

# **LAO LINGUISTICS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND SINCE**

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**L**aos shows a very high degree of linguistic diversity, with up to 100 languages, from five different major language families, spoken in an area smaller than the United Kingdom. This degree of diversity makes Laos an important place not only for linguistic science, but for human science. Languages may have little in common, but they spring from the same fundamental conditions: groups of human beings in tightly-knit and historically continuous social association. Since all human individuals share the same genetic make-up required for language acquisition – and this means acquisition of any human language to which a child is exposed – then to examine the limits of variation in language is to address a fundamental human question. Those who conduct research on the grammatical and semantic structures of languages spoken in Laos are contributors to this project.

To cover current research on all languages of Laos would require more space than is available here. I restrict my attention mainly to research on the national language Lao from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The main focus is research on grammar, by which I mean the formal linguistic structuring of information, in particular the encoding of concepts in morphosyntactic structure, grammatical constructions, and to some degree in words and other lexical items. Since grammar is embedded within a larger social and semiotic system, I also discuss a number of contexts for Lao grammar, including other Tai languages, issues of language contact and multilingualism, co-speech gesticulation, and the organization of conversation.

## **LAO**

Most research on the grammar of languages spoken in Laos has concerned Lao, the national language (Enfield, 1999). During the period of French rule in Laos (1893–1954) and up to the time around the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, several grammars of Lao appeared, written essentially in the style of European pedagogical grammars (Hospitalier, 1937; Vongvichit, 1967; RLG, 1972; Reinhorn, 1980; Nginn, 1984). Some intellectual activity was ostensibly devoted to grammar, but this mostly related to orthographic (spelling) conventions, though to some degree also concerned research on the

lexicon. This included most notably the work of Sila Viravong, P. S. Nginn, and Phoumi Vongvichit. The traditions of scholarship (and politics) associated with these three men are discussed in detail in Enfield (1999), so I devote no further discussion to them here.

An important recent development for the state of research on grammar in Laos is the Lao government's 2002 establishment of a Linguistic Research Institute, within the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Lao PDR. The institute director Dr. Thongphet Kingsada (PhD in Linguistics, Hanoi University) is also chief editor of a linguistic journal entitled *Language and Life*, which first appeared in January 2003. The first edition includes ten brief articles (three in English) on topics ranging from "Buddhism and the Lao language" to "Languages and Ethnic Classification in the Lao PDR" to "Lao Writing and Word Breaks" to a study of the morphosyntactic differentiation in Lao between the numerals '2100' and '2001'. Comparable venues for publication of such research in linguistics during the Royal Lao Government era (Evans, 2002: 93ff) included publications of the Literary Committee (e.g. RLG, 1972; Enfield, 1999) and the Royal Academic Council (e.g. Dejvongsa et al, 1972). There was nothing of this kind in the Lao PDR era until the establishment in 1988 of the Institute of Ethnography (within the Committee for Social Sciences) and a later offspring, the still extant Institute for Cultural Research (under the Ministry of Information and Culture). The Institute for Cultural Research established an academic journal in 1996, the *Lanxang Heritage Journal*. During the few years of its existence, the journal provided the only regular outlet for academic publication of linguistic research by Lao scholars. Otherwise, articles on linguistic matters appear in popular publications such as various Lao language newspapers and periodicals. These tend to be prescriptive discussions of style, or curiosities of 'correct' and 'incorrect' usage. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, such studies are fun to read, but their main appeal to scholarship relates less to their intended contribution to what we know about the structure of language, and more to their ethnographic appeal as socio-culturally loaded attempts to portray or manipulate the standard language in various ways.

### **TYPOLOGICAL/DESCRIPTIVE WORK ON LAO**

Two significant grammars of Lao written in French during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Hospitalier (1937) and Reinhorn (1980). Hospitalier (1937) is a formidable and penetrating treatment of the Lao language. J.-J. Hospitalier clearly had a thorough knowledge of Lao, evident for example in a brief but insightful section on interjections. His discussion of word formation in Lao was similarly incisive. Standards of description in linguistics at the time meant that certain important features of the Lao grammatical system were not described. For example, Hospitalier did not have the means to properly characterize the system of lexical tone in Lao, and he did not transcribe tone in his transcription of Lao examples. About half the book concerns the language's sound system, including its system of writing, and the system for reading tones correctly. Hospitalier evidently went to a great deal of trouble to get permission from the French authorities to use a Lao font in this publication. Generally, Hospitalier used French grammatical categories as a guide for analyzing Lao – for example, calling classifiers in one of their functions articles, in another "*catégories les plus usitées*"; or listing stative verbs as adjectives with sub-types like "determinative adjective". For its time, the Hospitalier grammar was an impressive achievement, and it has hardly been bettered in the 70 years since.

Reinhorn's grammar (1980) shows some evidence of its more modern intellectual context, with greater attention paid to features of phonological structure such as tones and the set of contrasts in vowel space. But there are no references to

literature on linguistic typology, nor is there any theoretically oriented discussion of the cross-linguistic status of Lao grammatical structures. The orientation is more to literature than to linguistics, with much attention paid to Indic features of the language – i.e. its orthography and some of its vocabulary. (These aspects of the language are considered superficial in theoretical linguistics.) Reinhorn devotes a significant amount of space to morphological analysis of Indic loan words, including Indic affixation and rules of *sandhi* and vowel mutation in Sanskritic compounds. These phenomena are indeed observable in borrowings, but they are not part of the productive morphosyntactic structures of the Lao language. Besides, most of the borrowings to which those observations apply are exclusive to restricted socially higher contexts such as literature and higher education, not to most of the everyday use of Lao. While by the time of publication of Reinhorn's grammar it had already become standard in linguistic reference grammars to use examples derived from naturally occurring texts, Reinhorn, like Hospitalier in 1937, relied on constructed examples. The treatment of Lao is prescriptive as much if not more than it is descriptive. The disproportionate amount of attention Reinhorn gives to Indic features of Lao further distances the description from the language as it is actually used by most people.

Hospitalier's Lao grammar was written while Laos was a colony of France, with the ostensive purpose of providing a pedagogical resource for French people who would travel to Laos for professional purposes. Its simple and pragmatic style reflects this *raison d'être*. The book is organized in the style of traditional European grammar, with no orientation to the value of a description of Lao to the science of linguistics or anthropology. This fits with its historical context, having been completed before the appearance of Bloomfield's classic and influential descriptivist treatise *Language* (Bloomfield, 1933). Reinhorn's book, on the other hand, was written at a time when major developments had taken place in linguistic theory, through developments in structuralism (in both linguistics and anthropology), the cognitivist/generativist movement in linguistics, and the comparative science of language typology. Nevertheless, Reinhorn devotes little if any attention to the possible contribution a grammar of Lao might have made to linguistics and anthropology.

The two French language grammars are similar to grammars written in Laos (Viravong, 1962; Vongvichit, 1967; RLG, 1972) in that their analysis of Lao follows distinctions in grammatical meaning traditionally made in European languages, such as categories of 'conjugation', 'mood' and 'inflection' of the verb. (A significant difference between Lao and the average European language is that Lao lacks precisely these categories!) Most points of grammatical analysis of this kind are not supported with language internal arguments along the lines supplied by modern standard reference grammars. Rather, the grammarian is here describing Lao in terms of the resources it has for expressing the grammatical distinctions one has in French or some other 'standard average European' grammar (Hospitalier makes it explicit that this is his purpose). Nevertheless, in these traditional grammars there is some attention to features of Lao not shared with European languages – for example, in discussion of the 'classifier' system (Enfield, 2004b). However, in describing this system neither Hospitalier nor Reinhorn give an analysis of its semantic/morphosyntactic structure or function, but simply supply a list of forms.

From a modern linguistic point of view, there are a number of features of Lao not normally found in European languages and which would nowadays be described on

their own terms. One example is the phenomenon of serial verb constructions, a type of complex clause structure that Lao and many other languages – but not European languages like French – feature, cf. Durie 1997, Aikhenvald and Dixon, 2005. Such structures are mentioned here and there in existing Lao grammars, but, unlike in early grammars of African languages, no attention is drawn to their identity as a distinct grammatical category in the language. Another, clearer example – a kind of test case – concerns the large category of expressives or ideophones in Lao (Crisfield, 1978; Chapman, 1996; Wayland, 1996; Trongdee, 1996; cf. Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz, 2001). A few examples appear in a paragraph of Reinhorn (1980: 119), mixed in with examples of other types under the heading ‘onomatopoeics’ as a subsection of ‘predicatives of manner’. Reinhorn does not recognize the distinct grammatical identity of expressives (as established, for example by the fact that they cannot be directly negated; cf. Chapman, 1994). This may be due to a lack of recognition of this status, or perhaps a lack of recognition that a system of this kind – very much colloquial – has a place in a serious grammatical description. Diffloth (2004; cf. 1972, 1976, 1979) argues that one of the reasons that an analysis of these words is hard to pin down is that, like interjections (*ouch!*, etc.), they tend not to be regarded by speakers (or grammarians) as part of real language.

Few scholarly articles were dedicated to linguistic analysis of Lao in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A rare example from the 1940s is Edward G. Roffe’s (1946) concise structuralist account of Lao phonemic structure. In the 1970s, a number of scholars associated with Nguyen Dang Liem and others working in the ‘tagmemic’ tradition at the University of Hawaii made passing references to Lao in broader discussions of grammatical features of Southeast Asian languages (Capell 1979; Nguyen, 1974, 1979; Clark, 1974, 1979). This work ranges in quality. Among these, Honts (1979) is one of the few scholarly articles dedicated solely to Lao to be published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marybeth Clark’s sound and insightful work began in this period and has sporadically appeared through subsequent decades (Clark & Prasithrathsint, 1985; Clark, 1985, 1989, 1995). A highlight of the Hawaii-based research in the 1970s is the work of Arthur Crisfield, whose insightful discussion of Lao sentence-final particles (Crisfield, 1974) is the best we have to date on this topic. Crisfield’s (1978) University of Hawaii PhD dissertation dealt with ‘Sound symbolism and the expressive words of Lao’. This topic has since been investigated by Adam Chapman in an Australian National University sub-thesis (Chapman, 1994), and by Ratree Wayland, in a study of a variety of Lao spoken in Thailand (Wayland, 1996; cf. also Trongdee, 1996). (Chapman has since turned his research focus to Lao ethnomusicology; Chapman, 2001, 2002, 2003.)

The most recent grammatical description of Lao is a German language grammar written by Boike Rehbein and Sisouk Sayaseng (2004). These two had earlier created a language learning course book (Rehbein & Sayaseng, 1997), followed by a dictionary (Sayaseng & Rehbein, 2000). This short grammar whose sub-title is ‘phonology, morphology, and pragmatics’ is a useful inventory of basic structures and grammatical forms, but the authors do not have space to do much more than simply list examples of each descriptive distinction, along with brief explanations. Like previous grammars, there is no detailed analysis of structures or typological comparison, and some features of the language’s structure are not mentioned at all (e.g. expressives; see above). In its favor, the Rehbein and Sayaseng grammar goes beyond previous grammars in paying attention to social dimensions of language such as speech level, formality, and politeness (chap. 4 & 5). This is thanks to Rehbein’s perspective as a sociologist and anthropologist.

Much of my own work on Lao has been typological/descriptive, covering a range of topics, including semantic/grammatical studies of specific lexical domains (Enfield, 2002a; 2002b; 2006a; 2007e), the relation between semantic encoding and pragmatic implicature (Enfield, 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2007c), processes of grammaticalization, particularly concerning the well-worn path from verb to verb marker (Enfield, 2001a; 2003d; 2004a), lexical semantics (Enfield, 1997; 2001b; 2002c; 2007a), and explorations of theoretical issues in morphosyntactic description and analysis, making primary reference to data from Lao (Enfield, 2002d; 2002e; 2005g; 2006c). In addition, ongoing preparation of a reference grammar of Lao (Enfield, 2007d) has produced a number of descriptive grammatical studies, including descriptions of multi-verb constructions (Enfield, *in press*), systems of nominal classification (Enfield, 2004b), depictive and other secondary predication (Enfield, 2005a), ‘adjectives’ (Enfield, 2004c), expressives (Enfield, 2005b), and three-place predicates (Enfield, 2007b). The aim of producing a reference grammar is to fill a gap left unfilled by 20<sup>th</sup> century grammars of Lao, none of which adequately function as reference grammars by modern standards of descriptive/typological linguistics.

Thai linguists are beginning to show genuine interest in Lao, but have tended to concentrate on varieties of Lao spoken in northeast Thailand, rather than Lao spoken in Laos (though this is changing). See, for example, studies of ‘Lao’ by Prakhong (1976), Premchu (1979), and Theraphan (1979), cited by Wayland (1996: 218). Are the speech varieties of the Isan region of northeast Thailand to be regarded as ‘Lao’? I have argued (Enfield, 2002f) that this question concerns politics and ethnic identity more than linguistic criteria. Isan speech varieties have some commonalities and some differences with Lao as spoken in Laos, and there are significant differences among different varieties in Isan, as well as within Laos. Whether we consider Isan varieties to be ‘Lao’ or not depends on the nature and scope of our questions. Thanks to the changing political situation which has made Laos more accessible to outsiders (at least unofficially), Thai scholars have more recently been able to conduct research on Lao as spoken in Laos itself. See, for example, Osatananda’s (1997) University of Hawaii dissertation on ‘Tone in Vientiane Lao’.

## LEXICOGRAPHY

Much of the lexicographic work on Lao is in French, such as Guignard’s early dictionary (1912) and Reinhorn’s (1970) tomes. Kerr’s (1972) two-volume Lao-English dictionary is an unsurpassed English language source on the Lao lexicon. Important sources for Kerr were French language botanical reference works (Vidal, 1960; Deuve, 1962; Deuve & Deuve, 1963-4), which continue to be important sources for many foreigners working in rural development, biodiversity conservation, and other technical areas. Marcus’s (1970) concise Lao-English English-Lao dictionary is well known and widely used, but is little more than a word list. The dictionary contains no examples and little grammatical information (see also Boonyavong, 1962). Recent Lao language dictionaries, most notably Onmanisone (1992), are directly based on these English and French language sources. It is reportedly part of the mission of the newly established Linguistic Research Institute to produce a definitive Lao language dictionary which improves upon previous efforts. Shortage of resources makes it unlikely that this project will bear fruit in the near future.

Several lexicographic reference works on Lao have been produced in Thailand, including a *Lao-Thai-English Dictionary* (LTED, 1999) and a Lao-Thai dictionary (Viraphong, 2000). There is a plethora of reference material on the language of Isan, the

Northeast region of Thailand (cf. for example Phinlhong, 1988; Mollerup, 2001). The volume of research being conducted on northeastern varieties of Thai reflects a fascination among Thai scholars and laypeople with ‘the Lao’. This fascination has led to the appearance of popular publications on the ‘charm’ of the Lao language.

Lao language lexicography suffers from a problem characteristic of most lexicography, namely a sacrifice of depth for breadth. Despite the large dictionaries and wordlists, there is little focused, in-depth, or theoretically oriented work on lexical semantics (cf. Wierzbicka, 1985, 1996; Cruse, 1986). This is not a criticism of the dictionary makers who have devoted a great deal of time collecting data and presenting it in accessible form. It is an issue for all lexicography, particularly where the purpose of such work is to compare the details of lexical semantics across languages as part of the general enterprise of linguistics, namely to establish the ways in which human languages differ, given that the basic ingredients are universal.

### PEDAGOGICAL MATERIAL

Probably the most accessible grammatical descriptions of Lao are pedagogical works such as Roffe and Roffe (1958), Yates and Sayasithsena (1970, produced by the US State Department during the Vietnam war), and Hoshino and Marcus (1981). While these works are substantial, and include many illustrative examples, the analyses presented are oriented neither to linguistic typology nor to theoretical or other general linguistic issues. (Pedagogical works on other languages are more helpful in this respect; cf. Huffman’s linguistically sophisticated 1970 description of Khmer.) Wright (1994) is a sketch grammar of Lao ostensibly intended for language learners, published by the Thai journal *Language and Linguistics* (Department of Linguistics, Thammasat University, Bangkok). This brief treatment is inaccessible as a general reference work (i.e. for linguists rather than learners of Lao) due to the author’s decision to provide Lao language examples only in Lao script.

Most recently, John Hartmann, in collaboration with Arthur Crisfield and other colleagues, has been developing practical materials for teaching Lao, making these accessible on an impressive ‘Lao Language and Culture’ website hosted by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University. A Lao language course book for speakers of German was published in 1997 (Sayaseng & Rehbein, 1997), followed by a Lao-German German-Lao dictionary (Rehbein & Sayaseng, 2000). Recent years have seen a spate of phrase books on sale in Laos, of varying quality (cf. e.g. Werner, 1992; Cummings, 1995; Callaghan, 1999). An impressive number of foreign residents in Laos learn to speak functional if not excellent Lao. This is helped by the supportive attitude of Lao speakers, and probably also by the fact that English is not widely spoken (making it more difficult to get by in Lao society without being able to speak Lao).

### LAO AMONG TAI LANGUAGES

Lao, like Siamese, is one of many members of the Tai family of languages spoken in Laos, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and India. Most of the work on languages of the Tai family in Laos (other than Lao) has concerned the study of the Tai language family more generally, more specifically the comparative and historical study of Tai languages (especially the southwestern branch). The progenitor of this tradition was William J. Gedney (University of Michigan), whose *Selected Papers On Comparative Tai Studies* (Gedney 1989) makes numerous references to Lao and other Tai languages spoken in Laos. Gedney carried out extensive field work in Laos, beginning in the

1940s. His many students continued his project (cf. the work of Bickner, Hartmann, Hudak, Jit Phumisak, Wilaiwan, Chamberlain, Compton, Gething, Sarawit, and Strecker). For work on comparative Tai, see edited collections such as Gething (1975), Harris and Chamberlain (1975), Bickner, Hudak and Patcharin (1986), Edmondson and Solnit (1988), Compton and Hartmann (1992), Edmondson and Solnit (1997), Diller and Edmondson (forthcoming), and the monograph by Luo (1997).

A minority of work in this tradition was carried out in Laos itself, and many mentions of Lao and other Tai languages of Laos are often made in passing rather than being the focus of attention. However, not all of these workers overlooked Lao and other languages of Laos. Carol Compton's research has concentrated on Lao verse and song structure as well as versification and rhyme in the spoken language (Compton, 1979, 2004). James Chamberlain's work has focused on the comparative ethnobiology of Tai languages (e.g. Chamberlain, 1975, 1992, 2000). Much recent work by Chamberlain is based on extensive field work conducted in the course of consultancies relating to the potential impact of major development projects on ethnic groups of the country's rural areas. This has been one of the only practical ways to gain access to minority language speech communities for the purposes of scientific research. Another important contributor is Anthony Diller (cf. Diller, 1988, 1992, 2004), who has had a long interest in Lao, and has taught it at the Australian National University. More recently, Diller has studied not only historical reconstruction and classification of Tai languages within the Tai family, but historical semantics, or more specifically comparative 'grammaticalization' (e.g. Diller 2001). Enfield (2003d) is an extended case study in this domain, which while concentrating on Lao, also provides primary data from field investigations of other Tai languages of Laos, including Thai Neua and Lue.

## LANGUAGE CONTACT, MULTILINGUALISM, AREAL LINGUISTICS

Edmund Leach's (1954) case study of inter-cultural relations in highland Burma described a situation closely related to that we find all over Laos. Leach investigated social relations between the Shan, a Tai speaking group whose livelihood centers on working rice paddies on flat land, and the Kachin (or Jingpoh), a Tibeto-Burman speaking group whose livelihood centers on working neighboring hillside swidden fields. Leach's study made the point that while neighboring ethnic groups may be of distinct cultural backgrounds, they will nevertheless maintain structured social relations, cross-cutting the cultures that define their differences. This is the pattern found in much of Laos (e.g. involving the Tai speaking 'lowland Lao', the Mon-Khmer speaking 'upland Lao', and/or the Hmong-Mien or Tibeto-Burman speaking 'highland Lao'; cf. Bradley, 2003; Enfield, 2005c, 2006d). The high level of ethnic and linguistic diversity in Laos means that there is a complex web of linguistic and cultural contact, by which members of different cultural groups and societies will be multilingual and multicultural to various degrees. This sets up the way to convergence in the structure of linguistic and cultural systems. The larger result of this is areal diffusion, i.e. the process whereby languages can become structurally similar over time (Dixon and Aikhenvald, 2001; Enfield, 2003d, 2005c, 2005e, 2005g). The relationship between language contact, multilingualism, and areal diffusion is still not well understood. Laos is an excellent laboratory for studying these issues.

## LAO LANGUAGE AS PART OF A BROADER SEMIOTIC SYSTEM

Many linguists now recognize that production and comprehension of spoken utterances are fundamentally linked to accompanying bodily/visual actions. Research on hand gesture and other aspects of nonverbal behavior has become closely tied to

research on the psycholinguistics and semiotics of utterance construction (McNeill: 1985, 1992, 2000; Kendon: 1972, 1980, 1988; Goldin-Meadow: 1999, 2002, and references therein). Hand gestures and other bodily movements are closely integrated with speech in their contribution to building ‘the utterance’, the semiotic and psycholinguistic equivalent of the clause (cf. Kendon: 1972, 1980; Chafe: 1976, 1980, 1994; McNeill: 1992, 2000). Gestures are now understood to have important cognitive functions for both speakers and addressees. Some of my own recent studies in Laos have been in this new tradition of research<sup>1</sup>. Enfield (2001c) is an investigation of lip-pointing (i.e. pointing by jutting the lips out while looking in the direction of the referent), a common practice among the Lao, integrated with the use of demonstratives and other deictic speech elements. Related to this, Enfield and Kita (2002) investigated the use of pointing gestures during spatial descriptions in discourse by speakers of Lao. Two studies – Enfield (2003e, 2005d) – have come from an investigation of the structural properties of ‘gesture diagrams’, and specifically their use for describing kinship relations and Lao kin terminology, their iconic properties, and their implications for the study of kinship and diagrammatic cognition. Enfield (2004d) presents a study of gestures made during native speaker descriptions of types of Lao fish traps, in which it is demonstrated that sequences of hand gestures show discourse-level syntactic organization.

### LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

An important issue in the contemporary linguistics of Laos is language endangerment (Enfield, 2006e; 2005f). Languages around the world are disappearing at a rate of some two per month (Crystal, 2001; Nettle & Romaine, 2001). One area of research relevant to the problem of language endangerment in Laos is exploration of the conditions and circumstances of language attrition and loss. There is a desperate need for primary field research, given that we know very little about even the number and identity of languages, let alone their structure. In Enfield (2006e), I discuss some of the theoretical issues concerning language endangerment and research on it in Laos. (See also Bradley, 2003.) There are many dozens of languages spoken in Laos, most of which are spoken by fewer than 5,000 people. Some are moribund, with only a few dozen speakers remaining. In this context, to claim that the national language Lao is ‘under pressure’ (Thongphet, 2004) is a completely different notion to endangerment. It is simply a way of dramatically expressing the idea that the language, like all languages, is changing. It does not mean that – as in the case of many other languages of Laos – the entire language and the community that speaks it is set to disappear from the face of the earth.

Beyond sociological analysis of language endangerment, a second area of research in language endangerment is the far more difficult and time-consuming task of surveying and documenting endangered languages and the cultures, communities, and societies in which they are spoken. Dixon (1997) forcefully argues that a linguist’s real job is to produce reference descriptions of previously undescribed (or inadequately described) languages. Most languages of Laos are both previously undescribed and seriously endangered (Enfield, 2006e). Only a handful of researchers are currently active in systematic documentation of minority languages of Laos. Pascale Jacq and Paul Sidwell, for example, have carried out descriptive work on several languages of

<sup>1</sup> Some work in social anthropology of Laos has paid attention to bodily practice in ritual (e. g. Evans, 1997), but not in terms of the structural integration of bodily movements with speech.

Southern Laos, with planned publication of a series of shorter grammars. Jacq (2002) describes Jruq, an endangered Bahnaric language of Champasak Province. I am currently undertaking a field-based description of Kariì, a Vietic language of Khammouane Province (Enfield, 2006b).

A different kind of language under threat is sign language of the Deaf (Nonaka, 2004). Sign languages are a little-appreciated and still relatively little-understood manifestation of the world's linguistic diversity (Stokoe, 1960; Klima & Bellugi, 1985; Emmorey, 2002). Deaf people are often isolated from each other in rural settings, but when in larger social association the Deaf will inevitably create conventions for linguistic communication, and as long as there is a community to develop and maintain those emerging conventions, a whole new language will arise (Senghas et al, 2004). Such communities are small, however, and often vulnerable. A Lao sign language is currently emerging in association with a recently established school for the Deaf at the Ministry of Public Health Rehabilitation Centre, Khou Vieng Road, Vientiane. No systematic research is being conducted on this process.

### FINAL REMARK

Lao is the language of the Lao PDR's socially and politically dominant ethnic group. The research attention it has received over the last century is highly disproportionate to its status as just one among many dozens of languages spoken across the country. Most languages of Laos are completely neglected in research. The few minority languages which are more than superficially documented (e.g. Jruq, Katu, Phunoy, Kmhmu, Kariì) owe this distinction to the dedication and ingenuity of a few scholars finding their way to remote field sites and carrying out their work. But it is not practical difficulties which make research on minority languages difficult – the greatest hurdle to such work is political resistance from the Lao authorities. The potential cost of this resistance is the decline and fall, without a trace, of one of the world's most linguistically and culturally diverse settings, whose lessons are of great consequence not only in linguistics and anthropology, but in the social and cognitive sciences generally. In order that the linguistic treasure trove hidden in the uplands of Laos should not simply evaporate, Lao linguistics in the new century must turn from its focus on just one of the country's languages, to thoroughly research the great linguistic diversity of Laos.

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