

So Orthography Committee and Revision Process

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ABSTRACT

Members of the So-speaking community in Kusuman district of Sakon Nakhon province have a desire to preserve their language, especially through writing. One writing system has been in use by a small number of speakers, but without wide acceptance. Some community members asked for outside assistance in developing and standardizing a So writing system which could be accepted and used by the So community. As seen in other language communities, in order for So speakers to use such a writing system, there must be ownership in the development process.

This paper seeks to document and analyze the process of a So committee working together with a linguistic consultant who is familiar with the So language. Several So speakers, who are literate in Thai, interested in writing So, and respected by the community, were invited to form the “Committee for Preserving and Developing the So Language.” Ten meetings were held in 2008, conducted primarily using the So language. During these meetings, the linguistic consultant first presented principles for good orthography development, and led a discussion on the sounds of the So language in comparison with Thai. For each of the sounds unique to So, linguistically sound options were discussed, and the So-speaking committee members decided on a trial spelling for each sound, and also chose key illustrative words.

Some of the benefits of this process include the following: the So language was given value, those interested in preserving their language were brought together and were able to make decisions together, with help from a linguist who knows their language. The next steps of the project will include having the committee members practice using the trial writing system, then make adjustments, and then test the system among the wider community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Orthography development is a key aspect of encouraging continued use and preservation of a minority language and cultural heritage.

Smalley is well-known in his efforts towards furthering linguistic research and development of minority languages, and in particular, orthography development for languages in Thailand. Smalley (1976:25) says:

An adequate, self-consistent and teachable system cannot be devised simply by writing words in Thai symbols the way they sound. Instead, the sound system of the language to be written must be studied to see just what distinctions occur, and under what circumstances, and then it must be determined how the Thai system of writing as a whole can be best adapted to represent the sound system of the language to which it is being applied, in a way that will meet acceptance by potential users.

He also summarizes these ideas in five simple maximums (Smalley 1964:34): 1) Maximum motivation for the learner, and acceptance by his society and controlling groups such as the government; 2) Maximum representation of speech; 3) Maximum ease of learning; 4) Maximum transfer; and 5) Maximum ease of reproduction. In order to achieve these, it is evident that the group of people involved in the development of the writing system must include both those who

have experience with “representation of speech,” and knowledge of linguistic methods and principles, as well as those who are the users themselves, and who know the language inside and out. Smalley listed the maximums in order of importance, with “maximum motivation for the learner, and acceptance by his society” being on top.

As stated in Person (2008), good orthographies rely both on sound linguistic analysis and mother tongue input. Van der Haak (2000:7), after reviewing various authors on principles of good orthography development, summarizes, “The development of an orthography, then, seems to be more a work of art than a purely scientific endeavor.” The process described in this paper, therefore, is an attempt to combine both of these aspects for the So community.

At least since 1980, possibly earlier, there has been at least one written system for rendering the So language in print (Gutwein 1980). A small group of So speakers has been using that orthography, with some slight modifications over time, mainly for printing translated religious material. Other individuals within the community have attempted to write So for various occasions, including the annual So festival held in Kusuman and the Thai-So Cultural Museum. There is a desire, at least among a few speakers, for preserving the So language, especially through written materials.

Thomas (1989) found a similar situation among the Northern Khmer, in that an orthography had first been worked out by outside linguists, and used in some capacity for about 15 years. However, there were some problems and some objections by key people in the community, enough to take a new look at the orthography. “The hope was to get a consensus from the people themselves and to stir up interest in writing this dialect of Khmer, with a minimum of conflict with the Thai writing system, yet efficient for N.K. (Thomas 1989: 47).” That has proven to be true in the case of the So committee described in this paper. Interest had already been gradually building within the So community, but the process of using a committee to revise the orthography is allowing for consensus and a greater stirring of interest.

Since the previous efforts at writing So were done by scattered individuals, and one small group with a specific interest, there were differing opinions about the best way to write So. Most agreed that the most practical thing is to base the So orthography on the Thai system. For many sounds in the So phonology, the same sound exists in the Thai phonology, so the same symbol

can be used. Other sounds create no small challenge, as in the Northern Khmer situation and many others.

There are many useful principles which are important to consider in the selection of an orthography. As pointed out earlier, linguistic understanding of the phonemic sound system of the language and experience with orthographies of other languages is important, as well as community consensus from key influential people. It was therefore seen to be beneficial to assist the So community in the discussion by bringing together various So speakers interested in writing their language, informing them of the principles of good orthography development, presenting a linguistic analysis of their language (e.g. how it differs from Thai), and guiding them through the steps.

2. SO ORTHOGRAPHY BACKGROUND

The orthography process discussed in this paper was carried out in Kusuman district of Sakon Nakhon province, with speakers of the So language. This So is part of the Katuic language group, within the Eastern Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. The same variety of So spoken in Kusuman is spoken in about 50 villages in Thailand, mainly found in three districts: Kusuman district of Sakon Nakhon province, and Phon Sawan and Tha Uthen districts of Nakhon Phanom province (Choo 2008). A few villages are scattered in other districts. More than half of these villages are still very strongly So, with the language being used throughout the village, including by children. In some of the villages, especially in larger or more commercialized areas or where there is a mix of other ethnicities, the language situation is beginning to shift, and the children seem to be using Isan more than So. Much of the literature (Malai 1980, Grimes 2005, Migliazza 1998) suggests between 35,000-50,000 So people in Thailand, though current estimates may be as low as 25,000. The difference in numbers may come both from loss of the language in some villages, or the earlier numbers having possibly grouped the Kusuman variety of So with other closely related varieties spoken nearby.

The So in Kusuman have maintained some connections with the So speakers in Khammouane province of the Lao P.D.R., which is historically where the So in Kusuman originated. The varieties have remained similar enough that So speakers from Thailand and Laos can still easily communicate. There are rough estimates of over 100,000 So in Khammouane,

although the number of speakers there is very difficult to determine, partly due to remote locations. Also, the name “So” is not listed in the Lao census as an ethnic group, and So is very closely related to several other Katuic languages. Some names, such as Makong or Mangkong, Tri, Bru, and others, are often interchanged, depending on the context they are used in, the proximity of villages to other groups, or other issues, so further investigation is needed.

As for the linguistic background on So, much research is already available (see, for example, Migliazza 2002 and 1998, Gainey 1985), and will not be repeated here, since the focus of this paper is on the process of working with the local committee to revise the orthography. Migliazza (1998, 2002, others) presents a thorough phonological description of the So language as spoken in Kusuman district of Sakon Nakhon province. As phonological research on So continues, revisions to these phonological descriptions may be appropriate.

Migliazza (2002) also gives a detailed description of the orthography used by one small group of So speakers. This excellent orthography was initiated by outside linguists more than 20 years ago. The current orthography revision process described in this paper builds on that strong foundation. Yet, since some key So community members were in disagreement about the best way to write So, and due to the fact that very few people were actually using any system to write So, there was seen to be a need to involve more community members in the actual decision-making process, by leading a committee through the steps of choosing each letter of the orthography based on sound linguistic research and principles. Similar to the Northern Khmer situation referred to earlier, this would hopefully lead to consensus, to an increase in acceptance among the community, and increased interest, as well as pride and ownership of the process.

3. LOCAL ORTHOGRAPHY COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Many factors have changed in the community since the existing orthography was developed, including increased interest and support for language preservation as a whole, better education levels among So speakers which allows them to participate more fully in the process, and language shifts in some areas causing fear that So may be forgotten. All of these factors led to motivation for working together on a standardized writing system at this time.

3.1 Creating a local orthography committee

In May of 2004 an initial meeting was held to discuss the issues of writing So. Present at this meeting were several So speakers interested in writing their language, linguists from Mahidol University, and linguists from SIL. An excellent summary of the So orthography needs was presented at this meeting. Ajarn Suwilai Premsrirat (Mahidol University) led a discussion of possible ways of adapting the Thai writing system to write So, including options for writing the sounds which are different in So from sounds in Thai. Those present at the meeting had varied personal opinions. It was suggested that the So try out the different options in writing and then test them within the So community. After the meeting, however, there was no specific plan made for this follow-up, and no one available to initiate, guide and coordinate the process.

Though I was not present at that initial meeting, I later became familiar with the So language situation. Starting in September 2005, I spent a year living in a So village for intensive language study. During that time and following, a database was collected and rhyme lists analyzed.

The interest among the So community for writing So persisted and even increased. There was already a committee sponsored by the government focusing primarily on preserving the So culture, especially through the annual So festival. However, there was no coordinated effort for standardizing So writing. So it was then suggested that key people from the community be invited to join a committee or “Club for Preserving and Developing the So Language” (ชมรมอนุรักษ์และพัฒนาภาษาโส้).

Several important criteria guided the selection of members. First, they must be So people, and fluent speakers of the So language. This is important both so that they have a good understanding of the language they are writing, and also so that the meetings can be carried out using the So language. This would not only facilitate good research, helping the committee to focus on So, but also would give prestige and value to the language. Prospective members had to also be able to read and write comfortably in Thai. This would allow them to play with the orthographic system while searching for the best way to adapt the Thai system to the unique needs of So. They also had to have some role or position of respect within the So community, such as teachers, village leaders, municipal workers and others. This would give credibility to the process and more likely lead to acceptance by the wider community.

3.2 Content of meetings

A total of ten meetings were held with the committee throughout 2008, in the months of March, April, May, September and December. More than 20 So people attended at least one meeting, with ten of those members participating in more than half of the meetings.

The first meeting in March was a special introductory meeting. A respected district leader officially opened the meeting. He made the comment that of all the meetings he has had the opportunity to ‘open’, this is the first one that he did so using the So language. This is a significant statement, since most of the other meetings were held in So communities as well. Next in the meeting, Feikje van der Haak, an SIL consultant who had attended the initial 2004 meeting, presented a summary of that initial meeting, a review of the guidelines to consider when developing an orthography, and steps to consider in the process. This was the only portion of the meetings conducted in Thai, since this researcher, while familiar with So and several other Katuic languages, does not speak So.

I then presented, using the So language, a brief introduction on phonetics, charting all of the sounds in the language, with some basic description of how and where in the mouth they are produced. This led to a discussion of which sounds in So are similar to sounds in Thai and which are unique to So (and yet often in common with other Katuic languages).

Other meetings throughout the year continued to work on several key objectives, as follows:

1. Choose letters (from the Thai alphabet) to spell each So sound, in each position that it occurs
2. Practice reading stories written in the revised orthography, and practice writing their own stories; note difficulties
3. Choose key words to illustrate each orthographic choice (and in each position, as appropriate)
4. Make a plan for testing the orthography in the community (both for ease of reading and writing, and also for acceptance and preference)

The goal is to work toward having at least ten So people who can easily use the chosen orthography, have them write enough to feel comfortable with the system and to discover the challenges, then make adjustments based on their experience, test the more difficult orthographic

choices among the community, and then present it all to linguists at Mahidol University for approval and recommendations.

3.3 Summary of orthography choices made by the committee

The majority of So speakers have at least basic skills for reading Thai. Based on the principle of maximum transfer to the national language, that is, the language of education, it was agreed that using the Thai writing system as the basis for the So system would be best. A few committee members suggested that a Roman alphabet may be able to more easily represent the phonemic system correctly, but after being assured that the Thai system could be adjusted to fit So, they agreed that for reasons of ease of learning and maximum transfer, Thai letters would be most appropriate. The committee had to be reminded regularly that the goal is to have a So writing system, which even though it is based on the Thai system, if done well will become a unique So system. Note that many of the decisions made by the committee are the same as those in the orthography presented in Migliazza (2002). However, a key point, which will be discussed further in section 4, is that the committee has chosen these orthographic representations for themselves, and thus is willing to accept them. They understand the options and the implications of the choices.

After studying together the sound system of So in comparison to the sound system of Thai, the committee was able to easily select many letters without much discussion, those that have the same sound in So as in Thai. This includes all but one of the initial consonants, many of the final consonants, and many of the vowels. Thai in several cases has multiple graphemes for a single sound, making it more difficult to learn and to use. The aim was to eliminate this duplication, instead having only one symbol (or set of symbols, as in the case of some vowels) per sound. Thus, a single grapheme was selected for each So phoneme, choosing the most common Thai character with a level tone. (Note that all of the letters chosen so far by the committee are shown in the appendices.) It was also generally agreed that, in contrast to the Thai system, So words must have spaces in between them, in order to prevent misreadings.

The sounds which are different from Thai, and thus more challenging to write using the Thai system, will only be summarized briefly here. Symbols which were agreed on with little discussion include the initial extra initial consonant, some consonant clusters and some of the

finals. Consistent with Migliazza (2002), most of the final sounds which do not occur in Thai can be written using the consonant symbols which represent the same sound in initial position (though two of these finals will be discussed more below). This may take some initial adjustment for So who are fluent Thai readers, who may at first tend to read the words following the Thai orthographic conventions. But it is necessary to distinguish these finals in So, and readers should be able to adjust as they read for meaning. The committee members easily agreed on this, and after some practice are now able to use them consistently (that is, disregarding alternate pronunciations by some speakers, especially with final /l/ and /r/ or loss of final palatal sounds by some). Another symbol choice all agreed on, though some may take time to get used to it, is writing the initial palatal nasal /ɲ/ in So using the second Thai palatal approximant symbol. As for consonant clusters, some which occur in So do not occur in Thai, but all members agreed to simply combine the two initials whose sounds make up the cluster.

A few consonant sounds stirred up much more discussion, and have not yet been completely resolved. Two of the more difficult final consonant sounds in So are the glottal fricative /h/ and the glottal stop /ʔ/. The same symbol used for the glottal fricative in initial position was agreed on for the final, although this will require testing, and may be difficult to learn. When the final glottal stop occurs following short vowels, the words may be spelled following Thai vowel conventions, with no additional symbol needed. However, in So, a final glottal stop may also occur following the palatal approximant /j/ and the labiovelar approximant /w/. In contrast to the previous system, the committee chose to try using the same symbol for initial glottal stop, with an additional mark which Thai uses for “silencing” a letter.

The So language, similar to most other Katuic languages, has many words which have a syllabic nasal sound at the beginning of the word. This was probably the spelling issue with the least consensus. This nasal sound is linguistically a single phoneme which assimilates to the place of articulation of the following consonant. In the system described in Migliazza (2002), as in some systems in use in other Katuic languages, this is represented by using nasal consonants. However, many of the committee members have an intuitive sense that even though these differ phonetically, the underlying phoneme is the same. They have chosen tentatively to use < ᨾ > for this phoneme. While there was a majority for this choice, the preference was well split, meaning that further discussion, testing, and much practice in use are needed. Some suggested first that it

would be more appropriate to maintain Thai syllable structure, in which case the full syllable < ๑๐ > would be used. However, this means three written symbols for a very common sound. The short version of this vowel < ๑ > is also possible, but was rejected by most, since this syllable in isolation would end in a glottal stop. Some members preferred the phonetic representation, rather than phonemic, using consonants for /m/ and /n/, as has already been in use.

While Thai has nine basic vowel positions, So has eleven. New combinations of symbols must be created for the two extra vowel positions. For ease of reading, these should be based as closely as possible on symbols for vowels nearest to them. Therefore, the open-mid centralized back vowel /ʌ/ can be based mainly on the spelling pattern for the Thai central vowel, but combined with the difference for a lower vowel in front position. The committee is following the previous orthography in this decision. The open-mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/ was shown in Migliazza (2002) using the same spelling for the Thai mid back rounded vowel, but with the addition of the third Thai tone mark. In practice, it was seen that with those who had been using that writing system, the use of a tone mark caused them to think of that not as a separate vowel position, but as carrying tone, especially in short vowels followed by final glottal. Then it was common for these writers to add this third tone mark to other vowels, even though pitch is not contrastive in So. In order to avoid this confusion, the committee has suggested using the ‘nalikhahit’ symbol (the circle from the Thai /am/ vowel combination), in conjunction with the Thai mid back rounded vowel. This is beneficial in that it is a symbol used for vowels, but in So it is used in a unique way from Thai, which helps So readers realize that it will be read in a unique So way, rather than a Thai way. This, of course, will require extra teaching, and needs to be carefully tested.

In front and back positions, So has two distinct vowel diphthongs, while Thai has only one in each of these positions. The one in So that is closest to the sound of the Thai diphthong can be spelled in the same way. However, the other must be written with new combinations that do not occur in Thai spellings. Since these appear longer than the standard diphthong, the previous system wrote these as if they were composed of two syllables. The current committee is attempting to leave off one of the vowel symbols in this combination, as they perceive greater emphasis on the second part of the vowel. This is also an effort to simplify or lessen the number of characters needed for a given word. However, this leads to some possible ambiguity or

difficulty in reading some of the words. As with all of these challenges, the committee needs further practice with the system, identifying the possible problems, and then testing with new readers.

So has two contrastive phonation types, clear vowels and breathy vowels. While this register system in So is slightly less complex than in some other Katuic languages, it still leads to challenges in the orthography. The committee has chosen to mark the difference in register simply by adding the first Thai tone mark, as was used in the previous system and many other languages. However, see the discussion in section 5 for possible changes.

A summary of the current spelling choices is found in the illustrated alphabet chart in Appendix 1 and the tables in Appendix 2. While choices have been made, it should be clear that some of these are still tentative. The process of carefully testing an orthography with the community who will be using it is crucial to its usefulness and acceptance. This will be discussed further in section 5.

4. COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROCESS

As described in the introduction, it has proved significant to have both motivated native speakers and trained linguists working side by side in this orthography process. One without the other would have hindered progress and lessened the quality. The committee has seen effectiveness in the process and is dedicated to seeing the project through to completion.

4.1 *Community ownership*

One very significant observation after a few of the meetings had passed was expressed by one of the committee members. He felt that even though each of the members had personal opinions on the best way to write So words, with some of those individuals being more strongly outspoken than others, the process now seemed to be working precisely because the linguistic advisor was not telling them what to choose, but presenting the issues and the options, and giving them the opportunity to be the decision-makers themselves. At the May 2004 meeting, a clear understanding of So was presented by outside investigators speaking Thai, with options suggested. Following that meeting, the So speakers were to work towards a consensus. However, on their own, without a knowledge of linguistics or experience gained in orthography development of other languages, none of the So individuals was able to push the process

forward. Each held to their own preferences. But now with sufficient linguistic input presented to them, step by step, with choices, the So were able to cooperate well together. They are willing to make informed decisions together as a group, regardless of personal opinion.

Committee members were given freedom in choosing the orthographic representations they preferred, as well as topics for stories in writing practice, and also the key words for illustrations. Many times they searched hard to find and choose words that would preserve their cultural traditions, or emphasize words that the young people may be forgetting these days.

4.2 Roles of the consultant

One obvious role of the consultant is to present the linguistic background needed. This includes a linguistic analysis of the sound system of So and how it compares with Thai. A thorough knowledge of the Thai writing system is needed, and it is also helpful to have examples of how the Thai system has been adapted for creating writing systems for other languages. The So speakers at first felt limited by the Thai system, not yet aware of the possibilities for adaptations. But when assured that other groups have successfully created working orthographies, based on sound orthography development principles presented, they had confidence to move forward. The consultant must also continually monitor and guide the process, checking to see if each choice made has considered a good balance between the ‘maximums’ discussed earlier.

As part of the linguistic analysis, preprocessing of words was very important. Each week, for whatever sounds were to be discussed, a clear set of examples was prepared, using rhyme lists compiled from the So database (using Toolbox and Phonology Assistant programs). This was especially necessary for the sounds which do not occur in Thai. Some committee members tended to want to ignore some distinctions and just use the closest Thai spelling. However, when multiple sets of words with minimal differences were presented, they recognized the need to distinguish between these in writing. For selecting key words to illustrate each orthographic choice, the linguistic database was also helpful for providing lists of words from which to choose the more picturable options. The consultant presented these to the committee who could first use these for reading practice to reinforce which sound was being focused on, then the committee

members could choose the more appropriate words to illustrate, or think of others not yet included.

But equally as important as the linguistic aspects, another key role of the consultant is to be a facilitator. This includes providing information along with a framework for using that information together. The ability of the linguistic consultant to speak So greatly facilitated the process. On most occasions, the entire meeting could be conducted in So. This allowed for focus on the So language itself, not on Thai and a Thai solution, but a So solution to a So issue.

A clear difference was seen when the non-So speaking consultant presented the initial principles in Thai, and the result was politeness and respect and little participation (although age was also a possible factor here). However, when I presented in So and asked a question, the ensuing discussion sometimes quickly passed beyond me, until a conclusion was reached, and then summarized for me. The committee members felt free to be active participants. Using So as the medium of communication made the meetings less formal and more practical. It is assumed that having invested the time and energy to learn the language and culture added significantly to the level of trust in the meetings.

A So-speaking consultant probably also contributed to an increase in pride in their own language. Seeing that an ‘ajarn’, perceived to be from a higher level of society, is willing to learn their language definitely gives value to the language. Another example of pride was shown once the initial consonant pictures had been chosen and drawn (expertly by one of the committee members), and posted around the room. The committee then worked together to write several additional words with the same initial for each page. Upon seeing these pages, one of the members remarked with satisfaction, “Look at that! No one else has something like this. If we keep going like this, the So will be able to read and write, and can preserve their language.”

The consultant must also work toward empowering the committee to gradually take on more of the responsibility for the process. The final decisions have always been made by the committee, the speakers of the language who will be using the orthography, not by the consultant. Also, the So committee now has confidence in checking each other’s spellings in the writing practice, and are also working together to write the testing materials. They will also be responsible for presenting the orthography to the Thai linguists for advice and approval, explaining their own decisions.

4.3 Challenges and insights

As in all new endeavors, many things have been learned during the process. Some of these challenges and insights will be noted here, with recommended changes. Many are related to cultural differences in learning styles and working styles.

Repetition and active involvement are key factors. The participants must have a chance to use what has been presented, in practical hands-on ways, before being able to internalize the concept and make good decisions. For example, based on a western teaching style, the vowels of Thai and So were charted phonetically, posted on the wall, and discussed. It was then assumed that the participants understood the differences and could apply this to the So orthography. This was repeated at several meetings. However, due to cultural differences in learning styles, such as learning concepts concretely rather than abstractly, these concepts may or may not yet have been internalized. It wasn't until the So committee members needed to use these to read and write certain words that they then asked for a re-explanation of how the vowels differed. In other words, since linguistics is a new academic area for them, they need the opportunity to discover for themselves what information is needed before they will learn that information. This suggests that many guided practice activities and much repetition are needed, as well as having sufficient examples ready to work with, or even examples of how other groups have solved similar problems.

There was initially a broader community interest, but as the process took longer than expected, some of the initial committee members dropped out. However, there is a small core of members continuing to come to the meetings regularly. These core members are willing to work hard wrestling through the issues, volunteering their time, and continuing on even though the steps are tedious and difficult. They expressed that they see the value in carefully considering the linguistic implications and other issues, and they believe it will be worth the investment of time.

5. REMAINING ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS

There are several issues remaining that still need to be resolved by the committee. Even though symbols were chosen for each sound, some of these are very tentative. The most important remaining step in the process of coming to consensus on these issues is to carry out

community testing. Also further reading and writing practice by the committee members will be crucial for good final decisions. The major areas to be settled are how to represent register (including the choice of initial consonants in words with breathiness), the nasal onsets before initial consonants, final glottal stop and fricative sounds, the two additional vowels not found in Thai, and the additional vowel glides.

Register is a significant area that still needs to be addressed more thoroughly. Some of the committee members instinctively feel that the initial stop consonants for syllables with a breathy register are neither exactly aspirated or unaspirated, but somewhere in between. This has been expressed by speakers of other Katuic languages as well (see Prasert 1978, for example, for research on the perceptions of Kui speakers). This may relate to the idea that some consider register to affect an entire syllable, rather than merely the vowel. It would be interesting to do some acoustic phonetic analysis of So words, comparing recordings of minimal word pairs with clear versus breathy register, to see if there is detectable difference in aspiration of the initial consonant. One orthographic solution is to add several new consonant symbols to the inventory (for example, using the set of high class Thai consonants, as is done with Kui in Prasert 1978). Regardless of which option is chosen, of course, this feature needs to be the focus of reading and writing tests. A key point in this debate, however, is that there is no contrast in aspiration for initial consonants of breathy syllables. So regardless of whether the initials of breathy syllables are truly ‘in-between’ aspirated and unaspirated, it is not necessary to show this change in the written consonant. The mark used to indicate breathy register can tell a native speaker to naturally apply all of the features of a breathy syllable. Tests for perception, accuracy in reading and writing, as well as acceptance, need to be carried out.

Several small issues have come up that have not yet been addressed by the committee, which will have to be discussed in meetings in early 2009. In general, it is agreed upon that word breaks are necessary, but in some cases, deciding what a ‘word’ is can be ambiguous. Many times the ambiguity occurs with words or short phrases borrowed from Thai, where the separate parts of the phrase have no individual meaning in So. This may suggest it would be best to combine these as a single word in So, though the committee will need to look at many examples and decide on a consistent rule to follow. Other problems are compound words and word pairs that are common in So. Another issue to be considered is where and how to indicate phrase and

sentence breaks. Some members have suggested using punctuation as in English; others would prefer to follow the Thai pattern of using wider spaces. This issue has mostly been ignored to this point.

Generally, rhyming lists have been used when trying to decide on the spellings of individual words, that is, matching the sound of a new word to a known word with the same rhyme. However, there are a few words which do not seem to fit clearly into any rhyme group, and pose a problem, both for reading and writing. These words still need to be checked and spellings decided on by the committee.

Key words (which are easily illustrated in a picture) have been chosen for the single consonants and some vowels, but the following areas still need committee consensus for choosing these key words: register, presyllable vowels, initial consonant clusters, and some of the combination vowels.

On a non-linguistic level, testing would also be helpful for the illustrations of each of the keywords. It is important to know whether So speakers would give the intended name for each picture, especially those who are less literate (since they would be less able to make a guess from the written word).

Basically, to summarize, the goal of committee is to become comfortable with an agreed-upon orthography. This requires several more meetings at which the members continue to practice reading and writing using the current system. Words or features that are consistently misspelled or misread will be discussed again, considering a different option.

A plan for formal testing must be prepared. Tests will probably include different sections for testing both readability and preference. There may be different tests at the word level, sentence level, and story level. For example, the committee is preparing groups of simple sentences which will test only one difficult feature at a time. All other words in the sentence should be easy to read. Once the tests are prepared, they will be used in several different So-speaking communities. The results will be analyzed, and then the committee must rediscuss the spelling options.

Once the committee comes to agreement on a satisfactory writing system, and at least some of the committee members are able to consistently write correctly using the new system, the next






















step is to present the system to a linguist at Mahidol University. The pages of written materials generated during the committee meetings will be submitted, along with the results of the community testing. The representatives of the committee will also need to be able to explain the reasons for the various choices made. The linguist from Mahidol University can then give insights and approval.

Once the spelling options are finalized, then promotion will be the next goal of the committee. The new writing system should be clearly presented to the So community, possibly through literature development, including illustrated alphabet charts, folktales and other stories. These materials should be distributed in all So-speaking areas. Possible methods of promotion included teaching in the schools, So radio broadcasts, and activities at the annual So festival held in several different districts.

The committee will need to network with other communities, to find those in other districts who are interested in reading and writing So, to explain to them the process used in this orthography revision, and to consider their input as well. There is definitely some variety in pronunciation and vocabulary across villages, so this will have to be tested carefully, to see whether or not a single standard can be used. Many teachers and school administrators (including non-So speakers) are interested in having written materials to help preserve the So language, so it will be important to work towards consistency in the writing system for developing these materials.

APPENDIX A

Following is an illustrated chart of the 21 initial consonants in So, as chosen by the local orthography committee.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| ก  โก้ย | ค  ค็อง | ง  ง่วาจ | จ  เจ็อม | ช  อ็แซ็ญ | ฌ  เซ็ยะ | ญ  ญั่งญาด |
| ค  คอง | ต  ตอง | ท  เทา | น  นง | บ  บง | ป  ปัด | พ  พวก |
| ม  มัต | ย  แยง | ร  ระ | ล  เล็ยม | ว  วัต | อ  อูยฮ | ฮ  ฮอง |

APPENDIX B

Following are the orthographic symbols chosen for each sound in So, as of January 2009. Some may change following testing and discussion. Also given are the picturable key words chosen by the committee to represent each spelling. Words in light print are examples provided by the consultant, and were not yet decided on by the committee.

Consonants

| | <i>Initial</i> | <i>Final</i> |
|---|----------------|--------------|
| ก | ไก๋ย | อะสี่ก |
| ค | ค็อง | -- |
| ง | ง่วจ | มะนาง |
| จ | เจ็อม | ชะมูจ |
| ช | ช็แซ็ญ | -- |
| ซ | เซ็ยชะ | -- |
| ญ | ญั๋งญาค | กุแซ็ญ |
| ด | ดง | เปรี๊ยด |
| ต | ตอง | -- |
| ท | เทา | -- |
| น | นง | อี่แปน |
| บ | บง | ระฮึบ |
| ป | ป็ค | -- |
| พ | พวก | -- |
| ม | มັค | ระแคม |
| ย | แยง | อี่ตรวัย |
| ร | ระ | เต็ยร |
| ล | เล็ยม | ตะป็ล |
| ว | วັค | อะตาว |
| อ | อุยฮ | กะนอยฮ |
| ฮ | ฮอง | อะแซ็ฮ |

Initial consonant clusters

| | |
|----|------|
| กร | กราง |
| กต | กตอ |
| คต | คตีย |
| ตร | ตรัม |
| ทร | ทรอ |
| บร | บราง |
| บล | บลาย |
| ปร | ปรา |
| ปล | ปลอม |
| พร | พรัก |

Minor syllables

| | |
|----|-------|
| -ะ | ระแนน |
| -ง | กุเตา |
| -ะ | จ็ง |

Register: clear vs. breathy

| | |
|-----|-----|
| | ั |
| กั | กั |
| โตง | โตง |

Vowels

Short

| | | |
|------|--------|--------|
| ิ | บิจ | |
| เ-ะ | เปะ | ละเมือ |
| แ-ะ | กะแทะ | อะแจ็ด |
| ี | กะตี | |
| เ-อะ | ระเปอะ | เต็อบ |
| แ- | แคอะ | เค็อง |
| อะ | | |
| -ะ | ปะระ | ชะลั้ง |
| ุ | มะอุ | |
| โ-ะ | กะโปะ | ระย้ง |
| โ-ะ | กะโระ | ต้งก้ง |
| เ-าะ | อะเงาะ | อะค็อก |

Long

| | | | |
|-----|-------|------|-----|
| ี | ฮึป | | |
| เ- | กูเป | | |
| แ- | แกล | | |
| ี๋ | ฮึฮึ | | |
| เ-อ | เร่อ | เฮิม | เฮย |
| แ-อ | แปลอ | แก็บ | แฮย |
| -า | ลา | | |
| ู | คู | | |
| โ- | กะโลง | | |
| โ- | โป้ง | | |
| -อ | กลอ | | |

Diphthongs

| | | | |
|-----|--------|---------|---------|
| ไ- | มะไซ | | |
| เีย | เป็ย | อะเจียง | เต็ริยะ |
| -ยา | จยา | รยาจ | |
| เือ | ระเมือ | เม็อย | |
| ัว | ปัว | กัวค | นัวะ |
| -วา | ปัว | ปัวน | |

Presyllabic nasals

| |
|--------|
| ฮึแปลง |
| ฮึต้ง |
| ฮึฮึล |
| ฮึก้ง |

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