

THE SOUND SYSTEM OF LAI

Nurit Melnik

University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

Lai is a language that belongs to the Naga-Chin-Kuki branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. It is spoken by approximately 100,000 speakers in two regions in the world, Chin State in Burma and Mizoram State in India.

My informant is Kenneth Van-Bik, a native speaker of Lai. Kenneth is 33 years old. He grew up in Haka, Chin State, Burma, where Lai is spoken. He lived there until the age of sixteen, when he moved to Rangoon. In Rangoon he spoke Burmese, a language which he learned as a second language at school.

The following analysis is based on a lexicon, containing approximately 300 words, which I elicited from Kenneth, and on additional data taken from the STEDT database. In the first section I provide an inventory of the phonemes and allophones of Lai, specifying their distribution and plotting the consonants in a chart that displays their place and manner of articulation. In the discussion section I focus on a number of issues that I believe are significant for an account of the sound system of Lai.

AN INVENTORY OF THE PHONEMES OF LAI

The phonemes of Lai are presented in Table 1 (consonants) and Table 2 (vowels). Tables 3 and 4 illustrate each phoneme, usually in both initial and medial position, along with Lai lexical examples, with allophones and environments also specified.

	<i>bilabial</i>		<i>labiodental</i>	<i>dental</i>	<i>alveolar</i>		<i>velar</i>	<i>glottal</i>
<i>plosive</i>	p	b		t	ʈ	d	k	ʔ
<i>plosive (asp.)</i>	p ^h			t ^h	ʈ ^h		k ^h	
<i>nasal</i>	ɱ	m			ɳ	n	ŋ	ɴ
<i>trill</i>					ʀ	r		
<i>fricative</i>			f	v		s	z	
<i>lat. appr.</i>					ɬ	ɮ		

Affricates

\overline{ts}	$\overline{tʃ}$	$\overline{tɬ}$	$\overline{tɭ}^h$
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Table 1. The consonants in Lai by place and manner of articulation.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> i, ii u, uu e, ee o, oo a, aa </div>		
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> — ui ei oi, ooi ai, aai </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> iu — eu ou au, auu </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> ie ia ua iau uai </div>

Table 2. The vowels of Lai.

Table 3. The consonants in Lai: allophones and distribution.

Phoneme	Allophones	Environment	Examples
/b/	[b]	*_{σ, #}	ban ‘sticky’; sau’bul ‘hammer’
/p/	[pʼ]	_#	kaapʼ ‘shoot’
	[p]	elsewhere	pa’kʰatʼ ‘one’; tam’pii ‘many’
/pʰ/	[pʰ]	*_{σ, #}	pʰaʔl ‘extinguish’; sa’pʰeʔr ‘dry meat’
/t/	[tʼ]	_#	?itʼ ‘sleep’
	[t]	elsewhere	tooi ‘short’; mit’ŋeel ‘eyebrow’
/tʰ/	[tʰ]	*_{σ, #}	tʰoo ‘breath’; pa’tʰum ‘three’
/d/	[d]	*_{σ, #}	daŋ ‘glottis’; kʰun’dim ‘marriage’
/t/	[t]	*_{σ, #}	tiŋ’taŋ ‘guitar’
/tʰ/	[tʰ]	*_{σ, #}	tʰaal ‘summer’; tʰin’tʰaŋ ‘patio’
/k/	[kʼ]	_#	pa’rukʼ ‘six’
	[k]	elsewhere	kutʼ ‘hand’; pa’kua ‘nine’
/kʰ/	[kʰ]	*_{σ, #}	kʰua’sikʼ ‘cold season’; pa’kʰatʼ ‘one’
/?/	[ʔ]	#_V	?ei ‘eat’
	[ʔ]	CV_C	deʔn ‘press’
	[ʔ]	CV_#	pasa’riʔ ‘seven’
/m/	[m]	everywhere	min’mei ‘clouds’; rem ‘be in harmony’
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	*_{σ, #}	ŋitʼ ‘go out’ (lights); ʔei’ŋin ‘fruit’
/n/	[n]	everywhere	nikaa ‘sun’; min’mei ‘clouds’; pan ‘thin (not thick)’
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	*_{σ, #}	pa’ŋiʔ ‘two’; ŋeem ‘comfort’

(continued)

(Table 3, continued)

<i>Phoneme</i>	<i>Allophones</i>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Examples</i>
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	everywhere	ŋaʔ 'receive'; pa'ŋa 'five'; keenj 'back'
/ŋ̥/	[ŋ̥]	*_{σ, #}	ŋaak' 'wait' (Form 1); mit'ŋeel 'eyebrow'
/r/	[r]	everywhere	rat' 'come' (Form 2); pa'ruk' 'six'; fuur 'rainy season'
/ɾ̥/	[ɾ̥]	*_{σ, #}	ɾem 'persecute/torture'; pa'ɾaa 'ten'
/v/	[v]	*_{σ, #}	vaan 'sky'; k^hua'vaj 'sky god'
/f/	[f]	*_{σ, #}	fuur 'rainy season'; si'faak' 'be poor'
/z/	[z]	*_{σ, #}	zaau 'lean/sleep'; zia'zaa 'attitude'
/s/	[s]	*_{σ, #}	sa'p^heʔr 'dry meat'; pasa'riʔ 'seven'
/l/	[l]	everywhere	luu 'head'; p^hiʔl 'forget'; pa'li 'four'
/l̥/	[l̥]	*_{σ, #}	lok' 'jump'; ban'laa 'banana'
/ts̥/	[ts̥]	*_{σ, #}	tsoon 'learn' (Form 1); sa'tsek' 'intestines'
/tʃ̥/	[tʃ̥]	*_{σ, #}	tʃim 'teach' (Form 1); ŋaak'tʃia 'child'
/tʃ̥l̥/	[tʃ̥l̥]	*_{σ, #}	tʃlip' 'bug'; pa'tʃliŋ 'mature man'
/tʃ̥l̥v̥/	[tʃ̥l̥v̥]	*_{σ, #}	tʃ^haa'paa 'moon'; ni'tʃ^haa 'calendar'