

STRESS IN THAI

Patcharin Peyasantiwong

Not until recently have linguists given much attention to the idea of stress in Thai. The question of stress arose when phonologists asked themselves about the rather striking consistency of some phenomena of vowel shortening, glottal-stop deletion, and tone alteration. Since these patterns were first noted there have been discussions of the role of stress in Thai, dealing primarily with the distinction between *weak* stress and *normal* stress syllables.

In his early study of Thai, Noss (1964) cited examples of words that come together to form compounds and pointed out that in these compounds some syllables receive weak stress while others receive strong stress. Later Noss (1975) looked into the studies of stress, tone, and vowel quality done by instrumental phonologists (Abramson 1962, 1974; Erickson 1974; and Sittachit 1972, among others). He became convinced that the existing experimental evidence told us nothing about tone variants under different conditions of stress, rhythm, and intonation, and concluded that this was a job for the noninstrumental phonologist. Noss's conclusion on this matter seems to be sound; the problem cannot be studied using pure phonology alone, but must be examined also from the point of view of semantics, and sometimes of syntax as well.

Other linguists have discussed the role of stress in Thai: Haas (1964), Warotamasikhhadit (1967), Hiranburana (1971), Surintramont (1973), and Gandour (1976). Although they differ in their approaches and opinions, all seem to agree that the syllable in word-final position is the most prominent, or has strong stress. However, many other points have been raised that have not yet been answered satisfactorily. Two such points are described here briefly. Hiranburana (1972) suggests that the first syllable of an institutionalized compound is unaccented or unstressed. Noss (1975:279), however, questions this point:

But how does one account for the perceptibly
different stress one hears on the first syllable of

โรงเรียน /ro:ŋrian/ “school” in expressions like
เรียกว่าโรงเรียน /rîak wâ: ro:ŋrian/ “It’s called a
school” and เดินไปโรงเรียน /da:n pay ro:ŋrian/
“walk to school”? Whether /ro:ŋrian/ is an
“institutionalized compound” or not, it certainly
behaves differently in different phonological
contexts, and its stress pattern cannot possibly be
covered by a single rule.

Noss is correct when he states that the stress pattern cannot be covered by a single rule. On the other hand, Hiranburana is correct in saying that /ro:ŋrian/ is an institutionalized compound. Other rules can be added which help to clarify the situation. These will be discussed below.

A second point which awaits satisfactory explanation was brought up by Surintramont (1973), who argues that a tone-neutralization rule must apply from left to right, and gives such examples as /sà'hà'rát/ → /sahàrát/ or /saharát/ ‘United States’ and /mǝǝrá'ná'kam/ → /mǝǝranákam/ or /mǝǝranakam/ ‘death, the act of dying’. Gandour (1976) argues that this explanation is incorrect and based on too narrow a set of data. He offers counterexamples such as /cintà'kà'wii/ → /cintàkawii/ or /cintakawii/ ‘poet’, and /wanná'khá'dii/ → /wannákhadii/ or /wannakhadii/ ‘literature’. This point will be addressed below, in the discussion of polysyllabic word stress.

It has been suggested by Professor William J. Gedney (in personal communication) that perhaps there are more than two levels of stress in Thai. This makes possible a better explanation than those offered by previous studies. A satisfactory explanation of stress in Thai does indeed require determination of more than one rule, and it is hoped that the hypothesis offered here will answer some of the questions dealing with it.

The stress system should be examined on two levels: word stress and sentence stress. This paper will discuss only word stress; due to the complexity of the subject and the length of time needed to explain all the relevant points, sentence stress will have to be addressed in a future work.

Stress in Thai

Word Stress

It is sometimes said that Thai is monosyllabic. While it is true that many Thai words have only one syllable, there are numerous polysyllabic words in the lexicon as well. Some of these polysyllabic words are combinations of Thai monosyllables, some are loanwords, and still others are combinations of two or more loanwords, or of loanwords and native Thai words. Of the commonly used loanwords in Thai, the majority are of Indic origin. Such words are about as numerous in Thai as are words of Latin or Greek origin in English (Gedney 1947). These words have become an important part of the Thai vocabulary, although they have been altered in various ways to conform to Thai speech and writing.

For the purposes of this study of stress in Thai, all loanwords will be counted as Thai root words and the smallest meaningful unit will be considered a word. This also applies to words that were borrowed and altered considerably, rearranged by the phonological rules of Thai, or affected by an intermediate language. Examples are given below.

pāda	=	(two forms) baathaa, bàat ‘foot’
rājā	=	(two forms) raachaa, râat ‘king’
nārī	=	naarii ‘woman’

Most loanwords borrowed into Thai are one, two, or three syllables in length; a few are longer. These polysyllabic units are often compounded in Thai, for example, /pràʔchaa/ ‘people, public’ and /sǒŋkhrǎʔ/ ‘to aid, assist’ are combined to form the term /pràʔchaasǒŋkhrǎʔ/ ‘public welfare’.

Two important points should be noted before proceeding with this discussion of stress. First, the term “underlying form” will refer to the spelling pronunciation, and the term “surface form” will refer to the spoken form in isolation, that is, to the pronunciation a native speaker will give when asked how one says a particular word. The second point concerns vowel shortening. Although it is not reflected in Thai writing or in the normal phonetic transcription used by students of Thai, both long and short vowels undergo stress-related shortening. For this reason an extra symbol must be used. For this discussion the symbol /◡/ under a vowel or a diphthong will indicate

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a vowel of reduced length.

Stress in Disyllabic Words

There are many types of disyllabic words, and for clarity they are presented separately. The first type to be considered is the compound word, that is, a word made up of two monosyllables, each of which has its own meaning and can occur by itself. The compound form has a different meaning than either of its components. A list of examples follows.

EXAMPLE SET 1

hũa (head)	+ khàw (knee)	= hũa <i>khàw</i>	- knee
taa (eye)	+ plaá (fish)	= ta <i>p/aa</i>	- a corn
mêê (mother)	+ yaay (grand M)	= mê <i>yaay</i>	- M-in-law
náam (water)	+ taa (eye)	= nám <i>taa</i>	- tear
din (soil)	+ nǎaw (sticky)	= <u>din</u> <i>nǎaw</i>	- clay
tôn (trunk)	+ máay (wood)	= <u>tôn</u> <i>máay</i>	- tree
rooŋ (building)	+ rian (study)	= roŋ <i>rian</i>	- school
máay (wood)	+ khiit (draw a line)	= máy <i>khìit</i>	- matches
pàak (mouth)	+ kaa (crow)	= pàk <i>kaa</i>	- pen
dòk (flower)	+ máay (wood)	= dòk <i>máay</i>	- flower
tòk (fall)	+ loŋ (down)	= <u>tòk</u> /oŋ	- agree on

In the examples above, the italicized syllables in the compound forms are exactly the same as the original forms, but the first syllables have shorter vowels than the original forms. Both long and short vowels are reduced in length; originally long vowels (V_1 V_1) are reduced to approximately the length of short vowels (V_1), and originally short vowels (V) are reduced to about half of their original