YAY, A NORTHERN TAI LANGUAGE
IN NORTH VIETNAM

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The language here called Yay is spoken in a number of relatively small areas in the extreme North of North Vietnam, adjoining or near the Chinese border. It is the language referred to on linguistic maps and in the literature as Nhang or Nyang, from the Vietnamese term for it, or as Yang, from the pronunciation of the Vietnamese name in some of the Tai languages of the area, or as Giay, which like our Yay is the word (yay in the transcription explained below) used by the speakers themselves for the language and the people.

My data, obtained from refugees in South Vietnam and in Laos, come partially from the town of Cha Pa (sa1 pa2 in Yay), but mainly from Muong Hum (mian4 hum1), both in the province of Phong Tho, until 1947 part of the province of Lao Kay.

The aims of this brief sketch will be first, to describe the phonological structure of Yay, including illustrative examples which will make it immediately apparent to students of the Tai languages that Yay is a member of the Tai family; second, to demonstrate that, by the criteria set up by Fang-Kuei Li, Yay is a member of the Northern group of Tai.

1) My research in Yay is part of a year of field work in Tai languages (1964–1965) sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and by the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies and the Center for Southern Asian Studies of the University of Michigan.

The Cha Pa data were provided by Lu a Phang (lu1 pa1 faan1) at Tung Nghia, South Vietnam, in July, 1964. Arrangements for me and my wife to stay and work at Tung Nghia were made by Miss Jean Donaldson of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

The Muong Hum data were provided by Nung To Phang (nun5 to1 faan1) at Vientiane, Laos, in September, 1964. His employer, Mr. J.E. Mast, principal of the American School there, made it possible to work during regular daytime hours.

Fang-Kuei Li's Wu-Ming glossary is accessible to me through the kindness of Professor Frederick W. Mote and his wife, who translated all the Chinese glosses into English for me.

languages; and third, to examine the position of Yay with respect to some of the other Northern Tai languages on which information exists in the literature.

As with other Tai languages, the phonological pattern of Yay is based on the syllable, in which we find distinctions of tone, initial (consonant or consonant cluster), nucleus (vowel or diphthong), and optional final consonant.

On free syllables (those with final vowel, semivowel, or nasal), Yay has six tones:

1 – level, slightly lower than mid: hun¹ ‘rain’;
2 – low level: hun² ‘a tracing, copy’;
3 – rising: hun³ ‘hardened, solidified’;
4 – high, with a slight rise and fall toward the end: hun⁴ ‘person, human being’;
5 – falling: hun⁵ ‘to seek, search’;
6 – higher than mid, with a slight rise toward the end: hun⁶ ‘very hungry’.

The above numerical order is arbitrary, suggested by the order sometimes used in numbering the etymologically most frequently equivalent tones in other Tai languages of the area. There is no native ordering (and no native orthography). My Muong Hum informant, when we began running each syllable through the six tones to see which ones actually occur, fell into the habit of using an order 1 4 6 5 2 3, based on his habitual way of writing Yay in Vietnamese orthography.

On checked syllables (those with final p t k), tones occur which may be identified on the basis of phonetic similarity with tones 1 2 3 5 of free syllables: rok¹ ‘bird’, rok² ‘a loom’, rok³ ‘six’, rok⁵ ‘outside’. Very infrequent on checked syllables are tones 4 and 6: ŕaap⁴ ŕaap⁴ or ŕaap² ŕaap² (sound of a duck quacking), ŕaat⁴ ŕaat⁴ (sound of a gander honking), fik⁶ or fik³ ‘vacuum bottle’, fuk⁶ (a man’s name).

Initial consonants are:


Voiceless aspirated stops. ph th ch kh: pha⁵ ‘to mate (of animals)’, thi¹ ‘aluminium’, cha⁵ ‘to inspect’, khi¹ ‘to look down on, despise’. These sounds, though not rare, are noticeably less frequent than other consonants, and in many cases the speakers identify forms containing them as loanwords. Sometimes variant forms occur with and without
aspiration: phaaw⁵ or paaaw⁵ 'to plane (wood)', thiaw⁵ kin¹ or tiaw⁵ kin¹ 'a spoon for eating'.

Voiced stops. b d: ba² 'shoulder', da² 'to revile, scold'. So extremely rare as to be considered marginal to the system is: g ([g] or [ɣ]): gek³ 'to draw or scratch a line'.

Nasals. m n ñ y: ma¹ 'dog; to come', na⁴ 'ricefield', ña¹ 'grass', ya⁴ 'sesame; elephant's tusk'.

Sonorants. y y r l: ya⁵ 'paternal grandmother; wife; woman', vaay⁴ 'water buffalo', ra¹ 'to seek', lin⁴ 'monkey'. For the r of Muong Hum, Cha Pa has [ŋ]. For y, speakers from both places often have [z] or [ʒ] when pronouncing words very distinctly in isolation; this appears to be due to Vietnamese-like 'teaching' pronunciation which disappears in normal speech. The same phenomenon occurs among educated speakers of many other Tai languages of North Vietnam.

Voiceless spirants. f θ s h: fi⁴ 'fire; drunk', ði² 'four', sa⁶ 'knife', ha³ 'five'.

Initial clusters occur of consonant followed by [w] and [y]. Those with [w] are ěw kw ɣw yw hw: ěwan¹ 'a thorn', kwa² 'to pass', ɣwaak⁵ 'to turn the head', ɣwaay⁵ or ɣwaay⁵ ywe⁴ or ywuay⁵ 'soft and rotten', hwa² 'to melt (gold, silver)'. For the phonemicist this [w] and also the final semivowel of certain diphthongs are clearly to be united with the initial labiodental v, but for comparative purposes I prefer to limit myself to identifying the contrasts in each of the syllable positions, recognizing that a valid phonemic analysis would require a much more thorough investigation, including stress and other features of connected speech, than is needed for comparative Tai studies. I therefore write v for the initial labiodental but w for the second element in these clusters and for the similar final semivowel.

Clusters with y are by py my: bya⁶ 'coarsely woven (of cloth)', pya¹ 'fish', mya⁴ 'to spread (plaster, cement)'.

There are six vowels, three high: i i (high back unrounded) u, and three low: e [æ^-] a o [ə^-], and three centering diphthongs transcribed: ia ia ua. A seventh vowel, mid central ə, is not infrequent when final, but extremely rare with final consonant. Examples:

\[ \begin{align*}
    m i^4 & \text{ to have} & k i^2 & \text{ to saw} \\
    n u^4 & \text{ rat, mouse} & p e^4 & \text{ a raft} \\
    m a^6 & \text{ horse} & m o^2 & \text{ new} 
\end{align*} \]
ria⁴ to lick  ria⁴ ear
rua¹ boat  cho¹ car

Only the vowel a shows a distinction in length, and only before a final consonant: ṭay¹ ‘to cough’, ṭaay¹ ‘goiter’, tay² ‘chair’, taay² ‘to differ’. Otherwise all vowels are phonetically long when final, and of indeterminate and varying duration when medial.

Final nasals are m n ɲ: ram⁶ ‘water’, ran¹ ‘to see; road’, piaay⁴ ‘a country’.

Various diphthongs occur which are analyzed as consisting of vocalic nucleus followed by final w or y. Those with final w are iw iaw ew aw aaw: kiw³ ‘mother’s younger brother’, liaw⁵ ‘to play’, hew¹ ‘green’, ṭaw¹ ‘to take’, haaw¹ ‘white’. Those with final y are iay uy uay ay aay oy: kiay⁴ ‘son-in-law’, uy² ‘because’, luay⁵ ‘to strike’, may⁶ ‘wood’, kaay¹ ‘to sell’, ṭoy⁶ ‘sugarcane’. In addition there is a diphthong transcribed aį, in which į represents the semivowel corresponding to high back unrounded i: baji¹ ‘leaf’, ṭaį⁵ ‘sweet’.

Final voiceless stops of checked syllables are p t k: Paap² ‘to bathe’, mir¹ ‘sharp-pointed knife’, saak⁵ ‘rope, cord’.

I am well aware that the day has long since passed when one might respectfully impose such an elementary phonological description as the foregoing upon a conference like this, but as Tai scholars know, one of our chief handicaps in comparative Tai linguistics is the lack of such basic information for many languages. It is needed, in particular, for the investigation of the matters which we will now look into.

Yay clearly belongs to the Northern group of Tai languages, for which Fang-Kuei Li has established various lexical and phonological distinguishing criteria, in his two papers on classification by vocabulary, in which he finds lexical and phonological criteria for dividing the Tai family of languages into three groups, and in his paper on ‘The Jui dialect of Po-ai and the Northern Tai’, in which distinctive phonological characteristics of languages of the Northern group are listed. ³) Wulff and Haudricourt have also discussed these matters, but for our purposes it seems simplest to concentrate on Li’s very clear and explicit criteria.

First as regards vocabulary, Li finds that certain words occur in