A simple transliteration of Thai

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Abstract

Thai script can be very intimidating for foreigners, and the official transliteration gives little help in correct pronunciation. Although there are also different IPA-like systems, these rely on symbols that cannot be typed without special software. Here we propose a new, simple scheme suitable for everyday use, which does not make any compromises in the description of Thai sounds.

Our system is introduced in the form of a tutorial to Thai phonology, so it can be used by learners just getting to know the language.

1 Anatomy of the Thai syllable

Thai is an isolating language where a large percentage of words is made up of a single syllable. A syllable is composed of the following parts:

head consonant (cluster) + vowel + (optional) tail consonant.

The syllable, as a whole, also has a *tone*. In the following we will look at these in detail.

2 Head consonants

Thai stop sounds are usually grouped by place of articulation, and can be voiceless without aspiration, voiceless and aspirated, or voiced.[1] Except for one case, a nasal version also occurs.

	Voiceless	Aspirated	Voiced	Nasal
Velar (back at the throat)	*k*	*kh*	-	*ng*
Palatal (near the palate)	*c*	*ch*	-	-
Alveolar (near the teeth)	*t*	*th*	*d*	*n*
Labial (with the lips)	*p*	*ph*	*b*	*m*

The base stops *k/c/t/p* are pronounced like k/ch/t/p in English, but without aspiration; *kh/ch/th/ph* are the same, just aspirated.[2] The sounds of *d/b/n/m* are as in English, while *ng* has the sound as in the word 'sing', but note that in Thai it can be at the beginning of a word.

[1] Aspiration means that the consonant is pronounced with a puff of air, like in English, but even more so. This can be approximated by saying a *h* sound right after the consonant.

[2] More precisely *c/ch* is alveo-palatal, so produced closer to the teeth. For most speakers, *c* is also partly voiced, sounding somewhat like ds in 'lads'.

There is one other stop, the *glottal stop*, marked by an apostrophe (*'*), which is a sudden blocking of air as in the middle of the Cockney pronunciation of 'bottle'.

The rest of the consonants (*f, y, r, l, w, s, h*) are as in English. Note that in casual speech *r* is often pronounced as *l*.

Consonant clusters

The consonants *r*, *l* and *w* can come after some of the stops, as the following table shows (*r* often dropping in casual speech):

	r	*l*	*w*
k	*kr*	*kl*	*kw*
kh	*khr*	*khl*	*khw*
p	*pr*	*pl*	-
ph	*phr*	*phl*	-
t	*tr*	-	-

3 Tail consonants

At the end of a syllable, only some of the consonants are possible, the plosives *k/t/p*, the nasals *ng/n/m*, the approximants *y/w,* and the glottal stop (*'*). In the tail position *k/t/p* are pronounced *unreleased*, i.e., reaching the position where the air would then be released, and stops there.

4 Vowels

Vowels can be short or long, with long vowels including diphthongs. Basic vowels can be categorized by tongue position (high/mid/low and front/central/back) and lip shape (rounded or unrounded). This can be summarized neatly in a table:

	Unrounded				Rounded	
	Front		Central		Back	
	Short	Long	Short	Long	Short	Long
High	*i*	*ii*	*ue*	*ueh*	*u*	*uu*
Mid	*e*	*ee*	*oe*	*oeh*	*o*	*oo*
Low	*ae*	*aeh*	*a*	*aa*	*eo*	*eoh*

Note the use of *-h* for lengthening (not a consonant) in *aeh/euh/oeh/eoh*. This *-h* is elided before *-w/y*, since the short versions never occur, so e.g. *oeh + y* is written as *oey*.

The short and long vowel pairs have the same quality. Most of these vowels are familiar to the European reader, but *oe* and *ue* need some special attention: while these look like transcriptions of German 'ö' and 'ü', here the lips are not rounded and they are articulated further back. Also, the vowel *eo* is like *o* but more open, like the vowel in English 'not'.

There are three diphthongs: *ia*, *uea* and *ua*. (If we regard the tail consonants *-w/y* as vowels, there are much more, and also triphthongs like *-iaw* or *-ueay*.) The first sound is always pronounced longer than the second.

5 Tones

Thai has five tones, which we will mark by using a combination of lowercase and uppercase letters. We can symbolize the tones by numbering approximate pitch levels from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with 3 being the most natural pitch.

1. *may* (mid tone / 3 → 3): all lowercase
   Mid tone is a level tone in normal voice.

2. *maY* (low tone / 2 → 1): all lowercase except the last character
   Low tone starts somewhat low and descends even lower.

3. *May* (falling tone / 5 → 1): all lowercase except the first character
   Falling tone starts high and drops at the end. When two falling tones follow each other, the first one drops only slightly.

4. *MAY* (high tone / 4 → 5): all uppercase
   High tone starts a bit higher than mid tone and rises.

5. *mAY* (rising tone / 2 → 4): all uppercase except the first character
   Rising tone starts below mid tone and rises.

For one-character syllables lowercase means low tone, and uppercase means high tone, other tones do not occur. Avoiding ambiguity in two-character words is shown in the next section.

6 Omitting the glottal stop

The glottal stop is only written when it is needed to avoid ambiguity. There are only three cases:

1. When it comes after a consonant mid-word, e.g. *Luuk'EOHT*

2. When it comes after a diphthong, e.g. *Nia'* (not to be confused with the long syllable *Nia*)

3. As the head consonant of a two-character word with rising tone, like *'iI*

While we do not write it, the glottal stop is still there: in all words (seemingly) starting with a vowel or ending in a short vowel, so *Kha* is actually *Kha'*, and *aray* is *'a'ray* (although mid-word glottal stops are often not pronounced).

7 Comparison with other transliterations

Scientific notation is very similar, the differences are shown below:

ng	*'*	*ae*	*aeh*	*eo*	*eoh*	*oe*	*oeh*	*ue*	*ueh*	*uea*
ŋ	*ʔ*	*ɛ*	*ɛɛ*	*ɔ*	*ɔɔ*	*ə*	*əə*	*ɯ*	*ɯɯ*	*ɯa*

In this transliteration the glottal stop is always shown. Tones are marked by accents:

may	*maY*	*May*	*MAY*	*mAY*
may	*mày*	*mây*	*máy*	*mǎy*

The official ISO 11940-2 'simplified transcription' scheme does not differentiate between short and long vowels, and does not show the tones. The syllable-ending approximants *-w* and *-y* are transliterated as *-o* and *-i*, respectively, and *eo* is written as *o*, erasing the distinction between these two sounds, as well.

8 Example text

From Sunisa Wittayapanyanon's Japanese-language textbook *Hyougen o hirogeru chuukyuu e no tai-go* (Sanshusha, 2017):

wanNII ChookRAAY cingcing. NUEK May eohK Waa luehm krapAWtang WAY ThiinAY. teohn cA caaY ngoen Phoeng RUUtua Waa krapAWtang hAAY pay. May Naehcay Waa tham toK rUEH doon khamooy, Keohloey Riip pay Caehngkhwaam WAY phueA Daaykhuehn. pheoh wanRungKhuen tamruaT Keoh thoo maa beohK Waa coeh LAEW, Hay pay RAP Daay Thii satHAAnii tamruaT. nay krapAWtang lUEA Khaeh baTprachaachon ThawNAN. duumUEAN cA doon LUANG pay. tamruaT beohK Waa mii khon keP Daay nay ROTfay, taeH Thaw Thii cam Daay teohn Khuen ROTfay yang mii yuU. sONGsAY cA doon LUANG tHAEW satHAAnii asooK PHREO khon Khuen YOE Maak, teohnNAN May Day rawang. ngoen thuuK khamooy pay THANGmoT, taeH Maypenray. thamngaanPHIseeT sEOHNG-sAAM wan dIAWKeoh keP Daay iiK.LAE Chook dii Thii baTprachaachon May Daay thuuK aw pay Duay. MayNGAN Teong sIA veelaa pay tham. THANG thuuK khamooy THANG Teong sIA veelaa pay tham, khong RUUsueK Yaeh Maak kwaA NII.

As an alternative, tones can be marked by symbols before the syllables:

wan^nii \chook^raay cingcing. ^nuek \may _eohk \waa luehm kra/pawtang ^way \thii/nay. teohn _ca _caay ngoen \phoeng ^ruutua \waa kra/pawtang /haay pay. \may \naehcay \waa tham _tok /rueh doon khamooy, \keohloey \riip pay \caehngkhwaam ^way _phuea \daaykhuehn. pheoh wan\rung\khuen tam_ruat \keoh thoo maa _beohk \waa coeh ^laew, \hay pay ^rap \daay \thii sa/thaanii tam_ruat. nay kra/pawtang /luea \khaeh _batprachaachon \thaw^nan. duu/muean _ca doon ^luang pay. tam_ruat _beohk \waa mii khon _kep \daay nay ^rotfay, _taeh \thaw \thii cam \daay teohn \khuen ^rotfay yang mii _yuu. /song/say _ca doon ^luang /thaew sa/thaanii a_sook ^phreo khon \khuen ^yoe \maak, teohn^nan \may \day rawang. ngoen _thuuk khamooy pay ^thang_mot, _taeh \maypenray. thamngaan^phi_seet /seohng-/saam wan /diaw\keoh _kep \daay _iik. ^lae \chook dii \thii _batprachaachon \may \daay _thuuk aw pay \duay. \may^ngan \teong /sia veelaa pay tham. ^thang _thuuk khamooy ^thang \teong /sia veelaa pay tham, khong ^ruu_suek \yaeh \maak _kwaa ^nii.

Conclusion

We have introduced a simple-to-learn and simple-to-write transliteration method that exactly encodes the pronunciation of Thai; it is thus free from the drawbacks of other current systems.