LAO FINAL PARTICLES

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Lao has a wealth of final particles. They are one-syllable words which usually occur at utterance finally but some may occur alone and a few combinations occur quite often. They seem to function in three ways: as question words, imperative words, or words of special emphasis. They may indicate something about the speaker's feelings or attitude or something about the relationship between two speakers.

Lao is comprised of many dialects. The discussion here is based on the speech of Vientiane, although there is variation among individuals as well as variation from one part of the city to another.

Phonologically the final particles differ somewhat from words in other grammatical categories. Although some follow expected phonological rules of Lao, most of them have variants of different tone and vowel length depending on emphasis or nuance of meaning. Usually there is a short, high variant contrasting with a long, high, rising-falling variant. In general, the long variant is sweeter, more beseeching, softer, or less abrupt. Since some final particles have tones on a pitch or contour not usually found in other Lao words, it is difficult to write them in Lao and know exactly what tone is intended. Although their meanings are sometimes elusive and they are subject to individual variation, the final particles are essential for competence in spoken Lao. In general, these particles are acceptable on all but the most formal speech occasions. Although the number of final particles is certainly not endless, I doubt if the following list is complete.

The transcription makes use of the following inventory. Vowels are doubled when long.
p t c k ? i y u
ph th kh e a o
b d t a o
m n ŋ ṭ la ya ua
f s h
w j

| 23 | low rising | sāj 'where'
| 22 | low        | caj 'heart, mind'
| 45 | high rising| sāj 'fishtrap', phēt 'peppery'
| 44 | mid level  | sāj 'to put', phēt 'gem'
| 21 | low falling| sāj 'intestine', saät 'mat'
| 53 | high falling| sāj 'to use', saät 'nation'

The two falling tones are glottalised. Words with low tone are said with the low rising tone by most Vientiane speakers giving only five tones. When necessary here, the approximate phonetic value of the tone of a final particle will be indicated by the number scale alone and not by a diacritic.

1 bōo, bōp This is usually considered the "yes-no" question word rather than a final particle. It may be considered neutral as to attitude or emphasis.

láaw sī paj bōo 'Is he going?'

2 bōo 454 When said with this tone, the question word signals doubt. The speaker can hardly believe it.

láaw sī paj bōo 454 'Is he going? (I doubt it.)'

3 bōp When said alone, this means something like 'Oh, I see, is that so?'. The speaker shows he has heard what has been said.

láaw sī paj bōp? '(You said) he is going?'

4 bōp? This is probably a contraction of 'bōp huə' 'don't know'.

láaw paj sāj bōp? 'Where he went, I don't know.'

5 dáj This serves to contradict a statement or action.

láaw paj dáj 'He did go too!'

kin dáj '(That's for you!) Eat it!'

6 dé-dee 454 As a question particle, this means 'and...?', what
about...?; how about...?

lāw si paj, cāw dō 'He's going; how about you?'
It is also used with the meaning 'let me remind you that...; understand that...'.
lāw bō pāj dō 'He didn't go, (you know).'

7 dō-dō, nē-nē As a question particle, this means 'who all, what all, etc.'.
mī phāj dō 'Who all is there?'
sāj nān dō 'What all do you put in?'
It is also used in polite requests.
khō nāmtān dō 'May I have some sugar?'
āt patuu hāj dō 'Please close the door.'

8 dō-dō 454 This is used with expressions of encouragement, pardon, warning and others to emphasise the sincerity of the statement, or to be sure one is heard.
sōk dī dō 454 'Good luck, now!'
paj dō '(I'm) going, you hear?'

9 dōk This means 'absolutely, indeed, on the contrary'.
bō bō mī dōk 'There isn't any, absolutely.'
paj jū dōk 'Oh, indeed I am going!'

10 hō-hōy 454 Alone this indicates puzzlement or wonder. As a question particle, it means 'I wonder, can you tell me'.
lāw paj sāj hō 'I wonder, do you know where he went?'

11 kō?, kō-kō? This is a question particle used to ask that a previous statement be repeated.
an dej kō? 'What did you say (again),'
lāw paj sāj kō? 'Where is it (you said) he went?'

12 kō-kō 454 This is used to remind, turn the attention to something or bring up a previously mentioned subject.
kin khāw jū kō 'We were eating (you see)...'
lyān pūm kō 'Oh, about the book...'

13 lā This usually follows a "yes-no" question and demands a definite answer.
lāw paj mēn bō 1ā 'He went. Am I right or not?'
cāw si paj bō 1ā 'Well, are you going or not?'

14 mē, mē-mē 454 This is a request particle meaning 'go ahead with with it, don't hesitate'. It is used when the speaker urges someone to do something he wants to do but is afraid to or dares not to.
paj mē 'Go ahead go (I think you should)!'
15 nə This introduces a new subject or draws someone's attention.
   sàñ nə lǎaw sì pəj bɔɔ? 'In that case then, is he going?'
   nə'í nə cǎw sì pəj bɔɔ? 'Say, are you going?'

16 nəa ꞈ 454 This can be used to plead or beseech. It is also used
   when making excuses or giving explanations.
   pəj nəa ꞈ 454, bɔɔ don nəa ꞈ 454 'Oh please come along; it won't
   take that long!'
   fən tòk nəa ꞈ 454, cỳŋ màa sə 'It was raining so of course I was
   late.'

It may indicate that the speaker has not been immediately understood.
   phùu nən nəa ꞈ 454, phùu sùŋ sùŋ nəa ꞈ 454 'That one, the tall
   one, (don't you see!)

17 nɔ̀-nɔ̀, nɔ̀-nɔ̀ This is sometimes used alone to indicate agreement
   with what has been said, such as when something is said and one says
   'Isn't it the truth!'. As a question particle, it requests agreement.
   pəj nɔ̀? 'Let's go all right?'
   mèn nɔ̀? 'That's right, huh?'

18 nɔ̀-nɔ̀ ꞈ 454 This means 'I wonder' and is used when asking oneself
   especially after having forgotten.
   lǎaw pəj sàŋ nɔ̀ ꞈ 454 'I wonder where (he said) he was going?'

19 sàŋ-sàŋ ꞈ 454 This is a request particle meaning 'let it be done
   or decided'. The longer variant is often used to plead. The short
   variant may sound curt or impatient depending on the situation.
   pəj sàŋ 'Leave!'
   'Go ahead and leave. (You don't have to stay.)'
   jũũ sàŋ ꞈ 454 'Oh, please stay!'

20 thɔ̀? This is a request particle meaning 'let's...'.
   pəj thɔ̀? 'Let's go!'

21 tTI This is used like No. 3 'bɔɔ?' to show one has heard what has
   been said.
   lǎaw sì pəj tTI 'He's going, (you say).'

22 tTI ꞈ 454 This means 'surely, quite sure' but always indi-
   cates some reservation or slight doubt or uncertainty.
   pəj tTI 'Sure, let's go, why not. (In response to the question:
   "Shall we go?")'
   lǎaw sì pəj tTI 'He's going I'm quite sure.'
   lǎaw sì pəj tTI ꞈ 454 'Of course he's going.'

23 tù Ł-tùa ꞈ 454 This is a question particle meaning 'of course?'.
   lǎaw sì pəj tùa 'He's going of course?'
24 wá-waa ʃ 454 This is a question particle. It usually expresses surprise or even puzzlement. Used alone in response to a previous statement it means 'oh?, is that so?'.
    bō bō pāj wá 'Oh, aren't you going?'
    lāw pāj sāj wá 'Now where did he get off to?'
    khīy hoñ thee waa ʃ 454 'How could it be so hot?'

25 wèj-wēej ʃ 53 This may indicate exuberance or impatience or annoyance. It is not used in formal speech.
    cāgaj wèj 'How's it buddy?'
    pāj sāj māa wèj 'Where the heck have you been?'
    bō pāj wèj 'Heck with it, I'm not going.'