THAI TONES AND ENGLISH LOANWORDS: 
A PROPOSED EXPLANATION

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English words borrowed into Thai are a source of both bemusement and consternation for language learners and linguists. Native speakers of English who study Thai soon realize that they must learn new pronunciations for words borrowed from their own native vocabulary or they will not be understood when they use those words in conversation with Thai speakers. Scholars have noted that there are definite patterns to changes made in English words borrowed into Central Thai, patterns which may have much to tell us about both the donor and the recipient languages. This brief paper will address one point of the discussion that has been conducted by a number of scholars (see Henderson 1951, Court 1975, Nacasakul 1979, and Gandour 1979, among others).

English consonant clusters are reduced and English vowels and diphthongs are altered or replaced in the same ways by nearly all Thai who speak the dialect of the central plain. These changes or substitutions are covered thoroughly in earlier studies and for the sake of brevity I will not repeat that material; it is the question of tone assignment that I wish to address here.

Words borrowed from English are pronounced with a variety of tones, some of which “feel” right to the native speaker of English, and some of which do not. In some cases the tone used seems to be perfectly in accord with both the native Thai spoken and written systems and with the expectations of the native speaker of English; the borrowed form of “game,” which is pronounced /keem/, with mid tone, is an example. The borrowed form of “net” /nêt/ is another example of a pronunciation which seems appropriate: the English vowel is rather short in duration, and many Thai words with a short vowel and final /t/ are pronounced with the high tone. The borrowed form of “gas” usually strikes the native speaker of English as a bit odd, however. The pronunciation is either /kāat/ or /kēet/ [with the two distinct vowel choices possibly the result of simultaneous
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borrowings from British and American models), but we know that Thai does not normally allow high tone on checked syllables with a long vowel. Also, if we consider the spelling rules associated with the consonant letter used to represent the sound /k/ (ŋ), which is a midcategory consonant letter, the high tone is even more inappropriate. Moreover, when we hear the soft drink “Coca-Cola” identified as /khoolâ/, we note what we feel to be a significant difference between the English model and the borrowed form; we would really expect to hear */khoolaa/, with both syllables pronounced with mid tone. Then, when we are told to ask for /soodaa/ (“soda”) and not */soodâa/ we are confused. Finally, when we note that “radar” is called by some /reedâa/ and by others /reedaa/, we must seek clarification.

Most discussions (both informal and scholarly) of tone assignment in English borrowings concentrate on, and attempt to explain, pronunciations which seem somehow odd, and simply enumerate without comment examples of words which somehow seem natural. When explanations are offered, however, the assumption often seems to be that the Thai speaker approaches the pronunciation of an English borrowing in the same way that an English-speaking student of Thai learns to decipher a syllable written in Thai characters, that is, by employing a rule-oriented and rather mechanical process focusing on those features of the spoken system that are represented in the written system of Thai.

Motivations for the seemingly anomalous patterns are generally defined in one of two ways. First is style. It is suggested (and this opinion is common among Thai speakers not familiar with linguistic studies) that the pronunciations are some sort of oral quote marks, used to acknowledge the foreign origin of the words, as though by using these pronunciations a native speaker of Thai could avoid appearing presumptuous or overly proud of his or her own erudition. If this were the whole story, however, we could not explain why different tones are used; if the goal is to mark borrowings, why not use the same tone for all of them? Nor do we know why some words are allowed to hide among the native words (/keem/, for example), while others are made to stand out (/kěet/, for example). If we posit an initial “getting to know you” stage, during which a new borrowing is pronounced one way, and then a later stage in which the word is accepted into the native vocabulary and given another pronunciation closer to the native system (/reedâa/ vs. /reedaa/, for example), how shall we account for the stubborn refusal to allow the
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ubiquitous /wítsakʰi/ "whiskey" to take up a more normal pronunciation, indicative of its familiarity? How shall we explain that /soodaa/ skipped the initial stage entirely? I do not believe that stylistic considerations can explain the situation; too many words which would seem to be likely candidates for such oral quotes do not, in fact, have them.

The second motivation suggested for tone placement applies to those polysyllabic words which, in the borrowed form, are pronounced with falling tone on the final syllable. Such words almost invariably sound odd to the native speaker of English, and are those which draw his or her attention. One suggestion is that the Thai speaker uses falling tone on the unchecked final syllable of a polysyllabic borrowing to imitate the English pattern of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, that is, a single Thai syllable is used to imitate features of two English syllables. This explanation, however, does not cover the exceptions to the pattern (again, /soodaa/). Nor does this explanation account for the pronunciation of polysyllabic words with other stress patterns, and it does not address monosyllabic words at all, either those which seem natural or those which seem odd to the native speaker of English. I believe that a closer examination of Thai tones, and of both monosyllabic and polysyllabic borrowings, including those which seem anomalous and those which seem perfectly reasonable to the native speaker of English, can add to our understanding of the situation.

Various aspects of the Thai tone system have been presented in detail elsewhere. The literature on the subject is particularly attentive to pitch height and contour shape. Rather than attempting to repeat that material, I will refer the interested reader to authors who have dealt with the subject (Bradley 1911, 1924; Jones’s 1918 study, discussed in Henderson 1976; Noss 1964; Brown 1965; Erickson 1976; Abramson 1962; Gandour 1976; among others). A short summary of points which are of particular relevance to the question of tone assignment in English borrowings is given below.

First, the mid tone is generally described as level throughout most of the duration of the syllable, with a fall in both intensity and pitch height only toward the end. Second, the low tone is generally described as beginning somewhat below the midpoint of the pitch range and falling quickly to a very low level, which is sustained. Third, the rising tone is described as beginning below midlevel, falling
somewhat lower, and then rising steadily to a point well above midlevel. Fourth, the high tone is described as starting at a point above midlevel and rising to a level somewhat above the starting point, which is maintained until very nearly the end of the syllable when there is a sharp fall; the high tone, at least in citation form, has glottal constriction. Finally, the descriptions given for the falling tone show a marked change over the years. In Bradley’s first study, in 1911, the falling tone is described as beginning somewhat below midlevel and falling to a very low level. In his 1918 study, Jones described the same fall, but noted a starting point above midlevel and glottal constriction in the falling tone. Later studies have noted a progressively higher starting point for the falling tone and the tendency for a rise in the early part of the syllable to a peak, followed by a steady fall to a point well below midlevel. There is thus a marked difference in pitch height and a change in contour compared to that found in the early studies, but glottal constriction is consistently noted as a part of the tone.

While these points are covered in much of the literature on Thai tone, there are a number of smaller points which often have been overlooked in discussions of English loans. First, Haas (1951) notes that some English words with a final stop consonant are borrowed into Thai with high tone, and that the glottal constriction on a Thai unchecked syllable with high tone seems to the Thai ear to be equivalent to a final stop in an English word. Second, in discussing stops in Thai, Henderson (1964) notes that the Thai final stop is actually composed of a double closure in which oral closure is accompanied by a simultaneous glottal closure. Finally, in the same study Henderson states that for the production of a high tone that will satisfy a critical native speaker, breath force “must be increased with the slight initial rise in pitch, reaching a peak of intensity during the sustained high pitch, and then decreasing quite sharply” (p. 420). A similar “swell” in breath force is sometimes noted for mid-tone words “as contrasted with the uninterrupted diminution of breath force heard in the other three tones” (p. 420).

In most discussions of borrowings from English these seemingly small details are not taken into account. It is clear that pitch height and tone contour are important considerations for the Thai speaker, but what has been overlooked, I believe, is the fact that breath intensity and the state of the glottis are also important, as is the nature of the Thai final stop. It seems that the Thai speaker notes the presence or absence of such features, or what he or she interprets