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THE RHYMING METHOD OF CHECKING VOWEL CONTRASTS IN VIET NAM

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The vowel rhyming method that we are using here now is tied to the observed phenomenon that final consonants have considerable effect on the vowels, initial consonants little effect. This makes the method peculiarly essential to Vietnam phoneme analyses but would be less important, say, in the Philippines. Final consonants are generally quite straightforward and unambiguous, but the number of vowels and the shifting and neutralizations between them can be frustrating. So the only way to pin them down is to line them up by final consonants. Velars often seem to have the largest number of vowel phonemes that can occur with them, so I have sometimes recommended that people start by taking k or ng. Write down every word that you have that ends with, say, k, putting -uk on one page, -ok on the next page, -ok on the third page, etc., with as many pages (lists) as you think you have vowel phonemes. Then have the informant repeat the words in pairs while you listen carefully to make sure that the vowel is identical. Occasionally contrast them with words from other lists with neighboring vowels. Or several words that you have decided are the same, listen to them one right after the other without interruption. (The less oral interruption there is, the easier it is to hear the contrasts.) Lining them up in pairs or sets this way makes it far easier to hear the contrasts. Most informants seem to get the hang of this quite readily, so that after a session or two of the linguist having to make the same-or-different decisions, the informant can start saying same or different, or picking out one in a set of key words which it rhymes with; if on rechecking on different days the informant is consistent in his responses, and the linguist's ear corroborates those responses, it would give confidence that the informant has really caught on to what he is doing, and this can speed up the whole process considerably, with just occasional rechecking. (We can't trust our own ears to get things right the first time without careful listening and comparing.) This procedure for all k-final words should give a clear and reliable picture of the vowel phonemes before k. The process will then have to be repeated for each final consonant. It seems to be most normal that consonants at the same point of articulation take the same set of vowel phonemes. The environments with the largest number of differentiated vowels would be used as the basis for setting up the basic vowel phonemes, and the other environmental sets would be harmonized with this by defective distribution and neutralization (as in my Chrau article).

People should be starting to line up rhyme sets by the time they have a 500-word vocabulary, but preliminary phoneme decisions can't be made with anything less than a 1000-word vocabulary with any confidence. (The larger the vocabulary the more also the minimal pairs forcing contrasts into attention.) Final phonemic decisions would probably not

be safe with less than about a 3000-word vocabulary.

(Some linguists might object to my confidence in the informant, but if language structure is emic, then we can expect informants to react according to that structure. There is not a linguist in Vietnam, who can be depended on to write a word accurately from just hearing it, but an alert native speaker has only to react according to the structure which is already fixed indelibly in his psychological make-up and he will be accurate. In other words, I believe in the psychological reality of the phoneme and of language structure.)