Some Textual Evidence on the Tai Sounds
*-ay and *-au

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The Thai classic poem Lilit Phra Law [līlīt phrá lō] has long been regarded as a work of great beauty. In addition to being a beautiful work of art, however, the poem also has important lessons to teach about the Thai literary heritage and also about the history of Thai speech and writing.

Lilit Phra Law is composed in the style known as līlīt, meaning that a combination of verse forms is used. These forms are known as khloong, a set of poetic structures that include rhyme and tone placement constraints, and rāay, a kind of rhymed prose in which each five-syllable hemistich rhymes with the next. The constraints of khloong require rhymes primarily from the ancient A and C tone categories.¹ The rāay form, on the other hand, leaves the poet free to select from the A, B, C, or D tone categories. In addition, the compositional style līlīt, as it was originally conceived, requires that certain stanzas be linked by rhymes and that these rhymes be formed by words from the ancient A tone category. In the 660 stanzas found in most published editions of Lilit Phra Law there are more than 3,000 rhymes, all requiring agreement in the tone, the vowel, and the consonant final, if any, of the words involved.

I have argued elsewhere that Lilit Phra Law, as we know it today, dates from a time prior to the transformation of the language from the former three-tone system into the modern five-tone system and that this has caused considerable confusion about certain aspects of the poem. Modern commentators praise the beauty of the poem, for example, but also criticize certain “flaws” in it, focusing primarily on the so-called thđot 'incorrect' words. One such word is lēn, 'to play', which is spelled vàŋ in the poem as though the word came from the upper part of the C column of the tone sys-

¹ For a detailed discussion of the poetic forms used in Lilit Phra Law and of the tone categories of Thai, see Bickner (1991).
tem, rather than วั, as it is normally spelled in modern Thai writing, indicating an origin in the lower part of the B column. It is said that the poets purposely misspelled these words in order to follow the tone placement rules of the poetic form in which they were working.

The historical facts, however, show that these criticisms, and others based ultimately on the ถุด concept, are groundless and must be abandoned completely. In the case of the word ล่ง, comparative linguistic analysis shows that the spelling found in Lilit Phra Law is historically correct, that the word does belong in the C column, and that it is modern Thai that has made the change, not the ancient poets. Once the modern reader realizes that these seeming "flaws" are actually evidence of changes in the language over the course of time, the text can be instructive in unexpected ways.

The strict rhyme constraints used in the ขล่อง and ร้อย forms help to identify many pronunciation changes that have taken place since the poem was composed, changes that are not directly related to the changes in the tone system. For example, the word วำ 'home' is pronounced and spelled in modern Thai with a short vowel ə than appears in the poem in rhymes with the word ถ้ำว ราม, a title of noble or royal rank. Cognates of the word วำ in other Tai dialects indicate that the long vowel is historically correct (Li 1977: 181) and that the vowel has been shortened in modern Thai. The rhymes found in Lilit Phra Law indicate that the change had not taken place at the time that the poem was composed. In this paper I would like to discuss briefly evidence found in the poem that may shed some light on a change in the sound system of Thai, involving words pronounced in modern Thai with a short ə vowel followed by a glide ỳ.

Modern Thai orthography commonly uses two separate vocalic symbols to represent the sound -ay in word-final position. The symbols are Ɂ, known as มะย malay, and Ʉ, known as มะย muan. Comparative studies of the Tai family of languages show that มะย malay and มะย muan once represented two separate sounds, *-ay and *-au, respectively. These sounds have fallen together in modern Thai, and in many other Tai dialects, but they do remain separate in some members of the family today (Sarawit

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2 The combination of มะย ฮาน ทากاط and the consonant letter ยค ยัก also represents the sound -ay in modern Thai, but this spelling does not appear in the manuscripts of the poem. Words that are written this way in modern Thai are generally written in the manuscripts with มะย malay or occasionally with มะย malay plus ยค ยัก as in the modern spelling for the word ทาย (หม) "Thai". The combination of มะย ฮาน ทากاط and ยค ยัก is evidently a very recent invention in Thai orthography.
1973: 66). Although the symbols now represent the same sound in spoken
Thai, they cannot be used interchangeably in Thai spelling. For example,
the word cay 'heart' is spelled with the symbol mây múan (ฃ), and spelling
it with mây malay would be considered an error. Similarly, the word 'go' is
spelled with mây malay (ร), and the use of mây múan in spelling the word
would be considered incorrect.

Precisely when the two sounds represented by these symbols may
have coalesced is an open question, although it certainly took place after the
invention of the writing system. Li points to the existence of a separate
vocalic symbol for *-au in modern Thai as evidence that the coalescence of
*-ay and *-au took place “late in Siamese” (Li 1977: 288-289). However,
in the published editions of Lilit Phra Law and even in the manuscript
copies of it held in the National Library collection in Bangkok, there are
many rhyme links that mix words spelled with these symbols and thus seem
to suggest that the sound had fallen together prior to the composition of the
poem. For example, the words pay (ห) 'to go' and nay (ห) 'in' appear
together in rhymes, as do the words dây (ถ) 'to get' and hây (ห) 'to give'.
Also, the emphatic sây, spelled either สะ or ช in modern Thai, appears in
rhymes with hây (ห) 'to give', klây (ถ) 'near', dây (ถ) 'to get', and yây
(ย) 'large'.

These rhymes seem to suggest that the sounds *-ay and *-au had
already fallen together at the time that Lilit Phra Law was composed, that
is, prior to the time of the tone splits. This would mean that the poets of
the time, like poets working in modern Thai, did not distinguish between
the sounds represented by these symbols and that the obsolete orthographic
distinction was retained by the scribes who recorded and copied the poem. A
careful study of this point, however, including a close comparison of the
printed editions of the poem and the old manuscripts, is most instructive.

There are fifty-one complete or fragmentary manuscript books samût
khây (สุขัย) in the National Library collection.3 The manuscripts are
said to date from the middle years of the last century.4 Only one bears a
specific date, and that is 1860, and one or two seem to be more recent, pos-

3 I am indebted to the director and staff of the National Library of Thailand for
their assistance in the preparation of microfilm copies of the manuscripts of
Lilit Phra Law.

4 See the brief, and not entirely satisfying, discussion of the point by Chanhit
Krásaesin (1954: 105-106). Also, acquisition information provided for some of
the manuscripts in the National Library collection indicates that they were
obtained after the Krásaesin study was completed.
sibly completed toward the end of the century. Several others, however, may be older than originally supposed, although a detailed study of the point remains to be done.

The question of the exact age of the manuscripts aside, they are not in and of themselves an infallible source for information on developments in the sound system, partly because the extant copies must have been made long after the changes took place, and partly because they are not entirely consistent. Many of the books appear to have been prepared by more than one scribe, and in some cases they each follow slightly different orthographic conventions. Two of the manuscripts do not differentiate at all between máy malay and máy múan, even as part of the orthographic system, using instead of either symbol another one that resembles both. In this compromise symbol, the final stroke goes to the left and down slightly, neither rising like máy malay nor turning in a circle like máy múan. All the rest of the manuscripts, however, do maintain a distinction between the symbols. Despite the occasional inconsistencies, it is clear that most of the scribes were aware of both symbols and endeavored to be consistent in using them.

The manuscripts are useful primarily in resolving wording problems. Frequently, the printed editions of the poem suggest that a rhyme link exists between an *-ay and an *au, but an examination of all of the manuscript versions shows alternate phrasings that solve the problem. In some extreme cases the suspect rhyme exists in only one or two manuscripts, while eight or nine more have a second wording that solves the problem. Thus, at least part of the problem is the result of uninformed editing of the text for publication. A critical edition of the poem is badly needed to help in resolving not only the *-ay versus *-au problem but also many others of a similar nature.

In the printed editions of Lilit Phra Law there are 353 rhymes formed by words with either máy malay or máy múan. Of these rhymes, 313 are completely unambiguous. That is, both words, or all three words in the case of the three-position khloor rhymes, can be shown to have used the same proto-vowel and final. In 227 of these rhymes *-ay words are involved, and in eighty-six of them *-au words are involved. There is some repetition of the words that form these rhyme links. In the raay passages, for example, the words, tháy (tʰa) 'lord' and dày (tʰa) 'to get' form eight of the eighty unambiguous *-ay links, and the words cay (tʰa) 'heart' and day (tʰa) 'whatever' form seven of the thirty-one unambiguous *-au links. We will