

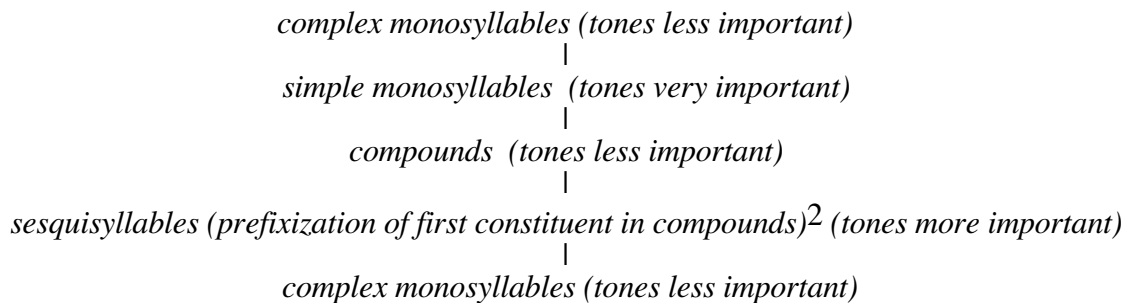
Towards a Typology of Southeast Asian Tonal Systems

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ABSTRACT

The potential for tonogenesis always exists in monosyllabic languages of the East and Southeast Asian type - the most "tone-prone" linguistic area in the world. Phonational and tonal contrasts are constantly arising and being lost in the languages of this area, concomitantly with changes in syllable- and word-structure.¹ Some languages find themselves caught up in different stages of the cycle at the same time, so that they include both tonal and atonal dialects (Tibetan, Qiang, Khmu [Mon-Khmer]). Very schematically we can envision the complementary cycles of tonality and syllable-type more or less as follows:



Languages in this linguistic area may undergo striking changes of syllable-type through time, either through internal structural pressure or when prodded to do so by outside influence. Vietnamese diverged from its sesquisyllabic Vietic relatives and became monosyllabic under Chinese influence (sesqui- > mono-), and how Tai and Hmong-Mien may have gone from dissyllabic to monosyllabic for the same reason (di- > mono-). Perhaps the most amazing example of all is

¹These changes in syllable-structure naturally include alterations in the manner of articulation of initial consonants (what Haudricourt called "mutations consonantiques"). The loss of a manner distinction in initial consonants has different consequences according to whether the language was already tonal or not: if the language was tonal, a loss of contrast can cause a tonal split; if the language was not tonal, a loss of manner contrast can cause a phonational difference, as in Austronesian (Cham of Cambodia and Vietnam) or Austroasiatic (Lamet, Riang [Palaungic group]).

²I have discussed this "compounding/prefixation cycle" in several publications, including Matisoff 1973:82-84; 1978:58-72.

Cham, originally a typical polysyllabic Austronesian language closely related to Achehnese. In the course of their migrations the Chams came into contact with monosyllabic languages on the island of Hainan, and developed a strictly monosyllabic, highly tonal dialect. The Cham dialects of those who settled in Southern Vietnam and Cambodia, on the other hand, became sesquisyllabic and acquired phonational contrasts under influence from Khmer and other Mon-Khmer language-groups of Vietnam like Bahnaric (poly- > mono-; poly- > sesqui-).

Is syllable-type really predictive of tonogenetic possibilities, or is there nothing more than a rough correlation between e.g. monosyllabicity and tone-proneness? Is there a necessary connection between sesquisyllabicity and the birth of phonational systems ("registrogenesis")? Even though phonation has reached its fullest development in the sesquisyllabic Mon-Khmer family, not all TB sesquisyllabic languages are phonational, and some are phonational but predominantly monosyllabic (e.g. Burmese).

It is high time to attempt a world-wide typology of tone-systems, broad enough to encompass African and Mesoamerican prosodic systems as well as those of East and Southeast Asia. Which typological traits are independent, and which are interrelated? Is it universally true that the functional load of tone contrasts is in inverse proportion to consonantal degeneration? Can we find languages with rich inventories of both initial and final consonants that also have complex tonal systems?

Can we ever reconstruct the phonetics of proto-tone systems? How stable are phonation types through time? Are tone and phonation really different aspects of one and the same phenomenon? Does one have logical primacy over the other, or is that a chicken-and-egg question? Are the principles of tono- and registro-genesis everywhere the same?