

INITIAL CONSONANT CLUSTER REDUCTION
AS A FUNCTION OF AGE GROUP
IN BANGKOK THAI SPEAKERS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First it is an attempt to describe some speech characteristics of two different age groups of native Bangkok-Thonburi residents. Secondly, it is an attempt to speculate on the significance of these synchronic data for the study of sound change.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the search for socially conditioned variations in language. Age or age group of the speaker has received particular attention. This is because people of different age groups have speech habits formed at different points in time. Although the speech of an individual changes with the passage of time, the static influence of early speech habits seems to dominate over the tendency for gradual change. Thus, older people retain some features of speech from their childhood that younger generations may not have developed at all.

The linguistic variables under study in this paper are the eleven initial consonant clusters of Bangkok Thai. Each cluster consists of a stop plus a liquid or a semi-vowel. For the sake of clarity, the clusters may be divided into three groups: (1) clusters of stop plus R; (2) clusters of stop plus L; (3) clusters of stop plus W. Each of these three groups has some clusters with aspirated and some with un-aspirated initial stops, but no group has a full range in place of articulation for the initial stop. There are never any palatal stops in modern Bangkok initial consonant clusters. The native R clusters

may have bilabial, alveolar, and velar stops as first members: PR, TR, KR, PHR, KHR. The L clusters have only four possibilities: PL, KL, PHL, and KHL. The alveolar series is missing. The W clusters are even more restricted. Only velar stops may occur with W, leaving just KW and KHW.

The variables listed here correspond to consonant cluster initials which are found in Thai writing. They are the same eleven consonant clusters which are traditionally posited in descriptions of Standard Thai. In this paper "Standard Thai" is used to mean no more than a "standard", a set of sounds believed to be "correct" by the people of Thailand. It is not to be equated with the actual speech of any specific group. Capital letters are used to indicate distinctions which are required by Standard Thai and still represented in written Thai. These are distinct from small letters, which are used here to indicate the actual phonetic values of the sounds as used by the informants of this study. In the course of this paper, the term "full retained variants" is used to refer to variants which are pronounced as clusters with the written R retained as flapped ʀ, the written L retained as the lateral, l, and the written W retained as the semi-vowel, w. "Reduced variants" is used to refer to situations where an initial written cluster, believed to be correctly pronounced as a cluster, is realised phonetically as a single initial.

The 151 informants for this study range in age from 18 to 60 years old. They were selected from a list of the native Bangkok-Thonburi employees of three large institutions: a university medical school, a hotel, and an oil company. The selection was made by random sampling stratifying for five levels of occupational prestige and two age groups. The occupational levels included professionals, managers, semi-professionals and clerical workers, semi-skilled labourers, and unskilled labourers. The two age groups included informants between ages 18 and 35 years old on the one hand and informants between ages 36 and 60 years old on the other. Since all informants were of working age, no extremely old informants could be obtained, and the very young were also automatically eliminated. However, an age range of forty-two years was found in the sample population, and the 151 interviewees were fairly evenly distributed throughout the different socio-economic classes. The data presented are based on tabulations of sounds made from taped interviews of one to three hours with each informant.

The remainder of this paper is in two parts. First, the results of the linguistic survey are presented in graph form in terms of percentages of occurrence. Secondly, the significance of these data for the study of sound change is discussed.

II. RESULTS

R CLUSTERS: FULL RETAINED VARIANTS

There was a positive correlation in all R clusters between age and full cluster retention. That is, the higher age group always had a higher percentage of full R clusters than the lower age group had. Figures 1 to 5 demonstrate this fact.

On the average the older group had 8% more full retained R clusters than the younger group. However, TR showed twice as high a difference between the age groups as the average R cluster. There were 16% more tr variants for TR pronounced by older speakers than by younger ones.

Both age groups retained full clusters for TR more frequently than for any other R cluster. A possible explanation for why TR has exceptionally high full cluster retention is that it is the product of people's conscious efforts at spelling pronunciation. There is some evidence that TR underwent a sound change in recent history to kr and then subsequently changed back again to the tr prevalent today due to people's concern with "correctness" in language. This evidence may be used to construct an argument which explains the high rate of full cluster retention for TR.

The first step in the argument begins with the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription of A.D. 1292 (Coedès 1962:133). This documents the earliest Thai writing system which was developed during the Sukhothai Period. The writing system was based on the Cambodian alphabet of the time which in turn was derived from Sanskrit (Coedès and Burnay 1927:88&90). This system had a ᩉ cluster which corresponds to modern TR. It is impossible to document the phonetic value associated with the letter ᩉ . However, William J. Gedney, the dedicatee of the Festschrift to which this paper is contributed, has informed me that ᩉ is believed to have been the letter that the Cambodians used for their t sound c. 1292. Thus we can infer that the Thais adopted this letter for a t sound in their own language.

The argument continues (for which I am indebted to Dr Gedney) with a second point based on evidence in literary sources. These sources indicate that there was a widely accepted kʔ variant which developed after the Sukhothai Period. In the works of Rama I and Rama II, the first two reigns of the Bangkok Period, 1782-1825, there is an expression, *pen ʔèek nay sàwèekkràchàt* 'to be first under the white umbrella' (i.e. to be the King). Although modern editions write *sàwèettràchàt*, we know that this was pronounced as a kʔ (or a k) variant because of the internal rhyme in the expression (Rama II 1921:9).

The Pallegoix dictionary of 1854 provides evidence for the third point in the argument. It shows that the T in the TR cluster was pronounced as a k during the first half of the 19th century. Pallegoix (1854:349,351,355,362,364) lists kron as a variant of tron 'to be straight', kraa as a variant of traa 'seal', kray as a variant of tray 'three', as well as other examples of TR words alternatively pronounced with kr. Also, the Royal Institute Dictionary (1950:80) lists kràap as an Ayuthaya Period (1350-1767) variant of tràap, an elegant word meaning 'until' in a few expressions.

From the preceding evidence we infer that between the Sukhothai Period and the reign of Rama IV in the 1850s, a kř variant for TR had become prevalent. The fourth step in the argument is that King Mongkut (Rama IV) seems to have been the first man on record to voice concern about "correctness" in the Thai language. This concern may have been due to increased Western influence in Thailand during the 19th century. Whatever the reason, King Mongkut (Rama IV 1923:16) began issuing edicts on proper usage at that time.

To conclude the argument, we find that today in Bangkok teachers urge their students to pronounce TR as tř. tř is now the only acceptable standard pronunciation. The change in acceptability of the kř variant for TR combined with efforts by authorities to enforce "correct" usage leads us to infer that a spelling pronunciation regained prominence due to people's conscious efforts. This is posited as a possible explanation why TR shows an exceptionally high rate of full cluster retention compared to other R clusters.

TR distinguished itself from other R clusters in another way. It had the sharpest stratification between age groups of all the R clusters on the rate of full cluster retention. Not only were the retention rates for each age group higher than the rates on other R clusters, but the difference between the rates of the two age groups was greater than for other R clusters. The latter suggests that age is a more powerful conditioning factor on TR than on other clusters.

R CLUSTERS: REDUCED VARIANTS¹

The data show that there was a negative correlation between age group and cluster simplification. That is, the older age group had a consistently lower percentage of simplified clusters than the younger group. Figures 6 to 10 illustrate this phenomenon.

¹It should be noted that the sections on full retained and reduced variants are not redundant since other variants for each cluster, not discussed in this paper, do exist.