. The position of the vowel symbols varies, with some written above the consonant, some below, some to the left and some following on the right – and some surrounding the consonant on three sides. Thai words are not separated by spaces; the spaces that do occur occasionally in Thai writing generally correspond to punctuation marks in English. Most Thais are exposed to the Roman alphabet at an early age and spend a considerable amount of time at the initial stage copying out letters and words; even those with little or no knowledge of English may be sufficiently familiar with the Roman alphabet to decipher words in isolation.

Punctuation

Essentially, there are no punctuation marks in Thai, although spaces between groups of words are used to indicate pauses. In the past there has been some experimentation with western punctuation marks, and question marks, exclamation marks and inverted commas can often be found in old books; they are, however, redundant and less common nowadays. Punctuation presents quite a problem to Thai learners; errors of omission are frequent, while the concept of what constitutes a sentence may prove an obstacle.

Grammar

General

The grammatical structure of Thai is very different from that of English. Plurals of nouns and verb tenses are normally unmarked; when it is necessary to distinguish between singular and plural or the time an action takes place, this is done by the addition of structural words rather than by inflection. Thai adjectives and adverbs can also function as verbs, while the Thai pronominal system is more complex, with different sets of pronouns reflecting different degrees of intimacy and hierarchy. One of the few broad areas of similarity is the order of words in a sentence, namely, 'subject + verb + object'; however, the subject is commonly omitted in Thai when it is clearly understood who or what is referred to.

Auxiliaries; questions and negatives

There are no auxiliary verbs in Thai.

1. In Thai, a sentence is transformed into a question by the addition of a question word which is placed at the end of the sentence. Since the question word has no equivalent in English, Thai speakers will often simply substitute a rising intonation in an otherwise literal translation:

**He go?* (Note also the uninflected verb.)

2. Negative questions – and answers – frequently cause confusion, Thais typically answering 'yes' where English requires 'no'.
'You're not going, are you?' **Yes (I'm not).'*

3. More specific questions such as *When?*, *Why?* and *How?* have direct equivalents in Thai, but since the first two can occur at either the beginning or the end of the sentence, the learner may produce sentences like:

**When he go?*

**He go when?*

How many? is frequently used to the exclusion of *How much?* and the verb is often omitted also:

**How many the price that shirt?*

4. Negatives in Thai are formed by putting the negative word *mây* in front of the verb. Confusion sometimes arises as to whether this word should be translated as *no* or *not*, resulting in sentences like:

**He not go.*

**He no go.*

Time, tense and aspect

The Thai verb has no inflected forms; a single word *pay* (= *go*) covers not simply *go* and *goes*, but also *went*, *was going*, *has gone*, *is going*, *will go*, *would go* and so on. Usually situation and context preclude any ambiguity, but where there is a possibility of misunderstanding arising, structural words are added, usually immediately in front of the verb, to clarify the time-reference. In normal narrative, it is usually quite enough to use the verb without any pre-verb modifier.

Verb inflections and complex verb phrases present a formidable obstacle to Thai learners, and many prefer to use the unmarked base form of the English verb rather than attempt a more difficult form which they feel will more than likely be incorrect.

**Yesterday we visit London.*

**She pay already.*

**I leave him since ten o'clock.*

Note, however, that a Thai who appears to be using the base form of a verb in speech may actually be having problems with pronunciation rather than grammar. He or she may be trying to say, for instance, *cooked* or *arranged*, but failing to pronounce the *-ed* at the end of the cluster. This is obviously a major area in which Thai speakers are at a disadvantage compared with European learners of English, and this should be borne in mind when teaching classes of mixed nationalities.

Articles

There are no articles in Thai, and errors of confusion between indefinite and definite articles, as well as when to omit articles, occur frequently:

**He is very nice man.*

**What the food you like?*

**The buffaloes are the important animals in Thailand.*

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs in Thai occur after the noun or verb which they modify. They also function as verbs meaning *to be* (the Thai equivalent of *to be* is not used as a copula with adjectives). Thus the expression *rót dii* (= *car-good*) can be considered as either a phrase (*a good car*) or a sentence (*the car is good*). As a result, the verb is often omitted in English sentences:

**This car not good.*

**This food very tasty.*

In Thai, there is no distinction between adjective/adverb pairs as there is in English (e.g. *good/well*, *clear/clearly*). Thai learners tend to overuse the adjectival form in English:

**You speak Thai very good.*

The comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives and adverbs in Thai are formed by the addition of the equivalent of *more than* and *(the) most* respectively, immediately after the base word. As a result, the English suffixes *-er* and *-est* are frequently disregarded by Thai learners:

**This dress is beautiful more than that one.*

**I work the most hard of my brothers.*

Nouns

Thai nouns have neither gender nor case, nor is there any distinction between singular and plural forms. Context is generally sufficient to indicate whether a noun has singular or plural reference, but in instances where it is important to be more precise, Thai employs 'pluraliser words' which occupy a fixed position in relation to the noun, or exact numerical descriptions. Thai learners make frequent errors in using the singular form of an English noun (the unmarked form) where a plural should be used:

**I have many friend.*

Again, however, it must be borne in mind that the Thai sound system has no final *-s*, nor final consonant clusters; some learners may have problems in oral production yet reproduce correct written forms.

Numerical expressions in Thai are more complex than in English, and involve the use of a special 'noun classifier'. *Two cars* and *five girls* would be expressed in Thai as:

<i>car</i>	<i>two</i>	<i>vehicle</i>
<i>girl</i>	<i>five</i>	<i>person</i>
(noun)	+ (number)	+ (classifier)

The Thai pattern seldom causes interference, but failure to pluralise a noun after a number is very common:

**I have five brother.*

Pronouns

The pronoun system of Thai is considerably more complex than that of most European languages, with a wide range of words to indicate relationships of both hierarchy and intimacy. Kin terms and personal names are widely used as first and second person pronouns to signal intimacy. English pronouns present problems for the Thai learner,

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because the two languages make different distinctions in both gender and number. Thus, there are masculine and feminine first-person pronouns in Thai, while the most commonly used third-person pronoun makes no distinction between gender, with the result that Thai learners frequently use *he* and *she* interchangeably in English:

**My girlfriend, he is very nice.*

**The policeman she chase me.*

(Note also the duplication of noun and pronoun which occurs commonly in spoken Thai.)

The same third-person pronoun not only does not differentiate gender – it does not distinguish number either, resulting in confusing statements like:

**My American friends are in Thailand. He stay at the hotel.*

**My sisters study at the university. He work very hard.*

Thai pronouns do not have separate forms to indicate subject or object functions; nor is there a possessive pronoun in Thai. Possession in Thai is expressed in the terms ‘noun + *of* + noun/pronoun’, although the Thai word for *of* is optional and frequently omitted. This can lead to mistakes like:

**house of my father* or **house of father*

It is very common in Thai to omit the subject from a sentence if it is perfectly clear who or what is being talked about. This means that pronouns are frequently discarded in Thai sentences, a pattern sometimes carried over into English:

**My brother was angry when came home.*

Prepositions

Most English prepositions have near Thai equivalents and are relatively easy for Thai learners to grasp. More difficult are English ‘verb + preposition’ or ‘adjective + preposition’ combinations which have a single-word Thai verb equivalent. This leads to errors such as:

**I angry you.*

**We interest / are interested it.*

**He frighten / is frightened you.*

Subordinate clauses

Thai learners inevitably experience difficulty in producing the correct verb tenses in complex sentences with subordinate clauses; again the most common strategy is to opt for the unmarked form. Relative clauses

present a further problem in that Thai has only one relative pronoun, and *who* and *which* in particular are frequently confused:

**My friend which I met . . .*

Conditional clauses in Thai frequently omit the word for *if*, and this is sometimes carried over into English. Other typical sentence constructions arising from a literal translation from Thai include:

**Although . . . but . . .*

**Because . . . therefore . . .*

Vocabulary

Traditionally, Sanskrit and Pali have been used for coining new words in Thai; however, the influx of western technology and consumer goods has resulted in a considerable number of English loanwords being adopted into the Thai lexicon. Such borrowings are given a Thai pronunciation which some Thai learners find difficult to shed when using the word in English, for example:

<i>plastic</i>	pát-tìk
<i>style</i>	sa-taay
<i>strike</i>	sa-tráy
<i>football</i>	fút-bòon
<i>pump</i>	pám
<i>alcohol</i>	?en-kò-hò

Apart from these loanwords, there is no similarity between the Thai and English lexicons, and the Thai learner has none of the advantages of the Western European learner who can draw on some familiarity with Latin and Germanic roots to guess vocabulary. The fact that many Thais with limited communicative competence in English nevertheless seem to have an extensive English vocabulary is largely due to traditional methods of education, which put great emphasis on rote learning at the expense of developing communication skills.

Culture

Generally speaking, Thais have a very positive attitude towards learning English. Competence in the language is seen as both a mark of sophistication and a passport to a more prosperous life. Most top jobs require a sound knowledge of the language, and tens of thousands of parents make considerable financial sacrifices each year so that their offspring can move from the provinces to the big cities, or from the big cities to overseas, in order to gain a better facility in the language. There even appears to be a certain social prestige attached to simply attending

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English classes, for many people with little need for English and little real interest appear to be willing to part with considerable sums of money to register for courses from which they will gain little benefit and to which they feel even less commitment.

English has been regarded as essential for national development and has therefore been a compulsory element in the secondary school curriculum for many years. However, the quality of language education provided varies enormously; in Bangkok, expensive private schools often provide English at the primary level, and with competent teachers and sometimes native speakers on their staffs, their pupils can be very fluent speakers by the time they leave school. Children from a rural background face a severe handicap by comparison, for the best teachers have traditionally gravitated towards the capital, where the pay and conditions are better; it is there, too, that most of the opportunities open to foreigners wanting to teach English in Thailand are to be found.

The teacher is traditionally a highly respected and respectable figure, and a class in Thailand is likely to have definite ideas about what is and what is not appropriate 'teacher behaviour'. Most things are a matter of common sense, although the Thailand-bound teacher would be well-advised to find out something about cultural *faux pas* from the numerous culture and etiquette guides now available. One area where Westerners do sometimes offend is in the matter of dress: appearance is very important in Thai society and a failure to adapt to this (and other cultural values) can seriously undermine the effectiveness of the teacher and even create latent hostility. When it comes to actual teaching, engaging pupils' active participation can be a problem. More used to receiving knowledge passively, they may feel threatened by a more active communication-oriented approach; alternatively, they may feel that they are learning nothing once the blackboard examples of grammar rules give way to apparently chaotic conversation classes. The Western teacher should also bear in mind that Thai society is a very hierarchical one; older learners should be treated with respect at all times. 'Face' is also important and any attempt to humiliate a student (e.g. by leaving a long pause after a question which the learner cannot answer, brushing aside pedantic questions too quickly, etc.) may rebound on the teacher, with the class withdrawing cooperation in sympathy with the victim. Similarly, showing anger and impatience, no matter how justified it may seem, is as culturally inappropriate and counter-productive in the classroom as anywhere in Thailand and will invariably alienate a class.

A sample of written Thai

Type-written Thai

ประชากรทางภาคใต้มีลักษณะแตกต่างจากประชากรทางภาคอื่นบ้างในทางผิวพรรณและรูปร่างหน้าตาคล้ายสำเนียงภาษา ส่วนความเป็นอยู่และอาชีพนั้นส่วนใหญ่ก็คือการกสิกรรม แต่มีข้าวน้อยกว่าภาคกลาง มีผลไม้บ้างพอจะเป็นรายได้ดีถ้าการขนส่งสะดวก หากตลาดได้ไกล ๆ ผลผลิตที่เป็นรายได้ขึ้นหน้าขึ้นตาว่าผลไม้คือยางพาราซึ่งปลูกกันมากในจังหวัดตอนใต้และเหมืองแร่ดีบุกในบางท้องถิ่น

A direct transliteration

prachaakoon thaang phâak tâay mii lâksanà t̄eekt̄aang càak prachaakoon
thaang phâak m̄un bâaŋ nay thaang phīwphan lé? rūprâaŋ nâataa kàp
s̄amniaŋ phaas̄aa s̄uaŋ khwaam pen yùu lé? aachīp nán s̄uaŋ yàw k̄h̄m̄
kaan kasikam t̄eē mii kh̄âw n̄óoy kwàa phâak klaaŋ mii ph̄õnlamáay
m̄âak s̄m̄ ph̄oo ca pen raayd̄âay dii th̄âa kaan kh̄õn s̄õŋ saduak h̄aa talàat
d̄âay klay klay phalitphõn thii pen raayd̄âay kh̄m̄ n̄â kh̄m̄ taa kwàa
ph̄õnlamáay kh̄m̄ yaŋ phaaaraa s̄m̄ pl̄uuk kan m̄âak nay caŋwàt t̄oon
t̄âay lé? m̄uaŋr̄eē diibùk nay baŋ th̄óŋth̄ii

A word-for-word translation

person way region south have characteristic different from person way
region other somewhat in way of complexion and shape face eye with
sound language. as for living and profession part big is agriculture but
have rice few than region middle. have fruit much which sufficient will
be income good if carry send convenient find market can far far.
product which is income rise face rise eye more than fruit is rubber para
which grow together much in province part south and mine tin in some
area.

An idiomatic translation

The people of the South differ somewhat from the people of other
regions in their complexion and physical appearance and in their
language. As far as their way of living and occupations are concerned,
they are mainly involved in agriculture. But there is less rice than in the

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Central Region. There is a lot of fruit, sufficient to bring in a good income if transportation is convenient and markets can be found over a wide area. A product which brings in a more noticeable income than fruit is the para rubber tree, which is grown in the southern provinces, and the tin mines in some areas.