

ABSTRACT

Vowel and tone change in Phrae Pwo Karen: Internal or external factors

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Pwo Karen is one of the six Karen languages spoken in Thailand. Phrae Pwo Karen is a dialect of Pwo Karen, which is also known as North-eastern Pwo. Pwo Karen speakers in Phrae Province have been settled in this area for a long time. Almost of all of the speakers are bilingual. They can speak Tai Yuan or Kham Mueang Phrae with the exception of some elderly speakers who are passive bilingual. The young generation can also speak Standard Thai very well since they are educated in school. As the language used by different generations can represent variation and change, this paper aims to analyze and compare the acoustic characteristics of the vowels and tones in the Phrae Pwo Karen spoken by three generations.

The data was collected at Khangchai Village in Wang Chin District, Phrae Province. A wordlist of Pwo Karen vowels and tones was recorded directly on to computer using Adobe Audition version 2. 15 female informants were divided into three groups: over 60 years old, 35-50 years old and under 25 years old. The informants were asked to pronounce each test-word three times randomly, with a three-to-five second break between each word. The total number of test tokens was 405 for vowel analysis, and 810 for tone analysis. The fundamental frequencies and formant frequencies were measured using Praat version 5.1.43.

The results show that there are nine monophthongs in Phrae Pwo Karen namely /i, e, ε, i, ə, a, u, o, ɔ/. It is noticeable that front vowels /i, e, ε/ occur very close to each other, i.e., with only a little difference in the tongue height position (F1). Whereas the back vowels /u, o/ occur close to each other but the vowel /ɔ/ appears closely to the vowel /a/. The vowel change can be seen in the 35-50 group and the under-25 group. It was found that the vowel /ε/ moves downward while the vowel /ɔ/ moves upwards in the vowel area.

There are 4 tones, namely, the high tone, mid tone, low tone and falling tone. In the over-60 group, the high tone begins at a high pitch and stays level until the end. The mid tone starts at mid pitch and also stays level until the end. The low tone starts at a mid/low pitch and falls to a low pitch. The falling tone begins at a high pitch and then rises slightly before sharply falling to a low pitch. For the 35-50 group, the acoustic characteristics of the 4 tones are similar to that of the elder group however the high tone behaves differently. The onset of the high tone is lower and rises slightly until the end. The change of the high tone is clearer in the under-25 group. It starts from a mid pitch and rises sharply to a high pitch.

It can be concluded that vowel and tone change in Phrae Pwo Karen may be explained by both external and internal factors. For vowels, the shift of the vowels /ε/ and /ɔ/ may be because of language contact with Tai Yuan or Standard Thai in which both vowels are mid-open. Whereas, the onset shift of the high tone which changes the overall contour shape can be said to be internal change.