# THE PHONOLOGY OF THAI PET NAMES

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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 Sanskritic loans 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 /sŭaj/ '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*

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simple Thai words, with the inclusion of some short Sanskritic
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 Sanskritic
words having a form and meaning related to the name of a partic-
ular 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 Sans-
kritic origin. The name /mii/ 'to have', for example, presents
a variety of choices such as /sèet-thǐi/ or /sèet-thǎa/ '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' |
| /thaná?-phan/ | 'Silvery Complexion' |
| /wɔɔrasáp/ | 'Excellent Treasures' |
| /sèet-thaphoŋ/ | 'Wealthy Clan' |
| /sèet-sirì?/ | 'Wealthy Glory' |
| /thaná-phát/ | 'Wealth Prosperity' |
| /thanawát-thaná?/ | 'Wealth Prosperity' |
| /thaná-sirì?/ | '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, /phai-
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 /sǒm-
buun/ 'perfect', /thaná-buun/ 'full of money', /thiirá-buun/
'perfect as a sage', /phátchara-buun/ 'full of diamonds', and

/kìttibuun/ '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 /nít/ 'tiny' may use the words /nít/ in a sentence such as '/nít/ wishes to have a birthday party with /nít/'s friends, so please let /nít/ 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) <u>Semantic pet names</u> 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:   /nít/       'tiny'

                 /lék/       'small'

                 /nɔ́ɔj/     'a little'

                 /cĭw/      'very little'

                 /cíit/      'very little'

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Flowers: | /bua/ | 'lotus' |
| | /pîip/ | 'name of a flower' (Millingtonia hortensis) |
| | /têw/ | 'name of a flower' (Cratoxylon prunifolium) |
| | /jîi-thɔ̌o/ | 'name of a flower' (Nerium oleander) |
| Fruits: | /klûaj/ | 'banana' |
| | /sôm/ | 'orange' |
| | /ŋɔ́ʔ/ | 'rambutan' |
| | /khanǔn/ | 'jack-fruit' |
| | /nɔ́j-nâa/ | 'sugar-apple' (Annona reticulata) |
| | /chom-phûu/ | 'rose-apple' (Eugenia jambos) |
| Vegetables: | /tɛɛŋ/ | 'collective name for melons,etc.' |
| | /fɛɛŋ/ | 'a kind of squash' (Cucurbitaceae) |
| | /fák/ | 'a king of squash' (Cucurbitaceae) |
| | /thùa/ | 'bean' |
| Sweets: | /ʔom-jím/ | 'lollipop' |
| | /lûuk-kwàat/ | 'candy' |
| | /kɔ̌o/ | 'a kind of sweet' |
| Toys: | /lûuk-pɔ̀oŋ/ | 'balloon' |
| | /lûuk-hǐn/ | 'marbles' |
| | /wâaw/ | 'kite' |
| | /tûk-kataa/ | 'doll' |
| Pets: | /mɛɛw/ | 'cat' |
| | /kaj/ | 'chicken' |
| | /nók/ | 'bird' |
| | /tàw/ | 'turtle, tortoise' |

| Animals: | /mŭu/ | 'pig' |
|---|---|---|
| | /pɛ̀t/ | 'duck' |
| | /mǐi/ | 'bear' |
| | /kɔ̀p/ | 'frog' |
| | /cháaŋ/ | 'elephant' |
| | /pák-kapâw/ | 'globe fish' |

| Offsprings: | /cíap/ | 'chick' |
|---|---|---|
| | /ʔɔ́ɔt/ | 'tadpole' |
| | /lûuk-kɛ̀ʔ/ | 'lamb' |
| | /lûuk-náam/ | 'water nymph, larva' |

| Appearances: | /tûʔ/ | 'chubby' |
|---|---|---|
| | /ʔǎn/ | 'chubby' |
| | /dɛɛŋ/ | 'red (of the skin)' |
| | /waj/ | 'alert, quick' |
| | /kĕe/ | 'smart' |

(ii) <u>Onomatopoeic pet names</u> 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 mono-syllables, such as:

| Cries of a baby: | /wɛ́ɛ/ | 'cry of a baby' |
|---|---|---|
| | /ʔɛ́w/ | 'cry of a baby' |
| | /ʔɔ̌j/ | 'a groaning sound' |

| Cries of animals and offsprings: | /ʔíit/ | 'sound made by a mouse' |
|---|---|---|
| | /mǐaw/ | 'meowing of a cat' |
| | /cíp/ | 'sound made by a bird' |
| | /ʔɔ́p/ | 'cry of a frog' |
| | /kúk/ | 'cluck of a hen' |
| | /cíap/ | 'cheep of a chick' |

| Sounds: | /pɔ̌m/ | 'sound of a solid body falling into water' |
|---|---|---|
| | /pɛ̌m/ | 'sound of a body splashing in the water' |
| | /kɛ́k/ | 'sound made by a latch' |
| | /ʔɛ́ɛt/ | 'creaking sound of a door' |
| | /cɔ̌m/ | 'sound of wading through water' |
| Behaviour: | /dɔ̌ə/ | 'awkward' |
| | /cɛ̌ɛ/ | 'bold (in speech and action)' |
| | /jɛ̌m/ | 'butting in' |
| | /cɔ̌ə/ | 'intruding, obtrusive' |
| | /níŋ/ | 'tip-top' |

(iii) <u>Nonsense pet names</u> 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:

| | |
|---|---|
| /tɔ̌ə/ | /ʔét/ |
| /tɛ̌n/ | /tǔu/ |
| /cǐn/ | /cǔŋ/ |
| /cǐŋ/ | /pík/ |
| /tǔŋ/ | /píŋ/ |
| /típ/ | |

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 $C(C)VV^{0-4}$, $C(C)VN^{0-4}$, $C(C)VS^{1,3}$, $C(C)VVN^{0-4}$ and $C(C)VVS^{1,2}$ 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 $Cv'C(C)VV^{0-4}$, $Cv'C(C)VN^{0-4}$, $Cv'C(C)VS^{1,3}$, $Cv'C(C)VVN^{0-4}$ and $Cv'C(C)VVS^{1,2}$, with the additional unstressed syllable Cv 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.

Onomatopoeic 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-occurence 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:

| | |
|---|---|
| /chə̂ət/ | 'shirt' |
| /nóot/ | 'note' |
| /méet/ | 'metre' |

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

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| /kíaw/ | 'wantan' | (Ch. jiǎo 餃) |
| /cóok/ | 'rice soup' | (Ch. zhōu 粥) |
| /tǎw/ | 'dice' | (Ch. tóu 骰) |
| /tǔn/ | 'steamed' | (Ch. dùn 燉) |
| /pɛ́p/ | 'water pipe' | (Eng. pipe) |
| /ʔɛk/ | 'to act' | (Eng. to act) |
| /kɔ́k/ | 'water tap' | (Eng. cock) |
| /kěe/ | 'gay, smart' | (Eng. gay) |
| /pǎa/ | 'father/ | (Eng. papa) |
| /pám/ | 'pump' | (Eng. to pump) |
| /bɔ̌j/ | 'boy, waiter' | (Eng. boy) |

or in special modifiers* like:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| /prîit/ | ( | /prîaw/ + | 'sour' |
| | | /prîaw prîit/ | 'extremely sour') |
| /pǐi/ | | /khǒm/ + | 'bitter' |
| | ( | /khǒm pǐi/ | 'extremely bitter') |
| /cɛ̌ɛ/ | | /dɛɛŋ/ + | 'red' |
| | | /dɛɛŋ cɛ̌ɛ/ | 'very bright red' |

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* That is, intensifiers, (Ed.).

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 :   /ʔɔ́ɔt/   $\text{CVVS}^3$   'creaking sound of a door'

/cíap/   $\text{CVVS}^3$   'cheep of a chick'

/pɛ́ɛt/   $\text{CVVS}^3$   'sound made by a horn, a loud cry of a baby'

/ʔɛ́ɛt/   $\text{CVVS}^3$   'creaking sound of a door'

/túk/   $\text{CVS}^3$   'sound made by a minicab'

/pɛ́w/   $\text{CVN}^3$   'cry of a pussy cat for its mother'

/pɔ́k/   $\text{CVS}^3$   'sound made by knocking at a head'

/cúp/   $\text{CVS}^3$   'sound of a kiss'

Rising tone :   /pʉ̌m/   $\text{CVN}^4$   'sound of a body splashing in water'

/tǔm/   $\text{CVN}^4$   'sound of something fallen into the water'

/tɔ̌m/   $\text{CVN}^4$   'sound of something dropped and disappeared in the water'

/pɛ̌w/   $\text{CVN}^4$   'shining of the eyes'

/ʔɔ̌j/   $\text{CVN}^4$   'a groaning sound'

/ʔɛ̌w/   $\text{CVN}^4$   '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:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| /cóo/ | $\text{CVV}^3$ | | /tʃ̌ə/ | $\text{CVV}4$ |
| /tíi/ | $\text{CVV}^3$ | | /tǔu/ | $\text{CVV}^4$ |
| /cɛ́w/ | $\text{CVN}^3$ | | /tɔ̌ŋ/ | $\text{CVN}^4$ |
| /púj/ | $\text{CVN}^3$ | | /cʌ̌n/ | $\text{CVN}^4$ |
| /kíaŋ/ | $\text{CVVN}^3$ | | /ʔǔaj/ | $\text{CVVN}^4$ |
| /wɛ́ɛw/ | $\text{CVVN}^3$ | | /bǔaj/ | $\text{CVVN}^4$ |

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

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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:

| | |
|---|---|
| /krúak/ | $CCVVS^3$ |
| /tíap/ | $CVVS^3$ |
| /búak/ | $CVVS^3$ |
| /dúat/ | $CVVS^3$ |

## 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[1] 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 con-
form 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:

| | |
|---|---|
| /kɔ́p/ | (Eng. golf) |
| /nát/ | (Eng. nut) |
| /nɔ́p/ | (Eng. knob) |
| /pɔ́p/ | (Eng. pop) |
| /dúk/ | (Eng. duke) |
| /ʔóot/ | (Eng. oat) |
| /bə́ət/ | (Eng. bird) |
| /khéek/ | (Eng. cake) |
| /ʔɤ̌n/ | (Eng. Ann) |
| /jɔ̌ɔn/ | (Eng. John) |
| /bɔɔj/ | (Eng. boy) |
| /cɔɔj/ | (Eng. Joy) |
| /ʔɛɛn/ | (Eng. Ann) |
| /mɛ̂m/ | (Eng. ma'am) |

## Conclusion

The majority of Thai people possess pet names and nick-
names 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 onomat-
opoeic 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 onomatopoeic 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 nick-
names, and which types will become more popular. However, it is
noted that the phonological patterns of onomatopoeic and nonsense
pet names of the types $C(C)VV^{3,4}$, $C(C)VN^{3,4}$ with initial unaspir-
ated stops, and the pattern $C(C)VVS^3$, although alien[2] 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:

    | | |
    |---|---|
    | /khìm/ | (Ch. qín 琴 ) |
    | /ŋím/ | (Ch. yín 吟 ) |
    | /hǐa/ | (Ch. xiāng 香 ) |
    | /sòoj/ | (Ch. xì 細 ) |
    | /kíam/ | (Ch. qiān 謙 ) |
    | /líaŋ/ | (Ch. liáng 良 ) |
    | /lím/ | (Ch. lín 林 ) |

They are only used by people who, although Thai by national-
ity, 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', /bôŋs/ 'extremely crazy', and
    the finals /l/, /s/, /f/ as in /bɔl/ 'ball', /kɛ́ɛs/ 'gas',
    /phaf/ 'puff'.

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