

## LANGUAGE STANDARDISATION IN LAOS

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The beginnings of language standardisation in Laos can perhaps be traced back to the National Educational Reform Act (RLG 1962) which declared that Lao was the Language of Education, theoretically ending the use of French as a medium of instruction in the classroom. However, French continued to be used for sometime thereafter and little attention was paid to the condition of the national language until the creation of the Lao Royal Academy in 1970 (RLG 1970). During 1972, two Lao language research projects were launched under the auspices of the Academy, one to translate basic scientific and technical vocabulary from French into Lao, and the other to begin basic research on phonology, etymology, syntax, dialectology, and history of Lao (see Soulang etc. 1972). Today, the process of standardisation, though not yet formalised as such, is taking place in some interesting ways that seem to fit the socio-cultural environment of Laos.

The first point most Lao scholars agree on is that promoting a standard pronunciation is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable. Although Laos is small in size and in population, a great many dialects exist, and tonal variation from village to village is especially rich. This dialect diversity does not cause great problems in communication, due partially without doubt to constant exposure to each other's dialects. Laotians working together accept these regional dialects with little notice. This would seem to be a highly desirable situation, as it eliminates social prejudice which would accompany the choosing of a 'standard' pronunciation. Interestingly enough, the nature of the Lao writing system allows completely for dialectal variation, even among the non-Lao Tai dialects spoken in the country (see Appendix I).

Another benefit of this situation concerns the nation's non-Lao speaking minorities (which constitute half of the entire population,

over a hundred languages belonging to five linguistic families). It is easier for a tribal student to learn the regional Tai tone system found in his part of the country, than it is for him to be taught one of any number of tone systems to which he has never been exposed. For example, in training an Akha teacher how to teach Lao, we have made use of the non-Lao Tai Lue tone system found in his region. This tone system, like all other Tai tone systems, is easily accommodated by the Lao orthography.

For the lexicon, it has been proposed that regional vocabulary items from all dialect areas be collected and their use promoted throughout the country. Wherever possible this practice has been followed by the writers of the forthcoming Lao dictionary, who were purposely chosen from six different parts of the country. A more detailed collection has been proposed by Dr. Bounlieng Phommasouvanh as one of the objectives of the Lao portion of the SEAMEO-RELC regional socio-linguistic survey (see Appendix II). This decision to accept all regionalisms as standard (as opposed to selecting the dialect of one region) follows the spirit of the decision not to standardise pronunciation.

There are, however, some areas where standardisation of vocabulary is necessary. Three years ago, in the technical schools, the proliferation of commonly used technical terms began to get confusing. The German Technical School, the French Technical School, the Fa Ngum Comprehensive School and the College of Education were all developing separate sets of terms independently of each other. The result was that teachers of the same subject from different schools could not discuss their subject matter without falling back on French or English. This situation was rectified by the creation of a Technical Terms Translation Committee. The needs soon became so great with the rise of the Laocisation movement, that separate committees were created for each new subject. As a general rule, foreign terms that are already in common use are retained and new terms are created when necessary. At the present time, professors submit their vocabulary needs and the respective committees translate the terms at a rate of approximately one hundred words per three hours. To date, terms have been translated to meet teaching and other needs for biology, physics, math, meteorology, geography, law, library science, military science, linguistics, and economics.

Lao orthography has recently been the subject of much discussion for two reasons. First, the spelling of Lao words themselves is not agreed upon. Second, a Ministerial Council meeting on April 2, 1969 banned the use of the roman alphabetical symbols for ethnic minority languages.

A great many lexical items in Lao are loan-words from Sanskrit and Pali. These languages have a rich supply of syllable final consonants which do not exist as phonological possibilities in Lao. For instance, the Indic word *raja* is borrowed as *ra:j*, /*ra:dʒ*/ according to the historical value of the consonants in the orthography, *ra:s* in the modern orthography, but the actual pronunciation is /*ra:ʔt*/. In 1949 Royal Ordinance Number 10 declared that all words shall be written according to the way they sound. This eliminated such spelling irregularities as *ka:l*, *ka:r*, or *ka:n* for the single pronunciation /*ka:n*/, but other ambiguities remained, for example: /*ra:ʔtsasap*/ *royal vocabulary* is spelled *ra:ssap* where the orthographic symbol *s* has the phonological realisation /-ʔtsa-/, the final /ʔt/ of the first syllable, the initial /s/ of the second syllable, and the short vowel /a/ of the second syllable (which in citation pronunciation becomes /aʔ/ increasing the phonological lead of the single symbol *s* to /-ʔtsaʔ-/). While the Vientiane faction of the coalition government still retains the system just described, the Neo Lao Hak Sat have followed a stricter interpretation of the Royal Ordinance, so that /*ra:ʔtsasap*/ is indeed spelled unambiguously as *ra:ʔtsaʔsap*. To date the two factions have not come to an agreement on the standard spelling, but some confrontation on the issue is to be expected in the near future and a compromise reached. There are some purists about who have not accepted the Royal Ordinance and still insist on spelling words according to their origin, a system obtuse in the extreme, especially for use in the classroom.

Finally, concerning the minorities issue, there is what amounts to a broader type of alphabetic standardisation. All minority alphabets must use the symbols of the Lao alphabet. The government feels this will give the minority peoples a greater sense of national identity. A bilingual education programme for minorities in Laos is only in the experimental stage, but it is believed that standardisation of the symbols used will eliminate needless disputes over alphabets.

APPENDIX I  
THE LAO WRITING SYSTEM

To begin with, Lao (practically all dialects) has the following phonemic system (some phonetic details have been included, the symbols are IPA):

INITIALS

<sup>h</sup> p	<sup>h</sup> t	<sup>h</sup> k	
ʔp	ʔt	ʔtɕ	ʔk
b	d	j	ʔ
m	n	ɲ	ŋ
f	s		h
v	l		

(simultaneous glottal release)

VOWELS

i, il	u, uu	u, uu
ia	ua	ua
e, ee	ɻ, ɻɻ	o, oo
a, aa	a, aa	ɔ, ɔɔ

FINALS

p	t	k	ʔ
m	n	ŋ	
w	j (ɣ only in LP)		

TONE

All initials except those in the square have two realisations in the orthography. The first set is referred to as 'high class' and the second set 'low class'. The consonants in the square have only one phonological representation and they are called 'middle class'.

There are five tone classes, A,B,C for smooth syllables (with continuant final or open) and DL and DS for checked syllables (with final stops and Long and Short vowels respectively). The initial consonant classes combine with the tone classes to allow for a maximum of seven or a minimum of four tone contrasts for classes ABC. Class DL usually combines with class C and the tones in DS are so short as to be considered separate, though severely restricted in distribution.

Thus, the following paradigm is born:

Consonant Class	Tone Class				
	A	B	C	DL	DS
High					
Mid					
Low					

**SYLLABLE STRUCTURE**

Each syllable is comprised of an initial with an optional cluster of C + w, a vowel, and perhaps a final, and a tone. Following a short vowel a final consonant is obligatory (although final glottal stop is realised in orthography only by the short vowel symbol). After a long vowel the final is optional. The tone restrictions have been discussed above. This structure has the formula:

$$C(w) \left( \begin{array}{l} V \\ \left( \begin{array}{l} C_t + DS \\ C_n + \begin{array}{l} A \\ B \\ C \end{array} \\ C_t + DL \end{array} \right) \end{array} \right)$$

(Where C<sub>t</sub> = stop and C<sub>n</sub> = continuant)

**LAO ORTHOGRAPHY**

High Class: p<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> k<sup>h</sup> s f l v n ɲ m r ŋ  
 ɸ ʈ ɕ ʂ ʃ ʈɕ ʈɲ ʈɕ ʈm ʈr ʈŋ

Middle Class: ?p ?t ?tc ?k b d j ?  
 ɸ ɲ ɳ ɲ ɸ ɲ ɳ

Low Class: p<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> k<sup>h</sup> s f l v n ɲ m r ŋ  
 ɸ ʈ ɕ ʂ ʃ ʈɕ ʈɲ ʈɕ ʈm ʈr ʈŋ

Vowels:	S	L	S	L	S	L
i	ȯ ẋ	o x	u	ȯ ẋ	o x	u ẋ
e	cẋ	cx	ɤ	cẋ	cx	o lẋ
a	cẋ	cx	a	ẋ	ẋ	o cẋ
cẋ	=	ia	cẋ	=	ua	ẋ
ɤ	=	aj	ɤ	=	ay	cẋ

Tone: A = ∅, B = ẋ, C = ẋ  
 DL, DS = ∅ (conditioned by syllable structure)

Sample Tone System, Vientiane:

	A	B	C	DL	DS
High	L	┌	┌ └		┌
Mid			┌ └		
Low	┌				┌

APPENDIX II

PROPOSALS FOR SOCIO-LINGUISTIC SURVEY PROJECT FOR LAOS

(Drafted by Bounlieng Phommasouvanh)

1. A study of language and language learning attitudes.
2. Language education (Lao and ethnic languages) for ethnic minorities. This may involve contrastive linguistic studies between Lao and ethnic languages that will eventually aid language learning for Laotians.
3. Survey of ethnic languages and major Lao dialects (lexical items for the Lao dialects for example).
4. Study of the role of foreign languages in Laos: function and extent of use including who uses it and where.
5. Comparative and contrastive studies of foreign languages and respective cultures of their speakers.

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