

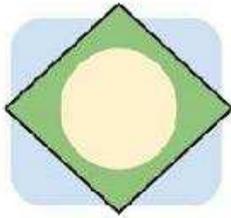
I want to speak Thai

The Sounds of Thai

A primer on the sounds and tones of Thai

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Introduction

The Thai language is a very rich language full of tones and sounds. Though many are found in the English language, There are many sounds that are foreign to a native English speaker. The purpose of this primer is to help bridge the gap for those learning the sounds of Thai for the first time.

Some may ask me, “Why are you **writing** a book about sounds? Shouldn't you create a recording or podcast?” At first I would have agreed with you skeptics. However, for some people, somethings just make more sense in print than in an audio format. The other things is that you can't use audio as a quick reference. It primarily due to these two reasons that I created this primer.

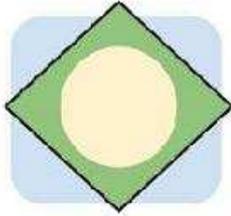
In this Primer, I am going to be going over the tones, the unique sounds, and how to read the romanization used by thai2english.com. This will give you the foundation to be able to understand and use the Thai that is written at mine and other website. If there are any comments on this primer please send them to me at want2speakthai.com.

Tones

Tones are an extremely important part of the Thai language. They are as much a part of the word as the letters are. Changing the tone of the word is as big of a change as changing a letter in the word.

Someone asked me once, “Even if you said the wrong tone, wouldn't they just figure it out through context?” To that person and any other person who asks me that same question, my answer is: Maybe, but probably not.

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Lets put it this way, if I asked you for an ‘apple’ would you know what I meant? I am guessing probably not. Now if I said, “I love apple pies and the story about Johnny apple seed. I love green apples the best. They are so sour!” Then maybe you would get through context that I was trying to say apples. It took a lot of context for you to realize what I was trying to say. Now maybe you can see what I mean by how important it is to speak with the correct tones. Tones are as important to the word as the letters themselves.

Here is a real life story. I had a friend who could speak Thai very clearly. Other Thai people we knew often told me how good at Thai he was. Once, he went to an Italian restaurant in Thailand and ordered Ravioli. The waiter, being Thai, didn’t understand what he was trying to order. Ravioli, Ravioli, Ravioli! Still the waiter could not figure out what he was trying to order. Giving up, he finally resorted to pointing it out on the menu. “Oh, Ravioli!” Without putting the tone on the word ravioli, he just could not understand what my friend was talking about.

I am not trying to say that one should be scared. This is what I mean by tones are as important to word as the letters are. That doesn’t mean tones are scary, but they do take practice.

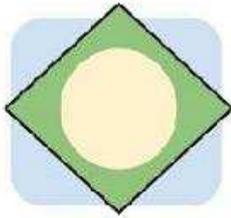
But tones are so different than English

Actually, in English we use tones as well. In English, tones are used to make subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) changes to the emphasis or emotion of the sentence. For example, **I** liked you, I **liked** you, and I liked **you**, all imply different meanings behind the words. The words themselves never change their direct meaning,

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but the meaning of the sentence is changed. In short, tones in English are used to change the implied meaning and not the direct meaning of the words.

In Thai, the opposite is the case. Tones will change the word itself, and implied meanings are adjusted by adding extra words on the end of sentences (More on that last part later).

The biggest thing I want you to take from this discussion is that tones are not so foreign. We use Tones all the the time in English. What you have to do is train your ear that the tones do not convey implied meaning, but direct meaning. When I first arrived in Thailand, I thought everyone was mad at each other. This was because my ears would hear the tones and automatically imply meanings that were not there.

After practice, however, I heard the tones for what they really are, a part of the word itself.

Enough already! Tell me what the tones are!

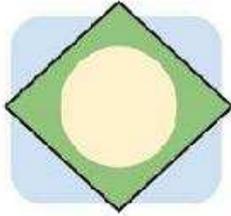
The best way to think of tones is to think of 3 notes that you sing: a high note, a medium note and a low note. The medium note is your normal talking voice; the high note is just simply higher than your normal talking voice and the low note is simply lower than your normal talking voice. It's that simple. These tones will be constructed by moving between these 3 notes. I like to think of it as a slide whistle or a trombone sliding between those 3 notes.

In Thai, there are 5 tones. There are various names for these tones, but I don't really see a point of naming them. As Juliet said, "What's in a name?" Instead I don't name them, I just describe them based on what I think would help you understand

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how to speak Thai better. I am also going to show you the symbols that are used in the Romanization so you get a feel for what they look like. we will be using in this course to denote the tones. An example of all the tones will be found in the corresponding audio lesson as well.

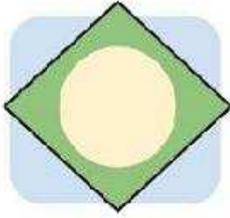
The first tone is a mid-tone. There is no symbol for the mid-tone. It will be considered the inherit tone for all words. It is the easiest tone to make, because all you do is speak at your regular tone. Pay attention though, I said regular tone, not regular voice. When you speak the mid-tone, you have to talk like a robot. You have to think of your boring history teacher and pretend you are reading a history book about stereo manuals. Practice this by saying “gaa” several times like a robot and with no tone changes.

The second tone is a low tone. An example of this written in romanization is “gàa.” To make this sound one must start at the mid range and then sliding down to the low range. Think of your slide whistle starting halfway down and then you pull it the rest of the way down. I personally like to think of it as if you are letting out a deep breath (not a sigh). Practice saying “gàa” with the low tone several times until you have it.

The third tone is what I call the mountain tone or falling tone. An example of this written in romanization is “gâa.” This tone starts at the high note and goes all the way to the low. Just think of your slide whistle starting all the way in and pulling it all the way down. It’s like you are skiing down a mountain or letting out a sigh. Once again, practice this by saying “gâa” several times in a row till you have it.

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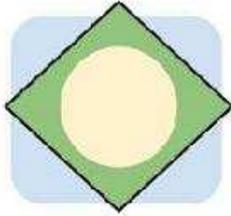
The fourth tone is a high tone. In romanization it would be written as "gáa" and the tone is made by starting at your normal mid-range and then sliding up to the high. This is like starting your whistle at halfway and then pulling it all the way back in. Practice saying "gáa" with the high tone several times until you have it.

The fifth and last tone is the valley tone. This is probably the most interesting tone out of all of them. An example of it written would be "gǎa" You start in the middle then you go to low and then you come back up again. You can go all the way up to the high note at the end if you want, but the most important part is the first part. I call it a valley tone because it's like starting half way up a mountain skiing down into the valley and back up the other mountain on the other side. Practice saying "gǎa" with the valley tone several times until you have it.

So to summarize we have:

gaa gaa gâa gáa gǎa

The reason I put them in this order is because this is a common order that Thai people put them in. When I first started out learning Thai I would say those 5 tones in that same order. I recommend that you practice saying that line ten times a day or more. If you do that, you will become an expert at the tones!



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The Romanization

Lets get the easy ones out of the way first. Here are a list of all the consonants that are spoken just like we do in English:

m n p b t d g k f s h j ch r y w l

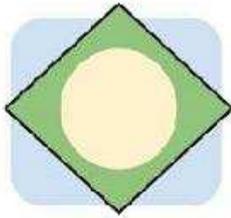
The only thing I need to mention is that the p, b, and d should be pronounce smooth like one would pronounce them in a Latin speaking language, such as French or Spanish. You will find out more why in just a minute. Just try and keep it smooth.

This leaves 3 consonants that are not written in English. The first one is what I call the hard 'b' sound. It is represented with a bp. The sounds are like a cross between a b sound and a p sound. It is also used with a lot more force than normal. You are essentially making a more forceful b sound when you do it.

The second consonant is what I call a hard 'd' sound. It is represented with a dt. The sounds are very much like a cross between a d and a t sounds. Just like the hard 'b' sound, the hard 'd' sound is given more force than the regular d sound.

This leaves the last consonant. It is the 'ng'. I know what you are saying, "We already have the ng sound in English." Yes in English we do use 'ng' at the end of words like sing and bring. Where it gets more difficult is when the 'ng' is at the beginning of the word.

When I first learned Thai some people suggested saying the word sing in place



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of the 'ng' and then keep saying it over and over again, slowly removing the 's' and then the 'i' of sing.

That never worked for me, but I mention it because it might help you.

Another person told me to simply stick the tip of my tongue to the very top of the roof of my mouth, right before it starts to slope down to the front of my mouth. Then say the 'ng' sound while bringing the tongue down from the roof of my mouth. When someone told me to do that I finally made the sound on a consistent basis.

What about Vowels?

Luckily most of the vowel sounds are ones we make in English as well. The vowels, as they are written in romanization form, will have a Latin pronunciation.

Here is a list of all the vowels that you should already be familiar with:

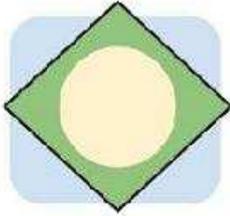
i	makes the sound of a 'ee' in seed
u	makes the sound of double 'oo' in food
o	makes the sound of 'o' in goat
e	makes the sound of 'ay' as in say
a	makes the sound of 'a' as in father
ae	makes the sound of 'a' as in apple

Luckily from here, there are only two more vowels. Despite the fact that they are not used in the English language, they are actually really easy to make. They are both made by grunting. Pretend someone punches you in the gut. It is a really simple sound. I said there are two vowels, the only difference between the two is one is made by grunting with your mouth open and the other is made by grunting with your

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teeth clenched. Here is how the vowels are written:

er made by grunting with you mouth open

eu made by grunting with teeth clenched

That's the primer. I know I have thrown a lot at you, but this is the foundation you are going to need to learn Thai. This is a free resource to use, all I ask is that you don't try and sell it or change it in anyway. I want this to be free to, hopefully, help any who want to learn Thai. Thanks for reading and be sure to check out want2speakthai.com for more helpful fun on learning Thai.