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## Analysis of the Sound Segments of Lai

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### Abstract

Lai language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages (Grierson, 1904), who carried out an extensive and comprehensive linguistic survey in India and Burma, classified the Tibeto-Burman Families into four groups, namely, Northern China, Central Chins, Old Kukis and Southern Chins. *Lai* literally means 'middle' or 'centre' and falls under the Central Chins group. Lai language is spoken in Lawngtlai District of Mizoram, India, Chin State of Burma (Melnik, Fall 1997, Vol.20.2) and in some parts of Bangladesh. The main goal of this paper is to describe the sound system of Lai and the data is based on the Lai language spoken in Mizoram.

### Introduction

Mizoram is situated in the North-Eastern part of India, and shares its boundary with Bangladesh and Tripura in the West, Burma in the East and South, and Manipur and Assam in the North. The total area of Mizoram is 21,087 Sq.Km (Singh, 1995). It is linguistically heterogeneous; the different communities speak their own languages, such as Bawm, Biате, Chakma, Hmar, Lai, Lusei, Mara, Matu, Pang, Paihte, Ralte, and Tuikuk (Riang). There are

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11 districts in Mizoram, namely, Aizawl, Lunglei, Saiha, Lawngtlai, Mamit, Kolasib, Champhai, Serchhip, Saitual, Hnahthial and Khawzawl.

The people who speak Lai language call themselves Lai, Laimi (people of Lai) or Laifa (children of Lai). Lai people are one of the well known tribes of Mizoram. There are more than 84 villages under Lawngtlai district (where the Lai speakers reside) and cover an area of 1550 sq km. The total population of Lai was 65,994 out of which 33,790 were males and 32,204 females (Census of District Council, 2004-2006).

### Segmental Phonemes

In phonology, a major division is often made into segmental and suprasegmental (or non-segmental) categories. Segmental phonology analyses the speech into distinctive units, or Phonemes (segmental phonemes), which have a fairly direct correspondence with phonetic segments (Crystal, 2003). There are two types of segmental phonemes, namely, consonants and vowels.

### Consonants

There are 35 consonantal phonemes in Lai. Though glottalisation is phonemic in Lai, glottalized consonants occur only in the final position. In order to describe the distribution of Lai consonants, it is important to note that Lai does not permit consonants clusters within the syllable boundary. Hence, consonants can occur only in the initial or final word syllable position. The consonantal segments of Lai are presented in the following table:

#### Phonemic Initial Consonantal Sounds of Lai

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stop/Plosive Aspirated	p      b p <sup>h</sup>		t      d t <sup>h</sup>	tʃ      dʃ tʃ <sup>h</sup>	k k <sup>h</sup>	
Nasal	m̃      m		ñ      n		ŋ̃      ŋ	
Affricates Aspirated			ts ts <sup>h</sup>			
Fricatives		f      v	s      z			h

Trill			$\underset{\circ}{r}$	r			
Lateral			$\underset{\circ}{l}$	l			
Lateral-affricates			tl	t $\underset{\circ}{l}$			

Minimal pairs or sub-minimal pairs are shown to illustrate the contrast between consonantal segments. The initial consonants of Lai are as follows:

**Voiced and voiceless aspirated and unaspirated bilabial stops: /b/, /p/ and /p<sup>h</sup>/**

1. /be/ ‘kinds of beans’    2. /bi/ ‘narrow’  
    /pe/ ‘give’                     /pi/ ‘grandmother’  
    /p<sup>h</sup>e/ ‘playing card’             /p<sup>h</sup>i/ ‘to be in haste’

**Voiced and voiceless aspirated and unaspirated alveolar stops: /t/, /t<sup>h</sup>/ and /d/**

1. /ti/ ‘water’                     2. /tin/ ‘nails’  
    /t<sup>h</sup>i/ ‘to die’                     /t<sup>h</sup>in/ ‘liver’  
    /di/ ‘kind of straw’             /din/ ‘soft voice’

**Voiceless aspirated and unaspirated palato-alveolar stops: /tʃ/ and /tʃ<sup>h</sup>/**

1. /tʃial/ ‘to write’                2. /tʃaŋ/ ‘uncle’  
    /tʃ<sup>h</sup>ial/ ‘to chew’                /tʃ<sup>h</sup>aŋ/ ‘awake’

**Voiceless aspirated and unaspirated velar stops: /k/ and /k<sup>h</sup>/**

1. /ke/ ‘to go’                      2. /kuaŋ/ ‘coffin’  
    /k<sup>h</sup>e/ ‘thigh’                      /k<sup>h</sup>uaŋ/ ‘drum’

**Voiced bilabial, alveolar and velar nasals: /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/**

1. /man/ ‘price’                    2. /mu/ ‘sleeping’  
    /naŋ/ ‘you’                        /nu/ ‘mother’  
    /ŋan/ ‘big’                         /ŋu/ ‘dozes off’

**Voiceless bilabial, alveolar and velar nasals: /m̥/, /n̥/ and /ŋ̥/**

1. /m̥a/ ‘sore’                      2. /m̥ar/ ‘north’  
    /n̥a/ ‘beginning’                 /n̥ar/ ‘snore/nose’

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/ŋa/ ‘should be’                      /ŋar/ ‘wild cat’

**Aspirated and unaspirated alveolar affricates:**

1. /tsaŋ/ ‘hard’                      2. /tseŋ/ ‘rupees’  
       /tsʰaŋ/ ‘younger siblings’    /tsʰeŋ/ ‘slope’

**Voiceless and voiced labio-dental fricatives, alveolar fricatives and voiceless glottal fricative:**

- |                        |                    |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. /fak/ -praise       | 2. /fa/ ‘child’    |
| /vak/ ‘to crawl’       | /va/ ‘husband’     |
| /sak/ ‘build’          | /sa/ ‘meat’        |
| /zak/ ‘shy’            | /za/ ‘hundred’     |
| /hal/ ‘to ask/thirsty’ | /ha/ ‘teeth/tooth’ |

**Voiced and voiceless alveolar trill:**

1. /rem/ ‘to arrange’                2. /ram/ ‘brittle’  
       /ṛem/ ‘punish’                    /ṛam/ ‘big (unusual)’

**Voiced and voiceless alveolar lateral:**

1. /la/ ‘spleen’                      2. /lim/ ‘python’  
       /ḷa/ ‘song’                        /ḷim/ ‘happy’

**Voiced and voiceless alveolar lateral-affricates:**

1. /tla/ ‘to drop’                    2. /tlai/ ‘evening (time)’  
       /tḷa/ ‘image’                      /tḷai/ ‘vegetables’

**Phonemic Final Consonantal Sounds of Lai are as follows:**

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stops/Plosive	p	t	K	ʔ
Nasal	m	n	ŋ	
Glottalised nasal	mʔ	nʔ	ŋʔ	
Lateral		l		

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Glottalised Lateral		lʔ		
Trill		r		
Glottalised Trill		rʔ		

From the above discussion we know that stops, nasal, lateral and trill are all phonemic in this language. So, I will give example just to show their distribution in the word final position.

### **Voiceless stops**

/p/ - /kap/ 'thigh'

/t/ - /tap/ 'oven'

/k/ - /kak/ 'crack'

/ʔ/ - /kaʔ/ 'shoot'

### **Voiced nasal**

/m/ - /tam/ 'many'

/n/ - /tan/ 'cut'

/ŋ/ - /taŋ/ 'skin disease of dog'

### **Glottalised nasal**

/mʔ/ - /kʰamʔ/ 'save'                      /mʔ/ - /dimʔ/ 'caring'

/nʔ/ - /kʰenʔ/ 'pounding'                      /nʔ/ - /dinʔ/ 'rest'

/ŋʔ/ - /kʰaŋʔ/ 'burn'                      /ŋʔ/ - /dɔŋʔ/ 'catch'

### **Lateral and Trill**

/l/ - /lem/ 'fake'

/r/ - /rem/ 'arrange'

### **Glottalised Lateral and Trill**

/lʔ/ - /pɔlʔ/ 'mixed'                      /lʔ/ - /kʰelʔ/ 'play'

/rʔ/ - /pɔrʔ/ 'bulge'                      /rʔ/ - /kʰerʔ/ 'prick'

### **Vowels**

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In Lai, there are five phonemic vowels, they are - /i/, /e/, /a/, /ɔ/, /u/. Two of the vowels, /i/ and /e/ are front unrounded high and mid-high vowels, /a/ low back unrounded, /ɔ/ and /u/ are back rounded high and mid-low vowels. All the vowels can occur in all word syllable positions.

	Front unrounded	Back unrounded
High	/i/	/u/
Mid-high	/e/	
Mid-low		/ɔ/
Low		/a/

The following are the minimal pairs or sub-minimal pairs showing contrast between vowels.

**i/ vs /u/**

- |                    |                   |                       |
|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. /it/ ‘sleep’    | 2. /sik/ ‘rebuke’ | 3. /pi/ ‘grandmother’ |
| /ut/ ‘burn (cook)’ | /suk/ ‘to wash’   | /pu/ ‘grandfather’    |

**/i/ vs /e/**

- |                            |                   |                  |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. /in/ ‘house’            | 2. /lim/ ‘statue’ | 3. /bi/ ‘narrow’ |
| /en/ ‘look’ /pe/ ‘to give’ | /lem/ ‘fake’      | /be/ ‘bean’      |

**/a/ vs /ɔ/**

- |              |                  |                  |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1. /a/ ‘mad’ | 2. /ral/ ‘enemy’ | 3. /pa/ ‘father’ |
| /ɔ/ ‘yes’    | /rɔl/ ‘food’     | /pɔ/ ‘stomach’   |

**/e/ vs /ɔ/**

- |                 |                 |                |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. /el/ ‘thigh’ | 2. /rel/ ‘read’ | 3. /pe/ ‘give’ |
| /ɔl/ ‘easy’     | /rɔl/ ‘food’    | /pɔ/ ‘stomach’ |

**/a/ vs /u/**

- |                   |                  |                    |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. /aŋ/ ‘similar’ | 2. /lam/ ‘dance’ | 3. /pa/ ‘father’   |
| /uŋ/ ‘old’        | /lum/ ‘warm/hot’ | /pu/ ‘grandfather’ |

**Diphthong**

There are nine (8) diphthongs in Lai. They are /ia,ai,au,ua,ei,eu,ɔi,ɔu/.

/ia/ - /biaŋ/ ‘cheek’

	/tia/	‘equal in size’
/ai/ -	/maisem/	‘mosquito’
	/tai/	‘waist’
/au/ -	/au/	‘call/shout’
	/sau/	‘long’
/ua/ -	/uaŋ/	‘showing off’
	/tuaŋ/	‘floor’
	/bua/	‘spill’
/ei/ -	/ei/	‘eat’
	/t <sup>h</sup> ei/	‘hear’
/eu/ -	/eu/	‘crooked’
	/leuʔ/	‘swim’
	/atseu/	‘half’
/ɔi/ -	/hɔi/	‘friend’
/ɔu/ -	/t <sup>h</sup> ɔu/	‘festival’

### **Triphthong**

Triphthong in Lai may be defined as a monosyllabic vowel combination usually involving a quick, but smooth movement from one vowel to another that passes over a third one. In a v1 v2 v3 combination, v1 and v3 are always occupied by a high vowel and v2 by a low vowel, such as,

1. /uai/    /nuai/ ‘lakh’  
              /tsabuai/ ‘table’
2. /iau/    /hat<sup>h</sup>iau/ ‘sneeze’
3. /iai/    /siai/ ‘to blink’  
              /piai/ ‘to pinch (in a face)’

### **Conclusion**

From the above analysis it is found that Lai has 35 consonants and 5 vowels. Except for glottal stop and glottalized consonants, all the others consonants can occur in the initial position. The consonants which can occur in the final word syllable position are all the Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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voiceless stops, voiced nasal and liquid. All the vowels can occur in all the word syllable positions. Lai lacks central vowel. It has 8 diphthongs and 3 triphthongs.

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