Tone Neutralization in Thai Disyllables of the Type CV(ʔ)-

In citation forms and in formal speech, the vowel /a/ in the initial syllable of a Thai disyllabic word usually exhibits either a high (thâle ‘sea’) or a low tone (thânôn ‘road, avenue’) depending on the consonantal shape (composition) and history of the disyllable. It is often assumed that this contrast is maintained consistently in formal speech, but in informal speech the glottal stop is often deleted and the vowel emerges as a centralized schwa [ə] that carries a mid tone (thâle > thâlee ‘sea’; thânôn > thânôn ‘road, avenue’). (Mid tones are signified here by the absence of a tone mark.) In an early study, Gandour (1976) characterized the neutralization as occurring in informal use but did not define precisely what was meant by ‘formal’ and ‘informal’. The neutralization is furthermore treated as being abrupt, and more recent studies have not challenged that characterization, although they have pointed out that tonal changes of various sorts are not uncommon in connected speech (Tingsabadth & Deeprasert 1997; Zsiga & Nitisaroj 2007). The present pilot study gathered data from some 30 native speakers of Thai while they pronounced disyllables in contexts with varying degrees of orthographic priming. The elicitation techniques included: 1) direct responses to orthographically primed words, 2) picture identification without orthographic priming, 3) delayed memory retrieval after orthographically primed words, and 4) a delayed retelling of a story that had been orthographically primed. The acoustic data were then analyzed using sound spectrograms.

Our analysis confirms that the loss of glottal stop occurs even when the expected high or low tone remains intact. The tone neutralization process, however, appears to occur in a gradient manner. We conclude tentatively that the neutralization of the contrastive high and low tones in this environment tend to be affected by orthographic priming, in part because the orthography provides the speaker with some cues as to the expected tone.

After studying the effects of one kind of formality (Thai orthography) on tone neutralization in disyllables, we conclude that greater orthographic priming appears to correlate with less neutralization of the tones in question. Although more research is needed especially on tone neutralization in connected speech, our results suggest very tentatively that speakers regularly neutralize these tones in speech, but maintain the tonal distinction in high register contexts where the influence of the written language is strong. It is possible that for most speakers of Thai the tonal distinction in question is now only artificial and for that reason is limited to high register use.

References


Zsiga, Elizabeth and Rattima Nitisaroj. 2007. Tone Features, Tone Perception and Peak Alignment in Thai. Language and Speech 50 (3). 343-383