Ta’uaih Phonology and Orthography: a preliminary statement

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This statement is based on a vocabulary of about 1500 words taken from six stories written by Khamphui Senkhuun (คำพูดส่งญุณ) in Lao script, analyzed on the basis of 34 rhyming lists. Orthography decisions were made together with Khamphui, with comments from Sam Mattix. Unfortunately no other speakers of Ta’uaih have been available to check the phonology or the orthography.

Khamphui is originally from Ban Tung Wiih, Muang Ta’oi, Khweng Salawan. His family moved out of that area when he was two years old but have continued to speak the language.

We have spelled the language Ta’uaih because that is how Khamphui pronounces it. However, he says that in another dialect they pronounce the name Ta’oiih. He estimates the total number of speakers of the language at 10,000. This includes people who speak the Katang-Ta’oiih dialect.

A. Initial single consonant phonemes with suggested Lao-based orthography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant</th>
<th>Lao Based Orthography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/p/</td>
<td>ป</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/t/</td>
<td>ต</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/d/</td>
<td>ด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/n/</td>
<td>น</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/l/</td>
<td>ล</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/w/</td>
<td>ว</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of initial single consonant phonemes:

- /p/ puut ภูต ‘many, much’
- /t/ tee เที่ย ‘hand’
- /d/ caa ฉี่ ‘to eat’
- /n/ kaw เคน ‘I’
- /l/ ?aak อาท ‘raven’
- /w/ thuum ทุ่ม ‘fragrant’
- /kh/ kho? ขะ ‘must’
- /b/ bic บี้ ‘to lie down’
- /n/ nar นาร ‘wing’
- /nh/ nhong น้อง ‘we two’
- /ng/ ngaay น่าย ‘they’
- /s/ ser ซ่า ‘to go up’
- /l/ ibh อิบะ ‘to go out’
- /r/ rong รอง ‘boat’
- /w/ weil เวีย ‘village’
- /y/ yon ยอน ‘to forbid’
/d/ dung [$_\text{ hometown}']           /h/ hocay chou ‘to know’
/m/ mat [$_\text{ eye}']                /f/ /yee?  ‘to go’

Notes on the single initial consonants:

1. There was only one example of the aspirated stop /th/ and only two of /kh/. They do not seem to be loans, but this needs more checking.

2. There were no problems with choosing Lao letters for the above sounds, except for the /y/ and /f/ contrast. There are many examples of both /y/ and /f/, even some minimal pairs. Lao does not have /f/, so we decided to use ,$_\text{s}$_ for /f/.

B. Initial consonant clusters

/pr/ ,$_\text{ps}$_  /tr/ ,$_\text{ts}$_  /cr/ ,$_\text{c}$_  /kr/ ,$_\text{ts}$_
/pl/ ,$_\text{pl}$_
/sr/ ,$_\text{rs}$_

Examples:

/pr/ prah [$_\text{sky}']  /pl/ plaw ,$_\text{p}$_ ‘head’
/tr/ truuuh [$_\text{garden}']  /kl/ kluung ,$_\text{ng}$_ ‘leg’
/cr/ cruum ,$_\text{j}$_ ‘to meet, see’  /sr/ sreuh ,$_\text{r}$_ ‘to stop raining’
/kr/ kruung ,$_\text{ng}$_ ‘forest, jungle’

At first I thought that /sr/ and /cr/ were presyllables sV- and cV-, but Khamphui insists they are consonant clusters and I think he is right.

C. Prenasalised consonants

/mp/ ,$_\text{mp}$_  /nt/ ,$_\text{nt}$_  /nc/ [$_\text{n}$_] ,$_\text{nt}$_  /nk/ [$_\text{nk}$_] ,$_\text{nt}$_
/ns/ [$_\text{nc}$_] ,$_\text{nt}$_  /nh/ [$_\text{nk}$_] ,$_\text{nt}$_

/mb/ ,$_\text{mb}$_
mpr/ ,$_\text{mp}$_
/mp/ ,$_\text{mp}$_

Examples:

/mp/ mpiil ,$_\text{m}$_ ‘tamarind’  /mb/ mbeen ,$_\text{m}$_ ‘fishnet’
/nt/ ntsay/ ,$_\text{nt}$_ ‘story’  /ntr/ ntruuy ,$_\text{nt}$_ ‘chicken’
/nc/ nceee ,$_\text{nc}$_ ‘louse’  /ns/ nso? ,$_\text{ns}$_ ‘rotten’
/nk/ nkar ,$_\text{nk}$_ ‘skin’  /nhk/nkhuur ,$_\text{nc}$_ ‘snoring sound’
/mpr/ mpram ,$_\text{m}$_ ‘be willing to’  /mpl/ mplat ,$_\text{m}$_ ‘to fold up’
Notes on prenasalization:

1. Khampui tried inventing single new letters for each of the prenasalized sounds by using the Lao /p/, /t/ etc. with an extra squiggle, apparently intuitively feeling them to be complex single phonemes rather than a sequence of phonemes.

2. Prenasalization in Ta’uaih occurs only before voiceless stops, but it gives a definite touch of voicing (or even of heaviness?) to that stop.

3. The prenasalised aspirated stop /nkh/ only occurs once, and that in an onomatopoeia.

4. /ns/ [nch] is spelled with Lao /ns/. This is because Lao has no aspirated /ch/ and Ta’uaih has no /ns/, so the Lao symbol for /ns/ is free to be used for Ta’uaih.

D. Final consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/p/</th>
<th>/t/</th>
<th>/c/</th>
<th>/k/</th>
<th>/n/ (see below)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/m/</td>
<td>/n/</td>
<td>/nh/[ɲ]ɲɲ/</td>
<td>/ng/[ŋ]ŋŋ/</td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

/s/ [ɕ, j] ɕ
/l/ ɕ
/r/ ʂ

/y/ ɕ
/y/ l
/y?/ l

Examples:

/p/ dāp ីីុុឹុឹ ‘belly’
/t/ kát ណា ‘to bite’
/k/ tak ណា ‘to do’
/l/ taaʔ ណា ‘iron’
/m/ hɔɔm ិិិិុិុុ ‘to see’
/n/ kan ណា ‘female’
/n/ penh ីីីីីី ‘to be full’
/ng/ seng ីីីី ‘to hear’
/nʔ/ ?oɔnʔ ីីីី ‘again, other’
/wʔ/ lal liawʔ ីីីី ‘to implore’

Examples of final consonants:

1. /n/ will be written in different ways. Short vowels follow the Lao writing system, e.g. /leʔ/ ‘not’, /prəʔ/ ‘silver’ ១២. However, Lao does not have /n/ following long vowels. Khampui has in his stories consistently indicated this final /n/ with the tone 2 mark: ញញញ (maay thoo), as in taaʔ ណា ‘iron’. We need to check with other Ta’uaih people to see if they like this.
2. Because final /h/ is a non-Lao sound Khamphui first wanted to write it as ວ as in /prah/ ‘sky’ and /koh/ ‘land’, ວែ as and ວែ as respectively. He later opted for just ວ, as in ព្រៃ, ខេ.  

3. For final /nh/ it was decided to write -nu.  

4. Final /s/ is pronounced in isolation by Khamphui as:

- palatal sibilant [ʃ], following vowels u, u and ia
- palatal flat fricative [ɕ], following other vowels

In normal speech it sounds to me like a slightly palatalized h.

5. So far we have found the post-glottalized finals /yː/, /mː/, /nː/, /ŋː/, /nː/ and /wː/. Watson’s notes (1975) from a workshop in Laos also mention /rː/. These sounds had been consistently written by Khamphui with the Lao tone 2 (as with final /iː/ after long vowels), but in his alphabet he used a tilde instead. He said that they were different from final /iː/ which, of course, is true. After some discussion we agreed to continue to use the second Lao tone mark for the post-glottalization of these finals. We do need to check this with other Ta’uainh people.

6. Syllables with final stops (including the post-glottalized finals) plus those with final /s/ and /h/ have a relative high pitch when spoken in isolation.

E. Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>/ie/</th>
<th>/u/</th>
<th>/ue/</th>
<th>/o/</th>
<th>/oe/</th>
<th>/æ/</th>
<th>/a/</th>
<th>/æ/</th>
<th>/o/</th>
<th>/oæ/</th>
<th>/ Guitar</th>
<th>interconsonantly</th>
<th>without final consonant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/i/ bic توقع ‘to lie down’</td>
<td>/o/ rot តុ ‘to be evil’</td>
<td>/o/ hot នគ ‘to blow (pipe)’</td>
<td>/e/ le? នែ ‘not’</td>
<td>/e/ le? និ ‘tired’</td>
<td>/a/ kat កើ ‘to bite’</td>
<td>/a/ kant កាំ ‘to burn’</td>
<td>/o/ song សក ‘a long grass’</td>
<td>/o/ long សេះ ‘wood, tree’</td>
<td>/ia/ rias រី ‘root’</td>
<td>/ua/ buas បៃ ‘to be deaf’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples:
Notes on vowels:

1. The vowels presented few problems orthographically because Lao has the same simple vowels, except for short /o/. We felt that the natural Lao way to write /ɔ/ would be as in ះ /nhɔŋ/ 'straight, honest'.

2. The /ia/ presented some problems because the Lao system today writes it differently from before. Sam Mattix helped us adopt the current system: ះ when interconsonantal, and ៚ in an open syllable or before final glottal stop.

F. Presyllables

The vowel /a/ in the presyllables is non-contrastive in its quality, but usually tends toward a low central pronunciation. Morphologically some presyllables are part of the root morpheme, some are prefixes, and some are formed as the result of infixation. The presyllables encountered so far have been of the following types:

1. Ca

It was decided to write this vowel with the long Lao vowel -ሣ, as it is pronounced (in isolation) slightly longer than the vowel in type 2. So far we have found the following presyllables of this type: pa, ta, ka, ؤa, ha, nga and may be ma (ma is a morpheme meaning ‘one’; but Khamphui feels that phonologically it is like the other presyllables).

Examples:

/pacoh/ បញ្ញេ ‘to call, give name’       /haʔeek/សំោំ ‘to feel sorry for’
/tamahʔ/ តំហំ ‘to ask’               /ngahaang/ កែកំ ‘bone’
/katash/ កំណាត់ ‘to answer’          /manaʔ/ ម៉ូ ‘one person (Cl.)’
/lamahʔ/ អំណាដ់ ‘what’

2. CaC

This vowel is shorter than the Ca presyllable vowel and we are writing it with ៚. The final C here is either -r, -l, -w or a nasal -m, -n, -nh, -ng.

2.1. Car

The Car sub-type occurs frequently. So far we have found par-, tar-, car-, kar-, har-. This sub-type often seems to have the grammatical function of nominalizer. It can occur before most consonants (all consonants??).

Examples:

/parlæa/ ប្រែ ‘between’
/parmong/ បែរ្ ‘life’      cf. /mong/ រ្ ‘fresh, to be alive’
2.2. Cal, Caw

This sub-type occurs infrequently, but includes a few common function words. So far we have found pal-, tal-, kal-, lal-, taw-.

They occur only before identical l or w.

Examples:

/pallong/ โป้ลัง (Classifier for ribs)
/pallak/ โป้ลาก ‘to waft up’ cf. puk ปุ๊ก ‘a smell’
/tallaa/ ตั้ลล้า ‘to move, wriggle’
/talliiing/ ตัลลิีิง ‘on top of’
/kallas/ กาลลัส ‘time, when’
/kallung/ กาลลุง ‘in, inside’
/lalluit/ ลาลลุ่ด ‘to crawl’
/tawwiiing/ ทว้วีิิ่ง ‘to give in return’ cf. /tawwiing/ ทวีิ่ง ‘to return (trans.)’

2.3. CaN

2.3.1. CaN, where N can be n or m

This gives the following types: pan-, kan-, tam- and ham-. Words of this type are sometimes causatives. It occurs only before stops b, d, nasals m, n, and prenasalised stops mp, nt, nhc, nhch, ngk.

Examples:

/pannoo/ ปั้นนู่ ‘price, worth’
/pandat/ ปันดาต ‘to extinguish’ cf. /dat/ ดาต ‘to wipe off’
/panduul/ ปันดููล ‘a roof’
/kannoh/ แคนน์ ‘other’
/tammei/ ทำมะ ‘new’
/tammok/ ทามมอก ‘evil spirit’
/hammoom?/ ฮัมม่ม ‘to offer, sacrifice’
/hambak/ ฮัมบัก ‘to wound’
That the analysis of the presyllable is not yet round shows in the following examples (of the infix -an-):

/cannual/ ប្រយោគ ‘hard work’   cf. /clual/ ខែ ‘to work hard??’
/cannak/ តុបប ‘body’   cf. /cak/ កេ ‘body’
/canoo/ ថ្លែ ‘return leg’   cf. /coo/ កែ ‘to return home’

2.3.2. CaNN

CaNN is a subtype of CaN- before prenasalized stops. Words of this type often are causatives. So far we have found the following:

pan-   tam-   kam   ham-
panh-   tanh-   kan-   han-
pang-   tang-   kanh-   hang-

(C and N do not have the same point of articulation. One wonders whether hanh- will still be found. It is also interesting that there is no presyllable of this type starting with /cl/, i.e. cam, can- or cang-.)

Examples:

/kammporop/ កាល់បុរ ‘to turn upside down’
/kanntoo/ ឬយោគ ‘to sing’
/kanhnhceet/ នឹកជំនួល ‘to kill’   cf. /kaceet/ ាវំ ‘to die’
/tammpool/ ក្តារឈី (CIf. for large objects)
/tanhnhceeng/ ដំបូង ‘heel’
/tangngko/ ដំបូង ‘beginning; boss; man’   cf. /tako/ ដំបូង ‘to begin’
/panntnuor/ ស្រែ ‘stars’
/panntzam/ ស្រែ ‘cause to be moist’   cf. /tisam/ ដែ ‘to be moist’
/pannahhchoom/ ស្រែ ‘cause to gather’   cf. /coom/ ជំង ‘to gather together’ (intr.)
/pangngkraa/ ស្រែ ‘to rule, govern’
/hammphenh/ ស្រែ ‘cause to be full’   cf. /penh/ ស្រែ ‘to be full’
/hanntong/ ស្រែ ‘vegetables’
/hangngkat/ ស្រែ ‘sarong’

3. CCa

There is only one kind of this type, tra (or sometimes pronounced tar-). It seems to carry grammatical function if occurring together with reduplication of the main syllable, namely that of reflexive.
Examples:

/trahəələəl/ กระบวนการ ‘to talk to eachother’  cf. /θəəl/ θελ ‘to say’
/trahəəuyəəuy/ กระบวนการ ‘to understand eachother’  cf. /θəəy/ θεύ ‘to know’
/tranəuə/ กระบวนการ ‘breath, heart’
/traməŋ/ กระบวนการ ‘to oppose, rebel’
/traləəl/ กระบวนการ ‘to agree’

REFERENCES

Watson, Richard 1975 (personal notes)

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