

***Tonal Evolution Caused by Language Contact:
A Case Study of the T'in Language of Nan
Province, Northern Thailand***

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Abstract

T'in is a Mon-Khmer language; generally, Mon-Khmer languages are non-tonal. The T'in (Lua) language of Bo Kluea District, Nan Province, comprises two major dialects, Mal and Pray. Pray is more conservative and has less speakers, due to geography and communist infiltration in the past. The data on Mal, Pray and Tai Yuan (language of the majority) were collected in 2005 for the research project on "Linguistic Diversity in Nan Province: A Foundation for Tourism Development".

Although different pitches can be heard in both Mal and Pray, there are no consistent patterns in Pray, even in the speech of a single speaker. In Mal, two pitches [high-falling] and [low-rising] have been found distinctive, e.g., /wâan/ 'year' vs. /wǎan/ 'vacant, occupied (Tai loan)'. It can be concluded that the Mal dialect of Bo Kluea District has acquired two tones, /falling/ vs. /rising/ or /high/ vs. /low/. The falling tone occurs mostly in native words, whereas the rising tone mostly occurs in Tai loanwords. However, a few native words can have rising tone and a few Tai loanwords can have falling tone. Acoustical measurements were done to confirm the characteristics of Mal and Thai Yuan tones.

Filbeck (1972) pointed out that a dialect of Mal had two tones, i.e., rising and non-rising, and that the emergence of the rising tone appears to be the result of an independent innovation. The results of our present study indicate that the two rising tones in Tai Yuan, namely, /low-rising/ (A1-2) and /mid-rising/ (A3-4) seem to be the cause of tone birth in Mal, especially, the rising tone. In Tai Yuan, a six-tone language, words having rising tones (A1-2 and A3-4) are outnumbered, thus, frequently heard by Mal people. Perhaps, this auditory factor could have induced tonal evolution in some Mal dialects.

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