

# THE TAI OF MUONG VAT DO NOT SPEAK THE BLACK TAI LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

A word list of 3,343 items with Standard Thai, English and Vietnamese glosses was used for eliciting the Black Tai or Tai Dam language data at each of the twelve research sites: ten in northern Vietnam, one in northern Laos, and one in central Thailand. The data collected at two villages in Muong Vat could not be used for a reconstruction of Old Black Tai phonological system and a lexicon because on a phonological basis and a lexical basis, the Tai dialect of Muong Vat is not Black Tai, especially the one spoken at Ban Phat, Chieng Pan sub-district and Ban Coc Lac, Tu Nang sub-district, Son La province, Vietnam.

## Introduction

The Black Tai (Tai Dam, Thai Song, Lao Song, Lao Song Dam, Phu Tai Song Dam) language has been studied by many non-Thai and Thai linguists, and by Black-Tai language specialists. (Diguet 1895, Gedney 1964, Hartmann 1985 and 1995, Don 1989, Fippinger 1970, 1971, 1975a and 1975b, Hoang Tran Nghich & Tong Kim An 1990, Cam Cuong 1991, Witsarut Suwanwiwek 1981, Meewan Leerawat et al 1982, Chakrit Anuntrawan 1978, Wilailak

Daecha 1989, Kanchana Panka 1980, Suree Pengsombat 1990, Wipawan Plungsuwan 1981, Anculee Buranasing 1988, Orapin Maneewong 1987, Kantima Wattanaprasert & Suwattana Liamprawat 1985, Suwattana (Liamprawat) Damkham & Kantima Wattanaprasert 1997, Oraphan Unakonsawat 1993).

In most of these previous studies, especially by Thai linguists, a Black Tai variety spoken at one location is described and in some cases compared with the other Tai or Lao dialects spoken in nearby areas. The Black Tai varieties spoken in Laos and Vietnam have never been investigated seriously by Thai linguists. Contrarily, in the works done by non-Thai linguists, general linguistic characteristics of the language are attempted with no emphasis on the location where it is spoken. In other words, a description and explanation of the so-called Common Black Tai is their major aim.

Not only Thai linguists but also Thai anthropologists and historians are interested in the Black Tai of Sip Song Chou Tai. Some of them believe that various features in the language and culture of the Black Tai can be taken as substantial clues for those of Southwestern Tais and the Thai (Siamese). To be able to react properly to this idea, the research project "From Sip Song Chou Tai to Central Thailand: Language, Social and Cultural Changes of the Black Tai" was launched in 1997. This research project has been funded by the Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn Research Fund, Chulalongkorn University. The sub-project on the Black Tai language is part of this project.

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A well-known Thai anthropologist and archaeologist, Srisakara Vallibhotama (1991), and a Thai historian, Manoo Udomwet (1995), who had an opportunity to visit Muong Vat said that the Tai of Muong Vat were Black Tai from a cultural point of view. For example, their clothing was similar to the one of the Petchaburi Lao Song or Black Tai. In this paper, the author, by using linguistic evidence, would like to argue that the Tai of Muong Vat are not Black Tai in the sense that they do not speak the Black Tai Language.

### **Language data**

To investigate the language of the Black Tai, three word lists with Standard Thai, English and Vietnamese glosses were devised and used for eliciting the language data at each of the twelve research sites: ten in northern Vietnam<sup>2</sup> (Muong Vat 1, Muong Vat 2, Muong Lo,

Muong Nam Ma, Muong La), one in northern Laos (Muong Luang Nam Tha), and one in central Thailand (Khaw Yoy district). The long word list which comprises 3,343 items and the two short additional word lists of 20 and 153 items were used for eliciting Black Tai vocabulary, tones, consonants and vowels. Every item in the short word lists was recorded on tape in order to check the phonetic transcription based on auditory judgement and for acoustical measurements to reconfirm the phonetic characteristics of tones.

Due to all types of problems, both technical and non-technical, 632 items in the long word list which were collected by the two Vietnamese linguists had to be discarded. Therefore, only 2,711 items could be used for the comparative study. The old black Tai phonological system and lexical comprising 2,300 entries, were reconstructed. In total, 1043 items in the long word list were discarded to control the quality of the data used for the analysis and reconstruction. Even though a lot of data on Black Tai can be found in other publications and many unpublished M.A. theses, they were not used because our Black Tai corpus was large enough for our research purposes. However, for a comparative and historical study, the data collected at Ban Phat, Chieng Pan sub-district and Ban Coc Lac, Tu Nang sub-district, in Muong Vat (Yen Chau) located in the province of Son La had to be excluded. On a phonological and a lexical basis, the Tai dialect of Muong Vat is not Black Tai. The detailed arguments can be found in the next section.

### **Tai Dialect of Muong Vat**

Chamberlain (1984: 73, and 1992: 154) points out that "The Tai of Muong Vat

<sup>2</sup> The data on Black Tai spoken at the two research sites in Laos and Thailand were collected by the author. The rest was collected by Professor Hoang Van Ma and Dr. Ta Van Thong, staff members of the linguistics Institute, the National Center for Research on Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam. To be certain that their collection of data was consistent with the author's standards, two Black Tai speakers studying in Hanoi were used as informants for a demonstration during the workshop. All necessary instructions, including batteries, film, blank cassettes, and so forth, were provided. At each research location, besides making recordings, they were required to photograph the village and the informants. In addition, brief information on the village where the data were collected and on the informants had to be provided. Notes on any other interesting aspects were also encouraged.



(Yen Chau) in Sip Song Chou Tai speak a form of Thay Neua closer to that of Xieng Kho than to Black Tai Proper<sup>3</sup> On linguistic grounds, the author totally agree with Chamberlain that the Tai of Muong Vat, at least the two groups which live in Ban Phat and Ban Coc Lac, do not speak Black Tai.<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain's view is based only on the pattern of tonal development: A1-234, B123-4, C123-4, DL and DS 123-4. The pattern of tone split in column A and the phonetic characteristics of the six tones in the Tai dialect of Muong Vat are not similar to those of Black Tai. The tonal analysis, the acoustical measurements of tones and the reconstruction of Old Black Tai tonal system which were done by the author support very well the idea proposed by Chamberlain, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Comparison of Muong Vat and Muong Lo (Black Tai) patterns of tone split

Muong Vat (Chamberlain 1984)

A	B	C	DL	DS
24				
33	22	31'	22	34
	42	55	42	44

<sup>3</sup> Since the data on Tai Nuea spoken in Laos is not available, the author can neither support nor reject Chamberlain's claim that the Tai of Muong Vat speak a form of Tai Nuea closer to that of Xieng Kho.

Muong Vat 1 (Ban Phat)

A	B	C	DL	DS
24				
53	33	21'	33	35
	41	45	42	44

Muong Vat 2 (Ban Coc Lac)

A	B	C	DL	DS
35				
42	32	21'	22	45
	42	44	32	34

Black Tai (Muong Lo)

A	B	C	DL DS
11	25	21	25~35
55	33	42	33~34



The patterns of sound changes as can be seen in the above examples help support the view that Tai Muong Vat is not a variety of Black Tai. Even though the speakers of Tai Muong Vat live in the area (Sonla province) which is occupied by the Black Tai people, they do speak different Tai dialect. Not only phonological differences but also lexical differences between Tai Muong Vat and Black Tai can be detected, as in the following:

	Tai Muong Vat	Old Black Tai
'to call'	hiək D2	*kheʔ D1
'to shoot'	jiɪj A2	*ben B1
'to crave for'	zaak DL1	*ʔɛ B1
'cheap'	hɛ A1	*thuʔ D1
'gun'	thuɪj B1	*ʔoɪj B1
'to practise'	thɪp DS2	*ʔɛp D1
'spear'	caw B1	*hɔʔ D1
'soaking wet'	mtɪk DS1	*ctɪm A2
'small basket'	sa-lɔ C1	*sɔɪj C1
'to fan'	phɪɪj A2	*vi~bi A2
'dip-net'	viɪj A1	*ka-sa A1

## Conclusion

Even though the Black Tai living in northern Laos and central Thailand left their homeland in Sip Song Chou Tai more than two hundred years ago, they have maintained their language very well. Perhaps language is regarded by them as the most important indices of their ethnic identity. They remain proud of their origins and the old kingdom from which they were forced to flee because of wars and for political reasons. In comparison with lexical differences caused by borrowings from Vietnamese,

Regarding the Tai dialect of Muong Vat, it is reconfirmed by both phonological and lexical evidence that the one spoken at Ban Phat, Chieng Pan sub-district and Ban Coc Lac, Tu Nang sub-district, is not Black Tai. The Tai Muong Vat dialect belongs to the PH language groups as the Lao language, whereas all of the Black Tai varieties spoken in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand belong to the P language group. The author's analysis of tone split and tone merger patterns supports Chamberlain's first claim in 1984, based solely on his tonal analysis that the Tai of Muong Vat do not speak Black Tai. The other phonological evidence shown in this paper also help prove that our findings can not be wrong. If the historians and anthropologists still believe that the Tai of Muong Vat are Black Tai, we do need a solid proof from them.



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**Note** Most of the English titles of the Tai Dam materials written in Thai are provided by their authors.

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## Editor's Note:

*Comments from readers are beneficial to the author in making his/her paper clearer or more interesting. In some cases, the author may not agree with the comments and has reasons to support his/her ideas. Both the reader's comments and the author's reasons for the disagreement to the comment are educational. The editor would like to thank both Assoc. Prof. Wilaiwan Kanitthanon and Prof. Theraphan L-Thongkum for allowing us to publish their views here.*

## Reflections on "The Tai of Muong Vat do not speak the Black Tai Language"

1. "The Tai of Muong Vat do not speak the Black Tai language" is a contribution to the study of the development of Black Tai's phonology. The article gives the detail of tonal, consonant as well as vowel developments of four Black Tai dialects, three of Muong Vat and one of Mung Lo.

2. Based on Chamberlain's claim on Muong Vat Tai that it was more like a "Tai Nuea" than a Black Tai proper, the author set out to prove that the Tai of Ban Phat and Ban Coc Lac of Muong Vat do not speak the Black Tai language. (Without the word "proper" after Black Tai)

3. The author proves by showing that the two Tai dialects of Muong Vat have different tonal, consonant as well as vowel developments from those of Black Tai in other places.

4. The proof is unconvincing in that we often find that subdialects of the same

language can have different tonal developments. For example, Gedney reported Red Tai with three different types of tonal development as shown below.

RTI	RTII	RTIII
1 2 3 2 2	1 2 3 5 2	1 2 3 2 2
1 2 3 2 2	4 2 3 5 2	1 2 3 2 2
1 2 3 2 2	4 2 3 5 2	1 2 3 2 2
4 3 5 2 3	4 3 5 4 3	4 3 5 2 1

(From Gedney, William. 1994. Southwestern Tai Dialects. In Thomas John Hudak (ed.) Papers on South and Southeast Asia.)

It seems that for many Tai scholars, such as Gedney, different tonal developments are not used as a criterion to group or to separate subdialects. Gedney also reported different languages with the same type of tonal development, for example, Black Tai of Son La and White Tai from Lai Chao.

Black Tai	White Tai
1 2 3 2 2	1 2 3 2 2
1 2 3 2 2	1 2 3 2 2
1 2 3 2 2	1 2 3 2 2
4 5 6 5 5	4 5 6 4 4

Both groups show development from Proto-Tai \*b \*d \*g to "p-, t-, k-".

5. Areal features have an important role in language development in North Vietnam. North Vietnam is a great show case of areal linguistics with 54 tribes. Languages of different language families share a lot of common vocabulary. Languages of the same language family may use different vocabulary if they are far apart and on the contrary, different Tai languages, i.e. Tay and Nung, can have many features in common. Tone CI in most Tai and



## Answers to Dr. Wilaiwan Khanittanan's reflections


1. The author would like to reconfirm that the varieties of Black Tai which the author came across in available Black Tai dictionaries, research reports and in her linguistic field trips had the same type of tone system and tonal development, i.e., six tones (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, D1=B1, D2=B2). The differences found

were phonetic characteristics of the six tones and the variation of few tones in one or two dialects which could have been caused by language contact, such as tone A1 in the Black Tai varieties of Chiang Khan (Loei) and Khaw Yoy (Phetchaburi).

The pattern of tonal development and the phonetic characteristics of tones in fifteen Black Tai dialects or varieties are shown below.

Pattern of tonal development

PT Tones	*A	*B	*C	*D
1/1-3	T1	T3	T5	T3
2/4	T2	T4	T6	T4



Phonetic characteristics of the tones in non-checked syllables

Location	Tone1 (A1)	Tone2 (A2)	Tone3 (B1)	Tone4 (B2)	Tone5 (C1)	Tone6 (C2)
<b>Vietnam</b>						
M.Lo	11	55	25	33	21	42
M.Mua	22	44	24	33	21	32
M.Than	22	55	25	44	21~12	43
M.Thanh	22	44	35	33	21	41
M.Kway	11	44	24	33	21	42
M.Muay	22	44	24	33	21	42
M.Nam Ma	22	44	25	33	21	31
M.La	33	55	34	44	21	31
<b>Laos</b>						
M.Luang Nam Tha	22	55	35	33	31'	42'
M.Nam Bak	22	454	24	33	31'	453'
M.May	22	44	24	33	31'	42'
<b>Thailand</b>						
A.Khaw Yoy	22~33	55	35	33	31'	453
A.Chiang Khan	332~343	454	35	33	31'	352
A.Muong (N.Prathom)	24	354	35	44	33	43
A.Tha Tako (N.Sawan)	14	343	35	33	22'	42




Besides Black Tai, the author also had an opportunity to work with the speakers of Red Tai living in Vietnam

and Laos at four locations. The typical pattern of tone split and merger in Red Tai can be summarized and illustrated as below.

Pattern of tonal development

PT Tones	*A	*B	*C	*DL	*DS
1/1-3	T1	T3	T4	T3	T2/T5/T2/ T3
2/4	T2	T4	T5	T4	T1/T3/T5/ T2



Phonetic characteristics of the tones in non-checked syllables

Location	Tone1 (A1)	Tone2 (A2)	Tone 3 (B1)	Tone4 (B2&C1)	Tone5 (C2)
Mai Ha (Mai Chau)	33	22	35	13'	41
Bao La (Mai Chao)	454	342	44	35	31
Phon Hom (Nam Bak)	232	343	44	24'	31
Nong Bua Thong (Sikhottabong)	343	22	33	24'	44

The data given above confirm that in non-checked or live syllables, the Red Tai language has five tones with the merger of B2/B4 tone to C1/C1-3 tone. The diverse behavior of tones DS1/DS1-3 and DS2/DS4 in Red Tai can be used as a criterion for classifying and subgrouping the Red Tai language into different varieties.

Even though the number of Red Tai speakers is less than that of Black Tai, there can be more varieties of Red Tai due to language contact. Language diversity in the areas where the speakers of Red Tai inhabit has reinforced the situation. In other words,

small number of speakers and the diverse nature of linguistic areas are the major causes of Red Tai varieties. In Vietnam and Laos, being Black Tai seems to be more prestigious than being White Tai, Red Tai or the other Tai ethnic groups. The Black Tai have more power and more roles to play at national level, especially in administration and politics in the two countries. The feeling of superiority makes them feel proud and try to maintain their ethnicity and language. For Red Tai and other small Tai ethnic groups, it is natural that they would like to be affiliated with the Black Tai since it is a way to raise their social status.




Regarding White Tai, the author has also worked on some White Tai varieties spoken in Vietnam and Laos. Certainly,

the pattern of tonal development of White Tai (WT) and Black Tai (BT) are the same as illustrated below.

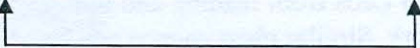
#### Black Tai

PT Tones	*A	*B	*C	*D
1/1-3	T1	T3	T5	T3
2/4	T2	T4	T6	T4



#### White Tai

PT Tones	*A	*B	*C	*D
1/1-3	T1	T3	T5	T3
2/4	T2	T4	T6	T4



Phonetic characteristics of the six White Tai tones (non-checked syllable)

Location	Tone1 (A1)	Tone2 (A2)	Tone3 (B1)	Tone4 (B2)	Tone5 (C1)	Tone6 (C2)
M.So (Lai Cau)	22	453'	35	44	213'	41
M.Baeng (Oudomxi)	22	44'	33	452	34'	41

However the development of diphthongs \*iə, \*uə, \*uə and \*au differ as shown below.

Proto-Tai	Black-tai	White Tai
*iə	iə	e
*uə	uə	ɤ
*uə	uə	o
*au	au	au

Regarding the development of diphthongs, Black Tai and White Tai are distinct.