

Phonetic and phonological field research in Vietnam and Cambodia

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In this contribution, I will address the three questions raised by the panel organizers while focusing on two perspective with which I am familiar: phonetics/phonology in the field and field research in Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia.

To answer the first question, I believe that the phonetic and phonological research questions that are likely to become important in upcoming years are largely conditioned by technological advances, the topic of the second question. With the advent of highly portable equipment and the growing availability of computer resources in most of Mainland Southeast Asia, it is becoming increasingly possible to record fine-grained phonetic data or to run perceptual experiments on large number of speakers. This opens up the possibility of conducting studies on problems that were difficult to tackle until recently, like phonologization and the sociophonetic underpinnings of contact induced change. Such research is likely to resound beyond Southeast Asian linguistic circles and to have a lasting impact on linguistic theory. However, for these exciting questions to be properly addressed, a new emphasis will have to be put on the development of new skills that are not part of the traditional training of Southeast Asian fieldworkers: statistics, computational modeling, management of natural speech databases and sociolinguistic techniques. Further, collaboration with local researchers is crucial as the collection of large datasets is better conducted by teams than by individuals. This in turns could create training opportunities from local graduate students and could strengthen linguistics at the regional level. The specific examples I will discuss are the microphonetic and sociolinguistic factors that underlie tonogenesis and tone change and the study of intonation in tone languages.

I will then address the third question in two ways. First, I will raise the question of language obsolescence and loss in ethnic minority languages in light of better communication technologies and of the better penetration of the national state in traditionally remote areas. More specifically, I will discuss some issues that arise from the fact that it is often difficult to determine if language consultants are semi-speakers or native speakers of languages that undergo a dramatic influence from large national or regional languages. Second, I will discuss issues related to government control over field research in authoritarian countries and show how an increased exploitation of natural resources and commercialization of ethno-cultural specificities not only impact the stability of ethnic minority languages, but also affect data collection and set limits on the type of research questions that can be raised by researchers (especially foreign scholars).

I will finally argue that there is a lot to be gained from increased cross-pollination between Southeast Asian national linguistic communities and will try to launch a discussion on the cultural, institutional and socio-political reasons behind the relatively limited nature of collaborations between researchers from different ASEAN countries.