

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 (ຄຳຜູ້ຍແສນຄູນ) 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'oih. He estimates the total number of speakers of the language at 10,000. This includes people who speak the Katang-Ta'oih dialect.

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

/p/	ປ	/t/	ຕ	/c/	ຈ	/k/	ກ	/ŋ/	ອ
		/th/	ທ			/kh/	ຄ		
/b/	ບ	/d/	ດ						
/m/	ມ	/n/	ນ	/nh/	ຍ	/ng/	ງ		
						/h/	ຮ		
		/s/	ຊ						
		/ʃ/	ຊ						
/w/	ວ	/r/	ຮ	/y/	ຢ				
				/ŋy/	ຣ				

Examples of initial single consonant phonemes:

/p/ puut ປູດ 'many, much'

/t/ tee ຕ 'hand'

/c/ caa ຈາ 'to eat'

/k/ kəw ກົວ 'I'

/ŋ/ ŋaak ອາກ 'raven'

/th/ thuum ທູນ 'fragrant'

/kh/ khəʔ ຄາະ 'must'

/b/ bic ບິຈ 'to lie down'

/n/ nar ນັຮ 'wing'

/nh/ nhong ນ້ອງ 'we two'

/ng/ ngaay ງາຍ 'they'

/s/ səʔ ຮຸ້ຮ 'to go up'

/ʃ/ loh ລ້ອຫ 'to go out'

/r/ rong ຣົງ 'boat'

/w/ weel ວລ 'village'

/y/ yəʔ ຢໍ 'to forbid'

/d/ dung ດູງ ‘house’
/m/ mat ມັດ ‘eye’

/h/ həəy ເຮີຍ ‘to know’
/ɲy/ ɲyɔɔʔ ຮໍ້ ‘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 /ɲy/ contrast. There are many examples of both /y/ and /ɲy/, even some minimal pairs. Lao does not have /ɲy/, so we decided to use ຮ for /ɲy/.

B. Initial consonant clusters

/pr/ ປຣ	/tr/ ຕຣ	/cr/ ຈຣ	/kr/ ກຣ
/pl/ ປລ			/kl/ ກລ
	/sr/ ຊຣ		

Examples:

/pr/ prah ປຣັຫ ‘sky’	/pl/ pləə ປເລີ ‘head’
/tr/ truuh ຕຣູຫ ‘garden’	/kl/ kluung ກລູງ ‘leg’
/cr/ cruum ຈຣູມ ‘to meet, see’	/sr/ srəh ຊເຮັຫ ‘to stop raining’
/kr/ kruung ກຣູງ ‘forest, jungle’	

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

C. Prenasalised consonants

/mp/ ຫປ	/nt/ ຫຕ	/nc/ [ɲc] ຫຈ	/nk/ [ɲk] ຫກ
		/ns/ [ɲch] ຫຊ	/nkh/ [ɲkh] ຫຄ
/mb/ ຫບ			
/mpr/ ຫປຣ	/ntr/ ຫຕຣ		
/mpl/ ຫປລ			

Examples:

/mp/ mpiil ຫປີລ ‘tamarind’	/mb/ mbeen ຫເບນ ‘fishnet’
/nt/ ntɔɔʔ ຫຕ້ອຍ ‘story’	/ntr/ ntruuy ຫຕຣູຍ ‘chicken’
/nc/ ncee ຫເຈ ‘louse’	/ns/ nsoʔ ຫໂຊຮ ‘rotten’
/nk/ nkar ຫກັຣ ‘skin’	/nkh/ nkhuur ຫຄູຣູງ ‘snoring sound’
/mpr/ mprɔɔm ຫປຣອມ ‘to be willing to’	/mpl/ mplat ຫປລັດ ‘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'uaih 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 /*nh*/ only occurs once, and that in an onomatopoeia.

4. /*ns*/ [ɲch] is spelled with Lao /*ns*/. This is because Lao has no aspirated /*ch*/ and Ta'uaih has no /*ns*/, so the Lao symbol for /*ns*/ is free to be used for Ta'uaih.

D. Final consonants

/p/ ບ	/t/ ດ	/c/ ຈ	/k/ ກ	/ʔ/ (see below)
/m/ ມ	/n/ ນ	/nh/[ɲ] ບຍ	/ng/[ŋ] ງ	/mʔ, nʔ, ngʔ/ (see below)
	/s/ [ç, ʃ] ສ			
	/l/ ລ			/lʔ/ (see below)
	/r/ ຣ			
/w/ ວ		/y/ ບ		/h/ ຫ
			/yʔ/	/wʔ/ (see below)

Examples:

/p/ dɯp ດິບ 'belly'	/l/ weel ເວລ 'village'
/t/ kat ກັດ 'to bite'	/ʔ/ tilʔ wilʔ ຕິລວິລ 'very small'
/k/ tak ຕັກ 'to do'	/r/ ʔeer ເອຣ 'to sleep'
/l/ taaʔ ຕ້າ 'iron'	/w/ kaw ເກົວ 'I'
/m/ hɔəm ເຮັມ 'to see'	/y/ waay ວາຍ 'to cut (grass)'
/n/ kan ກັນ 'female'	/yʔ/ ʔəyʔ ເອ້ຍ 'all'
/nh/ penh ແປ້ຍຍ 'to be full'	/h/ loh ລ້ອຫ 'to go out'
/ng/ seng ເຊັງ 'to hear'	/s/ krus ກຣິສ 'large'
/nʔ/ ʔəɔnʔ ເອ້ນ 'again, other'	/ngʔ/ tongʔyongʔ ຕ້ອງຍ້ອງ 'very straight'
/wʔ/ lal liawʔ ລັລລ້ຽວ 'to implore'	/mʔ/ leemʔ ເລັມ 'tiger'

Notes on final consonants:

1. /ʔ/ will be written in different ways. Short vowels follow the Lao writing system, e.g. /lɛʔ/ 'not' ແລະ, /praʔ/ 'silver' ປຣະ. However, Lao does not have /ʔ/ following long vowels. Khampui has in his stories consistently indicated this final /ʔ/ with the tone 2 mark: ໄມ້ໂທ (maay thoo), as in taaʔ ຕ້າ 'iron'. We need to check with other Ta'uaih people to see if they like this.

2. Because final /h/ is a non-Lao sound Khamphui first wanted to write it as ະຫ as in /prah/ 'sky' and /koh/ 'land', ປຣະຫ and ໂກະຫ respectively. He later opted for just ຫ, as in ປຣັຫ, ກັຫ.

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

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

palatal sibilant [ʃ], following vowels *u*, *ɨ* and *ia*
palatal flat fricative [ç], 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 /yʔ/, /mʔ/, /nʔ/, /ngʔ/, /lʔ/ and /wʔ/. Watson's notes (1975) from a workshop in Laos also mention /rʔ/. These sounds had been consistently written by Khamphui with the Lao tone 2 (as with final /l/ after long vowels), but in his alphabet he used a tilde instead. He said that they were different from final /l/ 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'uaih 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

/i/ ^{◌̂}	/i:/ ^{◌̂}	/ɨ/ ^{◌̂}	/ɨ:/ ^{◌̂}	/u/ ^{◌̂}	/u:/ ^{◌̂}
/e/ ະ-ະ	/e:/ ະ	/ə/ ຶ-ິ	/ə:/ ຶ	/o/ ື-ອ	/o:/ ື
/ɛ/ ຸ-ະ	/ɛ:/ ຸ	/a/ ັ-າ	/a:/ ັ	/ɔ/ ູ-ອ	/ɔ:/ ູ

diphthongs:	/ia/	-ຶ- ະ-ຍ	interconsonantly without final consonant
	/ua/	-ວ- ວ	interconsonantly without final consonant

Examples:

/i/ bic ບິຈ 'to lie down'	/o/ rot ຣົດ 'to be evil'
/i:/ pi:c ປິຈ 'difficult'	/o:/ ho:t ໂຮດ 'to blow (pipe)'
/ɨ/ hakɨm ຮາກິມ 'to put into fire'	/ɛ/ le? ແລະ 'not'
/ɨ:/ tɨ:m ຕິມ 'damp, cool'	/ɛ:/ le:ʔ ແລ້ 'tired'
/u/ karrung ກັຣຸງ 'clump of grass'	/a/ kat ກັດ 'to bite'
/u:/ kru:ng ກຣຸງ 'forest, jungle'	/a:/ ka:t ກາດ 'to burn'
/e/ seng ເຊງ 'to hear'	/ɔ/ song ຊ້ອງ 'a long grass'
/e:/ keeng ເກງ 'shore, bank'	/ɔ:/ lo:ng ລອງ 'wood, tree'
/ə/ kət ກິດ 'cubit'	/ia/ rias ຣຽສ 'root'
/ə:/ kə:t ກິດ 'to be, be born'	/ua/ buas ບວສ 'to be deaf'

Notes on vowels:

1. The vowels presented few problems orthographically because Lao has the same simple vowels, except for short /ɒ/. We felt that the natural Lao way to write /ɒ/ would be as in ຍ້ອງ /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: ɿ when interconsonantal, and ɛ-ʊ 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 -າ, 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*, *ʔa*, *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/ ປາຈິຫ ‘to call, give name’	/haʔeek/ ຮາເອກ ‘to feel sorry for’
/taməhʔ/ ຕາເມີຫ ‘to ask’	/ngahaang/ ງາຮາງ ‘bone’
/katas/ ກາຕັສ ‘to answer’	/manaʔ/ ມາມະ ‘one person (Cl.)’
ʔaməh/ ອາເມີຫ ‘what’	

2. CaC

This vowel is shorter than the Ca presyllable vowel and we are writing it with ă. 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/ ປັຣລາ ‘between’	
/parmong/ ປັຣມົງ ‘life’	cf. /mong/ ມົງ ‘fresh, to be alive’

/tarlah/ ຕັຣລັຫ ‘side’	
/carraw/ ຈັຣເຣົາ ‘an offering’	cf. /craw/ ຈເຣົາ ‘to offer’
/karnaa/ ກັຣນາ ‘road’	
/harngas/ ຮັຣງັສ ‘thoughts’	cf. /hangas/ ຮາງັສ ‘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-*, *lal-*, *taw-*.

They occur only before identical *l* or *w*.

Examples:

/pallong/ ປັລລັອງ (Classifier for ribs)	
/pallək/ ປັລລິກ ‘to waft up’	cf. pək ປິກ ‘a smell’
/tallaa/ ຕັລລາ ‘to move, wriggle’	
/talliing/ ຕັລລິງ ‘on top of’	
/kalləs/ ກັລລິສ ‘time, when’	
/kallung/ ກັລລຸງ ‘in, inside’	
/lalluut/ ລັລລູດ ‘to crawl’	
/tawwiing/ ຕົາວິງ ‘to give in return’	cf. /tawiing/ ຕາວິງ ‘to return (trans.)’

2.3. CaN

2.3.1. CaN, where N can be *n* or *m*

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:

/pannəən/ ປັນເນິນ ‘price, worth’	
/pandat/ ປັນດັດ ‘to extinguish’	cf. /dat/ ດັດ ‘to wipe off’
/panduul/ ປັນດູລ ‘a roof’	
/kannoh/ ກັນນ້ອຫ ‘other’	
/tammɛ?/ ຕາມແມະ ‘new’	
/tammok/ ຕາມ້ອກ ‘evil spirit’	
/hammɔm?/ ຮາມ້ອມ ‘to offer, sacrifice’	
/hambak/ ຮາມັກ ‘to wound’	

That the analysis of the presyllable is not yet round shows in the following examples (of the infix -an-):

/cannual/ ឆ័ររវល ‘hard work’	cf. /cual/ គុល ‘to work hard??’
/cannak/ ឆ័ររក ‘body’	cf. /cak/ គក ‘body’
/canoo/ គណ ‘return leg’	cf. /coo/ គួ ‘to return home’

2.3.2. CaNN

CaNN is a subtype of CaN- before prenasalised 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/ ភាគបលែប ‘to turn upside down’	
/kanntəə/ ក្រមតោ ‘to sing’	
/kanhnhceet/ ក្រមតចេត ‘to kill’	cf. /kaceet/ កាចេត ‘to die’
/tammpool/ តាមប៉ូល (Clf. for large objects)	
/tanhnhcəng/ តាមតងឡ ‘heel’	
/tangngko?/ តាងកខ ‘beginning; boss; man’	cf. /tako?/ តាកខ ‘to begin’
/panntuur/ ប៉ងតួរ ‘stars’	
/panntuəm/ ប៉ងតឹម ‘cause to be moist’	cf. /tuəm/ តឹម ‘to be moist’
/panhnhchoom/ ប៉ងតគួម ‘to gather’	cf. /coom/ គួម ‘to gather together’ (intr.)
/pangngkraa/ ប៉ងករា ‘to rule, govern’	
/hammpenh/ ហាមប៉ង ‘cause to be full’	cf. /penh/ ប៉ង ‘to be full’
/hanntong/ ហងតឺង ‘vegetables’	
/hangngkat/ ហងកាត ‘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:

/traʔɔɔʔɔɔ/ ຕຣາອອລງ 'to talk to eachother' cf. /ʔɔɔ/ ອອລ 'to say'
 /trahəəyhəəy/ ຕຣາເຮີຍງ 'to understand eachother' cf. /həəy/ ເຮີຍ 'to know'
 /tranguh/ ຕຣາງູຫ 'breath, heart'
 /traməng/ ຕຣາມິງ 'to oppose, rebel'
 /traʔəəʔ/ ຕຣາເອີ 'to agree'

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 Bangkok 10400,
 Thailand
