

Chapter 7

Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to study the phonology of an unknown language, Muak Sa-aak, a Palaungic language belonging to the little known Angkuic branch, found in Myanmar and China. There is no previous published research available on Muak Sa-aak, although some research was undertaken by Hopple in 2007. Since there is clear evidence of lexical borrowing from Tai Lue, an unrelated language, it seemed essential to consider the impact of this on the phonology of the language. In addition, since tonogenesis is frequently mentioned as the interesting feature of Angkuic languages, it seemed appropriate to explore these processes also.

7.1 Results

The following sections summarize the findings on Muak Sa-aak phonological inventory and phonotactics, tone and tonogenesis, and the effects of borrowing from a neighboring Tai-Kadai language on its phonology.

7.1.1 Phonology

In this study of the phonology, Muak Sa-aak was found to be a mono- and sesquisyllabic language with 22 consonants, 18 vowels, and three phonemic tones. Muak Sa-aak shows a shift in initial consonants, with voiceless initials having become voiceless aspirated, and voiced initials having become voiceless, characteristic of Angkuic languages. It also shows the retention of the historical distinction between initial *h- and *s-; both of these features are characteristic of the Angkuic languages. The vowels include 16 monophthongs, 9 of which are short, and 7 long; there are two diphthongs making up the remaining two long vowels. There is no contrastive voice register, but the tones do include features of voice phonation. The three tones are a low Tone 1, a checked Tone 2, sometimes with creaky voice, and a falling Tone 3. Tones and syllable structures

are correlated, so that there are restrictions on the co-occurrence of tones and syllable structures.

While previous studies of Angkuic languages have emphasized that tonogenesis resulted primarily from a loss of phonemic vowel length, in this language tonogenesis seems to be the result of a combination of the effects of vowel length and final consonants. Although vowel length has been involved in tonogenesis, the length contrast appears to be preserved. The most important distinction between final consonant types involved in tonogenesis is that between sonorants and stops or fricatives.

This pattern of tonogenesis suggests that overall syllable structure is the primary mechanism for tonogenesis. Although vowel length does appear to be part of the process of tonogenesis, the type of final consonant involved seems to be at least as important.

7.1.2 Borrowing

Borrowing is an interesting phenomenon in this language, as it has been heavily influenced by Tai Lue, a language of an entirely different family, from which it has borrowed large amounts of vocabulary. Even the numeral system has been borrowed essentially intact from Tai Lue. However, the Tai Lue words borrowed into Muak Sa-aak frequently show the effects of Muak Sa-aak phonology and sound substitutions, as they have been borrowed into Muak Sa-aak vocabulary, and Tai Lue has affected the phonology of Muak Sa-aak in only minor ways.

Despite the borrowing, some phonological features stand out as native to Muak Sa-aak. These include palatal final consonants and a final lateral consonant. It also includes various features which may reflect things which have been lost in the surrounding Tai Lue but not in Muak Sa-aak. One of these is the phoneme /r/; Muak Sa-aak has many, both word-initially and in consonant clusters, while Tai Lue does not have an /r/ in its phonemic inventory, and has very few clusters at all. In many words borrowed from Tai Lue, Muak Sa-aak actually replaces initial /h/ sounds in Tai Lue with an /r/. Conversely, this particular variety of Muak Sa-aak shows at least one development which does not appear in Tai Lue, the development of diphthongs (/ia/ and /ua/ from a former /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/). These also may be seen in words originally borrowed from Tai Lue, which, in Tai Lue, do not contain diphthongs, but in Muak Sa-aak usage have the monophthong replaced with a diphthong.

7.2 Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Ideally, it would have been better to have recorded more speakers. Another difficulty is that this study looks only at the variety spoken in one village. Since Muak Sa-aak appears to vary considerably from one village to the next, it is not clear how applicable the results are to the varieties spoken in other villages.

Another limitation is that there has been a lot of borrowing from the major language used in that area, which is a Tai-Kadai language, and thus belongs to a different language family entirely. A lot of work was required to separate borrowed words from native words. Another difficulty here is also in knowing how much the borrowed words may or may not have changed in pronunciation to reflect the phonology of Muak Sa-aak. The speakers could not always think of alternative words that were not borrowed from Tai Lue.

7.3 Areas for further study

The findings on the interaction of Muak Saak vowel and sonorant length and their impact on tonal behavior suggest further studies on syllable weight. The presyllables seen in the data also suggest further study on their semantic and grammatical categories. To this author's knowledge, nothing else has been published yet on this language, so there are many additional areas for further study, especially dialect survey and diachronic linguistics, as well as grammar and discourse studies.

Since this study examined only the variety of Muak Sa-aak spoken in one village, it would be very interesting to compare it to that spoken in other villages, to see just how great the variation is geographically between villages. Further analysis of the tones and of the voice phonation features, especially in comparison with the speech of other villages, might also be useful. Since the speakers in this study were primarily older speakers, it would also be helpful to examine the speech of younger speakers, to see how the language and its phonology might be changing between generations. This is a concern of the speakers involved in this study, as several of them expressed concern about the possibility of their children or grandchildren losing their language.

A detailed historical comparative linguistic study would be helpful in better defining the relationships between Muak Sa-aak and the other Angkuic languages. The situation with /f/ and /p^h/ is not clear; it is possible that there is a change ongoing,

but analysis of this in more speakers with more data might perhaps resolve this question. It would be interesting to examine this to try to determine the direction of this change. It is very likely that other changes are also ongoing. The diphthongs /ia/ and /ua/ were not seen in the small amount of data this author has from another Muak Sa-aak village. These diphthongs are also not seen in Tai Lue, the major language influencing Muak Sa-aak. In Muak Sa-aak as spoken in Wan Fai village, however, the diphthongs are seen both in native words and in borrowed words.

A study of the grammar of Muak Sa-aak remains to be done; in fact there is still very little written on the grammar of any Angkuic languages. Likewise, this author is not aware of any discourse studies having been done in these languages to this date.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY