

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the tonal systems and tonal characteristics of Northeastern Thai (Lao) varieties as a lingua franca by Lao, Phuthai, and So communities in Naphiang sub-district, Kusumal district, Sakon Nakorn province. Lao and Phuthai are both varieties of Tai while So is a Mon-Khmer language and is non-tonal. The hypothesis underlying the investigation is that the tonal systems and tonal characteristics of Phuthai and So varieties will be influenced by the native languages of the speakers.

Results of the study confirm the hypothesis in an unexpected way. Firstly, two distinct varieties of lingua franca must be proposed for Naphiang sub-district:

- (1) the local Northeastern Thai dialect spoken at Naphiang sub-district (NTN);  
and
- (2) the Northeastern Thai dialect spoken in Ubon Ratchathani, and Khon Kaen (NTUK).

This proposal is based on the fact that during data collection, whereas So speakers used the Lao variety of their own local sub-district, NTN, Phuthai speakers used the more broadly used Lao lingua franca, NTUK. It was subsequently reported that Phuthai speakers had previously lived with Lao speakers from Ubon Ratchathani and Khon kaen provinces.

Secondly, despite the differences between So and Lao, the So variety of Northeastern Thai has a very similar tonal system and tonal characteristics to NTN. Because of the non-prestigious standing of So language and culture, motivation for So speakers to assimilate to the more prestigious NTN is high.

Thirdly, the tonal system of the NTUK variety of Phuthai speakers showed no Phuthai influence. Northeastern Thai spoken by the Phuthai group shows the same "Ban Dai Lao" (literally "Lao Stairs") tonal split shared by NTUK.