



# Thai Language & Culture

*As seen in the translation industry*



# Introduction

This small book is a tribute to another colorful and interesting country in Asia—Thailand. It is a country mostly known for its tourist attractions but we decided to show you its culture and language rather than the beautiful destinations. So here we are with a bit of tradition, and a bit of color, with elephants and lovely dresses, along with a touch of beautiful Thai script. We we;ve chosen to publish it in April, as this is the time for Songkran—the Thai national holiday previously being celebrated as New Year. We hope you enjoy our latest addition to the series—Thai Language & Culture - As Seen in the Translation Industry.

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# White elephant

White elephants are rare and also considered sacred in Thai culture. They were gifts for the king and a king was determined for his status by the number of elephants he had.

There is an interesting story behind the term “white elephant” which in modern times is used as a synonym for something useless. In the past if the king wasn’t pleased with someone from his court, he could bestow upon him the gift of a white elephant. They were sacred, so they were not supposed to be used for labor or field work. The new owner was then ruined as they couldn’t give away the animal and at the same time they had to cover their maintenance.



# Thai words that do not exist in English

Thai culture plays a crucial role in shaping the Thai language. Some of the culture has created various Thai words that do not exist in English. To translate these words, a linguist needs to be more elaborate, using more adjectives and if necessary give examples so the target language can be understandable. In this article, we will share some of those words and what their meanings are.

## Being 'kreng-Jai' (เกรงใจ)

It has been taught from one generation to another that to be a good person, one of the qualities that you need to have is to be 'kreng-Jai' (เกรงใจ). 'Kreng' means to have fear of something while 'jai' means heart. A two-word in Thai that means to have a thoughtful consideration for other people's needs, feeling or action that they need to take in response to your action. That's what I mean with elaboration!

Thai people tend to have this value where you want to do things by yourself and not interrupt nor bother others. For example, if you visit a friend in another country and they offer to pick you up at the airport, you might be 'kreng-Jai' your friend and just tell him that you can go to the accommodation by yourself. This word can be used in a circumstance where you don't want to make others 'lose face'. To give an instance, your neighbor bake a cake and give it to you, you have to accept it because you feel obliged to. In short, you 'kreng-jai' them and don't want them to waste their efforts.

## Feeling 'noi-jai' (น้อยใจ)

Other words that relate pretty much to 'kreng-jai' are 'noi-jai' (น้อยใจ). 'Noi' means few or little. Using the previous example of the neighbor's cake, if you reject the cake, then the neighbor will probably feel 'noi-jai'. In English, the nearest







word to explain this feeling would be to be offended or to feel slighted.

### **The Silent Anger called “ngon” (งอน)**

Last but not least, there is another word I’d like to bring up. This word is commonly used among relationships. It is called “ngon” which means to be mad in silent and require that the other person comfort you first. For example, when you ‘ngon’ your boyfriend, you are not strongly mad at him but you just want to show him that you are slightly mad and you want him to be the one coming after you/ or you want him to start the reconciliation by comforting you first. In English, ‘ngon’ is the closest to ‘sulk’ (to be mad or having a bad-tempered because of a disappointment). However, sulking doesn’t have a subcontext like ‘ngon’ as it lacks the ‘comfort-me-first’ part.

These are only some of the most common words that you cannot find an exact match for them in English. There are so many more slang that we can talk about next time. As you can see, Thai culture is quite complex. That’s why linguists need to be thorough, aware of all the context available and careful in their choices of words in the target language. If you have a project in Thai language and are not sure how to approach with the translation, do reach out to our experts who will always be there to help you 24/7 and you don’t need to ‘kreng-jai’ them!





# Sigh ผ้าซิ่น (pha sin)

The sigh or as it is called in Thai ผ้าซิ่น, RTGS: pha sin is a beautiful traditional clothing that is typically worn by Thai women. It is more popular in the Northern and Northeastern regions of the country and the patterns represent the different regions. In Thailand, nowadays, these garments are worn mostly at special events.

With this traditional clothing we are showing some of the beauty of Thailand culture today





# Songkran

The Songkran festival was the Thai New Year celebration and it is still held on April 13 each year, even though nowadays the New Year is officially moved on January 1.

The traditional festival is transformed into a national holiday, where one can see crowds of people together.

The celebration includes water and the ritual of water pouring, which represents purification. That is why you will find a lot of water being thrown into and from the crowds who celebrate on the streets.

Today we wish all our Thai friends all the best and a prosperous and better year ahead!



# Similarities between Thai and Mandarin

Today we're going to dive in and take a look at the linguistic similarities between two languages, both of which originate from Asian countries with a considerable proximity to one another. The countries we're bringing up are Thailand and China (the south-east coastal China in particular).

To the unaided eye (or should we say "ear"), especially to those unfamiliar with Asian languages, Thai and Chinese languages don't really seem to have anything in common. It turns out, however, that those two languages share a lot of similar words, structures, and expressions!

## **Both are SVO (subject-verb-object order)**

They consist primarily of monosyllabic words, use similar word and sentence construction patterns, and they don't

conjugate verbs and nouns. Some would say that their grammar is quite simple.

## **Tones appear to be pretty similar**

They're both tonal languages, but they're not in the same language family, despite what linguists tended to believe some 15 years ago. Thai belongs to the Kra-Dai language family and has 5 tones. Mandarin is related to the Sino-Tibetan language family, and the Chinese uses 4 tones. The users of those languages have also adopted different writing systems.

## **Grammatical rules**

Thai and Chinese grammar is so much easier than Japanese and Korean grammar, but their pronunciation and writing







systems are harder! People find that Chinese-speaking students can pick up Thai relatively easily, and at the same time, Thais can also progress in their Mandarin studies faster than they could while studying Japanese or Korean.

### Identical vocabulary

But let's get to the real deal. No matter if you're a beginner, a Chinese or Thai native or you have no clue about those languages – there are similarities that are hard to miss for anyone.

Starting with the numbers:

- 2 – Soeng (Cantonese) – Soong (Thai)
- 3 – Saam – Saam
- 4 – Sei – Sii
- 7 – Chat – Jed
- 8 – Paat – Pead
- 9 – Kau – Kaau
- 10 – Sap – Sip
- 11 – Sap Yat – Sip et
- 20 – Yii Sap – Yii Sip
- 10 000 – Maan – Meuan

Continuing with some food-related words and animals:

In Thai, the word for “cooked” is Suk, and in Chinese – Sok. “Tea” will be Chaa in both of the languages. “Horse” and “chicken” are respectively pronounced as Maa and Kai in both Chinese and Thai.

Now for some miscellaneous words:

Words for “sad” would be pronounced as Sau in both languages. “Old” would be Kau and “glue” – Kaau. “Ink” would be Mak in Chinese and Meuk in Thai, and “bad luck” will sound like Soei and Suei in Chinese and Thai, respectively.

The similarities of these languages aren't limited to the purely lexical categories. Resemblances are found in the modal auxiliaries as well. Classic Chinese used 將 (Mandarin jiāng) for future/intention (will), 當 (dāng) for obligation (must), 得 (děi) for potential (can). Thai equivalents are จะ (cha), ต้อง (tɔɔŋ), ได้ (dǎi). If they're not evidence to cognate languages, they at the very least suggest that the languages influenced each other quite a long time ago.



# Thai language: Infographic

## THAI LANGUAGE *facts*

### CREATION

The language was created in **1283** by King Ramkhamhaeng.

### VOWELS

There are **21 vowels**. Each vowel exists in a long-short pair.

### CLASSES

There are **3 classes** of consonants (low, mid and high) – they help to determine the tone of a syllable.

### CONSONANTS

Thai has **44 consonants**. They are divided into 3 classes (low, mid and high), which help to determine the tone of a syllable.

### TONES

There are **5 phonemic tones**: middle, low, high, rising and falling.

### DIPHTHONGS

There are **6 diphthongs** (gliding vowels). They're a combination of two adjacent vowel sounds within the same syllable.

### COMPATIBILITY

Over **50%** of the Thai language is mutually intelligible with Lao.

### SPEAKERS

Almost **70 million** people speak Thai, with 3 major and distinct dialects (North, Northeast, South).







# Nicknames

Thai people universally have one, or occasionally more, short nicknames (Thai: ชื่อเล่น name-play) that they use with friends and family. Often first given shortly after birth by friends or an older family member, these nicknames are overwhelmingly one syllable[21] (or worn down from two syllables to one). Some common nicknames translate into English as “small”, “fatty”, “pig”, “little”, “frog”, “banana”, “green”, or “girl/boy”.



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