

THE NUNG AN LANGUAGE OF VIETNAM: STEPCHILD OR ABERRANT SON?

Beth Nicolson^(*)

1.1 Nung An's position

Nùng¹ is one of the officially recognized minority languages of Vietnam. Nùng speakers live predominately in the northeast corner of Vietnam on the Chinese border. While outsiders consider the Nùng people as one cohesive group, the speakers of this language divide themselves into groups using at least 12 different names such as Nùng Cháo², Nùng Inh, Nùng Hù Lai. Many of the present day names are based on the area of China from which they came; for example the Nùng Cháo people are from Longzhou, Nùng Phàn Slinh³ from Wanchengzhou, Nùng Inh from Longyinzhou⁴ and the Nùng An from Anjiezhou (or Ân Kết in Vietnamese) (Edmondson 1994:148, Viện Dân Tộc Học 1978:201). This agrees with reports from the Nùng themselves who claim to have migrated from China starting from about 10 generations ago. Other names are used by outsiders based on a distinctive feature of clothing or culture.

A more compelling reason not to consider the Nùng as one group has to do with their linguistic differences. There are clearly differences in dialect between the different Nùng groups, but Nùng An has characteristics which set it apart from the other groups calling themselves Nùng. This is also borne out by what the Nùng themselves claim: Cháo, Inh, and Phàn Slinh speakers say they can speak together with varying degrees of difficulty, but when they speak to Nùng An, they change to Vietnamese. The Nùng An say the same. The Nùng themselves perceive a wide linguistic gulf and informally put Nùng An into a class of its own.

Probably the first mention of Nùng An in the literature is was made by André Haudricourt (1960). He used Nùng An data from a survey done in 1938 by the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient. This survey gave word lists from a wide range of areas and lects but the word lists did have their limitations. The mode of transcription was not consistent and often incomplete. This was particularly true of tone descriptions. Despite this, Haudricourt could clearly see that four particular languages in Vietnam, though related to the Tai languages, did not fit into the same category as the other Tai-Kadai members Tày and Nùng. He put Nùng An and the other languages, Yay, Cao Lan and Ts'um-wa, into one category he called "Yay."

Since Haudricourt's initial report, a broader view of Tai languages has been developed. Fang-kuei Li in "Handbook of Comparative Tai" (Li 1977) divided the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai language family into three main groups: Southwestern (SW), Central (CT) and Northern (NT). He also gave criteria to describe each group. Haudricourt's "Yay" would be comparable to what Li called Northern Tai (Strecker 1985:479).

Work in the Tai languages found in northeast Vietnam include Tày (Day 1966 and Đoàn Thiện Thuật 1996), Nùng Phàn Slinh (Vy 1982), what Gedney called Western Nùng (Gedney 1995) and Nùng Cháo, and Nùng Inh (Nicolson 1998). Most recently Jerold A. Edmondson also has done

^(*) Summer Institute of Linguistics

¹ Cfo is pronounced [cau] with a high-rising tone. Inh is pronounced [i:n] or [i:ŋ] with a mid-level tone.

² Phàn Slinh is pronounced [fa:n tɿn] with low-falling tones on both words.

³ Vietnam sources list the origin as Long'an (Hoàng 1992:20, L and Sng 1968: 31).

⁴ In 1996 the provinces were changed. The discussion in this paper uses the provinces boundaries as they were at the time of the 1989 census.

some work in this area (Edmondson: forthcoming). All clearly show evidence that both Tày and the other Nùng dialects are members of the CT of the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai language family. But Nùng An data recently collected in Cao Bằng province shows phenomena different from what is expected for a CT language and raises questions as to whether Nùng An is indeed also a member of the CT subgroup as are the other Nùng dialects.

This paper examines the following question: Is Nùng An, as its name might suggest, a member of the Central Tai subgroup of Tai languages with some unusual quirks, i.e. an “aberrant son,” or is it, as Haudricourt claims, a Northern Tai language that over the years has come to be called Nùng, i.e. a “stepchild,” as it blended in with the CT-speaking neighbors that now surround it?

1.2 The Nùng Context

The northeast corner of Vietnam is dominated by Tai languages. The Tày are the most numerous of the language groups in this area with more than one million speakers. The Nùng are the second largest group found in the area with 705,709 speakers according to the 1989 census.

The Nùng are found mainly in Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng provinces, but there are smaller numbers found in Lào Cai, Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Bắc Thái and Hà Bắc provinces¹. The author found Nùng An in three main areas: Hà Quảng district in Nội Thôn commune (xã) on the China border and in Tự Do commune Quảng Hoà district. Quảng Hoà district appears to be the major Nùng An area. Nùng An speakers there reported that Phúc Sen, Đoàn Khôn, Quốc Dân and Chí Thảo communes surrounding Tự Do commune made up the main Nùng An area. This agrees with what others have reported. Edmondson (forthcoming) reports some in neighboring Phúc Sen commune. The survey done in 1938 by the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient also reported Nùng An in Đoàn Khôn commune.

A third group that called themselves Nùng An was also found in Ba Bể district in Cao Trĩ commune not far from Ba Bể Lake. They claimed to have moved from eastern Cao Bằng more than 60 years ago and that their ancestors had originally come from China more than a hundred years ago. The data from Ba Bể seemed different and is not discussed here. All these are shown in the map below.

¹ Lungchow is now called Longzhou.

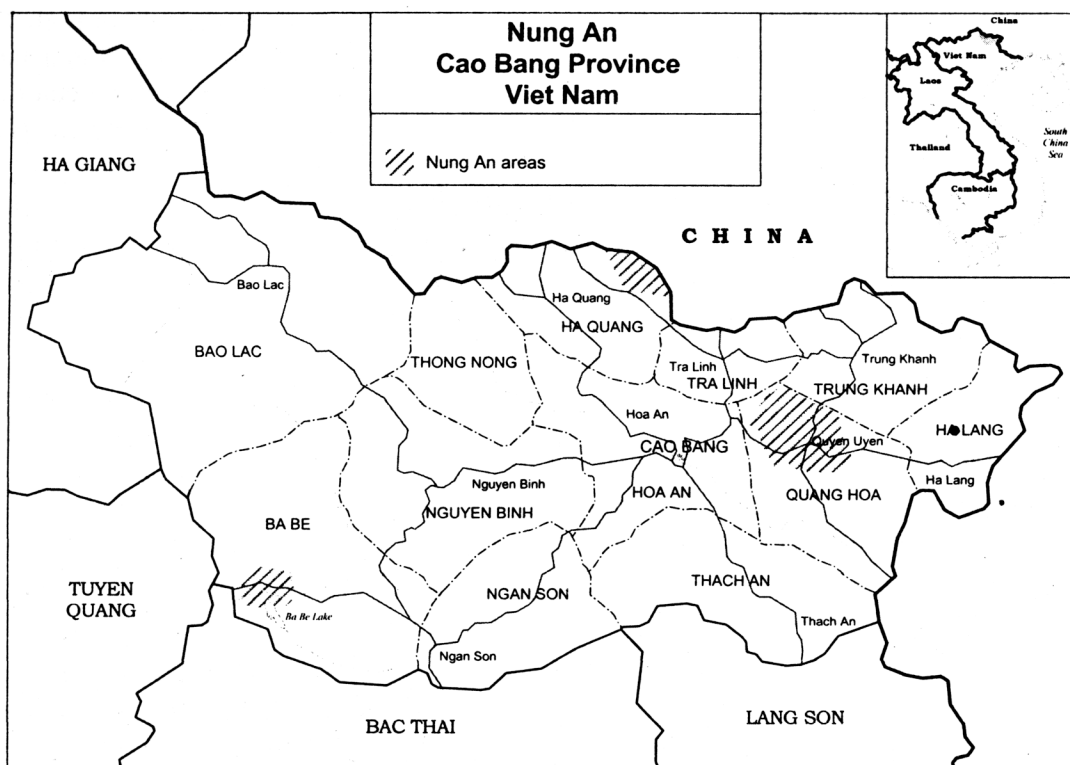


Figure 1. Map of Nùng An areas

Using the geographical points listed above, personal communications from the Nùng An themselves and the 1989 census at district level, the author estimates there to be about 30,000 Nùng An speakers, less than 5% of the total Nùng population.

1.3 The Data

Evaluating Nùng An data is based on the criteria that Li (1977) used to make the divisions between NT and CT:

Tone differences:

Tone changes

Tone contours that include voice quality

Segmental differences

Lexical differences

I discuss each of these points below.

The data used in this paper are from word lists taken in Cao Bằng province in 1994. The word lists were short with only 380 words, but they gave evidence for a wide range of features ranging from tones and segments to lexical items to use for comparison purposes. The Nùng An words were compared to data from Li (1977), Gedney (1994, 1991a, 1991b) and others, and data the author also collected in neighboring Lạng Sơn province and other locations in Cao Bằng.

Gedney's (1972) system of tone 10 tone boxes was also used to compare tone systems across languages. His system is based on the view that present day tone contours are residual frequencies of segments that have been lost. The lower frequency caused by voiced consonants caused proto-tones A, B, C, D to split into different tones (Series 2-usually lower). The D tone, which only occurs in syllables that end in p, t, k and ʔ, split further depending on vowel length. See the Figure 2 below.

Lexical Items that originally had	*A1	*B1	*C1	*D1S	*D1L	Series 1
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aspirated, voiceless and glottalized				(short vowel)	(long vowel)	tones
Lexical Items that originally had voiced consonants	*A2	*B2	*C2	*D2S	*D2L	Series 2 tones

Figure 2. Tone Boxes

Each reflex from the Nùng An, Cháo, Inh, and Phần Slinh data is followed by a description of its tone contour. This description is based on Chao’s method of describing tone contours on a scale to 1 to 5 where 5 represents the highest level. A tone contour that was low-rising, for example would be described as 13. Data in this paper may include tone contours with as many as four points. The description of the tone contours may also include additional information about voice quality that should be considered as part of the tone. Underlining is used to indicate breathiness or laryngealization that occurs somewhere over the syllable. A glottal stop after the tone numbers indicates a final glottal stop as part of the pitch contour.

2. Tone Evidence

2.1 Tone series changes

NT languages have been characterized by having a shared group of cognates in which the tone of one series becomes like the tone of the other series within the same tone category (changes of the number in the tone notation). For example, cognates that from a historical point of view are expected to have a Series 1 tone now have a tone that is like Series 2 tone. The opposite may also be true. These type changes are sometimes called “flip-flop” and hint at different NT segment development that caused the series to change from that of CT languages. Nùng An displays the changes considered to be a characteristic of NT. See the Chart 1 below:

Gloss	CT	CT	CT	NT	NT	NT	Nùng An	Nùng An
	Nùng Cháo	Nùng Inh	Li Lung-chow ¹	Li Poai	Li Wu-ming	Gedney Yay	Quảng Hoà	Hà Quảng
‘to bind’	p ^h ũk35 D1S=D1L	p ^h ũk55 D1S	phuk55 D1S	šuk44 D2S	x	suk33 ² D2S	sũk32 D2S	x
‘to come’	ma:31 A2	ma:31 A2	maa31 A2	ma24 A1	x	ma33 A1	ma:2131 A1	ma:341 A1
‘sugar’	t ^h w:ŋ33 A1	t ^h wǎŋ25 A1	thĩŋ33 A1	fĩŋ31 A2	x	tuwŋ454 A2	tuw:ŋ32 A2	tuw:ŋ31 A2
‘to arrive’	t ^h ũŋ33 A1	t ^h ũŋ25 A1	thĩ ŋ33 A1	fĩ ŋ55 A2	x	taŋ454 A2	tǎŋ32 A2	tǎŋ31 A2
‘animal’	tu:33 A1	tu:55 A1	tuu33 A1	tuu55 A2	x	tua454 A2	tu:32 A2	tu:31 A2

¹ Gedney originally used just a tone box number with items on his word lists. Hudak (Gedney 1991b: xx) later gave numeric descriptions and they are used here to standardize the data given.

² Some authors do not give a description of the tone rather a number representing the tone box that it belongs to. In those cases the comparable Gedney code has been put in parentheses.