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We Have ALL Five Thai Tones in English Too!...

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I'm always running into foreigners learning Thai (or giving excuses on why they can't learn Thai) who say, "I can't hear the tones. English doesn't have tones".

Well, sorry to burst your bubble or take away yet another excuse about why you can't learn Thai... BUT...

In English we have ALL of the five tones used in Thai. We just use them for different things. Plain and simple, in Thai the tones are used to delineate words, use a different tone, get a different word. However, in English we use tones to carry emotive value. No one, not even Stephen Hawking (who speaks thru a computer generated voice), speaks English without using tones. It'd be a very robotic and flat language if we did.

Here's my take on how we use the five Thai tones in our every day spoken English. And we do it totally without thinking.

Mid Tone: This is a normal tone and pitch in spoken English. Not much more needs to be said, other than it's how we speak most of the time. You would think this might be the easiest tone for non-native speakers to replicate in Thai, seeing as it's said in the normal tone of your voice. Sadly, this is not the case. Without thinking, native English speakers tend to inflect word endings with subtle changes in tone. Most people hafta really work at saying a mid tone Thai word with a long vowel and a live ending correctly, because in English we automatically change the ending sound.

Low Tone: This tone is used in English typically for non-committal types of single word answers. You wife asks you to take out the garbage while you're watching football. You answer "sure", but in a lower tone than your normal voice. It conveys that you got what she said but you're not gonna jump up and take out the trash this second. This tone is used a lot in English for statements where there's an understanding of what was being said, but the reply shows no commitment either for or against. In Thai, this is a tone you can pretty much give a pass to as I've found it can sound a lot like a middle tone in spoken Thai without loss in understanding.

Falling Tone: This is a tone we use in English to express regret, or sympathy with something that's said to us. A friend says his dog was hit by a car and the reply is, "Ohhh, is it okay?" That first word, "Ohhh" is said with a falling tone and conveys your sympathy to the speaker in just that single falling toned word. This tone in Thai is a critical one to wrap your head around. You should practice the falling toned Thai words used in daily dialogs.

High Tone: This tone is a little trickier to explain on how we use it in English, but we most definitely do. The reason it's trickier is that the high tone in Thai starts at a pitch higher than your normal spoken voice and then goes up even higher from there. In English it's used to express surprise, shock, mild outrage or a degree of incredulity when speaking. Someone says, "hey man your car just got backed into in the parking lot". Your response is, "what!?" The word starts high and goes even higher on the ending. It's my experience that this and the low tone are possibly the least critical of the tones to master in Thai, and they can be blurred in spoken Thai with little loss of comprehension.

Rising Tone: This tone is used when asking questions in English. It is especially evident on single word questions, "what?" or "right?". I'm sure this is why most foreigners don't have problems replicating this tone when using the question word ไหม seeing as it's also (by blind luck) a rising tone. You must use this tone correctly when you're speakin' Thai to Thais as they exhibit very little forgiveness in foreigners getting this tone wrong. Again, I suggest you go thru words in daily dialogs that use this tone. Work on getting it to sound right. Speaking rising tone Thai words with another tone is something which can send you off script faster than you would even believe possible.

As you can see, just from the few examples I gave – and I'm sure any native English speaker can think up a lot more – we most certainly do routinely replicate ALL five of the Thai tones without much thought.

The huge stumbling block we have as native English speakers tryin' to speak Thai is that we vary the intonation of Thai words like we do when we speak English. It's a deal-breaker from word one because you can't vary how a Thai word is toned and still have it be the same word. That's the reason Thais have ending particles (I think there're more than 50). They are the tag words Thais use to add emotive value to what's being said. They can change the meaning from speculative, interrogative, urging, questioning, etc.

However, ending particles are a horse of another color, and a topic I am not qualified to write about. I use maybe 8-10 out of the 50. I also often use them at the wrong time and place in sentence constructs. If you interested in how ending particles (codaphrases) are used in the Thai language, read the excellent (and in-depth) paper compiled by Don Sena: Codaphrases.