

Title of contribution

Laos – Language situation

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Abstract

Laos features a high level of linguistic diversity, with more than 70 languages from four different major language families (Tai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, Tibeto-Burman). Mon-Khmer languages were spoken in Laos earlier than other languages, with incoming migrations by Tai speakers (c. 2000 years ago) and Hmong-Mien speakers (c. 200 years ago). There is widespread language contact and multilingualism in upland minority communities, while lowland-dwelling Lao speakers are largely monolingual. Lao is the official national language. Most minority languages are endangered, with a few exceptions (notably Hmong and Kmhmu). There has been relatively little linguistic research on languages of Laos, due to problems of both infrastructure and administration.

Main body of text

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) is home to languages from at least four different 'genetic' groups: Tai (Southwestern and Northern branches), Mon-Khmer (Bahnaric, Katuic, Vietic, Khmuic and Palaungic branches), Hmong-Mien (Hmongic and Mienic branches), and Tibeto-Burman (Lolo-Burmese branch). The precise number of languages spoken in the country is not known, due mainly to a lack of empirical data. Estimates vary between around 70 and around 120 distinct languages (Ethnologue 2004 lists 82). For a country of its size (smaller than the UK) and population (less than 5 million), Laos features a very high degree of linguistic diversity in global terms. This diversity is greatest in the country's hill and mountain areas, which account for some 70% of the land mass. Flatter stretches of land along rivers (especially along the Mekong River) are dominated by speakers of Lao.

Historical background

Mon-Khmer languages appear to have been spoken in Laos longer than languages of other families. They show greater geographical spread and greater internal diversity. This is particularly apparent among languages of the Vietic, Katuic, and Bahnaric sub-groups spoken throughout upland areas of the country's South. Many of these languages are near extinction, with very few remaining speakers (e.g. Thémarou, with only a couple of dozen speakers). Other languages, while small, are still being learned by children (e.g. Tariang with c. 4000 speakers), although none show the vibrancy of the Northern Mon-Khmer language Kmhmu, with some three

hundred thousand speakers throughout Northern Laos. Tai languages such as Lao have their origins in Southwestward migrations of Tai speakers from Southwestern China beginning some 2000 years ago (Enfield 2003:47-50). Like their modern descendants, these incoming Tai speakers were in search of flat riverside land ideal for their trademark 'ditch-dike' system of wet-rice cultivation. The success of Tai languages and their speakers is attested by their present dominance of the region, with Lao the official national language of Laos (Enfield 1999), spoken as a first language by around half the population (more than two million people). (There are also approximately 20 million residents of Northeast Thailand whose native dialects are closely related to Lao.) Hmong-Mien speakers are the newest arrivals in Laos, descended from migrants coming southwards from China within the last two hundred years (Culas and Michaud 2004).

Language contact, sociolinguistics, multilingualism

Laos's high degree of linguistic diversity results in intensive language contact in most parts of the country. Upland peoples maintain structured social relations across ethnicities and language backgrounds, and are normally multilingual. By contrast, lowland-dwelling people of Lao ethnicity tend to be monolingual. Some minority languages serve as contact languages within restricted upland areas. For example, Ngkriang (Ngeq) is used in interaction among several Katuic ethnic groups in isolated Kalum District, Sekong Province.

Lao is the official language of administration, education, and major economic activity, and hence all minority communities have regular contact with Lao. Minority men are often more skilled than women and children in speaking Lao, due to greater contact with the language, for example during military service. Official promotion of Lao as a national language is served in part by the development of Lao language media and education, but this is slow thanks to the country's very weak infrastructure. Authorities widely encourage (and occasionally force) migration by minority peoples from upland areas to more accessible lowlands, ostensibly to ease the burden of social development in this poor nation. Internal migration is widespread, and in many cases this accelerates the process of attrition and loss of minority languages, due to division of already fragile speech communities and their resettlement together with speakers of other languages, in closer contact with the Lao-speaking world. The result is widespread and rapid shift to Lao.

The two most prominent and vibrant minority languages of Laos are Hmong and Kmhmu, both spoken by large populations mainly in Northern Laos. Hmong speakers in particular show no signs of abandoning their language in favor of Lao. Hmong has a roman orthography which is taught unofficially and is in widespread use in Hmong society (e.g. in advertising, development, private correspondence, etc.). This contravenes the Lao government's official stipulation that no minority language is to be written in any orthography other than the Indic-based Lao script.

International languages with a significant presence in Laos include Thai and Vietnamese. Laos's longest borders are with Thailand to the West and Vietnam to the East. Lowland communities along the Mekong River are in intensive contact with Thai via electronic media, as well as through seasonal migration of Lao workers to Thailand. Thai and Lao are essentially dialects, making Thai especially

accessible to Lao speakers. Vietnamese is less widely spoken as a second language (despite large urban communities of expatriate Vietnamese in the lowlands), but is used for economic purposes by many minority peoples living along the Vietnamese border. Through the colonial period 1893-1954 (Evans 2002), French was widely used in national education and administration. The use of French as an international language has since steadily diminished in favor of English.

Linguistic research and reference materials

Comparatively little scientific research has been conducted on the languages of Laos. Descriptive studies of Lao include traditional European style grammars (e.g. Hospitalier 1937, RLG 1972, Reinhorn 1980), dictionaries (Kerr 1970, Reinhorn 1970, Rehbein and Sayaseng 2000), pedagogical materials (e.g. Yates and Sayasithsena 1970, Hoshino and Marcus 1981), and work of a more technical linguistic nature (e.g. Roffe 1946, Morev et al 1972, Crisfield 1978, Wayland 1996, Osatananda 1997, Enfield 2003, 2005). Available research on minority languages includes dictionaries (e.g. Lindell et al 1994, Preisig et al 1994 [Kmhmu]; Ferlus 1999 [Nhaheun]), text collections (e.g. Costello and IRLCS 1993 [Katu]), grammatical descriptions (e.g. Jacq in press [Jruq]; Enfield 2004 [Kri]), comparative word lists (e.g. Kingsada and Shintani 1999, Wright 2003), and historical-comparative work (e.g. Diffloth 1982, Peiros 1996, Sidwell 2000, L-Thongkhum 2002). Field research on languages of Laos is hampered not only by difficulties of transport and communications, but also by severe restrictions imposed by the socialist government on research in the social sciences.

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Keywords

Lao, Laos, Tai, Hmong-Mien, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, language contact, language standardization, multilingualism.

(No artwork or annexes)

Biography

N. J. Enfield received his honors degree in Asian Studies and Linguistics at the Australian National University, Canberra (1994), and his PhD in Linguistics at the University of Melbourne (2000). He has been a member of the scientific staff of the Language and Cognition Group, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, since 2000. His research interests include linguistics of Laos and mainland Southeast Asia, the semantics-pragmatics relationship, and the relation between language, cognition, and culture in face-to-face interaction. Publications include *Ethnosyntax* (editor, 2002), *Linguistic Epidemiology* (2003), and numerous journal articles.

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