

Audio Track 24: Numbers 0-10



ສູນ zero

ຫົກ six

ນຶ່ງ one (also spelled ຫນຶ່ງ)

ເຈັດ seven

ສອງ two

ແປດ eight

ສາມ three

ເກົ້າ nine

ສີ່ four

ສິບ ten

ຫ້າ five

Lao Alphabet Basics, Continued: Tones and Consonant Class

You're most likely aware that Lao is a tonal language. Up until now we've let you slide on this and had you concentrate on copying your teacher's--and the Audio Tracks'--pronunciation, but you do need to start thinking about tones analytically now. One reason for this is the fact that how words are spelled in Lao is inextricably linked to tones. Luckily, the way the written language represents tones in Lao syllables is quite systematic and logical. In other words, there are way more "rules" than there are "exceptions to the rules," a lot more than can be said for spelling conventions in English!

When we say there are "rules" for representing tones, however, remember, the rules are for representing the tones, they don't determine what tone a word has. Tones exist first in the spoken language of Lao. The writing system was developed a certain way in order to represent those spoken tones.

There is some argument as to how many tones there are in Vientiane Lao, which is considered to be the standard, "official" pronunciation of Lao, the dialect closest to how written Lao is supposed to sound when read aloud. Some say there are five tones in Vientiane

Lao, some say six. There is data, and analysis by linguists, supporting both claims. The very question of “what is Vientiane Lao” today is even further complicated by the fact that Vientiane has seen a huge influx of immigrants from other parts of Laos over the last several decades. Many of these immigrants came from Central and Southern Laos, and the local dialects these people bring with them has undoubtedly influenced the way Lao is spoken in the capital. For our purposes here, we will assume that Vientiane Lao has six tones. By almost all analyses, by the way, southern dialects of Lao such as Savannakhet and Champasak are considered to have six tones. As for northern dialects, Luang Prabang is considered by some to have five and by others to have six tones. You’ll be hearing examples of speech from several major dialect areas in Laos in the videos accompanying this Textbook, so you can even come up with your own theories about this. Certainly, every dialect of Lao has distinctive qualities or variations in its basic tones which give that dialect its identity. Sorry this couldn’t all be simpler and “black and white”!

In this Textbook, we will consider that Lao has the following tones: low, middle, high, rising, high falling and low falling. For an overview of these tones with multiple examples of each (plus comparisons of various tones with other tones), see **Lesson One** in your Multimedia Materials, and open the “Tone Chart.” You’ll also get plenty of practice with all of these in class (or with a regular conversation partner). For now, though, we’re going to be concerned with how “consonant class” affects the representation of tone in written Lao. To understand this, and to learn all the “rules” of indicating tone in the Lao writing system, you need to first understand that there are three classes of consonant in Lao: high, middle and low. Every word in Lao is composed of syllables, remember, and every written syllable contains a consonant and a vowel. Depending on the class of that consonant--high, middle, or low--and depending on both the length of the vowel and the consonant that happens to end the word (when there is one), any given syllable will also possess a tone, one of the six tones mentioned above. In different dialects, those tones can be pronounced differently, some quite radically different from standard, Vientiane Lao pronunciation. But the Vientiane variety of Lao is what we’re going to focus on here.

Let’s start with the middle consonants (ອັກສອນກາງ in Lao), because they form the con-

sonant class with probably the most “logical” boundaries. Quite simply, the middle consonants in Lao are composed of all the non-aspirated stop consonants in the alphabet, with the addition of ຢ. And yes, this includes the two voiced stop consonants in Lao, because they are indeed unaspirated. Aha, are you starting to see now why we spent so much time in the last chapter defining the various types of consonants? So, the middle consonants in Lao are:

ກ ຈ ດ ຕ ບ ປ ຢ ອ

Now do you also see why it was so important that we define our lonely last row friend ອ as a stop consonant as well?

So these “middle consonants,” in various situations (i.e. combined with long or short vowels, as part of syllables with various different types of endings) indicate certain tones...there are four possibilities: low, low falling, high, and mid. Take a look at the tone chart in Multimedia Lesson One for an overview of when the middle consonants represent which tones. Listen to the examples, too. Take some time to do this, it’s more important than simply reading the descriptions below; you need to hear the tones to really remember them.

Here’s some good news about the middle consonants, other than the fact that they’re easy to remember because they’re all unaspirated stops, and there aren’t very many of them in Lao: only the middle consonants can produce a low tone. No other type of consonant (low, high) will begin a syllable with a low tone. So if the word has a low tone, it has to start with one of the middle consonants, period. (Note: as you’ll hear in the videos, the low tone in the spoken pronunciation of many Vientiane dialect speakers tends to rise a bit.) The pronunciation of the low tone when reading aloud should be rather even, no matter what one’s spoken dialect of Lao is.

Now, as you can also see (and hear) in the tone chart in Multimedia Lesson One , the “environment” involving middle consonants in which a low tone is produced is when the

middle consonant begins a syllable which contains either a short or long vowel AND ends with a) a nasal consonant, or b) a syllable which ends with a long vowel. Don't worry, we'll cover in detail just which vowels are the "long vowels" in a little bit.

Now let's consider the "low consonants" (in Lao, ອັກສອນຕໍ່າ). There are more of these than there are middle consonants, so it will be a little more difficult to remember just which consonants they are. However, this might help: they exist in pairs. That is, every consonant sound which is represented by a low consonant is also represented by a high consonant. And in the Lao alphabet order, the high consonant of the pair always precedes the low consonant.

There is one slight complication here, however. Among the nasal consonants and the "oddball" last row of consonants, there aren't enough high consonants to go around, that is, there aren't enough high consonants to pair with every low consonant. So we have to kind of "create them."

We'll get to this in a second. First, though, let's look at the stop consonants (and the fricative, and one of the "h" consonants in the last row) which are low consonants, because ready-made low/high pairs do exist for all of those:

ກ	ຂ	ຄ	ງ			
ຈ	ສ	ຊ	ຍ			
ດ	ຕ	ຖ	ທ	ນ		
ບ	ປ	ຜ	ຝ	ພ	ຟ	ມ
ຢ	ຣ	ລ	ວ	ຫ	ອ	ຮ

So what you see on the previous page are all the low consonants which have high “cousins,” in blue text. Next, let’s select out all of the low consonants (including those without high-class cousins), so you can get an idea of the total number:

ຄ ໆ ຊ ຍ ທ ນ

ພ ຟ ມ ຣ ລ ວ ຮ

And now, let’s look at the low consonants which have readymade pairs, alongside their pairs:

Low Consonant	Corresponding High Consonant
ຄ	ຂ
ຊ	ສ
ທ	ຖ
ພ	ຜ
ຟ	ຝ
ຮ	ຫ

That was sneaky, huh? Instead of just giving you the low consonants that have a pair among the high consonants as promised, you got all the high consonants-- ອັກສອນສູງ --in Lao as well. Needless to say, you have to memorize--how to recognize and write--every one of these consonants, high and low. You also have to be able to immediately recognize whether a given consonant is either high or low, since this quality is essential in spelling syllables (and words) so they have the right tone(s). Go to the alphabet section of your Multimedia Lessons again, Lesson One, and make sure you know what all of these consonants sound like. Notice too, if you haven’t already, that in the pro-

nunciation of each consonant you hear the inherent tone of the consonant, depending on its class (high, low or middle). The consonants are also sometimes referred to by “name,” that name being a common Lao word beginning with the consonant in question. You can listen to a list of these names in your Multimedia Materials, too, by following the appropriate link on the main alphabet page.

We’re now done introducing all the low consonants, but we still have some work to do on the high consonants. If you’ll look back on the previous page, you’ll notice that some of the low consonants don’t have ready-made pairs among the high consonants. Namely, those which you see here:

ງ ຍ ນ ມ ຣ ລ ວ

So what do we do when we want a syllable containing one of these sounds to behave in a manner befitting a high class consonant (and believe me, we will want this, often)?

I’m glad you asked. What we do is simple: we enlist the aid of our friend ຫ, himself a high consonant, and place ຫ in front of the low consonant which doesn’t have a high pair partner. In such a situation, ຫ has no sound of its own, but it transforms the low consonant into a high consonant for the purposes of causing the syllable it begins to behave in a “high class” way. Here’s how this looks in the real world:

ຫງ ຫຍ ຫນ ຫມ

ຫຣ ຫລ ຫວ

You can hear the result on your Multimedia Lesson One, just go to “high vs. low consonant comparisons”.

We're not done just yet, though. As promised earlier (you probably forgot by now), there are three special forms in which ຫ is actually combined with a low consonant in a hybrid form to accomplish the same thing accomplished above by placing ຫ in front of the low consonant. But you can only do this with these three consonants-- ນ, ມ , and ລ -- so no experimenting at home with other, unsuspecting low consonants, okay?

ຫ+ນ=ໜ ຫ+ມ=ໝ ຫ+ລ=ຫຼ

And actually, in modern written Lao it's more common to find the above "special forms" than it is to find the " ຫ in front of low consonant" combination described earlier...but you'll need to recognize both.

Congratulations, you've now been introduced to all of the middle, low and high consonants in Lao. Now get to work, and do whatever you need to do to memorize which is which. This knowledge is essential before you'll be able to apply any of the Lao tone rules with any amount of speed and efficiency. We'll tackle those tone rules in the next chapter. For now, let's move on to the written vowel symbols of Lao.

The Lao Vowels: Part One

Sound-wise, as languages go, the Lao vowels are not particularly complex or difficult. However, there are a lot of ways of writing Lao vowels, sometimes several different symbols for the same sound. There are also older (pre-war) ways of writing several of the vowel sounds which are now obsolete, and you'll need to recognize these in older texts. And maybe most importantly, you'll need to know the difference between what are considered the "short vowels" in Lao and what are considered "long vowels," because this has important implications for determining the tone of a given written syllable or word. So as not to overload or overwhelm you in this chapter (oops, maybe it's a little too to avoid that, isn't it?), we're just going to present the first half of all of the Lao vowels, and indicate whether each is considered "short" or "long". The rest we'll save for Chapter