

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN COMPARATIVE TAI LINGUISTICS

Preface

This essay, in a shorter version, was originally prepared at the invitation of Professor Russell N. Campbell for presentation before the Thai-Lao group at the University of California, Los Angeles, in May 1967. During that same month a resumé of it also was presented at the University of Washington and at the University of California, Berkeley. Questions and comments on all three of those occasions have been very helpful in the task of revision and expansion of the original paper for publication.

All the data cited were collected during two field trips to Southeast Asia, the first in 1964-65 under the sponsorship of the American Council of Learned Societies and of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies and the Center for Southern Asian Studies of the University of Michigan, and the second in the summer of 1966 under a National Science Foundation grant.

Several friends have read the manuscript at various stages. Among those whose criticisms have been especially helpful are William G. Boltz, Robbins

Burling, James E. Dew, Gordon B. Downer, and Thomas
W. Gething.

Languages and dialects of the Tai family are found across a broad expanse of Southeast Asia. In Thailand and Laos they are socially and politically dominant; elsewhere, in Burma, Assam, North Vietnam, and southern China, they are spoken by minorities.

In the extreme west, in Assam, we find the important but now extinct literary language Ahom. In Burma there are the well-known Shan dialects, with closely related varieties of speech in adjacent parts of Assam and Yunnan. Lue is spoken in Sipsongpanna, in southern Yunnan; to the north of it there are scattered islands of Tai speech, which do not differ greatly from Shan and Lue.

In Thailand the speech of the central plains and Bangkok forms the basis of the standard official and literary language, which nowadays is widely known throughout the country because of its use in administration, education, the press, radio, and television. Besides this prestige language, however, Thailand has a wide variety of regional and local dialects, which blanket most of the northern, northeastern, and southern parts of the country. In Laos inhabitants of the more populous areas speak dialects of Lao, found also in northeastern Thailand.

Tai languages and dialects are found across the entire northernmost part of North Vietnam, from White, Black, and Red Tai in the northwest to Tho and Nung in the northeast, with intermediate varieties usually designated by place names. Closely related

to the Nung dialects of North Vietnam are the Tai dialects of southern Kwangsi.

In all the areas mentioned above, the ethnic name "Tai," or "Thai," is widely used by the people in identifying themselves and their language, with the exception of a few special local names such as Lue and Lao and Tho and Nung. The two spellings "Tai" and "Thai" derive from the fact that the initial *t* of this word is aspirated in Siamese and Lao, but unaspirated elsewhere. Scholars vary as to which of these two spellings they prefer; one widespread practice, followed here, is to use the spelling "Tai" to designate the family and "Thai" to refer to the language of Thailand, also known as Siamese.

Scholars are agreed in regarding all the languages and dialects mentioned thus far, that is, those found in Assam, Burma, southern and southwestern Yunnan, Thailand, Laos, North Vietnam, and southern Kwangsi, as belonging to the Tai family. For Haudricourt these constitute the Tai family proper.¹ For Li they constitute two of the three branches which make up the Tai family, the Central branch including Tho and Nung and closely related dialects in northeastern North Vietnam and adjacent parts of southern China, and the Southwestern branch including all the others.²

There is another important group spoken farther north, in Kwangsi, throughout the southern part of Kweichow, and in the eastern part of Yunnan, with some small spillover across the border into North Vietnam. This group is included by Li in the Tai