

A NEW HIGH TONE IN SOUTHERN THAI

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0. INTRODUCTION

For some speakers of Southern Thai, lenition of final velar and glottal stops is beginning to distinguish a new class of open-syllable high-tone items. This 'new tone' arises in problematic circumstances which are discussed. Reference is made to more general contemporary theories of tonal development.

1. KIHT: TONOGENESIS-IN-PROGRESS

The Thai geographical metaphor for 'isthmus' is *khoo khôt* 'constricted neck'. For some Southern Thai speakers in the Kra Isthmus region 'constriction' is also more literal: it is an articulatory feature associated with the differentiation of a new phonological tone. This 'Kra-Isthmus High Tone', henceforth KIHT, is a rather limited case of tone development in progress and its evolution is along lines now familiar (cf. Haudricourt 1954; Jones 1960; Matisoff 1970); yet there are additional structural and sociolinguistic factors in the precarious survival of the tone which merit examination. Below we review the phonological setting for KIHT's appearance, its sociolinguistic 'protagonist', and some questions raised for general issues in tonal development.¹

Evidence for neolithic settlement in the Kra region is firm. For the first millennium A.D. Chinese records suggest several Indianised trading outposts, and these are confirmed by local archaeological evidence at Takuapa, Chaiya and Kanchanadit (Wheatley 1961). When the Kra region became substantially Tai-speaking is a matter of conjecture. Local historical legends (Wyatt 1975) and other testimony make it plausible that Tai varieties have been spoken in the area for some six or seven hundred years. Apart from a brief Burmese invasion in 1785

TABLE 1
TAI TONE CATEGORIES

	open, unmarked	open, ʔèek	open, thoo	closed, long	closed, short	
High class	A1	B1	C1	D1-L	D1-S	yin
Mid class	A2	B2	C2	D2-L	D2-S	yin
Low class	A3	B3	C3	D3-L	D3-S	yang
	ping	qu	shang	ru	ru	

historical sources mention little population disruption; there also has been less contact with non-Tai speakers than would be the case further south.

2. KRA ISTHMUS TONAL SYSTEMS

The Southern Thai dialect group extends from somewhat north of the Kra Isthmus proper (perhaps from Bang Saphan Yai, 11°17'N, where isoglosses converge) to south of 7°N. Tone systems in the Kra area have been described in surveys by Jones (1965) and Brown (1965). These surveys were concerned with wider issues of comparative Tai reconstruction, and it is not strange that they gave no specific attention to the rather parochial facts discussed here. KIHT occurs on items in a limited correspondence category which is usually of little more than marginal interest in comparative Tai, and furthermore occurs mainly among uneducated rural speakers.

'Tai' here refers to the large language family of which varieties of Central Thai (or Siamese), Southern Thai, etc., are members. It is convenient to discuss tones by referring to Tai tonal categories as labelled by F.-K. Li (1977), slightly modified as shown in Table 1. Etymological correspondence is reflected moderately well by spelling conventions in the traditional Thai orthography; these are shown above and to the left in Table 1. Unaspirated stops are confined to the Mid orthographic class; other initial consonants are presently represented by letters in the High and Low classes. There is also enough regularity in relationships with traditional Chinese etymological classes to postulate normal borrowing patterns for early-strate Chinese loans into Proto-Tai; these are shown below and to the right in Table 1.

Table 2 summarises Southern Thai tonal systems common in the Kra Isthmus region. Local varieties are shown in a north-to-south sequence from Chumphon to Phanom, the latter an isolated inland settlement on an old trans-isthmus route. The nearby Kanchanadit dialect on Bandon

TABLE 2
KRA ISTHMUS TONAL SYSTEMS

Tai tone category	D1-L	C1	C2	D2-L	B3	D3-L	C3	A3	A2	B2	B1	A1
1. Chumphon	/ 55 /	33	/		24	/ 21 /	232	/		52	/	
2. Ranong	/ " /	"	/		"	/ " /	"			/ "	/	
3. Langsuan	/ " /	"	/		"	/ " /	"			/ "	/	
4. Tha Chang	/ 54 /	"	/		"	/ " /	232 (343)	/		/ "	/	
5. Phanom	/ 44 /	33	/		"	/ " /	" / 343	/		452	/	
6. Kanchanadit	/ " /		/		"	/ " /	32 / 43	/		/ "	/	

Bay is cited for comparison. Pitch and contour are indicated by the low-to-high 1-to-5 numbering system (see Bradley 1977:1 for more detail). For the closed D categories, short- and long-vowel items have rather similar characteristics, particularly in the High and Mid orthographic classes, and only long-vowel items are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 3
URBAN CHUMPHON SOUTHERN THAI EXAMPLES

	Tai tone category		tonal pitch and contour
1. 'leg'	A1	khaa	high falling
2. 'crow'	A2	kaa	mid-low rising-falling
3. 'thatch grass'	A3	khaa	mid-low rising-falling
4. 'sp. rhizome'	B1	khaa	high falling (=1)
5. 'jungle'	B2	paa	high falling (=1)
6. 'value'	B3	khaa	low rising
7. 'to kill'	C1	khaa	mid level
8. 'aunt'	C2	paa	mid level
9. 'to do trading'	C3	khaa	low slightly falling
10. 'to lack'	D1-L	khaat	high level
11. 'mouth'	D2-L	paak	low rising
12. 'land leech'	D3-L	thaak	low rising
13. 'to polish'	D1-S	khat	high slightly rising
14. 'to bite'	D2-S	kat	mid slightly rising
15. 'to think'	D3-S	khit	low slightly rising

Table 3 illustrates the preceding issues for the case of Chumphon with data from an urban speaker. For comparison with Central Thai and also with a variety south of the Kra Isthmus, see Diller 1979:61-65.

As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, Kra Isthmus systems merge Tai tone categories into six or seven discrete tonal shapes. Several qualifications are necessary. Table 2 is based on citation-form pronunciation and questions of tonal sandhi are not considered. In fact in pretonic environments there is considerable levelling of contour in most varieties (see Thongkum 1978:27,47 for details). Also, Table 2 should be interpreted as a 'digitalisation' of what is really an areal continuum. Tonal shapes gradually shift to produce the systems reported, and there is a certain arbitrariness in deciding exactly where to report two discrete tonal shapes rather than one. This is particularly a problem in the case of the category A2 merging with A3. At the extreme north of the continuum the two are clearly identical; at the south, clearly separate. In the intermediate area a given speaker may show variation, sometimes - or for some items - making a distinction, but elsewhere not. Thongkum (1978:8) has recognised the difficulty for the Suratthani varieties she reviews and reports that speakers have a 'feeling' of separateness even when only slight register differences are discernible in sound spectrograms. It must be kept in mind that the consonant initials in A2 and A3 are in complementary distribution. In structuralist terms then we are confronted with an areally distributed separation of tonal allophones by a register distinction.

Another question of tonal allophone differentiation is directly relevant to the origin of KIHT. This concerns the tonal status of long-vowel closed-syllable items, particularly those with initial consonants associated with the High or -1 class, such as item 10 in Table 3.

In virtually all Tai varieties any long-vowel item terminating in -p, -t, -k will coincide tonally with other non-stop-final items, that is, D will merge suprasegmentally with either A, B or C, with only the final consonant, and not tonal features, distinguishing a given D item from similar open-syllable ones. A common pattern is for D to merge with B. This is the case for Central Thai, Northern Thai, Shan, Khamti and for most varieties of Zhuang. Mergers of D with A are unusual, e.g. White Tai D3-L = A3. D and C merge in most Lao varieties, although D2-L usually joins D1-L in merging with C1. Southern Thai south of the Kra Isthmus area under study here shows a mixed system, with D1-L and D2-L merging with respective C categories, while D3-L merges with B. The situation is similar to, but rather more tidy than, the shifting about of ru-class items in Chinese.

Now the Kra Isthmus systems show a rare exception to this tendency to merge. D2-L and D3-L indeed join tonally with B3. D1-L however resists the tendency, especially as one moves northward up the isthmus.