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# The Language of Leadership in Laos

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# The Language of Leadership in Laos

## Abstract

This paper responds to recent calls in the leadership studies literature for anthropologically-informed empirical research on leadership phenomena in non-Western and non-Anglophone settings. The authors have worked extensively on rural development projects in Laos and draw on ethnographic ‘observant-participation’ and interview data to explore how leadership is construed in contexts where traditional language usage is influenced by official government and international development terminologies. A theoretical discussion of linguistic relativity and the socially constitutive nature of language in general is offered as background justification for studying the language of leadership in context. The anthropological distinction between *etic* and *emic* operations is also introduced to differentiate between different interpretative positions that can be taken in relation to the fieldwork and data discussed in this paper. The study shows how difficult it can be for native Lao speakers to find words to describe leadership or give designations to ‘leaders’ outside of officially sanctioned semantic and social fields. A key finding of the study is that, viewed from the perspective of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, *authority and leadership are coextensive*. This social fact is reflected in the linguistic restrictions on what can and cannot be described as leadership in Laos.

## Keywords

Leadership, cross-cultural leadership, Laos, Lao Language, international development, rural development, anthropology, sociolinguistics, hierarchy

## Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between the language of leadership and leadership enactments in the non-Anglophone context of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). As such it seeks to respond to the growing calls for studies of leadership in non-Western contexts (Turnbull et al., 2011) and the adoption of anthropological theory and method in order to enhance understanding of the subtleties of leadership relations in situated *social contexts* (Jones, 2005, 2006; Warner & Grint, 2006). Some scholars have pointed out that the field of leadership studies has long been in thrall to Anglophone-centric and thus highly ethnocentric constructions of leadership (Jepson, 2009, 2010; Guthey & Jackson, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2011). Jepson (2009, 2010), for instance, provides ground breaking insights into the social effects of leadership language in *differing* national contexts, contrasting the Indo-European languages of German and English. The present paper builds on this important foundation by initiating an investigation of leadership as it is conceived and mediated within Lao culture through its official Lao language. This is a direct response to the *Leadership* special issue call for paper's concern to promote linguistically informed analysis of cross-cultural leadership phenomena. As has been pointed out by others (Kempster, 2006; Lowe and Gardener, 2000), there is a dearth of studies which examine in detail the experience of taking on and enacting leadership roles in specific settings<sup>1</sup>. This paper is also a response to this gap in the field insofar as it offers empirically based accounts of what is entailed in establishing authority and performing a leadership role in a particular Lao context.

One might reasonably ask why it is important to study leadership in agricultural settings, in general, and why, in particular, leadership of smallholder farmer organizations in Laos is of relevance to wider debates in the field? In answer to this, we would argue that, to date,

management researchers have tended to neglect organizational dynamics within resource poor or so called ‘developing nations’ (Burrell, 1998), the vast proportion of whose populations are engaged in agrarian-based livelihoods. Indeed, we think it not unreasonable to conclude, as does Burrell, that management and organization studies have been blind to the peasants that make up the majority of the world’s population. While the field of international development has received some critical attention from the management research community (e.g., Cooke, 2004; Dar and Cooke, 2008; Murphy, 2008), such work is certainly the exception rather than the rule. By studying leadership and organization in Laos – a predominantly rural country – we are thus seeking in a modest way to reverse this pattern of neglect. Smallholder farmers, moreover, find themselves inadvertently in the vanguard of changes in the socio-political relationships confronting Lao PDR; a state whose recent history has led to high levels of exposure to the vagaries of the neoliberal forces of modernization (Harvey, 2007). Laos, moreover, is typical of other resource poor nations in this regard.

Similarly, there is a dearth of research that focuses explicitly on the language of leadership in Laos. While there is a literature on Lao linguistics generally<sup>2</sup>, to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first attempt to explore this specific aspect of Lao language systematically. As a consequence of entering this virgin terrain, we are therefore unable to support some of the claims we make with references to extant research and literature. A principal contribution of this paper is precisely that of mapping a territory which has previously received scant attention. The empirical work we present below should therefore be viewed as *provisional* and in need of further investigation and verification.

The paper is structured in the following way. We begin by setting out a broad theoretical orientation and justification for a linguistically-based analysis of leadership in non-

Anglophone settings and introduce an etic/emic category distinction that plays an important role within our interpretative analysis. There follows a brief outline of the polity and diverse ethno-linguistic make up of Lao society that forms the general backdrop to our studies. Next, we describe our methods of data collection and explain our research orientation as ‘observant participants’ (Moeran, 2009) with respect to Lao rural development. We then enter the empirical heart of the paper, identifying three broad contextual influences on the language of leadership in this development context and, in two further sections, use ethnographic anecdotes and interview data to illustrate how ‘leaders’ and ‘leadership’ are linguistically construed in and through the Lao language. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key findings and their implications.

### **Theoretical dispositions: linguistic relativity and the etic/emic distinction**

A social anthropologist would typically take the view that every society (however defined) had its own specific words and categories, which were, at every level, socially derived and mediated; there can, from this perspective, be no guarantee that words and categories will be congruent from one society to the next... (Buckley and Chapman, 1997: 283).

Buckley and Chapman point here to the socially indexical nature of linguistic categories and meanings. They argue, moreover, that researchers interested in cross-cultural aspects of management and organization need to be sensitive to linguistic relativity and to pay close attention to ‘native categories’. In other words, it is crucially important to study *natural language use* and, as far as possible, expose locally understood meanings of terms. This generic social scientific position is commensurate with the more discipline-specific calls that Case et al. (2011) make regarding the need to pursue a research agenda that attends explicitly to linguistic aspects of leadership, focussing particularly on language-in-use. Approaching

leadership in Laos from a linguistic standpoint, a major premise of this paper is that language plays a constitutive role in creating ‘forms of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1972[1953]). Furthermore, one’s perceptual apprehension and understanding of every aspect of the world – one’s *weltanschauung* (worldview) – is inexorably tied to the language one is socialized into using (Schutz, 1996[1962]; Vygotsky, 1962[1934]). The extent to which, and precisely *how*, language shapes thought and action are persistent and obstinate questions and have been subject to much scientific and social scientific scrutiny. One domain of contemporary enquiry that is directly relevant to the concerns of this paper relates to the problem of linguistic relativity. Put simply, the premise of linguistic relativity is that language diversity is associated (causally or otherwise) with cognitive and social diversity in differing language groups. In other words, adherents to the principle of linguistic relativity claim - in stronger or weaker terms - that language determines/influences human intention, thought and action.

While there is certainly no consensus regarding the extent, nature or effects of linguistic relativity, Sidnell and Enfield (2012) offer some fascinating insights into its development. They identify two broad stages of evolution of linguistic relativity. Firstly, there is what might be viewed as a ‘classical’ tradition which, influenced initially by the work of Boas (1997[1911]) and later by that of Sapir (1966[1949]) and Whorff (1967 [1956]), has spawned a primarily *psychological* interest in the effects of language on processes of *cognition*. A second tradition of linguistic relativity emerged in the 1970s within the field of linguistic anthropology. Building on the work of Hymes (1986[1974]), Michael Silverstein set out a program for the ethnographic study of linguistic diversity and relativity (Silverstein, 1976, 1979) which focuses on indexicality, i.e., the way in which situated language-use invokes and infers *context*. This approach to relativity has been widely taken up within the field of anthropology (see, inter alia, Hanks, 1990; Luong, 1990).



To these two traditions of linguistic relativity, Sidnell and Enfield add a third based on their own research agenda. This third approach synthesizes ethnographically contextual understandings of language-use with the close, micro-sociological, analysis of *socially situated* linguistic exchanges. Informed by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995, Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974, Enfield, 2009), it privileges *interpretative* analysis of the micro-structure of social interaction as manifest in interlocking patterns of talk. Within this version of linguistic relativity, action, identity and agency are interpreted and understood as *on-going social accomplishments*. Although not subscribing wholesale to Sidnell and Enfield's conversation analytic agenda, we are sympathetic to this stance and our understanding of language-in-use is influenced by this theoretical and methodological position.

In discussing the nuances of language use, we find it useful to draw the distinction between *emic* and *etic* constructions and interpretations of meaning. Introduced by the linguist Kenneth Lee Pike in 1954 (Pike, 1993), this distinction is now widely deployed within the social and behavioural sciences, particularly by social anthropologists and folklorists (Harris, 1976; Berry, 1990). According to Harris (1979: 32): 'emic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of the native informant to the status of ultimate judge of the adequacy of the observer's description and analyses. Etic operations, in contrast, elevate the observer to the status of judge of the concepts and categories employed'. This is also commensurate with Buckley and Chapman's assumption in the context of cross-cultural management studies, '... that the categories of understanding used by the people under study are their own best solution' (1997: 284). In our application of the etic/emic distinction below, we describe occasions when we have 'tested' meanings and understandings of 'native categories' (Buckley and Chapman, 1997) through dialogue with local participants and thus, in these

instances, comply formally to Harris' criterion for employing *emic operations*. However, we also find it analytically felicitous to take the concepts to refer in a more generic sense to *differing interpretative positions*, namely, the emic representing the viewpoint of the *subject* and the etic that of the non-indigenous *researcher*.

### **Lao polity, demographics, languages and ethnicity**

To help key readers into our analysis of Lao leadership language it may be helpful to provide a brief overview of some pertinent aspects of Lao PDR polity, demographics, ethnicity and languages. According to the latest census data available at the time of writing, Lao PDR has a population of about 6.4 million people<sup>3</sup>. Until the French established its borders in 1893, Laos did not exist as a nation state in the modern sense, although there were certainly indigenous Lao polities that predated colonial rule. The ethnicities of people's making up the national population has resulted from migration occurring over the past two millennia (Evans, 2002). Laos is a single-party socialist state run since 1975 by the Lao People's Revolution Party. Working with the legacy of French colonial rule, since 1986 the Lao Government has been overtly promoting capitalism and market exchange, supported by a pervasive socialist technocracy and political infrastructure which facilitates implementation of national policy aims and objectives (Evans 1990, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 2002). What has resulted is a hybrid economy which marries planning and control – conceived at national level and then implemented through political structures at provincial, district and village levels – with market capitalism.

Depending on the technicalities of classification, it is estimated that there are between 50 and 200 ethno-linguistic groups represented in the population<sup>4</sup> (Pholsena, 2006), but these are generally grouped into 5 broad families (Sisouphanthong & Taillard, 2000; Rehbein, 2007).

The Tai-Kadai (also known as the Lao Loum), who dwell mostly in towns and villages in river valleys, constitute approximately 67% of the population (World Bank 2006a). These are the dominant group in linguistic, social, political and economic terms (King and van de Walle, 2010: 2). Other ethnic groups include the Mon-Khmer (21%), who typically settle hilltop slopes, and the Hmong-Lu Mien (8%) and Chine-Tibetans (3%) who occupy mountaintop villages. A small fraction of the population comprises a fifth ethno-linguistic group - the Viet-Muong (Sisouphanthong & Taillard, 2000; World Bank, 2006a).

Approximately 80% of the population is engaged in agricultural production although it only accounts for circa 48% of GDP (World Bank, 2006b). The majority of Tai-Kadai occupy the lowlands of the Mekong flood plain and other river valleys where their staple crop is irrigated rice paddy. The non-Tai-Kadai, by contrast, mainly practice subsistence farming in semi-permanent settlements and, in some upland locations, shifting (swidden) cultivation. Agricultural production of subsistence farmers can be very diverse as it is dependent on specific agro-ecological conditions, but typically includes upland (non-irrigated) rice, supplemented by other foodstuffs, such as, corn and other vegetables. In some locations coffee and rubber plants are cultivated, and opium poppy production is still a feature of some remote mountainous areas. Small-scale livestock rearing (typically of cattle, pigs and chickens) is also practiced by these groups. Although infrastructure has certainly improved over the past two decades, many of the upland areas remain difficult to reach and are poorly off in terms of school education, health and other social service provision. Under-nutrition and malnutrition remain a problem in these regions and for these minority ethnic groups.

Due to significant international investment—both foreign direct investment and international development assistance—combined with increasing infrastructure and better-functioning

markets, commercial production opportunities for smallholder farmers have advanced substantially over the last five to ten years. While reliable statistics are not available, a clear transition from subsistence to mixed commercial food production is underway throughout the country. These developments have a direct bearing on the emergence of forms of leadership, authority and agency that we been researching and report on in this paper.

Having set out our theoretical orientation and the general research context, we now turn attention to our methods of data collection and analysis.

### **Methods of data collection and interpretive analysis**

The authors of this paper each has a background of researching and consulting in the field of international development and, between them, have a cumulative experience of over forty years of working on rural development projects in Lao PDR. Two members of the team are fluent in Lao while the third has an elementary understanding of the language. For the past five years, all three have been collaborating on rural development projects in Laos sponsored by the Australian Government and delivered by an Australian University research team of which they are members. These projects are concerned with bringing about institutional changes in the way agricultural extension services are delivered to smallholder farmers as well as researching the development trajectories of farmer organizations at village and supra-village levels. In the Lao context, extension services refer to a pluralistic blend of technical advice to smallholder farmers ('farmer learning'), assisting farmers to access commercial markets for their products ('market engagement') and helping them organize groups, associations or cooperatives ('farmer organizations') to gain market and production advantages<sup>5</sup>.

Although the projects we are engaged in have remit to tackle problems of economic development and smallholder farmer livelihoods that address the needs of a variety of ethnolinguistic groups - each with their own minority languages - our main focus in this paper is on the dominant official Lao language. This is because the civil servants we work with all speak and interact in this language, even though some of them are of different ethnicity (e.g., Hmong) and represent communities for whom Lao is a second language. Furthermore, the interaction of government and farming communities is mostly, with very few exceptions, conducted in the Lao language. As our intention is to derive insights from observations of, and participation in, interactions that shed light on leadership we think it reasonable to focus on the dominant shared language.

The rural development projects we work on involve application of participatory action research design (Gonsalves, 2004; Gonsalves et al., 2005; Krznaric, 2007)<sup>6</sup>. As international advisors and researchers working within these overall designs, we routinely keep ethnographic notes of our experiences. These, in turn, are rooted in participant observation or, perhaps, more properly what Moeran (2009) refers to as *observant participation*. For one of the authors this has been a continuous endeavour over twenty years. But, in particular, over the past five years (2012-2016), during the course of implementing two interrelated projects, we estimate that we have conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with over 100 individual respondents and facilitated in the order of 50 participative workshops with varying combinations of stakeholders. Respondents and participants have principally been smallholder farmers and Lao government extension staff that we engage with. The interviews that we conduct are rarely audio-taped but we do keep detailed notes of content. In the empirical sections of the paper, below, we offer interpretative analysis which is, in effect, a *composite* of our combined knowledge of the Lao language, extracts from interview notes

and anecdotal ethnographic stories drawn from the rural development project work we have undertaken.

The following sections document our main findings based on a *composite understanding* of: the Lao rural context and (a) experiential linguistic knowledge and the Lao rural context; (b) field notes; and, (c) interview data.

### **Tripartite sources of leadership language in Laos**

The primary stakeholders and respective influences on leadership language within the development nexus we have studied can be grouped broadly into three categories. We shall describe each source in brief and provide a summary representation in Figure 1 (below).

Firstly, there are grassroots terms used by farmers to conceive, articulate and represent leadership and leader roles. This terminology is used by village-level participants in meetings and other development activities where organizational leadership is required, for example, to produce and sell agriculture products to private sector actors investing in production, processing, and trading. This source of leadership language we shall refer to as ‘traditional’. Secondly, there is a vocabulary deriving from the Government of Lao apparatus, that is, from the central-level ministries to the district line-ministry offices and field-level offices. Government of Lao officers occupying differing positions in this hierarchy are mandatory partners in almost every internationally-funded development initiative. This influence on the language of leadership we designate ‘GoL’, for short. Thirdly, there is the influence of terminologies deriving from Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects and the international advisors involved in development interventions and activities. Such projects typically comprise bilateral government-to-government and government-to-implementing

agencies (e.g., International Non-Government Organizations) offering financial, technical, and policy assistance. We call this influence on leadership language ‘ODA’.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The current usage of leadership languages in the research settings reported on here can be understood, we suggest, as the outcome of a conflux and on-going tension between these three primary sources of terms: traditional, GoL and ODA. Each of the stakeholder groupings in this nexus has a set of interests in the trajectory and legitimacy of various forms of leadership and representation within the Lao polity; and these interests, moreover, shape the use of leadership language at both a conscious and unconscious level. Each of these stakeholder groups can also be viewed as having added an ‘overlay’ of language and conceptions of leadership through Laos’ recent history: a language of common, traditional use; an overlay applied by the government as it strove to develop (and now seeks to maintain) legitimacy and unity; and a third overlay of ODA language introduced when Laos first opened up to contemporary Western influences in the 1980s and 1990s. In the country today, these three forces continue to interact, creating a dynamic and contested language space that is constantly evolving.

The Government of Lao has arguably engaged in a decades-long project of consolidating its authority and legitimacy throughout the nation (Evans, 1990, 1998, 2002). This project has included both implicitly and explicitly shaping the *language-in-use* within development circles. These efforts have included attempting carefully to circumscribe the very conceptions of what a leader is, who is permitted to lead and what constitutes legitimate collaborative efforts. There have also been terminological attempts to engineer nominal forms of ‘social

equity’ by introducing generic ‘non-hierarchical’ words of social address (e.g., the word *sahai*<sup>7</sup> – ‘comrade’) that undermine vocabularies which, traditionally, are highly sensitive to social deference and demeanour (an issue we take up in more detail below). Regardless of nominal attempts to democratize the language of status, the Government of Lao has sought strenuously to shape language use in such a way that leadership of collective action and organization remains exclusively within the domain of state sanction and control. While officials often use the term *paw-mae pasason* (literally ‘father-mother-commoner’), for instance, official policy generally reserves ‘strong’ terms for leader (*puh nam*) and authority (*amnart*) solely for Government of Lao use. We explore and illustrate this in more detail below.

The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has even gone so far as to appropriate words that traditionally indicate high level authority associated with sovereign power (Foucault, 1977). For example, terms for a city-state king that find their origins historically in the pre-colonial manadala systems of the region (Evans, 2002) have been adopted to represent Party appointed positions of district and provincial governor: *chao meuang* and *chao kwang* respectively. These words connote significant elevation of Party incumbents’ status above that of the general populace and, while they do imply a level of responsibility for the welfare of others, they confer substantial authority over decision-making. Moreover, role holders enjoy a relative lack of accountability to the subjects of this reinvented sovereign power. Similarly, *chao nai* is a term used for high-level leaders of a district or province and semantically implies a need for others to defer to role holders in political and social settings.

Over the past three decades since the Government of Lao began opening up to Western-inspired modernization programmes, international advisors from the development community



have gradually introduced a new and foreign vocabulary of leadership, organization and decision-making<sup>8</sup>. Such concepts as, inter alia, ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’, ‘participatory action research’, ‘consensus decision-making’, ‘leadership’, ‘accountability’, ‘performance management’, ‘strategic planning’, ‘operational planning’ and ‘professional responsibility’ have begun to gain parlance either in untranslated or translated forms. ODA has produced (and is still producing) a localized nomenclature and new vocabulary that not only facilitates interaction with development partners but also implicitly privileges modern technocracy and modes of organizing. Needless to say, the language of ODA is neither typically reflective of traditional communication patterns nor widely understood by all stakeholders outside of those directly working with ODA representatives.

A crucially important influence on the language of leadership in Laos is, of course, the rural population itself which, far from evincing the conscious manipulation of language unified by a stated and studied agenda, has its own varying and evolving vocabulary of leadership. This language reflects and represents the accumulated experience of generations of life under various governing regimes: from the mandala state systems of pre-colonial rule, through colonial power, anti-colonial and war-time internal conflict, post-war geopolitically instigated conflict and, finally, consolidation of power under the current LPRP regime (Evans, 1990, 1998, 2002). While the language used within communities is less well represented in the present article, common language usage provides a clear variation from, and can be viewed as being in opposition to, that of the Government of Lao; an issue we take up in more detail shortly.

## Hierarchy and social positioning in Lao language

It is important to realize that Lao culture is acutely sensitive to social status as this is inscribed within linguistic and paralinguistic practices; or, at least, it is acute by comparison to Anglophone cultures (Enfield, 2009; Rehbein, 2007). This feature of social relations is reflected structurally within the Lao language and, we contend, carries fundamental ramifications for the manifestation and enactment of leadership in the rural development settings we have studied. Several European languages draw distinctions between polite and familiar second-person ('you') references. For example, there are the polite forms *Sie* and *vous*, respectively, in German and French, which contrast with the more familiar *du* and *tu*. A relatively sophisticated knowledge of these languages and cultures is required before the references can be deployed confidently and without potentially giving offence. In Lao language both first-person and second-person reference is a far more baroque process when compared with the socially anodyne 'I/you' of English or even the *Ich/Sie/du* or *je/vous/tu* of German and French respectively. There are four common ways of referring to 'I', 'you', 'she/he' each of which index respective social positioning and status differentials between the speaker and interlocutor and/or the speaker and person being referred to (see Table 1 for a summary).

	I	you	she/he
Bare	<i>Kuu</i>	<i>mùng</i>	<i>man</i>
Familiar	<i>Haw</i>	<i>too</i>	<i>law</i>
Polite	<i>khòj</i>	<i>caw</i>	<i>phen</i>
Formal	<i>khaa- phacaw</i>	<i>thaan</i>	<i>thaan</i>

**Table 1. Lao personal pronouns (singular forms) adapted from Enfield (2010: 10)<sup>9</sup>**

Setting out the complexity and sensitivity of personal reference helps demonstrate that hierarchical structure is explicitly coded into the Lao language, reinforcing the central role of hierarchy in social ordering of Lao society. Since the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) took power in 1975, they have managed to implement and sustain a powerful system of hierarchical relationships; one that extends outwards from the central politburo through ministerial and department levels and then on to the governance of provinces, districts and even villages. There is no social grouping in Laos that is not defined or influenced by the Party for the purpose of providing leadership guidance (as they define it) to them. As we shall see, therefore, the way that leadership is generally understood in the development settings we have studied is intimately related to what the Party officially sanctions as 'leadership'. The forms of deference and demeanour that are prefigured linguistically in the Lao language, we suggest, serve to reinforce the population's acceptance of a status quo which is rigidly hierarchical.

That said, there is a tension that exists between forms of address officially sanctioned by the Party and everyday language use. There has been a transition from a pre-revolutionary language in which hierarchical sensibilities were very much to the fore to a post-revolutionary language of Communist officialdom that seeks to detract from old systems of deference and respect by introducing terms that, superficially at least, promote equality. An example of this would be the attempt on the part of the LPRP to promote social-levelling in personal reference by encouraging the use of 'comrade'—*sahai*. The socialist experimentation with language, however, was only ever partially successful and pre-revolutionary terms of address have certainly persisted throughout the post-revolutionary period and are in common use within the development context today. Indeed, in recent years,

greater liberalization has witnessed a more open return to the older systems of deference and demeanour. One example would be the increasingly common use of the term *doi* as a way of affirming something or agreeing with someone. *Doi* implies a deferential or even subservient positioning of self in relation to other.

### **Lao vocabularies of leadership**

As with many languages, Lao has no equivalent word to the English term *leadership*<sup>10</sup>, at least no term that is commonly understood and applied. Indeed, there is no simple, singular term for *leader*. This poses a challenge for both translation and anthropological explanation of the constellation of terms that relate broadly to the notions of leader and leadership. While there are several words listed in dictionaries—*hua na*, *phu nam*, *phu nam na*, *phu si nam* and, more occasionally, *phu nam pha*—each of these expressions has a different meaning and connotation. We would contend, moreover, that none has precisely the same semantic remit as the notion of *leader* as generally conceived in Western languages (acknowledging fully that even in English it is a highly contestable and sometime ambiguous concept)<sup>11</sup>. To complicate the picture further, the most potent words in Lao that connect associatively with the Western term *leader* are themselves highly politically charged. We shall now unpack some of the key concepts, making reference to our general knowledge of the Lao language and supported by ethnographic anecdotes and interview extracts to illustrate the discussion.

#### *The ubiquitous hua na*

*Hua na* is the common word for boss, supervisor, or director. In this sense, it correlates to what an English speaker might take to be the formal or designated *leader* of a collective entity. In most respects, this word is used reflexively to refer to someone in a position of administrative authority. For instance, an in-country member of staff responsible for

administering an international development project is referred to as a *hua na*. This term is neutral with regard to any sense of personal or collective ‘respect’ for the person referred to as *hua na*. In other words, it does not carry connotations of implied value or recognition of a person’s worthy qualities; it is simply a functional acknowledgement of a status differential. Regardless of their social status or the merit or demerit others might attribute to a person in this position, s/he will be referred to as *hua na*. It may also be applied to a person that does, indeed, hold a position of greater respect and authority, such as directors of government departments. *Hua na*, however, often demonstrates a limited value, with use often constrained to those who fall under the specific jurisdiction of the office. Therefore, if a moniker indicating more earned rank is available, this will often be applied instead: teacher (*ajarn*), doctor (*doctor*), or even mister (*tan*) is applied.

Further illustrating the semantic boundaries of the word *hua na* would be its reference to individuals who do not have administrative authority over a project or office, yet who do command the respect and attention of the individuals with whom they work. Such individuals would *not* be referred to as *hua na*. For example, a person known to us who conceived, designed, and played a major role in securing funding for a development project, never gained this designation of ‘boss’. Local staff certainly respected the ideas and contribution made by this person and—as with someone playing a boss-like role—it was commonly accepted by staff that he could, on occasion, veto or reverse certain decisions relating to the project. He was never *hua na*, however, but respectfully referred to as Mr (*tan*) so-and-so. So, to repeat, the meaning of *hua na* differs from that of the English word *leader*; ‘boss’ being a better literal translation.

### *Other terms for leader*

In our opinion, other suggested Lao *Dictionary of Languages* (2004) translations for leader—*phu nam*, *phu nam na*, *phu sin am*—seem to come much closer to the mark in offering meaningful translations. These expressions, however, are tied another semantic shackle. As an illustration of the issue, consider the following example of a ‘problem’ (from an etic perspective) we encountered when working with some Lao colleagues to write a Lao language version of plans for mobilizing ‘informal farmer group leaders’ – an explicit aspect of the ODA agenda ‘we’ (international advisors) were pursuing. The English version of the plan contained many references to ‘leaders’ so, obviously, we needed to agree on an appropriate translation and thus engaged in a long conversation to determine the most suitable term. *Phu nam* was the initial suggestion quickly accepted by two of the team members. However, a third member suggested this expression was really only appropriate for people in a recognized government position, so the discussion started up again with Lao colleagues expressing discomfort with each alternative that group members suggested. Their concern centred on the fact that *phu nam* is used for the highest leaders within the Communist Party, and they were not at all sure or emotionally sanguine that it could be used to designate an informal leader at a local level. They finally reached consensus on a more descriptive term - *phu nam pha* - which translates as ‘the person who takes others along’. We agreed with the outcome of this emic exchange, acknowledging that *phu nam pha* was a very practical and useable translation which suitably captured the active role of a leader vis-à-vis followers, especially in the context of new collective endeavour. This is an example of how the ODA leadership and organizational discourse interacts dynamically with Government of Lao and traditional discourses.

In another incident, working with Lao colleagues (who were relatively competent in the English language) to prepare a presentation for provincial and district authorities, there was a long discussion about the appropriate translation for *community leader*<sup>12</sup>. Here, the context again was villagers in unofficial, unrecognized positions taking on responsibility to organize people in their own communities to achieve particular ends. One set of people was mobilizing villagers to vaccinate their animals, while another set was encouraging (by example) women to seek more education. In both cases, an experienced senior Lao officer representing a donor agency said explicitly that the term *phu nam* should be reserved for leaders of the country, and could not, in her words, be ‘haphazardly applied to community members’. She pointed to the image of Kaysone Phomvihan<sup>13</sup>—an iconic founding leader of the LPRP—on a Lao currency note and said, ‘this is who we refer to as *phu nam*’. She stressed diplomacy in using the term locally and suggested the best alternatives would be either *phu si nam* or *phu nam pha*. Both of these terms are translatable as ‘the person who takes others along’ and so function well to describe the roles played by the villagers in this context. However, while finally providing a suitable expression, these terms remain somewhat convoluted and by no means represent common parlance.

When considering the subtler notion of *general community leadership*, however, it became even more difficult to find a suitable word. The team understood the meaning in the context: that, by participating in development planning and decision-making and initiating local activities, the project in question had offered opportunities for community members to build what we, as Western researchers, would understand in etic terms to be ‘leadership skills’. However, since we were not talking about persons with specific positions nor a definable action prescribed by government officials, a word that would satisfy emic sensibilities was not easily arrived at. We ended up describing longhand the skills being developed, i.e., ‘a

capacity to participate in decisions and mobilize community participation’, rather than being able to agree on a single word for *leadership*.

While we cannot be certain that the word *phu nam* is reserved exclusively for government and party officials, our empirical experience reveals that there is clearly self-censoring of its use within the formal settings we observed in the rural development context. Our collective experience suggests, at a minimum, that there exists a preference for applying *phu nam*—the most common form for leader—only to individuals granted official authority within the government and Communist Party and that locals feel uneasy if the term strays too far from what they would take to be its natural home.

This emic hesitancy or reluctance to use *phu nam* other than to refer to Party officials is perhaps indicative of a much broader socio-political strategy within the single-party state: namely, the subsumption of all roles for decision-making and organizational responsibility *within officially recognized LPRP positions*. From the village to the central level, the LPRP has established a hierarchically structured set of roles intended to cover every facet of decision-making and responsibility. Each village has an official leader, called a *nai ban*, who is elected with approval from local Party officials. *Nai ban* is often translated into English as ‘Head Man’, although in practice the role is not gender specific and we have encountered a few women occupying the *nai ban* position<sup>14</sup>. Each village also has a council of elders — collectively referred to as *neo hom ban*<sup>15</sup>—that includes: a leader of the women’s union, a leader of the youth, and a leader of traditions. This structural hierarchical pattern progresses from the group of villages to the district, province, and centre, subsuming typical community roles of organizing specific interest groups within *government offices*.



Terminology for referring to officials differs between community and higher (district, province, national) levels of officialdom. The term *nai* is combined with *chao*, two words with connotations of inherent ownership that harken back to Lao's mandala state history—*chao meuang* being the owner of, or person responsible for, the city-state at the centre of local politics; *chao sivit* being the 'owner of life', i.e., the king. In combination, *chao nai* now refers to that elite group of party officials—and they would be high-ranking party officials to merit this term—that make the decisions and policy for the district, province, or country.

While the appropriation of terms for leaders and leadership on the part of the government is certainly not unique to Laos, it has been a particularly effective socio-political strategy in that country. Until recent official changes, for example, policy even left few opportunities for farmers to organize and coordinate decisions about their own production and marketing. In Laos we thus find a language of leadership that intimately connects individuals with corresponding responsibilities for organizing events, people, or processes in a manner that is most commonly—if not exclusively—associated with *official government-appointed or government-approved authority*. Indeed, in an unstructured interview with a senior government official, one of the authors was told in very direct terms that 'there is no leader or leadership outside of the Party'.

It is to a closer interrogation of the apparently coextensive nature of leadership and authority from the standpoint of the LPRP that we now turn.

### **Competing interpretations of authority (*amnart*)**

During a field trip in February 2016 we were charged with the task of 'reviewing the performance and plans' of three district teams and also to give a presentation on our

interpretation of farmer organizations' development trajectories in a particular province. In trying to clarify how farmer group representatives acquire legitimacy and licence to represent the group members in activities, such as, negotiating draft contracts and attending government meetings, we suggested that the word *amnart* (authority) might be a suitable term to use. Considering that this word is often used to express official, government sources of authority, we anticipated discussion regarding the appropriateness of this expression and invited government participants to suggest other words. The group was clearly unhappy with our word choice and quickly substituted *amnart* with 'softer' alternatives, such as, *buat bat* (role), *nathi viek* (thematic work area), *kwam hapisop* (responsibility) and *nathi kwam hapisop* (thematic area of responsibility). The subtext of this exchange was that, in the eyes of the government functionaries, the farmer group representatives would not merit assignments of authority (*amnart*) through the kinds of village-level and multi-village activities they were engaged in; activities which were not formally registered within the government system. In this particular context, it appears that *amnart* is the kind of authority reserved for official Government of Lao policies, laws, and higher-level Party positions.

Contrasting with this view of authority, farmer group representatives clearly indicated an appreciation of the dual nature of authority: as government-granted authority coming from above, and as originating from farmers themselves. For both examples of authority, the farmer group representatives applied the word *amnart* and distinguished meanings by indicating government authority came from above, while community authority came from below. In an interesting twist, two farmer group representatives indicated that the authority which comes from group members selecting and appointing representatives has more chance of being effective in coordinating group members for collective economic action (in this case selling products together). Indeed, the community representatives indicated that the bottom-

up authority was more legitimate. (It is important to note that both individuals in question currently have government appointed positions.)

*Other sources of authority for farmer group representatives*

In order to test emic understanding further, we undertook follow-up interviews with four individual village representatives and engaged them each in brief conversations about the way they viewed sources of authority. In these semi-structured interviews, the following question was posed to each respondent: ‘Who gives you the authority to work as [name of position such as president/boss/council member] in your farmer group?’ Two distinct patterns emerged from these discussions. In most cases, elected leaders of farmer organizations indicated that they received personal authority from association with the overarching authority of the state. Two of these respondents indicated the District Agricultural and Forestry Office (DAFO) —the frontline operational unit of agricultural extension in Laos—as this source. Another indicated that her authority derived from membership in a nationwide network of farmer groups (which is also authorized and sponsored by the state) and, further, through a role designed by DAFO. Only one respondent of the four said unambiguously that his authority derived directly from fellow villagers..

Further discussion, however, revealed a more dualistic appreciation for the source of authority, and that these elected leaders felt a strong need to be responsive to group members. They also appreciated the important part that member involvement played in their recruitment and selection. While they acknowledged the authority of government-selected individuals to take on certain responsibilities and expressed an appreciation of the positive support offered by government agencies, especially the DAFO, this appreciation did not equate to exclusive provenance over the source of authority. One farmer group leader stated

that a community-selected leader would enjoy longer-lasting and broader acceptance by members; would be better able to mobilize members to act together for collective advantage such as joint marketing or consistent production; and that members would be more likely to listen to and engage with this person than they would with a government-appointed leader. This representative distinguished between top-down, government-originating authority and bottom-up, community-originating authority and clearly stated that the latter was stronger and more sustainable.

Importantly, all these farmer group-selected leaders had previous (or contemporary) experience in official positions, including that of village leader (*nai ban*). Despite their Government of Lao experiences and the ideological training they would have received in the *nai ban* role, they nonetheless consistently expressed a desire for greater independence to be given to their organisations. Their responses suggest that these leaders view authority and leadership as emergent properties of organizational processes rather than as affordances accruing to individual role holders with an official designation.

## **Discussion**

Our empirical observations suggest a continuing evolution in the use of language relating to the expression and representation of authority among community groups. While the authority of Government of Lao to nominate representatives, oversee activities, and support groups is widely respected, the increasing interest in asserting independence and exercising agency appears to be inspiring new language use that can be construed to be in tension with the official Party line. During this formative period where government and farmers are concurrently defining the political and administrative space with respect to agriculture markets—e.g., the formation of Government of Lao sanctioned independent farmer

organisations—new vocabularies of leadership and authority are evolving. We have noted, for example, a growing preference on the part of farmer organizations to privilege forms of non-governmental authority that arise organically within the community groups, while, by contrast, Government of Lao actors take a more conservative approach. Looking forward, we might envisage a time in the not too distant future when the ‘official’ word for authority (*amnart*) may become democratized and used in the more ‘unconstrained’ way that ‘authority’ is used in the Anglophone world. This is no insignificant matter as it spills over semantically into the very conception of what can be accepted as *legitimate collective action*; a notion which, in Laos, has been a matter of considerable sensitivity for the past four decades. If all stakeholders accept that it is only with government authorization that farmers can legally act collectively, this, in effect, ensures the continued containment of all such action within the province and subject to discretion of the Party. The empirical evidence reported in this article suggests that among some stakeholder groups, this position is being contested.

While our discussion is concerned purely with *economic action and decision-making* and in no way addresses political organization, it is nonetheless highly significant in the Lao context. For instance, in the case of nascent organic coffee grower groups we have worked with, the freedom to negotiate with buyers and investors is neither guaranteed nor assumed: in some other provinces, local governments vet potential buyers and negotiate contracts for the farmers. This severely restricts transaction options and the flexibility farmers rely on to respond to market and production dynamics. Even should the farmers’ best interests be served by government intervention, this practice limits the opportunities for farmers to develop market capacities, and undermines the basic rationale for collective action—market advantage—ultimately harming the government’s own directive for supporting the

development of independent farmer organizations. Even the current open market enjoyed by the coffee groups may not persist. For example, a former provincial governor (*chao kwang*) in a province we have worked in has started up his own coffee buying company and begun to exert influence on the organic coffee sector in the region. Owing to the sovereign power that a Party figure of this status enjoys, farmer organizations in the region could well feel implicit (if not explicit) pressure to sell at prices and conditions favourable to his business and thus, by implication, unfavourable to the farmers. As we have seen, Government of Lao officers tend to be more comfortable reserving the stronger term for authority (*amnart*) to government actors and allowing only vague terms for internal group authority. On the other hand, farmer organization members and leaders have a more open conception that encompasses space for internally-generated ‘authority’. This is illustrative of the continuing—and sometimes tension-prone—evolution of the language of leadership and its connection to leadership practice in the Lao rural development context.

## **Conclusions**

Our aim in this article was to respond to calls in the leadership studies field for empirical studies of leadership processes in non-Anglophone contexts. Taking inspiration from theoretical positions that emphasise linguistic relativity (Sidnell and Enfield, 2012) and the importance of attending to *native categories* (Buckley and Chapman, 1997) we attempted to pay close attention to local meanings of leadership by examining *language-in-use*. We identified what we took to be the three main sources of influence on contemporary leadership language in the Lao rural development context: Government of Lao, traditional and ODA. Many of our findings were derived through interviews and conversations with research participants (farmers, government officers and Party officials) as we sought to elicit, or even negotiate, particular equivalents in Lao language for the Anglophone terms *leader* and

*leadership*. Our position as researchers engaged in international development projects in Laos afforded us the opportunity to discuss definitional and translational issues directly with teams of Lao government officers (at differing levels) as well as members and leaders of semi-independent farmer organisations, and thus to derive indigenous perspectives and understandings of leadership. Our uncovering of the semantics of Lao words, such as, *hua na*, *phu nam*, and *amnart* enabled us to conform to the use of *emic operations* introduced by Pike (1993) and developed by Harris (1976, 1979). To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first attempt to begin mapping this particular terrain.

We argued that the operation of *hierarchy* is of central importance linguistically in Lao, using the example of the complexity of person-reference to indicate how hierarchy is, in effect, coded into the language. We went on to argue, furthermore, that this was indicative of the manner in which the language prefigures the operation of *hierarchical authority* in social relations, including, most importantly from our point of view, *leadership relations* within a system dominated politically and socially by the workings of the LPRP.

As we noted, Lao nationals were sometimes uncomfortable using an ‘obvious’ term for leader, such as, *phu nam*, if it was seen to stray too far beyond what they would take to be its natural sociolinguistic home. Similarly, Lao colleagues found it difficult to find words for *group leadership* or *community leadership*, having, instead, to make recourse to descriptive phrases to capture the meaning adequately. One of the major findings of our study is that the emotional discomfort and difficulty stems fundamentally from the fact that, within the LPRP socio-political system, *leadership and authority are coextensive* from the Government of Lao standpoint. In effect, this means that leader-follower relations that fall outside of officially recognized roles or Party approved domains (e.g., informal community leadership) are

literally not *seen or perceived* as instances of leadership. Thus with an absence of words to conveniently describe these informal leadership roles it becomes difficult actively to foster them for fear of attracting official disapproval or sanction.

We acknowledge fully that our analysis of leadership stems from our exposure to, and discussion of, the language of leadership in rural development contexts at the time of writing. This limits our ability to generalize from our findings either to other non-Agrarian development contexts or Lao society more broadly. Similarly, we do not posit that the language of leadership in Laos is determined or fixed, but rather that it is in a state of flux. The continued evolution of accepted and common uses of the terms for leader, leadership, and associated terms such as authority is likely and would merit continued observation as Laos pursues its very dynamic development trajectory. Any future studies of leadership language might seek also to widen the scope of qualitative research to embrace more general instances of leadership in villages, urban life and non-Government of Lao workplaces in order to establish a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic practices. It may be, for example, that the older terms of *nai* and *chao* are used more freely and differently in other lay contexts. We would need to sample more diverse situated enactments of leadership, and the language used, to establish whether or not there are generic linguistic constructions of leadership in Lao culture or, indeed, a set of differing indigenous sub-cultural spaces of leadership such as the one we have explored in this paper.

Given the ambition of this special issue of *Leadership* we have chosen to focus predominantly on the linguistic aspects of leadership in Laos in the rural settings with which we are familiar. This privileging of language over other paralinguistic, non-linguistic or multi-modal (Kress, 2010) dimensions of leadership could be seen as a potential limitation of



the approach we have taken here. We acknowledge this point but feel the initial focus is justifiable because of the fundamental role language plays in constituting and mediating cultural perceptions and social forms of life. It is our intention to develop a second paper that will explore situated *leadership practices* in Laos, with a particular focus on taking up leadership roles. That paper will, we hope, complement the linguistic focus of this preliminary foray into the relationship between leadership and authority in Lao PDR.

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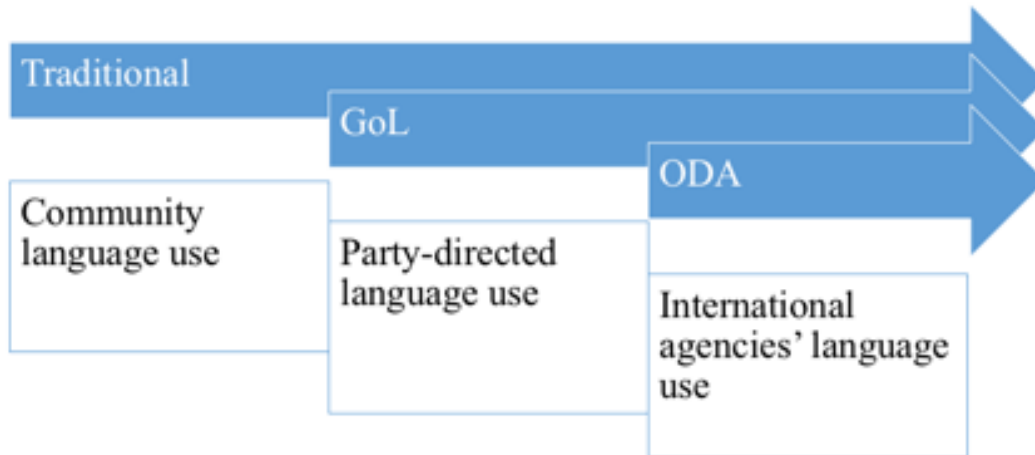
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**FIGURE 1**



**Figure 1: Layers of language of leadership**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions would include Parker (2004) and Kempster and Stewart (2010).

<sup>2</sup> See, inter alia, Enfield (2007, 2009) and contributions to Enfield and Comrie (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau [<http://www.nsc.gov.la/en> accessed 10.09.15].

<sup>4</sup> King and van de Walle note that, ‘There are several ethnic classification systems in Lao PDR and depending on the system used the number of ethnic groups vary... An alternative classification that is commonly used is based on geographic location. Hence, Tai-Kadai is called *Lao Loum* or Lao people of the valleys; Mon-Khmer are *Lao Theung* or the Lao people of the hillsides, and Tibeto-Burman and the Hmong-Mien are the *Lao Soung* or Lao people of the highlands’ (2010: 2, Fn 1).

<sup>5</sup> See Bartlett (2011) for an overview of agricultural extension in Laos.

<sup>6</sup> Within the broader debate regarding the ethics and politics of development (see En. 4 above), participatory action research (PAR) as a specific methodology informing



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interventions has come under sustained critical scrutiny. See, for example, Cooke (2003, 2008) and contributions to Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Hickey and Mohan (2004). Cooke's careful tracing of the managerialist legacy of colonialism within the contemporary world of development intervention is particularly cogent and telling. Whilst acknowledging such critique, we would argue nonetheless that PAR can play a *constructive* and *ethically sound role* in the *practice* of development intervention. For us, it depends very much on an assessment of the means-ends calculus that applies to a particular development context. In this regard see, for example, the introduction to Hickey and Mohan (2004). To fully justify this stance, however, would require a paper in its own right.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this paper we employ commonly accepted Anglophone transliterations of Lao terms (for ease of communication) rather than phonetic or Lao script. However, it should be noted that there is no *standard* form of such transliteration.

<sup>8</sup> International development interventions on the part of Western governments and agencies in resource-poor parts of the world have increasingly been subject to critical scrutiny. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the politics and ethics of international development interventions as to do so would detract too much from our central focus on the language of leadership in the Lao context. Readers interested in this debate might consult the penetrating critiques offered by, inter alia, Chambers (1997, 2010, 2012); Cooke (2006, 2010), Cooke and Faria (2013), Dar and Cooke (2008), Ferguson (1994), Fforde (2009), McGoey (2015), Wallace et al. (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Enfield uses phonetic script to represent Lao terms in this table.

<sup>10</sup> See Jepson (2009) and Case et al. (2011) on the rarity of terms for *leadership* in languages other than English.

<sup>11</sup> Such semantic complexity applies every bit as much to the English vocabulary of leadership as it does to Lao. Something that seems peculiar to English, however, is the historical 'slippage' of the verb *lead* to the role *leader* and abstract noun *leadership* (Case et al. 2011). The original, Old English verb *lædan* is an ancient word whose origins can be traced to an Indo-European (Sanskrit) root, meaning to go, go away or die. *Lædan*, meaning 'to cause [someone] to go with oneself' (*OED*), describes the way in which humans have a capacity to show one another the way or allow themselves to be guided. After several centuries in which 'lead' was used as a verb, the *noun* 'leader' appeared in written English for the first time around 1300. Four centuries later, however, another significant shift occurred when in the early nineteenth century a second noun, 'leader-ship', was created from the word 'leader'. As to contemporary uses of Anglophone vocabularies of leadership in organizational settings, these have been thoroughly researched and represented in the research literature, not least in the present journal. Difference, variation, ambiguity and mutual misapprehension seem to abound. Indeed, at the limit, it has been claimed that the English word *leadership* is little more than an empty signifier that is open to multiple uses and interpretations (Spoelstra, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> See Edwards (2015) for a discussion of community leadership in the Western context.

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<sup>13</sup> Kaysone Phovihan was the General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the first Prime Minister of Lao PDR. After his death in 1992, the LPRP tried to transform him into a cult figure along the lines of the Ho Chi Minh cult in Vietnam (Evans, 2002: 208). Although the attempt largely failed, Kaysone's bust adorns many formal government meeting rooms and his face appears on Lao Kip notes.

<sup>14</sup> 'Village chief' might be a more accurate literal translation of *nai ban* but this carries 'tribal' connotations that are not present in the Lao expression. It is an elected, officially sanctioned position. *Nai* is an owner or boss, whilst *ban* means village.

<sup>15</sup> *Neo* shares the same root as the word for 'seed' or 'variety' (*neo-pan* is a mixed variety/hybrid, for instance). In this context, *neo* refers to a type of personality. *Hom* is a 'collection' or grouping. So in combination *neo hom* connotes the 'core group' or the 'stock group'. Once again, there is a tension between the officially sanctioned role of 'Head Man' (*nai ban*) and the traditionally respected role played by the *neo hom* with respect to village social relations and decision-making.