

The Differential Development of **r* in Lao and Thai
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1) Traditional scholarship assumes that disyllables appeared in Lao only as late loan borrowings, and therefore did not undergo the change of **r*- > *h*- that affected monosyllabic forms around 1500 CE (*rim* ‘edge, shore’ > *him*; *rak* ‘to love’ > *hak*, etc.). The present paper considers a scenario whereby early disyllables containing *r* might have been present at the time of the change, but remained unaffected. It is plausible that *r* originally had two positional variants, a more aspirated and robustly trilled allophone ([r̥]) that occurred initially in monosyllabic words, and a less aspirated allophone with a short trill or a flap ([r̥]) that occurred word-medially and word-initially in weakly stressed position. Through two regular sound changes that have analogues in other languages, the more aspirated and robustly trilled allophone of *r* merged with *h* (**rao* > *hao* ‘we’), and the less aspirated flapped allophone of *r* later merged with *l* medially (**sāmrĕt* > *sāmlĕt* ‘to complete, to succeed’) and in word-initial position in disyllabic words (**rawaaŋ* > *lawaaŋ* ‘between’) where the initial syllable was weakly stressed. Standard Thai also inherited PSWT **r*, and preserves it normatively, but colloquial varieties of Thai have meanwhile undergone a parallel but modern and unconditioned, merger of *r* and *l* that was not sensitive to stress patterns or position in a word. Both developments may illustrate different kinds of perceptually based sound changes of the sort identified by Blevins (2004: 32-33).

2) Purpose of this paper: To compare and contrast the developments of PSW Tai **r* in Lao and Thai and to explore a hypothetical alternative to the standard view that *r*-initial disyllables did not exist at all at earlier stages of Lao.

3) Standard View: PSW Tai had only monosyllabic words (and compounds consisting of monosyllabic words). Disyllabic words were not introduced into Lao until after 1500. While initial *r*- in Lao monosyllables became *h*- (*rim* > *him* ‘edge, shore’), disyllabic words (from Khmer and other sources) containing syllable-initial *r*- arrived in Lao too late to be affected by this change (**sāmrĕt* > *sāmlĕt* ‘to complete, to succeed’, **rawaaŋ* > *lawaaŋ* ‘between’).

4) Unanswered questions:

- a) Did initial *Cr*- clusters remain extant in earlier stage of Lao or reduce to *C* early on? Did they pass through a phase of *Cr*- > *Cl*- > *C*- similar to the modern Thai developments?
- b) Did *r* cease to exist in earlier stages of Lao until it was reintroduced in later loan borrowings (from Khmer, Thai and elsewhere), or was initial *r*- in such loans realized immediately as *l* (**rōok* > *lōok* ‘disease’), since *l* would have been the only liquid in the language.
- c) Was the use of the grapheme <ᵛ> in early Lao texts motivated exclusively by orthographic and prescriptive conventions common in Buddhist and other early writings?
- d) Varasarin indicates that the Khmer initial clusters *sk*, *st*, *sd*, *sp*, *sb*, *sn*, *sn*, *sm*, *sv* and others triggered insertion of an epenthetic vowel in Thai (359 ff.) (*sa*-). The borrowing of these forms would have triggered the development of many disyllabic forms.
- e) Given the early and long interaction of Mon, Khmer, and Thai speakers, could disyllabic loans have crept into Thai prior to 1400 and have arrived in Lao and in closely related varieties (Lanna Thai) prior to the change of initial *r*- > *h*- that underwent a similar change? Disyllabic forms may not occur in the written record, or were recorded graphemically as if they were monosyllables.

5) Proto-Tai *r was likely a ‘tongue-tip vibrant or trill, which probably required strong breath to achieve’ (Li 1977:142).

6) Table 1: *r in Initial Position in Monosyllabic Words (including Khmer loan words). (Thai forms on left represent the earlier stage.)

rim	hím	edge, shore
ríip	híip	to hurry
rian	hían	to learn
reɛŋ	héɛŋ	to start
râi	hai	field
rao	háo	we
rang	háng	nest
rak	hak	to love
rôŋ	hōŋ	furrow, ditch
rón	hôn	hot
rôm	hom	shade
rɯa	húa	boat

Table 2: *r in Disyllables (medial and initial position)

gamrai	gàmlái	profit
samrap	sămlăp	for
samret	sămlět	succeed
thura	thula	business, work
seerii	seelii	free
sara	sala	vowel

tamrùat	tàmlùat	policeman
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rábàat	labàat	to spread
rábiaŋ	labiaŋ	balcony
rábïap	labïap	in order
rábèət	labèət	to explode
rádòp	laböp	system
rádàp	ladăp	level, stage
rádom	ladòm	to persuade
rákəŋ	lakákəŋ	bell
ránâat	lanâat	xylophone
rálúk-dâai	lanək	to recollect
ráwàəŋ	lawaaŋ	between
ráwəŋ	lawəŋ	danger, watch out
ráwɛəŋ	lawéəŋ	to suspect, doubt
raakaa	láakáa	price
raəŋwan	láəŋwán	reward, prize
ráyá	láinya	distance

7) Generalization based on modern data:

A. In word-initial position in monosyllabic words, Proto-Tai *r surfaces as *h* (where it was in word-initial position in a stressed syllable.)

and,

B. Elsewhere: *r > l (where *r was in word-initial position in a weakly stressed syllable, or in medial position regardless of the stress placement in the word.)

8) The Lao letter ᨾ <h> (ᨾᨾ ᨾᨾ) came about to write instances of initial *h* that derive from Proto-Tai **r* back about 1550 CE. The evolution of this new grapheme suggests that the merger of *r* with *h* initially in monosyllabic words may have already been complete by that time. Similarly, the evidence of early 20th century Lao-French lexica demonstrates that the remaining reflexes of **r* had already merged with *l* by the late 19th century (Cuaz 1904, Guignard 1912).

9) *r*- > *h*- occurs in SE Asia (Hayes 1982; Wayland, Ratre & Guion. 2005), in Brazilian Portuguese (Blust 1983). In Puerto Rican dialects *r*- > *x*- in initial position, *r*- > *l* medially (Hock 1991).

10) Word Stress in Thai and Lao:

Lao has non-distinctive lexical stress similar to Thai (Enfield (2007). Stress in a polysyllabic words falls on the final syllable. The second syllable of a disyllabic Thai word carries ‘normal’ stress, while the preceding syllable has ‘weak’ stress (*sāabaan* ‘swear’, *kanwon* ‘worry’). In polysyllabic words of three or more syllables, stress always occurs on the final syllable as in *prachaachon* ‘populace’, *thaleesaap* ‘lake’, and *thanaakhaan* ‘bank’ (Peyasantiwong 1986:214-215, Luksaneeyanawin 1998:376). Thus, **rV*- initial syllables are weakly stressed in polysyllabic words.

11) Blevins’ framework recognizes a general typology of sound change that consists of three types of reanalysis she calls CHANGE, CHANCE, and CHOICE. (The terms CHANGE, CHOICE, and CHANCE are written with small capitals to distinguish these technical terms from their common usages.)

(S = speaker, L = listener)

- i. CHANGE: The phonetic signal is misheard by the listener due to perceptual similarities of the actual utterance with the perceived utterance.

Example: S says [anpa]

L hears [ampa]

- ii. CHANCE: The phonetic signal is accurately perceived by the listener but is intrinsically phonologically ambiguous, and the listener associates a phonological form with the utterance which differs from the phonological form in the speaker’s grammar.

Example: S says [ʔaʔ] for /aʔ/

L hears [[ʔaʔ] and assumes [ʔa]

- iii. CHOICE: Multiple phonetic signals representing variants of a single phonological form are accurately perceived by the listener, and, due to this variation, the listener (a) acquires a prototype or best exemplar of a phonetic category which differs from that of the speaker, and/or (b) associates a phonological form with the set of variants which differs from the phonological form in the speaker’s grammar.

Example: S says [kakáta], [kǎkáta], [kkáta] for /kakata/

L hears [kkáta], [kǎkáta], [kakáta] and assumes /kkata/

(Blevins 2004: 32-33)

12) Conclusion: The standard view that Lao did not possess any disyllabic words until after about 1550 should not be discarded lightly, because it provides the most parsimonious explanation of why modern Lao disyllables have initial *l* < **r* (instead of *h*). If evidence of early Lao disyllables someday emerges, the present paper suggests a way to modify the standard account to explain how *r*- initial disyllables could have avoided the change of *r*- > *h*- in Lao to later emerge as *l*. In any case, the merger of *l* and *r* in modern Thai appears

to be a case of what Blevins calls CHANGE, while the Lao developments fall under her rubric of CHOICE.

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