

# Tonal Variations and Changes in a Language Mixture Area: A Case Study of Northeastern Thailand (Isan)<sup>1</sup>

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## STRACT

In northeastern Thailand or "Isan", Lao, otherwise known as the northeastern Thai dialect, is used as a lingua franca by people living in the area, in which minority ethnic groups are scattered. Some of the ethnic groups speak Tai dialects/languages, such as the Nyo, Phuthai, Saek, Kaloeng, Voi, as well as others. When all languages belonging to the same language family are spoken in an area with the respective speakers in constant contact, it is worthwhile to investigate to what extent their tonal systems and tonal characteristics have influenced each other. To achieve this, the earliest available literature was examined to obtain what appear to be typical tonal systems for the three languages. The specific goal, then, was to determine how well these prototypes have been preserved in a region of high language contact.

The That Phanom district of Nakhon Phanom province was selected as the field site since three Tai languages, Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai, are spoken there. The concept of Gedney's tone boxes was adopted but locally modified for the languages in question. The SIL CECIL programme was used for investigating the tonal systems and tonal characteristics. On the basis of the available literature, the prototypes of Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai tones were tentatively determined.

This study reveals that the prototypes of Phuthai tones are still retained in the Phuthai language, while those of Lao and Nyo have been changed to a certain extent due to mutual interference. That is, their tones are sorted from the tonal prototypes. This means that both major and minor languages spoken in the same area can be changed, and that at least some of the changes can be caused from external factors. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the new data from the present research support a single set of tonal prototypes for Lao. To obtain definite answers, more research needs to be done.

## RODUCTION

In northeastern Thailand, generally known as the Isan region, Lao or Lao Isan is spoken by Lao or Lao Isan people, the majority group, and various minorities languages are traditionally spoken. Some of the ethnic groups speak Tai dialects/languages, such as the Nyo, Phuthai, Saek, Kaloeng, Voi, as well as others. It has been generally known that Lao or Lao Isan is used as a lingua franca by people living in the area while the minorities use their own languages to communicate within their own groups. As being a Lao native speaker of Nakhon Phanom, a province in the Isan region, I have been interested in Lao as well as other surrounding minority languages. It has been noticeable that the accents of Lao spoken in some areas, for example in Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon where Nyo and Phuthai are tonal systems which are perhaps the most useful criterion for dialect boundaries within the Isan-speaking area (Gedney 1972). Thus it is suspected that the influence between the tones in Lao and minority languages can be one cause of such difference between Lao accents.

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on the author's ongoing research and M.A. thesis, "A comparative study of the tonal system of the speech of the 'Lao', the 'Nyo', and the 'Phuthai' in That Phanom district, Nakhon Phanom province", which was advised by Dr. M.R. Kalaya Tingsabhadh.

Then, I have examined the earlier available literature, concerning the tonal systems of Lao<sup>2</sup> and minority languages, mostly spoken in northern Isan, Nyo<sup>3</sup> as well as Phuthai<sup>4</sup>, and it is noticeable that while most of tonal systems in each language are distinctly different, there also appears no clear-cut difference between them. In other words, some tonal systems in the three languages show the same or similar patterns of tone mergers and splits (see the appendix 2 for the pairs of the same or similar tonal systems in Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai, for example Lao no. 45 ~ Nyo no.9&10, Lao no.51 ~ Nyo no.1&2 = Phuthai no.6 ~ Phuthai no.7, Lao no.53 = Nyo no.4, Lao no.54 = Nyo no.3, Lao no.55&56 ~ Nyo no.5&6)<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to confirming the migration of each ethnic group, such similarity of tone mergers and splits between Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai leads to the question about the influence between the tonal languages which might have taken place for a very long time. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate to what extent their tonal systems and tonal characteristics have influenced each other when tonal languages belonging to the same language family are spoken in an area with the respective speakers in constant contact.

The Lao tonal systems in the That Phanom district of Nakhon Phanom province had been investigated in my pilot study and it was found that the tonal system of Lao spoken in the northern area of the district was noticeably different from that spoken in the southern area. Based on my background, I strongly suspected that the accent of Lao spoken in the northern area was influenced by some minority languages spoken in the same locale. Therefore, the northern area of the That Phanom district was selected as the field site for investigating the influence between the tonal languages, since three Tai languages, Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai, are spoken there. In the northern part of the That Phanom district, there are a few villages of Phuthai and very few of Nyo, therefore, we can infer that Lao is the majority in that area.

Twenty "Lao", fifteen "Nyo", and ten "Phuthai" were selected to be the informants, according to the ethnic name they call themselves and their languages. Based on information from village headmen and villagers, each study location selected must have been inhabited only by a single group, and people from those villages have been in contact with each other for a very long time.

From studying the earlier literature as mentioned above, it can be claimed that most of the tone merger and split patterns in these three languages are different as well as most of the tonal characteristics. But after studying the tones in these three languages used in a language mixture area, an unexpected phenomenon was found: the "Lao" and the "Nyo" tonal systems overlap while the ones of the "Phuthai" do not. Also, concerning the tonal characteristics, it was found that these three languages share several similar tone shapes. It was also found that the "Phuthai" is the only group which is consistent in using their own ethnic name, the name of their language as well as the linguistic characteristics of their speech. Conversely, the "Lao" and the "Nyo" use their own respective names for themselves and their languages but the linguistic characteristics of their speech show a considerable amount of mixture. This paper aims to show the tonal variations and changes in the languages of the "Lao", the "Nyo", as well as the "Phuthai", and also to show the patterns of tonal mixture in these languages. Furthermore, there will be further discussion about the hypotheses of tone changes in Lao and Nyo languages.

<sup>2</sup> From Brown (1965), Chamberlain (1975&1984), Chantanakhom&Rattanaprasert (1983), Chinchest (1989), Daecha (1987), Dejvongsa et. al. (eds.) (1972), Haas (1958), Hoonchamlong (1985), Khanittanan (1973), Osatananda (1997), Panka (1980), Pungpaopan (1984), Simmonds (1965), and Wattanaprasert&Liamprawat (1985)

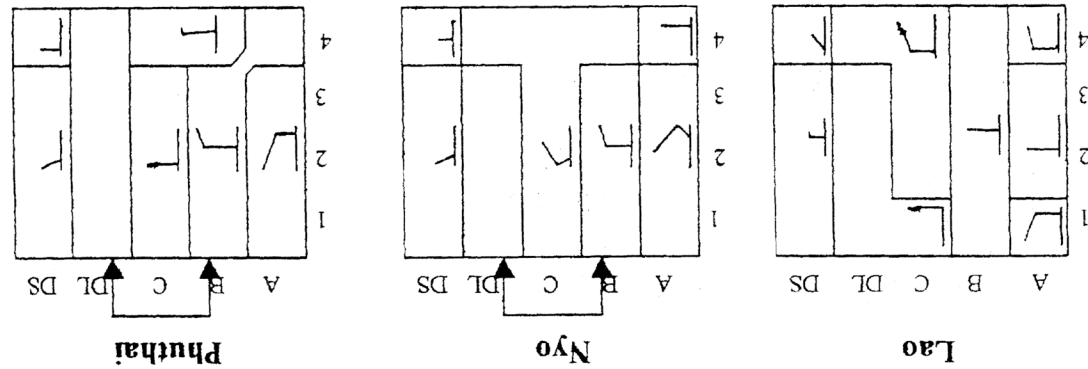
<sup>3</sup> From Brown (1965), Chamberlain (1975&1984), Koowatthanasiri (1981), and Simmonds (1965)

<sup>4</sup> From Brown (1965), Chamberlain (1984), Khanittanan (1977), and Sritarat (1983)

<sup>5</sup> The symbol = is used in stead of the words "is the same as", and the symbol ~ as "is similar to".

As mentioned above, there is more than one tonal system in Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai spoken in the studied area, and that led to questions about tonal variations and changes in the three languages. Therefore, the earlier available literature was examined to obtain what appear to be the prototypical distinctive merger and split patterns for the three languages. The frequency of tone merger and split patterns was the criterion for determining the prototypical tonal system. In other words, the pattern which mostly appears in each language will be proposed to be the prototypical one of each language. The same method was used to determine the prototypical tonal characteristics. These can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The prototypical tonal systems of Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai languages<sup>6</sup>



The conclusion from earlier studies would lead me to assume that the patterns which appear most in Lao are B1-2-3-4, C1=DL1-2-3-4, and B≠DL; the ones in Nyo are columns B, C, and DL coalescence; and the ones in Phuthai are the mergers between columns A, B, and DL. Those patterns were then used to indicate the difference between the three languages. Considering the tonal characteristics, some tones in the three languages share similar characteristics, especially the rising tone in columns A and DS, and some in Nyo look similar to Phuthai, for example the mid-falling tone in column B.

To determine how well these prototypes have been preserved in a region of high language contact, these prototypical tones were compared to the ones in the languages of the "Lao", the "Nyo", and the "Phuthai".

## METHODOLOGY

To study the tones in the “Lao”, the “Nyo”, and the “Phuthai” languages, the concept of Gedney’s tone boxes (see the detail in Gedney, 1972) was adopted but lexically modified for the languages in question. In order for the tonal systems to be judged by both listening analysis and the instrumental analysis of the tonal characteristics, fifteen monosyllabic words from the analogous set were selected from a minimal set which had been used in earlier tone studies (L-Thongkum et al. 1978, Tingsabadh 1980&1990, Nuanchansang 1992, Banditkun 1993, Kritsanapan 1995). To get the fundamental frequency of test vowels word, without the perturbation of prevocalic and postvocalic consonants, as well as the vowel height, voiceless (aspirated) stop initial consonants were followed by the long mid vowel /aa/. The voiceless stop final consonants were also controlled in the test words. Some of the words from the analogous set were then used besides some of Gedney’s words (/khăa/ ขา ‘leg’, /pâa/ ป่า ‘forest’, /pâa/ ป้า ‘aunt’, /khâat/ ขาด ‘to be torn’) as shown below,<sup>7</sup>

*A 1: ขา /khăa/ ‘leg’	*B 1: ข่า /khâa/ ‘ginger’	*C 1: ข้า /khâa/ ‘I’
*A 2: ป่า /pâa/ ‘fish’	*B 2: ป้า /pâa/ ‘forest’	*C 2: ป้า /pâa/ ‘aunt’
*A 3: -	*B 3: -	*C 3: -
*A 4: ค่า /khâa/ ‘to get stuck in’	*A 4: ค่า /khâa/ ‘value’	*C 4: ค้า /khâa/ ‘to trade’
*DL 1: ขาด /khâat/ ‘to be torn’	*DS 1: ขัด /khât/ ‘to rub’	
*DL 2: ปาด /pâat/ ‘to cut across’	*DS 2: ปัด /pât/ ‘to push away’	
*DL 3: -	*DS 3: -	
*DL 4: คาด /khâat/ ‘harrow’	*DS 4: คัด /khât/ ‘to copy’	

In order to get accurate results, the word list consisted of 5 tokens of each test word arranged in random order: 1,500 test words of the “Lao” (15 words X 5 tokens X 20 informants); 1,125 words of the “Nyo” (15 words X 5 tokens X 15 informants); and 750 words of the “Phuthai” (15 words X 5 tokens X 10 informants).

The tonal systems were first evaluated by listening, based on a system from the concept of Proto-Tai tonal systems of Li (1977) and Gedney (1972). Then, the instrumental analysis (the SIL CECIL programme -- Summer Institution of Linguistics’s Computerized Extraction of Intonation in Language), was used for examining the tonal characteristics and confirming the tonal systems.

## RESULTS

When comparing the various tonal systems in the languages of the “Lao”, the “Nyo”, and the “Phuthai” in the That Phanom district with the prototypical tonal systems, it has been found, surprisingly, that there were five tonal system patterns: the Lao pattern, the Non-Lao pattern (Nyo?), the Nyo pattern, the Non-Nyo pattern (Lao?) and the Phuthai pattern (A/B).

<sup>7</sup> There is no test word in the 3<sup>rd</sup> row as there has never been 2-3 split in each column in Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai tonal systems. And in the 2<sup>nd</sup> row, the [paa] set was selected in place of the [kaa] one so as to suit with the three languages, i.e. some words in the [kaa] are meaningless in the three languages. And actually, in Central Thai, the word in A2 and DL4 should be pronounced /plāa/ ปลา and /khrâat/ คราด respectively but there is no cluster in Lao, Nyo, and Phuthai, thus they are spelled ป่า /pâa/ and คาด /khâat/ respectively.