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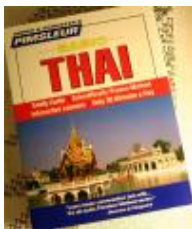
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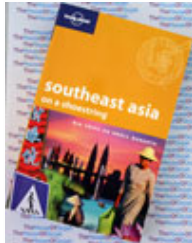
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About the Thai Language

Thai is the national and official language of [Thailand](#) and the mother tongue of the Thai people, Thailand's dominant ethnic group. Thai is a member of the Tai group of the [Tai-Kadai language](#) family. The Tai-Kadai languages are thought to have originated in what is now southern China, and some linguists have proposed links to the Austroasiatic, Austronesian, or Sino-Tibetan language families. It is a tonal and analytic language. The combination of tonality, a complex orthography, relational markers and a distinctive phonology can make Thai difficult to learn for those who do not already speak a related language.

Standard Thai, also known as Central Thai or [Siamese](#), is the official language of Thailand, spoken by about 65 million people (1990) including speakers of Bangkok Thai (although the latter is sometimes considered as a separate dialect). Khorat Thai is spoken by about 400,000 (1984) in Nakhon Ratchasima; it occupies a linguistic position somewhere between Central Thai and Isan on a dialect continuum, and may be considered a variant or dialect of either.

The Thai language uses a phonemic alphabet of 44 consonants and 32 vowels. All syllables must contain a vowel sound, but may begin and/or end with a consonant sound. A syllable which ends in a vowel sound is called open, and a syllable which ends in a consonant is called closed. Each syllable is pronounced in one of five tones: mid, high, low, rising, or falling; as a result, speaking correctly creates pleasing melodic patterns which has led the language to sometimes be called a sing-song language by foreigners. Since the alphabet is phonemic (like English but unlike Chinese), it is possible to pronounce a word without knowing it's meaning.

Most Thai words are a simple single immutable syllable; there are no suffixes, declensions, subject-object agreement, or word conjugations. Thai words are assembled into larger forms by aggregation; perhaps because of this, "Thais greatly appreciate puns and double-entendres which, besides enlivening everyday vernacular, spice and propel outrageous dialogue in popular art forms such as folk theatre." In general, Thai grammar is much simpler than Western languages, as particles and other helper-words are sprinkled about to fine-tune the meaning of a sentence.

Some beginning students are intimidated by the intricacies of language used by people of different social class in Thailand. This is not a problem, however, since the rules are quite general, and foreigners may be allowed more leeway, since the effort to speak Thai is widely appreciated. There are many ways to say "I" or "you," for example, but some are only used by royalty, ecclesiastics, etc., so they won't be of concern to the beginner.

Transcription

There is no universal standard for transcribing Thai into the Latin alphabet. For example, the name of King Rama IX, the present monarch, is transcribed variously as [Bhumibol](#), Phumiphon, phuuM miH phohnM, or many other versions. Guide books, text books and dictionaries may each follow different systems. For this reason, most language courses recommend that learners master the [Thai alphabet](#).

What comes closest to a standard is the [Royal Thai General System of Transcription](#) (RTGS), published by the Thai Royal

Institute only in Thai at . This system is increasingly used in Thailand by central and local governments, especially for road signs. Its main drawbacks are that it does not indicate tone or vowel length. It is not possible to reconstruct the Thai spelling from the RTGS transcriptions.

Thai alphabet

The Thai alphabet is derived from the [Khmer alphabet](#) , which is modeled after the Brahmic script from the Indic family. The language and its alphabet are closely related to the Lao language and alphabet. Most Laotians are able to read and understand Thai, as more than half of the Thai vocabulary, grammar, intonation, vowels and so forth are common with the Lao language. Much like the Burmese adopted the Mon script (which also has Indic origins), the Thais adopted and modified Khmer script to create their own writing system. While the oldest known inscription in the Khmer language dates from 611 CE, inscriptions in Thai writing began to appear around 1292 CE. Notable features include:

1. It is an abugida script, in which the implicit vowel is a short /a/ in a syllable without final consonant and a short /o/ in a syllable with final consonant.
2. Tone markers are placed above the consonant just before the vowel sound of the syllable.
3. Vowels sounding after a consonant are nonsequential: they can be located before, after, above or below the consonant, or in a combination of these positions.

Other Thai Dialects

Thai is the national language of Thailand, spoken by around eighty percent of the sixty million residents of the South-East Asian country. Linguists consider it an "uninflected, primarily monosyllabic, tonal language" in the "Ka-Tai group." The spoken language is believed to have originated in the area which is now the border between Vietnam and China, an idea which provides clues to the origin of the Thai people, an area of continued scholarly debate. Linguistically, the language is related to languages spoken in eastern Burma (Myanmar), northern Vietnam, Yunnan, and Laos.

The written Thai Language was introduced by the third Sukothai period king, Ramkamhaeng, in 1283. This writing system has undergone little change since its introduction, so inscriptions from the Sukothai era can be read by modern Thai readers. The writing was based on Pali, Sanskrit, and Indian concepts, and many Mon and Khmer words entered the language.

Within Thailand, there are four major dialects, corresponding to the southern, northern ("Yuan"), northeastern (close to Lao language), and central regions of the country; the latter is called *Central Thai* or *Bangkok Thai* and is taught in all schools, is used for most television broadcasts, and is widely understood in all regions. Nowadays, English is also taught in all public schools. There are a few minor Thai dialects such as Phuan and Lue, spoken by small populations. Also within Thailand, small ethnic minority groups (including so-called "hill tribes") account for around sixty languages which are not considered related to Thai.

The four primary dialects of Thai should not be confused with four different "languages" used by Thais in different social circumstances. For example, certain words are used only by Thai royalty, creating a royal language. There are also languages used for religious figures, polite everyday interactions, and gruff or crude communications.

- * Isan (Northeastern Thai), the language of the [Isan region of Thailand](#), considered by some to be a dialect of the Lao language, which it very closely resembles (although it is written in the Thai alphabet). It is spoken by about 15 million people (1983).
- * Nyaw language, spoken mostly in Nakhon Phanom Province, Sakhon Nakhon Province, Udon Thani Province of Northeast Thailand.
- * Galung language, spoken in Nakhon Phanom Province of Northeast Thailand.
- * Lü (Tai Lue, Dai), spoken by about 78,000 (1993) in northern Thailand.
- * Northern Thai (Lanna, Kam Meuang, or Thai Yuan), spoken by about 6 million (1983) in the formerly independent kingdom of Lanna (Chiang Mai).
- * Phuan, spoken by an unknown number of people in central Thailand and Isan.
- * Phu Thai, spoken by about 156,000 around Nakhon Phanom Province (1993).
- * Shan (Thai Luang, Tai Long, Thai Yai), spoken by about 56,000 in north-west Thailand along the border with the Shan States of Burma (1993).
- * Song, spoken by about 20,000 to 30,000 in central and northern Thailand (1982).
- * Southern Thai (Pak Dtai), spoken about 5 million (1990).
- * Thai Dam, spoken by about 20,000 (1991) in Isan and Saraburi Province.

Many of these languages are spoken by larger numbers outside of Thailand. Most speakers of dialects and minority languages speak Central Thai as well, since it is the language used in schools and universities all across the kingdom.

Numerous languages not related to Thai are spoken within Thailand by ethnic minority hill tribespeople. These languages include Hmong-Mien (Yao), Karen, Lisu, and others.

Standard Thai is composed of several distinct registers, forms for different social contexts:

- * Street Thai informal, without polite terms of address, as used between close relatives and friends.
- * Elegant Thai : official and written version, includes respectful terms of address; used in simplified form in newspapers.
- * Rhetorical Thai: used for public speaking.
- * Religious Thai: (heavily influenced by [Sanskrit](#) and Pāli) used when discussing Buddhism or addressing monks.
- * Royal Thai (influenced by Khmer) used when addressing members of the royal family or describing their activities.

Many Thais can speak at only the first and second levels, though they will understand the others.

Transliteration

The [ISO](#) published an international standard for the transliteration of Thai into Roman script in September 2003 (ISO 11940). By adding diacritics to the Latin letters, it makes the transcription reversible, making it a true transliteration. This system is intended for academic use and is hardly ever used in Thailand for the common public.

Grammar

From the perspective of linguistic typology, Thai can be considered to be an analytic language. The word order is Subject Verb Object, although the subject is often omitted. The Thai pronominal system

varies according to the sex and relative status of speaker and audience.

Alphabet, tones, and grammar

The Thai alphabet uses forty-four consonants and fifteen basic vowel characters. These are horizontally placed, left to right, with no intervening space, to form syllables, words, and sentences. Vowels are written above, below, before, or after the consonant they modify, although the consonant always sounds first when the syllable is spoken. The vowel characters (and a few consonants) can be combined in various ways to produce numerous compound vowels (diphthongs and triphthongs).

Unlike the Chinese language, Thai is alphabetic, so pronunciation of a word is independent of its meaning (English is also an alphabetic language). On the other hand, Thai is tonal, like [Chinese](#) and unlike English. This means that each word has a certain pitch characteristic with which it must be spoken to be properly understood. The Thai language uses five tones: mid, low, high, rising, and falling.

Each syllable, consisting of one or more consonants and a simple or [compound vowel](#) (possibly inherent or implied, and thus not written) has a "default" tone determined by several factors, including the type of consonant(s) present (consonants are divided into three classes for this purpose). The syllable's tone can be modified by one of four tone marks. Some people incorrectly assume that the tone marks identify all necessary tones, or perhaps force certain tones, but neither of these is correct. Actually the final tone of a syllable is determined by the tone mark in conjunction with the type of syllable, as determined by the vowel and consonant characters present.

The grammar of the Thai language is considerably simpler than grammar in Western languages, and for many students, this makes up for the additional difficulty of tones. Most significantly, words are not modified or conjugated for tenses, plurals, genders, or subject-verb agreement. Articles such as a, an, or the are also not used. Tenses, levels of politeness, verb-to-noun conversion, and other language concepts are accomplished with the simple addition of various modifying words (called particles) to the basic subject-verb-object format.

Many westerners do not make time to learn written Thai, focusing instead only on speaking. One problem with this approach is that the various reference materials you will accumulate each have a different transcription (phonemic spelling with a western alphabet) scheme, and it thus becomes difficult to recognize connections between your multiple sources of information. Although only you can decide whether to make the extra effort to study Thai script, I think it can provide a valuable and rewarding foundation for continued learning of the Thai language.

Thai News

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