Ta’uaih Phonology and Orthography: a preliminary statement

Feikje van der HAAK
Summer Institute of Linguistics

This statement is based on a vocabulary of about 1500 words taken from six stories written by Khamphui Senkhuun ( kazipprapam) in Lao script, analyzed on the basis of 34 rhyming lists. Orthography decisions were made together with Khamphui, with comments from Sam Mattix. Unfortunately no other speakers of Ta’uaih have been available to check the phonology or the orthography.

Khamphui is originally from Ban Tung Wiih, Muang Ta’oi, Khweng Salawan. His family moved out of that area when he was two years old but have continued to speak the language.

We have spelled the language Ta’uaih because that is how Khamphui pronounces it. However, he says that in another dialect they pronounce the name Ta’oiih. He estimates the total number of speakers of the language at 10,000. This includes people who speak the Katang-Ta’oiih dialect.

A. Initial single consonant phonemes with suggested Lao-based orthography

/p/ ป  /h/ ข  /s/ ข  /w/ ว  /b/ บ  /d/ ด  /m/ ม  /n/ น  /ng/ ง  /l/ ล  /r/ ร  /y/ ย  /th/ ธ  /kh/ ข

Examples of initial single consonant phonemes:

/p/ puut บุด ‘many, much’  /n/ nar ถึง ‘wing’
/t/ tee ถี ‘hand’  /nh/ nhong บุ้ง ‘we two’
/c/ caa ถ้า ‘to eat’  /ng/ ngaay วิว ‘they’
/k/ kew ถือ ‘I’  /s/ sor สด ‘to go up’
/l/ ?aak อาท ‘raven’  /l/ loh โล้ ‘to go out’
/th/ thuum ดู่ ‘fragrant’  /r/ rong รอง ‘boat’
/kh/ khpl? เกี่ย ‘must’  /w/ weel วิ้ง ‘village’
/b/ bic บิ่ง ‘to lie down’  /y/ yot? ยัส ‘to forbid’
/d/ dung 'house'  /h/ haaa yeev 'to know'
/m/ mat yee 'eye'  /l/ ?yang  d 'to go'

Notes on the single initial consonants:

1. There was only one example of the aspirated stop /th/ and only two of /kh/. They do not seem to be loans, but this needs more checking.

2. There were no problems with choosing Lao letters for the above sounds, except for the /y/ and /ly/ contrast. There are many examples of both /y/ and /ly/, even some minimal pairs. Lao does not have /ly/, so we decided to use 注册资本 for /ly/.

B. Initial consonant clusters

/pr/ prs  /tr/ trs  /cr/ crs  /kr/ krs
/pl/ pls  /sr/ srs  

Examples:

/pr/ prah pras 'sky'  /pl/ plaaw plaaw 'head'
/tr/ truuh trus 'garden'  /kl/ kluun kluu 'leg'
/cr/ cruun crus 'to meet, see'  /sr/ sruh sshu 'to stop raining'
/kg/ kruun kruu 'forest, jungle'

At first I thought that /sr/ and /cr/ were presyllables sV- and cV-, but Khamphoui insists they are consonant clusters and I think he is right.

C. Prenasalised consonants

/mp/ mps  /nt/ ntts  /nc/ ncts  /nk/ nks
/nb/ nps  /ns/ nnts  /nk/ nks

Examples:

/mp/ mpiil thiip 'tamarind'  /mb/ mbseen seem 'fishnet'
/nt/ ntaaw? thhiip 'story'  /ntr/ ntraaw thhui 'chicken'
/nc/ nceee ths 'louse'  /ns/ nso? thiip 'rotten'
/nk/ nkcar thhiip 'skin'  /nk/ nkuh uruuddh 'snoring sound'
/mp/ mpaaom seelw 'to be willing to'  /mpl/ mplat sput 'to fold up'
Notes on prenasalization:

1. Khampui tried inventing single new letters for each of the prenasalized sounds by using the Lao p, t etc. with an extra squiggle, apparently intuitively feeling them to be complex single phonemes rather than a sequence of phonemes.

2. Prenasalization in Ta’uainh occurs only before voiceless stops, but it gives a definite touch of voicing (or even of heaviness?) to that stop.

3. The prenasalised aspirated stop /nkh/ only occurs once, and that in an onomatopoeia.

4. /ns/ [nch] is spelled with Lao /ns/. This is because Lao has no aspirated /ch/ and Ta’uainh has no /ns/, so the Lao symbol for /ns/ is free to be used for Ta’uainh.

D. Final consonants

/p/ b  /n/ n  /c/ q  /k/ n  /l/ (see below)
/m/ m  /n/ n  /nh/[ŋ]ʔ  /ng/[ŋ]ʔ  /ŋʔ, nʔ, ngʔ/ (see below)
/s/ [ʂ, ʃ] ʃ  /l/ ɭ  /t/ ʂ
/w/ ɭ  /y/ ɭ

Examples:

/p/ dáp ɗíu ‘belly’
/l/ weel ៥៥ ‘village’
/t/ kat ɗák ‘to bite’
/l/ til? wih? ɗiidd ‘very small’
/k/ tak ɗám ‘to do’
/r/ ʔeer ɗə ‘to sleep’
/l/ taaʔ ɗák ‘iron’
/w/ kəw ɗi ‘I’
/m/ hɔɔm ɗiim ‘to see’
/y/ waay ɗə ‘to cut (grass)’
/n/ kan ɗám ‘female’
/y/ ɗiuy? ɗiim ‘all’
/nh/ penh ɗiipu ‘to be full’
/h/ ləh ləx ‘to go out’
/ng/ seng ɗiip ‘to hear’
/s/ kɔɔn ɗiim ‘large’
/nʔ? ɗɔɔnʔ? ɗiim ‘again, other’
/ngʔ? tɔɔŋʔyənŋʔ ɗiim ‘very straight’
/wʔ? lal liawʔ ɗiim ‘to implore’
/mʔ/ leemʔ ɗiim ‘tiger’

Notes on final consonants:

1. /ř/ will be written in different ways. Short vowels follow the Lao writing system, e.g. /řɛt/ ‘not’ ឈេ, /ʁɔʔ/ ‘silver’ ៉េ. However, Lao does not have /ř/ following long vowels. Khamphui has in his stories consistently indicated this final /ř/ with the tone 2 mark: ញេប (mah thoo), as in taaʔ ɗák ‘iron’. We need to check with other Ta’uainh people to see if they like this.
2. Because final /h/ is a non-Lao sound Khamphui first wanted to write it as ᵇ as in /prah/ 'sky' and /koh/ 'land', ᵇ and ᵇ respectively. He later opted for just ᵇ, as in ʰ, ʰ.

3. For final /nh/ it was decided to write -ʊ.

4. Final /s/ is pronounced in isolation by Khamphui as:

   palatal sibilant [ʃ], following vowels u, u and ia
   palatal flat fricative [ɛ], following other vowels

   In normal speech it sounds to me like a slightly palatalized h.

5. So far we have found the post-glottalized finals /γ/, /mγ/, /nγ/, /ngγ/, /γ/ and /wγ/. Watson's notes (1975) from a workshop in Laos also mention /γ/. These sounds had been consistently written by Khamphui with the Lao tone 2 (as with final /f/ after long vowels), but in his alphabet he used a tilde tone instead. He said that they were different from final /f/ which, of course, is true. After some discussion we agreed to continue to use the second Lao tone mark for the post-glottalization of these finals. We do need to check this with other Ta’uait people.

6. Syllables with final stops (including the post-glottalized finals) plus those with final /s/ and /h/ have a relative high pitch when spoken in isolation.

E. Vowels

\[
\begin{align*}
/a^o/ & \quad /a^\ddagger/ \\
/e/ & \quad /e/ \\
/e/ & \quad /æ/ \\
diphthongs: & \quad /ia/ \quad -\delta- \\
& \quad /ua/ \quad -\delta- \\
\end{align*}
\]

interconsonantally

\[
\begin{align*}
/a/ & \quad /e/ \\
/e/ & \quad /æ/ \\
\end{align*}
\]

without final consonant

Examples:

\[
\begin{align*}
/i/ & \quad \text{bic ˊ》 ‘to lie down’} \\
/i/ & \quad \text{pic ˊ》 ‘difficult’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{hakam ˋ》 ‘to put into fire’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{tam ˋ》 ‘damp, cool’} \\
/u/ & \quad \text{karrung ˊ》 ‘clump of grass’} \\
/u/ & \quad \text{kruang ˊ》 ‘forest, jungle’} \\
/e/ & \quad \text{seng ˊ》 ‘to hear’} \\
/e/ & \quad \text{keeng ˊ》 ‘shore, bank’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{kat ˊ》 ‘cubit’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{kat ˊ》 ‘to be, be born’} \\
/o/ & \quad \text{rot ˊ》 ‘to be evil’} \\
/o/ & \quad \text{rot ˊ》 ‘to blow (pipe)’} \\
/e/ & \quad \text{le? ˊ》 ‘not’} \\
/e/ & \quad \text{le? ˊ》 ‘tired’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{kat ˊ》 ‘to bite’} \\
/a/ & \quad \text{katt ˊ》 ‘to burn’} \\
/o/ & \quad \text{song ˊ》 ‘a long grass’} \\
/o/ & \quad \text{lao ˊ》 ‘wood, tree’} \\
/i/ & \quad \text{rias ˊ》 ‘root’} \\
/u/ & \quad \text{buas ˊ》 ‘to be deaf’}
\end{align*}
\]
Notes on vowels:

1. The vowels presented few problems orthographically because Lao has the same simple vowels, except for short /h/. We felt that the natural Lao way to write /o/ would be as in ឈៀ /nhong/ ‘straight, honest’

2. The /ia/ presented some problems because the Lao system today writes it differently from before. Sam Mattix helped us adopt the current system: ំ when interconsonantal, and ំ-់ in an open syllable or before final glottal stop.

F. Presyllables

The vowel /a/ in the presyllables is non-contrastive in its quality, but usually tends toward a low central pronunciation. Morphologically some presyllables are part of the root morpheme, some are prefixes, and some are formed as the result of infixation. The presyllables encountered so far have been of the following types:

1. Ca

It was decided to write this vowel with the long Lao vowel -ឈ, as it is pronounced (in isolation) slightly longer than the vowel in type 2. So far we have found the following presyllables of this type: pa, ta, ka, ?a, ha, nga and may be ma (ma is a morpheme meaning ‘one’; but Khamphui feels that phonologically it is like the other presyllables).

Examples:

/pacoh/ បោកឈេ ‘to call, give name’ /haʔeek/ សង្កៃ ‘to feel sorry for’
/tamohʔ/ កំហើឈេ ‘to ask’ /ngahaang/ វ៉ឹញ ‘bone’
/katas/ ការងេ ‘to answer’ /manaʔ/ មានឈេ ‘one person (Cl.)’
/lamoh/ អាមឈេ ‘what’

2. CaC

This vowel is shorter than the Ca presyllable vowel and we are writing it with យ. The final C here is either -r, -l, -w or a nasal -m, -n, -nh, -ng.

2.1. Car

The Car sub-type occurs frequently. So far we have found par-, tar-, car-, kar-, har-. This sub-type often seems to have the grammatical function of nominalizer. It can occur before most consonants (all consonants??).

Examples:

/parlaa/ ពានឈេ ‘between’ /pamong/ បោមឈេ ‘life’

/haʔeek/ សង្កៃ ‘to feel sorry for’

/cf. /mong/ ឈេ ‘fresh, to be alive’
/tarlah/ تذكر ‘side’
/carraw/ จาระ ‘an offering’  cf. /craw/ จน ‘to offer’
/karnaa/ ถนน ‘road’
/harngas/ จารือ ‘thoughts’  cf. /hangas/ จารือ ‘to think’

2.2. Cal, Caw

This sub-type occurs infrequently, but includes a few common function words. So far we have found pal-, tal-, kal-, lai-, taw-.

They occur only before identical l or w.

Examples:

/pallong/ พลัง (Classifier for ribs)
/pallak/ พลัก ‘to waft up’  cf. แพกปืน ‘a smell’
/tallaa/ ดัลดา ‘to move, wriggle’
/talliing/ ดัลิดี ‘on top of’
/kallas/ ดัลลั้ส ‘time, when’
/kallung/ ดัลลุ้ง ‘in, inside’
/lalluut/ ดัลลุต ‘to crawl’
/tawwiing/ ตัววิวิ ‘to give in return’  cf. /tawiiing/ ตัววิวิ ‘to return (trans.)’

2.3. CaN

2.3.1. CaN, where N can be น or มน

This gives the following types: pan-, kan-, tam- and ham-. Words of this type are sometimes causatives. It occurs only before stops b, d, nasals m, n, and prenasalised stops mp, nt, nhc, nhch, ngk.

Examples:

/pannawet/ ปันเงţ ‘price, worth’
/pandat/ ปันดี ‘to extinguish’  cf. /dat/ ฉี ‘to wipe off’
/panduul/ ปันดู ‘a roof’
/kannoh/ หับมือ ‘other’
/tamme?/ ซึ้ม ‘new’
/tammok/ ซึ้มนอก ‘evil spirit’
/hammoom?/ ซึ้มมอง ‘to offer, sacrifice’
/hambak/ ซึ้มปัก ‘to wound’
That the analysis of the presyllable is not yet round shows in the following examples (of the infix -an-):

/canual/ ิ้มมะ ‘hard work’          cf. /cual/ จอ ‘to work hard??’
/canak/ ิ้มบัท ‘body’               cf. /cak/ ีย ‘body’
/canoo/ ัาม ‘return leg’            cf. /coo/ ใจ ‘to return home’

2.3.2. CaNN

CaNN is a subtype of CaN- before prenasalized stops. Words of this type often are causatives. So far we have found the following:

pan-       tam-       kam       ham-
panh-      tanh-      kan-      han-
pang-      tang-      kanh-     hang-

(C and N do not have the same point of articulation. One wonders whether hanh- will still be found. It is also interesting that there is no presyllable of this type starting with /c/, i.e. cam, can- or cang-.)

Examples:

/kammproop/ ที่มมโปร ‘to turn upside down’
/kamnteo/ ีมณฑี ‘to sing’
/kamnhcchec/ กีกับจุด ‘to kill’          cf. /kaceet/ ตาแก ‘to die’
/tammpool/ ที่มมโปร (Cf. for large objects)
/tanhnhecno/ ีกับจุด ‘heel’
/tangngko/ รื่น ‘beginning; boss; man’      cf. /tako/ ตาไจ ‘to begin’
/pantnua/ ีป่านา ‘stars’
/pantnnao/ ีป่านา ‘cause to be moist’      cf. /ntna/ ีบ ‘to be moist’
/pantnhchoom/ ีป่านา ‘to gather’          cf./cnoom/ ีบ ‘to gather to gether’ (intr.)
/pangngkraa/ ป่ากง ‘to rule, govern’
/hammpenh/ ีมมโปร ‘cause to be full’      cf. /penh/ ีบ ‘to be full’
/hanntong/ ีภัมคุ ‘vegetables’
/hangngkat/ ีภัมคุ ‘sarong’

3. CCa

There is only one kind of this type, tra (or sometimes pronounced tar-). It seems to carry grammatical function if occurring together with reduplication of the main syllable, namely that of reflexive.
Examples:

/træʔoʔʔoʔ/ กระดอว ‘to talk to eachother’  cf. /ʔoʔ/ ออก ‘to say’
/træʔeʔuʔoʔ/ กระดอว ‘to understand eachother’  cf. /ʔeʔuʔ/ รู้ ‘to know’
/træŋg⁹/ กระจวจ ‘breath, heart’
/træm⁹ŋ/ กระนะ ‘to oppose, rebel’
/træʔoʔ/ กระดอ ‘to agree’

REFERENCES

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c/o David Thomas Library
1/3 Inthamara Soi 7
Bangkok 10400,
Thailand