

A SPECTRUM OF PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES IN TAI

The aspect of comparative phonology and reconstruction in the Tai family that has interested scholars the most has been the rather complicated correlation between initial consonants and tones. The generally accepted view is that the parent language of the family had a smaller number of tones than any of the modern languages and dialects, and that each of the latter has undergone, at some time after separating from the others, a splitting of tones, which in each case was conditioned by the phonetic nature of the initial consonants at the time of the split. Each daughter language or dialect has differed from others in precisely which original tones underwent splitting, in the number of tones resulting from each earlier tone, and in the conditioning factors at work in each instance. It is, of course, this variety in the details of the tonal splits that makes comparative Tai phonology possible at all; if all branches had made the same changes, we would hardly be in a position to apply the comparative

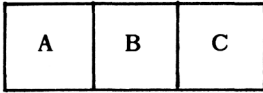
method and infer the changes or the structure of the parent language.

This paper will deal with the phonetic features that seem to have conditioned the tonal splits in the various languages and dialects. Most of the facts utilized here are not new. What is believed to be new is rather a notion that a systematic principle seems to underlie the entire phenomenon.

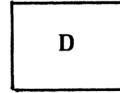
In order to explicate this suspected underlying general principle, it will be necessary to review a variety of specific examples of the various types of tonal splits, and their conditioning factors in the initial consonants, in a number of languages and dialects of the Tai family.

Many, though not all, scholars in this field assume that the parent language, Proto-Tai, had three tones, whose phonetic nature most of us do not attempt to describe, on syllables ending in a voiced sound--a vowel, semivowel, or nasal. In addition there were checked syllables, ending in a voiceless stop **p*, *t*, or *k*, in which the parent language showed no tonal distinction at all: these may well have been originally toneless syllables. Many of us use the symbols A, B, and C for the three contrasting tones and D for the tone (or lack of tone) of the checked syllables.

Nonchecked
syllables



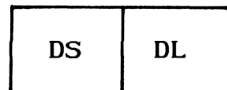
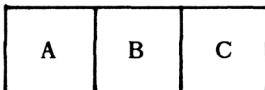
Checked
syllables



Tones of Proto-Tai

The student of comparative Tai, when confronted with a new language or dialect of the family, has to discover just how in this case each of the original tones A, B, and C has been split. In the checked syllables he often finds a somewhat more complicated situation, because here the tonal splits are usually found to have been conditioned not only by the phonetic nature of the initial consonants, as in the case of tones A, B, and C, but also by syllable length. Syllables with a short vowel followed by original final **p*, **t*, or **k* are found usually to have undergone different splits, or at least to have ended up with phonetically different tones, from syllables ending with a long vowel or a diphthong followed by one of these stops.¹

Because of the special behavior in checked syllables, with vowel length playing a part in the conditioning in addition to the phonetic nature of the initials, we must divide the D box into two.



Turning now to specific examples of the types of tonal splits that have occurred in various daughter languages and dialects, the most common variety is a

simple binary split all across the chart, conditioned, it is believed, by a simple distinction between voiceless vs. voiced initial consonant at the time of the split. For example, White Tai, spoken at Lai Chao in the extreme west of North Vietnam, today has six tones, the historical sources of which may be represented as follows.²

	A	B	C	DS	DL
Voiceless initials at time of split	1	2	3	2	2
Voiced initials at time of split	4	5	6	4	4

Historical Sources of White Tai Tones

White Tai examples are as follows.

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| xaa ¹ | leg |
| paa ¹ | fish |
| ʔaw ¹ | to take |
| naa ⁴ | ricefield |
| si ² | four |
| kay ² | chicken |
| baaw ² | young man |
| naj ⁵ | to sit |
| haa ³ | five |
| kaw ³ | nine |
| baan ³ | village |
| maa ⁶ | horse |
| hok ² | six |
| pet ² | duck |