Lao pronoun usage as reflected in post-1975 literature

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0. Abstract.
Traditional Western analyses of the Lao pronominal system have tended to use Western categories of pronouns and Western definitions of what a pronoun is as the basis for decision-making about what constitutes a pronoun in Lao\(^1\). A preliminary analysis of written dialogues in Lao fiction (written by Lao for Lao) indicates that the most frequently used noun substitutes in dialogues are not such Western-determined “standard” pronouns, but rather pronominally used kinship terms which show not kinship (except in cases where actual familial relationships obtain), but rather aspects of the social relationships between the speakers.

1. Introduction.
This paper reflects the results of the initial phase of a developmental research project on Lao pronouns, kinship terms, and their use. This is the first of a series of papers which will be based on this data; here I have chosen to focus on the use of standard personal pronouns and the use of kin terms used pronominally in dialogues, quotations or direct speech found in a sample of the materials surveyed. As an initial limit for the data to be discussed in this paper, I have chosen to look at the use of personal pronouns in written dialogue as presented in modern Lao fiction. Thus the vocabulary items discussed in this paper were obtained by recording Lao personal pronouns and Lao kinship terms used pronominally found in written sources. However, the study will eventually incorporate spoken materials and other forms of written material as well.

Work on pronouns and their usage has been carried out by a number of well-known linguists who specialize in various languages of the Tai family. Recently Hartmann (1990) has investigated the use of pronominal strategies in Tai Dam
poetry. Studies of Thai (Siamese) pronouns have been done by Cooke (1968), Campbell (1969), and most recently Hoonchamlong (1991).

Jeremy Kemp (1984: 57) notes that the Thai vocabulary has a remarkable range of pronouns; then he raises the question “why do these [pronouns] apparently not provide an adequate range of substitutes?” Kemp then comments on Thai “kin categories and their use” as follows:

The basic features of Thai kin and affine terminologies are well known and the minor variations noted between and within regions need not detain us. What is not well recorded are the ways in which people actually use their terminologies. Practice obviously varies according to personal, sometimes idiosyncratic, factors as well as with geographical and status differences. Social contexts are significant for their effect on the manner in which participants react to the structural properties of the terminologies themselves.

Casson (1981: 230) notes,

Critics have argued that, while practitioners of formal semantic analysis have been able to specify the genealogically-defined meaning of kinship terms, they have not been able to account for the social meaning communicated by the actual use of these terms in context.

As we look at the personal pronouns and kin terms found in the Lao data, we will explore the ways these words are used by the fictional speakers in the social contexts their authors have devised for them.

For participants in Lao society, social distance is something which one has to determine early on in a conversation in order to select the appropriate pronouns to use in the ensuing interaction. Many of the pronoun determining factors known to those who speak Thai are shared by those who speak Lao. For instance, Thai null pronominals are dealt with in Yumphaphann Hoonchamlong’s 1991 dissertation; the behavior of this phenomena in Lao appears to be essentially the same and thus will not be discussed here. However, the
Lao pronoun system is not exactly parallel to the Thai system, but needs to be looked at in its own light.

Two obvious categories emerge when we look at the modern Lao pronoun system. They are the standard pronouns and the kinship system vocabulary used pronominally. Lao personal pronouns have been discussed by Hospitalier (1937), Nginn (1956), Gething (1976) and Morev, et al. (1979). Lao kinship terms are discussed briefly in Barber (1979).

As a beginning of my study of the uses of standard pronouns and pronominally used kinship terms, I decided to begin with modern Lao literature as a way to learn how Lao writers portrayed the speech of Lao speaking to Lao. By looking at what native speakers of the language viewed as "natural speech", I can begin to get some information about the use of Lao pronoun and kinship terminologies before I design my data collection procedures for the oral phase of the study.

For the standard first person singular pronouns (essentially equivalent to 'I' in English), Lao, like English and contrary to Thai, makes no distinction between male and female speakers (khọy, khänɔɔy, khąaphacăw, etc. may be used either by men or women to refer to themselves). It is age, social status, degree of intimacy, and role in the speaking situation (among other things) which help determine the first person pronoun choice (and most personal pronoun choices) for Lao speakers.

2. Lao pronouns in written dialogues.

Volosinov (1986:117) says that "the basic tendency in reacting to reported speech may be to maintain its integrity and authenticity; a language may strive to forge hard and fast boundaries for reported speech." Traditionally, written Lao literature does not appear to have had clear, distinct visual conventions for marking off a passage as dialogue or reported speech. This is apparently beginning to change. A number of styles have been used to indicate direct speech, dialogues, or quotations in the modern Lao writings surveyed. In the post-1975 material, the most common forms found were: (1) to use a colon, drop down a line, and then begin the dialogue with a dash; or (2) to place the quoted or dialogue material in quotation marks (a typological device borrowed from Western print conventions). For an example of style (1), see sɔɔŋ fàak faŋ (1987:7), and for an example of style (2) see dian khâaŋ thii séelabām (1982:49).
Another important point made by Volosinov (1986: 116) is that “the author’s utterance, in incorporating the other utterance, brings into play syntactic, stylistic, and compositional norms for its [the reported speech’s] partial assimilation...” In other words, the dialogues from which the personal pronouns we will discuss were obtained must be understood to be dialogues that were embedded in an authorial context. Since at this point in the study, we have little information about the authors other than their names, we cannot begin to consider the age, education, social status, etc. of the authors when we discuss this material.

Since 1975 there has been a great increase under the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic of publications in the Lao language; for instance, print runs of novels and short story collections may range from 5,000 to 10,000 now, while prior to 1975 the runs often ranged from as low as 200 to 2,000. The significance of this figure is two-fold: first of all, there are many more books available now for the general public to read and secondly, the writings of one author will be read by many more people than a pre-1975 author could possibly have hoped for.

Out of the wide variety of printed fiction available, sections from two of the more recently published novels were investigated; however, for this paper only examples from the 1987 novel have been chosen for discussion.⁴

The personal pronouns found in the 1987 data were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>Pers</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>khọy</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1Sg</td>
<td>(‘I’, speaking about interaction with capitalists)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khānọoy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1Sg</td>
<td>(‘I’, in dialogue with older woman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>(‘I’, in a “letter” written to an older woman in the story)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khāw</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3?</td>
<td>(the builder ‘he’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phūakkhāw</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3Pl</td>
<td>“they”, referring to a couple)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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