

Audio Track 9: More Important Questions and Answers



(see Culture Note C.3; also see Note 1 below)

ອ້າຍໄປໃສມາ? Where have you been?

ບ້າມາແຈ່ໃສ? Where are you coming from?

A: ລຸງກິນເຊົ້າແລ້ວບໍ່? Have you eaten yet? See Note 2 below

B: ກິນແລ້ວ I've already eaten.

A: ລາວເວົ້າພາສາລາວໄດ້ບໍ່? Can s/he speak Lao? See Grammar Note G.2

B: ເວົ້າໄດ້ Yes, s/he can.

A: ເອື້ອຍແຈ່ງງານແລ້ວບໍ່? Are you married yet? See Note 3 below.

B1: ຂ້ອຍແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວ Yes, I'm already married.

B2: ຂ້ອຍຍັງບໍ່ໄດ້ແຕ່ງງານເທື່ອ No, I'm not married yet. See Grammar Note G.3

1. In the first three questions on this track, the goal is often not finding out the information asked for in the question, but rather simply greeting the person you're addressing. We do a similar thing in English when we casually ask "how are you" to someone as we pass by each other; we often don't really want to hear how they're doing, it's simply a form of greeting. ມາ by itself means "to come." For an explanation of the kinship terms used on this track, see Culture Note C.3.

2. Whenever you're visiting someone in Lao culture, you will be asked this question. You should always give the response indicated here, no matter how hungry you are. Don't worry, your host will continue to offer you food and eventually you can accept it, but it is polite to refuse at first, lest it seem you came to their house for the sole purpose of eating their food! You will also be asked this question in other contexts, in which it often simply functions as the type of greeting described in Note 1 above. (In some situations, of course, the person asking may really want to know if you've eaten yet or not!)

3. It is assumed in traditional Lao culture that everyone will eventually get married, hence the "yet"

in the translation. If you're single, whether you plan to get married in the future or not, it will simplify matters if you respond as indicated here. The ຍັງ (combined with ບໍ່) in the response makes it clear that the person is planning on getting married at some point. The particle at the end of the response, ເທື່ອ, simply emphasizes the fact that you're not married yet, though not in as strong a way as the particle ດອກ would.

Audio Track 10: Kinship Terms and Other Pronouns

(see Culture Note C.3)



ລາວ she/he (familiar and respectful)

ເຂົາເຈົ້າ they

ພວກເຮົາ we/us

ອ້າຍ older male sibling

ເອື້ອຍ older female sibling

ນ້ອງ younger sibling (gender neutral)

ລຸງ uncle older than one's parents

ປາ aunt older than one's parents

ມັນ it; potentially disrespectful when used to refer to adults

ເພິ່ນ highly respectful third-person pronoun (he/she)

Culture Notes

C.1 Greetings in Lao

ສະບາຍດີ is perhaps the most common and useful greeting to know in Lao; that's why you're learning it first. People of all ages will say it to you as you walk down the street; friends will say it to you when you run into them, etc. It's the all-around Lao icebreaker, kind of similar to "aloha" in Hawaiian, since it can be said to mean "hello," "how are you," "I'm fine," etc., depending on the situation. ສະບາຍ by itself means "to be healthy, happy, comfortable;" ດີ means "good" and simply intensifies the sense of well-being being described (or asked about). ບໍ່ has a variety of meanings in Lao, including "no," "not" (i.e. it's used to negate verbs), and its usage here, as the "tag marker" for

yes/no questions. So when you're asking ສະບາຍດີບໍ່?, you're asking how someone is doing; when you answer, you can omit the final particle because you're no longer asking a question, you're responding to one.

C.2 “Taking Leave”

Traditional Lao culture is very much built on respect and deference, especially to those older than you, but also toward those of a higher social class than you. So when you're “taking leave” of someone, you should announce that you're going (especially if the person you're parting with is older than you). This basically constitutes your “asking permission” to go before they do. We used to have something like this in Western culture; it's still very much “in fashion” in Lao culture. Note that the person staying-- or both of you, if you're parting company on the street, etc.--responds in a slightly different way. Either of the two “staying goodbyes” in this track are just fine to use in such a case; it's your choice.

C.3 Introduction to Kinship Terms in Lao

Up until now you've been only using two pronouns in your limited Lao speech, ຂ້ອຍ , “I/me” and ເຈົ້າ “you”. These two pronouns can indeed get you very far. In fact, we can say with great confidence that you will almost never need to use any word other than ຂ້ອຍ to refer to yourself when speaking Lao. However, in reality Lao people address each other in everyday life using a wide range of kinship terms (used for first, second, as well as third person reference) and you need to recognize these when you hear them. You should also learn to use them yourself, though only as second and third person pronouns, never first (I'll explain why in just a minute). Let's consider the kinship terms and assorted pronouns from Audio Track 10 now, one by one.

ລາວ he/she (familiar and respectful) This is the third person pronoun you use to refer to people whom you know fairly well. It can be used to refer to several people (“they/them”) but most often it's understood to refer to just one person, so we can translate it as either “he” or “she”. This one is never used in the first or second person by anyone, so that's easy enough.

ເຂົາເຈົ້າ they This is the pronoun used to refer to a group (more than one person) of people whom you know and respect. Third person only.

ພວກເຮົາ we, us This is the all-purpose first person plural pronoun. It has another use, which we'll discuss in a future chapter, but its “we/us” function is all you have to remember for now.

ອ້າຍ older male sibling This is a great pronoun. It's quite informal and friendly, more intimate than ເຈົ້າ , but still quite respectful. It's respectful because you're raising the person whom you're addressing up to the status of someone several years older than you (even if they're really not), and assuming greater age is always a sign of respect- -as long as it's done within reason, of course. This is the pronoun you use to address males who are roughly your age or several years (up to, say, 10) older than you. You'll hear Lao people also use this pronoun in the first person (to mean “I/me”); you should not use it this way. Using kinship terms in first person gets into subtleties of Lao social interaction/hierarchy that you will probably never totally understand, so trust me, don't mess with it. Think of how (in limited cases) in English we sometimes use kinship terms in the first person to speak to someone: “Mother doesn't think you should do that, sweetie;” or “Be a nice boy and come here and give auntie a hug” (assuming one's mother and one's aunt are doing the speaking, respectively). Using kinship terms in the first person, especially when you're “raising yourself up” as older than the person you're speaking to, opens a whole complex social/cultural can of worms in Lao, and believe me, you're better off not going there. Note that ອ້າຍ , and all the kinship terms discussed in this section, can also be used in the third person to refer to someone fitting that age/gender description relative to the speaker . This is perfectly fine and often quite desirable for you to do. Note that this is also the default term with which to address service people who are roughly your own age or a little older than you: market vendors, restaurant workers, tuk-tuk drivers, etc.

ອ້ອຍ older female sibling This pronoun works pretty much the same way ອ້າຍ does, except of course it's used to address (and refer to) women of roughly your age or a few years older than you. If you haven't already figured it out or been told in class, by the way, these two terms also translate literally as “older brother” and “older sister,” (and cousins, too) respectively, when used to refer to members of one's own family.

ນ້ອງ younger sibling (gender neutral) This is the term you use to address those younger than you,

including young children. Men, watch it though, this is also the default term that husbands use to address their wives (while referring to themselves as ອ້າຍ in the first person. Similarly, wives (and lovers) refer to themselves using this pronoun in the first person, and refer to their husbands in the second person as ອ້າຍ . Don't worry too much about this, but do be aware of the possible "alternate meanings" of these two pronouns when they're used together. This is the default pronoun you use to address service people obviously younger than you, especially in a restaurant or other shop setting. This word of course also translates as "younger brother/younger sister" (or cousin) in the context of the family. Once again, this pronoun can be used in either first, second or third person reference, but you should only use it as second and third.

ຊ່າງ older uncle Technically this term means "mother or father's older brother," and with those not directly related to you, you use it to refer to men who are (roughly) older than your parents. This usually means those around 20-25 years older than you, but there are no hard and fast rules. You'll get a sense over time, with experience, of the subtleties of this term.

ປ່າ older aunt This is the female equivalent of the above term; all the same usage comments apply.

ມັນ it; potentially disrespectful when used to refer to adults This is the pronoun used to refer to inanimate objects, animals, children in many cases, and that's about it. You'll hear adults use it to refer to other adults with whom they're either intimate or who they're contemptuous of, but you should never use this pronoun in reference to adults. By the way, this pronoun is used in the third person only. Note that Lao native speakers' use of this third person pronoun doesn't necessarily mean they're being disrespectful of the person they're referring to (especially if it's a child or family member or close friend), but no matter how close you might be to a person you're referring to, Lao native speakers will never "tolerate" you using this pronoun to refer to that person, it literally hurts their ears. So just steer clear of the whole problem and only use the term to refer to objects and animals.

ເພິ່ນ he/she (extremely respectful) This is a super-respectful third person pronoun, to be used when referring to very old people, people of very high social status, or in certain formal social contexts. Again, you'll get a sense of the parameters of this pronoun over time, as you observe native speakers using it in a wide range of contexts. Don't worry about it too much for now.

Grammar Notes

G.1 Word Order in Lao and the Concept of “Elegant Grammar”

Lao follows what we call a SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT word order, much as English does. But that’s pretty much where the grammatical similarities between Lao and English end! Lao verbs are not at all inflected for tense or person, meaning that you don’t find anything in Lao like you do in English regarding a verb like “to go.” In English, we have “I go,” “she goes,” “they went,” etc. (In languages like Spanish and French, of course, the situation with verbs changing according to person and tense is much more complex than this!). In Lao, there is one verb meaning “to go,” and one form of that verb: ໄປ . The form of this verb stays the same whether I’m doing it, you’re doing it, she’s doing it, they’re doing it. It stays the same whether I went yesterday, whether you’re going today, or whether “they” will go next year. Simple, right? Well, deceptively so. Keep in mind that all human languages are capable of expressing the same degree of nuance and subtlety with regard to time and aspect (completion of an action versus the action still being in an uncompleted state, etc.). Various languages just accomplish these tasks in different ways. Trust me, Lao--or any other Asian language not inflected for tense or person--is no “simpler” than English, just as English is no “simpler” than Spanish or French.

What is more accurate to say about Lao and languages similar to it is that Lao accomplishes the same nuance and complexity of expression that English does, but that it does it with a smaller number of tools. The trick with Lao is learning how to utilize that limited number of tools in exactly the right way to get your meaning across to a native speaker, and believe me, that’s no easy task. The number one grammatical mistake of non-native speakers of Lao when constructing Lao sentences is to make things more convoluted and wordy than they need to be. So I like to say that Lao grammar is “elegant” and “economical” in the ways it constructs meaning.

So don’t necessarily think of a set of sentences like ເຈົ້າໄປໃສ? and ຂ້ອຍໄປຕະຫລາດ as “meaning” “You go where?” and “I go store,” which would be a word-by-word translation to English of these sentences from Audio Track 1. Such a translation does Lao a disservice by making it seem “simple” or even “stupid” to the English ear and brain. These sentences in-

stead mean exactly what the grammatically correct English sentences “Where are you going?” (or “Where did you go?”) and “I’m going to the store” (or “I went to the store”) mean, they just convey the information in a different way.

G.2 The Verb Negator ບໍ່ and the Verb ແມ່ນ

Here we’re concerned first with these three exchanges; one is from Audio Track 3, and the other two are found on Audio Track 9:

A: ເຈົ້າເວົ້າລາວເກັ່ງຫລາຍນັ້ນ You speak Lao very well.

B: ບໍ່ແມ່ນ ຂ້ອຍເວົ້າລາວໄດ້ໜ້ອຍນຶ່ງ That’s not true, I speak a little Lao.

A: ລາວເວົ້າລາວໄດ້ບໍ່? Can s/he speak Lao?

B: ເວົ້າໄດ້ Yes, s/he can.

A: ເຮື້ອຍແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວບໍ່? Are you married yet?

B1: ຂ້ອຍແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວ Yes, I’m already married.

B2: ຂ້ອຍຍັງບໍ່ໄດ້ແຕ່ງງານເທື່ອ No, I’m not married yet.

In all three of these examples, ບໍ່ is used either as a “yes/no question tag” or as the negator of a verb. Note that when we’re asking a yes/no question (a question that ends with ບໍ່), the way to answer that question in the negative is to place ບໍ່ in front of the verb that was used in the question. You can see a clear example of this in the “B2” response to the “are you married?” question, and the slightly more complex response to the “you speak Lao very well” statement. We’ll get to that one in a second. But for now, look at the second exchange, “Can s/he speak Lao?” What would be a proper negative response to that question? If you can’t figure it out yet, read Grammar Note G.3 and then try again.

Now, look at the response to the compliment about speaking Lao well in the first exchange above. Notice that the verb negated is ແມ່ນ, which in fact did not appear in the original statement. That’s because ແມ່ນ is kind of a special verb. It means “to be,” but in a slightly

different sense than the “to be” verb you’ve already encountered, ເປັນ . ແມ່ນ usually means “to be” in a factual sense, as in “to be true; to be real”. So in this case, what the negative response is saying is that “it’s not true at all that I speak Lao well, in fact I only speak it a little.” We’ll encounter ແມ່ນ again in the next chapter.

G.3 ໄດ້ and the Concept of “Completion”

ໄດ້ is a rather complex particle in Lao, which has several meanings. All of those meanings, however, have something to do with the concept of having completed or finished something, or, when it follows verb, the ability or possibility of completing something (namely, the action described by the verb). So in the case of the second exchange in our three examples on the previous page, the question is literally “Can s/he successfully complete the act of speaking Lao?” The answer given in the exchange is in the affirmative; now, can you come up with the proper form for the negative answer?

Finally, in the third exchange, the one about marriage, we see a slightly different use of ໄດ້. Here it means “to have completed an action” (in the past). Essentially, in this way ໄດ້ functions as a kind of past tense marker in Lao. What the response (B2) is saying is that s/he has not “completed the act of getting married.” In this usage ໄດ້ always appears in front of the verb.

Riverside dining along the Mekong in Vientiane.

