

About The Thai Language & Transcription Guide

Thai, also known as **Siamese** or **Standard Thai**, is the official national language of Thailand, a country located in the center of Southeast Asia sharing common borders with Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. It is spoken by about 60 million people in Thailand.

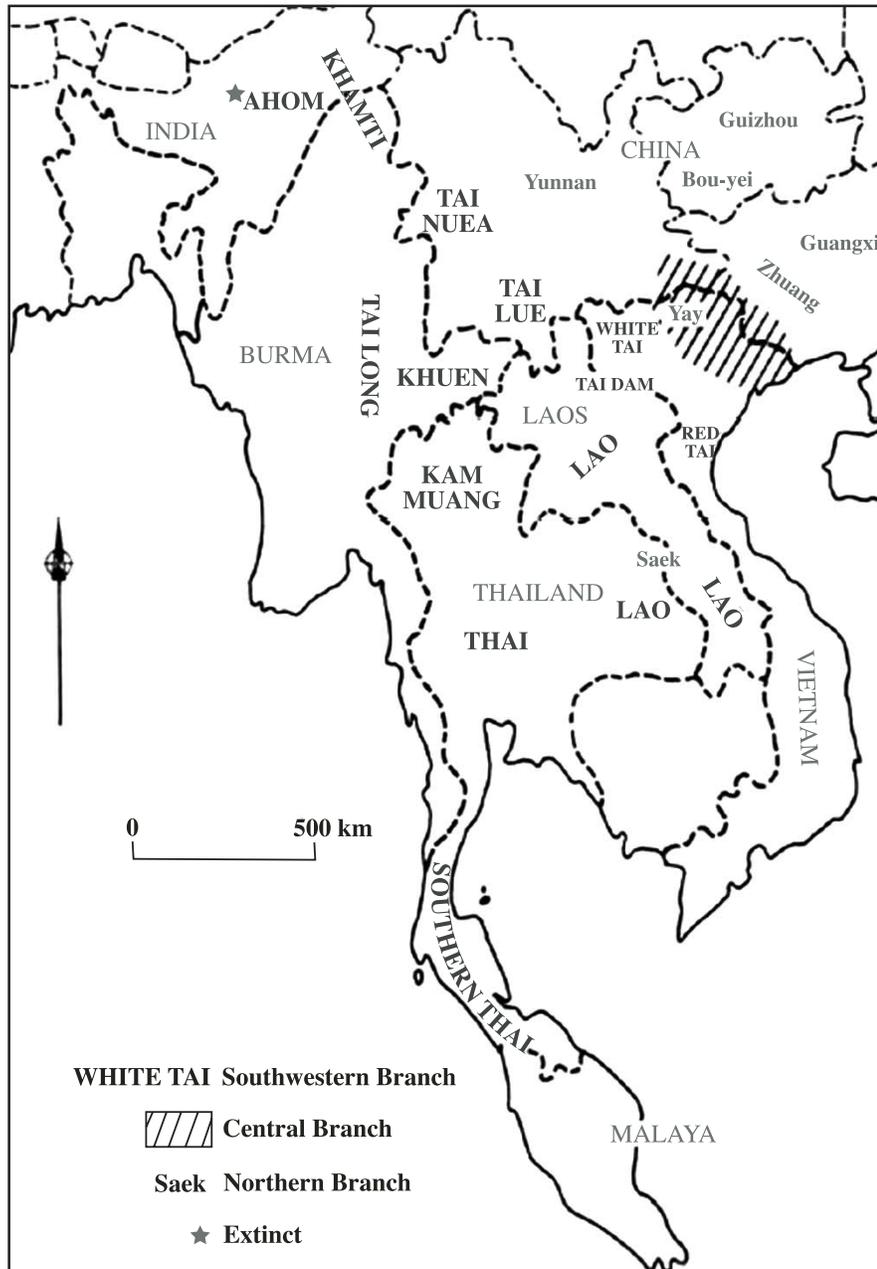
Thai is a tonal language belonging to the **Tai language family**, which includes languages spoken in Assam, northern Burma, all of Thailand including the peninsula, Laos, Northern Vietnam and the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou (Kweichow) and Guangxi (Kwangsi).

A Thai sentence may contain a subject, a verb, and an object in that order, similar to English. Thai does not make use of inflections or verb conjugation. Tense distinctions in the sentences are either determined by context or by adverbs and expressions of time.

Thai has its own script, which is basically alphabetic in nature, i.e., the script corresponds with the pronunciation.



Standard Thai is only one of four major regional Thai dialects spoken in Thailand. It is based on the Central Thai dialect as spoken in Bangkok. Other major regional dialects are: Kham Muang spoken in Northern Thailand, Isan or Lao, spoken in the Northeast region and Pak Tai or Southern Thai, spoken in Southern Thailand.



Map: Approximate General Location of Some Tai Language (From Comrie, Bernard (ed). *The World's Major Languages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.)

◆ Standard Thai Sound System and Transcription Guide

In this book, the lessons are presented in Thai script and in transcription symbols marked by /.../, representing the pronunciation. A syllable break within a multi-syllable word is indicated by the marker -.

The transcription symbol set used in this book follows the transcription convention used in Brown 1967, which is based on the International Phonetic Association (IPA) Symbols.

◆ Consonant Sounds

There are 20 consonant sounds in Standard Thai.

The following chart presents IPA consonant symbols matched with the corresponding Thai consonants that are pronounced in a similar way or the same way as the sounds of their English consonant counterparts.

b	d	f	h	l	m	n	r	s	w	y
บ	ด, ฏ	ฟ	ห, ฮ	ล, ฬ	ม	น, ณ	ร	ส, ศ, ษ	ว	ย, ญ

The following chart of symbols presents those consonants that are pronounced a bit differently from the sounds as pronounced in English. The closest pronunciation of a sound as it occurs in an English word is provided as a guide.

Note: The h combination in the following symbols means that a sound is pronounced with a puff of air.

Symbol	Approximate pronunciation	Thai Consonants	Thai word Example
p	as in <u>sp</u> in	ป	ปา /paa/ <i>to throw</i>
ph	as in <u>ph</u> in	พ, ภ, ฝ	พา /phaa/ <i>to bring along</i>
t	as in <u>st</u> ill	ต, ฏ	ตา /taa/ <i>eye</i>
th	as in <u>th</u> ill	ท, ฑ, ถ	ทา /thaa/ <i>to spread on</i>
k	as in <u>sk</u> in	ก	กา /kaa/ <i>crow</i>
kh	as in <u>kh</u> in	ค, ฆ, ข	คา /khaa/ <i>to be lodged in</i>
c	as in Spanish <u>c</u> inilla:	จ	จาน /caan/ <i>plate</i>
ch	as in <u>ch</u> urch:	ช, ฌ, ฉ	ชา /chaa/ <i>tea</i>
ʔ	as in the beginning sound in the second syllable of “uh-uh” (meaning “no”)	อ	อา /ʔaa/ <i>younger sibling of father</i>
ŋ	as in <u>si</u> ng	ง	งาน /ŋaan/ <i>work</i>

◆ Vowel Sounds

There are 18 single vowels in Standard Thai: a set of nine short vowels, and a set of their nine long counterparts. There are also three diphthongs. The following charts show the place of articulation and tongue height in pronunciation. The long vowels are indicated by double vowel symbols.

Short Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ	u
Mid	e	ə	o
Low	ɛ	a	ɔ

Long Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	ii	ɨɨ	uu
Mid	ee	əə	oo
Low	ɛɛ	aa	ɔɔ

Diphthongs

ia	ɨa	ua
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The following are approximate pronunciations in English words that each vowel transcription symbol represents, along with an example of a Thai word with the vowel.

Short and Long Vowels

i	as in hit ดี /tiʔ/ <i>to scold</i>
e	as in get เอ็น /ʔen/ <i>tendon</i>
ɛ	as in cat แกะ /kɛʔ/ <i>sheep</i>

ii	as in beat ดี๊ /tii/ <i>to hit</i>
ee	as in gate เอน /ʔeen/ <i>to lean</i>
ɛɛ	as in bad แก๊ /kɛɛ/ <i>you</i>

ุ	as in cou<u>l</u>d ยุง /yung/ <i>mosquito</i>
อ	as in log<u>o</u> สด /sòt/ <i>to be fresh</i>
๑	as in bot<u>to</u>m* เกาะ /kə̀/ <i>island</i>
า	as in bu<u>tt</u>er วัง /wang/ <i>palace</i>
๑	- เถอะ /thə̀/ <i>a final particle</i>
ห	as in u<u>h</u>-u<u>h</u> ขึง /khǐng/ <i>to stretch</i>

ู	as in too ยูง /yuung/ <i>peacock</i>
ู	as in so โสด /sòot/ <i>to be single</i>
๑	as in Paul* ก่อ /kə̀/ <i>to create</i>
า	as in far วาง /waan/ <i>to put</i>
๑	as in bird เธอ /thə̀/ <i>she</i>
ห	as in hmm ขืน /khǐn/ <i>to resist, defy</i>

*Please note that in some dialects of American English, the ๑ sound and the ๑๑ sound may not occur in these words.

Diphthongs

ia	as in beer	เมีย /mia/ 'wife'
หา	-	เรือ /rua/ 'boat'
ua	as in tour	ทั่ว /thua/ 'throughout'

Note that for the diphthongs, the vowels in the English examples only approximate the Thai sounds; they are not exact equivalents.

◆ Tones

Thai is a tonal language. This means pitches are meaningful. A syllable pronounced with a different pitch will carry a different meaning.

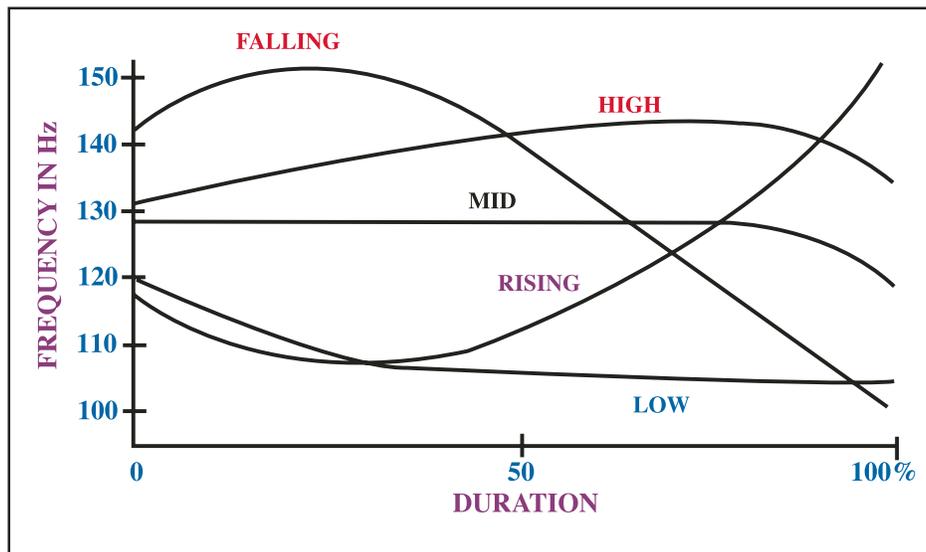
There are five distinctive tones (itches) in Standard Thai. They are

1. mid level tone (no tone mark in the transcription)
for example: ๓ /khaa/ *to be lodged in*
2. low level tone (marked with the symbol ̀ in the transcription)
for example: ข่า /khàa/ *Galanga, an aromatic root*

3. falling tone (marked with the symbol $\hat{\ }^$ in the transcription)
for example: ข้า /khâa/ *I, slave, servant*
4. high level tone (marked with the symbol $\acute{\ }^$ in the transcription)
for example: ข้า /khâa/ *to sell*
5. rising tone (marked with the symbol $\check{\ }^$ in the transcription)
for example: ขา /khâa/ *leg*

Mid	Low	Falling	High	Rising
คก /khaa/ 'to be lodged in'	ข้า /khâa/ 'Galanga, an aromatic root'	ข้า /khâa/ 'I, slave, servant'	ข้า /khâa/ 'to sell'	ขา /khâa/ 'leg'

The following is a chart of average fundamental frequency contours for tones adapted from the chart given in Jackson Gandour (1976).



References

- Comrie, Bernard (ed.). *The World's Major Languages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Gandour, Jackson. 1996. *Aspects of Thai Tones. Doctoral Dissertation*. University of California, Los Angeles. Ph.D. Dissertation, 1996.

A Note on Transcription, Pronunciation and Orthography.

The transcription in this textbook reflects the pronunciation of the words used in careful connected speech in conversational Standard Thai, to serve as a guide for pronunciation for learners. It is a compromise between the “authoritative” pronunciation of words in citation form (i.e. said in isolation) which reflects the written form (in Thai script) and the actual pronunciation in colloquial Thai in everyday natural speech.

There can be some discrepancy between the transcription and the recorded pronunciation in the accompanying audio files. This serves as an example of the variation in pronunciation in natural speech of Thai speakers.

The following are some of the prevalent and noticeable variations in spoken Thai that you might encounter in natural conversational speech of Thai speakers.

- Vowels in unstressed syllables (typically the first syllable in a multi-syllable word) tend to be shortened, and the tone in such shortened syllables tends to be neutralized to mid tone
- The substitution of the sound /r/ with /l/, for example, เราะ /raw/ is pronounced as เลาะ /law/
- The omission of the sound /r/ or /l/ in initial consonant clusters, for example, อังกฤๅ /ʔaŋ-krit/ is pronounced as /ʔaŋ-kit/, เปล่า /plàaw/ is pronounced as /pàaw/
- For speakers in their twenties or younger, there are slight change in the ending pitch of the falling tone and the rising tone; i.e., the falling tone does not quite “fall” and the rising tone does not quite “rise”