Degree of Foreign Accent in Thai Sentences Produced by Burmese and Urdu Speakers

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze degree of foreign accent in Thai sentences produced by native Burmese speakers (NB) and native Urdu speakers (NU). The two groups are the representatives of native speakers of tonal language and non-tonal language. The perceived foreign accent of the participant was rated by Bangkok people with a 5-score Likert Scale. The data were collected from 100 connected speech sentences; forty sentences from NB, forty sentences from NU, and twenty sentences from native Thai speakers (NT). The data were analyzed statistically to find out for Mean, Standard Deviation, and One-Way ANOVA with LSD. The result revealed that Thai sentences produced by NB and NU were significantly distinctive from those of NT. Moreover, the scores of individual speakers indicated that both NB and NU were rated at different levels according to their detectable foreign accents. The overall results showed that regardless of whether one's native language is tonal or non-tonal; this is not the factor in determining how well they are able to articulate Thai language correctly.

Keywords: Foreign Accent, Tonal Language, Non-Tonal Language

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาระดับของสำเนียงต่างประเทศในประโยคภาษาไทยที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาพม่าและผู้พูดภาษาอูรดู ซึ่งเป็นตัวแทนของผู้พูดภาษามีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์และภาษาที่ไม่มีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์ ระดับสำเนียงในภาพรวมของผู้พูดทั้งสองกลุ่มได้รับการประเมินโดยชาวกรุงเทพฯด้วยมาตรวัดของลิเคิร์ท (Likert scale) 5 ระดับ ข้อมูลการวิเคราะห์ คือ ประโยคต่อเนื่องจำนวน 100 ประโยคโดยแบ่งเป็นประโยคที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาพม่าจำนวน 40 ประโยคประโยคที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาอูรดูจำนวน 40 ประโยค และประโยคที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาไทยจำนวน 20 ประโยค ข้อมูลได้รับการวิเคราะห์ทางสถิติเพื่อศึกษาค่าเฉลี่ย (Mean) ค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน (Standard Deviation) และค่าความแปรปรวนของข้อมูล (One-Way ANOVA with LSD) ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าทั้งประโยคภาษาไทยที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาพม่าและที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาอูรดูมีความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติจากประโยคภาษาไทยที่ออกเสียงโดยผู้พูดภาษาไทย นอกจากนี้ผลคะแนนการประเมินระดับสำเนียงรายบุคคลแสดงให้เห็นว่าระดับสำเนียงของผู้พูดแต่ละคนได้รับการประเมินในระดับที่แตกต่างกันเนื่องจากระดับสำเนียงต่างประเทศที่ติดในภาษาไทยแตกต่างกัน ผลการศึกษาในภาพรวมแสดงให้เห็นว่า การมีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์ในภาษาแม่ไม่ใช่ตัวบ่งชี้สำคัญในออกเสียงประโยคภาษาไทยได้ดีกว่าผู้พูดที่ไม่มีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์ในภาษาแม่

คำสำคัญ: สำเนียงต่างประเทศ ภาษาที่มีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์ ภาษาที่ไม่มีระบบเสียงวรรณยุกต์

Introduction

Communicating with people from other countries; we have to learn inevitably new languages. Most of global population can speak more than one language. Even though talking with distant people on the internet is easier, many people try to gain more experience and fulfill their potential or dealing business, etc., by living in other countries. These people can learn eventually new languages as a foreign language because they live permanently in the countries and are exposed to new foreign languages. This way of learning is efficient as Steinberg, Nagata and Aline (2001, p. 185) stated that Pakistanis learning English in London will have better language experiences than Pakistanis learning English in a classroom in Karachi, the capital of the Pakistani province of Sindh.

Thailand, especially Bangkok, is a melting pot. A number of people from various countries have resided in the city. These foreigners moved to Thailand for many reasons. People from developed countries might live in Thailand for studying, working, or spending their lives after retirement. On the contrary, millions of people shifted to Thailand for seeking better life. Panam et al. (2004) stated that millions of people from Burma have left their country and searched for their security and safety due to nearly a half-century of conflict, militarization, economic hardship, ethnic uprising and minority persecution. The majority of these Burmese migrants end up in a neighboring country like Thailand.

The statement of Panam et al. (2004) was consistent with the declaration of UNHCR-The UN Refugee Agency (n.d.), which noted in 2015 that a number of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people of more than 40 nationalities are living in Thailand. The large number of this population is Burmese (72,900 came in January and 53,600 in December 2015) and Pakistani (400 in January 2015 and 700 in December 2015) Moreover, Ali (2014) claimed

that there are 10,000 registered Pakistani asylum seekers, a majority of them Christians and the remaining mostly Ahmaids and Shias.

In Bangkapi district of Bangkok, there are many Burmese and Pakistanis. Most Burmese work as employees in Thai shops. On the other hand, Pakistanis own their shops; they sell food or jewelry in Bangkapi district or nearby area. It was found that Thai language pronunciation of the two groups is comparable to that of Thai speakers. Thus, their Thai language is the case for investigating.

The native language of Burmese is Burmese and for Pakistanis is Urdu. The two languages are different because Burmese is a tonal language but Urdu is not. Yip (2007, p. 229) explains that a language is a tonal language if the pitch of a word can change the meaning of the word. Around 70% of the world's languages are tonal. Thai and Burmese share this characteristic. I supposed that a tonal system might be an evidence of better Thai pronunciation of Burmese. Moreover, it is interesting to prove whether Burmese have the advantage over Pakistanis in speaking Thai language.

Burmese and Urdu speakers were significantly investigated because of four reasons. Firstly, they learned Thai by being exposed to Thai language. They did not attend Thai classes like informants in previous studies (for instance Nguyen, 2006; Zinck, 2007; Sinthawashewa, 2009; Kittisurakosol, 2012) nor were they trained by Thai people (for instance Wayland & Guion, 2004). It can be said that the speakers learn Thai in a natural situation; they communicate with native Thai speakers directly. Secondly, despite the fact that there is a large number of Burmese and Pakistanis working in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, there has been no prior research about their acquisition of the Thai language. Thirdly, since Burmese and Pakistanis have lived in the same community, Bangkapi District in Bangkok, they contact each other and share solidarity. And the last reason, Burmese and Pakistanis have different

sound systems, namely Burmese has a tonal system but Urdu has not. I supposed that the sound system is the cause for clearer Thai accent of the Burmese.

Moreover, the study was designed to prove whether the finding will be consistent with that of my previous article (Akkharasena, 2015) which found that Thai tones produced by NB and NU were comparable. If Thai listeners judge Thai sentences produced by NB and NU similarly, it can be said that the tonal production of NB and NU (in the previous study) corresponded with the perception of Thai raters (in the present study). Thus, the present finding will show how the Thai sentences spoken by the two groups affect the perception of Thai people.

Method

1. Population

1.1 Participants

The participants consisted of three groups: four male Burmese speakers, four male Urdu speakers and two male Thai speakers. The native Burmese and native Urdu speakers are between twenty to fifty years old. Due to the fact that many Burmese and Pakistani immigrants are reclusive because of a questionable legal situation here in Thailand, I could find only eight willing subjects which prevented me from controlling a range of subject ages. All of them cannot speak English and never attended Thai language courses. The length of residence in Bangkok is a minimum of two years. Table 1 illustrated the language backgrounds of these foreign speakers. The native Thai speakers are two forty-year-old educated men. They were born and raised in Bangkok with native Bangkok parents.

	Speakers							
	NB1	NB2	NB3	NB4	NU1	NU2	NU3	NU4
Age of first exposure	25	21	20	19	27	17	17	25
Testing age	33	49	22	21	29	20	20	45
Length of residence in Thailand	15 yrs.	28 yrs.	2 yrs.	2 yrs.	2yrs.	3 yrs.	3 yrs.	20 yrs.
Average use of Thai	21 hrs./wk.	7 hrs./wk.	3.5 hrs./wk.	3.5 hrs./wk.	3.5 hrs./wk.	14 hrs./wk.	17.5 hrs./wk.	3.5 hrs./wk.

NB = Native Burmese Speaker, NU = Native Urdu Speaker, yrs. = years, hrs. = hours, wk. = week

Table 1 Language Background of NB and NU

1.2 Raters

Thai accent rating was performed by twenty native Thai speakers who consist of ten male speakers and ten female speakers. They were born and raised in Bangkok with native Bangkok parents. All are educated at a minimum of bachelor's degree. No one works in a field of language teaching and has prior contact with Burmese and Urdu speakers.

2. Materials

2.1 Stimuli

Stimuli were ten Thai sentences. Each sentence contained seven to eight syllables and varies in tones. The number of tokens was 200 (ten informants x ten tokens x two times). As shown in Figure 1, these Thai sentences were considered to be understandable and spoken in daily life of NB and NU

1.	นก	อยู่	บน	หลังคา	สาม	ตัว
	nók	*yùu*	*bon*	*lăŋ-kaa*	*săam*	*tua*
	bird	is	on	roof	three	classifier
2.	แกง	นี้	ใส่	ข่า	กับ	พริก
	kæŋ	*níi*	*sày*	*kʰàa*	*kàp*	*prík*
	curry	this	mix	galangal	and	chili
3.	เขา	ฆ่า	คน	ตาย		
	kʰăw	*kʰâa*	*kʰon*	*taay*		
	he	kill	person	die		
4.	ผม	รู้จัก	พ่อค้า	คน	นั้น	
	pʰŏm	*rúu-càk*	*pʰɔ̂ɔ-kʰáa*	*kʰon*	*nán*	
	I	know	merchant	classifier	that	
5.	หมา	มี	ขา	สี่	ขา	
	măa	*mii*	*kʰăa*	*sìi*	*kʰăa*	
	dog	have	leg	four	leg	
6.	ชาวนา	กำลัง	ปลูก	ข้าว		
	cʰaaw-naa	*kam-laŋ*	*plùuk*	*kʰâaw*		
	farmer	continuous aspect	cultivate	rice		
7.	ผม	ซื้อ	น้อยหน่า	มา	จาก	ตลาด
	pʰŏm	*súuu*	*nɔ́ɔy-nàa*	*maa*	*càak*	*tàʔ-làat*
	I	buy	custard apple	come	from	market
8.	ผู้หญิง	คน	นี้	หน้าตา	สวย	
	pʰûu-yĭŋ	*kʰon*	*níi*	*nâa-taa*	*sŭay*	
	woman	classifier	this	face	beautiful	
9.	ผม	มี	น้า	สาว	สอง	คน
	pʰŏm	*mii*	*náa*	*săaw*	*sɔ̌ɔŋ*	*kʰon*
	I	have	aunt	young	two	classifier
10.	เขา	หั่น	หมู	ชิ้น	หนา	เกินไป
	kʰăw	*hàn*	*mŭu*	*cʰín*	*năa*	*kɤɤn-pay*
	he	slice	pork	piece	thick	too

Figure 1 Stimuli

2.2 Rating Scale

A scale applied for rating foreign accent was a 5-score Likert scale ranging from 1 (definite foreign accent) to 5 (native speaker). Each score illustrated degrees of native-like proficiency. (see Table2)

3. Procedure

3.1 Training

Due to NB and NU are not literate in Thai, so they were asked to be trained in producing Thai sentences. The researcher trained the participants by showing pictures eliciting Thai sentences and asking them to repeat the sentences. They could practice as much as they were convenient. After training session, the participants were asked to come back the following day for recording.

3.2 Recording

Depending on the availability of the subjects, recordings were taken place in a quiet room at their places of stay. The pictures were shown to NB and NU for one at a time and they were asked to say the corresponding sentences. Burmese and Urdu sentences below the pictures were significant to remind them of the Thai sentences. All of them were asked to produce the sentences only twice.

3.3 Data collection

Due to NB, NU and NT produced each sentences two times, the number of sentences was 200. Since some sentences had minor errors, these 200 sentences produced by NB and NU were then assessed and selected for the best and most complete tokens. Eventually, the number of tokens was totally 100.

These 100 sound files were sorted randomly into a new folder. I presented these 100 sound files by turning on a speaker joining to a laptop. After listening, the raters were asked to rate the tokens by ticking in a blank they perceived. For instance, if a rater was perceived confidently a sentence was produced by non-native speakers, they were able to rate that sound by ticking in a non-native column.

4. Data Analysis

After the collection was done, the assessment results were sent to the researcher. Scores from 20 raters were calculated into a mean score. During the analysis session, the rated scores were calculated to find out statistical value by plotting scores on a Microsoft Excel and calculating scores of individual speakers. Since the sound files were in two groups, NB and NU, mean scores of individual speakers were then compared statistically with a One-Way ANOVA with LSD. This comparison was crucial because a result could indicate which group of speaker produced better Thai sentences. To interpret levels of score, I adopted a criterion of Sutthijetsadarot (2012) for interpreting the level of speaker's proficiency. Table 2 below described the meaning of each level.

Table 2 Criteria for interpreting levels of Score

Scale	Rank of Score	Interpretation
1	0 – 0.9 scores	definite foreign accent
2	1 – 1.9 scores	slight foreign accent
3	2 – 2.9 scores	questionable
4	3 – 3.9 scores	near native speaker
5	4 – 5 scores	native speaker

1. Range of Score

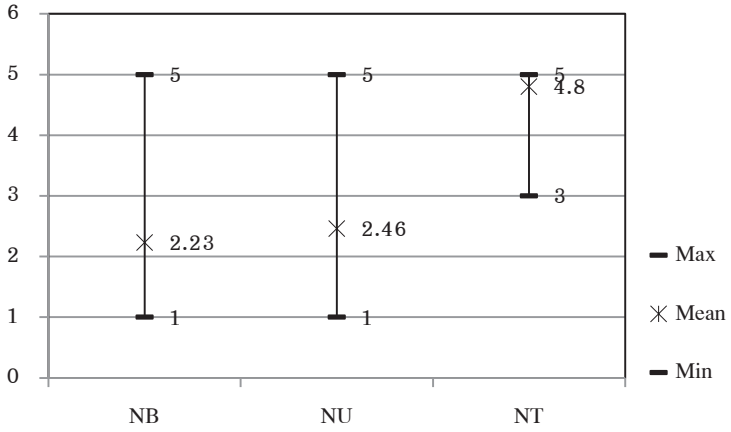


Figure 2 Range of rated score of NB, NU and NT

Figure 2 shows that the ranges of rated score of NB and NU are different from that of NT, namely the ranges of NB and NU are wider than that of NT because they range from 1 - 5. In contrast, the range of NT speakers is narrower; it ranges from 3 – 5. Obviously, the range of NB was comparable to that of NU. Thus, it can be said that the two groups were perceived by the Thai raters at the same level.

Besides the above results reveal that both NB and NU spoke Thai sentences equivalently, the results supported the fact that ears of native speakers were accurate in detecting foreign accent. As illustrated in Figure 1, the score of NT started from 3 – 5, the levels of “questionable” to “native speaker”. Moreover, the mean score of NT is high at 4.8, which was approximate to the highest score.

2. Statistical Analysis

Speakers	M	SD	F	*P*
NT	4.8	0.31		
NB	2.22	0.13	131.021	*.000**
NU	2.46	0.55		

Table 3 Statistical significance of mean score

A F-test result in Table 3 shows that the rated scores of NB, NU and NT are significantly different. According to the criteria in Table 2, the mean scores above showed that the Thai sentences produced by both NB and NU were at a level of questionable. It can be said that both two groups of speakers produced Thai language with foreign accent comparably.

Speakers	NT	NB	NU
NT	-	.000*	.000*
NB	-	-	.190
NU	-	-	-

Table 4 Between-group comparison

Table 4 shows a statistically significant One-Way ANOVA with LSD result, which was employed to compare between groups. The result indicated that the rated score of NT was significantly distinctive from those of NB and NU. However, the statistical comparison between the rated scores of NB and NU was not significantly different. This finding implied that the Thai sentences produced by the two groups, NB and NU, were comparable. However, when concentrating on scores of each speaker, it was found that the scores

were at different levels, even though, they were in the same group.

Table 5 Mean scores of individual NB, NU and NT

Individual Speakers	M	SD
NB1	3.60	0.74
NB2	2.17	1.19
NB3	1.77	0.96
NB4	1.37	0.58
NU1	1.73	1.00
NU2	3.63	1.01
NU3	3.13	1.08
NU4	1.33	0.56
NT1	4.97	0.13
NT2	4.63	0.61

According to the criteria in Table 2, Table 5 illustrated that the rated scores of individual NB, NU and NT were rated at different levels. A description below defined native-like proficiency of each speaker.

NB1 was rated at a native speaker level.

NB2 was rated at a questionable level.

NB3 was rated at a questionable level .

NB4 was rated at a slight foreign accent level.

NU1 was rated at a questionable level.

NU2 was rated at a native speaker level.

NU3 was rated at a native speaker level.

NU4 was rated at a slight foreign accent level.

The scores indicated that the raters could rate accurately, namely they could detect which sound was produced by native or non-native speakers. As can be seen in Table 5, Thai sentences produced by the two NT were rated as native speakers, NT1 = 4.72, NT2 = 4.63. On the other hand, the sound files spoken by NB and NU were rated at different levels according to their detectable foreign accent.

Although the mean scores of most NB and NU were rated at lower levels, the rated scores of three speakers were outstanding; NB1, NU2 and NU3. These three speakers were rated as native speakers. It can be said that Thai sentences produced by these three speakers were comparable to those of NT.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results from this study indicated that NB and NU had relatively equal competency in producing Thai sentences. Therefore, it can be said that there is no advantage of having a native language as a tonal system when it comes to producing Thai sentences. Furthermore, the statistical results showed that Thai sentences produced by both NB and NU participants were rated at a questionable level. That is, the raters were hesitant to judge the Thai sentences produced by the two groups of participants.

In considering individual scores, however, the findings showed that the score given to each speaker was at different levels. There were some speakers in each group that could produce Thai sentences similarly to the Thai. All the participants' background information was similar. One distinct exception was the average use of Thai. We found that three speakers: NB1, NU2 and NU3 received the highest score. They were also found to have a high average use of Thai. Thus, it can be said the average use of Thai can be an influence for the informants to pronounce better Thai.

The influence of a target language (TL) use on degrees of such a TL accent supports Derwing, Thomson and Munro's (2006) research which studied English pronunciation and fluency development in Mandarin and Slavic speakers. The findings showed that the Slavic learners made significant progress in fluency, whereas the Mandarin participants showed no improvement. This was because the Slavic learners had more contact with English than did the Mandarin speakers.

Therefore, it is noted that accurate pronunciation is consistent with the amount of Thai language use. It should also be noted that the Thai raters' accent perception corresponded to my research findings regarding Thai tones (Akkr-arasena, 2015), which concluded that NB and NU had equal capability in producing and differentiating Thai tones.

Thus, the findings in the two studies imply that native-like competency is not dependent on a native language sound system. The factor of language use seems to be influential. Nevertheless, since the number of participants in this study was limited to only four for each native language, the claim is not fully supported.

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