

On the Tone derived from Proto SWT DL with Final -k in Phu Tai, Tai Dam and Nyo

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1. Background

It is well known that proto-forms in checked long syllables with -k coda become checked short with -ʔ coda in Phu Tai, Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Khao (White Tai) and Nyo. For example :

gloss	Siamese	Phu Tai	Tai Dam	Tai Khao	Nyo
to expose to sun	taak	taʔ	taʔ	taʔ	taak
cow's hump	nɔk	nɔʔ	nɔʔ	nɔʔ	nɔk
land leech	thaak	thaʔ	taʔ	ta	thaʔ
outside	nɔk	nɔʔ	nɔʔ	nɔ	nɔʔ

But their tonal characteristics have been rarely mentioned.

2. Difficulty in assigning their tones

2.1 Phu Tai

Their tones behave differently from the tones in checked long syllables with other codas. For example :

'to carry on a pole'	haap	mid-falling tone
'sunlight'	dɛet	mid-falling tone
'to expose to sun'	taʔ	high-level glottalized
'root'	haʔ	high-level glottalized

When the author started eliciting data from Phu Tai informants, he got very confused how to designate their tones. Should it be assigned the same tone as in other DL or DS ?

In her pioneer book on PAASAA PHUTAI, Wilaiwan Khanitthananda (1977) designated the same tone as in others from DL and some the same tone as that from DS. For example :

‘to carry on a pole’	haap ³	(DL1)- mid-falling
‘root’	haɿ ³	
‘vegetable’	phak ⁵	(DS1)- high-rising
‘flower’	doɿ ⁵	

I have found this inconsistency appeared either in some M.A. students’ theses about Phu Tai and Lao Song (Tai Dam in Thailand)

2.2 Tai Dam

In my field note on Tai Dam from Muong Mua (Mai Son- Vietnam), the tones of etyma from *DL with -k coda behave the same as in Phu Tai that is “high level glottalized” and always short.

But in Gedney’s article “A Comparative Sketch of White, Black and Red Tai”, he says :

On checked syllables Black Tai has

2. high rising : sip² ‘ten’, boɿ² ‘flower’

5. level, slightly higher than mid : mot⁵ ‘ant’, noɿ⁵ ‘outside’ On syllables with diphthong or long vowel there is a slight fall : liat⁵ ‘blood’, taaɿ⁵ ‘land leech’

It is apparent that Gedney designates Tone2 as that in DS1 (etyma from proto voiceless onset and Tone5 as that in DL2 (proto voiced onset)

2.3 Nyo

White Tai will be skipped here since the author has not any data. The Nyo also has lost its – k coda in *DL syllables, specifically the Nyo in Muang Khammuoan, Laos. It is very interesting that this happened only on the etyma derived from the origin voiced onset :

to expose to sun	taak	(proto voiceless onset)
cow's hump	nɔ̌k	(proto voiceless onset)
land leech	thaʔ	(proto voiced onset)
outside	nɔʔ	(proto voiced onset)

3. How to solve the problem ?

When the author used Gedney's Tone checklists gathering data from Phu Tai informants he usually asked for a citation form therefore he often got confused and annoyed because the informants will pronounce it sometimes with high pitch and sometimes with lower pitch.

To solve this problem the author put that form in a connected speech and he found that the syllables derived from Proto DL with - k coda behave different among Phu Tai dialects (the author has got data from 25 dialects both in Laos and in Thailand) i.e. :

3.1 in some dialects they behave like

syllables from *DL voiceless onset	>	high-level glottalized
syllables from *DL voiced onset	>	mid –level glottalized

3.2 in some dialects they behave like

syllables from *DL voiceless onset	>	high-level glottalized
syllables from *DLvoiced onset	>	high - level glottalized

3.3 in some dialects they behave like

syllables from *DL voiceless onset	>	fluctuate high and mid level
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Syllables from *DL voiced onset > fluctuate high and mid level

As for Nyo in Khammuen, it is simple :

Syllables from *DL voiced onset > mid – level glottalized

As for Tai Dam in Muang Mua, it behaves like Phu Tai in 3.1

If it is mid level glottalized , the author will designate their tone the same as that of DS2 which is also mid – level.

And If it is high level glottalized, the author will designate their tone the same as that of DS1 even though he knows that there is a slight difference between them (DS1 is high- rising).

4. Can the Dead Becomes Alive ?

In Thai we call the checked syllables as “the dead syllables” and smooth syllable as “live syllables”.

Gedney (1989) had mentioned this in White Tai :

gloss	Siamese	White Tai	Black Tai
to cover	pok ²	pok ²	pok ²
to peel	pɔk ²	pɔʔ ²	pɔʔ ²
to dip out	tak ²	tak ²	tak ²
to expose to sun	taak ²	taaʔ ²	taaʔ ²
work	-	ve ⁴	viaʔ ⁵
to choose	liak ³	lə ⁴	liaʔ ⁵
to scald	luak ³	lo ⁴	luaʔ ⁵

Saying that :

"No final glottal stop appears in the transcription of White Tai words of this type having fourth tone. These sound exactly like fourth tone words with final vowel in free syllables where no earlier final stop existed; the fourth tone has automatic glottal constriction with a final glottal stop which is lost internally in a phrase, both in free syllables and in words like those in the table above. W second tone words lose their final glottal stop internally in a phrase, but in isolation words like pɔʔ2 and taaʔ2 are different from anything else, so that the glottal stop has to be written.

Attempts have been made by some students of White Tai to devise systems of Romanization (really transliterations of the White Tai writing system) in which fourth tone words with no earlier final consonant would be written without a final, while fourth tone words like those in our table above would be spelled with a final - k or - c. These attempts have resulted in constant error, since it is difficult to remember, and sometimes impossible to know, what the earlier form was."

5. The Dead in Lao Becomes Alive.

Words with short vowel and final - ʔ become smooth words in many dialects of Lao especially in Ubon Ratchathani and Maha Sarakham. For example :

gloss	Bangkok	Sakon Nakhon	Ubon Ratchathani	Maha Sarakham
to wash one's hair	saʔ (low-falling)	saʔ (high-rising)	saa (low-rising)	saa (low-rising)
to blame	tiʔ (low-falling)	tiʔ (high-rising)	tii (low-rising)	tii (low-rising)
diligent	-	duʔ(high-rising)	duu(low-rising)	duu(low-rising)

How about the dead in Phu Tai, Tai Dam and Nyo ? Yes. He is coming to tell you soon.

References

Gedney, William J. 1989. *A Comparative Sketch of White, Black and Red Tai*. In Selected Papers on Comparative Tai Studies, p. 415-463. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia. Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies. No. 29. Michigan U.

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