

COMPARISON OF CONSONANTS AND VOWELS IN THAI AND ENGLISH



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Thai Phonology (Segmental Sounds).

The Thai language has been heavily influenced by the Indian language through culture and religion. However, most linguists feel that Thai is probably more related to Chinese because both Thai and Chinese are tonal languages. Thai is different from Indo-European languages. The alphabet is entirely different from the Roman alphabet used by many European languages and teachers of English as a second language will often find Thai students not as fluent in English as say, Spanish speaking students who have perhaps studied English for a comparable period of time and whose alphabet is the same.

Before moving on to compare segmental features of the sound system of Thai and English, the sound system of Thai will be briefly described first.

Thai Contoids (Consonants).

There are 20 Thai consonants, some of which are different from English. The place and manner of the articulation of Thai consonants is shown in the chart.

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THAI CONSONANTS									
Manner of Articulation			Place of Articulation	Lips	Lower Lip & Teeth	Tongue Blade & Teeth Ridge	Middle of Tongue & Hard Palate	Back of Tongue & Soft Palate	Glottis
STOPS	aspirated	ว	p ^h			t ^h		k ^h	
	unaspirated	ว	[p]			[t]		[k]	
	unaspirated	vd	b			d			
AFFRICATES	aspirated	ว				tʃ ^h			
	unaspirated	ว				[tʃ]			
FRICATIVES					f	s		r	h
LATERALS						l			
NASALS					m		n	ŋ	
SEMI-VOWELS					w			j	

Sounds in boxes are not phonemic in English

Thai Stops

- there are 8 stops. These are as follows:

p^h (พ, ป, ฝ), p (บ), b (ป)
 t^h (ท, ถ, ฐ, ฒ, ฑ, ฒ), t (ด, ฏ)
 k^h (ค, ฆ, ฅ, ฌ, ฌ)
k (ก)
d (ด, ฎ)

Thai Affricates

- there are 2 affricates

c^h (ฉ) (ช, ฌ, ฌ)
c (จ) (จ)

Thai Fricatives

- there are 4 fricatives

f (ฟ , ฟ)
 s (ส , ซ , ศ , ษ)
 h (ฮ , ห)
 r (ร)

Thai laterals

- Only 1 lateral exists

l (ล , ฬ)

Thai nasal

- there are 3 nasals

m (ม)
 n (น , ณ)
 η (ง)

Thai Semi-Vowels

- there are 2 semi-vowels

Some consonants, for example, /S/ have more than one alphabetical form. Those forms are used to differentiate the meaning in writing. Besides the differences in form, they are also different in tone. For example,

consonant /kh/ has 5 forms-

Two of them are high tones i. e. $\text{ข} /kh^v/$, $\text{ค} /kh^v/$

Thai Vowels

Thai vowels can be divided into short and long sounds. There are 18 monothongs. The classification of Thai vowels differs between linguists in the description of diphthongs. This means that certain vowels described as diphthongs by one linguist have been classified as monothongs by another.

eg. /au/ or /aw/ = 1 - ๓

The Thai vowels are shown in the chart

Thai monothongs - There are 18 monothongs with short and long versions.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i, i: (ɨ, ɤ)	ɨ̌, ɨ̌: (ɤ̌, ɤ̌)	u, u: (ɯ, ɯ)
Mid	e, e: (ɛ̌, ɛ̌)	ə, ə: (ɨ̌, ɨ̌)	o, o: (ɤ̌, ɤ̌)
Low	ɛ, ɛ: (ɨ̌, ɨ̌)	ə, ə: (ɨ̌, ɨ̌)	ɔ, ɔ: (ɤ̌, ɤ̌)

Thai Diphthongs - There are 5 diphthongs

ai ɨ̌, ɨ̌: - ɤ̌
(au) au ɤ̌ - ɤ̌
ɨ̌ə ɨ̌ - ɤ̌
ɨ̌ə ɨ̌ - ɤ̌
ua ɨ̌ - ɤ̌

The vowel length is the important phonemic feature in Thai. The differences between short and long sounds, for example /i/ and /i:/ will lead to differences in meaning (although tone differences also play a part).

Meaning

/ ɨ̌'k /

to arise

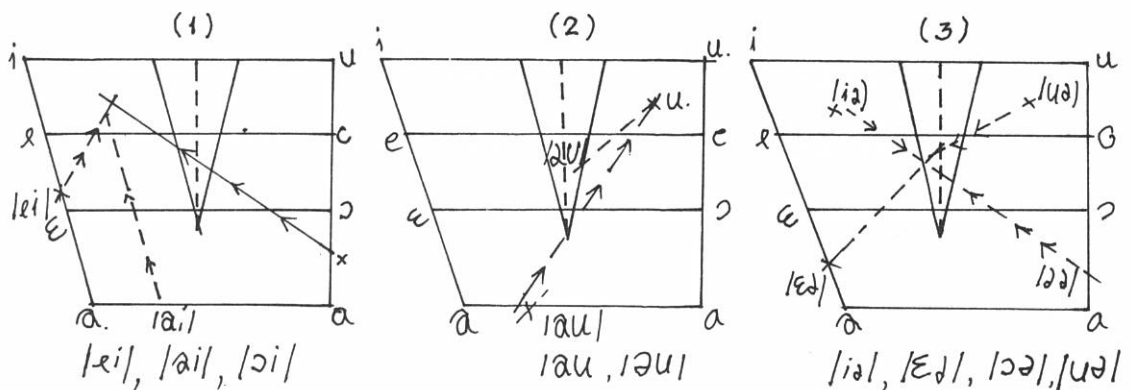
/ ɨ̌^:k /

child (daughter or son)

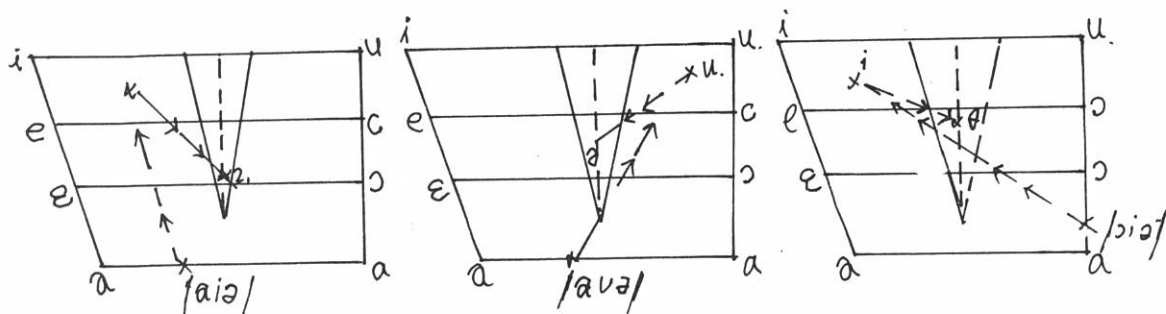
ENGLISH CONSONANTS								
Manner of Articulation	Place of Articulation	Lips	Lower Lips & Teeth	Tip of Tongue & Teeth	Tip or Blade of Tongue & Teeth Ridge	Blade of Tongue Teeth Ridge	Middle of Front of Tongue & Hard Palate	Back of Tongue & Hard Palate
STOPS	vl	p			t			k
	vd	b			d			g
AFFRICATES	vl				tʃ ^h			
	vd				dʒ			
FRICATIVES	vl		f	θ	s	ʃ		h
	vd		v	ʒ	z	ʒ	r	
LATERALS					l			
NASALS		m			n			ŋ
SEMI-VOWELS		w					j	

Sounds in boxes are not phonemic in Thai.

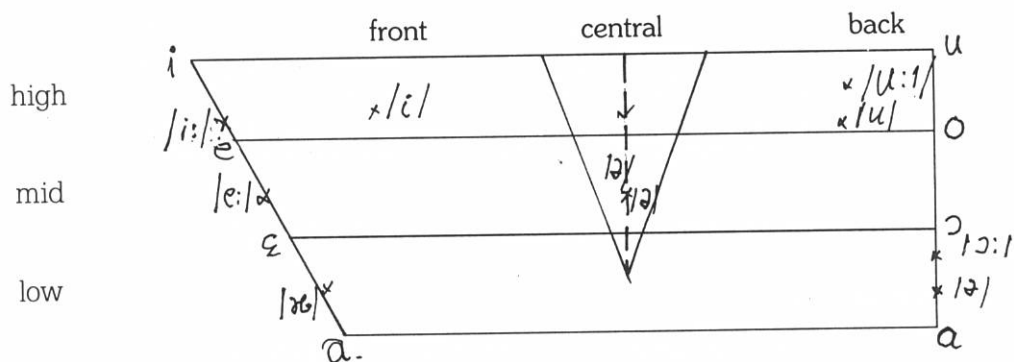
English Diphthongs



English Triphthongs



English Vowels



English Triphthongs

aɪə
aʊə
ɔɪə

English Diphthongs

aɪ
eɪ
aʊ
əʊ
ɪə
ɛə
ɔɪ
ɔə
ʊə

	ALLO	IPA			
1	í:	í:	í:	free	trí:
2	í	í	í	pin	pín
3	e	e	e	pen	pén
4	æ	æ	æ	pan	pæn
5	a:	a:	a:	barn	ba:n
6	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	box	bɔks
7	ɔ:	ɔ:	ɔ:	born	bɔ:n
8	u	u	u	put	put
9	u:	u:	u:	pool	pu:l
10	ʌ	ʌ	ʌ	putt	pʌt
11	ə:	ə:	ə:	bird	bə:d
12	ə	ə	ə	above	əbʌv

Comparison of Consonants Vowels Between Thai & English.

Consonants

It is quickly apparent, for example, that there are many more fricatives in English than in Thai. Conversely, it is obvious that there are three stop contrasts in Thai (voiceless aspirated, voiceless unaspirated, and voiced unaspirated). It seems probable that an English speaker would have difficulty in learning a three-way contrast in the production and recognition of stops in Thai. In the same way, it is obvious that a Thai speaker would have trouble mastering the contrast between /f/ and /v/ since Thai has only the voiceless fricative /f/.

Thai does not have /v/, /z/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/ sounds
whereas

English does not have unaspirated /p/, /t/, /k/ and /tʃ/

Thus, it is really apparent that there are two kinds of segmental features which are phonemic in English but not in Thai:

- (1) gaps in the oppositions between some Thai features, and
- (2) features which are absent in Thai because neither member of the opposition exists. The following feature illustrates the first situation:
 - Thai has the voiceless labio - dental fricative /f/ but not the voiced counterpart as in English /v/,
 - Thai has the voiceless alveolar /s/ but not the voiced counterpart as in English /z/.
 - Thai has both /l/ and /r/ , but in casual speech, most Thai speakers blur the distinction between /l/ and /r/. and there is a gap in the opposition.

/f/ vs. /v/

Most Thai speakers have a tendency to confuse English /v/ and /w/ in attempting to pronounce the voiced counterpart of English /f/.

eg. **vane** /weyn/ (sounds like wane)
 vine /wayn/ (sounds like wine)

Furthermore, there is no phonemic opposition between voiced and voiceless sounds in final position in Thai. The pronunciation and recognition of English /v/ is even more difficult for Thai speakers in final position.

eg. **safe** vs **save**, **leaf** vs **leave**

/l/ vs /z/

Another English consonant which is a gap in the Thai system is the sound /z/.

eg. **peace** vs **peas** and **cease** vs **seize**

/l/ vs /r/

In casual speech /l/ and /r/ are pronounced as /l/ by the majority of Thai speakers. However, it does seem true that Thai speakers who have had some

degree of formal education tend to make a consistent distinction between these two sounds.

Because these two sounds, /l/ and /r/ never occur in final position, the loan words **basketball** **football** are pronounced

in Thai as /futb n/ and /basketb n/.

(the Thai letters representing /l/ and /r/ are always pronounced /n/ in final position).

/s/ vs /ซ/ , and /θ/ vs /ช/

Another group of consonants that are phonemic in English but not in Thai are those sounds for which Thai has no counterpart in opposition, namely the sound : /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ʒ/.

Vowels

From the vowel charts, English has more diphthongs than Thai. Thai has a high central monothong i.e. /ɨ/, /ɪ/ whereas this does not exist in English. Diphthongs /jə/ exist in Thai but not in English. And there is no triphthong in Thai. The vowel length and not vowel quality is the important phonemic feature in Thai.

In English, the situation is the reverse, that is, the difference in vowel quality is phonemic and the difference in length is phonetic.

eg.

Thai Vowels (showing that length is phonemic)	
Short Vowels	Long Vowels
/i/ ----> /si/ ----> $\frac{\text{meaning}}{\text{emphasis}}$	/i:/ ----> /si:/ ----> $\frac{\text{meaning}}{\text{rib}}$
/u/ ----> /luːk/ ----> to arise	/u:/ ----> /luːk/ ----> child (son, daughter)

English Vowels (showing that length is phonemic)	
Short Vowels (preceding voiceless consonants)	Long Vowels (preceding voiced consonants)
/i/ ----> /mit/ ----> <i>meaning</i> <i>mitt</i>	/i:/ ----> /mi: d/ ----> <i>meaning</i> <i>mid</i>
/u/ ----> /ut/ ----> <i>shoot</i>	/u:/ ----> /u: d/ ----> <i>should</i>

Furthermore, the long vowels in Thai are not glides as in English.

eg. **English**

/bi/ ----->	bee ----->	ij
/li: d/ ----->	lead ----->	ej

Thai

	<i>meaning</i>	
/si:/ ----->	colour	no glide
/ke:/ ----->	not straight	from /i:/ to /j/

English uses 26 letters to transcribe the 35 consonants and vowels whereas Thai uses about 64 (consonants and vowels). Where as an English speaker has more sounds in his language than symbols to represent them, the Thai speaker has more symbols in his writing system than there are sounds in this language. The English system then, must utilise different combinations of letters to represent sounds.

Different Combinations

to
toe
bow
bought

The same Letter or Combination

can
city
thin
this

In Thai, the situation is almost exactly the reverse; since there are many more letters than sounds, there are many sounds which can be represented by several letters. For example, the sound /ph/ and /kh/ can each be represented by three different letters, and the sound /th/ can be represented by six different letters. For vowels, there is almost a one for one correspondence in the spelling of vowels in Thai.

In other words, if a Thai hears the vowel /i/, he can transcribe it on paper in only one way; he can use only one symbol to represent that sound. The spelling of English consonants is fairly consistent. However, there are at least 13 different ways the vowel /i/ can be spelled in English

be	receive	mosquito	larvae
bee	party	people	mediaeval
beat	key	phoenix	quay

Final Consonants

Thai has only six final consonants :

three stops /p/ , /t/ and /k/ and three nasals /m/ , /n/ , and /ŋ/ whereas English has more final consonants.

Thai contains a great deal of loan words from Indic languages. For example, Indic loan words ending in /s/ are spelled with the final letter 's' in Thai. These words are always pronounced with the six Thai finals, however, so that words ending with the letter **s** are actually pronounced with a final /t/ in Thai. Words ending with the Thai letter **ร** or **ล** are pronounced with a final /n/, since /r/ and /l/ never occur finally in Thai. As already mentioned, the English loan word **ball** is pronounced /bɔːn/ in Thai. Many Thai speakers have a tendency then to pronounce English words as if they conformed to the Thai system of final consonants, regardless of which final letter the English word is actually spelled with.

Thus **house** might be pronounced /haut/.



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