

LAO FINAL PARTICLES

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Lao has a wealth of final particles. They are one-syllable words which usually occur utterance finally but some may occur alone and a few combinations occur quite often. They seem to function in three ways: as question words, imperative words, or words of special emphasis. They may indicate something about the speaker's feelings or attitude or something about the relationship between two speakers.

Lao is comprised of many dialects. The discussion here is based on the speech of Vientiane, although there is variation among individuals as well as variation from one part of the city to another.

Phonologically the final particles differ somewhat from words in other grammatical categories. Although some follow expected phonological rules of Lao, most of them have variants of different tone and vowel length depending on emphasis or nuance of meaning. Usually there is a short, high variant contrasting with a long, high, rising-falling variant. In general, the long variant is sweeter, more beseeching, softer, or less abrupt. Since some final particles have tones on a pitch or contour not usually found in other Lao words, it is difficult to write them in Lao and know exactly what tone is intended. Although their meanings are sometimes elusive and they are subject to individual variation, the final particles are essential for competence in spoken Lao. In general, these particles are acceptable on all but the most formal speech occasions. Although the number of final particles is certainly not endless, I doubt if the following list is complete.

The transcription makes use of the following inventory. Vowels are doubled when long.

p	t	c	k	ʔ	i	y	u
ph	th		kh		e	ə	o
b	d				ɛ	a	ɔ
m	n	ñ	ŋ		ia	ya	ua
f	s			h			
w		j					
	l						

↗	23	low rising	sǎj 'where'
↓	22	low	caj 'heart, mind'
↗	45	high rising	sáj 'fishtrap', phét 'peppery'
↔	44	mid level	sāj 'to put', phēt 'gem'
↘	21	low falling	sâj 'intestine', saât 'mat'
↘	53	high falling	sàj 'to use', saât 'nation'

The two falling tones are glottalised. Words with low tone are said with the low rising tone by most Vientiane speakers giving only five tones. When necessary here, the approximate phonetic value of the tone of a final particle will be indicated by the number scale alone and not by a diacritic.

1 bɔɔ, bɔɔ̃ This is usually considered the "yes-no" question word rather than a final particle. It may be considered neutral as to attitude or emphasis.

láaw si paj bɔɔ 'Is he going?'

2 bɔɔ ↗ 454 When said with this tone, the question word signals doubt. The speaker can hardly believe it.

láaw si paj bɔɔ ↗ 454 'Is he going? (I doubt it.)'

3 bɔ̃? When said alone, this means something like 'Oh, I see, is that so?'. The speaker shows he has heard what has been said.

láaw si paj bɔ̃? '(You said) he is going?'

4 bú? This is probably a contraction of 'bɔ̃ huò' 'don't know'.

láaw paj sǎj bú? 'Where he went, I don't know.'

5 dáj This serves to contradict a statement or action.

láaw paj dáj 'He did go too!'

kin dáj '(That's for you!) Eat it!'

6 dé.dee ↗ 454 As a question particle, this means 'and...?, what

about...?, how about...?'

lǎaw si paj, cǎw dé 'He's going; how about you?'

It is also used with the meaning 'let me remind you that..., understand that...'.
 lǎaw bōō paj dé 'He didn't go, (you know).'

7 dē~dēē, nē~nēē As a question particle, this means 'who all, what all, etc.'.
 mǐi phǎj dēē 'Who all is there?'

sāj nǎŋ dēē 'What all do you put in?'

It is also used in polite requests.

khōō nǎmtaan dēē 'May I have some sugar?'

át patuu hāj dēē 'Please close the door.'

8 dǎ~dǎē ㄤ 454 This is used with expressions of encouragement, pardon, warning and others to emphasise the sincerity of the statement, or to be sure one is heard.

sođk dii dǎē ㄤ 454 'Good luck, now!'

paj dǎ 'I'm going, you hear?'

9 dōđk This means 'absolutely, indeed, on the contrary'.

bōō mǐi dōđk 'There isn't any, absolutely.'

paj jūū dōđk 'Oh, indeed I am going!'

10 hý~hyy ㄤ 454 Alone this indicates puzzlement or wonder. As a question particle, it means 'I wonder, can you tell me'.

lǎaw paj sǎj hý '(I wonder, do you know) where he went?'

11 kō?, kō?~kōō? This is a question particle used to ask that a previous statement be repeated.

an daj kō? 'What did you say (again)?'

lǎaw paj sǎj kō? 'Where is it (you said) he went?'

12 kō~kōō ㄤ 454 This is used to remind, turn the attention to something or bring up a previously mentioned subject.

kin khāw jūū kō 'We were eating (you see)...'

lyǎŋ pỳm kō 'Oh, about the book...'

13 lā This usually follows a "yes-no" question and demands a definite answer.

lǎaw paj mēēn bōō lā 'He went. Am I right or not?'

cǎw si paj bōō lā 'Well, are you going or not?'

14 mē, mē~mēē ㄤ 454 This is a request particle meaning 'go ahead with it, don't hesitate'. It is used when the speaker urges someone to do something he wants to do but is afraid to or dares not to.

paj mē 'Go ahead go (I think you should)!'

- 15 nā This introduces a new subject or draws someone's attention.
 sǎn nā láaw si paj bɔɔ? 'In that case then, is he going?'
 ni'i nā cǎw si paj bɔɔ? 'Say, are you going?'
- 16 naa ㄟ 454 This can be used to plead or beseech. It is also used when making excuses or giving explanations.
 paj naa ㄟ 454, bɔɔ don naa ㄟ 454 'Oh please come along; it won't take that long!'
 fǒn tók naa ㄟ 454, cǎŋ máa saǎ 'It was raining so of course I was late.'
- It may indicate that the speaker has not been immediately understood.
 phūu nǎn naa ㄟ 454, phūu suŋ suŋ naa ㄟ 454 'That one, the tall one, (don't you see!).'
- 17 nɔ̃?~nɔ̃, nɔ̃?~nɔ̃ This is sometimes used alone to indicate agreement with what has been said, such as when something is said and one says 'Isn't it the truth!'. As a question particle, it requests agreement.
 paj nɔ̃? 'Lets' go all right?'
 mēēn nɔ̃? 'That's right, huh?'
- 18 nɔ̃~nɔ̃ ㄟ 454 This means 'I wonder' and is used when asking oneself especially after having forgotten.
 láaw paj sǎj nɔ̃ ㄟ 454 'I wonder where (he said) he was going?'
- 19 sá~saa ㄟ 454 This is a request particle meaning 'let it be done or decided'. The longer variant is often used to plead. The short variant may sound curt or impatient depending on the situation.
 paj sá 'Leave!'
 'Go ahead and leave. (You don't have to stay.)'
 jūu saa ㄟ 454 'Oh, please stay!'
- 20 thɔ̃? This is a request particle meaning 'let's...'.
 paj thɔ̃? 'Let's go!'
- 21 tī This is used like No. 3 'bɔ̃?' to show one has heard what has been said.
 láaw si paj tī 'He's going, (you say).'
- 22 tǐ~tii ㄟ 454 This means 'surely, quite sure' but always indicates some reservation or slight doubt or uncertainty.
 paj tǐ 'Sure, let's go, why not. (In response to the question: "Shall we go?")'
 laaw si paj tǐ 'He's going I'm quite sure.'
 laaw si paj tii ㄟ 454 'Of course he's going.'
- 23 tuā~tua ㄟ 454 This is a question particle meaning 'of course?'.
 láaw si paj tuā 'He's going of course?'