Transcription as standardisation: The problem of Tai languages

N.J. ENFIELD
University of Melbourne

Grant EVANS
Hong Kong University

Scholars involved in cross-cultural studies are always faced with problems of translation and transcription of languages and of cultural meanings. Many of these problems are not easy to solve, but they do need to be addressed in order to enhance our analytical and communicative abilities. Working in Laos, in both anthropology and linguistics, we have continually encountered the problem of romanisation of Lao language, since no official system for romanising Lao exists.

We can take as an example of a quasi-official Lao romanisation ‘system’ the transcription of place-names in the recent Atlas of the Lao PDR, published by the Lao National Geographic Department, Vientiane 1995. This document reveals a deliberate attempt to change some previous conventions, such as the former Louang Phrabang (or Prabang), to now Louang Phabang, where the politically potent letter ‘r’ (see Enfield 1999) is not used. This decision with essentially political and cultural motivation is rationalised with reference to the spoken language, given that ‘r’ is not colloquially pronounced in Lao. However, the principle of following pronunciation is not applied by the authors of the Atlas in the case of Vientiane, where the long-accepted and highly conventionalised spelling is retained, despite its usual pronunciation (especially in English) deviating markedly from spoken Lao (Viang Chan).

In contrast to this Lao government document, let us consider the position taken by Martin Stuart-Fox in his recent History of Laos (Stuart-Fox 1997:4-5). While Stuart-Fox recognises the need to deal with inconsistencies in Lao romanisation, where conventional transcription of Lao words often departs from their native pronunciation, he doesn’t pursue this consistently. For example, he invokes a principle of following spoken language in using Viang Chan instead of the highly conventional Vientiane. On the other hand, he retains the letter r in the more historically conventional romanisation of Luang Phrabang, despite r not being normally pronounced in Lao. Stuart-Fox bases this latter decision not on any linguistic principle (such as pronunciation) but merely ‘on the urging of Lao friends’.  

1The issue of the letter r in Lao orthography and in transcription of Lao is a loaded one, and a position on its inclusion or not in any case cannot be politically or socially neutral. See Enfield 1999.
Both of these examples raise the issue of appeal (or not) to official convention in the absence of any formally established romanisation system. Such a system was introduced, for example, by the Chinese government when it decided to officially conventionalise (i.e. for international usage) Pinyin spellings of Chinese names and place names. In this case, it was a clear-cut matter to adopt such revisions as *Beijing* (formerly *Peking*) and *Mao Zedong* (formerly *Mao Tse Tung*), since there was now an internationally effective official guide to such usage. In the two isolated attempts to deal with the problem of romanisation of Lao mentioned above, there is no such official guide, and we thus see opposite decisions being made, resulting from essentially identical and similarly inconsistent logics, which each adopt some conventionalisations and make some exceptions.

While Pinyin as an unambiguous guide to transcribing Chinese provides a model of consistency and standardisation, it greatly suppresses variation across the languages we know as 'Chinese' generally. Being a state-produced system, Pinyin is motivated to a large degree by the requirements of a nation which houses considerable ethnolinguistic diversity, and yet faces the challenge of maintaining political and cultural unity. In the example of Laos, similar challenges are faced by the state, but, -- as in Thailand and Cambodia nearby, -- the state has not provided an official system of romanisation. Naturally, one therefore encounters widespread and chronic inconsistency in writings about Laos.

What concerns us in this essay is not just Lao, but the Tai language family as a whole. There is of course no unified 'Tai state'. So, there is no state in whose interest a variation-suppressing transcription system could be brought into service. We thus find interesting the recent attempt by Oliver Raendchen to tackle the problem of inconsistency in the transcription of Tai languages, in his 'Remarks on the need for a uniform transcription system including all Tai languages and dialects' (Raendchen 1997). Importantly, Raendchen restricts his interest to Tai and to the problems of communication within what is assumed to be a Tai universe, in which both Tai and outsiders participate. We argue that this assumption of a Tai universe, and the attempt to bring order to it, actually reproduces the logic of statehood, since one important

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2Of course, there was some resistance to this. Note also that the process was not total, and that in this case the term *China* remains, despite the country name being *Zhōng Guó* in Pinyin. Another example of a fairly sacred convention is *Hong Kong*, despite its Cantonese pronunciation as *Hēanggōng* as transcribed in the modified Yale system used in Matthews and Yip (1994), and its *Pinyin* transcription as *Xiāng Gāng*. 
project for the state is to suppress variation, and thereby highlight unity. A cover-all transcription system for related, but unlike, languages can be an effective tool in achieving this -- an ironic outcome for scholars whose aim is (presumably) to study the variation that is found. Even with the best of intentions, without extreme sensitivity the premise of a journal like ‘Tai Culture’ - in which Raendchen 1997 appears -- can create an institutional logic parallel to the logic of a nation state.

1. Raendchen’s proposed ‘New Tai’ transcription system

Raendchen (1997) proposes a single, uniform transcription system which is intended for transcription of ‘all Tai languages and dialects’ (see Raendchen 1997:10-11).³

Consonants: b, d, f, h, j, k, kh, l, m, n, ng, nj, p, ph, r, s, t, th, w
(with combinations like kw, khw, tj, ts, ch…)

Vowels: (long and short)

Monophthongs: a, aa, i, ii, u, uu, ü, üü, ö, öö, o, oo, ö, öö, e, ee, ā, āā

Diphthongs: au, aao, oi, ooi, öi, ööi, öi, ööi, ui, uui, eô, eeô, āö,
äö, ia, iaia, ua, uua, ai, aai

Triphthongs: iao, uai, üai

Tones: (none given)

Figure 1. Raendchen’s proposed ‘New Tai’ system

We identify a number of problems with Raendchen’s system, as he proposes it, both in errors of fact and analysis. A factual error firstly is the claim that the Tai vowel represented here by ü is phonetically similar to the German sound represented by the same symbol (p. 11, 12). The German vowel is a high front rounded vowel, the Tai sound is a high back unrounded vowel; the two sounds are at opposite extremes on two of three common phonetic parameters distinguishing pure vowels. A second error concerns the claim that Tai languages do not have a voiced velar stop (i.e. [ɡ] in contrast with [k]; p. 10). Counterexamples to this claim may be found among Tai languages of Northern Vietnam; see, for example, Ross (1996).

³In much of our discussion, we will consider the system as it applies to Lao, since that is the language we mostly work in.
Among Raendchen’s analytical choices, we would question firstly the omission of a symbol for the glottal stop, and secondly the excessively large vowel phoneme inventory. There may be language-internal grounds in various Tai languages for arguing that the glottal stop is totally predictable (e.g. always occurring before a syllable-initial vowel and after a syllable-final short vowel), but there is both strong pragmatic motivation (i.e. to remind readers when it is to be pronounced), as well as more principled reasons for including a symbol for the glottal stop, especially the argument for its natural status as a consonant, among others like $p, t, k$. The glottal stop is most naturally classed with other consonants for the purposes of calculating lexical tone, which in languages such as Lao and Thai is a function of a number of parameters including initial consonant, vowel length, and final. With regard to Raendchen’s excessive inventory of complex vowels, we can apply Ockham’s Razor, reducing diphthongs from 20 to 4, and eliminating ‘triphthongs’ altogether.\footnote{Of course, we are talking about choices in phonological - not phonetic - analysis, so any phonetic difference between pairs like [uj] and [ui] is irrelevant.} This can be done by using $j$ and $w$ (already provided in Raendchen’s ‘stock of consonants’ (p. 10)) as syllable-final consonants. Raendchen’s diphthongs ending in $i$ and $u$ (e.g. $ui$, $aai$, $au$) are then simple vowels with consonant endings $j$ and $w$, respectively (i.e. $uj$, $aaj$, $aw$; structurally analogous to $uk$, $aak$, $ak$). The only four diphthongs required are $ua$, $uwa$, $ia$, and $auw$. (See below for further comments on $auw$.) R’s ‘triphthongs’ are structurally resegmented as $uai$, $uaj$, $iaw$.

An inexplicable assertion made by Raendchen (based on his subjective appraisal that there are ‘more important factors’) is that tone marking can be left out of the transcription of Tai languages. Raendchen asserts without basis that vowel length is ‘more essential’ than tone-marking (p. 11), but there are no ‘degrees of importance’ when it comes to the role of phonological contrast, namely the distinction between lexical items in a language. The only principled argument we can find in his discussion concerns the technical problem of fitting overstriking tone-marking diacritics over the (also overstriking) vowel diacritics in the system proposed (p. 12).\footnote{We find it unusual that simple technical matters should get in the way. At the end of the 20th century computers have opened up to us possibilities of using not only customised transcription systems, but also a luxury not available to earlier scholars of being able to easily insert the native orthographies into our texts. This is a practice that should be encouraged.} But the standard Vietnamese writing system, for example, has long been able to cope with this challenge. We suggest that claims of the kind that ‘most of the [previous Tai language transcription] systems show that there is no need for tone-marks’ (p. 9), could be symptomatic of an insensitivity to the importance of tone which can be traced to the