

Tones In Thai

เสียงวรรณยุกต์ในภาษาไทย

Undoubtedly one of the most difficult and feared aspects of the Thai language for learners is the fact that it's a tonal language, which makes it quite distinctly different from English and European languages. Being tonal means that the tone (the pitch at you which you pronounce the word) is an integral part of the syllable itself, and pronouncing the tone wrongly is an error akin to pronouncing the syllable with a different vowel.

Although **tone** and **intonation** are both used to vary the pitch with which a word is said, the two are not the same. In a non-tonal language such as English, the intonation with a word is said can vary - for instance, to express surprise ("He said *what?!* ") or to form a question ("You're going to leave on Monday?") - but this is specific to the sentence and it doesn't occur if you pronounce the word in isolation. By contrast, the tone in Thai is specific to the syllable and occurs whether you pronounce it in isolation or in a sentence.

Thai has 5 different tones in total - mid tone, low tone, falling tone, high tone and rising tone. The written Thai language uses a fairly complex collection of [tone rules](#) to express which tone a particular syllable is pronounced with. For the [transliteration](#) of Thai script that we use, the tone of each syllable is shown by adding an extra character on top of the first vowel of each syllable. An example for the sound of [kaa](#) is shown in the tone chart below.

Tone	Thai name	Example Sound & Transliteration	Explanation
Mid	เสียงสามัญ sǎng sǎa-man	 คา kaa (no additional marker)	→ Easy to pronounce - just speak naturally without varying your pitch.
Low	เสียงเอก sǎng àyk	 ข่า kàa	↘ The low tone starts at a bit lower than natural pitch

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Falling	เสียงโท sǎng toh	 คำ kâa	and falls off slightly. The falling tone actually briefly rises in pitch before falling off to finish at roughly the same pitch as the low tone. The brief rise gives the opportunity to emphasize the fall, and so distinguish it from the low tone.
High	เสียงตรี sǎng dtree	 คำ kâa	The high tone starts at a natural pitch and rises quickly
Rising	เสียงจัตวา sǎng jàt-dtà-waa	 ขา kâa	In the opposite way to the falling tone, the rising tone falls slightly in pitch at first so that the following rise in pitch is

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			clearly distinguishable from the high tone. This tone is similar to the way English speakers raise their pitch on the last word of a sentence when asking a question

The names of the tones - เอก [àyk](#) , โท [toh](#) , ตรี [dtree](#) and จัตวา [jàt-dtà-waa](#) - are derived from the names of the Sanskrit numerals from 1 to 4.

Although the idea of speaking each syllable with a different tone tempts some people to give up before they've even got started, the reality isn't so bad as might be imagined. If you mispronounce the tones the reactions can vary from confusion to amusement, but in general Thais, particularly those in frequent contact with tourists, are used to foreign accents and more than capable of discerning what you mean. Indeed, Thais themselves frequently don't clearly pronounce each tone either, as in normal speech there often just simply isn't enough time to do so. There's also a substantial amount of variation in how the tones are pronounced in different regions around the country, and in Thai songs the tones take a distant second place behind the tune, but none of it causes any real communication difficulties as the context makes the meaning clear.

Really the only way to learn to speak the tones is plenty of interaction with native speakers. Although it takes practice, they can be learnt like any other aspect of the language and it's very possible to get to grips with them, even for native speakers of non-tonal languages. A way to practice the tones is saying the same syllable with each of the 5 different tones:

Tone Examples

กา  gaa	มาย  maai	นา  naa	ณ
ก่า  gàa	หม่าย 	หน้า 	น
ก้า  gâa	ม้าย  mâai	น่า  nâa	น
ก๊า  gáa	ม้าย  máai	น่า  náa	ณ
ก๋า  gǎa	หม่าย  mǎai	หน้า  nǎa	น

Or the well known tongue twister that plays on the differences in the tones.

New wood doesn't burn, does it ?

ไม้ใหม่ ไม่ไหม้ไหม *mái mài mâi mâi mǎi*

If you struggle with this, you can take comfort in the fact that these are just practice exercises and in normal speech there is rarely a need to differentiate the tones as clearly as this.

A couple of other points about the tones:

It's important to speak confidently. Although speaking hesitantly is natural for a language learner, it can easily interfere with the tones. In addition, hesitant speech is usually slower, and speaking slowly means you must pronounce the tones more clearly as you have more time to do so. In averagely fast normal speech, there is less time to differentiate between the tones and so any tone errors are less noticeable.

Be careful that you don't let your natural intonation interfere with pronouncing the tones. For instance an English speaker asking a question like "You play guitar, don't you ?" will likely use intonation on the last word, either falling intonation (showing doubt) or rising intonation (showing more certainty). This is itself also a similar kind of intonation, but in a way that doesn't affect the tone the syllable is pronounced with. That is unlikely to be the case for a foreigner who inadvertently carries over their natural intonation when speaking Thai though, and so to speak the tones clearly you need to try and avoid doing so. Unfortunately, as it comes so naturally it can prove to be quite a difficult habit to shake!

If you do find you're not being easily understood by Thais, there are [other non-tonal difficulties](#)

that Thai learners face too. You might find those easier to deal with, and doing so will make your pronunciation much improved regardless of how you do with the tones.

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This article is written from the point of a view of a native English speaker. Speakers of other languages may find some of the points below don't apply and/or they will have pronunciation difficulties in other areas where Thai differs from their native language.

Tones

These are covered in on the [tones page](#).

Unreleased Final Consonants

The final consonant of a Thai syllable is always what's known phonetically as an "unreleased" sound . The easiest way to see what this means in practice is with an example: try putting your hand in front of your mouth, and slowly and clearly say the word "out". As you complete the "t" sound, you should be able to feel a puff of air coming out - this is a "released" sound. Try saying "out" again but this time stop stop saying the "t" sound at the point your lips are closed and just before you release the puff of air - this is an "unreleased" sound. Another example of this is when you say the word "outcome" quickly, in which the "t" of "out" is unreleased.

Thai words that differ only in their final (unreleased) consonant can sound very similar to English speakers, though there is a small but distinct difference between them. This is all that is needed in Thai, so be careful you don't inadvertently "over pronounce" them by releasing the final consonant. You can improve your Thai pronunciation by practicing some words with unreleased final consonants, and making sure no puffs of air coming out when speaking them.

Examples

 รັก rák

 รັบ ráp

 รັด rát

 เล็ก lék

 เด็ก dèk

 เสรีจ sèt

 นั้บ náp

 นั้ด nát

 หนั้ก nàk

 รึ้บ rêep

 จึ้บ jèep

 อึ้ก èek

 จาก *jàak*

 มาก *mâak*

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 คัด *kít*

 นิด *nít*

 กิจ *gít*

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Difficult Consonants

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'Tor Tao' And 'Por Pla'

ต dt is an sound halfway between ด d and ท t , ป bp is a mid-way sound between บ b and พ p , and both are sounds unfamiliar to English speakers.

บ b is the same as the English "b", as in "beer", "brick" etc.

พ p is an **aspirated** "p" sound. Being aspirated means its pronounced with a puff of air, and you can feel this if you put your hand in front of your mouth while saying words like "pond", "put" or "push". English words beginning with "p" are aspirated too, so this should letter pose no problem for an English speaker.

ป bp is the more difficult one, as it's an **unaspirated** (i.e. without a puff of air when you say it) "p" sound. There is an equivalent to this found in English in some words where "p" is the second letter; for instance the "p" sounds in "spot", "spook" and "speak" are unaspirated. There are no English words that begin with this sound though, and so it takes a bit of practice to get right.

There is a difference in lip pressure between the aspirated "p" sound, where your lips only touch together lightly, and the unaspirated "p" where they are tense and then "pop open". You can notice this "popping open" in word like "spot" where your lips close together after the "s" sound and then "pop open" to produce the unaspirated "p" sound. This gives a 'harsher' sound than an unaspirated "pot" where your lips only come together gently. When you practice saying words when an unaspirated "p", try and make sure you have this "popping open" as it's the key to getting the sound right.

 บ้า bâa

 บี bee

 ป่า bpàa

 บี bpee


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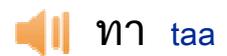
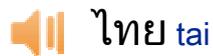
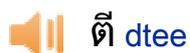
The differences between ด / ต / ท are very similar:

ด **d** is the same sound as the English "d", as in "drink", "dot" etc.

ท **p** is an aspirated "t" sound as in English words beginning with "t", like "top" or "train". As such, it's easy to pronounce for an English speaker.

ต **dt** is an unaspirated "t" sound. This is found in English in some words where "t" is the second letter, for instance the "t" sounds in "stop", "stab" are unaspirated like the Thai ต **dt**.

Some example Thai words to practice with are shown below, trying saying each of them and making sure they are clearly distinguishable:



'Ngor Ngoo'

The ง **ng** consonant is a difficult sound for English speakers, as unlike in English it can appear at the start of a word in Thai. It's important to master this sound, as it appears in a number of very common words in Thai, including งาน **ngaan** ("work") and เงิน **ngern** ("money").

If you're having trouble with it, a way of practicing is by repeating a word like "singing" or "ringing" several times and then dropping the letters before "ng", e.g. "singing singing singing nging". Once you can pronounce it that way, then try pronouncing "nging" in isolation, and then alternating between "nging" and "ning". If you can do that then other words beginning with "ng" shouldn't be much more difficult.

To practice, try saying the examples below and clearly distinguishing the **ng** word from a similar word with a **n** sound.

Examples



Examples

[Show Related Articles](#) **งั้น** ngán **นั่น** nán **งาม** ngaam **นาม** naam **เหงา** ngăo **หนาว** năao **งง** ngong **น้อง** nóng **งៃ** ngai **ไน** nai **ง้าย** ngâai **นาย** naai

An additional challenge is when there are two consecutive syllables beginning with ง :

หงุดหงิด

ngút-ngìt

งอแง

ngor ngae

จิ้งเง่า

ngêe-ngâo

งงวย

ngong-nguay

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'R' and 'L'

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'Ror Reua' and 'Lor Ling'

ร r and ล l are theoretically different sounds in Thai, but in everyday speech ร is very commonly also spoken as " l ". This is an informal and easier way of speaking, though it's somewhat 'lazy' as the correct pronunciation for ร is a trilled 'r' sound similar to Spanish. You can hear this when watching/listening to the news in Thai, where the presenters always speak in the formal correct fashion. Not all Thais can easily reproduce this trilled 'r' though, which is one of the reasons for the pervasiveness of ร being pronounced as l . It's also partly a geographical issue, as Thais from North and North-Eastern Thailand will rarely trill their ร while those from Southern Thailand regularly do so.

Speaking with trilled 'r's in an everyday situation, although technically correct, can potentially sound exaggeratedly formal and so you need to judge how to speak depending on the situation. By-and-large you can get by with saying ร as l like the majority of Thais, though you should clearly say r in a more formal situation or if the person you're talking to is correctly pronouncing their ร 's.

A common word many foreigners in Thailand come across that's affected by this issue is ฟรั่ง , technically a trilled fà-ràng but usually pronounced as fà-làng . The following are examples of words which differ only in ร / ล . The majority of Thais would usually pronounce them identically, though to clearly differentiate them you should trill the ร r sound

โรค rōhk

โลก lôhk

ร้าน ráan

ล้าน láan

 ราว raao

 ลาว laao

 หรอก ròk

 หลอก lòk

Dropping 'R' and 'L' Sounds

An additional issue affecting **ร** r and **ล** l is that they are often only pronounced very lightly or not pronounced at all when they are the second letter in a [consonant cluster](#). As with above issue, this is a very widespread though technically incorrect practice that is fine for everyday speech but inappropriate for more formal situations.

You may find that Thais helping you learn want to teach you what is formally correct, and so effectively hold you to a higher standard than they would another native speaker. This means you may find yourself being corrected on your pronunciation if you pronounce **ร** as l and/or drop **ร** /**ล** when they're in a consonant cluster, despite the fact the large majority of the population does so all the time in normal speech (very likely including the person correcting you!)

The following are examples of words which differ only in whether the **ร** or **ล** in the consonant cluster is dropped. The majority of Thais would pronounce them identically in normal speech, though will not usually drop the **ร** /**ล** when pronouncing the word in isolation.

ครับ [kráp](#)

คับ [káp](#)

 เปลา [bplào](#)

 เป่า [bpào](#)

กลาง [glaang](#)

กาง [gaang](#)

 ปลา [bplaa](#)

 ป่า [bpaá](#)

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