

Transcription as standardisation: The problem of Tai languages

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Scholars involved in cross-cultural studies are always faced with problems of translation and transcription of languages and of cultural meanings. Many of these problems are not easy to solve, but they do need to be addressed in order to enhance our analytical and communicative abilities. Working in Laos, in both anthropology and linguistics, we have continually encountered the problem of romanisation of Lao language, since no official system for romanising Lao exists.

We can take as an example of a quasi-official Lao romanisation 'system' the transcription of place-names in the recent *Atlas of the Lao PDR*, published by the Lao National Geographic Department, Vientiane 1995. This document reveals a deliberate attempt to change some previous conventions, such as the former *Louang Phrabang* (or *Prabang*), to now *Louang Phabang*, where the politically potent letter 'r' (see Enfield 1999) is not used. This decision with essentially political and cultural motivation is rationalised with reference to the spoken language, given that 'r' is not colloquially pronounced in Lao. However, the principle of following pronunciation is *not* applied by the authors of the *Atlas* in the case of *Vientiane*, where the long-accepted and highly conventionalised spelling is retained, despite its usual pronunciation (especially in English) deviating markedly from spoken Lao (Viang Chan).

In contrast to this Lao government document, let us consider the position taken by Martin Stuart-Fox in his recent *History of Laos* (Stuart-Fox 1997:4-5). While Stuart-Fox recognises the need to deal with inconsistencies in Lao romanisation, where conventional transcription of Lao words often departs from their native pronunciation, he doesn't pursue this consistently. For example, he invokes a principle of following spoken language in using *Viang Chan* instead of the highly conventional *Vientiane*. On the other hand, he retains the letter *r* in the more historically conventional romanisation of *Luang Phrabang*, despite *r* not being normally pronounced in Lao. Stuart-Fox bases this latter decision not on any linguistic principle (such as pronunciation) but merely 'on the urging of Lao friends'.¹

¹The issue of the letter *r* in Lao orthography and in transcription of Lao is a loaded one, and a position on its inclusion or not in any case cannot be politically or socially neutral. See Enfield 1999.

Both of these examples raise the issue of appeal (or not) to official convention in the absence of any formally established romanisation system. Such a system was introduced, for example, by the Chinese government when it decided to officially conventionalise (i.e. for international usage) Pinyin spellings of Chinese names and place names. In this case, it was a clear-cut matter to adopt such revisions as *Beijing* (formerly *Peking*) and *Mao Zedong* (formerly *Mao Tse Tung*), since there was now an internationally effective official guide to such usage.² In the two isolated attempts to deal with the problem of romanisation of Lao mentioned above, there is no such official guide, and we thus see opposite decisions being made, resulting from essentially identical and similarly inconsistent logics, which each adopt some conventionalisations and make some exceptions.

While Pinyin as an unambiguous guide to transcribing Chinese provides a model of consistency and standardisation, it greatly suppresses variation across the languages we know as 'Chinese' generally. Being a state-produced system, Pinyin is motivated to a large degree by the requirements of a nation which houses considerable ethnolinguistic diversity, and yet faces the challenge of maintaining political and cultural unity. In the example of Laos, similar challenges are faced by the state, but, -- as in Thailand and Cambodia nearby, -- the state has not provided an official system of romanisation. Naturally, one therefore encounters widespread and chronic inconsistency in writings about Laos.

What concerns us in this essay is not just Lao, but the Tai language family as a whole. There is of course no unified 'Tai state'. So, there is no state in whose interest a variation-suppressing transcription system could be brought into service. We thus find interesting the recent attempt by Oliver Raendchen to tackle the problem of inconsistency in the transcription of Tai languages, in his 'Remarks on the need for a uniform transcription system including all Tai languages and dialects' (Raendchen 1997). Importantly, Raendchen restricts his interest to Tai and to the problems of communication within what is assumed to be a Tai universe, in which both Tai and outsiders participate. We argue that this assumption of a Tai universe, and the attempt to bring order to it, actually reproduces the logic of statehood, since one important

²Of course, there was some resistance to this. Note also that the process was not total, and that in this case the term *China* remains, despite the country name being *Zhōng Guó* in Pinyin. Another example of a fairly sacred convention is *Hong Kong*, despite its Cantonese pronunciation as *Hēunggóng* as transcribed in the modified Yale system used in Matthews and Yip (1994), and its Pinyin transcription as *Xiāng Gǎng*.

project for the state is to suppress variation, and thereby highlight unity. A cover-all transcription system for related, but unlike, languages can be an effective tool in achieving this -- an ironic outcome for scholars whose aim is (presumably) to study the variation that is found. Even with the best of intentions, without extreme sensitivity the premise of a journal like 'Tai Culture' - in which Raendchen 1997 appears -- can create an institutional logic parallel to the logic of a nation state.

1. Raendchen's proposed 'New Tai' transcription system

Raendchen (1997) proposes a single, uniform transcription system which is intended for transcription of 'all Tai languages and dialects' (see Raendchen 1997:10-11).³

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|----------------------|---|
| <u>Consonants:</u> | b, d, f, h, j, k, kh, l, m, n, ng, nj, p, ph, r, s, t, th, w (with combinations like kw, khw, tj, ts, ch...) |
| <u>Vowels:</u> | (long and short) |
| <i>Monophthongs:</i> | a, aa, i, ii, u, uu, ü, üü, ô, ôô, o, oo, ö, öö, e, ee, ä, ää |
| <i>Diphthongs:</i> | au, aao, oi, ooi, ôi, ôôi, öi, ööi, ui, uui, eô, eeô, äo, ääo, ia, iia, ua, uua, ai, aai |
| <i>Triphthongs:</i> | iao, uai, üai |
| <u>Tones:</u> | (none given) |

Figure 1. Raendchen's proposed 'New Tai' system

We identify a number of problems with Raendchen's system, as he proposes it, both in errors of fact and analysis. A factual error firstly is the claim that the Tai vowel represented here by *ü* is phonetically similar to the German sound represented by the same symbol (p. 11, 12). The German vowel is a high front rounded vowel, the Tai sound is a high back unrounded vowel; the two sounds are at opposite extremes on two of three common phonetic parameters distinguishing pure vowels. A second error concerns the claim that Tai languages do not have a voiced velar stop (i.e. [g] in contrast with [k]; p. 10). Counterexamples to this claim may be found among Tai languages of Northern Vietnam; see, for example, Ross (1996).

³In much of our discussion, we will consider the system as it applies to Lao, since that is the language we mostly work in.

Among Raendchen's analytical choices, we would question firstly the omission of a symbol for the glottal stop, and secondly the excessively large vowel phoneme inventory. There may be language-internal grounds in various Tai languages for arguing that the glottal stop is totally predictable (e.g. always occurring before a syllable-initial vowel and after a syllable-final short vowel), but there is both strong pragmatic motivation (i.e. to remind readers when it is to be pronounced), as well as more principled reasons for including a symbol for the glottal stop, especially the argument for its natural status as a consonant, among others like *p*, *t*, *k*. The glottal stop is most naturally classed with other consonants for the purposes of calculating lexical tone, which in languages such as Lao and Thai is a function of a number of parameters including initial consonant, vowel length, and final. With regard to Raendchen's excessive inventory of complex vowels, we can apply Ockham's Razor, reducing diphthongs from 20 to 4, and eliminating 'triphthongs' altogether.⁴ This can be done by using *j* and *w* (already provided in Raendchen's 'stock of consonants' (p. 10)) as syllable-final consonants. Raendchen's diphthongs ending in *i* and *u* (e.g. *ui*, *aai*, *au*) are then simple vowels with consonant endings *j* and *w*, respectively (i.e. *uj*, *aaj*, *aw*; structurally analogous to *uk*, *aak*, *ak*). The only four diphthongs required are *ua*, *uaa*, *ia*, and *auw*. (See below for further comments on *auw*.) R's 'triphthongs' are structurally resegmented as *uaj*, *uajj*, *iaw*.

An inexplicable assertion made by Raendchen (based on his subjective appraisal that there are 'more important factors') is that tone marking can be left out of the transcription of Tai languages. Raendchen asserts without basis that *vowel length* is 'more essential' than tone-marking (p. 11), but there are no 'degrees of importance' when it comes to the role of phonological contrast, namely the distinction between lexical items in a language. The only principled argument we can find in his discussion concerns the technical problem of fitting overstriking tone-marking diacritics over the (also overstriking) vowel diacritics in the system proposed (p. 12).⁵ But the standard Vietnamese writing system, for example, has long been able to cope with this challenge. We suggest that claims of the kind that 'most of the [previous Tai language transcription] systems show that there is no need for tone-marks' (p. 9), could be symptomatic of an insensitivity to the importance of tone which can be traced to the

⁴Of course, we are talking about choices in phonological - not phonetic - analysis, so any phonetic difference between pairs like [uj] and [ui] is irrelevant.

⁵We find it unusual that simple technical matters should get in the way. At the end of the 20th century computers have opened up to us possibilities of using not only customised transcription systems, but also a luxury not available to earlier scholars of being able to easily insert the native orthographies into our texts. This is a practice that should be encouraged.

non-tonal language background of many scholars. For us, the question would not be *whether* or not to represent tones in a transcription system for Tai languages (or languages of mainland Southeast Asia in general), but *how* to represent tones. And while Raendchen's proposal is meant for general usage by scholars of Tai, including those for whom tone might be irrelevant, he does not even provide for the *option*.

2. 'Tai' has no normative standard: Against assumptions which arbitrarily assign privilege

We have identified a number of problems with Raendchen's proposed transcription system for Tai languages, which may stem from his own background as a European scholar, with the particular research concerns he has. We would like to focus now on greater conceptual problems imported by the logic of such a multi-linguistic transcription system, founded as it is upon the assumption of a pan-Tai universe.

Raendchen aims towards reproducing the logic of a state style program of standardisation, which will suppress -- in this case by default -- the natural variation found. A major contributing factor to the problems which emerge in Raendchen's discussion of transcription for 'all Tai languages and dialects' is his occasional treatment of 'Tai' as 'a language' with 'dialects', including Ahom, Lao, Tai Dam, and Thai (p. 8). But 'Tai' is *not* 'a language', just as 'Chinese' is not 'a language'. It is a putative language *family*. Languages within it must each be taken on their own terms and in their own right, and not with reference to one or another privileged variety.

Consider the fact that Raendchen lists 'diphthongs in Tai languages', but deliberately omits *auw* (his *aiü*), a complex vowel very widespread in Northern Tai languages (e.g. in Lue). He writes, some Northern Tai groups pronounce *ai* as *aiü* (p. 11) - as if the rhyme in words like, say, *baui* 'leaf' (Luang Prabang Lao) is 'actually' or 'underlyingly' *aj*, as it is pronounced in, say, Vientiane Lao (as *baɰ*). But who is to say that it is not the other way around, that it is not the Southern Tai groups who pronounce *auw* as *ai*? Indeed, this would seem more likely to anyone who has wondered why the Lao script includes two separate symbols for the rhyme pronounced *-aj* in Vientiane Lao (i.e. າ vs. ື), and who has been pleasantly surprised to find that in Northern varieties this seemingly arbitrary convention is actually motivated by pronunciation. The fact is that speakers of Luang Prabang Lao and other Northern Tai varieties *do not* 'pronounce *ai* as *auw*'. Rather, those varieties have a phonemic combination *auw* which is, naturally,

pronounced as *au*. It is *au*. Similarly, we do not say that the French pronounce the combination *sc* as *éc* in words like *école* and *écriture* (cf. English *school* and *scripture*).

Another example of this problematic glossing over of difference among Tai languages (and implicit assumption of an underlying norm) is revealed by Raendchen's statement that some Western Tai groups pronounce triphthongs 'in a manner very close to diphthongs' (p. 11). But if they pronounce diphthongs, then surely that's what they are pronouncing, unless the speakers of Western Tai groups are unable to pronounce their own language properly, which Raendchen is surely not claiming. Similar is his statement (p. 11) that 'some Western Tai groups *neglect the existence of diphthongs*, but rather *consider them as monophthongs*' (emphases added). This again reveals a constant underlying notion of a normative standard for 'Tai', such that certain monophthongs pronounced by Western Tai speakers are somehow *actually* diphthongs, perhaps 'underlyingly'. We would prefer to take languages on their face value, such that if we find *x* (e.g. a monophthong) in a language, then that is what we find in the language, regardless of whether or not that corresponds somehow to *y* (e.g. a diphthong) in some neighbouring language. Recall that 'Tai' itself is not a language, but a putative family of languages. Whether *x* and *y* (e.g. a monophthong in Language A and a diphthong in Language B) may be historically related is a matter for historical linguists to consider, and while this is of course of interest, we cannot base synchronic descriptions on such considerations. The Phou-Thai speakers who use a pure vowel or monophthong in the word *mée* for 'wife' (where a Vientiane Lao would use a diphthong in the cognate *mia*), are not 'pronouncing *méa* as *mée*', they are properly pronouncing the Phou-Thai word *mée*.

Again, who is to say that those who say *mia* for 'wife' (e.g. speakers of Central Thai) are not pronouncing *ee* as *ia*? That this is not said reveals to us a normative view of Tai with Thai as its 'correct' target. And it is confirmed by Raendchen's claim that 'it is easily possible to transcribe any of the Tai *dialects*, even if there might exist differences in the pronunciation of words resulting from vowel *shifting* and differing *versions* of consonants' (p. 8, emphases added). If someone really wanted to say that one Tai group's pronunciation is actually a 'version' of something else (underlying?), then they would need a good reason to privilege one group over another as representative of the target for Tai in general. They would also need to justify their implicit claim that Tai can be treated as a 'language' with 'dialects'. Let us treat languages on their own terms, and restrict matters of 'shifting vowels', and 'versions' of consonants to contexts of historical and comparative linguistic studies.

3. Can we assume that Tai is an ethnolinguistic entity?

The 'institutional logic' we have mentioned above is nicely captured in Raendchen's assumption of a 'common starting basis... that the Tai languages and dialects are both grammatically and phonetically very similar' (p. 6), followed by his later assertion, broadening also into the realm of anthropology, that '[t]he roots of the Tais are probably the same, their cultures are very similar and they mutually understand each other's language' (p. 14). However, a claim of intelligibility across Tai languages is certainly untenable. Claims such as Raendchen makes about the Tai could no doubt be made for the Germanic or Romance-speaking peoples but, significantly, few scholars make them these days. Would Raendchen apply his argument to the Germanic languages, since the level of mutual intelligibility between German and Dutch, and perhaps even English, is surely more than that between two distant Tai languages - e.g. Zhuang and Ahom (Tony Diller, personal communication)? We argue that one cannot *assume* such linguistic commonality or correspondence and one certainly cannot assume *cultural* commonality or correspondence. Indeed, for us it is more intellectually constructive to focus on *differences* between so-called Tai groups.

Pan-Tai/Thai assertions have been made for a long time now, initially by the missionary William Clifton Dodd (Dodd 1923), and in the 1930s and '40s by extreme nationalists in Thailand (Barmé 1993). These views have persisted outside this more extremist context as can be seen in the views of the Lao intellectual, Sila Viravong (n.d.), for example, who claims that Tai languages are all varieties of a single language 'Lao', and that the differences inhere merely in pronunciation, and a smattering of vocabulary. (Differences in morphosyntax are not considered.) More recently, Souksavang (1995:85) says the Tai-Lao languages 'have a few minor differences', but that they are 'basically the same language'. So while Raendchen's views have a long pedigree, we can find similar views in other cultural contexts, suggesting that we are dealing with a more profound theoretical problem. For example, in Sinitic studies, where modern linguistics has followed Chao's (1968:13) assertion that there is 'practically one universal Chinese grammar', a generation of younger scholars were steered away from acknowledging, let alone examining, the fascinating grammatical variations across the languages of China. Students of Tai languages could learn from this.

The slippage in Raendchen's use of the terms 'language' and 'dialect' deserves some attention in this context. According to the descriptive linguist's received view, two linguistic varieties may be termed 'dialects' if they are mutually intelligible to a high degree, and 'a language' may be loosely defined as a group of such dialects, where

separate 'languages' are *not* mutually intelligible. Thus, 'Tai' is not a language, since the various linguistic forms under its umbrella are far from mutually intelligible. 'Language families' may be defined as groups of separate languages which are demonstrably related to a single ancestor language or proto-language.⁶ But these guiding notions are readily overridden by nationalist agendas. Consider, on the one hand, the rather similar linguistic varieties known as 'Swedish' and 'Norwegian', which by the criteria of mutual intelligibility would be termed dialects, but which by their political status are officially, and effectively, separate languages. On the other hand, the 'language' (in fact a language family) known as 'Chinese' includes varieties such as 'Cantonese', 'Gan', and 'Mandarin', *which have very low levels of mutual intelligibility, but which are* traditionally described as 'dialects'. Such manipulations of the 'dialect'/'language'/'language family' categories may emerge from the essentially political/cultural need to assert *difference* (despite extreme similarity, e.g. between the Swedish and Norwegian nations in the first case), or to assert *similarity*, and thus *unity* (despite extreme difference, e.g. among languages in the Chinese language family). We acknowledge state motivations for manipulating these categories, but it is unclear why any scholar would have an interest in promoting a Tai 'nation'. There is of course no Tai 'nation'.

The assumption of pan-Taism/Thaism, in whatever form it manifests itself, is based on an ethno-linguistic illusion that routinely equates languages and cultures. The comments of Chamberlain et al (1995:10) typify this problematic stance: 'Language, being an unconscious phenomenon, has internal consistencies in structure and the laws of sound change are regular and systematic. *It is also the primary indicator of ethnic identity*' (Emphasis added). First, note how so much rests here on the assumption that 'language is an unconscious phenomenon'. There are many important ways in which this assumption is untenable. A vast literature documents ways in which sociolinguistic phenomena of linguistic *variation* -- which are certainly 'conscious' in nature, and are often introduced externally, crossing social and cultural boundaries -- feed into linguistic *change*, including processes of adoption of new vocabulary and new grammatical features (at any level) in languages (see Chambers 1995 for a recent introduction, also Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). A second point here concerns the ways in which language may 'indicate ethnic identity'. No particular linguistic system bears an intrinsic

⁶Dixon (1997:7ff) has recently criticised standards in historical/comparative linguistics, insisting that for 'family relatedness' between Languages A and B to be properly established, one must reconstruct a sizable portion of a proto-language, with regular rules accounting for the changes that have led to the present forms of A and B. He, like others recently such as Thomason and Kaufman (1988), now calls into question the very model of 'family tree' relationships among languages in certain cases, especially in the presence of intensive language contact.

relationship to any particular ethnicity as such.⁷ It is not the form of languages nor anything about their historical relatedness to other languages which determine the ways in which they may act as emblems of ethnic identity. Rather, languages become emblematic because of what they mean to the people who are doing the identifying, and this may or may not include speakers of the language. Thus, while Zhuang language may be a totem for the Zhuang, and Ahom language may be a totem for the Ahom, it is in no way guaranteed that these two groups view their languages *as Tai languages*, therefore identifying *as Tai*, unless the Tai-ness of their language has somehow explicitly come to their attention, and has acquired a meaning for them in their self-identity. Ethnic Tai-ness does not come surreptitiously under cover of grammatical fossilization.

We would argue that just as we cannot assume the mutual intelligibility of Tai languages, so we cannot assume that speakers are somehow 'culturally Tai' (however we want to identify the latter) *because of* the putative relatedness of their languages. That is, 'family relatedness' of speakers' respective languages a claim not unproblematic in itself, see Dixon (1997), Thomason and Kaufman (1988), does not entail that their everyday cultural and ritual practices are mutually intelligible. Whatever the level of mutual intelligibility between Zhuang and Thai (no doubt very low), the everyday cultural practices of Zhuang people are so clearly Sinitic that they are culturally *not* intelligible to a Central Thai. At the same time, the Khmer, whose language is clearly *not* intelligible to a Central Thai, observe cultural signs and practices which *are* easily recognised and comprehended by the latter.

We are concerned that the ideas of 'language families' and/or 'pan-ethnic cultures' may be taken to have more cohesion and integrity than they actually do have. It is important to balance such notions in anthropology and linguistics with the notion of *areas*, both linguistic or cultural. Cultures and languages are not hermetically sealed, and cultural and linguistic transmission is not confined to the borders of labelled human groups. There are no such crisp lines, and the bleeding across supposed borders may either seep or flow. Thus, we would question the assumption of a specifically Tai linguistic area, let alone a Tai culture area -- especially since the areas occupied by 'the Tai' are not contiguous. Accordingly, one of the authors of this essay argues elsewhere

⁷Cf. Franz Boas' classic discussion of 'race and language' (Boas 1974[1911]), in which he argued that no necessary correlation between '[physical] type, language, and culture' can be assumed (p. 18), and that any attempt to classify human groups on basis of more than one of these 'can not be consistent' (p. 19).

(Evans 1999) that it is more productive to view issues related to the various Tai groups in the context of the broader culture areas in which so-called Tai groups reside.⁸

The consequences of this conclusion could be quite problematic for a journal like 'Tai Culture', in which Raendchen (1997) appears, which is clearly premised on pan-Tai assumptions. But the journal could, of course, be equally committed to an exploration of the complex boundaries and strata of 'Tai' culture/s, their histories and transformations, in short, their diversity. What is most important is to get away from fixed *a priori* positions that assume we already know the answers to questions which still have not yet been researched thoroughly. This will require greater sensitivity by researchers to the nature of questions being posed, and to the levels of abstraction at which they are posed.

4. Conclusion

Raendchen's (1997) proposed transcription system assumes that Tai languages can be considered in isolation from the languages that surround them, and that there are differences among them which can be routinely suppressed in research. The very nature of the questions being asked does not allow him to go beyond Tai languages and consider the neighbouring languages which interact with them. By this we do not just mean the neighbouring *national* languages, but languages spoken in the same districts as Tai languages, in the same forests, at the same marketplaces, in the same school yards, along the same roads and paths. These include the many dozens of languages from Akha to Burmese to Mandarin to Yao, which are in intensive contact with Tai languages, and pose similar transcription problems. We want to stress the importance of acknowledging and giving proper attention to the phenomena of linguistic and cultural *contact* within an area, and the resulting influence and interference between languages and between cultures.⁹ To factor out non-Tai languages from the context of Tai studies is to provide an inaccurate and incomplete picture of the true situation of the languages we classify as 'Tai'. Of course, there is an important sense in which languages and cultures can have a common historical source, but this original shared 'genesis' is no more important in

⁸Let us leave aside the complexities of defining such areas for the moment, but see Evans 1999 for some discussion.

⁹Within this, of course, there are important asymmetries. One only has to look at grammatical description of Khmu as spoken in Thailand (Suwilai 1987) to see immediately that there is strong influence of Thai upon the structure of Khmu. But there is no interference going the other way. Thus, a Mon-Khmer language is getting 'Tai-ised' through contact. An example of a Tai language getting non-reciprocally 'Sinicised' in a similar process is Mulao (Wang and Zheng 1993).

these situations than the range of ongoing sources of interference throughout their long history, and in the present. Languages and cultures cannot be prised apart from their immediate environments, especially the languages and cultures which happen to be next door.

With respect to transcription and romanisation of Tai languages, for example in the case of the Lao problems we began with, we are not really concerned to eradicate traditional or conventionalised inconsistencies, especially in the absence of any officially sanctioned system. Many of the problems we have discussed for 'Tai' apply in the case of 'Lao' anyway, given that there is so much variation in the language across the country. And with respect to the Tai languages overall, for which no political entity exists, we certainly do not see convincing reasons for proposing a single overarching scheme for transcription, unless for very particular purposes. In establishing a system even for purely linguistic purposes, there are a large number of competing factors which would point to quite different systems for transcription, and there would be no convergence on any one 'best' or most appropriate system. Linguists have different needs in representing languages, depending on whether they are concerned with reflecting phonetic reality, with depicting one of a range of possible phonological analyses, with describing morpho-syntax, or semantics, with exploring issues in sociolinguistics, or historical/comparative studies, or a range of other areas of specific interest. Beyond linguistics and other studies where language is particularly relevant to the analysis, we recommend sticking to established convention as far as possible, and we see little point in being too concerned with inconsistency or irregularity. If it means making exceptions in order to observe some persistent conventions, this can even enhance intelligibility. The irony of such an attempt from within the scholarly community to come up with a single transcription system for the Tai languages would be the ultimate result of a bland picture of unity, reminiscent of typically state-created homogenisation of ethnolinguistic phenomena found within any country's ink-drawn borders. The world of the Tai is surely too diverse for that.

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