A COMPARATIVE SKETCH OF WHITE, BLACK AND RED TAI

These notes are offered with affection and respect to Chao Khun Anuman in the hope that they will be of interest to him and to his friends and pupils. They deal with three languages of the Thai or Tai family spoken outside Thailand, in sections of North Vietnam and Laos. Since this area is not now accessible, the research has been conducted among refugees in South Vietnam and in Vientiane, during the course of a year of field work on Tai languages supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies of the University of Michigan, and the Center for Southern Asian Studies of the University of Michigan.

What will be attempted here is a comparison of the sound systems of these three languages with each other and with Siamese. (To avoid confusion, the standard Thai language of Bangkok will be called Siamese, and the family as a whole will be referred to as Tai.) In making this comparison, certain basic principles and assumptions underlie our work.

It is assumed in comparative linguistics that when we speak of a family of related languages what we mean is that these languages are the divergent continuations ("descendants" or "daughters," if one likes the figure of speech) of a single former (or "parent") language. The system of sounds of any language is constantly changing, and changes in the sound system of a language are regular in the sense that they affect all words containing the sound or combination of sounds that undergoes change. Now when two or more languages that are related in the way just described undergo different changes in the course of time, the result is that sets of words that had the same sound in the original parent language will come to have different sounds in different related languages, but because the sound changes are regular, all the members of a set of words that originally had the same sound will in one language have one sound and in the other related language another sound, so that when we discover regular sound correspondences in related languages we may infer that we are on the track of a single sound or sound combination in the parent language.

If we have data from enough related languages, and if we work hard enough, we may be able to reconstruct the sound pattern of the parent language even though it is no longer available for direct study. In the case of the Tai family of languages much progress has been made toward this goal by scholars in Europe, America, and the Far East. In this sketch of White Tai, Black Tai, and Red Tai, however, we would be foolish to attempt very much in the way of reconstruction of the parent language of the Tai family, because these three languages are very closely related to each other, and not very distantly related to Siamese; those who work on the reconstruction of the parent language (Proto Tai, as it is called) utilize data from a much broader area, including Shan and Ahom to the west, Nung and Tho to the east, and the various Tai languages spoken in China.

If we find two words in related languages that have similar meanings and can be shown, through the kind of study of regular sound correspondences just described, to go back to one and the same word in the parent language, then we have what are called "cognates." The main purpose of the present study is to work out the sound correspondences among the languages so that we will be on firm ground in identifying cognates. That is when the fun begins; once we have proved that two words are true cognates, we can explore the differences in meaning and use in the different languages.

Another basic principle is that linguistic study must deal primarily with speech. For White Tai and Black Tai there are old writing systems, and of course also for Siamese, but this is regarded as irrelevant. Sound systems and sound changes are just as systematic and orderly in languages for which there are no writing systems as in languages with a long literary tradition. We will find sound changes in Red Tai (for which there is no writing system in the dialect here studied) that are just as systematic as any in the other languages, and Red Tai has preserved without error some distinctions of the parent language which Siamese, in spite of its writing system, has lost.

White Tai is spoken in North Vietnam in the town called Lai Chao in Vietnamese and məŋ^{4} lay^{5} in White Tai, as well as at the town called məŋ^{4} tɛ^{4} farther north. The people call themselves and their language tay^{4} dɔn^{2}. The word dɔn^{2} is the usual word for 'white' in White Tai. Two excellent studies of this language have been published. The dictionary by Georges Minot, *Dictionnaire tay blanc-français avec transcription latine*, BEFEO 40 (1940), pp. 1–237, uses a rational transcription from which it is possible to make out the exact phonetic shape of each word, and is also excellent in its scope and its accuracy. The more I use this book, the more reliable I find it. A fine study on modern principles of the sound system of White Tai has been made by Miss Jean Donaldson of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, *White Tai Phonology*, Hartford Studies in Linguistics 5, Hartford, Conn., 1963, 50 pages. Minot also has a two-volume work on White Tai, mostly pedagogical and devoted to modern terms. There is also a *Cours de langue 'tai* by Edmond Chabant and Diew-Cingx Gnimz (no place, no date), 187 pages; this turns out to be a selection from Minot's dictionary of 1940, with a handful of additions, retranscribed in the complicated system of romanization devised by François Martini and described by him in "Romanisation des parlers 'tay du Nord Viêtnam," BEFEO 46 (1954) pp. 555-572. *I am greatly indebted to Miss Donaldson for making arrangements for my wife and* myself to spend some three weeks during July, 1964, in the White Tai settlement at Tung Nghia, near Dalat in South Vietnam, and for giving me a great deal of instruction and assistance in White Tai. All of the White Tai words quoted in this paper, however, are from my own field notes. Many of them are from the speech of the Lai Chao people of the household and neighborhood where we lived. Most of them, *however, are from the speech of Dao van Thuong (thəŋ^{6} in White Tai), who assisted* me as interpreter in working on other more remote Tai languages spoken by other refugee groups in Tung Nghia, using White Tai in speaking to me and Vietnamese in speaking to the others. He is from məŋ^{4} tɛ^{4}, but has lived

since he was a small boy among the Lai Chao people at Tung Nghia, to many of whom he is related. There are said to be differences between the dialects of mən^{4} lay^{5} and mən^{4} tɛ^{4}, but I have not been able to pin them down; for example, it is said that the small frog called khet^{2} at mən^{4} lay^{5} is called khwet^{2} at mən^{4} tɛ^{4}, but I have heard the pronunciation khwet^{2} used by a woman from mən^{4} lay^{5}. Minot's dictionary was written at mən^{4} tɛ^{4}, but seems to be an accurate lexicon of the speech of mən^{4} lay^{5} as well.

It should be noted that there are other forms of Tai to the east and northeast that are also sometimes called White Tai. It is some of these that are described in François M. Savina, *Dictionnaire tày-annamite-français* (Hanoi, 1910), 488 pages. These other dialects have the same tone system as the White Tai which we are describing, but differ greatly in initial consonants.

The chief center of the Black Tai people is Son La in North Vietnam, to the south of the White Tai area. This town is called m̀aŋ^{4} laa^{5} in Black Tai, and the people and language are called tay^{4} dam^{1} or tay^{4} lam^{1}. Some of my Black Tai material was collected at Tung Nghia, South Vietnam, in visits with a Black Tai family from m̀aŋ^{4} piaŋ^{4}, which is 44 kilometres from Son La in the direction of Lai Chao, that is, to the northwest. Much more of the data come from my Black Tai teacher in Vientiane, Bac cam So (bak^{5} kam^{4} sɔ^{1} in Black Tai), who in the course of 16 hours of intensive work was able to give me several thousand words and phrases, all clearly explained. He is from a place called baan^{3} ciaŋ^{4} di^{1}, 35 kilometres northwest of Son La, and slightly to the east of Tuín Giao. These two dialects, as we shall see below, differ slightly in the pronunciation of one tone, but more particularly in their treatment of the consonants d and 1 and of b and v.

Black Tai was described long ago by Édouard Diguet, *Étude de la langue tai* (Hanoi, 1895), 88 and 192 pages. He used an impressionistic method of transcribing Black Tai sounds in French spelling. The result is quite baffling, but reexamination of his book after having heard the language spoken shows that his spelling of the vowels and consonants is consistent, and therefore decipherable. For the tones he is quite hopeless; words that occur more than once in the book seldom have the same tone mark, and careful study shows that he failed completely to discern the fifth tone. The dialect appears to be that of Son La (called m̀aŋ^{4} laa^{5} in Black Tai); it seems to differ from the two dialects which I have studied only in the treatment of the consonants d and l and of b and v. More on this subject later.

Red Tai is shown on linguistic maps of Southeast Asia as being spoken in various places in North Vietnam, but the dialect which I have studied is from just inside the Lao border, in the province of Sam Nuea, at a place called in Red Tai baan^{3} naa^{4} ŋon^{1}, located north of the town of Sam Nuea 80 kilometres by road, or 50 kilometres by foot, in the direction of Son La. The Red Tai term for the language and people is tay^{4} lɛɛŋ^{1}. My data on Red Tai are much less extensive than for the other two languages, and as regards vowel length, as we shall see later, it may be that my transcription will have to be revised. I have included Red Tai here even though I have worked on it only a few hours, because it has interesting points of similarity to and differences from White Tai and Black Tai.

The names White Tai, Black Tai and Red Tai are labels which have only limited linguistic usefulness; as in many other parts of the Tai speaking area, the names by which speakers of particular dialects are known are not so important as the analysis of the dialect's sound system and identification of it geographically. One hears various theories as to why these names White, Black, and Red are used. In the case of White Tai the usual explanation is that the women wear white blouses. It is true that they do, and their white blouses distinguish them so vividly from other neighboring people that the explanation would seem to be the right one. As regards the Black Tai, some say that they are so called because the women wear black blouses. Again, this is true, but there is also an explanation sometimes heard that they are called Black Tai because they come from along the Black River (Rivière Noire). The Red Tai explain that they are so called because they came "centuries" ago from a place called mɨaŋ^{4} lɛɛŋ^{1} ('Red Town') in Vietnam. Others deny this, and claim that the Red Tai came from along the Red River, but there is strong evidence in favor of the 'Red Town' theory in J. B. Degeorge, "Proverbes, maximes et sentences tays," *Anthropos* 22 (1927), pp. 911-32, and 23 (1928), pp. 596-616, who collected his material at Yên Khuong (Muong Deng). The dialect represented in his material turns out to be very close to the dialect represented in my data. It is accurately recorded for the most part, but for many words there is an occasional inconsistency in the marking of the tones, and this inconsistency is just serious enough that one cannot make out for sure whether or not this dialect has a tonal distinction not found in any of the other dialects described here.

Whether White Tai, Black Tai, and Red Tai ought to be called three different languages or three dialects of one language is debatable. Each differs from the others in definite, identifiable ways; on the other hand, they are certainly mutually intelligible, and much closer to each other than say, some dialects of what is called "English" or "German." Although we will speak of them as three languages, because the three language names exist, it might be wiser to call them three dialects. This problem arises throughout the Tai speaking area, from Burma to North Vietnam, because transition is for the most part gradual.

In all that follows, the abbreviations W, B, and R will be used for White Tai, Black Tai, and Red Tai respectively, and S for Siamese. Proto Tai, the assumed prehistoric parent language of the family, will be abbreviated PT. As regards phonetic symbols, they will be explained as they come up, where possible in terms of Siamese sounds; for the most part, symbols are used in accordance with general practice.

The languages under consideration, like all other languages of the Tai family, have their sounds arranged in syllables. Each syllable has an initial consonant or consonant cluster, and a vowel or diphthong as its nucleus; there may or may not also be a final consonant. Each syllable also has a tone. Our comparison will consider the sounds in each of these syllable positions in turn. It should be noted that the aim is only to distinguish the various sounds in each position in the syllable. This is sufficient for our purposes. Further study of any one of the languages would lead to a more refined analysis, since in connected speech there are modifications and additional linguistic features. Nor is the transcription used here to be regarded as useful as a practical orthography. It serves merely to identify the distinctive vowels, consonants, and tones of the syllables as pronounced in isolation.