THE PHONOLOGY OF THAI PET NAMES

Karnchanā Nacaskul

Names of Thai people can be divided into the formal and informal, formal being first and family names, while the informal ones are pet names and nicknames. Indeed, the Thai people have a widely popular practice of informally addressing one another with names other than the legal first family name. These so-called pet names and nicknames may have a meaning or may be onomatopoeic or just nonsense words; those with meaning conform to the general patterns of monosyllabic words, whereas those without possess the phonological patterns of onomatopes or of English and Chinese loanwords.

Development of pet names

The first names of the Thai are those given to them by their parents in childhood. They are, it seems, legally the equivalent of the Christian names of European and Christian people, but in reality they have little connection with Buddhism, the state religion of Thailand. A Thai first name is not given to a baby at its first religious ceremony, although in the majority of cases it is given to a baby either by a priest or a parent, or by a respectable elder, in accordance with the baby's horoscope, in order to bless the baby with luck, ability, prosperity, wealth, honour, grace, or a combination of such blessings. There are also cases in which ugly names are given to fool the devil who might take the child away if it were considered to be a good-looking baby. The practice is possible because all Thai first names have a meaning. In olden days, such first names were the only names given to Thai people; in the Sukhothai period, Thai names were mostly simple Thai words, some loanwords from Khmer and Sanskrit. In the Ayutthayā period, however, more Sanskrit loanwords were used as names, especially for members of the royal family. Traditionally, it is believed that the name of a person has an effect on the ups and downs of its owner's life. Generally, words which have a meaning in accord with the blessing that should be due to a child as noted in his or her horoscope are used. A boy named /mii/ 'to have' is expected to grow up rich or, at least, to know no poverty. Likewise, it is hoped that a girl named /sūaj/ 'beautiful' will grow up into a good-looking woman. In the context of such practices, a person who becomes ill or poor may change his name if he thinks that the one he possesses does not fit well with his horoscope and his expectations of life. In the early Ratanakosin period, the names of commoners were still
simple Thai words, with the inclusion of some short Sanskrit loans, whereas the names of members of the royal family were made up of long coinages from Sanskrit.

In 1913 King Rama VI introduced family names into Thai law. The family names given by the King were mostly Sanskrit words having a form and meaning related to the name of a particular ancestor of a given person. Common people generally combined the names of their parents to make up their family names. In such cases a family name could be, and usually, longer than the owner's first name. First names at this time also began to change their form from simple Thai words to more complex forms of Sanskrit origin. The name /mii/ 'to have', for example, presents a variety of choices such as /sêet-thêi/ or /sêet-thêa/ 'a rich man' (Skt. śreṣṭha), the second being used only as a name; /thanaa/ 'money' (Skt. dhana), /sáp/ 'treasure' (Skt. dravya), and so on. With time, the first names of the younger generation seemed to become longer and longer. Thus, one finds names of three, four or five syllables, all similarly related to 'wealth', as follows:

/sáp-praphaa/ 'Radiant Wealth'
/thanaʔ-phan/ 'Silvery Complexion'
/woorasáp/ 'Excellent Treasures'
/sêet-thaphoŋ/ 'Wealthy Clan'
/sêet-sirîʔ/ 'Wealthy Glory'
/thanaʔ-phát/ 'Wealth Prosperity'
/thanawát-thanâʔ/ 'Wealth Prosperity'
/thanaʔ-sirîʔ/ 'Wealth Glory'
/sáp-moŋkhon/ 'Lucky Treasures'
/sáp-thawii/ 'Multiplying Treasures'
/sáp-manii/ 'Precious Gems'

With the advent of family names and the consequent usage of Sanskritically-derived names for both first and family names, it was natural that Thai people should revert back to the use of the simple name-words with which they were more familiar in order to address one another. At first, only part of a polysyllabic first name was used in addressing someone; for example, /phaï-buun/ 'abundance' is shortened to /buun/ with a virtual loss of the correct meaning of the original first name as used in full. In some cases, this shortening of names can cause confusion, since there may be occasions on which more than one person with the same shortened name is present; these people may all be called /buun/, for example, although their first names may well be /sôm-buun/ 'perfect', /thanaʔ-buun/ 'full of money', /thirâ-buun/ 'perfect as a sage', /phâṭchara-buun/ 'full of diamonds', and
/kittibuun/ 'full of fame'.

The problem of calling for someone by part only of the first name, combined with the familiar use of simple Thai words signifying the particular characteristics of a person, was, in fact, the origin of the now popular practice in family circles, among classmates, close friends and work colleagues, of using pet names and nicknames to address one another.

Pet names are generally given to children by their parents and thus express fondness and affection, while nicknames are generally created by and used among friends or classmates to express familiarity or friendly mockery. However, some nicknames can be so widespread that their use is extended into wider circles of friends and close acquaintances. Most Thai people nowadays have pet names, and a number of them have both pet names and nicknames, which may last, and by which they may be addressed till the latter part of their lives.

Grammatically, a pet name plays the role of a personal pronoun. For example, a person whose pet name is /nīt/ 'tiny' may use the words /nīt/ in a sentence such as '/nīt/ wishes to have a birthday party with /nīt/’s friends, so please let /nīt/ have a new dress for the occasion'. A nickname may also play the role of a personal pronoun but is rarely used as the first personal pronoun, since some people accept, but do not particularly like, the nickname given to them.

Classification of pet names

Pet names can be classified semantically into three groups; namely, semantic pet names, onomatopoeic pet names, and nonsense pet names.

(i) Semantic pet names make up the largest group. They are given, or used, to show special affection and also for convenience in addressing one another. They are expressions of miniaturization, flowers, fruits, vegetables, sweets, toys, pets, offspring, as well as descriptions of the appearances of the name-owners. Nicknames are also grouped with semantic pet names since they all have meanings, generally used in teasing or mockery of the person named. Examples of such pet names are:

Miniaturization: /nīt/ 'tiny'
/lék/ 'small'
/nāoj/ 'a little'
/cīw/ 'very little'
/cīt/ 'very little'

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Flowers:  
/ˈtuə/  'lotus'
/prɪp/  'name of a flower'  (Millingtonia hortensis)
/təw/  'name of a flower'  (Cratoxylon prunifolium)
/jǐ-thǒo/  'name of a flower'  (Nerium oleander)

Fruits:  
/klaːj/  'banana'
/sôm/  'orange'
/qɔ̝/  'rambutan'
/khaːnʊ̞n/  'jack-fruit'
/nɔj-nàa/  'sugar-apple'  (Annona reticulata)
/chom-phûu/  'rose-apple'  (Eugenia jambos)

Vegetables:  
/təɛn/  'collective name for melons, etc.'
/fəɛn/  'a kind of squash'  (Cucurbitaceae)
/fək/  'a kind of squash'  (Cucurbitaceae)
/thùa/  'bean'

Sweets:  
/ʔom-jǐm/  'lollipop'
/lûuk-kwàa/  'candy'
/kɔ̝o/  'a kind of sweet'

Toys:  
/lûuk-pɔoŋ/  'balloon'
/lûuk-hûn/  'marbles'
/wəaw/  'kite'
/tûk-kataa/  'doll'

Pets:  
/me̝w/  'cat'
/kaj/  'chicken'
/nɔk/  'bird'
/taw/  'turtle, tortoise'
Animals:  /mũu/ 'pig'
        /pɛt/ 'duck'
        /mũi/ 'bear'
        /kɔp/ 'frog'
        /cháaŋ/ 'elephant'
        /pák-kapãw/ 'globe fish'

Offsprings:  /cfap/ 'chick'
             /ʔɔɔt/ 'tadpole'
             /lũuk-kẽ?/ 'lamb'
             /lũuk-náam/ 'water nymph, larva'

Appearances:  /túʔ/ 'chubby'
              /ʔãn/ 'chubby'
              /dɛeŋ/ 'red (of the skin)'
              /waŋ/ 'alert, quick'
              /kẽe/ 'smart'

(ii) Onomatopoeic pet names also make up a large proportion of pet names and are generally formed in imitation of the cries of babies and animal offspring, other distinctive sounds, and words descriptive of behaviour. Onomatopoeic words can be monosyllables, disyllables or polysyllables, but such pet names are mostly monosyllables, such as:

Cries of a baby:  /wɛɛ/ 'cry of a baby'
                  /ʔɛw/ 'cry of a baby'
                  /ʔɔŋ/ 'a groaning sound'

Cries of animals and offsprings:  /ʔiʃt/ 'sound made by a mouse'
                                    /mũaw/ 'meowing of a cat'
                                    /цип/ 'sound made by a bird'
                                    /ʔɔp/ 'cry of a frog'
                                    /kũk/ 'cluck of a hen'
                                    /cfap/ 'cheep of a chick'
Sounds: /pɔm/ 'sound of a solid body falling into water'
/pɔm/ 'sound of a body splashing in the water'
/kɛtk/ 'sound made by a latch'
/?ɛt/ 'creaking sound of a door'
/cɔm/ 'sound of wading through water'

Behaviour: /dɔa/ 'awkward'
/cɛt/ 'bold (in speech and action)'
/jɛm/ 'butting in'
/cɔɔ/ 'intruding, obtrusive'
/níŋ/ 'tip-top'

(iii) Nonsense pet names belong to the third group which appears to possess no meaning, nor to imitate the sound or manner of anything. They serve only as pet names, are well accepted by Thai society, and can be used as personal pronouns in just the same ways as pet names of the other groups. Examples of them are:

/tɔa/ /?át/
/tɔn/ /tũu/
/cɔn/ /cũŋ/
/cɔp/ /pǐk/
/tũŋ/ /pĩŋ/
/tfŋ/ /tfn/

Phonological patterns of pet names

The pet names investigated here are mostly monosyllabic words, although there are a few disyllabic examples. The large number of semantic pet names can be phonologically analysed as monosyllabic words, having the phonological patterns of C(C)VV⁰⁻⁴, C(C)VN⁰⁻⁴, C(C)VNS₁,³ C(C)VNO⁻⁴ and C(C)VVS ᵃ,ᵇ where C stands for consonantal phonemes, V for short vowels, VV for long vowels and diphthongs, S for stops, N for nasals and semi-vowels, and figures 0 to 4 for the five tonal phonemes (Nacaskul 1977:106). Those having two syllables can be analysed as two monosyllables or a disyllable of Cв'C(C)VV⁰⁻⁴, Cв'C(C)VNO⁻⁴, Cв'C(C)VNS₁,³, Cв'C(C)VVN⁰⁻⁴ and Cв'C(C)VVS₁,² with the additional unstressed syllable Cв preceding. Those having more than two syllables,
which are very rare, can be analysed as the combination of mono-
syllable and disyllables. The patterns of these pet names
coincide with those of Thai words in general.

Onomatopoetic pet names, on the other hand, are found to
have some different patterns, in addition to the ordinary ones.
These patterns coincide with those of loanwords from English and
Chinese (Henderson 1949:195; 1951:142-3; Nacaskul 1979:113) and
with those of special intensifiers to certain stative verbs
(Nacaskul 1972:6). The co-occurrence of high tone in syllables
with long vowels or diphthongs, and closed by a stop, for example,
is found only in English loanwords such as:

/chëot/      'shirt'
/nôot/      'note'
/mëet/      'metre'

Also, the co-occurrence of rising tone or high tone with an un-
aspirated stop initial in Thai is found only in onomatopoes or
loanwords from either Chinese or English, such as:

/kïaw/      'wantan' (Ch. jiăo 餃)
/côok/      'rice soup' (Ch. zhōu 粥)
/täaw/      'dice' (Ch. tōu 骰)
/tùn/      'steamed' (Ch. dùn 煮)
/pêp/      'water pipe' (Eng. pipe)
/?sk/      'to act' (Eng. to act)
/kôk/      'water tap' (Eng. cock)
/këe/      'gay, smart' (Eng. gay)
/pãa/      'father' (Eng. papa)
/pâm/      'pump' (Eng. to pump)
/bôj/      'boy, waiter' (Eng. boy)

or in special modifiers* like:

/prïit/ ( /prïaw/ + 'sour'
          /prïaw prïit/ 'extremely sour')

/pïi/ /khôm/ + 'bitter'
      ( /khôm pïi/ 'extremely bitter')

/cës/ /dêsë/ + 'red'
      /dêsë cës/ 'very bright red'

* That is, intensifiers, (Ed.).

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Most onomatopoeic pet names appear to have the same phonological patterns as those of loanwords and modifiers, as shown in the following examples:

**High tone:**
- /ʔɔt/ CVVS³ 'creaking sound of a door'
- /ʧap/ CVVS³ 'cheep of a chick'
- /pʰɛt/ CVVS³ 'sound made by a horn, a loud cry of a baby'
- /ʔɛt/ CVVS³ 'creaking sound of a door'
- /túk/ CVS³ 'sound made by a minicab'
- /pék/ CVN³ 'cry of a pussy cat for its mother'
- /pák/ CVS³ 'sound made by knocking at a head'
- /cáp/ CVS³ 'sound of a kiss'

**Rising tone:**
- /pɔm/ CVN⁴ 'sound of a body splashing in water'
- /tɔm/ CVN⁴ 'sound of something fallen into the water'
- /tɔm/ CVN⁴ 'sound of something dropped and disappeared in the water'
- /pɛw/ CVN⁴ 'shining of the eyes'
- /ʔɔj/ CVN⁴ 'a groaning sound'
- /ʔɔw/ CVN⁴ 'cry of a hungry cat'

Nonsense pet names also seem to be confined to high and rising tones. Some of them conform to the permissible patterns of simple monosyllables, especially when the syllable is either open or is closed by a nasal or a semivowel, in which case high and rising tones are also preferred. Thus, we have these examples:

- /cọo/ CVV³ /tɔə/ CVV⁴
- /tʃi/ CVV³ /tɔu/ CVV⁴
- /cɛw/ CVN³ /tɔŋ/ CVN⁴
- /púj/ CVN³ /cɔŋ/ CVN⁴
- /kɔʔŋ/ CVVN³ /ʔʊʔŋ/ CVVN⁴
- /wɛsw/ CVVN³ /bʊʔŋ/ CVVN⁴

In the majority of Thai monosyllables, the syllable closed by a stop is found to occur only with low (1) and high (3) tones if the syllable has a short vowel, and is found to occur only with low (1) and falling (2) tones when the syllable
has a long vowel. In nonsense pet names, however, the long vowel syllable closed by a stop is found to accompany the high tone, hence the syllable structure of CVVS$^3$, which is regarded as irregular for the Thai phonological patterns of monosyllables. Examples are:

/kʁuak/  CCVS$^3$
/tʃap/   CVVS$^3$
/buak/   CVVS$^3$
/duat/   CVVS$^3$

Loan and newly-coined pet names

As the population grows in number, it appears that new pet names have to be found. It is conceivable that in order to avoid repetition they have to be created and are, in fact, being constructed along the phonological patterns described above. English and Chinese loanwords$^4$ had been introduced as pet names in the past and are increasingly used by Thai people of the younger generation. The majority of English-loan pet names conform to the phonological patterns of onomatopoeic and nonsense ones, and only a minority of them conform to the normal patterns of Thai words, as can be seen in the following examples:

/kɔp/ (Eng. golf)
/næt/ (Eng. nut)
/nɔp/ (Eng. knob)
/pɔp/ (Eng. pop)
/dûk/ (Eng. duke)
/ʔõot/ (Eng. oat)
/bɔet/ (Eng. bird)
/khēek/ (Eng. cake)
/ʔɔn/ (Eng. Ann)
/jɔn/ (Eng. John)
/bɔɔj/ (Eng. boy)
/ɔɔj/ (Eng. Joy)
/ʔɔn/ (Eng. Ann)
/mɔm/ (Eng. ma'am)

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Conclusion

The majority of Thai people possess pet names and nicknames in addition to their legal first and family names, and such names have grammatical functions as nouns and pronouns, and a number of them have meanings. Pet names with meanings conform to the general patterns of monosyllabic words whereas the onomatopoetic pet names have additional patterns which are the same as those for loanwords from English and Chinese, while nonsense pet names have the phonological patterns of onomatopoetic words and loanwords. More and more pet names are created for Thai people because, although formal first names are longer and more poetic, they are neither practical for use in normal conversation, nor as pronouns. The other reason for new pet names being introduced into the Thai language is that the Thai people like to have unique names of their own. It is, therefore, unpredictable which names will be added to the existing list of pet names and nicknames, and which types will become more popular. However, it is noted that the phonological patterns of onomatopoetic and nonsense pet names of the types $C(C)V_{V}^{3,4}$, $C(C)V_{N}^{3,4}$ with initial unaspirated stops, and the pattern $C(C)V_{V}S^{3}$, although alien to the Thai language, are widely accepted, whilst other alien features are accepted with a certain reluctance. These pet names, together with a large number of loanwords of the phonological patterns described above have now become the accepted patterns of Thai words.

NOTES

1. Chinese words, several of which are used in Chinese as given names, or even surnames, are, however, also treated as pet names since first names in Thai style do exist formally. Examples are:

/khîm/  (Ch. qín  )
/ŋîm/  (Ch. yîn  )
/hıyla/  (Ch. xīāŋ  )
/sōjo/  (Ch. xī  )
/kîam/  (Ch. qiān  )
/lfäŋ/  (Ch. liāng  )
/lfîm/  (Ch. lîn  )

They are only used by people who, although Thai by nationality, are ethnically Chinese.
2. The other alien features which are still not accepted in the system of the Thai language are, for example, the occurrence of the final /s/ to show excess or plurality as in /mâaks/ 'very very much', /bôqs/ 'extremely crazy', and the finals /l/, /s/, /f/ as in /bôl/ 'ball', /kêês/ 'gas', /phaf/ 'puff'.

REFERENCES


