Some peculiarities of Cuoi Cham, a Vietic language of Nghe-An (Vietnam)
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Some peculiarities of Cuoi Cham, a Vietic language of Nghe-An (Vietnam)\(^1\)

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The Cuoi Cham language (in Vietnamese: *Cuội Chăm*) is a member of the Tho (*Thổ*) subgroup of the Vietic group within the Austroasiatic family. The other member of this subgroup is Môn – spelt here in Vietnamese orthography, with a subscript dot, to avoid confusion with the Mon language of Burma and Thailand. The Tho dialects are spoken in some areas of the northern part of Nghe An province; Henri Maspero referred to them as “Southern Muong”. They have a high degree of lexical similarity with Vietnamese, partly inherited, and partly acquired through Vietnamese influence. However, the Tho dialects are phonetically more conservative than Vietnamese.

**Tho dialectology**

Tho (*Thổ*) is one of the ethnic groups recognized by the official Vietnamese classification. The information on two Cuoi dialects and two Môn dialects found in a book about Tân Kỳ district (Ninh 1992:109–111) allows for an insight into dialect classification: on the basis of the evolution of Proto-Vietic (hereafter PV) *-l* and *-s*, three different situations are found in Cuoi, Giai Xuân Môn, and Tam Họp Môn, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PV</th>
<th>Cuoi</th>
<th>Môn (Giai Xuân)</th>
<th>Môn (Tam Họ)</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*-l</td>
<td>-l</td>
<td>-n</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-j (i/y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*-s</td>
<td>-l</td>
<td>-j</td>
<td>-j</td>
<td>-j (i/y) (tones ā ā, etymological C1 and C2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-l (tones a⁵ a⁶, etymological C1 and C2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initial consonants

Cuoi  | Viet  |  |  |  
---|---|---|---|---
p | b | pɔːn³ | bón | four | quatre  
v | puː⁴ | voi | limestone | chaux  
t | tɔː⁴ | đuôi | tail | queue  
ch | cɛt⁷ | chét | to die | mourir  
gi | cɔːŋ⁵ | gióng | seed | semence  
k | ɔːn¹ | con | son | fils  
g | kuː⁴ | gâu | bear | ours  
s | taj¹ | tai | ear | oreille  
r | ɔːŋ³ | rán | snake | serpent  
b | mɔːŋ³ | muội | salt | sel  
d | bal¹ | may | to sew | coudre  
| dəŋ⁴ | đuôi | to raise | dresser, élever  
| c  | ɔːŋ¹ | jalo | to jump | sauter  

Two series of Vietnamese initials correspond to Cuoi initial p t c k s. In cases where the word was monosyllabic in Proto-Vietic, Vietnamese has b d ch c/k t (IPA: ɓɗ c/k t). In cases where the word was disyllabic, these same consonants in medial position developed to v d gi g/gh r (IPA equivalents at the stage of spirantization: βðʒɣr) (Ferlus 1982).

Correspondences between Tho b d j and Vietnamese m n nh reflect former preglottalized consonants. The other correspondences between initials are self-explanatory.

Initial clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bl</th>
<th>pl</th>
<th>kl</th>
<th>kʰr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| bl | tr | blæj¹ | trôi | sky | ciel  
|   |   | blɔŋ¹ | trỏng | to plant | planter  
|   |   | (but: |   | sáng | morning | matin)  
| pl | tr | plæː⁴ | trái | fruit | fruit  
|   |   | (but: |   | sǎng | morning | matin)  
| kl | tr | klen¹ | trên | top | le haut  
|   |   | klam¹ | trăm | hundred | cent  
|   |   | (but: |   | sɔi | gravel | gravier)  
| pʰr | s | pʰram¹ | suộn | ribs | côtes (anat.)  
|   | r | pʰraj¹ | say | drunk | ivre  
|   | r | pʰrɛn¹ | rǎn | louse | pou  
| kʰr | s | kʰraw¹ | sao | star | étoile  
|   | r | kʰrap⁷ | sǎp | wax | cire  
|   | (but: | kʰɾaw¹ | trâu | buffalo | buffle)  |
**Tones and vowels**

Tones belong to two etymological series, (i) a *high* series comprising \(a^1\) \(a^3\) \(a^5\) \(a^7\) in Cuoi (and \(a\ á\ á\ át\) in Vietnamese); the etymological categories are A1, B1, C1, and D1; and (ii) a *low* series comprising \(a^2\) \(a^4\) \(a^6\) \(a^8\) in Cuoi (and \(á\ á\ ã\ át\) in Vietnamese); the etymological categories are A2, B2, C2, and D2. Among categories A, B, C and D, the first three (A, B, and C) are found on open syllables and sonorant-final syllables (syllables ending with a nasal or sonorant). Category D is that of words ending in an unvoiced stop.

Table 2. Cuoi and Vietnamese tones, presented by etymological categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>(a^1)</td>
<td>(a^3)</td>
<td>(a^5\ á)</td>
<td>(a^7\ át)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>(a^2\ á)</td>
<td>(a^4\ á)</td>
<td>(a^6\ á)</td>
<td>(a^8\ át)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tonal correspondences between Cuoi and Vietnamese are regular, in that the evolutionary conditioning of the eight tone categories are the same in both languages. In practice, numerous cases of tonal inversions are found within the four categories A, B, C and D, for reasons that remain to be explored in detail.\(^2\)

The phonemes placed in brackets are only found in recent Vietnamese loanwords. The consonant shifts that affected initial stops (leading to a two-way splitting of the tone system) resulted in changes in the degree of vowel opening for reflexes of proto-vowels \(*a\): \(*o\): \(*ɛ\): in the two series (high and low), as below:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{i} & \text{i} & \text{u} & \\
\text{ɛ} & \text{ɛ} & \text{o} & \text{*o} \\
\text{e} & \text{*ɛ} & \text{ɔ} & \\
\text{a} & \text{a} & \text{a} & \\
\text{(ia)} & \text{ia} & \text{(ua)}
\end{array}
\]

A slight difference in vowel opening can be heard for \(*ɛ\); it is not transcribed in the present notes.

\(^2\) [Since the time of this presentation (1994), the topic of irregular tonal correspondences between Vietnamese and Muong on the one hand, and the rest of Vietic on the other hand, has been analyzed by Ferlus (1999). *Note added at translation.*]
### The development of two distinct tonal series (High and Low)

The development of two distinct tonal series (High and Low) is a consequence of the consonant shift among initial stops, whereby two series of consonants merged with each other. Among former unvoiced initials, unvoiced stops remain unvoiced (p, t, ...) whereas unvoiced nasals and sonorants become voiced (ʰm > m, ʰl > l, ...), developing High-series characteristics: (i) clear voice (modal phonation type), (ii) high tones, and (iii) a tendency towards vowel opening. Among former voiced initials, stops become devoiced (b > p, d > t, ...) and nasals and sonorants remain voiced (m, l, ...), developing Low-series characteristics: (i) breathy/whisphery phonation type, (ii) low tones, and (iii) a tendency to vowel closing.3

Vietnamese and Muong developed purely tonal systems, i.e. characteristics (i) and (iii) are not preserved in the current system of these languages. On the other hand, the Tho language varieties, including Cuoi, present full-fledged eight-tone systems but also retain differences in degree of vowel opening: opening of *oː and *ɔː in the high series, and closing of *aː (and *ɛː) in the low series.

### Final consonants

Proto-Vietic final *-l is preserved in Cuoi:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Vietic</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>puːl¹</td>
<td>vị</td>
<td>lime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kʰal³</td>
<td>kháí</td>
<td>tiger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pAl¹</td>
<td>bay</td>
<td>to fly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cal⁴</td>
<td>chạy</td>
<td>to run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puːj⁴</td>
<td>bui</td>
<td>clump, tuft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>veːl²</td>
<td>về</td>
<td>to come back</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proto-Vietic final *-s became -l under tones a⁵ a⁶ (tones C1 and C2, corresponding to Vietnamese ě ě):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Vietic</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tʰul⁵</td>
<td>thô</td>
<td>to blow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paːl⁵</td>
<td>vài</td>
<td>fabric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cal⁵</td>
<td>chạy</td>
<td>to flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muːl⁶</td>
<td>mũi</td>
<td>nose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laːl⁶</td>
<td>lưỡi</td>
<td>tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>veːl⁶</td>
<td>vãi</td>
<td>to sow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 [On consonant shifts, see Haudricourt (1965); on the developments that occur in tone systems as a result of the merger of two series of initial consonants, see Haudricourt (1972). Note added at translation.]
At certain places inside the Cuoi-speaking area, some elderly people pronounce a final -r instead of final -l (in reflexes of Proto-Vietic *s-final words and *l-final words). This peculiarity created some perplexity among linguists, starting with Maspero (1912); many concluded that there was an opposition between final -r and -l – an opposition that is widespread in the Austroasiatic family. It turns out that those are merely phonetic variants of one and the same phoneme: Cuoi did not preserve the proto-Austroasiatic opposition of final *-r and *-l.

References


Appendix: The languages of the Vietic group of Austroasiatic

1. maleng
2. arem
3. chut
4. aheu
5. hung
6. thô
7. muong, nguồn
8. vietnamien