

# TONAL EVOLUTION IN SUAI (KUAY)

**Preecha Sukkasame**

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science  
Thepsatri Rajabhat Institute

## 1. Introduction

Suai, a Mon-Khmer language spoken in Surin, Srisaket, Buriram, Ubon and other nearby provinces, has two dialects, Kuy and Kuay. Suai (Kuy-Kuay) is generally known as a register language with two lexically contrastive phonation types, clear (normal or modal) voice versus breathy voice.

Register (also called register complex) refers to clusters of linguistic features working together as a combination of phonation type (or voice quality), pitch, voicing of the initial consonant, vowel length, vowel quality and so on. The register complex affects the whole syllable not just the vowel (Premsrirat 1997). Normally, one or two features of the register complex becomes more prominent in one language.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Haudricourt (1954) described the mechanism of tonal development in Vietnamese. Subsequent support for Haudricourt's theory of tonal development in Mon-khmer languages has been provided through such languages as Samtao (Diffloth 1982), Nyahkur (L. Thongkum 1982) and Khmu (Premsrirat 1997). Matisoff (1973) explained the theory of tonogenesis in Southeast Asian languages that because of a historical process of consonant devoicing, formerly initial voiced stops turned into voiceless ones. There are two sets of voiceless initial stops. The old voiceless stop and the old voiced consonant initials yielded different sets of tones. Haudricourt (1954) suggested that from a situation of no tones in Vietnamese the tones historically developed from pitch adjustments associated with different classes of codas at the end of the syllable. L. Thongkum (1989) in her acoustic measurements of register complex in Kuy and Sukkasame

(1994) in his study of Kuay pointed out that both phonation type and pitch seem equally prominent. The syllable with clear voice always carries higher pitch than the syllable with breathy one. The initial consonant causes the pitch height while the final one causes the contour.

Brown (1965) analyzing the tonal systems of Lao Ubon and Lao Suai (spoken in Surin and Srisaket) claims that there are six tones in Lao Ubon and five tones in Lao Suai. From my auditory impression as well as my native intuition, I observe that the phonetic characteristics of pitch patterns in Kuay are very similar to tones in Lao Ubon and Lao Suai. Historically and geographically Kuay, Lao Ubon and Lao Suai settle together and have been in continuous contact with each other. The language they use in contact is usually Lao which seems to be prestigious so the evolution of tones in Kuay may be due to the influence of these two groups of Lao.

### 3. Scope

The analyses of pitch patterns in two Kuay dialects and the tonal systems of two Lao dialects are based on:

1. Kuay, Samrong Village, Chompra district, Surin (KS),
2. Kuay, Uthumporn Village, Uthumpornpisai district, Srisaket (KU),
3. Lao Suai, Nongkap Village, Chompra district, Surin(LS), and
4. Lao Ubon, Jaeramae Village, Muang district, Ubon (LU).

### 4. Methodology

I. Measure the pitch ranges. The results of the acoustic measurements of pitch in 16 syllable types of Kuy dialect made by L. Thongkum (1989) are referred to in this paper. Two Kuay dialects were studied by using the same set of syllable types as L. Thongkum (1989):

1. Live syllables CVN
  - 1.1 Short live syllables C<sup>̂</sup>VN
  - 1.2 Long Live syllables CVV(N)

## 2. Dead Syllables CVS

2.1 Short Dead syllables C<sup>̣</sup>V S

2.2 Long Dead syllables C V V S

2.3 Short Dead syllables with glottal stop ending C Ṿʔ

2.4 Long Dead syllables with glottal stop ending C V Vʔ

## 3. Syllables with glottal fricative ending CVh

3.1 Short syllables with glottal fricative ending ( -h final short syllables) C Ṿ h

3.2 Long syllables with glottal fricative ending ( -h final long syllables) C V V h

II. Analyze the tonal systems of Lao Ubon and Lao Suai by using the checklist of William J. Gedney (1972) for determining tones in Tai dialects

III Make a comparison of Kuay pitch patterns to tones in Lao

## 5. A Brief Sketch of Kuay and Lao Phonology

| Initial consonants |    |   |    | Final consonants |    |    |     |   |   |    |      |   |   |
|--------------------|----|---|----|------------------|----|----|-----|---|---|----|------|---|---|
| p                  | ph | t | th | c                | ch | k  | kh  | ʔ | p | t  | ***c | k | ʔ |
| b                  |    | d |    |                  |    |    |     |   | m | n  |      |   | ŋ |
| **f                |    | s |    |                  |    |    |     | h | w | *l |      |   | j |
| m                  | n  | ɲ | ŋ  |                  |    |    |     |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| w                  | l  | j |    |                  |    |    |     |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| Monophthongs       |    |   |    |                  |    |    |     |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| i                  | ii |   |    | ɯ                | ɯɯ | u  | uu  |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| e                  | ee |   |    | ɤ                | ɤɤ | o  | oo  |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| ɛ                  | ɛɛ |   |    | ʌ                | ʌʌ | ɔ  | ɔɔ  |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| æ                  | ææ |   |    | a                | aa | *D | *DD |   |   |    |      |   |   |
| Diphthongs         |    |   |    | ia               | ua | ua |     |   |   |    |      |   |   |

\* occur in Kuay only    \*\* occur in Lao Ubon only

\*\*\* phonetically [iʔ]

## 6. Pitch Patterns in Kuay

According to the co-occurrence with the syllable structures and the registers, Kuay has 6 pitch patterns

**Pattern 1: low-rising pitch**

Occurring with breathy voice (register 2), this pitch pattern has 2 sub-types;

Sub-type 1a which is realized as [25(4)] starts at a mid-low pitch then rises to a high pitch before slightly falling at the end. It occurs in h-final long syllables (CVVh) such as

[ph̄aah<sup>25(4)</sup>] 'salt'      [m̄uəh<sup>25(4)</sup>] 'mosquito'

Sub-type 1b [13] starts at a low pitch then abruptly rises to a mid pitch. It occurs in short dead syllables (CVS), h-final short syllables (CVh) and ?-final short syllables (CV?) such as

[m̄at<sup>13</sup>] 'eye'      [təph̄at<sup>13</sup>] 'six'

**Pattern 2: low-rising-falling pitch**

This pattern also occurs with breathy voice. Phonetically, it is a low slightly rising and falling pitch [121] occurring in live syllables (CVN) such as

[khaḷ<sup>121</sup>] 'plough'      [th̄iḷ<sup>121</sup>] 'high'

**Pattern 3: high-falling pitch**

This pattern occurs with clear voice (register 1). It starts at a high pitch and rises slightly then abruptly falls to a low pitch [451]. It occurs in live syllables (CVN) such as

[khaḷ<sup>451</sup>] 'basin'      [tii<sup>451</sup>] 'old'

**Pattern 4: high level pitch**

This pattern also occurs with clear voice and has 2 sub-types;

Sub-type 4a a high level pitch with slightly falling at the end [44<sup>(3)</sup>] occurs in h-final long syllables (CVVh) such as

[paah<sup>55</sup>] 'to break apart'      [tənɔəh<sup>44(3)</sup>] 'mouth'

Sub-type 4b a high level pitch [ 55 ] occurs in short dead and h-final short syllables (CVS, CVh, CV?) such as