

Semantic Considerations in Interpreting Inscriptions: Illustrations from Lue, Lao, and Kammuang

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It is unfortunate that some of the errors writers have made in the interpretation of older Siamese literature, such as the Sukhothai inscriptions, have been due primarily to a lack of understanding of the meaning of particular lexical items in Tai dialects.¹ A careful investigation of words used in one dialect, but not in another, could shed some light on the interpretation of older Thai literature and inscriptions.

Identical words or phrases can mean totally different things in two Tai languages. For instance, the word *nam*⁴, in Lao means 'to follow' (Kasuangsiuksathikan 1962: 637); however, it means 'to lead' in Siamese (Manit 1983: 490). In Kammuang (Northern Thai) *ta²ki³* means 'just a moment ago', while the same expression means 'a long time ago' in Lao (Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, personal communication 1988). Lue has *sa⁵kam⁴* for 'a moment ago' and *tɛɛ²dai¹* or *huw¹* for 'long time ago'. Tai Yai (Shan) has *muu³ka²* for 'a moment ago' and *huw¹* for 'long time' (Sao Tern Moeng, personal communication 1988). Siamese *phɛɛ⁵* is a verb meaning 'to be defeated; to give in, lose' (Haas 1964: 379). Lue *pɛɛ⁶* and Kammuang *pɛɛ⁶* are identical in meaning with Lao *phɛɛ⁶*, 'to win' (Marcus 1970: 376). In Tai Yai, *pɛɛ⁵* is a verb meaning 'to win' (Sao Tern Moeng, personal communication 1988). The point is that translators and interpreters of Tai language materials must be aware of the fact that the meanings of seemingly the same words or cognates may vary along a continuum from identical meaning to opposite meaning.

The idea for investigating this challenging issue was inspired by Professor Gedney's reinterpretation of some lines of Sukhothai inscription. The example Gedney gives of possible wrong interpretations of the reading of a Sukhothai inscription revolves around the word *naaŋ¹* (Gedney 1964: 47). He argues convincingly that the word *naaŋ¹* does not mean 'an ordinary woman'. To support his argument, Gedney gives examples from Black Tai

¹ Tones for these three languages and for some of the other Tai languages referred to in this paper are indicated by the numbering system used by Professor Gedney. Descriptions of the tones for each of these languages can be found in the appendix.

and White Tai in which *naaŋ*¹ means 'royal lady, princess', not 'woman'. It is even more convincing if one looks at the meaning of the same word from other Tai languages such as Lue and Lao. Lue has the expression *pin*¹ *caw*³ *pin*¹ *naaŋ*⁴ meaning 'to be prince (ruler), to be princess'. In Tai Yai, *caw*³ *naaŋ*⁴ refers to 'a lady of high status or a princess' (Sao Tern Moeng, personal communication 1988). In Lao, *naa*⁴ *naaŋ*⁵ refers to 'a respected lady' (Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, personal communication 1988). According to an elderly Laotian (Daovone Vongsavanthong, personal communication 1988), *naaŋ*⁵ is an older Lao word referring to 'princess'. Terwiel (1982: 47) gives the transcription and definition of the word *naaŋ* in early Siamese as follows:

nang: 'lady', it seems that originally the term indicated a lady of high rank, but that with the passage of time the term was used to include women of a less exalted class.

It is clear that the word *naaŋ*¹ refers to 'princess, high-ranking lady, queen' in Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Tai Don, Tai Yai, Lue, Lao, Kammuang, and early Siamese. The only time that the word *naaŋ*¹ comes close to meaning an ordinary woman is when *naaŋ*¹ is used as a given name for a girl or woman. Even here, it is meant to signify an admired or ideal lady. The following is the part of the Sukhothai inscription that Gedney refers to and his partial interpretation:

*khon*¹ *day*¹....*bɔɔ*² *mii*¹ *chaar*⁴ *bɔɔ*² *mii*¹ *maa*⁴ *bɔɔ*² *mii*¹
*pua*² *bɔɔ*² *mii*¹ *naaŋ*¹ *bɔɔ*² *mii*¹ *ŋian*¹ *bɔɔ*² *mii*¹ *thɔɔŋ*¹
*hay*³ *kɛɛ*² *man*¹ *chɔy*³ *man*¹ *tuar*¹ *pen*¹ *baan*³ *pen*¹ *mian*¹

(If) anyone....has no elephants, has no horses, has no king,
 has no queen (to depend on), has no silver, has no gold....
 (1964: 47)

Just as Gedney has suggested, in checking with speakers of various Tai languages we find that the word *pua*², in Kammuang or *poo*² in Lue means 'chief, leader'. In Kammuang, *hua*¹ *pua*² is used interchangeably with *pua*². The same thing is true of *hoo*¹ *poo*² and *poo*² in Lue. In Tai Yai, *poo*² is a noun meaning 'leader' (Sao Tern Moeng, personal communication 1988). An older Lao word, *pua*², is a noun meaning 'prince, leader, ruler' (Daovone Vongsavanthong, personal communication 1988). The Siamese interpretation of the word *pua*² in the Sukhothai inscription should then be 'leader, ruler, prince'.

Another word that deserves discussion here is *kɛɛ*². The word *kɛɛ*² in Lao is a verb meaning 'to pull, drag' (Kerr 1972: 34). It is evident that the vowel systems and function words in Lao and that of the language of the Sukhothai period are strikingly similar. Chamberlain (1975) posits that the

Lao and Sukhothai dialects belong to the same branch in Southwestern Tai. It is suggested here that a careful analysis might prove that Sukhothai is indeed another dialect of Lao. Thus, the word *kɛɛ*²—as main verb—in the Sukhothai inscription reinterpreted through Lao means 'to lead or direct', following the preverb *hay*³ ('to have someone do something'). In modern Siamese this is indicated by the phrases *chak*⁵ *nam*⁴, *chak*⁵ *cuuŋ*⁴, *chiɿ*⁵ *nam*⁴ 'to lead, direct'. The new interpretation of the following Sukhothai inscription lines

*khon*¹ *day*¹....*bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹ *chaaŋ*⁴ *bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹ *maa*⁴ *bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹
*pua*² *bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹ *naaŋ*¹ *bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹ *ŋian*¹ *bɔɔ*² *miɿ*¹ *thɔɔŋ*¹ *hay*³
*kɛɛ*² *man*¹ *chɔy*³ *man*¹

should then be:

Whoever....has no elephants, has no horses, has no prince, has no princess, has no silver, has no gold (you) should pull him along, help him....

instead of:

(If) anyone...has no elephants, has no horses, has no servants, has no women, has no silver, has no gold, (he) gives to him, helps him....

as originally interpreted by Siamese scholars.

In this context, *kɛɛ*² should be a verb meaning 'to pull' not an adverb *kɛɛ*² as in *hay*³ *kɛɛ*² in Siamese. A good question is why was the use of the word *kɛɛ*² as a main verb ignored? Syntactically and semantically, this new interpretation makes much more sense than *hay*³ *kɛɛ*² *man*⁴ meaning 'to give him'. To give what? Culturally speaking, most of the items in the partial Sukhothai inscription above (that is, elephants, horses, princes, princesses) are not things that one gives to others. This example illustrates the need for scholars of Tai dialectology to seriously deal with comparative Tai lexicon. This effort will lead not only to a better understanding of older Siamese literature and inscriptions, but also eventually it can lead to a better understanding of the relationship between various Tai dialects in China, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, India, and Thailand.

Professor Li (1975: 271) suggests that isoglosses can be formed on the basis of selected Tai words. As a bilingual speaker of Lue and Kammuang, the author can see very clearly how this line of investigation might open up a new arena of research in Tai linguistics in the future. Kammuang, Lue, and Lao, for instance, share many words with identical meanings that are not found, or at least do not have the same meanings, in

Siamese. In Lao, words like *nan*⁵, a verb meaning 'noisy, loud'; *suun*¹, a verb meaning 'to mix, mingle' (Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, personal communication 1988); *foi*², a verb meaning 'to boil' and *faaw*⁵, a verb meaning 'to hurry, press' (Marcus 1970: 907, 909) occur and have identical meanings in Lue and Kammuang, but they do not occur in Siamese.

From a lexical point of view, Lue seems to be more closely related to Lao than to Kammuang. The words *wiak*, a noun meaning 'work'; *wit*, a noun meaning 'toilet'; and *sop*, a noun meaning 'mouth' are found in just about every dialect of Lue and Lao. The word *caaf*⁵ in Lue, and *caaf*⁶ in Kammuang, or *saaf*² in Lao has a somewhat different meaning from its Siamese counterpart *chaaf*³. Kerr (1972: 491) gives the transcription and definition of *saaf*² as follows:

sa:ŋ 1. n. artisan; expert in art, in speech, in handicraft,
skilled worker 2. adj. skilled 3. v. to know how.

The word *saaf*² in Lao, *caaf*⁵ in Lue, or *caaf*⁵ in Kammuang also means 'why or how can you....that; knowing when it is appropriate to....' In Lao (Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, personal communication 1988), Lue, and Kammuang we find the following expressions:

<i>saaf</i> ²	<i>waa</i> ²	<i>thee</i> ⁵	'(You) really have a way with words!'	(Lao)
<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>waa</i> ⁵	<i>noo</i> ⁴	'How can you say that?'	(Lue)
<i>saaf</i> ²	<i>pa</i> ¹	<i>saaf</i> ²	<i>maa</i> ⁴	'Knowing when to visit'
<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>pa</i> ¹	<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>maa</i> ⁴	'Knowing when to visit'
				(Lue)

In Lue and Kammuang, *caaf*⁵ means 'to be able to, know how' as well as 'usually, to be used to' as in:

<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>maa</i> ⁴	'usually come, used to come'	(Lue)
<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>maa</i> ⁴	'usually come, used to come'	(Kammuang)
<i>caaf</i> ⁵	<i>het</i> ⁵	'usually do, can do'	(Lue)
<i>caaf</i> ⁶	<i>yia</i> ²	'usually do, can do'	(Kammuang)

Clearly, the meanings of *caaf*⁵ or *saaf*² in these contexts are quite different from the Siamese definition of *chaaf*³. Therefore, one cannot assume that cognates in Tai dialects carry identical meanings.

These examples illustrate how a better understanding of lexical items in various Tai dialects can be helpful in dealing with older manuscripts, inscriptions, and literature as well as dialectal grouping. There is no doubt that a research team working on old inscriptions and manuscripts should include linguists who are well acquainted with those dialects and native speakers of such languages as Siamese, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Tai Don (White Tai), Tai Yai (Shan), Lue, and Lao. This team effort would definitely help make the study of Tai historical materials more comprehensive