Pronominal Strategies in Tai Dam Poetic Discourse

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Abstract

A segment of a Tai Dam (Black Tai) poetic narrative, the tale of Khun Terng is examined from the standpoint of pronominal strategies employed. Southwestern Tai languages do not exhibit an exclusive category of pronouns to indicate addressee, addresser, or referent. Pronoun substitutes include the zero form, kinship terms, names, titles, and, especially in the written mode, epithets. Pronominals in older written texts are of comparative-historical interest, and discussion includes references to other languages within S.W. Tai as well as to Strecker's (1984) reconstruction of Proto-Tai pronouns.¹

Introduction

The text under study here is an anonymous Tai Dam (Black Tai) narrative discourse written in a style known to students of Siamese literature as râay or râay yaaw ('long râay'). The râay form has been aptly described as "poetic prose." Line length typically varies between 7-11 syllables, with the rhyme of the final syllable of a line linked to one of the early syllables of the succeeding line. Alliteration and assonance are heavily employed to pack the poetic space of the text. In older texts, tonal rhymes based on Proto-Tai tone categories (A, B, C, D) can also be shown. The râay yaaw is a popular form used in the Jataka tradition of "Greater Laos."² It is an ancient poetic style shared by the Tai Dam with their Tai Lue and Lao neighbors. In fact, a longer, "Old Lao" version of the story being studied here was located by the author in the Thai National Library in 1985. The story, a founding myth, is important to the Tai Dam and the Lao for a number of reasons, not the least of which derives from the fact that both versions are

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masterpieces of imaginative literature that deserve to be translated for a wider audience.

In translating the text, one of the first challenges is coming to grips with who is who, who is talking, and who is being talked about—that, is pronominal strategies. Before going deeply into that matter, however, we shall discuss what is known of pronouns in contemporary Tai Dam speech, and the speech of other dialect areas in the near geographic region.

Contemporary Lao-Tai Dam Personal Pronouns

In the Tai Dam-English, English-Tai Dam Vocabulary Book (Baccam Don et al. 1989), we find the following personal pronouns, noting (p.7) that "some of the lexical entries reflect the influence of Laotian upon the Tai Dam community they represent." The Lao-Tai Dam interviewed by the dictionary compilers had lived in Laos after fleeing the traditional homeland of the Tai Dam in the Son La region of Vietnam. Later we shall compare this array with the Tai Dam personal pronouns cited by Strecker (1984) in his reconstruction of Proto-Tai pronouns, citations which more likely reflect older Tai Dam usage in Vietnam. We shall also compare these two varieties of Tai Dam with Lao of Vientiane and Phu Thai of Nakhorn Phanom for the light they shed on the changes within the dispersed Tai Dam speech community.

Table I: Lao-Tai Dam Pronouns
(adapted from Baccam Don et al. 1989)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>Polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>ku1</td>
<td>khɔy3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>mɯŋ4</td>
<td>caw3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>man4 ('he, she, it')</td>
<td>pʰən5 ('he')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>Polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td></td>
<td>haw4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>su1</td>
<td>pɯŋ4-caw3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussing the array of contemporary Lao-Tai Dam pronouns, we note that there is a division along lines of +/- familiarity in the first and second person, the "I/you" axis. In the first person plural, the division is between the inclusive vs. the exclusive "we." In the third person, the plural category marks a distinction between a definite and indefinite "they." (The form pɯŋ5 appears to me to be a Lao-ism and will be compared to Vientiane Lao and Phu Thai of Nakhorn Phanom later.) If one were to eliminate the familiar vs. polite category— and the extraneous Lao borrowing pɯŋ5 'he' (only)—the list of pronominals would be unique monosyllabic forms divided along the lines of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular and plural, not unlike the Aiton forms recorded by Diller below.

Proto-Tai and Older Tai Dam Compared with Ahom and Kam Muang

Strecker's (1984) reconstruction of Proto-Tai pronouns illuminates changes within Tai Dam itself (the Lao-Tai Dam vs. the older Vietnamese-Tai Dam speech communities) and changes from Proto-Tai to two other dialects in the northern reaches of Southwestern Tai.

Table II: Proto-Tai Pronouns Compared to Ahom, Kam Muang, and Tai Dam (adapted from Strecker 1984)

1st Per. sing:*kuuA/*kauA
   Ahom /kau/
   Kam Muang /kuu4/
   Tai Dam /kuu1/ (p. 26,33)  
1st Per. dual excl.:*raaA
   Kam Muang /həa4/
1st Per. pl. excl.:*pruuA
   Kam Muang /tuu1/
   Tai Dam /tuu1/ -fuul [sic]
1st Per. pl. incl.: *rauA
   Ahom /rau/
   Kam Muang /hau4/
   Tai Dam /hau4/

2nd Per. sing: *mawA/*mau/
   Ahom /mau/
   Kam Muang /maw4/
   Tai Dam /maw4/ (p. 36)

2nd Per. pl: *sau
   Ahom /faw/
   Kam Muang /suu1/
   Tai Dam /suu1/

3rd Per. sing: *minA/*mawA
   Ahom /man/
   Kam Muang /man4/
   Tai Dam /man4/ (p. 48)

3rd Per. pl: *khrAau
   Ahom /khu/
   Kam Muang /khau1/
   Tai Dam /khau1/

   T.D. /sau1, sau2/²

Aiton Pronouns

Diller (MS) lists a simple six member system for Aiton, a Tai language of Assam, that deserves comparison with Tai Dam. The differences are simply person and number. He mentions that "honorable forms, some in -caw2, are available." A guess would be that caw2 is an innovation that has crept into Aiton, just as it has into Lao Tai Dam speech. Strecker (1984) reports that the origin of caw2—as a pronoun—is unknown. Its appearance in Lao-Tai Dam and Aiton seems to indicate that it is a change that is being taken up readily in other Tai dialects in more northerly SW Tai.

Table III: Aiton (Assam) Pronouns
(adapted from Diller MS.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>kaw1</td>
<td>haw1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>maw1</td>
<td>su3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>maw1</td>
<td>khaw3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vientiane Lao Pronouns

Gething (1976) provides a very comprehensive list of Lao pronouns. To such dimensions such as familiar (intimate) vs. polite (formal), inclusive vs. exclusive, definite vs. indefinite (vague), singular vs. plural, he adds the social determinants of age, sex, status, and solidarity, information lacking from our Tai Dam data. His list of Lao pronouns is more extensive than the list of Tai Dam pronouns, where, clearly, sex of the speaker is less relevant, as is age, status, and solidarity—except for whatever can be inferred from the familiarity of the speakers. At