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Translating the State: Ethnic Language Radio in the Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

The nation-building project of the Lao People's Democratic Republic has been challenged by the task of uniting the multi-ethnic country under its political ideology. The Lao National Radio broadcasts in the Khmu and Hmong languages are the only official voice of minority languages and provide insights on how political messages are sent to the population. In their creation of programming material, the broadcasters must translate the socialist ideology of the Communist Party into language that is politically correct and culturally acceptable. In the process, they are creating a political register in the two languages that is heavily influenced by the linguistic structures of Lao. This article examines these two broadcasts to see how language use at the radio effects the message that is delivered to the listeners, enhancing the calls for mobilisation by teaching the people a new political language reflected not only in terms of lexicon, but also in the syntax and phonology of their translations. The result is a way of speaking that crosses ethno-linguistic boundaries to reinforce the control of the state.

KEYWORDS

Laos; ethnic minorities; language; media; translation; radio

At 6:30 every morning the public address system at the Luang Namtha provincial governor's office, in the northwest of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter, Laos), announces the beginning of the day with the national anthem, a brief news programme and information on government activities for that day (See Figure 1). These public messages are delivered in the official-sounding language that the Lao government uses in formal situations, but the announcers may use any number of local varieties of Lao pronunciation. The ethnic Lao population of the province does not reach 5% of the total. Nevertheless, as the official language in this multi-ethnic state, the use of Lao is not questioned. How effective Lao language political messages are among the ethnically diverse population is not an issue of debate. Language use in state media provides insights on how ethnicity, nationalism and the everyday extension of state power intersect in the lives of *pasaason laaw bandaa phaw* (the Lao people of all ethnicities).

Later in the day, many Hmong and Khmu people will turn on their radios after the midday meal to listen to news, policy directives, information on health, agriculture and other aspects of daily life and songs and messages from listeners. These daily programmes are broadcast in Khmu and Hmong – the two most widely spoken languages

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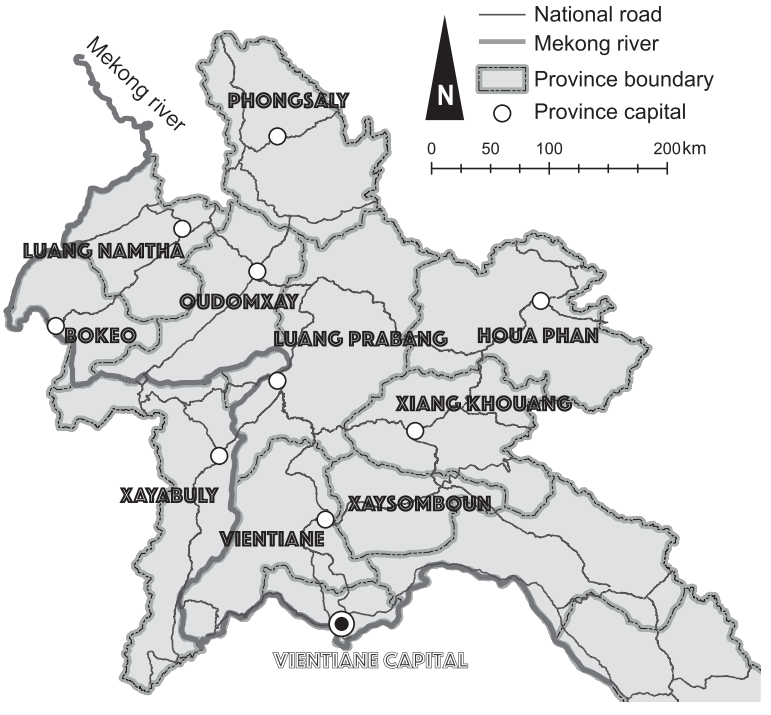


Figure 1. Map of northern Laos.

after Lao, but geographically limited to the northern and central areas of the country – from the Lao National Radio station in Vientiane, and they are the only information put out officially on a regular basis in local languages other than Lao. The two broadcasts share much content and strive to emulate the official feel of the Lao language broadcasts. For the most part, rural people enjoy the material, but there are many discussions in villages about how correct or appropriate language use is in these programmes.

This concern for the work of translation is at the heart of the broadcasters' daily work. This article examines the ethnic language broadcasts of the Lao National Radio – daily programmes in the Khmu and Hmong languages – to understand how messages are translated from Lao into "minority" languages, creating not only a shared political lexicon but also a powerful political register of speech.[1] Because these radio broadcasts are virtually the only official voice of ethnic language that can be observed, insights from the work of those translating the news and producing material for the radio will open a window onto how the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) presents itself to the diverse population, asserts its legitimacy and works to mobilise support. The radio is particularly interesting for understanding the power of political language, because written media plays only a small role in a predominantly oral society. Similarly, analysis of these radio broadcasts is more than a study in coercive propaganda, as we look at not just the messages used in reproducing political control, but the ways in which these messages are shaped and delivered across ethnic boundaries – a translation of the state. The approach here is not to look at symbolic elements of discourse, but rather to delve

into the actual language itself, to turn official representations of ethnicity inside out, focusing on these political messages as language spoken by individuals from two ethnic groups at work for the state.

According to the 2015 census, the population of Laos was 6.5 million, of which 53% are officially classified as ethnic Lao. The remaining 47% comprises the other 48 officially recognised ethnic groups. The Khmu population was recorded at 708,412 people, or 11% of the population, making them the second largest group. The Hmong are the third largest ethnic group at 9% or 595,028 people. Together, the ethnic language broadcasts target this 20% of the population. While this is a significant figure, it should be born in mind that there are 46 other ethnic groups. Moreover, the Khmu and the Lao live in the north and central provinces, creating a geographic bias, that enhances the demographic gap between the Hmong/Khmu and other ethnic populations.

The morning public address system delivers political messages from the central government in the "official register" of Lao. In linguistics, registers are sets of meanings that are appropriate for particular functions of that language. Local programming follows in grammatically standard Lao, but often with characteristics of local pronunciation – a hybrid register that conveys both central authority and local legitimacy. Registers are part of how linguistic structure is used in the construction of public ideas, for example in the press (see Fowler 1991, 67). The official register we hear in Luang Namtha is characterised by an "official sounding" tone of voice and use of political vocabulary and set ideological phrases. The language of this register – syntax, phonology and lexicon – provides the vehicle for the message and takes a distinct style as it sends out messages calling for national unity, acceptance of national culture and participation in state public life.

The extreme ethno-linguistic diversity found in Luang Namtha province is a reasonable representation of the entire country. The majority of the people speaking Lao-Tai languages as their first language – about half of the nation's population – is located along the central and southern stretch of the Mekong River. In the mountainous areas that make up 80% of the national territory, native speakers of Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien languages live multilingual lives in which Lao, in some local variety, plays an increasingly large role. But the question of communication in such a diverse country – with more than 100 languages spoken – remains an issue of paramount importance, where the state sees the national language Lao as a key force in unifying the country. This article brings to the forefront the perspective of the ethnic languages, as they are situated within the official discourses of state power.

Gellner (1983, 46) argued that nationalism has an "objective need for homogeneity," which is achieved by creating a "high literate culture." The shared culture of prestige comes to dominate people's thinking and this allows nationalism to arise. In a similar vein of reasoning, Anderson argues that in Indonesia "it was less nationalism that created a common language than that a common language helped create nationalism" (Anderson 1990, 199). Not surprisingly, the government is keen to establish Lao as the main language of communication, and education plays the key role in this political agenda. This "official register" is a shared language in which the political and socio-economic sophistication of modern life is communicated from the centre to the rural areas in radio broadcasts, crossing socio-linguistic community boundaries. Importantly,

this official Lao register is primarily a spoken register, raising the question of whether literacy is a necessary part of the creation of high culture.

In her analysis of the policy texts that frame the position of language and minorities, Cincotta (2009, 21) suggested that "…a grammatically invisible process of judgment and selection indicates unequal power relationships between ethnic minorities and the predominantly ethnic Lao government, or a hierarchy of 'backward' and 'progressive' cultures." This apt assessment identifies the importance of power relations between the majority and minority sectors of society that play out in the linguistic expression of cultural representation. This article seeks to trace the production of a linguistic register through a "grammatically invisible process" that works on the thinking of its users, instilling a shared language of participation in the socio-political structures of the Lao party-state.

Propaganda, People and the State

Ethnic language broadcasting has its origins in the period 1945–1975, when Laos was the site of concurrent struggles – between the Lao and the French colonial regime, within different political factions in the country and between the USA and the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao (literally, Laos or Lao country), as the Cold War gathered pace. The 1954 Geneva Agreements ordered communist forces be regrouped to the northeastern areas of the country mainly in Huaphan and Phongsaly provinces, which the Pathet Lao had controlled since 1950. The Royal Lao Government (RLG), with massive support from the USA, struggled to administer the rest of the country focusing on the Mekong river corridor, where most ethnic Lao lived, while the communist forces continued to fight to expand their control over upland areas (see Stuart-Fox 1997).

In 1953, the RLG had established a Psychological Warfare Section to counter the propaganda efforts of the Pathet Lao. This was followed in 1955 by the establishment of a Special Service for Political Propaganda, which the RLG established to encourage resistance to the Pathet Lao in Phongsaly and Huaphan. During this period, propaganda was used by both the RLG and the Pathet Lao to gain the support of the minority people that made up the majority population of these two provinces (Stuart-Fox 1997, 80). The role of ethnic minorities in the Lao communist revolution has been debated, with scholars divided on how critical the minorities' support was to the success of the communists (Pholsena 2006, 4). Although little is known about the role of language during this period, Langer and Zasloff (1970, 122) mention that North Vietnamese support to Pathet Lao propaganda efforts – specifically to the Neo Lao Hak Sat, or Lao Patriotic Front, which was responsible for the resistance's political agenda – included training ethnic minority people from Vietnam, who worked among the same ethnic groups living on the Lao side. Grass-roots propaganda efforts were facilitated by radio broadcasts that were made possible by the spread of transistor radios through the 1950s.

These incipient propaganda activities were institutionalised in a new form with a different political mandate after the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) in 1975. Propaganda in the liberated zones had often been accompanied by instruction in Lao language and literacy, but when the new regime was established the question of language assumed an even more important position in the

definition of nationalism and search for unity among the diverse ethnic groups. Evans (1998, 150–151) argues that the communists' vision of nationalism was more successful during this time because it incorporated the ethnic minorities more effectively than had the RLG, which had pushed a more assimilationist approach. Nevertheless, according to Pholsena (2006, 12), "under the present day Lao state, ethnic minorities have been turned into neutral items whose main use is to instil ethnic flavor into the 'national' culture."

A familiar example of this is the women representing the three large ethnic groupings, seen on many symbols of national unity such as money, public signage and statues (Creak 2014, 112). These categories, which were already in currency in the French period, are based on imagined and stereotyped residence patterns that bore only unreliable correlation to actual settlements, not to mention larger ethno-linguistic affiliations; Lao Loum ("Lowland Lao") speaking Lao, Lao Theung ("Upper Lao"), in the foothills, speaking Austroasiatic languages and Lao Soung ("Highland Lao") speaking Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman languages in the higher elevations. In representing the diversity of citizens, drastically reduced and biased as they are, these visual symbols do embody some continuity with the ritualised role of minority people in legitimising royal power in the past (Evans 1998, 142–143). Although this system has been abandoned in favour of the officially recognised 49 ethnonyms, it persists in popular discourse and has morphed into a new framework for grouping people whereby in Luang Namtha one finds the terms Lao Theung and Lao Soung used to refer to specifically the Khmu and the Hmong, respectively, while other groups are known by various local names.

Language use provides both direct and indirect windows on social relations, sources of power and ways of imagining legitimacy. Both official propaganda and daily language use give insights into political notions and social imaginings, yet it is the intersections, convergences and collisions within daily language use that highlight the motivations and justifications for people's statements about interactions with, as well as within, the state in its many forms.

Revolutionary Lexicon: The Language of Participation

The establishment and standardisation of a national language was a necessary part of modern nation-building projects, dating back to the French colonial experience. In addition to the primary need to establish Lao as a national language, rather than French, efforts to standardise the Lao language have always been preoccupied with orthographic conventions and lexical heritage, both concerned with distinguishing Lao from Thai and clarifying the position of Pali-Sanskrit loanwords in the language. Prestigious, learned and official language is typically marked by the use of Pali-Sanskrit terms. Interestingly, there has never been much concern for a standardised spoken form of the language (Ivarsson 2008; Enfield 1999). The more immediate concern for the nation builders was to extend the Lao language to areas where it was not widely spoken. Literacy was a stated objective, but in practical terms, written language would remain a domain of the elite, at least until recently.

In the 1950s, communist revolutionary leaders set out to unify the country under a new political system. The challenge of communicating a political ideology to a culturally diverse population, speaking languages unrelated to Lao, was enormous, and conceived of first and foremost as a problem of oral language. The political leaders developed their revolutionary language through translation of Russian, French and Vietnamese texts. One strategy as they worked in their own linguistic setting was constantly bombarding the population with simple, common words and expressions that were integrated into daily life. As Chapelier and van Malderghem (1971, 79) put it: "These concepts gave to the peasants a political framework which allowed them to reinterpret their daily life as well as the internal and, or, external political events." These expressions were intended to permeate the spoken language of the people and the national radio was a key vehicle for delivering these messages.

In Laos, the language of politics is steeped in terms that appeal to a sense of obligation among citizens. The essence of this obligation is composed of many elements, including sentiment such as "making an effort" (*ao cai sai*), "participating" (*khao huam*), "agreeing" (*hen dii*), "being constructive" (*saaŋ saa*), "co-operating" (*saamakkhii*) and "being unanimous" (*ekaphaap*). Much of this lexicon is not from the lexicon of what we normally understand to be the high culture of Pali-Sanskrit etymologies but based rather in colloquial Lao language and is much more accessible to the public. An interesting question is how these concepts "travel," in their linguistic forms, creating a national lexicon that dominates communication. Following the "motion" of words can help us understand how concepts are translated, transferred and transcribed across cultural boundaries (Gluck 2009, 3). As the words permeate speech, they permeate thinking and the common national lexicon contributes to the realisation of a shared worldview. The creative linguistic forces mobilised to instil a popular rhetoric for the revolution remain an area for continued scholarship. However, recent works signal that more attention is being given to these dynamics. Creak (2010, 2015) has explored how the language of political power in Laos has been steeped in images of the strong, disciplined and masculine human body and High (2013) has discussed the language of co-operation and coercion in development projects.

The radio broadcasts examined in this article are awash in the common rhetoric of political, and now, socio-economic development. There are many elements of revolutionary Lao rhetoric that have made it into Khmu and Hmong. These are part of the basic lexicon that the Pathet Lao struggled to instil and have moved into these languages in several ways. First, Lao phrases like *huam muuu* "co-operate," have been internalised by both languages through loan translations (calques) – Khmu *rôôm ti'* and Hmong *koom tes*. Just how old these phrases are is difficult to ascertain, but it is certain that revolutionary rhetoric has played a major role in popularising them. One Khmu informant, a well-educated man living in Vientiane, expressed his displeasure at the use of *rôôm ti'* on the radio, saying that there is a perfectly good Khmu phrase that could be used – *tééng broom yo'* "to do together." But after some discussion he decided that the nuance was rather different and lacked the feeling that one should be compelled to take part as a matter of political principle. Another ubiquitous phrase, the Lao *ao jai sai* "to make effort," has been so deeply internalised in Khmu (*dé' hrñwam séh*) and Hmong (*muab siab rau*), both of which are direct translations of the Lao, that most speakers are not aware of its Lao language origin.

Other action-oriented concepts, such as the Lao *cat tang patibat* "implement," are treated differently. In Khmu the phrase has been borrowed and localised, with phonological adjustments. The Hmong use the term *teev tsa*, which is of more recent origin, but according to informants it does not have a foreign ring. It is interesting to note that these political terms now appear in not only daily conversation but are heard in storytelling and other more traditional domains of language use as well. These constructions have made it into other languages across Laos and can now be considered part of a shared linguistic-political culture, urging people to participate in the revolution, or at least talk about the importance of participation. Most importantly, this language instils a sense of social and political obligation and a simple way to monitor people's commitment to the goals of the state.

Lao National Radio: Reaching the People

Together with Lao National Television, Lao National Radio is one of the key mouthpieces of the LPDR. The radio has been an important tool for the government to transmit policy, propaganda and information since the first days of the revolution (GoL 2015). Most recent studies of minority language radio have focused on assertion of rights and preservation of languages (see, for example, Cormack and Horrigan 2007), although some authors have stressed the contested nature of language as it is used in these efforts (for example, Urla 1995; Garrett 2007). This study, by contrast, looks to a subtle, politically sensitive arena of power linguistic relations in the state-controlled media where the outright assertion of rights is not part of the agenda.

Establishment and Development of Lao National Radio

On August 13, 1960, Radio Pathet Lao was established in Hua Phan province to help the revolutionaries reach out to the people. In 1965, the Party issued a resolution to establish the Liberated Zone, in which the Pathet Lao would start to consolidate its political control and administration of services to the people. Hmong and Khmu broadcasts had begun the previous year, foreshadowing a policy move on the part of the Pathet Lao which signalled that "ethnic people long exploited and oppressed by colonial rule were integrated into the struggle" (Phongsavath 2003, 73). An important part of this decision was the establishment of the Central Committee within the Neo Lao Hak Xat, which was to have representation from the three major "ethnic" groupings – Lao Loum, Lao Theung and Lao Soung. That the radio broadcasts preceded official changes in representation within the Pathet Lao leadership shows that there was some awareness of the need to use multiple languages to increase communication between the revolutionaries, local leaders and the people.

With the establishment of the LPDR in December 1975, Lao National Radio, as Radio Pathet Lao was renamed, assumed a wider role, reflecting the expanded scope of its name.[2] The priority for Lao National Radio in the early post-liberation period was to help the government assert and maintain power over all areas of the country, spreading the new messages and policies of the Party. During this period, almost all news was taken from Party newspapers like *Siang Pasason* ("Voice of the People," the official newspaper of the Party) and *Vientiane Mai* ("New Vientiane") or fed directly from the

Table 1. Directors-general of Lao National Radio and location of operations.

Period	Director-general	Title	Location
1960–1962	Khamtay Siphandone	Director-General of Pathet Lao Radio	Hanoi, Vietnam
1962–1963	Souk Vongsack	Director-General of Pathet Lao Radio	Hanoi, Vietnam
1963–1965	Khamma Phomkong	Director-General of Pathet Lao Radio	Phou Khae, Viengxay district, Huaphan province
1965–1975	Sisan Sisane	Director-General of Pathet Lao Radio	Phou Khae, Viengxay district, Huaphan province
1975–1983	Chaleun Vongsamang	Director General of Lao National Radio	Vientiane prefecture
1983–1988	Bouaban Vorakhoune	Director General of Lao National Radio	Vientiane prefecture
1988–1993	Bounteng Vongsay	Director General of Lao National Radio	Vientiane prefecture
1993–2006	Bounthan Inthasay	Director General of Lao National Radio	Vientiane prefecture
2006–present	Sipha Nonglath	Director General of Lao National Radio	Vientiane Capital

national news agency Khaosan Pathet Lao. The job of the broadcasters was mainly to read out official documents, providing a one-way flow of information from the government to the people. But in 1988, after the formal launch of the New Economic Mechanism, the radio started to take on more of a bridging role between the people and the central government (see Yamada 2018). In subsequent years, Lao National Radio has continued to reinvent itself to appeal more broadly to society, developing material that can compete with the Thai radio and television broadcasts that are easily received and understood in Laos, as well as the more recent entry of private domestic broadcasting.

Lao National Radio operates under the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. The internal structure consists of a director-general who oversees three deputy directors-general. These deputies are responsible for seven departments, including Programming, Arts and Literature, Hmong Language, Khmu Language, Foreign Language, Internet Magazine and News and Current Affairs. Four departments – Radio Transmission, Audio Technical Management, Personnel and Administration – report directly to the director-general. Since its founding, Lao National Radio has had nine directors-general, including key leaders of the revolution (GoL 2015; see Table 1).

Table 1 indicates Lao National Radio's origins with close ties to Vietnam, transfer of operations to the Liberated Zone and the subsequent move to Vientiane after the establishment of the new regime in 1975.

Broadcasting to the Ethnic Groups

Lao National Radio's official history, made available in Lao on its website as part of its 55th anniversary, makes repeated references to the need to reach "people of all ethnic groups" (*pasaason bandaa phao*) (GoL 2015). This echoes political sentiments heard frequently in Party messages, but represents one of the rare cases in which strategic and sustained efforts have been made to communicate in ethnic languages. Hmong and Khmu broadcasts are present in much of the radio's history, signalling the importance of reaching these two large ethnic groups. As there has been no independent research on the history of radio broadcasting in Laos, the official version of the organisation's basic development trajectory is summarised here to provide a reference point.

As mentioned, after 1975, operations were brought to Vientiane. Institutions of administration were being established and the radio was an important vehicle of

communication for the central government. The Hmong broadcast was continued from the Vientiane station, but the Khmu broadcast was transferred to Luang Prabang, where it became the responsibility of the province. The central government was sensitive to the need to continue delivering the Party's message and post-liberation plans to the Hmong, as the anti-communist resistance associated with that group continued. The exact reasons for the discontinuation of the Khmu broadcast from Vientiane are not clear, but the scarcity of resources and lack of personnel figured in the decision. It is also possible that the government was hesitant to continue the Khmu broadcast as part of Party propaganda casting itself as a representative of the ethnic diversity of the new Lao state. Although the Khmu are the largest Austroasiatic group and the language enjoyed something of a *lingua franca* status among the Austroasiatic groups of the north, Khmu is unintelligible to other Austroasiatic people in the central and southern regions. In addition, the Khmu were not perceived as presenting the same security threat as the Hmong.

Individuals involved with the radio at this point recall that many revolutionaries were brought to the capital and given jobs in the new central agencies after 1975. This included a sizable number of Khmu from the Pathet Lao stronghold areas of Huaphan, Xieng Khouang and Phongsaly. Many of these officials strongly believed that the Khmu broadcast should be continued, arguing that the Khmu were much more numerous than the Hmong, and that the Khmu made a huge sacrifice for the revolution and deserved to have the radio broadcast in their language as part of the central government's programming. Some insisted that the Khmu should be recognised as the official representative of the non-Lao in the country. At the same time, there was disappointment from the sub-national levels of government, not to mention people in the liberated areas who had come to rely on the radio for information. There was also a feeling of pride that had developed around being the first of two ethnic groups to be officially recognised with such a direct link to the ruling elite. This psychological factor should not be underestimated. Pressure to reinstate the Khmu broadcast mounted, with the high Khmu officials in Vientiane leading and local people providing support with letters and messages sent by whatever means possible – post, telex, and most importantly word-of-mouth.

A 1985 letter to the editor in the *Vientiane Mai* newspaper inquired about the possibility of reinstating Khmu broadcasts. This reader also wanted to know if there was Khmu representation in the Party Central Executive Committee, the Politburo or the Central Committee. The editor's response was to reassure readers that the radio wanted to broadcast in Khmu, but that at the time only Hmong broadcasts were possible. The editor also mentioned that people should take the opportunity to get used to the central Lao dialect, but was not able to comment on the question of ethnic representation in the government. Another letter in *Siang Pasason* concerning race relations in the new regime was received and also responded to by the editors, in this case reassuring the readership that all levels of government from the highest to the most local would have representatives of ethnic groups (Batson 1991, 154). It is difficult to ascertain how effective radio broadcasts during this period were. At that time there was no system of local representation at the central level, but the official communication channels proved effective, allowing a low-profile but persistent Khmu lobby to develop.

Discussions with Khmu elders in various areas of the north revealed that information was scarce and people who were able to did often listen to radio broadcasts.

The constitution, finalised in 1991, included provision for the strengthening of rights of self-determination for ethnic minorities. Article 13 mentions "raising the material and spiritual well-being of multiethnic peoples" (Phongsavath 2003, 137). The Khmu disappointment at having their national broadcast cancelled was considered an affront to this fundamental sentiment, although it is not clear if Khmu leaders referred directly to the legal framework. When former Director-General Khamtay Siphandone became Party chairman in 1992, important reforms were to follow for broadcasting. It was in this year that the Resolution of the Central Party Organisation Concerning Ethnic Minority Affairs in the New Era was issued. Point 3.1 stated: "Let the relevant organization urgently research again the writing systems of the Hmong and Khmu using the Lao alphabet as was used in the old liberated areas for use in areas occupied by these ethnic minorities in unison with the Lao language and alphabet" (see International Labour Organization 2000, 23). An Ethnic Commission was established within the National Assembly as well, indicating a significant recognition of the need for broad-based policy measures to increase the participation of the ethnic minority groups in the affairs of the party-state.

Finally, in 1993, against this background of reform, approval was given for the restart of Khmu broadcasting by Lao National Radio from Vientiane. The first national Khmu language programme under the LPDR regime was aired on November 12, 2003. The Hmong and Khmu language units remained administratively separate until 2006, when they were merged to form the Ethnic Minority Language Department and then subsequently re-established as separate Hmong Department and Khmu Department (GoL 2015).

In 2018, some provincial radio stations also broadcast in ethnic languages, such as Luang Prabang, where daily Hmong and Khmu broadcasts can be heard. Moreover, United Nations funding has supported the expansion of Hmong and Khmu broadcasting on a local station called Radio Phou Koun, as well as a Jru language broadcast in Champassak (Bouabane 2003). There has been a recent proliferation of local radio stations, which have begun to explore the possibilities and challenges of broadcasting into ethnically diverse areas with varying degrees of government oversight (Neng 2003). While these are interesting developments, they should not be considered as "alternative public spheres" in which power structures are challenged by a diversity of local voices (Urla 1995).

Translating the News

The role of radio in nation building has been under-studied (Hayes 2000, xiii). Although, there has been some interest in anthropological studies that ask how media is used in the making of the modern nation-state, particularly with regard to ethnicity, there is a need to go beyond tracking the role of metaphors in state building. This requires the recognition of linguistic processes that go into the production and delivery of messages (Postill 2006, 46). The importance of linguistic structure in the construction of ideas in the press is evident in the outcomes of selection and transformation of news items (Fowler 1991).

Translation of news items into Hmong and Khmu is the most important task of the staff responsible for these languages at Lao National Radio. Knowledge of their languages and understanding of government and Party policy must be woven together to communicate a message that is subject to multiple political, linguistic and aesthetic sensitivities. These individuals are both members of ethnic groups speaking Lao as their second language and key actors in the transmission of the Party's political messages of solidarity under a common national culture. As cultural brokers working in a political apparatus, there is concern among both the Khmu and Hmong staff that the translations should be as accurate as possible. However, there is much lexical material in the Lao news for which there are no agreed Hmong and Khmu translations. This covers not only the names of government offices and official titles, but extends further into the specialised vocabulary of governance, economics, politics, science and technology.

Lao cultural material weighs heavy in the radio broadcasts as well, creating additional challenges to the use of ethnic languages. There is neither a centralised mechanism for considering and approving translations nor formal channels for consultation. Interestingly, the Neo Lao Sang Xat (Lao Front for National Construction), which plays a large role in consideration of ethnic issues in the government, is not involved in the question of how official and technical terms are to be handled in the minority media. Thus, there is a daily tension between the two approaches, translation into Hmong and Khmu and borrowing from Lao. Translation is a creative process fraught with disagreement about semantic nuances, communicative effectiveness and cultural legitimacy. Borrowing words is a natural linguistic phenomenon, couched in larger terms of cultural change and imbalances in inter-ethnic relations. There is on-going debate within both linguistic communities – from the radio station to the village – about how news terms should be dealt with in the broadcasts.

At the time of writing, there were six staff members in each of the two units – Khmu and Hmong – producing material and presenting on the air. There is one hour each of Khmu and Hmong language radio programming, from 1pm to 3pm daily. Material presented in Hmong and Khmu broadcasts is derived from five major sources. The first two are government-led and represent the bulk of the programming material, while the second two are staff-led and give room for the creation of locally appropriate material:

Priority issues provided by the government. These items are detailed at the weekly political meetings of the senior management (department heads and higher) within the Lao National Radio. These weekly messages and news items may be accompanied with specific texts and instructions on how to present them or may consist of just a list of points to be raised.

Official state news sources. A significant proportion of the material presented comes from state newspapers, particularly *Siang Pasason*. The daily news items are identified by the department head and translated by the announcers. Reports on official meetings, both domestic and international, are also common.

Self-produced material. The staff produces its own programmes, including special interest and cultural pieces that draw on its own information gathering efforts. These pieces are drafted directly in the broadcast language, and content differs between the Hmong and Khmu programmes. Interviews with local leaders and other active community members are common, as well as journalistic essays on cultural issues.

Local news from the provinces and districts. Local radio stations and other government agencies provide news pieces to Lao National Radio for broadcast on the national programmes. These often take the form of reports on progress towards socio-economic development objectives or noteworthy activities of farmers.

Project-based content. At times a large donor project supporting a specific government agency may provide content. These are issues-based pieces and the extent of Lao National Radio staff's role varies. For example, one large project funded by UNESCO produced a radio drama about trafficking of women. The radio broadcasters played a large role in gathering information from local areas in the north, wrote the script and acted the roles.

The department head is responsible to the Ministry of Information and Culture, under which the various news agencies of the government are managed. The main mechanism of accountability with regard to radio programming is through the weekly political meetings and is focused mainly on the integration of the weekly points, such as those introduced above, into the broadcasts.

The following sections examine the language use in actual radio broadcasts. The Khmu broadcast is from March 5, 2008, while the Hmong broadcast was aired on April 8, 2008.[3] The two broadcasts are of similar structure – domestic news followed by public interest pieces. The broadcasts were chosen because they are similar in terms of structure and thematic content. Direct comparison between the two is not possible, because the programmes are created separately by Khmu and Hmong staff. The objective, rather, is to identify what types of strategies are employed by the announcers to produce minority language programming. Statistics are presented only to give a general point of reference in understanding the striking differences between the Khmu and Hmong broadcasts.[4]

Khmu Programme Text

The Khmu text consisted of 3,101 total words, with 649 distinct lexical items occurring (see Table 2). The number of Lao borrowings in Khmu is striking. With more than 40% of the total words heard on the Khmu radio having Lao origins, even a non-Khmu-speaking listener may feel that they can follow along with the general flow. This is exacerbated by the fact that many of the borrowings occur in the top 25 commonly occurring words. These are common words in normal conversation, although they are pronounced according to Khmu phonological rules.

Some Lao speakers who hear the broadcasts comment that without Lao the Khmu language would die. These statistics may give the impression that Khmu is in a position of retreat in the face of an onslaught of Lao terms. Is Khmu in danger of "death by borrowing" (Croft 2000, 217)? It is true that many Khmu commentators believe that the

Table 2. Lao borrowings in Khmu broadcast.

Total count	3,101	
Distinct lexemes	649	
Lao borrowings (total count)	1,274	41%
Lao borrowings in top 25	327 count 9 distinct lexemes	29%

use of Lao borrowings is too high. Discussing this issue with the Khmu announcers, it was found that they prefer to use many of these Lao words as they are, rather than use uncertain translations. For the Khmu broadcasters, the question of borrowing words from Lao is an important issue with a long history.

Contemporary Borrowings in Historical Context

Khmu speakers have been in contact with speakers of Lao and other Tai languages probably since the Lao established political dominance in the lowland areas of the region approximately 600 years ago. This is evidenced by the large number of Lao origin loanwords found in Khmu. Based on the historical sound correspondences, it is known that many of the borrowings are old, although dating these borrowings is difficult. In his analysis of the influence of Lao on Khmu, Downer (1989–1990) identified more than 130 common Khmu words with old Lao origins, including grammatical words. This signals the significant historical depth of linguistic transfer between Lao and Khmu speakers and suggests that the seeming proliferation of Lao borrowings in modern Khmu be considered in this socio-linguistic context.

It would be convenient if one could easily separate the old borrowings from the new in an attempt to demonstrate the significance of language contact in the contemporary period. Unfortunately, this is not a straightforward consideration. One can, however, identify several "old" Lao words in the Khmu broadcast, where the phonology of old Lao is preserved in Khmu. For example, old sounds, such as voiced stops (b, d, g), voiceless sonorants (hm, hr) and medial liquids (l, r), all of which have changed or disappeared in modern Lao, are still found in Khmu (see Table 3). Many of these words would not be recognised by Lao speakers and Khmu speakers may or may not be aware of their Lao etymology.

There is also a large number of words that are clearly new borrowings, evident from their contemporary political and economic meanings. Words such as *khana'* ("committee"), *pativat* ("revolution"), *pathéét* ("nation") and *utsaahakam* ("industry") have a history much longer than the current regime, but are heard with much more frequency now as they are critical to the official discourse of political and socio-economic development. While the total count of these words is high, the average frequency for any one of these specialised terms is usually relatively low, with most occurring less than three times. This is in stark contrast to the frequency with which the borrowings in the top 25 occur. Based on phonology and pragmatics,

Table 3. khmu preservation of old Lao phonemes.

khmu	Gloss (with Lao)	Correspondence
Voiced stops		
Broom	"together with" [pʰɔ:m]	Khm /br/ > L /ph/
Gôn	"person" [kʰon]	Khm /g/ > L /kh/
Voiceless sonorants		
hmwan	"the same" [mɯən]	Khm /hm/ > L /m/
hrôk	"six" [hok]	Khm /hr/ > L /h/
Medial liquids		
plaay	"in excess" [pa:j]	Khm /pl/ > L /p/
klaay	"to change, to pass" [ka:j]	Khm /kl/ > L /k/

it seems reasonable to conclude that most of the nine Lao borrowings in the top 25 entered the language well before the end of the colonial period. Moreover, the phonological systems of the two languages are relatively close and this further facilitates borrowing.

Localisation or Over-compensation? Lao Words with Khmu Phonology

As mentioned above, many of the Lao loan words in Khmu are distinguished by phonological features retained from old Lao. Because neither the Lao nor Khmu have an understanding of these historical linguistic interactions, these words in the contemporary language have a particularly Khmu feel to them.

Old Lao borrowings in Khmu have preserved the pre-glottalised stops that used to be found in Lao, as shown in Downer's analysis (see Table 4).

In the radio broadcast we find pre-glottalised stops in words that are new borrowings where there is no historical justification for a pre-glottalised onset (see Table 5). This phenomenon is observed in Luang Prabang radio broadcasts as well and has frequently been a topic of spirited discussion in my interviews with Khmu people. In the radio broadcasts, the announcers seem to be trying to instil a sense of locality by juxtaposing these Khmu phonological rules onto words where they do not actually occur. Among all the Lao borrowings, this is perhaps one attempt to balance the impression that the Khmu character of the programmes is getting too low. In political news items, the Lao word for "role" (*bot baat*) is often used, but localised with pre-glottalisation into *ʻmôt ʻmaat [ʔmot ʔma:t]*. However, there is a sense among educated Khmu that this is unnecessary and slightly embarrassing because there is no link to an older borrowed Lao form. In their opinion, it is an over-compensation that does nothing to increase the quality of the Khmu and shows ignorance about the pronunciation of the Lao words. The broadcasters, however, feel that there is a need to lend phonological legitimacy to these words that are travelling across modern cultural boundaries.

Adjusting phonological rules in this case can be considered an effort to reclaim the "Khmuness" of the programme, in light of the large number of Lao borrowings used. It may also be seen as a way to localise the largely external concepts associated with the LPRP regime, increasing the willingness of the general public to accept the concepts by indigenising the vocabulary.

Table 4. Preservation of pre-glottalisation.

Khmu	Old Lao source	Lao	Gloss
ʔniən	ʔduɯən	duɯən	"month"
ʔmɔ:n	ʔbɔ:n	bɔ:n	"place"

Table 5. Khmu "innovations" to localize Lao borrowings.

Khmu	Lao	Gloss	Correspondence
patiʔmat	patibat	implement xx	/ʔm/ < /ʔb/ > /b/
ʔmɛ:p	bɛ:p	model xx	/ʔm/ < /ʔb/ > /b/
ʔna:n	da:n	aspect xx	/ʔn/ < /ʔd/ > /d/

Table 6. Khmu dialect variation.

Phongsaly Khmu Uu	"Standard" eastern Khmu	Gloss
prveey	khveey	surpass xx
côt	lôôc	entire xx
yoor	yar	to be xx
ruam	rôôm	to collect, to gather xx
dôk	tèèng	to do xx
There are also lexical differencespa' rmlôôc	lôôc	all xx
joom	broom	together xx

Inter-dialect Contact

Analysis of the radio text uncovered interesting socio-linguistic dynamics, internal to Khmu. The Khmu language can be roughly divided into two main dialect groups – eastern and western. The dialects are mutually intelligible, but there are significant differences. One of the most important markers of the east–west grouping is the presence of tones to make the abstract form in situationsin the western dialects. There are also lexical differences among the dialects. The majority of the Khmu staff of the department are speakers of eastern Khmu varieties, from Xieng Khouang, Hua Phan and Vientiane provinces.

There was a noteworthy body of common words from the Khmu Uu dialect spoken in Phongsaly province present in the speech of announcers who spoke other varieties of eastern Khmu (for examples, see Table 6).

There are two explanations for this phenomenon. First, when the new government was established in 1975, a large number of senior Phongsaly Khmu who were instrumental in the communists' victory were given jobs, resulting in an injection of Phongsaly Khmu Uu in the speech of the Khmu political elite. Second, one of the newer announcers at the department speaks this Phongsaly variety. Her programmes, along with the popular radio drama she starred in, has invested her dialect with a certain prestige factor that has spread among the other announcers. This is important for the current analysis, because this type of inter-dialect borrowing may be one force working to balance the "official register" that is becoming stronger in radio Khmu.

Hmong Programme Text

The total count from the Hmong text was slightly larger than the Khmu. The most striking feature of the Hmong statistics is the extremely low level of borrowing from Lao. At only 2% of the total, Lao borrowings are hardly noticeable in the Hmong broadcast (see Table 7). Many of the Lao words are pronounced with Hmong phonological rules, making them difficult to pick out to the untrained ear.

Of the total 105 Lao words borrowed into Hmong, there were 57 distinct lexemes. The majority (37) were political or administrative terms, a semantic group of

Table 7. Lao borrowings in Hmong broadcast.

Total lexemes	4,664	
Distinct lexemes	642	
Lao borrowings (total count)	105	2%
Lao borrowings in top 25	0	0%

terminology colouring official Lao speech. The rest of the borrowings fall into cultural or technological areas. None of the borrowings occurred in the top 25, and the largest count for any one lexeme was 9 (*bolisat* "company"). In fact, Lao borrowings stand out much more prominently in normal speech than on the radio. Native-speaker informants confirm that daily Hmong conversation is usually peppered with many more Lao words. In this sense, the language used on the radio gives a more stiff and official feel because of its usage of Hmong words and phrases that seem old or awkwardly new.

Grammaticalisation as Officialisation

Further analysis of the Hmong text reveals other interesting influences from Lao, reflecting rather different dynamics to the Khmu discussed above. The Hmong radio announcers come from the first generation of Hmong that could be described as being widely bilingual in Hmong and Lao. Of course, bilingualism has existed in previous generations, and many Hmong have functioned in Lao society using the Lao language. However, with the spread of the national educational system, new patterns of bilingualism have appeared among the Hmong.

This influence appears in subtler changes having to do with grammaticalisation, the process in which words assume new grammatical roles within the language. For example, there appears in the broadcast two new ways of making abstract nouns. Typically, an abstract noun is formed from a verb by adding the word *kev* "way, road" in front of the word, as in *kev ntseeg* "belief" ("way" + "to believe"). In the text, we find the word *lus*, the normal Hmong noun meaning "word, speech," used in place of *kev* to make the abstract noun *lus ceev faj* "caution." This use of *lus* is a calque from Lao, which uses the word *khwaam* ("word, speech") to make the abstract form in situations like this. To most Hmong speakers, this form would sound strange, but the meaning is clear.

In another related example of radio Hmong, one finds another innovation, *kam* + verb, to form abstract nouns. The Hmong word *kam* is a Lao borrowing *kaan* ("work, affairs," commonly used to create abstract nouns in Lao) and is found in phrases such as *kam zej kam zos* "official village business" [Hmong *zej zos* "village"], *kam teb kam chaws* "politics" [Hmong *teb chaws* "country"] and *kam noj kev haus* "livelihood" [Hmong *noj* "eat" and *haus* "drink"]. In any of these examples, the more normal usage would be *kev*, introduced above, and this is heard more frequently in normal speech. By using *kam* the speaker increases the formality of the language.

Calquing is also found in the Hmong text. New Hmong words are created by directly translating a Lao term, often composed of two elements. Frequently heard examples are shown in Table 8. In this list we find examples of normal descriptive language, economics-related terms and politics-related terms, suggesting that calquing is active in many social domains of the language. There are also examples of Hmong words being paired in new ways to form a slightly different meaning (see Table 9).

In these cases, the words are often related to policy or administration. The feeling is that by pairing the words, the meaning is strengthened, in some way reflecting the original Lao meaning better.

Finally, there are instances where Lao phrases are partially calqued (see Table 10). In these cases, the usual pattern is an initial Lao element followed by a Hmong element,

Table 8. Hmong calques from Lao.

Hmong	Meaning	Lao source	literal meaning
suav hnub	"increasing day-by-day"	*nap mɯɯ*	"count-day"
nqis peev	"invest"	*long thɯn*	"lower-capital"
muaj feem xyuam	"participate in"	*mii suan huam*	"have-part-join"

Table 9. Hmong lexical innovations.

Hmong	meaning	original Hmong
ruaj khov	"stable"	*ruaj* "firm" *khov* "durable"
nthuav txav	"to disseminate (policy)"	*nthuav* "to express, to show" *txav* "to move"

Table 10. Calques with partial borrowing.

Hmong	Meaning	Lao source	Lao literal meaning
ing ***rau***	"according to"	*iiŋ* ***sai***	"lean-put in/on"
yam ***txhij txhua***	"extensively"	*yaaŋ* ***thua thɞɞŋ***	"manner-all-arrive"
suam ***ntau***	"majority"	*suan* ***laai***	"part-many"
ongkaan ***teebtsa*** *mahason*	"mass organization"	*oŋkaan* ***cat taŋ*** *mahaason*	"organization-set up-public"
thws ***tias***	"means that", "in other words"	*thɯɯ vaa*	"hold-that"

shown in bold. To Hmong speakers, the result of these innovations is to make the language sound more official, emulating the formalised political Lao speech.

Previous Waves of "Modernisation": Chinese Influence on Hmong

The level of borrowing from Lao in contemporary Hmong is low but rising. This can be considered the first concrete, but somewhat ad hoc, steps in a process of "language modernisation" as Hmong takes on an official role it has never previously played. But Hmong has already gone through several phases of modernisation, borrowing from Chinese, as the Hmong originally lived in southern China before the southern migrations of the recent two centuries. Although they may not be obvious to Hmong speakers now, they are observable through lexical comparison. It is estimated that more than 20% of the Hmong lexicon may be of Sinitic origin, borrowed over a period of time that may have started around the fifth century. Mortensen (2000) gives no less than 530 words of Sinitic origin, covering virtually every semantic field in modern Hmong. Many words used on the radio are of Chinese origin (see examples in Table 11). These are compound words, borrowed in their joined form from Chinese to enrich the lexicon with abstract, political, philosophical and technical items. Ritual and literary language tends to have a higher proportion of these Chinese borrowings, and although etymologies are commonly

Table 11. Chinese compounds in Hmong.

hmong	Gloss	Chinese
pejxeem	"citizen, people"	百姓 bǎixìng
vajhuam	"culture"	文化 wénhuà
vajmeem	"civilization, development"	文明 wénmíng
peejxwm	"capacity, ability"	本事 běnshi

known, compound words containing these elements give the language a certain Chinese feeling to native speakers. This heritage is a resource that the Hmong broadcasters draw on as they search for ways to give their language the necessary officialness, even as these words are often replaced in village Hmong with Lao borrowings.

Strategies for Language Standardisation and Modernisation

Despite the similar effect of creating an official register, the approaches to translating the news differ significantly between the Hmong and Khmu sections of the Lao National Radio.

Khmu Broadcast: Celebrate Diversity

In the daily Khmu broadcast one hears several different Khmu dialects being spoken by the announcers. Khmu eastern dialects Khmu Cuang (spoken in Xieng Khouang and Huaphanh) and Khmu U (spoken in Luang Prabang and Phongsaly) are used by the broadcasters, and there were at the time of the research no speakers of the western dialects. There is no "official" policy about what language should be used, but the director explains that from the beginning of the Khmu broadcast there was interest in having broadcasters from different regions. All the Khmu dialects have a high degree of mutual intelligibility and the general understanding among the broadcasters is that hearing the speech of different areas makes the programmes more enjoyable. This is also closely linked to people's preferences for hearing different types of traditional singing styles (*teem*). The vision for the Khmu broadcasting team is one that represents as many of the local varieties as possible, to reflect the reality of the diversity within the Khmu ethnic group. By extension, this should contribute to the legitimacy of the broadcast more broadly across Khmu society. It is likely that the lack of a movement to standardise spoken Lao has at least some indirect influence on the Khmu broadcasters.

The Khmu team has a flexible approach with regard to the phonetic integration of Lao borrowings. In principle, all staff agree that the number of Lao words used should not be excessive, and translation and calquing are important parts of their daily preparations. However, the reality is that there is no standardisation of how technical terms should be handled and there is a degree of variation among broadcasters. Because of the presence of old borrowings in Lao, a certain level of new Lao borrowings does not stand out significantly. Also, as mentioned above, many of the new Lao words being used are subject to phonological rules of the Khmu language and they are assimilated into the body of old borrowings. There is however a basic lexicon of words that are frequently used, having specific socio-economic and political meanings, that the group would like to standardise. An official standardisation of terminology would require financial and political resources that the group does not have. For the time being they prefer to monitor matters by themselves and use the freedom they do have to produce material that is acceptable to the listeners.

Hmong Broadcast: Slowly Towards Standardisation

The Hmong broadcasters have a different view of how to present their language. Compared to the Khmu, there is a much higher level of concern for the standardisation of language use. Hmong broadcasters express more interest in using the high level of freedom they enjoy with regard to language use to move forward in establishing standardised translations for Lao terms. They also believe that one dialect of Hmong should be the common language used. There is a feeling among much of the Hmong population that White Hmong is the "standard" variety, appropriate in more official and formal settings, a situation that has prevailed probably since before the French colonial period, and seems to have been bolstered by the importance of Hmong figures from Xieng Khouang province, where White Hmong is the dominant variety, in both the colonial and revolutionary periods. It is interesting to note that the Hmong language broadcast of the Chiang Mai provincial radio station in Thailand has used both the White and Green Hmong dialects (Hmoob Dawb and Moob Ntsuab) in its programming. In the Lao broadcast however, there is a feeling that presenting a standardised (White) Hmong voice is in the interest of both the government and the Hmong people.

Thus, while the Hmong broadcasters are constrained by the same lack of funds, expertise and political mechanisms to go through a formal process of standardisation, their unwritten policy is to push forward to the degree that they can. There is thus a relatively long list of words for government agencies and key terms in the politico-economic realm that have been "agreed upon" by the broadcasters. There is also a significant degree of informal consultation with Hmong community leaders before terms are accepted by the radio station.

There is a literate Hmong culture in China which has dealt with these same issues, considering that in China there is more space provided for education and media in local languages. Theoretically, the Lao Hmong could find a way to tap into that experience and add words that are in line with the Chinese material already existing in the language. The Hmong in Vietnam and Thailand also have experience in this regard. However, this is not considered to be a practical option for the broadcasting team. The broadcasters do not like the idea, and they believe that the acceptability of this would be low within the community of listeners, not to mention politically problematic.

In actual practice, the Hmong broadcasters make use of the internet, accessing the wealth of material being created by Hmong diaspora. This is also done in an informal way. Overseas Hmong engage in online discussions about translation, and the US government particularly has produced many official documents in the Hmong language. The radio staff are reluctant to borrow from these, but do recognise the internet as an important resource. At the same time, a number of online Hmong-language broadcasts from Hmong diaspora countries such as the USA and Australia, including those of Christian groups, have increased the political sensitivity of using the internet as a resource.

A last but important resource is the Hmong listeners. It is common for listeners from around the country to call in (or fax, in previous days) ideas about how specialised terms should or should not be translated directly to the radio station. This often includes more general commentary about the overall quality of the Hmong language used on the radio. The listeners provide critical feedback that further reinforces the broadcasters' desire to have things standardised in "proper" White Hmong. Although

they are more cautious with decisions on individual usage cases, the Hmong are eager to move forward with some sort of standardisation process for their language.

Flexibility in Formality

The Khmu and Hmong broadcasts display different strategies towards dealing with the challenges of translation and the production of a high political culture. Each is deeply rooted in its own cultural context. Khmu broadcasters' attempt to retrofit "modern" terms to "traditional" Khmu phonology are noteworthy, because they are grounded in the desire to make the new terminology culturally acceptable to the public, yet they produce a result that seems uneducated and backwards to some ears. The dynamics of embarrassment that colour the cultural intimacy between the broadcasters and listeners have several layers. The Hmong, on the other hand, feel that their lack of standardised Hmong terms is a source of embarrassment not only within their community, but perhaps more importantly vis-à-vis the government. At the same time, influence from Lao is changing the grammar they use, driven by the same desire to create formal, official-sounding Hmong.

Standardisation of key political and economic terms is left to the translators, and listeners contribute ideas regarding usage, but this is mostly concerned with getting the cultural appropriateness correct. Thus, accountability of the translators' work follows two trajectories – political correctness is the purview of the government and cultural acceptability is open to commentary from the audience. We can see that while the news broadcasters determine how political and economic terms are represented in Khmu and Hmong, we can also see how the linguistic features of revolutionary Lao language affect the forms of the languages as they are used. In these subtle questions of word choice, calquing and pronunciation, an important register of revolutionary Lao language permeates the minority languages and contributes to the shared lexicon and grammar that are so important to the state's delivery of official messages.

Conformity, Legitimacy and Authenticity

This article, in responding to Pholsena's call to bring more of an emic "ethnic" perspective to the analysis of Lao nationalism, strives to highlight approaches to the modern history that, while recognising the ethnic complexity of the country, still struggle to get out of the normative framework of mainstream, lowland Lao culture. The Lao National Radio broadcasts in Khmu and Hmong are virtually the only official view on, and more importantly, through non-Lao languages. But the very nature of this material, provided daily in these languages, has kept it out of sight of researchers. This situation is in stark contrast to the situation in China, another country where broadcasting political ideas and rhetoric from the centre to a diverse population is an important area of government work. In China, the "ethnic media," consisting of broadcasts in more than 20 minority languages, is a part of all levels of governance and goes closely together with official efforts to support multilingual education (Si and Li 2013). Vietnam has ethnic minority broadcasting and there is some discussion about how this should be done from a technical, political and cultural point of view (see Nguyen 2008). Ethnic minority radio in Laos remains hidden from the public view, and

the only broad-based discourse to be found is informally within the linguistic communities that are targeted.

The political sensitivity of ethnicity is a hindrance to the analysis of linguistic discourse and how it reflects power dynamics in Laos. Often, we are limited to "performances" of ethnic culture that are done by local people for the benefit of government audiences (Petit 2013, 472). More often than not, the narratives analysed in these situations are in the Lao language, as speaking minority languages in front of higher-level officials is often considered rude. Analysis of these types of representation may provide useful insights into how the state influences culture in the official sphere.

The unspoken background to the question of ethnic language broadcasts is of course the resistance of the ethnic groups to the Revolution, not the support. The ideological and armed conflict divided many of the ethnic groups and the remnants of these fractures are a source of concern to the government. Now, there is perhaps a subtler pressure on the Hmong broadcasters to present and maintain a picture of Hmong solidarity in support of the party-state. For the Khmu, there is less of a perceived imperative to assert a unitary linguistic identity. This article has tried to contribute analysis from data that is broadcast within ethnic communities, in the world of the ethnic language – one that is closed off from Lao ears – where the borders between official and unofficial, state and citizen are more blurred.

There is an assumption that the rhetoric of unity in multi-ethnic diversity is produced by the production and communication of official texts, but it has also been shown that contradictory articulations of solidarity and power characterise projections of the official vision of Lao society (Cincotta 2009, 330). The forces of conformity with the Party line, legitimacy in the public opinion and authenticity in contested ideas of ethno-linguistic identity are at play every day in the hour-long broadcasts. Behind those transmissions, broadcasters make judgements on the political and social acceptability of translations of official messages into local languages. These, they supplement with other material of cultural, social and economic interest. The result is a struggle to do the political work of imposing the supposedly uniform, non-negotiable messages of a centralised state on a diverse population, but in a way that does not alienate the audience from the material that is being broadcast. Focus on the organic development of an official register has brought some visibility to "the invisible grammar" and highlighted the human elements of propaganda production.

The radio broadcasters are engaged in a project of creating a linguistic community with a "correct" political awareness. But what is the actual impact of this awareness on people's actions? What is the mobilisation dividend? The use of Pali-Sanskrit words in the Thai/Lao world is not only considered to be a sign of intelligence, but also a marker of diligence (McDaniel 2008, 167). While the linguistic context is different, the demonstration of diligence – the public display of one's willingness to engage with the system – communicated in the official register may be one of the motivating factors for its spread. As McDaniel discusses in the Pali-Sanskrit context, the ability to link stories across registers is a critical strategy in making texts accessible to people; as the radio broadcasters translate political messages into Hmong and Khmu using the techniques and strategies discussed above, a link between cultural words is made. The next step in this analysis requires

in-depth surveys about people's perceptions of what they hear. More importantly, it requires in-situ observation of language use at the local level. First impressions, and the initial motivation for this study, indicate that the official register is very much present in the full range of village socio-linguistic settings. But a more definitive statement on this must await further research. In his analysis of the propaganda machine of the Soviet Union, Kenez (1985, 255) concluded that the Soviet propagandists were successful in "teaching people a political language and a pattern of behaviour," meaning that "[f]irst the people came to speak a strange idiom and adopt the behavior patterns expected of them, and only then did the inherent ideological message seep in." In the Lao experience, it seems that the popularisation of an official register of ethnic languages, peppered with calques and grammatical influence from Lao, give a sense of urgency to the broad-based calls for participation, effort, struggle and sacrifice. Enfield (1999, 287) has described the approach to standardisation of the Lao language as a preference for metonymic emblems over generalised linguistic principles. Here too, the lack of a systematic and technically accurate process of "translation" underscores a deeper concern for the organic production of an official register that subtly guides the way people speak.

In this sense, the broadcasters are engaging in "legitimate language." That is, the instruments of production that include rhetorical devices, genres, legitimate styles and manners, which are effective because they are perceived as examples of good language. At the same time, the broadcasts are "authorised" language situated in discourse within the ethnic language communities, but playing out across several levels of society, in line with Bourdieu's (1993, 113) assertion that "the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs."

But what of the other ethnic groups and their languages? The fact that Khmu and Hmong are spoken only in the central and northern parts of the country has led political figures from the southern areas, where other ethnic minorities have played important roles in the local history of the state, to call for the abolition of the Khmu and Hmong broadcasts. Just under the surface of the tolerance of a certain degree of linguistic diversity is a much more serious problem of ethnic representation. But for the state, the existence of minority language radio itself is considered to be a symbol of the current system's commitment to equality among ethnic groups.

Conclusion

A standard approach to the question of political language would be to analyse the content of the radio programming, trying to uncover what can be learned from the types of messages that are broadcast – the type of discourse analysis championed by Foucault that ignores the detailed linguistic analysis of discourse production and transmission (Cincotta 2009, 70). In this study, we see the Khmu and Hmong language taking on influence from both messages of the official rhetoric and the Lao language in which it is usually delivered. It is the processes of translating political messages into minority languages – making adjustments in pronunciation, borrowing technical vocabulary, calquing political jargon, coining new terms, all done with reference to official Lao political language – that highlights the creation of a shared political discourse. In this way,

political ideology is transferred through the "official register" of Khmu and Hmong, in ways that are not noticed by the political organs of the state. At the same time, officialisation may create a "proto-elite" register of the language from which the general population feels increasingly alienated (Garrett 2007, 152).

Thus, the language of the state works on several levels. The Lao language rhetoric of the Party wields influence over the minority language broadcasters, who struggle to create a linguistic discourse in their own languages that is politically correct yet culturally acceptable. By reflecting the official register of Lao in their translations, the broadcasters create space for a negotiation of internal power dynamics to achieve "modern" Khmu and Hmong languages that speaker communities, always minorities in the face of Lao language domination of all other realms, are proud of. The fascinating part of these linguistic politics is that there is virtually no official technical oversight of the details of translating the news. Well-versed in the political register of the Lao language, and relying on guidance regarding programming content, the radio staff walk a narrow path between self-censorship and journalistic license in broadcasting the state in the Hmong and Khmu languages. They also deal with unsettled questions of dialect diversity, reflecting an inherent heterogeneity in voices that typically characterise ethnic language radio (Urla 1995, 258).

How this language permeates the lower levels of political work, particularly in district and village meetings, is another area of linguistic ethnography that should be investigated. Together with a closer look at the official registers of Hmong and Khmu from the point of view of those who listen to the broadcasts, these approaches will add further nuance to our understanding of the use of linguistic resources in the extension of centralised power to a diverse population. My own experience in the field suggests the existence of an official register that sounds very much like the language used on the radio. To assert that the radio is the source of this language would overstate the impact of the radio on people, yet the radio is one of the ways in which official registers are developing. In contrast to Gellner's high literate culture, the radio broadcasters in fact seek to maintain a more flexible hybrid language that is located solidly in the oral culture, as seen in their hesitation with standardisation and their efforts to localise Lao influence on the language. This linguistic culture works quietly to encourage people to participate in the larger political discourse of the state. It is perhaps the lack of standardisation and clear policy guidance from higher levels that allows the radio to wield its subtle influence over its listeners.

Notes

1. In fact, the concept of majority and minority are not used in Lao political discourse, as all people of Laos by law belong to an "ethnic group" (*son phaw*), of which the ethnic Lao themselves are one. The use of the term Lao (*laaw*) as an adjective is fraught with ambiguity, as it can be interpreted to mean the ethnic group or the state, without any overt linguistic marking.
2. The Lao name, *vithanyu kacaai siang haeng saat laaw*, invokes the *saat* "nation" in place of the previous Pathet Lao "country" element.
3. While these programmes are from a decade ago, the broadcasts continue in basically the same format today. The programmes analysed in this article are from a period in which

state broadcasting was expanding the scope of its content and provided much of the substantive basis for the development of Khmu and Hmong language television broadcasts which are now aired daily on the main state channel.

4. Khmu words are presented in the Romanised orthography used in the *Kmhmu'-Lao-French-English Dictionary* (Suksavang, Sayavong, and Preisig 1994). Hmong words are presented in the Romanised Popular Alphabet (RPA) orthography used unofficially by Hmong in Laos and widely by the Hmong diaspora. Final consonants mark tones and are not pronounced as normal consonants.

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