

Linguistic criteria for determining Tai ethnic groups: Case studies on central and south-western Tais

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1. Chulalongkorn university project on languages and ladies' costumes of the Tai group

On the occasion of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's 60th birthday in 1992, the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, assigned a research team of two researchers, Pranee Kullavanijaya and Theraphan L-Thongkum with two photographers to conduct a survey of the languages and ladies' costumes of the Tai-Kadai groups in honour of Her Majesty. With a two year time limit and limited financial resources, the survey areas were selected to cover Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou provinces in the People's Republic of China, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Although the Tai-Kadai groups were included in the project, only the Tai groups of the Central and South-western branches will be considered in this paper.

Why did we want to do a survey of the Tai languages in southern China, Laos and Vietnam? There seems to be quite a number of phonemic studies of the Tai dialects in the region by well-known Tai comparativists such as Fang-Kuei Li, William J. Gedney, André G. Haudricourt, Søren Egerod and many others. However considering the vast areas where the Tai speakers live, the studies are comparatively few and do not cover even half of the Tai ethnic groups. Secondly, from previous works such as 'The Tai Race' by William Cliffton Dodd (1923), a number of Tai ethnic names were recognized in southern Yunnan, Laos and Vietnam. These ethnic groups were supposed to speak Tai dialects but this was not confirmed. It would also be valuable to determine whether these Tai ethnic groups speak the same or different Tai dialects from the dialects studied by the aforementioned comparativists. Thirdly, we learned that the Tai dialects as well as the people are usually referred to collectively under certain names. Zhuang, for example, is used by Chinese scholars to cover Tai dialects in Wenshan, Malipo, Maguan and Funing counties whereas in fact several Tai dialects such as Tay Lo, Tay Nam, Nung, Mitai, Mata, and Budai, can be identified. *On the other hand, many Tai groups with different ethnic names are in fact speakers of the same language.* For example, Tay Mawn, Tay La, and Tay Lo, can be grouped as speakers of the same dialect. With these uncertainties in mind we decided to survey the Tai languages/dialects in southern Yunnan, Guangxi, Hainan, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand in the hope that the survey could serve as a source of information for more in-depth linguistic research.

The survey took 3 years - more time than we had planned. This was due to many factors; the workload of the researchers, road conditions which allowed travelling only during certain times of the year, and last but not least, financial problems which arose because of unexpected expenses during the many trips to rural areas.

2. Research sites and data collection

We began our survey of Tai-Kadai languages and ladies' costumes in October 1991 and completed it in December 1994. During the three years of our investigation, several field trips were conducted in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hainan, Vietnam and Laos. Tai-Kadai language data and ladies' costumes were collected at 88 locations as listed in the appendix. This research was made possible by the kind co-operation and arrangements of the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities, the Guangxi Institute of Nationalities, the Thai Studies Program of Hanoi University, and the National Center for Social Science and Humanities of Lao PDR.

The Matisoff 200-wordlist arranged by semantic categories which has been said to be a culturally appropriate lexicostatistical model for Southeast Asia¹ and the Gedney tone checklist were used as tools for Tai-Kadai language surveys at 88 locations. The interviews based on the two wordlists took about three hours to collect at each location. We spent most of our time travelling on rough roads in remote mountainous regions. Quite a few times after all types of hardships, we reached the places where we had been informed by the local authorities that particular Tai languages were spoken only to find to our dismay that none of the villagers could speak even a word of Tai. At an earlier stage we let our co-ordinators help us select the research sites which they thought accessible and appropriate for our research project. Later we found out that our co-ordinators did not know much more than we did, and the local authorities, who took care of us while we were conducting field research, did not provide correct information. To solve these problems we consulted the available literature, especially maps, and then selected the research sites ourselves instead of depending upon the knowledge and judgement of our local colleagues. The Red River (which has many different names) and the border areas between China and Burma, China and Laos, and Vietnam, and so on became our major target areas. Following this strategy a picture of the distribution of Tai-Kadai speaking people became clearer. It was also easier for us to pinpoint the locations we wanted to visit. After several field trips we learned that South-western

¹We had problems getting the right words for the following items: A-31 'brain', A-38 'bone marrow', A-39 'breath/life', C48 'poison', C52 'animal', N184 'grind', and N200 'drive/drive away/ride/hunt/burn/cut' These items are not suitable for collecting data on Tai-Kadai languages, especially when the fieldwork time is limited.

Tai speaking people occupied the areas to the west of the Red River whereas Central and Northern Tai speakers were distributed in the area to the east.

In total we worked with 52 Tai speaking groups. Tai Nuea, Tai Lue, and Tai Don (White Tai) are the biggest South-western Tai groups in Yunnan. We came across a few Thu or Dai/daj A2/ ethnic groups whose languages still retain the Tai initial consonant Proto voiced series, i.e. **b*, **d*, **j*, **g*, **v*, and **z*. Many different Tai ethnic groups were misplaced under Dai and Zhuang nationalities, and some groups such as Tay La, Tay Lo, Tay Nam, etc., were classified as Dai even though their languages and the costumes of their women were of the Zhuang type. Our field experience taught us a lot of valuable lessons.

3. Subgrouping of Central Tai (CT) dialects

3.1 Identification of Central Tai Dialects

The first survey of Wenshan Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture covering Wenshan, Malipo and Maguan Counties was conducted in 1992. It was the first trip to an area where we had little information on where the Tai lived and had to depend largely on local authorities for site selection. We got a lot of information, however, from that first trip about the ethnic groups in the area, which together with information from the available literature enabled us to plan our following trips in 1993 and 1994 more effectively. In these three trips we covered 32 locations in Wenshan Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province; 5 sites in Yuxi, Yunnan Province and 3 sites in Pinxiang, Guangxi Province (See Appendix). The speakers at these sites speak Tai dialects with the exception of the Tujins in Malipo County who cannot speak Tai anymore but are certain that their ancestors were Tai.

To decide which groups were speakers of the CT dialects the following criteria were used:

a) Development of Proto Tai initial aspirated stops

It is accepted that the Northern Tai dialects have voiceless unaspirated stops for the development of Proto Tai voiceless aspirated stops, for example, **ph*, **th*, **kh* > *p*, *t*, *k*, whereas the other Tai dialects keep **ph*, **th*, **kh* > *ph*, *th*, *kh*. Using this criterion, dialects collected in the sites mentioned above are shown to be non-Northern Tai dialects.

b) Development of Proto Tai dental consonant clusters **tr* and **thr*

Fang-Kuei Li has pointed out a distinct development of consonant clusters **tr* and **thr* in SWT dialects as follows:

**tr* is represented by *t* in all SWT dialects (Li 1977).

**thr* is represented by *h* in most SWT dialects except in Ahom where **thr* > *r* (Li 1977).

Previous studies and our fieldnote data confirm his statements as can be seen below:

**tr* > SWT *t* **thr* > SWT *h, r*

	Siamese (LI)	Black Tai (Fieldnote T.L-T)	Lue (Fieldnotes P.K.)
'eye' (*tr)	taa ³³	taa ³³	taa ⁵³
'die' (*tr)	taai ³³	taai ³³	taai ⁵⁵
'tail' (*thr)	haaŋ ²⁴	haaŋ ³³	haay ⁵⁵
'stone' (*thr)	hin ²⁴	hin ³³	hin ⁵⁵

The development of **tr* as *t* is consistent in SWT dialects and therefore is used to exclude SWT dialects from our data collected in the Yunnan, Guangxi and Vietnam sites mentioned above. The non-SWT and non-Northern dialects following the development of PT **tr* and voiceless aspirated stops will therefore be referred to as the Central Tai dialects. These CT dialects show the development of **tr* as *th* or *h* but not *t* for example:

**tr* > CT *th / h*

	Tienbao (Funing)	Kon Min (Funing)	Tay La (Banfai)
'eye' (*tr)	tha ³¹	tha ²⁴	ha ³³
'to die' (*thr)	thaai ³¹	thaai ²⁴	haai ³³

The development of **thr* can be *th* in some CT dialects and *h* in other CT dialects, for examples:

**thr* > CT *th / h*

	Tienbao (Funing)	Kon Min (Funing)	Tay La (Banfai)
'tail' (*tr)	thaŋ ³¹	thaŋ ²⁴	haaŋ ³³
'stone' (*thr)	thən ³¹	thin ²⁴	heen ³³

Altogether 17 dialects are identified as CT dialects: two Tay La dialects, four Nong dialects, two Tai Nam dialects, one Mata dialect, one Mitai dialect, one Tay Lo dialect, one Thu dialect, one Budai dialect, one Kon Min dialect, two Tienbao dialects and one Tay dialect. (See Appendix for site numbers 29, 30 and 45 to 58.)