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Remembering Mary Haas' s Work on Thai

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Mary R. Haas belonged to the heroic generation that established the study of Southeast Asian languages and linguistics in the United States. Before World War II the region had been virtually the exclusive domain of scholars from the European countries that had colonized it politically -- Britain, France, and the Netherlands. Hardly a soul in the USA knew anything about the rich profusion of languages and cultures of Indochina, Thailand, Burma, or the Indonesian archipelago. With Japan's incursions into Southeast Asia in the 1940's, some knowledge of the languages of the area came to be viewed as essential to the war effort. The nation's linguists were recruited to study Far Eastern languages, and ordered to produce practical handbooks, teaching grammars and vocabularies, as quickly as possible.

How well they succeeded in this enterprise is now a matter of historical record. The brightest stars in that new constellation of Orientalists included such scholars as William S. CORNYN, who was assigned Burmese, and ended up at Yale with the ecumenical title of "Professor of Slavic and Burmese";¹ and Murray B. EMENEAU, the eminent Sanskritist and Dravidianist, who was channeled into the study of Vietnamese, and eventually published the first great grammar of that language to appear in English.² Emeneau, as of this writing still going strong at age 93, was co-founder of the Berkeley Linguistics Department, along with Mary Haas, in 1953.³

To Mary Haas fell the task of describing the national language of the only country of Southeast Asia that had escaped colonization, Thailand. Given the near total dearth of teaching materials on Thai in those days, Haas, like Cornyn and Emeneau, had to learn her language from scratch, through direct elicitation from native speakers. This was no big problem for her, since she had merely to apply the classic fieldwork techniques honed to such perfection in her Amerindian work to this new language of utterly different phonological and grammatical structure: from the Southeast United States, where she had worked on Tunica and Natchez, to Southeast Asia -- an effortless intellectual leap.

Mary Haas eventually became one of the leading Thai specialists in the world outside of Thailand, taking her place in a select group that included three other towering scholars of her generation. Needless to say, each of these four possessed unique strengths and pursued complementary interests. The late André-Georges HAUDRICOURT was a quintessential French scholar of the old school, a botanist and

¹Cornyn produced a series of invaluable teaching materials on the language; see Cornyn 1944, 1947, 1957, 1958, 1968.

²See Emeneau 1951.

³Emeneau and Haas had previously held positions in Berkeley's Oriental Languages Department (which has recently changed its name to "East Asian Languages").

theoretician of diachronic linguistics. Not a fieldworker, he was content to sit in his cluttered apartment and make brilliant deductions (often on the basis of crudely recorded old data) about the phonological history of all the language families of Southeast Asia, among them Tai.⁴ The career of LI Fang Kuei followed a curiously similar trajectory to that of Haas in some respects. Like her, he was a student of Sapir, and was trained in Amerindian linguistics. He applied Western fieldwork techniques to his meticulous recording of the Tai languages and dialects of China, culminating in his reconstruction of Proto-Tai (1977). He succeeded in demonstrating the nature of the relationship between Tai proper and its closest kin, the Kam-Sui languages (1965). In China today he is perhaps most famous for having developed an influential new system of reconstruction for Old Chinese. Along with Y.R. Chao, he must be reckoned one of the greatest Chinese linguists of the 20th century. William J. GEDNEY is the most Thaiicized scholar in this group. Perfectly fluent in spoken Siamese, he carried out extensive fieldwork on Tai dialects in the 1950's and 1960's in remote corners of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, as well as in Hongkong and Taiwan, discovering such wonders as the Saek language of Nakhon Phanom province, which alone among all known Tai dialects preserves Proto-Tai final *-l.⁵

Mary Haas made lasting contributions to Thai studies in five areas which these other scholars barely touched upon:⁶

(1) *Thai language teaching*

Building on the pedagogical materials she had assembled during and after the War years (Haas 1942a, 1945a, 1945b, 1954, 1956), Haas taught Thai in the Berkeley Oriental Languages Department from 1947 to 1960. Her book *Spoken Thai* (1945-48), co-authored with her then husband, Heng R. Subhanka, was the culmination of this early work, and constituted the high-water mark of the Holt "Spoken Language Series".⁷ With hindsight it is easy to criticize *Spoken Thai* on the grounds that the style of its dialogues is sometimes unnaturally formal and polite. Thus the English sentence "Where are you going?" is rendered by *khun kamlaŋ cà? paj nǎj khráb*, with the honorific pronoun *khun*, the polite masculine final particle *khráb*, and the Khmer-derived progressive modal auxiliary *kamlaŋ cà?* 'be...ING'; though in most contexts of actual usage one is far more likely to hear simply *paj nǎj* (literally "Go where?"). Yet it was essential to sensitize the American student to the fact that Thai is a language with highly codified levels of politeness based on such factors as age, status, and gender. It is just as unfair to fault *Spoken Thai* for over-formality as it would be to attack it for the traditionally practical nature of the content of its lessons (e.g. The Bank, The Post Office, The Doctor). It behooves us rather to appreciate this pioneering book

⁴See, e.g. Haudricourt 1948, 1956. Following accepted usage, I use the spelling "Thai" for Siamese (the national language of Thailand) and "Tai" for the language family to which Siamese belongs.

⁵A good anthology of Gedney's most influential articles was published in 1989. See the review by Matisoff (1993).

⁶For a complete bibliography of Haas' publications on Thai see Huffman 1986, pp. 164-5.

⁷This book was my own introduction to Thai. I remember devouring it from cover to cover during the summer of 1964, before leaving for my first fieldtrip in Thailand.

for its manifold excellences: the clarity and accuracy of its grammatical notes, and the insight displayed in the organization of its drills and pattern practices.

(2) *Synchronic phonology*

Haas' analysis of Thai phonology has stood the test of time. Her elegant phonemic transcription (including her diacritical marks for the tones) was accepted as standard for decades, and even today has only undergone minor modifications (mostly for the worse) by one writer or another. A few points are of special interest:

·She uses /j/ as the symbol for the palatal semivowel, thus freeing up /y/ for the high central vowel [ɨ]. This in turn provides a simple way to transcribe the three centralizing diphthongs /ia ya ua/.⁸

·She transcribes the low front vowel as /ɛ/, even though it is phonetically closer to [æ]. Since everyone transcribes Thai long vowels by writing the vowel twice, it is esthetically preferable to have /ɛɛ/ rather than the unsightly tetragraph /ææ/.

·Haas writes the single series of Thai postvocalic stops (phonetically unreleased) with the voiced symbols -b -d -g, even though Thai lacks initial g-, and despite the fact that a voicing contrast in final stops is almost unheard of in Southeast Asian languages. This is one point where almost everyone has overruled Haas, and now the transcription /-p -t -k/ is universal. Yet Haas stuck to her guns here, and I have heard her spiritedly offer several arguments to buttress her position. For one thing, she maintained that these final voiced symbols obviate the necessity for using hyphens to show syllable boundary in binomes like rîābrōj 'well-groomed; polite' or lûuglâj 'person picked on by others': since Thai lacks initial clusters with voiced stops (and lacks initial g- altogether), but does have clusters with voiceless unaspirated p- and k-, spellings like rîāprōj or lûuklâj would be ambiguous (rîā-prōj or rîāp-rōj; lûu-klâj or lûuk-lâj). Furthermore, Haas claimed that when informants are pressed to repeat pronunciations of words with final stops, when they are irritated beyond endurance they will finally voice them: "ràak...tàak...tàak -- oh, all right, goddammit, tàa-G !" ⁹

·Haas was adamant (rightly I believe) about always transcribing initial glottal stop, even though it is automatic before an initial vowel that is not preceded by any other consonant, on the grounds that 'once a phoneme always a phoneme'. In syllables with short vowels, in fact, -ʔ does behave exactly like -p -t -k in terms of what tones it may appear under, so at least in that position it certainly patterns like the oral stops. Unlike the three oral stops, however, -ʔ cannot occur after a long vowel, so that it is really *sui generis* in Thai phonology.

·Since all vowels in stressed open syllables are long (e.g. taa), while all short vowels not followed by an oral consonant are automatically followed by -ʔ (e.g. taʔ), a strictly taxonomic approach would phonemicize the contrast either as ta : taʔ or taa : ta . To

⁸This works better than hugging the phonetic ground too closely with, e.g. /iə iə uə/.

⁹Lest these arguments seem a bit arcane, it should be pointed out in Haas' defense that the devisers of the Tibetan writing system (6th-7th cc. A.D.) also chose voiced devanāgarī symbols to write their single series of final stops.

Haas's credit, she decided to introduce a bit of redundancy into her transcription, and wrote the contrast as **taa : taʔ**. Besides its practical mnemonic value (the learner does not have to remember either the 'vowel lengthening rule' or the 'glottal-stop insertion rule'), this has the advantage of allowing Haas to distinguish a third type of syllable: unstressed, often toneless syllables with short vowels, written with a single vowel but no glottal stop (e.g. **ta**), as in **talàad [tələat] < Khmer**.¹⁰

·To my knowledge, Haas was the first to describe the allophonic nasalization that occurs in Siamese syllables with laryngeal initials (**ʔ**- and **h**-) and low vowels, especially **-a**, as in **hâa [hâaN]** 'five', **ʔaw [ʔawN]** 'take'.¹¹

·Although Haas never focussed primarily on comparative Tai phonology (in the sense of Haudricourt, Li, or Gedney), even here she made pioneering contributions, as in her comparison of the tones of Standard Thai to those of the dialects of Nakhon Srithammarat, Roi-et, and Chiangmai (Haas 1958).

(3) *Thai grammar and sociolinguistics*

Haas was among the first to describe the syntax and semantics of numeral classifiers in Southeast Asian languages, both for Thai (Haas 1942b) and for Burmese (Haas 1951a). She was particularly interested in Thai techniques of word-formation, such as reduplication (Haas 1942c), intensification (Haas 1946), and "elaboration". It is to Haas that we owe the felicitous term "elaborate expressions" to characterize those innumerable four-syllable constructions (usually with repeated syllables, ablaut and/or alliteration) that abound in the more elevated styles of Southeast Asian discourse,¹² e.g. **nâam-hũu-nâam-taa** 'tears' (lit. "water-ear-water-eye"), semantically equivalent to the ordinary compound **nâam-taa**. Haas succinctly discusses these expressions in the memorable "Brief Description of Thai" that serves as a preface to her *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* (see below). This Preface itself constitutes the best capsule account of Thai morphology ever written.

Haas's anthropological background led her to pay special attention to Thai linguistic phenomena that directly reflect aspects of Thai society and culture. It was in this line of research that she gave relatively free rein to the more humorous, even racy, side of her personality. In "Interlingual word taboos" (1951b), she discusses the titillative malaise felt by Thai-English bilinguals when pronouncing innocent Thai words that fortuitously resemble naughty words in English (e.g. **phrīg** 'chili-pepper'; **fâag** 'deposit, put down'). In "Thai word games" (1957), she describes how speakers intentionally mutilate the phonological structure of dissyllabic collocations for comic effect, often by a kind of spoonerism whereby the initial consonants remain intact while the vowels and tones of the syllables get switched, e.g. **hěn mǐi** 'see a bear' > **hǐi měn**

¹⁰For more on these unstressed syllables in "sesquisyllabic" words, see the section on Lexicography, below.

¹¹I subsequently dubbed this phenomenon (which is actually fairly widespread in the world's languages) *rhinoglottophilia* (Matisoff 1975).

¹²These are also highly characteristic of Chinese, where they are known as *chengyu*.

'*puerum muliebre odoriferum*'.¹³ This word-play is actually of great interest, in terms of figuring out how native speakers parse the elements of their syllables. In "Sibling terms as used by marriage partners" (1969), Haas explores the complex realm of Thai terms of address within the family, where couples often start by addressing each other as if they were siblings; then, after having children, they may settle into comfortable *teknomy*, addressing each other as 'father' / 'mother'.¹⁴

(4) *Thai writing*

Haas's *The Thai System of Writing* (1956) is far and away the best treatment of the subject in English (or any other non-Thai language). Beautifully clear and systematic, but without burdening the learner with historical explanations for the synchronic complexities, this is the indispensable introduction to the Thai writing system.

(5) *Thai lexicography*

In my opinion, Haas's crowning achievement in Thai studies is her wonderful *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* (1964). After the elegant grammatical sketch in the front matter (pp. xi-xxii; see above), the body of the Dictionary (pp. 1-638) is presented in the Thai alphabetical order. Every entry is painstakingly crafted, with absolute consistency of format. Besides the Thai spelling and the phonemic transcription, each lemma is provided with a form-class designation, and many include information on stylistic level, synonyms, and/or antonyms; all nouns have their appropriate classifier(s) indicated. The glosses are clear and crisp, natural and unstilted, often with three or four English equivalents to delineate the precise range of meaning. The lemmata are richly illustrated by examples and subentries. Even non-initial bound syllables in compounds appear in their proper alphabetical place as head entries, rather than being swept under the rug. The sin of "pernicious interalphabetization" committed in all too many dictionaries of Southeast Asian languages, whereby collocations involving homophonous morphemes are interalphabetized in a single list regardless of their morphemic identity, is rigorously avoided: every collocation appears under its proper head-entry.

An important feature of the *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* is the indication of *stress* for every entry. Although Thai is basically monomorphosyllabic (i.e. in native vocabulary the syllable and the morpheme are roughly coextensive), the language has innumerable binomial compounds and collocations, as well as many

¹³Haas produced a similar article on Burmese ("Burmese disguised speech" 1969). Her involvement in Burmese was more than casual throughout her career. She was particularly interested in Thai/Burmese contact vocabulary (e.g. 'elephant': Thai *châaŋ*, Written Burmese *chaŋ* [Mod. Bs. *hsī*]). Perhaps influenced by R. Shafer's inclusion of the Tai family in Sino-Tibetan, Haas seems actually to have flirted with the notion of some kind of genetic relationship between Thai and Burmese.

¹⁴An extended study of pronominal reference in three key Southeast Asian languages was published at about the same time as this article by one of Haas's students, Joseph Cooke (1968).

“sesquisyllabic”¹⁵ or polysyllabic words of Khmer or Indic origin that contain unstressed vowels, so that the phonological texture of the language is very different from that of uncompromisingly monosyllabic languages like Chinese and Vietnamese. The stress patterns of stretches of speech larger than the monosyllable are independent of the tones of the individual syllables, and Haas insisted on carefully marking both tone and stress for every entry and subentry. This may be illustrated by part of the interminably ornate official name for the city of Bangkok (called simply **krunthêeb** in ordinary language):

krunthêeb · phrámahăa · nákhooŋ · bowooŋ · rádtanákoō · sĭn ·
mahĭn · tharaa · júdthajaa · mahăa · dilòg · phíphób · nób · pharád ·
râad · chathaa · nii · burii · rom · ʔudom · sántisùg · *TESD*, p. 15

The 21 stressed syllables of this 42-syllable utterance are indicated by the postposed symbol · (substituting for the accent marks in the *TESD*).

When I entered the Berkeley linguistics department as a graduate student in the fall of 1962, Haas was Chair, and her influence on the departmental ethos was pervasive. I was somehow imbued with such radical Haasian notions as that to really do right by one’s language of study, one had to produce a grammar, dictionary, and collection of texts for it. Although I never actually took a course from Haas for credit, my whole academic life was crucially influenced by her. It was she who steered me into Southeast Asian linguistics. She was contacted early in 1963 by a young anthropology student at the University of Arizona, an ethnic Jingpho (Kachin) from northern Burma named LaRaw Maran, who told her that he wanted to work on his language with a linguist that summer. Miss Haas knew that I was interested in Japanese and Chinese, and judging that Jingpho was close enough, arranged for me to be the one to work with him. I was eventually offered a Fulbright to do fieldwork on Jingpho in Burma for 1965-66, but all foreigners were kicked out of Burma in a wave of rabid xenophobia by the end of 1964. Again Miss Haas decisively intervened, and suggested that I change my Fulbright destination to Thailand. There was a lovely city in northern Thailand, she told me, called Chiangmai, where I would have access to speakers of many minority languages. Following this excellent advice, and no doubt with the help of a covering letter from Miss Haas, I got my change of venue, went through her *Spoken Thai* again, and took off for Thailand with wife and nine-month-old daughter, with no very definite idea of what language I would be working on. Such was the encouragement given to students of exotic languages in those post-Sputnik days, that I got away with filling in the “Language of Study” box on the revised application form with “Miao, Yao, Lahu, and/or Wa” -- the only minority languages of northern Thailand that I had heard of up to that point.

One of my favorite memories of Mary Haas dates from some years later, right after the Sixth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics,

¹⁵These words that are “a syllable and a half” in length, consisting of an unstressed prefixal or “minor” syllable followed by a fully stressed “major” syllable, are especially characteristic of the Mon-Khmer family, but many Tibeto-Burman languages (e.g. Burmese and Jingpho) have a similar profusion of words of this type. The term “sesquisyllable” was introduced in Matisoff 1972.

held at the University of California at San Diego in October 1973. I had purchased a large handsome painted plaster of Paris Buddha statue in Tijuana for something under two dollars. Mary and I were seated next to each other on the plane back to Oakland, the Buddha statue on my lap. The flight turned out to be horrendously turbulent, and free cocktails were distributed to take the passengers' minds off their possibly imminent demise. Mary and I each had several. When at length we landed safely, not a few passengers came up to thank the Buddha for his help and protection. I had never seen Miss Haas as jolly as she was at that moment, demonstrating the proper way to make obeisance.

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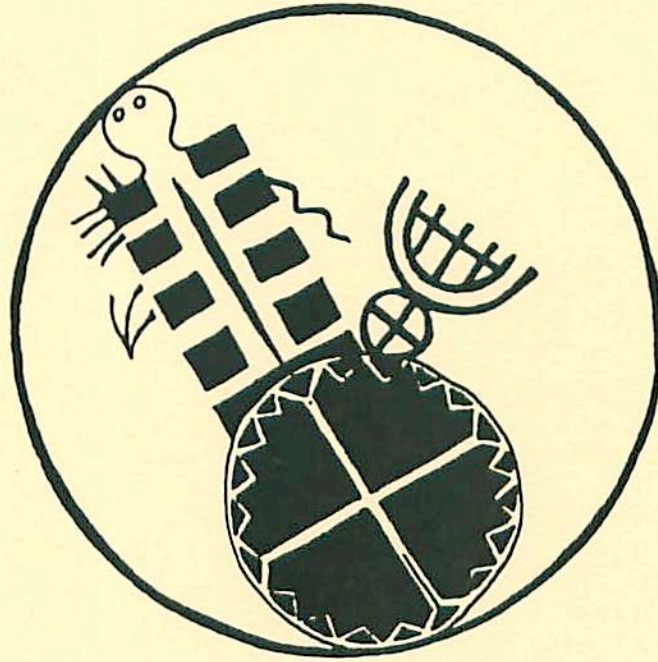
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REPORT 10

**SURVEY OF CALIFORNIA AND
OTHER INDIAN LANGUAGES**



**THE HOKAN, PENUTIAN &
J.P. HARRINGTON CONFERENCES
And
THE MARY R. HAAS
MEMORIAL**

**June 28-29, 1996
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Leanne Hinton, Editor

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Leanne Hinton, Editor

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cover design by Leanne Hinton (Santa Barbara Chumash rock painting)

This volume is dedicated to the memory of

MARY R. HAAS

Professor emeritus of Linguistics

at the University of California at Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

This volume of the Survey Reports is the Proceedings of the Hokan, Penutian and J.P. Harrington Conferences, held at the University of California at Berkeley on June 28-29, 1996. Part I includes five of the papers that were presented at that conference, and also a paper by George V. Grekoff, who was unable to attend the conference but arranged in advance to submit an article for inclusion in the Proceedings. During the conference, a memorial session was also held for Mary R. Haas, who died a month before the conference. Part II of this volume consists of the presentations that were made about her life and research.

We gratefully acknowledge grants from Joseph Cerny, Vice Chancellor for Research and Dean of the Graduate Division, and William Simmons, Dean of Social Sciences, that helped make this conference possible.

Leanne Hinton
Volume and Series Editor

THE HOKAN, PENUTIAN AND J.P. HARRINGTON CONFERENCES

and the

MARY R. HAAS MEMORIAL SESSION

June 28-29, 1996
University of California at Berkeley, Alumni House

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PART II

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