

Tonogenesis in Khmu Dialects of SEA

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This paper is a part of a larger on-going research project entitled “Thesaurus of Khmu Dialects in SEA”. It is a three year project supported by SEASREP (Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program). The project covers the study of major Khmu dialects in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and South China. Seven dialects have been selected to study. About 4000 words, which are both basic and culturally specific words in Khmu, were arranged into semantic fields that were sufficient to reflect the Khmu worldview, were collected. The major syntactic patterns and folktales of each dialect were also collected. This year is the last year of the project. Some findings are revealing, such as the development of tones or tonogenesis in Khmu.

Tonogenesis is one of the most interesting linguistic phenomena in Southeast Asia today. It is quite obvious that most of the small minority languages in SEA are now undergoing prosodic changes in the direction of the development of tones. Not only are the Sino-Tibetan or Tai-Kadai languages tone languages, as is generally known, but languages in other language families such as Austroasiatic and Austronesian languages that were originally non-tonal are also acquiring tones. A classic example is the tones in Vietnamese. Haudricourt (1954) demonstrated that Vietnamese belonged to Austroasiatic language family though it is now a tone language. Another interesting example is Cham, which was a non-tonal and non-registeral Austronesian language, and which was found to have tone contrasts in Eastern Cham (Blood 1967, Bui Khan The 1981, and Phu Van Han and others 1997) and also register contrast in Western Cham (Friberg and Hor 1973). This papers attempts to investigate the prosodic features

in Khmu dialects in the wide area of SEA which demonstrates different stages of tonogenesis.¹ The data for investigation was drawn from the Thesaurus research project on Khmu Dialects in SEA. The field work for this project was done in the Khmu speaking areas in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and South China.

1. Background of Khmu.

Khmu is a Mon-Khmer language of the Austroasiatic language family. It is spoken in a wide area of northern SEA which includes parts of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and South China. In Thailand the Khmu are found mainly in Nan and Chiangrai in the north, including Kancanaburi and Uthaitani in the Central part. In Laos where the majority of the Khmu are, the Khmu are found in eight provinces (Luang Namtha, Udomsaj, Bokaew, Sayaburi, Phongsalai, Luang Prabang, Hua phan, and Chiengkhwang). In Vietnam the Khmu are found in Dien Bien Phu and Senla, Laicau province and in Nge-An. In China the Khmu are found in Chiangrung and in Muang La, Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China. The total population are more than 500,000. In all Khmu areas the Khmu people are found living together with the Tai-speaking groups. For example the Khmu in Thailand live in the same area as the Northern Thai speakers. In Laos, the Khmu live among the Tai Lue, Tai Daeng, Phuen and Lao people. The Khmu in Vietnam live in the same area as the Tai Dam and Tai Siang. And the Khmu in China live with the Tai Lue. Because of the contact with Tai languages which are tonal, the Khmu have unavoidably been exposed to tone influence. From my field work in various Khmu speaking areas, I have found that Khmu dialects in various parts of SEA have a similar basic structure though vocabulary and pronunciation vary. One of the most outstanding variations of Khmu dialects is the differences in the phonological system. Khmu dialects in SEA can be

¹This paper is a further development of a paper presented at SEALS IV in Thailand which deals with Khmu dialects in the north of Thailand.

phonologically divided into two main dialects - which I prefer to call Western and Eastern Khmu instead of Northern and Southern Khmu, as they are called by Svantesson (1984) and others because this corresponds more to the geographical reality as seen on the map provided below.

2. The Western and Eastern Khmu.

The Western Khmu is comprised of the Khmu dialects spoken in Udomsaj, Bokaew and Luang Namtha in Laos, Chiangrai and Nan in Thailand, and a some villages in Sipsongpanna. The Eastern Khmu is comprised of the Khmu dialect spoken in Huan Phan, Phongsalee, Luang Prabang and Chiengkhwang in Laos, in Dien Bien Phu, Senla, Nghe-An in North Vietnam and some villages in Sipsongpanna. In the homeland of Khmu in Laos, different Khmu dialects have specific names. For Western Khmu they are the Khmu Yuan in Luang Namtha area near Chinese border, Khmu Lue in the North of Udomsaj, Khmu Rook in the central part of Udomsaj and Khmu Khroang in the southern part of Udomsaj or Parkbang area. For Eastern Khmu, they are Khmu Cuang or Khmu VN. The names refers mainly to the name of the rivers in their settlement such as Maekhoang river, Rook and Uu rivers, or refers to the people the Khmu has special relationship with such as the Tai Lue people or Cuang, the Khmu hero. Remnants of all of these Khmu dialects are found in various parts of Thailand. On the border of Thailand and Laos the Khmu Khroang and Khmu Rook are found. In Sipsongpanna area near Laos, both western and eastern Khmu are found.

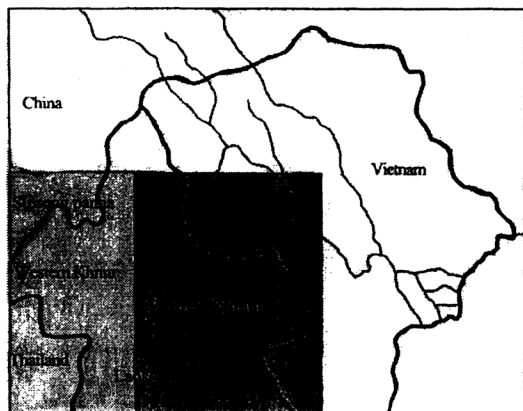


Figure 1. A map shows the Khmu speaking area including the western and eastern Khmu area.

Eastern Khmu dialects are phonologically uniform. They have no tone and no register but have a rich consonant inventory. They have a full set of voiced and voiceless consonants because words are distinguished from each other by the voiced/voiceless contrast of the initial consonants. The western Khmu dialects vary in their prosodic features. They are an excellent example of tonogenesis. Some western Khmu dialects have register contrast whereas some have tone contrast. The following are the phonological systems of the western and eastern Khmu. Each will be presented in terms of consonants, vowels and also suprasegmental phonemes in the case of western dialects.

1. Initial consonants.

The western dialect have 19 initial consonants whereas the eastern dialect have thirty five consonants.