

*Some Textual Evidence on the Tai Sounds *-ay and *-au*

Robert J. Bickner

The Thai classic poem *Lilit Phra Law* [lílít phrá lɔɔ] has long been regarded as a work of great beauty. In addition to being a beautiful work of art, however, the poem also has important lessons to teach about the Thai literary heritage and also about the history of Thai speech and writing.

Lilit Phra Law is composed in the style known as *lílít*, meaning that a combination of verse forms is used. These forms are known as *khloong*, a set of poetic structures that include rhyme and tone placement constraints, and *râay*, a kind of rhymed prose in which each five-syllable hemistich rhymes with the next. The constraints of *khloong* require rhymes primarily from the ancient A and C tone categories.¹ The *râay* form, on the other hand, leaves the poet free to select from the A, B, C, or D tone categories. In addition, the compositional style *lílít*, as it was originally conceived, requires that certain stanzas be linked by rhymes and that these rhymes be formed by words from the ancient A tone category. In the 660 stanzas found in most published editions of *Lilit Phra Law* there are more than 3,000 rhymes, all requiring agreement in the tone, the vowel, and the consonant final, if any, of the words involved.

I have argued elsewhere that *Lilit Phra Law*, as we know it today, dates from a time prior to the transformation of the language from the former three-tone system into the modern five-tone system and that this has caused considerable confusion about certain aspects of the poem. Modern commentators praise the beauty of the poem, for example, but also criticize certain “flaws” in it, focusing primarily on the so-called *thôot* ‘incorrect’ words. One such word is *lên*, ‘to play’, which is spelled *ล่น* in the poem as though the word came from the upper part of the C column of the tone sys-

¹ For a detailed discussion of the poetic forms used in *Lilit Phra Law* and of the tone categories of Thai, see Bickner (1991).

tem, rather than เฒ, as it is normally spelled in modern Thai writing, indicating an origin in the lower part of the B column. It is said that the poets purposely misspelled these words in order to follow the tone placement rules of the poetic form in which they were working.

The historical facts, however, show that these criticisms, and others based ultimately on the *thōot* concept, are groundless and must be abandoned completely. In the case of the word *lên*, comparative linguistic analysis shows that the spelling found in *Lilit Phra Law* is historically correct, that the word does belong in the C column, and that it is modern Thai that has made the change, not the ancient poets. Once the modern reader realizes that these seeming “flaws” are actually evidence of changes in the language over the course of time, the text can be instructive in unexpected ways.

The strict rhyme constraints used in the *khlooj* and *rây* forms help to identify many pronunciation changes that have taken place since the poem was composed, changes that are not directly related to the changes in the tone system. For example, the word *yâw* ‘home’ is pronounced and spelled in modern Thai with a short vowel เฝ้า but appears in the poem in rhymes with the word *tháaw* ฐา, a title of noble or royal rank. Cognates of the word *yâw* in other Tai dialects indicate that the long vowel is historically correct (Li 1977: 181) and that the vowel has been shortened in modern Thai. The rhymes found in *Lilit Phra Law* indicate that the change had not taken place at the time that the poem was composed. In this paper I would like to discuss briefly evidence found in the poem that may shed some light on a change in the sound system of Thai, involving words pronounced in modern Thai with a short *a* vowel followed by a glide *y*.

Modern Thai orthography commonly uses two separate vocalic symbols to represent the sound -ay in word-final position.² The symbols are ๒, known as *máy malay*, and ๑, known as *máy múan*. Comparative studies of the Tai family of languages show that *máy malay* and *máy múan* once represented two separate sounds, *-ay and *-au, respectively. These sounds have fallen together in modern Thai, and in many other Tai dialects, but they do remain separate in some members of the family today (Sarawit

² The combination of *máy hǎn ʔaakàat* and the consonant letter ย๑ *yák* also represents the sound -ay in modern Thai, but this spelling does not appear in the manuscripts of the poem. Words that are written this way in modern Thai are generally written in the manuscripts with *máy malay* or occasionally with *máy malay* plus ย๑ *yák* as in the modern spelling for the word *thay* (๒๑) ‘Thai’. The combination of *máy hǎn ʔaakàat* and ย๑ *yák* is evidently a very recent invention in Thai orthography.

1973: 66). Although the symbols now represent the same sound in spoken Thai, they cannot be used interchangeably in Thai spelling. For example, the word *cay* 'heart' is spelled with the symbol *máy múan* (๓๓), and spelling it with *máy malay* would be considered an error. Similarly, the word 'go' is spelled with *máy malay* (๓๓), and the use of *máy múan* in spelling the word would be considered incorrect.

Precisely when the two sounds represented by these symbols may have coalesced is an open question, although it certainly took place after the invention of the writing system. Li points to the existence of a separate vocalic symbol for **-aɯ* in modern Thai as evidence that the coalescence of **-ay* and **-aɯ* took place "late in Siamese" (Li 1977: 288-289). However, in the published editions of *Lilit Phra Law* and even in the manuscript copies of it held in the National Library collection in Bangkok, there are many rhyme links that mix words spelled with these symbols and thus seem to suggest that the sound had fallen together prior to the composition of the poem. For example, the words *pay* (๓๓) 'to go' and *nay* (๓๓) 'in' appear together in rhymes, as do the words *dây* (๓๓) 'to get' and *hây* (๓๓) 'to give'. Also, the emphatic *sây*, spelled either ๓๓ or ๓๓ in modern Thai, appears in rhymes with *hây* (๓๓) 'to give', *klây* (๓๓) 'near', *dây* (๓๓) 'to get', and *yà* (๓๓) 'large'.

These rhymes seem to suggest that the sounds **-ay* and **-aɯ* had already fallen together at the time that *Lilit Phra Law* was composed, that is, prior to the time of the tone splits. This would mean that the poets of the time, like poets working in modern Thai, did not distinguish between the sounds represented by these symbols and that the obsolete orthographic distinction was retained by the scribes who recorded and copied the poem. A careful study of this point, however, including a close comparison of the printed editions of the poem and the old manuscripts, is most instructive.

There are fifty-one complete or fragmentary manuscript books *samùt khòy* (สมุดข่อย) in the National Library collection.³ The manuscripts are said to date from the middle years of the last century.⁴ Only one bears a specific date, and that is 1860, and one or two seem to be more recent, pos-

³ I am indebted to the director and staff of the National Library of Thailand for their assistance in the preparation of microfilm copies of the manuscripts of *Lilit Phra Law*.

⁴ See the brief, and not entirely satisfying, discussion of the point by Chanthit Krasaesin (1954: 105-106). Also, acquisition information provided for some of the manuscripts in the National Library collection indicates that they were obtained after the Krasaesin study was completed.

sibly completed toward the end of the century. Several others, however, may be older than originally supposed, although a detailed study of the point remains to be done.

The question of the exact age of the manuscripts aside, they are not in and of themselves an infallible source for information on developments in the sound system, partly because the extant copies must have been made long after the changes took place, and partly because they are not entirely consistent. Many of the books appear to have been prepared by more than one scribe, and in some cases they each follow slightly different orthographic conventions. Two of the manuscripts do not differentiate at all between *máy malay* and *máy múan*, even as part of the orthographic system, using instead of either symbol another one that resembles both. In this compromise symbol, the final stroke goes to the left and down slightly, neither rising like *máy malay* nor turning in a circle like *máy múan*. All the rest of the manuscripts, however, do maintain a distinction between the symbols. Despite the occasional inconsistencies, it is clear that most of the scribes were aware of both symbols and endeavored to be consistent in using them.

The manuscripts are useful primarily in resolving wording problems. Frequently, the printed editions of the poem suggest that a rhyme link exists between an **-ay* and an **-aʉ*, but an examination of all of the manuscript versions shows alternate phrasings that solve the problem. In some extreme cases the suspect rhyme exists in only one or two manuscripts, while eight or nine more have a second wording that solves the problem. Thus, at least part of the problem is the result of uninformed editing of the text for publication. A critical edition of the poem is badly needed to help in resolving not only the **-ay* versus **-aʉ* problem but also many others of a similar nature.

In the printed editions of *Lilit Phra Law* there are 353 rhymes formed by words with either *máy malay* or *máy múan*. Of these rhymes, 313 are completely unambiguous. That is, both words, or all three words in the case of the three-position *khloong* rhymes, can be shown to have used the same proto-vowel and final. In 227 of these rhymes **-ay* words are involved, and in eighty-six of them **-aʉ* words are involved. There is some repetition of the words that form these rhyme links. In the *râay* passages, for example, the words, *tháy* (໗໓) 'lord' and *dây* (໗໔) 'to get' form eight of the eighty unambiguous **-ay* links, and the words *cay* (໗໕) 'heart' and *day* (໗໖) 'whatever' form seven of the thirty-one unambiguous **-aʉ* links. We will

return to this point below, but for the moment it is enough to point out that while some of the rhymes are repeated, many are not, and there are more than sixty different combinations in the 111 *-ay and *-au rhyme links in these passages alone. It is thus clear that in the vast majority of the examples found in the poem the ancient distinction has been maintained, and the number of examples of each type, across all of the tone categories, is large enough to demonstrate that this is not simply coincidence.

Of the forty other rhymes involving *-ay or *-au, those about which there is some ambiguity, twenty-two involve the word *sây*, used throughout the poem as an emphatic or an exclamation, and it is primarily here that the confusion about these sounds arises. The word is generally written in the published editions either as *sây* (𑜋𑜨𑜃𑜫) or *sây* (𑜋𑜨𑜃𑜫), both of which are recognized as correct by the Royal Institute Dictionary (1982: 287, 828). These spellings are frequently used in the manuscripts, but so also are the spellings 𑜋𑜨 and 𑜋𑜨. Thus, unlike the other words that appear in these rhymes, there is considerable inconsistency in the manner in which this word is represented. The real problem is that while all the written forms suggest that *-ay is the correct form, the poem seems to call for the word to rhyme with both *-ay and *-au words. A close examination shows that seventeen of these twenty-two rhymes are with *-au, not *-ay words. Of these rhymes fourteen are with the word *hây* (𑜋𑜨) 'to give', two are with *klây* (𑜋𑜨𑜃𑜫), 'near', and one is with *chây* (𑜋𑜨) 'to use'. As their spelling indicates, all of these words actually derive from proto-forms with *-au.

Of the other five rhymes involving *sây*, one is with the word *yây* (𑜋𑜨𑜃𑜫) 'large', but this is highly suspect because it involves a rhyme across the ancient tone categories. The other four such rhymes are with *-ay words, *dây* (𑜋𑜨) 'to get', for example, but they come from very garbled portions of the text in which the different manuscripts show considerable variation, casting doubt on the presently available wording.

The large number of rhymes between *sây* and *-au words, and the suspect nature of the few rhymes with *-ay words, suggests that although *sây* is consistently spelled with *mây* *malay* today, the proto-form was actually *-au. If we accept this reasoning and add the seventeen to the other rhymes formed with words spelled with the *mây* *múan*, we now have a total of 103 *-au rhymes and 227 *-ay rhymes, or a total of 330 rhymes in which the ancient distinction is maintained.

There still remain eighteen other ambiguous rhymes involving *-ay and *-au words, none with *sây*. Of these rhymes, six are from garbled por-

tions of the text in which, again, there is such great variation that it is difficult to evaluate the wording. There are twelve other rhymes in the poem in which *-ay and *-aʉ words seem to be rhymed. They come from portions of the text on which the manuscripts seem to agree and for which there is no obvious explanation. There is no consistent pattern, and I suspect that further study of the manuscripts will reveal that at least some of them are recent alterations in or additions to the text. In any case, their number is too small to offer a strong counter to the 330 rhymes in which the ancient distinction is maintained.

Several conclusions are suggested by a study of these words as they appear in *Lilit Phra Law*. First, although the published editions of the poem seem to indicate the opposite, I think that it is appropriate to conclude that the *-ay and *-aʉ sounds fell together only after the poem as we know it today was set down in written form. This implies that the distinction was lost more recently than the early Ayutthaya period of Thai history.

A second conclusion suggested by this study is that the emphatic, spelled in modern Thai either as ไช้ or ใจ, must actually have developed from a pronunciation using *-aʉ. It would most likely be difficult to find cognates for this type of word using normal comparative methods, and poetic texts from other Tai dialects may be the best source for corroboration.

A third conclusion has to do with the repetition of certain rhymes, some of which are mentioned briefly above. There are other repetitions using *-ay and *-aʉ words, as well. The words *cay* (ใจ) 'heart', *day* (ใจ) 'whatever', and *nay* (ใน) 'in' form the three-position rhyme link in seven stanzas of *khloong*-4. The words *dây* (ได้) 'to get', and *thây* (ไท้) 'lord' form the two-position link in fourteen *khloong*-4 stanzas. The words *cay* (ใจ) 'heart' and *day* (ใจ) 'whatever' are used to form fourteen inter-stanza rhyme links, and *day* (ใจ) and *cay* (ใจ) are used to form such links twelve times. These are far from the only rhymes that are repeated, and I believe that a full examination of the point will show a great many "standard" rhymes and phrasings that are repeated throughout the poem.

It has been demonstrated that the presence of formulaic devices is a characteristic of orally composed poetic work and that such devices are not found in written compositions.⁵ I believe that the repeated rhymes in *Lilit Phra Law* are part of a formulaic aspect of the poem that has not been recognized previously and remains to be fully studied. The presence of this

⁵ For a treatment of this point and others of relevance for a study of *Lilit Phra Law*, see pages 17–56 of Scholes and Kellogg (1966).

formulaic material suggests that what we have in the poem is a written record of an oral composition, one that developed over the course of time as many singers used it in performance. I believe that further study will demonstrate clearly that *Lilit Phra Law* was the work of a culture far more attuned to the spoken than the written word and that scholars will have to take this fact into account if they are to arrive at a true understanding of the position of the poem in the history of Thai literature. One implication of this line of reasoning is that the search for the author of the poem will remain fruitless. If it were an oral composition, it was most likely not the product of one particular individual working alone, or even with a small group, but of the whole speech community using the story as part of its common heritage.

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