

A SIAMESE INNOVATION

Siamese (that is, Standard Thai of Thailand) *haa*² means 'plague, cholera, epidemic'. Nowadays this word is most commonly heard in various cursing expressions, for example, *taay*¹ *haa*² 'to die, or may he (you, etc.) die of the plague', roughly equivalent in force and in degree of vulgarity to English 'God damn it!' and *?aay*³ *haa*², used in cursing a man, or boy, or object. Also there is another homophonous word *haa*² 'classifier for showers of rain'. These two forms have different etymological origins, as we shall see, and most dictionaries list them as separate items. McFarland (1954), however, combines the two words in a single entry and contrives a gloss to cover both, reading in part 'coming or occurring in great abundance (as rain or disease)'.

The second word, *haa*² 'shower', has in Siamese the precisely correct etymological form, corresponding without any deviation whatsoever to cognates found in all branches of the Tai family. The initial and tone of this word for 'shower' everywhere reflect an original voiceless initial with the B tone of

Proto-Tai. On the basis of the initials found in the various languages, F. K. Li long ago grouped this word with those for which he reconstructs Proto-Tai initial **xr* (see Li 1954, 378; Li 1960, 955-56; Li 1977, 234).

But the first word, *haa*² 'epidemic', is aberrant in Siamese; this form cannot be directly inherited. The initial *h* with second or low tone ought, as in the case of the other word, *haa*² 'shower', to reflect an original voiceless initial with Proto-Tai B tone, but everywhere in the Tai-speaking domain, outside of Thailand and Laos, the cognate forms for Siamese *haa*² 'epidemic' have initials and tones that reflect a Proto-Tai voiced initial, presumably **r*, with the Proto-Tai B tone, so that the Siamese form ought to be not *haa*² with second or low tone, but rather **raa*³, with third or falling tone. In his *Handbook of Comparative Tai* (1977), F. K. Li has (I believe mistakenly) listed his word with those for which he reconstructs the voiceless Proto-Tai initial **hr*, that is, he takes the Siamese form *haa*² to be regular, and forms in other languages reflecting an original voiced initial to be aberrant. For some of the cognates that he cites he notes that they have not B1 tone (B with voiceless initial) but B2 (B with voiced initial). He fails to note that everywhere, except in Thailand and Laos, the initial and tone in this word reflect an original voiced initial. If the evidence to be presented in this paper is accepted, then 'epidemic' ought to be listed under Proto-Tai **r*. Others have, so far as I know, also failed to notice the true facts regarding this word.

This paper will first present the evidence for the foregoing statement that the cognates of Siamese *haa*² 'epidemic' indicate that the Siamese form ought to be not *haa*² but **raa*³. Then an attempt will be made to venture a possible explanation for the aberrant and innovative Siamese form.

The evidence for the statement that the Siamese form for 'epidemic' ought to be **raa*³ will be presented in the following way. For each language or dialect cited, the form for this word will be given, along with other words that agree with it in initial and tone, that is, other words having the initial and tone that reflect the voiced Proto-Tai initial **r* with tone B, such as the cognates of Siamese *ray*³ 'dry field', *rom*³ 'shade', and *rua*³ 'to leak'. And for each language or dialect we will cite, by way of contrast, the cognate for Siamese *haa*² 'shower', to show that the two words 'epidemic' and 'shower' everywhere but in Thailand and Laos differ in initial, or tone, or both.

Readers will be spared a complete analysis of the tone system of each language, or of the transcription system used in each source cited. For our present purpose it will presumably be sufficient to show that, regardless of vagaries of transcription in various sources, the word for 'epidemic' has the same tone and initial as the words for 'dry field', 'shade', and 'to leak', but differs in tone, or initial, or both, from the word for 'shower', in each language or dialect cited.

To the west of Thailand and Laos, Shan (citing Cushing 1914) has *haa*³ 'an epidemic disease, disease

prevailing without any apparent cause, particularly cholera', agreeing in initial and tone with *hay*³ 'a cultivated spot of ground, not subject to inundation, an upland field', *hom*³ 'to shade, to cast a shadow; the shade of anything', and *ho*³ 'to leak', but differing in tone from *haa*² 'a shower'. The Shan change of **r* to *h* in 'dry field', 'shade' and 'to leak' (see also Siamese *ray*³, *rom*³, and *rua*³) is an instance of a very widespread but apparently fairly recent change of **r* to *h* in all Tai dialects of Burma, Assam, northern and northeastern Thailand, Laos, Sipsongpanna in Yunnan, and the extreme north-western part of Vietnam. Where this change has occurred, the word for 'epidemic' ends up, of course, with initial *h*, like the word for 'shower', and we are forced to turn to the tone to distinguish forms with original voiced initials, such as 'dry field', from those with original voiceless initials, such as 'shower'.

Even farther west, Ahom, in Assam, an archaic Tai language now extinct, is of no help to us, because the dictionaries do not mark tones. The *Ahom Lexicons* (Barua and Phukan 1964) gives *rā* 'an epidemic, disease', and *rā* 'to rain heavily'. The latter form, cognate with Siamese *haa*² 'shower', has in Ahom an initials *r*, which is part of the evidence upon which Li relied for his reconstruction of **xr* for the set of words in which he includes it.

To the north of Thailand and Laos, the Lue language of Chieng Hung in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan (citing Gedney's field notes, quoted in Gedney 1976), has *haa*⁵ 'cholera, epidemic', agreeing in initial and

tone with *hay*⁵ 'dry field', *hum*⁵ 'shade', and *ho*⁵ 'to leak', but differing in tone from *haa*² 'shower'.

Still farther north, in Yunnan, are found some small islands of a form of Tai speech called Tai Nuea. Our forms are found in the two articles on Tai Nuea by Harris (1975) and Gedney (1976). From Harris we cite the dialect designated TN: *haa*¹ 'cholera, epidemic', agreeing in initial and tone with *hay*¹ 'dry field', *hom*¹ 'shade', and *ho*¹ 'to leak', but differing in tone from *haa*² 'heavy shower'.

Moving eastward into Vietnam, the White Tai dictionary of Dieu and Donaldson (1970) gives *hā* 'an epidemic', agreeing in initial and tone with *hāy* 'a rice field, corn field, etc.' and *hūm* 'the shade'. For 'to leak' this dictionary gives the puzzling form *lō̃*, in which the initial *l* is inexplicable. Presumably it is an error of some sort, because the Minot dictionary of White Tai (1940) gives the expected form *hō̃* for 'to leak'. All these contrast in tone with *há* 'a storm (CL for storm)'.

Surprisingly, I do not find the word for 'epidemic' anywhere in all the copious data, published and unpublished, on the much studied Black Tai language recorded by many scholars, including myself.

Moving further eastward, we find about midway across the northern part of Vietnam, near the Chinese border in the vicinity of the town of Lao Kay, islands of a form of Tai speech (apparently displaced in rather recent times from still further east) which I have called Western Nung. In my field notes on this dialect I find *ǎa*⁵ 'epidemic' agreeing in

initial and tone with *đu⁵* 'to leak', but differing in initial and tone from *chaa²* 'a heavy shower'.

In the extreme northeast of Vietnam we find evidence for our thesis in the old dictionaries of Tho (Diguët 1910) and Nung (Savina 1924). For the Tho dialect of Caobang, Diguët gives the word for 'epidemic' in a couple of phrases: *pène rả* 'avoir le choléra' and *bẻ^hgne rả* 'choléra'. This form *rả* agrees in initial and tone with the word for 'dry field': *rẻⁱ* 'champ'. I do not find the word for 'shower' in Diguët's book.

In Savina's dictionary of Nung we find the word for 'epidemic' in the phrases *pìng phát là* under 'épidémie' and *phát là* under 'choléra', agreeing in initial and tone with *lày* 'champ', *lòm* 'ombrager', and *mỏ lủ* 'la marmite coule', but differing in initial and tone from the word for 'shower' found in the phrase *sá p'ân*, given under both 'ondée' and 'averse'. (Nung *p'ân* is the word for 'rain', cognate with Siamese *fon⁵*.)

Tho and Nung belong to the group of Tai languages that F. K. Li has designated Central Tai. Other dialects of this Central Tai group are spoken across the border in Kwangsi. I find evidence for our argument in my field notes on three of these Central Tai dialects of Kwangsi, those of Lungming, Lei Ping, and Ning Ming.

Lungming has *laa⁵* 'cholera, epidemic' agreeing in initial and tone with *lay⁵* 'dry field', *lom⁵* 'shade', and *luu⁵* 'to leak', but differing in tone from *laa²* 'a shower'.

Lei Ping has *ɿay*⁵ 'cholera, epidemic' agreeing in initial and tone with *ɿay*⁵ 'dry field' and *ɿuu*⁵ 'to leak', but differing in initial and tone from *haa*⁵ 'shower'.

Ning Ming has *laa*⁵ 'cholera, epidemic' agreeing in initial and tone with *lom*⁵ 'shade'. For 'to leak' my notes show *low*¹, where I suspect the first tone is a recording error for fifth tone. For 'shower' Ning Ming has, with different initial and tone, *khyaa*².

Turning now to languages of the Northern Tai group, spoken mainly in southern China, we find that the original voiced initial, presumably **r*, of 'epidemic', 'dry field', and so on, and the original voiceless initial, reconstructed by F. K. Li as **xr* of 'shower', are represented in the modern dialects by the same consonant sound, sometimes *r* and sometimes another consonant, so that we have to rely on the tones for evidence to support our thesis. This coalescence of original **r* and **xr* we also have seen occasionally in other branches of the Tai family, for example, in Ahom, Western Nung, Lei Ping, and Lungming. Still another Proto-Tai initial, **hr*, has fallen together with **r* and **xr* in the Northern Tai group; for example, the Yay form cognate with Siamese *haay*⁵ 'to disappear' is *riay*¹. It is with the group of words having Proto-Tai initial **hr* that F. K. Li has (mistakenly, if the argument of this paper is accepted) included 'epidemic', on the basis of the Siamese form *haa*².

In my data on the Northern Tai language Yay I find *ra*⁵ 'epidemic' with the same initial and tone as

*ri*⁵ 'dry field', *ram*⁵ 'shade', and *ro*⁵ 'to leak', but with a different tone, *ra*² 'shower'.

The Kweichow dialects recorded in the old Dioi dictionary of Esquirol and Williatte (1908) is fairly close genetically to Yay, and not very distant geographically. The language name Dioi is the same word as Yay. In Dioi, **r* has become *ɔ̃* (as also has occurred in Western Nung, cited above), spelled in the dictionary *th*. For Dioi the evidence would seem to spoil our case because the tone given for 'epidemic' is the same as for 'shower', and different from the tone given for 'dry field', 'shade', and 'to leak'. The forms given in the Dioi dictionary are *tha*¹ 'maladie épidémique' and *tha*¹ *houn*⁴ *deou*⁴ (see also Siamese *fon*⁵ 'rain' and *diaw*¹ 'one') 'une averse, une ondée', with the tone that is indicated by a raised numeral 1, but *thi*₁ 'champs en terrain sec', *tham*₁ 'intercepter la lumière, ombrager', and *tho*₁ 'couler, laisser passer l'eau ou autre chose', all three forms with the tone that is indicated by a lowered numeral 1.

In view of the Yay evidence, I am forced to suspect a misprint in the Dioi dictionary. The entry *tha*¹ for 'epidemic' comes immediately after other entries of the shape *tha*¹ and immediately before the entries of the shape *tha*₁. I believe that *tha*¹ for 'epidemic' must be a typographical error for *tha*₁. A search of the entire dictionary ought to be made, for possible occurrences of this word in the illustrative phrases and sentences given under other entries. If the tone in the 'epidemic' entry is indeed a

misprint, then Dioi agrees exactly in all the forms cited above with Yay.

Saek is a displaced and isolated language belonging genetically to the Northern Tai group, now spoken in a few villages in Laos and Thailand, some near Tha Khek and some near Nakhon Phanom. We find that Saek has fifth tone in *rii*⁵ 'dry field' and *roo*⁵ 'to leak'. For 'shade' Saek has *yum*¹, perhaps not related to the word for 'shade' cited throughout this paper. But for 'epidemic' Saek has *haa*⁶, agreeing in tone but not in initial with *raa*⁶ 'shower'. Saek has been inundated with loanwords from Lao and Siamese, presumably in recent centuries since speakers of Saek moved into this area. The initial *h* of Saek *haa*⁶ 'epidemic' brands it as such a borrowing, and so the tone is explained away. Saek is disappointing in not providing support for our argument. On the other hand, the Saek form is not counterevidence.

Unfortunately, for other languages of the Northern Tai group the available data fail us. The word for 'epidemic' does not occur, so far as I can find, even in such otherwise rich sources as the Pu-Yi book (Chinese Academy 1959), which describes forty dialects in Keichow, or F. K. Li's magnificent glossary of the Tai dialect of Wu-ming (Li 1956), or the Chuang-Chinese dictionary (Kwangsi People's Press 1960).

Returning now to Thailand and Laos, it is only in these two countries that 'epidemic' and 'shower' are homophonous. Laos, however, requires special discussion. In many dialects of Laos and north-eastern Thailand there is nowadays no tonal

distinction whatsoever in forms reflecting the B tone of Proto-Tai, regardless of the voiced or voiceless quality of the original initial. Scholars are inclined to believe that in these Lao dialects a split did at some time actually occur in the B tone, producing two or more tones, as everywhere else in the Tai area, but then a later tonal coalescence occurred. This view is supported by the data for our words.

Both the Reinhorn (1970) and Kerr (1972) dictionaries record Lao of the kind that makes no tonal distinction between B-tone words with an original voiced initial and B-tone words with an original voiceless initial. In both dictionaries, for example, the two words that in Siamese are respectively *khaa*² 'galengal' (with original voiceless initial) and *khaa*³ 'price, value' (with original voiced initial) are homonyms. Reinhorn transcribes both as *k'ă*, Kerr transcribes both as *khā*. But both dictionaries give different Lao spellings for these two homophonous words; that is, the traditional Lao orthography spells 'galengal' and 'price, value' with different initial-consonant letters.

Similarly, although 'epidemic' and 'shower' are now homophonous in Lao, an older distinction in initial consonants is preserved in the traditional orthography. 'Epidemic', as well as 'dry field', 'shade', and 'to leak', are, as given in both dictionaries, spelled in Lao orthography with the letter that corresponds to Siamese *r*, now pronounced *h* as a result of the widespread change of **r* to *h* discussed above. But 'shower', though now homophonous with

'epidemic', is spelled with an initial-consonant letter corresponding to Siamese *h*. The actual forms are, from Reinhorn, *hà* 'l'épidémie (not. la peste, le choléra)' and *hà* 'l'ondée, l'averse'; and from Kerr, *hā*: 'evil spirits causing an epidemic. . . , plague' and *hā*: 'shower'.

So in Lao the homophony between 'epidemic' and 'shower' is the result of regular phonological changes, specifically tonal coalescence and the change of **r* to *h*. For Siamese no such excuse can be found. 'Epidemic' in Siamese ought to be **raa*³, totally distinct from *haa*² 'shower'.

There is a possible bit of evidence that in southern Thailand the old form **raa*³ may actually still be in use. A Southern Thai dialect dictionary (*Southern Thai Dialect Dictionary* 2514), described as a provisional edition, published in Songkhla in 1971, gives for 'epidemic' the form *haa*, agreeing with the standard dialect of Bangkok, but gives also a word *raa*, glossed as 'a kind of disease'. Unfortunately it is impossible to make anything of the tones as recorded impressionistically in this dictionary. It would be gratifying if a check of this southern dialect item showed that it has the tone corresponding to that of the lost Siamese **raa*³.

In summary, it seems to be possible to state with confidence that, except for Thailand, throughout the Tai-speaking domain the word for 'epidemic' has everywhere the same initial and tone as 'dry field', 'shade', and 'to leak', reflecting Proto-Tai B tone with an original voiced initial, presumably **r*, and is distinct from the word for 'shower', which has

everywhere, including Thailand, an initial and tone reflecting Proto-Tai B tone with an original voiceless initial, reconstructed by Li as *xr.

Why has Siamese given 'epidemic' the unhistorical shape *haa*², homophonous with *haa*² 'shower', instead of preserving the original form *raa*³?

The only suggestion I am able to make is that euphemism is involved, that **raa*³, either because of its terrifying association with dread diseases or because of the vulgarity of some of the cursing expressions in which it occurs, or perhaps for a combination of both these reasons, came to be avoided, and a euphemistic distortion or substitute was sought, perhaps in somewhat the same way that English substitutes *gosh* for *God*, *darn* for *damn*, *heck* for *hell*, and *cuss* for *curse*.

If *haa*² 'epidemic' is a distortion or substitute form euphemistically replacing **raa*³, the source for it may have been in Lao. If so, the borrowing would have to have occurred at some time after the Lao writing system was established, and after the Lao change of **r* to *h* occurred. The borrowing from Lao, if that is what happened, could have come about in either of two ways. It may be that the actual Lao pronunciation, including the tone, was imitated. To investigate this possibility it would be necessary to try to determine the phonetics of the tones in earlier times on both the Lao and the Siamese sides, taking into account geographical differences from dialect to dialect in tones in both areas. Another possibility is that Siamese did not attempt to imitate the actual Lao pronunciation, but imitated

only the fact of homophony between 'epidemic' and 'shower'. In either case (imitation of the actual Lao pronunciation or imitation of the fact of homophony), what happened would have been facilitated by the well-known close contact between speakers of Siamese and speakers of Lao (including the Lao dialects of northeastern Thailand), at all social levels, through the centuries.

The vague semantic similarity between 'epidemic' and 'shower', as shown in McFarland's rather forced effort to combine the two words in one dictionary entry, cited above, is difficult to assess objectively. Certainly most speakers of Siamese nowadays, when asked, talk as if they regard these as two completely different words. It is difficult to imagine that any fancied similarity in meaning could alone have caused the replacement of **raa*³ by *haa*². However, once the change occurred for other reasons, it is not impossible that this factor helped the new form, *haa*², to survive.

Finally, Siamese *haa*² 'epidemic' is sometimes said in Thailand to be derived by some sort of process of distortion and contraction from Pali *ahivātakaroga*, which has about the same meaning and is used in the Siamese learned vocabulary. This notion, implausible on the face of it, is completely refuted by the fact that we find cognates of this word for 'epidemic' in all parts of the Tai-speaking area, including areas in Vietnam and China, which are remote from Indian influence.

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SPECIAL VOCABULARIES IN THAI

One of the most interesting of the recent trends in linguistics is the search for features of semantic structure in the lexicons of languages. It is the purpose of this paper to point out in the Thai language an exceedingly simple structural feature manifested in various segments of the vocabulary. This feature is the conventional substitutability on a one-to-one basis of special terms in certain contexts for particular items of the ordinary vocabulary.

Perhaps the most obvious of these special vocabularies is the special set of forms used in speaking of and to royal persons. It is well known that Thai and many other languages of South and Southeast Asia have such special royal terms. They are often described by tourists and even scholars as a special royal language. This is an exaggeration, perhaps encouraged by the tendency of speakers of the language to grumble about the alleged difficulty in

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