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Some peculiarities of Cuoi Cham,
 a Vietic language of Nghe-An (Vietnam)¹

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Updated in October 2014

The Cuoi Cham language (in Vietnamese: *Cuối Chắm*) is a member of the Tho (*Thổ*) subgroup of the Vietic group within the Austroasiatic family. The other member of this subgroup is Mọn – spelt here in Vietnamese orthography, with a subscript dot, to avoid confusion with the Mon language of Burma and Thailand. The Tho dialects are spoken in some areas of the northern part of Nghe An province; Henri Maspero referred to them as “Southern Muong”. They have a high degree of lexical similarity with Vietnamese, partly inherited, and partly acquired through Vietnamese influence. However, the Tho dialects are phonetically more conservative than Vietnamese.

Tho dialectology

Tho (*Thổ*) is one of the ethnic groups recognized by the official Vietnamese classification. The information on two Cuoi dialects and two Mọn dialects found in a book about Tân Kỳ district (Ninh 1992:109–111) allows for an insight into dialect classification: on the basis of the evolution of Proto-Vietic (hereafter PV) *-l and *-s, three different situations are found in Cuoi, Giai Xuân Mọn, and Tam Hợp Mọn, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reflexes of Proto-Vietic *-l and *-s in Tho dialects and in Vietnamese

PV	Cuoi	Mọn (Giai Xuân)	Mọn (Tam Hợp)	Vietnamese
*-l	-l	-n	-i	-j (i / y)
*-s	-l (tones a ⁵ a ⁶ , etymological C1 and C2)	-j	-j	-j (i / y) (tones ả ã, etymological C1 and C2)

¹ Translated and expanded by Alexis Michaud in 2014, in consultation with the author. Original title of handout: “Quelques particularités du cuối cham, une langue viet-muong du Nghê-an (Vietnam)”. Available: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00927642>

Initial consonants

Cuoi	Viet				
p	<i>b</i>	pɔ:n ³	<i>bốn</i>	four	quatre
	<i>v</i>	pu:l ¹	<i>vôi</i>	limestone	chaux
t	<i>đ</i>	tɔ:j ²	<i>đuôi</i>	tail	queue
	<i>d</i>	təŋ ⁴	<i>đựng</i>	to raise	dresser, élever
c	<i>ch</i>	ce:t ⁷	<i>chết</i>	to die	mourir
	<i>gi</i>	cɔ:ŋ ³	<i>giống</i>	seed	semence
k	<i>c</i>	kɔ:n ¹	<i>con</i>	son	fil
	<i>g</i>	ku: ⁴	<i>gấu</i>	bear	ours
s	<i>t</i>	sa:j ¹	<i>tai</i>	ear	oreille
	<i>r</i>	siŋ ³	<i>rắn</i>	snake	serpent
b	<i>m</i>	bɔ:j ³	<i>muối</i>	salt	sel
		bal ¹	<i>may</i>	to sew	coudre
d	<i>n</i>	da:k ⁷	<i>nước</i>	water	eau
		da:ŋ ³	<i>nướng</i>	to roast	griller
j	<i>nh</i>	jal ⁵	<i>nhảy</i>	to jump	sauter

Two series of Vietnamese initials correspond to Cuoi initial **p t c k s**. In cases where the word was monosyllabic in Proto-Vietic, Vietnamese has *b đ ch c/k t* (IPA: **β d̪ c k t**). In cases where the word was disyllabic, these same consonants in medial position developed to *v d gi g/gh r* (IPA equivalents at the stage of spirantization: **β ð ʒ ɣ r**) (Ferlus 1982).

Correspondences between Tho **b d j** and Vietnamese *m n nh* reflect former preglottalized consonants. The other correspondences between initials are self-explanatory.

Initial clusters

			b l	p l p^hr	k l k^hr	
b l	<i>tr</i>	blə:j ¹	<i>trời</i>	sky	ciel	
		blɔ:ŋ ¹	<i>trồng</i>	to plant	planter	
p l	(but: <i>tr</i>	bla:ŋ ³	<i>sáng</i>	morning	matin)	
		ple: ³	<i>trái</i>	fruit	fruit	
k l	<i>tr</i>	plai:l ⁵	<i>trải</i>	to spread out	étaler, déployer	
		kle:n ¹	<i>trên</i>	top	le haut	
p^hr	(but: <i>s</i>	klam ¹	<i>trăm</i>	hundred	cent	
		klɔ:l ⁵	<i>sỏi</i>	gravel	gravier)	
k^hr	<i>s</i>	p ^h ra:n ¹	<i>sườn</i>	ribs	côtes (anat.)	
		p ^h raj ¹	<i>say</i>	drunk	ivre	
k^hr	<i>r</i>	p ^h riŋ ³	<i>rận</i>	louse	pou	
		p ^h rɛ: ⁴	<i>rựa</i>	billhook	serpette	
k^hr	<i>s</i>	k ^h ra:w ¹	<i>sao</i>	star	étoile	
		k ^h ra:p ⁷	<i>sáp</i>	wax	cire	
	(but:	k ^h rΛw ¹	<i>trâu</i>	buffalo	buffle)	

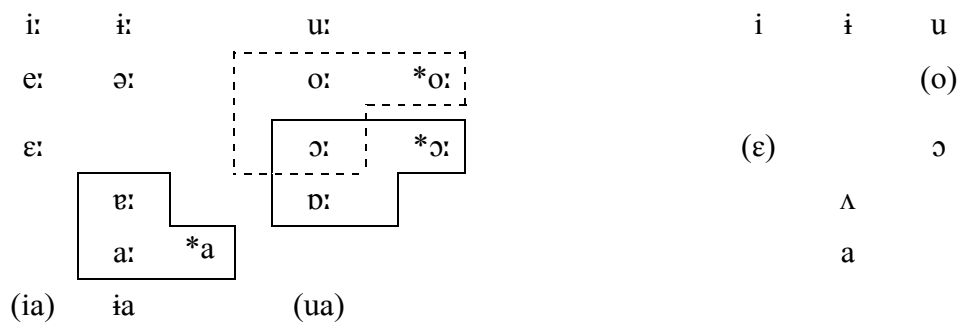
Tones and vowels

Tones belong to two etymological series, (i) a *high* series comprising **a¹ a³ a⁵ a⁷** in Cuoi (and *a á ǎ át* in Vietnamese); the etymological categories are A1, B1, C1, and D1; and (ii) a *low* series comprising **a² a⁴ a⁶ a⁸** in Cuoi (and *à ą â ăt* in Vietnamese); the etymological categories are A2, B2, C2, and D2. Among categories A, B, C and D, the first three (A, B, and C) are found on open syllables and sonorant-final syllables (syllables ending with a nasal or sonorant). Category D is that of words ending in an unvoiced stop.

Table 2. Cuoi and Vietnamese tones, presented by etymological categories

	A	B	C	D
high series	a ¹ <i>a</i>	a ³ <i>á</i>	a ⁵ <i>ǎ</i>	a ⁷ <i>át</i>
low series	a ² <i>à</i>	a ⁴ <i>ą</i>	a ⁶ <i>â</i>	a ⁸ <i>ăt</i>

Tonal correspondences between Cuoi and Vietnamese are regular, in that the evolutionary conditioning of the eight tone categories are the same in both languages. In practice, numerous cases of tonal inversions are found within the four categories A, B, C and D, for reasons that remain to be explored in detail.²



The phonemes placed in brackets are only found in recent Vietnamese loanwords. The consonant shifts that affected initial stops (leading to a two-way splitting of the tone system) resulted in changes in the degree of vowel opening for reflexes of proto-vowels ***a:** ***o:** ***ɔ:** in the two series (high and low), as below:

	*a:	*o:	*ɔ:
high series	a:	ɔ:	ɔ:
low series	ɐ:	o:	ɔ:

A slight difference in vowel opening can be heard for ***ɛ**; it is not transcribed in the present notes.

² [Since the time of this presentation (1994), the topic of irregular tonal correspondences between Vietnamese and Muong on the one hand, and the rest of Vietic on the other hand, has been analyzed by Ferlus (1999). *Note added at translation.*]

PV	Cuoi	Viet				
*a:	a:	<i>a</i>	sa:t ⁷	<i>tát</i>	to dry up	assécher
		<i>ưƠ</i>	da:k ⁷	<i>nước</i>	water	eau
	ɐ:	<i>a</i>	ɲɛ: ²	<i>nhà</i>	house	maison
		<i>ưƠ</i>	tɛ:ŋ ²	<i>đường</i>	path	chemin
*o:	ɔ:	<i>ô</i>	bɔ:j ¹	<i>môi</i>	lips	lèvres
			kɔ: ⁵	<i>cổ</i>	joint	articulation
	o:	<i>ô</i>	mo:t ⁸	<i>một</i>	one	un
			so:m ²	<i>tôm</i>	shrimp	crevette
*ɔ:	ɒ:	<i>o</i>	kɒ:n ¹	<i>con</i>	son	fil
		<i>uô</i>	bɔ:j ³	<i>muối</i>	salt	sel
	ɔ:	<i>o</i>	mɔ:t ⁸	<i>mọt</i>	weevil	charançon
		<i>uô</i>	rɔ:t ⁸	<i>ruột</i>	intestines	intestins

The development of two distinct tonal series (*high* and *low*) is a consequence of the consonant shift among initial stops, whereby two series of consonants merged with each other. Among former unvoiced initials, unvoiced stops remain unvoiced (**p**, **t**, ...) whereas unvoiced nasals and sonorants become voiced (^h**m** > **m**, ^h**l** > **l**, ...), developing *high-series* characteristics: (i) clear voice (modal phonation type), (ii) high tones, and (iii) a tendency towards vowel opening. Among former voiced initials, stops become devoiced (**b** > **p**, **d** > **t**, ...) and nasals and sonorants remain voiced (**m**, **l**, ...), developing *low-series* characteristics: (i) breathy/whispery phonation type, (ii) low tones, and (iii) a tendency to vowel closing.³

Vietnamese and Muong developed purely tonal systems, i.e. characteristics (i) and (iii) are not preserved in the current system of these languages. On the other hand, the Tho language varieties, including Cuoi, present full-fledged eight-tone systems but also retain differences in degree of vowel opening: opening of ***o:** and ***ɔ:** in the high series, and closing of ***a:** (and ***ɛ:**) in the low series.

Final consonants

Proto-Vietic final ***-l** is preserved in Cuoi:

pu:l ¹	<i>vôi</i>	lime	chaux
k ^h a:l ³	<i>khái</i>	tiger	tigre
pʌl ¹	<i>bay</i>	to fly	voler (intr.)
cal ⁴	<i>chạy</i>	to run	courir
pu:j ⁴	<i>bụi</i>	clump, tuft	touffe
ve:l ²	<i>về</i>	to come back	rentrer

Proto-Vietic final ***-s** became **-l** under tones **a⁵** **a⁶** (tones C1 and C2, corresponding to Vietnamese *á* *â*):

t ^h u:l ⁵	<i>thổ</i>	to blow	souffler
pa:l ⁵	<i>vải</i>	fabric	étoffe
cal ⁵	<i>chảy</i>	to flow	couler
mu:l ⁶	<i>mũi</i>	nose	nez
lɛ:l ⁶	<i>lưỡi</i>	tongue	langue
vɛ:l ⁶	<i>vãi</i>	to sow	semer

³ [On consonant shifts, see Haudricourt (1965); on the developments that occur in tone systems as a result of the merger of two series of initial consonants, see Haudricourt (1972). *Note added at translation.*]

At certain places inside the Cuoi-speaking area, some elderly people pronounce a final **-r** instead of final **-l** (in reflexes of Proto-Vietic ***-s**-final words and ***-l**-final words). This peculiarity created some perplexity among linguists, starting with Maspero (1912); many concluded that there was an opposition between final **-r** and **-l** – an opposition that is widespread in the Austroasiatic family. It turns out that those are merely phonetic variants of one and the same phoneme: Cuoi did not preserve the proto-Austroasiatic opposition of final ***-r** and ***-l**.

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Appendix: The languages of the Vietic group of Austroasiatic

1. maleng
2. arem
3. chut
4. aheu
5. hung
6. thô
7. muong, nguồn
8. vietnamien

