

**James Higbie and Snea Thinsan. (2002). *Thai Reference Grammar, The Structure of Spoken Thai*. Bangkok: Orchid Press. Pages: xviii, 443; ISBN: 974-8304-96-5**

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Foreign students and their teachers searching for just the right key to open up Thai grammar for them will be interested to know that *Thai Reference Grammar, The Structure of Spoken Thai* is comprehensive, accessible, and practical, with just about every conceivable sentence pattern systematically and conveniently packaged in this one handy volume. James Higbie and Snea Thinsan, the authors of this grammar, have chosen to organize its contents into 18 relatively straightforward and intuitive categories that can be described as pragmatic, semantic, and grammatical as follows: (1) *Fundamentals*, (2) *Referring to Things*, (3) *Referring to People*, (4) *Questions*, (5) *Expanded Sentences*, (6) *Tenses*, (7) *Using Verbs*, (8) *Using Hai / Requests*, (9) *Conjunctions*, (10) *Using Gaw*, (11) *Quantifiers*, (12) *Comparisons*, (13) *Prepositions*, (14) *Particles and Interjections*, (15) *Time Phrases*, (16) *Order of Events*, (17) *How Long?*, (18) *Frequency*. That these categories are relatively intuitive

should prove quite helpful to the foreign student.

Two sections precede the main grammar, viz., Introduction and Pronunciation. In the Introduction the authors state that in preparing their grammar “ . . . [they have] collected samples of language from conversations, TV, radio, magazine interviews, and even comic books, trying to find examples of all the common patterns and function words of spoken Thai.” In order to identify grammatical correspondences between the two languages, they have translated English sentences into Thai and then tested their acceptability on native Thai speakers who were language teachers and deeply interested in what constitutes correct Thai grammar. They also created example sentences in order to demonstrate how individual words and patterns are used in Thai. In regard to the issue of correct grammar, it is interesting to note here that the authors mention that speakers of Thai may omit words from their utterances, even though the meanings of the variant

sentences remain essentially the same, and throughout this book the authors have listed multiple forms of what is essentially the same sentence by helpfully enclosing in parentheses the words that may be omitted.

The section on pronunciation is rather sparse, so students will need to supplement it with additional material to amplify the description of Thai speech sounds given here. The authors have first introduced the five contrastive tones by giving verbal descriptions of their pitch heights and movements. They then move on to the consonants by identifying those that they say are the same as in English. No jargon from articulatory phonetics has been used in describing the consonants; nonetheless, a brief mention of the difference between the phonetic features of aspirated and unaspirated, viz., the first simply means the consonants are released with a puff of air and that these same aspirated consonants are also found in English, might be more helpful than simply saying the voiceless unaspirated stops are “hard” (?) sounds and a cross (presumably, intermediate) between their voiceless aspirated and voiced counterparts.

For students learning languages that are not normally written in an alphabet based on a European language, romanization is the essential, unavoidable tool. Unfortunately, for foreign students of Thai the development of an accurate Thai romanization system has not been a simple task, and the

main reason for this lies not only with its numerous vowels, but also with its tone system as well. Vowel length is contrastive which is to say that vowels can be either long or short with corresponding differences in the meanings of words; in one word the vowel may be short, but in the same phonetic environment a different word is produced when the vowel is pronounced long; this feature of vowel length raises the question, what is the best symbol for representing this difference? The authors’ of this book have chosen to mark the short vowels rather than the long vowels by positioning a raised dot over the relevant vowel letter; while this choice of symbol seems rather awkward and odd and requires the reader to pay close attention to its occurrence, nonetheless, it may be somewhat intuitive in that all the unmarked vowels are thus long by default. In addition, the Thai vowel system includes simple and complex vowels, that is monophthongs or single vowels, diphthongs or two vowels, and triphthongs, or three vowels; while some of these vowels do occur in English and other European languages, at least one does not and this further compounds the difficulty foreign students have in learning to speak Thai. Anyone romanizing Thai for foreign students would like to minimize their difficulty, and at the same time, not put them off the task of acquiring accurate pronunciation; however, the romanization of Thai raises the question



of what symbols should be used to represent both the common and unusual vowels for foreign students? Since the authors of this book have restricted themselves to the English alphabet, they have used double (and even triple vowel) symbols to indicate some monophthongs.

Further complicating the foreign student's task is the Thai tone system and how to graphically symbolize the different tones. The authors have chosen iconic symbols which are intended to indicate the pitch height and direction of movement of the relevant tone; the tone symbols which comprise a series of lines, some of which are straight, while others have a falling or rising tail, are positioned above or below the romanized syllables. While they certainly serve their purpose, at the same time they are quite idiosyncratic and unnecessarily complicated; however, anyone looking at the range of Thai textbooks that are available in Bangkok bookstores will have discovered there are myriad and strange ways for marking Thai tones, and I must say that the tone symbols used here are far more intuitive than some others I have seen.

This grammar has explained in simple English how Thai is actually spoken, and the authors have also provided useful advice to their readers on how to speak and not to speak the language; for example, on page 4 on the topic of "impolite pronouns/cursing", they have written as follows:

"Thais generally don't speak abusively, but there are a few cursing terms including the following crude-sounding pronouns. These words [namely, d<sup>^</sup>, ,7M, wv<sup>h</sup>, vu] are impolite and shouldn't be used in public." There then follows a brief explanation of the meaning of each word.

While this book takes for granted the reader understands such basic grammatical terms as adjective, adverb, classifier, compound word, gerund, noun, object, predicate, pronoun, prefix, subject, suffix, word order, verb, etc., yet it can be said to be relatively free of the unhelpful, mind-numbing jargon of theoretical linguistics. Among the commendable aspects of this book are its thoroughness of explanation and generous use of example sentences; each example comprises the fluent English sentence followed by its Thai equivalent in romanization and Thai orthography.

This volume includes three very helpful Appendices, and these are responsible for putting the word *reference* in the book's title. The first Appendix (pages 389 to 400) has collected together Thai classifiers in a series of three lists of English nouns followed by their appropriate Thai classifiers in romanization and Thai orthography and entitled as follows: (1a) *Classifiers, Based on Characteristics*; (1b) *Specific Classifiers*; and (1c) *Special Rules, the noun and classifier are the same*. The second Appendix is the

*Index-Thai* (pages 401 to 424) which lists romanized Thai words and phrases in alphabetical order followed by their English equivalents and the corresponding page numbers where they are explained and exemplified in the main text; the third is the *Index-English* (pages 425 to 443) which lists English words and phrases followed by the corresponding page numbers where their Thai equivalents are explained and discussed in the main text. Aided by these two indices, the reader can easily and quickly look up any Thai lexical item or its English equivalent to find the explanation and examples of how the item is used.

This paperback book is sturdily bound and has been printed on paper of high quality (to be precise, “acid-free long life paper which meets the specifications of ISO 9706/1994”, as stated in the book itself). The fonts used for English, Thai romanization, and Thai orthography are attractive and easily legible. As for the quality of the printing process itself, this is generally fine, although I did notice on page 1 at the end of the second line in the word *chan*, the first-person pronoun used by women, about two-thirds of the letter “n” failed to print. As for typographical errors, it is obvious the contents of the book have been very carefully checked for these, as there appear not to be any. Most chapters include an interesting black and white drawing depicting some aspect of Thai society or

culture (although the contents of the drawings themselves do not have any direct connections to the points of grammar discussed in the texts in which they occur).

In sum, this reference grammar has been written in relatively down-to-earth English and should appeal to the foreign student wanting to know how to use certain words, how to express particular concepts, and how to say the same thing with similar but variant sentences. It is especially recommended for its authors’ practical explanations, abundant examples, and helpful indices. After having been a constant companion to the reviewer over the past three years, I am delighted to say this grammar has proved itself to be an investment that has paid dividends by providing me with a clearer understanding of Thai sentence structures and the usages and meanings of grammatical function words.