

# A NEW LOOK AT THE HISTORY AND CLASSIFICATION OF THE

## TAI LANGUAGES

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0. In the field of comparative Tai one of the problems that linguists have not fully come to grips with is the problem of classification. Li (1960) divided the Tai languages into three groups; and we have his (1958) classification of the Northern branch. Brown (1965) has classified the Tai languages spoken in Thailand. Haudricourt (1956, 1968) has given us a slightly different picture of the Kadai, Kam-Sui, and Tai languages, uniting the Central and Southwestern branches of Li into one (Thai conquérant, Thai proprement dit) as distinct from the Chuang branch (Northern Branch of Li). More recently, the author (1972) has attempted to define certain phonological criteria by which to classify the Southwestern (SWT) dialects. It was suggested in the latter that these dialects be divided into two groups, P and PH, and that the languages of Sukhothai, Southern Thai, and Lao form one subgroup of PH while Neua, Phuan, Ayutthaya, and Siamese form another. Gedney (unpublished) has expressed the opinion that the Central and Southwestern languages of Li form only one branch but to date we lack data from the Tai languages spoken roughly in the expanse between the Red River and Cao Bang in North Vietnam. Now, in what might be labeled a subsumation of the author (1972), we would like to suggest the possibility that the same phonological criteria used in classifying the SWT dialects, may in fact be used in grouping the Central and Southwestern branches into one, whereas the same criteria would not be readily applicable to the Northern Branch. In addition we offer a catalogue of Central and SWT tone systems and discuss some of the historical ramifications of the classification.

### 1. Classification

#### 1.1 The phonology of Tai tone systems

In the author's previous article it was shown that certain types of tone system splitting and coalescing were associated only with the PH group and certain others only with the P group. This was summarized by stating that, historically, the P group tone system was \*ABCD 123-4 with the possibility in some modern dialects of A12-34, apparently a local development in the Northern Thailand, Keng Tung area. For the PH languages there were reconstructed two types of tone systems, \*1-23-4 / BCD 123-4 and \*ABCD 1-23-4.

The generalization was made that 1-2 splitting never occurs with P languages, and 12-34 never occurs with PH languages. At first, it appears that dissimulative pressure is coercing the two sets of identical initial stops to remain tonally distinct, just as aspirated stops of PH languages in rows 1 and 4 must always remain so. This

would explain why the A12-34 split and never A1-234 occurs in the P group as an option to the normal A123-4.<sup>1</sup> Lexical items in row 3, because of their initial voiced stops, are in no danger of being confused with those of row 4. Ordinarily, however, rows 2 and 3 behave the same.

Now, it appears that this previous generalization was not without its exceptions. In the author's work with the Nüa language spoken slightly to the north of the Sipsongpanna region of Yunnan, and in two other nearby languages, Tai Mao and Tse Fang (probably what has been referred to as Chinese Shan) it was found that these P languages have A1-234 (Nüa) and A1-23-4 (Tai Mao, Tse Fang).

This information leads one to the conclusion that tone splits are not always governed by laws of linguistic balancing. Note that in Nüa just cited A column syllables with initial p, t, k, < \*b, d, g will have identical tones to A column syllables with initial p, t, k < \*p, t, k. But in Tai Mao and Tse Fang the syllable distinctions will still remain intact for PT initials \*voiced, \*voiceless aspirated, and \*voiceless unaspirated.

The phenomena of P group A1-23(-)4 splitting is obviously not widespread (unless it occurs in more of the northern Shan dialects for which we have no reliable data at the present) but it seems peculiar enough to warrant a tentative separate subgrouping in the classification scheme.

## 1.2 SWT dialects

The languages of the Southwestern Branch may be classified according to the following hierarchy of criteria.

1. P / PH
2. \* A column
3. \* BCD columns
4. B-DL coalescence<sup>2</sup>

The chart below illustrates the SWT classification.

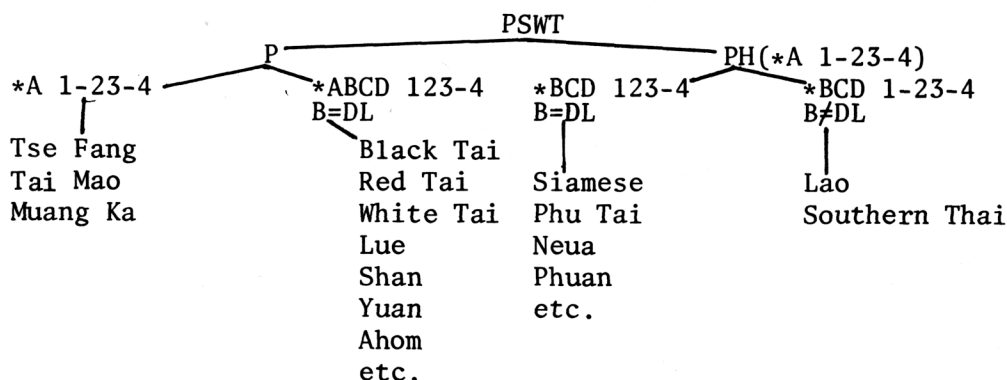


Chart 1 Classification of SWT dialects

### 1.3 Central Tai dialects

When the data from the Central dialects are included in the study and the classificatory criteria of 1.2 are applied we find exactly the same type of diversification as in the SWT dialects: e.g. a P group (Ning Ming, Sze Lo, Lung Chow, Ping Siang, Lung Ming, Western Nung) and a PH group (Lei Ping) and tone system variation which correlates in precisely the same way, A 123-4 or A12-34 in the P group and A 1-23-4 in the PH. If our criteria are at all valid, there would appear to be no reason for separating the Central and SWT branches, and certainly not in the same way that the Northern dialects may be separated. Perhaps, in time, the same principles used here may be applied to the Northern branch.

### 1.4 A tone system catalogue

We now present a catalogue of tone systems from most of the recorded Central and SWT languages. The reader will note the great variety of systems in the Lao-Southern Thai subgroup, while there is less in the Neua-Phuan and still less in the P group.

The B-DL coalescence, common to most other Tai languages and most probably a feature of PT, is found complete in only three Lao-Southern Thai languages, Yo, Kaleung, and Korat. In the remaining dialects of this group this feature is either present only partially or not at all. Because of this peculiarity the Lao-Southern Thai subgroup is certainly the most divergent tonally. Chart 2 shows the degrees of this coalescence within these languages.

- |    |           |   |          |                              |
|----|-----------|---|----------|------------------------------|
| 1. | B 123-4   | = | DL 123-4 | (8, 9)                       |
| 2. | B 1234    | = | DL 123   | (4)                          |
| 3. | B 123     | = | DL 123   | (7)                          |
| 4. | B 123     | = | DL 4     | (5)                          |
| 5. | B 4       | = | DL 4     | (11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17) |
| 6. | B 123(-)4 | = | DL 123-4 | (1, 2, 3, 6, 10, 46)         |

#### Chart 2

#### Degrees of B-DL coalescence in Lao-Southern Thai

An interesting B-DL pattern occurs in Nyq (26) where there is no split in the B or DL columns. One suspects is closely related to Phu Tai (23) which has no split in DL but has a peculiar coalescence of A4 = B123.

Another interesting tendency is the B 4 = C 123 = DL 4 coalescence found sporadically in certain Neua-Phuan languages as well as in some P languages (19, 24, 25, 30, 31, 35). This might indicate the tones of these boxes, originally separate, became similar enough to merge into a single tonal unit. But why is it restricted to only these subgroups?

1. Luang Prabang, Kene Thao,  
Dan Sai, Loei, Sisaket,  
Attapeu

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

2. Vientiane, Lom Sak

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

3. Nakohn Phanom, Chaiyaphum,  
Nong Khai, Bua Yai, Ubon,  
Khon Kaen, Udon

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

4. Muang Ngoy

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

5. Nam Bac

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

6. Lao Neua (Nam Tha), Tai Bo  
(Done Keo)

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

7. Yooy

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4

8. Yo, Kaleung, Korat

A	B	C	DL	DS
1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4