THE STATUS OF /-w-/: A PERSPECTIVE FROM KHAMPHUAN – A THAI LANGUAGE PLAY

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Abstract

This article aims to show how to understand a language phenomenon through the language play of the Thai. The data is based on Tamjai (2003): Mechanisms and Patterns of Reversed Speech in Bangkok Thai, Northern Thai, Northeastern Thai, and Southern Thai Dialects. There are 334 utterances used to analyze the status of /-w-/ in five different types when reversed the utterances. Firstly, the second phoneme of an initial cluster: /-w-/ Secondly, the single phoneme of an initial consonant: /w/. Thirdly, the property of vowel: /y/. Fourthly, the vowel: /u/. Finally, the zero: /o/. The results according to McMahon (1994) about the stages of sound change. Moreover, the status of /-w-/ from reversing the utterances show how the sound changed from Proto South-Western Tai to Modern Tai; Yuan, Lao, and Siamese.

Introduction

Language plays are frequently used as evidence in many aspects of linguistics, especially phonological analysis (Laycock, 1972; Surintramont, 1973; Vago, 1985; Davis, 1994). 'Word-reverse' is a type of Thai language play which distorts normal speech by rearranging syllable components. This mechanism yields 3 different patterns of word-reversing: rhyme and tone interchange, only rhyme interchange, and rhyme interchange with an addition of tone or vowel-length change. Each pattern is illustrated below.

1.1 Rhyme and Tone Interchange

Q: /ma.nnaw33-?a.raj33-maa33-klaj33-thii42-sut55/ lime-what-come-far-most 'What lime has traveled the furthest?'

A: /ma.nnaw33-taan11dut55/ lime-nonsense ‘Nonsense’

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1 Syllable structure in Thai consists of 3 components. They are (1) onset, (2) rhyme which is composed of nucleus and/or coda, and (3) tone.

syllable

onset rhyme

| | tone

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1.3.1 Rhyme Interchange with an Addition of Tone Change

A person who is falling in love with everything new is described as /bəɔ33 haa42/ ‘number five’, which on reversal is /bɑa42 həə11/ ‘crazy about new thing’.

1.3.2 Rhyme Interchange with an Addition of Vowel-Length Change

Here, we witness not only rhyme interchange but also tone change: /bəɔ33 haa42/ > /bɑa42 həə11/

1.3 Rhyme Interchange with an Addition of Tone or Vowel-Length Change

A: /pluu42 chaa33-khon33-nan55-nan42-khoɔj33-ʔa.raj33/
man-classifier-that-sit-wait-what
‘What is that man sitting there waiting for?’

B: /khoɔj33-phan42-man55/
wait-friend-particle
‘Waiting for his friend, I guess.’

A: /maj42 chaa42-khaw24-nan42-khoɔj33-huaj42-juu11/
no-he-sit-wait-nonsense-progressive
‘nonsense’

The fun here lies in /khoɔj33-huaj42/ ‘nonsense’ which when reversed becomes
"Hung penis". Note that in the reversed utterance, in addition to rhyme interchange, the vowel sounds /o:/ /o/ are also interchanged.

In all these patterns, every speaker must separate each syllable between onset and rhyme before modifying it.

Table 1: Number of Reversed Utterances Containing /-w-/ in each Dialect

| Dialect      | Number of Reversed Utterances | Total | With /-w-/ |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Bangkok      | 340                            | 43    |            |
| Northern     | 320                            | 261   |            |
| Northeastern | 220                            | 0     |            |
| Southern     | 360                            | 30    |            |
|              |                                 | 1,240 | 334        |

Results

3.1 The Status of /-w-/ in reversed utterances

We have seen in the previous section that reversed utterances involve the separation of onset and rhyme. In this section we will see that different ways of onset-rhyme separation in reversed utterances reflect different status and syllable structure of the second phoneme of an initial cluster /-w-/.

/kwaanj33 naw42/ ‘deer-rotten’ is given as an example.

3.1.1 As the second phoneme of an initial cluster: /Cw/ > /Cw/

/kw aaj33 n aw42/ >
/kw aw42 n aaj33/
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3.1.2 As a single initial phoneme: /Cw/ > /w/

/kwaan/ > /kwaan/

Figure 1: Syllable Structure of /-w-/

In this case /-w-/ is still interpreted as the second phoneme of an initial cluster /-w-/; the second phoneme of an initial cluster fastens onto the first phoneme of an initial cluster, together acting as one unit.

3.1.3 As a property of a vowel: /Cw/ > /Cu/ 3

/kwaan/ > /kwaan/

Figure 3: Syllable Structure of /u/

This time /-w-/ is interpreted as a property of a vowel: /u/. Thus, it attaches to the rhyme and moves with it when reversed. Due to its attaching and moving with rhyme, it is interpreted as a property of vowel.

3.1.4 As a vowel: /Cw/ > /Cu/

/kwaan/ > /waan/

Figure 2: Syllable Structure of /w/

Here /-w-/ is interpreted as a single initial phoneme because the initial /k/ is deleted. In the reversed version /-w-/ appears as a single initial phoneme /w/.

3 /-w-/ and /u/ have a similar pronunciation. But /-w-/ is a property of onset and /u/ is a property of rhyme. Although they are similar in pronunciation, they differ in syllable structure.
In this example /-w-/ is interpreted as a vowel: /u/, and moves with the rhyme when reversed.

3.1.5 As a zero: /Cw/ > /C\o/

/kwaança/ > /kuaança/

Figure 4: Syllable Structure of /u/

/kwaança/ > /kaança/

Figure 5: Syllable Structure of /o/

/-w-/ is interpreted as zero. It disappears in the reversed utterances.

The percentages of the interpretation of the phoneme /-w-/ in each dialect are given in figure 6.

Figure 6: Different Interpretations of /-w-/ in each Dialect
As can be seen in figure 6, /-w-/ is interpreted as a second phoneme of an initial cluster outstandingly both in Bangkok Thai dialect (74.41%) and Southern Thai dialect (86.67%). In these two dialects the status of /-w-/ as the second phoneme of a cluster is relatively stable. On the contrary, the interpretation of /-w-/ in the Northern Thai dialect varies extensively, ranging from a single initial phoneme (1.54%), a vowel (2.68%), the second phoneme of a cluster (27.2%), a zero (31.8%), and a property of vowel (36.78%). From this variation, it can be predicted that /-w-/ in Northern Thai dialect tends to change its status from the second phoneme of an initial cluster to a (property of) vowel and zero. Wantanee (1983) found two main sub-dialects of Khammuang which match this article. Western and Eastern Khammuang have variations in pronunciation. ‘A village chief’ is pronounced /kɤɛnɨ/ (according to 3.1.1) in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lam Phun but the same word is pronounced /kʰɛnɨ/ in Lam Pang (according to 3.1.5).

3.2 Different Status of /-w-/ and the Stage of Sound Change

Weakening (sometimes called lenition or laziness) is the technical term to explain the language phenomenon which is a relaxation in articulation effort (Hock, 1991). McMahon (1994: 16) has proposed the sequences of weakening sound change whereby the strongest optimal consonants shift to the weakest optimal vowels and then to zero.

**Weakening:** voicing > fricative/glide > vowel > zero

The different status of /-w-/ in reversed utterances seems to neatly fit McMahon’s sequences of weakening change as shown in table 2.

3.3 Evidence to Support Sound Change from Proto south-Western Tai (Proto SWT) to Modern Tai

There are 5 statuses of /-w-/ in reversing and all of these statuses match the development of sound change in Modern Tai, Yuan, Lao, and Siamese, sub grouping from Proto SWT.

| Sequences of Weakening Change | glide | vowel | zero |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|------|
| Status of /-w-/ in Reversed Utterances | /-w/, /w/ | /ɤ/ | /u/ | /ø/ |

Table 2: The Sequences of Weakening Change and the Different Status of /-w-/
Table 3: Comparing /-w-/ Status in Reversing and the Cognates of Modern Tai

| The /-w-/ Status in Reversing | glide | vowel | zero |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|------|
| Proto SWT                     |       |       |      |
| *swaaj                        |       |       |      |
| Yuan                          | /swaaj21/ |       |      |
| Lao                           | /saaj24/ (Yuan) |       |      |
| Siamese                       | /saaj24/ (Lao) |       |      |

*/swaaj/ ‘late in the morning’ is reconstructed from /swaaj21/ in Yuan, /suaaj24/ in Lao, and /saaj24/ in Siamese. Though, */sw/ does not occur in Li (1977)’s Proto Tai reconstruction but */s/ and */yai/ are similar to */swaaj/. Hence the statuses of /-w-/ in reversing is useful to show how the phoneme from Proto SWT developed to Modern Tai.

Conversely, in reconstruction from cognates in many Modern Tai dialects, if the words have the vowel /u(a)/, /u/ should be considered as /-w-/ because this article found that /-w-/ can develop to /u/. The development of /-w-/ from Proto SWT to Modern Tai and the reconstruction of */-w-/ from cognates in Modern Tai to Proto SWT are related as in figure 7 and 8.

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Figure 7: Development of /-w-/  

Figure 8: Reconstruction of /-w-/
Discussion

The results show that the second phoneme of an initial cluster /-w-/ could change to the vowel /u/. This phenomenon consonant > vowel seems unusual because they are different types of sound. The important reason that /-w-/ could change to /u/ is because both of them have the following similar distinctive features:

|   | /w/   | /u/   |
|---|-------|-------|
| -syllabic       | +syllabic |
| +sonorant       | +sonorant |
| +high           | +high    |
| +back           | +back    |
| +round          | +round   |

Table 4: The Similar Distinctive Features of /-w-/ and /u/

Adapted from Schane (1973: 31)

The distinctive features in table 4 show that the main factor of the sound change from /-w-/ > /u/ is internal. All of the distinctive features (based on phonetic characteristics) are similar except ±syllabic feature (based on functional characteristics): /-w-/ has -syllabic but /u/ has +syllabic. Therefore, the second phoneme of an initial cluster /-w-/ could change to the vowel /u/ as in the phonological system in Northeastern Thai. For example, /kwaanj33/ ‘deer’ in the Bangkok Thai dialect is pronounced /kuanj33/ ‘deer’ in Northeastern Thai. So, the change from /-w-/ in Proto SWT to /u/ in Modern Tai is usual.

The variation in the synchronic study can be applied to describe the development in the diachronic study.
The horizontal line (figure 9) represents one point of time. Rotating the horizontal line to the vertical line (figure 10) will represent many points of time, so the first status will occur in the first point of time and the second status will occur in the later point of time.

This article investigates the data like the synchronic study, so the findings can describe the state of /-w-/ in the Thai language at one point in time. Moreover, the variation of /-w-/ status in reversing can be used to support the diachronic study, such as the reconstruction of Proto SWT.

**Conclusion**

The findings of Language Play can be evidence to support the linguistic theory or linguistic phenomena. None of the people who study language play know what the beneficial findings will be until they have finished. Some thought this topic is playful, so research in this field is rare. By the way, the finding of this article can be used (1) to support the stages of sound change hypothesis and (2) to show development of the second phoneme of an initial cluster from Proto SWT to Modern Tai.

**Acknowledgement**

Thanks to Chailert Kijprasert for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.
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## Appendix

| Devised utterances | Reversed utterances | Status | Quantity |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------|----------|
| Bangkok Thai Dialect | | | |
| 1. /kwaan33 naw42/ | /kwaaw42 naaŋ33/ | -w- | 6 |
| | /kwanw33 naaŋ42/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /kaw33 nwaan42/ | ŋ | 1 |
| | /kaw42 naaŋ33/ | ō | 1 |
| 2. /sia24 khwit11/ | /sii11 kwaaw42/ | -w- | 6 |
| | /swiit11 khaa24/ | ŋ | 1 |
| | /sii11 khaa24/ | ō | 3 |
| 3. /kwaan33 khwit11 sia24/ | /kwaaw42 khwit11 saaŋ33/ | -w- | 5 |
| | /kwaaw42 khwit11 saaŋ42/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /kiaa24 khwit11 swaaŋ33/ | ŋ | 1 |
| | /kiaaw42 khwit11 saaŋ42/ | ō | 2 |
| 4. /kroot11 kwaan33 ru24 wen42/ | /kroot11 kwen42 lu24 waan42/ | -w- | 4 |
| | /kroot11 kwen42 lu24 waan33/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /ken42 kwaan33 lu24 woot11/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /kwen42 koot11 lu24 waan42/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /koot11 ken33 lu24 waan42/ | ō | 1 |
| 5. /ya?55 khwit11 ɲəay33 dep42/ | /ya?55 khen42 ɲəay43 dvit11/ | -w- | 4 |
| | /ya?55 khen42 ɲəay33 dvit11/ | ŋ | 1 |
| Northern Thai Dialect | | | |
| 1. /nwaam42 biaw51/ | /niaw51 bwaam42/ | ŋ | 4 |
| | /niaw51 buam42/ | ŋ | 3 |
| | /niaw51 baam42/ | ō | 3 |
| 2. /waay33 cee42/ | /wee42 caay33/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /wee33 caay42/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /cee42 cwaay33/ | ŋ | 3 |
| | /cee33 cwaay42/ | ŋ | 3 |
| 3. /nwaay55 niip11/ | /nwiip55 naay11/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /wiip11 naay55/ | ŋ | 4 |
| | /niiip55 nwaay11/ | ŋ | 1 |
| | /niiip11 nwaay55/ | ŋ | 1 |
| Devised utterances | Reversed utterances | Status | Quantity |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------|----------|
| **Bangkok Thai Dialect** |
| 3. /ŋwaay55 niip11/ | /ŋiip55 naay11/ | ø | 1 |
| 4. /cwaa42 faa55/ | /cwhaa42 faa55/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /cwhaa42 fwa42/ | ø | 2 |
| | /cwhaa42 faa55/ | ø | 1 |
| | /cwhaa55 faa42/ | ø | 4 |
| | /cwhaa55 fwa55/ | ø | 1 |
| 5. /khwan51 ween55/ | /khween51 wan55/ | -w- | 4 |
| | /khween55 wan55/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /kheen55 wan55/ | ø | 3 |
| | /kheen55 wan55/ | ø | 1 |
| 6. /kwen11 daaw51/ | /kwaaw51 den51/ | -w- | 5 |
| | /kwaaw51 den51/ | -w- | 3 |
| | /kawaaw51 den51/ | ø | 2 |
| 7. /lwaas33 sook11/ | /lwook11 saa33/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /lwook11 saa33/ | ø | 4 |
| | /lwaas33 saa33/ | ø | 1 |
| | /lwaas33 saa33/ | ø | 1 |
| 8. /swaam33 ṭaak42/ | /swaak42 ṭaam33/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /swaak42 ṭaam33/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /swaak42 ṭaam33/ | ø | 7 |
| | /swaak42 ṭaam33/ | ø | 1 |
| 9. /twaay33 ?oons51/ | /twoons33 ?aay51/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /twoons33 ?aay51/ | ø | 6 |
| | /twoons33 ?aay51/ | ø | 3 |
| 10. /ywaat11 hŋ24/ | /yŋ24 hwaat11/ | ø | 5 |
| | /yŋ24 huat11/ | ø | 1 |
| | /yŋ24 huaat11/ | ø | 1 |
| | /yŋ24 huaat11/ | ø | 3 |
| Devised utterances | Reversed utterances | Status | Quantity |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------|----------|
| Bangkok Thai Dialect |                      |        |          |
| 11. /nwaam42 kuup11 tho24/ | /nwaam42 kuup11 thaam42/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /n24 kuup11 thaam42/ |        | 2        |
|                     | /ko24 thuup11 nwaam42/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /n24 kuup11 thwaam42/ | y       | 6        |
| 12. /nwaay55 khin24 niip11/ | /nwaay55 khin24 naay11/ | -w-    | 2        |
|                     | /n2ip55 khin24 naay55/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /khin24 niip55 nwaay55/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /niip55 khin24 naay11/ | w       | 1        |
|                     | /niip55 khin24 naay55/ | y       | 2        |
|                     | /niip11 khin24 nwaay55/ | o       | 2        |
| 13. /?waay33 yut24 weens5/ | /?weens5 yut24 waay33/ | o      | 10       |
| 14. /cwa42 biaw51 paa11/ | /cwa42 biaw51 paa42/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /ca41 biaw51 paa42/ | y       | 3        |
|                     | /ca41 biaw51 paa11/ | y       | 1        |
|                     | /ca42 biaw51 paa42/ | o       | 4        |
|                     | /ca42 biaw51 paa11/ | o       | 1        |
| 15. /khwan1 luak42 sook11/ | /khwan1 luak42 san11/ | -w-    | 1        |
|                     | /khook11 luak42 swan51/ | y       | 2        |
|                     | /khook51 luak42 swan11/ | y       | 1        |
|                     | /khook11 luak42 sans1/ | o       | 3        |
|                     | /khook51 luak42 san11/ | o       | 3        |
| 16. /kwen11 chaas3 ?ens1/ | /kwen11 chaas3 ?ens51/ | -w-    | 3        |
|                     | /koon51 chaas3 ?wen11/ | y       | 2        |
|                     | /koon11 chaas3 ?wen51/ | y       | 1        |
|                     | /koon51 chaas3 ?ten11/ | o       | 3        |
|                     | /koon11 chaas3 ?ten51/ | o       | 1        |
| 17. /lwa33 pa55 ce42/ | /lee33 pa55 cwa42/ | y       | 4        |
|                     | /lee42 pa55 cwa43/ | y       | 3        |
|                     | /lee33 pa55 caa42/ | o       | 2        |
|                     | /lee42 pa55 caa33/ | o       | 1        |
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| Devised utterances | Reversed utterances | Status | Quantity |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------|----------|
| **Bangkok Thai Dialect** | | | |
| 18. /swaam33 daaw51 hai24/ | /swaam33 daaw51 haam24/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /swaam33 daaw51 hwaam24/ | ū | 5 |
| | /swaam33 daaw51 haam24/ | ō | 4 |
| 19. /twaay33 ṉak42 mo?55/ | /ṯo?55 ṉak42 mwaay33/ | ū | 2 |
| | /ṯo?55 ṉak42 muay33/ | ū | 1 |
| | /ṯo?55 ṉak42 maay33/ | ō | 7 |
| 20. /ywaat11 fim55 top24/ | /yop24 fim55 twaat11/ | ū | 6 |
| | /yop24 fim55 twaat11/ | ū | 1 |
| | /yop11 fim55 twaat24/ | ū | 1 |
| | /yop11 fim55 taat24/ | ō | 1 |
| | /yop24 fim55 faat11/ | ō | 1 |
| 21. /ṉwaam42 kwen11 mo?55 tho?24/ | /ṉwaam42 ko?24 mo?55 then11/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /ṉwaam42 kwo?24 mo?55 then11/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /ṉwaam42 ko?11 mo?55 then24/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /ṉo?24 kwen11 mo?55 thwaam42/ | ū | 3 |
| | /ṉo?24 kwen11 mo?55 thaam42/ | ō | 2 |
| 22. /ṉwaay55 lwaas33 yut24 daaw51/ | /ṉwaay55 laaw51 yut24 daa33/ | -w- | 3 |
| | /ṉwaaw55 lwaas33 yut24 daa51/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /ṉwaay55 laaw33 yut24 daa51/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /ṉaaw55 lwaas33 yut24 daa51/ | ō | 1 |
| | /naaw55 lwaas33 yut24 daay55/ | ō | 1 |
| 23. /cwaaw42 khii24 sook11 biaw51/ | /cwaaw42 khiiaw61 sook11 biaw24/ | -w- | 3 |
| | /cwaaw42 khiaaw24 sook11 biaw51/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /ciaaw51 khii24 sook11 bwaaw24/ | ū | 1 |
| | /ciaaw51 khii24 sook11 baaw24/ | ō | 5 |
| 24. /khwan51 fim55 phet24 kuup11/ | /khwan51 fuup11 phet24 ḵṉ55/ | -w- | 3 |
| | /khuup51 fim55 phet24 kwan11/ | ū | 1 |
| | /khuup11 fim55 phet24 kuan51/ | ū | 1 |
| | /khuup11 fim55 phet24 kan51/ | ō | 2 |
| | /khuup51 fim55 phet24 kan11/ | ō | 2 |
| Devised utterances | Reversed utterances | Status | Quantity |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------|----------|
| **Bangkok Thai Dialect** |
| 25. /swaam33 cee42 niip11 ween55/ | /swaam33 ceen55 niip11 wee42/ | -w- | 3 |
| | /swaam33 cee42 niip11 wee55/ | -w- | 2 |
| | /steen55 cee42 niip11 waa42/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /seen55 cee42 niip11 wuam33/ | u | 1 |
| | /seen55 cee42 niip11 waa55/ | ø | 3 |
| 26. /twaay33 na?55 4aak42 hin44/ | /twaay33 ini44 4aak42 ha?55/ | -w- | 4 |
| | /tin44 na?55 4aak42 haay42/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /tin44 na?55 4aak42 hwaay42/ | u | 3 |
| | /tin44 na?55 4aak42 hwaay33/ | u | 1 |
| | /tin44 na?55 4aak42 haay33/ | ø | 1 |
| 27. /ywaat 11 chaas3 luak42 ?oen55/ | /ywaat 11 chaon33 luak42 ?aa55/ | -w- | 5 |
| | /ywaat 11 chaon55 luak42 ?aa33/ | -w- | 1 |
| | /yoon55 chaan33 luak42 ?aat55/ | ø | 2 |
| | /yoon11 chaan33 luak42 ?aat55/ | ø | 1 |
| Some informant can not reversed | | - | 1 |
| **Southern Thai Dialect** |
| 1. /khwak22 pay45/ | /khway22 jak45/ | -w- | 9 |
| | /khway45 pak22/ | -w- | 1 |
| 2. /kwaat21 khoom33/ | /kwoom33 khaat21/ | -w- | 6 |
| | /koom33 khaat21/ | u | 3 |
| | /koom33 khaat21/ | ø | 1 |
| 3. /khwak22 huay45 wa?44/ | /khwo?22 huay45 wak44/ | -w- | 7 |
| | /khwo?44 huay45 wak22/ | -w- | 3 |