

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE THAI LANGUAGE  
IN THE SUKHOTHAI INSCRIPTIONS

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# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE THAI LANGUAGE IN THE SUKHOTHAI INSCRIPTIONS

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The present paper attempts to deduce the phonetic values of vowel symbols and to describe briefly some syntactic categories by utilizing the Sukhothai inscriptions as the corpus for analysis.

## 1. Reconstruction of vocalic system

From the correspondence to modern Tai dialects, mainly modern standard Thai, the vocalic system of the Thai language in Ramkamhaeng's inscription may be reconstructed as follows:

i, ii	๒, ๒๒	u, uu
e, ee	๑, ๑๑	o, oo
ɛ?, ɛɛ	a, aa	ɔ?, ɔɔ
ia	๒a	ua
ai	๒๒	au

ee, ๑๑ and oo (also ɛ? and ɔ?) appear in loan words.

## 2. Description of some syntactic categories

- (1) Classifiers: อัน is most widely used; others include ทาง, ลูก, ฝั้น, ก้อน, แดง, คน, องค์, คน, etc.
- (2) Demonstratives: นี่, นั้น, อัน, พน, หั้น, ฟี and โพน are found.  
นั้น and อัน have the function of presenting the topic of a sentence as well as that of referring.
- (3) Personal pronouns: กู, กู, เมือ and ไร appear as first person; ส as second person; ท, เขา, ชา, ทาน and มั่น as third person. The dual form and exclusive form are partially attested.
- (4) Prepositions: among others, แก, แก, คาย, โคย, แต, เทา, ถึง and ใน are found.
- (5) Conjunctions: และ occurs as a coordinator; เมือ, ลั่น, เตียมแต, ฝิ, แบน, ชือ, เพื่อ and อัน occur as subordinators.
- (6) Negatives: ม, มิ, มมิ, ไม and ไบ are used in negating verbal predicates; ไซ is used in negating non-verbal predicates.

The historical materials in the Sukhothai period are, for the most part, stone inscriptions, including Ramkamhaeng's inscription, the oldest of the surviving ones recording the Thai language and script. So far these inscription materials have been used as primary sources chiefly to elucidate the history and society of that period. At the same time they were taken up from a linguistic point of view as represented by the studies of Bradley, Burnay, Coedès, and so on, but their main interest lay in the writing system and deduction of phonetic values, and few results have been obtained in the grammatical analysis.

The purpose of this paper is first to discuss the vocalic system of the Thai language in Ramkamhaeng's inscription and next to describe briefly some of the syntactic categories of the Thai language found in the inscriptions which are assigned to the period between Ramkamhaeng's inscription (1292 A.D.) and 1438 A.D. when Sukhothai was annexed to Ayuthaya.<sup>1)</sup> The inscriptions in this period, however, are not of great value as linguistic materials: they are absolutely small in number and quantity; they contain many obscure passages due to breakage; their subject matter is limited. Since the materials are restricted both in quantity and

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1) Inscriptions used as the corpus for analysis are the following: หลักที่ 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15 in พระชุมศิลาจารึก ภาคที่ 1, หลักที่ 38, 40, 45, 46, 49 in พระชุมศิลาจารึก ภาคที่ 3 and หลักที่ 40, 93, 95, 102, 106 in พระชุมศิลาจารึก ภาคที่ 4. Inscriptions 13, 14 and 15 are used as reference, although they are assigned to the period after 1438 A.D.

Citations will be indicated by (inscription number/face number/line number ).

quality in this way, we are forced to deal with extremely limited linguistic phenomena, which will make it almost impossible to investigate the language systematically. For this reason, we do not know exactly to what extent the inscription materials available reflect the state of the language in that period.

In this paper, taking the nature of the inscriptions mentioned above into consideration, I will not generalize but describe the language just as it is.

## 2. VOCALIC SYSTEM<sup>2)</sup>

When we try to deduce the phonological system of the language in the Sukhothai period on the basis of its script, we are confronted with irregularity in spelling: the same word is often written in different ways even in the same inscription. In fact, it is not quite certain to what this is due, but breakage, engraving errors or reflections of phonetic facts may be suggested as possibilities. However, if we adopt the method of comparing the Sukhothai language (ST) with modern Tai dialects,<sup>3)</sup> examining the script, it will be possible to some extent, even if unsatisfactorily, to get at the phonetic reality underlying the spelling symbols. Here I will point out the difficulties in doing so, and discuss the phonetic values of the vowel letters of Ramkamhaeng's inscription chiefly by comparison with modern standard Thai (MT). Since the corpus is limited to one inscription of Ramkamhaeng, the reconstructed vocalic system is tentative in its nature.

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2) In connection with this section, Professor Mitani, Yasuyuki of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies made helpful suggestions.

3) With regard to Tai dialects, I have consulted Li (1977) and A Comparative Tai Wordlist by William J. Gedney.