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Overview of the Thai Language

The Thai language, according to many linguists, is part of the Tai language family.   The languages in this family are said to be derived from a proto-Tai language which is grouped into the much larger Austro-Tai language family.

The vast majority of Thai words are monosyllabic.   While there are some polysyllabic words which cannot be broken down into monosyllabic components, especially words that have been borrowed from Pali, Sanskrit, English, and other languages, the language is based on single syllable words.

While most words are monosyllabic, many complex words are formed by combining two monosyllabic words. For example, the word **khaow¡´-jai** (to understand) is a combination of the verb **khaow¡`**, which means to enter, and **jai**, which can be roughly translated as heart, spirit, or mind. Nouns, verbs, and adjectives are frequently combined in the creation of polysyllabic words.

The basic syllable can be broken down to four parts.   First, all syllables have an initial consonant (although this may be silent, it is always written).   Second is a vowel of which there are 26 phonemic variations in Thai.   Third is the optional final consonant. And fourth is the tone which can be either high, low, rising, falling, or mid.

Because Thai is a tonal language, inflection (like the rising voice an English speaker might use to indicate he is asking a question) is not used. Instead mood, tense, questions, negation, and other forms of speech are constructed by adding certain words to sentences. The word **māi!´**, for example, serves the same purpose as a question mark in written English.

Example:

khaow¡`-jai	to understand
khaowᵢ-jai` māi!´	Do you understand?

While gendered words are very frequently used in the Romance languages, they are virtually absent in Thai. Instead, the English speaker will notice that the emphasis falls on terms of respect accorded to people of differing ranks. While a full description of rank is beyond the scope of this program, basic words such as **krub`** or **kaᵢ** (spoken by men or women respectively), added to the end of a sentence, indicate respect for the person whom you are addressing.

Nouns

A noun, as in English, is a word that names a person, place, thing, or idea.   Unlike English, however, nouns can be constructed out of multiple words which are combined to form complex nouns.

Simple nouns:

thai (Thai)

pernֽ (friend)

hóng (room)

Complex nouns:

rong (building) + **ram** (to spend the night) = **rong ram** (hotel)

fai (fire) + **faˊ** (sky) = **fayfaˊ** (electricity)

See Also:
   Gender and Agreement
   Number and Agreement

Gender and Agreement

There are no gender specific nouns in Thai that do not refer to either human beings or animals. All nouns that refer to inanimate objects, places, things, or ideas are gender neutral.

Number and Agreement

Nouns in Thai do not have singular and plural forms.   Instead the number of items is derived from either the context of the sentence or a word or number indicating plurality.   Verbs, like nouns, also do not have specific singular or plural conjugations.

Numbers in Thai are always followed by a classifier.   The classifier indicates the category to which the object that has been counted belongs.

Some examples are:

poo¡ ying! sarm! khòn	three women (women three people)
tooah! song! bai	two tickets
chang´ jed` chuak¡	seven elephants

Some common classifiers are:

khon (people)
tooah (bodies, things with arms and legs such as tables, chairs, shirts, animals, etc.)
bai (leaves, containers, tickets)
khoo¡ (pairs of things)
met´ (pills, seeds, small things)
ān (unclassified things)
khan (cars, spoons, umbrellas, bicycles)
gawn¡ (lumps of sugar, stones, rocks)
ging` (branches of trees, sub-divisions of an organization, antlers)
chabap` (manuscripts, documents, letters, newspapers)
chuak¡ (tame elephants)
song (envelopes, packs (e.g. cigarettes))
mooan˙ (cigars, cigarettes, rolled things)
sen¡ (head hairs, stings, ropes, lines)
jān (plates of food)
ong (holy personages, kings, princes and princesses, statues of the Buddha)

See Also

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that stands for a previously mentioned (or understood) noun.   The noun is called the **antecedent** of the pronoun.

In the sentence:
    The house was badly damaged when **it** was hit by the hurricane.
the pronoun it refers back to the noun **house** (the antecedent).

Pronouns can also be used as the subject of a verb as in the sentence:
    She isn't here.

or the object of a verb:
    John saw **her** in the street.

In English, pronouns are often shorter than the nouns to which they refer. Because Thai is monosyllabic, the need to substitute shorter words is less important. The distinction between pronouns and nouns, therefore, is less clear. For example, the noun **pāwj**, which is Thai for father, can be used as a pronoun meaning **I**, by a father speaking to a child, **you**, for a child speaking to a father, and **him** for someone speaking about a father. The same is true for other kinship terms and names. Unlike English, people frequently refer to themselves by nicknames or kinship relation in conversation. Pronouns are often omitted when the subject of the sentence is understood.

The pronoun **I** has several varieties in Thai:

pȯrm!	for males
dichan´	for females
khajpajawj	very formal

Other common pronouns are:

khaow!	a general term for he, she, or they
khȕn	you
raow	we
mān	it

Kinship terms, which are often used as pronouns, need not refer to biological kin. The term **lung** (older brother of either parent) can be used to respectfully refer to any man of one's parents' generation.

Other kinship terms, which may be used as nouns or pronouns, are as follows:

Paw	Father
Mea	Mother
pee	Older sibling
nawng`	Younger sibling
pūu`	Paternal grandfather
ya	Paternal grandmother
ta	Maternal grandfather
yay	Maternal grandmother
lúng	Uncle (elder brother of either parent)
pāi	Aunt (elder sister of either parent)
nā´	younger brother or sister of mother
āh	younger brother or sister of father
lọok	Child

Adjectives

An adjective is a word that is used to modify a noun.   Descriptive adjectives usually follow the nouns that they modify.   Demonstrative adjectives often follow classifiers.   Thai words that act as adjectives or adverbs are actually verbs.

Some examples of descriptive adjectives are:

raew	fast
dee	good
aroy`	delicious

Simple sentences with verbs might be:

rót reaw	The car is fast.
khòn dee	The person is good.
ahan! aroy`	The food is delicious.

As adjectives, these verbs would be:

rót´ reaw māi̧ dee	Fast cars are not good.
khòn dee māi̧ po̧odḩ maķ	A good person doesn't talk much.
ahan! aróy` māi̧ mee teȩ ran´ ahan! nee´	There is no delicious food at this restaurant.

Demonstrative adjectives, which follow classifiers, are words like:

nee´	here
nan´	there
noen´	(further) over there

Some examples are:

rót khan nee´	this car
khòn nan´	that person
ahan! j̄an noen´	that plate of food (over there)

See Also:

Adverbs

An adverb is a word that modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb.   Like Thai adjectives, words that function as adverbs are usually verbs. They differ from adjectives only in that they precede verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs rather than nouns.

Examples:

ròt´ wing¡ raew

khòn pood¡ dee

āhan! gin aroy`

See Also:
  Adjectives

Verb Conjugations: Tense and Mood

Thai has no verb conjugations.   The same verb is used with proper nouns, pronouns, singular or plural subjects.   Furthermore, the verb does not change form in different tenses such as past, present or future.

Tenses are created by adding words that indicate the flow of time to a sentence.   Some of the most common tense words are as follows:

future	ja´ + verb	ja´ gin	I will eat
past	muahᵢ +subject+verb	muahᵢ chan! gin	when I ate
past	daiᵢ + verb	dāi` gin	I did eat
past perfect	verb + laew´	gin laewē	I ate already
continuous	gamlang + verb	gamlang gin	I am eating

Other words used to indicate tense are:

khoiy + verb	present perfect (**ever**)	khoiy hen! chang´	I have seen an elephant
yang + verb	past perfect (**yet**)	yang māiᵢ dāiᵢ gin	I have not eaten yet
phungᵢ + verb	immediate past (**just**)	phungᵢ gin	I have just eaten

Imperative

To express a direct command add the word **si'** to the end of a sentence:

gin si´
(Eat!)

Prepositions

Prepositions are words that connect clauses and show the relationships between words in a sentence.   They generally precede the noun to which they are referring.

Simple Thai prepositions are:

gap`	with
jak	from
nái	in
bón	on
rawāng`	between
tee¡	at
kha n¡glang!	behind

Examples of prepositions in use are:

Khaow! yọọ` **nái** bān¡

porm! ja´ mah **gap`** pern¡

raa´nahan! yọọ **khang¡lang!** rong ram

Conjunctions

A conjunction connects words or phrases or clauses.   English examples are **and, or, but, nor,** etc.

Here are the most common Thai conjunctions:

laˊ	and
laewˊ	then
teeˋ	but
rūˊ	or
gapˋ	and
tāᵢ	if
praˊwahᵢ	because
wahᵢ	that
jungˋ	therefore

 Most conjunctions come between two independent clauses such as:

gin khawᵢ laewˊ klapˋ bānᵢ

(Eat rice (food) **then** go home.)

doọm namˊ ru! doọm biaˊ

(Drink water **or** drink beer.)

The conjunction **if** is always used with the word **ja**, which, as you have seen in the section on verb tenses, indicates a future action.

taᵢ pernᵢ māiᵢ mah pọrm! jaˊ klapˋ bānᵢ

(If my friend doesn't come **then** I will go home.)

Sentences

The typical simple Thai sentence consists of subject-verb-object in that order.   More complicated sentences combine simple sentences with conjunctions by making the first subject-verb-object the subject of the second verb and object.   Adjectives precede nouns and adverbs precede verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.   In general, the correct word order is more important than creating a bound sentence.

Questions

There are several ways of asking a question in Thai.   The way to answer a question is dependent on how it is asked.   Frequently questions are answered simply by stating the verb if the answer is positive, or the word **mäi** + verb if it is negative.   The most common question forms are as follows:

Question	English	Answer	English
tammāi	why	**pra´wahᵢ**	because
māi!	a spoken question mark	Verb or **māiᵢ** +verb	
chāiᵢ māi!	is that so	**Chāiᵢ/māiᵢ chāiᵢ**	yes/no
ru´ plow`	or not	Verb/**plow`**	confirm/deny
tee` näi´	where	**tee`** +(place)	at (place)
laew´ ru! yang	yet or already	**laew´** or **yang**	yes/no

Examples:

tammāi +Subject (optional) + verb

tammāi khun poodᵢ pāsā! thai

Why do you speak thai?

pra´wahᵢ porm! chopᵢ muang thai

Because I like Thailand.

(subject) + verb + **mai!**

chawpᵢ **mai!**

Do (you) like (it)?

māiᵢ chawpᵢ

(I) do **not** like (it).

chawpᵢ

(I) like it.

(subject) + verb + **laew´ ru! yang**

gin **laew´ ru! yang**

Have (you) eaten **already or not yet**.

gin **laew´**

(I) have eaten **already**.

yang

Not yet.

Negation

Negation in Thai is effected by adding negative words or phrases to sentences.

The simplest form of negation is the word **māi`** that could be translated as **not**. It is placed before the verb in the sentence.

māi¡ pai	not going
māi¡ chawp¡	don't like
māi¡ yak`	don't want
māi¡ dee	not good

Another negation is the combination **māi¡dai¡** which means **cannot**, or **did not**. This negation follows the verb when it means **cannot** or **do not do** and precedes the verb when it means **did not**.

porm! pai **māi¡dai¡**	I (m) can not go
dichan! duum` lao¡ **māi¡dai¡**	I (f) do not drink alcohol
porm! **māi¡dai¡** pai nai!	I (m) did not go anywhere
dichan! **māi¡dai¡** duum` lao¡	I (f) did not drink alcohol

Note: The positive form of all of the examples on this page can be made by dropping the **māi¡** element.

Particles

Particles are put at the end of sentences to indicate respect.   When speaking with strangers or acquaintances it is always polite to end sentences with a particle, with close friends it is not necessary.

Standard particles are:

krub´	males speaking to superiors or equals
ka´ or **kaɩ**	females speaking to superiors or equals (**kaˑ** is used with questions)
ja´ or **jaɩ**	used with intimates or inferiors (**jaˑ** is used with questions)