

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research problem

Like other Southeast Asian languages Lao has a rich inventory of final particles. When we listen to Lao people conversing with each other, we immediately hear a variety of particles. Some particles are used frequently such as /dɤ:⁷/, /dɤ:²/, /nɔʔ³/. These final particles are used automatically by Lao people, but they are difficult for foreigners learning Lao. It is possible that a foreigner may avoid using some particles when he wants to make the Lao addressee understand his words, but his speech will sound strange and incomplete to Lao people.

Final particles are complicated not only for foreign students, but also for Lao instructors who teach Lao to foreigners. When the author taught Lao to foreigners at the National University of Laos, he found that he had difficulties explaining the meaning and usage of Lao final particles. Every time he taught a lesson with them, he would avoid explaining the final particles that occurred. If asked, he would say that the final particles were not true words, they just were emphasis particles in the sentence. His colleagues who taught Lao to foreign students likewise could not explain the meaning and function of these final particles. So the problem posed in this thesis is a question: What function and meaning do the Vientiane Lao final particles have?

This study will seek to explain Vientiane Lao final particle usage in terms of the four types of sentence that Trask defines in his book *A dictionary of grammatical terms in linguistics*:

Sentence type is one of the four traditional classes of sentence, in a classification which attends only to surface form and not to discourse

function, the four types being statements, commands, questions and exclamations, conventionally associated with the four mood categories declarative, imperative, interrogative and exclamative. (1993:251)

1.1 Methodology

This section provides an overview of the research objectives and the data collection procedures utilized in this thesis.

1.1.1 Objectives of the research

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To analyze final particles in Vientiane Lao by considering their meaning and function in the sentence.
2. To describe the co-occurrence of commonly used final particles.

1.1.2 Data collection procedures

The first step of this research was to review relevant documents, books, theses, and research reports published in Lao, Thai and English about final particles in Lao and other Tai languages. Then final particle data was gathered from conversations in Lao short stories and novels. In addition, the author spent two months staying in Vientiane with his family to collect data at home and other places such as the market, office, and medical clinic by listening to natural speech.

After the data was collected, it was compared and checked with three Vientiane people by birth for accuracy. The names of these three are:

1. Mr. Bounmy Kongmany, 48 years old, a Lao language lecturer in the National University of Laos.
2. Mr. Somphet Phommavongsa, 44 years old, a Lao language lecturer in the National University of Laos.

3. Ms. Bounhom Dinavong, 64 years old, a retired Ministry of Education official.

Next, the author produced a phonetic transcription, English gloss, and English free translation, plus a note about the sociolinguistic context of the utterance, for the example sentences (examples from books and magazines are cited accordingly, while examples from daily life were transcribed in the author's data notebook). Finally, the particles themselves were classified and analyzed on the basis of the four sentence types.

1.2 Limitations of the study

This thesis is a study of Lao final particles used in the Vientiane municipality, which is the capital city of Laos. Thus, these observations may not completely apply to other varieties of Lao. In addition, while the list of final particles that may occur in isolation (without any other particles) is exhaustive, the high number of possible combinations of final particles dictates that only those which co-occur frequently in everyday conversation be observed and analyzed here.

1.3 Information about Laos and the Vientiane Municipality

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is the official name of Laos, which is a mountainous, landlocked country, bounded on the north by China, on the east by Vietnam, on the south by Cambodia, and on the west and northwest by Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). It has a total area of 236,800 sq. km.

Laos has a population of 5,777,180 (2002 estimate)¹, which consists of forty-nine officially recognized ethnic groups, in four main linguistic families: The Lao-Tai family includes Lao, Phouthai, Tai, Lue, Gnouane, Young, Saek, and Thai Neua. The Mon-

¹ "Laos," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2002
<http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2002 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

Khmer family includes Khmu, Pray, Singmoun, Khom, Thene, Idou, Bid, Lamet, Samtao, Katang, Makong, Try, Trieng, Ta-oi, Yeh, Brao, Harak, Katou, Oi, Krieng, Yrou, Souai, Nyaheune, Lavy, Kabkae, Khmer, Toum, Ngouane, Meuang, and Kri. The Tibeto-Burmese family includes Ahka, Singsali (Phu Noi), Lahu, Sila, Hayi, Lolo and Hor. The Hmong-Mien family has two main branches: Hmong and Mien (Yao)².

Vientiane is the capital and largest city of Laos, situated on the eastern bank of the Mekong River, which forms the border between Laos and Thailand. The Vientiane municipality is the administrative name of the capital, which has a total area of 3,920 sq. km., and a population of 616,160. The city consists of nine districts: Chanthabouly, Sikhottabong, Saysettha, Sisattanak, Saythany, Nasaythong, Hatsayphong, Sangthong, and Pakngum. The Vientiane Municipality shares a border with Vientiane Province, the Saysomboun Special Region, Borikhamxay Province, and Nongkhai (Thailand). The city incorporates many government offices, the national university, the national library, an international airport, as well as monuments and many temples that are important places for tourism.

Vientiane was the capital of the Lane Xang kingdom from 1560 until 1713, when the kingdom was divided into three parts. Vientiane became the capital of the Lane Xang Vientiane Kingdom. Sixty-six years later, all three Lao kingdoms became tributary states of Siam, which destroyed and took over Vientiane in 1828. The city was rebuilt in 1899, six years after France took control of Laos, and Vientiane was made the administrative capital of the country. After Laos became independent in 1954, Vientiane was the capital of Lao Royal Kingdom. In 1975, it became the capital of the Lao's People Democratic Republic.

² Lao Mission, 2003. "Lao Statistics"

<http://www.un.int/lao/>

1.4 Information about Lao and Vientiane Lao

Among the ethnically varied languages, Lao is the official language of the country. Lao belongs to the Tai language family, which is spoken over a wide area in Southeast Asia including Laos, Thailand, and some part of Myanmar, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Malaysia (Reuangdet 1988: 1).

Vientiane Lao is spoken in the Vientiane Municipality, which is a multilingual community because a large number of people from other provinces have moved to the city. Even though people speak in different dialects, they can understand each other. However, Vientiane Lao is spoken by people, who were born and raised in this city, regardless of their parents' place of origin.

In *From Ancient Thai to Modern Dialects*, Brown (1985) considers Vientiane Lao as a submember of Lao. He divides Lao into three dialect groups: the Luangprabang group, the Vientiane group, and the Yo group. The Vientiane group is spoken all over most of central and southern Laos, and northeastern Thailand. The classification of Lao language group is shown in the following figure.

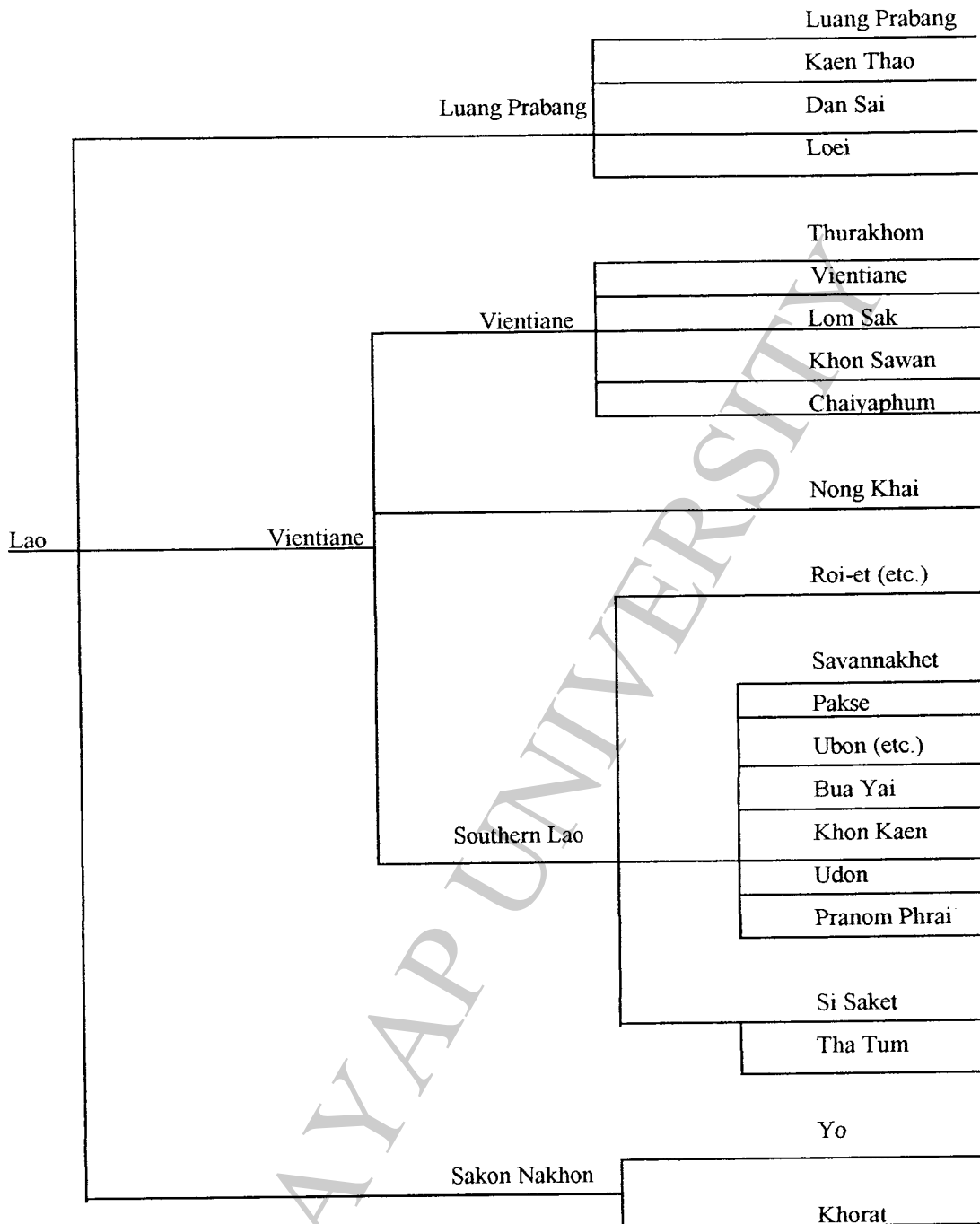


Figure 1. The classification of Lao language groups

(adapted from Brown 1985: 144)

1.5 Overview of phonology

Lao phonology is not complex. Most surface forms directly represent underlying forms. The transcription which is presented here is adapted from the *Lao-Thai-English Dictionary* published by the Linguistics Department of Kasetsart University (2000 edition).

1.5.1 Consonants

There are 20 initial consonants /p, p^h, b, t, t^h, d, k, k^h, ʔ, m, n, ɲ, ŋ, f, s, h, tɕ, w, j, l/ and nine final consonants: /p, t, k, ʔ, m, n, ŋ, w, j/ in Vientiane Lao, as shown in Table 1. For ease of use, the chart is given as a phonemic representation of Lao.

Consonants	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	p p ^h b		t t ^h d			k k ^h	ʔ
Nasals	m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
Fricatives		f	s				h
Affricates				tɕ			
Approximant	w				j		
Lateral Approximant			l				

Table 1. Vientiane Lao consonants

1.5.2 Vowels and diphthongs

There are 18 vowels and 6 diphthongs in Vientiane Lao, as shown in Table 2:

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
High	i i:	ɯ ɯ:	u u:
Mid	e e:	ə ə:	o o:
Low	ɛ ɛ	a a:	ɔ ɔ:
Diphthongs	ia i:a	ɯa ɯ:a	ua u:a

Table 2. Vientiane Lao vowels and diphthongs

1.5.3 Tones

The six tones of Vientiane Lao as used in this thesis are adapted from Cristfield (1974). The six phonemic tones are as follows:

1. Low (22)
2. Mid level (44)
3. High rising (45)
4. Low rising (23)
5. High falling (53)
6. Low falling (21)

Some final particles have a distinct phonetic tone which differs from the six standard tones mentioned above. Cristfield (1974: 42) marked this “high-rising-falling” tone

numerically as 454. However, in order to make the transcriptions in this thesis easier to read, the number 7 will be used for this tone.

1.5.4 Lao syntax

The general arrangement of a simple Lao sentence is Subject-Verb-Object, as in English. There is no inflection of nouns, or pronouns of verbs. Gender, number and tense are denoted where considered necessary by the addition of other words. Adjectives come after the noun they modify. In many cases, verbs and adjectives can be changed into nouns with the use of a prefix e.g. (ka:n¹-, ku:am³-). The basic sentence in Lao follows a set pattern. It can consist of a single verb but in most cases one or more of the optional elements is present. The most common of these is the subject which precedes the verb. After the verb comes the direct object and indirect object. Following the objects can come several additions which in turn may be followed by a particle. The formula for a basic sentence is given below:

<p>Sentence → (SUBJ) + VP + (DO) +(IO) + (Add) + (FP)</p>

(adapted from Wright 1994: 6)