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# Plant-based classifiers in Tai Dam

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**Research Title:** Ethnicity: New  
Paradigm in Language and Culture  
Transmission

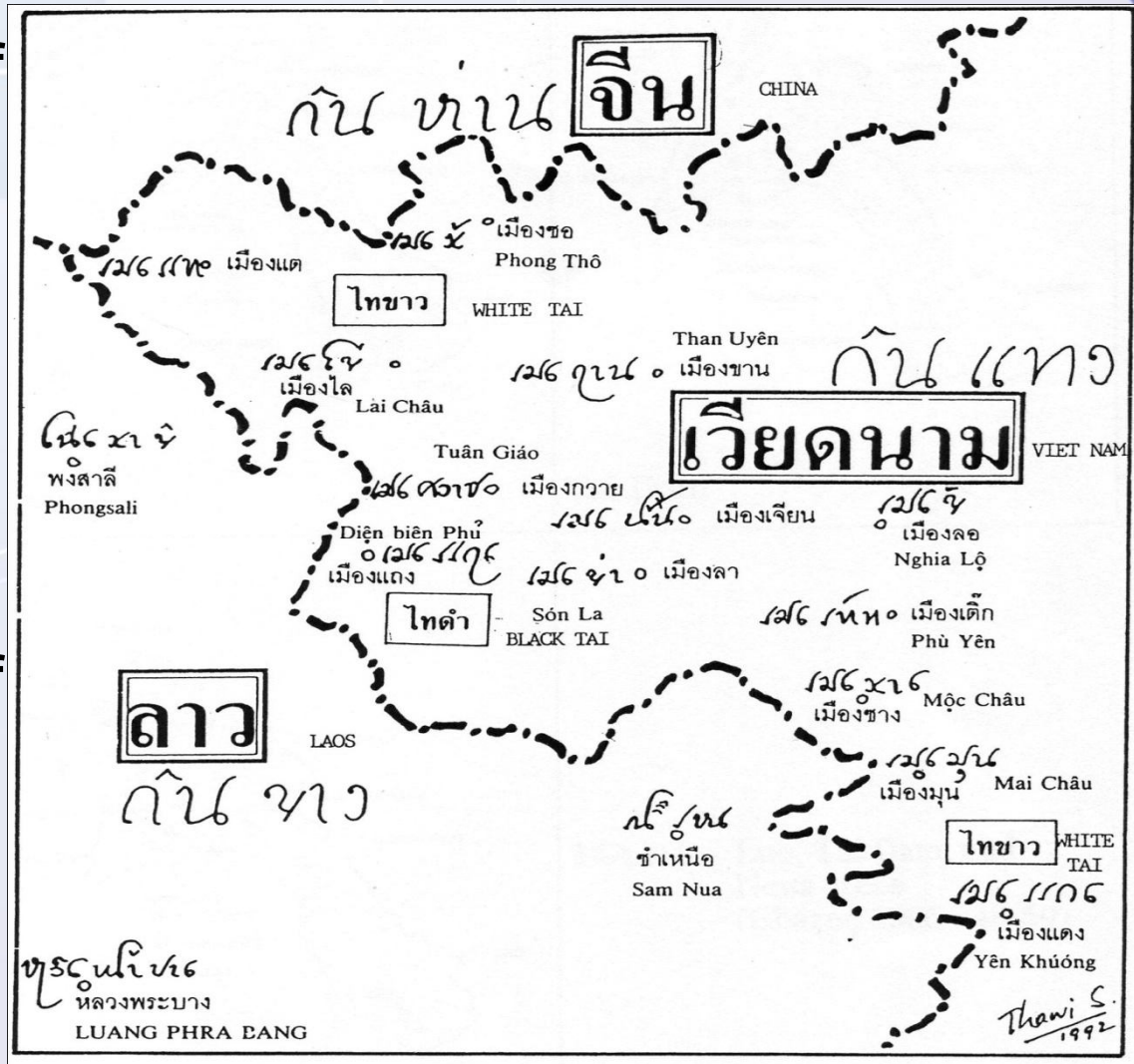
**Principle Investigator:** Somsonge  
Burusphat

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Original homeland of  
Black Tai areas  
Muang Thaeng  
(Myang Teng or Muoi),  
Sipsongchutai  
(Sipsong Chao Tai) in  
the northern part of  
Laos







**Ethnic names: Tai Dam (Black Tai),  
Lao Song, Song, Lao Song Dam, Thai Song, Thai Song Dam**







## The purposes of this paper

- To study the semantic components of classifiers derived from plant part names
- To study the metaphorical extension of plant-based classifiers



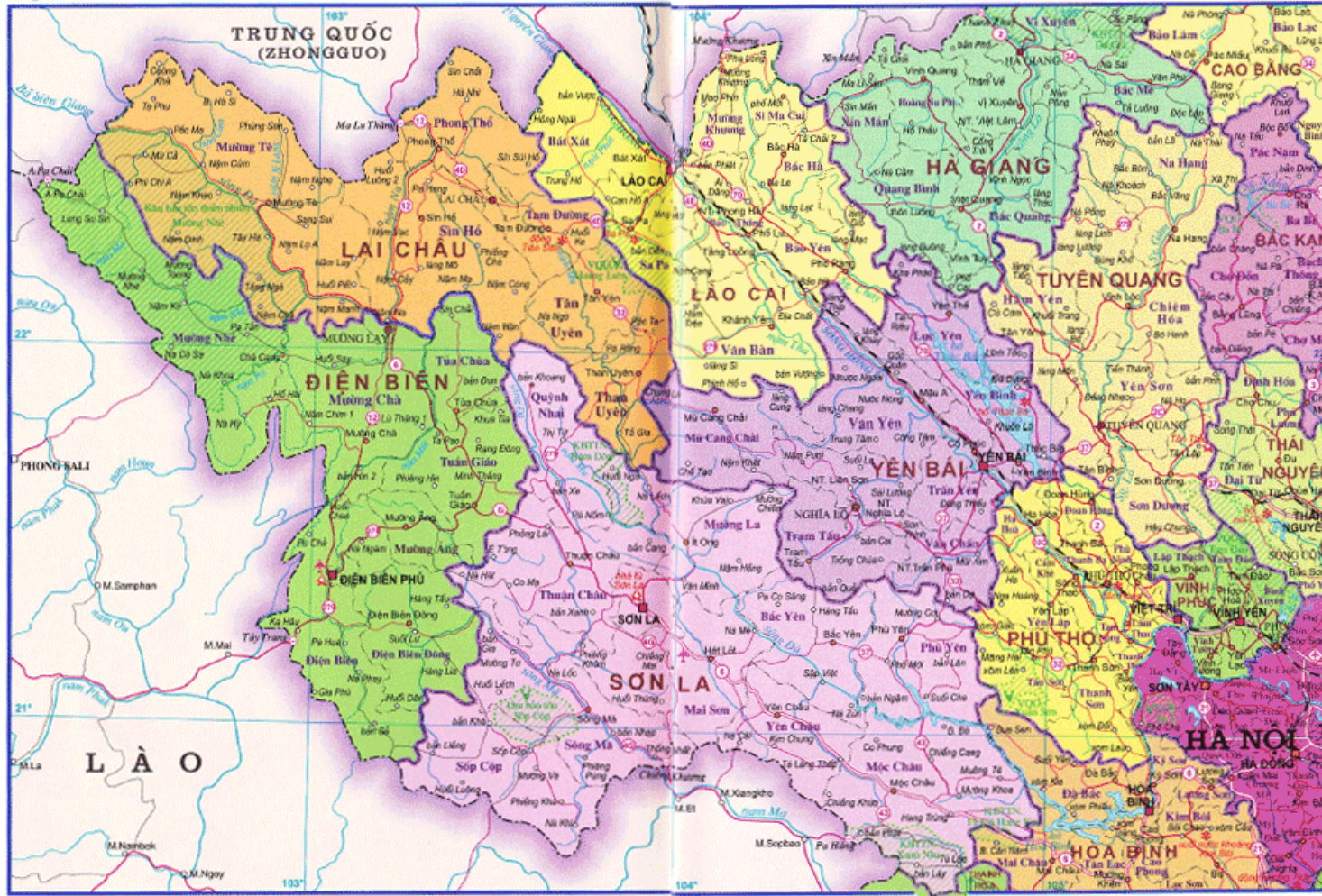
## Sources of Data

Gender	Age	Location
male (main informant)	75	Komi village, Sathaengjan, Dien Bien Phu บ้านกอมี่ สาเหตุจัน
male (main informant)	47	Thaengluang village, Sachiangtung, Son La บ้านแทงหลวง สาเหตุตุง
female	73	Komi village, Sathaengjan, Dien Bien Phu บ้านกอมี่ สาเหตุจัน
male	81	Kangna village, Nghia Lo, Yen Bai บ้านกานา เมืองลอ
female	87	Thaengsuan village, Sammuen, Dien Bien Phu บ้านแทงชวน สามหมื่น
female	47	Boong village, Saboonglaw, Dien Bien Phu บ้านบุง สาเหตุลาว
male	85	Piang village, Sanampa, It Ong (Muong La), Son La บ้านเปียง สานำป่า เมืองลา
female	62	Kangna village, Nghia Lo, Yen Bai บ้านกานา เมืองลอ





DIỆN BIÊN, LAI CHÂU, LÀO CAI, PHÚ THỌ, SƠN LA, YÊN BÁI







# Framework

- The semantic analysis of the plant-based classifiers in Tai Dam is based on the approaches proposed by: Adams and Conklin (1973), Denny (1976), Allan (1977)
- The metaphorical extension of the plant-based classifiers in Tai Dam into other semantic fields is based on the work of Conklin (1981).



# Tai classifier system

- The primary dichotomy of Tai classifier system is animate versus inanimate (Morev 2000).
- Animate classifiers are divided into human and non-human.
- The classification of inanimate nouns is mostly based on a perceptual basis, i.e., their observed characteristics like shape, size, and consistency.
- Inanimates are grouped according to their similar shapes.



# Tai classifier system

- Conklin (1981:136) points out that the geometric shapes are derived from plants, in their component parts:
  - stalk/stick,
  - leaf,
  - fruit, seed,
  - flower,
  - tuber, and shoot.





# Whole plant

**ก๑1** 'plant/tree'



**ton5** 'plant'







# Whole plant

ซำ๒ 'slender stem of a climbing plant'



ซำ๑ 'clump'







## Sticklike and stalk-like as a basis for classification

**ko1** 'stalk'



**ton4** 'a piece of wood'



**lam2** 'trunk of a tree'







## Sticklike and stalk-like as a basis for classification

lon5 ~ don5 'stick of wood'



๗๓4 'branch of tree'



kaan5 'midrib'







## Sticklike and stalk-like as a basis for classification

baŋ3 'segment of jointed stem'   plɔŋ5 'segment of jointed stem'

pen3 'board'





## Seed as a basis for classification

**mit4** 'seed'



**kɛn3** 'kernel of fruit'







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Fruit as a basis for classification

นุ๑j3 'fruit'

fak3 'pod'





## Leaf as a basis for classification



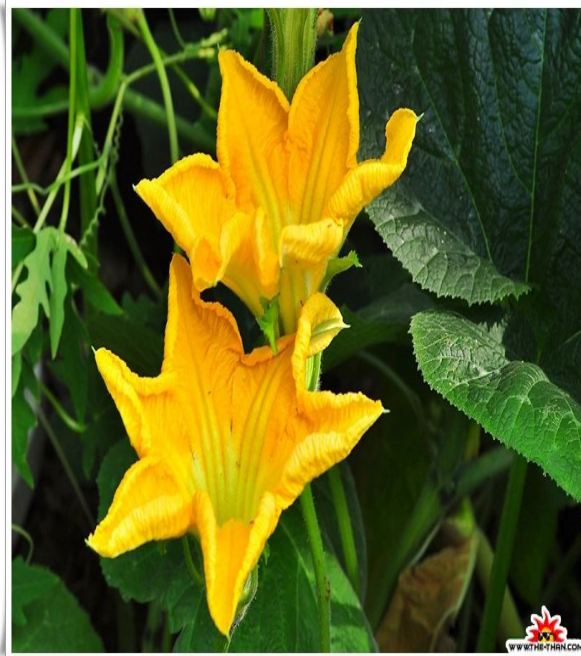
**baɯ1 'leaf'**





## Flower and sprout as a basis for classification

บอ๓ 'flower'



thu๓๓ 'sprout of mushroom'



du๓๑~ lu๓๑ 'shoot'







## Tuber and root as a basis for classification

**ban5** 'tuber'



**hua1** 'head/front'





## Metaphorical extension

Lexically plant-based	Semantic components	Non-plant entities
sum <sup>1</sup> 'clump'	whole plant, cluster	sum <sup>1</sup> puə <sup>?</sup> 'anthill, termite hill'
lon <sup>5</sup> ~ don <sup>5</sup> 'stick of wood'	round, small, rodlike	maj <sup>6</sup> th <sup>u</sup> 1k <sup>hew</sup> 5 'toothbrush' (also ?an) maj <sup>6</sup> taw <sup>6</sup> 'walking stick'
ken <sup>3</sup> 'kernel of fruit'	round, small, kernel	ken <sup>3</sup> taa <sup>1</sup> 'pupils' ken <sup>3</sup> ham <sup>1</sup> 'testicles'
nuəj <sup>3</sup> 'fruit'	round, globular, spherical	saj <sup>3</sup> 'egg' ma <sup>3</sup> pat <sup>3</sup> 'beads' ma <sup>3</sup> ket <sup>4</sup> 'botton' haj <sup>1</sup> nuŋ <sup>4</sup> k <sup>haaw</sup> 5 'small earth jar for steaming rice'
fak <sup>3</sup> 'pod'	long, pod	fak <sup>3</sup> ph <sup>haa</sup> 6 'knife sheath'



# Metaphorical extension



**kaan5** 'midrib, the stem of a leaf, a flower, or a fruit' (slender, pointed)



kaan5bu๓๓3

kaan5c๓๓5



ka:n5/ma?4but4m๓k3  
(also ma?4)

ka:n5vi1/ ka:n5bi1



ka:n5/ma?4but4ci2  
(also ma?4)



kaan5๓๓2



kaan5h๓๓๓1

kaan5h๓๓๓1



bet3/vet3



?o1hom4





## Metaphorical extension

Lexically plant-based	Semantic components	Non-plant entities
<b>ban</b> <sup>3</sup> ‘segment of jointed stem’	segment, hollow, open ends	<b>ban</b> <sup>3</sup> <b>fum</b> <sup>2</sup> ‘reed of a loom’ (also <b>k</b> <sup>h</sup> <b>an</b> <sup>5</sup> ) <b>huə</b> <sup>2</sup> ‘boat’ <b>se</b> <sup>1</sup> <b>kwaaj</b> <sup>2</sup> <b>la</b> <sup>4</sup> ‘buffalo cart’ <b>se</b> <sup>1</sup> <b>dap</b> <sup>4</sup> ‘bicycle’ <b>se</b> <sup>1</sup> <b>maj</b> <sup>4</sup> ‘motorcycle’ <b>ban</b> <sup>3</sup> <b>ʔo</b> <sup>1</sup> <b>to</b> <sup>1</sup> ‘car’ <b>ban</b> <sup>3</sup> <b>se</b> <sup>1</sup> <b>bin</b> <sup>1</sup> ‘air plane’



# Metaphorical extension

Lexically plant-based	Semantic components	Non-plant entities
<b>baw<sup>1</sup></b> ‘leave’	flexible, flat, sheet-like	cia <sup>1</sup> ‘paper’ be <sup>3</sup> c <sup>h</sup> ε <sup>2</sup> ‘ticket’ (also <b>be<sup>3</sup></b> ) baw <sup>1</sup> ηən <sup>1</sup> ‘bank note’ baw <sup>1</sup> doη <sup>5</sup> ‘winnowing basket’ (also <b>k<sup>h</sup>aη<sup>5</sup></b> ) kup <sup>3</sup> ‘hat’ le <sup>3</sup> k <sup>h</sup> aaw <sup>5</sup> ‘plate’ (also <b>le<sup>3</sup></b> ) thuj <sup>5</sup> ‘bowl’
<b>duəη<sup>1</sup>~ luəη<sup>1</sup></b> ‘shoot’	shoot	duəη <sup>1</sup> mə <sup>5</sup> ‘pot’ mə <sup>5</sup> k <sup>h</sup> uə <sup>4</sup> ‘pan’ daw <sup>1</sup> ‘star’ ta <sup>3</sup> wen <sup>2</sup> ‘sun’ buəη <sup>1</sup> ‘moon’





## Discussions

The classification of entities with plant-part names in Tai Dam is geographically varied.

	fruits	spherical objects	containers
Tai Dam (Vietnam)	→		

	fruits	spherical objects	bulky objects	non-spherical
Tai Dam (Thailand) Lao	→			



# Discussions

Objects may be used with different classifiers depending on how they are perceived.



But4ci2 'pencil'



lon5 (stick)



ma?4  
(bladed  
implement)



kaan5  
(slender,  
pointed)





## Discussions

Objects may be used with different classifiers depending on how they are perceived.



**kup3** 'Vietnamese hat' is perceived as flat (two dimensional) so the classifier **baɯ1** 'leaf' is used with this object whereas **muʔ3** 'hat' is used with the general classifier **khaŋ5**.



## Discussions

Some plant-based classifiers have not undergone a metaphorical extension to class non-organic objects.



**mit4** 'seed'



Tai Dam (Thailand) - **jaa2mit4** 'tablet'

Tai Dam (Vietnam) - **ton1** 'small pieces'





## Discussions

Tai Dam, both in Vietnam and Thailand, have their own development of classifier system resulting in some innovative classifiers such as:

**ban5** 'tuber'





## Discussions

Tai Dam, both in Vietnam and Thailand, have their own development of classifier system resulting in some innovative classifiers such as **thuəŋ3**.

Tai Dam (VN) **thuəŋ3**  
Tai Dam (TH) **thuəŋ3**

Tai Dam (VN) **duəŋ1**  
Tai Dam (TH) **thuəŋ3**

Tai Dam (VN) **duəŋ1**  
Tai Dam (TH) **no3**







# Discussions

A comparison of the extended usage of **ดุน๑** in Tai Dam, Lao, and Central Thai

	shoots	heavenly bodies	containers
Tai Dam	_____→		

	round and illuminated (the sun, moon, stars)	round and bladed tools (sickle)	long bladed tools (spear, sword)	Long musical instrument: reed organ
Lao	_____→			

	round and illuminated (the sun, moon, stars)	round (heart, eyes)	perceived as round (stamp, seals, soul)	Abstract nouns
Thai	_____→			



## Language contact

- The classifier **lu?**<sup>4</sup> ‘classifier for round objects such as fruits’ which is derived from the noun **lu?**<sup>4</sup> ‘offspring’ is absent in Tai Dam in Vietnam but present in Tai Dam in Thailand because of the influence of the Thai language.

- A number of Tai Dam plant-based classifiers were borrowed from Chinese. For example:

Tai Dam	Chinese
kɔ <sup>1</sup> ‘whole plant’	kē
kaan <sup>5</sup> ‘long, inflexible, slender’	gēn
pɛn <sup>3</sup> ‘flat, inflexible’	pa’n





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Thank you.



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