

West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen Phonology

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1. Introduction

This paper represents a start at a phonological description of West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen. Speakers of West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen live in Tak, Kanchanaburi, Uthaithani, Suphanburi, Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi and Prachuapkhiri Khan provinces. The reported population is 20,000 (Tribal Research Institute 1986).

West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen is one of the Karenic languages, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Namkung 1996). At least three distinct, mutually unintelligible Pwo Karen languages exist in Myanmar and Thailand (Atsuhiko 1995; Phillips 1996). These are the Western Pwo Karen in Myanmar, Eastern Pwo Karen (Myanmar)/West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen (Thailand), and Northern Pwo Karen (Thailand). "Phrae" Pwo Karen in east-northern Thailand is a possible fourth distinct language, although more research is required. The locations of the Pwo Karen languages are listed in Figure 1 below.

Language Name	Location
Western Pwo Karen (Bassein)	Irrawaddy Delta, Myanmar
Eastern Pwo Karen (Moulmein)/West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen	Karen State, Mon State, Tennasserim Division, Myanmar; West-Central Thailand
Northern Pwo Karen	Northwestern Thailand
"Phrae" Pwo Karen???	Eastern-northern Thailand

Figure 1. Pwo Karen Languages

Dialectal variation studies of West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen show at least two major dialects (Phillips 1996). The northern variety is spoken in Kanchanaburi province and the southern variety is spoken in Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi and Prachuapkhiri Khan provinces. The results of intelligibility testing in these provinces show that the variety of Pwo Karen spoken in Sisawat district, Kanchanaburi, is the most widely understood by Pwo Karen throughout the testing area. As for Tak, Uthaithani and Suphanburi provinces, Pwo Karen report mutual intelligibility and I have seen this demonstrated at meetings of Pwo Karen of the language area. Phonological differences center mainly in the vowels. No tonal variation has been observed and variation in the consonants is minimal.

Previous research on Pwo Karen phonology is abundant. The first was Jones 1961 which includes short descriptions of Bassein and Moulmein Pwo Karen phonology. Cooke et. al. 1976 describe Phlong (Northern Pwo Karen) phonology in detail. Atsuhiko Kato (1995) describes and compares the phonological systems of three Myanmar Pwo Karen dialects: Kyonbyaw (Western Pwo Karen), Hpa-an and Tavoy (Eastern Pwo Karen). West-Central Thailand Pwo Karen phonologies have been written for a number of areas: Sisawat district, Kanchanaburi: Griffiths (1976), Potchanat (1983); Ban Rai District, Uthaithani: Chutima (1982); Suanpheung District, Ratchaburi: Weerawat (1973); Phop Phra District, Tak: Wasana (1996).

The paper will begin in Section 2 with a description of the syllable patterns of Pwo Karen. Section 3 follows with comments on stress and rhythm, including suggestions for some possible directions for future research. Section 4 focusses on the segmental phonemes, tonemes, tonal variation and intonation. Finally, Section 5 provides a portion of a text. Data for this paper has been collected at different times since 1992. At present, I am living with the Pwo Karen in Plamasuan village, Sisawat district, Kanchanaburi.

2. Pwo Karen Syllable Patterns

All Pwo Karen syllables are open and of two kinds: reduced "minor" syllables and full "major" syllables. Minor syllables are bound syllables comprised of a single consonant (C_i) with [a] as the vowel. No tonal contrast is present. They also never occur word-final. In many cases, minor syllables have no apparent morphemic status, for example, the word /pana/ 'buffalo'. In other cases, the source is clear as in /chacha/ 'disease; sick one'. The meaning of /cha/ is 'thing' and /c^ha/ is 'pain'. Thus, 'thing' + 'pain' = 'disease; sick one'. The Pwo Karen minor syllable is diagrammed in Figure 2 below.

C_i[a]

Figure 2. Pwo Karen minor syllable

In major syllables, all consonant phonemes are possible in initial position (C_i). In medial position (C_M), only the consonants /j, w, r, l/ occur. Vowels (V) are either plain, nasalized or glottalized with no distinctive vowel length. The four distinctive tones (T) are high-rising, mid, low-falling and high-falling. Glottalized vowels co-occur with the high-rise and low-falling tones only. The Pwo Karen major syllable is diagrammed in Figure 3 below.

C_iC_MV
T

Figure 3. Pwo Karen major syllable

3. Stress and rhythm

Pwo Karen, for the most part, exhibits two rhythmic patterns in words. The first is the unstressed-stressed iambic pattern which is typical of languages of mainland Southeast Asia, including Mon-Khmer languages, Thai and Burmese (Donegan et. al. 1983; Wheatley 1987). The other rhythmic pattern is combinations of major syllables where the first major syllable is stressed, which is more typical of Tibeto-Burman languages, including Burmese (Wheatley 1987), as in /mí mǐ/ 'sun'.

Cooke et. al. (1976:216), Griffiths (1976) and Aitsuiko (1995:81,88,92) report an inventory of atonic/proclitic morphemes with unstressed [a]. These include the subject/possessive pronouns, [ma] 'IR', [c^ha] 'thing' and [la] 'one, a'. All of these morphemes have stressed variants in other contexts. Except for [c^ha] 'thing' which serves as a nominalizer in words and is unstressed in that context, I have not observed a Pwo Karen awareness of these proclitic morphemes. It seems more likely that these destressed variants are due to the rhythmic patterns at the phrase and clause level. Donegan et. al. (1983:345) suggest that most Southeast Asian languages have stress-

timed rhythm, "...an unmistakable symptom of which is the polarization of their accented and unaccented syllables into... "major" and "minor" types, the latter having a vowel we would call "reduced" in English." It is likely, then, that Pwo Karen rhythm also functions similarly to English stress-timed rhythm where syllables are reduced based on their position in a phrase or clause rather than their inherent morphemic quality.

As yet, evidence is limited on Pwo Karen rhythm, intonation and word boundaries, although Cooke et. al. (1976:205) report for Northern Pwo Karen that "...all utterances must have at least one phrase or sentence stress which is superimposed on a normal syllable, causing the syllable in question to be pronounced with slightly more loudness and duration than other adjacent syllables...."

4. Pwo Karen Phonemes and Distribution

The phoneme inventory of Pwo Karen is fairly standard for Pwo Karen languages. The possible consonant clusters with medial approximants are extensive. The nasalized vowels seem to be undergoing a change where nasalized vowels are being diphthongized with a lessening of the nasalization effect. Finally, the tonal system seems to be transparent with some typical tonal alteration.

4.1. Consonant Phonemes

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Unaspirated Stops	p		t		c	k	ʔ
Aspirated Stops	ph		th		ch	kh	
Implosives (pre-voiced)	b		d				
Nasals	m		n			ŋ	
Voiced Fricatives						ɣ	
Voiceless Fricatives		θ		ʃ		x	h
Approximants			r		j	w	
Lateral Approximant			l				

4.1.1. Labials

- /p/ voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop [p].
 /pî/ 'little', /pè/ '1pl', /pèi/ 'tease', /plè/ 'allow' /pé/ 'CL:thread hank'
- /ph/ voiceless aspirated bilabial stop [p^h].
 /phî/ 'rice husk', /phè/ 'cooking pot', /phài/ 'skin', /phĩ/ 'younger sibling',
 /phí'lò/ 'weed out', /phĩ/ 'pus'
- /b/ voiced bilabial implosive [ɓ].
 /bài/ 'pull', /blè/ 'full, satisfied', /bài/ 'massage', /bí/ 'paddy rice',
 /bí/ 'goat', /bé/ 'correct', /bé/ 'CL:flat things'
- /m/ voiced bilabial nasal [m].
 /mè/ 'drunk', /mé/ 'tooth', /mĩ/ 'female', /mí/ 'fire', /mái/ 'fun, well',
 /mè/ 'do, want'

4.1.2. Alveolars

/t/ voiceless unaspirated alveolar stop [t].
/tā/ 'do', /tu/ 'CL:pills', /tā/ 'CL:week', /tō/ 'thick', /tā/ 'basket'
/th/ voiceless aspirated alveolar stop [tʰ].
/thā/ 'go, return', /thu/ 'bird', /thc/ 'gold', /thā/ 'arrive',
/thi/ 'CL:instance'

/d/ voiced alveolar implosive [ɖ].
/du/ 'hit, spank', /dā/ 'put in', /dā/ 'still', /di/ 'egg', /dā/ 'sesame seed'
/n/ voiced alveolar nasal [n].
/nā/ '2s', /nā/ 'enter', /nū/ 'patung', /nā/ 'win'

/θ/ voiceless dental fricative [θ]. On occasion, some speakers will pronounce /θ/ with [s]. However, there seems to be no pattern to this and I do not hear it often.

/θu/ 'sheep', /θō/ 'CL:night', /θi/ 'medicine', /θā/ 'three', /θā/ 'fruit'
/r/ voiced alveolar approximant [ɹ]. As an initial consonant, /r/ is rare.

/rwi/ 'choose', /rā/ 'burlap bag'
/l/ voiced alveolar lateral approximant [l].
/lā/ 'one, a', /lā/ 'completely', /li/ 'four', /lai/ 'motorcycle'
/ʃ/ voiceless postalveolar fricative [ʃ].
/ʃō/ 'poor', /ʃu/ 'lunge', /ʃā/ 'star'

4.1.3. Palatals

/c/ voiceless unaspirated palatal stop [c].
/ci/ 'left', /cā/ 'walk', /cō/ 'tie', /cō/ 'wet'
/ch/ voiceless aspirated palatal stop [cʰ].
/chi/ 'some', /chā/ 'sour', /chō/ 'chicken', /chā/ 'animal feed'

/j/ voiced palatal approximant [j].
/ji/ 'some', /jai/ 'pound', /jā/ '1s', /jō/ 'easy', /jā/ 'fish, meat', /jē/ 'five'

4.1.4. Velars

/k/ voiceless unaspirated velar stop [k].
/kwē/ 'play', /kā/ 'difficult', /kō/ 'lamp', /kī/ 'INTENS', /kā/ 'cough',
/ke/ 'is',
/kh/ voiceless aspirated velar stop [kʰ].
/khwē/ 'craw', /khā/ 'chin', /khā/ 'cutting board', /khwi/ 'nine'

/ŋ/ voiced velar nasal [ŋ]. Thus far, I have only discovered three instances of this phoneme.

/ʔāŋ/ 'tin, hackles', /ŋō/ 'confused', /thōmā/ ŋ/ 'chant'

/x/ voiceless velar fricative [x].

/xwi/ 'buy', /xā/ 'heavy', /xā/ 'field', /xā/ 'mushroom', /xā/ 'winnow'
/y/ voiced velar fricative [ɣ].

/yā/ 'evening', /yā/ 'husk (v)', /yā/ 'hear', /yī/ 'cleanse', /yā/ '1p',
/yē/ 'spicy',
/w/ voiced labial-velar approximant [w ~ v ~ β].

/wē/ 'older sibling', /wi/ 'sweep', /wī/ 'first, before', /wā/ 'not',
/wē/ 'fishnet'