

Thai Tone Geography¹

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INTRODUCTION

Dialect geography, “the study of local differentiations in a speech area” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 321), came into existence in Europe in the nineteenth century and has been carried out in many parts of the world. In Thailand, although studies of Thai dialects began to be conducted about 40 years ago, these studies only presented the system of each individual dialect or compared it with Bangkok Thai. Thus they are not proper studies of dialect geography. The first one that could be regarded as dialect geography in Thai was published only 22 years ago (L. Thongkum et al., 1978). However, since then many studies in dialect geography have been carried out in Thailand, providing new information on dialect variation in this country. More importantly, the studies of Thai dialects that deal specifically with tonal variation have shown how tone geography could be a distinct sub-branch of dialect geography with its own methods.

Tone geography is a new term. The most widely studied subtype of dialect geography is word geography, the study of lexical variation. It studies how speakers of the same language who live in different areas use different words with the same meaning. In word geography maps are usually produced to show how these words are distributed in the area of study—one map per semantic unit. When two different words or sets of words that represent the same semantic unit are used in adjoining areas, a line known as an isogloss is drawn to mark the boundary between the two areas. Sometimes when results shown in a set of maps are compiled, it is found that several isoglosses go through the same area. When this occurs dialect geographers conclude that an important dialect boundary lies in the area.

Although in almost every study of word geography consonantal and vocalic variations are also analysed and presented, the terms consonant geography and vowel geography have apparently never appeared in the literature on dialect geography. This may be because neither consonantal variation nor vocalic variation has been investigated in isolation. The present paper will show that tone geography could exist independently of word geography. Tonal variation among Thai dialects and subdialects can be systematically investigated. Several studies in Thai tone geography are already in existence. They will be reviewed to show how Thai tone geography has progressed up to now.

¹This paper is an outgrowth of two unpublished oral papers, “Acoustic-Based Tone Geography of Thailand: Dream or Reality” presented with Daranee Krisnapan at the Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies, 5–10 July 1993, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, United Kingdom, and “Tone Geography in Thailand: The Tone Box Method” presented at the Eighth International Conference on Methods in Dialectology, 3–7 August 1993, at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The author wishes to thank Dr. Pranee Kullavanijaya and Professor Arthur S. Abramson for their helpful comments on the first draft of the paper.

THAI DIALECTOLOGY AND TONE GEOGRAPHY

Linguistic studies of Thai dialects began in 1956 (Chantavibulya, 1956; Miller, 1956). Both descriptive studies of individual dialects and comparative studies of two or more dialects have been carried out since then (Tingsabadh, 1985). Although many of these studies deal with tone systems and tonal variation, only a few of them will fit the definition of tone geography given here. It is proposed that a study will be regarded as tone geography only when it shows how an area is subdivided on the basis of tonal variation on a single map or a set of maps. The descriptive studies that investigate the tone system of a single variety, therefore, do not belong to tone geography. Those studies that compare tone systems but do not show how tonal variation is distributed over an area are not regarded as studies of tone geography either.

Thai tone geography came into existence in the late 1970s. Diller (1976) in his study of Southern Thai diglossic speech variation included a map dividing Southern Thailand into six areas on the basis of tonal variation (see Figure 1). L.Thongkhum et al. (1978) investigated phonological variation in the varieties of Southern Thai spoken in Surat Thani province. Three types of tone systems were found in that study and the province could be divided into three distinct areas (see Figure 2). Thampradit (1981) showed that Southern Thai spoken in Phuket, Phangnga, Krabi and Trang may be divided into two areas on the basis of tonal variation (see Figure 3). Debavalya (1983) carried out the first study that deals exclusively with tone geography. In that study the boundary between two main Thai dialects: Central Thai and Southern Thai was located based on tonal variation (see Figure 4). A few tone geography studies have been carried out since then. Most limited their scope to one province, for examples, Loei (Taengko, 1987), Chaiyaphum (Sawangwan, 1991), and Udonthani (Sittiprapaporn, 1997). One study covers two provinces – Ang Thong and Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya (Malaichalern, 1988).

Tone geography in Thai dialectology owes its existence to a method developed in the discipline of comparative and historical Tai linguistics. It is known among the scholars working in Tai and Thai linguistics as the tone box method. It consists of two parts: the tone checklist and the tone box (Gedney, 1972). The structure of the method and its usage will be described in detail here for the benefit of those readers who are unfamiliar with Tai and Thai linguistics.

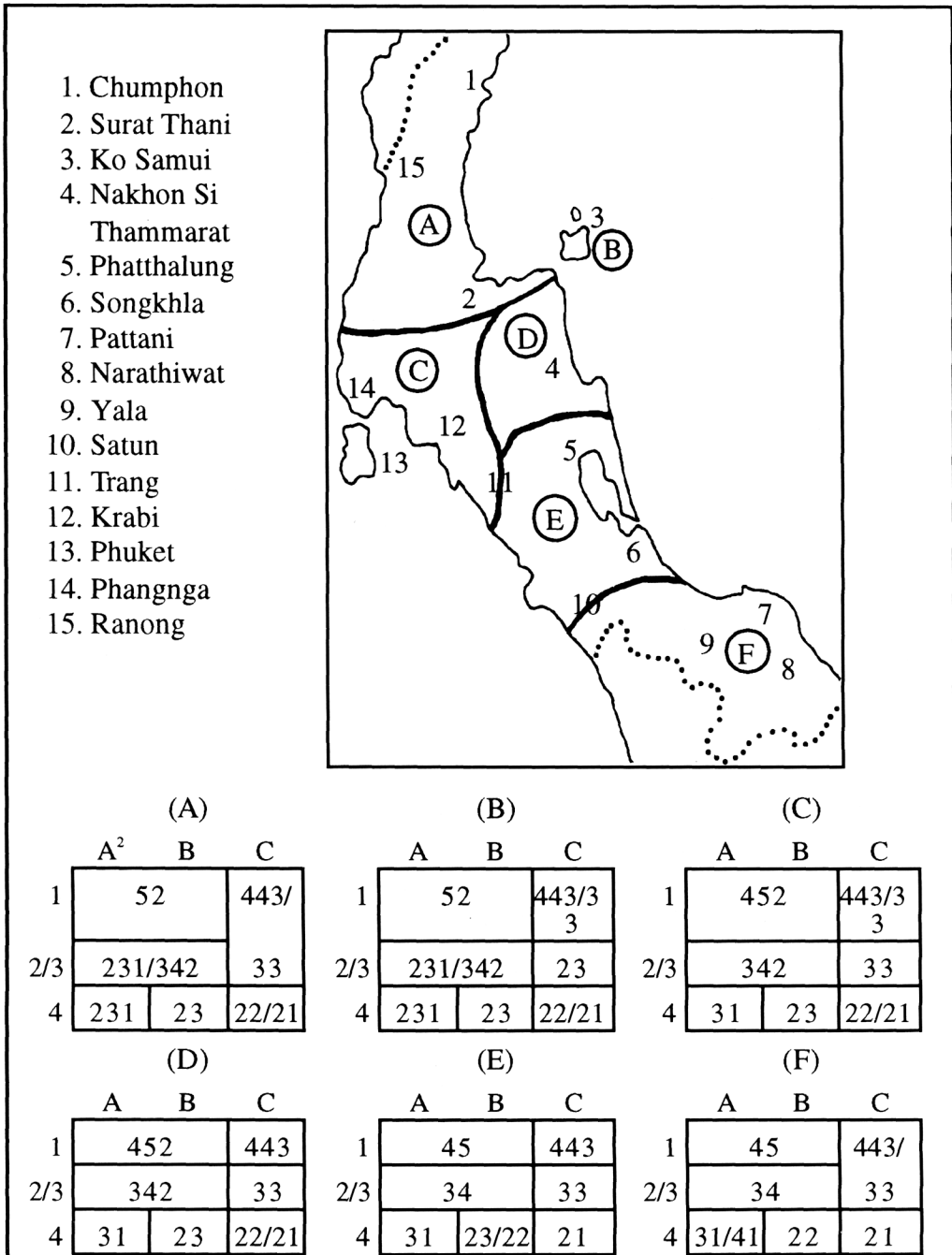


Figure 1. Map showing areal variation in tone of Southern Thai (adapted from Diller, 1976).

² The diagram in this and subsequent figures, together with all of the symbols, will be explained in detail in the section on the tone box method.

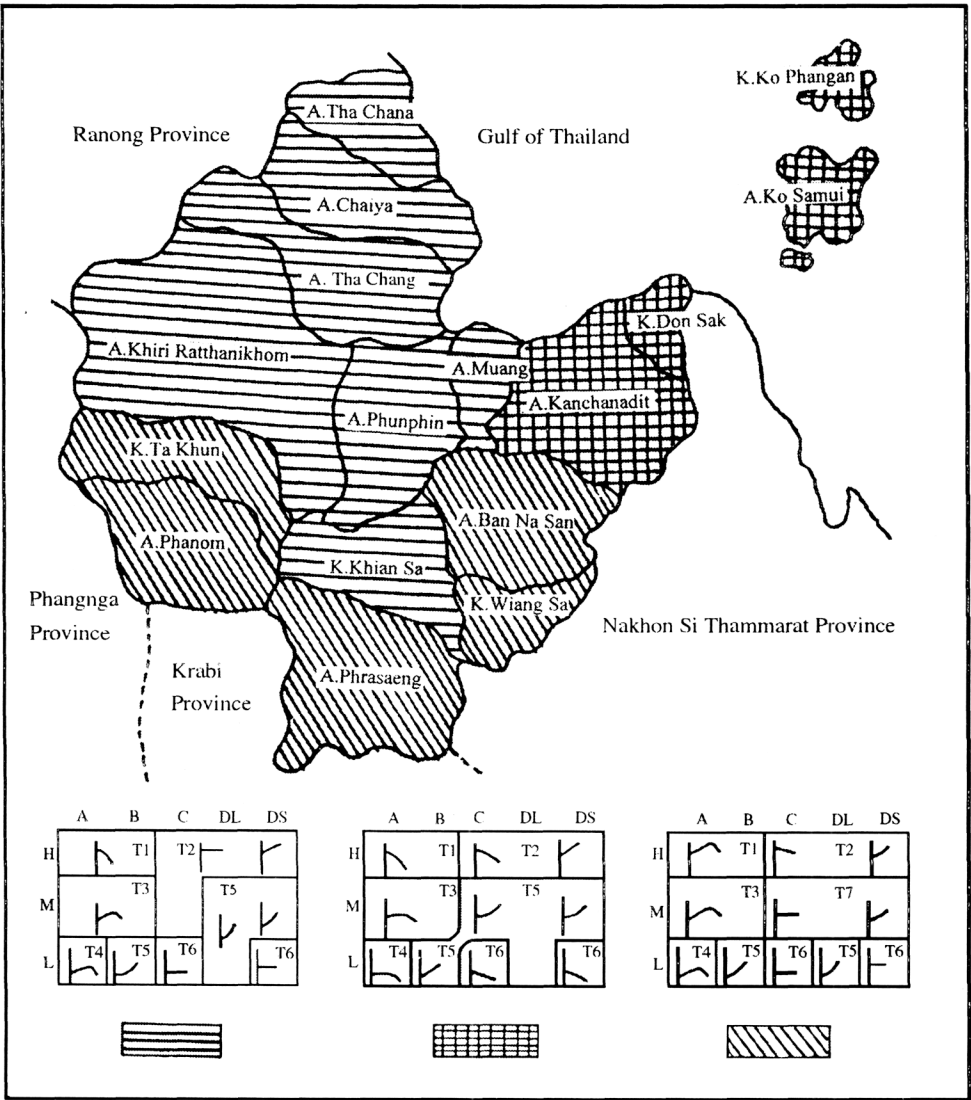


Figure 2. Map showing the distribution of the sub-dialects of Southern Thai spoken in Surat Thani province based on tonal variation (adapted from L.Thongkum et al., 1978).³

³In this and other diagrams, T refers to tone and the following numbers indicate the different tones in each system.