

TOWARD CONTRASTIVE ANALYSES BETWEEN THAI AND HILL TRIBE LANGUAGES : SOME PHONETIC DATA

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INTRODUCTION¹

Over the past several years an increasing amount of attention has been focused on minority languages and their problems by scholars and Thai government agencies. The Department of Public Welfare, especially through its Hill Tribes Division and the Tribal Research Centre in Chiangmai, has been conducting and sponsoring research among the minority peoples of northern Thailand (Suwan). This research has been primarily in fields such as anthropology, economics, agriculture, and public health, but there has also been a growing interest in the field of linguistics. The Border Patrol Police have established schools in a number of tribal villages in the northern border provinces. These schools are staffed with Thai teachers who are brought together periodically for lectures and workshops. One of the primary tasks of these teachers is to instruct tribal children in the Thai language, both in its spoken and written forms, the Thai language being actively used as one of the means through which the minority peoples hopefully will be drawn into the Thai nation, identifying with it and participating in its security and development. The Department of Educational Techniques of the Ministry of Education recently conducted a two-week seminar in Chiangmai for the purpose of producing a series of textbooks for teaching Thai to Karens.

Increasing numbers of scholars have been turning their attention to minority languages in Thailand. In addition to their academic interest in particular linguistic problems, some scholars have expressed their views on pedagogical problems connected with teaching Thai to minority peoples and minority languages to Thais (Dellinger, Hinton, Roop, all 1967; Smalley 1965b).

A third group has been actively engaged in learning and analyzing many of the minority languages of Thailand for almost two decades. Missionaries and scholars with former or present ties to missionary groups have lived with minority groups, learned their languages, and produced various types of published and unpublished language materials. Among these are phonological analyses, practical orthographies in both Thai and roman scripts, grammatical sketches, dictionaries, language lessons, and literacy primers and readers in the minority languages.²

1) A somewhat different version of this paper was read at the Thai Phonetics Conference under a different title.

2) Dictionaries, for example, have been produced for Akha (Lewis 1968). White Meo (Heimbach 1969), and Mien Yao (Lombard and Purnell 1968).

One area of the study of minority languages which has been neglected in the past is that of detailed contrastive analyses of Thai and the various hill tribe languages. This neglect is particularly noticeable with the present emphasis on teaching Thai to the hill tribes. Thai and western scholars alike have long been aware that English cannot be taught to Thais using the same methods and materials suitable for teaching it to those who speak English as a native language. For this reason, a great deal of time, effort, and material resources has been expended to produce thorough contrastive analyses of Thai and English and, on the basis of such studies, develop and experiment with teaching materials which would suit Thai students of English. Very little, however, has been done in the field of contrastive studies of minority languages and Thai. But without such studies and materials developed from them how can minority people be adequately taught the national language of the country to which they belong? Furthermore, some Thais are, or will be called upon to be, "cultural middlemen", that is, interpreters of Thai customs, laws, policies, and programs to the hill tribes on the one hand, and interpreters of minority customs, aspirations, needs, and problems to government agencies or academic and social institutions on the other. How can these Thais adequately learn minority languages?

This paper attempts to make a contribution to the beginning of serious contrastive study of Thai and hill tribe languages in several ways: (1) by showing something of the range of phonetic inventory and phonemic differences between Thai and selected hill tribe languages, (2) by drawing to the attention of persons interested in this field some of the basic research on phonetic and grammatical problems which is already available, and (3) by pointing out a few areas in which systematic investigation and coordinated activity is needed. No attempt has been made to actually contrast Thai and the minority languages. It is quite obvious, though, that speakers of languages which lack initial consonant clusters, final consonants, vowel length, or tones are likely to have problems in these areas when they attempt to learn Thai. Speakers of such languages will have many other problems with Thai as well, however, problems which are much more subtle than those just mentioned and thus harder to deal with. What is needed at this time is much more than a superficial awareness of some of the obvious problem areas. The need is for detailed studies of the phonetic and phonemic systems of both Thai and specific hill tribe languages.

LANGUAGE DESCRIPTIONS

Of the many different languages found in Thailand, nine are described briefly in this paper: Standard Thai and eight minority languages, all but one of which (Kuy) are from northern Thailand. Lawa, Mal, and Kuy are Mon-Khmer languages. The Tibet-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family is represented by Akha, Lisu, and perhaps Karen. White Meo and Mien Yao represent the two branches of the Miao-Yao group.

Some general information on locations, number of speakers, and sources used are given.³ No attempt, however, has been made to provide complete phonological descriptions of the languages.

1. Thai (Standard Thai)⁴

Standard Thai is the prestige dialect of Thailand, the language used in the educational process and communications media. Sources: *Abramson*, (1962), *Hass*, (1964), *Noss* (1962).

a. Phonological Summary

(1) Consonants

(a) *Initials*

p	t	c	k	ʔ
ph	th	ch	kh	
b	d			
f	s			h
m	n		ŋ	
	l			
w	r	y		

(b) *Clusters*

pr	tr	kr
phr	thr	kh
pl		kl
phl		khl
		kw
		khw

(c) *Finals*

p	t	k	ʔ
m	n	ŋ	
w		y	

(2) Vowels

i	ɨ	u
e	ə	o
ɛ	a	ɔ
ia	ia	ua

Features: Length with monophthongs

(3) Tones

- | | | |
|--------|------------|-----------|
| 1. Mid | 3. High | 5. Rising |
| 2. Low | 4. Falling | |

3) With the exception of that on Yao, the material on the various minority languages presented here has been taken from prepublication manuscripts prepared for inclusion in a forthcoming book by William A. Smalley. It should be noted that further revisions of the various analyses may be made by the respective authors before final publication. Moreover, some descriptive and interpretive changes have been made here for the sake of clarity and convenience of comparison in this paper. Responsibility for these changes is mine alone.

4) Alternate names are given in parentheses.

5) The primary source for this paper is underlined.

b. Comment

Thai lacks initial spirants and voiced stops in the palatal and velar positions, though [ʃ] occasionally occurs as an allophone of /ch/ and [j] as an allophone of /y/. There is also no palatal nasal.

In initial clusters, the first member is a voiceless stop: labial, dental, or velar.⁶ Possible second members are /r l w/, /r/ occurring after any first member, /l/ after labials or velars, and /w/ after only velars. Clusters with /w/ thus have a very limited distribution. There are no clusters with /y/ as the second member.

Unaspirated stops, nasals, and semivowels occur in final position.⁷ Final stops are slightly voiced in some environments.

All monophthongs occur both long and short. There are three diphthongs: /ia
ia ua/. After nasals and /ʔ h/, long and short /a/ are slightly nasalized.

Tone /1/ tends to fall slightly in pitch before pause. Tone /3/ has a rise-fall contour and is accompanied by glottal constriction. With some speakers, tone /4/ also has some constriction, though not so pronounced as with tone /3/. Syllables ending with stops occur with tones /2 3 4/; long vowels with tone /3/ and short vowels with tone /4/ occur infrequently, however.

2. Lawa (Lua?)

Lawa is a Mon-Khmer language spoken primarily in Chiangmai and Maehongson Provinces, although it is also found in Petchabun and Kanchanaburi. There are perhaps 20,000 Lawa in Thailand, many of them in the process of being completely assimilated to Thai culture. The dialect presented here is spoken in Amphur Maesariang, Maehongson. Source: *Schlatter (1965)*.

a. Phonological Summary

(1) Consonants

(a) *Initials*

p	t	c	k	ʔ
ph	th	ch	kh	
b	d	j	g	
f	s			h
m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
mh	nh		ŋh	
	l			
	lh			
w	r	y		
	rh	yh		

(b) *Clusters*

pl	kl
phl	khɫ
bl	ɡɫ
phr	khr
br	ɡr
	kw
	khw
ʔn̄	ʔŋ
ʔv	

6) Clusters occurring in modern loans, especially from English, have been disregarded, e.g., /fri:/ "free" and /braaw/ "brown".

7) Finals occurring in modern loans have not been included, e.g., /chéef/ "Chev, Chevrolet".