

THE PHONEMIC SYSTEM OF THE TAI LÜ LANGUAGE

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This paper is to present a short description of Tai Lü language and to clarify its position in the Southwestern branch of the Tai languages, which consists of Siamese (Thai), Lao, Shan, Khün, Tai Noir, Tay Blanc (Minot), etc.¹⁾ Tai Lü is spoken in the southern part of Yunnan, China, and, to a small extent in the northern part of Laos. This group forms a semi-independent state in China with an area of about 2500 sq. kilometers and an estimated population of about two hundred thousand of which about forty per cent consists of other ethnic groups.²⁾ The native name of the state is called Sipsong Panna (Shih-erh Pan-na 十二版納 or Hsi-shuang Pan-na

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- 1) This paper was read before the Tenth Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, 1960. The Lü material was gathered by me for Academia Sinica in 1936-1937. For information about other languages of this branch, see
- Mary R. Haas and Heng R. Subhanka, *Spoken Thai*. 2 vols. 1945-1948.
- Mary R. Haas, *The Tones of Four Tai Dialects*, *CYYY* 29 (1958), pp. 817-823.
- T. Guignard, *Dictionnaire laotien-français*. Hong Kong, 1912.
- G. Edward Roffe and Thelma W. Roffe, *Spoken Lao*. 2 vols. 1956-1958.
- J. N. Cushing, *A Shan and English Dictionary*. Rangoon, 1914.
- S. Egerod, *Essentials of Shan Phonology and Script*, *CYYY* 29 (1958), pp. 121-129.
- S. Egerod, *Essentials of Khün Phonology and Script*, *Acta Orientalia* 24.3-4. (1959), pp. 123-146.
- Georges Minot, *Dictionnaire Tay Blanc Français*, *BEFEO* 40.1 (1940).
- Georges Minot, *Vocabulaire Français-Thay Blanc*, 2 vols. Public. of EFEO, 1949.
- F. Martini, *Romanization des parlers 'Tay du Nord Vietnam*, *BEFEO* 46.2 (1954), pp. 555-572.
- Fu Mou-chi and others, *Yunnan sheng Hsi-shuang-pan-na Yün-ching-hung T'ai-yü ti Yin-wei hsi-t'ung*, *Yü Yen Yen Chiu* 1 (1956), pp. 223-264.
- E. Diguët, *Etude de la langue Tai*. Hanoi, 1895.
- F. K. Li, *A Tentative Classification of the Tai Languages*, in *Culture in History*, ed. by S. Diamond, pp. 951-959. This is slightly revised version of an article in *Anthro. Linguistics* 1,2 (1959), pp. 15-21.
- S. Egerod, *Studies in Thai Dialectology*, *Acta Orientalia* 26.1-2 (1961), pp. 43-91.
- 2) See Li Fo-i, *Shih-erh Pan-na Chih 十二版納志*, pp. 38-52. Taipei, 1955.

西雙版納), and the capital is Ceng Hung (Ch'e-li 車里). There are dialects in this area, but on the whole the differences are slight.³⁾ The dialect that I am presenting here is based on material gathered from speakers from Ceng Tong (Cheng-Tung 整董).

1. Phonemic system.

1.1 Consonants. There are twenty-two consonant phonemes. They are:—

/	p	ph	b	m	f	w
	t	th	d	n	hr	l
	k	kh		ŋ	x	
	c	ch			s	j
	ʔ				h	/

/b/ and /d/ are pronounced with glottal stricture and slightly implosive in character. /c/ and /ch/ pre-palatal affricates. /w/ is labio-dental with no or very little friction when it stands alone as an initial, otherwise it means simply lip rounding.

All the twenty two consonants may appear as the initial of a syllable, but only nine consonants may appear finally, namely /m, n, ŋ, w, j, p, t, k, and ʔ/. A number of initial clusters also occur, e.g. /kw, khw, and xw/. There are also a small number of clusters such as /pl, thl, tw, and sw/, which occur only in literary, semi-literary, and largely loan words, for example /ple/ to translate, /thle/ a kind of trumpet, /twaj²/ or /taj²/ to guess, foretell, /swen⁶ wi³/ or /sen⁶ wi³/ title of the ruler at Ceng Hung (hsüan-wei 宣慰).

The phonemic status of /hr/ is interesting. It often alternates with /h/ in tone 2, 4, and 6 (cf. infra), /hr/ being the literary and more formal pronunciation, and /h/ being the common form. Thus a word like /hrăj²/ chicken flea, is likely to be pronounced with /h/, while a word like /hra²-

3) See Fu Mou-chi and others, op. cit., pp. 246-250.

cǎ⁴-ma² ta/ mother of a prince, is likely to be pronounced with /hr/.

1.2 Vowels. There are ten vowel phonemes. They are:—

Front unrounded	Back unrounded	Back rounded
/ i	i	u
e	ë	o
ɛ	ǎ	ɔ
	a	/

/e/ and /ɛ/ are phonetically [¹e] and [^ɛɛ]; /o/ and /ɔ/ are phonetically [^uo] and [^ɔɔ]. There are also differences of length phonetically, e.g. /ǎ/ is always short and /a/ is always long, but there are also qualitative differences between these two vowels, e.g. /ǎ/ is further back and higher, and /a/ is more central and lower. The other vowels are either long or short depending on the tone and the final consonant or juncture.⁴⁾ Thus all vowels followed by a glottal stop (or the close juncture) are short; e.g. the vowel is long in /kɔ/ classifier for trees, but short in /kɔʔ/ island. Similarly the vowel is short in the high tone when followed by a stop consonant as in /het/ mushroom, but long when rising as in /het³/ omen. We shall not therefore consider vocalic length as phonemic.

All vowels may be followed by /m, n, ŋ, p, t, k/ and, except /a/, by /ʔ/. Final /j/ occurs only after back vowels, i.e. /aj, ǎj, ëj, ij, ɔj, oj, and uj/, and final /w/ occurs after unrounded vowels, i.e. /aw, ǎw, ëw, ɛw, ew, and iw/.⁵⁾

1.3 Tones. There are six tones.

1. The high level tone(ᳵ 55). It is high level in all situations, except before a pause where it is slightly rising at the end. Ex. /ma/

4) Fu Mou-chi and others distinguish long and short vowels by dropping the glottal stop as a phoneme.

5) The combination /iw/ does not occur in my material.

dog, /to ma/ a dog.

2. The falling tone (↘ 31). It starts at about the middle pitch, and falls rapidly to low. Ex. /kun²/ person, /na²/ rice field.
3. The high rising tone (↗ 25). It starts at a point slightly below the middle pitch and rises up to high. Ex. /käj³/ chicken, /pet³/ eight.
4. The mid-level tone (↔ 33). Ex. /näŋ⁴/ to sit, /nok⁴/ bird, /nok⁴/ outside.
5. The low rising or level tone (↗ 13, or ↘ 11). It starts at the low pitch and rises to about the middle before pauses and before the 1st., the 4th., and the 6th. tone, otherwise it is low level. Thus /xa⁵/ to kill, is low rising in /xa⁵/, /xa⁵ pet/ to kill a duck, /xa⁵ nok⁴/ to kill a bird, but low level in /xa⁵ kun²/ to kill a person, /xa⁵ käj³/ to kill a chicken.
6. The mid-low tone (↘ 22). Ex. /mäj⁶/ tree, /caŋ⁶/ elephant.

The tones are designated by raised numerals to the right of the word, except the first tone which is unmarked.

1.4 Junctures. We may tentatively recognize an intra-syllabic juncture (zero), a close juncture, indicated by a hyphen, and an open juncture, indicated by a space. Thus in a word like /pa naj²/ carp, the transition between /p/ and the following /a/ is intra-syllabic, but between the /a/ and the following /n/, the juncture is open (indicated by a space). In a word like /hra² că⁴-bi-ta/ father of a prince, the transition among the last three syllables are close and indicated by hyphens.

1.5 Syllables. The syllables are bound by either the open or the close juncture. Its structure is CV or CVC; the initial C may be a permitted cluster. The distribution of tones is restricted by the syllabic types as in many Tai languages and Chinese dialects. A syllable may have any of the

six tones, except when they are followed a close juncture or end in a stop consonant.⁶⁾ Those that end in /p, t, k/ may have the first, the third, or the fourth tone, and those that end in a glottal stop or are bound by a close juncture may have only the first or the fourth tone.

2. After this brief description of the phonology we may compare this system with the other closely related languages, especially Siamese. No attempt is made to go into detailed comparisons of individual words, except to clarify certain systematic differences. In my previous tentative classification of the Tai languages, I have not gone into a more detailed classification of the Southwestern branch. This will give us an opportunity to survey briefly the situation. We shall discuss the various features under three headings.

2.1 Consonants. The consonant system of Lü agrees in general with the Siamese system, and particularly with Tai Blanc as described by Minot. It differs from Siamese in having /h/ or its literary variant /hr/ instead of Siam. /r/. This change of /r/ to /h/ is shared by most languages of this branch except Khün. Lü has, in addition, a contrast of /kh/ and /x/, which is not shared by most of the languages except Tai Blanc.⁷⁾ Examples, Siam. /khaa/ to kill, Lü /xa⁵/; Siam. /kham/ gold, Lü /xäm²/, but Siam. /khaa/ slave, Lü /kha⁵/; Siam. /khrok/ mortar, Lü /khok⁴/.

The simplification of initial clusters of the type pl, kl, kr, etc. which exist in Siamese, is a common feature of Lü shared with practically all the languages of this branch. Ex. Siam. /plaa/ fish, Lü /pa/; Siam. /kron/ cage, Lü /khun/, etc..

6) In Siamese these are known as dead syllables.

7) Minot represents /kh/ and /x/ by kh and k'. The latter is described as a sound approaching the ch of German nach. Fu Mou-chi reports that certain Lü dialects have /x/ only, op. cit. pp. 225-226.

2.2 Vowels. The ten vowel system of Lü agrees with Shan and Tai Blanc but differs from Siamese, Lao, Tai Noir, and Khün. It differs from Siamese in two ways. In the first place there are in Lü no diphthongs of the type /ia, ia, ua/, which are simplified to /e, ě, o/, for example, Siam. /mia/ wife, Lü /me²/; Siam. /rĭan/ house, Lü /hĕn²/; Siam. /hua/ head, Lü /ho/, etc.. This development is shared by Shan, Khün, and Tai Blanc. In the second place, there is no phonemic distinction of length, this is shared only by Shan and Tai Blanc.⁸⁾ The functional load of the contrast of long and short vowels, except /ă/ and /a/, in native Tai words is very light even in Siamese and Lao, where the length distinction is most evident. Thus Siam. /luk/ to rise, and /luuk/ child, are not only distinguished by the length of the vowel, but also by the tone. The great quantity of Sanskrit and Pali loans which make scrupulous distinctions of length, seem to bolster this distinction in Siamese. I venture to suggest that the so-called long vowels in Siamese are due perhaps in part to the coalescence earlier vowel clusters in Proto-Tai.

Another special phenomenon in Lü, which I shall call nasal umlaut, is the raising of the vowels, corresponding to Siam. /e/ and /o/, to /i/ and /u/ before a nasal. For example, Siam. /khon/ person, Lü /kun²/; Siam. /pen/ to be, become, Lü /pin/; Siam. /doŋ/ forest, Lü /duŋ/; Siam. /phom/ hair, Lü /phum/; Siam. /len/ to play, Lü /lin⁵/, etc.. This phenomenon is shared only by another language, namely, Tay Blanc. A special case of raising what correspond to the short /a/ in Siamese to /ɛ/ takes place when it is flanked by a dental or prepalatal initial and a dental final. Thus, Siam. /tat/ to cut, Lü /tɛt/; Siam. /sat/ animal, Lü /set/, etc. In the speech of

8) It is interesting to note that Khün, according to Egerod, has a tendency to neglect length distinctions in the high vowels. The situation of length in Tai Noir is not clear.

some speakers this may form a special phoneme / $\tilde{\epsilon}$ /, differentiated from the / ϵ / by being shorter and opener in quality, but my informants regularly confuse these two front low vowels. The functional load of this vowel if recognized as a special phoneme is very light indeed. My material does not show at all such syllables like /tăn, tăt, săn săt/, etc. and would have made this / $\tilde{\epsilon}$ / a allophone of / \tilde{a} /, if there were not the word /năn⁶/ that.⁹⁾ This is a special Lü phenomenon, not shared by any of the other languages.

2.3 Tones. The languages of this branch have either five or six tones. Lü agrees with Tay Blanc, Khün, and Lao in having six tones, while Siamese, Shan, and Tai Noir have five tones.

2.4 Summary of comparisons. The preceding discussions of the similarities and differences in Lü can best be summarized in comparison with six other languages by the following table. A number of features and contrasts are listed.

The existence of certain feature or contrast is represented by ×, its absence by—.

	pl, kl, etc.	r/h	b/m	d/l	kh/x	ph/f	Voc. length	ia, ia, ua	Nas. umlaut	a>ε	Tones
Siam.	×	×	×	×	—	×	×	×	—	—	5
Lao	—	—	×	×	—	×	×	×	—	—	6
Tai Noir	—	—	×	—	—	×	?	×	—	—	5
Khün	—	×	×	×	—	×	×	—	—	—	6
Tay Blanc	—	—	×	×	×	×	—	—	×	—	6
Lü	—	—	×	×	×	×	—	—	×	×	6
Shan	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5

9) Cf. Fu Mou-chi's tables of the finals on pp. 253-261, where he recognizes a phoneme / $\tilde{\epsilon}$ /. Except / \tilde{a} / and / $\tilde{\epsilon}$ /, the other short vowels do not occur before any final consonant, except the glottal stop.

From this table it seems clear that Lü is very closely related to Tay Blanc, as described by Minot, but very different from the Tay Blanc described by Savina.¹⁰⁾ As a matter of fact Lü and Tay Blanc may be considered as close dialect variants.

4. Writing system. The writing system of Tai Lü is described by Louis Finot (1917), Jean Rispaud (1933), Li Fo-I (1955), and Fu Mou-chi (1956). It is essentially the same as that Khün described by Egerod (1959). The writing system of Tay Blanc as given by Minot is different from Lü, and resembles the Tai Noir system as given by Diguët (1918).¹¹⁾ Thus although Lü and Tay Blanc are very closely related, they have adopted different writing systems.

10) See F. M. Savina, *Dictionnaire Tay-Annamite-Français*, 1909.

11) See Louis Finot, *Recherches sur la littérature laotienne*, BEFEO 17 (1917), pp. 20-39; Jean Rispaud, *Notes sur les alphabets Lü du Yunnan et les dénominations ethnique données aux T'ay*, JRAS Nor. Ch. Branch 64 (1933), pp. 143-150; Li Fo-i, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-175; Fu Mou-chi and others, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-245; S. Egerod (Khün), *op. cit.* pp. 128-138; E. Diguët, *op. cit.* pp. 69-88.