



# Indian Influences on the Thai Language

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*Scene from the Ramakien (Thai Ramayana) at Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Bangkok, c.1800*

**T**HIS IS JUST an informal collection of some interesting examples of Indian influences on the Thai language that I have stumbled upon by living in Thailand.

## **Origin and Basic Structure**

Nobody knows for sure where the Thai people originally came from. One recent theory says they have always been in Thailand; an older theory says they came from southern China. To my untutored ear, their language sounds like a southern Chinese dialect. Like Chinese, it is a tonal language, and may originally have been monosyllabic. Thailand became a Theravada Buddhist country very early on. Its language has been strongly influenced by Sanskrit and Pali as well as regional languages like Mon and Khmer. The situation may be slightly analogous to English,

which started off as a Germanic language but later received heavy influxes from Latin and French.

The Indian influence is most obvious in the written Thai language. The spoken language changes the pronunciation of Indian-derived words to suit the Thai tongue, which has difficulty managing consonant clusters. It chops off final clusters and sometimes adds a vowel to break up others. In doing so it often makes the Indian derivation almost unrecognizable.

For instance, there is a road near my home whose name is sometimes transliterated as Srinagarindra, but is pronounced Si-nakaran; the Dharmachakra is called a Thammachak; and the name Vishnu is often pronounced Wissanu. This tendency to change the pronunciation of Indian words becomes clear when we look at the Thai pronunciation of names from the Indian classics.

The Thai version of the Ramayana is called the *Ramakien*. It is taught in Thai schools and every Thai schoolchild is familiar with the names of the main characters. However, the pronunciation changes: Dasaratha becomes Tossarot, Kaikeyi becomes Kaiyakesee, and Ravana becomes Tossakan. How do we get Tossakan from Ravana? Actually Tossakan comes from Dasakanta, 'ten-necked'. Some names do not change much: Rama becomes Phra Ram, Phra being an honorific title; Sita is Nang (Lady) Sida; and Hanuman is still Hanuman; but Lakshmana's name gets truncated to Phra Lak. In the Mahabharata Yudhisthira becomes Yutissatera; Dhritarashtra becomes Taliterat; Duryodhana becomes Turayot; Krishna becomes Kissana; and Arjuna becomes Orachoon.

Such changes also occur in the Thai names for the Vedic deities, whom Theravada Buddhism honours with the title Thewadaa—Sanskrit *devata*. Brahma becomes Phra Phrom, pronounced Prah Proam; Lord Vishnu becomes Phra Wissanu; Shiva becomes Phra Siwa; and Ganesha becomes Phra Pi-Ka-Net. Phra is a high honorific title given to deities, monks, eminent personages, Buddha images, temples, and even amulets. The wide range of usages makes it impossible to translate Phra into a single English word, although in many cases 'revered' or 'venerated' might come close. Despite the dissimilarity, the word *phra* is derived from the Sanskrit *vara*, meaning excellent.

The Indian influence is striking when we turn to terms relating to the monarchy. All the kings of the current Chakri dynasty have had Rama as their official name. The present sovereign, who is highly revered by his people, is the ninth of his line: His Majesty King Rama IX, or Phra Ram Gaew in Thai. His Majesty's given name is transliterated as Bhumibol or Bhumibalo, it means 'strength of the land' and is pronounced Poomipon. He has a retinue of court brahmanas who

advise him. One of the titles of his son and heir is Rachakumarn—Rajakumara; and his ministers have the title Rachamontri—Rajamantri.

Coming to Buddhism one of the most famous Thai monks of recent times was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. His name in Thai was written as Phra Phutthathat and pronounced Prah Poota-that. Lord Buddha's title is written as Phra Phuttha Chao and pronounced Prah Poota Jow. *Phrachao* is the Thai word for 'the Lord' and is used as the name of the Christian God.

We also find the Indian influence in many Thai place names. Thailand's gigantic new airport is named Suvarnabhumi, the name the Indians gave to Southeast Asia in ancient times. Many foreign tourists have flown into Bangkok thinking they would be landing at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, only to discover to their bewilderment that everybody calls it Suwannapoom. The names of some Thai cities begin or end with *huri*, the Thai rendering of *pura*: Buriram, Petchaburi, Saraburi, Suphanburi, Chonburi, and so on. Ratchaburi is obviously related to Rajpur; Singburi means 'lion city', and Kanchanaburi means 'golden city'. There is a town named Si Racha, derived from Sri Raja; and Ayutthaya, the old capital, was intentionally named after Ayodhya. Sometimes the derivation is less obvious, as with Nakhon Si Thammarat, which comes from Nagara Sri Dharmaraja, and Nakhon Sawan, derived from Nagara Swarga. Sometimes the connection is indecipherable, as with the north-central Thai city of Phitsanulok; believe it or not, it means Vishnu-loka.

In the southern part of Bangkok there is a neighbourhood called Pahurat, populated mainly by Thais of Indian descent. I used to teach English at Bangkok's Thammasat University, and I never gave the name Pahurat a thought until one of my students gave a speech on India. 'The Indians call their country Pahurat,' she informed

*The kidnapping of Sida, from the Ramakien; centre left: Tossakan disguised as Ruesi [Rishi] Sutham woos Sida; centre right: Tossakan turns back into his normal aspect and makes off with Lady Sida; right: Marees [Marichi] calls out in Phra Ram's voice to entice Phra Lak out of the ashrama so Tossakan can kidnap Sida; bottom right: Phra Ram attempts to catch the golden deer (Marees in shape shifting), but suspects something bad and shoots the deer, killing Marees, who with his dying gasps calls out in Phra Ram's voice to trick Phra Lak*



the class. I resolved to ask her, during the question period that followed each speech, where she had unearthed from this spurious bit of information. Then it hit me: Pahurat = Bharat.

The Indian influence also occurs in personal names. I used to have female students with names like Sawitree, Savitri; Wassana, Vasana; Warunee, Varuni; Wanida, Vanita; Bussaba, Pushpa; Supatra, Subhadra; and Suchada, Sujata. Male students might be named Anand, Arun, Wasant, Kaset, Kshatriya; Wichai, Vijaya; or Dusit, Tushita, one of the Buddhist heavens.

Even the standard Thai greeting comes from India. Thais greet each other the same way Indians do, with palms pressed together and raised in a prayer-like gesture. In Thailand this gesture is called a *wai*. Instead of saying ‘namaste’ or ‘namaskara’ Thais say ‘sa-wa-dee’, usually transliterated *sawasdee*; it is used for both ‘hello’ and ‘good-bye’, and comes from the Sanskrit word *svasti*. Thais do sometimes say ‘namaskara’, pronounced ‘na-ma-sa-kan’, but only when greeting monks.

While the Indian influence is most obvious in formal language and expressions relating to classical literature, religion, and government, it is also seen in some of the most common Thai words. The word for ‘food’ is pronounced ‘ah-hahn’, but is spelled *ahara*. We also have a word pronounced ‘khao’, but it does not mean ‘eat’, instead it means ‘rice’.

When I first arrived, I found that the word for a university teacher is pronounced ‘ah-jahn’, usually transliterated as *ajarn*. That is the title I was addressed by, and it usually translates as ‘professor’. But what was my amazement, some time later, to discover that it is written as ‘acharya’—for someone like me to presume or claim the title of acharya seemed an act of unpardonable hubris. The word for an elementary or high school teacher is almost as exalted. It is pronounced ‘kru’ and is derived from guru. And finally, there is a building in Bangkok with a sign in English letters identifying it as: Kuru Sapha, Guru Sabha.

Interesting influence indeed!

PB