THE TONAL SYSTEM OF CHIN FINAL STOPS

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Introduction: sources and problems

- Bawm-English dictionary, draft manuscript (S.L. Pardo 1968), including examples which allow reconstruction of the tones from recorded pitch levels/contours. Difficulty: in first position nearly all syllables are pronounced in the level pitch, irrespective of the tone. Tones to be reconstructed: 1) low, 2) high.

- Lai-English dictionary, draft manuscript (K. Lian Cung n.d., last revision 2001). Difficulty: the original version has no tone marks. I made a version for my personal use, integrated the above mentioned Bawm material with tone marks, and added further tones on the basis of the following sources. In both cases some adjustments were necessary, the principles of which will be mentioned below. Still, the results need to be checked.

- J.H. Lorrain’s Lushai-English dictionary (1940) with tone marks added by A.S. Khawlhring (1976). A few minor errors (inconsistencies) are obvious, but not serious. Difficulty: Verbal Form II (in brackets after Form I) is shown only in case the tonal difference requires another spelling. Otherwise we have but one entry with but one tone (= Form I). Sometimes, however, Form II of the same verb appears in some compound. Though the spelling remains the same, the syllable bears another tone mark. Form II tones may appear on verbs in verbal constructions (noun + pronominal particle + verb).

Reason: Lorrain indicated the pronominal particle by inserting /"/ or /\, but due to the purely verbal equivalents in English it has become common in the languages of the Chin group (I use “Chin” as a common term for Lushai, Lai, etc.) to treat these constructions without particle insertion as “verbs” though they are actually pronounced (and used) as nominal constructions (noun + attribute). The possibility of using the infinitive preceded by “to” in English nominal constructions also veils the difference.

The consequences of this practice are already apparent in Lorrain’s dictionary, in that under a single entry (same spelling) both transitive verbs and their past participles (both as adjectives and verbs) may be listed, plus possibly some nouns. Both past participle and noun, however, have a
different tone (Form II) which distinguishes both meanings but goes unheeded in the spelling, and thus also in the Chin peoples’ conception of their grammar.

This fact may help to explain why Chin speakers tend to confound English “Form II” (ending: -ed or its equivalent) with Form I (the simple verb).\(^1\) This problem is the more remarkable since the Chin languages in the past made their Form II in much the same way as English or German, viz. by adding something like a final -t. In Lushai and Lai this -t is still visible in Form II for verbs with Form I in tone 1 (flat) and open vowel. With open vowel and tone 2 it changed to -k; after tone 1 and final nasal or lateral it changed to tone 2, etc. (see below).

For comparative purposes I used a reorganized version of R.A. Lorrain’s English-Maraa dictionary (1951) with tone marks added by a Siaha Committee (1998) and the word list given by E. Henderson for Tedim (1965).

In the following text “F1” will stand for “Form I”, “t1” for “tone 1”, and similarly for Form II, tones 2, 3, 4 and final glottal stop (ʔ), so that, for instance, “F2 t2” will stand for “Form II tone 2”, “F2 tʔ” for “Form II with final glottal”, etc. In our examples t2 will be marked /ʔ/ (in Bawm) or /ʔ/ (in Lushai), the final glottal will be written /h/ (the conventional spelling in Lushai and Lai), and t1 will go unmarked.

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These initial remarks already imply two hypotheses: A) Lai is a tonal language, B) all verbs have two forms: Form I and Form II.

**Regarding A:**

Already more than 30 years ago my Bawm-Lai informant told me that his language (unlike Lushai, Mru, Khumi and Marma) was not a tonal language. But he agreed that it had pitches, like any language. He was fortunately able to transform them into strokes, and we soon found minimal pairs where these “pitches” were decisive in distinguishing different meanings and grammatical functions.

Again, the author of the Lai dictionary, 30 years later, wrote me (I have never met him, he is living in Falam) that he knew nothing about tones. I confronted him with some minimal pairs for which I knew the tone must be different. His answer: “Yes, there are differences, but there is no use and no way to record them, since different people pronounce them differently.” No

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\(^1\) This tendency may be strengthened by the fact that “Form II” in Lai (Kathol and VanBik 2000, but not in Lushai, Chiangte 1993) has to be used in ergative constructions as well. These might be rendered by an English passive construction (with English F2) but then would require (contrary to Chin) an exchange of subject and object.
doubt: differences in phonetic realization of tones do exist. Nevertheless they basically remain the same and can be identified as such. But if people from different regions come into prolonged close contact they may indeed run into difficulties with their tonal realizations. I came to know a Bawm lady who grew up in a village with a mixed Bawm and Paang (= Pângkhua) population. In Paang t2 is pronounced low (as in Lushai), while in Bawm it is pronounced high. As a result this lady pronounced all t2 syllables flat (that is like t1), but she used (Lushai) t4, which otherwise merged with t1 in Bawm.

Already 30 years ago, I opined that in order to proceed we would need a larger data basis. I helped myself to more data on Maraa, but until recently it was quite common for Lai speakers from Hakha to maintain that their language had no tones, and this conviction was even shared by such an eminent linguist on Chin as F.K. Lehman (personal communication 1998). The first Lai speaker from Hakha (D. Cung Bik Ling) whom I could contact in 1997 shared the same opinion. Still, he soon revised it, and from him I learned that whenever the Lai of Burma have to write their names in Burmese script, they use Burmese tone marks, since otherwise their names “would be pronounced wrongly”. You see the paradox: when you use Latin letters, the existence of tones is denied; when you use Burmese letters, tone marks have to be added!

To be sure, not all Lai share this opinion. My best “witness” of recent times was a distinguished person from Lawngtlai (Southern Mizoram) who contacted me about a Lai dictionary, and who called – to my great surprise – the tonal system “the distinguishing feature of the Lai language”. Hence a dictionary without tone marks would be no true Lai dictionary! (Hmun Hre, personal communication 1993). But I did not need these witnesses, even if the Lai unfortunately have forgotten one of their national heroes: Pau Chin Hau (see Census of India 1931), who invented a new Chin script, because the Latin spelling offered by the missionaries did not represent tonal differences.

My conclusion: the educated elite, due to their contacts with people from different areas (and their single-minded belief in the Latin spelling system) may indeed have lost their ability to identify and to use consciously the traditional tonal system. In reality, Lai always was and still is a tonal language, and tones are still the basic means of distinguishing, e.g., present and past participles or verbal nouns. If it were not so, there would be an abundance of homophones and new means of differentiation would have to be used. There must have been

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2 For Zahao-Lai the existence of three tones had already been established by Osburne 1975. However, her dissertation seems to have escaped the notice of many people. I admit to having been one of those and have to excuse myself for not considering her work here.

3 This strict adherence to the ordinary roman alphabet even leads them to a reluctance to indicate vowel length in the orthography.
a process of replacement which, however, is not discernible for Lai. (More on this topic below.)

To explain my inferences, I have to state a fundamental fact. Even though Lushai has 4, Lai, Maraa and Tedim have 3, and Bawm has but 2 tones, in the overwhelming number of cognates the tone remains basically the same. However, each of these distinctive tones may be realized quite differently in the different languages (and most probably – at least for Lai – even in different dialects) and may show different historical developments, including merger with another tone. On the basis of these differences in realization we may reconstruct some aspects of the history of the language, of the distinctive tones, and even of single syllables. We may, e.g., identify certain syllables as loans, even though the informants may consider them to be inherited vocabulary.

The following table provides a survey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lushai</th>
<th>Tedim</th>
<th>Lai</th>
<th>Bawm</th>
<th>Maraa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t1</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>mid</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t2</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>falling</td>
<td>rising</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t3</td>
<td>rising</td>
<td>rising</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t4</td>
<td>falling</td>
<td>rising</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, only Lushai has 4 tones; Tedim, Lai and Maara have 3; Bawm has merely 2. For Tedim Henderson actually recorded 5 tones, apart from those mentioned also high and low – but the latter are conditioned (see below). As can also be seen, t3 and t4 merged in all languages except Lushai and Lai – but in many cases Lai *t3 is still pronounced high like *t4; the conditions need further clarification (Olawski and VanBik 2000). Let me add that “low” does not always mean the same thing, in Lushai and Lai it may imply a slightly falling tendency. In Maraa (my own data) this tendency is so remarkable that I might better have called it “falling”. I did not do so, because “falling” in Lushai means a “high-mid” contour (Chhangte 1993), quite different from the low-falling in Maraa. In Bawm there is a very conspicuous high-low falling tone, but I have not discussed it, since it is nothing but a conditioned “allotone” of t1 (Löffler 1972).

There are some deviations from the regular correspondence. In my view they are conditioned by the final, e.g. open vowels and final laterals. In this paper, however, I’ll tackle the problem of syllables with a final stop (normally an occlusive) only. (These syllables are sometimes called “checked”, although I prefer to call them “stopped”.) The reader may expect me to provide first of all a phonological explanation for the apparent divergence in the realizations of what a comparative analysis easily shows to represent the same proto-tone. I