

# SPOKEN LAO

## BOOK ONE

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and

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## GENERAL FOREWORD

The debt of this course in spoken Lao to Spoken Thai, by Mary R. Haas and Heng R. Subhanka, one of the publications in the ACLS-Army Intensive Language Program series now distributed to the public by Henry Holt and Company, will be obvious to everyone familiar with the latter, and is hereby gratefully acknowledged. The authors of the present work have departed in one respect from the pattern of the earlier series. They have introduced the conventional Lao writing system at the very beginning of the course; they hope that the innovation will prove useful.

After more than fifteen years' residence in Laos, initial research on this project was begun by Mrs. Roffe, with the active collaboration of Mr. Chan Khong. Further work was carried on by Mr. Roffe in the Graduate School of Cornell University, where he enrolled in the spring term of 1954 upon receiving a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, whose Program in Oriental Languages made them particularly interested in this project. A second grant from the same body made it possible to continue this work at Cornell University in the fall of 1954. This aid is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

The authors also wish to express their gratitude to The Christian and Missionary Alliance, under whose auspices they have worked in Laos, for having released them

from other duties during this furlough, thus freeing them for work on Spoken Lao.

Special thanks are due to Dr. Charles F. Hockett, Professor of Linguistics in the Division of Modern Languages at Cornell University. Professor Hockett played a significant role in the program which produced the ACLS-Army-Holt Spoken Language Series, and his experience in this particular field, as well as in the more general one of teaching both languages and linguistics, was drawn upon in the preparation of this book. His contribution, both tangible and intangible, was inestimable.

The authors are deeply grateful to Mr. Thephathay Vilaihongs, Information Secretary of the Royal Embassy of Laos, Washington, D.C., whose willingness to undertake the difficult task of writing the Lao script solved a major problem in the publication of this book.

Acknowledgment of the authors' indebtedness to Mr. Kruong Pathoumxad, Director of Religions of the Royal Lao Government, is gratefully made. Mr. Pathoumxad, who was Director of the National Information Service of the Royal Lao Government when this material was in preparation, gave unstintingly of his time whenever the authors called on him for help. His assistance in the checking of vocabulary and structure should be noted especially.

The authors wish to extend a final note of thanks to the editorial staff of the Publications Services Office of the American Council of Learned Societies, who prepared the manuscript for publication.

Making no claim to perfection, the authors offer this

text in the hope that it may facilitate for speakers of English the task of teaching and learning to speak Lao.

Vientiane, Laos  
May, 1956

G. EDWARD ROFFE  
THELMA W. ROFFE

## INTRODUCTION

1. **THIS COURSE** in spoken Lao is designed as a general introduction to the Lao language. It contains all the essential grammatical materials for learning to speak everyday Lao, and its vocabulary, though small, is built around a number of the most useful common situations and current topics. It is based on the principle that you must hear a language if you are to understand it when spoken and that you must practice speaking it in order to master its sounds and its forms.

A teacher will often not be available for those for whom this book is written. So the course has been made as nearly self-teaching as possible. This manual covers the course completely and requires the need of no other reference material.

2. **THE LAO LANGUAGE** is spoken by some two million people in Laos. Languages very similar to Lao are spoken in Thailand, in parts of southern China and North Vietnam, and in the Shan States of Upper Burma.

Variations in language are perfectly natural and are found in every language in the world. So do not be surprised if no two Lao whom you meet seem to speak in exactly the same way. If the pronunciation you hear is not exactly like what is given to you in this manual, imitate the person with whom you are speaking. Likewise,

do not hesitate to use the gestures which you see, for they are part of the language. Imitate them if you can.

3. **A NATIVE SPEAKER AND THIS MANUAL** are used in this course to help you in learning to speak Lao. The two must be used together. Neither is of any value without the other.

This manual is so organized that it can be used to study by yourself or in a group. If you work in a group, and have no regular teacher, choose one of the group to act as Group Leader.

4. **A NATIVE SPEAKER** is the only good source of firsthand knowledge of the pronunciation and usage of any language. The method used in this manual requires the presence of the native speaker of Lao, preferably a person who can be on hand throughout the course, or next best the voice of the speaker recorded on phonograph records or on tape. The native speaker is referred to as the Guide. The Guide's job is to act as model for you to imitate, and as a check on your pronunciation and usage. It is not his business to be a "teacher" or to "explain" the language to you. That is the function of this manual. The Guide should be, if possible, a person who speaks naturally and without affectation. He should be neither overeducated nor too uncultured.

5. THIS MANUAL is divided into five major parts. Each part contains five learning units and one unit devoted to review. The present volume contains Parts One and Two; Parts Three, Four, and Five and the two master vocabularies are in preparation. Each unit contains several sections, usually the following:

- A. Basic Sentences (with Hints on Pronunciation in Parts One and Two and Pronunciation Drills in Parts Three, Four, and Five)
- B. Word Study
- C. Review of Basic Sentences
- D. Listening In
- E. Conversation
- F. Conversation (Cont.)

These six sections are followed in each learning unit by a Finder List containing all the new words in the particular unit.

All the words in the manual are included in two complete vocabularies, Lao-English and English-Lao.

6. THE BASIC SENTENCES in each unit are arranged so as to give you a number of new words and a number of new ways of saying things, first broken up into words or phrases, and then combined in complete sentences.

7. THE AIDS TO LISTENING which are given throughout the manual provide a transcription which is designed to help you remember the Lao words as they sound. You will notice that the only mark of punctuation which is used with this transcription is an occasional comma. When a comma is written, it represents the slight pause which

you will hear when your Guide speaks the sentence. Commas are written only when their absence would make the sentence ambiguous.

8. THE HINTS ON PRONUNCIATION are given you to help improve your speech in Lao. No language has a sound system exactly like that of another language; and in Lao you will find some sounds which are quite absent from English, and others which are somewhat but not exactly like English sounds.

After you have gone through these hints, you will be able to hear and imitate more precisely the sounds in the Basic Sentences.

9. PRONUNCIATION IS IMPORTANT for a number of reasons: if you expect to be understood when you speak a foreign language, you will have to pronounce it more or less as the people are used to hearing it. Furthermore, the nearer you get to pronouncing the precise sounds, the easier it will be for your ear to catch the sounds as spoken by a native, and the more rapidly you will pick up new words and phrases and make progress in learning the language.

10. THE NATIVE SPEAKER is always right. Imitate his pronunciation even when it differs from the transcription in the Aids to Listening or from the Lao script, or when these latter differ from each other, as sometimes occurs.

11. THE WORD STUDY sections show you certain uses and combinations of words and phrases studied up to that point; you are taught how to take apart the words and

phrases which you have heard and how to make new words and phrases on the same model.

12. THE LISTENING IN sections give you a number of conversations, anecdotes, or stories, which use the vocabulary and constructions you have learned in each unit and in all those preceding. Their purpose is to give you practice in listening to and understanding the foreign language as you might overhear it in normal conversations among the Lao speaking people, and to furnish you with models for your own conversation practice.

13. THE CONVERSATION PRACTICE represents the central aim of the course. Situations will be outlined which will give you the settings for your conversations. Here you will be able to use all the material that you have learned up to this point.

14. IN SPEAKING LAO you should not first figure out what you want to say in English and then translate it into Lao, word for word. You should apply, instead, the words and expressions you already know to the given situation. If you cannot immediately rattle off a word or expression to fit a particular situation, go on to another, or ask a question, but under no circumstances attempt to compose long and complicated sentences. As soon as you do, you

lapse into English speech habits and stop learning Lao and Lao speech habits.

When people speak to you, they will often use words and expressions you do not know. If you can't guess their meaning, try to find out by asking questions in Lao, or by asking them to repeat slowly, or to explain in simpler terms. If you do this, you will constantly learn more and will practice the Lao you already know in the process.

Your learning of Lao will not stop, therefore, when you have mastered this material. You will, rather, be able to get around among the people, practice what you know, and steadily pick up more words and phrases. Try to learn them as you go. Carry a notebook to jot down what you want to remember; you can review this new material from time to time.

You should not wait until you finish this manual before you start to use the language. Start practicing right away. When you have done the first unit, try out the expressions on as many people as possible. When you try out your Lao at this early stage, make it slide off your tongue as smoothly as possible. Be careful not to slide back into careless English-like pronunciation. Listen closely to what the person says in response, trying to catch as much as you can. The first few times it may be hard to catch even the words you know, but you will improve rapidly if you keep on practicing every chance you get.



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PART ONE