

HEAVY SOUND LIGHT SOUND: A NAM NOI METALINGUISTIC TROPE¹

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1 Introduction

The Nam Noi Watershed is an enclave nestled in upland Central Laos, about 300 km due east of Vientiane. It has only recently been connected to national and global infrastructural projects, and only partially so.³ Our research focuses on a situation of intense language contact and multilingualism in this area. It is something of a microcosm of the kind of ethnic pluralism that has arguably been the norm in mainland Southeast Asia over the last few thousand years (Enfield 2011, 2020).

In the Nam Noi Watershed, four languages are spoken in close proximity (within an hour's walk from each other):

- Kri (Vietic/Austroasiatic, spoken by approximately 600 people. Includes two varieties: Kri Mrka and Kri Phòngq, which is spoken both in the watershed in Laos and just over the border in Vietnam.)
- Saek (Northern Tai, spoken by at least a thousand people in the watershed.)
- Bru (Katuic/Austroasiatic, spoken by several thousand people in the watershed.)
- Lao (Southwestern Tai, the national language of Laos.)

Members of these communities show varying degrees of capacity to produce and comprehend each other's languages, along with Vietnamese. Most villagers can converse in multiple languages.

Our broader research questions have to do with language contact and the sociolinguistic conditions for linguistic convergence. Convergence can involve many different aspects of a language, from phonetics and phonology to morphology and syntax, and beyond. In this article we are concerned with a case of convergence in metalanguage. In this sense we are interested in language ideology, broadly conceived (Silverstein 1979, 1981; for recent treatment of the notion, see Gal and Irvine 2019).

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³ The area is in the catchment for the Nam Theun 2 hydroelectricity project (see Enfield 2018). The reservoir, created when the Nam Theun 2 Dam wall was completed and sealed in 2008, has flooded previous land access routes between the Nam Noi and lowland transportation in Laos. Where villagers could previously traverse a plateau along tracks and waterways, they must now travel by passenger boat. This increases the flow of certain kinds of traffic (e.g., merchants) and stems the flow of others (e.g., individuals without vehicles).