

# **Changing to the new world: high-tech verbalization in Thai**

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## **1. Introduction.**

The relationship between Thailand and England began in the Ayudhaya period (1350-1767). However, during that time the Portuguese and other Westerners, i.e. the French, were more familiar to the Thais than the English. Thus, not many English loanwords are found in the old documents from that time. Even in the reign of King Rama I of the Bangkok Period (1782-1809) there was no contact from any Englishman. Then in the reign of King Rama II (1809-1824) there was an official contact from England. Thus, English loanwords started to appear in various documents. The loanwords increased in the reigns of King Rama III (1824-1851) and King Rama IV or King Mongkut (1851-1868) due to more contact with Englishmen and Americans. King Rama IV himself studied English and was able to use it fluently (Changkhwanyuen 1983).

Unlike in other Asian countries where Christian missionaries had access only to the lower classes, in Thailand missionaries made a distinct impression on the ruling classes. They, however, were more interested in the missionaries' knowledge of Western sciences and modern technology than Christianity. They realized also that, in order to better pursue their scientific interest, they had to be proficient in English.

King Mongkut's successors, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reign 1868-1910) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, reign 1910-1925), were more confident in dealing with Western powers than their forefathers had been. They realized that the adoption of Western ways and the

utilization of Western techniques were the tools of modernization (Masavisut et al 1986).

Today with the invasion of radio, telephone, television, video tape, fax machine, cable TV, satellite TV, computer network, and finally Thailand's own satellite, Thaicom<sup>1</sup>, the Thais cannot escape high-tech terms in everyday life. Thailand is now in the world communications systems. The problem is how to cope with them in the Thai language.

## 2. Early Adaptation

Before the appointment of the word-coining committees of the Thai Royal Institute there were 3 ways of adaptation: loan blending, loan translation, and word building (Prugsapramool 1989).

### 2.1 Loan Blending

Loan blending is a compound word consisting of partly Thai and partly English. Either a Thai word or an English word may serve as the main part. English word may be the whole word with original meaning. For example:

เครื่องแบตเตอรี่	khruangbattery <sup>2</sup> (/khɾiŋ/ = implement),
เครื่องไดนาโม	khruangdynamo, khruangradio,
ลูกบอลลูก	lukballoon (/lûuk/ = rounded thing),
หม้อแบตเตอรี่	mobattery (/mǎw/ = pot), mometer,
โรงแฟกเตอรี	rongfactory (/roon/ = factory),

Otherwise it may be a part of the original word, for example:

ถุงเมล์	thungmail (/thûŋ/ = bag, mail is cut from mail-bag),
คณะฟุตบอล	khanafutbol (/kháná/ = group, football is cut from football team),

รถตัดมิม rotsteam (/róʔ/ = car, steam is cut from steam car).

## 2.2 Loan Translation

Loan translation is a direct translation, either word for word or with some adaptation. For example:

แรงม้า raengma 'horsepower' (/ræŋ/ = power, /máa/ = horse),

รถยนต์ rotyon 'motor car' (/róʔ/ = car, /yon/ = machine),

รถไอน้ำ rot-ai 'steam car' (/róʔ/ = car, /ʔai/ = steam),

ทางรถไฟ thangrotfai 'railway' (/thaŋ/ = way, /róʔ/ = car, /fai/ = fire) (/róʔfai/ = train),

รถไฟฟ้า rotfaifa 'electric car' (/róʔ/ = car, /fai/ = fire, /fáa/ = sky) (/faifáa/ = electricity).

## 2.3 Word Building

Word building is an interpretation of new things or ideas, for example:

แผ่นเสียง phaensiang 'disk' (/phæŋ/ = thin piece thing, /sǎŋ/ = sound),

แรงไฟ raengfai 'volt' (/ræŋ/ = power, /fai/ = fire, electricity),

ลูกสวรรค์ luksawan 'balloon' (/lúuk/ = rounded thing, /sàwǎn/ = heaven),

ตู้เย็น tuyen 'refrigerator' (/túu/ = cabinet, /yen/ = cool).

Besides the meaning-oriented adaptation mentioned above, another way to use loanwords is sound-oriented adaptation. The English sounds are equated to Thai sounds of familiar words which are not necessarily related to the original words, for example:

สเตชั่น satethaen 'station' (/sàtee/ sounds like a kind of food, /thæn/ = stand, platform),

กะปิตัน kapitan ‘captain’ (/kàpì/ sounds like shrimp paste and /tan/ sound like a Thai words meaning being clogged up, not hollow, dead end).

ตะแลปแกป talaepkaep ‘telegraph’ (there are many Thai words beginning with /tà/; /læp/ and /kæp/ are easy to pronounce) .

Both ways of adaptation reflect the Thai ways of thinking in that they think of the new technology in terms of the familiar things in their own culture, either Thai things or Thai sounds. If they cannot equate the new things to anything in Thai they choose to adapt the foreign sounds to the Thai sounds.

### 3. The Royal Institute Rules

From the very start of word-coining the work has been unofficially carried out by Thai scholars including members of the Royal family and the kings themselves.

When Prince Wanwaitayakon came back from Europe in 1919, word-coining was coming into vogue, due mainly to the necessity of establishing a Thai version of the Civil and Commercial Code after the English draft of each Book of the Code was ready. At the change of Regime in 1932 he became active in coining words. He started a newspaper and felt that it was necessary to coin new words. In his opinion, to get to the people one cannot use English words which have not penetrated into the system of thought. If one can get hold of a Thai word it would be better, but if not, one can have recourse to Pali and Sanskrit words which have come into the Thai language (Wanwaitayakon 1970).

Therefore the general word-coining rules of The Royal Institute go like this (Royal Institute 1992):

- 1) Find a Thai word first. If no Thai word is appropriate then,
- 2) Find Pali and Sanskrit words already used in Thai.

3) Write the original word in Thai using another set of Royal Institute Rules.

So far the Royal Institute prefers “formal” Thai words, and sometimes remote Pali and Sanskrit words are used. Moreover, the original words are usually avoided. This practice causes some conflicts on the part of the modern language users, especially those in the high-tech world.

#### 4. The Cataract of High-Tech Terms

When English loanwords started to penetrate into the Thai language almost 200 years ago, they were not for the general public. Only a few persons who got involved with the official documents understood those remote words. Even in the prime of Prince Wanwaithayakon only the elites and the scholars knew those words. The general public accepted whatever they were told. They rarely or never heard or used the original words. For example, they were told that ‘telephone’ is /thoorásàp/ (‘thoorá’ = ‘far’, ‘sàp’ = ‘sound’, both from Pali-Sanskrit). They accepted it, no questions asked. When the sounds of the original words were adapted to the Thai system they were accepted as Thai words. For example, ‘pipe’ became เป๊ป /pǎp/, ‘litre’ became ลิตร /lít/, ‘dinosaur’ became ไดโนเสาร์ /dainoosǎo/, ‘brandy’ became บรันดี้ /bàràndii/, ‘pound’ became ปอนด์ /pɔ̀ɔn/, etc.

However, in the last few years the power of communication has taken people around the world closer to one another. With the coming of fax machines, cellular phones, computer networks, and satellite TV, Bangkok is as close to Los Angeles as to the neighboring Thai cities, or maybe closer. The new words, whether they are high-tech terms or not, are no longer obscure. They came ready with the concepts, which may be international. The Thais can use high-tech terms like computer, fax, video etc. right away.

## 5. Conflict between Popular Practice and Conventional Practice

In this case, popular practice means the way the general public uses loanwords. Conventional practice means the way the Royal Institute uses them. The general public in this case means only people who are exposed to high-tech terms, at least those who know how to use an ATM.

While the Royal Institute prefers Thai or Pali-Sanskrit words that general public prefers the original words, i.e. English. The big reason is that the new words are familiar to them and can be understood immediately. They always complain that words from the Royal Institute have to be translated again from “Indian” (Pali-Sanskrit) into Thai. To them Pali and Sanskrit are also foreign languages. Gone are the days when education is conducted in Buddhist monasteries where the students also study Pali and Sanskrit.

For example, while ‘television’ is easily accepted as โทรทัศน์ /thooráthát/ (word coined from Pali-Sanskrit) and is still widely used, ‘fax’ is partly accepted as โทรสาร thoorásāan/ (/thoorá/ = ‘far’, /sāan/ = ‘message’). The original word ‘fax’ is also widely used. The word ‘video’ is hardly accepted as วิดีทัศน์ /wiidithát/, forming up the same way as /thooráthát/ (/thoorá/ = ‘far’, /thát/ = ‘picture’, /wiidī/ ‘enjoyment, pleasure’).

Not only do the general public prefer the original words but also they choose the shorter and more compact ones. For example, English ลิฟท์ ‘lift’ is chosen instead of American ‘elevator’.

However, when it comes to the problems of ‘formal’ versus ‘informal’ Thai words, the Royal Institute seems to win, because their words are more polite and convey more precise meanings. For example, กดลง /kòt

long/ won over ดันลง /dan long/ for ‘push down’ because of its politeness (/dan/ has sexual implication in Thai) .

## 6. Conflicts within the Popular Practice

Although the general public has discovered to its horror that a /mæssides/ is in fact a /mærsedis/ ‘Mercedes,’ they do not change the word because they got used to the name now.

Some people, however, are annoyed to hear that ‘label’ is pronounced ลาเบล /laa-beel/ and ‘erase’ อีราส /ʔii-ráat/ where /aa/ is pronounced as in ‘car’. Strangely enough, many Thai computer scientists or scientists still stick to the Thai pronunciation rules, i.e. one vowel for one sound.

The big conflict within this group is that some pronounce the words American or English ways, while some pronounce them the Thai way.

## 7. Differences between Thai and English sounds.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1. Comparison of Thai and English consonant sounds

	ENGLISH	THAI <sup>4</sup>	ROMANIZATION <sup>5</sup>
1)	bib	บีบ	bip
2)	church	จัช	chat
3)	deed	ดีด	dit
4)	fife	ไฟ	fai
5)	gag	กัก	kak
6)	hat	หัด	hat
7)	which	วิด	wit
8)	judge	จัด	chat
9)	high	หิ	hik

10)	lid ,needle	ลิด, ดาล	lit, dan
11)	mum	มัม	mam
12)	no	โน	no
13)	thing	ทิง งาน	thing ngan
14)	pop	พป, ภพ	phop, phop
15)	roar	รช	ro
16)	sauce	ศาสดร์	sat
17)	ship, dish	ชัช	chat
18)	tight	ทป, บท	thop, bot
19)	thin	ทิน	thin
20)	this	ดิส	dit
21)	valve	วาว	wao
22)	with	วิด	wit
23)	yes	ญาติ	yat
24)	zebra	ชิบ	sip
25)	vision	ชัน	chan
26)		ปา	pa
27)		ตา	ta
28)		กา	ka

## REMARKS

1. The final in Thai is unreleased as indicated by underlining.

2. Thai /ch/ is equated to English /č/ (in *church*), /j/ (in *judge*), /ʃ/ (in *ship*), and /ʒ/ (in *vision*).

3. Thai /d/ is equated to English /d/ (in *deep*) and /ð/ (in *this*).



4. Thai /p/, /t/, /k/ may be equated to the second member of the English clusters /sp/, /st/, /sk/ respectively.

5. Thai /w/ is equated to English /hw/ (in *which*) , /v/ (in *valve*) and /w/ (in *with*).

6. Thai /s/ is equated to English /s/ (in *sauce*) and /z/ (in *zebra*).

7. Thai /th/ is equated to English /t/ (in *tight*) and /θ/ (in *thin*).

Table 2. Comparision of Thai and English vowel sounds.<sup>3</sup>

	ENGLISH	THAI	ROMANIZATION
1)	pat	แพทย์	phaet̚
2)	pay	เพ	phe
3)	care	แคร์	khae
4)	father	ฟ้า	fa
5)	pet	เพชร	phet̚
6)	bee	บี	bi
7)	pit	พิศ	phit̚
8)	by	ไบ	bai
9)	pier	เปี้ย	pia
10)	pot	พจน์	phot̚
11)	toe	โท	tho
12)	caught	คอด	khot̚
13)	noise	น้อย	noi
14)	took	ทูก	thuk̚
15)	boot	บูด	but̚
16)	out	เอา	ao
17)	cut	คัต	khat̚

18)	term	เทอม	thoem
19)	about	อบาย	abai
20)	butter	เออ	oe

## REMARKS

There are more vowel sounds in Thai, but they are omitted here because of their irrelevance.

## 8. Sound Conflicts

Even when the original words are chosen they are pronounced differently. One group pronounces them in the English or American way, another in the Thai way. One group pronounces 'fax' with the final sounds, another like /fæk/. Those who observe the one-symbol-for-one-sound rule of the Thai vowels pronounce 'label' /laa-beel/ , 'erase' /ʔii-ráat/ or /ʔii-ráas/.

For the general public the final sounds /f/, /l/, /s/, and /ʃ/ in English are coming into the Thai sound system as well as the new initial clusters. Traditionally there are 12 clusters in Thai: /kr/, /kl/, /kw/, /khr/, /khl/, /khw/, /pr/, /pl/, /phr/, /phl/, /tr/, and /thr/. With the arrival of some high-tech terms some Thais are now able to pronounce the likes of 'block', 'break', 'drive', 'flip-flop', and 'free'.

Another conflict is in tone marks. Since Thai has tones and English does not, it is reasonable to omit tone marks when writing English words in Thai. However, since English words with Thai characters assume some tones, not necessarily like the original words, when used in Thai language, some Thais can't help putting a tone mark in some syllable, making them are Thai. For example, 'Pepsi' became เป็ปซี่ /pépsi/ where a tone mark indicating high tone is placed above the first syllable , and a tone mark indicating falling tone is placed above the second syllable. 'Pepsi' without tone marks looks like this: เป็ปซี่.

## 9. Conclusion

Despite the protest from the conservatives that Thai terms should be used instead of English, no one can stop the avalanche of high-tech terms which can be understood immediately. The world has been made so small by the communications systems that nothing is obscure anymore.

It was recently reported in *Asiaweek* that many Asian governments have tried to slow the infiltration of foreign words into their national languages. In Indonesia where some 200 indigenous tongues are spoken, authorities incorporated Bahasa Indonesia to unite the country linguistically. Jakarta has been fighting the encroachment of English words. Recently it banned the use of English in advertisements. And at one symposium, government officials and linguists called for improved efforts to promote the use of Bahasa as a language of science and technology. One minister called for experts to develop new words in order to keep up with scientific advances.

*Asiaweek* agreed that as an agent of national unity Bahasa Indonesia should be promoted. And the bastardized usages of "indoglish" can encourage both bad English and bad Indonesian, but not every language needs to have its own expressions for everything. Scientific words that are globally accepted could be adopted. Just like Latin is widely used by biologists and medical scientists to classify things, *Asiaweek* proposed the standardization of easy-to-pronounce, easy-to-spell scientific usage throughout the world. To do so would facilitate communication among scientists from different nations and make it easier for researchers and students alike to work from primary sources.

In Thailand the importance of English was realized long ago. As all nations of the present decade belong to a global community, English is the language of international commerce and information interdependence. English has lost its 'foreignness' in Thailand. Instead it is a powerful vehicle for carrying on international business, strengthening

the economy and improving technical knowledge (Masavisut et al 1986).

Whether “standardization” of high-tech terms is a good idea or not, the Thais will continue to adapt and adopt them in a Thai way. More original words may be used and understood as most carry “international” concepts with them, despite different pronunciations. The Americans and the Thais have the same concepts when using the likes of ‘remote control’, ‘xerox’, ‘fax’, etc. Whatever conflicts there may be now, the original high-tech terms will be here to stay.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Thaicom was launched on December 18, 1993 at French Guiana, South America. The Ariane rockets carried both the Thai and the US satellites.

<sup>2</sup>The Thai part is in transliterated form while the English part retains the original form for better understanding.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 3 rd. edition, 1992.

<sup>4</sup>Thai words are chosen in order to illustrate consonant or vowel sounds only, not the translation.

<sup>5</sup>This paper uses the Royal Institute Romanization Rules in converting Thai scripts to Roman scripts except when underlining is used to indicate the difference between English and Thai sounds.

## References

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