

# ความหลากหลายทางภาษาศาสตร์ของภาษาผู้ไท

## About Some Linguistic Variations in Phu Tai

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เกี่ยวข้องกับลักษณะความหลากหลายด้านโครงสร้าง หน่วยคำ คำศัพท์ของภาษาผู้ไท ซึ่งเป็นภาษาตระกูลไท สาขาตะวันตกเฉียงใต้ที่พูดในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทยและในภาคกลางของลาว ผลการศึกษาจะอภิปรายรวมไปถึงรูปแบบประโยคต่อเนื่องที่เกิดจากการใช้คำ (“ให้” “เอ็ด”) หน่วยคำแสดงความเชื่อมโยงของเหตุการณ์จากปัจจุบันไปสู่อนาคตและคำศัพท์บางคำ (“งาม” “ยาย” “ที่”) บทความนี้เสนอแผนที่ภาษา 3 ลักษณะที่สามารถเกิดขึ้นได้บนแนวคิดพื้นฐานทางภาษาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล (Corpus Linguistics) นอกจากนี้ผู้เขียน ซึ่งมีประสบการณ์ในพื้นที่ภาษากับผู้บอกภาษาชาวผู้ไทเป็นเวลา 3 ปี จึงจะอธิบายทัศนะของผู้พูดภาษาผู้ไท ที่มีต่อการใช้ภาษาและการหลักสูตรการฟื้นฟูภาษาผู้ไทด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาผู้ไท ภาษาไทยถิ่นอีสาน วิทยาภาษาถิ่น

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## Abstract<sup>2</sup>

The present article deals with some syntactical, morphemic and lexical variations of Phu Tai, a Southwestern Tai language which is spoken in Northeastern Thailand and Central Laos. The examples discussed include serialized sentence patterns (“to give” and “to be made of”), pre-verbal morphemes expressing present continuous and future and a few lexical items (“beautiful”, “(maternal) grandmother” and “where”). On the basis of this corpus of linguistic variations, this article proposes three possible kinds of linguistic maps. In addition, the author, who has been interacting with many Phu Tai informants for 3 years, expresses his views about Phu Tai speakers’ language usage, attitudes towards Phu Tai language and Phu Tai language revitalization programs.

**Keywords:** Phu Tai, Northeastern Thailand, dialectology

<sup>2</sup> The transcription of Phu Tai used in this article follows the principles of Mary Haas’ transcription of Thai (Haas, 1964), which Khanittanan (1977) and Sayankena (1985) adapted to Phu Tai. However the vowels which Mary Haas, Khanittanan and Sayankena treat as central vowels are treated here as back unrounded vowels, hence the use of the phonetic symbols **ɯ** (instead of **y** in Haas or **ɨ** in Sayankena) and **ɤ** (instead of **ə**). Sayankena, following Mary Haas’ transcription of Thai tones, uses “diacritics” to indicate Phu Tai tones (1985: 13). He describes Phu Tai language as having “5 phonemic tones”, but a close analysis of his corpus shows that the “low tone (...) represented by /<sup>l</sup>/” appears mainly in grammatical words such as the “definite-topic-marker” and some conjunctions, prepositions and auxiliaries (Sayankena, 1985: 5, 50-52, 78-79, 151-153). The case of the accomplished aspect marker in Sayankena’s data seems to confirm the existence of a tonal specificity of grammatical words: the expected **lɛw**, a C4 syllable in William J. Gedney’s tone box (Gedney, 1972: 434), is written **lɛw** by Sayankena and is pronounced **la** (tone left unmarked) in some varieties of Phu Tai (according to reliable informants from Nong Sung district in Mukdahan province, Phanna Nikhom district in Sakon Nakhon province and Boulapha in Kham Mouan province). Although tones change from one Phu Tai dialect to another, four of the diacritics used by Sayankena can indicate, rather accurately, the various tones in the A, B, C and DL syllables of many varieties of Phu Tai: /<sup>l</sup>/ can be used for the “rising tone” of A 123, /<sup>h</sup>/ for the “high tone” of B4 and C4 (which is quite different from the high tone of standard Thai), /<sup>HL</sup>/ for the “high level tone” of C 123 and /<sup>f</sup>/ for the “falling tone(s)” of A4, B123 and DL1234 (whether A4=B123=DL1234 or not is discussed by Sritarat, 1983). Concerning the tones of short syllables (DS 1234) in my own data, I have chosen to leave most of them unmarked, because I think that none of them can be indicated by a common diacritical tone mark, hence **ʔet** “to make”, **be** or **me** “(maternal) grandmother”, **sap** “beautiful”, etc... If we consider for example the first syllable of the interrogative word **pha lɔɔ** “what” (which we have chosen to write with a space between the two syllables, hence **pha lɔɔ** or **phi lɔɔ**), the following discrepancies tend to show that it is better to leave its tone unmarked: whereas Sayankena (1985: 42-43) writes **pha** (**pha lɔɔ**) with a low tone (this is another instance of Sayankena’s “low tone”), some informants pronounce **pha** (**pha lɔɔ**) with a rising tone and others pronounce **pha** (**pha lɔɔ**) with a high tone. In the Thai words or sentences which are referred to, the absence of tone mark indicates a mid level tone as in Mary Haas’ transcription. As for Lao data, we have chosen not to use any tone mark, because there is no agreement on diacritics which can be used for Vientiane Lao as well as other varieties of Lao.

## Introduction

This article deals with Phu Tai, a minority language which is spoken on both sides of the Mekong River in Laos and in Northeastern Thailand<sup>3</sup>. In Laos, a significant number of Phu Tai speakers live in the provinces of Kham Mouan and Savannakhet<sup>4</sup>. In addition, some Phu Tai villages can be found in the southern part of Bolikhamxai province and in the northern part of Salavan province. As for Thailand, Phu Tai people are mainly found in the provinces of Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Kalasin.

According to historians, the ancestors of the Phu Tai living presently in Thailand migrated from their original settlements in the provinces of Kham Mouan and Savannakhet to their present locations in Thailand in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the language hierarchy of Thailand as

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, the transcription of toponyms in Latin alphabet follows the Laos usage for places located in Laos and the Royal Thai General System of Transcription for places located in Thailand. As the Laos usage was largely inspired by the way French people used to transcribe Lao words in French, we can observe that in Laos Khammouan (sometimes Khammouane) is written with -ou-, which shows the French way of transcribing [u] (as a vowel or as the first part of a diphthong), and that Savannakhet is written with -v-, which reminds that [w] was a consonant hard to pronounce for French speakers till recently. Although I find the Royal Thai General System of Transcription much more convenient, I have respected the Laos usage, because readers from Laos are familiar with it. However I have chosen to write Khammouan or Houaphan in two words, hence Kham Mouan and Houa Phan.

<sup>4</sup> The statistics available for Savannakhet and Kham Mouan provinces in the National Census of 1995 show that Phu Tai number approximately 20 percent of the population of these two provinces. However, when it comes to Phu Tai in Laos, one should be very cautious. The same National Census of 1995 mentions 41 percent of Phu Tai in Bolikhamxai province and 31.5 percent in Houa Phan province, but most of them belong to other Tai minority groups, because Phu Tai refers actually to all ethnic Tai groups (Phu Tai being understood as “the people who are Tai”) and not merely to Phu Tai “known only as Phu Tai, who have their own distinct language” (Chamberlain, 1984: 76). Joachim Schliesinger (2003: 97) explains that “the confusion over the Phu Tai people and the term ‘Phu Tai’ in Laos originates from an understanding on the part of the Lao people and some Western writers, including Seidenfaden, that ‘Phu Tai’ is not the name of a specific ethnic group, but a generic term for all upland Tai groups who still live in Northeastern Laos and the adjacent area of Sip Song Chu Tai or Muang Thaeng, today’s Dien Bien Phu in Northwestern Vietnam”. As Schliesinger mentions Erik Seidenfaden, the details by this author about the term ‘Phu Tai’ in Laos are worth referring to precisely: “Other Thai people are the Puthai, Black and Red, and the Puthai of Kham Muan Kham Köt” (Seidenfaden, 1967: 81).

proposed by William A. Smalley (1994: 69), Phu Tai is thus categorized as one of the “displaced Tai” languages. More generally speaking, the Phu Tai language, whether spoken by Phu Tai living in Laos or by Phu Tai living in Thailand, appears to be a “displaced Tai” language, displaced from Northern Laos, if one considers that it retains some of the features of Tai languages spoken in that area, such as the pronunciation ɤɤ (< aw, which can still be heard in Luang Prabang province) of words that Thai and Lao write with ไ้ (spelled in Thai สระไ้ไม่มีวรรณ saʔˀ raʔˀ ʔaj majˀ muanˀ).

When it comes to minority languages, many scholars assume that they are rapidly declining, but this is not entirely true about Phu Tai<sup>5</sup>. Whatever may be the decline of Phu Tai and the influence of Thai or Lao on Phu Tai, there are still many Phu Tai speakers in the previously mentioned provinces of both Laos and Thailand. I do not mean here only old people still interacting in Phu Tai among themselves. I do not mean here younger people trying their best to preserve and revitalize Phu Tai by collecting old Phu Tai words and whose fear is that the authentic Phu Tai language will disappear soon with the death of the last Phu Tai speakers. The Phu Tai I mean here are people of all ages and all levels of education who live in Phu Tai villages<sup>6</sup> or who used to live in Phu Tai communities when they were younger.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Smalley, in a short account about Phu Tai (he writes Phu Thai), tells us how A. Thomas Kirsch retrospectively assessed his earlier analysis of the Phu Tai language: “Kirsch (personal communication) has (...) commented that the primary mistake he made in his earlier analysis of the Phu Thai situation was in assuming that the communities would soon lose their Phu Thai language. Twenty-five years later, in spite of increased multilingualism, the Phu Thai language seemed as strong as it was in the 1960s” (Smalley, 1994: 200).

<sup>6</sup> Many accounts about Phu Tai imply that Phu Tai should be considered as an upland group. It is true that Phu Tai are often associated with the hilly parts of Kham Mouan and Savannakhet provinces, in Boualapha or Vilabouli districts. Many Phu Tai consider that their original place is the hilly area of Muang Vang (Muang Vang Ang Kham, presently Ban Wang Ang Kham in Vilabouli district). However many Phu Tai villages in Laos, for example in some parts of Phin or Xepon districts, are definitely not located in hilly areas. When it comes to Phu Tai groups in Northeastern Thailand, not all Phu Tai villages are located in the Phu Phan chain which separates Kalasin and Sakon Nakhon. For instance, Renu Nakhon can not be linked to any upland environment.

From my personal approach of Phu Tai people as a language instructor at Mahasarakham University<sup>7</sup> and in some secondary schools of Northeastern Thailand<sup>8</sup>, my opinion is that the strength of the Phu Tai language in some areas can be explained by the fact that the Phu Tai are the majority in those areas and that the Ministry of Education of Thailand had schools built there and that in these schools there are many Phu Tai teachers and administrators<sup>9</sup>. The role of the schools located in Phu Tai villages both in Northeastern Thailand and in Laos<sup>10</sup> in keeping the Phu Tai language alive and well is relevant enough to be mentioned in this article<sup>11</sup>. The academic teaching and the teaching materials in those schools are of course in Thai language in Thailand and in Lao language in Laos, but the dominant language of the school community is Phu Tai. Pupils speak Phu Tai among themselves<sup>12</sup>. As for non-Phu Tai students, many pick up Phu Tai quite

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<sup>7</sup> I conducted a personal research at Mahasarakham University about the learning abilities of Phu Tai students when studying foreign languages. This research was presented in two conferences, both presentations being subsequently published (Pacquement, 2007 and 2008).

<sup>8</sup> I taught at Renu Nakhon Witthayanukul secondary school (Renu Nakhon district, Nakhon Phanom province) in June and July 2009, and, between May and September 2010, I taught every Friday in the Um Mao Prachasan secondary school (That Phanom district, Nakhon Phanom province).

<sup>9</sup> Phu Tai pupils have, according to the non-Phu Tai teachers teaching in Phu Tai villages whom I could interview, good capacities in learning mathematics and foreign languages. As a French native speaker and an instructor teaching French, I can confirm the excellent abilities of Phu Tai students in learning French pronunciation. This has led many Phu Tai to become teachers, sometimes headmasters or directors, not only in Phu Tai villages, but also in many provinces of Northeastern Thailand. More generally speaking, Phu Tai people show a high concern for education. Local bodies of Phu Tai villages and municipalities are aware of the issues of education and try their best to support local schools, as can show the example of Renu Nakhon municipality.

<sup>10</sup> I am presently a visiting lecturer at Savannakhet University (October-December 2010). I can meet on a daily basis a significant number of people from Kham Mouan and Savannakhet provinces who tell me about their schools and described a situation more or less similar to Thailand.

<sup>11</sup> Schools help preserve not only Phu Tai language, but also Phu Tai culture, especially Phu Tai dance and Phu Tai traditional dresses.

<sup>12</sup> If one has any doubt, I suggest him or her to stay for sometime in an internet café of Renu Nakhon, near the Renu Nakhon Wittayanukul secondary school. One can see there kids playing video games and shouting their gains or losses in Phu Tai. You can also attend student meetings in Phu Tai secondary schools, as I did at Renu Nakhon Wittayanukul or at Um Mao Prachasan: the leaders make speeches in a very clear Phu Tai, and everybody can argue in Phu Tai.

easily. Then many of the teachers are Phu Tai and use Phu Tai language in their informal interactions with students.

While interacting with Phu Tai speakers, I could observe some language variations from one place to another. My personal interest in dialectology and a branch of linguistics called ethno-linguistics (which I became familiar with through the linguistic work of André-Georges Haudricourt) gave me the idea of collecting linguistic data for a few language variations of Phu Tai from every Phu Tai village I had the opportunity to visit. My present data, collected in Thailand and in Laos, are based upon interviews and less formal interactions. About data collected in Thailand, I have at least 5 or 6 reliable informants in every district having Phu Tai villages in Thailand (Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Kalasin provinces). I went to meet these informants as often as I could. On many occasions, I spoke on the phone or chatted on MSN messenger with some of them to check data or to get more information. About data collected in Laos, I met many reliable Phu Tai speakers who gave me credible pieces of information: 5 were from Kham Mouan province (2 from Nong Bok, 2 from Boualapha and 1 from Mahaxai) and 12 from Savannakhet (4 from Atsaphon/Atsaphangthong, 4 from Xepon, 2 from Outhoumphon, 1 from Vilabouli and 1 from Phin). All these informants grew up in a Phu Tai village, have a good awareness of Phu Tai language and have good capacities in comparing Phu Tai with other languages.

While the data collection for more language variations and lexical items is still going on, the analysis of the presently available data has started already with the following research questions.

1. Some of the questions that a corpus of language variations raises concern the analysis of language variations. Dialectologists process such data in order to do linguistic mapping and to draw isoglosses. However, whatever may be the amount of data so far collected, this article will not propose the

construction of any linguistic map. As for the isoglosses which are discussed, they are presented as hypothesis only.

2. The fact that Phu Tai is a minority language, showing some strength in some places but declining in others leads us to another question: can linguistic variations be used for Phu Tai revitalization programs?

3. Can Phu Tai data collected in Laos significantly change our approach with Phu Tai? Although this issue is not specifically dealt with in this article, it should remain a concern at every step of linguistic research about Phu Tai. When Phu Tai data are collected in Thailand, informants as well as field workers rightly compare Phu Tai with standard Thai or Lao spoken in Isan, but linguistic analysis may then focus on some aspects of Phu Tai only. If one has the opportunity to collect data on Phu Tai in Laos, the informants will be much less influenced by standard Thai. Moreover, drawing comparisons with Lao and its varieties or with Tai dialects spoken in Laos may help linguists have broader perspectives in their analysis of Phu Tai.

In this article, leaving aside the phonetic and tonematic variations of Phu Tai<sup>13</sup>, I will concentrate on some lexical, morphemic and syntactic variations.

- Concerning lexical variations, the Phu Tai lexical items meaning “beautiful”, “(maternal) grandmother” and “where” will be dealt with.

- Concerning morphemic variations, the use of pre-verbal morphemes expressing present continuous and future in Phu Tai will be assessed.

- Concerning syntactic variations, two sentence patterns will be analyzed: the first one expresses “to give” in Phu Tai and the second one is used to express the material used for building houses or making clothes.

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<sup>13</sup> Tonematic variations of Phu Tai in provinces of Northeastern Thailand having Phu Tai communities have been studied by Pojaneer Sritarat in her masters degree thesis (Sritarat, 1983).

## Syntactic variations: the sentence patterns “to give” and “to be made of”

In his Ph.D. dissertation, Sayankena<sup>14</sup> (1985) draws our attention to many syntactic features of Phu Tai as compared to Standard Thai or Lao. One of the first syntactic particularities of Phu Tai which he mentions is “the fact that [it] lacks a construction in which both a direct and an indirect object co-occur” (Sayankena, 1985: 5-6)<sup>15</sup>. Sayankena takes the example of the sentence: “Mother gave me money”. The Thai sentence  $m\epsilon\epsilon^{\wedge} haj^{\wedge} \eta x n$   $chan^{\vee}$  (mother/ to give/ money/ me) shows a construction with two objects, in which the second object expresses the recipient. According to Sayankena,  $*\eta ii^{\wedge} m\epsilon\epsilon^{\wedge} h x x^{-} \eta x n^{\wedge} kan^{\vee}$  (title+mother/ to give/ money/ me), which is the word-by-word translation into Phu Tai of  $m\epsilon\epsilon^{\wedge} haj^{\wedge} \eta x n$   $chan^{\vee}$ , is “unacceptable” in Phu Tai. Sayankena writes that “instead, an acceptable Phu Tai sentence conveying the same meaning will be [...]  $\eta ii^{\wedge} m\epsilon\epsilon^{\wedge} \eta aw^{\vee} \eta x n^{\wedge} h x x^{-} kan^{\vee}$  [title/mother/ to take/ money/ to give/ me]”, where one can recognize a serialized pattern  $\eta aw^{\vee} \dots h x x^{-}$  (to take/ .../ to give).

Although in such sentences some Phu Tai speakers use the serialized pattern  $\eta aw^{\vee} \dots h x x^{-}$  deemed “acceptable” by Sayankena, a significant amount of informants from Northeastern Thailand, whom I have interviewed since 2007, more than 20 years after Sayankena’s data collection and analysis, use the pattern with two objects considering sentences like  $\eta ii^{\wedge} m\epsilon\epsilon^{\wedge} h x x^{-} \eta x n^{\wedge} kan^{\vee}$  as perfectly acceptable. As a result, in the data I collected, the serialized pattern  $\eta aw^{\vee} \dots h x x^{-}$  coexists with the pattern

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<sup>15</sup> Other noteworthy syntactic features in Phu Tai analyzed by Sayankena include topicalization and compound sentences (Sayankena, 1985: 5, 50-53, 54-58).



showing two objects. If we follow Sayankena's analysis, we may then assume that Phu Tai speakers considering ʔii<sup>h</sup> mɛɛ' hɔɔ<sup>h</sup> ŋɔn<sup>h</sup> kan<sup>v</sup> as acceptable show a lack of awareness about specific constructions of Phu Tai and that their syntax has been influenced by standard Thai.

A similar situation can be observed in the instance of the syntactic constructions expressing the material used for making clothes or building houses in Phu Tai.

- The typical construction of Phu Tai, with the serialized pattern ʔaw<sup>v</sup>... ʔet (to take/ .../ to make)<sup>16</sup>, appears in sentences like sɔɔ<sup>h</sup> caw<sup>h</sup> ʔaw<sup>v</sup> phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> ʔet (shirt/ you/ to take/ what/ to make) "Your shirt is made of which material?" or hɔɔn<sup>h</sup> kan<sup>v</sup> ʔaw<sup>v</sup> maj' ʔet (house/ my/ to take/ wood/ to make) "My house is made of wood".

- Some Phu Tai informants from Northeastern Thailand, when discussing this construction, propose another pattern, hence the sentence sɔɔ<sup>h</sup> caw<sup>h</sup> ʔet dooj<sup>h</sup> pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> (shirt/ you/ to make/ with/ what), where one can recognize the prepositional construction of standard Thai swa<sup>h</sup> khun tham duaj<sup>h</sup> ʔa<sup>h</sup> ʔaj<sup>h</sup><sup>17</sup>.

Whether such serialized patterns and other syntactic features are specific to Phu Tai or not, their analysis leads us to an important point. Phu Tai can not be obtained or retrieved merely by a code-switching from Thai to Phu Tai. At the same time, Phu Tai may share some particularities with

<sup>16</sup> Some speakers use ʔaw<sup>v</sup>... maa<sup>h</sup> ʔet (to take/ .../ to come/ to make). As for ʔaw<sup>v</sup>... paj<sup>v</sup> ʔet (to take/ .../ to go/ to make), I heard it once only.

<sup>17</sup> A sentence like sɔɔ<sup>h</sup> caw<sup>h</sup> ʔet dooj<sup>h</sup> pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, even pronounced with pure Phu Tai tones by reliable Phu Tai speakers, appears to be hardly acceptable, especially because there seem to be no other instances of dooj<sup>h</sup> used as a preposition in Phu Tai. The sentence sɔɔ<sup>h</sup> caw<sup>h</sup> ʔet dooj<sup>h</sup> pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> thus appears to be nothing else than a word-to-word translation of the standard Thai prepositional construction swa<sup>h</sup> khun tham duaj<sup>h</sup> ʔa<sup>h</sup> ʔaj<sup>h</sup> either by speakers influenced by standard Thai or by informants eager to explain a Phu Tai construction by referring to standard Thai.

neighboring dialects and with Lao<sup>18</sup>, with which it has been long in contact. Whatever may be our interpretation of the fact that some serialized patterns are available in both Phu Tai, a local dialect with only an oral tradition, and Lao, a national language with a large range of oral and written uses<sup>19</sup>, there appears to be a need for revitalization programs of Phu Tai language in Thailand to focus on sentence patterns<sup>20</sup>, and not on Phu Tai lexical items only.

### **Morphemic variations: pre-verbal morphemes expressing present continuous and future in Phu Tai**

Whereas the comparison of Thai, Lao and Phu Tai sentence patterns may involve some significant differences in sentence structure and word order, Thai, Lao and Phu Tai have roughly the same conception of tenses

<sup>18</sup> The serialized patterns ?aw ... haj (to take/ .../ to give) and ?aw ... het (to take/ .../ to make) are common in Lao. According to Somphavanh Keouboutta, a Lao native speaker teaching Lao language at Mahasarakham University, academic writing in Lao prefers using the serialized pattern rather than using the prepositional pattern (personal communication).

<sup>19</sup> The use of serialized patterns in both Phu Tai (?aw' ... hɔx' and ?aw'... ?et) and Lao (?aw ... haj and ?aw ... het) can be interpreted as a resistance against standard Thai's way of thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Phu Tai prepositions, whether pure prepositions or Phu Tai nouns or verbs used as prepositions, as well as Phu Tai conjunctions should not be forgotten in revitalization programs. I was recently surprised to see some competent speakers of Phu Tai, whom I had asked about the preposition "since" (more precisely a temporal adverbial marker used to indicate order of events), using the standard Thai preposition taŋ' tɛɛ' and explaining that taŋ' tɛɛ' is pronounced taŋ' tɛɛ' in Phu Tai (as per the Phu Tai pronunciation of tones). Precisely, when it comes to the preposition "since", Phu Tai has kɔɔ' tɛɛ', which Sayankena (1985: 78-81) writes kɔɔ' tɛɛ'. As for conjunctions, Sayankena tells us that "there are no conjunctions [in Phu Tai] that behave syntactically in the same way as / tɛɛ' / 'but' or / lɛ?' / 'and' in standard Thai, which always occur in the environment before the second clause" (1985: 50-51). The Phu Tai conjunctions ka' "and", phat' "but" and ha' "yet" are instead placed after the noun used as the subject of the second clause and are used in the same way as the Thai conjunctions ᨾ kɔɔ' "also, then, so, and" or cawŋ "therefore". One of the examples given by Sayankena is the sentence: tuu' juu' ta' baan' suu' phat' juu' ta' paa' (we/ to say/ at/ village/ you (pl.)/ but/ to stay/ at/ forest) "We live in the village, but you live in the forest" (1985: 51).

and aspects and use morphemes expressing present continuous and future in a similar way<sup>21</sup>.

Starting with future pre-verbal morphemes, we have caʔ in Thai, siʔ in Lao and la in Phu Tai (Sayankena, 1985: 151-152). The collected data show that Phu Tai speakers actually use caʔ, siʔ and la<sup>22</sup>.

- The use of caʔ is limited to contexts where they have to speak or write standard Thai or Lao.

- When they speak Phu Tai, they use either la or si, in Laos as well as in Northeastern Thailand.

Phu Tai informants explain that many Phu Tai speakers use si, but can easily switch to la. They consider la to be the authentic Phu Tai future marker, but, according to some of them, who live in districts having many different groups of people, Phu Tai speakers have developed the habit of using si because of regular interactions with groups using si<sup>23</sup>.

The use of la and si by Phu Tai speakers shows us one aspect of the resistance of Phu Tai: la is available in every Phu Tai village as the authentic

<sup>21</sup> In this article, I am treating as morphemes some items that linguists may consider more rightly as auxiliaries (Sayankena, 1985: 151-153) or tense-markers. Syntactically speaking, these tense-markers are pre-verbal morphemes, because they are placed before the verb in Thai, in Lao and in Phu Tai. When the marker expressing present continuous and the marker expressing future are used together, the order is the same in the three languages: the present continuous morpheme occurs before the future morpheme.

<sup>22</sup> The present analysis leaves aside the use of jɔ (written jɔʔ by Sayankena, 1985: 152). According to Sayankena, it is an auxiliary meaning "to want to", but the analysis of sentences with jɔ shows that it may be interpreted in some contexts as an alternative of la, indicating the future (jɔ paj "I want to go, I am planning to go, I will go") or an action which is assumed to happen shortly (khɔɔ jɔ hɔɔt la [nearly/ jɔ/ to reach/ lɛɛw] or khɔɔ la hɔɔt la [nearly/ la/ to reach/ lɛɛw] "[we] have nearly reached", the final la being the spoken form of the marker lɛɛw).

<sup>23</sup> In all the varieties of Lao, whether spoken in Laos or in Northeastern Thailand, siʔ is clearly predominant in oral speech. However, in written Lao, caʔ is quite frequent. As for Tai dialects such as Kaloeng, Nyo and Yoi, with which Phu Tai is often in contact in Northeastern Thailand, they all use siʔ.

Phu Tai option of *si* and remains a rather strong option among speakers of Phu Tai, especially those who are aware of their native language<sup>24</sup>.

As for present continuous pre-verbal morphemes, Thai and Lao have *kamlarj*, and Phu Tai has *thom^* (Sayankena, 1985: 151). When assessing the use of *kamlarj* or *thom^* by Phu Tai speakers, we have to take into account the numerous cases where the present continuous marker and the future marker are used together. Thus, in addition to *kamlarj* and *thom^*, we will consider *kamlarj ca?* (Thai), *kamlarj si?* (Lao) and *thom^ la* (Phu Tai).

The collected data show that Phu Tai speakers predominantly use *kamlarj*, which they pronounce *kam<sup>y</sup> larj^* (following the Phu Tai pronunciation of tones), but they mostly use it together with the future morpheme *la* and *si*, hence *kam<sup>y</sup> larj^ la* and *kam<sup>y</sup> larj^ si<sup>25</sup>*. Phu Tai speakers rarely use *thom^* and *thom^ la<sup>26</sup>*.

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<sup>24</sup> Some Phu Tai from Phanna Nikhom and Ban Muang districts (Sakon Nakhon province) say that only *si* is used there. Interestingly, the same speakers do not use the Phu Tai negation *mi* and use the Lao negation *bo* instead. However investigations with other speakers in those districts (sometimes in the same villages) showed that *la* and *mi*, which Sayankena writes *mii^* or *mii-* (1985: 51, 81, 151-153), could be heard too.

<sup>25</sup> The combination *kamlarj ca?* can be found in contexts where Phu Tai speakers have to speak and write Thai (in Thailand) or write Lao (in Laos). For Phu Tai, *kamlarj ca?* clearly belongs to Thai or written Lao.

<sup>26</sup> I have heard *thom^* and *thom^ la* used spontaneously on three occasions only.

- At Renu Nakhon, in the speech of senior teachers (they are in their fifties) of Renu Nakhon Wittayanukul secondary school.

- At Non Ngam, a village in the Um Mao subdistrict of That Phanom district (Nakhon Phanom province), in the speech of Phu Tai pupils of the Um Mao Prachasan secondary school and their parents.

- In the speech of a young lady in her twenties from Boualapha, Kham Mouan province.

Phu Tai informants who are aware of their language consider kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup> as perfectly acceptable in Phu Tai, explaining that the tones of kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup> are Phu Tai and that the combination of kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup> with la indicates an already long use of kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup> in Phu Tai. Many of them agree that thom<sup>^</sup>, which they heard in their childhood from their parents or grandparents, may be the original Phu Tai present continuous marker, but only a few of them remember having actually used thom<sup>^</sup>, and I could see only one of them switching to thom<sup>^</sup><sup>27</sup>.

Assessing the use of present continuous pre-verbal morphemes by Phu Tai speakers indicates us the decline of thom<sup>^</sup>, which is nearly completely replaced by kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup>. Although Phu Tai informants both in Laos and in Northeastern Thailand still know and remember thom<sup>^</sup>, it is not their natural choice. The present continuous marker thom<sup>^</sup> thus appears to be a residual option.

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<sup>27</sup> This informant, Sarika Klangrapun, a Phu Tai young lady in her twenties, is from Ban Pao subdistrict in the Nong Sung district of Mukdahan province and is a very competent speaker of Phu Tai. Her linguistic background was detailed in one of my articles dealing with the learning abilities of Phu Tai students when studying foreign languages (Pacquement, 2007). In the sentences which Sarika Klangrapun provided me, she uses ka lar<sup>^</sup> instead of kam<sup>v</sup> lar<sup>^</sup> and then switches to ka thom<sup>^</sup> in the next sentence. When asked about ka lar<sup>^</sup> and ka thom<sup>^</sup>, she explained that ka lar<sup>^</sup> and ka thom<sup>^</sup> are the usual present continuous morphemes in the Phu Tai she speaks and that she never uses either lar<sup>^</sup> or thom<sup>^</sup> without ka. The element ka thus appears to be one of the Phu Tai conjunctions that Sayankena describes as being placed after the noun used as the subject of the second clause (1985: 51). Rather than meaning “and” as in Sayankena’s analysis, ka may be analyzed here as the Phu Tai equivalent of the Thai  $\overline{\text{ก็}}$   $\text{ก็}$  “also, then, so, and”.

### Lexical variations: “beautiful”, “(maternal) grandmother” and “where”

Studying lexical variations can show similar instances, where a Phu Tai lexical item coexists with a lexical item used in Lao. However lexical items used in Lao are often words used in other Tai languages spoken in Laos as well, and, when considering their use by Phu Tai speakers, it appears to be better to treat them as words available in many Tai languages of that specific area rather than borrowings from Lao.

About the Phu Tai lexical item meaning “beautiful”<sup>28</sup>, the available data show a competition in the entire Phu Tai area, in Laos as well as in Northeastern Thailand, between *sap*, which Phu Tai speakers consider as the original Phu Tai word<sup>29</sup>, and *ɲaam*, a word used in Lao and in other Tai languages meaning “beautiful”, which Phu Tai speakers pronounce *ɲaam*<sup>^</sup> according to the Phu Tai rules of tones<sup>30</sup>.

If we compare *sap* with the present continuous morpheme *thom*<sup>^</sup> and the future morpheme *la*, we can observe that *sap* is used more frequently than *thom*<sup>^</sup>, but less frequently than *la*. However, using *sap* is not the same as using *thom*<sup>^</sup> and *la*. Phu Tai speakers, whatever may be their awareness of their native language, are expected to be much less sensitive to verbal morphemes, for which some grammatical reasoning is required, than to

<sup>28</sup> In his master’s thesis, Suntorn Worahan selects 50 semantic items and details their numerous lexical variations, which he obtained from many places in each of the seven districts of Mukdahan province (Worahan, 1997). The 47<sup>th</sup> semantic item which Suntorn Worahan discusses is *khon suaj* “the beautiful one(s)”, and he proposes 7 different words which are used to express *khon suaj* in the entire Mukdahan province (Worahan, 1997: 83, 138). In the Phu Tai district of Nong Sung, the picture is much simpler: *khon*<sup>^</sup> *sap* in Phu Tai) is used by 93.02% of the interviewed speakers, *khon*<sup>^</sup> *ɲaam* (in Phu Tai) being used by 5.81%.

<sup>29</sup> It should be noticed that the Phu Tai word *sap* is used for things and for people (both males and females).

<sup>30</sup> The expression *phuu*<sup>ˉ</sup> *ɲaam*<sup>^</sup> *phuu*<sup>ˉ</sup> *sap* “those who are beautiful, the beautiful ones” confirms the fact that Phu Tai speakers consider *ɲaam*<sup>^</sup> as a full-fledged word of Phu Tai.

a word which expresses esthetic appreciation and can thus help build a linguistic and cultural identity<sup>31</sup>.

There appear to be a few lexical items for which we can find many more variations than a mere choice between a specifically Phu Tai word, available in the entire Phu Tai area, and a word more generally used in Lao and neighboring Tai languages. Such lexical items give us the opportunity to propose isoglosses as hypothesis for Phu Tai dialectology.

The first lexical item discussed here is the kinship term “(maternal) grandmother”. Although the influences of Thai and Lao<sup>32</sup> are present, we can observe a clear division between one area consisting of Savannakhet province and Mukdahan province, where *naaj*<sup>33</sup> dominates<sup>34</sup>, and another area, where we have *be* (Na Kae in Nakhon Phanom province, Phang Khon and Warichaphum in Sakon Nakhon province) or *me*<sup>35</sup> (Khao Wong in Kalasin

<sup>31</sup> The word *sap* is dialectal, and one should not underestimate the feeling of shyness that its use may create in some speakers. One of my informants, a Phu Tai lady in her twenties from Nong Sung in Mukdahan province, who had a positive attitude towards Phu Tai language and its use, had never used *sap* in her interactions with me. It was by mere chance only that I discovered that she knew the word *sap* (which I had heard from many other Phu Tai speakers in Nong Sung itself), when I asked her about “ugly” in Phu Tai. The translation she gave me was *mi sap* (not/ beautiful). When we discussed about *mi sap* and *sap*, she agreed that *sap* was the Phu Tai word used by her parents, relatives and fellow-villagers, but she was drawing a distinction between the context of her village, where she feels natural to use *sap*, and other contexts, where *naam*<sup>^</sup> appears more appropriate.

<sup>32</sup> When Phu Tai speakers are influenced by Thai, they use the Thai word *jaaj* and the Thai title *khun* (*khun*<sup>^</sup> *me* is an interesting example showing the Thai title *khun* accompanying the Phu Tai word *me*). Those who are influenced by Lao use the word *mεε* *thaw* (*mεε*<sup>^</sup> *thaw*<sup>^</sup> in Phu Tai), which is used by Lao speakers in Kham Mouan and Savannakhet.

<sup>33</sup> All the Phu Tai kinship terms can be preceded by the title *ʔii*<sup>^</sup> (sometimes *ʔi*), whether the concerned individual is a male or a female.

<sup>34</sup> However, some reliable informants from Atsaphon (Savannakhet province) use *me*.

<sup>35</sup> The words *be* or *me* often mean “paternal grandmother” too. The original meaning of these terms is “mother”.

province, Renu Nakhon and That Phanom in Nakhon Phanom), the limit between these two areas appearing to cross Kuchinarai district in Kalasin province. However *naaj<sup>^</sup>* is again available in the North of Sakol Nakhon (Ban Muang district): this can be explained by the fact that many Phu Tai of Ban Muang have come from Kham Cha-I four generations before.

The other lexical item we will deal with is the interrogative word “where”, which shows an impressive display of linguistic variations, when used along with the verb “to go”: *paj<sup>v</sup> si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> sɔɔ<sup>^</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> sɔɔ<sup>v</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> ta lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> ka lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>*, *paj<sup>v</sup> phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>* and *paj<sup>v</sup> phɔɔ<sup>v36</sup>*.

In a linguistic analysis about the question-word “where”, we first have to deal with a syntactic and semantic difficulty, which concerns Phu Tai and spoken forms of Lao. Phu Tai speakers as well as many Lao speakers tend to conceive the interrogative sentence “Where are you going?” either as a question about a location or as a question about a purposed action. Although many speakers do not distinguish clearly whether they mean a location or a purposed action and do not care about such a distinction in their daily use of Phu Tai or Lao, the need for a semantic and syntactic clarification is obvious for linguists<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> One of the most striking specificities of Phu Tai language, when compared to Lao or Thai, appears to be its set of question-words. In his account about Phu Tai people in Laos, J. Schliesinger (2003: 98) mentions the designation of Phu Tai as “Tai Piloe”, in which “Piloe” is the Phu Tai question-word *phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>* “what”. I personally remember a Lao lady from Nong Bok district in Kham Mouan province answering my question about the presence of Phu Tai people around her village by saying “Yes! Yes! You mean these people who say *pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>* [“what”], *si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>* [“where”].

<sup>37</sup> The comparison during the data processing of sentences in which “where” follows the verb “to go” with sentences in which “where” follows verbs meaning “to be at” or “to come from” appears to be the most convenient way to separate question-words asking about location from these referring to a purposed action, because verbs meaning “to be at” or “to come from” can not be followed by a complement expressing a purposed action.



Starting with the cases in which the interrogative sentence, “Where are you going?” refers to a purposed action, we have the following sentences paj<sup>v</sup> pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, paj<sup>v</sup> phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, paj<sup>v</sup> phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> and paj<sup>v</sup> phɔɔ<sup>v</sup>. The use of these questions is general all over the Phu Tai area, and the available variations (pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> and phɔɔ<sup>v</sup><sup>38</sup>) are the morphemic variations of the question-word meaning “what”<sup>39</sup>.

In the cases where the interrogative sentence “Where are you going?” implies a pure location, Phu Tai language mostly uses the interrogative words si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup><sup>40</sup>, sɔɔ<sup>^</sup>, sɔɔ<sup>v</sup> and ta lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>. The form ka lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>, available in Kham Muang district (Kalasin province), is isolated. Another form appearing only once in the available data is dɔɔ<sup>v</sup> lɔɔ<sup>^</sup> (district of Sakon Nakhon, Sakon Nakhon province) and is used with the locational verb juu<sup>^</sup> “to be at” in our corpus.

- The form si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup> is widely used and known. In districts of That Phanom and Nakhon Phanom of Nakhon Phanom province and in many parts of both Savannakhet and Kham Mouan provinces, Phu Tai speakers use both si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup> and sɔɔ<sup>^</sup><sup>41</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> The form phɔɔ<sup>v</sup> appears to be a reduction of pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> or phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>. Many Phu Tai informants think that studying the variations pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> and phɔɔ<sup>v</sup> of the lexical item “what” can not lead anywhere and do not agree with the hypothesis that there could be pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> villages, phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> villages or phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> village. This opinion held by Phu Tai informants may indicate that Phu Tai speakers are not much sensitive to the variations of the vowel in the first syllable and rather focus on the tone, which is the same in pha lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, phi lɔɔ<sup>v</sup> and phɔ lɔɔ<sup>v</sup>. The question-word “what” is the 50th semantic item dealt with by Suntom Worahan in his master’s thesis, and he presents as many as 15 different question-words meaning “what” from all the seven districts of Mukdahan province (Worahan, 1997: 84, 141-142).

<sup>39</sup> We can observe a similar use of the question-word “what” in Lao (paj naŋ or, in the Lao spoken in Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Kham Mouan and Savannakhet provinces, paj phi sang) and even in the Thai spoken in Northeastern Thailand by Lao speakers (paj ʔaʔraŋ).

<sup>40</sup> Sayankena writes sii<sup>ˉ</sup> lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> The interrogative word sɔɔ<sup>^</sup>, which must be distinguished from sɔɔ<sup>v</sup>, is a shortened form of si lɔɔ<sup>^</sup>.

- The form sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v</sup> can be found in Na Kae district (Nakhon Phanom province) and in Somdet (Kalasin province).

- The form ta lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup> is used in some parts of Warichaphum (Sakon Nakhon province) and in Kham Muang (Kalasin province).

It is important to stress here that, even when Phu Tai people have nearly completely forgotten their language, they still remember the questions paj<sup>v</sup> si lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>, paj<sup>v</sup> sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>, paj<sup>v</sup> sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v</sup> or paj<sup>v</sup> talɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>. These sentences may thus be considered as a part of Phu Tai people's linguistic heritage and identity. However, studying these words suggests that the Phu Tai linguistic identity may not be exactly the same in Thailand and in Laos.

- In Thailand, si lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>, sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>, sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v</sup> and ta lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup> sound extremely different from Thai words and imply a strangeness of Phu Tai language.

- In Laos, when si lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup>, sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup> or sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v</sup> are compared with their counterparts in other Tai dialects spoken in Laos, there appears to be a good deal of consistency between Phu Tai and other Tai languages. Interactions with Luang Prabang speakers show that the Lao interrogative word "where", saj (rising tone), retains the pronunciation saw in the Lao dialect spoken there. Precisely saw helps us to understand sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v42</sup>, which is used by the Phu Tai of Na Kae and Somdet. In the countryside of Luang Prabang, quite far from the city, one can hear the rustic form si daw, which makes us realize that the Phu Tai interrogative word si lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup> is actually not specific to Phu Tai<sup>43</sup>. Some Luang Prabang speakers also use ka daw, which is pronounced ka dɔ̃ɔ̃ in Houa Phan and ka lɔ̃ɔ̃ by Phuan speakers in Xiang Khouang

<sup>42</sup> In the Yoi language spoken in Akat Amnuay district (Sakon Nakhon province), we can hear saw in some villages and sɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>v</sup> in others.

<sup>43</sup> The Phu Tai question-word si lɔ̃ɔ̃<sup>^</sup> is present in the language of the Tai Moei in Bolikhamxai province and can be related to si daj, which is frequently used in the Lao of Savannakhet, Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan.

province, and there is an obvious correspondence between forms like ka daw, ka dɔɔ and ka lɔɔ and the isolated form ka lɔɔ^ found in Kham Muang district (Kalasin province).

## Conclusion

Although the present article is grounded upon a few language variations of Phu Tai only and has not proposed the construction of any linguistic map, the analysis of the data indicates the availability of three types of linguistic variations and, subsequently, three possible kinds of linguistic maps.

- The first type shows a coexistence between a Phu Tai (and sometimes Lao) item and an item indicating the influence of standard Thai. This type has been exemplified in this article by the variations of the sentence patterns “to give” and “to be made of”, but many lexical items would illustrate it too<sup>44</sup>. This type of linguistic variation is expected to provide linguistic maps showing the frontier between Thailand and Laos as the main division between an area - in Northeastern Thailand - where the influence of standard Thai is strong and an area – in Laos - where the reference to standard Thai may be considered as less relevant.

- As for the second type, while analyzing the pre-verbal morphemes expressing present continuous and future and the lexical item “beautiful”, we could observe a coexistence between a Phu Tai item and an item used in Lao or in other Tai languages spoken in that area. The tentative mapping of this type of linguistic variation can provide us information concerning the density

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<sup>44</sup> Among many examples, we can mention the lexical item “spoon”, for which, in Northeastern Thailand, there is a coexistence between the Phu Tai word booŋ^ (in Lao buaŋ) and the word soɔn', which is borrowed from standard Thai.

of use of the Phu Tai specific items and their resistance in the context of a competition with items not specific to Phu Tai. The examples of the Phu Tai present continuous marker and of the lexical item “beautiful” suggest that, whereas this competition may threaten the survival of the Phu Tai linguistic specificity as in the case of *thom*<sup>45</sup>, the resistance of Phu Tai items is stronger in the case of items considered a part of Phu Tai people’s linguistic identity like *sap*.

- Our data show a third type of linguistic variation concerning an apparently limited number of Phu Tai linguistic items. The examples of the kinship term “(maternal) grandmother” and the question-word “where”, for which we find many linguistic variations, suggest the availability of isoglosses in the Phu Tai area. More data and more confirmed examples are needed for their interpretation.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the present author holds the view that Phu Tai is still alive and well, first because it has a good number of speakers and communities in both Laos and Northeastern Thailand, and second because it appears to have many specificities which give young Phu Tai the opportunity to develop high (although generally ignored) capacities in comparing and observing languages. As a result, one can still meet Phu Tai speakers with a strong awareness of their native language and with the capacity of explaining and comparing Phu Tai.

However, there is a need to stress the importance of taking into account all the linguistic aspects of Phu Tai, especially when it comes to revitalization programs. Rather than teaching pupils one Phu Tai word per

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<sup>45</sup> We can mention another case where a Phu Tai item with the question-word “how much”: the Phu item *haaw* ໄຫວ້ is nearly completely replaced by *thoo* ໄຫວ້, where we can recognize the Lao element *thoo* ໄຫວ້ available in *thoo* ດາງ.

day, Phu Tai school teachers revitalizing their language should teach one Phu Tai sentence per day, with at least a Phu Tai structure/sentence pattern and a few Phu Tai words! A language can not survive with lists of lexical items only; but it needs competent native speakers who can master syntax, can build sentences and think about its usage.

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