

Language as Identity and Evidence of Tai: A Case Study of Tai Phake and Tai Lue

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ABSTRACT

Language is a key tool used in the creation, maintenance and expression of ethnic identity. The current paper discusses the role played by the languages of Tai Phake and Tai Lue in providing linguistic evidence of Tai identity and continuity outside the limits of the contemporary nation-state. The analysis utilizes the comparative phonological method from the perspective of ethnographic linguistics based on phonological data obtained in the field and in writing.

It becomes clear that the languages of Tai Phake and Tai Lue possess phonological traits that are characteristic of Southwestern Tai languages such as similar consonantal inventories, syllable structure and tone system. The similarities demonstrate linguistic evidence for the genealogy and history of these languages among others within the Tai community. However, at the same time there are differences in the phonological systems due to the specific nature of their histories in various sociocultural surroundings.

The paper suggests that the importance of phonology exceeds its function in language. Language for speakers of Tai Phake and Tai Lue is not only a means of communicating with each other but is also a way of emphasizing their ethnic origin as well as retaining their connection with common ancestry. It allows not only to communicate through speaking but also to preserve their collective memory through rituals and oral tradition. The results of research allow us to emphasize the significance of language as a tool of communication and culture.

In this way, the examples of Tai Phake and Tai Lue reveal the importance of language not only as a means of historical identity but also as an archive of Tai identity.

Keywords: Tai languages, Tai Phake, Tai Lue, language and identity, comparative phonology, ethnicity, sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Language has always been viewed as both a means for communication and a key identifier of one's social or ethnic group. Sociolinguists view language as a tool for creating, communicating, and shaping identities and their relation to societies at large (Hassan & Rami, 2024; Beqiri, 2025). Furthermore, research in the field of historical linguistics has provided insight into the way that certain linguistic characteristics - particularly phonological systems, lexical relationships, and classification of language families.

The Tai language family, which includes a large number of languages spoken in a vast area of Mainland Southeast Asia, provides an outstanding opportunity to explore the connections between language, identity and evidence (Enfield, 2021). Among these languages, Tai Phake and Tai Lue are both related from a linguistics point of view; however, they have developed in two different social and cultural environments (Diller, 2018).

Prior research has focused primarily on phonological systems, vowel inventories, and tonality; however, there has been very little research on the twofold function of these characteristics: serving as markers of Tai affiliation and as elements that identify a person's ethnic background (Dockum, 2018). Linguistic structures and social identities are often researched as discrete realms (Rami, Hassan & Shatnawi, 2023). In comparative linguistics, historical connections are reconstructed through the shared traits of a group of people; however, in sociolinguistics the focus is on how the speaker performs different types of identities based on their use of language and is measured through the examination of that same language (Rami, 2024). Therefore, the exploration of understanding how linguistic structures can be used as evidence of historical connections and as symbolic resources in the performance of identity and how those resources are used to create and sustain that identity, particularly in relation to Tai-speaking communities such as Tai Phake and Tai Lue, remains lacking a comprehensive and integrated approach.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how the linguistic characteristics of Tai Phake and Tai Lue can provide evidence of their historical connection to the Tai language family while also contributing to the development and maintenance of a Tai identity.

The main objectives of the project are to answer the following research questions:

1. What phonological, lexical and structural characteristics do Tai Phake and Tai Lue share, and in what way do these features indicate their membership in the Tai language family?
2. In what way do the differences between the two varieties reflect localized identity and linguistic divergence? and
3. How do speakers of these languages view linguistic features as representing their ethnic identities?

Utilizing theories and research methods from sociolinguistics, comparative linguistics and linguistic anthropology, this study seeks to illustrate how linguistic structures are instrumental in shaping both local and global forms of Tai identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Tai language family

The Tai languages represent a significant language group in Mainland Southeast Asia as the predominant branch of the Kra-Dai language family. These languages include the different varieties of Tai such as Thai (Siamese), Lao, Shan, Tay (in Vietnam) or Yi, which are found throughout Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, the southern region of China, and northeastern India and form an important part of Mainland Southeast Asia's linguistic heritage (Strecker & Pittayaporn, 2018). Within historical linguistics, Tai languages have traditionally been classified into three subfamilies based on comparative phonology, lexical variation, and tonality. These three subfamilies include Southwestern Tai, Central Tai, and Northern Tai; therefore, this classification is based primarily on how their respective phonology, lexicon, and tonal system delineate the relationships between the Tai languages (Li, 1977).

In terms of the Southwestern Tai family of languages, Tai Phake and Tai Lue demonstrate the manner in which separate Tai languages have developed linguistic characteristics occasioned by long-term geographic isolation and/or social separation from other Southwestern Tai languages and continued interaction with non-Tai neighboring cultures/communities (Pittayaporn, 2025). While the commonalities in terms of their vowel systems, tonal systems, and cognates further support the evident genealogical connections between Tai Phake, Tai Lue, and Proto-Tai, the significant differences between these two languages today reflect migration patterns, language contact/divergence, and sociolinguistic factors that have historically occurred since their separation from each other (Pittayaporn, 2009).

Language Identity

Language is recognized as an important resource that individuals can form, perform and negotiate their social and ethnic identities. Identity is not considered something that is established before or at the same time as a person uses language; it is a process that is continually being constructed and reconstructed through what a person does with language when they use it (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). As such, speakers will intentionally choose specific variables of language (phonological features, lexicon choices, or broader discursive styles) in order to communicate their association with a particular social group (Eckert, 2008).

The connection between language and identity is very evident in expressing ethnic identity, and especially so among Tai-speaking groups in multilingual/diaspora settings. In these multi-ethnic contexts, the use of certain linguistic features can help to create a sense of community or solidarity among speakers of Tai and to differentiate them from other ethnolinguistic groups (Freedman & Barth, 1970). In addition, the documented differences in Tai languages from one location to another do not simply indicate geographic distance but also reflect and create localized regional, cultural, and historical identities. For instance, the adoption of specific linguistic practices within Tai communities often mirrors complex historical shifts where populations have assimilated into dominant Tai-speaking cultures while maintaining distinct markers of their unique ethnic heritage (Enfield, 2005, p. 185; Onlao & Hongsuwan, 2024).

Language as Evidence in Historical and Comparative Linguistics

Researchers in the areas of historical and comparative linguistics rely on evidence of language structures to help them construct language families through genealogical connections between languages and to identify the historical development of various languages based on several forms of structural evidence. This work involves a systematic investigation into the phonological innovations, shared cognates (words from different languages that have a common consonant or vowel), and morphosyntactic similarities found among all of the languages and allows linguists to describe the relationships among the languages in terms of their genealogical families and the historical development of language families (Greenhill et al., 2018, p. 578). For those working in the subfield of Tai languages, much of this research has focused on reconstructing the phonological forms of Proto-Tai, documenting the historical development of tonal contrasts, and identifying patterns of sound correspondences across dialectal differences (Pittayaporn, 2009; Li, 1977).

Methodologies in this area suggest that changes to language are not random and are bound by systematic historical processes. Thus, the primary epistemological limitation of these methodological approaches is that they treat formal linguistic systems as isolated from the people who use them. This focus on structural and genetic relationships has led to a lack of consideration of the complex sociolinguistic implications for the speakers of the languages, language attitudes, and the lived experience of the speakers (Chambers, 2009).

Linguistic Features of Tai Phake and Tai Lue

Linguists have used linguistic features to demonstrate that these features establish relationships between languages. This includes the way sounds are made (phonology), the presence of shared words between languages, and the structural type or pattern of individual languages, which can be used to show whether two languages are related or the extent to which one language has developed from another (in order to trace the evolution of a particular language).

Research in the field of Comparative Tai Linguistics has focused primarily on two objectives: recreating proto-forms and exploring the tonal splits between Tai languages, as well as exploring the systematic similarities in the auditory characteristics of Tai languages. The outcome of this work indicates that researchers do not use arbitrary standards to create the structures of the languages they are analyzing, but rather derive them based on the evolution of these languages as a group, or based on the geographical placement of the group of languages.

Most of the literature cited in the preceding paragraph describes the relationship between the structures of the languages being studied and how they are compared to one another, rather than on how the linguistic structural features being studied may be viewed within the social context related to their placement in geographic areas.

Table 1. Comparison of Selected Linguistic Features of Tai Phake and Tai Lue

Linguistic Feature	Tai Phake	Tai Lue	Shared Tai Characteristic
Tonal system	Yes	Yes	✓
Monophthong vowel inventory	Yes	Yes	✓
Diphthong vowel inventory	Yes	Yes	✓
Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) word order	Yes	Yes	✓
Numeral classifier system	Yes	Yes	✓
Lexical cognates	High degree of shared cognates	High degree of shared cognates	✓

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design employed in this study is a qualitative comparative research design, which brings together many of the methods from comparative linguistics and sociolinguistics to determine linguistic similarities and differences between Tai Phake and Tai Lue languages, interpret those similarities and differences as evidence of historical connection to the Tai people or both the current ability to construct identity. The descriptive and analytical approaches will be used to assess phonological, lexical, and structural data based on their social meanings.

Data Sources

This research has both primary (raw) and secondary (compiled) data. Primary data was obtained by conducting fieldwork with speakers of Tai Phake and Tai Lue languages in order to collect recorded conversations, and to conduct elicitation sessions and obtain words. Secondary data was obtained by reviewing published linguistic descriptions, dictionaries, and previous studies about the Tai languages.

The data include:

1. Phonological data (e.g., vowel systems, consonants, and tones);
2. Lexical data (i.e., basic vocabulary and culturally relevant vocabulary);
3. Syllable structure and selected grammatical features;

Approximately 100 lexical items and many recorded utterances were used to provide data for the analysis of the representativeness and reliability of the sample.

Participants and Field Sites

The study involves native speakers of Tai Phake and Tai Lue from selected communities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they are fluent speakers with strong knowledge of their respective languages.

The criteria for participant selection include:

1. native or near-native proficiency;
2. regular use of the language in daily communication;
3. representation across age groups and genders.

Field sites include Tai-speaking communities where the languages are actively maintained. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a combination of methods:

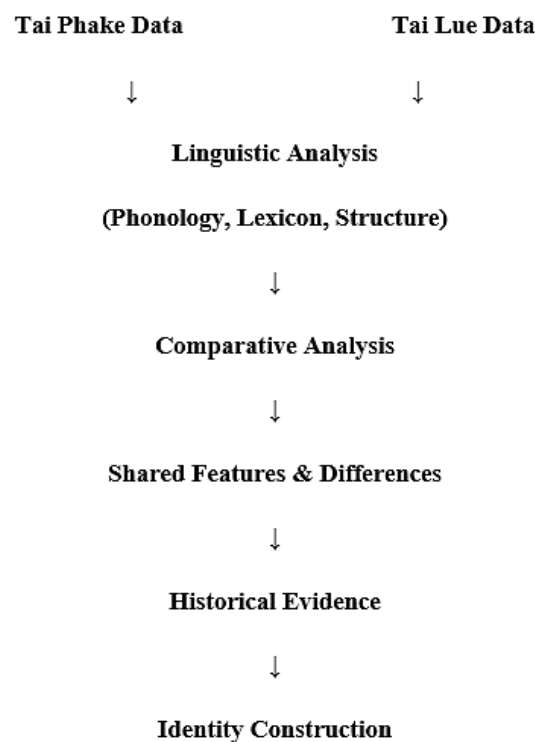
1. Elicitation sessions using structured wordlists to obtain comparable lexical items
2. Audio recordings of natural speech for phonological and prosodic analysis
3. Field notes documenting contextual and sociolinguistic observations

The elicitation process focused on core vocabulary domains such as kinship terms, body parts, natural elements, and everyday actions, which are commonly used in comparative linguistic analysis.

Analytical Framework

This study utilizes a multi-layered framework integrating linguistic and sociolinguistic approaches:

Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the Study



Phonological Analysis

Drawing on phonology, the study examines vowel inventories, consonant systems, and tonal patterns in both languages. Comparative analysis is used to identify systematic correspondences and divergences.

Lexical and Comparative Analysis

Using principles from comparative linguistics, lexical items are analyzed to identify cognates and shared forms. This analysis provides evidence for genetic relationships within the Tai language family.

Structural Analysis

Syllable structure and selected grammatical features are analyzed to identify patterns that may reflect shared typological characteristics or language-specific developments.

Sociolinguistic Interpretation

Insights from sociolinguistics are applied to interpret how linguistic features function as markers of identity. The concept of indexicality is used to explain how specific linguistic forms point to social meanings, including ethnic affiliation and group membership.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. Identification of shared features across Tai Phake and Tai Lue (phonological, lexical, structural)
2. Comparison of differences to identify patterns of divergence
3. Interpretation of linguistic features as evidence of Tai affiliation and as resources for identity construction
4. Linguistic data are presented in tables and examples to support these findings, ensuring transparency and replicability.

Ethical Considerations

This study follows standard ethical guidelines for linguistic fieldwork. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and consented to the recording and use of their data. Personal identifiers were anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Data Analysis

Phonological Systems

The phonological structures of Tai Phake and Tai Lue show considerable structural similarities, especially when examined in the light of both their tonal system and the type of vocalic systems found there. These two features are considered to be among the most important typological characteristics of the Tai language family. Both Tai Lue and Tai Phake contain extensive subsystems of monophthongs and diphthongs, and they both have tonal systems that create distinct structural boundaries for lexical differentiation. Preliminary analyses reveal regular, systematic correspondences between the two varieties in both the quality of vowels and tonal categories. Mid and low vowel systems align well with both of the varieties, while the tonal trajectories exhibit structural parallelism, despite minor differences related to real-time articulation. These systematic correspondences support the theory that they share a common phonological substratum, thus supporting the assertion that they belong to the same sub-family of Tai languages.

On the other hand, phonologically distinct characteristics are easily seen in the two varieties. For example, Tai Lue has a documented diachronic trajectory of moving toward tonal simplification (or tonal syncretism) in certain phonological environments. In contrast, Tai Phake is considered to be a more conservative variety and continues to maintain archaic tonal contrasts that have been neutralized in many languages. Furthermore, these phonological differences cannot be explained by one factor, but rather through an intricate combination of internal drift, prolonged contact with dominant neighbours, and the differential sociolinguistic parameters influencing language use within the community.

Syllable Structure

Tai Phake and Tai Lue have standard consonant/vowel (C/V) patterns of syllables which are set out by a set of rules called syllable structure (CVC). Most syllables follow a CVC pattern (Consonant/Vowel/Consonant), while most open or not-limited-ending syllables occur at the beginning of a syllable, while most closed-syllable endings occur only in specific phonotactic conditions (conditions under which a phonetic behavior

will occur). There are many of the same types of no following syllable as in other types of Tai phonetics, and these multiple can be considered as multiple shared types of no following-syllable phonemic restrictions. That being said, they still contain some phonetic variability between each other, and for the most part the phonetic development of either Tai variety has resulted in a level of systematic retention of coda type for the consonants within the Tai Phake vowels, especially in coda or closure of syllable positions (where a coda would typically have been preserved) would have experienced much less phonetic simplification than in the relatively less conservative Tai Lue. In addition, because they have retained different coda types, the Tai Phake phonotactic restrictions differ, as do the Tai Lue's. The difference in coda types, while contributing to contemporary Tai phonotactic norms, also contributes to a variety of prosodic behaviours and ways that syllables are weighted differently across the two Tai languages.

Table 2. Similarities and Differences between Tai Phake and Tai Lue

Domain	Similarities	Differences
Phonology	Shared tonal base	Tonal simplification in Tai Lue
Lexicon	Cognate vocabulary	Borrowed lexical items
Structure	SVO sentence pattern	Minor grammatical variation
Identity	Shared Tai ethnic affiliation	Distinct local ethnic identity

Lexical Correspondences

Based on similarities in their vocabulary, Tai Phake and Tai Lue are genetically related. A large number of cognates exist in the core vocabulary, such as kinship, body parts, natural things, or basic verbs.

For instance, “water,” “fire,” and “mother” all have phonological similarities according to the data from previous Tai comparative studies. These cognate terms can indicate that these two languages share a linguistic history and reinforce the linguistic connection to the Tai language family.

However, these languages also demonstrate a divergence in their vocabularies. There are differences due to borrowing from surrounding languages and differences due to independent development of the vocabularies. This shows that languages change and evolve over time.

Structural Features

Tai Lue and Tai Phake both have a basic SVO (subject-verb-object) structure, which is consistent with the general typology of the Tai languages. Both languages also use aspectual particles, numeral classifiers, and serial verbs, showing that they come from the same source. There are some (notably minor) syntactic differences between Tai Lue and Tai Phake, as well as differences in the pragmatic functions of some of their particles and grammatical elements. These differences are not just random but rather valuable linguistic markers for identifying each language as a distinct variety and represent localized pathways of grammaticalization and usage unique to each speech community.

Section summary

Overall, the analysis of phonological, lexical, and structural features reveals a combination of strong similarities and meaningful differences between Tai Phake and Tai Lue. While shared features provide evidence of common ancestry, divergent features point to processes of linguistic change shaped by social and geographical factors.

Findings

Shared Linguistic Features as Evidence

The phonological systems, cognate words, and structural systems discussed in Section 4 are fundamental pieces of evidence showing the relationship, or affiliation, of Tai Phake and Tai Lue within the Tai language

family. From a historical linguistic perspective, the identified features exhibit systematic correspondence (as opposed to coincidental) between the two languages, thereby supporting the case for a genetic relationship.

Therefore, linguistic evidence provides an empirical way to define “Tai-ness” that goes beyond geographic or political constraints. It provides evidence of a relationship between speakers of these languages due to their common linguistic heritage, which is a product of historical migration and language development.

Divergence and Local Identity

While shared features establish a common Tai identity, linguistic differences between Tai Phake and Tai Lue reflect localized identities. Variations in tone, pronunciation, and lexical choice contribute to the distinctiveness of each community.

These differences are not merely linguistic but are socially meaningful. They allow speakers to signal their specific group affiliation within the broader Tai ethnolinguistic context. In this sense, divergence does not weaken Tai identity; rather, it enriches it by enabling multiple expressions of belonging.

Language and Identity Construction

Linguistic features can play a role in the construction of self-identity from a sociolinguistic perspective. Phonological and lexical features are used by speakers to create an index of their membership in a Tai-speaking community.

The concept of indexicality is very helpful in analyzing how this occurs. Linguistic form does not solely represent its referential meaning but also conveys its social meaning—namely, ethnicity, group membership, and cultural affiliation. An example of this could be the use of particular lexical items or phonological forms which signal authenticity, heritage or solidarity among members of the community.

Figure 2. Language as Evidence and Identity



Language as Both Evidence and Symbol

This study argues that language operates simultaneously in two domains:

1. as evidence, providing objective data for establishing linguistic relationship
2. as a symbol, representing identity and social belonging

These two functions are not separate but interconnected. Linguistic features that serve as historical evidence also become meaningful symbols in contemporary social contexts.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The comparative analysis of Tai Phake and Tai Lue provides empirical evidence that challenges the traditional, isolated boundaries between historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. The findings illustrate that a language's phonological and structural survival is not merely a mechanical byproduct of its genetic lineage, but a continuous, socially negotiated process.

Linguistic Evidence and Genealogical Continuity in the Tai Family

The empirical data collected from both Tai Phake and Tai Lue demonstrates a remarkable resilience of the core Southwestern Tai structural matrix. Despite centuries of geographical isolation—with Tai Phake situated in the northeastern periphery of India (Assam) and Tai Lue distributed across Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China—both systems strictly preserve the foundational tonal contrasts, vowel structures, and essential consonantal distinctions characteristic of Proto-Tai reconstructions (Pittayaporn, 2009; Li, 1977).

This linguistic continuity serves as empirical evidence of their shared genealogical origin. It proves that even when a speech community is completely uprooted and separated from its cultural epicenter, the inherited “structural blueprint” of the language family remains highly stable. The conservative nature of their core vowel contrasts and suprasegmental tonal systems indicates that genetic relatedness places a strict, internal boundary on how much a phonological system can mutate over time, maintaining a recognizable “Tai affiliation.”

Localized Environments and Linguistic Divergence

However, while genealogy explains the structural similarities, it fails to account for the systematic differences observed between the two varieties. The divergence between Tai Phake and Tai Lue is a direct reflection of their unique, localized socio-political ecologies and asymmetric language contact (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988).

Tai Phake: Under heavy, continuous pressure from dominant Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages in India, Tai Phake exhibits a more restricted phonological inventory and a tendency toward partial neutralization or mergers in certain contexts. The reduction in input and limited functional domains (restricted primarily to intra-community and religious settings) have accelerated these structural constraints.

Tai Lue: Conversely, Tai Lue operates within a vastly different contact ecology. While it experiences intense contact with national languages (such as Mandarin or Thai) through education and state media, it enjoys a much broader speaker base and wider social domains. This has allowed Tai Lue to maintain broader consonantal contrasts and exhibit greater phonotactic flexibility and systemic expansion.

Therefore, the phonological differences are not random mutations; they are systematic adaptations conditioned by the intensity of contact and the specific sociolinguistic environments in which the speakers reside.

Language as a Symbolic Resource for Performing Ethnic Identity

Beyond mere structural adaptation, the linguistic features of Tai Phake and Tai Lue function as crucial symbolic resources for the performance and maintenance of ethnic identity (Labov, 2001). In a minority context, language is never just a tool for information exchange; it is a boundary-marking mechanism. For Tai Phake speakers, preserving specific phonetic features and utilizing the language in cultural/religious domains serves as a conscious performance of their distinct identity, preventing total assimilation into the larger Indian national fabric. For Tai Lue speakers, the variation in phonological stability across different borders reflects how speakers navigate shifting language ideologies and state-led pressures.

When a minority community selectively reinforces or maintains certain inherited contrasts (even under intense pressure from a dominant language), they are using phonology as an ideological shield. The language acts as a twofold mechanism: it simultaneously signals historical membership in the broader Tai macro-culture and asserts a localized, distinct ethnic background.

Theoretical Implications: Integrating Historical Linguistics and Sociolinguistics

The overarching theoretical implication of this study is that genealogically-driven models and contact-driven models of language change must be integrated. Relying solely on historical-comparative methods creates an artificial illusion of homogeneity, treating language change as a closed, internally motivated system. On the other hand, focusing exclusively on sociolinguistic transmission risks ignoring the structural constraints inherited from a common ancestor.

As demonstrated by the cross-border minority ecologies of Tai Phake and Tai Lue, language change is a gradual, socially embedded phenomenon. Inherited structures define the range of possibilities, but social practices, prestige hierarchies, and intergenerational transmission patterns determine the actual direction of the change. This integrated framework is essential for developing holistic linguistic theories, particularly when analyzing complex, cross-border minority languages across Asia.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research is to look at Tai Phake and Tai Lue in order to see how languages are both a source of evidence for showing Tai connection and an element used to construct identity. The combination of Historical Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, allows us to confirm that phonological systems, lexical similarities and grammatical structures provide predictably systematic evidence of the genetically relatedness of Tai Phake and Tai Lue as members of the Tai language family.

Results show that there are numerous phonological and lexical similarities between Tai Phake and Tai Lue including similarities in vowel systems, tonal distinctions and core vocabulary. These similarities also support their classification as part of the Tai subgroup, indicating a shared linguistic history that has resulted from historical migrations and development of languages. Differences in tonality, lexical variation, and phonotactic structures have continued through time and show that differences between Tai Phake and Tai Lue are a result of local sociocultural influences and other contact situations.

These factors relate to sociolinguistic features, of which linguistics are but one type. Moreover, this research reveals that the role of linguistic features extends beyond the historical significance of being used in the creation, establishment and/or maintenance of an individual and/or social identity as well as the expression of that individual and/or social identity by members of the same group. These sociolinguistic features are indicators of membership in a particular group and of ethnicity; that is why the choice of a particular way of pronouncing and using words and phrases can be an indicator of belonging to a specific group within a broader Tai ethnolinguistic group. Thus, the linguistic features that speakers use to identify with a larger Tai ethnolinguistic group contribute to “one Tai,” whereas the localized variations in those linguistic features help speakers to differentiate their own identities as members of distinct Tai communities within the greater Tai ethnolinguistic group.

Furthermore, this study adds to existing literature by providing an example of how an integrative approach (which incorporates both a structural linguistic and a sociocultural approach) can be used when examining language and identity. In other words, while it is widely understood that language is a system of forms, this research supports the argument that language is also a dynamic resource through which speakers negotiate their identity and their feelings of belonging to a particular community. Therefore, the two spheres of linguistic evidence and social meaning are intertwined.

This research has limitations in terms of dataset size and focuses primarily on specific phonological and lexical features. Expanding the dataset with additional Tai varieties through more extensive fieldwork would allow for discourse-level analysis and multiple speakers’ perspectives and provide greater insight into the interplay of language, identity, and history in Tai-speaking regions.

To summarize, there is strong evidence from the Tai Phake and Tai Lue dialects that certain linguistic features are markers of a shared ancestry as well as a means of constructing multiple, interrelated identities. This demonstrates that language is not only essential in reconstructing linguistic histories but also has an impact on the experiences of speakers in today’s sociocultural context.

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