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Language and Culture in Laos: An Agenda for Research

On the publication of the first issue of the Journal of Lao Studies, it is worth asking how the study of all things Lao might be of interest to the greater scientific community. For anthropology, a key attraction of Laos is its unusually high degree of human diversity. The problem is that we know little of what defines this diversity. Worse, one of the few things we do know is that this diversity is under threat. This makes the task of anthropologists more urgent than ever. The study of human diversity directly addresses a fundamental question for human science: What are the limits of possibility for human life?

The striking differences between humans and other species are most clearly manifest in the properties of our linguistic and cultural systems. We maintain massively complex symbolic systems that each individual has to learn over a long period of socialization, and that differ almost entirely in form and content across thousands of different human groups. The average villager in Laos will know tens of thousands of words and expressions in his or her own language, each of which may differ entirely from the tens of thousands of words and expressions known to the people in the community next door, which will be different again from the next community, different further from the next, and so on. The same is true for the thousands of local practices, cultural values, and conceptual systems also known to be unique from human group to human group. Each language and culture is in this sense a natural experiment in historical collaborative creation of cultural tradition (Enfield 2005:192-7). Members of each sociocultural group will conform in following a collectively created pattern of ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of doing things, and ways of interacting with the environment (Boyd and Richerson 2005). Each linguistic and cultural system can therefore be viewed as a living document of human tradition (Enfield 2006a).

The ethnolinguistic diversity known to exist in Laos makes the country a rich archive for anthropologists of all types. With the current state of the art, the immediate agenda is

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clear: We need to describe the country's human diversity. Until the empirical data are available, any general discussion of language(s) and culture(s) in Laos is going to be incomplete, or, worse, ill-informed. For now, there is a lack of balance in scholarly attention. The situation in linguistics is indicative: scholars of language in Laos are preoccupied with orthographic prescription for the national language, arguing for example about whether written Lao requires a letter 'r' (ICR 1995, Enfield 1999). Despite the political issues of interest, and attendant curiosities of the sociology of intellectual life, orthography of the Lao language is just one leaf on a single branch of a single tree in a giant forest of problems for research. We are meanwhile learning next to nothing of the endangered mysteries of language and culture in the country.

Just consider what we don't know about language and culture in Laos.¹ We don't know how many languages are spoken in the country. Existing proposals vary from around 60 to over 100 (see LNFC 2005, Enfield 2005, 2006b), none offering empirical support for the cited figure, or any appreciation of the problems of answering this question at all (cf. Hudson 1996:36). But even if we could state how many languages there are in Laos, this wouldn't be much. What are the properties of these languages? What are the words and expressions (numbering in tens of thousands!) that each speaker of each language has to know? What are the grammatical structures? What do the kinship systems look like? How do they differ structurally? How are the languages related to each other, historically and socially? What ethnic importance do the languages have? What sorts of social settings do they inhabit? What are the patterns of language contact and multilingualism? How do children acquire these languages? What degree of cultural knowledge is encoded in the languages' vocabularies and grammatical structures? What kinds of poetry, verse, or song can speakers of these languages produce? What might the languages tell us about the social organization of the societies in which they are spoken? Or of their mechanisms of face-to-face interaction? Or of the livelihoods of the people (e.g. in the vocabulary of biological classification)? Or of their cognitive analysis of the world in general? Lists of ethnolinguistic distinctions such as the one produced in 2005 by the Lao government (LNFC 2005) are welcome and fascinating (shortcomings, errors, and infelicities aside). But they are of little use as reference sources for this list of questions. The reality is that we know little of substance about what defines this country's great human diversity. Hence the pressing need for primary field research.

None of the above questions are answered quickly or cheaply. Most researchers who visit remote communities don't have the time to collect long-term or in-depth data. From the colonial expeditions of Pavie's time to the helicopter drops by consultants of the last decade or so, short-term research visitors to the uplands of Laos have by necessity employed rapid methods of data collection. The relatively superficial results are of great use when nothing else is available. Linguists and ethnographers are grateful for even the sketchiest references to linguistic and ethnographic facts documented by officials of the Pavie mission and similar colonial projects. These are sometimes our only source of word lists and other empirical data on otherwise entirely undocumented languages and cultures. However, for lack of any alternative, there's a risk that such sources will be employed for purposes beyond those for which they were designed.

With appropriate time and resources, research can acquire a host of virtues which rapid research can't deliver. It can be broadly systematic, thorough, comprehensive, and thus a significant resource for future researchers and field workers. It can enlist and involve the ongoing participation of the communities involved, not only in their provision of data, but in their analysis of it, supplying findings which are both significant and comprehensible to the communities themselves. It can feed into the building up of information and analysis, contributing to longer-term cumulative research. With these three properties – comprehensive, participatory, cumulative – research can be responsible, sustainable, and of high quality.

The agenda being sketched here entails a number of requirements. One is funding. Researchers need to find and mobilize research funds. Funding bodies need to recognize the importance of field research, and channel research funding there. As it happens, funding and other kinds of support are available for documentation of linguistic and cultural systems, particularly those most endangered and most implicated in the country's biocultural diversity (Nettle and Romaine 2000, Crystal 2000, Maffi 2005).

A second requirement is people. Willing researchers don't grow on trees, but they do spring from university graduate programs. One of the best kinds of researcher for field work is the humble graduate student. There are great opportunities in Laos for students who would be field workers, not only those based in universities abroad, but also for students and other researchers originating in Laos.

A third requirement is state of the art research methods. There are well developed tools and techniques for documentation of linguistic and ethnographic material. (A) Methodological tools: The dramatic growth of research and other activity being done around the world on endangered biocultural diversity has concentrated on the development of methods that are maximally sensitive to the community's wants and needs (Nettle and Romaine 2000, Grenoble and Whaley 1998). Findings of these projects are ready to be applied to similar activities in Laos. (B) Technical tools: Ethnographic and linguistic research is becoming increasingly sophisticated in its employment of technical resources such as video and sound recording, GPS, and computer programs for data organization and analysis (e.g. video processing, dictionary/text building, mapping, data processing). (C) Theoretical tools: Concerning the relationship between linguistic/cultural diversity and cognitive diversity, much recent progress has been made in the analysis and understanding of relationships such as those between culture and language (Gumperz and Levinson 1996, Enfield 2002, Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003). In addition, there is much recent progress in understanding how linguistic and cultural diversity relates to diversity of livelihoods and lifestyles, particularly as it concerns human interaction with the natural environment (Berlin 1992, Maffi 2005).

Lao people stand to gain from the proposed research agenda. Researchers must strive to impart these tools and techniques to the Lao scholars and field workers who have the chance to be involved in these projects, such that they may carry the work through beyond the confines of limited research programs. This is part of the desideratum of sustainability in research. But all the resources and expertise in the world will amount to nothing if the relevant authorities lack the political will to approve sustained primary field research in remote communities of Laos. The last two decades have seen willing fieldworkers encounter resistance to their research plans, often when they are offering a good deal of financial, technical, and training resources. These researchers have come from fields as diverse as literature, ethnomusicology, historical and comparative linguistics, ethnobiology, grammatical description, and ethnography. Without these projects going ahead, valuable training and resources have been lost to the Lao research community. More generally, research both interesting and important has just not been done.²

I have tried to define an agenda for research on language and culture in Laos. The ethnolinguistic diversity characteristic of Laos makes the country a treasure trove for

research in human traditions of language, culture, and cognition. The key requirement for research to really count is that descriptive and analytical work be conducted in sustained field residence. Now is the time to promote a broad agenda of primary field research in Laos which prioritizes the systematic collection of quality empirical data bearing directly on the significant yet ill-understood human diversity that this complex country harbors. This will first be a contribution to human science, to documenting the naturally occurring limits on human variation, to figuring out where human groups around the world are alike, and where we may (even radically) differ. Second, it will be a sorely needed corrective to the current balance of linguistic and other anthropological research in Laos.

Abstract

There is at present a vigorous public debate in Laos on the issue of language, with the participation of scholars, researchers, educators, and politicians. This debate goes to the highest level, and has been on the agenda for decades. The issue? Whether the letter 'r' should or should not be included in the Lao alphabet. Meanwhile, dozens of distinct human languages spoken in Laos are in danger of extinction in the immediate or near future. We know little or nothing about the structure, history, or social setting of these languages or the people who speak them. There is no public debate about this issue in Laos, and little research activity to document the country's dozens of minority languages, whether for scientific, practical, or social purposes. The problem is identical in research on culture. This paper offers a number of reasons why this must change.

Notes

¹ Notwithstanding exceptional contributions such as Costello and IRLCS (1993), Evans (1999), Jacq (2002), Sidwell and Jacq (2004), Suksavang and Preisig (1999), Svantesson et al (1994), Thipmuntali (1999), Kingsada and Shintani (1999), Wright (2003), Pholsena (2006), Rehbein (2007), among others.

² Fortunately, there are recent signs of emerging opportunity for academic research in Laos, for example through the fast-developing National University of Laos, and the recently established National Academy of Social Sciences.

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