

Voice Quality and Tone in Several Lao Dialects

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines some phonological distinctives in the dialects of several individuals from different regions of Laos. The relationship of pitch, tone, and voice quality is analyzed instrumentally in an attempt to explain some features of regional uniqueness, especially in reference to tone split. Special attention is given to B category tones, as one of the dialects analyzed displays a syllable final creaky voice quality that may have implications for the historical development of Tai tones.

1.0 Introduction

Like all languages, the Tai family has undergone significant changes in its phonology over the centuries. Tonal change has been very prominent in this process.

The purpose of this paper is to examine data from several Lao dialects possessing import for a clearer understanding of some aspects of Tai tonal change. A brief summary of current consensus on the development of the Tai tones is presented as necessary background to interpret the data presented thereafter.

It is asserted that one of the Lao dialects analyzed manifests a syllable final creaky voice quality in the B tone category that may hail from a time when proto-Tai had no contrastive tones. This could lend credence to the theory that Tai tonal development may have followed along the same lines proposed by Haudricourt (1954) for Vietnamese.

2.0 Historical Background

Virtually any phonology book that deals with tone will contain examples taken from Central Thai, Lao, or other Tai

languages. Phrases like Central Thai's *mǎj māj māj māj* 'Is the new silk burning?' are often cited to show the contrastive nature of tone in the Tai languages.

The question nevertheless remains of whether the new silk was always burning. That is, were these words always contrastive only on the basis of tone?

The consensus among Tai scholars as reflected by William Gedney (1973) and Li Fang Kuei (1977) is that there was a time when Proto-Tai exhibited no more than three tones (compared to the 5-7 found in most Tai languages today). Although Li Fang Kuei and William Gedney differ slightly in the details of their tonal change models, the key factors remain the same.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will primarily use Gedney's framework as described in his "Checklist for Determining Tones in Tai Dialects" (1973). Here, the Proto-Tai tones are first divided into three classes of open syllables--A, B, and C--and two classes of closed ("dead") syllables D--[preceded by]-short[vowel] and D[preceded by]-long [vowel] as shown in Figure 1.

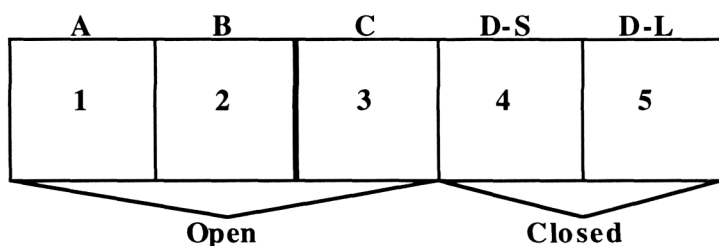


Figure 1. Proto-Tai tones (adapted from Gedney, 1973)

The A-B-C divisions may have been related to word final consonants. It is thus possible that the Tai languages followed along the same route of word final consonant absorption and tonal birth documented by Haudricourt (1954) for Vietnamese. That is, there may have been a time when

Vietnamese did not have tones, but did have word final consonants which would later affect tone formation as they disappeared or were absorbed into the syllable peak. Glottal constrictions which may be remnants of these word final consonants have been found in the C tones of some Central and Southwestern Tai languages (including some of the Lao dialects studied here).

As time passed, the original three proto-tones further divided on the basis of word initial consonants. The basis of this split seems to have been word initial voicing. Voiced initials are thought to have depressed the pitch of the words (Li Fang Kuei, 1977:26).

	A	B	C	D-S	D-L
Voiceless	1	3	5	7	9
Voiced	2	4	6	8	10

Figure 2: Initials at time of first Tai tone split (adapted from Gedney, 1973)

One further differentiation has occurred in the midst of the voicing categories shown here, yielding a large number of potential tones (Figure 3).

	A	B	C	D-S	D-L
Voiceless friction sounds	1	5	9	13	17
Voiceless unaspirated stops	2	6	10	14	18
Glottals	3	7	11	15	19
Voiced	4	8	12	16	20

Figure 3: Maximal tonal categories for Tai (adapted from Gedney, 1973)

Indeed, Gedney (1973) states that additional tone categories may be necessary to explain a handful of rare but significant tones in a few Tai languages. There is insufficient data, however, to posit exact categories at this time (Gedney 1973).

This is not to say that any Tai language had or has some 20 contrastive tones. Rather, each language “clumped” certain tone domains together in a unique way. In fact, tonal contours can be quite different from one Tai language to another. Siamese Thai, for example, “clumped” as shown here.