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HOW TO DEFINE 'LAO', 'THAI', AND 'ISAN' LANGUAGE? A View from Linguistic Science

ABSTRACT

This article argues that it is not possible to establish distinctions between 'Lao', 'Thai', and 'Isan' as separate languages or dialects by appealing to objective criteria. 'Lao', 'Thai', and 'Isan' are **conceived** linguistic varieties, and the ground-level reality reveals a great deal of variation, much of it not coinciding with the geographical boundaries of the 'Laos', 'Isan', and 'non-Isan Thailand' areas. Those who promote 'Lao', 'Thai', and/or 'Isan' as distinct linguistic varieties have subjective (e.g. political and/or sentimental) reasons for doing so. Objective linguistic criteria are not sufficient.

KEYWORDS

Lao, Thai, Isan speech – sociolinguistics – 'languages' – dialectology

It is common for 'Thai', 'Lao', and 'Isan' to be treated as distinct and coherent linguistic systems. Some regard the three as distinct 'languages', others say they are 'dialects'. And there are those who say that 'Lao' and 'Isan' are indistinct. But how are we to *define* the linguistic varieties known as 'Lao', 'Thai', and 'Isan'? On what empirical basis do we say that one utterance is 'in Lao' and another is not? The purpose of this article is not to settle the issue with, say, a contribution of empirical data. In any case, such data is seldom the basis of assumptions that these labels refer to real distinct systems. As discussed below, when empirical criteria *are* provided, they often amount to a handful of 'diagnostics'. The purpose here is to challenge a view widely encountered in research on the linguistics of Laos and Northeast Thailand, namely, that it is unproblematic to assume 'Lao', 'Thai', and 'Isan' as being distinct systems (whether 'languages' or 'dialects'), each with internal coherence. My position is that there are no objective criteria for establishing the validity of propositions such as 'There is a language of Isan', 'Isan and Lao are separate languages', 'Isan and Lao are the same language', 'Thai, Lao, and Isan are dialects of a single

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language', or the like. Those who assume the truth of such propositions base their preconceptions not only on 'linguistic criteria'.

The terms 'language' and 'dialect' are widely used. The most common criterion for distinguishing between these is 'mutual intelligibility'—that is, if two people speak together and each can understand what the other is saying, then they are speaking 'the same language', but not necessarily 'the same dialect'. If significant differences in pronunciation, lexicon, and/or grammar may be detected, then the two mutually intelligible varieties may be referred to as separate 'dialects'. However, this conception is so subjective as to be virtually vacuous in reality. How much of a difference is 'significant'? At the finest level of grain, every individual speaks a different variety—as Sapir (1921:147) put it, 'two individuals... are never absolutely at one in their speech habits'. Standard textbooks in sociolinguistics conclude that 'there is no real distinction to be drawn between "language" and "dialect"', and even that 'the search for language boundaries is a waste of time' (Hudson 1996:36).

It is not obvious to most people that 'languages' such as 'Thai' and 'Lao' are primarily *imagined* entities, arising from predetermined and/or preconceived conditions which come from the top down. By 'bottom up' criteria, there are no objective empirical bases for defining a given language (in the common sense). What is labelled by a language name is not a thing but an *idea* of a thing. The crucial factor is the distinct *identity* of the language and of its speakers *qua* speakers of that language, and this notion of 'a language' does not (necessarily) map onto 'a language system' as defined by linguistic science (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Speech varieties which are clearly very close in structure can get labelled as different languages for political and sociocultural reasons (compare 'Serbian' and 'Croatian', 'Dutch' and 'Flemish', 'Thai' and 'Lao'). The non-essential nature of distinctions between 'languages' has long been recognised by linguistic science: 'paradoxically enough, a "language" is not a particularly linguistic notion at all. Linguistic features obviously come into it, but it is clear that we consider Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and German to be single languages for reasons that are as much political, geographical, historical, sociological and cultural as linguistic' (Chambers and Trudgill 1998:4).

What, then, is the true form of language and 'languages' from a bottom-up point of view, 'on the ground'? What we normally refer to as 'a language' is a concentration within a community of a specific set of what sociolinguists have called 'linguistic items'—words, ways of pronunciation, grammatical constructions, speech routines. It is possible to talk about the distribution and meaning of these *individual items* within populations and across geographical

areas (as well as over time), and in many cases, large numbers of such items have common distribution. However, very small clusters of linguistic items are often considered to suffice as bases for claims about entire linguistic systems, and about the habits of entire speech communities. Specific linguistic items are considered 'diagnostic' of a distinction between two 'dialects' or two 'languages', usually with the assumption that the important diagnostics are accompanied by many other consistently patterning differences.

What are some possible 'diagnostics' for distinctions between linguistic varieties in the geographical area in which we expect to find 'Lao', 'Isan', and 'Thai' spoken? In the speech of people from Stung Treng to Korat to Chiang Rai to Sam Neua different diagnostics suggest different borders between linguistic varieties and/or sub-varieties, but very few of them attest to a clearly defined 'Isan' language or variety, as opposed to 'Lao'.

Beginning with phonology, we first consider tone systems. Distinctions between different tone systems could be diagnostic of over a dozen dialect distinctions in the Isan area alone (Preecha 1989), with none of the relevant distinctions corresponding to the political boundary between Laos and Isan. Segmental contrasts, such as the alternations between 'r-', 'h-' and 'l-' (compare pronunciations of 'hot' and 'hundred' across the region) would also not correspond to political borders. Vowels are more stable, but some distinctions such as the use of 'ia' rather than standard 'ua'¹ in words such as 'moon' (e.g. in Yasothon in Isan and in neighbouring areas of Southern Laos) also do not support a distinction between 'Lao', 'Isan', and/or 'Thai'.

In the grammar, functional morphemes such as *bòò* 'not' or the irrealis marker *si* may be suggestive of a distinction from Thai, but these do not separate 'Lao' from 'Isan'. The same is the case for more subtle differences between varieties in the meanings and uses of shared grammatical resources. For example, not all varieties allow *mak* as both a preverbal modal meaning 'tend to, be apt to', and a complement-taking predicate meaning 'like to'. Another example concerns the preverbal use of *pên* as a modal meaning 'able to, know how to'—cf. Vientiane *kin bòò pên* versus Stung Treng *bòò pên kin* for 'cannot eat'.

In the lexicon, certain verbs are differentially distributed (e.g. *cak* 'to know' or *qêêw* 'to play'), but neither of these support distinctions between 'Lao' and 'Isan'. They in fact group together varieties on either side of the Thai-Lao border (Southern Laos with Southeast Isan, versus Northwest Laos with Northern Thailand, respectively). Even more divisive are distinctions based on the distribution of plant and animal names, which show a great deal of variation

¹ Editor's insertion: [ua].

across the 'Lao/Isan' area. On the basis of many of these diagnostics, varieties spoken in Northern Laos have more in common with varieties spoken in Northern Thailand than with varieties spoken in Southern Laos. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the area, but the coercive effect of language names (e.g. 'Thai' versus 'Lao') can be strong indeed.

Diagnostics which do seem to correspond to the political border between Laos and Northeast Thailand are those things which are due to 'top-down' effects (e.g. political terms and neologisms which are learned in the education system). Their distribution has an ultimately political explanation, and they have only been established in very recent times (i.e. within the last 25 years). There are a few artefact names, which, intriguingly, do seem to correspond well to a geographical line between Laos and Isan. For example, the words for 'window' and 'book' used in Laos (*pòòng-iam* and *pùm*,² respectively) are often not understood in any part of Thailand (at least by younger speakers). These, however, can perhaps also be viewed as the outcome of recent political facts.

Those few linguistic items whose distribution corresponds reasonably well to the political border between Thailand and Laos are simply not enough to establish on convincing linguistic grounds that the speech of people on either side of that line is of distinct 'dialects' or of distinct 'languages'. Any other of the diagnostic 'isoglosses' which criss-cross the region of Northeast Thailand, Northern Thailand, and Laos would provide just as strong a basis for an argument of different 'dialects' where no political border is associated. The point is that if one tries to claim a coherent distinction between unitary 'languages' or 'dialects' 'Lao' versus 'Isan' based on a few linguistic items, this choice is basically arbitrary in terms of the linguistic items (or the small cluster of linguistic items) chosen as the basis for distinction. Other diagnostics could just as well support different 'dialect' distinctions, which happen *not* to correlate with political boundaries. The linguistic criteria do not suggest a unique solution, and so in a 'Lao' versus 'Isan' argument, linguistic evidence would merely be appropriated to support a distinction which had been decided upon in advance.

It is clear why the governments of Laos and Thailand desire language standardisation in their territory. They are involved in large-scale political activity, and therefore have a clear motivation for intentionally establishing a goal for a standard language—Thai is a good case (Diller 1988, 1993). However, when social scientists such as anthropologists, historians, linguists, and sociologists, who are not involved in political ambition beyond the realm of university ranks, make reference to an assumed linguistic variety, it is essential to

² Editor's insertion: [*poong jiam, püum*].

be careful about how that variety is defined—i.e. whether our generalisations are genuinely likely to apply in reality (Enfield and Evans 2000). For example, if we examine the linguistic variety spoken in a certain village of a certain district of a certain province of Northeast Thailand, it is illegitimate to consequently assert that the feature described is a property of ‘Isan’ language more generally. In the context of the ‘Thai’/‘Lao’ question, ‘Isan Language’ is perhaps the most problematic category of all. Despite the recent appearance of dictionaries of ‘Isan’ language (e.g. Preecha 1989) and similar publications, there is considerable sub-regional variation in linguistic habit among people who live in the Isan region. Isan has not so far experienced the politically and culturally established top-down processes which would create greater focus of linguistic practice across the area (although implicit focal standards are being set by Isan cultural stereotypes in the Thai television and music industries). But what are the non-linguistic forces behind the aims of those who would establish an ‘Isan’ language?

Anyone who makes a claim about what is and is not a language, and about which labels are most appropriate, has some non-linguistic criteria and/or purpose in mind, and should be explicit about what that purpose is. Neither the claim ‘Thai and Lao are separate languages’ nor ‘Thai and Lao are dialects of a single language’ may be supported more convincingly than the other by linguistic data alone. The deciding factors are subjective and non-linguistic (i.e. are of political, ethnic, historical, and/or sentimental nature). In any case, ‘languages’ are not ‘things’ which we ‘recognise’ or ‘discover’ being then able to act upon (e.g. by working on ‘maintenance’ or ‘preservation’). Rather, they are *created* by social action. Our projections of what they should be, and where their borders lie, can become reality, but only because powerful social entities put a great deal of time and effort toward that end.

Thus, in the context of Laos and Thailand, the coherence of ‘Isan’ as a linguistic variety is an *imagined* one. The imposed powers of standardisation on ‘Thai’, ‘Lao’ and ‘Isan’ will not ease, but we must strive meanwhile to acknowledge and understand the genuine ground-level diversity of language in the ‘Lao/Thai/Isan’ region.

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