

The Tai Languages

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Introduction

This is not a technical paper on Tai linguistics but rather a report of general interest on the study of Tai languages and some problems in connection with it, particularly in the field of comparative Tai linguistics.¹

Because of the importance of Southeast Asia, in terms of international and regional development, there is a growing interest in the study of the Tai languages. During the last two decades a number of universities began to offer courses in the Tai languages, particularly the Thai language.

The word *Tai* (with an unaspirated consonant) is used by a number of Tai speakers to designate themselves, while the word *Thai* (with an aspirated consonant) is used in Thailand and Laos. Since the form *Thai* has been designated as the official name for the language of Thailand, it does not seem appropriate to use it to designate the various languages spoken in many different countries. Thus, the name *Tai* has been chosen to refer to the whole family of languages. The difficulty of keeping *Tai* and *Thai* apart for English speakers (and many other speakers as well) makes it necessary to use the old name *Siamese* to refer to the standard language of Thailand.

Distribution of the Tai Languages

The Tai languages are spoken in Thailand, Laos, North Vietnam, Burma, Assam (a province of India), and China (Southwestern Provinces of Yunnan, Kweichow, and Kwangsi). With the exception of Thailand, the Tai speakers formed in the past semi-independent states in Burma, Vietnam (then called Annam), and China. In China these states are known as *T'u-ssü*, and they have been gradually abolished in the course of several hundred years. However, after the Second World War, several autonomous regions or districts were set up in China for the Tai speakers. Kwangsi province

¹ To our great loss, Li Fang-kuei passed away in 1987, at the age of 85. [Editor's note: We follow the manner of spelling and capitalizing the name of Li Fang-kuei employed in the 1986 *Bibliography and Index of Mainland Southeast Asian Languages and Linguistics* by Franklin E. Huffman. New Haven: Yale University Press.]

was established as an autonomous province; a *Pu-yi* autonomous region was set up in Kweichow; and several autonomous districts were set up in Yunnan. The former semi-independent states in Burma, known as the Shan States, were abolished by the Burmese government not too long ago.² After the Second World War, Laos was made an independent state.

As nationalism grew in Southeast Asia, the Tai population tended to form minority groups in many countries, presenting political and administrative problems.

The Need for a Linguistic Survey

There are important areas where we lack information about the Tai languages. Some regions are not readily accessible to us for investigation, but eventually we shall need good descriptions of many key languages and dialects. There are, of course, increasing numbers of current publications about these languages and dialects, but still more will be necessary.

The study of Tai languages has been in the past more or less oriented from the point of view of Siamese, the standard language of Thailand. Very often the Tai languages in China have been considered as aberrant languages or dialects, and still very little is known about them, in spite of some good, recent publications. The study of Tai languages as a whole must put the linguistic material from China on the same level as the Siamese, Lao, or Shan language.

My own interest in this group of languages dates back to the early 1930s, when a project for the survey of Chinese dialects was proposed by the Academia Sinica. It became evident that there were many non-Chinese languages in China that needed to be surveyed. Among them were the Tai languages.

The body of linguists who were trained to do field work was very small at that time. Even a preliminary survey of Chinese dialects alone would take decades to accomplish. Nevertheless, a beginning was made, and I started to investigate the Tai languages in Kwangsi in 1935. This was a preliminary work, consisting of sampling a small number of dialects, and the work was continued to include Yunnan in 1936 and 1940, and Kweichow in 1941-1942.

It is not necessary here to list the problems that one encounters in such a survey. Since most of the Tai languages in China (and elsewhere) have not been recorded, one of the important tasks that any student must face is to provide a good record of these languages, which would normally consist of a collection of texts, a glossary, a phonological analysis, and a grammatical analysis.

² 1948 was the date of independence from Britain. Under the British, the Shan States were autonomous.

Systems of Writing

Some Tai languages adopted the Indic alphabet in the 13th century, but those in China did not do so, except for some languages in Yunnan [such as Tai Lue, Tai Don or White Tai, and Chinese Shan or Tai Mau].³ *Some have adopted the Chinese systems of writing, by using Chinese characters and creating new characters out of the Chinese such as Wuming, very much like the Vietnamese did before the introduction of the Latin alphabet.* This form of writing is used mostly in recording their poetry or songs.

It is interesting work to study these folk poems or songs for both their poetic form and their content. We know that Siamese has developed very complicated and elaborate poetic forms, partly due to the influence of Indic poetry and partly to a poetic tradition, which the study of the folk songs of the Tai speakers in China will help to clarify.

Comparative Study of Tai Languages

Having obtained a collection of records of a number of languages or dialects, for example as in China, we are faced with the problem of how to relate these languages to each other and to other well-known languages such as Siamese and Lao. It is also important to get an idea of how these different dialects developed. Since the earliest records of the Tai languages are not too old, the only way to get an historical perspective is to use the comparative method, a technique well developed in the Indo-European field and applicable to other languages as well.

The comparative method permits us to reconstruct a proto-language from which the various languages or dialects are developed. This proto-language is, of course, a hypothetical one, but it remains, as far as I know, the best model to relate the various languages and dialects, and the best model to give us an insight into their historical development.

At present we have by no means surveyed the most important languages. New important languages may be discovered yet. I have in mind particularly the Saek language, which has been investigated by André Haudricourt and more recently in some detail by William Gedney. While it confirms in some ways our hypothetical reconstructions of the proto-language, it also presents many new problems.

Classification of the Languages and Dialects

The comparative study leads to the classification of the dialects into subgroups. We have a fair idea of what these subgroups are. A preliminary classification of the Tai languages and dialects has been proposed, namely

³ The use of brackets here indicates additions made by the editors.

that the Tai languages may be divided into three groups: 1) the Southwestern group (Siamese, Lao, Shan, Ahom, and so on); 2) the Central group (the languages in North Vietnam and Western Kwangsi); and 3) the Northern group (the languages in Kweichow, Northern Kwangsi, and Eastern Yunnan). Although the names seem to be geographic, actually the criteria for their classification are based on the distribution of vocabulary items and phonological characteristics.

Relation of the Tai Languages to Other Language Families

This is the last problem that I would like to raise, but would not wish to answer. It is quite evident that some more basic work has yet to be done. The theory that the Tai languages are related to the Sino-Tibetan family is quite old; the newer theory that the Tai languages are related to the Austronesian languages needs to be tested. In addition, there is the theory that the Sino-Tibetan and the Austronesian languages are related as well. It is a problem that will take some time to solve.