Classification by Tone Shapes and by Patterns of Tonal Splits and Coalescences
[Thai dialects of Thailand]

WANNA Tienmee
Kasetsart University

The purpose of this paper is to show that both patterns of tonal splits and coalescences and tone shapes may be of use in characterizing Thai dialects of Thailand and that they support and supplement each other, though tone shape can be more easily influenced or borrowed.*

The study of Thai spoken in different areas of the country has shown that there is a considerable amount of local variation in the language. Dialects of Thai are traditionally grouped geographically into four main regional dialects:[1] northern, northeastern, southern, and central.[2] They differ more in phonology and vocabulary than they do in grammar. Linguists have long known that the languages of the Tai family differ most strikingly in tone, namely, the number of tones, tone shapes or phonetic realisations of tones, and patterns of tonal splits and coalescences. Among these three aspects of tone, tone shape seems to have been least employed in classifying dialects of the Tai language family.

Linguists interested in dialects of the Tai language family use different criteria in classifying the dialects. The classification of Li (1959, 1960) of the whole Tai family is based on lexical and phonological criteria. Brown (1965), Chamberlain (1972), Hartmann (1977), and many others have classified dialects of the Southwestern Tai group (SWT) on the basis of tonal splits. Chamberlain (1975) has also classified Tai dialects of the Southwestern and Central groups on the basis of the development of initial consonants. Within Thailand, Thai dialects have been classified on the basis of various criteria (Theraphan [1978], Wanaporn [1983], Vichin [1984]). To the best of my knowledge, however, little attention has been given to the traditional geographic classification of the dialects although it is often referred to. In this study, I attempt to establish criteria based on tone splits, coalescences, and shapes which accord with the traditional classification of the dialects within the country into four regional groups. Tai dialects which are suspected to have moved to their present location less than two centuries ago or since the fall of Ayudhaya in AD 1767, will be excluded.

Tonal splits and coalescences of Northern Thai

For the Thai dialects of the northern region, the so-called Lanna–Thai dialects, tone A always reflects the [± *glottalization]. That is, the tone A has split between the non–glottalized classes I (*ph) and II (*p) on one hand and the glottalized classes III (*ʔb) and IV (*b) on the other. And tones in B=DL; that is, the shapes of the tones in column B and DL are the same. These are seen in the tonal array displayed below:

---

*Originally presented to the *18ᵗʰ International Conference on Sino–Tibetan Languages and Linguistics*, Bangkok 27 – 29 August 1985.
[1] Thai dialects here will not include Tai minority groups which recently moved to Thailand, such as Black Tai, Phuan.
[2] In fact, I prefer to group the dialects of Thai into five, adding the five eastern provinces of Chonburi, Chanthaburi, Trat, Prachinburi, and Rayong.

Chiangmai *[adapted from Haas (1958), Brown (1965)]*
Chiangrai,Phrae, Nan, Lampang
[adapted from Brown (1965)]

Tonal splits and coalescences of Northeastern Thai

For the Thai dialects of the northeastern region, tone C always reflects the [± *aspiration]. That is, tone C has split between aspirated Class I on one hand and unaspirated Classes II, III, IV on the other. And tones in B ≠ DL, that is, the shapes of the tones in column B and DL differ. These may be seen in dialects of some parts of Khorat (Wanna 1979), Chaiyaphum, Roi–et, Ubon, Sisaket, Surin, Sakon Nakhon (Brown 1965), the tonal arrays of which are displayed below:

Khorat *(4 and 5 tone system)*

Khorat *(4 and 5 tone system)*

Khorat *(5 and 6 system)*
Roi–et, Sakon Nakhon

Chaiyaphum, Nongkhai, Ubon,
Khon Kaen, Udon

Sisaket

Tonal splits and coalescences of Southern Thai

For the Thai dialects of the southern region (here Tak Bai dialects are excluded), at least one tone always reflects both [± *aspiration] and [± *voice]. A tone has split in two places, resulting in three–way splitting of the tone in that column, that is, *ph__ *p *ʔb __*b. And tones in B ≠ DL; that is, the shapes of the tones in column B and DL differ. Examples of the patterns of tonal splits in the Southern provinces are displayed below:

Chumphon *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*

Songkhla *[adapted from Vichintana (1959)]*, Krabi, Trang, Nakhon Sri Thammaraj *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*, Surat *[Wanna]*

Chaiya, Takua–Pa *[adapted from Brown]*, Yala *[Wanna]*

Ranong *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*ʔb					
*b					

Phuket, Satun *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*ʔb					
*b					

Yala *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*, Phuket *[Wanna]*

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*ʔb					
*b					

Ko Samui *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*

Tonal splits and coalescences of Central Thai

For the Thai dialects of the central region, tone A always reflects [± voice], that is, *ph__ *p *ʔb *b. In tone C there is a contrast *ph *p *ʔb__ *b. Tones in B = DL; that is, the shapes of the tones in B and DL are identical, in contrast to the northeastern and southern Thai dialects. Examples of the dialects in central provinces are shown below:

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*ʔb					
*b					

Suphanburi *[adapted from Kalaya (1980)]*

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*ʔb					
*b					

Ayudhaya *[adapted from Brown (1965)]*, Suphanburi *[adapted from Kalaya (1980)]*, Kanchanaburi *[Wanna]*

It is interesting to note that tones in B are the same as DL in Northern and Central Thai while tones in B are different from DL in Northeastern and Southern Thai. Besides, the Thai dialects discussed all show tripartition, or three–way splitting of tones. Thus, the zone of tripartition should include the whole of Thailand (except some parts of the southernmost provinces of Thailand where Tak Bai dialects are spoken) instead of only some parts as suggested by Hartmann (1977). According to Hartmann (1977/1980) the northern dialects, or Lanna group, represent a two–way splitting or bipartition of tone of the dialects in his zones of bipartition (with a variant) and tripartition as may be seen in *Map 1*.
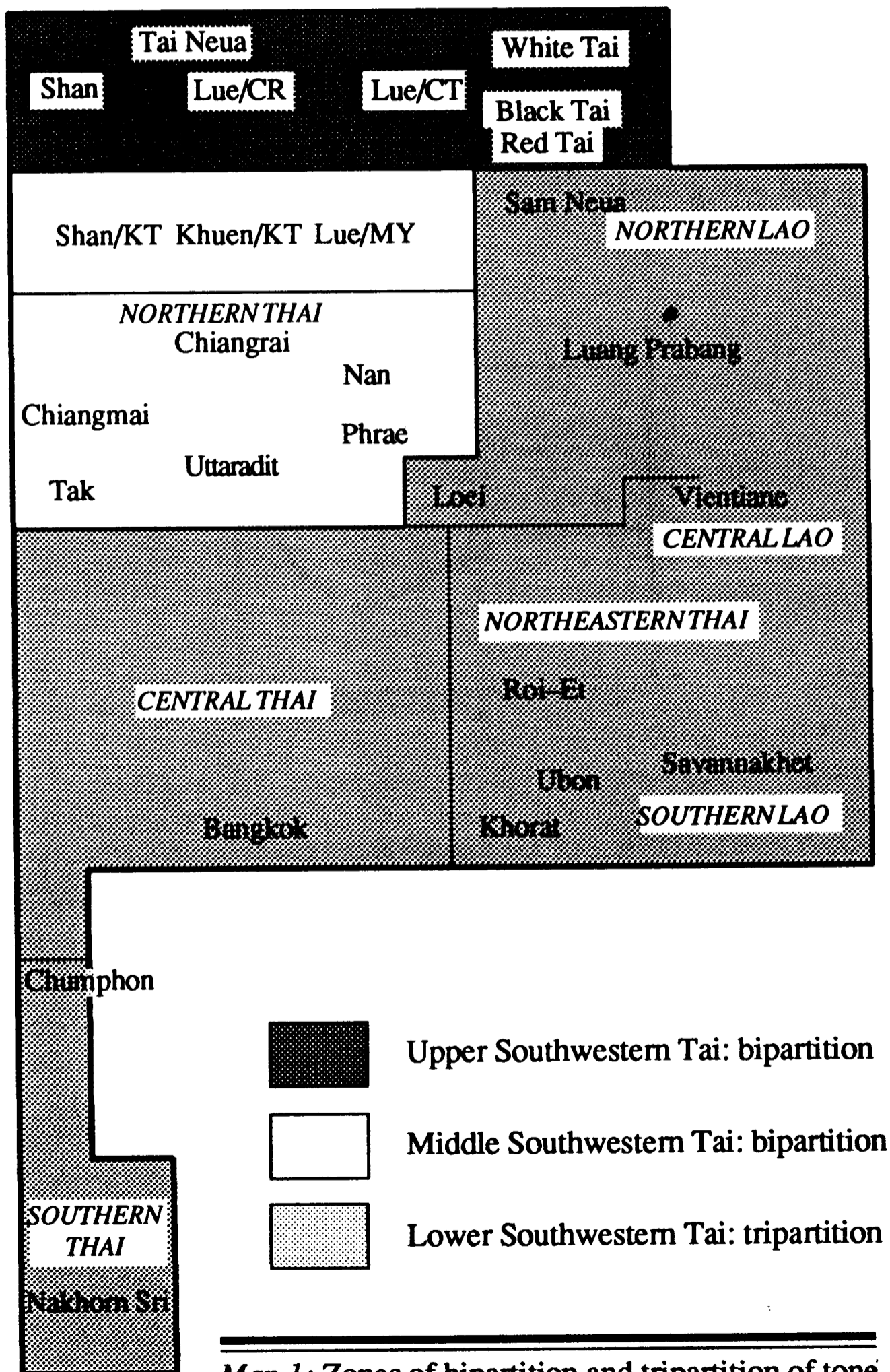

Map 1: Zones of bipartition and tripartition of tone
in Thai [adapted from Hartmann 1977/1980]

Tonal shapes

Another suggested criterion which I think might be of use in identifying which dialects belong to any of the four main regions is to look at the tone shape, or phonetic realizations of tones. In the patterns of tonal splits and coalescences above the tones represented are those on citation forms of words pronounced in isolation. But here I shift attention to tone shapes in connected speech.

During the past five years, I have been interested in listening to Thais from different localities of Thailand speaking in natural unguarded conversation among themselves. Most of them were from the central plain region of Thailand. This was unknown to me at first until they spoke for quite a while. Many of them are friends or relatives whom I already knew well, but many are just acquaintances or strangers. After listening for a while, I found that there is a distinctive tone shape which characterizes the dialects of the central region of Thailand as a whole no matter which provinces in the central region they are from. The shape of this tone is a sustained lower mid pitch with falling and rising contour at the end as shown here below.
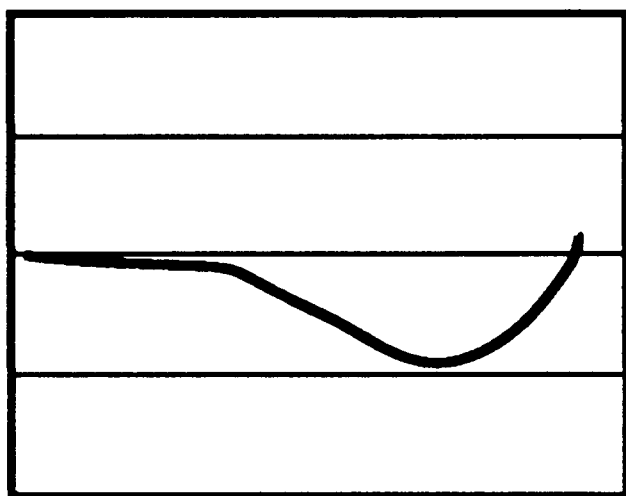
There is a slightly different degree of the rising contour at the end of this particular tone shape depending upon which different provinces the speaker is from.

It appears to me that this tone shape always occurs in the speech of people from the central region of the country, e.g., Suphanburi, Ayudhaya, Ang Thong, Nakhon Pathom, and Kanchanaburi. It also occurs in the speech of people, whose native tongues are the central dialects, speaking Standard Thai. Many of them talked to me with what they felt confident was the Bangkok Standard dialect but to me it seemed they had an 'accent'.

Whenever I heard this particular tone shape in anybody's speech, I would ask if they were from somewhere in the central provinces and the answer was always yes. So I continued to ask them questions which I thought might give me more chances to hear more words which were likely to contain this particular tone shape. It turned out every time that the words in A *ph and B— *ph *p *?b carry this tone shape, as shown in the tonal array below.

	A	B	C	DL	DS
*pʰ					
*p					
*?b					
*b					

It became clear to me that this particular tone shape of these words (in connected speech) might be used as a clue to characterize the dialects. That is, it always appears in the speech of the native speakers of the central Thai dialects or in the speech of the central Thai native speakers speaking the Bangkok Standard dialect. It enables me to identify the region where these dialects are spoken.

Since the tone shape of certain selected words can be regarded as characterizing the Thai dialects of the central region, other kinds of tone shape might be found to be characteristic of dialects from the three remaining regions. The present finding seems compatible with what patterns of tonal splits and coalescences do in characterizing the Thai dialects. Nonetheless, there is more work to be done on the tone shapes of Thai dialects in the remaining regions; namely, the northern, the northeastern, and the southern regions of Thailand, to see whether this feature can be used on its own or with other concomitant features to characterize the Thai dialects.

REFERENCES

BROWN, J.M. 1965. *From Ancient Thai to Modern Dialects*. Bangkok: Social Science Association Press of Thailand; Bangkok: White Lotus, [2]1985.

CHAMBERLAIN, J.R. 1975. A New look at the History and Classification of the Tai Languages. In *Studies in Tai linguistics in honor of W.J. Gedney*, ed. by J.G. Harris and J.R. Chamberlain. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, pp.49-66.

EGEROD, S. 1972. The Tones of Phuket and Ko Samui, a Correction. In *Tai phonetics and phonology*, ed. by J.G. Harris and R.B. Noss. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, pp. 50-1.

GEDNEY, W.J. 1972. A Checklist for determining tones in Tai dialects. In *Studies in linguistics in honor of George L. Trager*, ed. by M.E. Smith. Den Haag: Mouton, pp. 423-37.

HAAS, M. 1958. The Tones of four Tai dialects *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* [Academia Sinica] XXIX:817-26.

HARTMANN, J.F. 1977. A Model for the alignment of dialects in Southwestern Tai. *10th International Conference on Sino–Tibetan Languages and Linguistics*, Washington D.C. published in *JSS* 1980, 68.1:72-86.

HENDERSON, E.J.A. 1959. The Tones of the Tai dialect of Songkhla. *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* [Academia Sinica] XXX: 233-5.

VICHINTANA Chantabulya. 1959. The phonology of the syllable in Songkhla, a southern Thai dialect. MA Thesis. London: University of London [School of Oriental and African Studies].

VICHIN Panuphong. 1984. *Word Geography in Nakhon Ratchasima: A pilot project*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.

WANNA Pudhitanakul. 1979. *A Tonal Comparison of Dialects in Nakhorn Ratchasima Province, Thailand*. M. Phil. Thesis. London: University of London [School of Oriental and African Studies].

KALAYA Tingsabadh. 1980. *A Phonological Study of the Thai Language of Suphanburi Province*. Ph.D. Thesis. London: University of London [University College].

THERAPHAN Thongkham, et al. 1978. [*Phonetics and Phonology of a Southern Thai Dialect: Suratthani Province*] (in Thai). Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.

WANNAPORN Thongmark. *The linguistic borderline between Central Thai and Southern Thai: A lexical study*. M.A. Thesis. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.