

Convergence and divergence of tone paradigms across Tai dialects in the 21st century

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Having dispersed from the Proto-Tai-Kadai language spoken approximately 5000 years ago in Southern China (Ostapirat 2005: 126), the Tai branch and its linguistic populations have spread outside China towards India and Mainland Southeast Asia. Previous studies have proposed a taxonomical structure of the Tai branch with three major groups: 1) Northern Tai; 2) Central Tai; and 3) Southwestern Tai (Chamberlain 1975; Li 1977; Luo 1997). However, the subgrouping of Southwestern Tai in particular remains disputable. By only applying a conventional comparative method of historical linguistics, common patterns and clustering of phonological innovations do not give a straightforward dialect classification. This is very likely due to later language contact resulting from migration and relocation of the linguistic populations, and causing convergence among Tai dialects spoken in adjacent areas (Pittayaporn 2009: 298). Such a scenario is particularly common in Laos and Thailand where people were forced to migrate to new places, particularly during the war times when many Lao speakers fled to different parts of Thailand, creating new diaspora communities. As the resettlement of Lao speakers concerned mostly two generations upwards, the younger generation of dialect speakers already show a sign for shifting towards a national language or regional dialect of their current location (Akkharawatthanakun 2003).

In the present study, we conduct a large-scale investigation of over two hundred Tai dialects (Black Tai, Lue, Shan, Lao, Thai, etc.), focusing on tone paradigm. The question concerns how tones D (close syllables *-p*, *-t*, *-k*, *-ʔ*) rhyme with tones A-B-C (open syllables *-V*, *-N*). Our main goal is to identify change in progress, concerning rhyming patterns in tone paradigm of dialects which may have diverged from their proto-systems as we have arrived in the 21st century. The data collected from various grammatical and phonological descriptions of Tai dialects in Southeast Asia is organised according to whether tones D match with tones A, B and/or C in given dialects. This information is then processed by a Neighbor-Net algorithm (Bryant & Moulton 2004), which produces a network diagram showing the distance and clustering among tone profiles of each dialect under investigation.

The preliminary interpretation of the generated network diagram identifies several dialect clusters: 1) Lao proper; 2) Northern Thai; 3) Central Thai; and 4) Southern Thai. By capturing dialects which do not belong to a cluster of their own, we look further into their current speaking areas on the map and migration history of their speaking populations. A number of cases clearly point to a scenario where a given dialect has shifted its rhyming pattern of tones D, converging with a local dialect of the new settlement area in line with sociocultural assimilation. This phenomenon is manifest of language shift in progress which has taken and is taking place in many areas of Thailand where a younger generation of Lao dialect speakers in particular is shifting towards a national language, Standard Thai.

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