

# Farangs and Siamese: A Brief History of Learning Thai

David Smyth

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

The history of attempts by people of one language-speaking group to study the language of another is a fascinating one, reflecting not only changing ideas about language teaching and the insights and prejudices of individual authors, but also changing political, economic, and social relations between the two groups. A paper of this length can scarcely do justice to what is a vast and virtually unexplored topic; hopefully, however, it will at least provide today's student or teacher of Thai with some historical perspective on his or her endeavours.

The first published grammar of Thai was James Low's *A Grammar of the Thai or Siamese Language* (1828). Although Western contact with Thailand dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century, no hand-written dictionaries and grammars from that time are known to have survived.<sup>1</sup> The only sources on Thai that Low had access to, were a brief description of the language by de la Loubère (1693/1969), a comparative wordlist that included central Thai, Shan and "Tai Loong" (Khamti), by Buchanan (1798) and what amounts to a critique of that list by Leyden (1808).

James Low had been sent to Penang by the East India Company in 1818 and there set about learning both Malay and Thai. His interest in Thai was stimulated by "the proximity of the Siamese empire to the British settlements in the Straits of Malacca, and to the lately acquired territory of Tennasserim; the increasing number of Siamese living under British protection in these settlements; and the new political relations which exist betwixt the British and Siamese courts" (Low, 1828, p. 1). He completed his *Grammar* in 1822 and presented it in manuscript form to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. In 1824 he was rewarded with a special bonus for his competence in Thai, but it was not until four years later that the work was published at the instigation of the Governor of the British settlements in the Straits of Malacca, who wished to encourage the study of Siamese. Six hundred copies were printed.

The work begins with a discussion of the relationship of Thai to neighbouring languages. This is followed by a description of the writing system, an explanation of tones, for which Low acknowledges the influence of Marshman's *Clavicus Sinica* (1819), and a lengthy discussion of the principle parts of speech. The appendices include a Thai-English vocabulary, a vocabulary of royal language, a comparative dialect vocabulary, examples of neighbouring scripts, and translations from Thai literary works.

---

<sup>1</sup>Burnouf (1829, p. 211) refers to "une grammaire siamoise en latin composée par un missionnaire dont on ignore le nom, et qui se trouve manuscrite à la bibliothèque du Roi." Jones (1851, p.74) points out that Pallegoix "had the advantage of all the recorded investigations of his predecessors for the last two centuries. Many of these were shrewd men—and at different periods had given much attention to the literature of Siam."

Although Low's declared audience were "those to whom, either from their public or professional situation, a knowledge of [the Siamese or Thai language] may be desirable" (Low, 1828, p. 1), he has a tendency—like many language book writers of the day—to lose sight of the needs of his readers. Thus, while his explanations of parts of speech are, in general, accurate, to use, as examples, long, complex sentences from literary classics, printed—or as often as not, misprinted—in Thai script, is not simply unhelpful, it is willfully obscuring. Here, for example, are three sentences that Low uses to illustrate the gender of Thai nouns, each printed below the Thai script original, but with no romanization (Low, 1828, p. 24):

The princess had a golden cage constructed for her speaking Mina birds, male and female.

The buck with branching horns led forth his hind to seek the tender grass, and to gambol in the water.

The peacock, with his starry, beautiful tail spread out, and drooping wings, strutted and danced after his partner, to the fascination of all beholders. (Oonnaroot)

Whether Low was motivated by a desire to furnish his work with a veneer of academic sophistication in order to impress his superiors, or whether he really felt that his choice of illustrative sentences—presumably provided by a highly literate native speaker informant—were of genuine use, one can only speculate. But whatever his reasons, Low's interest in Siam and the Siamese was genuine and he was convinced that without a knowledge of their language "our intercourse with the Siamese must be limited and unsatisfactory, while we cannot expect to gain an accurate acquaintance with their real history and character as a people, or with their ideas, their literature, and polity" (Low, 1828, p. 2).

While Low's work was superior to anything hitherto published, its limitations were immediately apparent to any westerners who became competent in the language. Writing in 1851, the American Baptist missionary, John Taylor Jones pointed out that Low's *Grammar* "was compiled under many disadvantages—and the typographic blunders by which it was disfigured, were so numerous that it would inevitably mislead those who relied upon it as giving a fair representation of the language as used at the capital" (Jones, 1851, p. 74). There are, quite apart from the printing errors, a sufficient number of mistakes in the examples to suggest that Low's grasp of the language was far from perfect. But despite its inadequacies, Low's *Grammar* has earned its place in the history books as the earliest surviving example of Thai printing.<sup>2</sup> Nor does the story quite end there. For a certain Augustus Dormer Chase, a Captain in the Bengal Army and later Governor of Pegu, clearly unaware of the flaws in Low's work, took it upon himself to copy out Low's *Grammar* in numbered paragraphs. He tired of the project after a mere 22 paragraphs and then hastily despatched it to London, under the title *A Grammar of the Siamese or H'tai Language* followed by the inscription, "Presented to the British Museum by

---

<sup>2</sup>Low's *Grammar* is sometimes described as the first example of Thai printing. In fact, Ann Judson, the wife of an American missionary in Burma, had a Thai catechism printed, apparently in 1819, but no copy of it survives (Winship, 1986).

the author, 1857." History does not record whether Dormer Chase also received a special bonus for his competence in "H'tai."<sup>3</sup>

In 1828, the same year that Low's *Grammar* was published, the first two representatives of the London Missionary Society, Gützlaff and Tomlin, reached Bangkok, and they were followed two years later by the French Catholic missionary, Pallegoix. Unlike the LMS representatives, Pallegoix remained in Thailand for many years and in the 1850s, he published a grammar of Thai written in Latin (1850) and a monumental Thai-Latin-French-English dictionary (Pallegoix: 1854). Jones, while regretting the use of Latin, describes the grammar "as the most valuable introduction to the Siamese language and literature yet before the public" (Jones, 1851, p. 77). At 246 pages, it is considerably longer than Low's work. There are chapters dealing with parts of speech, tones, the writing system, classifiers, pronouns, royal vocabulary, and so on; an early analysis of four-syllable "elaborate expressions" appears in Chapter 15, under the heading "De Paribus." Later chapters deal with Thai history and Buddhism and there are two chapters devoted to cataloguing Thai books. The grammar was in fact translated into English a year later by Jones' adopted son, Samuel J. Smith, although it was never published. Years later Smith did publish a volume entitled *The Principles of Siamese Grammar* (Smith, 1889) in which he acknowledged his debt to Pallegoix (1850) and Jones (1842) and unpublished work by Gützlaff and Bradley (Smith, 1889, p. vi).

While the Latin medium limited the audience for Pallegoix's grammar, his dictionary was an invaluable reference work, both for its scope and its accuracy. It is a huge volume, running to almost 900 pages with approximately 25,000 entries. Entries are not arranged according to the traditional Siamese system, however, but in alphabetical order based on his system of romanization. Thus, words with as many as four different initial consonants might appear on the same page. Pallegoix's system of transcription, modified from existing systems used by French Catholic missionaries, is notable for its systematic representation of tones, and although designed with the French speaker in mind, it was, nevertheless, adopted by other English-speaking dictionary writers.

From the 1830s a steady flow of American Protestant missionaries began to arrive in Bangkok, several of whom compiled dictionaries, phrasebooks, and other learning aids. They were also to play a major role in introducing printing technology, medical techniques, and other western ideas to Thailand. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, however, the western community in Bangkok had expanded considerably beyond a handful of missionaries, and now included a growing number working in Thai government service for whom some knowledge of Thai would have been desirable.<sup>4</sup> But those wishing to learn Thai were still faced with a formidable task. Despite the existence of phrasebooks that enabled the speaker—in theory, at least—to inform any Thais who happened to be interested that "the grace of God is infinite" or "the ship has stuck on the bar" or to order the servants to "have the tennis lawn rolled" or "go get my rubber shoes," the only graded materials available were

<sup>3</sup>Dormer-Chase's book is now held in the British Library. He follows the convention in romanizing Burmese of indicating an aspirated consonant by an initial *h*, hence *H'tai*.

<sup>4</sup>For a brief and succinct account of early western contact with Thailand, see Siffin (1966) and Vella (1955). Siffin (p. 97) includes a table listing posts held by foreigners in Thai government service in 1909.

those used for teaching Thai children to read.<sup>5</sup> A further problem was that the foreigner usually had to depend upon Thai teachers whose command of English was often inadequate. W. A. R. Wood, former British Consul-General in Chiangmai, describes his language training as a newly-appointed Consular Officer in 1896 thus:

...we learnt Siamese when we could find the time. We had two teachers, one of whom knew some English, the other not. Neither of them had any idea of teaching, so we had to set our own lessons... At the end of two years we could speak, read and write Siamese more or less, and passed our examination with flying colours...Siamese writing was, I may say, an accomplishment only attained by one of our predecessors. (Wood, 1965, p. 2)

This was the situation that Basil Osborn Cartwright, an English teacher at the Royal Civil Service College in Bangkok, set out to redress. In his *Elementary Handbook of the Siamese Language* published in 1906 and later substantially revised as *The Student's Manual of the Siamese Language* (1915), he wrote the first properly structured course to address the needs of the foreigner. The course is designed to be used with a native-speaker teacher, but with clear, concise explanations and examples, "the real work...of the Siamese teacher is...to teach the learner the correct pronunciation, and...to help him to translate English into good Siamese" (Cartwright, 1906, p. 2). Cartwright's book was to become the westerner's main introduction to the language for almost half a century, and although the grammar-translation approach now seems dated and the language a little stilted, the book remains a model of clarity from which any serious student today could benefit.

For Cartwright, "the great secret of learning to speak Siamese correctly" lies in knowing the script. "Firstly," he advises, "learn the values of the different characters and become familiarized with the tones, before trying to make even the simplest sentence. Secondly, always try to remember how a word is spelled, as then it is easy to know its correct pronunciation." He cautions "those who imagine they can 'pick up' a smattering of the language in a few weeks by trying to learn words or sentences in a parrot-like fashion from romanized versions which are invariably misleading." Such an approach, he adds, "is merely absolute waste of time, money and frequently of temper also" (Cartwright, 1906, p. ix). The initial chapters of the *Handbook* are accordingly devoted to introducing the script and providing simple graded reading exercises. Cartwright's master-stroke—and enduring legacy to the teaching of Thai—was to abandon the traditional alphabetic order of presenting the consonants, introducing them instead by *class*, with the most frequently occurring low class consonants first. This not only enables the learner to start reading simple

---

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, *A collection of Words and Phrases in English and Siamese for Schools and Beginners*, (originally prepared by Mrs. Davenport and later revised by S. G. McFarland, 1883, pp. 56–57) and *An English-Siamese Pronouncing Handbook*, by G. B. McFarland, 1900, p. 150. A number of missionaries were involved in producing text books for schools. Bradley's *Elementary Tables and Lessons in the Siamese Language* was in its 8th edition of 1000 copies in 1875.