Choosing Lao Pronouns for Conversational Purposes: Negotiating and Establishing Relationships Verbally

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0. Abstract

Building on my earlier work on the use of Lao pronouns in dialogues found in Lao fiction (Compton 1992), this study analyzes the choice of pronouns in both formal and informal conversations in Lao. Pronominal choices are discussed in terms of the actual pronouns used, as well as the factors which may influence speakers to make the choices they do. Both "standard" pronouns and kintype pronouns are discussed, as are the social contexts and situational factors involved in choosing them.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of the second phase of a research project on Lao pronouns, kinship terms, and their use.

Numerous studies exist, for a wide variety of languages, which focus on how various social relationships influence a speaker's selection of terms of address and second person pronominal usage. For some languages, there are studies of social influence on first and third person pronominal usage as well (see the work of Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). As John Spencer (1977:vii) comments:

> Such studies open up a picture of the processes of personal interaction in a given society, showing how address forms and pronominal usage indicate difference or dominance, intimacy or distance, equality or differential status. Relationships between individuals are not necessarily, of course, static or permanently fixed; and changes in relationships may be marked, and perceived, by changes of address form or pronoun. In fact, individuals may utilise

the options offered by these forms to manipulate
the attitudes towards them of those they address.

At this point in my research on pronominal usage in Tai
languages, I am not ready to make even tentative conclusions
about the manipulation of attitudes which may result from the
use of particular pronoun sets or kinship terms used
pronominally. However, I do have some observations about the
process of negotiation and selection which appears to be in
use for Lao pronouns and kinship terms. I submit that we will
find similar processes of sociolinguistic negotiation in use in a
number of other Southeast Asian languages. For most Tai
languages, both first and second person pronouns, including
kinship terms used pronominally, may be involved in negotiation
and third person pronouns may be affected as well.
   In this paper, I present a theoretical model for viewing
Lao sociolinguistic relationships and a description of a variety
of techniques that I have observed being used by speakers of
Lao to determine, select or change pronouns or kinship term
use. I discuss some of the exceptions to the use of "sets" of
pronouns or "reciprocal pairings" of kinship terms used
pronominally. Then I indicate a number of social situations
which may limit negotiation. Finally, I present an outline of
steps used in determining Lao pronoun selection.

2. A Model for Viewing Lao Sociolinguistic Relationships
   Linguistic interpersonal social distance varies from
society to society and from language to language, as well as
within a particular language and society. I present here a
theoretical model for Lao to illustrate the sociolinguistic
position of speakers in relation to ego. (A graphic for this
model can be found in the appendix.) A series of concentric
circles are used to represent rings of society within which ego
interacts. At the center ring is ego. In the ring immediately
surrounding ego are those who have an intimate or semi-
intimate relationship with ego. In the next ring are those who
are unknown or somewhat distant from ego. This is the area of
most neutral relationship to ego. Farthest from ego, in the

outer ring are those who deserve or demand respect in society through status, age, position or role. Linguistic usage will depend upon a speaker's position in the circle of relationships with ego.

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the outer ring of the model, some of the forms which ego may use in conversation include: 1) high respect pronouns such as *tháan* (second person) or *phǝn* (third person); 2) a role or occupational title such as *khúu* ('teacher'); 3) a respect term such as *ñáa* in front of a kinship term used pronominally such as *mɛɛ* ('mother') thus producing a form such as *ñáa mɛɛ*.[1]

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the next ring in from the outside, that is those about whom ego has little information or whom ego may wish to keep at a distance, some of the forms which ego may use in conversation include: 1) standard pronouns for 'you' and 'I' such as *câw* and *khɔ̀y* and for the third person, a pronoun such as *láaw*; 2) avoidance of pronoun or kinship terms whenever possible.

For those speakers whose relationship to ego is represented by the ring closest to ego, quite a number of pronouns are available in Lao. In addition, one can select the most appropriate (in terms of age and sex) kinship term to be used pronominally. It should be made clear that for such terms to be used, one is not necessarily related to the person with whom one uses such a kinship term. (Occasionally, one may choose to use a kinship term in an environment such as the market or a restaurant, even though the recipient is in fact not an intimate.) Examples of forms which ego might use in conversation with members of this group include: 1) pronouns such as *kūu, tōo*, and *mán* (first, second, and third person respectively, but not a set per se); and 2) kinship terms used pronominally such as *ʔâay* ('older brother/male only a little older than ego') or *pâa* ('aunt/female somewhat older than one's parents').

Finally, elsewhere I noted (Compton 1992:113) that when kinship terms are used pronominally, they have, in fact, **floating person**. The first, second or third person aspect is determined primarily by the real world relationship in age between those conversing or conversed about, and is not a feature of the word being used pronominally itself.

3. Techniques of Initial Negotiation

On initially meeting another for the first time, speakers may skillfully participate in a "pronoun selection dance." There are a number of steps in this dance, any of which may be used to arrive at the correct conversational pattern.

A common technique used by speakers observed in my research is that of initially **avoiding the use of pronouns** in conversation when interacting with another for the first time. Lao (and Thai) allows for this possibility because, once engaged in conversation, the subject slot may be left empty. The situational context is one in which "you" and "I" are obviously the two speaking to each other; thus there is generally no need to mark the obvious fact that when I am speaking, "I" is the speaker and "you" is the addressee. A variation on the avoidance of personal pronoun usage is to use a known title to address the unfamiliar person, at the same time avoiding any use of personal pronoun for the self.

Another frequently used technique is to **defer a decision** on more appropriate pronominal usage by staying with the neutral pronoun set, *câw* and *khòy*, 'you' and 'I' respectively. This pronoun set may be appropriately used while one gathers more social information about the other. The new social information can then help one to determine what pronominal adjustments might be more appropriate in the conversation.

A technique which appears in conversations of women is to **use one's personal name** (usually a nickname) to refer to self (i.e. in the grammatical slot for and with the meaning of 'I') and to use the role or title for addressing the other.

An attempt by one speaker to initiate a pronoun set usage (other than the neutral set) may result in what I call a

"broken set" response. One speaker, for instance, may use a pronoun or kinship term pronominally to refer to the other ('you'). The second speaker may indicate rejection of the proposed pronominal set by not responding with the matching pronominal term during the conversation. Though the first speaker may persist for a few more conversational turns in using the term, it finally becomes clear that the other is rejecting the pronominal selection outright if that second speaker responds with a term from a different possible pronominal set.

On the other hand, use of both terms of a pronominal set, or what I will call here a **"full set" response** by both speakers usually indicates their mutual acceptance of these pronoun or kinship terms choices. Such use of full sets early in a conversation is most likely to occur when factors such as age and social distance are clearly present at the outset of the conversational interaction. Social conventions make negotiation and decision-making unnecessary in such situations. One of the speakers will use the expected forms for self and other, and the second speaker will respond in kind, indicating clear agreement that the first speaker's choices are indeed appropriate.

Another technique is the use of a direct **question for permission** to use a pronominal form or a kin term pronominally. Such a question usually is from a lower status speaker to a higher status speaker. An example I presented earlier (Compton 1992:7) is one in which early in a conversation in Lao, a young woman asked an older one, "May I call you older sister?" in order to obtain permission to use the more intimate set of kintype pronominals rather than the more distant or neutral set for 'you' and 'I'.

Another approach is for one of the speakers to simply **state the form** by which that speaker prefers to be addressed. This statement would most often be made by the higher status speaker to the lower status speaker. The following example from the research illustrates this point.

At a Lao party, a young woman new to the community chatted with an older Lao woman from whom she learned that a good friend of the young woman's father lived nearby. The

older woman called this man on the phone and explained to him that the daughter of his friend was present and would like to talk to him. The young woman greeted her father's friend and then attempted to establish a term of reference for him. She used the term *lúŋ* ('father's older brother/male who is older than father'). He immediately corrected her selection to *ʔàaw* ('father's younger brother/male who is somewhat younger than father'), explaining that he was younger than her father. She proceeded to address him as *ʔàaw* during the rest of the phone conversation.

4. Techniques Indicating Change in Relationships

Both positive and negative aspects of changes in interpersonal relationships can be indicated in Lao by changing kinship terms used pronominally or by changing personal pronoun usage. Positive changes in a person's life may result in others switching to pronouns which show greater respect or social distance or by prefixing a respect term to a kinship term that has traditionally been used pronominally. For example, a person one has generally referred to as *ʔâay* may (upon receiving a promotion, new rank or status) now be called *ñáa ʔâay* 'respected somewhat older male.' Prior to 1975, in the case of a less intimate relationship, a person with whom one had used the form *câw* would be called *tháan* (a very polite form for 'you') if that person had received a significant elevation in social status.

In the case of husband and wife, once the couple has had a child, the wife may now address her husband as *phɔ* 'father', whereas she had previously called him *ʔâay* 'older brother/male intimate'. Similarly, the husband may now call the wife *mɛɛ*, 'mother', reflecting her new status as mother of their child. Where ambiguity might result from the use of words that also function in the general meaning of 'father' or 'mother,' the respective parties may be addressed by the new term plus the nickname of the first child (i.e. *phɔ ʔee* or *mɛɛ ʔee*).

In the case of a **new occupational role**, a person who becomes a teacher (*khúu*) is addressed and spoken of by that

term. Similarly, the person, particularly while in the work environment, would now refer to himself or herself as *khúu*. In addition, this new role in society will be marked by a new third person pronominal usage by those referring to that teacher. While a student, this individual would have been referred to with the third person singular pronoun *láaw* or by some with a more intimate form such as *mʉ̌*, as a teacher, however, the appropriate third person pronoun now becomes *phən*, reflecting society's respect for both the role of teacher and for one who has attained this position.

In the case of the **development of new intimacy or closeness** in interpersonal relations, one set of pronominal forms which the parties had previously used in conversation may be discarded, and a new, more intimate set chosen to reflect the more personal relationship that has developed. For example, two individuals who had previously only a slight acquaintance begin to work in the same office. The more neutral set of pronouns they previously used eventually is replaced by the pronominal usage of suitable kintype terms such as *ʔâay* and *nɔ́ŋ* ('older brother/male somewhat older than ego' and 'younger sibling/person somewhat younger than ego,' respectively).

Negative changes in interpersonal relationships can be reflected in conversational pronominal usage as well. Such changes can be marked in a number of ways. First of all, a speaker may **withdraw a respect term** formerly used when speaking to or about the other. This withdrawal of the pronominal linguistic signal of respect indicates one's withdrawal of personal respect for that individual.

Withdrawal of a familiar form for the third person reference to another, as well as the withdrawal of familiar forms in first and second person can also signal negative aspects of a relationship.

Another indication of negative feelings is the **use of forms showing disrespect**, anger or disgust. This can be accomplished either by using forms which are overly intimate or by the sarcastic use of too high a form. For example, if a

person one has normally referred to in the third person by *ʔâay* (an intimate kinship term used pronominally) or even by the more neutral third person pronoun *láaw* has made one angry, the reference might become *mɔ̌* or even *mɔ̌ nân* ('that one'). In some dialects, the person one is angry at may be referred to as *tɔ̌o* or *tɔ̌o nân* ('that body'). These forms (*mɔ̌* and *tɔ̌o*), which may be considered friendly, intimate terms in certain social relationships, can be scorchingly angry terms in others. Only those who are aware of previous pronominal and interpersonal interactions between the angry parties can appropriately interpret the significance of these pronominal linguistic changes.

The use of a high form of 'you' such as *thâan* to another who would normally have received a neutral pronoun such as *câw* or who had previously been addressed with the more intimate *ʔâay* indicates sarcasm or anger on the part of the speaker.

5. Techniques Acknowledging Audience Change

The presence of other listeners can also influence the pronominal choices made by speakers. Conversations between individuals may take place in environments where others are also listening to or may overhear the two talk. Consequently, the speakers may choose to switch from more informal terms to standard pronoun sets or role or title usage for first and second person.

Conversations also occur in which more than two speakers are involved. This may make it necessary for individual speakers to switch from intimate to standard pronoun forms because members of the conversational group may hold a variety of role relationships to the speaker. In addition, it may be necessary to switch back and forth during the conversation from a plural form for 'you' (for instance *phûak câw*) to the appropriate form of 'you' (such as *nɔ̌ŋ*) for a particular individual in the group.

6. Broken Sets

Sets of pronouns and sets of kinship terms used pronominally are generally recognized for a number of *Southeast Asian languages*. *Joseph Cooke (1968:83-85)*, *in* discussing Burmese, notes that "any two first and second person forms may be paired, if they do not have contradictory semantic features." For Lao, a typical pronoun set might be *khɔ̀y/câw* ('I'/'you'); a typical kinship set used pronominally might be *ʔâay/nɔ̌ŋ* ('older brother or slightly older male'/'younger sibling or younger person'). However, it appears from the data that just as relationships are generally individual, usage of pronouns is individual. For instance, one may call a member of a married couple by a part of a pronoun set or kinship set, but not give the matched pronoun or equivalent kinship term to the other spouse with whom one does not have an equivalent relationship (for instance, Uncle, but not Aunt; Older Sister, but not Older Brother; *tháan* (respect term for 'you') for one member of the couple, but not for the other).

7. Alternating Sets

Although a particular set of pronouns (or of kinship terms used pronominally) may be the set that is predominantly used in speaking to another individual, it does not mean that that set is the only one which will be used in a conversation. Two speakers may, for example, alternate between neutral and intimate sets in the same conversation.

8. Predictable Pronoun Usage

Lao society has already determined what are appropriate usages of pronouns in certain role relationships. Thus, there really is no negotiating to be done when those roles and their accompanying pronominal forms are clear. An example of this is the teacher/student relationship. The form to be used by students in addressing their teacher in formal settings is established; no negotiation to determine which terms will be used takes place. Similarly, the appropriate pronominal usage

with monks, with elders, with children, and when speaking formally to groups is generally set.

The ultimate choice of which pronouns or kintype pronominals will be used in a conversation generally rests with the older person or with the person of superior social status between the two negotiating parties. Permitting a particular usage by another speaker to continue rather than trying to change it can usually be considered acceptance by the superior of the usage selected. It is with those whose relationships with one are not immediately clear that one has to negotiate in order to determine just what the most appropriate pronominal usage will be.

9. **Steps in Determining Lao Pronoun Selection: An Outline**

The following outline summarizes the steps that I have observed taken by speakers of Lao as they determine the appropriate forms to use in conversation with a new or unfamiliar person.

    A. Gather social information by
        1) Visual and linguistic observation (such as visually determining sex and relative age, or noting ways in which others with whom one has already established pronominal relationships address the new person)
        2) Questioning (about occupation; about relationships to known people, both kin and non-kin; about schools attended and year completed for estimating age relationships; about home province for other possible information on social connections and status, etc.)
    B. Analyze social information
    C. Make tentative selection of pronoun **or** kinship terms to be used pronominally **or** name **or** title to be used for self and other
    D. Test pronominal selection in conversation

1) Selection confirmed; forms to be used established.
2) Move on with conversational activity

OR

1) Selection rejected
2) Revise choice of forms **or** receive command or suggestion from other speaker **or** avoid use of pronouns
3) Test new selection
4) Evaluate response
5) If confirmed, move on with conversational activity

It is by making use of a process similar to the one suggested in the outline provided above, and by drawing on previous sociolinguistic experiences in Lao society that Lao speakers are able to select rather quickly suitable terms of address and referral. Through further study and closer analysis of conversations between Lao speakers, a more finely tuned process of speaker decision-making may be discovered. However, the model proposed and the accompanying discussion provide us with an initial framework for understanding factors in the selection of pronouns and kinship terms for conversational purposes in Lao.

Notes

1. The six tones of the Southern Lao dialect represented here are described below in terms of the tone chart used by William J. Gedney and other Tai linguists. The various boxes in the tone chart are indicated by the phrases in parentheses. The six tones include a mid rising tone (box A1); a low mid tone with a slight initial rise and final fall (boxes A2 and A3); a mid level tone (boxes B1, 2, 3, 4 and DS4); a low level tone (boxes C1, DL1, 2, and 3); a mid falling tone (boxes C2, 3, 4, and DL4); and a high falling tone (box A4).

References

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Appendix
A MODEL FOR VIEWING LAO SOCIOLINGUISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

RESPECTED

NEUTRAL

INTIMATES   DISTANT

EGO

SEMI-INTIMATES

UNKNOWN

HIGHER STATUS, AGE