

ISAAN RECORDINGS ON AAKANEE – TONES AND TRANSCRIPTION SYSTEM

This document^{1,2} describes the tones of the Isaan variety spoken by Ton in the Isaan language projects on www.aakanee.com; any reference to “Isaan” or “Isaan language” is specifically meant to refer to this particular variety which is spoken in Nong Ruea district, Khon Kaen province (and certainly beyond). The tonal system of other Isaan varieties will be different.

Tonal System

Gedney has developed a system to quickly determine the number and distribution of tones in Tai languages, see [1]. This system is widely used to classify and compare different varieties and applies well to the Isaan language. See also [2] for corresponding Gedney charts for several Lao varieties spoken throughout North-Eastern Thailand.

Using an adapted Gedney word list, I distinguish five³ tones as follows:

	A	B	C	DL	DS
1 – voiceless friction	mid	high	low-falling		mid
2 – voiceless unaspirated					
3 – voiceless glottalized	high-rising		high-falling		high
4 – voiced					

Description of the five tones

M	mid	A123 DS123	In fast speech, this is a flattish tone on mid level. On smooth syllables pronounced in isolation, in final position, which are stressed, or which have a Thai rising tone, it can have a falling-rising or even wave-like contour. This seems to be the tone with the highest degree of variability in its contour.
HR	high-rising	A4	This tone starts somewhere between mid and high and then rises further. Compared to H, HR usually starts lower and ends higher than H.
H	high	B1234, DS4	This tone is quite high and, if long, flat.

¹ Thanks go to Luke Bruder-Bauer for valuable feedback.

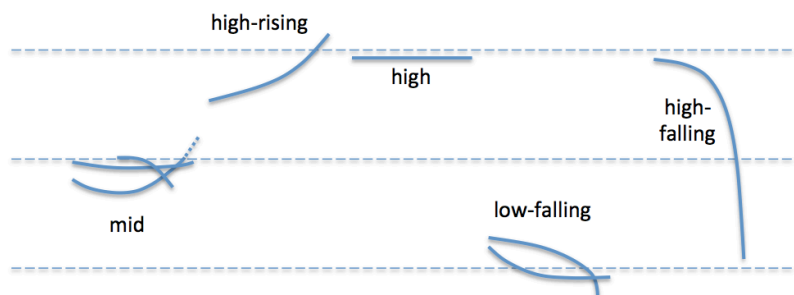
² I'm not a linguist and can't guarantee that my analysis is accurate. Any feedback or correction is appreciated.

³ The identification of the tones in DL/DS (syllables with final stops) with the tones in A/B/C (open syllables) is partly a matter of convenience. There are audible differences in tone height and contour between counterparts with and without final stops but overall the match is not bad.

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LF	low-falling	C1, DL123	This tone starts well below the mid level and then drops.
HF	high-falling	C234, DL4	This tone starts mid-high and then drops down to low.

Approximative and stylized contours are as follows:



Writing system

There is currently no established writing system for Isaan. However, for native Tai words which have a Thai equivalent, it is often possible to infer the Isaan tone from the following three elements:

- consonant series of the Thai spelling (ก, ข or ค)
- syllable type (smooth, checked long, checked short)
- Thai tone/marker

This allows to use standard Thai spelling with a re-interpretation of the tone rules and some minor adaptations to transcribe this particular Isaan variety⁴ with correct tones.

Writing system – adaptations

- ญ is used for the ny-sound missing in Thai
- เอียย is used for the iai-triphthong which corresponds to เอียย⁵ in Thai
- ย is counted as belonging to the ก-class of consonants, not the ค-class

⁴ This method, i.e., to reinterpret Thai tone rules/markers and leverage syllable type and consonant class, can be applied to transcribe a wide variety of Tai varieties. It may be confusing for bilingual native speakers who are literate only in Thai and used to one particular interpretation of tone markers. See also [3] for a more detailed discussion of the reasons why this approach works well for Tai languages.

⁵ In Ton's speech, often both forms coexist, e.g., เดือน and เดือน for 'month'.

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Writing system – tone rules

Three elements determine the tone of a syllable: the consonant series (ก, ข or ค), the syllable type (smooth, checked long, checked short), and the tone mark.

Series	Syllable type	unmarked	ไม้เอก	ไม้โท	ไม้ตรี
ก	smooth	mid	high	high-falling	high-rising
	checked short	mid	high		high-rising
	checked long	low falling		high-falling	high-rising
ข	smooth	mid	high	low-falling	
	checked short	mid			
	checked long	low falling			
ค	smooth	high-rising	high	high-falling	
	checked short	high			
	checked long	high-falling			

The following table contains example Gedney words. See the website for corresponding recordings to hear the tones.

Gedney cell	Tone	Isaan spelling	Thai (if different)	Translation
A1	mid	หู		ear
		ขา		leg
		หัว		head
		สอง		two
A2	mid	ปู		crab
		ตา		eye
		กิน		to eat
		กา		crow
A3	mid	บิน		to fly
		แดง		red
		บาน		to flower
		ดาว		star
A4	high-rising	มือ		hand
		ควย	ควาย	water buffalo
		นา		rice field
B1	high	งู		snake
		ไข่		egg
		ข่า		galangal

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Gedney cell	Tone	Isaan spelling	Thai (if different)	Translation
B2	high	ถั่ว		general term for beans
		เข่า		knee
		ไก่		chicken
		เป่า		to blow
		เต่า		turtle
B3	high	ปี่		kind of a flute
		ไหล่		shoulder
		อึ่ง		bullfrog
		ด่า		to scold
		บ่าว		groom
B4	high	เลื่อย	เลื่อย	saw
		พ่อ		father
		ไร่	ไร่	plantation
C1	low-falling	ข้าว	ข้าว	rice
		เสื้อ	เสื้อ	shirt
		หม้อ		pot
C2	high-falling	ห้า		five
		เก้า	เก้า	nine
		ป้อน		to feed
		ก้าง		fishbone
		ตู้		cupboard
C3	high-falling	ด้าย		(cotton) thread
		อ้อย		sugar cane
		ด้าม		handle
		คิ้ว		eyebrow
		น้ำ		water
C4	high-falling	ลิ้น		tongue
		ม้า		horse
		ขวด		bottle
		หมวก		hat
		ศอก		elbow
DL2	low-falling	ปีก		wing
		กอด		to embrace, to hug
		ตอก		to hammer
		ปาก		mouth
		บีบ		to squeeze
DL3	low-falling			

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Gedney cell	Tone	Isaan spelling	Thai (if different)	Translation
DL4	high-falling	บอด		blind
		อาบ		to bathe
		ดอก		flower
		มีด		knife
		เลือด	เลือด	blood
		เชือก	เชือก	rope
DS1	mid	มอด		wood mite
		ผัก		vegetable(s)
		หก		six
		สิบ		ten
DS2	mid	หมัด		flea
		กบ		frog
		เจ็ด		seven
		เตะ		to kick
DS3	mid	จับ		to grasp, to catch
		เอิก	อก	chest
		เด็ด		to pluck (a flower)
		เบ็ด		fish hook
DS4	high	ดิบ		raw
		นก		bird
		มด		ant
		คก	ครก	mortar (for crushing)
		เล็บ		nail

References

- [1] William J. Gedney: A Checklist For Determining Tones In Tai Dialects, Studies in Linguistics in Honor of George L. Trager, Mouton, 1972.
- [2] M. R. Kalaya Tingsabadh: Thai Tone Geography, 1993.
- [3] Stephen Morey: Studying tones in North East India: Tai, Singpho and Tangsa, Language Documentation and Conservation, 2014