

# LAO AS A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

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A recurring theme in discussion amongst Lao scholars as to the right path for standardization of the Lao language is the equation of a unified standard national language with a unified national heritage, and contemporary national and socio-political integrity. In such contexts, the following proverb is often quoted: ພາສາບອກຊາດ ມາລະຍາດບອກຕະກຸນ; (Language reveals one's nationhood, manners reveal one's lineage). The fact that the Lao language does not have a well-applied and codified standard is therefore telling. As a nation, Laos has experienced long years of difficulty along the road to unification. Many of the political divisions that can be traced across the history of the nation are also reflected in the current inconsistencies of the language as it is used, and in the decades-old arguments about the Lao language and its proper form. The pressures on Lao as a language are many of the same pressures as those on Laos as a nation. There is a tension between the older, ornate traditions associated with Buddhism and aristocracy on the one hand, and the more recent, austere rationalist traditions associated with socialism and the culture of modern technology on the other. In addition, the Lao are keenly aware of the need to maintain and delineate their nationhood in the face of pressures from outside, most notably those from Thailand. It is these two main themes which persist throughout the discussion below.

## LAO LANGUAGE—VARIATION AND STANDARDIZATION

The national language of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, as declared on the establishment of the first government on 2 December 1975, is Lao (Tay 1995: 169).<sup>1</sup> As a Southwestern Tai language, Lao is closely related to Thai (Li 1960). Lao and Thai share extensive vocabulary, and have very similar phonological and grammatical systems. Because of the mostly one-directional flow of cultural exposure, however, Central Thai is well understood by the Lao, while many speakers of Central Thai would have real difficulty understanding Lao, due essentially to lack of exposure to the language. It is important to understand for much of the discussion below that Lao and Thai are for all intents and purposes (i.e. in descriptive/structural linguistic terms) dialects of a single "language" (but it is especially important not to interpret this as meaning that "Thai is a dialect of Lao," or vice versa). This is not meant to downplay in any way the differences between them. For a number of reasons, they *should* be treated as different languages, that is, as languages each on their own merits. This avoids serving the political purposes of either Thai or Lao nationalism. It is usually the case that Lao is treated by outsiders in terms of how it differs from Thai, and not the other way around, since outsiders are more often familiar with Thai first.

While there are many fascinating differences and similarities between Lao and Thai, the substantive issues related to the establishment of Lao as a national language almost exclusively concern orthography (very often with reference to the orthography of Thai).<sup>2</sup> It is thus necessary to begin with a brief digression, and sketch a few points about Lao and Thai orthography which will be relevant to the discussion below. The two languages use scripts which are quite similar, and which both derive ultimately (but indirectly) from Indic scripts. There is a robust folk (mis)understanding that the languages "come from" Pali and/or Sanskrit, including the notion that Lao and Thai incorporate higher proportions of Pali, and Sanskrit, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The Thai and Lao languages *do not* "come from" Pali and/or Sanskrit, in any sense of genetic continuity. They have heavily borrowed vocabulary from those languages, especially during this century. Pali and/or Sanskrit have provided for a range of neologisms required in a rapidly changing political and social world, in a similar way that Greek and/or Latin have been used creatively in stocking the modern vocabularies of European languages. Pali in particular is important in religion and religious studies in Laos and Thailand.

Modern Thai orthography includes the full range of Pali and Sanskrit characters, while Lao does not. (Lao monasteries use *nangsǎm thǎm* (ໜັງສືທັມ), the "dharmic script," not known by those without religious education.)

This full complement of Indic characters in Thai originated in the fourteenth century or earlier, and was “patterned closely on Khmer, not directly inherited from Indic in India” (Anthony Diller, personal correspondence; cf. Diller 1988a). Throughout the following centuries, there were considerable inconsistencies in the spelling of Indic words due to a range of factors, including the deliberate re-spelling of native words in fancy “etymological style,” and the mixing up of Pali and Sanskrit spellings of common roots. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Rama IV (Mongkut) became concerned about the “flux and caprice in Thai spelling” (Anthony Diller, personal correspondence), and launched an interest in standardizing the Thai language in a “proper etymological” way, which eventually resulted in the deliberate adoption during the 1950s of full and regular Sanskrit spelling of Indic borrowings in Thai. The historical development of Lao orthography is much less clear. Today it remains the case that while Pali and Sanskrit can be transcribed literally to the letter in regular everyday Thai script, the “limited” inventory of twenty-seven Modern Lao consonants (including the letter “r”; see below), cannot handle this task.

Thus, from the naive point of view, it looks as if Lao is less complete than Thai, and if one believes that Lao really does “come from” Pali (as many apparently do), then one is led to conclude that something must have happened along the way to those “missing” characters. When people argue on this basis for a “return to tradition” through incorporation of the remaining characters, they are in fact *not* arguing for *restoration*, but for the modern, and in many cases novel, fixture of orthographical devices in the language. The deeper historical questions regarding developments of “native” Lao/Thai orthography are complex ones, which I cannot pursue here. But it is important to understand in the present context that the standardized etymological basis of Thai orthography in its present form, being literally designed to handle faithful transcription of Pali and especially Sanskrit, does *not* represent something that Lao once had or, in particular, could ever “go back to.”

Spoken Lao, in its numerous regional forms, shows considerable variation. Not only do speakers from different regions have markedly different “accents,” but they also display significant differences in regular vocabulary, as well as subtle grammatical and idiomatic differences. These differences may identify a Lao person’s background, and thereby indicate much about their likely history and, probably, their position in society. Each regional variety of Lao has one or two salient diagnostic indicators (among many actual distinctions), which are strongly symbolic of that variety, and generally known in Vientiane by all speakers of Lao in the community. For example, the Southernmost varieties of Lao have a

characteristic falling pronunciation (typically with glottal constriction of the vowel) of the tone inherent in “live” syllables with “low” consonant initials (such as *láv* (ລາວ) ‘Lao’, *máa* (ມາ) ‘come’, *khúu* (ຊ) ‘teacher’).<sup>4</sup> This pronunciation is immediately diagnostic of a speaker’s southern origin, and is fabled to be a “loud,” “heavy,” or “rough” style. On the other hand, the variety of Lao spoken in Luang Prabang includes a distinctive high falling-rising tone in “live” syllables with “high” consonant initials (such as *hín* (ຫີນ) ‘stone’, *mǎa* (ໝາ) ‘dog’, *mǔu* (ໝູ) ‘pig’). This pronunciation is considered typical of the “softness” or “lightness” of that variety. There are also some lexical stereotypes which are diagnostic of regional varieties, such as Phou-Thai *kilǎə* (ກິລຳ) ‘where’ (cf. Vientiane *sǎj* ສຳ), or Luang Prabang ‘*eew* (ເອວ) ‘play, pass time’ (cf. Vientiane *lín* ລິນ). These examples show features which have achieved privileged status as folk diagnostics of speakers’ regional origin. Each variety, of course, has many other distinctive features, but these have not achieved the same diagnostic status, and are not consciously recognized, nor publicly symbolic in the same way as those other more stigmatized features.

While speakers’ regional origin may be easily identified by accent, it has been claimed that this has no negative consequences in Laos. Regarding the situation in 1974, Chamberlain had this to say: “Laotians working together accept these regional dialects with little notice. This would seem to be a highly desirable situation, as it eliminates social prejudice . . .” (Chamberlain 1978: 267). But while aspects of regional “accents” associated with different tone systems are indeed considered basically innocuous (sometimes even quaint), there do seem to be more negatively stigmatized regional “mispronunciations.” Consider the perceived inability of speakers from Savannakhet (including many Phou-Thai from that area) to produce the labio-dental fricative /f/, instead producing an aspirated bilabial stop /p<sup>h</sup>/ for words which in other dialects have /f/, and which are spelt with “F” (ຟ/ຟ) in Lao. (In other words, the distinction between /f/ and /p<sup>h</sup>/ collapses in favor of /p<sup>h</sup>/.) The stock example is /pháj-phâa/ ‘electricity’, corresponding to Vientiane /fáj-fâa/ (written as ຟາງຟາ). While people in the Vientiane speech community are aware of this diagnostic feature of Savannakhet speech, many are not aware of other diagnostics, such as the lack of diphthongs in the Phou-Thai varieties of Lao (spoken in the eastern part of Savannakhet province), whereby /ia, ua, ua/ correspond to simple long vowels /ee, əə, oo/ (such that ‘wife’, ‘salt’, and ‘bridge’, written as ພີເຢ, ພີອ and ອີວ are pronounced /mée/, /kǎə/, /khoǎ/, while in Vientiane they are /mía/, /kǎə/, /khǎa/).

Another example of regional variation perceived as “mispronunciation” is the neutralization in some Southern varieties of the phonemes /l/ and /d/. It is an oft-related anecdote that where a Vientiane speaker says /khwáaj dǎm

khwáaj dᵛᵛᵛn/ for ‘dark buffalo, pale buffalo’ (ຄວາຍດຳຄວາຍດ່ອມ), the Southern speaker says /khwáaj lām khwáaj lᵛᵛᵛn/. This is in fact a naive perception of the Southern “accent.” Rather than literally “mixing up” /l/ and /d/, these varieties instead neutralize this distinction, producing a single phoneme, usually realized as a lateral tap (which, incidentally, would seem to be the phonetically closest thing to the trill [r] found in dialects of Lao; see below). This is heard by speakers of other varieties of Lao as sometimes /d/, sometimes /l/. The stigma of such regional “mispronunciations” means that they are likely to be consciously phased out of the speech of newcomers to Vientiane, where possible.

It is of course natural to find extensive dialect variation in any region (Chambers 1995: 229ff), and out of this arises the political, cultural, and practical necessity for establishing and properly codifying an official standard language. The standard is a vehicle for leveling regional variation in administration, education, and the media, as well as providing a benchmark of prestige and “correctness,” regardless of what variety of the language is spoken in an individual’s own region or own home. Establishment of a standard requires an effective level of codification (i.e. the official certification in grammar books and dictionaries of what exactly the grammar, particularly the pronunciation and spelling, of the standard language is).

If it were possible at all to identify a *spoken* standard for Lao, it would have to be the Vientiane variety. Vientiane is at the geographical and political center of the country. While “Vientiane Lao” could be defined as either “the variety of Lao spoken in Vientiane,” or “the variety of Lao spoken by those who have grown up in Vientiane (or whose families have been in Vientiane for *x* (number of) generations),” the former definition would allow no generalization about the form of the language itself, since a huge proportion of the population of the capital are speakers of regional varieties, born and raised in the provinces. Thongphet Kingsada, director of the Language Section of the Institute for Cultural Research (ICR) in Vientiane, evidently goes by the latter definition. He commented in an interview that it was “a shame” that “Vientiane Lao” is used less and less in Vientiane these days. Thongphet’s impression is that the dialects of greatest influence in Vientiane now are the Southern varieties, especially those of Savannakhet and Champassak provinces. (The sociolinguistic implications of the large flow of immigrants into the capital over recent years are worthy of extensive research.)

An important measure of “standard” pronunciation is the language used in national television and radio programming (e.g. news), which indeed tends to follow the phonology of native Vientiane speakers, and tends not to include regional vocabulary. But actually pinpointing the distinctive

features of this “standard” is complicated by the fact that the target is constantly shifting. The pronunciation of “Vientiane Lao” is nowhere codified, and its form has surely been shaped in different ways over the decades through major demographic changes, with an influx of wartime refugees during the 1960s and early 1970s, incoming revolutionaries taking power in 1975 with the accompanying flow of population into the capital which followed, and the wave of economic migrants during the 1990s, encouraged by increasing urban development and eased travel restrictions. The outpouring of post-1975 refugees must also have had some effect.

Thus, while there is no official standardization of the spoken form of Lao, and while it is perhaps even impossible to say exactly what constitutes the Vientiane variety, there is no doubt an implicit *concept* of some neutral, central style. There is at the very least a notion of “toning down” one’s native (regional) speech when in the capital, or indeed when dealing with speakers from outside one’s own area, particularly when in some official setting. People are quite willing, and quite able, to curtail the most representative features of their own “non-neutral” regional variety. There is thus a natural tendency to neutralize differences, at least for the pragmatic purpose of facilitating communication. Thus, if a “standard” or “central” spoken Lao can be characterized at all, it is to be characterized partly as “central” in the geographical sense (spoken by natives of the geographical and political “center”), and partly in Diller’s (1991: 110) third sense of “central” language: “the intermediate or shared variety, similar to a *lingua franca* or *koine*,” that is, one in which the most salient regional stereotype features are bleached away.

Spoken Lao rates pretty poorly in terms of Diller’s (1991: 99–100) checklist of “national language functions.” If we take the Vientiane variety as our spoken standard, then it probably passes the criteria of (a) being understood by a majority of national residents, and (b) being used in electronic media for the majority of official or national level programming. As a national standard for pronunciation, Vientiane Lao probably fails to pass other of Diller’s “national language” criteria, namely (a) being the national medium of instruction; (b) being the sole language of official government business; (c) being the “prestige dialect” for social mobility; (d) being used for religious purposes; (e) being enforced institutionally; and (f) being the norm for impersonal announcements. There is no pressure on regional speakers to *pronounce* Lao as it is pronounced by natives of Vientiane. (Consider one Vientiane speaker’s reported amusement upon hearing an announcement in strong regional accent over the public address system at Louang Prabang airport.)

Where Lao does have a stronger sense of standardization is in its written form, where much greater concern has been focused throughout the history

of Lao as a national language. Today's *written* (i.e. orthographic) conventions of Lao do pass the "standard" criteria of being used as the national medium of instruction, the language of official business, and the object of institutional maintenance.<sup>5</sup> But the nature of the written language is such that it may be pronounced in a broadly varying range of regional accents. Most of the discussion below concentrates on a range of issues surrounding the history and development of the standardization of Lao as a written language, since it is this issue which has been the native preoccupation.<sup>6</sup>

The area of strongest standardization of Lao can be witnessed in the Lao print media. Publication of any printed material is subject to official approval by the Lao government, who since 1975 has done well in seeing that the standard writing system (according to Phoumi's (1967) grammar; see below) is adhered to. However, while it is often observed that print media can be one of the strongest forces of language standardization (cf. Ivarsson, this volume), this is compromised in Laos by the fact that Lao language newspapers have extremely limited readership. The two main Vientiane dailies *Vientiane Mai* (New Vientiane) and *Pasason* (The People) are distributed to government offices, hotels, other workplaces and some private homes, but no newsagents or magazine stands as such exist. In general, Lao people do not avidly read Lao language materials (but they are beginning to avidly read Thai language materials; see below). So, the fact of a fairly well-standardized orthography in the Lao press does not have the significant consequences for the standardization of the language that one might expect.

Radio programming across the country tends to have strong regional orientation, with local dialects being used in a large percentage of local programming. Rural areas are, however, exposed to a certain degree of "central Lao" via national news reports produced in Vientiane. As already mentioned, *spoken* Lao has been much less effectively standardized, and this is reflected in, and partly because of, the less unified spoken conventions in regional radio programming. (For further comments on radio programming, see below.)

During this century, a number of government bodies have been set up to take responsibility for the tasks of language standardization, which have included production of Lao language educational materials; research on Lao grammar, language, and literature; authorization of neologisms, borrowings, and revisions in the language; and work on an official dictionary. In the 1930s, the Buddhist Academic Council (ພຸດທະບັນດິດທະສະພາ), presided over by Prince Phetsarath, was responsible for various recommendations regarding Lao orthography, including the attempted addition (attributed to Sila Viravong) to the Lao alphabet of fourteen supplementary consonants,

making up the full complement of orthographic distinctions required for transcribing Pali (Bizot 1996). The early 1940s saw developments in language standardization associated with the *Lao Nhay* (ລາວໃໝ່) movement, in which the “simple etymological spelling” associated with P. S. Nginn took hold. Again the Buddhist Academic Council was involved in this process, along with the École Française d’Extrême-Orient. (See Ivarsson, this volume, for detailed discussion.) In August 1948, the Committee for Compiling and Authorizing the Spelling of Lao Words (ຄະນະກຳມະການຮຽບຮຽງຜະລິດພັດການຂຽນລຳລາວ) was set up (by Royal Decree no. 67, August 1948), and this was soon followed by the establishment of the long-standing Comité Littéraire (ກອງວັນນະຄະດີ), under the Ministry of Education (by Prime Minister’s Decree no. 407, 27 August 1951). The Comité was to contain twenty-four members, and the founding five were Kou Aphay, P. S. Nginn, Phuy Panya, Sila Viravong, and Bong Souvannavong. (Sila left the Comité at the end of 1963.) In 1970, the Comité became the Lao Royal Academic Council (ລາດຊະຍັນດິດຕະສະພາລາວ), by Royal Ordinance no. 72, 23 February 1970. It was to last five years until the demise of the Royal Lao Government in 1975.

The reforms introduced by the post-1975 government were implemented quite effectively without the need for a distinct official regulatory body, presumably because the policy was so clear (as defined in Phoumi 1967), and also because little or no debate was entered into. The reforms adopted had already been well established for at least twenty years in the Liberated Zone. In 1999, there remains no official body specifically entrusted with regulation of the Lao language.

On 8–10 October 1990, a major conference “The Round Table on Lao Language Policy” was held in Vientiane, organized by the Institute for Cultural Research under the Ministry of Information and Culture. A number of the papers presented were collected and published as a volume (ICR 1995), in which is found a representative array of current attitudes about Lao language and culture (see below for further discussion). One of the most common demands made was the need for an institute or academy to oversee and authorize decisions about the language, particularly concerning the incorporation of neologisms, and decisions about what orthographical conventions should be adopted. Indeed, it was an official recommendation at the conclusion of the meeting that an official body be set up to work at least on problems of standardizing orthography (Houmphanh 1995: 5). But nearly a decade later, nothing has come of that recommendation. In 1999, a proposal for a Linguistic Institute was before the minister of information and culture.

Lao linguistic scholarship has of course been closely involved with the various institutions concerned with regulation and standardization of the



language. The three figures of greatest importance are P. S. Nginn, Sila Viravong, and Phoumi Vongvichit, noted by Khamphao (1995: 15) as synonymous with the three most important views of the last seventy years regarding how Lao language should be written.

Sila Viravong, the most prominent figure of traditional (i.e. pre-revolutionary) Lao scholarship, produced a range of works on aspects of Lao culture, and today there is a rather romanticized notion of his scholarship (cf. Outhin et al. 1990). Sila instigated an early (unsuccessful) attempt to incorporate the full complement of Indic characters (following Pali) into Lao orthography, so that Indic etymology could be reproduced letter for letter in the everyday spelling system (cf. Bizot 1996, Ivarsson (this volume), Sila 1996 [1938]). This attempt is to be found in Sila's grammar, published in 1935 by the then recently established Chantabouri Buddhist Academic Council. One of Sila's primary concerns was to promote religious studies, and the move to make Pali accessible to anyone who knew Lao was seen as a crucial step in doing this (Sila 1935: x (cited in Thongphet 1995: 103)). This project ran into problems due especially to the Lao nationalist desire for the language to be clearly distinct from Thai, which was already well on the way to having standardized its full complement of Indic characters. Sila's approach was taken by many to be dangerously close to aping developments in Thai orthography at the time (see Diller 1991, Ivarsson (this volume)). Much later, Sila's proposals for Lao orthography were also seen as less practical and more elitist, in opposition to fundamental principles of Phoumi's "revolutionary" grammar (see below).

Pierre Somchin Nginn was head of the long-standing Comité Littéraire for over fifteen years, becoming president of the Lao Royal Academic Council, and presiding over the publication of the Royal Lao Government official Lao grammar, published in 1972 (RLG 1972). Nginn's view of Lao grammar and orthography was more progressive, whereby he partly followed a principle of simplicity and "phonetic" spelling, while allowing for Indic etymology to be reflected in the spelling of borrowings, at least to the extent that existing Lao characters could facilitate this.

Most recently, Phoumi Vongvichit has had the most direct hand in determining the current state of Lao grammar, as well as being a leading political figure throughout the history of the revolutionary struggle in Laos. The "cultural tsar" of the Lao revolution (Stuart-Fox 1997: 5), Phoumi was a "revolutionary activist member . . . of the traditional Lao elite," who was named interior minister of the Pathet Lao resistance government when it was endorsed in 1950 (Stuart-Fox 1997: 78), later becoming minister of education, culture, and information and a member of the inner cabinet and the political bureau of the government of the Lao PDR (Stuart-Fox 1997). Phoumi published his *Lao Grammar* in the heartland of the revolutionary

struggle in 1967. The book was widely distributed after the revolution in 1975, and has come to assume as much significance in Laos as a historical and culturally symbolic document, as it has as an academic contribution to either linguistic description or language standardization. In the last ten years, and especially since his death in 1994, Phoumi has come to receive mixed respect within the academic community in Laos. Compare, for example, the strong support from younger scholars seen in Thongphet (1995) and Khamhoung (1995), in contrast to Thongkham and Souvan's (1997: ii) tepid, and essentially quite negative, mention of Phoumi's role in the context of Sila's much earlier traditionalist work.

"Grammar" for the Lao is essentially prescriptive, properly consisting of a set of rules which define and thereby prescribe what is correct and proscribe what is incorrect in the language. Further, the focus of "grammar" is almost exclusively on orthographic convention, i.e. correct spelling, leaving much about the overall grammar (or morphosyntax) of the language undescribed and unexplored by Lao scholars. Work that has been done on morphology and syntax is explicitly, and in many cases, inappropriately, modeled on traditional European grammar (cf. Diller 1988b, 1993 on a similar situation in Thai). Similarly, much of the descriptive linguistic work done by foreign researchers is less than comprehensive and not always reliable. No Lao "reference grammar," in the descriptive linguist's sense, has so far been produced.

With the establishment of the Lao PDR, the politically motivated reforms embodied in Phoumi's *Lao Grammar* were officially adopted, and remain officially in place today. The positions of Phoumi on the one hand, and of Nginn and Sila, on the other, have polarized, symbolizing the forces of "old" versus "new," pre-revolutionary versus revolutionary, traditional versus progressive. When Phoumi's grammar became the national standard, the people accepted and adopted the reforms in accordance with this. Clearly, it was not felt that criticism or debate regarding government policy was appropriate at the time. However, since the "perestroika" of the late 1980s, many aspects of culture and society associated with socialist ideology have decreased in popularity (especially in Vientiane), and have been somewhat "toned down," now tolerated rather than actively supported. Since then, and particularly since Phoumi's death in 1994 (cf. Sisaveuy 1996), the general feeling in Vientiane has been that Phoumi's reforms are now out of date, having already "served their purpose" in contributing to a certain phase of the revolution (Houmphanh 1996[1990]: 167). In a rather different tone, Thongkham and Souvan (1997: ii) imply that Phoumi's grammar crowned a long history of steady deterioration of the ideal embodied in Sila's four-volume grammar of more than three decades earlier (Sila 1935). It is clear that at least some of Phoumi's reforms are ready to be

phased out, by popular choice. But while commentators are almost unanimous that the reforms are inappropriate for contemporary Lao, there remains the problem of determining what the new alternatives are. Let us first look briefly at the debate which occurred in the decade or so before liberation.

Lao was first officially adopted as the language of education in (Royal Lao Government-controlled) Laos in 1962, under the National Educational Reform Act (RLG 1962, cited in Chamberlain 1978: 267). While the diversity of pronunciation in various dialects of Lao was apparently considered quite tolerable (“most Lao scholars agree . . . that promoting a standard pronunciation is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable,” according to Chamberlain 1978: 267), the issue that generated lively debate was orthographic standardization (Chamberlain 1978; Houmphanh 1996[1990]). The situation at the time is nicely summed up by Allan Kerr in the preface to his 1972 *Lao-English Dictionary*:

A major difficulty which confronted the compiler was the fact that the spelling of Lao words has not been standardised; this is particularly true in the case of words of Pali and Sanskrit origin. The chief guide for correct spelling is a special directive sent by the King of Laos to the *Comité Littéraire*, which states as a general principle that all words are to be spelled exactly as they are pronounced. However, this has thus far been an ideal rather than an accomplished fact . . . In determining which of a series of [variant spellings] should be treated as a main entry the compiler has had the temerity to make decisions in doubtful cases . . . His decisions represent a compromise between the attitude of the traditionalists who oppose change of any kind and that of the modernists who are eager to change everything (ix).

Clearly, the debate was highly politicized. The original directive (Royal Ordinance no. 10, 27 January 1949, for which consult Khamphao 1995, RLG 1972), was interpreted in different ways (or to different degrees of “strictness”) by different political factions of the various coalition governments. Article 2 reads:

The orthography of Lao words, and of words borrowed into Lao from foreign languages, follows pronunciation used in Laos.

The “traditionalists” wanted aspects of original Pali/Sanskrit spelling retained in loanwords from those languages, creating apparently arbitrary complexity for those unfamiliar with Indic etymology. These spellings would have to be learnt by memory, rather than directly reflecting pronunciation in predictable fashion. Houmphanh (1996[1990]: 163; cf.

ICR 1995) mentions the added issue of foreign borrowings and neologisms, with regard to which there were many different opinions, and no unified resolutions.

Chamberlain (1978: 269) reports that at the time the Lao Patriotic Front “followed a stricter interpretation of the Royal Ordinance.” Thus, not only would they dispose of spellings which used final consonants alien to Lao phonology, they would also overtly write in the epenthetic vowels which are automatically inserted by the phonological rules of Lao between consonants in erstwhile clusters.

| Etymological | Phonetic | Pronunciation    | Meaning        |
|--------------|----------|------------------|----------------|
| ຮັດທະບານ     | ລັດຖະບານ | <i>lāthabāan</i> | government     |
| ສັມຍ         | ສະໄໝ     | <i>samāj</i>     | era            |
| ວິຣະວົງສ໌    | ວິລະວົງ  | <i>vīlavóng</i>  | (surname)      |
| ສະໜາມ        | ສະໜາມ    | <i>sanāam</i>    | (sports) field |

While the various interpretations were subject to debate in the Royal Lao Government–occupied areas of lowland Laos, there was no such discussion in the Liberated Zone, where this stricter interpretation (which would eventually prevail) had been accepted and applied by revolutionary forces since at least the early 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a symbolic struggle between “grammars” directly reflected the political struggle between the communist forces in the Liberated Zone, and the royalist forces in the lowlands. The competing interpretations carried potent symbolism, throughout the embattled period up to 1975, and well beyond.<sup>8</sup>

### PHOUMI VONGVICHIT’S REFORMS

Phoumi’s *Lao Grammar* was published by the Lao Patriotic Front at Sam Neua in 1967. Its wider distribution a decade later had far-reaching effect (Houmphanh 1996: 164), setting in place as a national standard the revolutionary forces’ strict interpretation of the 1949 Royal Ordinance, which had already been the norm in the Liberated Zone for at least twenty years. Phoumi takes a strongly political stance in his introduction, stressing the nation-unifying function of a “scientific” grammar, an urgent requirement at that time of struggle to unite the nation under socialism. He commits to words the principles of language reform in Laos which were established and carried through until his death. Let me quote him at length:

Every country in the world has its own principles of speech and writing,

its own linguistic principles which may demonstrate the style and the honour of the nation, and demonstrate the cultural independence of the nation, along with independence in political, economic and other arenas.

Laos has gone back and forth as a colonised state of various foreign nations for many centuries. Those countries that have colonised us have brought their languages to be used here and mixed with Lao, causing Lao to lose its original former content, bit by bit. Most importantly, this has been the case during the time that Laos has been an “old-style” colony of the French colonialists, and a “new-style” colony of the American imperialists. They have tried to incite and force Lao people to popularise speaking and studying their languages, and so then to abandon and forget our own Lao language, little by little. Furthermore, activities along the borders adjoining various neighbouring countries have led a certain number of Lao people, who do not remember their Lao well, to introduce those foreign languages and mix them with Lao, causing their already degraded Lao to further depart from the original principles, on a daily basis. The result of this situation is that Lao people speak and write Lao without unity, where those who live close to the border with whichever country it may be, or who have studied the language of that country, write and speak according to the style and the accent of that country.

Since Lao does not yet have unified principles of writing and speech, we Lao neither like to nor dare to write books or translate books into Lao, which means the cultural struggle of our Lao nation is not as strong as other areas of the struggle. This has considerable negative consequences for our struggle to seize control of the nation and fight American imperialism.

The preservation and renovation of the nation’s orthography, idiom, literature and cultural principles demonstrates the patriotic spirit, the fine tradition and heritage of bravery which was passed down to us from our forebears . . .

The leading idea in my research and writing of this book “Lao Grammar” is for the grammar of Lao to belong to the nation, and to the people, and for it to be progressive, modern, and scientific . . . Every principle and every term used herein is intended to be simple, so that the general populace, of high or low education, may easily understand . . . My greatest concern in writing this book is to have people understand and utilise the principles and the various terms in the easiest possible way (Phoumi 1967: 5-8).

Thus, two crucial principles guided Phoumi’s reforms—first, to preserve the language as uniquely Lao and free of unwelcome foreign (especially Thai) influence, and second, to facilitate the greatest access to literacy for the population as a whole, not just the well educated and/or privileged.

Adult education was an important focus of educational policy in the new government, and much of this was aimed at non-Lao speaking minorities (Stuart-Fox 1986: 147–8).

It is interesting to consider why it is that while in the passage quoted above, Phoumi named the French and the Americans, he didn't explicitly name the Thai, even though he was so obviously referring to them. The passage about “neighbouring countries” could only be referring to Thailand, particularly obvious given the distribution of political control during the time the book was written. Thai influence was also already a topic of scholarly debate in Royal Lao Government areas of lowland Laos when Phoumi's grammar was published. Apparently, Thai was then noticeably influencing not only Lao orthography, but also Lao pronunciation, in daily life, as well as in the mass media. For example, it was claimed (Xao n.d: 5) that Lao *háv* (ເຮົາ) ‘I/we’ and *hóng-héem* (ໂຮງແຮມ) ‘hotel’ were being written/pronounced in the Thai manner (i.e. as ເຮົາ *láv* and ໂຮງແຮມ *lóngléem* in Lao). In these pre-1975 lowland debates, Thailand was also often euphemistically referred to, as in Xao (n.d), where most references are to *phásǎa fāng khǎa* (ພາສາຝັ່ງຂວາ) ‘the language of the right bank (of the Mekong),’ and even *phásǎa khǎw* (ພາສາເຮົາ) ‘their language.’ This sensitivity is apparently less operative today, as evinced by Sisaveuy's recent open reference to the influence of Thai words bringing about the “death” of Lao words (Sisaveuy 1996: 99).

Phoumi's changes to the orthography fully reflected the Lao Patriotic Front's “stricter interpretation” of the royal directive to spell words according to their pronunciation. This especially concerned the spelling of Indic loanwords whose original pronunciation (and thus spelling) included a far greater range of syllable-final consonants than were phonologically possible in spoken Lao. Bounthan (1995: 52) and Chamberlain (1978: 269) separately discuss the example of the syllable /kaan/ which formerly could be spelt variously as ກາລ *kaal*, ກສ *kaar*, or ການ *kāan* (where ລ “l” and ສ “r” in final position are regularly pronounced as /-n/, as in Thai today). While the “purists” had hoped to preserve etymology (at the expense of ease of learning and predictability of pronunciation, according to some), the “strict” reformers at the other end of the scale now had their way, and such distinctions neutralized in speech would now also be neutralized in writing. Thus, the three syllables pronounced /kaan/ are all today standardly spelled ການ.

The most famous and most potent symbol of Phoumi's reforms was the removal from the Lao alphabet of the letter ສ “r,” theoretically representing the alveolar trill [r] (for impassioned discussions, see Bounleuth 1995: 37–39, Sisaveuy 1996: 98–99). This had already been long in place in revolutionary writing in the Liberated Zone. For example, in a Neo Lao

Issara information sheet, dated 1955, the Lao letter “r” does not appear once; examples of “l” for “r” in that document include *’āaméelikāa* (ອາເມລິກາ) ‘America’, *falāng* (ຝະລັ່ງ) ‘France’, *lāatsa’āanāacák* (ລາດຊະອານາຈັກ) ‘kingdom’, and *lātthabāan* (ລັດຖະບານ) ‘government’.) Whereas Central (i.e. the normative standard) Thai, for example, has a spoken contrast between /l/ and /r/, there is no such contrast in spoken Lao, and /r/ is not part of the sound system.<sup>9</sup> As Thongphet puts it, “no linguist, phonetician or phonologist would ever say that the Lao language had the sound [r]” (Thongphet 1995: 104). He goes on to quote Reinhorn (1970: x), for whom “r” exists in Lao language “purely in theory.”

If a word beginning with /r/ in Central Thai is also found in Lao, the Thai /r/ will correspond in spoken Lao to either /l/ or /h/:

|  | <i>Thai</i> |            | <i>Lao</i> |            | <i>meaning</i>                                       |
|--|-------------|------------|------------|------------|--|
|  | ร่ำ         | <i>ram</i> | ຮ້າ        | <i>hám</i> | bran   |
|  | รำ          | <i>ram</i> | ລ້າ        | <i>lám</i> | kind of dance  |
|  | ลำ          | <i>lam</i> | ລ້າ        | <i>lám</i> | classifier for boats, and other large tubular things |
|  | รด          | <i>rót</i> | ຮົດ        | <i>hōt</i> | to pour (water)                                      |
|  | รถ          | <i>rót</i> | ລົດ        | <i>lōt</i> | vehicle  |
|  | ลด          | <i>lót</i> | ລົດ        | <i>lōt</i> | to reduce  |

Given Phoumi’s premises, his reasoning for removing the symbol “r” was perfectly rational. Why should the language retain an orthographic distinction (i.e. “l” vs. “r”) which reflects no spoken distinction, and thus must be remembered either arbitrarily (thus harder to learn), or with explicit reference to a distinction made in a foreign language? The removal of “r” nicely served both of Phoumi’s aims in linguistic reform—to exclude “non-Lao” elements, and to make the system simpler, and thus easier to learn for those with lower level of education (i.e. by not having to remember by rote, or by knowledge of Thai, which Lao words pronounced with /l/ are spelt with “r” and which are spelt with “l”).<sup>10</sup>

There is an increasing popular preference in recent years to tend towards the preservation of etymology in loanwords where possible. While traditional etymological spellings are less likely to be seen in official publications, they are now often seen where privately produced, as for instance in the spelling of shop names. This is perhaps felt to be eye-catching, for example in the case of the flamboyant etymological spelling ສີລບ໌, in place of the “correct” spelling ສິບ, for the syllable pronounced *sɯn*. One place where etymological spelling has recently become notably popular is in the romanization of Lao names, virtually all of which are of Indic

origin. While many feel that they cannot write their name with its etymological spelling in *Lao*, there is a growing tendency for people to *romanize* their name according to etymology rather than pronunciation. This is very common in Thailand, where the etymologically-motivated English spellings of many Thai proper names result in Anglo pronunciations often very different from the Thai—cf. Dejphol, Poolsub, for example.

Consider the following Lao examples. The name of the present vice minister of information and culture appeared romanized in the 1980s as *Bouabane Volakhoun* (Stuart-Fox 1986: 155), but now as *Bouabane Vorakhoun* (Bouabane 1996a) reflecting an etymological “r” in English, while the Lao spelling ວິລະຊຸນ retains “l” (e.g. as in Bouabane 1996b). The pronunciation remains /vólakhūn/. Similarly, the founding head of the ICR Houmphanh Rattanavong uses the etymological “r” in the romanization of his family name, while still using “l” in Lao (i.e. ສັດຕະນະວົງ, as in Houmphanh 1996[1990]). The pronunciation remains /lāttanavóng/. The novelist whose name is pronounced /būnthanavong sōmsájp’hón/ now romanizes his family name as *Xomxayphol*, using the “x” of former French transliteration (for /s/), and reflecting the final “l” of the word’s Sanskrit root (pronounced as /n/ in Lao). The name of the former minister for public health was pronounced /vānnalēet lāatphóol/, and yet was romanized as *Vannareth Rajpho* (*Vientiane Times*, vol. 4.1, 1–3 Jan 1997), again reflecting etymology at the expense of correct pronunciation by the Anglo reader.<sup>11</sup>

How do younger Lao know what these etymological spellings should correctly be, since they have been largely erased from Lao orthography for now over twenty years? Since few Lao study enough Pali (let alone Sanskrit) to really be closely familiar with the sources of many Lao loanwords, it seems clear that they would have to rely for this on their self-taught knowledge of Thai (see below), whose orthography has long been designed to reflect etymology. The problem is not a new one, and has often been raised in debate on Lao orthography, in which there has been an ongoing tension between the desire on the one hand to maintain (or invent) “tradition” by asserting the religious and scholarly importance of having a “Pali-based” language, and, on the other hand, to adhere to the nationalist requirement for Lao and Thai to be clearly distinguished (cf. Ivarsson this volume). Interestingly, Thai is considered by some Lao to be “more correct,” and even “superior” for this reason. Thai is often authoritative where there are discrepancies between the spelling systems. This is presumably a combination of, firstly, the known high level of official codification and standardization in Thai; secondly, the more “difficult” and thus “higher” (i.e. more “learned”) form that Thai orthography takes; and, thirdly, the excessive humility Lao people are sometimes known to display.



There is a running joke in Vientiane about the brand name *b'la láaw* (ບຸບລາວ 'Lao Beer': due to the similar shape of Lao ບ "b" and Thai ข "kh," in addition to a vowel symbol combination ອ-ູ which is read in Lao as /ia/, but in Thai as / əj /, a Thai is likely to read the label of a Lao Beer bottle not as *b'la láaw* 'Lao Beer', but as *khəj láaw* 'Lao (son)-in-law' (or, more generally, Lao man who has married into one's family). I have heard educated Lao remark in seriousness that the Thai reading is in fact "correct" (although this is by no means the majority view).

Moving away from the issue of spelling, there are other aspects of the language which have been similarly subject to politically motivated reforms, although it seems these were not overtly published and distributed in the same way. Many changes were brought in either explicitly, or by example, during the nationwide "massive increase" in education immediately after 1975 (Stuart-Fox 1986: 145), of which a major proportion was ideological and political in nature (cf. also Stuart-Fox 1997: ch. 6).

Prior to the change of government, the particle *dđoj* (ດ້ອຸ) was a standard polite/deferential affirmative marker in Lao, with similar uses to Thai *kháp/khâ* (ครับ/ค่ะ; cf. *yes, sir/ma'am*), usually associated with the use of the self-deprecating pronoun *khanđoj* (ຂະນ້ອຸ) 'I' (literally 'little slave'). Apparently, this was regarded by the new regime as symbolic of an overly hierarchical pre-revolutionary society, asserting and perpetuating values which were to be abolished. The use of *dđoj* was immediately associated with this social arrangement, and was banned. This ban was apparently not effected by any official public decree. Rather, the changes were brought in at ground level through the education system, and in the frenzy of public "seminars" held in schools, temples, and other public places in the early years of the Lao PDR (Stuart-Fox 1986: 156).

*Dđoj* was deliberately replaced by another word *câw* (ຕ້າ). Many Lao report that the initial period of transition was a very difficult and uncomfortable one, in which ordinary people had to drop a well-established habitual politeness marker overnight, replacing it with something unfamiliar. People report having felt embarrassed in doing so, and conscious of being "rude." One must wonder how long it took for the new usage to become normal, or even if for some people it remains uncomfortable to this day.

In recent years, *dđoj* has made a comeback. Its usage began to slowly re-emerge in the early 1990s, and is now once again quite widespread, particularly by children speaking to teachers and elders, as well as by adults addressing traditionally respected people—e.g. monks, one's own elders, and so on. Many Vientiane children are now openly urged to "*dđoj*" their superiors (in the same way many English-speaking children are urged to "please" and "thank you" theirs). Som (1996: 146–7) argues in favor of this

return to traditional etiquette, beginning with the question “Is *dđoj* a word for slaves?” (clearly referring to the original revolutionary reasoning behind the word’s prohibition). Interestingly, he never explicitly mentions the post-1975 ban on *dđoj*, but in arguing that the etiquette does *not* symbolize self-deprecation, he remains out of danger of challenging the revolutionary motivation for the original ban (i.e. he simply challenges one of the argument’s premises).

Complementing proscriptive reforms like the banning of *dđoj*, there were also a number of *prescriptive* reforms under the new regime. Consider the introduction of *sahđaj* (ສະຫາຍ) ‘comrade’ as a standard “leveling” term of address (in accordance with global socialist practice). In Lao, kinship terms and other terms of address (such as occupational terms like ‘*đacđan* (ອາຈານ) ‘teacher’) are used as pronouns, and *sahđaj* was no exception. Up until the early 1990s, the term *sahđaj* could be heard in many official transactions, meaning ‘you,’ ‘s/he,’ or even ‘I,’ depending on the circumstances. As Lao society has begun to loosen up over recent years, and proscribed elements like *dđoj* are returning, the use of proscribed elements like *sahđaj* has begun to recede, correspondingly. The usage of *sahđaj* has become a loaded indicator of socialist conservatism, and thus, in today’s social climate, considerable social distance. In Vientiane today, this is often not appropriate (although there remain contexts in which this kind of talk is expected).

Other terms have taken on a stigma of association with socialist conservatism, in particular many of the expressions prevalent in the numerous propaganda slogans which Lao people have had to learn by rote (especially until the late 1980s). One example is the term *sđamđkkhđi* (ສາມັກຄີ) ‘solidarity, friendship,’ used most notably in the political slogans referring to “special relationships” of political nature (e.g. between Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia). Until more recently, this term would often be used informally with regard to collective activities. I recently used the term with reference to an invitation to dine amongst friends who hadn’t met for some time, but was advised that it was inappropriate (unless ironic in tone) for a casual and intimate engagement such as it was. Many other terms from socialist propaganda (often calqued from universal socialist political slogans) are now falling out of favor in Vientiane, due to their association with a conservative socialist stance. Such expressions are, however, still noticeable in more isolated rural centers.

Another interesting and perhaps more subtle area of prescriptive reform in Lao concerns the choice of certain official terminology. Prior to 1975, many standard terms were common to Lao and Thai, especially those based on Pali or Sanskrit borrowings. A number of such terms were changed in Laos, arguably based on Phoumi’s two major principles of reform—to make

the terms uniquely Lao, and to make them as easy as possible to teach and understand. For example, the former term for ‘mathematics’ *khanītsàat* (ຄະນິດສາດ; from Sanskrit *gaṇita-śāstra* ‘the science of computation’), was substituted by *lêek* (ເລັກ), literally ‘number(s).’ While *lêek* is in fact a loan from Pali, it is nevertheless a simple term in daily use, unlike the more technical term *khanītsàat*. Twenty years later, the Ministry of Education has now dropped that reform, publishing its high school mathematics textbooks once again using the former “high” term *khanītsàat*. Why the reversion? In direct contrast to the original principles behind the reform, people I have interviewed on the matter favor the adoption of the former term, partly because of its more “learned” flavor, and partly because it unified the terminology of Lao and Thai. This latter point is especially significant for the many students who utilize the considerably greater volume and range of instructional and educational materials available in Thai (see below). Here we see a direct conflict of interest between the highly practical benefit of Thai/Lao orthographic/terminological consistency, and the long entrenched nationalist opposition to the very idea.

A final example concerns the reformed terms for the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior. In the Royal Lao Government, these two Lao ministries had the same Pali-derived titles as in Thai, *Kasúang kaláahōm* (ກະຊວງກະລາໂຫມ) and *Kasúang mahàattháj* (ກະຊວງມະຫາດຕະຫຼາດ), respectively. These were changed to *Kasúang pōng kǎn pathêet* (ກະຊວງປ້ອງກັນປະເທດ; literally ‘ministry (to) protect (the) country’) and *Kasúang pháaj-náj* (ກະຊວງພາຍໃນ; literally ‘ministry (of the) inner part’). The adoption of these new terms again nicely satisfied Phoumi’s policy of firstly maintaining Lao uniqueness (i.e. while many ministries remained named as in Thai, these two powerful ministries were perhaps the most symbolic choices), and secondly bringing the terminology “down to earth,” away from “big words” which the average peasant (or speaker of Lao as a second language) would be unlikely to use.

## CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Within current debate among today’s community of Lao concerned with the state of the language, we can discern a number of divisions, related in general to the partition of “new” versus “old.” But since there are three main movements in the standardization of Lao, as discussed above, the line may be drawn in different places. The extremes are the (post-) Phoumi position (e.g. Thongphet 1995) on the one hand, and the Sila position (e.g. Thongkham and Souvan 1997), on the other. The Nginn approach is progressive and rationalist from the Sila point of view, but conservative and

traditional from the Phoumi point of view. From the perspective of modern socialist principles, and a concern for the integrity of the present government's cultural policies, only the Phoumi position is politically correct. But for those with the more general nationalist concern that the Lao language be kept safely distinct from Thai, only Sila's approach looks problematic. For those who are particularly concerned that Buddhism be better served in education and in public life, neither the Nginn nor Phoumi approach offer the promise of what Sila had planned. These oppositions of rationalist versus traditional, progressive versus conservative, emblems versus principles, all overlap to various extents. While I cannot attempt here to unravel this complex intellectual weaving, let me try to bring out a few of the issues which emerged in the recent conference on Lao language policy (published in ICR 1995), and which remain the main topics of contemporary debate.

One issue concerns the general choice between taking Lao as "Lao," or trying to see it from the view of how it fits in to the greater world which presses in upon it. This may concern contemporary global social and political forces such as the spread of the culture of science and technology, or it may involve historical encrustations, such as those traceable to the Indic sources of religious culture in Laos. A common theme in arguing for increasing the complexity of the Lao writing system is that foreign words, especially proper names and technical terms, must be faithfully transcribed. Bounyok (1995: 100) claims that a simplified Lao orthography (i.e. without the letter "r") prevents us from effectively transcribing foreign terms, with the result that "people of the world will figure that we [Lao] are ignorant, and have nothing good in our country." In contrast, Thongphet (1995: 103) praises Phoumi's "daring" in "serving the people" by cutting out "r," among other simplifying reforms.

This is typical of a strong theme of Lao "local pride" throughout Thongphet's work, nowhere more apparent than in his discussion of the removal of the letter "r," in which he pointedly argues that "those who are most offended are those who have previously used the letter 'r' and have held an attitude of worship towards Pali and Sanskrit, that these languages are superior to Lao, their own mother tongue" (Thongphet 1995: 110). Consider Douangdeuan (1995) and Outhin (1995), who share a view of rather extreme normative conservatism, opposing linguistic change, and even revealing a lack of confidence in the integrity and/or expressive capacity of the basic resources of the Lao language (as opposed in particular to Pali and Sanskrit). Outhin (1995: 125–6), for example, argues that a range of cases of rather ingenious folk reanalysis of expressions originally from Pali are actually "negative developments" in Lao which should be rectified. In a similar vein, Douangdeuan (1995: 133), making a case in

favor of the need for Lao people to learn Pali and Sanskrit, gives a set of Pali words for ‘beautiful,’ arguing that they attest to the “clearer” expressiveness of Pali over Lao.<sup>12</sup> Scholars such as these (and many other contributions to ICR 1995) are now arguing for greater attention to Pali and Sanskrit in basic Lao language education, often (whether intentionally or not) playing on the vagueness of the Lao term *khâw* (ຄຳ) ‘source, root, basis’ which is typically used to describe the status of Pali/Sanskrit with respect to Lao. Younger scholars such as Thongphet (1995) and Khamhoung (1995) point out the misleading effect of this usage, and find it necessary to stress that Pali is not “the source” of Lao language at all.

Many commentators show primary concern for issues which are essentially emblematic in nature, rather than being concerned with the application of general principles. This may be illustrated once again with respect to the tireless letter “r.” Two important arguments for reinstatement of “r” are (a) that it is required for representation of the “rolled-tongue” sound [r] found in many minority languages of Laos, and (b) that it is required for representation of (at least) proper names and technical terms from European languages. In such discussions, it is often as if the presence or absence of “r” *alone* will make or break the ability of the Lao language to cope with these tasks (Souvanthone (1995: 117) is a typical example). But according to Thongphet’s rationalist view, if one is really concerned with the *principles*, then there are many equally deserving candidates in the inventory of sounds required to faithfully transcribe minority languages, and to transcribe foreign technical terms and proper names. The point here is that throughout the years, the debate has revolved around the stock examples, and *not* on general principles. These examples become potent symbols, and quickly eclipse rationalist issues of principle. However, those who try to argue this line often do not acknowledge that such an emblem has a greater meaning than its face value would suggest. By orthographic convention, “r” signifies an alveolar trill, a convention Phoumi’s view deems unnecessary and inappropriate for Lao. But by historical fact, the letter “r” has come to import with it the signification of pre-revolutionary Laos, a society and culture personally lived by many, and yet collectively denied in recent times. It now signifies what is missing. The removal of “r” from the language came with the removal of much more significant things in the culture and society of lowland Lao people. Thus, while Thongphet’s arguments regarding the letter “r” may be more rational and consistent, many of them are likely to fall on deaf ears in a circle fixated upon such salient and historically (not to mention personally) loaded emblems.

There are many more issues which could be discussed in this context, but these should suffice to invoke the aroma of the current array of intellectual standpoints in Vientiane. On the one hand, rationalist scholars like

Thongphet harshly criticize simplistic and/or unprincipled arguments put forward by those who “understand nothing at all about the basic and unique features of the Lao language” (Thongphet 1995: 111). His aim is to retain and promote the principled rationalization of the language which began with Nginn and was taken much further by Phoumi. Others argue for the very opposite, such as Khamphan (1995: 57), for example, who demands a two-stage renovation of the Lao language, first reinstating the Nginn system (RLG 1972), as a prelude to adopting Sila’s proposed Pali-fied system (Sila 1935). Such a course would precisely reverse the direction in historical trend of the last seventy years.

### THAI INFLUENCE

WE may now turn to the Thai language, and consider its constant presence in the development of Lao as a language, and as a national language. In Phoumi’s “Introduction,” above, Thai was implicitly singled out as a language (and culture) whose influence Lao must resist.<sup>13</sup> It now appears that Phoumi’s worst fears are turning to reality (Stuart-Fox 1997: 205), but for most modern Lao the facts are not considered quite so awful. The level of exposure to Thai in Laos has increased dramatically in recent years, and now most if not all residents of Vientiane (as well as those in many other parts of the country) have daily contact with Central Thai. In a recent survey on social makeup in urban Vientiane, over 90 percent of residents responded that they could understand Thai, while at the same time less than 30 percent said they could speak or write it (ICR 1998: 57).

By far the most pervasive and powerful medium of exposure to modern Thai culture in Laos today is television. In reporting on the reception of Thai television in Laos over ten years ago, Stuart-Fox noted that “(o)nly those [Lao provincial towns] close to the Thai frontier can receive programmes,” and that in any case there were “few residents lucky enough to possess TV sets” (Stuart-Fox 1986: 155). Due to stronger broadcast signals from Thailand, or better reception equipment, or a combination of both, the reception of Thai television now goes a lot further. It has been reported, for example, that Thai programs can now be received in Attapeu, a province with no border to Thailand. Further, not even those places out of range of Thai television transmission are spared from regular exposure to Thai. Enterprising Lao are doing good business in rural areas charging for public access to video showings, whose popularity is rapidly increasing. In Sepon town, for example, a district center near the Vietnamese border in the far East of Savannakhet province, I witnessed large numbers of young men paying for entry (US\$ 0.50 each) to gather around a television set and

view Chinese and Thai videos, all with dialogue in Central Thai. Similarly, the advent of satellite television dishes has now well and truly taken hold, and television programming from across the world can be received virtually anywhere as long as one can afford to buy a dish (from US\$ 400 to US\$ 1000). Thus, fewer and fewer Lao people are isolated from exposure to the Central Thai language, and to the popular culture of mainstream Thai society.

It was noted in 1985 that the Vientiane authorities “(took) no action against those watching Thai programmes” (Stuart-Fox 1986: 155). While the official view of modern Thai culture at the time was certainly negative, the perceived “threat” of Thai TV was apparently not great, given that television sets were fairly rare. At the time, the Lao television station had only recently expanded programming from three days to five days a week (each day only a few hours in the evenings), and was about to introduce programming seven days a week. Thai programs would have often been the only choice. By the late 1990s, ownership of television sets has skyrocketed, and they are found everywhere. While there are now two Lao television stations broadcasting in Vientiane, the competition from Thailand is overwhelming, with Bangkok-based programming matching the technical level of any developed country. Thai television is loud, flashy, and technologically advanced. These are all attractive qualities to many modern residents of Vientiane. Many homes, markets, and workplaces have televisions installed to help pass the time (as is common practice in Thailand). It has been somewhat ironic to observe that even the State Bookshop has a television installed, broadcasting Thai commercial programming inside the shop throughout the day. This is the same place that ten years ago contained “nothing but Eastern bloc magazines, the works of Marx and Lenin and a few ‘acceptable’ novels translated into Lao” (Stuart-Fox 1986: xiv).

As in any high-consumption society, the vast proportion of television programming in Thailand is overwhelmingly consumer-oriented. The most obvious features of this are the high frequency of advertisements, and the array of consumer-oriented game shows which revolve around the accumulation of money and consumer goods. Also very popular is the plethora of implausibly dramatic soap operas, most of which are based around the lives of the wealthy and beautiful (much in the “Western” mold).

Thai radio and Thai popular music are also in high demand in lowland Laos. Ownership of radios is widespread, and it is very common for people to work outdoors (e.g. on construction sites, at marketplaces, in rice fields) to the tune of radio sets. More and more commonly, Vientiane sets are tuned to the FM stations broadcasting from nearby Nong Khai and Udon

Thani in Thailand. Vientiane residents contribute to the participating audience of the Thai stations, writing to the stations to request songs, and taking part in promotional competitions. Vientiane businesses advertise on these Thai stations. While announcers on the northeast Thai radio stations received in Vientiane speak some amount of Lao (or at least “Isan Thai,” the mix of Thai and Lao spoken in northeast Thailand; cf. Preecha 1989), mostly Central Thai is used, especially in regular news bulletins and the like.

Commercial radio programming is, of course, dominated by popular music, and Thai radio is no exception. The Thai popular music industry is very advanced in terms of its levels of production quality and marketing, and among the Vientiane youth especially, the booming, heavily image-oriented Thai scene is popular. The many bars and clubs operating in Vientiane play a high proportion of Thai and “international” (i.e. Western) songs. A minimum level of “local content” is required by law (VMGO 1997, Articles 9.8 and 15) though often not followed, and is enforced by occasional monitoring (including educational “seminars”) by local authorities.

Many bars and clubs in Vientiane feature live bands which play a mix of Lao, Thai, and Western music, with a few clubs playing no Lao music at all. Among the more trendy youth, Lao songs are uncool, and there are interesting ways in which language becomes a factor. For example, Thai popular songs, especially those that deal with the dominant themes of love and relationships, use the pronouns *chǎn* (ฉัน) for ‘I’ and *thəə* (เธอ) for ‘you.’ While a number of pronouns and pronominal strategies are common to Thai and Lao, these particular forms are highly marked as “very Thai,” and definitely *not* Lao. Young Lao musicians who aspire to write original songs in the style of modern Thai pop are stuck. They are unable to use the Thai pronouns, since these would never pass the approval of the government, as is required for original material broadcast or published in Laos (VMGO 1997, Article 6.3). But to use Lao pronouns (*khəj* (ຂ້ອ) ‘I’ and *cāw* (ເຈົ້າ) ‘you’; or ‘*āaj* (ອ້າຍ) ‘older brother’ and *nəj* (ນ້ອງ) ‘younger sister’) in a song of the Thai pop style would sound embarrassing to a hip young Lao.<sup>14</sup> The result is that the Thai industry dominates the pop music market in Laos.

Print media is another major channel for Lao people’s exposure to Central Thai. Lao language newspapers and magazines are somewhat limited in quantity and content, for both economic and political reasons. All Lao publications require official government approval, a fact which must, to some extent, discourage experimentation and/or enterprise in any non-established styles of publishing (for example, anything “lowbrow,” satirical, critical, or politically reactionary). In this context, the sheer



quantity and variety of Thai written materials attracts a lot of interest in Laos.

The Thai language written materials found now in Laos are basically of two types, the "popular," and the "practical." Thai popular written materials include novels, comics, and popular magazines (the latter often associated with promotion of Thai music or television industries), as well as stickers, signs, and slogans advertising Thai products. These can be seen all over Vientiane, in shops and homes, in markets, and on the street. The popularity of these materials is evinced by the small shopfront or market "libraries" which can be found around Vientiane, from which one may borrow (for a price) Thai-language glossy magazines and novels. There is no such market in Vientiane for private Lao language libraries.

Thai practical written materials include educational resources, technical manuals, instructional materials, and the like. These kinds of publications are widespread and of a relatively high standard in Thailand, and many students in Vientiane now utilize the broad range of publications which provide information and resources on technical matters. There is often no alternative, since so little is available in Lao. Most of the bilingual English language teaching materials are produced in Thailand, and are on sale in most Vientiane bookshops. A number of new bookshops have opened up around Vientiane, stocking mostly Thai language titles. Thus, many Vientiane Lao are being exposed to a lot of written Central Thai out of sheer practical necessity, and much of their working technical terminology is directly borrowed from Thai. A typical example observed recently was a series of Thai health education information sheets hung on the wall of a ward in the "150-bed" Lao-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Vientiane. While it would of course be preferable for the Lao to have such materials available in Lao language, it is obviously better to have access to the information in Thai than not at all.

Thai newspapers provide elements of both the "popular" and the "practical." The nature of journalism in the Thai press is a world apart from that in Laos, and is very closely modeled on the style of developed countries. Aside from the range of human interest stories and glossy advertising, one can find critical social/political analysis, scarce in the Lao press. This in itself is engaging for Lao readers, particularly where this concerns probing of native political mechanisms, whereby readers may be privy to highly critical analysis of the activities of their national leaders, as well as no end of gossip. This for the Lao is attractive, at the very least for its novelty. (At the same time, many Lao are glad that they are not themselves governed directly by such an openly chaotic system.) It is also notable that the kinds of news people are exposed to in the Thai press (as well as electronic media) are probably slightly nerve-racking for those

concerned with Lao national security, given the open political debate, criticism, and also exposure to the culture of industrial action, and so on. Recently, Lao people in Vientiane may be observed debating over morning coffee the fortunes of Thai politicians and political parties, and the dynamics of Thai politics.

Thus, with respect to mass media like television and newspapers, there is no way to state simply whether the exposure of Lao people to Thai culture in this way is “good” or “bad,” “destructive” or “constructive.” Like television in general, Thai television can be said to have a numbing and/or distracting effect, or it may be said to broaden horizons and promote progressive thinking by means of creating exposure to ideas from without, which can be constructively borrowed and appropriated. For better and/or worse, Lao people learn a lot from watching the Thai. And the Thai, who spend little time taking any notice of the Lao, indeed learn very little from them.

The present high level of exposure to Central Thai in Laos is having a noticeable effect on the spoken language, particularly of young people. The following chart shows a handful of the many Thai words which are coming into use among Lao in Vientiane:

| Lao terms                  | Lao terms of recent Thai origin | meanings   |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|
| ໂທລະພາບ <i>thóolaphâap</i> | ໂທລະທັດ <i>thóolathāt</i>       | television |
| ເຮັດວຽກ <i>hēt vīak</i>    | ຫ້າງານ <i>thām ngáan</i>        | to work    |
| ຮັ່ງມີ <i>hāng-mīi</i>     | ລວຍ <i>lúaj</i>                 | rich       |
| ທຳອິດ <i>thām-’it</i>      | ທຳເລກ <i>thī-i-lêek</i>         | at first   |
| ຮ້ອງ <i>hǒong</i>          | ສ້ອງ <i>lǒong</i>               | sing       |
| ແກ້ວ <i>kéew</i>           | ຂວດ <i>khùat</i>                | bottle     |
| ພົບ <i>phōp</i>            | ເຈີ <i>cá’</i>                  | meet       |

Accent may be affected, although this is perhaps less widespread. In a number of cases, the Thai pronunciation of a Lao word may be adopted (e.g. Thai *lên* (เล่น) for Lao *lìn* ຫຼິ້ນ) ‘play, pass time’). Effect on tones may be observed, where, for example, young Lao women can be heard using the (characteristically Thai) lengthened, rising tone with final glottal stop on the sentence-final perfective marker *lêew* (ແລ້ວ). Outhin (1995: 126–7) gives the examples of *phāəm* (ເພີ່ມ) ‘add, additional,’ *lāəm* (ເລີ່ມ) ‘begin,’ *mūang* (ມ່ວງ) ‘purple (color),’ and *thāw* (ເທົ່າ) ‘extent, amount,’ which are being pronounced in Lao as *phāəm*, *lāəm*, *mūang*, and *thāw*, following the Thai tone (i.e. as if they were written in Lao as ເພີ່ມ, ເລີ່ມ, ມ່ວງ, and ເທົ່າ).

There are at least two levels of usage of spoken Thai among the Lao

which may be termed “flippant” versus “serious.” Flippant usage of Thai is common among young people, and among those into popular culture. It involves “putting on” a Thai accent, and using Thai expressions in imitative, joking fashion (just as Australians often do with American or English accents and idioms). This conscious and deliberate usage of Thai is considered by most to be not actually “speaking Thai” in any genuine sense. Thus, someone who uses Thai expressions flippantly may still assert that their “serious” Lao does not incorporate any Thai elements at all. Nevertheless, there *is* a significant degree of “serious” usage, and this is on an apparently unconscious level, where many people would indeed deny that they do it at all. John Gumperz (1982: 75) has described this phenomenon, noting that “expressed attitudes tend to conflict with the observed facts of behaviour.” Indeed, I have pointed out to Lao informants who deny seriously using any Thai, that they have in fact been recorded on tape doing just that. When the facts are attested, the result has often been considerable debate and confusion as to what is Thai and what is Lao after all. Some speakers are very clear about the distinction, others are not. The former tend to be those who oppose Thai influence, while the latter tend to see it as “no problem,” since Thai and Lao are “basically the same language” anyway. This is an especially common line when defending one’s use of a Thai term in Lao.

The adoption of Thai words into the Lao system has resulted in some interesting phenomena with respect to the changes in meaning that certain elements undergo. For instance, a Thai word may simply replace its Lao equivalent. An example is ‘television,’ *thóolaphâap* (ໂທລະພາບ) in Lao. Lao speakers have now almost unanimously adopted the same term as Thai, *thóolathât* (ໂທລະທັດ cf. Thai โทรทัศน์). Another possibility is for a Thai *meaning* to replace the Lao meaning, where Thai and Lao had different meanings for a shared word. An example is *falāng* (ຝະລັ່ງ), which until recently meant ‘French’ in Lao, an abbreviation of *falāngsèet* (ຝະລັ່ງເສດ). The term *farāng* (ฝรั่ง in Thai) refers generally to ‘Westerners’ or ‘Caucasians,’ and this usage is now being adopted by children and youth in Vientiane, as well as many adults. Another example concerns the word *phêe* (ເຜີ້), which in Lao (for older speakers) means ‘to win, to defeat someone.’ Interestingly, it has the very opposite meaning in Thai, i.e. ‘to lose, to be defeated by someone.’ With the present level of exposure to Thai, this has now become a possible source of confusion, which on occasion needs to be resolved by the question “Do you mean Lao *phêe* or Thai *phêe*?” (cf. English “Do you mean *funny* ‘peculiar’ or *funny* ‘ha-ha?’”). It appears that the confusion engendered by the possibility of opposite readings for a single word is too impractical, and I have noticed that some young people in Vientiane now use *phêe* almost exclusively in the Thai sense.

Where Thai and Lao have synonyms, a Thai word may be incorporated into Lao, where the meanings of the two words adjust, each taking on a separate sense. For example, the words for ‘wealthy’ in Lao and Thai are *hāng-mīi* (ຮັງມີ) and *ruaj* (รวย), respectively. The term *ruaj* (Lao *lúaj* ລວຍ) is now being used in Vientiane to refer to the kind of flashy nouveau-riche style of wealth often depicted on Thai TV, or associated with the modern new rich of Vientiane. The Lao term *hāng-mīi* now tends to refer to more established family wealth, with inherited ownership of land and paddy, perhaps with influence because of this, and so on. Another example concerns the words for ‘work,’ *vīak* (ວຽກ) and *ngaan* (งาน) in Lao and Thai, respectively. The Lao term tends now to refer to manual labor, while the Thai term is gaining currency in Vientiane for reference to white-collar work. This example is rather transparent in terms of the social levels at which Lao and Thai expressions tend to refer. David Bradley (personal communication) has suggested that these examples of former synonyms adjusting to complement each other semantically could be construed as cases where Thai actually has an enriching influence on Lao. While Lao indeed gains a semantic distinction it formerly lacked, there is a tendency, however, for the formerly neutral Lao terms to become pejorative (as in the example of Lao vs. Thai ‘work,’ above). This has already happened in many cases in Isan Thai.

A feature of Central Thai which modern Lao now conspicuously lacks is *lāatsasáp* (ลาตสะสะบ) “royal vocabulary,” the special flowery terminology derived from Pali, Sanskrit, and Khmer, used for reference to activities of the royal family. Lao possessed this feature at the time Laos had a royal head of state. Tay (1995: 169) reports that upon the establishment of Lao PDR, royal vocabulary was officially banned, permitted only where appropriate or necessary in poetry and literature.<sup>15</sup> Today, however, the Lao in range of Thai TV are exposed daily to lengthy reports on the activities of royal family members on Thai news bulletins, and these are full of royal vocabulary. Perhaps more significantly, Lao language reportage is itself beginning to use the conventions of royal vocabulary (see front page report of Princess Sirindhorn’s visit to Vientiane, *Pasason* newspaper, 20 Mar. 1998). Notably, the Thai royal family is well-liked by many Lao. Images of King Bhumibol and Princess Sirindhorn are common in shops and some private homes in Vientiane. The Krung Thai Bank distributed a 1997 calendar to shops and offices all over Vientiane featuring a large photograph of King Bhumibol of Thailand. It is amazing that in Vientiane his image is now at least as widespread as those of any of the Lao revolutionary leaders. The issue is well worth researching, but remains politically quite sensitive (cf. Evans 1998).

The bottom a line here is that while attitudes to the incursion into Lao

of various elements of Thai differ considerably from individual to individual, no one denies that it is happening. And the debate goes back throughout the history of Laos as a nation-state. Adoption of Thai linguistic practices correlates with the adoption of other cultural practices, including some of the most salient symbols of the “social evils” to which the current regime’s cultural policies have been so strongly opposed. Consider the following comments of a Vientiane man who spent time during the late 1970s in re-education, as a “social misfit”: “They took those with long hair, they took those with platform shoes, they took those with even slightly flared pants. They’d say, ‘This person is attached to social evils from the West,’ like the Americans. They took out the bad people for re-education.” (Enfield 1994: 189–90.) Clearly, these “social evils” were taken very seriously by the new regime. It is thus perhaps a cruel irony for some that the streets of Vientiane are once again replete with flared pants and platform shoes. And the Thai influence on Lao language that Phoumi resisted is well under way. It will thus be of great interest to monitor the progress of these influences within Laos itself over the coming decades.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE POLITICS OF LAO LANGUAGE: OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSION

Trends in linguistic and cultural policy are subject in part to fluctuating social and political attitudes. In Vientiane, particularly with the recent emergence of a consumer middle class, this correlates with the compromise of certain revolutionary ideals. But Laos remains a socialist country, and there are important signs of a continuing level of revolutionary consciousness, particularly in official contexts. For example, in a recent newspaper article on Lao language studies, Thongphet (1996) displays a similar level of political concern as Phoumi had done in his 1967 grammar. In the second part of the paper, entitled “The Viewpoint of our Party,” Thongphet quotes Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh, going on to present his “Ten directions for linguistic research.” The first two of these are “Research on Marx-Lenin theory,” and “Research on the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic policies of the [Lao People’s Revolutionary] Party.” Similarly, in a classic token of political correctness, having made one of the strongest statements *against* Phoumi’s revolutionary reforms in the recent “Lao Language Policy” volume (ICR 1995), Khamphan signs off “in revolutionary solidarity” (Khamphan 1995: 60). Indeed, the general trend since the early 1990s away from conservative politics in Laos was noticeably reversed in the lead-up to the general election of December 1997, during which an atmosphere of political conservatism was apparent in Vientiane

and elsewhere (cf. e.g. PCPC 1997). So it is difficult to predict what the future will hold for Lao as a national language, but it is highly unlikely that the current government will officially approve restoration of conventions such as those championed by Nginn, and especially Sila, with such salient symbolic attachment to former regimes, and the foreign nations. The best that traditionalists can hope for is official restoration of the letter “r,” in place already for foreign words and proper names.

In conclusion, a review of the status of Lao as a national language supports a claim that variation and change in a given language is revealing of the nature and extent of variation and change in the culture and society in which that language is spoken. The persistent disunity of grammatical convention in Laos, and the rapid change the Lao language is presently undergoing are clearly symptomatic of the sediments and fault lines across Lao social and political history, as well as the rapid and dramatic social change occurring now. The two most salient forces of change in the language today are the overall decrease in social presence of revolutionary ideals, and the active and pervasive influence (perhaps unprecedented in extent) of Thai culture, and through it, the culture of the developed world. The two are surely not unrelated, and it is impossible to give a simplistic appraisal of the value or detrimental effect of this process for Lao people. When we examine current popular debate on Lao language, we see clearly how the real issues are to a large extent not really “linguistic” (in one important sense of the term) at all. When it comes to language engineering, the pivotal arguments are often not based on theoretical principles or rational argumentation derived from linguistic science. They are based on salient emblems whose presence or absence may be exploited to achieve certain desired cultural or socio-political effects. The Lao letter “r” is a classic example. From a rationalist standpoint (e.g. from the point of view of a theoretical linguist or a Marxist-Leninist theoretician), most of the debate on “r” is appallingly simplistic, and the symbol itself, as a substantive issue, is overrated. As Thongphet has shown, by the *principles* that argue for the official reinstatement of “r” into Lao orthography, there are a number of other sounds/letters equally deserving. But they receive little or no attention in these contexts. Why? Because the stock example, “r,” has achieved unique status as a potent metonymic emblem of whole cultural and social worlds denied by the movement that Phoumi Vongvichit represented, yet which remain embedded in the biographies of many Lao people. And despite the revolutionaries’ principled and rational justification for the removal of “r,” the symbol is a potent metonym for them, too. In language engineering driven by the social and political forces of nationalism, the “linguistic principles” at stake virtually fade into insignificance.

### APPENDIX: NOTE ON LAO LANGUAGE REFERENCE MATERIAL

The most extensive original work on Lao lexicography appears in large bilingual dictionaries compiled by American and French researchers (Kerr 1972; Reinhorn 1970), although a Lao monolingual dictionary was produced by Sila Viravong (1962, cited in Kerr 1972: xx), and some smaller bilingual dictionaries have also appeared over the years (e.g. Marcus 1970). The most extensive Lao monolingual dictionary appeared recently, largely a synthesis of these works, translated into Lao (Thongkham 1992). Published materials on the grammar of Lao (ranging from excellent to unreliable) include a small range of pedagogical and descriptive materials produced in foreign languages (e.g. Hoshino 1973; Hoshino and Marcus 1981; Morev et al. 1972; Ngaosyvath and Ngaosyvath 1984; Reinhorn 1980; Roffe and Roffe 1958; Werner 1992; Wright 1994; Yates and Sayasithsena 1970). For Lao language materials, see the three Lao grammars: Phoumi 1967, RLG 1972, Sila 1935.

### NOTES

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1. There are of course many languages spoken in Laos which are not dialects of Lao, including the languages of the Hmong-Mien group (e.g. Hmong), the Tibeto-Burman group (e.g. Lahu), and the Mon-Khmer group (e.g. Khmu). The current status, and future of these languages is of urgent concern in the present climate of rapid change and development in Laos. However, these matters are beyond the scope of this essay. Note also that in the interest of keeping the subject matter manageable, the present exposition is necessarily biased towards the situation of Lao language in urban Vientiane.

2. As Kathryn Sweet (personal communication) has pointed out, this concern with written language means that the issue of language standardization has little or no effect on the large number of people who are not literate. The level of literacy in Laos would have been especially low earlier this century.

3. Sanskrit and Pali are Indo-Aryan languages, both no longer natively spoken. Sanskrit has a specific script (the Devanagari script used in modern Hindi), and is associated mostly with Hindu writings. While Sanskrit remained very conservative due to emphasis on retaining the integrity of its original written form, Pali developed out of a spoken descendent of Sanskrit, which was used in the dissemination and subsequent spread of Buddhism. Pali does not have its own specific script (many different scripts are used for writing Pali), but does require essentially the same range of characters as the Devanagari script, with some minor differences.

4. Traditional description of the tone system of Lao (as well as Thai) makes reference to three parameters: status of syllables as “live” (i.e. with vocalic or sonorant final) or “dead” (i.e. with stop final); membership of the initial consonant in one of the three classes (“high,” “middle,” and “low”); and vowel-length (“long” vs. “short”; cf. Phoumi 1967: ch. 1; Preecha 1989: introduction).

5. This, however, does not mean that the standards of the language are faithfully adhered to. There remains a certain margin for slippage in the writing of Lao, as persistent variation in spelling of many words will attest.

6. For example, in ICR 1995, an important recent volume on “Lao language policy,” almost no one among over twenty-five contributors identifies regional pronunciation as an issue. Bounyok (1995: 98) is one exception.

7. It must be acknowledged that those who were producing Lao language documents in the Liberated Zone constituted a small community in comparison to those in Royal Lao Government areas at the time.

8. Many overseas communities of Lao who fled Laos under the revolutionary government continue to publish their community materials using orthographic conventions based on the more traditional interpretation of the 1949 Royal Ordinance.

9. As Grant Evans (personal communication) has pointed out, there are cases where “r” is pronounced by Lao people. Note, however, that these are without exception *marked* usages, licensed either by the particular cultural context (e.g. religious formality or marking of class distinction), or the markedness of particular words being pronounced (e.g. foreign names). Contrary to folk belief in Vientiane, it is not the case that Lao people are “unable to roll their r’s.” But it remains the case that there is no *unmarked* spoken usage of an alveolar trill [r] corresponding to written ຣ in Lao.

10. Diller (1991) reports similar issues in Thailand, where the orthographic “r” vs. “l” distinction is not colloquially pronounced by most Thai. He writes, “Occasionally higher government units take direct linguistic action. On 12 January 1988 the Prime Minister’s Office issued a proclamation warning the bureaucracy to pronounce /r-/ and /l-/ distinctly . . .” (Diller 1991: 112).

11. Note that there are exceptions (and the situation is quickly changing): Lao “r” appears on the cover of the 1995 *Road Regulations Manual* in the spelling of the author’s name Sisouphan Urai (ສີສຸພັນ ວຸຣາຍ), and also in the spelling of Sila Viravong’s name in various reissued publications (e.g. Sila 1996 [1938]). The abbreviation of “doctor” has always used Lao “r” (ຣ.), following English/French “Dr.”

12. Thongphet’s comments seem pertinent here, given Douangdeuan’s high praise of the shades of meaning Pali provides, despite the extraordinarily rich expressive power



of “native” spoken Lao. One of the special features of Lao is its category of expressives (cf. Chapman 1996), a grammatical system providing abundant and subtle distinctions across a range of semantic fields. The Pali terms *Douangdeuan* recommends are expressive only to the extent that semantic distinctions from a classical language can be re-created and/or contrived and deliberately imported into Lao linguistic culture. Native expressive distinctions are arguably of much greater value to the cultural integrity of Lao language, since they are already established among Lao fashions of speaking, and are naturally inculcated through existing native channels of social transmission.

13. Indeed, the influence of Thai on Lao has been a concern in Laos ever since Lao nationalism began, and is certainly not a preoccupation exclusive to the revolutionary movement. Ivarsson (this volume) discusses the long-standing nationalist issues surrounding Laos’s need to distinguish itself from Siam and Thailand, and how this is manifest in the need to distinguish the languages of the two nations.

14. Compare the similar virtual prohibition on Australian popular musicians singing in an Australian accent, instead using American, or occasionally English, style. Exceptions to this tendency may be found in “country” and/or “folk” genres (both in Australia and Laos).

15. Souksavang (1995: 84) has challenged the premise that royal vocabulary is “class-ist” in the same way that Som (1996) argued against the persecution of *dōj* ດ້ອງ, arguing that as part of the language, it is “the common property of the whole society, and of all people.”

16. Consider the possibility in years to come of a conscious return to “uniquely Lao” culture, a people’s reclamation of all things “truly Lao.” Would the rediscovered “Lao language” and “Lao culture” have to be invented, pieced together from clues and fond memories, while accommodating the new cultural requirements of the modern society? This process of “revival” of culture has been witnessed in many parts of the world, none closer to Laos than Isan (northeast Thailand), where the people have been actively “rediscovering” (mostly reinventing) their “Lao” roots. Much of what is now emerging as “Isan” culture is in fact new, but importantly, “uniquely Isan,” and also putatively “Lao.” And ironically, this “Lao” style is being adopted as a hip “alternative” by some young residents of Vientiane. It would not be at all surprising to see this same process take hold in lowland Laos in a decade or two, as a backlash against the process of intense cultural change we are witnessing now.