

NOTES

Mal Phonology Revisited

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It has been 25 years since "Phonemes of Mal" was first written (Filbeck 1966, 1976). It has been 20 years since the same description was incorporated in a Ph.D. dissertation (Filbeck 1971, 1978). Over the intervening years a few changes have had to be made, especially in certain areas of phonological interpretation that were once thought settled but which have now become uncertain. These changes have not involved the discovery of any new sounds or the description of any new phonemes. Rather, the changes have revolved around the (re)interpretation of certain consonant and vowel clusters in Mal. Moreover, the changes and uncertainties involve less than one percent of the Mal language so far described. But while they affect only a minute part of Mal they are nevertheless interesting phonologically.

The dialect described in this paper is what was designated as Mal B in Filbeck 1971, 1978. Altogether there are three Mal dialects which were designated Mal A, B, and C respectively. Mal B is the largest of the Mal dialects, numbering some 3,000 speakers in nearly a dozen villages in the Pua and Chiang Klang Districts of Nan Province in northern Thailand. It is also the dialect that has been described in greatest detail. All Mal dialects form a sister language to Prai and together belong to the Khmuic branch of the Mon-Khmer language family.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the changes and reinterpretations that have become necessary in describing Mal phonology both synchronically and diachronically. There are two reasons behind this update. One is in the interest of accuracy of description. The other is in the interest of accuracy in field work, for the source of the need to update and revise Mal phonology stems from imperfect field work in the first place. Consequently this paper will also give an analysis of what went wrong nearly 30 years ago when I began eliciting data from Mal language helpers.

The following discussion is investigative and inductive in nature. The result of this methodological decision is that we shall be comparing competing analyses of various problems involved in order to arrive at an interpretation that will cover the most territory for us in describing Mal phonology as it currently stands. As we shall see, this territory includes both diachronic and synchronic aspects of Mal.