The Story of Lao *r*: Filling in the Gaps[1]

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1.   Overview

This paper addresses the history of the grapheme[3] (letter) ຣ in the Lao language, and the disappearance of the sound that ຣ originally represented—the phoneme *r*. The issue is that the graphemes of a writing system do not always represent the phonemes (distinctive sounds) of a language in a straightforward manner. In Lao, the problem was further compounded when the writing system did not keep pace with subsequent changes in pronunciation for reasons that will be examined below.[4] Since scholars of Lao studies are generally more familiar with the modern aspects of this problem, I first describe the current use of two graphemes, ຣ and ລ, to write one and the same phoneme: *l*.[5] I then examine how the loss of *r* is inextricably linked to the phonemes *h* and *l* because *r* long ago became *h* under certain conditions and *l* elsewhere, and because *r* and *l* were both eventually lost in consonant clusters. Finally, I examine how loan borrowings from other languages such as Pali-Sanskrit,[6] Khmer, and Thai fit into these developments. I will show that ຣ's tremendous resilience over the centuries explains why it is now so difficult to unravel the history of *r*'s disappearance from the Lao phonological system.

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[3] A grapheme is a unit in a writing system, not the sound that the unit represents. Thus the [f]-sound in a word like *fan* is spelled with an <f>, but the same sound is also spelled <ph> in *phone*. By convention, graphemes are written between wedge brackets (e.g., <ຣ >). Phonemes, on the other hand, are distinctive sounds in a language, meaning they contrast with other sounds. Thus, in English, /l/ and /r/ are distinctive because they contrast in minimal pairs such as *rip* and *lip*. Phonemes are traditionally written between slanted brackets (e.g., /r /). To enhance readability, however, wedge brackets will be used here to enclose the Romanized transcriptions of Lao graphemes (such as ຣ <r>). Otherwise, I dispense with wedge and slanted brackets except where they help to prevent misunderstandings, and transcribe Lao words phonemically using the same system as Kerr (1972). When referring to the particular phonetics of a sound, I place it within square brackets (e.g., [r]). An asterisk (*) indicates a phoneme that is posited for an earlier stage of the language. A sentence such as *r* > *h* should be read as: "*r* changed into *h*." A hyphen (e.g., *r*-) indicates that the preceding consonant or cluster stands at the beginning of a word or syllable. Finally, all words used as linguistic examples are italicized.

[4] Of course, English is rife with examples of antiquated spellings of this sort as in homophones like *write* and *right* where the ("silent") letters *w*, *-e*, and *gh* once represented sounds, but no longer do.

[5] When it is necessary to differentiate between the two Lao graphemes for /l/, I use the traditional mnemonics ຣ "lɔɔ lot" 'car' and ລ "lɔɔ líing" 'monkey.' The same practice holds for ຣ "hɔ́ɔ húan" and ຫ "hɔ̌ɔ haan," which both represent /h/, but whenever possible I follow the common practice in spoken Lao and dispense with the mnemonics.

[6] I use the term Pali-Sanskrit here to refer to Sanskrit words that entered Lao via the later stage of spoken Sanskrit known as Pali, which was the major source of loan words associated with Buddhism.

This paper owes much to Enfield (1999) who was able to show that *r* is no longer a phoneme in spoken Lao, and that it exists in the language nowadays only in a marginal and artificial way. I pick up where Enfield left off by fully describing where *r* was lost, and by showing that these developments were by and large common linguistic changes. In later sections of the paper, I identify gaps that remain in our knowledge of the loss of *r*, and suggest that similar developments in Thai may shed light on these gaps. Finally, I discuss a few cases in which spoken Thai has brought about an alternative pronunciation in a number of monosyllabic Lao words so that doublets now exist, one with initial *l-* and the other with initial *h-*.

I conclude that ຣ's long graphemic survival obscured the loss of *r* in the spoken language, and that the retention of the grapheme ຣ was largely motivated by the same kinds of cultural and historical factors and the same kind of influence from Thai that are making ຣ's modern resurgence possible. It is hoped that the present discussion will assist future researchers as they continue to study the development of the Lao phonological system during the period when the modern language was emerging amid internal change and external influence.

2.   A Resilient Grapheme

Few topics in Lao linguistics have excited so much discussion in recent years as the resurgence of the grapheme ຣ (Kamalanavin 2003). In fact, the subject has been treated so thoroughly by Enfield and others that I need only provide a brief overview here. Currently, ຣ leads something of a dual life. When it is used within the context of Buddhist writings, ຣ transcribes the [r]-sound that occurred in words of Pali- Sanskrit origin,[7] and in such cases—as others have reported—Buddhist monks can sometimes conjure up a (presumably pedantic) pronunciation of this grapheme as [r]. Observers agree (Enfield 1999: 289, note 8), however, that such uses are marked, or exceptional, and are triggered by the desire to pronounce these words in an authentic (Pali-Sanskrit) manner. Then, too, the specter of the grapheme ຣ has been noted of late in some Lao surnames, at least with regard to the Romanized version of the name. Enfield (1999: 273) cites one surname (phonemically best rendered as vɔ́ɔlakhǔn) that was earlier transliterated as <Volakhoun>, but is now again Romanized as <Vorakhoun> so as to reflect its etymological spelling with ຣ. And Lew (2013) notes the recent return of etymological spellings of this sort, even in official Lao government publications, where loan borrowings such as *radar* are again transliterated using ຣ. At the other end of the spectrum, many Thai loan words have penetrated the youth scene in Vientiane (Enfield 1999: 283) and some young people can now be heard pronouncing an [r] in a few words, such as *faraŋ* 'Westerner,' which can presumably be attributed to the heavy influence of

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[7] The large number of loan borrowings from Pali-Sanskrit has created the popular misconception that the Lao language itself derives from these languages. The traditional practice of transcribing Pali-Sanskrit words into Lao in a one-to-one fashion accounts in part for the complexity of the traditional Lao writing system (and that of Thai). It is the reduction of this complexity that post-1975 reforms to spelling hoped to achieve.

the ever-present Thai media.[8] In these interesting cases [r] replaces the [l] (*falaŋ*) that we expect in modern Lao pronunciation given the linguistic developments to be discussed in detail below.

The modern situation described above is particularly ironic because for decades, if not centuries, the [r]-sound has been, and remains, exceedingly rare in the Lao language. In fact, Enfield (1999: 271) notes that modern attempts to do away with the grapheme ຣ date back at least to the mid-1950s, when revolutionary groups operating in parts of Laos made it a point of general policy to substitute ລ for ຣ everywhere in their publications in words such as *falaŋ* 'Westerner,' *àaméelikàa* 'America,' and *latthabàan* 'government.' This substitution and many other graphemic simplifications became mandatory after the Pathet Lao came to power in 1975 and embarked on an effort to increase literacy in the country in part via orthographic reforms that yielded an almost one-to-one correspondence of graphemes to phonemes.[9]

To the extent that ຣ has returned to usage, it again represents the phoneme *l* in the same contexts as it did prior to the post-1975 reforms, though it has probably not regained the wider currency it once enjoyed. Thus, ຣ (lɔ́ɔ lot) and ລ (lɔ́ɔ líing) are both once again used to write the phoneme *l* in the same way that *f* and *ph* are both used to write the phoneme *f* in English, with the choice of grapheme depending on the history of the individual word. I now turn to what is known of the phonemes *r* and *l* in the history of Lao.

3.   Writing Systems and Historical Sound Change

Lao and Thai are closely related languages that descend from Proto-Tai via the intermediate stage of Proto-Southwestern Tai (henceforth PSWT). Since comparative evidence leaves no doubt that the phonemes **r* and **l* existed in the language at that point, the period immediately following PSWT serves as the starting point for our discussion of the history of these sounds in Lao.[10] While Standard Thai (also known as Central Siamese) continues to distinguish both these phonemes—at least in the upper registers of speech and in writing—*r* in Lao underwent significant changes early on.

The writing systems of Thai and Lao derive from a South Indian writing system (Devanagari) of the Grantha type (Diller 1996: 458–9). The intermediary was likely a form of Old Khmer or Mon script that later became the direct source of both the Tham Lanna and the Lanna Fakkham scripts associated with the Sukhothai Kingdom of north-central Thailand. It is thought that both of these closely related scripts spread to the Mekong River basin from the Sukhothai Kingdom, but the details are sketchy, as is the

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[8] I wish to thank Charles Zuckerman (oral communication) who reports a similar use of [r] by young people in Luang Phrabang, including Thai terms such as *ríap róoi* 'tidy,' *antàraai* 'dangerous,' and *àrɔ̀i* 'good tasting.'

[9] There were notable exceptions to this principle, however. The grapheme ຮໍ (ຮ) was likewise retained after the spelling reforms as a placeholder in syllable-initial position (ອ່ານ 'read') even though it has no sound value in this context. See Ivarsson (2008) for a discussion of the controversy surrounding the standardization of Lao orthography.

[10] The language family that Lao and Thai belong to is called 'Tai' (not 'Thai'). Scholars (Pittayaporn 2009, Li 1977: 117) agree that the consonant clusters *pr-* and *tr-* cannot, strictly speaking, be reconstructed for PSWT, but that they must have entered the language in loan borrowings soon thereafter because Thai and Lao share close cognates with these clusters.

possible influence of the Burmese writing tradition on these scripts. It is known, however, that by about 1500 CE, they had given rise to the Lao Tham and Lao Laic writing traditions (Kourilsky per literas and forthcoming). The Tham (dharmic script) system was used primarily in religious writings and remains in use in Lao monasteries today (Enfield 1999: 259). The Laic style was more commonly used for secular sorts of writing and provided the most direct input into the modern Lao script. Much of what we know about early writing in Laos comes from Gagneux's (1983) study of Lao stone inscriptions dating from the 15th through the early 19th centuries,[11] and his comparison of individual graphemes in multiple inscriptions is particularly important to the question at hand.

Figure 1 (below) is an abbreviated reproduction of Gagneux's grapheme data showing the script characters ຣ, ລ, ຫ (<r l h>) and the cluster ຫລ (<hl>) recorded with both their Tham and Laic variants. The first attestation of the character ຣ (hɔ́ɔ hɯan) <h> dates to 1559, and it is attested only in the Laic system. The emergence of ຣ in the writing

	ຣ	ຣ	ລ	ລ	ຣ	ຫ	ຫ	ຫລ	ຫລ
	<r>	<r>	<l>	<l>	<h>	<h>	<h>	<hl>	<hl>
CE	T	L	T	L	L	T	L	T	L
1491	ຽ		ນ			ຫ			
1534 1538	ຽ					ຫ		ຫຍ	
1541									
1551							ງ		
1559 1566	ຣ		ນ		ຽ	ຫ		ຫຍ	
1582 1586		ຣ		ລ	ຽ		ຫ		ຫຍ
1603		ຣ	ນ	ລ	ຽ	ຫ	ຫ		ຫຍ

Figure 1: Development of the characters ຣ, ລ, ຣ, ຫ, ຫລ <r, l, h, h, hl-> from 1491–1603 CE (adapted from Gagneux 1983: 88–90). Script characters from Tham sources are listed under "T," Laic characters under "L." Most characters are attested in both traditions with variations in both.

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[11] Recent work by Lorrillard (2005, 2009) builds on Gagneux's work and incorporates data from palm-leaf manuscripts. The preservation and analysis of early Lao manuscripts continues apace and promises to add much to our knowledge of Lao historical phonology. The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (DLLM) project is among the leaders in this area (http://laomanuscripts.net/en/bibliography).

system appears to coincide with the well-known change of *r > h* that occurred in early Lao (**rao* > *hao* 'we,' **rak* > *hak* 'love') and in closely related northern Thai varieties (Gedney 1966:22).[12] Hɔ́ɔ hɨan's attestation in only the Laic tradition is consistent with the interpretation that it arose as a way to write a sound that had previously been pronounced as [r] but now was pronounced as [h]. Its absence from the more conservative Tham script is predictable because the more traditional system would likely continue to favor traditional spellings over new ones even if the new ones better reflected current pronunciation.

The grapheme ຣ (hɔ́ɔ hɨan) is similar to ຣ (lɔ́ɔ lot) in appearance, and it is used exclusively to write the [h]-sound that developed via the change of *r* to *h*, but not the inherited *h* that is traditionally written as ຫ (hɔ́ɔ haan). Thus, even though both [h]-sounds have long since merged into a single phoneme, they continue to be written with different graphemes due to their distinct historical origins. Gagneux (1983: 80) points out that ຣ <r> and ຣ <h> co-occur in the older inscriptions, and he adds that the "opposition of 'R/h' is almost never noted except for a few cases where R is written in as a subscript or as a superscript." In fact, however, the parallel occurrence of both graphemes is consistent with our expectations of how writers of early Lao would have adapted to the change of *r > h*. In conservative (often religious) writings in the Tham style, writers may have ignored the change altogether. In less formal contexts, they may have followed their instincts to write the [h]-sound that they were pronouncing. They may also have later corrected themselves or been corrected by their overseers by inserting the character ຣ above or below the new <h> grapheme.

To summarize, the way the original *r* was written in early Lao inscriptions suggests that it had come to be pronounced consistently as [h] in word-initial position, and writing conventions were starting to reflect that change by about 1550. As it turns out, the change of *r > h* is not uncommon in the languages of the world and even occurs in some dialects of Brazilian Portuguese (Blust 1983). Similar changes have also been reported for the Vietic language Thavung (Hayes 1982) as well as the modern Khmer dialect of Phnom Penh (Pisitpanporn 1994: 106). The motivation for a change of *r* to *h* may be that *r* was pronounced with a good deal of aspiration (and was trilled) (Li 1977: 142, Court 1996). If the articulation of the highly aspirated [r]-sound weakened (lenited) slightly, it would have sounded acoustically similar to the aspiration of an [h]-sound,[13] resulting in a merger of *r* with the already extant phoneme *h*.

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[12] As in modern Lao, I assume that *r* and *l* could not occur in the syllable coda (end of a syllable), and that clusters of *h + l* had already simplified to just *l*, or were well on their way to doing so. The stubborn retention of silent <h> in the orthographic cluster <hl-> may be due to its usefulness in marking the tone on the following vowel (which was indeed originally triggered by the *h* sound that was once pronounced there).

[13] A trilled *r* is articulated with the tongue slightly raised and held in place so that the airstream causes it to vibrate continuously. The airflow is stronger and longer than for a tap because a tap is a momentary event. Trilled *r*'s often become voiceless, which brings them phonetically closer to an *h*. Modern phonological theories now often describe the change of word-initial *r > h* (as in the Lao examples above) as a type of debuccalization (O'Brien 2012: 15); that is, a weakening in which the sound loses its original place of articulation in the oral cavity to become an [h].

4.   Lao Pronunciation of <r> in the Early 20th Century

As pointed out above, the Lao graphemic system's slow pace of change serves to obscure historical developments that took place in the language, and the lack of philological research until recent times has limited the sources at our disposal to trace and date such changes. However, two dictionaries compiled by French missionaries, Cuaz's (1904) *Lexion Français-Laocien* and Guignard's (1912) *Dictionnaire Laotien–Français*, provide vital clues to the pronunciation of Lao at the beginning of the 20th century. Both dictionaries list all entries in both Lao script and in Romanization, and we are thus not dependent on the Lao spellings alone to determine how Lao was pronounced. Compilers of both dictionaries were in agreement that the [r]-sound already had no reality in the Lao language at the time of their writing. Both dictionaries Romanize the grapheme ຮ as the letter <l>, suggesting that words spelled with ຮ were probably always pronounced with an [l]-sound in normal speech. Cuaz even notes overtly that the [r]-pronunciation sometimes associated with the grapheme ຮ was just a conservative tradition. These descriptions make clear that by the early 20th century there was no phonological distinction between the [l]-sound in words spelled with ຮ and those spelled with ລ.[14]

To put this change into linguistic perspective, we note that the merger of *r* and *l* is actually a common change both in Southeast Asia and cross-linguistically, because these sounds are both liquid (highly sonorous) consonants that are phonetically similar. In the earlier stages of the Polynesian language family, for example, *r* and *l* were apparently distinct phonemes. In some of the daughter languages they merged into an [l]-like phoneme while in others, like Maori, they merged to become [r]-like. Sometimes, as in modern Japanese, the result of the merger of *r* and *l* is a single phoneme that is [r]-like in some environments but [l]-like in others. Finally, we see an ongoing merger of *l* and *r* to *l* in spoken Thai varieties that is similar to the Lao development.

Tracing the loss of *r* in consonant clusters, however, is less straightforward. Cuaz's (1904) Lao dictionary itemized specific sound changes that characterized the difference between Thai and Lao pronunciation. Among these changes were the developments in clusters of the type *C(h)l-* and *C(h)r-* that were inherited by both languages and were retained in Thai (*phr-*, *phl-*, *khr-*, *kr-*), but reduced to single consonants *C(h)*-[15] in Lao. Despite the absence of *r* and *l* in these clusters in the Lao pronunciation of his day, Cuaz noted that the conservative orthographic practice of the time still favored placing an orthographic remnant, or trace grapheme, underneath a consonant where an etymological *r* or *l* had at some point been lost from the cluster. (See Figure 2 below.)

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[14] In some cases, Guignard appears to decide between a Lao spelling with ຮ or ລ based on the tone of the following vowel. This leads to the use of ຮ in some words where it never occurred historically (because the *l* in these words derived from PSWT *l*, not *r*). He thus spells <róm> 'wind' and <ró͟ɔŋ> 'to try' instead of <lóm> and <ló͟ɔŋ>. Such cases of etymological misidentification are apt to happen when writers try to draw a distinction between *r* and *l* that no longer exists.

[15] For simplicity's sake I use *C* throughout as an abbreviation for any unaspirated voiceless stop consonant (such as *p*, *t*, *k*) and *Ch-* for any aspirated voiceless stop (such as *ph*, *kh*, *th*) since aspiration is a distinctive feature. *C(h)-* here represents any voiceless stop, whether or not it is aspirated.

5° AVEC L OU R SOUSCRITS.

Klo kla klĭ kli klŭr klur etc.   Plo pla plĭ pli plŭr plur etc.   Tlo tla tlĭ tlĭ tlŭr tlur etc.
Kro kra krĭ kri krŭr krur etc.   Pro pra prĭ pri prŭr prur etc.   Tro tra trĭ tri trŭr trur etc.

Figure 2: *r* and *l* as a single trace grapheme in Lao (from Cuaz 1904: LXI)

Guignard (1912) similarly observed the absence of clusters consisting of *C(h)l-*, and he states flatly "…[clusters] such as these do not exist…[in Lao]" (LX). Nevertheless, he notes sporadic cases of words in his dictionary with written sequences of *C(h)+<l>* (ລ) (such as *pá* 'fish'; cf. Thai *plaa*). He attributes these spellings to an orthographic influence from Thai (LX) rather than to the common inheritance of clusters from an earlier stage of the language. The differing explanations that Cuaz and Guignard provide for the lingering use of a grapheme or trace grapheme in former clusters (of the type *C(h)r/l-*) thus suggest that the loss of *r* and *l* in clusters was chronologically later than the change of *r > h*, and that the later chronology of this sound change, as well as Thai influence, were both factors that mutually reinforced the orthographic retention of the trace graphemes. In the following section, we address the question of exactly how *r* and *l* underwent reduction in these clusters since the details of their loss constitute a significant gap in our understanding of historical Lao phonology.

5.   The Gaps that Remain

As discussed in sections 2 and 4 above, when *r* occurred in word-initial position, it merged with the already extant phoneme *h* by about 1550 CE (**r*ak > hak*). However, in clusters in which a consonant was followed by an *r* or an *l* (*C(h)r/l-*), the phonological developments were different, and were masked, because for a long time, the clusters continued to be written as if the *r* and *l* were still actually pronounced. Thus, the early Lao clusters *pr-*, *phr-*, *kr-*, *khr-*, *pl-*, *phl-*, and *kl-*, *khl-* are likely to have lost *r* and *l* in normal Lao pronunciation long before this was reflected in the orthography, first as a trace grapheme placed under the consonant and later by the omission of the grapheme altogether. Under these circumstances, the chronology of the developments is difficult to ascertain. I suggest it is reasonable to assume a gradual loss of *r* and *l* in these clusters in Lao that is similar to the process described by Beebe (1979) for the corresponding clusters in Bangkok Thai. As in Thai, the loss of *r* and *l* in Lao could have taken place over a period of perhaps several generations. Full clusters including *r* and *l* might have been preferred by older speakers for some span of time, with the reduced clusters gradually becoming more prevalent until the modern situation of simplified clusters became the norm. Based on the pattern of cluster reduction in Thai, I speculate that the loss of *r* may have preceded the loss of *l* (Beebe 31), or that *r* may have first merged with *l* in clusters before *l*, in turn, was also lost.[16]

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[16] It has been noted that Thai speakers will sometimes use *l* in a cluster in place of *r* as in *khráp > khláp* instead of the colloquial pronunciation *kháp* (polite particle for males). Although this practice has been studied extensively, it remains unclear whether this is a sound change or the result of hypercorrection.

The clusters *tr-* and *pr-* are both preserved in Standard Thai, and the parallel existence of cognates suggests that these clusters once existed in unreduced form in Lao as well. They deserve special scrutiny because they were not inherited via PSWT but rather ended up in both languages as loan borrowings from either Khmer or Pali-Sanskrit. The borrowed cluster *pr-* follows the pattern of the native clusters by deleting -*r-* and becoming simply *p-* (Thai *pratùu*, Lao *patùu* 'door'). The cluster *tr-* on the other hand, remained unchanged in Standard Thai but became *k-* in Lao (cf. Thai *triiam* 'to prepare' and *troŋ* 'straight' versus Lao *kǎ-kìam* 'to prepare' and *kòŋ (pài)* '(go) straight.') The change of *tr-* to *k-* seems to have initiated in Thai as well, but stalled early on (Beebe 1979: 14), leaving behind traces mostly in the Thai royal language and in northern Thai and Isaan (Lao) dialects where *tr-* becomes *k-* in the Lao manner (Katsura 1969). Once again, it is difficult to establish the chronology or intermediate stages of this development. It is possible that *r* was lost from the cluster followed by the direct change of *t* to *k*, that is: **tr-* > **t-* > *k-*. The development of *t* > *k* is known from the history of Hawaiian, for example. In that case, *k* had already been lost due to a previous change, and the pronunciation of *t* then came to vary allophonically between *t* and *k*. Crucially, though, Kingkham (2007: 26) reports some Thai dialects that appear to show a development of *tr-* directly to *kr-*. Thus, chances favor a change of *tr-* > *kr-* > *k-* in Lao and in the Thai varieties where this change also occurred. Finally, I note that the reduction of clusters like those discussed here is motivated by a common cross-linguistic tendency to reduce complexity in the onsets of syllables. This strong tendency has been discussed extensively in the literature and was formulated by Vennemann (1988: 13–21) as the (Syllable) Head Law. Here again, we see that the changes that Lao has undergone are cross-linguistically common.

6.   More about *r*'s Loss

There remains the important question of exactly how and when *r* was lost from the Lao phonological system. PSWT was a monosyllabic language, meaning that—with the exception of compounds—words would have consisted of a single syllable. We know that monosyllabic Khmer words like **rim* 'edge, shore' and **rap* 'to receive' that contained an initial [r]-sound were borrowed into Lao early on, such that they underwent the change of *r* > *h* (Lao *him, hap*) alongside native words. Assuming that Lao was still completely monosyllabic at this stage, it follows that all occurrences of *r* had disappeared completely, because *r* did not occur at the end of a word. This, in turn, would suggest that all disyllabic words, such as those in Figure 3, below, must be more recent borrowings.

Modern Lao	Standard Thai	gloss
láakáa	raakaa	price
láwaŋ	ráwaŋ	be careful
kàmlái	kamrai	profit
sămlăp	samrap	for

Figure 3: Romanized transcriptions of disyllables containing *r in early French-Lao dictionaries

Traditional thinking thus assumes that disyllabic borrowings from Khmer and Pali-Sanskrit could not have been in the language at an earlier date because, if they had been, words like those in Figure 3 would have necessarily undergone the change of *r > h*. Since there was no longer an *r* in Lao after this change, the assumption is that the *r* contained in later loan words would have been reinterpreted upon arrival as an *l*, because at that point it was the closest sound in the language to *r* (Pali-Sanskrit *rôok* 'disease' > modern Lao *lôok* (*laa bàat*) 'epidemic'; Khmer *rawaaŋ* > *lawaaŋ* 'between'). Despite the appeal of this view, there remain some concerns, because it is known that the Tai group had been in contact with speakers of Mon and Khmer (cf. the monosyllabic loan borrowings above) for a long period of time, and these languages had disyllabic words that contained the phoneme *r*.

An alternative theory (Davis 2010) hypothesizes that Lao may have borrowed disyllabic words from Khmer sources earlier than scholars usually assume, and that some of these words contained *r* since it was a common phoneme in the Old Khmer language.[17] An initial [r]-sound in disyllabic words might have been able to avoid the change of *r > h* because polysyllabic words in Lao are stressed on the final syllable, meaning that the initial syllable of the word was only weakly stressed. An [r]-sound in that environment might have been less aspirated and less robustly trilled, and would have been less acoustically similar to an [h]-sound. The same allophone would have occurred in word-internal position in disyllabic words (e.g., *sămrĕt* 'succeed' > *sămlĕt*) where *r* was also less aspirated and trilled. What is of interest here is that the less-aspirated allophone of *r* word-initially and word-internally in disyllabic words might have remained unaffected even after the change of *r > h* in monosyllables. The phoneme *r* could then have lived on in pronunciation until more monosyllabic and polysyllabic loan words from Khmer and Pali-Sanskrit arrived that contained *r* (*rôok, rot, rattabàan* > *lôok, lot, latthabàan*). The advantage of this view is that it can accommodate the possibility that polysyllabic words reached Lao earlier than most scholars think. Furthermore, if *r* continued to be pronounced until a later point in the history of Lao, it could help explain how the use of the grapheme ຣ could persist into the early modern era.

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[17] Bauer (1993) has found evidence of early polysyllabic words in Lanna Thai, which is closely related to Lao. The forms in question appear to derive in part from Mon, but it is unclear to what extent they were already part of the spoken language at the time of their attestation.

In either event, it is clear that what was originally an *r* in polysyllabic words in the donor languages eventually emerged as *l* in Lao. Thus, the Standard Thai *r* in these words corresponds to *l* in their modern Lao cognates whereas monosyllabic Lao words have *h* where Thai has *r* (because Thai never underwent the change of *r >h*). To illustrate this point again, compare monosyllabic words like **rao* and *háo* 'we' and **rɔ̂ɔn* and *hɔ̂ɔn* 'hot' with polysyllabic words with original *r* that yielded *l*, such as *lawaaŋ* 'between' and *labìaŋ* 'veranda.'

7.   Influence and Borrowing

The influence of Thai on the written Lao language was extensive throughout the first half of the 20th century as Laos slowly continued to define itself culturally and linguistically vis-à-vis its western neighbor (Ivarsson 2008: 127-136). But by the 1960s and '70s, officials of the Royal Lao government were also known to have commented on and to have debated the obvious Thai influence that was creeping into the spoken Lao language at the time. Examples included the pronunciation of a number of simple words in both everyday life and in the media. A number of these borrowings from the mid- and late 20th century were monosyllabic and contained an initial [l]-sound as in *láo* and *lóoŋ léɛm* in contrast to the Standard Thai forms *rao* 'we,' and *róoŋ réɛm* 'hotel.' This is probably because *r* and *l* have since merged in most spoken varieties of Thai and, as Enfield (1999: 270)[18] has noted, it is this colloquial pronunciation of Thai for the most part that has been imported into Lao in recent decades. The result is a series of doublets in Lao that now include such common words as *láo* versus *háo* 'I/we' and *lóong léɛm* versus *hóong héɛm* 'hotel.' The point is that the pronunciation with initial *l-* occurred due to borrowing rather than via an actual sound change. The doublets obscure the regularity of the sound changes outlined above and therefore encourage a certain lack of clarity in phrasebooks and dictionaries of Lao, many of which leave the impression that the sound correspondences between Lao and Thai are haphazard or inconsistent.[19]

There may be older examples of such doublets as well. The word *hap* 'to receive' in Lao is an early monosyllabic Khmer loan word (*rap*) that underwent the change of *r > h*. However, there is also the doublet *lap* that is probably the result of the re-borrowing of this lexeme from Thai into southern Lao (Cuaz 1904: XIII). In this case, the word may have entered the language with an initial *r-* that was immediately interpreted as *l-*, because that would have been the closest available phoneme in Lao at the time. Alternatively, *lap* could have been borrowed from Thai varieties in which *r* had already undergone the colloquial Thai change of *r > l*. Either way, the final outcome would have been the same. See Figure 4 below for an overview of the changes discussed in this paper.

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[18] An alternative hypothesis is that the donor variety was Standard Thai and that Lao speakers equated this phoneme with *l*, the only liquid in their phonological inventory (cf. similar arguments below and in Section 6). In either case, the result would be the same.

[19] For example, Kerr (1972: 967) states: "ຣ is interchangeable with ລ and ຮ."
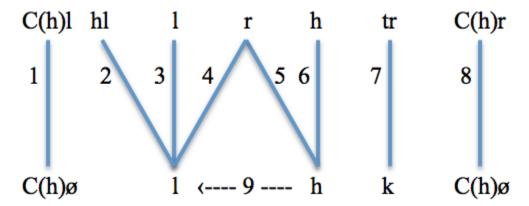
Figure 4: Partial overview of changes affecting *r* and *l*[20] (Tipped arrow indicates borrowing rather than sound change.)

8. Conclusions

Evidence from Lao inscriptions and early 20th century writings suggest an approximate timeframe of 1550 CE for the merger of *r* and *h* in monosyllables and 1550-1900 CE for the merger of *r* and *l* in polysyllabic words. The grapheme ຣ was used to represent the phoneme *r* until that sound merged with *h* at the beginning of a monosyllabic word. A modified grapheme inspired by ຣ eventually arose to signify this *h* (ຣ) sound. By then, the sound had merged phonemically with the preexisting *h* that was written with the grapheme ຫ (hɔ̌ɔ haan). In *C(h)r*- clusters, the phoneme *r* appears to have been lost sometime subsequent to the change of *r* > *h*, but the precise chronology is unknown because the clusters were long written as if the *r* were still present. Not until the early 20th century do we have proof that *r* and *l* had been lost in that environment. Polysyllabic Lao words have *l* where Standard Thai preserves *r*. Controversy surrounds this development. Perhaps these words were late borrowings and have always been pronounced with an *l*; or perhaps *r* was able to survive in this context for a time before it merged with the already extant phoneme *l*. In any case, ever since the merger, ຣ (lɔ́ɔ lot) and ລ (lɔ́ɔ liing) have been used to write the same sound.

The developments discussed above are at once clouded and elucidated by the history and complex relationship between Lao and Thai. Colloquial Thai pronunciations with *l* for Standard Thai *r* have become popular in recent decades and, conversely, an odd word or two has recently even come to be pronounced in Lao with an actual [r]-sound (*faraŋ*). At the same time, the traditional pedantic pronunciation of *r* in words where it has not been used in normal speech for centuries continues, but only under exceptional, typically religious, circumstances. ຣ has been a resilient grapheme for the spelling of traditional surnames and terms of Pali-Sanskrit origin, and it has had a complex

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[20] Thai examples are used to illustrate the starting point of most changes: 1. *plaa > pàa* 'fish,' *phlɛ̆ɛ > phɛ̆ɛ* 'wound,' *klàp > kăp* 'to return,' *khlɔ̂ŋ > khɔŋ* 'fluent,' 2. *<h>lâo > <h>lào* 'alcohol,' 3. *liŋ > líiŋ* 'monkey,' 4. *rôok > look* 'disease, epidemic,' 5. *rao > háo* 'we,' 6. *hàan > haan* 'goose,' 7. *triiam > kiam* 'to prepare,' 8. *pràtuu > patuu* 'door,' *phrɔ́ɔm > phɔɔm* 'prepared,' *krɔ̀ɔp > kɔ̀ɔp* 'frame,' *khrɔ̀ɔŋ > khɔ̀ɔŋ* 'drum, group,' 9. (*rao*) *> háo > láo*.

relationship with the phoneme *r.* Religious and cultural traditions and influence from Laos' powerful neighbor to the west have helped shape Lao pronunciation and graphemics in the past and continue to do so today.

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