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# Introduction

Lao is a member of the Tai-Kadai language family. As far as we know, all of the Tai languages originated in southern China and present-day northern Vietnam about 2,000 years ago. In the 1200s, Tai speakers began to move in great numbers into the Middle Mekong River area. This area was previously dominated by speakers of non-Tai languages, in particular Mon-Khmer languages. In present-day Laos, the Tai speakers (which include Lao and related Tai languages like Phuan and Phu Tai) tend to congregate in the low-lying river valleys. As one travels up in elevation, one encounters Mon-Khmer languages (languages such as Khmu), and then at the highest elevations (1,000 feet and upward), speakers of Hmong and Mien, who are the most recent migrants into Laos (as recent as 150 years ago).

While most citizens of Laos today speak at least some Lao, only about 40% of them are ethnic Lao and speak Lao as their first or home language. As you would expect from a rugged geographic area with many mountains such as Laos, there are many, many different languages spoken within its borders. We'll be concerned here with Vientiane Lao, arguably the national standard and the language used in radio and TV broadcasts and all official communications. In reality, "Vientiane Lao" is kind of a hard thing to define, since in recent years, large numbers of Lao people from other regions of the country—especially the south—have migrated to Vientiane, bringing their many dialects with them. But I do think an argument can be made for it as some sort of standard.

Lao language is very closely related to Thai, and in the modern social contexts of Thailand and Laos, the two languages can be considered 80% or more mutually intelligible. If you could find a hypothetical native speaker of Lao who had never been exposed to Thai and a hypothetical native speaker of Thai who had never been exposed to Lao, and you placed the two people in a room, that mutual intelligibility would probably

shrink to something like 40-50%. Lao and Thai in their “pure” forms differ strikingly in vocabulary, use different tones, and differ somewhat in various aspects of grammar. However, this is human language we’re talking about here, and due to political and economic realities and social interaction between speakers of the two languages, the term “pure” is actually quite silly.

Thailand is an economic giant compared to Laos, and it’s looked to by a large majority of Lao people as a model of culture and learning (especially pop culture), as well as business. Since it’s relatively easy for Lao people to learn to read and write Thai, let alone understand it when it’s spoken, and because Thai TV and radio signals and music media travel freely across the Mekong, virtually all Lao people living in the major cities along the river can understand and often converse in Thai, and read Thai. Many Lao, for instance, choose to write largely in Thai on social media such as Facebook, as opposed to in Lao. In Thailand, some 20 million ethnic Laos live in the northeastern part of the country (up to 10 times the amount of Lao native speakers in Laos!), and the food and music of this region is extremely popular throughout Thailand. Therefore, most Thais acquire (at least aurally) a fairly large Lao vocabulary, albeit the version of Lao spoken in Northeast Thailand.

If you already speak Thai and you’re now studying Lao, you should be cautious. No doubt your knowledge of Thai grammar and much of its vocabulary can be a huge aid to you in learning Lao, but Thai grammatical expressions and vocabulary can also be a hindrance to you. Whenever possible in this Textbook, we’ve endeavored to provide you with distinctly Lao ways of saying things. You should go out of your way to adopt this Lao vocabulary and grammatical style (not to mention the Lao tones, which can be quite different from Thai), if in fact you really want to learn to speak Lao and not “Lao-inflected Thai.” This goal can be complicated by the fact that most Lao speakers will understand you if you “slip up” and say something in Thai, and they won’t correct you. Also, if you’re a foreigner, many Lao will prefer to speak Thai with you over Lao. You need to be a bit pushy sometimes to switch the conversation to Lao. Of course, it all

depends on your goal in learning Lao, but we're assuming here that you wish to learn it as a unique language with its own specific identity.

You'll quickly find that Lao is very different from the languages you're used to speaking in the US and in Europe. Verbs are not inflected for tense or person (e.g, the word meaning "to go" in Lao has the same form whether we're talking about the past, present or future (i.e. there's no "went"), and whether or not we're talking about you going, her going, they going, etc.). Most words in Lao do not indicate plural or singular. Many Lao words are much shorter than many English words, though the more you venture into the realm of "high," educated vocabulary in Lao, the longer the words are.

You'll often see (and hear) in translations of Lao into English that the Lao version of a given phrase or sentence often gets across a concept in three or four—or less— words, while the corresponding English gloss may be a sentence or more long. This fact—that Lao grammar and word placement tends to "do more with less" than English—leads many people, including Lao native speakers, to make statements like, "Lao grammar is simple," or even "Lao has no grammar." Nothing could be farther than the truth. Lao grammar is every bit as complex as that of English (or Spanish, or French), but it just goes about expressing things in a completely different way. While you'll find that it's quite easy to express the most basic needs and concepts in Lao, you'll also soon see that to convey nuance and subtlety of meaning in Lao, something we tend to do in English with vocabulary choice and intonation, is extremely tricky for English speakers. Lao is capable of expressing all the nuance and subtlety that English (and all languages) is, but to do it you need to learn to carefully rearrange words, add short particles at the end of phrases, etc.

One of the most daunting tasks you'll encounter in learning Lao is learning to recognize (and produce) all of the various tones correctly. This is very important. Sometimes if you don't "nail" a tone perfectly, native speakers can figure out from context what word you're trying to say. But oftentimes they cannot, so spending a good

deal of time practicing getting your tones perfect is essential, as is practicing other features of the language which are alien to English, such as initial unvoiced, un-aspirated consonants, unreleased final consonants, and several of the vowels. These will all be explained in detail in the “alphabet basics” sections of this Textbook, as well as presented in Multimedia Lesson One.

There’s a very visible difference between English and Lao as well; by this I’m referring to how the language is written. Lao has its own unique script, based on Khmer script, which was based on a South Indian script which was itself based on Devanagari, the alphabet used by the Indians to write Sanskrit, Hindi and other languages. The Lao writing system is syllabic, just like Hindi, and also Arabic and Hebrew (not to mention Thai and Khmer). In a syllabic writing system, the most important unit from which words are built is (surprise!) the syllable. Each syllable is represented by a consonant symbol, to which is usually attached a vowel symbol. In Lao, these vowel symbols can occur before or after the consonant (or both), above it, or below it. If this all sounds highly complicated, well, it is. But it’s important that you not be scared by the Lao writing system. It’s closer to being phonetic than English is (though not to the extent that Spanish or Indonesian is phonetic). And while there are many rules for spelling words in Lao, there aren’t that many exceptions to those rules (the reverse of course being true for English!). In this textbook, we’ll be using only the Lao alphabet, no phonetic transcription system. Most students devise their own phonetic system based on English letters, but I strongly advise against this. By using your own phonetic system you’ll only be using a crutch that impedes your full learning of the Lao alphabet, plus you’ll probably be reinforcing your own mistakes in hearing and speaking Lao. The Lao alphabet is the best system on this planet for representing the sounds of the Lao language, so why not use it from day one?

Last but not least, another striking difference between Lao and Western languages is the way that social status and hierarchy are expressed vividly in the language, mostly by means of word choice. There’s no “neutral” pronoun meaning “you” in Lao, rather

one chooses from quite a few options(!) based on one's social status, age and (less often) gender relative to the person you're speaking to and the level of formality/intimacy of your relationship. In fact, many students of Lao find that the way social hierarchy is boldly displayed in Lao conversation very distasteful and hard to accept. This is because in the West, though of course we do have a class system and social hierarchy (which we express more in things like body language and tone of voice than in word choice), we like to pretend that we don't. We have an ideal of social equality. Traditional Lao society has nothing like this, and social hierarchy is often boldly proclaimed by those of high status, and humbly adhered to by those of low status. You'll need to come to terms with this if you want to carry out successful communication in Lao. It's not your job to change the ways that Lao look at the world of social relationships, and you couldn't do it if you tried

## What You'll Learn (and Won't Learn) in a Beginning Lao Course

After two months of intensive study of the material in this book, combined with frequent practice with native speakers, or two full semesters in a University level class doing the same, you will be able to communicate in Lao at "survival" level. In ACTFL terms (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), you will most likely be at a "High Novice" level of language proficiency.

You'll be able to partially satisfy the requirements of basic communication exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances; that is, memorized phrases (this goes for both listening and speaking). Occasionally you'll be able to expand these memorized phrases through simple recombination of their elements...but for the most part you'll rely on phrases you've learned in this book. You'll be able to ask questions or make statements involving the material you've learned. You'll be able to show some signs of spontaneity, although this will fall short of real "autonomy of expression."

Your Lao vocabulary will center on areas such as basic objects, places, and the most common kinship terms. Your Lao pronunciation—though significantly better than it was when you were starting out!—will most likely be strongly influenced by your command of the sound system of English. Errors (both phonetic, grammatical and tone-related) will be frequent and, in spite of repetition, you will often have difficulty being understood by even those with experience listening to non-natives speak Lao. This will be most true when you deviate from your “learned utterances” and attempt to improvise.

You will possess a basic vocabulary and command of structures relative to the topics focused on in the chapters of this Textbook: introductions/pleasantries; items and activities in the classroom; family and making reference to various life-states and rites of passage; food (eating and cooking); basic directions and location in space; work (including important related verbs) in a general sense; states of health and illness; very limited concepts relating to Lao Buddhism, including rote memorization of one Buddhist chant; the physical environment and the weather; basic living tasks such as renting a hotel room; describing the purchase, selection and wearing of clothing.

You’ll be able to understand many simple questions related to the above topics, but you’ll often have great difficulty creating an answer, especially if the larger context of the question is not crystal clear, if extralinguistic cues are not present, or if you’re in doubt about what types or ranges of response are expected of you.

In general, you’ll be able to best communicate (and understand) when you yourself are in control of the communication; i.e. when you’re the initiator of an exchange and when it’s you who determines the subject matter. You’ll do less well when the conversation (and its topic) is primarily controlled by the native speakers with whom you’re interacting. You will also not be a good eavesdropper.

In terms of literacy, after sufficient study of and practice with the material in this book

(again, two months in an intensive language program like SEASSI or two semesters in a University full academic year program), you will be able to identify common words, usually in a specific social context.

You will be able to decode simple narratives and instructions in a previously-known context using vocabulary which coincides with your spoken Lao vocabulary. Where the right vocabulary has been learned, you'll be able to read a variety of documents for instructional and directional purposes. This includes reading standardized messages, phrases, or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps, and signs. You'll also be able to decode—albeit haltingly and requiring re-reading and frequent stops for prediction, evaluation of context, and guessing the meaning of unknown vocabulary—simple narratives such as personal letters and informational articles on topics dealing with Lao life. You'll be able to work your way through Lao folktales without too much trouble where you know 70-80% of the vocabulary in the story already.

You'll be able to read some texts dealing with basic personal and social issues such as work and occupations, descriptions of the physical environment, and health and illness. You'll do best with material written for social purposes and aimed at the widest possible Lao audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions dealing with public life. You'll also be able to decode, with some difficulty, many newspaper *headlines* and advertisements, though you'll have a lot of trouble with the text of newspaper articles. You'll especially have a problem where a text contains multiple embedded dependent clauses, which are not covered in this Textbook.

You'll be able to write from memory or when prompted in oral dictation a large number of familiar words and phrases and important sight words, as well as the entire Lao alphabet. You'll be able to write some complex sentences, which will be grammatical about 40-50% of the time. You'll be able to write a number of fixed expressions and much of your memorized spoken material, though often with some spelling mistakes. You'll be able to supply information on simple forms and documents, especially when



those documents reflect specific topical areas focused on in this textbook. You'll be able to write Lao numbers and some names, and make lists of things. In all, you should be able to write from memory or when prompted approximately 30-40% of the material in this textbook, though often with spelling errors.

You'll be able to write short messages (such as phone messages), postcards, and letters to friends. The majority of your writing will focus on personal experiences, daily routines, and everyday events. You will be able to write creatively and expressively as well, though native speakers not experienced with reading creative or humorous writing may have a great deal of difficulty understanding such writing by you.

## The Structure of This Textbook

Each chapter begins with the presentation of vocabulary lists dealing with the topical focus of the chapter. All of this vocabulary can be heard pronounced on the Audio Tracks that came with the Textbook. There will often be footnotes explaining the nuances of this vocabulary and mentioning how it fits into Lao culture.

Interspersed with the Audio Track vocabulary, you'll be guided to the Multimedia Lessons for that chapter, which can be accessed on any web browser. Multimedia Lessons consist of a video, taped on the street or in a home in Laos (or extracted from popular Lao media), explanatory material in the book, and usually a vocabulary list.

Next, you'll find the Culture and Grammar Notes for the chapter. These will explain in some detail the usage and function of vocabulary and phrases which were introduced in the Audio Tracks.

Next, you'll come to the Literacy Lessons for the chapter. In the first four chapters this material will mainly consist of detailed explanations of various aspects of the alphabet. In the latter part of the book, you'll be given actual Lao stories to read, as well as other

material.

In the early chapters of the book, following the Alphabet Basics for that chapter you'll find a list of sight words which you'll need to memorize how to write and read. You can hear the first few sets of these words pronounced on the Audio Tracks as well.

Finally, each chapter ends with some suggestions for further study and applications of the material covered in that chapter.

## What and How Much to Study

You're presented with a huge amount of material to learn in this Textbook, and absorbing it all can be overwhelming. One thing's for sure: it's not just going to be poured into your head, no matter how good the teacher is you're working with. You're going to have to do a lot of work to internalize and be able to use all of this language knowledge. It's doable, and can be made less daunting if you carefully organize your study time. Do keep in mind that the promises earlier about "what you will learn" in a course using this Textbook assume that you will be putting in lots of structured study time: roughly at least one hour outside class for every hour spent in class.

You'll need to divide your study time between the various aspects of the language you need to work on (memorization of the alphabet and vocabulary words, practicing speaking, practicing listening with the many audio and video materials available to you, practicing writing, working on out-of-class projects with your fellow students, etc.), and very importantly, you need to schedule generous breaks in between sessions of studying.

Here's a more detailed breakdown on how this might look. The section below is meant to help you answer the question, "what exactly do I do with all this language study time?" Again, a lot of that is up to you, but I do have a number of suggestions based on

my personal experience:

**Memorization.** This is probably the least glamorous and most tedious aspect of language study. But it's really important, and unavoidable. There are lots of terms for things that you're just going to have to memorize. Your teachers try to help you do this in class by various activities, repetition, use of new terms in context, by bringing in pictures, "real life" objects to associate with the new terms, etc. In the end, however, you're the one responsible for knowing all the vocabulary, and being able to recall it in real-life situations.

So how do you go about this? What works for every individual is going to be different, but a lot of language learners find flash cards useful. You can write multiple words on one index card (in the corners), or just one word. You can write the Lao term on one side and the English on the other. Or maybe draw a picture (it only needs to make sense to you) on the side opposite the Lao word, and write no English word. How you use flash cards can differ from study session to study session, too. Sometimes, you'll want to show yourself the English term or picture and then come up with the Lao word; other times, the reverse. You also might want to consider working with other students, drilling each other using the cards.

I've never exactly used flashcards myself, mind you. When I was learning various Southeast Asian languages, I always had pieces of 8 1/2 by 11 paper in my back pockets containing lists of words (or phrases) which I was currently working on memorizing. Sometimes there would be English definitions on the paper, sometimes only Lao. Whenever I had a free moment: at a bus stop, walking outdoors, sitting in a cafe, I'd pull out the list and cram another word into my head, then test myself later. I'd also go for walks in the woods and talk to myself, reciting both parts of various types of conversations and lists of vocabulary terms. Or I'd try to describe whatever I saw around me, or what I was doing at the time. However you do it, it's tedious, but it has to be done.

It's hard to say how many hours you're going to need to spend on memorization per chapter, but suffice it to say that the above activities or similar ones should take up at least 50% of your personal study time.

**Drills.** This is one of the old dreaded practices of post WW II language classrooms in the US, due to the postwar popularity of something called the “Audiolingual Method” of language learning. Depending on who your language teacher was, you might have spent entire hour-long foreign language classes at some point in the past six decades doing nothing but drills! Nowadays, the overwhelming consensus in modern language classes is that class time is best used for communicative activities. However, drills do have some value for some learners, and you're encouraged to devise and use them on your own. At the end of some units in the textbook, you'll find some suggestions on useful drills to try. This is another activity that can be quite nice to do with a partner.

**Free Writing.** In the language classes I teach, students write something called a “dialog journal” every other week during the semester, but there's no reason you can't do it on your own as well. As soon as you know how to write even one word or letter in Lao, you can practice writing it again and again, sometimes pronouncing it, sometimes not. Trying to make sentences with words you've learned in class is especially useful as you learn more, and more fun than just writing the same word over and over again. Write a letter to a real or imaginary friend, a real friend, a teacher, or try to write a simple story about your life.

**Focused Listening Practice.** This is extremely important. The fact that listening is important is evidenced by the large amount of learning materials you're provided with here with which to practice focused listening: your Audio Tracks, various videos in your Multimedia materials, and videos (hopefully) shown in your language classroom. In a good language class, you'll be given specific listening activities using these materials; that is, you'll be told to listen for specific words, phrases, information. If you're studying on your own, you can devise your own focused listening exercises. For example,

“what are all of the various kinship terms used by people speaking in the video?”

“What larger shared cultural knowledge or concepts is crucial to the communication, even though it may not be expressed in the vocabulary?”

You should always watch each video in the Multimedia Lessons more than once. Listen a first time without consulting any text materials; just try to let it “soak in.” Then listen again, following the transcript if there is one. Write down words you know in the video. Write down an approximation of words you can hear which you *don't* know. Go back and listen again, to see if you can figure out the meaning of the unknown words using the context of words you do know. Consult the vocabulary list or a dictionary, then listen to the video again. The variations are endless. You should spend at least an hour, if not two, doing this with each video.

**Plain Old Speaking Practice.** Granted, your non-native speaking classmates are not the best “models” for Lao grammar and pronunciation. But that doesn't mean you can't get together and practice speaking Lao with them outside of class! You will benefit from such an activity, just not the same way as you would if you were practicing with a native speaker. You and a classmate can either work on memorizing specific required spoken material from whatever unit you're working on in class, or just have free conversation. For “free” conversation, however, it might be good to set some rules (impose some sort of basic structure) for yourselves. For instance, agree that you have to get through an entire meal (or pitcher of beer?) together using only Lao. If you're studying on your own, supplemented by meetings with a native speaking tutor, all of the above can of course apply as well. You'll need to find what works specifically for you. Everyone learns languages a little differently, so part of your overall language learning task is to get to know yourself well enough to identify your specific learning style and then plan your time and activities accordingly.

It's also important that (assuming you're using this Textbook as part of a class) you prepare each day for class in advance, by reading your Textbook, memorizing mate-